

# VERMONT

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## T The Truth About Thanksgiving

By James W. Loewen



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Weather vane images of Massasoit, Indian Chief of the Wampanoag, were sold by Harris & Co. in Boston in the late 1800s.

No one knows what the Mayflower looked like. More than one ship bore that name in the early 1600s. Mayflower II, now berthed at Plymouth, is a good reproduction of generic English ships of the time.

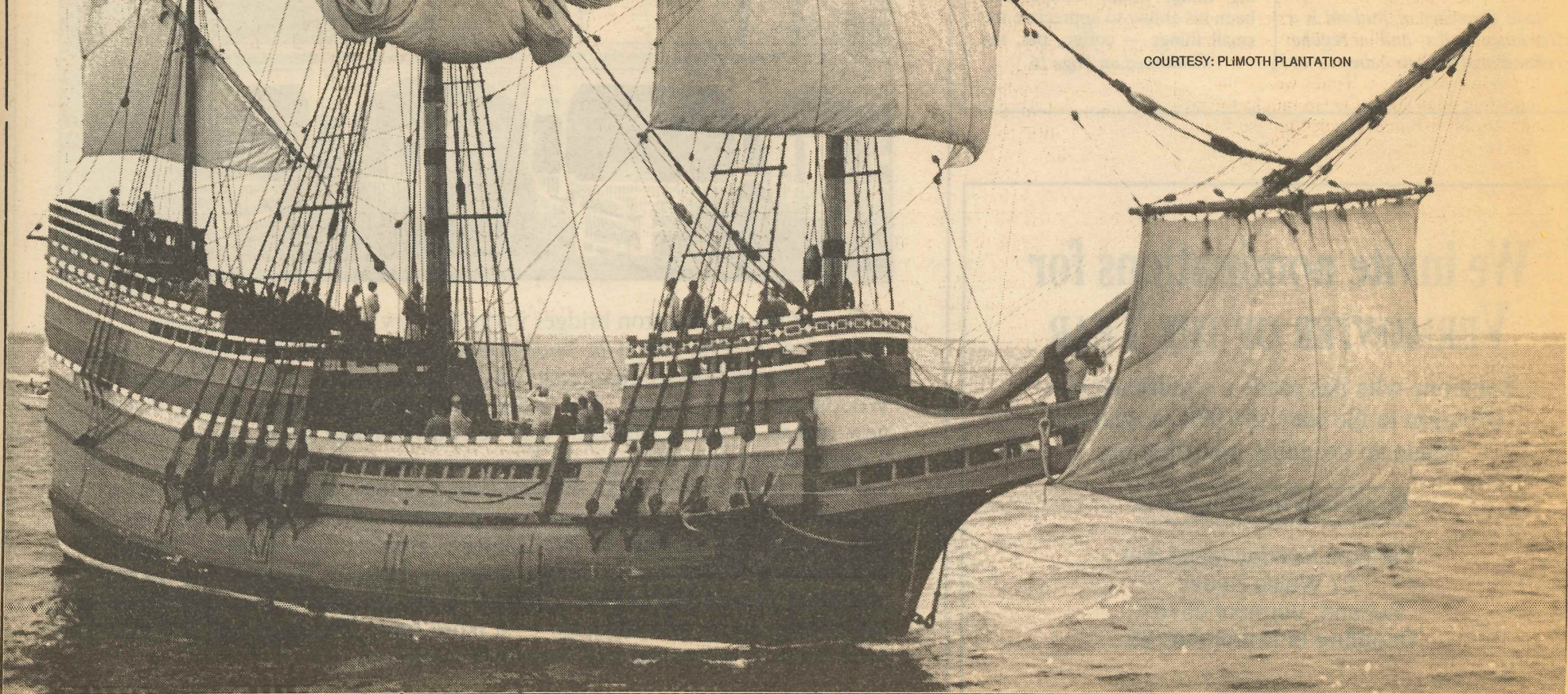
# T The Truth About Thanksgiving

By James W. Loewen

Over the last few years, I've asked hundreds of University of Vermont students to tell me, "When was the country we now know as the United States first settled?"

