

Note: the following is the entire text content from the interactive historic scene.

MAKING A NATION: THE PHILADELPHIA CONVENTION

The violence and unrest in Massachusetts loomed large in the minds of the delegates crafting a new United States constitution at Philadelphia in the spring and summer of 1787. Could they create a free government of the people powerful enough to keep the United States from collapsing into anarchy?

Pennsylvania Statehouse, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, May, 1787

Overview

A Grand Convention

During the Revolution, the states had formed a deliberately weak [Confederation](#). Their colonial experience with the British government had made all 13 [republics](#) innately suspicious of strong central authority. Turmoil on the state level in the 1780s, especially Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts, forced Americans to rethink earlier assumptions about the nature and purposes of their national government. In May, 1787, men representing every state except Rhode Island began arriving in Philadelphia to attend a "grand convention." The 55 delegates included many of the most prominent men in the United States. For the next three and one-half months, they endured oppressive heat in closed-door (and window) sessions at the Pennsylvania State House, the same building in which the [Continental Congress](#) had voted for American independence almost 11 years earlier.

Fatal Flaws

Edmund Randolph of Virginia set the tone in the opening speech of the convention. According to fellow delegate [James Madison's](#) notes, Randolph lamented that "the foederal government could not check the quarrels between states, nor a rebellion in any." [Rufus King](#) and Nathaniel Gorham of Massachusetts agreed. Both men had served in the [Confederation Congress](#). That experience, combined with disorder and bloodshed in their home state, made them strong proponents of a stronger national government with corresponding limits on state authority. Many delegates agreed with Madison that the [Articles of Confederation](#) had proven to be fatally flawed, lacking "the great vital principles of a Political Cons[ti]tution." Instead of amending and revising the Articles, the convention decided to create a much stronger federal plan.

A More Perfect Union

The Constitution's framers hoped the proposed system would address instability at the state level through clauses limiting the autonomy and authority of the state governments. "[We the People](#)," not the state governments, were to "form a more perfect union," but the United States Congress acquired the power to suspend habeas corpus "in cases of rebellion." Most delegates believed the advantages of the new design outweighed any disadvantages. A few, however, remained unconvinced that the dangers of insurrections like Shays' Rebellion or the activities of the state legislatures, justified creating a central government whose authority diminished the rights of the states. [Elbridge Gerry](#) of Massachusetts questioned whether the proposed constitution adequately protected the liberties of the people. George Mason of Virginia agreed, insisting that the people be adequately represented and individual rights be protected. Their concerns foreshadowed the ratification debates to come.

Federalist

A Warning

Shays' Rebellion had sent a clear warning: the United States were in danger of collapse. The chaotic, shoestring finances of the war years, and its inability to regulate trade or raise revenue, or even convene a [quorum](#), crippled Congress. Massachusetts representative [Rufus King](#) alternated between anguish and exasperation when he declared in April, 1787 that "It is a mere farce to remain here...Foreigners know our situation and the friends of free Governments through the world must regret it." Simply revising the ineffectual [Articles of Confederation](#) was not enough. Only a new system could save the [republics](#).

George Washington Attends

Twelve states sent delegates to Philadelphia in the wake of the Massachusetts [insurrection](#), a welcome contrast to the previous September when a mere handful of representatives attended a similar meeting at Annapolis, Maryland. Alarming reports from former army officers like General [Benjamin Lincoln](#) had convinced [George Washington](#) that the Massachusetts insurgents "[by force, sap the foundations of our constitution](#)." The situation was so grave that the former commander in chief agreed not only to attend, but to chair the Convention. Washington embodied the American ideals of heroic virtue. His presence lent vital credibility to the Convention proceedings. Under Washington's leadership, the delegates voted to keep all proceedings secret in order to encourage absolute candor and open discussion.

