

LESSON 11

Who Attended the Philadelphia Convention? What Did They Agree to Do?

Purpose of Lesson

The second U.S. Constitution was written at a convention held in Philadelphia in 1787. This lesson describes the idea of a constitutional convention, how the Philadelphia Convention came to be, some of the most important people who attended it, and some of the first steps they took to create our present Constitution.

When you complete this lesson, you should be able to describe the steps leading to the calling of the Philadelphia Convention and some of the leading Framers who attended it.

Terms to Know

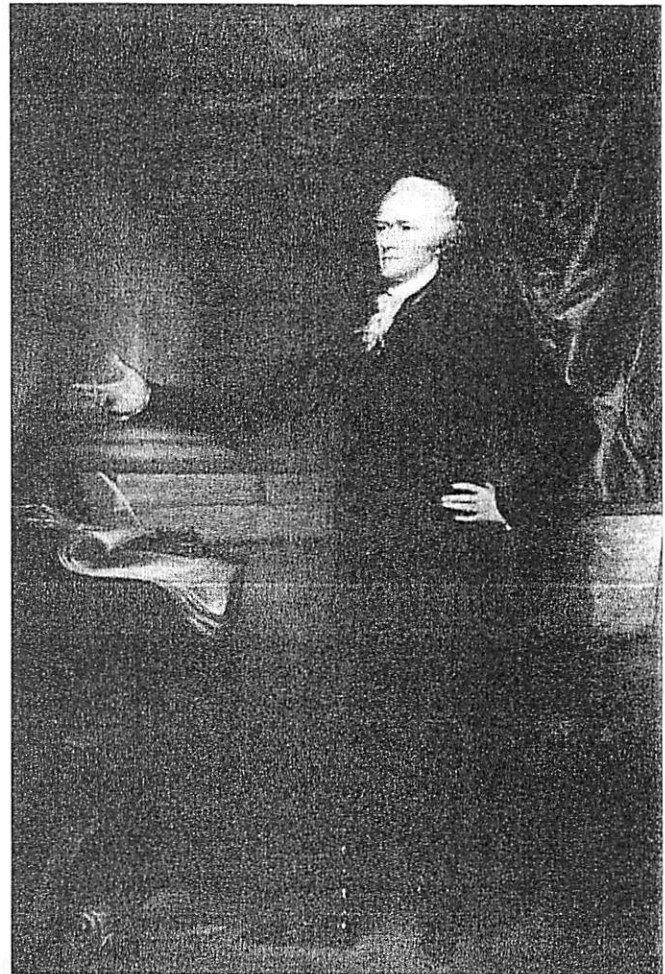
Constitutional
Convention
delegate

The Federalist
ratification
Virginia Plan

What attempts were made to solve the problems of the Articles of Confederation?

Many political leaders, including Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, were dissatisfied with the government under the Articles of Confederation. They claimed the government was inadequate for meeting the problems of the United States.

A number of prominent leaders suggested holding a meeting of representatives of all the states. This idea of holding a special meeting or convention to discuss constitutional changes, instead of using the legislature, was an American invention. Most of the early state constitutions had been written by state legislatures. In 1780, Massachusetts became the first state to hold a constitutional convention. By 1786, Madison and other leaders decided that if a convention could be used successfully in a state, it was worth trying at the national level.



Alexander Hamilton (1757–1804)

In 1786, a meeting to discuss commercial problems was held in Annapolis, Maryland. Only five states sent representatives. Disappointed at the low turnout, Hamilton, Madison, and others wrote a report asking Congress to call a meeting in Philadelphia to suggest ways to change the Articles of Confederation to strengthen the national government. Congress did so after a delay of several months. **Delegates** to the Philadelphia Convention were authorized only to propose amendments to the Articles, not to develop an entirely new constitution which is exactly what they did.

Critical Thinking Exercise

EVALUATING ALTERNATIVE POLITICAL STRATEGIES

Suppose you wanted to develop a plan to change the Constitution of the United States. Your class should be divided into two groups. Each group should adopt one of the positions. Be prepared to present and defend your assigned position.

Group 1. Position: The plan to change the Constitution should be developed by Congress and then submitted to state governments for approval.

