

From Compact to Constitution

Video Three: Mayflower Compact: The Original Social Contract

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One. Mayflower Compact: The Original Social Contract. An Introduction to Video Three

Plymouth Colony was a place of political creativity and improvisation. It was a birthplace of self-government in the British Atlantic World and played a critical role in this country's constitutional tradition. The *Mayflower Compact* was only the beginning of a groundbreaking seventy-year experiment in civil government and individual spiritual liberties. It is an experiment which can shine a light for us today.

Historian Pauline Meier characterized our Nation's founding documents as American Scripture. Certainly, the *Mayflower Compact* takes chronological priority in the sacred text of America's civil religion. In the absence of a royal charter, faced with mounting dissension because *Mayflower* landed north of the colony's legal destination in northern Virginia, key passengers initiated organization of a government and legal structure by formulating a self-declared "combination" in which the necessity of forming a "civil body politic" was set forth.

This combination was signed on November 11, 1620, by 41 adult men of the original settlers, and it provided a first step toward setting up a government which could claim legitimate authority to impose constraints on the colonists. Later Plymouth Colony declarations would cite this combination, the land patents received from the New England Council (a private corporation established by the Crown), and the settlers' pursuit of the greater "glory of God" as the foundations for the Plymouth government's authority in issuing laws to govern the colony and manage an expanding settlement over the years.

Two. Transcript of “The Original Social Contract”

November 11th, 1620. After completing a perilous two-month journey across the Atlantic, Mayflower is anchored off Cape Cod. Rebellion is brewing aboard the ship.

No one has gone ashore, but some passengers, those who are not members of the Pilgrims' Separatist church, are threatening to go rogue once they do.

Master Christopher Jones has decided that the shoals off Cape Cod are too dangerous to navigate and he cannot get the passengers to Northern Virginia. He has determined they will remain in New England. The rebels claim that now neither the crown nor anyone else has control over them.

The ship's leaders know that without unity, they have no chance to survive. Their solution is the Mayflower Compact, a document that will bind everyone together into one civic body, idealized depictions of the Compact signing imagine a stately group event in the ship's “spacious” main cabin. As you can see, it is anything but spacious. A group would never fit.

More likely, those who signed, signed in the cramped cargo space converted to living quarters. They signed separately – most willingly, some under duress. Every passenger knows no one is getting off the ship until every male of majority age agrees to the covenant.

In his history of Plymouth Colony, William Bradford wrote, “a combination made by them before they came ashore being the first foundation of government in this place. Occasioned partly by the discontented and mutinous speeches that some of the strangers amongst them had let fall from them in the ship ... and partly that such an act by them done might be as firm as any patent, and in some respects more sure. The form was as followeth:

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 honor 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 here under 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.

Ano: Dom. 1620.

History remembers the *Mayflower Compact* as a social contract that established self-government in New England. In the eyes of the Pilgrims, it was a covenant. A covenant is an agreement that binds at least two people together where mutual promises are made and there are also mutual responsibilities. In 1606, it was a religious covenant that bounds the Pilgrims together they first formed their Separatist church in the English town of Scrooby. Plymouth colonists deemed covenants so essential that they regularly and publicly affirmed them. From 1620 to 1692 the *Mayflower Compact* was read aloud at the start of every court session, bringing to everyone's mind their foundational document, their contract with each other.

In an oral culture where few people read, this repetition was hugely important as a memory device. The Pilgrims' world-famous agreement contains only 199 words, yet it laid the foundations for America's system of representative government. It is also time-honored testimony that social contracts can have power.

Glossary of Terms

Mayflower Compact: A written agreement created aboard the *Mayflower* in 1620 to establish a self-governing colony in New England. It served as a social contract to maintain unity and order among the colonists.

Covenant: A solemn agreement binding individuals to mutual promises and responsibilities.

Separatist Church: A religious group that sought to separate from the Church of England, forming their own congregation in pursuit of spiritual purity.

Northern Virginia: The intended destination of the *Mayflower's* voyage, corresponding to parts of present-day New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

Cape Cod: A peninsula in present-day Massachusetts where the *Mayflower* anchored, leading to the foundation of Plymouth Colony.

