

# Cases and Controversies in U.S. History

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## Contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
<b>Unit 1: 1000—Leif Eriksson Explores Vinland</b> .....	1
From <i>The Graenlendinga Saga</i> , c. 1190	
<b>Unit 2: 1492—Privileges and Prerogatives Granted to Columbus</b> .....	3
From the Privileges and Prerogatives Granted to Columbus, April 30, 1492	
<b>Unit 3: 1494—The Treaty of Tordesillas</b> .....	5
From the Treaty of Tordesillas, 1494	
<b>Unit 4: 1620—The Mayflower Compact</b> .....	8
The Mayflower Compact, 1620	
<b>Unit 5: 1666—Religious Conformity in the Bay Colony</b> .....	11
From the proceedings of the County Court of Middlesex, April 17, 1666	
<b>Unit 6: 1692—The Salem Witch Trials</b> .....	13
From the petition of Mary Easty, 1692	
<b>Unit 7: 1735—Peter Zenger</b> .....	15
From <i>The New York Weekly Journal</i> , November 2, 1733	
<b>Unit 8: 1755—Newcomers and Native Peoples</b> .....	17
A proclamation made in Boston, 1755	
<b>Unit 9: 1765—The Stamp Act</b> .....	19
From the Stamp Act, March 22, 1765	
<b>Unit 10: 1770—The Boston Massacre</b> .....	22
From <i>A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston</i> , 1770	
<b>Unit 11: 1774—Logan’s Speech</b> .....	24
A speech by Captain John Logan, October 1774	
<b>Unit 12: 1775—The Battle of Lexington</b> .....	26
From an account by the Provincial Congress at Watertown, Massachusetts, April 26, 1775, and the report of Lieutenant-Colonel Smith to Governor Gage, April 22, 1775	
<b>Unit 13: 1776—Thomas Paine’s <i>Common Sense</i></b> .....	29
From <i>Common Sense</i> , 1776	

<b>Unit 14: 1776—The Declaration of Independence</b> .....	33
From a draft of the Declaration of Independence, 1776	
<b>Unit 15: 1776—Women’s Rights and the Revolution</b> .....	35
Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776	
Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776	
<b>Unit 16: 1796—Washington’s Farewell Address</b> .....	38
From George Washington’s Farewell Address, September 17, 1796	
<b>Unit 17: 1798—The Alien and Sedition Acts</b> .....	40
From the Naturalization Act, June 18, 1798	
<b>Unit 18: 1803—The Louisiana Purchase</b> .....	42
Transcript of remarks of Senator Timothy Pickering to the Senate, Nov. 3, 1803	
<b>Unit 19: 1831—Native Americans and the U.S. Government</b> .....	46
From <i>Cherokee Nation v. Georgia</i> , 1831	
<b>Unit 20: 1831—<i>The Liberator</i></b> .....	49
From <i>The Liberator</i> , Vol. I, No. 1, January 1, 1831	
<b>Unit 21: 1832—The Spoils System</b> .....	51
From a speech by Senator William Marcy, 1831	
<b>Unit 22: 1843—Dorothea Dix and Mental Hospital Reform</b> .....	53
From <i>Memorial to the Legislature of Massachusetts</i> , January 1843	
<b>Unit 23: 1846—The Oregon Boundary Dispute</b> .....	56
From James K. Polk’s Inaugural Address, March 4, 1845	
<b>Unit 24: 1846—Henry David Thoreau</b> .....	58
From <i>Civil Disobedience</i> , 1849	
<b>Unit 25: 1848—The Seneca Falls Convention</b> .....	60
The Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments, July 19–20, 1848	
<b>Unit 26: 1850—Slavery</b> .....	63
A Southern defense of slavery	
From a Frederick Douglass lecture in Rochester, New York, December 1, 1850	
<b>Unit 27: 1857—The Rights of a Slave</b> .....	66
From <i>Dred Scott v. Sanford</i> , 1857	

