

### **13. Founding of American Exceptionalism: Jamestown and Plymouth Plantation**

The main language of the young United States of America was English, its laws were most similar to England, the religion of most Americans were similar to those in England, and even its buildings closely resembled England. Without England, there would be no America. For us to understand the United States of America, it is essential to understand the history of individual liberty as it developed in Great Britain. This is why this book focuses so much on this theme in the preceding chapters. However, it was not until Englishmen took their traditions and planted them in the soil of North America that American exceptionalism took hold in the new land. The English political tradition needed the great expanse of North America and the distance between Great Britain and the English colonists to create the opportunity for individual liberty to flourish as it never had in history.

The first English attempt to found a colony in North America was by Sir Walter Raleigh in 1585, and it ended in mystery. Queen Elizabeth I granted Sir Raleigh a royal charter to establish a colony in America to find gold and riches for Great Britain. Raleigh named this colony Roanoke, and it was located in present-day North Carolina. After a settlement was established, Governor John White left for England for supplies. Returning three years later, Governor White found no trace of the 115 colonists he had left behind; only the word “Croatan” was engraved on a tree. Croatan was the name of one of the Indian tribes. No one today knows what happened to this lost colony.

With Jamestown and Plymouth Plantation, we have the story of how two English colonies began in America, but we see also how the beginning of the United States of America was exceptional, formed by religious faith and free market principles. Jamestown was founded primarily by people who risked their lives for better economic opportunities in a place that was largely unknown. Plymouth Plantation was founded mainly by religious people who wanted to practice their faith in their own way, out of reach of Great Britain’s religious restrictions. Jamestown colony was financed by investors who pooled their money together to form corporations. In both colonies, the settlers faced unbelievable hardships and suffered greatly. During the first few years, both colonies were run on a communal model, with the land owned by one company and the work and profits shared by all, regardless of each individual effort and accomplishment. After each colony faced utter defeat, with over half dying in the first years, leaders of both colonies decided to leave the communal model by giving to each settler their own land, and each settler then profited individually from their own labor. This change saved both Jamestown and Plymouth Plantation. Both the Jamestown and Plymouth Plantation colonies faced complete catastrophe, and in both colonies, they decided on the same remedy that brought them success – free market principles.

#### **Jamestown**

The first successful English colony in North America was the 1607 settlement of Jamestown, in the colony of Virginia. Seeing the riches Spain was taking from North and South America, the English wanted to join in. But instead of being led by the English government, the English colonies received their start from private citizens, through a type of business called a joint-stock company. Individual investors founded the London Company in 1607 and received approval from King James I to found a settlement in

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Virginia. The company chose a governor and colonists were employees. Most were gentlemen adventurers seeking gold who thought physical labor was beneath them. When they arrived in April, there were flowers in bloom along the James River. The settlers took months before deciding on a place to build a settlement, and by then it was too late for them to plant crops.

The land of America was not a paradise, but was a nightmare for the first settlers of Jamestown. Out of 120 colonists, more than two-thirds died the first winter. The settlers died of malnutrition, malaria, diseases, brackish water, and were attacked by Indians who viewed the English as another tribe to oppose. In 1608, Captain John Smith assumed control of Jamestown and imposed military discipline. He made this rule, "He who will not work will not eat." Smith organized raids on Indians, which brought the settlers food, but also more hatred against them. But in the second winter, in 1608, less than 15% of the settlers died. Smith was injured and sent back to England.

The London Company was now called the Virginia Company, and in the winter of 1609, the settlers experienced the harshest conditions imaginable. Ships from England brought people and supplies, making the number of inhabitants to nearly 500. There was not enough food for the people, and the Indians were intent on destroying the new settlement, attacking anyone who stepped outside. Settlers ate everything possible that winter, known as the Starving Time. Their meals were rats, mice, snakes, toadstools, horses, and even dead humans. When another supply ship arrived in the spring of 1610, only 60 of the 490 settlers were still alive. That summer, another 150 settlers died.

For the next five years, Jamestown was led by Sir Thomas Dale, a cruel and exacting man. He drove away some of the Indians and built fortifications. He punished settlers for not working hard enough by whippings and putting them to work in irons for years. Those who rebelled were executed by being tortured on the wheel, starved to death, or burned to death.

