

TURKEY, ROCKS, AND LIES
The Strange Recipe Behind America's Creation Myth

Christian Barravecchio

Anglo-American Protestants — New Englanders in particular — molded the new nation's memory. And so a creation myth arose, of Pilgrim Fathers seeding a new land with their piety and work ethic. The winners wrote history.

But losers matter, especially in the history of early America. It was Spanish, French, and Portuguese voyages that spurred the English across the Atlantic in the first place, and that determined where they settled. Early Europeans also introduced horses, pigs, weeds, swords, guns — and most lethally, diseases to which Indians had no resistance (Horwitz, 6.).¹

Each Thanksgiving celebrates the Pilgrims as America's founders, but their fame rests on the graves of those Spanish and French explorers whose journeys sowed what the Pilgrims later reaped. In many classrooms, America's story jumped from Columbus's 1492 voyage to the Pilgrims 1620 landing at Plymouth, as if little of consequence occurred in between. Yet during this forgotten era, Europeans advanced through the Americas, reshaping indigenous societies as they established settlements. They brought new religion and culture, while introducing devastating diseases that destroyed the cultures of those who they first encountered. In *A Voyage Long and Strange*, Tony Horwitz argued that Americans ignored the centuries between Columbus and Plymouth to create a simplified national origin, mirroring a cultural preference for a singular heroic story rather than gradual and complex beginnings. The forgotten realities of conquest and loss undermined indigenous and European lives in the sixteenth century. The myths created by Anglo-Protestant New Englanders and the ways the nation remembers their story ultimately has reduced other winners and losers to irrelevance. Long before the Pilgrims arrived, the forces of European expansion had already indelibly reshaped the continent, profoundly affecting Indigenous and European lives. In this context, Anglo-Protestants recast Plymouth as a symbol of heroic beginnings and shaped the narrative of national origin. Over the following

¹ Tony Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange: on the Trail of Vikings, Conquistadors, Lost Colonists, and Other Adventurers in Early America* (Picador USA, 2009), 6.

centuries, symbols such as Thanksgiving and Plymouth Rock cemented this narrative into American memory and obscured the complex histories of winners and losers. Indigenous peoples were the clear losers, while the French and Spaniards initially triumphed; yet ultimately, New Englanders became the true winners, remembered as America's idealized founders.

European conquest, disease, and violence transformed the Americas long before the Pilgrims' arrival in 1620. In fact, the Europeans paved the way and prepared the ground on which the nation's "founders" later arrived. American myth has portrayed the Pilgrims as brave settlers who arrived in an untouched wilderness. In reality, by their arrival, Europeans had already traveled to half of the continental United States.² In other words, the Pilgrims' "virgin land" was in fact a devastated one, scarred from previous contact.³ The Pilgrims' success was never a pure beginning but rather one built on over a century of European presence. Captain Thomas Dermer, while heading to the Americas in hopes of establishing trade and settlements, found many villages "not long since populous now utterly void," and their inhabitants dead.⁴ Ironically, this was the very shoreline where the *Mayflower* Pilgrims landed about a year later. If this was not enough, an Indigenous man who had been kidnapped, enslaved, and taken to Europe returned on Dermer's ship six years earlier. This man, Tisquantum—nicknamed "Squanto" by the Pilgrims—was the last survivor of the Patuxet. He became an interpreter for the colonists, and their leader William Bradford even described him as a "special instrument sent of God."⁵ This perfectly depicts the moral inversion of the Pilgrims' "divine blessings" and the Natives' absence. The loss of the Indigenous directly enabled the Pilgrim's success. Although it seemed as if only the Indigenous living on the American shorelines were affected, the previous century's

² Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, 4.

³ Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, 1.

⁴ Thomas Dermer, "Letter of Thomas Dermer: Describing his Passage from Maine to Virginia, A.D. 1619," (New York: 1841) Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/11022272/>.