That's a generous way of putting the question. Surely "we now know as" implies that the original settlement happened before the United States. I had hoped that students would suggest 30,000 BC, or some other pre-Columbian date. They didn't. Their consensus was 1620.

COURTESY: PLIMOTH PLANTATION





Part of the problem is the word "settle." Settlers were white. Indians didn't settle. As we shall see, however, if Indians hadn't already settled New England, our European forebears would have had a much tougher job of it. Starting with the Pilgrims not only leaves out the Indians, but also the Spanish, who began their settling of "the country we now know as the United States" in 1565. Some were pilgrims, seeking regions new to them in order to secure religious liberty: these were Spanish Jews, who settled in New Mexico in the late 1500s.

Few Americans know that one third of the United States, from San Francisco to Natchez to Florida, has been Spanish longer than it has been "American." Moreover, Spanish culture left an indelible impact on the West, for the Spanish introduced horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, and the basic elements of cowboy culture, including its vocabulary: *mustang*, *bronco*, *rodeo*, *lariat* and so on. Beginning with 1620 also omits the Dutch, who were living in what is now Albany by 1614. Indeed, 1620 isn't even the date of the first permanent British settlement, for in 1607, the London Company sent settlers to Jamestown, Virginia. No matter. The mythic origin of "the country we now know as the United States" is at Plymouth Rock, and the year is 1620. My students are not at fault. The myth is what they remember from their textbooks and their culture.

Here is the version in one high school history book, *The American Tradition*:

"After some exploring, the Pilgrims chose the land around Plymouth Harbor for their settlement. Unfortunately, they had arrived in December and were not prepared for the New England winter. However, they were aided by friendly Indians, who gave them food and showed them how to grow corn. When warm weather came, the colonists planted, fished, hunted, and prepared themselves for the next winter. After harvesting their first crop, they and their Indian friends celebrated the first Thanksgiving."

My students go beyond this text to tell me that the Pilgrims were persecuted in England for their religion, so they moved to Holland. They sailed on the *Mayflower* to America and wrote the Mayflower Compact. Times were rough, until they met Squanto. He taught them how to put fish in each corn hill, so they had a bountiful harvest.

But when I ask them about the plague, they just stare back at me.

"What plague? The Black Plague?"

No, that was three centuries earlier, I sigh.

## "The Wonderful Plague Among The Salvages"

The Black Plague does provide a useful introduction, however. William Langer, writing in *Scientific American*, tells us that the Black (or bubonic) Plague "was

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undoubtedly the worst disaster that has ever befallen mankind." In the three years from 1348 through 1350, it killed perhaps 30 percent of the population of Europe.

Catastrophic as it was, the disease itself made up only part of the horror. Thinking the day of judgment was imminent, farmers did not plant crops. Many people gave themselves over to alcohol. Civil and economic disruption may have caused as much death as the disease itself. In 1617, just before the Pilgrims landed, a plague struck that made the Black Death pale by comparison in terms of numbers of victims. Today we think this disease was the bubonic plague, although smallpox and influenza are also candidates. It was probably transmitted by British fishermen, who had been fishing off Massachusetts for decades before the Pilgrims landed.

Whatever it was, within three years, this plague wiped out between 90 percent and 96 percent of the inhabitants of southern New England. The Indian societies lay devastated. Only "the twentieth person is scarce left alive," wrote British eyewitness Robert Cushman, describing a death rate unknown in all previous human experience. Unable to cope with so many corpses, the survivors simply abandoned their villages and fled. Historian Howard Simpson tells what the Pilgrims saw:

