

Constitution Day



September 17

Preamble

"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, 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."

Did you know?

- The U.S. Constitution is the oldest and longest continually-used document of its kind in the world, and it is also one of the shortest of any written. The document has served as a source of inspiration and democracy around the world.
- The National Archives (NARA) has the original in a bomb-proof vault. One page is displayed for the public behind bullet-proof glass and the entire document is displayed only on Constitution Day.
- The Constitution was signed at the convention in Philadelphia on September 17, 1787.
- Although the Framers were an impressive group of enlightened leaders, the Constitution has required several amendments in order to expand rights and political enfranchisement to all Americans. For instance, the 13th Amendment (1865) ended slavery, the 14th Amendment (1868) extended equal protection to all, and the 15th Amendment (1870) provided voting rights to Black men. A half century later, the 19th Amendment (1920) extended voting rights to women and, another half century later, the 26th Amendment (1971) lowered voting age to 18.
- The Constitution is a living document and will likely continue to be amended, interpreted, and debates. For instance, many Republicans want to repeal the 14th Amendment.

The surprising history of the Constitution

The Articles of Confederation (proposed in 1777, ratified in 1781), the system designed to govern the newly independent nation, immediately proved to be ineffective. It had but one branch of government (legislative) and few powers. Thus, it became apparent to the Founders that such problems as the ability to pay off the war debt, deal with foreign powers, and settle disputes among the states, would require an improved system.

In 1786 the Founders met at the Annapolis Convention in Maryland, but only delegates from five states showed up and they were unable to come to an agreement about what to do. About the only point of agreement among the quarrelsome delegates was to try again the following summer.

Therefore, in May of 1787, the delegates met in Philadelphia to open another convention. There are several interesting and unusual ironies that occurred during the convention. The first was that, though charged with *amending* the Articles of Confederation, the delegates *disregarded* them and developed a new and vastly different system of government. A second irony was that, in a move that would raise eyebrows today, the delegates swore themselves to secrecy while inventing a government based on openness. Yet another irony was that the delegates that gathered in Philadelphia constituted but a small collection of elite, white males; yet they created a democracy of, by, and for the people. Despite these and several other ironies and challenges, it worked!

We don't know exactly who wrote the famous preamble or some other key sections of the Constitution. But we do know that it took the Framers six weeks to write the Constitution and the task was led by a committee chaired by Gouveneur Morris of Pennsylvania.

The Framers who gathered in Philadelphia were an impressive and well-read group. In drafting the Constitution, they were influenced by British Common Law, the writings of the British philosopher John Locke (who advocated the rights of individuals), the French philosopher Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (who espoused the idea of checks and balances), and the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (who viewed the relationship of the government with the governed as a social contract). The Framers were also influenced by a mix of their own philosophical readings, their visions for the nation, their views on the nature of humankind, and their own self-interest.

Two radically different viewpoints had been brewing in the lead-up to the convention. One was argued by Francophile Thomas Jefferson, who favored a weak, decentralized government in part because he believed in the ability of selfless men to govern. The other was championed by Anglophile Alexander Hamilton, who favored a strong, centralized government in part because he distrusted democracy and the ability of men to govern.

There was a lot of disagreement in Philadelphia. Indeed, the convention rarely resembled the collegial atmosphere depicted in paintings and textbooks. Fortunately, the Framers were able to rise above their disagreements (except on the issue of slavery). An example of this is the disagreement over representation in Congress, as seen in the "Big State Plan" (the "Virginia Plan" by Edmund Randolph and James Madison) and "Small State Plan" (the "New Jersey Plan" by William Patterson). But, the so-called "Great Compromise," led by Roger Sherman and the Connecticut delegation, remedied the differences through a bicameral legislature with the House having representation based on population and the Senate having equal representation.

Two of the most difficult issues – slavery and the means of electing a president – were wisely put off until late in the summer, as the Framers preferred to pick the low hanging fruit before tacking the most divisive matters. Unfortunately, the Framers were unable to find adequate common ground on these two issues and slavery remained legal, along with the "Three-

Fifths Clause,” and the Electoral College was developed as something of the least problematic way to pick a president.

The Constitution went into effect on March 4, 1789. George Washington was to be inaugurated that day in New York City while the new capital city was being built, but the Congress was delayed and Washington needed additional time to travel from his home in Virginia. So the Constitution was implemented while the President and many members of Congress were still en route to the temporary capital.