⁵ William Bradford and Francis Murphy, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647* (Modern Library, 1981).

conquistadors inflicted even greater devastation. De Soto, for instance, turned Natives into “traveling agents of infection,” and diseases such as smallpox spread long before English arrival.⁶ These epidemics were no coincidence, natural disaster, or a blessing by God; they were the consequence of the Europeans’ prior generations. Natives on nearby islands suffered similar fates. Bartolomé de las Casas, who at first participated in the conquest of Cuba and later became a Dominican priest and a strong critic of conquistadors, wrote the *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, a survey of torture and genocide of America’s Natives. He described in detail how powerful chiefdoms collapsed and were abandoned, the various ways the Spanish tortured and enslaved Natives, and other atrocities. One important example is the Taino, the group that first encountered Columbus in 1492, who quickly ceased to exist and were driven into extinction by European hands.⁷ Historian Richard Flint published *Great Cruelties Have Been Reported*, in which he presented documents where the Spanish conquistador Francisco Vázquez de Coronado’s men coldly describe the acts of sexual assault, torture, massacres, and other brutalities committed against Indigenous peoples.⁸ Disease was not the only factor of Indigenous demise; the unparalleled violence of the Europeans amplified this case, ensuring that people across the continent remembered them as destroyers. One historian explained the post-conquistador south as a “shatter zone,” in which Indigenous groups preyed on one another.⁹ Simply put, Plymouth was not the only area affected; Europeans caused a chain of continent-wide disruption. The Pilgrims’ “success” depended less on their own ability and divine providence than on the devastation wrought by earlier Europeans. This was the first factor that

⁶ Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, 211.

⁷ Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, 87-88.

⁸ Richard Flint, rpt in Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, 178-179

⁹ Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, 262.

complicated the heroic origin myth of the Pilgrims, who were better described as beneficiaries of disaster than the founders of America.

Due to the controversy against the ideal American origin, Anglo-Protestant memory-makers later recast this story to focus on providence and heroism, selectively ignoring Indigenous destruction and earlier European “winners.” Horwitz argued that memory has been selective, or as he put it “the winners wrote the history.”¹⁰ In reality, the Pilgrims’ actions did not align with the Thanksgiving myth Americans would later create. Anglo-Protestants, especially New Englanders, molded the nation’s memory by emphasizing Plymouth rather than Spanish and French ventures.¹¹ Memory has derived from cultural dominance, not historical fact. Unlike the generous Pilgrims of the Thanksgiving story, the actual settlers robbed graves, stole buried food reserves, and exploited Indigenous devastation.¹² Through a long and arduous process, the recast successfully excised any moral compromises and depicted the Pilgrims as pious founders. Another flaw with the Thanksgiving myth was that the Spanish and French had them before the Pilgrims. In other words, the so-called “First” Thanksgiving was not the first at all. In St. Augustine, fifty-six years before the feast, Spanish conquistador and later first governor of Florida Pedro Menéndez de Avilés “had the Indians fed and dined himself.”¹³ In similar fashion, Americans neglected this story in favor of the more fitting Thanksgiving they have been celebrating. This has been a strong example of selective memory in which “myth trumps fact,” and helped create fact as well.¹⁴ Nations have preferred usable myths over complex truths. The Anglo-Protestants cleverly designed the Pilgrim story and emphasized certain parts to offer a

¹⁰ Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, 6.

¹¹ Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, 6.

¹² Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, 380.

¹³ Mendoza Grajales, Francisco Lopez De. Memoir of the happy result and prosperous voyage of the fleet commanded by the illustrious Captain-General Pedro Menendez de Aviles: which sailed from Cadiz on the morning of Thursday, June 28th, for the coast of Florida, and arrived there on the 28th of August. New York, 1875. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/11007012/>.

¹⁴ Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, 387-388.

clean, moral origin. This advantage was part of what elevated the Pilgrim myth above other colonists. For instance, the cruel and conquering conquistadors were far less suitable for an origin myth. The Spanish and French were not “forgotten” by accident; their violent narratives were instead deemed unusable and were left in the shadows of America’s history. New Englanders not only selected Plymouth but also built it into “fact” by suppressing and neglecting rival stories. Stephen Jay Gould explained this as Americans having a “physic need for an indigenous creation myth,”¹⁵ and Plymouth fulfilled that role. Plymouth came out on top not because of its truth, but rather its cultural and emotional usability. For this reason, the Anglo-Protestants successfully enshrined Plymouth as America’s “beginning.” To preserve this story, New Englanders and later Americans as a whole embedded Plymouth and its Pilgrims into national symbols and rituals to ensure the myth endured for many generations.