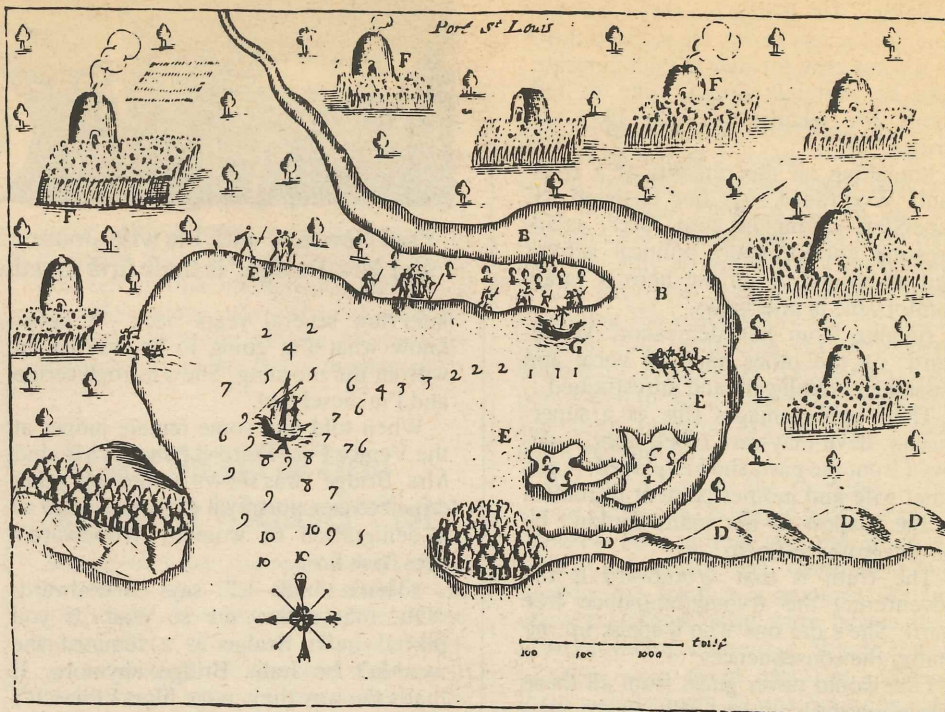
"The summer after the Pilgrims landed, they sent two envoys on a diplomatic mission to treat with Massasoit, a famous chief encamped some 40 miles away at what is now Warren, Rhode Island. The envoys discovered and described a scene of absolute havoc. Villages lay in ruins because there was no one to tend them. The ground was strewn with the skulls and the bones of thousands of Indians who had died and none was left to bury them." During the next fifteen years, additional epidemics, most of which we know to have been smallpox, struck the Indians. Almost as profound as their effect on Indian demographics was the impact of the epidemics on the two cultures, white and red. The Puritans found it easy to infer that they had God on their side. To a friend in England in 1634, John Winthrop, Governor of Massachusetts Colony, wrote:

"But for the natives in these parts, God hath so pursued them, as for 300 miles space the greatest part of them are swept away by the smallpox which still continues among them. So as God hath thereby cleared our title to this place, those who remain in these parts, being in all not 50, have put themselves under our protection. . . . Many Indians drew the same inference. After all, neither they nor the Pilgrims had access to the germ theory of disease. Indian healers could supply no cure for the disaster that had befallen them. Their religion offered no explanation. That of the whites did. Like the Europeans three centuries before them, many Indians surrendered to alcohol or other forms of defeatist behavior or began to listen to Christianity. These epidemics constituted perhaps the most important single geopolitical event of the first third of the 1600s, anywhere on the planet. They meant that the British would face no real Indian challenge for their first fifty years in America. Indeed, the plague helped cause the warm reception Plymouth enjoyed in its first formative years from the Wampanoags. Massasoit needed

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In the absence of any illustrations of the epidemics in New England, these Aztec drawings of smallpox, coupled with the words of William Bradford, Governor of Plymouth, describing the scene near his colony's trading post at Windsor, Connecticut, in 1634, convey something of the horror. "This spring also, those Indians that lived about their trading house there, fell sick of the small pox and died most miserably; for a sorer disease cannot befall them, they fear it more than the plague. For usually they that have this disease have them in abundance, and for want of bedding and linen and other helps they fall into a lamentable condition as they lie on their hard mats, the pox breaking and mattering and running one into another, their skin cleaving by reason thereof to the mats they lie on. When they turn them, a whole side will flay off at once as it were, and they will be all of a gore blood, most fearful to behold. And then being very sore, what with cold and other distempers, they die like rotten sheep."



