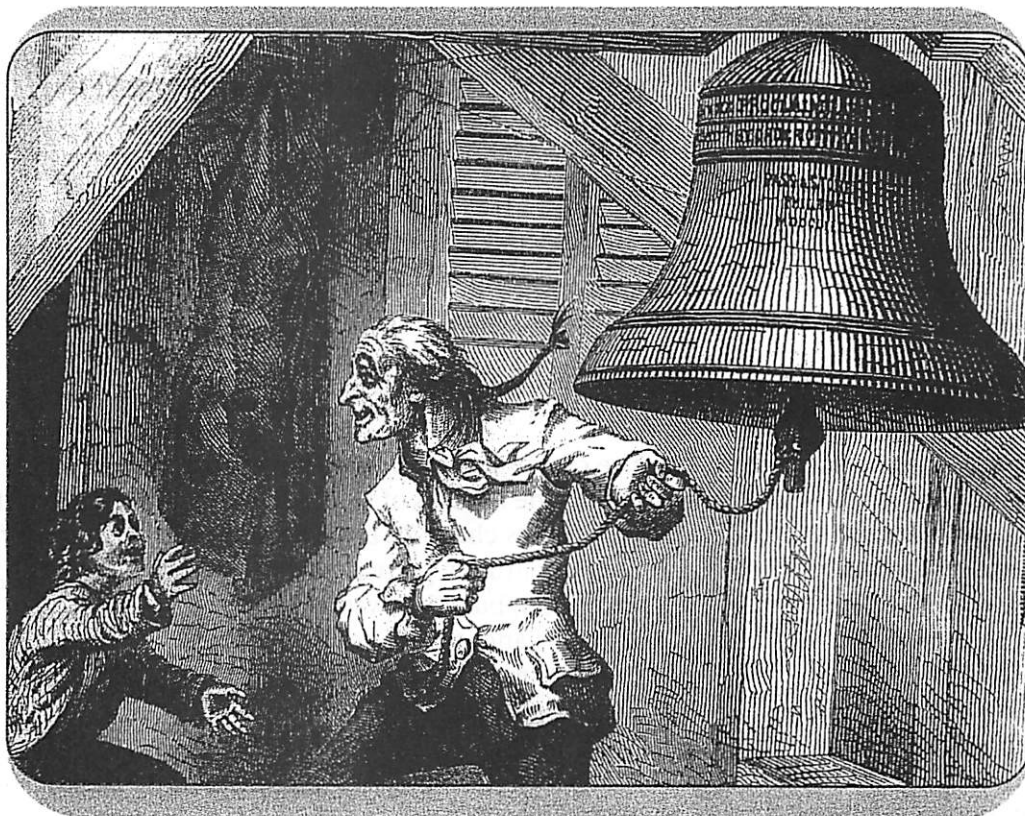


The Constitutional Convention



Ring the Liberty Bell.

Chapter Outline

- 1 Delegates Meet in Philadelphia
- 2 Convention Proceedings and Compromises
- 3 Ratification

About This Chapter

On February 21, 1787, aware of its growing inability to deal with national issues, the Congress of the Confederation called on the states to send delegates to a national convention. The purpose of this meeting was to revise the Articles of Confederation in the hope of producing a more effective national government.

Soon after arriving in Philadelphia, the delegates (some of the most remarkable and distinguished citizens of the day) decided to dispense with the Articles entirely. They set about to draft a completely new constitution. After four months of debate, disagreement, and compromise, they presented the nation with a bold, new constitution. Despite its modest appearance—only 23 clauses—the document proved to be the blueprint for an enduring system of government. The delegates' next job was to persuade a strong and suspicious opposition to agree on the new constitution.

SECTION

1

Delegates Meet in Philadelphia

As you read, think about the answers to these questions:

- Who attended the Constitutional Convention?
- What were the delegates like as a group?
- Who did not attend the Constitutional Convention and why?
- Who were some of the most important people at the convention?

The states responded quickly to the call to send representatives to a convention for the purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation. During the spring of 1787, state legislatures chose 74 delegates to attend this meeting. Of that number, 55 eventually participated in what we now call the Constitutional Convention, but what was then known as the Federal Convention. Only Rhode Island, whose political leaders were opposed to any strengthening of the national government, refused to send any delegates.

convention *gathering of persons for a common purpose*

delegate *person who is authorized to act as a representative for others*

Profile of the Delegates

Much has been written about the remarkable collection of individuals who gathered in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787. Thomas Jefferson later referred to the delegates as "an assembly of demigods." By this phrase he meant to emphasize their uncommon talent and intelligence, far from typical of the nearly 4 million Americans they represented. In the late 1700s, the vast majority of Americans lived and worked on small farms. By contrast, the delegates were largely wealthy and well educated.

demigod *person of such outstanding qualities as to be almost godlike*

Experience and Education. The delegates to the convention were among the most learned and politically experienced men of their time.

- 8 had signed the Declaration of Independence.
- 30 had served in the Continental Army.
- 6 had signed the Articles of Confederation.
- 8 had served in constitutional conventions in their own states.
- 7 had been or were still state governors.
- 39 had been members of the Continental Congress, the Congress of the Confederation, or both.

- 31 had attended college (at a time when few Americans received an education).

