

Early Government in Colonial America

In 1607, English settlers established the colony of Jamestown in Virginia. This was the first successful English colony in North America. These settlers brought with them their English traditions and laws. These would serve as the building blocks for the democratic form of government established in the United States.

The House of Burgesses

The **House of Burgesses**, established in Jamestown in 1619, was the first representative legislature in what is now the United States. It was made up of two elected representatives from each of eleven settled parts of Virginia. Together with the appointed governor and his council, the house made up the General Assembly of Virginia. This assembly made laws that were in the best interest of the settlers. As time passed, the practice of **representation** became the foundation of our system of government.

The Mayflower Compact

The Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620. Their trip from England was made aboard the *Mayflower*. Storms and rough waters carried the small ship far off course. The Pilgrims decided to land and settle in an area for which they did not have a charter. A charter was a government document that enabled colonists to settle in a specific place. Without a charter, they needed to establish policies of their own. The Pilgrims wrote the **Mayflower Compact**. The Pilgrims who signed the compact agreed to follow all the laws that were passed by the majority of the settlers. The Mayflower Compact was important because it gave the power of governing to the people. In the years to follow, this system would become the cornerstone of our government.

British Colonies in America

The British colonies in Colonial America could make their own laws, raise taxes, and set up their own court system. The British governors could overrule the colonial governments but usually did not interfere. In later years, when trouble began between the British and the Americans, this changed.

The northern New England Colonies were made up of small farms and many small towns. The towns elected their own officials and made their own laws. The salaries paid to the people who ran the government came from taxes collected from the residents. The people took part in the town meetings because the towns were so small. The beginnings of a democratic form of government were established in those early northern colonies.

In the Southern Colonies, farms were larger and the towns were farther apart. The area was divided into counties. A county was a large area that included many small towns. Town meetings, such as those in New England, were not used. It was much harder for residents to be involved in the government because they lived so far apart. The governor appointed public officials to manage the affairs of the county.

The Middle Colonies practiced a mixture of the two systems. Some had town meetings, and others had the county system. Coincidentally, the three groups of colonies all developed the democratic approach to government.

Write your answer to the following questions.

1. List three important facts about the House of Burgesses.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

2. Why was the Mayflower Compact written? _____

3. Why was New England well suited for town meetings?

4. Why was it hard to hold town meetings in the Southern Colonies?

5. **Special Thought Question:** The Middle Colonies had a mixture of town meetings and county government. Why do you think this happened?
