

MAYFLOWER COMPACT:
PROVIDENCE

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HIST300: Research Methods in History

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The Covenant

The Mayflower Compact provided an ordering and preservation of the Pilgrims' motives and purpose. What did it mean to the Pilgrims then, and what does it mean to America now? This examination of the Mayflower Compact delivers a thorough understanding of the document within its textual context in the light of its historical settings. With this document, they codified their unity and purpose to go forward. The Compact became the basis of American Law that was influenced by their Christian heritage. While not the first European attempt, it could better be known as the Mayflower Covenant that became the Genesis of American settlement and government.¹

Arriving at the New World

After two months at sea, the Mayflower voyagers grew sea weary, in need of food, freshwater, and better living conditions. Having arrived at Cape Cod, they faced the disease of scurvy and the concern of savages on land, thus keeping them on-board for about a month. The Pilgrims, having reached the New World in November of 1620, were at a critical point in their voyage. They were about to leave the safety of the ship and must have faced the collective yet decisive thoughts of, "*Are we all in agreement?*" The Mayflower Compact provided a commitment of unification.² The Compact helped resolve a dispute and gave them a good reason to disembark, with no reversing of their decision. Henceforth, it was to be forward, and as a polis body, they had to be unified to survive.³ Their legal background both learned of England, and biblical heritage formed the foundation of their law and order. With strangers on board, these Pilgrims were led by Leiden Separatists (a form of Puritans) seeking religious freedom.⁴ They were aliens, immigrants, if you will, in a foreign land. Their faith and hope were in God's grace

1 . Sargent, Mark L., "The Conservative Covenant: The Rise of the Mayflower Compact in American Myth", 61 (2), (Online: The New England Quarterly, Inc., 1988), 238,243, 250-251, Accessed November 24, 2015. doi:10.2307/366234, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.apus.edu/stable/366234?pq-origsite=summon&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

2 . Ibid., 241.

3 . Bradford, William, Mayflower Compact: 1620 (New Haven, CT: Lillian Goldman Law Library: 2008), Thorpe, Francis N., United States Congress, (Government Printing Office, 1909), http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mayflower.asp

4 . Bradford, William, Of Plymouth Plantation, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 3, <https://books.google.com/books?id=LGfX-Op3ZNAC&lpg=PP1&ots=rxDkc2wv15&dq=william%20Bradford&lr&pg=PR8#v=onepage&q=william%20Bradford&f=false>

for provision and safety. During this time, they developed a rudimentary democracy, now known as the Mayflower Compact.

According to Bradford, upon their first step on dry land, they dropped to their knees with praise and rejoicing to God, who saw them through all their trials. Upon disembarking, they searched for the right place in which to establish their colony. Scouting the land, they began to encounter native tribespeople they referred to as savages. This term was given of the natives due to a prior colony attempt known as Jamestown, where relations had not been established well, eventually resulting in a massacre of the Virginia Co. colony in 1622.⁵ For one month, they scouted and returned to the anchored ship in the natural harbor of Cape Cod. It was named New Plymouth (Pli^moth), in modern-day Massachusetts, after the Plymouth of England they had left from. In the broader sense, it was later known as the New England colonies. Their test of faith continued subsequent to setting up camp as winter arrived with increasing sicknesses and death.

“*our*” Pilgrims

Thomas Weston (non-Separatist) of the Company of Merchant Adventurers of London financed the Mayflower voyage. But it was the King of England’s charter designating they were to govern their own. On-board the ship was Captain Christopher Jones (Separatist), Miles Standish (non-Separatist) as Military Adviser, John Carver (Huguenot-Separatist) as first Governor, and William Bradford (Separatist and named patent holder for the Plymouth Co.) as second Governor.⁶ Other key people who signed the compact were: Edward Winslow (Separatist) as third Governor, and William Brewster as the Separatists’ Preacher, who was well educated, having political and diplomatic experience.⁷ Some 30 of the 101 on-board were of the Separatists. It goes without certainty as to who the original author of the Compact was, but it is believed that John Carver wrote it since he was the first to sign; however, it likely could have