Plymouth Colony: The first permanent English settlement in New England.

Shoals: Sandbanks or underwater ridges that posed navigational hazards to ships near Cape Cod.

Brief Bios

Master Christopher Jones: The master (captain) of the *Mayflower*, responsible for the ship and its voyage across the Atlantic. Jones played a key role in deciding to anchor at Cape Cod due to dangerous conditions.

William Bradford: A leader of the Pilgrims and eventual governor of Plymouth Colony. He documented the history of the colony, including the creation of the *Mayflower Compact*.

King James: James I of England (reigned 1603 – 1625) the ruling monarch at the time of the *Mayflower's* voyage. The Pilgrims pledged loyalty to him in the Compact despite their quest for religious freedom.

Discussion Questions

1. Why was *Mayflower Compact* necessary for the passengers aboard the *Mayflower*? Discuss the reasons behind the creation of the *Compact* and its importance for unity and survival.
2. What challenges did the passengers face upon arriving at Cape Cod, and how did these challenges influence their decision to stay in New England? Explore the difficulties of navigating the shoals and the implications of remaining in New England instead of Northern Virginia.
3. How did the concept of a covenant play a role in the Pilgrims' society and governance? Examine the significance of covenants in the Pilgrims' religious and social structures, and how it influenced their approach to self-government.
4. In what ways did the *Mayflower Compact* lay the foundation for America's system of representative government? Analyze the principles of the *Compact* and how they contributed to the development of democratic governance in America.
5. What can we learn from the Pilgrims' use of oral repetition to reinforce the importance of the *Mayflower Compact*? Discuss the role of oral culture in maintaining social contracts and the impact of regularly affirming the *Compact* in court sessions.

Three: The England of the Tudor and Stuart Dynasties: Background Essay for Students

In 16th and 17th-century England, church reformation was one of the most dramatic and intense controversies of the time. The Protestant Reformation, started by Martin Luther in Europe, officially reached England in 1533 when King Henry VIII broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. He did this because the Pope refused to grant him a divorce from Catherine of Aragon. As a result, Henry created the Church of England, with the king as its leader instead of the Pope.

This break from the Catholic Church led to big changes in English religious practices. However, once the door to change was opened, it was hard to close. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, a new wave of reformers, inspired by the teachings of John Calvin, pushed for even more changes in the Church of England.

These reformers, known as Puritans, argued that the English Reformation hadn't gone far enough. They believed the Church of England was still too similar to the Roman Catholic Church, keeping ceremonies and clothing that had no basis in Scripture. According to the Puritans, Christian worship should return to the practices of the early church as described in the Bible. They believed nothing should be allowed in worship unless it was directly supported by Scripture.

On the other hand, Anglicans, who supported the Church of England, were satisfied with the way things were. They believed the Scriptures were the ultimate authority in matters of salvation but felt that in other areas, people could make their own decisions about how to organize the church.

The disagreement between Puritans and Anglicans wasn't just about religion—it was also a struggle for power. Each group believed its beliefs should be the official religion of England, and neither side was open to tolerance. At the time, tolerating other beliefs was seen as a sign of weak faith. Since the Church of England was closely tied to the government, this conflict also had political consequences that would lead to revolution in the 1640s and the execution of King Charles I.

Some reformers felt the Church of England was so flawed that it couldn't truly serve God's will without immediate reform. When the rest of the Church refused to follow their vision, these individuals, called Separatists, decided to leave. They stopped attending Church of England services and created their own congregations, which they believed were true churches. These Separatist churches were formed and guided by covenants—agreements among their members to work together in faith and follow God's teachings.

Glossary of Terms

Protestant Reformation: A 16th-century religious movement started by Martin Luther that challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and led to the creation of Protestant churches.

Roman Catholic Church: The largest Christian church, led by the Pope, held significant political and religious influence in Europe during this period.

Church of England (Anglican Church): A Christian church established by King Henry VIII in 1533, separating from the Roman Catholic Church.

