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[The hidden story of the third Thanksgiving: 1623--giving thanks for freedom](#)

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by Jim O'Keefe

Thanksgiving is a very special time for many of us. Some of our fondest memories are of shared feasts with dear friends and family members, some no longer with us. The aromas, sights and tastes of the feasts shared serve to cement those memories for us, memories to last a lifetime.

Growing up in New England, I heard the story of the first Thanksgiving repeated endlessly, reenacted with excitement and stage jitters by many a grade school child (including the author), with proud parents in attendance. The funny looking clothing, black britches and the hat with the big belt buckle. The story about how the Native Americans, the Pakonoket Wampanoag, led by their sachem Massasoit to be more exact, saved the starving Pilgrims from another brutal winter by showing the settlers how to grow corn in the flinty New England soil. We can all picture the scenes in our minds' eye. But the story we've known all our lives is incomplete....

The first Thanksgiving took place in 1621, as the history books tell us. But it was not so much a celebration of the bounty of nature as it was the last meal of a condemned man. The first winter had been brutal, with forty four of the original one hundred and one pilgrims dying of scurvy and exposure. While the Pilgrims managed to grow some corn that next summer, it wasn't nearly enough. The following winter took more settlers' lives. While the Pilgrims - as hardy, adventurous and motivated a group of settlers as ever lived - knew how to farm, how to husband animals, how to hunt and fish, something kept them from being as productive as they needed to be to feed and clothe themselves throughout the New England winters. When the Pilgrims came to this new land, they had decided that they would pool their resources and share their production. Those more capable would do their part, and those more needy would get their share. Plymouth Colony Governor William Bradford called this system "communism", two hundred ninety six years before the Russian revolution. (The Russians met with the same results, but took seventy years and 30 million dead to figure it out.)

But after two successive harsh, hungry winters had nearly destroyed the Plymouth Colony, the elders of the community, led by Governor Bradford, decreed a change in how food was produced and distributed. In 1623, they allotted a parcel of land to each settler, and allowed them to keep the produce of those parcels for themselves, instead of putting them into the common stores and distributing them equally, which had been the practice up until then. Governor Bradford wrote [in his journal](#) that ending communism:

"...had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the Governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble, and gave far better content. The women now went willingly into the field, and took their little ones with them to set corn;

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which before would allege weakness and inability; whom to have compelled would have been thought great tyranny and oppression."

"The experience that was had in this common course and condition, tried sundry years and that amongst godly and sober men, may well evince the vanity of that conceit of Plato's and other ancients applauded by some of later times; that the taking away of property and bringing in community into a commonwealth would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser than God. For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort. For the young men, that were most able and fit for labour and service, did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children without any recompense. The strong, or man of parts, had no more in division of victuals and clothes than he that was weak and not able to do a quarter the other could; this was thought injustice. The aged and graver men to be ranked and equalized in labours and victuals, clothes, etc., with the meaner and younger sort, thought it some indignity and disrespect unto them. And for men's wives to be commanded to do service for other men, as dressing their meat, washing their clothes, etc., they deemed it a kind of slavery, neither could many husbands well brook it."

They had tried collectivism and, finding it destructive to human nature, had changed course.

The following November, 1623, saw a Thanksgiving Feast that was truly a celebration of abundance, a bounty created by the enterprise of free men and women, toiling on their own behalf and, in the process, creating a richer society. Today we call this system free enterprise, or the free market. Of all the things that have come down to us from the Pilgrims to today's America, that is their most precious gift to us.

We hope that your Thanksgiving Day celebration will provide you the warmth, sustenance, and joy bequeathed us by the Pilgrim settlers, and their inspiration to lay the foundation of a rich, just and generous America.

Happy Thanksgiving,

Jim O'Keefe

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