

### THANKSGIVING ROOTS IN AMERICA

"We sang a psalm of Thanksgiving unto God, beseeching Him that it would please Him to continue His accustomed goodness towards us." This is the prayer the French Huguenots prayed in what is present day Jacksonville, Florida. This prayer was made in 1564 by this group of Protestants fifty-seven years before the Pilgrims celebrated Thanksgiving with the Indians in the Plymouth Bay Colony. The story of the Huguenots is a very touching one. The name 'Huguenot' is derived from Hugues Capet, king of France, nicknamed "Hugo." The 11th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica quotes from Henri Estienne (1566) who said that the Protestants at Tours used to assemble at night near the gate of King Hugo whom the people of the Catholic persuasion regarded as a spirit. A monk said in a sermon that the Protestants should be called Huguenots since, like the spirit-king Hugo, they only went out at night. They were therefore called "Huguenots" and the name became popular from 1560 onwards. The current edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica says the name Huguenots come from the word *aignos*, derived from the German *Eldgenosen*, meaning, "confederates bound together by oath." The persecutions this group received is inconceivable. Multiplied thousands of these Bible-believing Christians were martyred for their faith in Europe.

Many are unaware that a group of these stalwarts of the Christian faith made their way to America. In June of 1564, construction of a triangular-shaped fort named Fort Caroline in the area of present day Jacksonville was begun with the help of a local tribe of Timucuan Indians. One historian records, "their strong religious motivations inspired them." When the king of Spain (under the rule of the devoutly Catholic Philip) discovered this encroachment on what he considered his property, he dispatched an army under Don Pedro Menéndez to drive out the French and to establish a Spanish colony in La Florida. This was the beginning of St. Augustine.

Jean Ribault and his soldiers sailed from France to resupply Fort Caroline. Menéndez from Spain was charged with removing the French, and he sailed in May. The Spanish came ashore on September 8 and established and named their new village "St. Augustine" because land had first been sighted on the Feast Day of St. Augustine, August 28, 1565. Two tragic events then ensued. Menéndez defeated the French and demanded that they give up their Protestant faith and accept Catholicism, who refused and 111 Frenchmen were killed. Two weeks later Ribault and his remaining men surrendered and met their fate, again refusing to give up their faith. This time 134 were killed. From that time, the inlet was called Matanzas - meaning "slaughters" in Spanish. Many people do not realize that right here in the founding days of pre-Pilgrim America, 245 professing Christians were martyred for their faith.

Think of it, the first Thanksgiving celebration by Bible-believing Christians was that of singing " . . . a psalm of Thanksgiving unto God, beseeching Him that it would

please Him to continue His accustomed goodness towards us." Even though the answer to that prayer was not realized in Florida until after the death of the Huguenots fifty-seven years after their martyrdom, far to the north in the Plymouth Colony that prayer was realized! On September 6, 1620 the Pilgrims from England set sail for America. For two months they braved the elements of a very inhospitable sea to finally land at Plymouth Rock and find an even more miserable winter awaiting them on land. Their humble shelters and meager diet could hardly protect them from the grueling winter that took nearly half of the Pilgrim's lives before spring. But a glorious surprise awaited the Pilgrims come spring. Out of the wilderness comes a Wampanoag Indian, Samoset who had learned the English language from fishermen and traders. A week later, Samoset returned to the Plymouth Plantation with his friend and only survivor of the Patuxet tribe, Squanto (also known as Tisquantum). Squanto had been sold into slavery a decade earlier into Spain, but benevolent monks bought him and sent him to England where he mastered the English language and ten years after his capture was able to catch a ship back to America. He was shocked once back in the land of his birth to discover his entire tribe, every family member and friend had died from, presumably, smallpox. He was alone in the wilderness until finally told by his new friend, Samoset that a group of fair skinned inhabitants were now settled in the exact area where he and the Patuxet tribe once lived. He came out of the woods greeting the English with the impeccable tongue of mother England. He taught the Pilgrims who were basically an urban people unfamiliar with agrarian ways how to farm, fish and hunt. History has recorded that this one singular friendship was the making of the miracle that saved the Plymouth Colony. The alliance of Indians and Pilgrims initiated by Samoset and Squanto led to the first celebration of Thanksgiving in America in 1621, which lasted for about three days. According to Smithsonian magazine, historians only know for certain that the Pilgrims and Indians feasted on wildfowl, corn, and venison. It is uncertain that turkey was served.

Allow me to direct your thoughts to Thanksgiving today.

### **1. We are thankful for the martyrs that paved our way in America.**

We should be thankful for the brave Huguenots that chose death rather than recant their faith right here on American soil. Those were the harbingers of America's evangelical Bible-based faith. For any who wonders if those early lovers of the Lord Jesus Christ and lovers of freedom were universalists or deists, think again. They lived and died "*...for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*" (Jude, verse 3).

From the earliest days of America's founding it was all about faith and freedom!

### **2. We are thankful for the Providence that brought and kept us in America.**

According to the diary of Pilgrim Governor William Bradford, Squanto "became a special instrument sent of God for [our] good . . . He showed [us] how to plant [our]

corn, where to take fish and to procure other commodities . . . and was also [our] pilot to bring [us] to unknown places for [our] profit, and never left [us] till he died.”

When Squanto lay dying of a fever, Bradford wrote that their Indian friend “desir[ed] the Governor to pray for him, that he might go to the Englishmen’s God in heaven.” Squanto bequeathed his possessions to the Pilgrims “as remembrances of his love.” I agree with the late Charles Colson who said, “Who but God could so miraculously convert a lonely Indian and then use him to save a struggling band of Englishmen? It is reminiscent of the biblical story of Joseph, who was also sold into slavery—and whom God, likewise, used as a special instrument for good.” Joseph told his brothers who had sold him into slavery, *“But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive”* (Genesis 50:20).

### **3. We are thankful for the spiritual children of the Pilgrims who are praying the price for America today!**

America’s greatness does not live only in her past. There are still the same ilk and breed of those old Pilgrims among us still. I find them at church on Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday Prayer and Bible Study. I find them working on farms, in factories and in courts of law. I meet them constantly in hospitals; they are doctors, nurses, and ambulance drivers. I find them in fire halls, airplanes, truck stops and grocery stores. I find them in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard. I find them in police uniforms, Homeland Security, FBI and CIA. I find them tending beehives, ranching cattle and keeping sheep. America has praying people who are claiming: *“If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land”* (II Chronicles 7:14). Like Abraham in Genesis 18, I find intercessors asking the Lord to have mercy on our country that has become so sadly much like Sodom and Gomorrah of old. God said, *“And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none”* (Ezekiel 22:30). Thank God for those who are “standing in the gap” before God in prayer. May this Thanksgiving be a time of rededication to the business of praying for the United States of America.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Johnny Pope". The signature is written in black ink and has a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.