Puritans: A group of religious reformers who believed the Church of England needed further changes to align with biblical teachings.

Anglicans: Members of the Church of England who supported its existing practices and believed in some flexibility within church traditions.

Covenant: A formal agreement among members of a religious group to work together in faith and follow shared beliefs.

Key Figures

Henry VIII (1491-1547): King of England who initiated the English Reformation by breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church and establishing the Church of England.

Catherine of Aragon (1485 – 1536): The first wife of Henry VIII, their marriage and his desire for a divorce were central to the split with the Catholic Church.

Martin Luther (1483 – 1546): A German priest and theologian who started the Protestant Reformation by challenging the practices and doctrines of the Catholic Church.

Elizabeth I (1533 – 1603): Queen of England who ruled during a critical time in the English Reformation, balancing Protestant and Catholic pressures while supporting the Church of England.

John Calvin (1509 – 1564): A French theologian and reformer whose ideas greatly influenced Puritan beliefs about worship and church organization.

Charles I (1600 – 1649) King of England whose conflicts with Parliament and religious divisions led to the English Civil War and his eventual execution.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did King Henry VIII decide to break away from the Roman Catholic Church, and how did this decision change religious practices in England?
2. The Puritans believed the Church of England hadn't changed enough. What were some of their main concerns, and how did their ideas differ from those of the Anglicans?
3. Did the conflict between Puritans and Anglicans go beyond religion? What political consequences came from their disagreements?
4. What motivated Separatists to leave the Church of England, and how did their use of covenants reflect their beliefs about faith and community?
5. How do the ideas and struggles of religious reformers in the 16th and 17th centuries related to the concept of freedom of religion today?

Four. What is a Primary Source? Covenants.

Primary sources are like time machines. They are things created during the actual time period you're studying. It gives you a first-hand look at what happened back then. For example:

Diary entries or journals: Someone writing about their life at the time.

Letters: Messages exchanged between people long ago.

Photographs: Pictures taken during an important event or era.

Official Documents: Things like law, speeches, or contracts.

Artifacts: Objects like tools, clothing, or art from a specific time.

Primary sources are unique because they come directly from the past—straight from the people who were there—so they help us understand history in personal way. They are different from secondary sources, like history books, which talk about the past but were not made during the same time. Think of it like hearing the story from someone who was there versus someone telling it second-hand.

Covenants

During the early years of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther created catechisms, or teaching guides, for both adults and children in his growing movement. In the Roman Catholic Church, catechisms had been an important part of a priest's training. These guides used a question-and-answer format, making it easier to memorize important religious teachings.

By the early 1600s, adult catechisms weren't commonly used in England, but books like *Of Domestic Duties* by William Gouge encouraged parents to teach children and servants about faith through catechisms. For Separatists in Plymouth, Reverend John Robinson's *An Appendix to Mr. Perkins' Six Principles of Christian Religion* was especially helpful in showing how a church covenant could guide the daily lives of church members.

The six questions that follow show how church covenants worked and give clues to the way the Pilgrims' church covenant influenced the way that the *Mayflower Compact* would hold people together as a civil covenant. The many citations from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament show how the Bible was central to the way Puritans and Separatists organized their world.

Who was John Robinson (1575–1625)?

Between 1604 and 1606, a group of Separatists—Christians who wanted to separate from the Church of England—gathered in Scrooby, England. They chose Richard Clyfton as their pastor and John Robinson as their teacher, which was like an assistant pastor. Robinson had studied at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, where the teachings leaned toward Calvinism. He earned a BA in 1596, became a fellow of the college in 1598, and was ordained in the Church of England.

Robinson earned his MA in 1599 but eventually left the Church of England to become a strict Separatist. Later in his life, he became more open to other Christian views.

When the Scrooby group fled religious persecution in England and went to Amsterdam, Robinson went with them. Later, when the group moved to Leiden in the Netherlands, he became their pastor. Clyfton stayed in Amsterdam to lead an older English Reformed Christian church called the Ancient Brethren. Life in Holland was challenging, and Robinson dreamed of leading his church to a new home in America. However, some members of his congregation insisted he stay in Leiden until they could create a successful settlement in the New World.

