

The Constitutional Convention

The Constitutional Convention of the United States of America consisted of an assembly of delegates who met in the Pennsylvania statehouse in Philadelphia during the period of May 25 to September 17, 1787. There, the delegates drafted the Constitution of the United States, which replaced the Articles of Confederation as the governing document of the country. The convention was called as the result of a demand for a stronger government. By 1787, it had become extremely doubtful that the Articles of Confederation could be amended to create an effective central regime that would regulate interstate commerce and effectively handle foreign relations. An economic depression, which was at its worst in 1785–86, and a rebellion led by Daniel Shays stimulated action.

In the fall of 1786, the Annapolis convention issued an invitation to the states to send delegates to Philadelphia “to take into consideration the situation of the United States, to devise such further provisions as shall appear necessary to render the constitution of the federal government adequate to the exigencies of the Union...” The congress sent forth a similar request on February 21, 1787, and 74 delegates were chosen by 12 states. Rhode Island failed to appoint deputies. Only 55 men actually took part in the proceedings at Philadelphia; of these, 39 signed the Constitution.

The convention quickly decided to make a new constitution rather than try to amend the Articles of Confederation. Its basic elements were contained in the Virginia plan, prepared by the Virginia delegation before the opening of the convention and proposed by Edmund Randolph. This plan called for the creation of a powerful central government, including a bicameral congress with the representation of each state based on its population or wealth.

Agreement was quickly reached (May 30) that ample powers be vested in a central government and also (June 12) that the constitution, when finished, should be presented for ratification to specially elected conventions in the several states rather than to their legislatures. Later, it was stipulated that the constitution should be put in motion when nine such conventions had voted approval. Thus, it was arranged that the constitution should have as its basis the solemn will of the people. Accordingly, both the central and state governments came to rest upon them.

The basis for representation in congress proposed in the Virginia plan, however, encountered serious opposition. From the time of the First Continental Congress, each colony-state had possessed (as in the convention itself) one vote. The use of a ratio of numbers or wealth would obviously destroy that system and would give the larger states, especially Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, a heavy representation. Bitter protests came from the delegates of the smaller states. They were moved not only by state pride, but

also, and especially, by fear that members of the congress from the large states would combine their votes to dominate it.

Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, with support from Connecticut, the Carolinas, and Georgia, urged the proportional principle for both houses of the congress-to-be. Although James Madison of Virginia correctly declared that voting would be in accordance with sectional, economic, and social beliefs rather than in accordance to state size, the smaller states insisted upon equal representation of each state because they believed the votes of the large states would be cast in bloc. The small-state delegates rallied behind William Paterson of New Jersey, who offered the New Jersey plan on June 15. This scheme would have created a one-house legislature in which all states would have an equal vote. It also would have materially increased the powers of the congress beyond those granted under the Articles of Confederation. Provision was also included for an executive and a judiciary.

After some weeks of discussion, it became evident that constitutional reform would fail unless concession was made to the small states. As a result, the "Great Compromise," in which the Connecticut delegation played an important role, was arranged by votes taken on July 16 and 23. It called for a bicameral congress with proportional representation in the lower house and equal representation of the states in the upper house, or senate. Thus, the convention solved its most difficult problem, and the advocates of a strong central government gained strength, for Paterson and other representatives of small states abandoned their fears of national tyranny.

THE BIRTH OF THE CONSTITUTION

The Constitutional Convention

The Constitutional Convention opened in Philadelphia in May 1787 and finished its work in September. The delegates to the convention were not elected by the people, but instead were selected by their state legislatures.

