

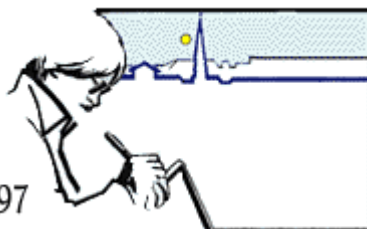


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As I Please

By J. Dennis Robinson

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Outgrowing the Pilgrims

NH's first citizen David Thompson makes a less abusive Founding Father.

Thanksgiving riles me like no other holiday. Any psychic wounds I've suffered due to Santa and the Easter Bunny have long scabbed over. Those characters were a little hard to swallow from the get-go. But the Pilgrims were another thing. They founded America, for God's sake, and I believed in them. I believed they were my forebears because they looked just like my relatives, with maybe a tad more starch.



The "rock" is where the story first unraveled. Like that little slice of tape at the Watergate hotel, they never should have left this thing behind. Every kid on every field trip is taken aback by its size -- so small. Then the questions flow. Is that the real Plymouth Rock? How do they know? Did they step on it or crash into it? How come it's so far from shore?

It's a symbolic rock, teachers told us, but from there the whole story comes undone. Kids discover there were no Thanksgiving turkeys, no pies, no cranberry sauce, no dressing. Worst of all, there were likely no Indians. Those few that survived the diseases brought by European contact were likely outside the Plymouth Plantation stockade at musket-point. The native seed corn that saved America's early white families was likely pilfered from sacred Indian graves. Squanto was not some compliant Tonto, but a regal Native American king who was kidnapped, jailed and put on display in the courts of England like a trained seal. Squanto wasn't even his name.

All this does nothing to malign the Separatists. They didn't write the biased history books, declare a national pig-out day or inflate the giant Underdog balloon for Macy's parade. They just hated the Church of England and everyone else so much that England was thrilled to see them go.

What riles me every Thanksgiving is not the Pilgrims, but the all-too-American need for white-washed history. By canonizing our founders, we've made them inaccessible. The USA started out as a wacky Fascist religious cult. So what? Countries, like people, grow up. But we can't fully mature until we get out of denial and face the truth about our always primitive past. The Pilgrims are America's inner child and its time for a healthy primal scream.

It wasn't always so. George Washington needed the myth of the Pilgrims, just like Lincoln needed the myth of Washington, Kennedy needed Lincoln, and so on. America was a mess back when New Hampshire's Sara Hale talked Lincoln into the Thanksgiving holiday idea. She was looking to medicate a national psyche that was practically schizoid over the slavery issue. The Pilgrims were a soothing distraction then. Maybe it's time we come off the Prosaic and face the facts.

But for those who can't handle the facts cold turkey, I have a suggestion. Why not simply substitute one founder for another, the way therapists modify bad behavior with good? And to that end, may I introduce -- David and Amias Thompson, New Hampshire's first European-born couple.. Certainly it would be better to select from thousands of true Native Americans who discovered America 12,000, maybe 25,000 years earlier. But behavior is best changed with baby steps.

For those who need a refresher course, there was the Jamestown Colony in 1607, Plymouth in 1620 and the Thompson party in 1623. The Virginia group should get dibs to replace the Pilgrims, except for one politically incorrect fact. They started the first tobacco plantation. Ouch!

So we're back, as it should be, to "first in the nation" New Hampshire. As far as we know (and we'll address the Dover claim to the Hilton family in an upcoming column) America's "new and improved" founding father David Thompson first set foot in Rye, NH in April 1623. His wife Amias soon followed. They arrived with a group of indentured fishermen (including Dover's Hiltons) and planters, and quickly set up a giant fortified manor called Pannaway, now Odiorne Point. Today there is scarcely a plaque to remember them by.

