

The Mayflower Compact (1620)

The settlers who came to the New World brought with them a great deal of baggage in the form of ideas and beliefs they had held dear in England. Indeed, many of them, such as the Puritans, came to America so they could live in stricter accord with those beliefs. The Pilgrims, a branch of the Puritans, arrived off the coast of Massachusetts in November 1620, determined to live sacred lives according to biblical commands, and in so doing to build a "city upon a hill" that would be a beacon to the rest of the world.

But aside from their religious enthusiasm, the Pilgrims also knew that the English settlement founded a few years earlier at Jamestown in Virginia had practically foundered because of the lack of a strong government and leadership. They would not make that mistake, and agreed that once a government had been established, they would obey the commands of its leaders.

In making this compact, the Pilgrims drew upon two strong traditions. One was the notion of a social contract, which dated back to biblical times and which would receive fuller expression in the works of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke later in the century. The other was the belief in covenants. Puritans believed that covenants existed not only between God and man, but also between man and man. The Pilgrims had used covenants in establishing their congregations in the Old World. The Mayflower Compact is such a covenant in that the settlers agreed to form a government and be bound by its rules.

The Compact is often described as America's first constitution, but it is not a constitution in the sense of being a fundamental framework of government. Its importance lies in the belief that government is a form of covenant, and that for government to be legitimate, it must derive from the consent of the governed. The settlers recognized that individually they might not agree with all of the actions of the government they were creating; but they, and succeeding generations, understood that government could be legitimate only if it originated with the consent of those it claimed to govern.

For further reading: William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (Morison, ed., 1952); George Langdon, *Pilgrim Colony* (1966); John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth* (1970).

The Mayflower Compact

We whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread 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 Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the First Colony in the Northern Parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one of another, Covenant and Combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts,

Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cape Cod, the 11th of November, in the year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord King James, of England, France and Ireland the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth. Anno Domini 1620.