

Directions: READ the passage about the Mayflower. As you read, underline important facts and details that you find interesting (do not underline entire paragraphs). **Answer the questions at the end.**

The Mayflower Compact was a set of rules for self-governance established by the English settlers who traveled to the New World on the *Mayflower*. When Pilgrims and other settlers set out on the ship for America in 1620, they intended to lay anchor in northern Virginia. But after treacherous storms drove their ship off course, the settlers landed in Massachusetts instead, near Cape Cod, outside of Virginia's jurisdiction. Knowing life without laws could prove catastrophic, colonist leaders created the Mayflower Compact to ensure a functioning social structure would prevail.

Mutiny on the Mayflower

Of the 102 passengers on the *Mayflower*, there were 50 men, 19 women and 33 young adults and children. Just 41 were true Pilgrims, religious separatists seeking freedom from the Church of England.

The others were considered common folk and included merchants, craftsmen, indentured servants and orphaned children—the Pilgrims called them “strangers.”

Seeking the right to worship as they wished, the Pilgrims had signed a contract with the Virginia Company to settle on land near the Hudson River, which was then part of northern Virginia. The Virginia Company was a trading company chartered by King James I with the goal of colonizing parts of the eastern coast of the New World. London stockholders financed the Pilgrim's voyage with the understanding they'd be repaid in profits from the new settlement.

But when the *Mayflower* landed in Massachusetts instead of Virginia, conflict began before the colonists even left the ship. The strangers argued the Virginia Company contract was void. They felt since the *Mayflower* had landed outside of Virginia Company territory, they were no longer bound to the company's charter.

The defiant strangers refused to recognize any rules since there was no official government over them. Pilgrim leader William Bradford later wrote, “several strangers made discontented and mutinous speeches.”

The Pilgrims knew if something wasn't done quickly it could be every man, woman and family for themselves.

What Was the Mayflower Compact?

Pilgrim leaders wanted to quell the rebellion before it took hold. After all, establishing a New World colony would be difficult enough without dissent in the ranks. The Pilgrims knew they needed as many productive, law-abiding souls as possible to make the colony successful.

With that in mind, they set out to create a temporary set of laws for ruling themselves as per majority agreement.

On November 11, 1620, 41 adult male colonists, including two indentured servants, signed the Mayflower Compact, although it wasn't called that at the time.

Who Wrote the Mayflower Compact?

It's unclear who wrote the Mayflower Compact, but the well-educated Separatist and pastor William Brewster is usually given credit.

One now-famous colonist who signed the Mayflower Compact was Myles Standish. He was an English military officer hired by the Pilgrims to accompany them to the New World to serve as military leader for the colony. Standish played an important role in enforcing the new laws and protecting colonists against unfriendly Native Americans.

What Was the Purpose of the Mayflower Compact?

No one knows exactly what happened to the original Mayflower Compact. The accepted translation was found in William Bradford's journal, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, in which he wrote about his experiences as a colonist.

The Mayflower Compact created laws for Mayflower Pilgrims and non-Pilgrims alike for the good of their new colony. It was a short document which established that:

- the colonists would remain loyal subjects to King James, despite their need for self-governance
- the colonists would live in accordance with the Christian faith
- the colonists would create one society and work together to further it
- the colonists would create and enact "laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions and offices..." for the good of the colony, and abide by those laws

Plymouth Colony

Once the colonists agreed to work together, the hard work of starting the colony began. They elected John Carver governor on November 21, 1620.

Carver had helped secure financing for the *Mayflower* expedition and served in a leadership role during the voyage to America. He's also sometimes given credit for helping write the Mayflower Compact.

Search parties then went ashore to find an ideal place to settle. They decided on Plymouth, where the colonists endured a brutal winter. Ravaged by starvation, disease and lack of shelter, more than half of the colonists died, yet Plymouth Colony survived.

It has been argued the Mayflower Compact's role in cementing the colonists' dedication to each other and their mission was critical to their endurance that first winter.

John Carver survived the hard winter of 1620 but died in April 1621, and the colonists chose William Bradford to replace him. Under his leadership, Plymouth Colony started to thrive.

As more and more settlers arrived and colonized the surrounding areas, a General Court was established. Each town elected representatives to attend the court, thereby creating an early representative government.

Why Was the Mayflower Compact Important?

The Mayflower Compact was important because it was the first document to establish self-government in the New World. It remained active until 1691 when Plymouth Colony became part of Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The Mayflower Compact was an early, successful attempt at democracy and undoubtedly played a role in future colonists seeking permanent independence from British rule and shaping the nation that eventually became the United States of America.

Questions

1. In your own words, what was the Mayflower Compact?

2. Define a Pilgrim. Were all passengers aboard the Mayflower Pilgrims?

3. What were the four laws established on the Mayflower Contract?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

4. In your own words, why was the Mayflower Compact important?