<b>Unit 28: 1868—Impeachment of Andrew Johnson</b> .....	68
From Articles for Impeachment of Andrew Johnson, March 1868	
<b>Unit 29: 1895—The Income Tax</b> .....	70
From <i>Pollock v. Farmer's Loan and Trust Company</i> , 1895	
<b>Unit 30: 1896—"Separate but Equal"</b> .....	72
From <i>Plessy v. Ferguson</i> , 1896	
<b>Unit 31: 1903—The Panama Canal</b> .....	75
From the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, November 18, 1903	
<b>Unit 32: 1905—Tammany Hall</b> .....	77
From <i>Plunkitt of Tammany Hall</i> , edited by William L. Riordon, 1905	
<b>Unit 33: 1918—The League of Nations</b> .....	79
From Woodrow Wilson's Address to Congress, January 8, 1918	
<b>Unit 34: 1921—Sacco and Vanzetti</b> .....	81
From Bartolomeo Vanzetti's last statement in court, April 9, 1927	
<b>Unit 35: 1937—Court-Packing</b> .....	83
From Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Address, March 9, 1937	
<b>Unit 36: 1939—Roosevelt's Appeals for Peace in Europe</b> .....	85
From Letter from F.D. Roosevelt to Adolf Hitler, April 14, 1939	
<b>Unit 37: 1940—Due Process of Law</b> .....	87
From <i>Chambers v. Florida</i> , 1940	
<b>Unit 38: 1940—The Gobitis Case</b> .....	89
From <i>Minersville School District v. Gobitis</i> , 1940	
<b>Unit 39: 1942—Japanese-American Internment</b> .....	91
From <i>Hirabayashi v. United States</i> , 1943	
<b>Unit 40: 1949—Truman's "Fair Deal"</b> .....	93
From President Truman's Annual State of the Union Message, January 5, 1949	
<b>Unit 41: 1951—The Korean War</b> .....	96
From Gen. Omar N. Bradley at Senate hearings, May 15, 1951	
<b>Unit 42: 1954—McCarthyism</b> .....	99
From the Army-McCarthy hearings, 1954	

<b>Unit 43: 1954—Segregation in Schools</b> .....	102
From <i>Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka</i> , 1954	
<b>Unit 44: 1958—Freedom of Association</b> .....	105
From <i>NAACP v. Alabama</i> , 1958	
<b>Unit 45: 1966—The Rights of the Accused</b> .....	107
From <i>Miranda v. Arizona</i> , 1966	
<b>Unit 46: 1973—Abortion</b> .....	109
From <i>Roe v. Wade</i> , 1973	
<b>Unit 47: 1973—Watergate</b> .....	111
From Richard M. Nixon’s Address to the Nation, April 30, 1973	
<b>Unit 48: 1982—The Equal Rights Amendment</b> .....	113
From a statement by Eleanor Smeal, president of NOW, June 24, 1982	
<b>Unit 49: 1991—Women in Combat</b> .....	116
From remarks by Senator Edward Kennedy in the Senate, July 31, 1991	
<b>Unit 50: 1991—Clarence Thomas Confirmation Hearings</b> .....	119
From the testimony of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas, Oct. 11, 1991	

## UNIT 1

### 1000—Leif Eriksson Explores Vinland

In 1963, a site yielding Viking artifacts was found on the northern tip of Newfoundland. It is now thought to be the site of the community established by Leif Eriksson and Thorfinn Karlsefni. Here is an excerpt from a Norse saga describing Leif's first voyage to the west.

---

They sailed away to sea in a north-east wind for two days until they sighted land again. They sailed towards it and came to an island which lay to the north of it.

They went ashore and looked about them. The weather was fine. There was dew on the grass, and the first thing they did was to get some of it on their hands and put it to their lips, and to them it seemed the sweetest thing they had ever tasted. Then they went back to their ship and sailed into the sound that lay between the island and the headland jutting out to the north.

They steered a westerly course round the headland. There were extensive shallows there and at low tide their ship was left high and dry, with the sea almost out of sight. . . . As soon as the tide had refloated the ship they took a boat and rowed out to it

and brought it up the river into the lake, where they anchored it. They carried their hammocks ashore and put up booths. Then they decided to winter there, and built some large houses.

