

The Mayflower Compact

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The Mayflower Compact is often cited as an example of one of the first cooperative organizations in the U.S. In discussing cooperative history it is always difficult to classify activities that occurred before the formal legal structures for cooperatives were developed. Some consider those examples as early examples of cooperatives, while others consider them as just examples of the spirit of cooperation. The Mayflower Compact was a written agreement composed by a consensus of the new settlers arriving on the Mayflower. It did include several cooperative principles and called for mutual cooperation of the settlers for their common good.

There were 102 passengers on the Mayflower. Forty one of them were separatists, a closed society whose primary motivation in making the journey was to establish a colony where they could pursue their religious beliefs. That group, which called themselves, “Pilgrims” organized the voyage but brought along merchant adventures (who they referred to as “Strangers”) to help finance the operation. The Pilgrims had obtained a Land Patent allowing them to settle at the mouth of the Hudson River. However, when the Mayflower reached the new world, the group realized that the area was not suited for settlement and journeyed North to what is now Massachusetts.

The group realized that they had no legal right to settle, and conversely, that England had no legal rights over them. There were major differences between the two sub-groups in terms of education, religion, political views and attitudes toward personal freedom versus social structure. Both groups realized that if they didn’t work together they could all die in the wilderness. The two factions had to come together on a strategy to survive. That led to the Mayflower Compact.

While the compact was short, and intentionally avoided any contentious elements, it had several significant elements. It was based on the concept of majority rule and established that the colonists would choose leaders and policies that they agreed to follow. The compact established the concept of one member-one vote, although voting was limited to adult males. The signers of the compact also agreed to mutual regard to one another. These democratically developed rules led to a structure where the proceeds of crop production, fishing and other activities were pooled and divided equally. The term “commonwealth” came from that arrangement and some hold it up as early example of a cooperative. The Mayflower Compact is also universally considered to be a precedent for the development of the U.S. Constitution.

How American are cooperatives? As American as the Mayflower!