

Mayflower Compact (1620)

William Bradford and the Men of the Mayflower Voyage

Historical Background

In the early seventeenth century, a group of like-minded religious separatists, called Pilgrims, left England to try to establish settlements free from the constraints of the Anglican Church and King James I. After first settling in the Netherlands, in 1620 a group of Pilgrims decided to join the first British colony in the Americas, Virginia, where after thirteen hard years the Jamestown colony was just beginning to thrive. A group of Pilgrims, along with non-Pilgrim travelers referred to as “Strangers,” sailed the Mayflower toward Virginia, only to find themselves forced to anchor off Cape Cod due to storms. They decided to settle this territory, rather than continue on to seek the established British colony. With no formal charter, the governance and rule of this territory was in question, and the men aboard the Mayflower agreed to write and sign a document that united the group as a coherent body politic, bound by their faith and by their obedience to King James. Signed by most of the adult men on board the Mayflower, this document empowered the men to create and enforce rules to provide order and security to the fledgling colony.

Historical Significance

The Mayflower Compact is the first written constitution of the British colonies in the Americas. As a foundational governing document, it is significant because the men aboard willingly subordinated their individual rights to the rule of law and the authority of the British crown, but also to the majority within the colony. In signing this compact, they enshrined in American law the principle of government by consent, a concept that Englishmen had first affirmed in the Magna Carta and that would prove influential in the creation of the Constitution of the United States of America.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: government by consent; social compact or contract

On completion of this lesson, students will be able to

- define the terms “government by consent” and “social contract” or “social compact” and explain the significance of the act of signing an agreement to establish a government;
- identify the different sources of political authority recognized in the Mayflower Compact and compare and contrast them with those recognized by Americans today.

Questions to Explore

Why did the men of the Mayflower feel a compact to be necessary? On what authority did they create it? Was it legally binding? Morally binding? Why or why not?

In what ways does the Mayflower Compact represent a departure from traditional British political practice? In what ways does it represent a continuation of it?

How many different sources of political authority can you identify that are recognized in the compact? Do you see any tensions between them? How do you think the signers might rank the different sources of authority in importance?

To what extent do the signers of the Mayflower Compact seem to believe in equality? Do you see evidence of limits on this belief?

If modern-day Americans found themselves stranded in a distant land and drew up a compact to establish a government, how might it resemble and how might it differ from this one? What changes in beliefs and priorities might account for the differences?