Pocahontas is perhaps the most well-known of Indians during the beginnings of Jamestown. She was one of Chief Powhatan's hundred (or hundreds) of children, but reportedly his favorite. As a child, Pocahontas had played with the boys within Jamestown. As a young woman of 16, English captain Argall paid Indian chief Japazaws a copper kettle to capture her. The Jamestown settlers held Pocahontas captive so Chief Powhatans would stop attacking the settlers. In Jamestown, Pocahontas chose to become a Christian and was baptized. John Rolfe married her, they had a son, and Pocahontas went to England and was treated as a princess. Pocahontas died, though, of tuberculosis on the return voyage to America. Historians think 90% of American Indians died from European diseases. Pocahontas gives us an example

## **Tobacco**

The first settlers of Jamestown believed they would find gold treasures that matched or surpassed those found by the Spanish among the Aztecs and Incas. In North America, there was little or no gold to be found. However, the Indians introduced a plant that came to be the moneymaker of Virginia and other southern colonies – tobacco. Tobacco is an addictive stimulant that can be sniffed, chewed, or smoked. It soon became very popular in Europe, and was a most popular drug in America until the 1980s.

### **The Great Charter of Virginia**

In November of 1618, everything changed for the people of Jamestown and the Virginia Colony. The Virginia Company granted to the people living in Virginia a “Great Charter.” Before the Great Charter, everyone was fed and clothed out of a common warehouse, and the laziest man received the same amount as the most industrious. There was a disincentive to work. There was never enough food, and the military laws made life harsh. Virginia was a very unpopular place to go to.

Under the new Great Charter of Virginia, the colonists were allowed a voice in their government. Virginia was granted a governor, a council, and a general assembly. The general assembly, known as the House of Burgesses, was elected by property holders of Virginia. It is the first group of elected lawmakers in North American history. In 1623, the company went bankrupt, and the governor and the council of estate were chosen by the king of England. Nowhere else in the world, outside of England, was there a freer people than in Virginia. Everywhere else, a ruler dictated to the people what they had to do. In Jamestown, free government in America was born.

The Great Charter of Virginia also had major changes involving private property and how an individual could support himself. The land of Virginia was divided into farms, and each man received the right to own land and work for himself. Immediately, industrious people of Virginia set out to work, and their colony saw huge improvements in economy. Virginia became an attraction for many English people. In England, land was scarce and extremely expensive, and in Virginia, every owner of land had the right to vote. These two aspects made Virginia, and America, exceptions to the rule in the world. Nowhere else could a person of humble means own land, prosper, and vote.

One year after the Great Charter, 1619, two major social changes came to Virginia. Women arrived, and slave traders brought African slaves. Unlike the French, the English colonists normally would not marry Indian women. The arrival of English females meant the colony would grow on its own. To marry, a man had to gain consent from a woman, and he had to pay her passage from England with 150 pounds of tobacco. With the arrival of slaves began the great slave issue in America that ended with the Civil War, over two hundred years later.

### **Plymouth Plantation and the First Thanksgiving**

In the early 1600s, a group of people called Pilgrims left England to find a new home where they could practice their religion freely. In England, everyone who was not a member of the Church of England (Anglicans) was persecuted. The Pilgrims were protestants but not Anglicans. They went to Holland, where there was religious freedom.

In Holland, the Pilgrims could practice their religion freely, however, they were not happy. Their children were learning to speak Dutch, practice Dutch customs, and were losing their English culture. Also, in England, the Pilgrims had been farmers, but in Holland, they lived in the cities. Because of these reasons, the Pilgrims decided to leave Holland.

After returning to England for a short time, the Pilgrims left for America in 1620. The king of England had allowed them to settle in Virginia. While at sea, a storm hit them, and they sailed off course, over 600 miles north of Jamestown. After traveling 65 days, they landed their ship, the Mayflower, in the New World. Before stepping ashore, they wrote The Mayflower Compact, a short paper declaring every person's intention to glorify God, follow the laws, and to honor the King of England. They wanted to make it clear to the king they were not intentionally founding a settlement far from Virginia. The Mayflower Compact is the first self-written constitution in North America. 102 English citizens set foot in America and founded Plymouth, in present-day Massachusetts. The Pilgrims stayed on their ship until homes could be built out of the wood from the forest.