There was no lack of salmon in the river or the lake, bigger salmon than they had ever seen. The country seemed to them so kind that no winter fodder would be needed for livestock; there was never any frost all winter and the grass hardly withered at all.

In this country, night and day were of more even length than in either Greenland or Iceland: on the shortest day of the year, the sun was already up by 9 a.m., and did not set until after 3 p.m. [*The Graenlendinga Saga*, c. 1190]

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#### —Questions—

1. What significance did this Viking settlement have in American history?
  2. What information in this excerpt might help researchers locate the site of the Viking settlement?
  3. Christopher Columbus is usually referred to as having "discovered" the American continent. But the continent was already settled by native Americans, and the Vikings were aware of America centuries before Columbus. Why is Columbus's voyage considered so important?
- 

**GLOSSARY** artifact—item made or worked by humans

## *Sample Answers*

### **Leif Eriksson Explores Vinland**

#### **A Basic Question: How significant was this exploration?**

1. The Viking discovery of America had no impact on the future course of American history. The settlement was abandoned, discouraged by the constant threat of attack by the natives, whom the Vikings called Skraelings.
2. The description of the weather is less helpful than it appears at first, as the world climate has changed dramatically in the last millennium. For this reason, the references to wildlife are also difficult to rely on, although, on the east coast of the North American continent, salmon are not usually found south of the Hudson River. However, the references to the amount of daylight can be used to approximate latitude. If the shortest days of the year were at least six hours long, then the location must be south of latitude fifty and north of latitude forty, or somewhere between the Gulf of St. Lawrence and New Jersey.
3. Although the Vikings were aware of America, they did not pursue their attempts to colonize the continent, and did little to share their knowledge with other people. Columbus's voyage was the one which, for better or worse, let all Europe know of the existence of an unknown land to the west.

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## UNIT 2

### 1492—Privileges and Prerogatives Granted to Columbus

For years, Columbus had been trying to find someone to finance his idea. He wanted to sail westward to reach India. Finally King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain agreed to help him. Here is an excerpt from the terms they agreed to.

---

For as much of you, Christopher Columbus, are going by our command, with some of our vessels and men, to discover and subdue some islands and continent in the ocean, and it is hoped that by God's assistance, some of the said islands and continent in the ocean will be discovered and conquered by your means and conduct, therefore it is but just and reasonable, that since you expose yourself to such danger to serve us, you should be rewarded for it. And we being willing to honour and favour you for the reasons aforesaid; Our will is, that

you, Christopher Columbus, after discovering and conquering the said islands and continent in the said ocean, or any of them, shall be our admiral of the said islands and continent you shall so discover and conquer; and that you be our admiral, viceroy, and governor in them, and that for the future, you may call and style yourself, D. Christopher Columbus, and that your sons and successors in the said employment, may call themselves dons, admirals, viceroys, and governors of them. [Privileges and Prerogatives Granted to Columbus, April 30, 1492]

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#### —Questions—

1. Based on this passage, what do you think were Columbus's motives for sailing west?
2. One of the rewards Columbus was given was being allowed to call himself "D. Christopher Columbus." What do you think was the significance of this?
3. What were Ferdinand's and Isabella's motives in supporting him?
4. Why do you think some people see Columbus as a destroyer, not a discoverer?

