

The Virginia House of Burgesses (1619)

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During the 1610s, the small English colony at Jamestown was essentially a failure. Fearful of losing their investment, the officers of the Virginia Company of London embarked upon a series of reforms designed to attract more people to the troubled settlement. They began by ending the company monopoly on land ownership, believing that the colonists would display greater initiative if they had an ownership position in the venture. Company officials also made justice in Virginia more predictable by adopting English common law as the basis of their system which established the foundation for *self-government*, and replaced the whims of the governor as the final voice on legal matters.

An additional inducement (incentive) was provided by the company's effort to make local government in Virginia more responsive to the colonists. In July 1619, a meeting of the House of Burgesses was held in Jamestown, the first such assembly in the Americas. The initial session accomplished little, however. It was cut short by an outbreak of malaria. The assembly comprised 22 members who represented the following constituencies:

- The governor, who was appointed to his position by the company officials in London
- The governor's council, six prominent citizens selected by the governor
- The burgesses (representatives) from various locales, initially the larger plantations and later in Virginia history from the counties.

The House of Burgesses was empowered to enact legislation (laws) for the colony, but its actions were subject to veto by the governor, council, and ultimately by the directors in London. Nevertheless, such a legislative body would have been unthinkable in the Spanish or French colonies of that day, which highlights the degree to which the concept of a limited monarchy had become accepted by the English people.

Voting for the burgesses was limited to landowning males, 17 years of age or older.

In 1624, Virginia became a royal colony. The House of Burgesses continued to meet, but its influence became severely restricted. Despite limitations on its actions, the assembly listed within its later ranks such notables as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry, and would assume a major leadership role in the movement toward independence.



Recent photo of Conference House of Burgess es



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The Pilgrims sign The Mayflower Compact, a written agreement for self-government that was established in the colony in Massachusetts.

<http://www.sonofthesouth.net/revolutionary-war/pilgrims/signing-mayflower-compact.jpg>

The Mayflower Compact

In ye name of God Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyall subjects of our dread soveraigne Lord King James, by ye grace of God, of Great Britaine, France, & Ireland King, defender of ye faith, &c.

Haveing undertaken, for ye glorie of God, and advancemente of ye Christian faith and honour of our King & countrie, a voyage to plant ye first colonie in ye Northerne parts of Virginia, doe by these presents solemnly & mutuallly in ye presence of God, and one of another, covenant, & combine ourselves together into a Civill body politick; for our better ordering, & preservation & furtherance of ye ends aforesaid; and by verdue 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 ye generall good of ye colonie: unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Capz-Codd ye -11- of November, in ye year of ye raigne of our soveraigne Lord King James of England, France & Ireland ye eighteenth, and of Scotland ye fiftie fourth. Anno Dom. 1620.

John Smith	Richard Warren	John Turner	Samuel Maynard
William Bradford	John Holland	Thomas Eaton	Peter Barrow
Charles Under	Stephen Hopkins	John Clark	Richard Dillingham
William Brewster	Edward Tilley	John Carver	George Burdett
Samuel Eaton	John Talley	John Coddington	Richard Clark
Major John Smith	Thomas Leake	Thomas Blin	Richard Sanderson
John Alden	Thomas Savage	John Brewster	John Elliott
Samuel Butler	Samuel Tilden	Robert Hunt	Thomas Foy
Christopher Mottis	John Byrd	Thomas Wilson	Edward Doty
William Mullins	Thomas Fuller	Robert Verrill	Edward Little
William White			

Mayflower Compact: 1620

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(Here are the original words of the agreement)

