



PRINCE HALL Although early biographical details of Prince Hall are hard to authenticate, he most likely was a former slave who served in the Massachusetts militia during the Revolutionary War. After the war, he became one of the most prominent free black men in Boston, where he worked to end slavery in Massachusetts and to better the lives of African Americans. He is depicted here in his role as the founder of the first black Masonic lodge in the United States, African Lodge No. 1 in Boston, an organization that also worked for black emancipation and betterment.

STUDY QUESTIONS FOR RESTRUCTURING POLITICAL AND SOCIAL AUTHORITY

1. In what ways did the Revolutionary War change the social roles of some women and African Americans?
2. Why was the economy in the post-Revolutionary United States so unstable?

■ A FEDERAL NATION

Many average Americans had fought for liberty in the Revolutionary War, but they were suffering in the postwar economic chaos. State and national governments faced troubles, but few people agreed on solutions: some favored a stronger central government, and others looked to the states for solutions. How could these two visions of government be satisfied by elite politicians who also wanted to control the democratic unrest

that seemed to be bubbling up in the states? The creation of the U.S. Constitution was a victory for more centralized power, but the concept of **federalism** also insured that the states would remain powerful. A new politics arose based on the concept of **popular sovereignty**, the notion that the people could consent to granting power to both state and federal governments without giving up their rights as the true source of authority in American society.

Debt and Discontent

The uncertain economic system in the United States following the Revolutionary War caused hardship and unrest. While governmental leaders worried that the Articles of Confederation provided too little national tax power, poor men and women felt simultaneously squeezed by heavy state taxation—poll taxes, land taxes, and taxes on certain occupations such as tavern keeping. The poor faced a variety of other economic challenges, starting with inflated prices. Both taxes and private debt payment often required hard currency, but many poor people had little access to anything other than devalued paper money or the direct trade of farm goods. Although excess paper money hurt them by causing inflation, the poor relied on it.

By 1785, as the number of people imprisoned for the inability to repay debts rose above 1,000 in each state, debtors from New Hampshire to Massachusetts to Virginia began to organize themselves to oppose state and county enforcement of debts. Taking lessons from the pre-Revolutionary political protest movements, debtors petitioned state legislatures for the redress of their grievances and to demand the reinstatement of paper currency. Debtors, many of whom lived in western counties that were underrepresented in state legislatures, were angry that their hard currency payments often went to land speculators who held state war bonds.

Some groups took stronger action and resorted to armed protests to close down county courts. One Connecticut lawyer worried about “contentions and civil discord in almost every state in the union.” Armed individuals and groups tangled with sheriffs seeking to seize property from debtors in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Massachusetts. The largest insurrection came when Revolutionary veteran Daniel Shays organized protestors in Western Massachusetts at the end of 1786 into an armed resistance movement. Denied the right to assemble to protest creditors and tax collectors, the Shays threatened violence. In December 1786, the Shaysites shut down courts in Springfield, Massachusetts, and a month later they marched against the state arsenal in that city. Massachusetts governor Benjamin Lincoln called out the state militia to put down **Shays’ Rebellion**, and Daniel Shays himself fled to Canada.

Lincoln also appealed to Congress for help in suppressing Shays’ Rebellion. Although the rebellion ended before Congress responded, a number of national leaders seized the opportunity to call for enhancing the power of the national government. George Washington agreed with his friend John Jay in 1786 that “our affairs are drawing rapidly to a crisis.” Elites and politicians worried that popular uprisings like Shays’ Rebellion could spread or get out of control. A small meeting in Annapolis, Maryland, in September 1786 solidified conversations among nationalists like James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, who thought the time had come to change the Articles of Confederation. The Annapolis Convention issued a call for all the states to send delegates to a new convention in Philadelphia the following summer.

Constitutional Convention

Instead of merely changing the Articles of Confederation, the Philadelphia convention proposed an entirely new U.S. Constitution. It was, perhaps, not surprising that delegates to the Constitutional Convention moved beyond amending the Articles of Confederation because they largely came from the elite, creditor class of merchants, lawyers, and plantation owners who believed that the weakness of the national government and the popular unrest threatened social order. They also rose above those interests to create a political document that has become the longest-lasting written constitution for any government in the world. Every state but Rhode Island sent delegates to meet in Philadelphia in May 1787. Some of the most prominent leaders of the Revolution—George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and John Dickinson—came together to shape a new national government for the United States.

The convention elected George Washington presiding officer and agreed to meet in secret. Although the delegates tried hard to keep news of their deliberations from leaking out, we know much about what took place because of their written communications and the careful notes James Madison kept of their oral debates.

All of the proposals that the delegates debated fit within the conception of republicanism—the new national government would surely confirm the United States as a representative republic. They clashed over how to balance regional and economic interests within that representation, and though the delegates generally agreed that they needed to restrain volatile popular democracy, they did not agree on how to do that. In the first several days of debate, Edmund Randolph introduced James Madison's Virginia Plan, which proposed a two-house national legislature chosen according to proportional representation (based on population), a judicial branch, and a president elected by the legislature. Madison strongly advocated for the Enlightenment idea of **balance of powers** that would put authority in different branches of government, providing checks and balances against one another. Many states with small populations disliked Madison's plan, but it proved a useful starting point for debate—especially about the nature of Congress. William Paterson, a New Jersey delegate, proposed a rival New Jersey Plan that would keep more of the state power in the Articles of Confederation by retaining a unicameral legislature with equal state representation but which would have greater financial power. On July 16, the delegates adopted what became known as "The Great Compromise" between the Virginia and New Jersey plans and decided to form a bicameral legislature: A House of Representatives with proportional representation, and a Senate with equal state representation. Creating this form for Congress allowed the Convention to balance the interests of small and large states.