Age and Occupation. Considering their experience, one of the most striking characteristics of the delegates was their youth. Only four delegates were over 60 years old, nearly half were in their 30s, and five were less than 30. Even when Benjamin Franklin's age of 81 is taken into account, the average age of the delegates was a mere 42.

Although the Framers represented a variety of occupations, more than half were lawyers, and many of those had held public office. Merchants and plantation owners made up the largest percentage of the remaining delegates. There were three doctors, two college presidents, and three college professors.

PRIMARY SOURCES

"I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put unlimited power into the hands of their Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or Representation."

—Abigail Adams

boycott to avoid using, buying, or dealing with as a means of protest

Who Was Missing

The term "Founding Fathers," which is used to refer to the convention delegates, immediately suggests one significant group that was missing from the famous gathering in Philadelphia. No women, blacks, or Native Americans participated in the Constitutional Convention. White men of modest means, who constituted 85% of the population, were represented by just two delegates of the same social standing.

Groups Not Represented. While the absence of these groups might seem strange to us today, the delegates would have been equally surprised by the suggestion that they be allowed to participate. Despite the example of such remarkable and accomplished women as Abigail Adams (wife of John Adams) and Mercy Otis Warren (playwright and historian), women were viewed as dependents of their fathers or husbands. When they married, all that they owned became their husbands' property. They could neither vote nor hold office.

Free blacks and Native Americans also lacked political and legal rights. Even white men without property could not hold political office. Many poor and middle-class whites could not vote for the same reason.

Advocates of States' Rights. Some of the strongest supporters of the rights of the states were missing from the convention. Patrick Henry of Virginia, famous for his fierce devotion to liberty, decided early on to stay home, saying that he "smelt a rat." In other words, he believed that the convention's planners might be using the meeting to establish a powerful central government. Other prominent citizens—Samuel Adams of Massachusetts, Governor George Clinton of New York, and Samuel Chase of Maryland—were not selected as delegates by their states. Rhode Island boycotted the convention entirely, thus giving up any influence it might have had on the final outcome.

Several Prominent Americans. Several of the better-known leaders of the Revolutionary period were also missing from Philadelphia.

- Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, was in Paris at the time, serving as minister to France.

- John Adams, envoy to England and Holland, was also out of the country.
- Thomas Paine was in Europe trying to promote his recently invented design for an iron bridge.

Jefferson and Adams managed to influence some of the proceedings through letters and a book about constitutions that Adams had just published.

Key Delegates

Some of the delegates who attended the convention in Philadelphia played more significant roles than others in the process of writing the Constitution.

George Washington. Although Washington had retired to his Mt. Vernon estate at the end of the Revolutionary War, he was still one of the best known and most respected men in America. His decision to attend the convention helped to attract other important individuals to Philadelphia. Washington rarely participated in the debates, but as president of the convention he guided the proceedings with a firm hand.

James Madison. Despite his unimpressive appearance, the 36-year-old Madison contributed more to the creation of the Constitution than any other individual—for which he became known as the “Father of the Constitution.” Exceptionally well educated in history and government, he quickly became the convention’s floor leader. Most of what is known of the proceedings is the result of his careful, detailed *Notes*.

Benjamin Franklin. Senior statesman of the convention, Franklin enjoyed an international reputation as a writer, scientist, inventor, and diplomat. Despite failing health that forced him to miss many of the convention’s sessions, Franklin played an important role as conciliator during the often heated debates at the convention.

Gouverneur Morris. Only 35 at the time, Morris was disabled as a result of an accident. Even though he had a wooden leg and could not use one of his arms, he was an active participant at the convention, delivering even more speeches than Madison. Morris was a gifted writer and is given credit for most of the actual language in the Constitution.

Alexander Hamilton. A brilliant lawyer and influential figure in New York politics, the 32-year-old Hamilton had served as Washington’s secretary during the Revolutionary War. Hamilton admired the British system of government and was probably the convention’s most passionate advocate of a strong national government. His desire for a single chief executive, chosen for life, came close to a wish for monarchy.

envoy diplomatic representative of a government

PRIMARY SOURCES

“I consider the difference between a system founded on the legislatures only, and one founded on the people, to be the true difference between a league or treaty and a constitution.”

—James Madison

conciliator person who settles disputes or restores friendships

Name _____ Date _____

SECTION

1 Review

1. Defining Constitutional Terms

Write a brief definition for each of the following terms.

- a. convention _____
- b. delegate _____
- c. boycott _____
- d. envoy _____
- e. conciliator _____

2. Reviewing Social Studies Skills: Reading for Historical Facts

Write the answer to each of the following questions in the space provided.

- a. Where did the Constitutional Convention take place? _____
- b. What was the Constitutional Convention known as in 1787? _____
- c. Who was president of the Constitutional Convention? _____

3. Reviewing the Main Ideas

Using complete sentences, answer each of the following questions.

- a. Why did Rhode Island refuse to send delegates to the Constitutional Convention? _____

- b. How did the delegates differ from typical Americans of their time? _____

- c. What people or groups did not participate in the convention? _____

- d. Who were some of the most important delegates at the convention? _____

4. Critical Thinking Skills: Understanding the Constitution

On a separate sheet of paper, write a paragraph to answer the following question.

How might the Constitution have turned out differently if some of the groups missing from the convention had been represented in Philadelphia?