



James Madison

To many Americans, Shays' Rebellion was yet another sign that the nation could not hold together. A worried Madison wrote to a friend that:

"No money is paid to the public treasury; no respect is paid to the federal authority [Congress]. . . . It is not possible that a government can last long under these circumstances."



The Call for a Convention

In September 1786, a few months before Shays' Rebellion, delegates from five states had met in Annapolis, Maryland, in order to discuss trade problems. Madison was one of the leaders at this meeting. The Annapolis Convention ended with a call for a meeting of delegates from all 13 states in Philadelphia in May 1787 to consider "the situation of the United States."

The shock of Shays' Rebellion spurred every state but Rhode Island to agree to send delegates. Congress suspected that the delegates might seek to scrap the current plan of government. Therefore, it declared that the meeting should be "for the sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation."

Dumping the Articles of Confederation, however, was exactly what Madison had in mind. A year earlier he had written Thomas Jefferson, then the American ambassador to France, asking Jefferson to send him any books that "may throw light on . . . confederacies which have existed." The books arrived by the hundreds.

Madison threw himself into the study of governments, both ancient and modern.

The Constitutional Convention

Philadelphia was already hot and humid when delegates to the convention began drifting into the city. None of them knew it yet, but they would be there all summer.

A Profile of the Delegates

All of the 55 delegates were white males, and almost all were well-educated and wealthy. About a third owned slaves. There were half a dozen planters and almost three dozen lawyers. The convention delegates were the nation's ablest political leaders. Many had been leading Patriots and had helped draw up state constitutions. Thomas Jefferson, who was still in France, called them "an assembly of demi-gods."

James Madison was the best-prepared of the delegates. Despite his weak voice, he would address the convention more than 200 times in the weeks ahead. His influence was so great that later he would be called the Father of the Constitution.

When not speaking, Madison took notes. Sitting near the front of the room so that he would miss nothing, he wrote down almost every word in his own shorthand. At night he rewrote his notes in longhand. Today Madison's notes cover more than 600 printed pages. From this record we know what went on at the convention day by day.

Getting Started

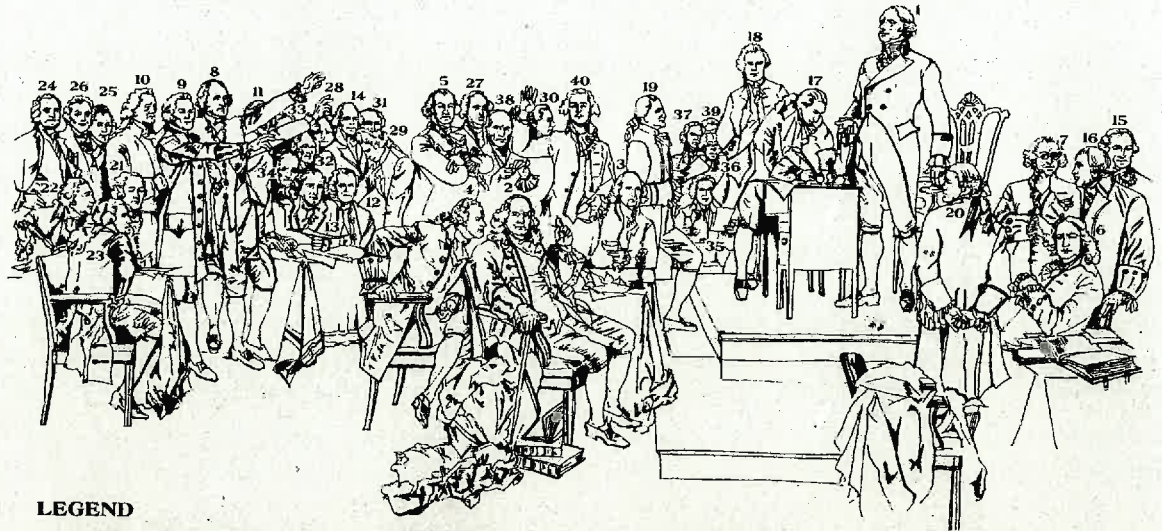
On May 25 the convention began. For the next four months the east room of the Pennsylvania State House would be the center of the delegates' lives. When they arrived each morning, the east room was cool and inviting. By noon it was an oven. Despite the hot weather, the windows had to be locked for secrecy and for protection from insects.

The delegates' first action was to elect George Washington president of the convention. No man was more admired or respected. Washington's presence would keep the convention from flying apart in its worst moments.

Next the delegates agreed on a set of rules. Each could speak twice on a subject, and no one was to whisper, pass notes, or read while others spoke. Each state had one vote, and decisions would be by majority vote of the states present.

The most important rule was secrecy. No one was to say anything to anyone about what went on in their discussions. The delegates wanted to feel free to state their opinions and even change their minds later on. The rule of secrecy was taken very seriously. During that long summer, not a single word about the convention debates appeared in any newspaper.

Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States



LEGEND

- | | | | |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. George Washington
Virginia | 11. Pierce Butler
South Carolina | 21. Rufus King
Massachusetts | 31. Thomas Mifflin
Pennsylvania |
| 2. Benjamin Franklin
Pennsylvania | 12. Roger Sherman
Connecticut | 22. Nathaniel Gorham
Massachusetts | 32. George Clymer
Pennsylvania |
| 3. James Madison, Jr.
Virginia | 13. William Samuel Johnson
Connecticut | 23. Jonathan Dayton
New Jersey | 33. Thomas FitzSimons
Pennsylvania |
| 4. Alexander Hamilton
New York | 14. James McHenry
Maryland | 24. Daniel Carroll
Maryland | 34. Jared Ingersoll
Pennsylvania |
| 5. Gouverneur Morris
Pennsylvania | 15. George Read
Delaware | 25. William Few
Georgia | 35. Gunning Bedford, Jr.
Delaware |
| 6. Robert Morris
Pennsylvania | 16. Richard Bassett
Delaware | 26. Abraham Baldwin
Georgia | 36. David Brearley
New Jersey |
| 7. James Wilson
Pennsylvania | 17. Richard Dobbs Spaight
North Carolina | 27. John Langdon
New Hampshire | 37. John Dickinson
Delaware |
| 8. Charles Cotesworth Pinckney
South Carolina | 18. William Blount
North Carolina | 28. Nicholas Gilman
New Hampshire | 38. John Blair
Virginia |
| 9. Charles Pinckney
South Carolina | 19. Hugh Williamson
North Carolina | 29. William Livingston
New Jersey | 39. Jacob Broom
Delaware |
| 10. John Rutledge
South Carolina | 20. Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer
Maryland | 30. William Paterson
New Jersey | 40. William Jackson
(Secretary) |

Scene at the Signing of the Constitution of the United States. Painting by Howard Chandler Christy. United States Capitol, Washington, D.C.

