

Great Documents in U.S. History

EARLY SETTLEMENT TO RECONSTRUCTION (1620–1870)

Volume I

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The Mayflower Compact

Document: The Mayflower Compact (1620)

Historical Context

The situation called for action. The *Mayflower*, a British ship, had carried 102 passengers across the Atlantic Ocean. They had traveled 3,000 miles only to land north of their destination. They had hoped to begin a colony at the mouth of the Hudson River, the site of today's New York City. This would have placed the colony within the geographic boundaries the king outlined in the Virginia Company of Plymouth's charter. This group of businessmen invested money to start the colony. In return they hoped to profit from the products of the New World. The company's charter outlined how the settlement would be governed. But the *Mayflower's* passengers had drifted outside the charter's boundaries. Now they were off the tip of Cape Cod on November 9, 1620, with no laws to govern them. The passenger list showed that the colonists needed to create a government.

- About one third was a group later called Pilgrims, the organizers of the colony. They had separated from the Church of England over religious differences. The Pilgrims had lived for a time in Holland. Now they hoped to make a new start.
- The rest of the passengers were skilled workers and servants who sought a new life. They were members of the Church of England. The Pilgrims called them "Strangers."

Pilgrim William Bradford wrote about what happened. As the *Mayflower* neared shore, its passengers realized they were outside of the area covered by the charter. Arguments began among the "Strangers" and Pilgrims. Clearly, a temporary government was needed. One of the Pilgrims drew up an agreement, or compact. It was later called the Mayflower Compact because passengers signed it while still on board the *Mayflower*. It was based on the way the Pilgrims governed their church. Every male head of household and male bachelor, as well as three male servants, signed the compact on November 11, 1620. The signers pledged to obey any laws agreed to by the majority.

Later, the ship's passengers settled in a more sheltered harbor in today's Massachusetts for their permanent colony. Called Plymouth, it was the first New England colony. In the first couple of years about one half of the original colonists died of starvation and disease, even with the help of the Indians. But the colony survived, and its people worked together.

Importance

It was not until after the American Revolution that the Mayflower Compact received much attention. At this time the new nation began looking back to the roots of its self-government. Today, the compact is often viewed as the first example of American democracy, a social contract. But it is also understood that the idea came from the practical need for unity to survive in the wilderness.

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The Mayflower Compact (1620)

In the name of God Amen. 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 our selves 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 11 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 Dom. 1620.

John Carver	Richard Warren	Thomas Williams
William Bradford	John Howland	Gilbert Winslow
Edward Winslow	Steven Hopkins	Edmond Margeson
William Brewster	Edward Tilly	Peter Brown
Isaac Allerton	John Tilly	Richard Bitteridge
Miles Standish	Francis Cook	Richard Clark
John Alden	Thomas Rogers	Richard Gardiner
Samuel Fuller	Thomas Tinker	John Allerton
Christopher Martin	John Rigdale	Thomas English
William Mullins	Edward Fuller	Edward Doten
William White	John Turner	Edward Liester
James Chilton	Francis Eaton	John Goodman
John Craxton	Moses Fletcher	George Soule
John Billington	Digery Priest	

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Vocabulary

dread—causing great fear

sovereign—ruler, king

grace—undeserved help from God

undertaken—having taken upon oneself

solemnly—seriously

mutually—acting together in common

covenant—pledge

civil body politic—the people organized as a nation considered as a group

furtherance—the act of advancing

aforesaid—previously mentioned

by virtue (of)—by reason (of)

hereof—of this

ordinances—commands by an authority

submission—the act of giving in to the power of another

whereof—of what

subscribed—signed one's name

reign—period during which a king rules

Anno Dom.—short for *Anno Domini*, “in the year of our Lord” (after the birth of Christ); usually written A.D.

Comprehension Questions

1. According to the Mayflower Compact, what was the purpose of the voyage?
2. Where were the voyagers intending to land? Where did they end up?
3. What is the reason the signers combine into “a civil body politic”?
4. What do the signers promise?
5. When was the compact signed?
6. What was the gender of the signers?