While Robinson was never officially the pastor of the Plymouth church, he was an important spiritual guide for its members. He deeply wanted to join his congregation in New England but was blocked by powerful Puritan merchants who opposed his emigration. Robinson passed away in Leiden in 1625, leaving behind a legacy of faith and leadership.

John Robinson's Catechism. His questions related to covenants.

Q. 1. What is the church?.

A. A company of faithful and holy people with their children, called by the Word of God into public covenant with Christ and amongst themselves, for mutual fellowship in the use of all the means of God's glory and their salvation.

Modern English Adaptation: A group of devoted and righteous people, along with their children, brought together by God's Word to enter into a covenant with Christ and one another. They commit to supporting each other in faith and using all the ways God provides to honor Him and achieve their salvation.

Q. 2. Of what sort or number of people must this company consist?

A. It is all one whether they be high or low, few or many; so as they exceed not such a number as may ordinarily meet together in one place for the worshiping of God and sanctification of the Lord's day. Galatians 3:28; Matthew 28: 17, 19; 1 Corinthians 11: 17, 18, 20; Matthew 24: 23; Acts of the Apostles 20:7.

Modern English Adaptation: "It doesn't matter if the group is large or small, important or humble, as long as it's not so big that they can't all gather in one place to worship God and honor the Lord's day."

Q. 3. What are the reasons why the church must consist of faithful and holy people?

A. 1. The Scriptures everywhere so teach. Leviticus 20: 26; Romans 1: 7, 8; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Philemon 1: 1-9.

Modern English Adaptation: "The Bible teaches this in many places."

2. The church is the body of Christ, all whose members, therefore, should be conformable in some measure to Him their Head. Ephesians 1: 22; Colossians 1: 18.

Modern English Adaptation: "The church is like the body of Christ, and all its members should try to reflect Him, who is their leader."

3. Only such worshippers please God, are accepted of him, and have right to the covenant of grace and seals thereof. John 4:23; Hebrews 8: 8-10; Jude 1:1; Ezekiel 44: 7.
Modern English Adaptation: "Only those who worship God sincerely are pleasing to Him, accepted by Him, and have the right to His covenant of grace and its blessings."

Q. 4. But are not hypocrites mingled with the faithful in the church?

A. None ought to be by the Word of God, and where such are, they are not truly added by the Lord to the church, but do creep in through their own hypocrisy, and not without the church's sin also, if they may be discerned to be such.

Modern English Adaptation: "Anyone who doesn't truly follow God's Word shouldn't be part of the church. If they pretend to belong through hypocrisy, they aren't really added by the Lord. Their actions also reflect the church's failure if their behavior can be recognized and yet isn't addressed."

Q. 5. By what means is the church gathered?

A. By the Word preached, and by faith received by them that hear it. Matthew 28: 19, 20; Acts of the Apostles 2: 14, 11: 19, 20: 21; Romans 1: 5; 1 Corinthians 15: 1, 2.

Modern English Adaptation: "Through the preaching of God's Word, and by having faith in it, those who hear it can receive its message."

Q. 6. Is every believer a member of the visible church?

A. No, but he must also, by his personal and public profession, adjoin himself to some particular fellowship and society of saints. Acts 2: 41, 47, 8: 37; 9: 18.

Modern English Adaptation: "No, he must also publicly and personally declare his faith and join a specific group or community of believers."

Fragments of church covenant language contained in Chapter One of William Bradford's manuscript at "Of Plimoth Plantation".

And whose hearts the Lord had touched with heavenly zeal for his truth; they shook off this yoke of antichristian bondage. And as the Lord's free people, joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel to walk in all his ways, made known, or to be made known unto them (according to their best endeavors) whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them. And that it cost them something this ensuing history will declare.