One of the Pilgrims' sources of information about New England were the maps of Samuel Champlain, including this chart of Plymouth when it was still the Indian village Patuxent, before the plague of 1617. In choosing Patuxent to build their new town, the invaders followed a pattern. Everywhere in the hemisphere, Europeans pitched camp right in the middle of native populations — Cuzco, Mexico City, Natchez, Chicago. Throughout New England, colonists appropriated Indian cornfields, which explains why so many town names end in "field" — Marshfield, Springfield, Deerfield, and so on.



# TRUTH

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to ally with the Pilgrims because the plague had so weakened his villages that he feared the Mohawks to the west.

In Colonial America, everyone knew all this. Indeed, even before the *Mayflower* sailed, King James of England gave thanks to "Almighty God in his great goodness and bounty towards us," for sending this "wonderful plague among the salvages."

But it's no surprise that my college students have never heard of it. I have surveyed twelve of the best-selling history textbooks used in our high schools, and most of them don't even mention it.

## "Errand Into the Wilderness"

Instead, as usually told, the story of the Pilgrims constitutes a heroic myth. Battered by storm, hopelessly off course, the Pilgrims undertook what New England historian Perry Miller called an "errand into the wilderness." The imagery is right out of "Star Trek:" "to go boldly where none dared go before." Our high school texts emphasize this against-the-odds nature of the enterprise, referring to "the little party" in their "small, storm-battered English vessel."

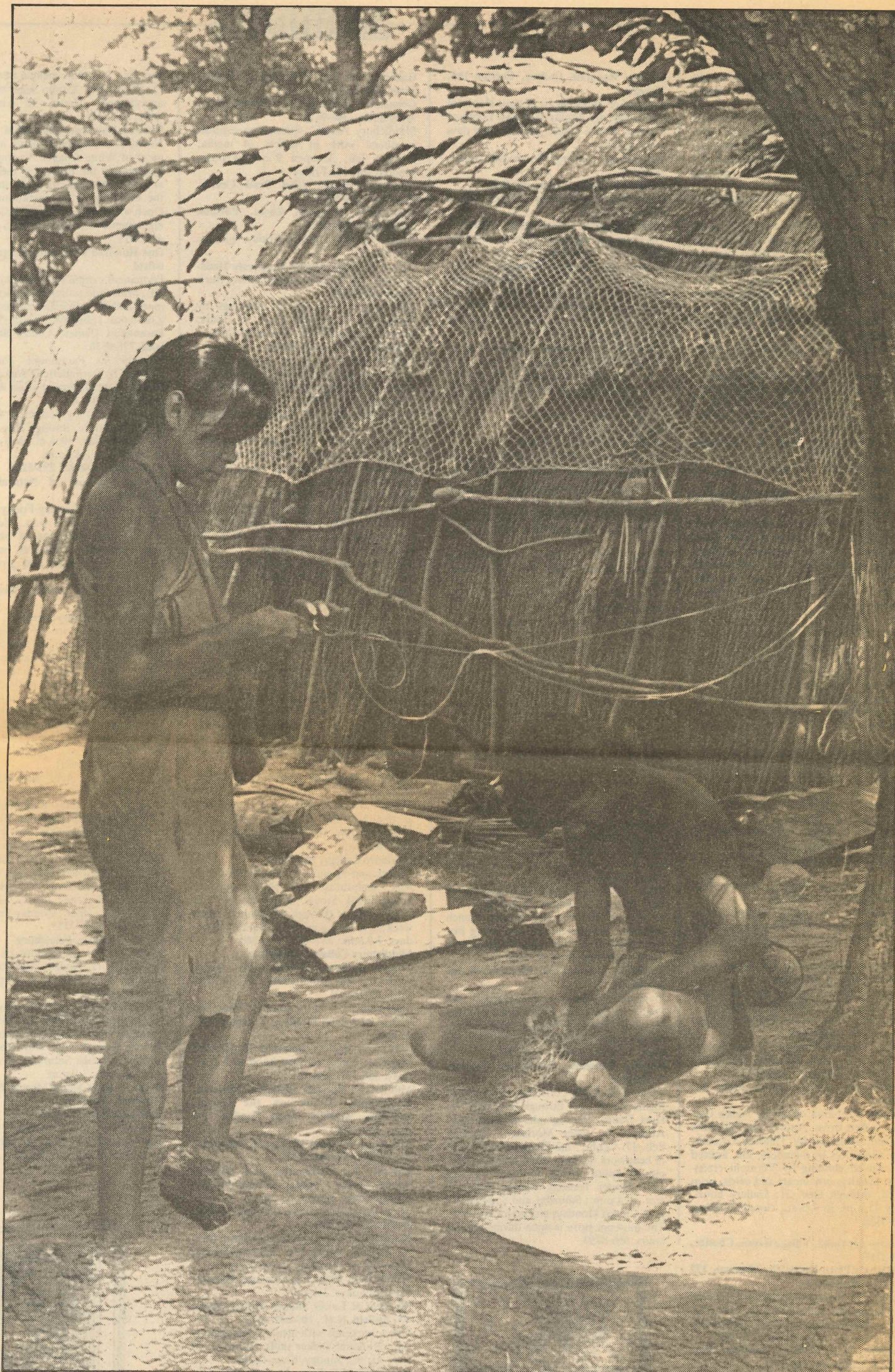
The Pilgrims had intended to go to Virginia, where there already was a British settlement, according to the texts, but "violent storms blew their ship off course," or else an "error in navigation" caused them to end up hundreds of miles to the north. How did the Pilgrims end up in Massachusetts? Only one text tells the truth — and it is a shocker! If the United States dates from 1620, then our nation was founded in a hijacking! Bear in mind that Pilgrims numbered only 35 of the 102 settlers aboard the *Mayflower*. The rest were ordinary folk seeking their fortunes in the new Virginia colony.