To Ensure Domestic Tranquility

Only a strong federal government would control the fickle, legislative tyrannies dominating the state legislatures and quell internal convulsions like Shays' Rebellion. Although abroad and unable to attend, John Adams and [Thomas Jefferson](#) both approved of the goals and the work of the convention. Perhaps most telling, three of the four Massachusetts delegates enthusiastically endorsed the new plan. They knew firsthand the horrors of insurrection, made worse by the powerlessness of the United States to offer any assistance. And, although the fourth delegate, [Elbridge Gerry](#), disagreed with the convention's decision to forego a bill of rights, he declared that he "had been taught by experience the danger of the levelling spirit" of the people and that "the evils we experience flow from the excess of democracy." Surely the people and the legislatures of the states would understand that this more perfect federal union would safeguard the liberties of the people and ensure domestic tranquility.

Antifederalist

Unauthorized Agenda

Their mission was clear: the [Confederation Congress](#) had called on the states for representatives to meet in May "for the sole and express purpose of revising the [Articles of Confederation](#)." Some delegates, however, arrived in Philadelphia already determined to overstep those instructions. Once there, they devoted their considerable energy to convincing others to abandon their original directive. As a result, the Convention voted not to amend, but to abandon the [Confederation](#) and its constitution.

Loss of Sovereignty

The Continental Congress had created an intentionally weak [confederation](#) to protect and ensure the [sovereignty](#) of the 13 [republics](#). If [James Madison](#) and [Alexander Hamilton](#) had their way, the states would become mere satellites of an alarmingly powerful national government. A crucial [compromise](#) hammered out during the long, hot summer days kept small and large states on an equal representative footing in a Senate, but the rest of the plan stripped all the republics of their sovereign powers. States would no longer be able to negotiate treaties or trade agreements. They were forbidden to print or even to coin their own money. Fortunately, the delegates roundly rejected Madison's insistence that the national government exercise an absolute veto power over any and all state legislation!

The Rights of the People

George Mason of Virginia feared the increase in executive, judiciary and Senate authority at the expense of the directly-elected House of Representatives. Both Mason and [Elbridge Gerry](#) of Massachusetts deplored the absence of a bill of rights to protect essential liberties. It remained to be seen whether or not the recent troubles and bloodshed would encourage Massachusetts citizens to accept the new [federal](#) plan. The hard-line policies of Governor [Bowdoin](#)'s administration in putting down the [Regulation](#) had only heightened animosity and suspicion of strong central authority. Massachusetts voters already had replaced Bowdoin with the popular and more lenient [John Hancock](#). It would fall upon delegates at ratifying conventions throughout the states [to decide](#) whether the proposed [Federal Constitution](#) protected or threatened the rights of the states and their citizens.

Rollovers

Text for rollovers in the interactive scene illustrations.

Desperate Times

James Madison of Virginia hopes a more powerful national constitution will save the republican experiment in government. His detailed notes of the often-intense convention debates will not be published until after his death. [Click for more information.](#)

Out of Retirement

The bad news from Massachusetts has helped convince George Washington, the most revered and celebrated hero of the Revolution, to come out of retirement and chair the convention. [Click for more information.](#)

Preserving States' Rights

George Mason of Virginia believes any plan of government must "attend to the rights of every class of the people" and worries that excessive federal power will jeopardize state powers and liberties.

A Federal Remedy

Alexander Hamilton is convinced that only a much stronger federal government can control the democratic impulses and selfish interests of the individual states and their citizens. [Click for more information.](#)

Ready for a Change

A former president of Congress under the Articles of Confederation, Nathaniel Gorham of Massachusetts has had enough of weak national government.

Voice of Experience

Declaring that the people of his state are "daily misled into the most baneful measures," Elbridge Gerry is eager to revise the Articles of Confederation. [Click for more information.](#)

MA Perspective

Fresh from the unrest in Massachusetts, Caleb Strong of Northampton supports a stronger central government able to offer assistance to states in turmoil.

Disillusioned

As a congressional representative, Rufus King of Massachusetts has experienced first-hand the shortcomings of the Confederation government. He is eager to replace the Articles of Confederation with a stronger, more functional constitution. [Click for more information.](#)

President of PA

Pennsylvania president Benjamin Franklin has congratulated the governor of Massachusetts on "the wise and

vigorous measures taken for the suppression of that dangerous insurrection." [Click for more information.](#)

Catching a Glimpse

Philadelphians pause to observe the delegates as they arrive for another long day of deliberations. Of all the states, only Rhode Island has declined to send any representatives.