After the legislature was settled, other compromises followed. The delegates created the electoral college as a way to give power to the states and to restrain popular democracy. They also designated that the House of Representatives would stay quite small (as compared to the total population) in an effort to further insulate it from popular passions. Delegates to the convention largely tried to avoid the thorny issue of slavery, but they could not sidestep the institution altogether. After difficult debate, the delegates decided that three-fifths of slaves, or "other persons" as the final document phrased it, would be counted in the population for representation, although the convention never discussed direct citizenship rights or political status for the slaves themselves. The three-fifths compromise ensured that Southern states, where most enslaved

people lived, would exercise strong political influence in the first decades of the republic. Delegates also agreed to restrict Congress from outlawing the international slave trade until 1808. Many of the political structures and compromises at the convention—including the electoral college—attempted to deal with the fact that some states had large slave populations whereas others had outlawed the institution altogether, but the delegates largely managed to avoid openly discussing the ties between their politics and slavery.

Near the end of the convention, Virginian George Mason proposed the inclusion of a bill of rights, a written guarantee of civil liberties, within the Constitution. Many delegates, despite their desire for a more powerful central government, still feared too much national power infringing the rights of individuals. Several state constitutions contained such guarantees, but most delegates did not think they were necessary. Even though they created a national government that was much more powerful—with the ability to tax and carry on foreign affairs—advocates believed that such power would only protect liberty, not threaten it. Several delegates, such as Marylander **Luther Martin**, were so upset by the exclusion of a bill of rights that they disavowed the work of the convention and opposed the Constitution. Three delegates refused to sign the final document. The Philadelphia Convention closed on September 17, 1787, and it remained to be seen whether such opposition would prevent the Constitution from being ratified.

Ratification

The new U.S. Constitution was ratified by specially elected conventions, not by the state legislatures, a majority of which would probably have rejected it. The Constitution was set to go into effect when nine of the 13 states ratified it. The Constitution's supporters, who dubbed themselves "Federalists," faced off against a very loose coalition of opponents, subsequently dubbed "Antifederalists." Federalist leaders, including Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, James Madison, and **John Marshall**, had impressive financing,

MERCY OTIS WARREN Warren was a sharp thinker and prominent resident of Boston who supported the revolutionary cause by publishing, anonymously, poetry and plays during the war. After the war, she opposed the U.S. Constitution on the grounds that it created too much centralized government power. She continued to broadcast her Antifederalist opinions in her 1805, three-volume, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*.



coordination, and access to newspaper and pamphlet publishers. They also counted among their ranks the most famous national and international Revolutionaries: George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. The Federalists won converts in commercial cities and seaports and from creditors who favored strong government power. The Antifederalists—including Samuel Adams, Elbridge Gerry, Patrick Henry, George Mason, Richard Henry Lee, George Clinton, and Mercy Otis Warren—were much less organized and much more wary of centralized power. Some Antifederalists objected to the lack of rights protection in the Constitution; others favored weak national power or direct democracy and agreed with Connecticut Antifederalist James Lincoln who warned that if the Constitution were ratified, “you are at once rushing into an aristocratic government.”

Federalists displayed political skill as they easily won ratification in Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey by the end of 1787. Georgia and Connecticut each ratified the document in January 1788. In February, Massachusetts ratified the Constitution by a narrower margin but only after proposing amendments and making Federalists promise to add a bill of rights later.

As the ratifying conventions continued, the newspaper and pamphlet war between the Federalists and Antifederalists intensified. Madison, Hamilton, and Jay anonymously published the “Federalist” essays, sometimes called the “**Federalist Papers**,” which offered wide-ranging arguments in favor of ratification. Their words, republished in books, pamphlets, and newspapers, helped to shape ratification politics and became some of the most enduring political commentaries in American history. Madison, Hamilton, and Jay applied Enlightenment political theories to the U.S. context and argued that the constitution was necessary. Madison, in particular, also took a new era of politics into account when he argued in Essays 10 and 51 that the Constitution could balance the behavior of self-interested Americans, who were not necessarily always guided by republican virtue.

By narrow margins, Maryland and South Carolina ratified the Constitution in the spring of 1788. When New Hampshire ratified it on June 21, 1788, the Constitution technically went into effect because nine states had completed the process. But it was unlikely that the new government would succeed without the support of the large and influential states of New York and Virginia. On June 23, Virginia gave its assent, delivering along with ratification 20 proposed amendments and support for a future bill of rights. On June 26, New York followed suit. North Carolina rejected ratification in August, only subsequently voting for ratification in November when it was clear the document would go into effect. Rhode Island, ever the dissenter, held out its ratification until May 1790 (Table 7.1).

At the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention in September 1787, Benjamin Franklin, less than a year away from his own death, rose to urge his fellow delegates to sign the new Constitution. He claimed that the document would “astonish our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear . . . that our states are on the point of separation.” Franklin declared, “I consent, Sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better and because I am not sure that it is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors, I sacrifice to the public good.” That very notion of republican sacrifice for “the common good” had motivated many of those who fought in the Revolution. Conflicts during the war and developments in postwar society had proven that more struggle was necessary to find out whose version of “the public good” would reign in American government. And, as Franklin reminded the other convention delegates, much of the world would be watching to see if the United States of America could succeed.