The Pilgrims, meanwhile, had no intention of settling in Virginia. Massachusetts was neither wild nor unknown to them. They had maps drawn by Samuel Champlain in 1605. John Smith had studied the area in 1614, and he offered to guide the Pilgrim leaders. They rejected his services as too expensive, because they could bring along his book, instead!

Squanto, an Indian from the village of Patuxent, Massachusetts, had provided one of the financiers of the *Mayflower* with a detailed description of the area. They had even sent an advance man, Captain Thomas Dermer, to be waiting for the Pilgrims when they arrived, although he had sailed away when they were delayed in England.

Nonetheless, because the Pilgrim leaders, their merchant sponsors and the *Mayflower's* captain all had lied about their intended destination, "The New England landing came as a rude surprise for the bedraggled and tired non-Pilgrim majority on board the *Mayflower*," says the sole text, *Land of Promise*, that tells the truth of this bizarre episode.

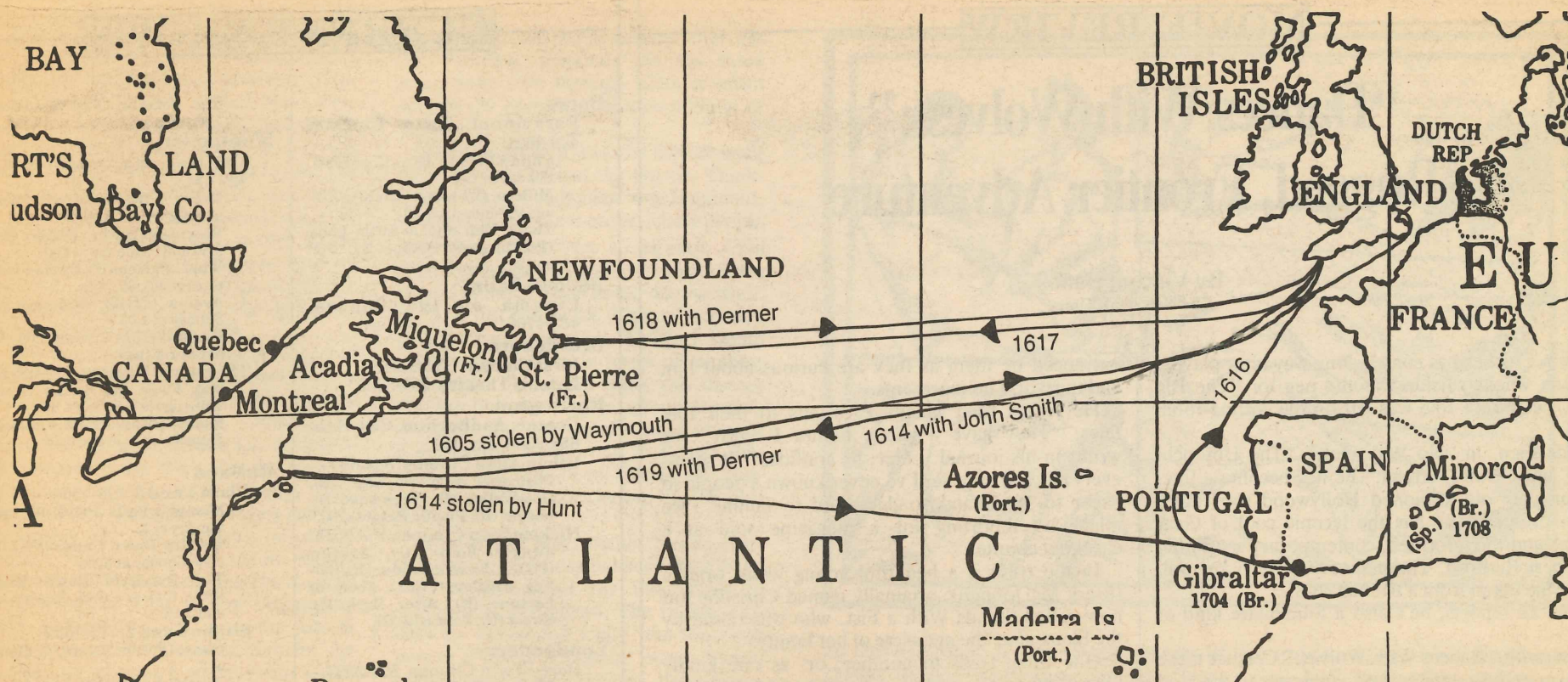
"They had joined the expedition seeking economic opportunity in the Virginia tobacco plantations." Obviously, these passengers were not happy at having been taken elsewhere, and rumors of mutiny



COURTESY: PLIMOTH PLANTATION

The Wampanoag settlement at Plimoth Plantation includes examples of wetus, houses made of saplings, woven mats, and rushes. The Natives' frequent bathing shocked the British, who often went months or even years without removing all their clothes at one time.





Squanto's travels acquainted him with more of the world than any Pilgrim. He had crossed the Atlantic six times, twice as a British captive, and had lived in Maine, Newfoundland, Spain, and England, as well as Massachusetts. As translator, ambassador, and technical advisor, he was essential to the survival of Plymouth in its first three years.

