

The Mayflower Compact (1620)

In 1620, the passengers aboard the Mayflower found themselves for nine stormy weeks in the Atlantic Ocean. They were headed for the warm climate and fertile land of the Virginia colony, but they landed instead far to the north of this desired colony. The passengers consisted of a group of 35 Pilgrims— a religious group that had separated from the Church of England—and 70 others. On November 11, 1620, the boat reached Cape Cod, in present-day Massachusetts. The non-Pilgrims claimed that because the ship had not landed in Virginia, the charter for a colony was not valid. Moreover, the non-Pilgrims claimed that they did not have to obey the Pilgrim leaders. In an effort to keep the group together and to maintain order, the Pilgrim leaders drew up the Mayflower Compact. While still on board, most of the adult men in the group signed the document. A month later, the passengers went on land, creating the first permanent English settlement in New England, at Plymouth, Massachusetts. The Mayflower Compact became the basis for government of the Plymouth Colony. The document is remarkable for its time because it created a government of ordinary citizens, not just members of the ruling class.

In The Name of God, Amen. We, whose names are underwritten, the Loyal Subjects of our dread [awe-inspiring] 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 the Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the first colony in the northern Parts of Virginia; Do . . . solemnly and mutually in the Presence of God and one another, covenant [promise] and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid [just-mentioned]; And by Virtue hereof do enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions, and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet [necessary] and convenient for the general Good of the Colony: unto which we promise all due Submission and Obedience. IN WITNESS whereof we have hereunto subscribed our names at Cape Cod the eleventh of November, in the Reign of our Sovereign Lord King James of England, France, and Ireland, the eighteenth, and of Scotland, the fifty-fourth. Anno Domini, 1620.

Review Questions

1. Why did the Pilgrims sail to North America?
2. Why was the Mayflower Compact created?
3. Why do you think that the writers of the Compact swore loyalty to the King of England?
4. What were the signers of the Mayflower Compact promising one another?
5. How might the Compact have promoted needed unify among the Plymouth colonists?
6. Do you think that the creation of the Mayflower Compact was a significant event in the history of the United States? Explain your answer.