

C H A P T E R I I

OUR FATHERS' ROCK

Why We Must Not Remove the Ancient Landmarks

*Once considered the cradle of American democracy,
Plymouth is slowly but surely being transformed into a city
ashamed of its past.*

If you find yourself standing in front of Plymouth Rock this Thanksgiving Day, do not expect to hear stories of pious Pilgrims in search of religious freedom. Before you go, prepare your children and family for a slightly different vision of America's past.

If you walk less than a hundred yards from Plymouth Rock and ascend to Cole's Hill, the magnificent burial

ground of the fifty Pilgrims who perished during the first cold winter of 1620, you will not only encounter hundreds of demonstrators who gather on the last Thursday of every November to disabuse the memory of the Pilgrim fathers, but you can also read the new monument plaques that describe the devastating effect of Christianity on North America, the “genocide” of Native Americans by the Pilgrims and the importance of treating Thanksgiving as a “National Day of Mourning.”

Once viewed by poets and politicians as the cradle of American democracy, Plymouth is gradually being transformed—a stunning example of how a few revisionist historians and a small cadre of well-organized political activists can pressure a community into renouncing its heritage.

In November of 1999, I unwittingly found myself an observer to one small but significant step toward this transformation. It was the day before Thanksgiving. Standing on Cole’s Hill, I gathered my wife and four children around the great stone sarcophagus containing recovered bones of the Pilgrims who died during the first winter. Just a few yards to my left stood the towering statue erected in 1921 by the Improved Order of Red Men and dedicated to “Massasoit, the great sachem of the Wampanoags: Protector and Preserver of the Pilgrims.” It commemorates the famed chieftain who adopted

Christian names for his children and who facilitated an unprecedented fifty-year treaty of unbroken peace between the local Indian community and the Pilgrim settlement.

Since it was to be the last Thanksgiving of the millennium, I determined that my children needed to know and understand the Pilgrim legacy. With the uncertainty of a new century before us, I wanted to take a special opportunity to exhort my sons and daughters to embrace a Pilgrim vision for dependence on God, for self-sacrifice, and for multigenerational faithfulness. I wanted to pray for them and over them at the place where American freedom began.

Few people realize our country was founded by a devout band of nonconformist Christians who lived and breathed a vision for family and community they understood to be clearly defined by the Bible. Though the Pilgrims left England because of religious persecution, they also left Holland for America for several other reasons.

Governor William Bradford, the Pilgrim leader, explains in *Of Plymouth Plantation* that they had multiple goals: to protect their children from ungodly peer influences of the culture in Holland, to bring the gospel to the natives, and to lay a foundation of multigenerational faithfulness for their children and a future society.

Bradford proclaimed that these families were more than willing to sacrifice their lives, if necessary—“even though they be but stepping stones”—for future generations of believers they would never meet.

Each of these goals was achieved: Many Indians were converted to Christ; generations of Pilgrims remained faithful to the vision and a nation was ultimately birthed, its charter documents drawing extensively from the principles of self-government and freedom under God communicated by the Mayflower Compact.

Remove Not the Ancient Landmarks

With this in mind, I had taken my family to Plymouth. On Cole’s Hill, I asked God to make them mighty warriors for Christ with a rich multigenerational vision. I was just reminding my son of the text from Scripture—“remove not the ancient landmarks”—when a truck pulled up. Out of the truck came city workers carrying shovels. They began to dig just yards from where I stood. I approached them and engaged in a most unusual conversation:

“What are you digging?” I asked.

“We’re placing a new monument marker for the city,” they replied.

“May I see what’s on it?”

“We aren’t sure. We were just told to dig the hole. Someone else will put the marker in tonight.”

“Now why would anyone put a marker on Cole’s Hill under cover of darkness?”

“We aren’t sure. We were just told to dig the hole.”

Most revolutions are staged at night, so it should have been no surprise to discover the next day permanent stone markers and plaques in multiple locations around Plymouth, including Cole’s Hill, which present Thanksgiving Day as a day of mourning over the invasion of this continent by thieving murderers.

