

Pilgrims Were English and Loyal to the King

In the 1500s England broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and created a new church called the Church of England (sometimes referred to as the Anglican Church).

Although the new church had been founded by Henry VIII of England (r. 1509-1547 CE) during the Protestant Reformation in opposition to the Catholic Church, it still retained many aspects of Catholicism which some Protestants, derisively known by Anglicans as “Puritans” because they wished to purify the Church, objected to. (Joshua Mark, 2021)



Henry VIII

King James I, the same who commissioned the famous King James Translation of the Bible, was the head of the Anglican Church, interpreted this criticism as treason, and authorized officials to fine, arrest, imprison and even execute dissenters. (Joshua Mark, 2021) Everyone in England had to belong to the Anglican Church. There was a group of people called Separatists that wanted to separate from that church.

Pilgrims Wanted to Remain English, Even Though They Were Persecuted and Arrested

In 1607 CE, the Anglican Church became aware of the Scrooby congregation and arrested some, placing others under surveillance, and fining those they could. The congregation, under the leadership of John Robinson (l. 1576-1628 CE) sold their belongings and relocated to Leiden, the Netherlands, where the government practiced a policy of religious tolerance.



Engraving by Kaspar Merian from Martin Zieler's Topographia Germaniae Inferioris (c. 1660), 'View of Leyden' (Leiden)

According to William Bradford,

“But after these things they could not long continue in any peaceable condition, but were hunted & persecuted on every side, so as their former afflictions were but as flea-bitings in comparison of these which now came upon them.

For some were taken & clapt up in prison, others had their houses besett & watcht night and day, & hardly escaped their hands; and ye most were faine to flie & leave their howses & habitations, and the means of their livelihood.

Yet these & many other sharper things which afterward befell them, were no other then they looked for, and therefore were ye better prepared to bear them by ye assistance of Gods grace & sprite.

Yet seeing them selves thus molested, and that ther was no hope of their continuance ther, by a joynte consente they resloved to goe into ye low-countries, wher they heard was freedoms of religion for all men ...”

Between 1607-1618 CE, the congregation lived freely in Leiden. Bradford and Edward Winslow both wrote glowingly of their experience. In Leiden, God had allowed them, in Bradford’s estimation, “to come as near the primitive pattern of the first churches as any other church of these later times.” God had blessed them with “much peace and liberty,” Winslow echoed. (Joshua Mark, 2021)

However, after several years of living the Netherlands they cherished the freedom of conscience they enjoyed in Leiden, but the Pilgrims had two major complaints:

- they found it a hard place to maintain their English identity (their children wanted to speak Dutch instead of English and they missed other things about English life) and
- it was an even harder place to make a living.

In America, they hoped to live by themselves, enjoy the same degree of religious liberty and earn a “better and easier” living. (Robert Tracy McKenzie)

Their leaders, William Bradford, Reverend John Robinson and several others worked out a plan to move the entire Pilgrim church group to America. That way they could still be English. (NPS, Cape Cod National Seashore)

The English had established the colony of Jamestown in the Virginia Patent of North America in 1607 CE, which, ten years later, was flourishing.

The Leiden congregation were looking into some means of creating their own colony in Virginia when, in 1618 CE, one of their leading members, William Brewster (l. 1568-1644 CE), published a tract criticizing the Anglican Church and orders were given by the English officials for his arrest.

Brewster was hidden by his friends, but the congregation stepped up their efforts to relocate and contracted with Thomas Weston (l. 1584 - c. 1647 CE), who was a merchant adventurer who matched potential colonists with investors.

After deciding to leave, they settled on the New World as their destination due to its remoteness, according to Bradford:

“The place they had thoughts on was some of the those vast & unpeopled countries of America, which are frutfull & fitt for habitation, being devoyd of all civill inhabitants, wher there are only savage & brutish men, which range up and downe, little otherwise then ye wild beasts of the same.”

Bradford went to the Virginia Company and asked them for permission to establish a new colony in Virginia.

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 would be repaid in profits from the new settlement.

The voyage itself across the Atlantic Ocean took 66 days, from their departure on September 6 (September 16), until Cape Cod was sighted on November 9 (November 19), 1620.

As the Mayflower approached land, the crew spotted Cape Cod just as the sun rose on November 9 (November 19). The Pilgrims decided to head south, to the mouth of the Hudson River in New York, where they intended to make their plantation. However, as the Mayflower headed south, it encountered some very rough seas, and nearly shipwrecked.

