

Who attended the Philadelphia Convention and how was it organized?

Purpose of Lesson

This lesson will help you understand the reasons for the convention that was held in Philadelphia in the spring of 1787. It will also describe some of the famous Americans who attended the convention and some who did not. Finally, you will learn some of the first decisions made by the Framers.

When you complete this lesson, you should be able to explain why the Philadelphia Convention was held. You should also understand how the Framers organized the convention. Finally, you should be able to describe the contributions of some important Americans who participated in the convention.

Terms to know

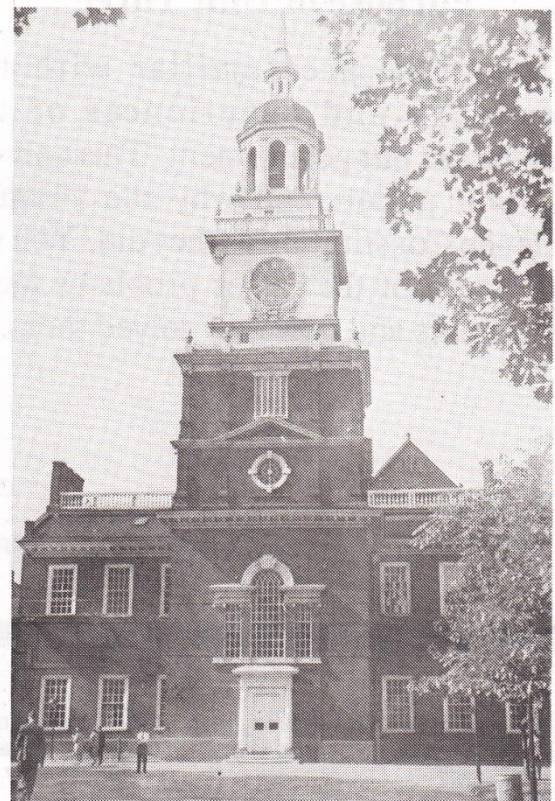
Philadelphia Convention
delegate
compromise

Congress starts the process

Imagine that Congress has called for a convention. Each state is invited to send representatives, or **delegates**, to the convention. Congress gives the delegates the responsibility to recommend ways to improve the present government. Who would attend the convention? Where would it be held? What rules would be followed at the

convention? Would the public be kept informed of what was happening at the convention?

These were the questions facing the United States in 1787. Congress called for a convention to be held in Philadelphia. Congress told the delegates from the states to develop a plan to improve the Articles of Confederation. The plan was then to be sent to Congress for its approval. As far as Congress was concerned, the men who met in Philadelphia were just advisers to Congress. But something very different was about to happen.



What did Congress tell the delegates in Philadelphia to do? What actually happened?



Write a descriptive slogan for Washington's and Madison's T-shirts.

Fifty-five men: delegates to the Philadelphia Convention

Fifty-five delegates attended the meeting held in Philadelphia. All of them were men. Most were fairly young. Their average age was forty-two. Most had played important roles in the American Revolution. About three-fourths of the Framers had served in Congress. Most were leaders in their states. Some were rich; most were not, but nobody was poor.

Three very important delegates to the convention were George Washington, James Madison, and Benjamin Franklin. Washington was probably the most respected and honored man in the country. He was convinced that a stronger national government was necessary, but he did not talk about it in public. He did not want to become involved in politics. At first, Washington refused to attend the convention. He finally agreed. He was afraid that if he did not, people might think he had lost his faith in republican government.

James Madison is often called the "Father of the Constitution." His influence was great. This was partly because he brought a plan for a stronger national government—called the Virginia Plan—to the convention with him. This plan was used as the basis for discussing how to improve the government. Much of what we know about what happened at the convention is based on Madison's notes.

Benjamin Franklin was 81 and in poor health. He attended the convention as a delegate from Pennsylvania. He was one of the most respected men in America. Franklin had a long and distinguished career as printer, inventor, writer, revolutionary, peacemaker, and diplomat. At the convention, his primary role was encouraging the delegates to cooperate with each other when they disagreed. He also supported the important **compromises** they reached to solve their disagreements. You will learn more about his contributions in later lessons.



Patrick Henry said he did not attend the convention because he "smelled a rat."
What do you think he meant by this?

Americans who were not at the convention

Some important Americans did not attend the convention. Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine were in France. John Adams was in England. Patrick Henry refused to attend the convention because he was against the creation of a strong national government. He suspected that the delegates might not just try to improve the Articles of Confederation. He was afraid they might try to write a new constitution that created a powerful national government. He was right. After the convention, Patrick Henry worked against ratification of the Constitution.

The delegates to the convention did not represent all parts of the American population. There were no women among the delegates. There were no free black men or slaves present. Poor farmers—like those who took part in Shays' Rebellion—were not present. The Rhode Island state legislature refused to send a delegation to the convention. Citizens there were fiercely independent and hostile to any idea of a new constitution.

The convention begins

By May 25, 1787, delegates from eleven states were present in Philadelphia. George Washington was unanimously elected to preside over the convention. Almost immediately, the Framers agreed on three things:

1. Congress had told them to recommend ways to improve the Articles of Confederation. The Framers decided not to pay any attention to these instructions. They thought the problems with the Articles of Confederation were too serious to try to correct them. So, they began to write a new constitution.
2. They decided to keep the record of what they said at the convention a secret for 30 years. There were two reasons for this:
 - The Framers wanted to develop the best constitution they could. Many were afraid that if their discussions were made public, they would not feel free to express their opinions. They also did not want people outside the convention to try to influence what they were doing.

- The Framers wanted the constitution they developed to be accepted. They thought that it would have a greater chance of being accepted if people did not know about the arguments that went on during its creation.
3. They agreed that each state would have one vote at the convention. This decision was made to gain the cooperation of the small states. Delaware, for example, had threatened to withdraw from the convention if states with large populations were given more votes than states with small populations.

The Framers agreed on a number of basic ideas about government. These included the following ideas:

- They should create a constitutional government, a government of limited powers.
- The purpose of the government should be to protect basic rights and promote the common welfare.
- A strong national government was needed to serve these purposes.
- A republican form of government of elected representatives was necessary to make sure the government served the common welfare.

- The separation of powers and a system of checks and balances were necessary to prevent the abuse of power.

Because of their agreement on basic ideas about government, the Framers were able to write the Constitution. In less than four months they created a constitution that has lasted, with some revisions, for over 200 years.

Reviewing and using the lesson

1. What was the original purpose for calling a meeting in Philadelphia in 1787? Why was the purpose changed? By whose authority was it changed?
2. In what ways were the delegates representative of the American people? In what ways were they not representative?
3. If you were forming a group to write a new constitution today, who would you choose for your group? Explain your answer.
4. Should the topics being debated at the Philadelphia Convention have been reported to the public? Why or why not?