5 . Native Americans: Friends or Enemies?, (Boston, MA, BU School of Education, 2013), <http://ed101.bu.edu/StudentDoc/Archives/ED101sp06/emilyo/NativeAmericans.html>

6 . Bradford, William, Of Plymouth Plantation, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 50, 129, <https://books.google.com/books?id=LGfX-Op3ZNAC&1pg=PP1&ots=rxDkc2wv15&dq=william%20Bradford&lr&pg=PR8#v=onepage&q=william%20Bradford&f=false>

7 . Ibid., 5-6, 207

been Bradford or Brewster or with any of their collective inputs.⁸ William Bradford recorded a copy of the Mayflower Compact in his journal.⁹ These Separatists were Protestant Christians who were critical of the Church of England, asserting that it could not reform, and thus they needed to separate themselves from the State Church. Separatists believed in Mosaic law and the Common Law of England that set the Mayflower Compact's foundation. As an agreement, it was written in a legal style and tone. Their belief in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world enabled them to compassionately reach out to the natives of the New World and establish relatively good relations.

Governance and Jurisprudence

Having diverted from their original destination that was slightly more south, as prescribed by the voyages assignment: inclement weather, rocky shores, late in the season from a rough start, needs of food, water, and taking up shelter, all contributed to their landing and remaining at Cape-Cod.¹⁰ Justification for the change of destination may have contributed to the Captain's need, as well as the voyage leader John Carver. As a result, a manuscript that all agreed to the new location was drawn up. They collectively had to conclude this should be the place they settle, not the original assignment. Given their circumstances, it must have looked just as good as many a place.

Sea weary and eager to settle on the land, they set anchor just offshore and waited aboard the Mayflower putting forth an agreement in writing. Forty-one Pilgrims signed the following Compact of which is examined herein:

“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, &c. Having undertaken for the Glory of

8 . Ibid., 50

9 . Bradford, William, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 49-50, <https://books.google.com/books?id=LGfX-Op3ZNAC&1pg=PP1&ots=rxDkc2wv15&dq=william%20Bradford&lr&pg=PR8#v=onepage&q=william%20Bradford&f=false>

10 . Ibid., 58.

God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the 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 another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation, and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid: And by Virtue hereof do enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions, and Officers, 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 hereunto subscribed our names at Cape-Cod the eleventh of November, in the Reign of our Sovereign Lord King James, of England, France, and Ireland, the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth, Anno Domini; 1620.”¹¹

(Bradford, William ~ Mayflower Compact, 1622.)

United States Congressional Documents and Debates of 1774-1875, titled the Elliot’s Debates, puts forth that the Mayflower Compact laid the foundation of law and Constitution for America. In this debate for the Adoption of the Federal Constitution, the argument asserts that the Mayflower Compact laid the foundation for the adopted Common Law of England as jurisprudence, “to their stern notions of the absolute authority and universal obligation of the Mosaic institutions.”¹² Moreover, it was declared “in the language of Magna Charta, that justice should be impartially administered unto all... in respect to life, limb, liberty, good name, or estate”.¹³

This argument sets forth the kind of law and its origins instituted by the United States of America. In this argument, the founding colonists acknowledged that they honored the Christian faith, church, and Scriptures (for the basis of capital offenses) in the statement: “reverential regard for the Scriptures... And, as might well be presumed from the religious sentiments of the people, ample protection was given to the church... orthodox ministry... was carefully provided

11 . Bradford, William, *Mayflower Compact: 1620* (New Haven, CT: Lillian Goldman Law Library: 2008), Thorpe, Francis N., *United States Congress*, (Government Printing Office, 1909),

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mayflower.asp

12 . The Library of Congress, *Annals of Congress*, Elliot's Debates (1774-1875), 26-27,

https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:17:./temp/~ammem_9xrz::

13 . *Ibid.*, 26-27.

for.”¹⁴ This heritage is the basis from which Mosaic moral and common law was derived. Subsequent to the Constitutional Convention, the State delegates ratified the Federal Constitution for the United States of America. In this hearing, and by this Compact, it was argued that there should be justice for all and laid the foundation for law and constitution in the United States of America.

