

Community Legal Aid

A non-profit law firm serving the legal needs of low-income individuals and families in central northeast Ohio

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Welcomed at the table

Thanksgiving: Welcomed at the table?

Immigrants, Refugees, and the story of the Mayflower

by Koula Glaros-King, staff attorney

Thanksgiving is intended to be a time for gratitude, giving, and togetherness. Most enjoy the holiday even knowing that its actual history bears little resemblance to what you and I were taught in grade school. Rosy stories of shared feasts are much more complex. Blood was shed before and after. The holiday can give us space to acknowledge these often ugly histories, even while finding beauty in our holiday traditions. The lessons are many.

The first Thanksgiving involved some of our country's earliest European immigrants and refugees who came to a new land aboard the Mayflower. How can we celebrate a holiday based around these storied Pilgrims without examining the true history of the newcomers? Without celebrating all the immigrants and refugees who came to the United States in the four centuries since? Or without examining how we can welcome newcomers into our land of plenty today?

The 102 immigrants and refugees who arrived on the Mayflower, settled in Plymouth, and participated in the first Thanksgiving were not just Pilgrims, but actually a fascinating mix of people from diverse social classes and religions.

The most storied Mayflower voyagers were a group of thirty-seven men, women, and children from the "English Separatist Church" - a radical faction of Puritanism who, like many newcomers of today, sought religious freedom. These religious refugees negotiated with English investors of the Virginia Company to settle on the Company's Hudson River land. These separatists went on to be known as the "Pilgrims" in the Thanksgiving story, but they were not alone on the Mayflower voyage or in the Plymouth settlement. Along side them were many others - indentured servants, children, expectant mothers, laborers - most of whom endured great hardship and many of whom died during the voyage or shortly after arrival. Mayflower passengers included:

- Thirty children, one born on the voyage, arrived at Plymouth. The story of these children is

often untold, as they went on to survive the colony's "great sickness" (thought by some historians to be a combination of scurvy and pneumonia) at greater rates than their parents - leaving around 30% orphaned or abandoned within their first few years in a new world.

- Twenty indentured servants landed in Plymouth. They were collected from debtor's prisons or were the children of debtors who were contracted to the persons who paid their debts for up to seven years as an "indenture." Few survived seven years to reclaim their freedom. Records show that four orphaned siblings, debtors' children as young as five years old, embarked but only one survived the voyage. The Head Right System of the Virginia Company entitled each master to fifty acres for each person (including those accompanying them) to settle under their charter, so this master claimed land for each child. This system advanced displacement of the native peoples from lands the Virginia Company sought to control. How many Mayflower passengers were not free to legally contract this voyage for themselves and never received their freedom, let alone their land? Today, these individuals could be considered victims of human trafficking.
- Fifty Mayflower voyagers were hunters, farmers, builders, and soldiers sent to support creation of this new Virginia Company settlement. Most left everything they had known and traveled with their families. Like the separatists, they faced terrible sickness upon arrival and died in great numbers.

The parallels between many of these voyagers and our modern day immigrants and refugees are hard to ignore. It's also interesting to consider how these early newcomers would have been treated under current immigration laws. Had our Mayflower voyagers arrived in 2022, would they have been welcomed? The Pilgrims might have been sent back for breaking their immigration contract with their business sponsor. While they had contracted to land in New York, they instead settled in Plymouth, outside their Virginia Company charter. Today, anyone entering the United States for an exclusive purpose that they do not follow (like a foreign student who does not go to school) will be deported. Our earliest and most well-known religious refugees - whose deeds make up the very DNA of our country - would be denied entry into the United States today.

In the centuries since the Mayflower, our country has continued to attract immigrants and refugees with the promise of hope and American freedom. People have and will always migrate looking for a better life. It is because of our enlightened democratic freedoms, that people fleeing persecution, calamity, and hunger seek to come here. Current estimates are that one in every 200 people worldwide desperately need refuge outside their homeland. Another 100 million are displaced and homeless, and 800 million face famine.

Today the United States is one of only 29 resettlement countries for refugees. Human migration happens now on a much broader scale and in a matter of hours, rather than the months the Mayflower took to bring only one hundred passengers to a new land. In less than six months of 2022, more than 100,000 Ukrainians came to the United States - 10,000 to northern Ohio. And in 2021, the United States airlifted 120,000 Afghans in just days, bringing 76,000 to the United

States. Sadly, fewer than one percent of the refugees in the world find safety and resettlement in another country.

The United States is now the powerful product of major waves of immigration, voluntary and involuntary, from throughout the world. Immigrants built this nation. The result of this has been a beautiful amalgam of races, religions, ethnicities, languages, cuisines, and traditions. Today, more than 40 million people living in the United States were born in a different country. Over 400 languages are spoken in the United States. And immigrants contribute greatly to the economy, working at higher rates than native born adults. Almost half of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children.

An important lesson of the Thanksgiving Holiday is that this country does not belong to any one group. It belongs to every one of us, as citizens of the United States and heirs of the migrants and the native peoples of this land. If you are looking for meaning in your Thanksgiving this year, remember the stories of the Mayflower and all those who followed.

Consider ways we can all make our country a more open and welcoming destination for those who need a safe new place to call home. Support the critical work of local resettlement agencies like the International Institute of Akron who help newcomers with their immediate needs to live in the United States. Our government even offers the opportunity for everyday citizens to temporarily sponsor people fleeing war (Ukraine) and hunger (Venezuela).

For inspiration this Thanksgiving, consider chef José Andrés. This month, the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery's 2022 'Portrait of a Nation' series was revealed. A prominent piece by Kadir Nelson depicted the renowned chef, a Spanish immigrant and now a U.S. citizen, and the work of his World Central Kitchen to “feed the world” in war and disaster zones. They have provided 170 million meals in Ukraine, 200 tons of food in flood ravaged Pakistan, and just now stepped into Florida after Hurricane Ian. This is the ethos of our country celebrated at Thanksgiving: building that longer table for all our neighbors to join.

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