

THE BIRTH OF THE CONSTITUTION

The Constitutional Convention

The Constitutional Convention opened in Philadelphia in May, 1787, and finished its work in September. The delegates to the convention were not elected by the people, but instead were selected by their state legislatures.

The delegates to the convention were men of great ability. Many had fought in the Revolutionary War, many were educated, and many were wealthy. They were men of great power and influence in their own states. Eventually, two would become presidents of the United States, one a vice president, and 26 would serve in Congress. All in all, there were 65 official delegates, but only 55 made it to Philadelphia. The average attendance at each day's meeting was about 30.

George Washington, a delegate from Virginia, was chosen to be the president of the convention. At first, the purpose of the convention was to revise the Articles of Confederation, but very quickly the delegates decided to replace the Articles with a new plan for government.

Two important leaders were absent from the convention. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who were influential in the writing of the Declaration of Independence, were in Europe serving as ambassadors to other nations. Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania was the oldest delegate at 81 years old, and Jonathan Dayton of New Jersey was the youngest at 26. Other delegates present were Alexander Hamilton and James Madison. There was one state that refused to send delegates to the Constitutional Convention; Rhode Island did not send any representatives to Philadelphia.

During those five hot summer months in 1787, the 55 delegates struggled to create a more flexible form of government for the new United States. The most serious task that faced the delegates was how to achieve a balance between liberty and authority. There were many different viewpoints and opinions on how to go about that task. The concept of compromise unified the differences into a supreme document capable of representing the opinions of all Americans.

The Constitution that resulted from this historic convention is now over 200 years old. Few written constitutions have lasted as long as the Constitution of the United States.



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