At Plymouth Plantation, the first year was incredibly harsh for the Pilgrims. They settled on abandoned Indian fields. Of the 102, 45 people died during a few months. Of the eighteen women, only four survived that first year. The Pilgrims were unaccustomed to the harsh winters of the Northeast, and did not know which crops grew best. The Pilgrims were afraid of the Indians, who had attacked a Pilgrim exploring party, and so the Pilgrims made sure that when they buried their dead, they leveled all the graves, and planted corn over the dead. They did this so the Indians wouldn't know how weak the Pilgrims were.

One day in spring, the Indian Samoset walked up to the Pilgrims, and to their surprise, said "Welcome Englishmen." Samoset had learned English from English fishermen, who travelled to the American coast for abundant fishing. He introduced the Pilgrims to Squanto, who lived among English speakers for a time as a slave. When Squanto retained his freedom, he went back to his people in America. Squanto taught the Pilgrims what crops to grow and how to use fish as a fertilizer. He also acted as a peaceful contact between the most powerful Indian of the area, Chief Massasoit, and the Pilgrims.

In the fall, the Pilgrims, a very religious people, decided to set aside a time to honor God and give him thanks for all of their blessings. It is amazing to think of the faith, courage, and humility of these people. In a year, half of them had died in a cold and cruel climate. They were far from their friends and comforts. And still, they wanted to have a number of days set aside to give God thanks for their blessings. They invited their neighbors, the Indians, to show them thanks for their help, and to include them in their feast.

The first Thanksgiving in America lasted for three days, involved all of the Pilgrims (approximately 50), and 90 Indian men. It is believed the Indian women did not attend because the Indians did not trust the Englishmen. In the Indian culture of the Northeast, it was common for Indians to steal the wives of enemies, and the Indians thought the Pilgrims would do the same to them. During these three days, Indians played competitive games, and the English and Indian men shared the best foods together.

A few years later, in 1623, the governor of Massachusetts, William Bradford, wrote America's first Thanksgiving Proclamation. He set aside a specific day and time for the citizens to honor God for his blessings. Beginning with President George Washington, U.S. Presidents have issued a Thanksgiving Proclamation, as well. In 1863, in the middle of the American Civil War, where over 600,000 Americans were killed, President Abraham Lincoln declared that the last Thursday in November be set aside as... "a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens." Lincoln's proclamation made Thanksgiving Day a federal holiday.

In Plymouth Plantation, just as in Jamestown, the settlers first tried to share everything, including land, work, food, clothing, and drink. But, as in Jamestown, there were always shortages, and there were those who would not work and so benefitted from the work of others. In 1624, each family received their own land, and from that time on, Plymouth Plantation was a success. The industrious worked hard, saved, and grew in wealth and in self-sufficiency.

### **Primary Source Documents from Plymouth Plantation**

#### **The Mayflower Compact**

##### **1620**

In the name of God, Amen. We whose names are under-written, the loyal subjects of our dread sovereign Lord, King James, by the grace of God, of Great Britain, France, and Ireland King, Defender of the Faith, etc.

Having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and honor of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant and combine our selves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions and offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cape Cod, the eleventh of November [New Style, November 21], in the year of the reign of our sovereign lord, King James, of England, France, and Ireland, the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth. Anno Dom. 1620.

#### **America's First Thanksgiving Proclamation by Governor Bradford, 1623**

Inasmuch as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, peas, beans, squashes, and garden vegetables, and has made the forests to abound with game and the sea with fish and clams, and inasmuch as he has protected us from the ravages of the savages, has spared us from pestilence and disease, has granted us freedom to worship God according to the dictates of our own conscience.

Now I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all ye Pilgrims, with your wives and ye little ones, do gather at ye meeting house, on ye hill, between the hours of 9 and 12 in the day time, on Thursday, November 29th, of the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred and twenty-three and the third year since ye

Pilgrims landed on ye Pilgrim Rock, there to listen to ye pastor and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all His blessings.

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