Group 2. Position: The plan to change the Constitution should be developed at a special national convention of delegates from the states selected by their legislatures and then submitted to the people of their state for approval.

Who attended the Philadelphia Convention?

Fifty-five delegates attended the meeting that later became known as the **Philadelphia or Constitutional Convention**. This group of men are now often called the **Framers** of the Constitution. Most of the delegates were fairly young; the average age was 42. About three-fourths of them had served in Congress. Most were prominent in their states, and some had played important parts in the Revolution. Some were wealthy, but most were not. A French diplomat in America at the time said that the Framers "without being rich are all in easy circumstances."

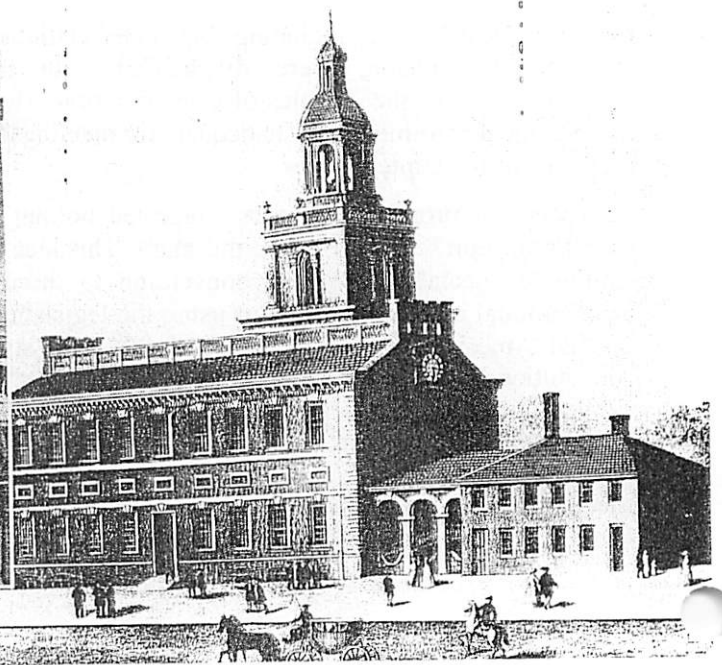
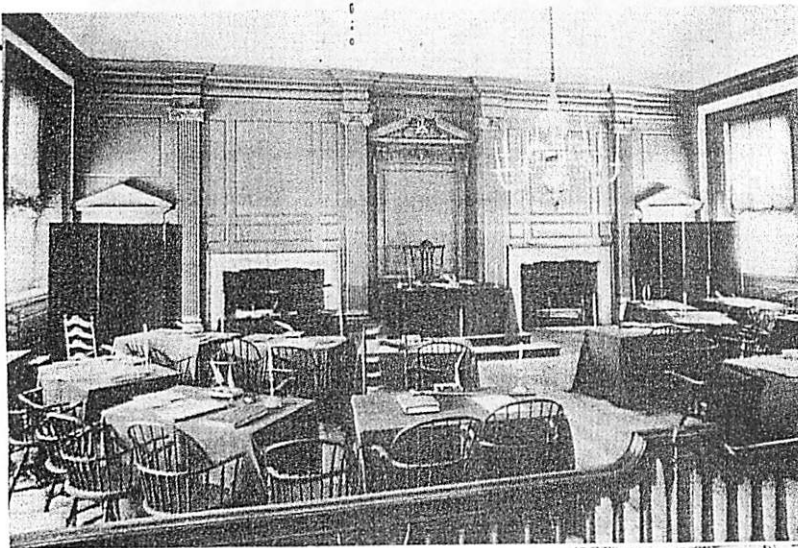
Contemporary observers were impressed by the quality of the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention. Another

French diplomat stationed in America observed that never before, "even in Europe," had there been "an assembly more respectable for talents, knowledge, disinterestedness, and patriotism." From Paris, Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Adams in London that the convention "is an assembly of demigods."

We should remember, however, that some of the Framers were men of modest abilities or questionable motives. Probably the most balanced view of the men at Philadelphia has been given by Max Farrand, a historian, who wrote: "Great men there were, it is true, but the convention as a whole was composed of men such as would be appointed to a similar gathering at the present time: professional men, business men, and gentlemen of leisure; patriotic statesmen and clever, scheming politicians; some trained by experience and study for the task before them; and others utterly unfit. It was essentially a representative body."

