

New England Confederation

There were seven colonies in New England in the 17th century:

- Plymouth Colony, founded in 1620, absorbed by the Province of Massachusetts Bay in 1691
- Province of Maine, founded in 1622, later absorbed by the Massachusetts Bay Colony
- New Hampshire Colony, founded in 1623, later became the Province of New Hampshire
- Massachusetts Bay Colony, founded in 1630, became the Province of Massachusetts Bay in 1691
- Rhode Island Colony, founded in 1636
- Connecticut Colony, founded in 1636
- New Haven Colony, founded in 1638, absorbed by Connecticut Colony in 1664

“The main principles which underlay the social and political life of each colony were identical. Each was formed of much the same material, each had been established from the same motives and with the same hopes, each started with the same political training and had carried on that training in the same direction.”

“The fact that Massachusetts limited the rights of citizenship to church-members was no serious ground of difference. We may be sure that the men of Plymouth and Connecticut disregarded that precaution because it seemed either needless or inexpedient, not because they were in the abstract opposed to it.”
(Doyle)

Over time, “Experience had by this time made it clear that some sort of union between the various colonies was a necessity. Union indeed had been distasteful when it was likely to be enforced from without in a manner which would override local liberties and rights.”

“But the state of affairs in England put an end to that danger, and the colonists were left free to enter upon a self-imposed union which should be consistent with local independence, and even helpful to it”.
(Doyle)

“[S]ources of dispute, actual or possible, showed the need for some common jurisdiction. An even stronger motive to union existed in the necessity for mutual support against the Indians, against the Dutch in New Netherlands, and, in a less degree, against the French to the North.”

“The real hindrance to union was the inequality which could not fail to exist between the partners. In population, in wealth, in learning, in the security of her possessions, in the friendship of those who were now rising into power in England, Massachusetts towered over the other colonies.” (Doyle)

In spring of 1638, several Connecticut ministers suggested a confederation but neither side could see eye to eye on the matter.

Connecticut brought up the issue again in 1639, as a result of threats from the New Netherland colony, but nothing came of it.

In 1640, threat of an Indian war prompted Rhode Island, Connecticut and New Haven to offer a joint proposal on the matter but the Massachusetts Bay Colony refused to work with Rhode Island, whom it viewed as too tolerant of other religions.

Finally, in the fall of 1642, Plymouth Colony proposed a confederation in which the General Courts in each colony would ratify all agreements.

The colonies all decided to send delegates to a meeting in the spring to finalize the details.

“The experience of the Puritan colonies in the joint aggression against the Pequots, added to the continuing drive of Massachusetts Bay for domination over its neighbors, led to a more formal bond between them.” (Conceived in Liberty)

“In May, 1643, the Commissioners from each of the three colonies, Connecticut, Newhaven, and Plymouth, met at Boston. Fenwick, too, the governor of the fort at Saybrook, appeared on behalf of the Proprietors. Massachusetts was represented by the Governor, two Magistrates, and four Deputies.” (Doyle)

The representatives “coming to consultation encountered some difficulties, but being all desirous of union and studious of peace, they readily yielded each to other in such things as tended to common utility.” (Winthrop)