Examining the Compact Text

As previously mentioned, as an agreement, it was written in a legal style and tone. A text analysis of the Mayflower Compact revealed the following results: The text data showed that: *God* and *King* were of greatest importance to the original author(s). With the word *our*, respectively, the text was concerning themselves.¹⁵ It also reveals that the original author(s) were not concerned with making the text lengthy.¹⁶ The textual analysis was done combining two independent online tools giving the following ranges of results.¹⁷ Data extracted from these analysis’ are as follows:¹⁸

- Total words: 113-197
- Sentence count: 4-8
- Top words: our, God, King
- Prominent expression: of God

Explicating and expounding some keywords in the Mayflower Compact provide clarity to the text. The Compact opens with reverence to God and then gives honor to human authority. The motive for their *voyage* was two-fold. Foremost, their motivation was to bring *glory* or splendor to God and *advance* the good news, love of God, and salvation of Jesus Christ. This proclamation was being restricted in England, and despite this, they also desired to promote their *King and country*. At the same time, the purpose of their plan was to *plant the first colony* or take up permanent residence.

This Compact was the first written plan of governance and jurisprudence for the *Colony*. This Compact established law and constitution for a New World. Whether it was a lapse of

14 . Ibid., 26-27.

15 . Textalyser: <http://textalyser.net/>; Online-Utility.org: <http://www.online-utility.org/text/analyzer.jsp>

16 . Ibid.

17 . Ibid.

18 . Ibid.

memory, oversight, ignorance, disregard, or meaning not clarified, the text states they were the *first colony*. However, it is presently known that the people of Jamestown and Roanoke Island settlements had been antecedent to those of New Plymouth. It goes without little doubt the Plymouth settlers were among the first that accomplished the following: 1) established permanent and lasting residence, 2) produced descendants, 3) established governance and law, and 4) established relations with natives. This occupying goes without speaking in regard to the native Americans.

The Compact identifies the location as *northern Parts of Virginia* and *Cape-Cod*. These names indicate that these locations had already been mapped out and named before their arrival. By this *presents* or occurrence, they *mutually*, in witness (*presence of*), *covenant*, or commit to one another to join together to form a *Body Politick* or polis. A covenant is similar to a marriage. It is where two or more commit to support and help one another. Furthermore, it should be a *civil* society, distinct from force, barbarism, or war. Moreover, this civil society should be for their *betterment* or well-being, of having *order* or peaceful arrangement, and *preservation* or maintaining, and for the *furtherance* or continuation of their purpose.

By *virtue* or righteousness, they *constitute* or compose, and *frame* or structure their laws and rights to all citizens. Likewise, they *promise* or assure that all *Officers* or public servants are to be subject to the same laws for the good of all their citizens. Finally, they close by reiterating that their agreement is in witness of the signers as in the opening statement. They recognize under what authority and with regards to the place of their origin.

The Manuscript According to Mourt and Bradford

The Mayflower Compact is derived from two sources. These publications give detailed descriptions of the Mayflower landing, Pilgrims exploring, and their settling. The oldest being from *Mourt's Relation* (or Journal) published by John Bellamy in London England, 1622, just two years after the Compact was originally written and signed. The primary author was George Morton (Mourt), as given by Bradford and Winslow. Mourt says he records the compact manuscript "word for word," indicating he was viewing the original document.¹⁹ According to

19 . Deetz, Patricia S., et al., *Mourt's Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth, 1622, Part I*, (Illinois:

Mourt's Relation, the mood on-board the ship was that of some disunity and divisions among the voyagers as they arrived.²⁰ This problem prompted them to come to an agreement and make such an agreement in the form of a written covenant.²¹