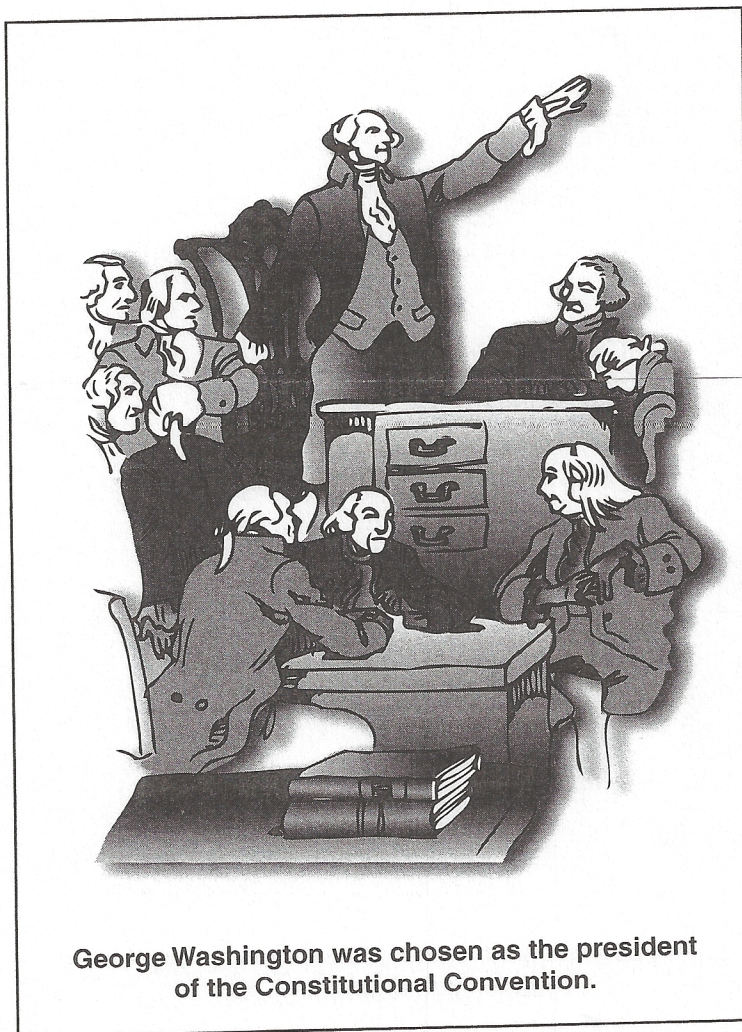
The delegates to the convention were men of great ability. Many had fought in the Revolutionary War, many were educated, and many were wealthy. They were men of great power and influence in their own states. Eventually, two would become presidents of the United States, one a vice president, and 26 would serve in Congress. All in all, there were 65 official delegates, but only 55 made it to Philadelphia. The average attendance at each day's meeting was about 30.

George Washington, a delegate from Virginia, was chosen to be the president of the convention. At first, the purpose of the convention was to revise the Articles of Confederation, but very quickly, the delegates decided to replace the Articles with a new plan for government.

Two important leaders were absent from the convention. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who were influential in writing the Declaration of Independence, were in Europe serving as ambassadors to other nations. Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania was the oldest delegate at 81 years old, and Jonathan Dayton of New Jersey was the youngest at 26. Other delegates present were Alexander Hamilton and James Madison. There was one state that refused to send delegates to the Constitutional Convention; Rhode Island did not send any representatives to Philadelphia.

During those five hot summer months in 1787, the 55 delegates struggled to create a more flexible form of government for the new United States. The most serious task that faced the delegates was how to achieve a balance between liberty and authority. There were many different viewpoints and opinions on how to go about that task. The concept of compromise unified the differences into a supreme document capable of representing the opinions of all Americans.

The Constitution that resulted from this historic convention is now over 200 years old. No other written constitution has lasted as long as the Constitution of the United States.



George Washington was chosen as the president of the Constitutional Convention.

Name: _____ Date: _____

THE BIRTH OF THE CONSTITUTION

The Constitutional Convention **Challenges**

1. Define:

Convention: _____

Compromise: _____

Delegate: _____

2. Where did the Constitutional Convention meet in May 1787? _____

3. During what months of 1787 was our Constitution written? _____

4. Which state didn't send delegates to the Convention? _____

5. Who served as president of the convention? _____

6. What was the most serious task that the convention faced? _____

7. Name two famous politicians who were present at the convention. _____

8. Name two famous politicians who were absent from the convention. _____

9. Who was the oldest delegate? _____

10. Who was the youngest delegate? _____