Soon Penry and other independent thinkers were being imprisoned, hanged or drawn and quartered.

In 1602, John Robinson made a heart wrenching decision to leave the corrupt state church and become a Separatist. He resigned from Cambridge in 1603, lost his licensed career and returned to the midlands in poverty and began teaching at the underground church at Scrooby.

When Elizabeth died in 1603, her heir to the throne, James I, was even more intolerant. James blasphemed God Almighty in 1604 and declared himself to be virtually god on earth. He began persecuting all dissenters like John Robinson and the Scrooby believers.

Hunted by spies and facing death in a dungeon or scaffold, Robinson and his congregation made the decision to flee to Holland where there was some degree of religious liberty. After two terrifying attempts to leave on Dutch ships, they were united in Holland. They settled in Leyden for 11 years.

Life was hard in Leyden. But they rejoiced that they were free to worship God in a loving fellowship. Robinson purchased a home, the Greengate. The church built 21 tiny homes on the property to house many of the new exiles.

In Leyden they lived in peace alongside many groups seeking freedom from the tyrants of Europe, including Swiss, Poles, French Huguenots and Jews. They learned from the Dutch, who had suffered near genocide at the hands of the Spanish. The Dutch had pioneered in the field of limited, constitutional government based on the biblical model. They also were leaders in the field of free enterprise and what became known as the biblical work ethic.

Primarily it was the wise, biblical teaching and counsel given by John Robinson that prepared the Pilgrims to build self and civil government in America. Robinson was a peacemaker in a world dominated by wars between religious sects. He warned that their stand should be “be tempered with much wisdom, moderation, and brotherly forbearance.” Robinson taught his congregation to humbly apply their faith in their present world vocations and in discourse with others outside their group. He did not teach an escapist, judgmental faith or retreat from the real world. The Pilgrims became loved by the Dutch for their honesty, diligence, faithfulness and care and love for others.

Desiring to reach their beloved homeland with the liberating truths of Scripture, Robinson, William Brewster and Thomas Brewer started the Pilgrim Press in Choir Alley. They published 18 books and other pamphlets that were bombsbells of truth packed in wine vats and sent to England and Scotland.

King James intensified his hatred for and fear of these loving believers. In 1614 he closed Parliament for seven years and increased his persecution of all dissenters, even restarting the hated practice of burning “heretics.” He pressured the Dutch - since they needed his wealth to fight the war against Spain - to find the press and arrest the Pilgrim leaders. Historian Robert Bartlett says, “The brief cloak and dagger contest between the tiny press and the mighty throne gave proof of the courage of the Pilgrims and the loyalty of their Dutch friends.”

By 1619, with the press destroyed, Thomas Brewer in the dungeon and Brewster and his family forced into hiding in northern England, Robinson prepared his people for one more relocation that would change the course of history and bring freedom to hundreds of millions over the next 400 years.

As he sent the flower of his church out on the little ship, the Speedwell, on July 22, 1620, the founding Father of the Forefathers had prepared his spiritual army well. He never made it across the ocean, but his powerful faith and optimism road the waves that year as the real national treasure of America was carried to our country in the hearts of his disciples.

In his last words to the Pilgrims as they left Holland, John Robinson said, “This holy army of saints is marshaled here on earth…under the conduct of their glorious Emperor, Christ. Thus it marches in this most heavenly order and gracious array, against all enemies…peaceable in itself, as Jerusalem…terrible to the enemy as an army with banners, triumphing over their tyranny with patience, their cruelty with meekness, and over death itself with dying….The gates of hell, and all the principalities and powers on earth shall not prevail against it.”

Marshall Foster