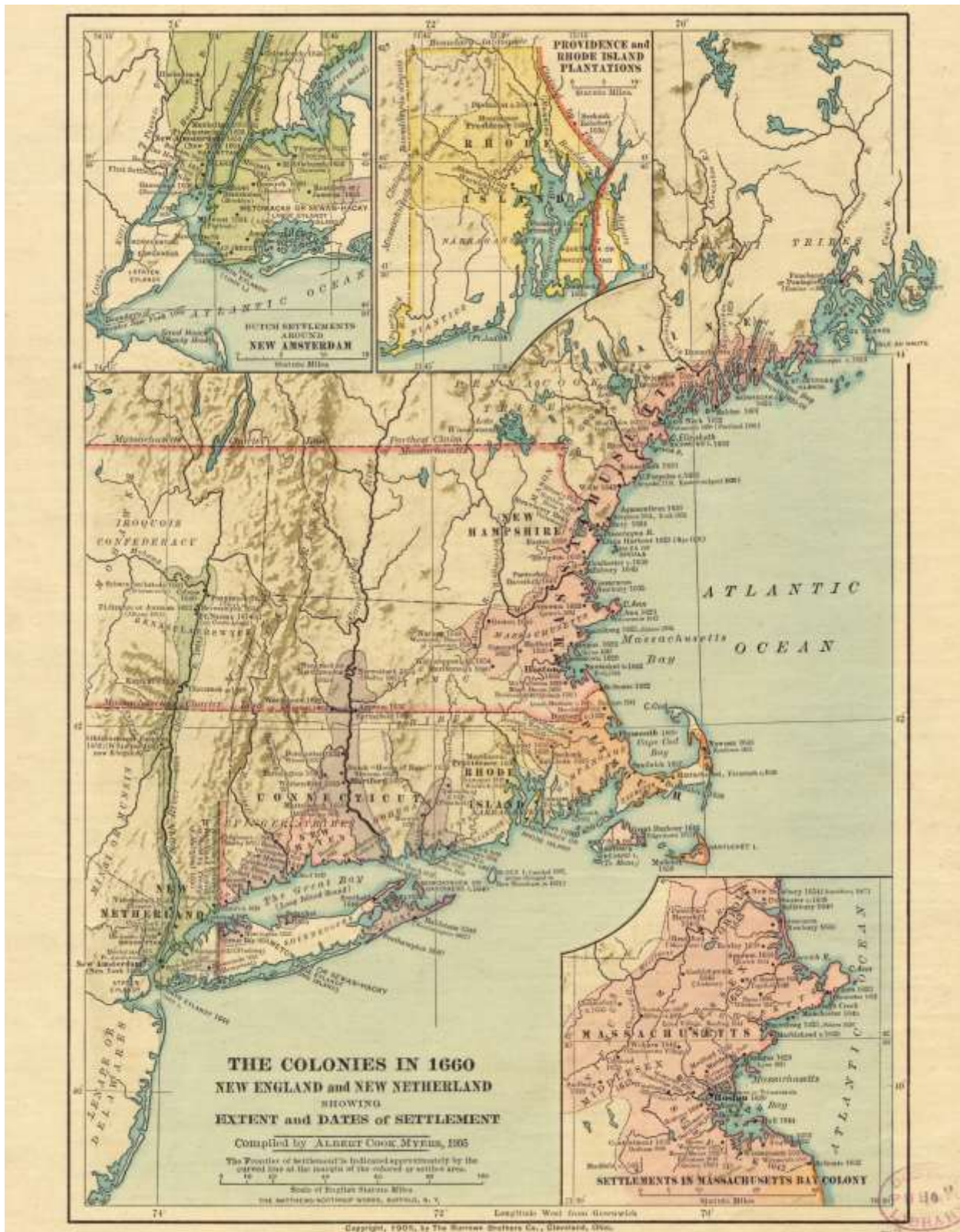
After two or three meetings the Articles of Confederation were agreed upon, and signed by all the Commissioners save those from Plymouth. Their commission obliged them to refer the matter back to the Court of the colony, by whom the agreement was at once ratified.

New England Confederation, also called United Colonies of New England, a federation of Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Haven, and Plymouth was established on May 19, 1643 by delegates from those four colonies.

Several factors influenced the formation of this alliance, including the solution of trade, boundary, and religious disputes, but the principal impetus was a concern over defense against attacks by the French, the Dutch, or the Indians. (Britannica)

The treaty outlining the alliance contained the following provisions (summarized here):

- The colonies should form into a “perpetual league of friendship and amity for offence and defence”. This relationship would ensure the communal safety and welfare of the colonies and preserve their Puritan way of life.
- They further “agreed that the Plantations which at present are or hereafter shall be settled within the limits of the Massachusetts shall be forever under the Massachusetts and shall have peculiar jurisdiction among themselves in all cases as an entire body, and that Plymouth, Connecticut, and New Haven shall each of them have like peculiar jurisdiction and government within their limits”. Their jurisdictions would remain unfettered by the other members of the confederation, and any changes made would have to be agreed upon by the other members.
- All members of the confederation were bound that “the charge of all just wars, whether offensive or defensive, upon what part or member of this Confederation soever they fall, shall both in men, provisions and all other disbursements be borne by all the parts of this Confederation in different proportions according to their different ability”. The colonies would also be obligated to provide a census of all their available men “from sixteen years old to threescore [60], being inhabitants there” for militia.