Agreement Between the Settlers at New Plymouth : 1620

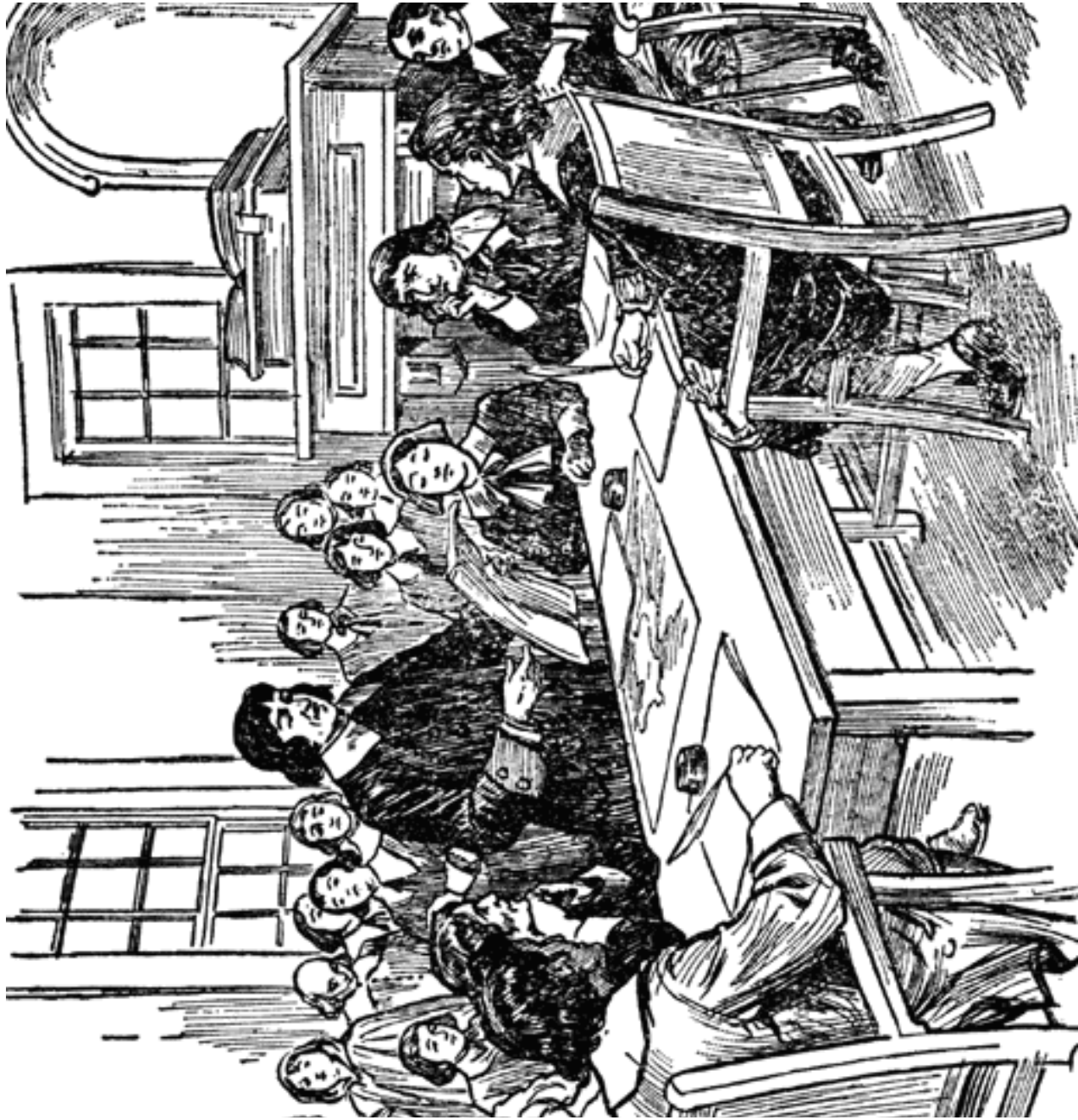
IN THE NAME OF GOD, AMEN. We, whose names are underwritten... Having undertaken for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the first Colony in the northern Parts of *Virginia* (they intended to land in Virginia but landed in Massachusetts instead)...

Do by these Presents, solemnly and mutually, in the Presence of God and one another, covenant (promise) 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 (create), 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.

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A depiction of a New England Town Meeting.

http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_YA-lSxNRcoo/TQu8iSo1iRI/AAAAAAAAABC0/C97EYDhc70/s1600/meeting_21922_lg.gif

3



A drawing of a colonial New England Town Meeting House.

Town meeting—the act of a group of individuals gathering together to make decisions—can be traced to the 1630s. Town meeting finds its roots in the earliest New England settlements, when townspeople assembled to discuss and decide upon all matters that impacted the community, which established the basis for *self-government* in these colonies. Records show that town meeting was a serious matter: attendance was mandatory—not only was it expected and required, failure to attend was punishable by a fine.

In New Hampshire, town meeting dates to the earliest settlements of Dover and Portsmouth in 1623. Records of the time are scarce, but there is little doubt that the business of the town was discussed collectively by settlers and likely in the town meeting style of gathering. The first formal town government in New Hampshire did not appear until 1639, in Exeter, followed by Dover and Portsmouth in 1641.

Early reference to actions of town meeting can be found in Plymouth Colony records dating from 1635. Bryan notes records of the General Court that clearly indicate how settlements were to be arranged: “...no dwelling

house could be built more than one-half mile beyond the meeting house in any new plantation without the permission of the court. ... Land suitable for cultivation near the center of town was divided among the settlers in an equitable manner. Each man was responsible for keeping his fields 'sufficiently fenced,' and town meetings appointed individuals to see that fields were fenced adequately. The penalty in Dorchester for failing to fence properly a field was three shillings."

As town meeting evolved and colonists became more empowered by their government, it was increasingly seen as a threat to Britain. Town meeting fueled the spark that ultimately led to the American Revolution, and was lauded and studied for more than a century to follow. Elevated by the great writers and scholars of the day, town meeting represented the best of American government. Henry David Thoreau called it "the true Congress ... the most respectable one ever assembled in the United States."