In addition to Anglo-Protestant advocacy, Thanksgiving’s endurance centuries after its origin can be largely attributed to its presence in rituals, monuments, and education. In this way, Plymouth’s transformation into a cultural symbol reshaped national memory. One iconic symbol of Plymouth has been Plymouth Rock, which later tradition claimed the Pilgrims onto when disembarking the *Mayflower*. In other words, the rock was imagined as the first point of contact between the future “founders” of America and their new home. The rock, however, was never mentioned in a single early Pilgrim record, confirming it as a symbol of myth. Unlike the story of Thanksgiving, which had some basis in events between the Pilgrims and Indigenous peoples, Plymouth Rock had absolutely no ties to a trace of early American history. Yet, the rock became a powerful symbol of the country, its people, and even some of its recent immigrants. This has demonstrated the strong correlation between collective memory and invented symbols, rather than historical accuracy. Returning to the story of Thanksgiving, the Pilgrims themselves only

¹⁵ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Panda's Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History* (Norton, 1992).

wrote two paragraphs about the feast as it was truthfully, a relatively unimportant event. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln made a proclamation that transformed Thanksgiving into a unifying holiday in the midst of the Civil War. Notably, Lincoln's proclamation never mentioned either turkeys or Pilgrims; rather, he used the holiday as a means of political support.¹⁶ This showed how a local and relatively unimportant event transformed into a national ritual at a time that the country desperately needed unity. Therefore, Thanksgiving was initially made a holiday to acknowledge the Union's sacrifices, not to celebrate a feast. Eventually, Thanksgiving was included in citizenship manuals, where applicants were taught the event as the country's origin.¹⁷ This demonstrated another instance in which Thanksgiving, a myth, carried state power and became embedded into many people's identities. When Horwitz returned to Plymouth at the end of the book, he overheard visitors asking if Columbus himself had dropped the Pilgrims off. This demonstrated how America's origin myths amalgamated over a century of history into a single simplified story and its absolute dominance over actual history. Although the majority of Americans celebrated Thanksgiving, some Indigenous descendents marked the day as a Day of Mourning. They protested the idea of celebrating a genocide and the real history that had been forgotten. Even in resistance the holiday's mythic frame has remained central in American history, showing just how powerful symbols have been in shaping memory. Myth became national identity, even when fact pointed elsewhere.

The story that Americans have explained as their beginnings revealed less about the past itself and more about the needs of those shaping national memory. Horwitz showed that Plymouth became America's "origin" not because it was truly the beginning, but because its survival story could be better reshaped into a heroic myth. Earlier European-Indigenous

¹⁶ Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, 381.

¹⁷ Horwitz, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, 381.

interactions were instead pushed to the margins of memory. Epidemic disease, conquest, and sheer cruelty had devastated Indigenous societies, creating the empty “virgin” lands that enabled the Pilgrims’ survival. Anglo-Protestant New Englanders then reframed their survival story into a usable national myth, erasing Pilgrim opportunism and suppressing French, Spanish, and Indigenous histories that contradicted it. Through symbols such as Plymouth Rock, Thanksgiving, and national education, this simplified narrative became fixed into American identity, even through protest and adversity. Just as Plymouth myth-making turned catastrophic events into providential origin, later ideologies such as John Louis Sullivan’s *Manifest Destiny* used the same logic and acquired similar results.¹⁸ In both cases, conquest and dispossession were reframed as divine purpose and national progress, a clear pattern that reflected American society that preferred myths of triumph and unity over histories of violence and complexity. The Pilgrim myth has endured to this day not because of its truth, but because it fulfilled cultural needs; yet its persistence has warned that what nations forget can matter just as much as what they choose to remember.

¹⁸ "The Origins of Manifest Destiny," in *Manifest Destiny*, Updated Edition (Chelsea House, 2017), online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=17232&itemid=WE52&articleId=397179.

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"The Origins of Manifest Destiny." In *Manifest Destiny, Updated Edition*. Chelsea House, 2017. online.infobase.com/Auth/Index?aid=17232&itemid=WE52&articleId=397179.