



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on November 25, 2010

Who Funded the Mayflower?

Richard Maybury's "The Great Thanksgiving Hoax," first published in 1999 summarized the sanitized version of the Pilgrim's landing at Plymouth Rock in 1620 which appears in most high school history texts:

The official story has the Pilgrims boarding the *Mayflower*, coming to America and establishing the Plymouth colony in the winter of 1620-21. This first winter is hard, and half the colonists die. But the survivors are hard working and tenacious, and they learn new farmed techniques from the Indians. The harvest of 1621 is bountiful. The Pilgrims hold a celebration and give thanks to God. They are grateful for the wonderful new abundant land He has given them.



Not exactly. As Maybury points out, history is much different. Fifty-three of the 102 souls that left England in September of 1620 perished that first winter. Of those who survived, many were virtually incapacitated and unable to work because of the famine resulting in starvation and disease. And many of those who were healthy enough to work stole food from the store house. As William Bradford, leader of the colony, noted in his journal, *"Of Plimouth Plantation,"* the crops were small because "much was stolen both by night and day, before it became scarce eatable." After their attempts to grow crops failed in 1622, "they began to think how they might raise as much corn as they could, [in order to] obtain a better crop."

The original plan created an economic community, called a "common course," by which each member would contribute to the warehouse as much as he could produce, and take from the warehouse what he needed to live. Maybury wrote that this sounded like Karl Marx's "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need," which was why, according to Maybury's account, the Pilgrims were starving. He concluded that when Bradford abandoned the "common course" that was the end of famines.

Maybury's article continues to get airtime and blogtime, which raised the ire of Kate Zernike at *The New York Times*. Her review of Maybury's article comes out with a different twist. The "common course" was instituted by the business interests who funded the Pilgrim's venture in the first place. A closer look at the real history behind the Pilgrims' experience is revealing. Historian Charles A. Beard's *Basic History of the United States* reveals that:

Under English law all the territory claimed in America belonged to the Crown. The monarch could withhold it from use, keep any part of it as a royal domain, or grant it, by charter or patent, in large or small blocks, to privileged companies or persons.



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And so, when the Pilgrims decided to leave England for political, economic, social or religious reasons, they had to get permission. As farmers and working class citizens they had little if any capital. So they approached a group of private capitalist entrepreneurs who were interested in exploiting the new world for profit, especially gold. As historian Robert V. Remini explains in *A Short History of the United States*, this group “formed a joint-stock company, the London Company, in which shares were sold to stockholders for twelve pounds ten shillings [roughly \$250] in order to sponsor colonization by settlers in North America.” The London Company then obtained a grant from the Crown and additional financing through the Merchant Adventurers which considered their investment as a loan to the Pilgrims to be paid back, with interest and a share of the profits. Upon landing, the Pilgrims considered themselves as bound in a “common course” to repay the loan as quickly as possible. As Zernike explained, the Pilgrims “were more like shareholders in an early corporation than subjects of socialism.” Richard Pickering, deputy director of Plimouth Plantation, said the plan “was directed ultimately to private profit.”

The irony, then, is that the part of history most frequently left out not only ignores the Pilgrims’ failed experiment with collective farming, but also the fact that it was private capitalists, risk-taking entrepreneurs, hoping to gain a profit from the venture, who were the ones who funded the start of America. As another historian, Steve Wiegand noted:

Part of the charm of U. S. history is that many of the images it conjures up are based on things that never really happened. Many historians are appalled at the acceptance of myths as fact by so many Americans.

It should be comforting that this really happened: the land of the free and the home of brave was initially funded by capitalists hoping to turn a profit. How delightful.



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