spread quickly. *Promise* then ties this unrest to the Mayflower Compact, giving its readers a uniquely fresh interpretation as to why the settlers adopted the agreement and why it was so democratic: "To avoid rebellion, the Pilgrim leaders made a remarkable concession to the other colonists. They issued a call for every male on board, regardless of religion or economic status, to join in the creation of a 'civil body politic.'"

## "It Was With God's help ... For How Else Could We Have Done It?"

Settlement proceeded, not with God's help, but with the Indians'. The Pilgrims chose Plymouth because of its beautiful cleared fields, recently planted in corn, coupled with a useful harbor and "a brook of fresh water that flowed into the harbor," as our best-selling high school textbook, *Triumph of the American Nation*, puts it.

It was a lovely site for a town; indeed, until the plague, it had been a town, for "New Plimoth" was none other than the village of Patuxent! In so choosing, the invaders followed a pattern. Everywhere in the hemisphere, Europeans pitched camp right in the middle of native populations — Cuzco, Mexico City, Natchez, Chicago. Throughout New England, colonists appropriated Indian cornfields, which explains why so many town names end in "field" — Marshfield, Springfield, Deerfield, and so on. Indian assistance started on the Pilgrims' second full day in Massachusetts. A settler's journal tells us:

"We marched to the place we called Cornhill, where we had

found the corn before. At another place we had seen before, we dug and found some more corn, two or three baskets full, and a bag of beans . . . In all we had about ten bushels, which will be enough for seed. It was with God's help that we found this corn, for how else could we have done it, without meeting some Indians who might trouble us . . . "The next morning, we found a place like a grave. We decided to dig it up. We found first a mat, and under that a fine bow . . .