Most of the Framers' stories are worth telling in detail, but here we are limited to introducing you to those who were the most important. We also will mention some leaders who did not attend the convention but who played a part in the establishment of our constitutional government.

George Washington. George Washington was probably the most respected and honored man in the country. During the Revolutionary War, he had left Mount Vernon, his Virginia plantation, to lead the American army to victory over the British. When the war was over, Washington returned to private life. Although convinced of the necessity for a strong national government, he was not interested in holding public office.



Independence Hall where both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were signed.

At first Washington refused the invitation to attend the convention. He later agreed to be a delegate from Virginia, fearing that if he did not attend, people might think he had lost his faith in republican government. Washington was unanimously elected president of the convention, though he was not active in the debates. His presence and support of the Constitution, together with the widespread assumption that he would be the nation's first president, were essential to the Constitution's **ratification** by the states.

James Madison. Of all the Framers, James Madison probably had the greatest influence on the organization of the national government. Born in 1751, Madison was one of the youngest of the revolutionary leaders, but by 1787 his talents had long been recognized and admired. In 1776, at the age of 25, Madison had been elected to the Virginia convention, where he was named to a committee to frame the state constitution. There, he first displayed his lifelong commitment to freedom of religion. Madison was instrumental in persuading **George Mason**, author of the Virginia Bill of Rights, to change the clause that guaranteed "toleration" of religion to one that secured its "free exercise."

As a leader in Virginia politics and a member of the Confederation Congress, Madison was active in the 1780s in support of a stronger national government. His influence at the convention was great, in part because he brought with him a plan he had already developed for creating a new national government—the **Virginia Plan**. After much debate over alternatives, this plan was used as the basis for discussion on improving the government.

Had it not been for Madison, we probably would not know much about what happened during the convention. The Framers had decided to keep the discussions a secret, although delegates were free to take notes. Madison

attended nearly every session and kept careful notes. Much of what we know today about what happened in the convention is based on his records.

After the convention, Madison collaborated with **Alexander Hamilton** and **John Jay** to write a defense of the new Constitution. This defense was a series of 85 articles written for newspapers in New York. In 1788, the articles were collected in a book called *The Federalist*. The articles urged citizens of New York to vote for delegates to the state ratifying convention who were favorable to the Constitution. *The Federalist* is probably the most important work written on the basic principles and ideas underlying our constitutional government.

What other important delegates attended?

In addition to Washington and Madison, the delegates included many other prominent men. **Benjamin Franklin** was 81 and in poor health, but because he was internationally respected, his mere presence lent an aura of wisdom to the convention. **Alexander Hamilton**, although one of the strongest supporters of a strong national government, was outvoted within his own state delegation and left in frustration before the convention was half over. He returned for a few days and he signed the completed document in September. Hamilton played a major role in the struggle over ratification, as a principal author of *The Federalist* and as the leader of pro-Constitution forces in New York. **James Wilson**, although not as well known as Madison or Hamilton, was also a major influence in shaping the theory of the Constitution. Later, Wilson would lead the Federalist forces in Pennsylvania, and in 1789 President Washington appointed him a justice of the Supreme Court.



George Washington
(1732–1799)



James Madison
(1751–1836)



James Wilson
(1742–1798)



Elbridge Gerry
(1744–1814)



Roger Sherman
(1721–1793)



Edmund Randolph
(1753–1813)

Besides Madison and Wilson, the delegate who spoke most frequently at the convention was **Gouverneur Morris** of Pennsylvania. **Edmund Randolph**, who as Governor of Virginia was officially the head of the Virginia delegation, introduced the Virginia Plan into the convention. Randolph, however, refused to sign the completed document. **Roger Sherman** of Connecticut was instrumental in forging the “Connecticut Compromise” on representation in Congress. **George Mason**, author of the Virginia Bill of Rights, believed that the national constitution also should contain explicit guarantees of fundamental rights. Like Randolph, he did not sign the Constitution. **Elbridge Gerry**, who also refused to sign the Constitution, later led the forces against ratification in Massachusetts. Later still, he served as vice president under President James Madison.