Secondly, the Mayflower Compact is recorded in his journal titled, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 1630, by William Bradford. *Of Plymouth Plantation*, was later published by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts titled *William Bradford's Journal*, 1897. As in the Compact, many passages reference their Christian faith and respect for England in both of these documents. Likewise, these documents shed some light on the mood that was taking place, and it is Bradford's Journal that gives more detail. The voyage was primarily planned and led by the group of Separatists; however, there also were others that Bradford refers to as *strangers*. It was these strangers that became "discontented and mutinous."²² Since the Mayflower had diverted its destination, the strangers reasoned that they were, therefore, no longer under the authority or patent. Thus, they wanted to break away from being part of the settlement and go on their own.²³ They probably just had an antipathy toward the preaching they received on-board ship and thought they would take advantage of the free ride. Too much was vested at this point, and such a division would be even more difficult for the survival of all. By God's providence, Bradford relates it was partly this dispute that drove them to write an agreement.²⁴ Furthermore, he mentions also that such necessity was made more sure under the said agreement anyways.²⁵ It is apparent that the dispute was resolved, and they came to an agreement and unity.²⁶ With regard to the concern of location, the Compact generalizes or expands its mission to the "northern Parts of Virginia" and cites the place of "Cape-Cod."²⁷

The Pilgrims brought with them a Geneva Bible where they would have reflected upon

The Plymouth Colony Archive Project, 2007), <http://www.histarch.illinois.edu/plymouth/mourt1.html>

20 . Ibid.

21 . Ibid.

22 . Bradford, William, Bradford's History of 'Plimoth Plantation', The 2. Booke, (Online: The Project Gutenberg eBook, 2015), 109, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/24950/24950-h/24950-h.htm>

23 . Ibid., 109.

24 . Ibid., 109.

25 . Ibid., 109.

26 . Ibid., 110.

27 . Bradford, William, Mayflower Compact: 1620 (New Haven, CT: Lillian Goldman Law Library: 2008), Thorpe, Francis N., United States Congress, (Government Printing Office, 1909), http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mayflower.asp

the following passages. Given their situation, just as the children of Abraham with similar experiences, and as the Apostle St. Paul reiterates, they came seeking a better place, a homeland, and for the time being, found it.

1 Chronicles 29:15 For we [are] ⁱ *strangers* before thee, and *sojourners*, as [were] all our fathers: our days on the earth [are] as a shadow, and [there is] none abiding.

(i) Therefore, we have this land loaned to us for a time.

Hebrews 11:13 These all died in ^g faith, not having received the ^h promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of [them], and ⁱ embraced [them], and confessed that they were *strangers* and *pilgrims* on the earth.

(g) In faith, which they had while they lived, and followed, them even to their grave.

(h) This is the figure metonymy, for the things promised.

(i) For the patriarchs were given to profess their religion by building an altar and calling on the name of the Lord when they received the promises.²⁸

Summary

The Mayflower Compact was the planning and recording of the Pilgrims' motivations and purpose of their voyage that established American settlement and government. Their heritage sets the tone for their motivations. First, it was to further the Christian faith, and secondly, to promote the King and country of England. They were to achieve this by purposing to colonize the New World. They suffered much, just reaching the New World, but faced new difficulties as they arrived. While leadership changed, it was centered around John Carver and William Bradford, who were both Separatists. An examination of the text sheds light on its meaning and how it impacted the United States of America today. It defined motives of their heritage, as well as the purpose and settled a dispute. There was something in that document that

²⁸ Geneva Bible, (c1560), 1 Chronicles 29:15 and Hebrews 11:13, Bible Study Tools, Salen Web Network, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/geneva-study-bible/1-chronicles/1-chronicles-29.html> and <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/geneva-study-bible/hebrews/hebrews-11.html>

everyone could agree upon, whether God, King, and Country, or their new location. It brought unity to the Separatists and strangers yet laid the foundation of jurisprudence to America. Finally, it was the circumstances of dispute that ensued, providentially inspiring the Mayflower Compact manuscript. Out of chaos was the creation of the New World.

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