- “[I]f any of these Jurisdictions or any Plantation under or in combination with them, be invaded by any enemy whomsoever, upon notice and request of any three magistrates of that Jurisdiction so invaded, the rest of the Confederates without any further meeting or expostulation shall forthwith send aid to the Confederate in danger but in different proportions; namely, the Massachusetts an hundred men sufficiently armed and provided for such a service and journey, and each of the rest, forty-five so armed and provided, or any less number, if less be required”. If a greater number of men or supplies is needed, then the commissioners of the Confederation would need to approve of the measure.
- Two commissioners were to be chosen from each province “to hear, examine, weigh, and determine all affairs of our war, or peace, leagues, aids, charges, and numbers of men for war, division of spoils and whatsoever is gotten by conquest”. The commissioners were to meet once a year on the first Thursday in September, rotating the location among the colonies.
- The commissioners would select a president from among themselves; he would not have any extra powers and would serve a purely administrative function.
- Commissioners “may have commission or opportunity, do endeavor to frame and establish agreements and orders in general cases of a civil nature, wherein all the Plantations are interested, for preserving of peace among themselves, for preventing as much as may be all occasion of war or differences with others”. These laws would be to ensure friendly relations among the provinces and security for the Confederation. There was also to be cooperation between provinces in terms of the return of fugitives and runaway servants.
- “[N]either the Massachusetts, Plymouth, Connecticut, nor New Haven, nor any of the members of them, shall at any time hereafter begin, undertake, or engage themselves, or this Confederation, or any part thereof in any war whatsoever” without the consent of the others. This would be to prevent smaller provinces from being forced to engage in a war that they did not have the resources to fight. Any offensive war would need approval of six of the eight Commissioners.
- “[F]our of the Commissioners shall have power to direct a war which cannot be delayed, and to send for due proportions of men out of each Jurisdiction, as well as six might do if all met; but not less than six shall determine the justice of the war, or allow the demands or bills of charges, or cause any levies to be made for the same.”
- If any member province of the Confederation were to break any of the clauses, then the remaining provinces' commissioners were to meet and decide upon any further action.
- “[T]his perpetual Confederation, and the several articles and agreements thereof being read and seriously considered, both by the General Court for the Massachusetts, and by the Commissioners for Plymouth, Connecticut, and New Haven, were fully allowed and confirmed by three of the forenamed Confederates, namely, the Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Haven”. Plymouth needed to “advise with their General Court”. If Plymouth consents, then the whole treaty stands; if Plymouth does not, the rest would settle the details moving forward.

“Two weak points in this constitution are at once apparent. It failed to provide any machinery whereby the advantages which a colony derived from the league should be proportioned to the amount which it contributed.”

“That difficulty can indeed only be overcome where there is a somewhat elaborate federal constitution. But though it might be an unavoidable defect, it was none the less a defect. If Massachusetts was often arrogant and overbearing to her confederates, and unjust in the pursuit of her own advantages, we must remember that she was perpetually galled by a sense of unfairness.”



SIGNING OF THE NEW ENGLAND CONFEDERATION

“It was perhaps a more serious defect that the machinery of the Confederation provided no means by which the federal government could act directly on the individual citizen. The Confederation was in fact rather a league of independent powers for certain special and limited purposes than a federal state. More than this was scarcely possible among states constituted as were those of New England.”

“The Confederation ... was looked on as a convenient piece of political machinery and no more. Yet even in this there were compensating advantages. It was well that the federal constitution was framed deliberately and, so to speak, in cold blood, not under the pressure of any special excitement.”

“It was an advantage too that it should have come into being while the individual colonies still kept the plasticity of youth. A confederation is a frame to which organized and articulated communities have to adapt themselves. The experiment is more likely to succeed if they have not yet acquired the fixity and rigidity of mature life.”

“One aspect of the matter, all the more striking from the fact that it seems to have been almost unnoticed, was the absence of any reference to the home government. There is nothing to show that the framers of the Confederation ever entertained a thought as to the manner in which their policy would be regarded in England.”

“Yet this was undoubtedly the most important political step that any of the colonies had yet taken. The feeling of local independence, the spirit which made men look on themselves as citizens of Massachusetts and not as citizens of England, ebbed and flowed.”

“Beyond a doubt it was stronger in 1640 than it was in 1700. But it never wholly perished, and the formation of the Confederacy was perhaps the most striking manifestation of it.” (Doyle)

“It was adopted by only four colonies, and these four were not long afterwards consolidated into two; but it embodied principles, and recognized rights, and established precedents, which have entered largely into the composition of all subsequent instruments of union.” (Winthrop)

“The spirit which finally led to its adoption after so many years of controversy, and the only spirit in which such political unions can ever be formed or preserved, is well expressed by the Governor when he says: ‘Being all desirous of union and studious of peace, they readily yielded each to other in such things as tended to common utility, &c.’” (Winthrop)

The New England Confederation did achieve some of its goals, but the alliance ultimately proved to be weak, since its decisions were only advisory and were often ignored by Massachusetts, its strongest member.

The confederation’s influence declined with the merger of Connecticut and New Haven (1662–1665), though it continued to exist until the Massachusetts charter was forfeited in 1684. The New England Confederation had represented the first significant effort by English colonists to form an intercolonial alliance for mutual benefit. (Britannica)

Information here is from Life and Letters of John Winthrop; English Colonies in America- The Puritan Colonies, Doyle; Life and Letters of John Winthrop, 1630-1649; Britannica

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