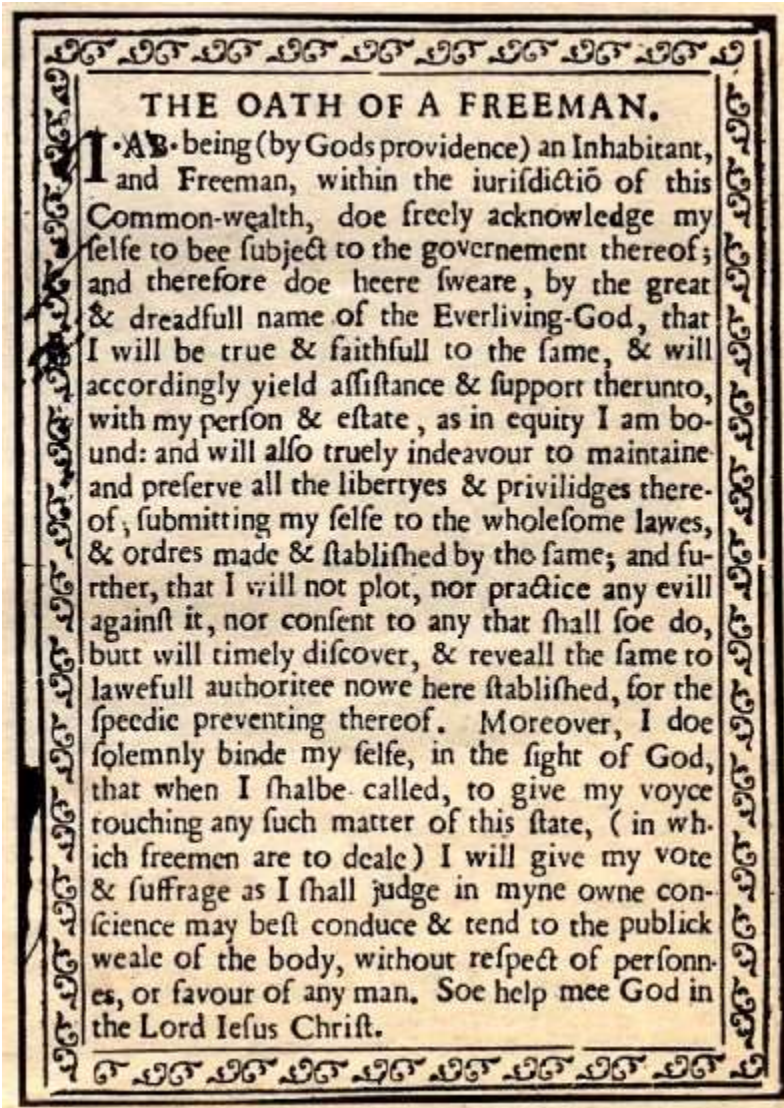


Freeman



“The adult men in the first settlement of Plymouth all held the status of ‘stockholders’ in the joint-stock company that financed the Colony or ‘plantation.’ They thus shared in the ownership of the plantation’s assets, its speculative economic venture, and its liabilities. They participated in the economic venture and its colonial government.”

“The colonists also began use of the separate term ‘freemen’ early in the settlement, which indicated a citizen of the Colony, who possessed the right to vote for the Governor and Assistants and the right to hold office (thus, all stockholders were freemen, but not all freemen would be stockholders). Women and servants were not eligible for freeman status.” (Fennell)

A “freeman” (this designation has nothing to do with slavery, or former slavery) refers to a person’s position in his church and community. This position as a “freeman” had to be earned by those who settled among the New England colonists. (Dehler)

A “freeman” should not be confused with a “freeholder” or “free planter.” These latter terms refer to individuals who possessed land. This land was usually either granted to the person by the colony, purchased by him from the colony, or inherited. Freeman, of course, could be, and were, free planters – that is, land owners.

A man who committed a crime or infraction against the government or church could lose his status of freeman and also lose his land. (Dehler)

When he first entered the colony, a settler was not considered “free.” He was a commoner. His actions and activities were closely monitored by the hierarchy to make sure they fit with the church’s ideal.