The Pilgrims then decided, rather than risk another attempt to go south, they would just stay and explore Cape Cod. They turned back north, rounded the tip, and anchored in what is now Provincetown Harbor. The Pilgrims would spend the next month and a half exploring Cape Cod, trying to decide where they would build their plantation. (Caleb Johnson, Mayflower History)

The Pilgrims were about to settle some 200-miles north of the northernmost jurisdiction of the Virginia Company, where they were authorized by King James I to coordinate colonial ventures along the Atlantic seaboard. Since they had been blown off course, they needed a temporary government authority.

The Colonists were British Until the Declaration of Independence and Subsequent Revolutionary War

While the Mayflower Compact¹ (signed in 1620) established a government for the Plymouth Colony, they still considered themselves loyal subjects of King James I and made that very clear in the text.

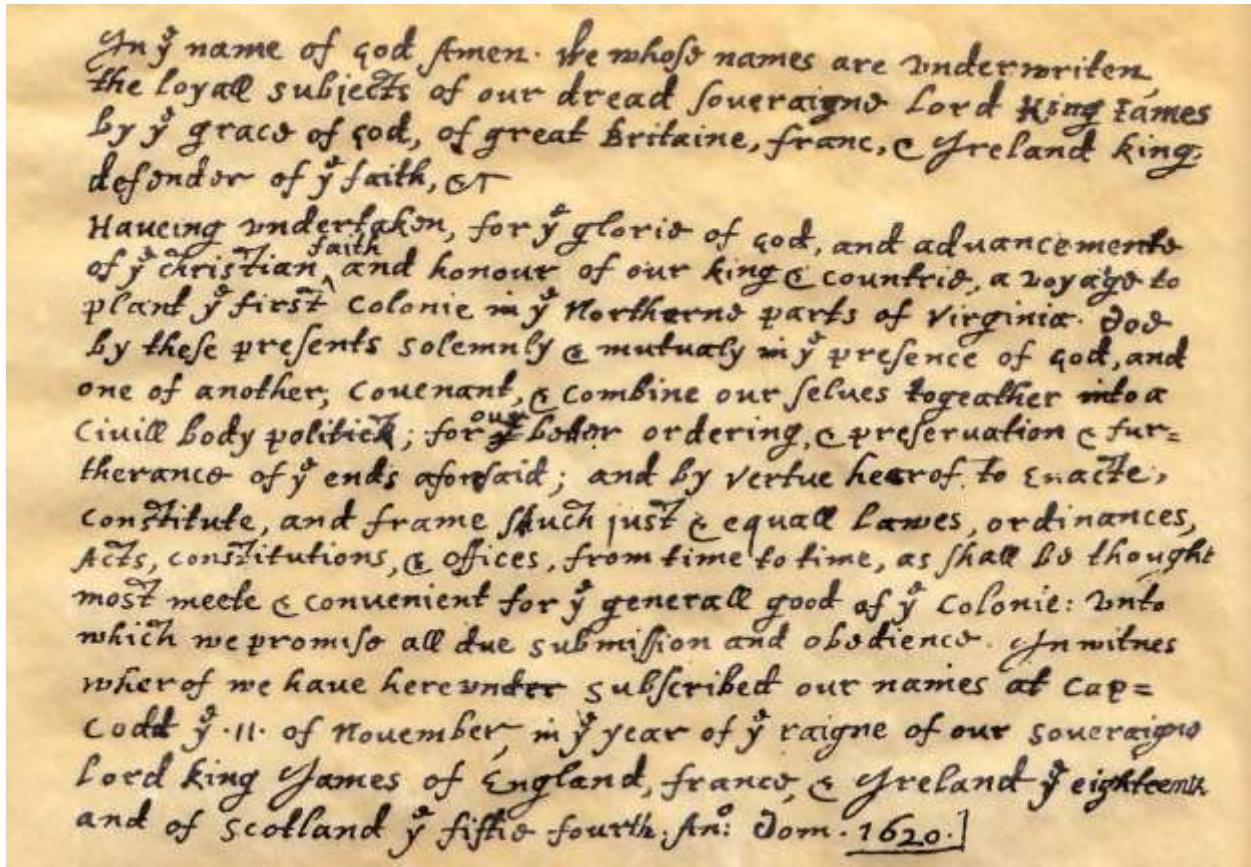
The first words of the Mayflower Compact confirm the Pilgrims’ loyalty to the king:

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.