Little is known about Thompson except that he was granted the land by the same folks in Plymouth, England who gave the Pilgrims the nod. So go get a big eraser, open your encyclopedia to "Thanksgiving," and replace all that old stuff with the following healing information:

- **New Hampshire, I mean, "America"** was founded, not for kooky religious isolationism -- but for money. David Thompson came to fish off the Isles of Shoals. If you don't think America was founded for money, turn on your TV, pick up a magazine or drive down main street.
- **Thompson was not a religious zealot** but a scholar, a clerk, an apothecary, a traveler and a Scot. David had married Amias Cole 10 years earlier in Plymouth, England. Their son John was the first European born in what is now New Hampshire.
- **Unlike the Pilgrims**, Thompson knew where he was going. He had been here a least once before, maybe a number of times, and had selected the Piscataqua River ("where he liketh well") as the cradle of America. The Pilgrims were headed to Virginia and, as the story goes "blown off course." Ya, right.
- **Thompson had likely been to Plymouth**, Massachusetts even before the Pilgrims arrived. In fact, there is speculation that he influenced the captain of the Mayflower by telling him of that location in advance. Did Thompson therefore save the entire Plymouth Colony from a stormy death? Read on.
- **Unlike the Pilgrims**, Thompson got along with the Indians. As a capitalist, he had little choice. His financial backers wanted a return on their investment, and the Indians had top grade furs for sale. Some historians believe Thompson's friendship with the Native Americans in Maine may have saved a trading ship from being attacked. It is also reported that the local Indians complained to Thompson when they were mistreated by the Pilgrims. Yet Pannaway was built with a high palisade mounted with fearsome guns. It is known that Thompson had at least one Indian servant (read "slave"). A local Indian chief had presented Thompson with his own son as a welcoming gift.
- **Thompson, not the Pilgrims**, may have been "friends" with the famous Squanto. One privately published Thompson history called "The First

Yankee" theorizes that while under house arrest in Plymouth, England, the captured Squanto was cared for by a 14-year old ward of Sir Ferdinando Gorges. Gorges with John Mason owned land title to New England. At that exact time, in the same town, in the same household lived 14-year old David Thompson. Coincidence? He may have taught the Native American to speak the King's English, then been inspired by Squanto to travel to the New World.

- **Before founding NH**, Thompson had wintered in nearby Maine. After three years as NH's first whites, he packed up his family in 1626 and they became the first residents of Boston. (Three states! Is this guy a hero or what?) Tompson built a new house in Boston Harbor on what is now called Thompson Island. Each time Thompson settled, the Pilgrims immediately sent him a tax bill.
- **David Thompson mysteriously disappeared** in 1628. His wife Amias remarried, and since the Pilgrims considered marriage a "civil" ceremony, her Church of England wedding goes on the books as the first nuptials in New England. She moved from Thompson Island and joined her new husband in Chelsea. MA. Some historians hint at foul play.

And you thought you knew history! This whole untold heroic story gets even stranger. Although isolated in New Hampshire, the Thompson's had quite a few house guests, one a shipwrecked sailor who had been robbed by the Indians of everything including his clothes. Another visitor was the infamous Miles Standish from the military wing of the Pilgrim cult. Unlike the well supplied and well fed Portsmouth colonists, the oversized under-skilled Pilgrims were usually starving. Although they had crossed the ocean to avoid Englishmen like Thompson, the Pilgrims begged Thompson for food. He complied, and though he had only arrived in the New World months earlier, Thompson personally took a load of salted codfish to the struggling Plymouth Plantation. According one Pilgrim journal, Thompson's errand of mercy kicked off a second thanksgiving. Since the goods were from NH, we assume there was no sales tax.

Thanks, in part, to David Thompson, the Massachusetts Bay Colony survived, thrived and eventually got a stranglehold on New England. Thanks to that deep-rooted "Puritan ethic," you and I have been feeling guilty ever since -- especially on Thanksgiving. Another piece

of pecan pie? Better not, kids are starving somewhere. Our true founder David Thompson wouldn't make you feel guilty. He'd just trade you some pie for a little of that there turkey.

By J. Dennis Robinson
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