---

**GLOSSARY** **aforesaid**—as mentioned earlier  
**don**—Spanish nobleman

**viceroys**—governor who rules as representative of a king

### *Sample Answers*

## **Privileges and Prerogatives Granted to Columbus**

### **A Basic Question: Was Columbus more discoverer or destroyer?**

1. Columbus was looking for personal gain. In the passage quoted, Isabella and Ferdinand promise to reward Columbus if he discovers any new countries for them. In fact, negotiations with Ferdinand and Isabella were broken off earlier, as the terms Columbus was setting were considered exorbitant.
2. The "D" stands for Don, which was a title used by Spanish nobles. The king and queen are saying here that Columbus, an Italian adventurer, will now be considered a member of the Spanish nobility.
3. Isabella and Ferdinand were looking for an easier route to India. Spain had just driven out the Moorish forces, and now had the time and resources to look elsewhere for territory. The passage quoted makes it clear that the king and queen did not consider the possible wishes of the people living in the lands Columbus might find. They wanted him to "discover and subdue" territory, to increase the wealth of Spain.
4. People who argue that Columbus was a destroyer, not a discoverer, point out that when we talk about "discovering" America, we really mean "making America known to Europe." People had already been living in America for centuries. Many different civilizations and ways of life flourished in the continent. (It had even been "discovered" before by Europeans. In the early years of the eleventh century, there was a Viking settlement in Newfoundland.) But to Columbus and other European explorers, the newfound lands, and the people who lived in them, were there only to be exploited.

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## UNIT 3

### 1494—The Treaty of Tordesillas

After Columbus's discoveries in 1492, both Spain and Portugal were eager to explore further and claim more new lands. To prevent disagreements, they appealed to Pope Alexander VI. The pope drew an imaginary line from north to south, 100 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands. Anything discovered west of that line would belong to Spain; anything east, to Portugal. However, King John of Portugal was not satisfied with these provisions. In the Treaty of Tordesillas, Spain and Portugal agreed to move the boundary line to 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands.

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This boundary or line shall be drawn straight, as aforesaid, at a distant of three hundred and seventy leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands. . . . And all lands, both islands and mainlands, found and discovered already, or to be found and discovered hereafter, by the said King of Portugal and his vessels on this side of the said line and bound determined as above, toward the east, in either north or south latitude, on the eastern side of the said bound, provided the said bound is not crossed, shall belong to and remain in the possession of, and pertain

forever to, the said King of Portugal and his successors. And all other lands, both islands and mainlands, found or to be found hereafter, . . . by the said King and Queen of Castile, Aragon, etc. and by their vessels, on the western side of the said bound, determined as above, after having passed the said bound toward the west, in either its north or south latitude, shall belong to . . . the said King and Queen of Castile, Leon, etc. and to their successors. [The Treaty of Tordesillas, 1494]