Modern English Adaptation: "And with hearts inspired by the Lord's heavenly passion for His truth, they freed themselves from the burden of oppressive, anti-Christian practices. As God's free people, they came together through a covenant with the Lord, forming a church dedicated to living out the fellowship of the gospel. They committed themselves to walk in all the ways of the Lord, as they understood them or as they would come to understand, striving with their best efforts to follow Him—no matter the cost, trusting in the Lord's help. And as this history shows, that commitment came with great sacrifices."

Plymouth Church Covenant Renewed June 1676

From the Plymouth Church Records

In compliance with the Plymouth Colony General Court request “that all our churches renew their covenant engagement to God for reformation of all provoking evils,” on June 29, 1676 the Plymouth congregation voted that the following covenant should be left upon record as that which they “did own to be the substance of that Covenant which their Fathers’ entered into at the first gathering of the Church:”

“In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ & in obedience to his holy will and divine ordinances. Wee being by the most wise & good providence of God brought together in this place & desirous to unite our selves into one congregation or church under the Lord Jesus Christ our Head, that it may be in such sort as becometh all those whom He hath redeemed & sanctified to himselfe, wee doe hereby solemnly & religiously (as in his most holy prescence) avouch the Lord Jehovah the only true God to be our God & the God of ours & doe promise & binde ourselves to walke in all our wayes according to the Rule of the Gospel & in all sincere conformity to His holy ordinances & in mutuall love to & watchfullnesse over one another, depending wholly & only upon the Lord our God to enable us by his grace hereunto.”

Modern English Adaptation: "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in obedience to His holy will and divine commands, we, brought together by the wise and good providence of God, desire to unite ourselves into one congregation or church under the leadership of Jesus Christ, our Lord. We do this so that we may live as those who have been redeemed and sanctified by Him.

We solemnly and reverently declare, in His holy presence, that the Lord Jehovah, the one true God, is our God and the God of our descendants. We promise and commit ourselves to walk in all our ways according to the teachings of the Gospel, to faithfully follow His holy commands, to love one another, and to watch over one another with care. We depend completely and solely on the Lord our God to strengthen us by His grace to fulfill these promises.”

Discussion Questions

1. How does a church covenant reflect the shared values and commitments of its members? Why was this important to the Pilgrims?
2. Why do you think the Pilgrims connected their church covenants to the idea of forming a community in America?
3. What does the phrase “walking in all His ways” mean in the context of church covenants? How might this idea guide daily life for believers?
4. Why was the Pilgrims’ commitment to their covenant sometimes described as costly? What sacrifices might they have faced?

5. How do church covenants help establish trust and unity in a community? Can you think of similar commitments people make today?

Mayflower Compact

From Of Plymouth Plantation

This excerpt opens the second volume of William Bradford's manuscript at *Of Plymouth Plantation*.

The remainder of Anno 1620

I shall a little return back, and begin with a combination made By them before they came ashore; being the first foundation of their government in this place. Occasioned partly by the discontented, and mutinous speeches that some of the strangers amongst them, had let fall from them in the ship; That when they came ashore they would use their own Liberty; for none had power to command them, the patent they had being for Virginia, and not for New England, which belonged to another Government with which the Virginia Company had nothing to do. And partly that such an Act by them done (this their condition considered) might be as firm as any patent; and in some respects more sure.

The form was as followeth.

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 honor 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 here under 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 eighteen, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth.

Ano: Dom. 1620.

After this they chose, or rather confirmed Mr. John Carver (a man Godly and well approved amongst them) their Governor for that year.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the Pilgrims decided to write the Mayflower Compact *before* they even got off the ship?

2. The Compact says the settlers will “combine ourselves together into a civil body politic.” What do you think that meant for them in 1620, and what might it mean for a community today?
3. The signers agreed to make and obey “just and equal laws.” What makes a law “just” or “equal” in your opinion?
4. Only adult men signed the Compact. How might the colony have been different if women, servants, or Wampanoag leaders had been included?
5. Some historians call the Mayflower Compact the first step toward American democracy. Do you agree, or do you think that gives the document too much credit? Why?

Five. Charters and Letters Patents

What was the difference between a royal charter and letters patent from the king of England?

