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The Constitutional Convention

Getting Started

Since 1781 the United States had been governed under the Articles of Confederation, but the government wasn't working very well. A convention of states dealing with interstate commerce met in Annapolis in 1786 and proposed that a convention be held the next year to deal with some of the deficiencies of the Confederation. The states agreed to a convention to revise the Articles of Confederation to be held in Philadelphia in May 1787. The idea had been discussed for several years because many public leaders had observed and discussed the failures of the existing government.

Due to travel problems and the uncertain response of many states, only Virginia and Pennsylvania had delegates present on the appointed day of May 14. Gradually, delegates arrived and on May 25, 1787, the Constitutional Convention formally opened in what is now Independence Hall in Philadelphia. By the end of the convention, 12 of the 13 states sent delegates. Rhode Island would have nothing to do with the deliberations. A total of 55 delegates attended the convention at some time, and 39 signed the document.

The Delegates

George Washington was immediately elected president of the convention. Important leaders at the convention included Benjamin Franklin, as a representative from Pennsylvania and Gouverneur Morris who "wrote" the final document in his handwriting. James Madison, called the "Father of the Constitution," kept notes, delivered speeches, and helped formulate several compromises. Other important men included Roger Sherman, Edmund Randolph, and Alexander Hamilton.

Important Americans who didn't attend included Thomas Jefferson and John Adams who were overseas serving as ambassadors. Patrick Henry refused to attend, and 18 others who were chosen by their states couldn't or wouldn't attend. A total of 74 delegates were appointed and 55 attended.



The Rules

The delegates agreed to some ground rules. Only delegates would be allowed to attend meetings. There would be no visitors and no reporters. Sentries were actually placed at the doors to insure that deliberations were kept secret. The windows were closed to prevent eavesdropping.

The delegates quickly agreed on the need to devise a new form of government, not just to revise the Articles of Confederation. Most delegates wanted a strong, firm, central government that still had to respect the rights of the people and the individual character of the states. The problems at the convention centered around how to accomplish this purpose.



Reading Comprehension Quiz

Creating the Constitution

Directions: Read pages 11–15 about the Articles of Confederation and the Constitutional Convention. Answer these questions based on the information in the selection. Circle the correct answer in each question below. Underline the sentence in the selection where the answer is found.

- In which state did Shays' Rebellion occur?
A Virginia C New York
B Massachusetts D New Hampshire
- Who created the Articles of Confederation?
A Continental Congress C President Washington
B the Constitution D Great Britain
- Which of the following was true about the United States under the Articles of Confederation?
A There was a strong navy. C Paper money was valuable.
B The U. S. owed no money. D The U. S. owed many debts.
- What was the largest number of delegates that attended the Constitutional Convention at any time?
A 18 C 74
B 55 D 39
- In what year was the Constitutional Convention held?
A 1789 C 1791
B 1787 D 1786
- Which two states refused to ratify the Constitution until a Bill of Rights was added?
A Virginia and Delaware C South Carolina and New Jersey
B New York and Massachusetts D North Carolina and Rhode Island
- How many states sent delegates to the Constitutional Convention at some time?
A 50 C 9
B 13 D 12
- Which country would not allow American farmers to use the port of New Orleans?
A Spain C Great Britain
B France D United States
- Where was the Constitutional Convention held?
A Annapolis C New York City
B Boston D Philadelphia
- How much money did the national government under the Articles of Confederation owe altogether to foreign governments and on domestic loans?
A 12 million dollars C 25 million dollars
B 52 million dollars D 40 million dollars