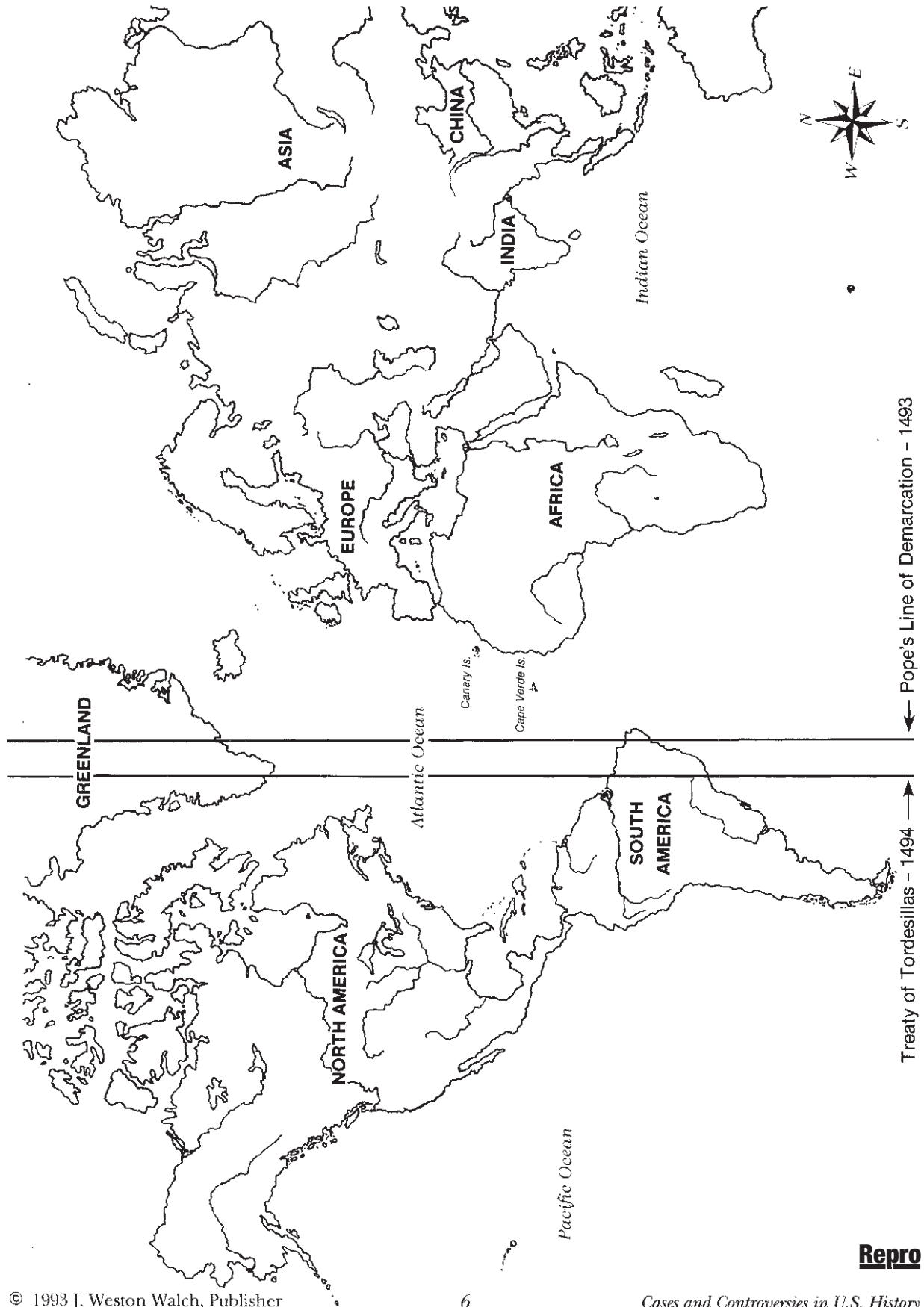
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#### —Questions—

1. In this treaty, Spain and Portugal divide the unknown world between them, assuming that any further discoveries will be made by Spanish and Portuguese explorers. Why do you think they made this assumption?
2. If you had been an English explorer, how would you have felt about this treaty?
3. What effect did the Treaty of Tordesillas have on the future of the American continent?

---

**GLOSSARY** hereafter—from now on  
league—three miles



## *Sample Answers*

### **The Treaty of Tordesillas**

#### **A Basic Question: What was the effect of this treaty?**

1. At that time, Spain and Portugal were the leading seafaring nations of Europe. The most famous explorers of the 15th and 16th centuries—Columbus, Bartholomeu Dias, Vasco da Gama, Amerigo Vespucci, Cortes, Pizarro—came from Spain and Portugal. Portugal's Prince Henry was known as "the Navigator" because of his interest in seagoing explorations. It seemed reasonable to them to assume that they would remain the foremost seagoing nations, and that their explorers would make all major discoveries.
2. Answers will vary. In fact, as might be guessed, rising nations such as England rejected the Spanish and Portuguese claims to all newly discovered territories. In 1497 John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto), a native of Genoa who adopted British nationality, took possession of Newfoundland for England, giving Britain its first claim on the American continent.
3. The Treaty of Tordesillas gave Portugal claim to any lands found in a 1,000-mile-wide swath of ocean. It probably seemed reasonable to assume that such a huge area would offer many new territories for Portuguese colonization, but in fact, most of the new lands fell west of the line of demarcation. The only territory Portugal was able to claim was Brazil, which Pedro Alvares Cabral accidentally discovered in 1500. In the centuries that followed, Brazilian exploration and settlement far to the west of the line set by the Treaty laid the basis for Brazil's claims to vast areas of the interior of South America. By 1500, other nations were beginning to make claims to parts of the continent, ignoring the assertions of Spain and Portugal that any new discoveries should belong to them.