Time-line

08/29/1786	Shay’s Rebellion occurs and highlights the need for a new system of government
09/11/1786	Annapolis Convention opens
09/14/1786	Annapolis Convention fails and adjourns
02/21/1787	Congress votes to approve a convention to amend the Articles of Confederation
05/03/1787	James Madison is the first delegate to arrive in Philadelphia
05/13/1787	George Washington arrives to the relief and pleasure of delegates
05/29/1787	The Virginia Plan is proposed
05/31/1787	Debate on representation
06/01/1787	Debate on executive power
06/02/1787	Debate on salaries
06/04/1787	Debate over a single executive versus an executive committee
06/06/1787	Debate on how representatives are selected
06/07/1787	Debate on how senators are selected
06/11/1787	The Great Compromise proposed
06/15/1787	The New Jersey Plan is proposed
06/21/1787	Debate on federalism
06/26/1787	Debate on the length of Senate terms
06/28/1787	Debate on the role of states in selected the Senate
07/17/1787	Debate on the length of the executive term
07/21/1787	Debate on judicial appointments
07/23/1787	Debate on ratification of the Constitution
08/06/1787	Committee submits rough draft of the Constitution
08/07/1787	Debate over voting rights and qualifications
08/09/1787	Debate on citizenship for immigrants
08/15/1787	Debate on executive veto
08/21/1787	Debate on slavery
09/04/1787	Debate on executive powers
09/10/1787	Debate on process for amending Constitution
09/12/1787	Committee submits revised draft of Constitution
09/12/1787	Debate on Bill of Rights
09/15/1787	Final draft of Constitution written
09/17/1787	Vote and signing
09/19/1787	Constitution is published
09/28/1787	Constitution sent to the states for ratification
10/27/1787	The first Federalist Paper is published
12/07/1787	Delaware ratifies Constitution (30-0 vote)

12/12/1787	Pennsylvania ratifies Constitution (46-23 vote)
12/18/1787	New Jersey ratifies Constitution (38-0 vote)
01/02/1788	Georgia ratifies Constitution (26-0 vote)
01/09/1788	Connecticut ratifies Constitution (128-40 vote)
02/06/1788	Massachusetts ratifies Constitution (187-168 vote)
03/24/1788	Rhode Island rejects Constitution
04/28/1788	Maryland ratifies Constitution (63-11 vote)
05/23/1788	South Carolina ratifies Constitution (149-73 vote)
05/28/1788	All 85 papers published as <i>The Federalist</i>
06/21/1788	New Hampshire ratifies Constitution (57-47 vote) With the necessary 9 states ratifying, the Constitution is adopted
06/25/1788	Virginia ratifies Constitution (89-79 vote)
07/26/1788	New York ratifies Constitution (30-27 vote)
03/04/1789	Constitution takes effect
11/21/1789	North Carolina ratifies Constitution (194-77 vote)
05/29/1790	Rhode Island ratifies Constitution (34-32 vote)

Test your knowledge of the Constitution

- How many Articles are in the Constitution?
 - 3
 - 7
 - 10
 - 12
- How many Amendments have been added to the Constitution?
 - 10
 - 19
 - 27
 - 38
- The first 10 Amendments are known as _____?
 - The Articles of Confederation
 - The Establishment Clause
 - The Founding Principles
 - The Bill of Rights
- Which of the following is NOT a right that is protected by the First Amendment?
 - Religion
 - Speech
 - Privacy
 - Press
- The most recent Amendment deals with _____?
 - Religious rights
 - Congressional pay

- c. Internet regulation
 - d. Gun control
6. How many delegates signed the Constitution?
- a. 39
 - b. 46
 - c. 53
 - d. 78
7. Which state did not send any delegates to Philadelphia?
- a. Massachusetts
 - b. Rhode Island
 - c. Virginia
 - d. Maryland
8. Interestingly, two of the most important of the Founders were not at the Constitutional Convention. Who were they?
- a. George Washington and John Hancock
 - b. James Madison and Alexander Hamilton
 - c. Benjamin Franklin and James Wilson
 - d. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson
9. Which Framers became known as the Father of the Constitution?
- a. George Washington
 - b. Thomas Jefferson
 - c. James Madison
 - d. John Hancock
10. Which Framers was so elderly and frail that he had to be helped to both his chair and the table to sign the Constitution?
- a. George Washington
 - b. John Hancock
 - c. James Wilson
 - d. Benjamin Franklin
11. Which of the following Framers did NOT contribute to “The Federalist Papers,” the 85 essays produced to both explain the work of the Framers to the public and help build support for the Constitution?
- a. John Hancock
 - b. James Madison
 - c. Alexander Hamilton
 - d. John Hay
12. Have any of the Amendments ever been repealed?
- a. Yes
 - b. No

13. Do you have the right to burn the American flag as a form of political speech?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
14. As a form of free speech, do you have the right to yell “fire” in a crowded movie theater?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
15. Can government ban obscene and offensive material on the Internet?
- a. Yes
 - b. No