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Imagine a long, wooden table set with the fresh produce and wild game of the New World and surrounded with grateful men, women, and children of the colonies and native tribes. These people, from very diverse backgrounds, were brought together to give thanks for a successful harvest on new land and the cultivation of friendship. When envisioning the first Thanksgiving, one should stop to consider how it was made possible. The transoceanic voyage of the Pilgrims would not have been an easy or inexpensive feat to accomplish. Commonly overlooked forces were at work in the background to ensure the success of the colonization of North America. As one of many American citizens who enjoys the modern version of Thanksgiving, with turkey, pumpkin pie, family gatherings, and shopping, I must realize the importance of the Pilgrim's financial supporters. Without the Merchant Adventurers of London, the Pilgrims would never have reached the New World or held the first Thanksgiving.

The Merchant Adventurers of London were essential in the success of the Plymouth Colony, and their origin dates back many years before the Pilgrims required funds to sail for North America. The Merchant Adventurers were chartered in 1407. At first, this group primarily engaged in trade with the Netherlands and areas of Northwest Germany, but they were willing to risk their money on speculative expeditions. The Merchant Adventurers eventually controlled over half of all foreign trade in London and were influential financial figures of the time period, which proved their evident skills and expertise. In the early 1600s, the Pilgrims decided to liberate themselves from an oppressive monarch and travel to the Netherlands to freely practice their religion. However, the tyrannical King James I of England still had considerable influence in this area of Europe. The Pilgrims believed that the New World held the key to their survival and freedom; unfortunately, with their limited resources, they could not afford the pricey journey across the Atlantic. This is where the Merchant Adventurers of London enter the well-known tale.

The desperate Pilgrims turned to a trusted iron merchant from London named Thomas Weston, a member of the Merchant Adventurers of London, for support. Weston recognized this as an opportunity to invest in an adventure that may earn a significant return for the Merchants. The group agreed to supply seven-thousand pounds, additional settlers with helpful skills, and other tools to assist the Pilgrims on their historic *Mayflower* voyage. The Merchant Adventurers and Pilgrims formed a joint-stock company with a seven-year agreement. For that period of time, every natural resource from the New World would be owned in partnership between the Merchants and the Pilgrims. With the agreement finalized, they departed Plymouth, England, in September of 1620 and arrived in North America sixty-six days later.

In this strange new wilderness, the Pilgrims faced deadly sicknesses and difficult conditions and were unable to fulfill their end of the agreement. Despite Thomas Weston's hopes for a lucrative return investment, the *Mayflower* returned to England in 1621 without any furs, timber, or other tradeable goods. This unfortunate situation caused Weston to sell his shares and pursue other interests, but the Merchants continued to participate in the agreement. The colonists attempted to make a payment in 1621 only to have their shipment attacked by French privateers. Their second attempt also failed because of coastal pirates in the English Channel. The Merchant Adventurers of London held on to the hopes of the Pilgrim's success to no avail. The time and funds invested into the *Mayflower* voyage never resulted in profits. The Merchant Adventurers eventually sold their shares to the Pilgrims for one thousand eight hundred pounds.

Originally, the Merchant Adventurers of London only viewed the *Mayflower* voyage as a remunerative investment, but as we reflect on history, we realize their integral role in the Pilgrim's

success. Without proper funding, the Pilgrims would have remained trapped in the Netherlands, oppressed by their monarch. However, the Merchant Adventurers paid the way to a hopeful new start in a new land. This assistance allowed the Pilgrims to establish a new colony and overcome the challenges of the unfamiliar continent. The first Thanksgiving can be attributed to the noble investment of the Merchant Adventurers of London, who could not have realized the powerful role they played in the settlement of North America.

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