

Mayflower Compact



Pilgrims signing the Mayflower Compact, reproduction of an oil painting, 1932.

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The signing of the Mayflower Compact, bas-relief memorial in Provincetown, Mass.

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Mayflower Compact, document signed on the English ship *Mayflower* on November 21 [November 11, Old Style], 1620, prior to its landing at Plymouth, Massachusetts. It was the first framework of government written and enacted in the territory that is now the United States of America.

Rough seas and storms prevented the *Mayflower* from reaching its intended destination in the area of the Hudson River, and the ship was steered instead toward Cape Cod. Because of the change of course, the passengers were no longer within the jurisdiction of the charter granted to them in England by the Virginia Company. Within this legally uncertain situation, friction arose between the English Separatists (the Pilgrims) and the rest of the travelers, with some of the latter threatening to leave the group and settle on their own.

To quell the conflict and preserve unity, Pilgrim leaders (among them William Bradford and William Brewster) drafted the Mayflower Compact before going ashore. The brief document (about 200 words) bound its signers into a body politic for the purpose of forming a government and pledged them to abide by any laws and regulations that would later be established “for the general good of

the colony.” The compact was signed by nearly all of the *Mayflower*’s adult male passengers (41 of a total of 102 passengers) while the ship was anchored at Provincetown harbour. Its authority was immediately exercised when John Carver, who had helped organize the expedition, was chosen as governor of the new colony.

The Mayflower Compact was not a constitution but rather an adaptation of a Puritan church covenant to a civil situation. Furthermore, as a provisional instrument adopted solely by the colonists, the document did not solve the matter of their questionable legal rights to the land they settled. (A patent was eventually obtained from the Council for New England in June 1621.) Still, the Mayflower Compact became the foundation of Plymouth’s government and remained in force until the colony was absorbed into the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1691. Although in practice much of the power in Plymouth was guarded by the Pilgrim founders, the compact, with its fundamental principles of self-government and common consent, has

been interpreted as an important step in the evolution of democratic government in America.

As the original version of the Mayflower Compact was lost, the oldest known source in which the text of the document (provided below) can be found is *Mourt's Relation* (1622), an account of Plymouth's settlement written by Edward Winslow and William Bradford.

In the name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread sovereign lord King James, by the grace of God, of Great Britain, France, and Ireland King, Defender of the Faith, etc.

Having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and honor of our king and country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one of another, covenant, and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation, and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, offices from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony: unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names; Cape Cod, the 11th of November, in the year of the reign of our sovereign lord King James, of England, France and Ireland eighteenth and of Scotland fifty-fourth, Anno Domini 1620.

"Mayflower Compact". *Encyclopædia Britannica*. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2018. Web. 09 Feb. 2018
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