

In 1786, at Annapolis, Maryland, a meeting was held to discuss commerce problems. Five states attended. During the discussions, a future meeting was proposed. The hope was expressed that all states would participate. This future meeting, or convention, would be held in Philadelphia for the purpose of correcting faults in the Articles of Confederation. As we will learn, the outcome was much larger. They created the *Constitution of the United States*.

The Delegates

The convention began its work in May of 1787 and finished in September of the same year. More than 70 men had been chosen as *delegates* by the various states, but only 55 attended in Philadelphia. A delegate is a person sent to a meeting or conference to represent the interests of the state. The average attendance each day was approximately 30 members. Rhode Island, distrustful of a powerful federal government, was the only one of the 13 original states to refuse to send delegates to the Constitutional Convention.

The men who attended the convention were of remarkable ability. From Virginia came George Washington, Edmund Randolph, and James Madison. New York sent Alexander Hamilton. Pennsylvania sent Benjamin Franklin, Gouverneur Morris, and James Wilson. From New Jersey were William Livingston and William Peterson. Other key delegates were: Elbridge Gerry and Rufus King, Massachusetts; Oliver Ellsworth and Roger Sherman, Connecticut; John Dickinson, Delaware; and John Rutledge and Charles C. Pickney from South Carolina.



Ben Franklin

The delegates were men of wealth and prestige. Many of them had served in the Revolutionary War and the First and Second Continental Congresses. Many had served in their state governments. Eight had been signers of the Declaration of Independence. Two would become presidents of the United States, and one would become vice president. Eighteen would become senators, and eight would become representatives.

The average age of the men attending the convention was 42, yet many were in their 30s. Ben Franklin was the oldest at 81. Not all of the leaders of the colonies consented to attend, however. Patrick Henry "smelt a rat" and would not attend. Later, he would become a bitter foe of the Constitution, accepting it only after the addition of the Bill of Rights. Samuel Adams and John Hancock also refused to attend, and Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine were in Europe.



Independence Hall is the location where both the Declaration and Constitution were debated and adopted.

The Convention at Work

The delegates met in Philadelphia in Independence Hall. Dirt had been spread on the cobblestone street outside

the hall, so noise from passing carriages would not disturb the meeting. George Washington was selected as president of the convention. Although the official purpose of the convention was to improve the Articles of Confederation, a decision was quickly reached to replace the Articles with a new constitution. The delegates agreed on an early resolution:

"Resolved...that a national government ought to be established consisting of a Supreme, Legislative, Judiciary, and Executive."

The delegates often disagreed on proposals. However, they all agreed that the new government had to be strong enough to rule the entire nation. Lessons learned under the Articles were put into practice, and this new and improved constitution would:

1. make the Constitution the highest authority in the land;
2. provide for an effective central government;
3. protect the rights of the people by setting limits on governmental authority.

The third objective was the most difficult — creating a constitution that would achieve a balance between liberty and authority.

Slavery and the Constitution

How could a country like the United States, so interested in freedom, not outlaw slavery in 1781? Many northern states had outlawed slavery. But the delegates at the Constitutional Convention knew southern states would never accept the Constitution if it interfered with slavery. So to create the new government, the delegates did not outlaw slavery. Instead, they left the problem for another day and another war. Unfortunately, even with the other freedoms guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, slavery was not outlawed, but slavery's days were numbered.

Who was missing from the Convention?

No women, blacks, Native Americans, or whites of modest or poor means attended the Constitutional Convention. This was unsurprising since most of the above groups could not even vote then. As one historian noted, it was a "Convention of the well-bred, the well-fed, the well-read, and the well-wed."

QUESTIONS

THE CONVENTION BY THE NUMBERS. Choose the correct number from the bank that matches the statement.

Number Bank: 0, 1, 2, 5, 8, 13, 42, 55, 81, 99

- ___ States attending Annapolis meeting.
- ___ Native Americans at the convention.
- ___ Number of original states.
- ___ Age of oldest delegate at the convention.
- ___ Delegates present in Philadelphia.
- ___ Average age of the men attending the convention.
- ___ Delegates that would become presidents.
- ___ Number of Declaration signers at the convention.