We also found bowls, trays, dishes, and things like that. We took several of the prettiest things to carry away with us, and covered the body up again."

A place "like a grave!" Although the Pilgrims continued to rob graves for years, more help came from a live Indian, Squanto. Here my students return to familiar turf, for they have all have learned the Squanto legend. *Land of Promise* provides an archetypal account:

"Squanto had learned their language, he explained, from English fishermen who ventured into the New England waters each summer. Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to plant corn, squash, and pumpkins. Would the small band of settlers have survived without Squanto's help? We cannot say.

But by the fall of 1621, colonists and Indians could sit down to several days of feast and thanksgiving to God (later celebrated as the first Thanksgiving)." What do the books leave out about Squanto? First, how he learned English. As a boy, along with four Penobscot Indians, he was stolen by a British captain in about 1605 and taken to England, where he spent nine years, two of them in the employ of a Plymouth merchant who later helped finance the *Mayflower*. At length, the merchant helped him arrange passage back to Massachusetts.

Then, in 1614, a British slave raider seized him and two dozen fellow Indians and sold them into slavery in Malaga, Spain. Squanto escaped from slavery, escaped from Spain, and made his way back to England. In 1619 he talked Thomas Dermer into taking him along on his next trip to Cape Cod. It happens that Squanto's fabulous odyssey provides a hook into the plague story, a hook that our texts squander, even though they devote space to detailing his helpfulness. For now Squanto set foot again on Massachusetts soil and walked to his home village of Patuxent, only to make the horrifying discovery that he was the sole member of his village still alive. No wonder he threw in his lot with the Pilgrims! How do we assess the account in *Promise*? What are we to make of books that tell us the unimportant details — Squanto's name, the occupation of his enslavers — while mitting his enslavement and the crucial fact of the plague?

## "Truth Should be Held Sacred, At Whatever Cost"

Should we learn and teach these things? Or should we, like our texts, look the other way? An early Massachusetts settler, Col. Thomas Aspin wall-acknowledged, "It is painful to advert to these things. But our forefathers," he continued, "though wise, pious, and sincere, were nevertheless, in respect to Christian charity, under a cloud; and, in history, truth should be held sacred, at whatever cost." Thanksgiving is full of embarrassing facts. The Separatists weren't even called "Pilgrims" until an amateur historian applied the term 250 years later! The archetypal Thanksgiving handouts that school children have carried home for decades portray the groaning tables in the woods, with the Pilgrims

in their starched Sunday best and the almost naked Indians, complete with the caption, "They served pumpkins and turkeys and corn and squash. The Indians had never seen such a feast!"

When his son brought home this information from his elementary school, Native American novelist Michael Dorris pointed out that it was "the Pilgrims (who) had literally never seen such a feast, since all foods mentioned are exclusively indigenous to the Americas and had been provided by the local tribe." Perhaps most embarrassing is the ideological meaning of Thanksgiving, that holiday when we give thanks to God as a nation for the blessings which He(sic) hath bestowed upon us. If we are to maintain the conceit that God is on our side, we may as well thank Him openly for the gift of the European plagues that, beginning 100 years before the Plymouth landfall and continuing for 300 years there after, reduced the Native American population in the United States and Canada from probably 18,000,000 to one tenth that number.

We can follow in the thinking of Increase Bather, who told of a land conflict between new settlers and old in 1631: "But God ended the controversy by sending the small pox amongst the Indians at August, who were before that time exceeding numerous. Whole towns of them were swept away, in some of them not so much as one Soul escaping the Destruction." But if our histories and our holidays claim that God is on our side, we have to understand that those on the other side may not share our delight in them. As Native American Rupert Costo put it, testifying before a Senate Subcommittee, "There is not one Indian in the whole of this country who does not cringe in anguish and frustration because of these textbooks. There is not one Indian child who has not come home in shame and tears . . ."