

The Calling of the Constitutional Convention



James Madison

After retiring from the army, Washington wanted to spend the rest of his life in peace at home at Mt. Vernon, but he kept getting disturbing information that could not be ignored. British forts were still standing on American soil; the French were demanding that the bankrupt Congress repay their loans, and Spanish agents were working among the Native Americans. The continental currency was a joke, and states were taxing imports from foreign countries and other states. This was leading to fierce arguments between states. Congress had little power under the Articles. Shays' Rebellion had demonstrated growing public disorder. Fear of a military takeover was always present. Unless something was done soon, everything Washington had fought for would be lost.

A new approach to solving the nation's problems began to appear. In 1785, Virginia and Maryland delegates met at Mt. Vernon to work out problems of trade on the Potomac River. The meeting went very well, so it was decided that another conference should take place the following year at Annapolis, with all thirteen states invited. Only five states sent delegates to Annapolis, but Alexander Hamilton suggested that another meeting be held in Philadelphia in 1787, to consider changing defects in the Articles of Confederation. Congress

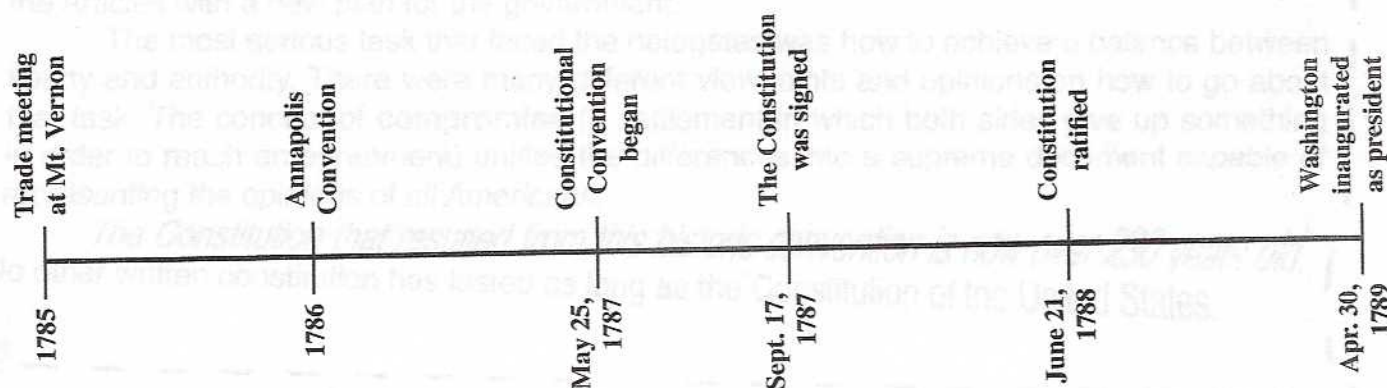
gave a feeble endorsement to the proposal, and states were asked to choose delegates to go to the meeting.

At the time, Washington suffered from malaria and rheumatism, but when asked to go, he accepted. That news gave special meaning to the gathering, and states began to choose talented men for their delegations. The average delegate was in his early forties, although Ben Franklin, who was now 80 years old, raised that average. Most were college educated, had served in state legislatures or Congress, and were financially well off. Lawyers, merchants, and farmers were overly represented; no poor men, women, or minorities participated.

To no one's surprise, Washington was chosen president of the convention. The delegates made an important early decision to keep the proceedings secret; compromising was easier if no one was giving headlines to the press. A few delegates, including James Madison, took notes on the debates. Later, these would be important to historians since the official minutes gave only a brief outline of what was said and decided.

Much compromising went on as delegates from large and small states, North and South, commercial and agricultural states, liberals and conservatives, struggled to find the words upon which they could agree. Fortunately, they all believed there should be *three branches of government* (legislative, executive, and judicial), and each should be independent of interference from the others. They believed in *checks and balances*, so each could stop the others from grabbing power. All believed in *republican government*, one where supreme power rests with the people.

RESULTS: Out of this meeting came the Constitution of the United States, an incredible document that has served the nation for over 200 years and has only been amended 27 times.



Key Details

Constitutional Convention

After the Revolutionary War, the 13 states realized they needed something stronger than the Articles of Confederation to hold them together as a united nation. However, exactly what they needed was a matter of much debate.