In seventeenth-century New England, both royal charters and letters patent were formal grants issued by the English monarch, but they served different purposes and carried varying levels of authority.

1. **Royal Charters:** These were formal documents issued under the Great Seal of England, often used to establish colonies, towns, or institutions. They granted significant rights and privileges, such as self-governance or land ownership, to a group or corporation. For example, the Massachusetts Bay Colony operated under a royal charter, which allowed it to function with a degree of autonomy. Charters were typically more solemn and comprehensive than letters patent.
2. **Letters Patent:** These were open letters also issued under the Great Seal, but they were more versatile and less formal. They could grant a wide range of rights, such as land, titles, or official positions, to individuals or groups. Unlike charters, letters patent were not necessarily tied to the establishment of a governing body or institution.

In essence, royal charters were foundational documents for larger entities like colonies, while letters patent were more specific grants of rights or privileges. Both played crucial roles in shaping the legal and political landscape of New England. Let's dive into some specific examples of royal charters and letters patent that shaped seventeenth-century New England:

Royal Charters

1. **Massachusetts Bay Charter (1629):** This charter established the Massachusetts Bay Colony, granting the colonists the right to self-governance and significant autonomy. It allowed the Puritans to create a society based on their religious ideals. However, the charter was annulled in 1684, leading to the creation of the Dominion of New England.
2. **Connecticut Charter (1662):** Issued by King Charles II, this charter granted Connecticut extensive self-governing rights. It famously survived an attempt by King James II to revoke it, thanks to the legendary "Charter Oak" incident, where the document was hidden in an oak tree to prevent its seizure.
3. **Rhode Island Charter (1663):** Also granted by Charles II, this charter provided Rhode Island with remarkable religious freedom and self-governance, reflecting the colony's founding principles under Roger Williams.

Letters Patent

1. **Grant to Sir Ferdinando Gorges (1637):** Letters patent were issued to Gorges, appointing him as the governor of New England. This grant was part of an effort to establish more direct royal control over the region.

2. **Land Grants to John Mason (1635):** Letters patent granted land to Mason, leading to the establishment of New Hampshire. These grants were instrumental in shaping the territorial boundaries of the colony.

These documents were not just legal instruments; they were foundational to the political and social structures of the colonies. They also highlight the tension between colonial autonomy and royal authority.

Royal Charters

1. **Massachusetts Bay Charter (1629):**

- This charter was granted by King Charles I to the Massachusetts Bay Company. It allowed the company to establish a colony in New England and provided a framework for self-governance. The charter defined the colony's territorial boundaries, which included land between the Merrimack and Charles Rivers, extending three miles beyond each.
- What made this charter unique was its omission of a clause requiring the company to remain in England, enabling the colonists to govern themselves directly in New England.

2. **Connecticut Charter (1662):**

- Secured by Governor John Winthrop Jr., this charter was granted by King Charles II. It provided Connecticut with extensive self-governing rights and absorbed the New Haven Colony into its jurisdiction.
- The charter famously survived an attempt by King James II to revoke it, thanks to the "Charter Oak" incident, where the document was hidden in an oak tree to prevent its seizure.

3. **Rhode Island Charter (1663):**

- This charter, also granted by Charles II, was groundbreaking for its guarantee of religious freedom. It allowed Rhode Islanders to govern themselves and practice their religion without interference, a radical concept at the time.
- The charter reflected the colony's founding principles under Roger Williams and remained in effect until Rhode Island adopted its state constitution in 1843.

Letters Patent

1. **Grant to Sir Ferdinando Gorges (1637):**

- King Charles I issued letters patent appointing Gorges as the governor of New England. This grant aimed to establish a centralized government to address conflicts among settlers and ensure royal control over the region.
- Gorges was a key figure in early English colonization efforts, often referred to as the "Father of English Colonization in North America".

2. **Land Grants to John Mason (1635):**

- Letters patent granted land to Captain John Mason, leading to the establishment of New Hampshire. The grant included territory between the Merrimack and Piscataqua Rivers and extended inland for sixty miles.
- Mason's efforts laid the groundwork for the colony's development, although disputes over land boundaries persisted for years.