An Unusual Task

This workman nails the windows shut to prevent even idle passers-by from overhearing the debates and discussions among the delegates.

Curious Observers

Barred from following the proceedings, it will be fall before these curious bystanders can read and assess the constitution the delegates are creating.

"Heated" Deliberations

Despite the oppressive summer heat, the windows will remain closed throughout the entire convention to keep the proceedings a secret.

PA State House

The Pennsylvania State House witnessed the birth of the nation in 1776; now it hosts a Convention to try and preserve it.

Popular Headwear

The tricorne remains among the most popular of men's hat styles, both military and civilian. [Click for more information.](#)

Shoe Buckles

Eighteenth-century fashion dictates that well-dressed men and women fasten their shoes with silver shoe buckles.

Gentleman's Cane

Knowing how to carry a cane in a gentleman-like manner demonstrates poise and gentility.

Short Gown

The short gown and petticoat this woman wears is common everyday clothing and is particularly popular in this region.





An All-Purpose Container






Baskets are useful, durable and infinitely versatile containers; this one contains the morning's purchases.

Daily Dress

Despite the heat, the delegates conform to the dictates of fashion, wearing the wool coats and breeches considered appropriate formal attire.

Related to this scene

-  [Articles of Confederation](#)
-  [Bickerstaff Almanack on the Consitution](#)
-  [US Constitution](#)
-  [The Looking Glass for 1787](#)

-  [Southern Papers](#)
 -  [Delegates to Massachusetts Ratifying Convention](#)
 -  [Delegates to Philadelphia Convention](#)
 -  [Extract on George Washington's Farm](#)
 -  [Massachusetts Ratifies the Constitution](#)
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Observers

Thomas Jefferson to James Madison December 20, 1787

"I own I am not a friend to a very energetic government. It is always oppressive. The late rebellion in Massachusetts has given more alarm than I think it should have done. Calculate that one rebellion in 13 states in the course of 11 years, is but one for each state in a century and a half. No country should be so long without one. Nor will any degree of power in the hands of government prevent insurrections."

[Click for more information.](#)

Richard Price January 26, 1787

"It is a pity that some general controuling power cannot be established, of sufficient vigour to decide disputes, to regulate commerce, to prevent wars, and to constitute an union that shall have weight and credit."

an anonymous Pennsylvania correspondent, Hampshire Gazette January 17, 1787

"A convention...will undoubtedly be able to remove the defects of the confederation, produce a vigorous and energetic continental government, which will crush and destroy faction, subdue insurrections, revive public and private credit, disappoint our transatlantic enemies and their lurking Emissaries among us, and finally (to use an Indian Phrase) endure 'while the sun shines, and the rivers flow.'"

Samuel Adams to Richard Henry Lee December 3, 1787

"I confess, as I enter the Building I stumble at the Threshold. I meet with a National Government, instead of a Federal Union of Sovereign States. I am not able to conceive why the Wisdom of the Convention led them to give the Preference to the former before the latter. If the several States in the Union are to become one entire Nation, under one Legislature, the Powers of which shall extend to every Subject of Legislation, and its Laws be supreme & controul the whole, the Idea of Sovereignty in these States must be lost."

[Click for more information.](#)

Themes

Getting By and Getting Ahead

More lenient state fiscal policies following the collapse of the Regulator movement eased the financial burdens of Massachusetts citizens.

[Click for more information.](#)

We the People

Massachusetts citizens flocked to the polls to reject the hard-line policies of Governor James Bowdoin and his supporters.

[Click for more information.](#)

The Wider World

Events in Massachusetts over the preceding fall and winter had heightened interest in the work of the Philadelphia Convention, both at home and abroad.

[Click for more information.](#)

Everyday Life

In the aftermath of the Regulation, Massachusetts communities turned their attention to re-forming and repairing community ties.

[Click for more information.](#)

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