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Critical Thinking

1. Why do you think the Mayflower Compact begins as it does?
2. What is the document's main idea?
3. Who is the document's audience?
4. What is the most important idea in the document?
5. What might have happened if the *Mayflower's* passengers had not created this agreement?
6. Why has the Mayflower Compact gained such importance in our nation's history?

Making Connections

1. Is the Mayflower Compact a democratic document? Explain.
2. Why did people aboard the *Mayflower* believe it was necessary for the men to agree to the compact, but not the women?
3. Why didn't the settlers of the earlier British colony of Jamestown create a similar document?
4. What other groups came to the United States for religious freedom?
5. How does the Mayflower Compact compare in importance with other important documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution? Which do you think the compact is more like? Explain.

Relating the Past to Our Lives

1. Imagine being shipwrecked on a deserted island. How might something like the Mayflower Compact help your group survive?
2. What groups do you belong to that are governed by the group's members?
3. The Virginia Company of Plymouth hoped to make a profit on its investment in the colony. Have you ever invested money for a later profit? If so, in what? Did you in fact make a profit?

Essay Questions

1. Which laws do you think the colonists will create first? Why?
2. Why do you think this document was identified later as significant?
3. How do you think the two groups in the new colony got along? What were the dividing factors? What were the unifying factors? How does creating the compact further unity?

Common Sense

Document: Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)

Historical Context

Occasionally a book is published that shifts public opinion concerning an important event. *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine was such a book. Many Patriots argued that Britain should stop its unfair taxation. Paine went further. He wrote that common sense determined that nothing less than full independence should be the American colonies' goal. Paine's book was published during the colonies' crisis with Britain. Many historians believe that this book shaped public support for independence.

The first edition of *Common Sense* was published in January 1776. This was after the war had begun but before many Americans were willing to take the final step of separation from their mother country. A second larger edition came out a month later. *Common Sense* sold 120,000 copies in the first three months. In a country of 1.5 million people, 500,000 copies were sold by the end of the year. It had become America's first best seller.

The Second Continental Congress continued its meeting in Philadelphia in 1776. It contained representatives whose colonies had denied permission for them to vote for independence. Did *Common Sense* alone change public opinion? Events rarely have a single cause. But historians credit *Common Sense* with having the single greatest influence on public opinion. Paine had a way of expressing the ideals of the Revolution in an understandable manner. Soon Patriot conventions were being held throughout the colonies urging independence. In July independence was declared.

Thomas Paine, son of a corset maker, met Benjamin Franklin in London. Following Franklin's advice, Paine came to the American colonies in 1774. Once in the colonies, Paine wrote for *Pennsylvania Magazine*. After writing *Common Sense* he joined the Continental Army in 1776. In 1776 and 1777, he published *The Crisis*, designed to inspire support for the war among average American colonists. After the war he traveled to Europe. He continued his revolutionary work there by supporting the French Revolution.

Importance

Paine understood the American Revolution's importance to the world. No colonial people had won their independence before. Paine wrote that independence was America's natural right. Not only did he argue for independence, but also he urged that a republican government be formed. This, Paine believed, could instruct the world. In *Common Sense* Paine uses the technique of first raising the opposition's argument, then explaining why it is wrong. He also makes comparisons everyone can understand, such as the mother-child relationship compared with the colonial relationship. Although logical, Paine's language can be emotional also.

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Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776

I have heard it asserted by some, that as America has flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness, and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious than this kind of argument. We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk, that it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent for the next twenty. But even this is admitting more than is true; for I answer roundly, that America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power taken any notice of her. The commerce by which she hath enriched herself are the necessaries of life, and will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe.

But she has protected us, say some. That she hath engrossed us is true, and defended the continent at our expense as well as her own, is admitted; and she would have defended Turkey from the same motive, *viz.* the sake of trade and dominion.

Alas! we have been long led away by ancient prejudices and made large sacrifices to superstition. We have boasted the protection of Great Britain, without considering, that her motive was *interest* not *attachment*; and that she did not protect us from *our enemies* on *our account*, but from *her enemies* on *her own account*, from those who had no quarrel with us on any *other account*, and who will always be our enemies on the *same account*. Let Britain waive her pretensions to the continent, or the continent throw off the dependance, and we should be at peace with France and Spain, were they at war with Britain. . . .