These documents were not just legal instruments; they were pivotal in shaping the governance, territorial boundaries, and cultural identity of the New England colonies.

What impact did these documents have on New England society?

The royal charters and letters patent had profound and lasting impacts on New England society, shaping its governance, economy, and cultural identity. Here's a closer look at their influence:

Governance and Autonomy

- **Self-Governance:** Charters like those of Massachusetts Bay, Connecticut, and Rhode Island granted significant autonomy, allowing colonies to establish their own legislative assemblies and legal systems. This fostered a tradition of self-rule that would later influence the development of American democracy.
- **Tensions with the Crown:** The autonomy granted by these documents often led to conflicts with the English monarchy, especially when attempts were made to revoke or modify charters. For example, the annulment of the Massachusetts Bay Charter in 1684 and the subsequent establishment of the Dominion of New England highlighted the struggle between colonial self-governance and royal authority.

Economic Development

- **Land Ownership:** Letters patent often granted land to individuals or groups, facilitating the establishment of settlements and agricultural development. This contributed to the growth of a land-owning class and the expansion of colonial economies.
- **Trade and Commerce:** Charters provided legal frameworks for trade and commerce, enabling colonies to engage in economic activities with a degree of independence. This laid the groundwork for a thriving mercantile culture in New England.

Cultural and Social Identity

- **Religious Freedom:** Documents like the Rhode Island Charter explicitly guaranteed religious freedom, attracting diverse groups seeking refuge from persecution. This contributed to the region's reputation as a haven for religious tolerance.
- **Community Building:** The legal structures established by these documents encouraged the formation of tight-knit communities with shared governance and collective responsibility.

Overall, these documents were instrumental in shaping the political, economic, and cultural foundations of New England, leaving a legacy that would resonate throughout American history.

Why did charters give colonies more autonomy than letters patent?

The key difference in autonomy stemmed from the nature, scope, and intent of these documents:

1. **Broader Authority:** Charters were designed to establish colonies as semi-autonomous entities, often granting them the authority to create their own governments, laws, and judicial systems. For instance, the Massachusetts Bay Charter allowed the colony to set

up a General Court that functioned as both a legislative and judicial body. This level of autonomy enabled the colonies to govern themselves with minimal interference from England.

2. **Corporate Foundation:** Many charters were issued to corporations (e.g., the Massachusetts Bay Company), which then transferred their operations to the New World. This corporate foundation gave colonists collective control over their governance, as seen in colonies where elected representatives held power within a framework provided by the charter.
3. **Limited Purpose of Letters Patent:** Letters patent were narrower in scope, often granting specific rights or privileges to individuals or groups without establishing a larger governing framework. For example, a letter patent might grant land to an individual without addressing governance, leaving such matters to higher authorities in England.
4. **Legal and Political Flexibility:** Charters provided colonists with a greater degree of legal and political flexibility, enabling them to adapt governance structures to suit local conditions. Letters patent, being more specific, lacked this adaptability.

In short, charters were foundational documents that empowered colonies to develop self-governing institutions, while letters patent were typically more limited in purpose and scope, focusing on granting rights or privileges without addressing broader governance.

Were letters patent easier to revoke than charters?

Yes, letters patent were generally easier to revoke than royal charters, and here's why:

1. **Scope and Purpose:** Letters patent were often issued for specific grants or appointments, such as land ownership or titles, and could be revoked if the conditions of the grant were not met or if the Crown deemed it necessary. Their narrower scope made them more straightforward to annul.
2. **Legal Framework:** Royal charters were foundational documents that established colonies or institutions and often included provisions for self-governance. Revoking a charter required significant legal and political justification, as it could disrupt entire communities or governing structures. For example, the annulment of the Massachusetts Bay Charter in 1684 was a complex and contentious process.
3. **Authority and Precedent:** Letters patent were issued at the discretion of the monarch and could be revoked more easily by the same authority. Charters, on the other hand, often involved broader legal and administrative processes, making their revocation more challenging.