The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, 1639

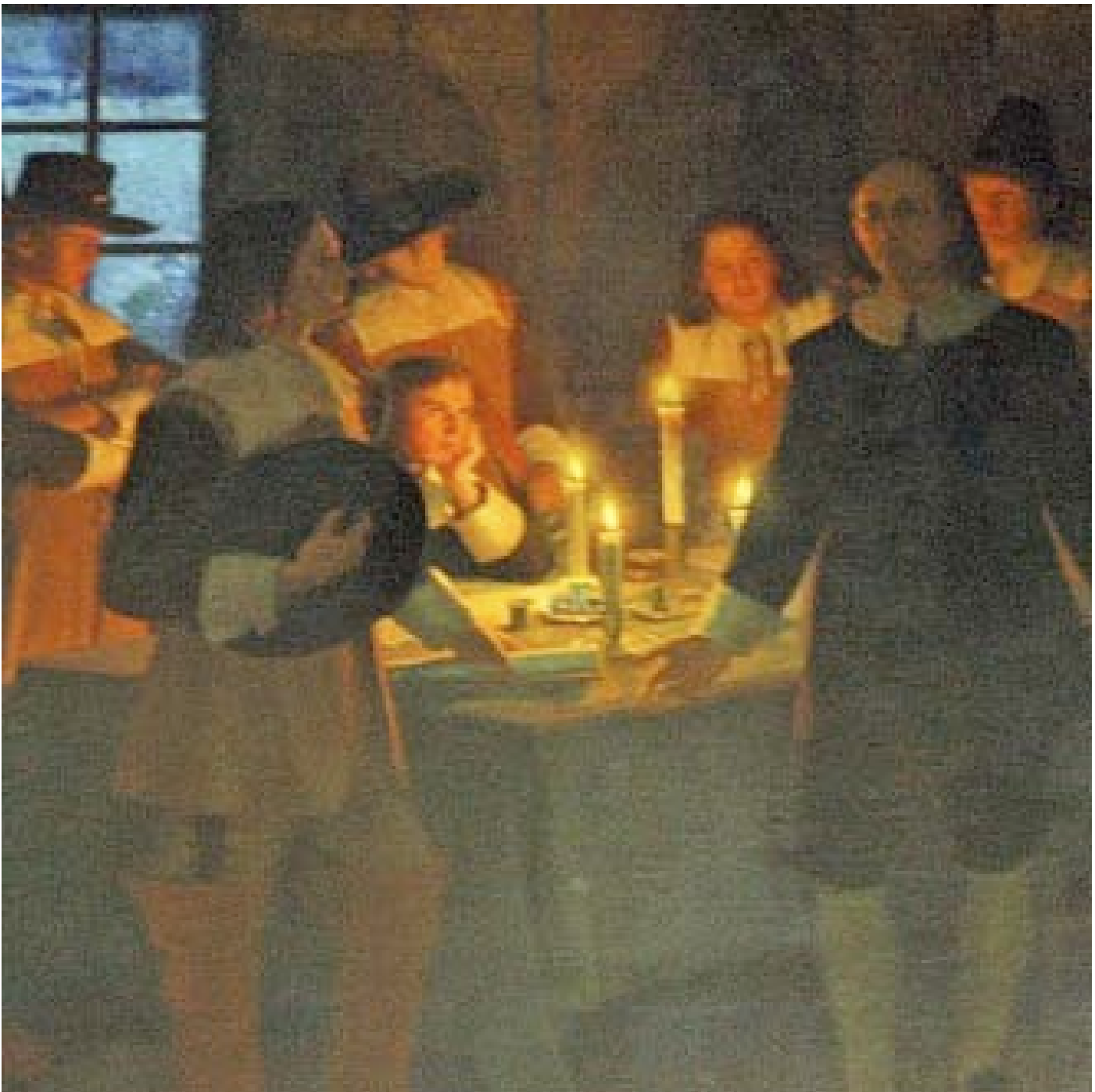
This document was the first written constitution developed in America; it provided specific rules of government. It was the foundation for *self-government* in the colony.

Here are some of the rules that were included:

1. It is ordered... that there shall be yearly two general assemblies or courts; ... The first shall be called the Court of Election, wherein shall be yearly chosen... so many... public officers... whereof one to be chosen governor for the year ensuing and until another be chosen, and ... there be six chosen besides the governor; which being chosen and sworn according to an oath... shall have the power to administer justice according to the laws here established...
4. It is ordered... that no person be chosen governor above once in two years, and that the governor be always a member of some approved congregation...
11. It is ordered... that when any general court... has agreed upon any... sums of money to be levied upon

the several towns within this jurisdiction... a committee be chosen to set out and appoint what shall be the proportion of every town to pay the said levy (like a tax), provided the committees be made up of an equal number of each town.

*Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, January 14, 1639. Adapted from Poore, *The Federal and State Constitutions...*, Part I, 249-252.*





A coin depicting the signing of The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut in 1639.