

The Mayflower and You

by Charles B. Wendel

Four hundred years ago this past Saturday the Mayflower dropped anchor near Cape Cod, Massachusetts instead of in the northern Virginia area the sailors were hoping for. The Pilgrims left England first for Holland, with many living near where Rembrandt went to school. After Holland some Pilgrims then set sail across the Atlantic to find a place where they could worship freely, what they believed was a new Promised Land.

Due to bad weather the ship arrived more than a month later than intended. Because they landed outside of Virginia, the charter or contract they had agreed to as part of obtaining financing for the trip had no relevance. Plus, a significant number of the passengers were not Pilgrims and had their own interests that differed from the Pilgrims. This potential conflict resulted in what is now called the Mayflower Compact, the first document that established self-government in the New World. And they held the first election ever on our shores.

Many of you remember the story of their long winter and their early 1621 meeting with Samoset, Squanto, and the Wampanoag tribe. Following a good harvest the Pilgrims invited them to the First Thanksgiving. The trip and the Compact were big deals, now largely ignored or forgotten. A search of the *NY Times* and CNN yesterday turned up no stories about this major anniversary.

Thanksgiving used to be the American holiday that everyone celebrated with anticipation and joy, no matter one's religion, politics, or ethnic background. Of course the pandemic has eroded if not destroyed what was once a sacred American holiday with TV doctors suggesting shorter meals with fewer people eating outside with masks and gloves on. Oh, and don't forget to put the mask back on between bites, unless you are the Governor of California. Fun!

Many Americans now view Thanksgiving Day with disdain or embarrassment, as if the holiday is a stain rather than an event that borders on the miraculous, like America itself.

Happily for me, unlike Peter Wood, the President of the National Association of Scholars, quoted below, I no longer need to deal with inane teachers pushing their distorted, politically charged view of history that undercuts our heritage.

“Like all kindergartners, Adam gets Thanksgiving off from school. Exactly why he gets the day off is something of a mystery to Adam. His teacher, Mr. Fiddle, hews to his New Jersey school district's policy that allows teachers to exercise discretion in whether to explain the meaning of this holiday. Adam's mom met with Mr. Fiddle who patiently explained that because there is ‘no conclusive evidence that the first Thanksgiving happened and teaching about it would be oppressive to Native Americans, teachers are allowed to touch upon the holiday, or not at all, as they see fit.’

No conclusive evidence? There is plenty of evidence that 53 surviving Pilgrims came together to celebrate a communal feast to ‘rejoice together’ (in Edward Winslow's words) in fall 1621. The details were contemporaneously recorded by the colony's chroniclers. Two years later, they recorded the feast as a ‘Day of Thanksgiving.’

There is no serious scholarly doubt about these facts. Our national holiday version of Thanksgiving emerged as these things do out of memories, recapitulations, sometimes fractured traditions, an impulse to valorize the past, and crises that quickened the need for communal gathering. It is no small thing that our current national holiday was enunciated by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 several months after the Battle of Gettysburg.

Mr. Fiddle, shame on you. The children entrusted to your care ought to know that Thanksgiving is not just a private celebration but a truly national holiday. We give thanks for having come together through the dark vicissitudes. We give thanks for the abundance that is more profoundly abundant during lean times. We give thanks for the blessings of liberty that enable us to encompass and rise above our differences.”

The above must have something to do with banking and financial services, right? Even if it does not, we need to be reminded of the Thanksgiving story and what it should mean to us, particularly now.

But most bankers also share a heritage. In some cases that heritage is being eroded by the tsunami of digital-this and AI-that, along with cost reduction sweeping away the traditions of customer service and customized client solutions. My experience is that customers are thankful for those remaining banks that maintain the focus that distinguished them in the past.