Talk about historical schizophrenia. The “Pilgrim genocide” markers, on the exact spot 380 years ago that Pilgrims had buried their dead at night, are just a few yards from the great stone sarcophagus inscription at the Tercentenary, which reads:

Here under cover of darkness the fast dwindling company laid their dead, leveling the Earth above them lest the Indians should learn how many were their graves. Reader, history records no nobler venture for faith and freedom than that of this pilgrim band. In weariness and painfulness in watchings often in hunger and cold, they laid the foundations of a state wherein every man through countless ages should have liberty to worship God in his own way. May their example inspire

thee to do thy part in perpetuating and spreading the lofty ideals of our Republic throughout the world.

The same forces of political correctness behind the markers returned on Thanksgiving afternoon, as my family did. Demonstrators (most of whom appeared to be college students, not Native Americans) rejoiced over their new victory by desecrating the other monuments, including that of William Bradford and even Massasoit, who some consider to have been a collaborator with the Pilgrim enemy. For a man who had just traveled 1,500 miles to remember the faith of my spiritual fathers and to introduce it to my children, this was truly heartbreaking.

I placed my children in the car with my wife, locked the door, grabbed my Bible, walked to the new monument and began to share some words of encouragement from Scripture and from American history with the tourists who were beginning to assemble. The response was less than enthusiastic. After all, they had just read the plaque and listened to “experts” offer the new revised version of history. And if the town of Plymouth is finally officially willing to get the message of Pilgrim genocide out, then it must be true.

When things died down, I took my firstborn son and walked to each monument defaced with obscenities

or littered with pagan paraphernalia. We relocated the material—into trash receptacles—and walked away to pray.

Rent a Riot

The genesis of the decision by the town of Plymouth to erect “National Day of Mourning/Genocide” plaques dates back to 1997, when a group calling itself the United American Indians of New England (UAINE) disrupted a historic march called The Pilgrim’s Progress to stage a violent confrontation.

Since the 1920s, it had been the custom of the Mayflower Society to host a march through Plymouth commemorating the loss of the first fifty-one Pilgrims. The Pilgrim’s Progress usually draws thousands of visitors, many in historic costume and some of whom are direct Mayflower descendants. The marchers walk through town to Burial Hill, where an authentic Pilgrim service is performed. The gospel witness of the service is distinctive—prayers, psalm-singing, and declarations of trust in Almighty God.

So who were these protesters and where did they come from? Four years later, the facts remain unclear. What is clear, however, is that the leaders of the protest

specifically recruited participants, including members of radical out-of-state groups, with one goal in mind: to create a media event they could use as leverage against the town of Plymouth.

One of the marchers in the 1997 Pilgrim's Progress, who asked not to be identified, put it this way: "They needed to get some money for their agenda, and they knew the best way to do this was by creating a media frenzy, so they called 'rent a riot.'"

According to several participants in the 1997 march, protesters dressed as Indians surrounded the Pilgrims, blockaded them from proceeding, and threatened them. At least one marcher was assaulted. When police intervened, the protesters resisted, making sure to behave in a way that would facilitate later charges of police impropriety against Native Americans.

The media had a field day. National newspapers declared new tension between Indians and Pilgrims. The result? Plymouth allowed the protesters a regular Thanksgiving Day forum near Plymouth Rock and to erect new markers across Plymouth designed to communicate the "genocide" perspective of Pilgrim history.

But is any of it true? Is the American dream built upon a lie? Shouldn't fair-minded Christians feel a twinge of guilt before tasting that turkey? After all, if our spiritual

forefathers committed atrocities, shouldn't we be willing to fess up to the facts?

Ask a growing number of scholars and historians about those facts, and they won't hesitate to defend the Pilgrim colonists.

"Most of these charges against the Pilgrims are based on pop history, not historical analysis," says Paul Jehle, the education director of the Plymouth Rock Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded during the 350th anniversary of the Plymouth settlement.