But Britain is the parent country, say some. Then the more shame upon her conduct. Even brutes do not devour their young, nor savages make war upon their families; wherefore the assertion, if true, turns to her reproach; but it happens not to be true, or only partly so, and the phrase *parent* or *mother country* hath been jesuitically adopted by the king and his parasites, with a low papistical design of gaining an unfair bias on the credulous weakness of our minds. Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. This new world hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from *every part* of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of the mother, but from the cruelty of the monster; and it is so far true of England, that the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home, pursues their

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descendants still. . . . I challenge the warmest advocate for reconciliation to show a single advantage that this continent can reap by being connected with Great Britain. I repeat the challenge: not a single advantage is derived. Our corn will fetch its price in any market in Europe, and our imported goods must be paid for buy them where we will.

But the injuries and disadvantages which we sustain by that connection, are without number; and our duty to mankind at large, as well as to ourselves, instruct us to renounce the alliance: because, any submission to, or dependance on Great Britain, tends directly to involve this Continent in European wars and quarrels, and sets us at variance with nations who would otherwise seek our friendship, and against whom we have neither anger nor complaint. As Europe is our market for trade, we ought to form no partial connection with any part of it. It is the true interest of America to steer clear of European contentions, which she never can do, while, by her dependance on Britain, she is made the make-weight in the scale of British politics.

Europe is too thickly planted with kingdoms to be long at peace, and whenever a war breaks out between England and any foreign power, the trade of America goes to ruin, *because of her connection with Britain*. The next war may not turn out like the last, and should it not, the advocates for reconciliation now will be wishing for separation then, because neutrality in that case would be a safer convoy than a man of war. Every thing that is right or natural pleads for separation. The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, 'TIS TIME TO PART. Even the distance at which the Almighty hath placed England and America is a strong and natural proof that the authority of the one over the other, was never the design of Heaven.

Vocabulary

asserted—stated positively

hath—has

flourished—prospered

fallacious—wrong

thrived—grew well

precedent—an earlier happening that should be a model for later happenings

roundly—in a forceful manner

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commerce—trade, business

enriched—made rich

engrossed—occupied

dominion—absolute ownership

motive—something that causes a person to act

pretensions—goals that may not be reached

devour—eat

jesuitically—done in a secret manner

parasites—things dependent on something else for support

papistical—relating to the Catholic Church

bias—prejudice

credulous—ready to believe based on little evidence

asylum—a place of shelter and security

persecuted—bothered by attempts to hurt

civil—relating to citizens

hither—to this place

tyranny—harsh power

emigrants—people who leave a place

advocate—person who argues for something

reconciliation—the act of restoring friendship

fetch—bring

sustain—suffer

renounce—to give up

submission—the condition of giving in to others

variance—state of being in disagreement

contentions—arguments

make-weight—something of little independent value thrown in to fill a gap

pleads—argues

slain—killed

design—plan

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Comprehension Questions

1. What argument against independence did Paine consider first? How does he respond to this argument?
2. How does he counter the argument that Britain protected its American colonies?
3. For what, according to Paine, should Britain be ashamed?
4. Who does he say is the parent of America? Why?
5. What does Paine challenge American supporters of the British to do?
6. For what two reasons does Paine think the colonies should separate from Britain?
7. How does Paine think the connection of the American colonies with Britain affects the colonies' relationship with other countries?
8. How does Paine think this connection can affect trade relations?
9. *Note:* As an alternative to questions 1–8, students might list the points made in the discussion in two columns on a sheet of paper entitled "Arguments Against Independence" and "Paine's Response."

Critical Thinking

1. What is the purpose of *Common Sense*?
2. Why do you think Paine chose that title?
3. Paine challenged British loyalists to name one advantage the colonies would have in remaining in the British Empire. Can you think of any?
4. How, according to Paine, would remaining in the British Empire affect the colonies' relations with foreign countries?
5. Paine's language can be very emotional and uses exaggeration. Give some examples of this.
6. Is Paine's style of argument effective? Explain.

Making Connections

1. What other books in history have had a significant effect on public opinion?
2. Paine writes that Europe is more the mother country of the colonies than Britain because Americans have come from many parts of Europe. Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Paine argues that the colonies would have grown even more economically if it were not for British control. Do you agree? Why or why not?