¹ “The Mayflower Compact was actually not so named until 1793, and was known by the citizens of Plymouth as the ‘Plymouth combination,’ or the ‘agreement between the settlers at New Plymouth.’” (Ernst)

They concluded the Mayflower Compact with:

In witness whereof we have hereunto 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, 1620.



In y^e name of god Amen. We whose names are underwritten
the loyal subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord King James
by y^e grace of god, of great Britaine, France, & Ireland King
Defendor of y^e faith, &c
Having undertaken, for y^e glorie of god, and advancement
of y^e Christian^{faith} and honour of our King & Countrey, a voyage to
plant y^e first Colonie in y^e Northern parts of Virginia. Do
by these presents solemnly & mutually in y^e presence of god, and
one of another, Covenant, & combine our selves together into a
Civill Body politicke; for y^e better ordering, & preservation & fur-
therance of y^e ends aforesaid; and by vertue hereof, to enacte,
constitute, and frame such just & equall Lawes, ordinances,
Acts, constitutions, & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought
most meete & convenient for y^e generall good of y^e Colonie: unto
which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness
whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cap-
Codd y^e 11. of November, in y^e year of y^e raigne of our Sovereign
Lord King James of England, France, & Ireland y^e eighteenth
and of Scotland y^e fiftie fourth. An: Dom. 1620.]

It was quite possible that they were committing an illegal act in the eyes of the crown. So they made a point of assuring James of their unquestioned loyalty. (McKenzie, Washington Post)

The Mayflower Compact stated principles of a self-governed body not completely separate from England. The colonists had no intention of declaring (and did not declare) their independence from England when they signed the Mayflower Compact.

As noted in the opening line of the Compact, both Pilgrims and “Strangers” refer to themselves as “loyal subjects” of King James, regardless his actions to persecute and exile the Pilgrims. They also identify him as their king not by virtue of their consent, but “by the grace of God.” This puts the Mayflower Compact closer to an affirmation of the divine right of kings than the right of self-rule.

The rest of the Mayflower Compact bound the signers into a “Civil Body Politic” for the purpose of passing “just and equal Laws ... for the general good of the Colony.”

In the 1600s and 1700s, Europeans came to North America looking for religious freedom, economic opportunities, and political liberty.

They created 13 colonies on the East Coast of the continent. Each colony had its own government, but the British king controlled these governments.

They believed that Great Britain did not treat the colonists as equal citizens. (US Citizenship and Immigration Services)

Over 150-years Later, There Was a Push for New Governance and Citizenship

Over one-hundred and fifty years after the Pilgrims landed and signed the Mayflower Compact in the New World, the subsequent colonists stated in 1776,

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another ...

... and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,

That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government.

The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.



They concluded their Declaration stating,

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States

that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

The Declaration of Independence (1776) was designed for multiple audiences: the King, the colonists, and the world. It was also designed to multitask. Its goals were to rally the troops, win foreign allies and to announce the creation of a new country.

The introductory sentence states the Declaration's main purpose, to explain the colonists' right to revolution. In other words, "to declare the causes which impel them to the separation." Congress had to prove the legitimacy of its cause. It had just defied the most powerful nation on Earth. It needed to motivate foreign allies to join the fight.

The most important and dramatic statement comes near the end: “That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.” It declares a complete break with Britain and its King and claims the powers of an independent country. (National Archives)

By issuing the Declaration of Independence, adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, the 13 American colonies severed their political connections to Great Britain. The Declaration summarized the colonists’ motivations for seeking independence.

By declaring themselves an independent nation, the American colonists were able to confirm an official alliance with the Government of France and obtain French assistance in the war against Great Britain. (National Archives)

However, King George III did not want to lose this valuable land, and so the colonies took to arms to defend their new country and rights in what is now known as the Revolutionary War.

Unfortunately, it took five long years of war before the British surrendered in October 19, 1781, and the United States of America could begin the business of becoming a nation. Later, when the colonists won independence, these colonies became the 13 original states.

Information here is from Bradford; National Archives; Robert Tracy McKenzie, Washington Post; Joshua Mark; Declaration of Independence, National Archives; Mayflower Compact; Caleb Johnson, Mayflower History

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young