The Mayflower Compact was a brief agreement to submit to common government that was drafted and signed by male English migrants aboard the Mayflower on November 11, 1620. Although the Compact is celebrated as one of the seminal documents of American political history, its actual influence was rather modest. In its own time, the Mayflower Compact represented no major political watershed. Its significance to American political history lies primarily in the Revolutionary and early national periods, when American politicians revived its memory for their own ends.

An Unexpected Landing

The Mayflower Compact was something of an accident of history. In early November 1620, after 65 days at sea, the passengers aboard the Mayflower spotted land. They had reached the outer banks of Cape Cod. Unfortunately, the ship was well north of its intended destination, the Hudson River. The group soon determined to settle in the area, but because the ship had landed north of the Hudson, whatever settlement they planted would necessarily lie outside the bounds of their patent. Thus, it would be situated beyond the reach of English law.

Many, but not all, of the migrants aboard the Mayflower were members of the tight-knit Leyden congregation, English Separatists who were strongly committed to building an orderly new society. The party included some "strangers" as well—merchants, adventurers, and servants. When some of these men heard of the new settlement plan, they protested. A few threatened to not be bound by the colony’s laws, since neither the Virginia Company nor any of their fellow passengers had any official authority in this new place. The threat that some colonists might disregard the new government’s authority raised special alarm because in recent years disobedience among the early settlers had nearly destroyed the English colony at Jamestown. Before the ship could land, this discord needed to be addressed and a means of ensuring some measure of order in the new colony had to be devised. The threat of "faction," inflamed by "mutinous speeches," inspired the writing of the document. The Mayflower Compact was, therefore, an improvised and temporary measure, aimed narrowly at tamping down disunion and preventing lawlessness.

Although designed for unique purposes, the agreement was modeled on a kind of covenant that would have been familiar to most of the voyagers. Covenants that bound the like-minded together were fairly common among Puritan and Separatist groups in this period. Separatist men and women conceived of their relationship to God and to one another as a "covenant"—a contract or agreement built on consent and implying shared obligation. They founded new churches and congregations as covenants; this covenant was one that was adapted for civil purposes. A brief document, fewer than two hundred words in total, the Mayflower Compact, once signed, allowed the men aboard the Mayflower to agree to combine into a civil body politic—able to make laws for the good of the whole and for the preservation of order. The signatories agreed to submit to the laws and government agreed to by the consent of the whole. Forty-one, apparently all of the free men aboard, signed. Afterward, they chose a governor—John Carver.
This Compact was, therefore, the earliest foundation of government in England’s Northern colonies. It was also an affirmation of written law as the bedrock of social order. In both intent and practice, however, it was a temporary fix. Plymouth’s settlers knew that ultimately they would need a grant of more official authority. As early as 1621, the Compact was rendered all but void when stockholders in the colony—led by John Pierce—obtained a new patent.

The Compact Revived

The document that was created aboard the Mayflower in November 1620 was not designated a "compact" until well over a century after its writing. Before the early national period, it had been termed an "agreement," a "covenant," a "combination," and an "association," but not a compact. That title—"Mayflower Compact"—originated in 1793, with Alden Bradford’s A Topographical Description of Duxborough, in the County of Plymouth. When Alden Bradford gave it this famous name, in fact, the Compact’s memory was in the midst of a renaissance.

The Mayflower Compact received few accolades before the time of the American Revolution; until then, it had not been celebrated, nor was it even well-remembered. But after American colonists broke with Britain, Patriots resurrected the Mayflower Compact as a model for creating government in extraordinary and unprecedented circumstances. To some it seemed a fitting illustration of social contract, a theory of government advanced by political philosophers such as John Locke. In his Second Treatise of Government (1689), for instance, Locke had written that legitimate government existed only by virtue of the consent of the governed, who, being in a state of nature, entered into a contract or association of government in an effort to protect individual liberties. These ideas seemed to fit well with what had happened off the coast of Cape Cod in 1620. In 1802, John Quincy Adams made the connection explicit, in a speech venerating the Mayflower Compact as "the only instance in human history of that positive, original social compact which speculative philosophers have imagined as the only legitimate source of government. Here," he averred, "was a unanimous and personal assent by all individuals of the community to the association by which they became a nation."
political impact, its memory was resurrected a century and a half later during the era of the
American Revolution; Patriots proclaimed it a model for creating government in
extraordinary and unprecedented circumstances, and Loyalists saw in it an affirmation of
colonial allegiance to King James. (Library of Congress)

But not all agreed on the meaning and significance of the Compact. During the Revolutionary period,
Loyalists, too, saw affirmation of their position in the Pilgrims' agreement. The drafters of the
Compact had proclaimed themselves, in the preamble, "the loyall subjects of our dread soveraigne Lord
King James." Others also saw the Compact through the lens of their own political objectives. In the
foment of the early national period, the Compact’s memory became fully politicized. Although the
Compact is often remembered as a seminal document for American democracy, its place in American
culture, ironically, is owed in large part to Federalist and Whig politicians of the early republic who
looked to it for mostly conservative purposes. These men sought to use the Pilgrims' story as proof
that government founded on "social contract" need not imply an excess of democratic liberty. Because
Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Du Contrat Social (1762) had advocated direct—rather than representative—
democracy, some worried that government based on social contract might lead to dangerously
powerful masses. Thus, the Compact was utilized by writers such as James Wilson, one of the Framers
of the United States Constitution, as proof that government by consent did not necessarily imply
excessive democracy.

No figure did more to shape American feeling about the importance of the Compact than Daniel
Webster, a Whig politician in the era of Jacksonian democracy. Webster almost single-handedly raised
the Pilgrims to the level of national myth. It was he who cemented the memory of the Mayflower
Compact as the foundation of the Constitution and written law in the United States. In several
speeches, Webster applauded the "Pilgrim Fathers" and their Compact as paragons of social order—
and as endorsement of the idea that liberty required the strictures of written law to prevent abuses.

**Memory and Importance of the Mayflower Compact**

The original of the Mayflower Compact is now lost. Its text survives only because two early sources on
Plymouth—Mourt’s Relation (1622) and William Bradford's history Of Plimoth Plantation—reproduced it;
however, neither of these gave the signatories. We know who signed the compact only because
Nathaniel Morton's history, New England's Memorial (1669), related the signers' names. Despite its
brush with obscurity, however, the Compact has achieved a somewhat improbable fame.

Since the nineteenth century, the Mayflower Compact has been hailed as a precursor to the
Constitution of the United States. In the 1830s, the historian George Bancroft deemed its signing to
be the "birth of popular constitutional history." But the true significance of the Mayflower Compact to
American political history lies in the early republic, in the postrevolutionary years that found Americans
casting about for a national heritage and identity. The Mayflower Compact is remembered largely
because of this jockeying to define its legacy. For those who landed in 1620, however, the Compact
had only a passing significance; during most of the colonial period, it was an obscure and forgotten
agreement.
Bibliography and Further Reading


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