What important Founders did not attend the convention?

There also were some important political leaders who did not attend the Constitutional Convention.

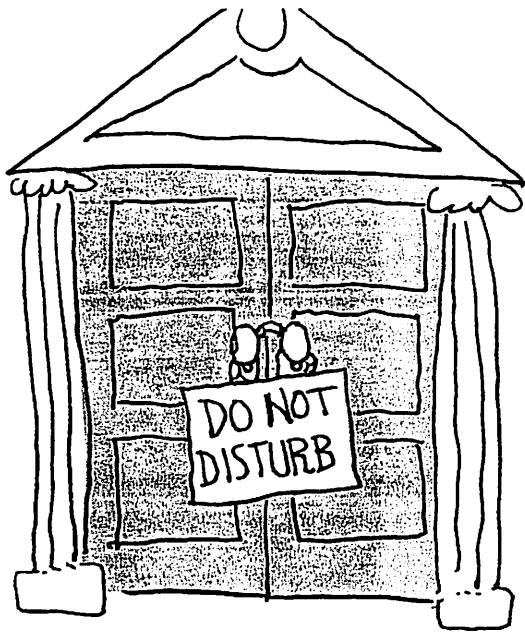
Thomas Jefferson was in Paris as U.S. ambassador to France. **John Adams**, who was serving as U.S. ambassador to Great Britain, was recognized as a leading American political thinker. Adams had been a principal architect of the Massachusetts constitution of 1780. The first volume of his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* had also appeared in early 1787.

Patrick Henry, the revolutionary leader, refused to attend the convention. He was against the development of a strong national government and was suspicious of what might happen at the convention. He supposedly said later that he had “smelt a rat.”

Other leaders not present at Philadelphia included **John Hancock**, **Samuel Adams**, and **Richard Henry Lee**. Besides these prominent individuals, one state—Rhode Island—refused to be represented at the convention.

What do you think?

1. In what ways were the Framers representative of the American people in 1787? In what ways were they not?
 - a. What criteria would you use to select a group of people to draft a constitution today?
 - b. Explain any advantages and disadvantages that might result from using your criteria to select people to write a constitution compared with the group of Framers who actually wrote our Constitution.
 - c. Are there any groups whose interests you feel do not need to be represented? Why or why not?
2. Would you agree with Thomas Jefferson’s characterization of the Philadelphia Convention as an “assembly of demigods”? Explain your answer.



Why did the delegates to the Constitutional Convention decide to keep their deliberations secret?

What happened when the convention began?

By Friday, May 25, 1787, eleven days after the convention was scheduled to begin, delegations from a majority of the states were present in Philadelphia. George Washington was unanimously elected president of the convention, and a committee was appointed to draw up the rules for the meeting.

Once the rules were agreed on, the convention got to work. Almost immediately, the Framers decided to ignore their instructions from Congress to limit their work to amending the Articles of Confederation. Instead, they voted to work on the development of an entirely new constitution.

The Framers decided that what was said in the convention should be kept secret. There were two reasons for this.

- The Framers wanted to develop the best constitution they could. This required a free exchange of ideas. They were afraid that if their debates were made public, many of the delegates would not feel free to express their real opinions.

- The Framers thought the new constitution would have a greater chance of being accepted if people did not know about the arguments that went on while it was being created.

The Framers agreed that each state would have one vote at the convention, even though their delegations varied in size. They also agreed that a member could not be absent from the convention without permission if it would deprive a state of its vote. In addition, they adopted a rule making it possible to reconsider issues freely. This way no decision had to be made permanent until the entire plan was completed.

What do you think?

1. Were the members of the convention right to ignore their original instructions? Why?
2. Should the debates at the Constitutional Convention have been open to the public? Why?

Reviewing and Using the Lesson

1. Why did Congress call for a constitutional convention? What did Congress authorize the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention to do?
2. How would you describe the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention? What prominent political leaders attended?
3. Why did the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention decide to conduct their deliberations in secret?
4. In recent years there have been calls for a constitutional convention. If such a convention were to be held today, what should be the make-up of its members? List the characteristics desirable in members attending a contemporary constitutional convention.