Delegates

On May 25, 1787, 55 **delegates** (chosen representatives) from 12 states met in Philadelphia for the Constitutional Convention. All states except Rhode Island sent delegates to the Constitutional Convention. The delegates to the convention were not elected by the people, but instead were selected by their state legislatures. Many had fought in the Revolutionary War, many were educated, and many were wealthy.

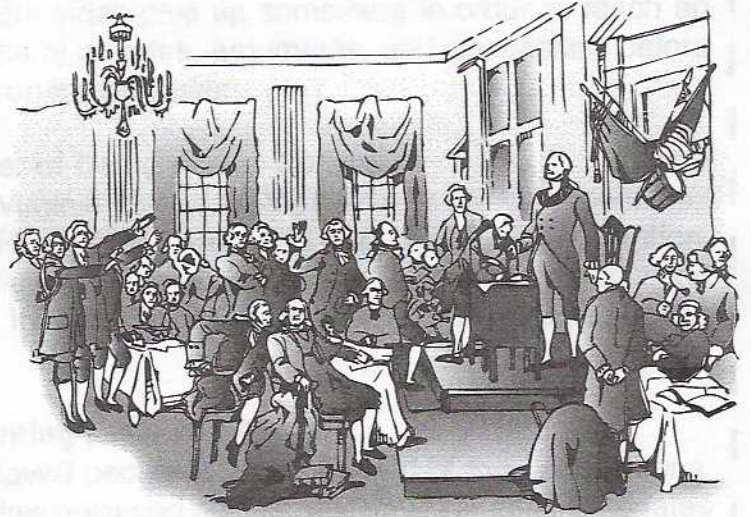
George Washington, a delegate from Virginia, was chosen to be the president of the convention. Benjamin Franklin was the oldest delegate at 81 years old, and Jonathan Dayton of New Jersey was the youngest at 26. Two important leaders were absent from the convention: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. They were on diplomatic assignments in Europe. James Madison became known as the "father of the Constitution." During the convention, he kept detailed records of the debates.

Convention Details Kept Secret

The delegates wanted to be able to speak their minds freely at the convention, so the first rule the delegates made was secrecy. Not even wives were to know what went on in the convention. During those five hot summer months in 1787, the 55 delegates struggled to create a more flexible form of government for the new nation. 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 the government.

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** (a settlement in which both sides give up something in order to reach an agreement) 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 230 years old.
No other written constitution has lasted as long as the Constitution of the United States.



George Washington was chosen to be the president of the Constitutional Convention.

Key Details

Compromise

Without compromise in 1787, our government would have collapsed in its infancy. A **compromise** is a settlement in which both sides give up something in order to reach an agreement. It took the delegates four months of debates, arguments, and discussions before they finally made compromises and agreed on a constitution.

- **Great Compromise: The Number of Delegates to Congress**

Two plans were proposed. The Virginia Plan: Large states wanted representation based on population; New Jersey Plan: Small states wanted equality in representation. Delegates agreed Congress should have two houses. In one house, each state would have equal representation. In the other house, representation would be based on each state's population.

- **Three-fifths Compromise: Counting Enslaved People**

The southern states wanted enslaved people to count as part of their populations. Most northern states, which had few enslaved people, opposed the idea. Delegates agreed enslaved persons would count as three-fifths of other persons. This number would be used to determine both representation and taxes.

- **Commerce and Slave Trade Compromise: Regulating Trade**

The northern states felt that Congress should be able to regulate trade with other countries. The southern states feared Congress would use this power to interfere with trading enslaved people. Delegates agreed Congress would regulate trade and would not interfere with the slave trade for 20 years.

- **Electoral College: Choosing the President and Vice President**

Some delegates thought members of Congress should choose the president. Others believed the people should elect the president. Delegates agreed each state legislature would choose a number of electors. The electors would select the president and vice president.

- **Ratification of the Constitution: Federal System of Government**

One group, Anti-Federalists, opposed the new Constitution because it gave too much power to the national government and lacked a bill of rights. The other group, the Federalists, wanted a strong national government. Delegates agreed if the Constitution was ratified, a bill of rights would be added.

For the Constitution to become official, at least 9 of the 13 states needed to approve it. Although it became effective in July 1788, the last of the original states to **ratify** (approve) the Constitution (Rhode Island), did not do so until May 29, 1790.