The First Thanksgiving Likely Occurred Here, & Not at Plymouth . . .

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Ross Mackenzie, Richmond Times-Dispatch

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Berkeley Hundred

Now begins the season for giving thanks -- something that more of us could profit from doing more often. As an inevitable consequence, this also is the season for refueling the debate about where the first Thanksgiving occurred.

For centuries the New England version went practically unchallenged. Many children know the general story, even in this contemporary culture that so frequently reviles its past.

In 1621, at Plymouth Plantation in Massachusetts, the Pilgrims held a harvest festival. The colonists were ever so thankful for their safe passage, for their survival of that first awful winter, and for the good offices of the remarkable Indians -- Samoset and Squanto.

As William Bradford, governor of the colony, described it: "For summer being done, all things [stood] upon them with a weather beaten face, and the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage view." They were understandably thankful.

But at the risk of sounding chauvinistic, the truth is that the right to claim firstness, like so many other "firsts" attributed to New England, probably belongs to Virginia. Indeed, it is
altogether fitting and proper to conclude that the first Thanksgiving was held here.

The Virginia version is not widely known -- particularly outside the South.

ON SEPTEMBER 16, 1619, a group of 38 English colonists headed by Captain John Woodlief sailed from England aboard the Margaret. They landed at Berkeley Hundred 10 weeks later. The settlers were sent by the London Company; it owned thousands of acres in the area, and settled and supported Berkeley Plantation.

Exhibit A in the Virginia claim to firstness is this sentence in the company's instructions to the settlers -- instructions to be opened upon reaching Virginia:

*We ordaine that the day of our ships arrivall at the place assigned for plantacon in the land of Virginia shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God.*

These settlers held that Thanksgiving at Berkeley Hundred on December 4, 1619 -- a year before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth. Surely Woodlief and his followers were equally as grateful as the Pilgrims -- equally schooled in adversity, equally determined to renew themselves with roots in the land. Surely they were equally devout and equally thankful. To suggest that they were disobedient and did not give thanks requires a superabundance of credulity and moral pretension.
But lest we forget, there were numerous trips to Virginia prior to Woodlief's: the Raleigh expeditions of the 1580s, and the London Company's initial expeditions -- beginning with the one under Christopherr Newport that founded Jamestown in 1607.

The London Company's charter of May 23, 1609, was written principally by Sir Edward Sandys with the concurrence of Sir Francis Bacon, the early philosopher of natural right. It was probably the first document to say that government derives its authority from the consent of the governed. It was the closest thing to a constitution and bill of rights that colonists in Virginia had for three years, until refined in 1612. The Sandys charter was written 11 years before the first Pilgrim reached Plymouth.

On November 18, 1618, the London Company issued instructions to Sir George Yeardley upon his appointment as Governor of Virginia; those instructions provided for a liberal form of government. At Jamestown, in 1619, Yeardley convened the first legislative assembly in the New World. That was a year before the landing at Plymouth.

THOSE WERE firsts of considerable magnitude. They, and the events in Virginia during the 35 years prior to the Plymouth landing, tell us a good deal about the Virginia colonists.

They were God-fearing people. Just about every one of their existing documents speaks of their duties and obligations to a God almost always described as "almighty."

These also were people of discipline and self-will. Contrary to so many of us today, they were people determined not to tear down the old to make way for the ersatz old. They retained their umbilical ties to the past, as Virginians --
inhabitants of the most English of states -- tend to do still. Their past was England, and central to England were the church and God.

Even without the instructions to Woodlief, is it not logical to assume that the colonists in Virginia regularly prayed and gave thanks prior to 1621? Do we not have to overlook too much to believe they did not? In 1962, the evidence proved overwhelming to Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., then an adviser to President John Kennedy. In December of that year he repented of "an unconquerable New England bias" on the question, and acknowledged that Virginia's claim is "quite right." But despite the evidence, the bias persists.