If the man proved himself to fit with this ideal – if he joined the church, paid his debts, was owing to no man, and was under no judicial restraints – he would be accepted by the hierarchy and would be allowed to take the freemen’s oath. This process of acceptance took some time because the man had to prove himself worthy and become a member in good standing of the congregation. (Dehler)

“The status of ‘freeman’ conferred the right to take part in the government of the Colony as a whole ... The ultimate unit of political participation and power was the individual ‘freeman.’ This was a formal status of which all adult male householders might directly apply.”

“Approval was based on general consideration of character and competence; ... Plymouth set no specific requirements in terms of church membership.”

“Initially, the ‘freemen’ themselves composed the General Court, which enacted all necessary ‘laws and ordinances,’ voted ‘rates’ (taxes), and (after 1640) supervised the distribution of lands.” (Demos)

“Freemen were required to take an oath of allegiance to the Colony and to England [as noted above]. There were several instances of charges brought to the Court over the years of freemen failing or refusing to take such an oath. In 1659, for example, twelve men were convicted for refusing to take the oath, and were fined 5 pounds sterling each, although not banished or imprisoned.” (Fennell)

“Sometime in the period from 1636 to 1671, the Plymouth colonists formulated a declaration called The General Fundamentals, which further emphasized their desire for self-governance as ‘freemen’ or ‘associates’:

Wee the Associates of New-Plimouth, comeing hither as Freeborn Subjects of the State of England, endowed with all and singular; the Priviledges belonging to such being;

Assembled; Do in Act [enact], Ordain and Constitute; That no Act, Imposition, Law or Ordinance, be made or imposed upon us, at present or to come;

but such as shall be made or imposed by consent of the Body of Freeman or Associates, or their Representatives legally assembled: which is according to the free Liberties of the State of England.

This has often been viewed by historians as one of the earliest forms of a demand for "representative" government and individual rights in the American colonies.

“The procedure for becoming a freeman was fairly simple, with a candidate being approved for status as a freeman by the existing freemen in his town, and then the name was submitted and accepted by the General Court.” (A majority of those who applied were accepted.)

“Laws passed in 1658 denied the grant of freeman status to those persons who were ‘opposers of the good and [wholesome] lawes of the Collonie or manifest opposers of the true worship of God or such as refuse to doe the Countrey service.’”

“The Colony's General Court placed further restrictions on freemen status in 1658. The procedure for becoming a freemen now required that a candidate would have to wait a year after his name was presented to the General Court before he would be approved as a freemen.”

“Restrictions focusing on Quakers were added as well. No Quaker could be a freemen, and a freemen who became a Quaker would lose his status, as would any freemen who aided Quakers.”

“The duties of being a freeman may have been more than some persons cared to possess. Towns often were forced to threaten fines for freemen failing to attend town meetings. An even heavier fine was levied against freemen who failed to attend the General Court or to serve on the Grand Enquest when selected.”

“As a result, by 1638 the freemen had prompted legislation which permitted them to elect representatives, called ‘deputies,’ who would then attend the sessions of the General Court for each town. Those persons elected deputies tended to be re-elected year after year.”

“While only freemen could be elected to be deputies, nonfreemen who paid taxes and swore fidelity to the Colony were permitted to vote for candidates for deputy.”

“By 1652, the General Court instituted a process for freemen to vote by proxy at the General Court sessions, to prevent them from having to travel to Plymouth Town where the Court was convened.”

“The declaration of ‘The Generall Fundamentals’ set forth in the 1672 Book of Laws listed an array of rights and privileges possessed by freemen.”

“No freeman was to be punished ‘but by virtue or equity of some express Law of the General Court of this Colony, the known law of God, or the good and equitable laws of our Nation.’” (Fennell)

Information here is from Tribune Star, Tamie Dehler; Plymouth Colony Archive Project, Christopher Fennell; A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony, John Demos; Winthrop Society;

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