Jehle rattles off the many dates, names, charters, and deeds that make up the rich legacy of Pilgrim and Indian relations. He points out that Indian and Pilgrim communities alike benefited from cross-cultural contact. Pilgrims not only introduced economic principles of free trade to the Indians, allowing them to prosper financially, but they helped the Indians redeem mineral-depleted land using the Old Testament laws of crop rotation. Similarly, without Indian knowledge of innovative ways to fertilize crops in the harsh New England soil, the Pilgrims would have failed. Each culture was advanced by coming into contact with the other.

The greatest benefit of Pilgrim contact with the Indians was the introduction of the gospel. Through the foundation laid by the Pilgrims and continued

later by men like twentieth-century martyr Jim Elliot, many thousands—even whole tribes—were converted to Christ. In fact, by 1670 the entire Indian population of Martha’s Vineyard Island was converted. Many of these Christian “praying Indians” remained faithful and actually took up arms on behalf of the colonists during the bloody season known as Prince Phillip’s War.

Not Guilty

So what about the charges of genocide, theft, and ill will by the Pilgrims against the natives?

- The charge that Pilgrims stole the land from the natives is false. Pilgrim leaders viewed it as a moral and legal obligation to contract for the purchase of lands with the Wampanoag, with whom they entered into land deeds and signed covenants. Nothing was stolen. Western and biblical concepts of property ownership were not recognized by the local population during the Christian settlement. In the pantheistic worldview of Indian culture, the land belonged to everyone and to nature itself.

- The claim that Pilgrims committed genocide against the Indian tribes is false; the precise opposite is true. For more than fifty years, Pilgrims and local Indians lived in a state of equanimity and peace. Because Indian tribes constantly warred with one another, the Pilgrims found themselves on at least one occasion acting in military concert with the Wampanoag in standing against invading tribes, but such an action was in self-defense—a far cry from genocide.
- The claim that the Pilgrim community lived in a state of tension and enmity with the Wampanoag is false. The official Pilgrim policy was to treat the Indian tribes as sovereign foreign states. In the case of the Wampanoag, this meant they were afforded all the legal rights and respect due any foreign power.

As Jehle observes, Indian tribes often were treated improperly by later groups of European settlers not bound by the strict code of Christian conduct and law to which the Pilgrims subscribed, but the Plymouth community stands out as a model example of the “right way” to interact with a native population.

A Faithful Remnant

It's easy to look at the new, historically inaccurate and politically motivated monuments now standing near Plymouth Rock and feel defeated. But more than a little hope can be found in the story of another monument, the most magnificent and prominent historical marker in the town.

Back in 1989, a Plymouth council had convened to determine the fate of the Founders' Monument. The colossal structure, completed in 1889, stands eighty-one feet tall and was designed to communicate the Pilgrim ideals of faith, morality, education, law, liberty, and justice.

The monument was complete and perfect in every respect but one. For more than one hundred years, one side had remained uninscribed, primarily because no one could decide what should be written on it.

Fearing that some future generation might be less generous with the Pilgrim legacy, Jehle moved to have a quote from Bradford etched on the stone tablet. The motion was doomed, except for one small fact. Seated in the audience that day, for the first time ever, was an octogenarian from Florida named Verna Orndorff, well known for her generous patronage, who had flown in to attend her first and last meeting.

Jehle read the Bradford quote:

Thus out of small beginnings greater things have grown by His hand Who made all things out of nothing, and gives being to all things that are; and as one small candle may light a thousand, so the light kindled here has shone to many, yea, in a sense, to our whole nation; let the glorious name of Jehovah have all the praise.

With tears in her eyes, the elderly Mrs. Orndorff declared:

My father had me memorize this quote when I was a little girl. . . . If you will vote for it, I will pay for it.

The great quote is now etched on the monument and stands as an ever-present reminder to every one of the estimated thirty-five million physical descendants of the fifty people who survived the first winter, as well as to an entire nation that owes its gratitude to those first settlers. The message? That few visions have ever been as beautifully realized as that embraced by this ragtag band of devoted moms and dads.

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