In essence, the broader implications and legal protections associated with charters made them more resistant to revocation compared to the more specific and discretionary nature of letters patent.

What are some notable examples of revocation?

Revocation of Royal Charters

1. **Massachusetts Bay Charter (1684):**

- The Massachusetts Bay Charter was annulled by King Charles II due to the colony's resistance to royal authority and its violation of trade regulations. This revocation marked the end of the colony's self-governance under the charter and led to the establishment of the Dominion of New England under a royal governor.

2. **Virginia Company's Charter (1624):**

- The charter of the Virginia Company, which had established the Jamestown settlement, was revoked by King James I. The company faced criticism for mismanagement and financial troubles, leading to the transformation of Virginia into a royal colony directly under the Crown's control.

Revocation of Letters Patent

1. **Grant to Sir Ferdinando Gorges (1639):**

- Letters patent appointing Gorges as the governor of New England were effectively nullified when the region's governance shifted toward more localized control. This marked the decline of Gorges' influence in the region.

2. **Land Grants to John Mason:**

- Some of Mason's land grants faced disputes and challenges, leading to their eventual reassignment or modification. These disputes often arose from overlapping claims and the evolving political landscape.

Revocations often reflected the Crown's efforts to reassert control over colonies or address conflicts and inefficiencies. They also highlight the dynamic and sometimes contentious relationship between the colonies and the English monarchy.

Other than the period of the Dominion of New England, did Plymouth Colony ever have their letters patent revoked or challenged?

Yes, Plymouth Colony's letters patent faced challenges, though they were not formally revoked. Here are some key points:

1. **Peirce Patent (1621):**

- The original letters patent for Plymouth Colony, known as the Peirce Patent, was issued to John Peirce and his associates by the Virginia Company. This document granted the Pilgrims the right to settle and govern themselves in New England. However, it was limited in scope and did not provide a secure legal foundation for the colony's long-term governance.

2. **Bradford's Patent (1630):**

- In 1630, a new patent was issued to Governor William Bradford and his associates by the Council for New England. This document expanded the colony's territorial claims and provided a more stable legal basis for its governance. However, it was not a royal charter, which meant the colony's legal status remained somewhat precarious.

3. **Challenges and Surrender (1640):**

- In 1640, William Bradford formally surrendered the patent to the freemen of Plymouth Colony, transferring ownership and governance to the colony as a whole. This act was intended to solidify the colony's communal governance

structure. However, the lack of a royal charter left Plymouth vulnerable to external challenges.

4. **Annexation into Massachusetts Bay Colony (1691):**

- Plymouth Colony's lack of a royal charter ultimately contributed to its annexation into the Massachusetts Bay Colony under the new Province of Massachusetts Bay charter in 1691. This marked the end of Plymouth as an independent colony.

These events highlight the legal and political uncertainties faced by Plymouth Colony throughout its history.

Why was the Bradford Patent significant?

The Bradford Patent of 1630 was a significant legal document for Plymouth Colony, issued by the Council for New England to Governor William Bradford and his associates. Here's a closer look at its context and impact:

1. **Purpose and Context:**

- The patent was issued to provide a more stable legal foundation for Plymouth Colony after the limitations of the earlier Peirce Patent (1621). By 1626, the Pilgrims had negotiated a new agreement with their financial backers, the Merchant Adventurers, which allowed them to buy out their debts. This necessitated a new patent to formalize their governance and land claims.

2. **Key Features:**

- The Bradford Patent granted the colonists rights to specific lands and the authority to govern themselves. It marked a shift from the earlier arrangement, which had tied the colony's governance to external investors.
- The patent was held in trust by Bradford and later transferred to the freemen of the colony in 1640, ensuring communal ownership and governance.

3. **Impact:**

- The Bradford Patent helped solidify Plymouth Colony's legal and political structure, allowing it to operate with greater independence. However, it was not a royal charter, which meant the colony's legal status remained somewhat precarious compared to neighboring colonies like Massachusetts Bay.

The Bradford Patent reflects the evolving relationship between the Pilgrims, their financial backers, and the English Crown.