

# LIBERTY! The Constitutional Convention



Philadelphia, 1787

*"My wish is that the Convention may adopt no temporary expedience, but probe defects... to the bottom and provide radical cures."*

*George Washington*

*"On the whole, sir, I cannot help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention who may still have objections to it would with me, on this occasion, doubt a little of his own infallibility and... put his name to this instrument."*

*Benjamin Franklin*

*"The first question that offers itself is, whether the general form and aspect of the government be strictly republican. It is evident that no other form would be reconcilable with the genius of the people of America."*

*James Madison*

## "Goodbye to the Articles of Confederation"

The independence and liberty which had been gained years before on the battlefield was in danger of being lost. Problems continued to divide the states under the weak Articles of Confederation. A convention was called to review and revise the Articles. Not everyone believed this "Philadelphia Convention" was needed. In fact, Rhode Island refused to participate. Even George Washington was advised not to go by many friends, who feared the convention would fail. Yet he answered his country's call to service, and on May 9, 1787, left his Mount Vernon home by coach, and reached Philadelphia in time for the convention's beginning on May 14.

Washington, hero of the American Revolution, was cheered by crowds as he arrived in Philadelphia. The convention met in the Assembly Room at the State House, now known as Independence Hall. It took several days for enough delegates to show up to begin work, and when seven of the states were represented, the convention unanimously elected Washington as president of the convention. He took his seat in a tall chair at the front of the room. The chair had a red seat, and on the back of the chair was carved a half sun above the horizon.

Throughout the long weeks, delegates debated in secret so that everyone could speak opinions and suggest ideas. Windows were closed and shades were drawn. One historian called the convention an "experimental laboratory in which a group of men educated each other to work out together such a government as existed nowhere in the past or present of the world." Although Washington did not enter into the debates, his presence commanded respect and reminded them of their common cause. He also worked closely behind the scenes with James Madison, often called the architect or the father of the Constitution.

After one week, delegates decided to scrap the Articles of Confederation. They adopted the Virginia Plan, designing a federal government with three major branches: a bicameral legislative body or Congress to make the laws; an executive branch to carry out or administer the laws; and a judicial branch to interpret the laws. In sweltering June heat, they debated the plan, and after recessing on July 4 to celebrate Independence Day, came back and reached "The Great Compromise." That plan gave each state equal representation in the Senate and representation in the House of Representatives based on state population. The plan passed by one vote, saving the new Constitution, and possibly saving the United States of America from tearing apart. One writer called the new Constitution the "miracle of Philadelphia." Washington himself called it a "new phenomenon in the political and

10 moral world."



Benjamin  
Franklin

# The Constitutional Convention LIBERTY!

## Who was there?

**George Washington** - former Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. Washington was elected unanimously as presiding officer of the Constitutional Convention.

**Benjamin Franklin** - printer, scientist, author, diplomat, and elder statesman. At the age of 81, Franklin was the oldest delegate to the convention and one of the few who had also signed the Declaration of Independence.

**James Madison** - known as "the Father of the Constitution" at age 36. He had been elected to the first Virginia Assembly in 1776. It was his plan that called for the legislative, executive, and judicial branches and a two-house congress. From his copious notes, historians have learned much about the proceedings of the Convention.

**52 Other Delegates** from all states except Rhode Island



The State House in Philadelphia where the convention was held

## Words to know

**Articles of Confederation** - original plan of government for the colonies, voted on in November, 1777

**Bicameral** - consisting of two chambers or legislative branches

**Compromise** - to settle a question by using ideas from both sides

## In Their Own Words:

"We, the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

**Preamble to the Constitution of the United States of America**

## What Happened Next?

The new Constitution was sent to the States to be ratified, or formally adopted.

A Bill of Rights was missing and some opposed the Constitution without it. The Federalist Papers were written in support of the Constitution and urged ratification by the states. Some states passed the Constitution with the provision a bill of rights would be added. By mid-1788, the Constitution was ratified. The first Congress which met in 1789 proposed a bill of rights, and the first ten amendments to the Constitution were ratified by the states in 1791.

