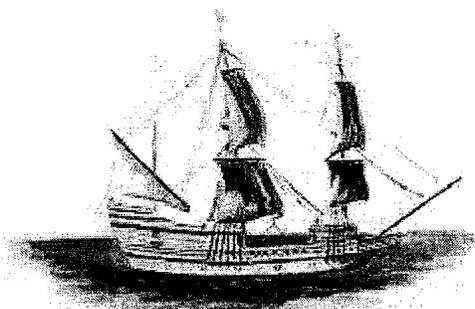


THE MAYFLOWER PILGRIMS

and the

Mayflower Compact

In the year 1620, 102 passengers boarded the Mayflower and set sail to America.ⁱ The New World was a dangerous place, largely unmapped and little understood. Starvation, sickness, and Indian attacks were all very real threats to the early settlers. They were leaving behind everything, sometimes even family members, with little possibility of communication except for an occasional ship – and letters carried across the ocean often never made it to their designated recipients.



These 102 adventurous settlers had various reasons for embarking on such a dangerous and risky journey. Many of them were separatists, later called “Pilgrims”, desiring to separate themselves from the English Church. Some passengers did not have religious reasons for moving, but were pulled by the financial potential of a new country where land was plentiful and laborers were few. Still other non-separatist passengers were merchants, soldiers, servants, and more, seeking to start a new life in America.

On November 11th (or 21st, according to the Gregorian calendar), the New World finally came into view. But it wasn't Virginia, their planned destination. During the 66-day voyage a severe storm blew them several hundred miles northⁱⁱ to what is now Provincetown Harbor in Cape Cod, Massachusetts.ⁱⁱⁱ Because it was so late in the year and travel around Cape Cod proved difficult, the passengers decided not to sail any further and to remain in New England.^{iv}

This change in plans quickly brought up some controversy among the passengers. They had a charter authorizing them to settle in Virginia, but because of the storm they were no longer under the bounds of the governmental authority they had contracted with in England. Some of the passengers saw no reason to abide by the Pilgrim's laws, and wanted “use their owne libertie”,^v as William Bradford put it. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, “Because of their 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 settle on their own.”^{vi} The Pilgrims quickly realized that without an already established colony, the first thing

that had to be done was create a government that would provide the necessary rules and regulations for the new colony. They knew that the New World's earlier settlements failed due to a lack of government,^{vii} and they did not want to suffer the same fate. Before anyone went ashore, the Pilgrims created a short contract of about 200 words in which the people agreed to abide by the government's laws in exchange for shared protection,^{viii} which all 41 men on board signed.^{ix} This document, called the Mayflower Compact, was the first framework of government that was written and enacted in what is now the United States of America.^x

This Compact had one very unique quality. It was written, as Abraham Lincoln said of the American government, "of the people, by the people, for the people".^{xi} This primary governing document was written and enforced by those who were governed by it. The Plymouth colony did not have a monarch whose decisions went unchallenged; rather, the leaders were chosen by the people whom they were to lead. John Quincy Adams described it as "the only instance in human history of that positive, original, social compact".^{xii} Coming from England, where King James was considered to have the "divine right" as king, this was a new and unique form of government that was, in many ways, an experiment. An experiment to determine if a people really could be governed by common consensus, and not by dictator. It seems that the experiment was a success, for initiated a form of government that was followed by the founding fathers in the writing of the United States' Constitution.



Signing the Mayflower Compact

In conclusion, the Mayflower Compact was a significant step toward America's principles of self-government. It began a series of events that eventually led to the American Revolution, and in turn, the birth of a nation in which the government is "of the people, by the people, for the people".^{xiii} The Mayflower Compact, with its fundamental principles of self-government and self-consent, has been an important step in the evolution of democratic government in America.^{xiv}

- i http://americanhistory.about.com/od/colonialamerica/a/may_compact.htm
- ii <http://www.history.com/topics/mayflower-compact>
- iii <http://www.allabouthistory.org/mayflower-compact.htm>
- iv <http://www.plimoth.org/learn/just-kids/homework-help/who-were-pilgrims>
- v <http://www.history.com/topics/mayflower-compact>
- vi <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370977/Mayflower-Compact>
- vii <http://www.allabouthistory.org/mayflower-compact.htm>
- viii http://americanhistory.about.com/od/colonialamerica/a/may_compact.htm
- ix <http://www.history.com/topics/mayflower-compact>
- x <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370977/Mayflower-Compact>
- xi <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/abrahamlincoln>
- xii <http://www.plimoth.org/learn/just-kids/homework-help/mayflower-and-mayflower-compact#top>
- xiii <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/abrahamlincoln>
- xiv <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/370977/Mayflower-Compact>