#### ***For Further Reading***

Morison, Samuel Eliot. *The Great Explorers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

## UNIT 4

# 1620—The Mayflower Compact

In 1620 the English ship the *Mayflower* carried a group of colonists to America. While we often think that all the passengers on the *Mayflower* were committed Puritans, some of the people on board had their own, different reasons for sailing to the new land. There were 101 passengers in all. About 87 of them were Separatists or members of Separatist families. The colonists had been granted territory in Virginia, but storms blew them off course. In November the Pilgrims found themselves off New England, where they had no legal right to land and settle. Nor did they have any plans for governing the colony once they landed. So, while the crew tumbled the sails, the Pilgrim leaders wrote what we now call the Mayflower Compact. Forty-one men—Pilgrims, hired laborers, and sailors—signed the agreement.

---

We whose names are underwritten, . . . 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 end aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, 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.  
[The Mayflower Compact, 1620]

---

### —Questions—

1. Working singly or in groups, rewrite the Mayflower Compact in your own words. If you want, you can use the glossary or a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words.
2. What different reasons might people have had for sailing to America with the Pilgrims? List as many as you can think of.
3. Why do you think the Pilgrim leaders thought they needed something like the Mayflower Compact?
4. If you had been on board the *Mayflower*, would you have signed the Compact? Why or why not?
5. What significance did the Mayflower Compact have for American government?

---

**GLOSSARY** **covenant**—agreement  
**hereof**—of this, concerning this  
**frame**—to put together, put into words

**ordinances**—decrees, directions  
**furtherance**—helping forward, promotion  
**plant**—settle, found a colony

**Repro**

## *Sample Answers*

# The Mayflower Compact

### A Basic Question: Would you have signed?

1. Answers will vary. By signing the Mayflower Compact, passengers on the *Mayflower* agreed to be ruled by laws considered best for everyone.
2. Most English immigrants came to America for one of three reasons: political reasons, religious reasons, and economic reasons. Those who came for political reasons wanted to find political freedom or to escape the unsettled conditions that resulted from the struggles between kings and Parliament. Those who came for religious reasons wanted to escape religious persecution and to establish communities where they could worship God in their own way. But the most important reasons for emigration to the American colonies were economic. People left England because the enclosure laws pushed many farmers off the lands they had formerly tilled, because inflation made prices too high, and because of widespread unemployment. The emigrants wanted land, jobs, and better lives for themselves and their families.
3. The Pilgrims felt they needed an agreement like this because, even while the *Mayflower* was still at sea, a few passengers had made “mutinous speeches.” There were rumors that some of the non-Separatists would defy the Pilgrims if they landed anywhere besides the place specified in the land grant they had received from the London Company. The Compact was a direct response to the threat of divisiveness. Since the colonists knew that they faced considerable difficulty and hardship, they wanted assurance that everyone would be willing to work together for the common good. The Compact was signed by forty-one Pilgrims, hired laborers, and sailors, who agreed to obey whatever laws and officers the community would create. Even so, almost from the first days ashore, there was discontent and murmuring, which the leadership could not finally dispel. Some of the “strangers”—people not primarily committed to religious aims and values—continued to seem different and suspect.
4. Answers will vary. The forty-one signers of the Mayflower Compact included every head of a family, every adult bachelor—including those who had threatened trouble—and most of the hired manservants. The only males who did not sign were those under age, and two sailors who were only obligated to stay for one year. (Females were not invited to sign the Compact.)
5. The Mayflower Compact was the foundation of Plymouth’s government, and the first instance of self-government or self-determination in American history. It also contained the germ of the idea of government by consent of the governed, one of the fundamental principles of American government. The significance of the Mayflower Compact lay in the fact that in it, a group of ordinary people took part in making an agreement under which they were to live. For this reason, the document marked an important milestone along the road to government of, by, and for the people. However, the Compact should not be seen as a sort of early Declaration of Independence, with the colonists asserting their rights to self-