

Bold action helped the nation overcome the serious shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation.

The Need for Change

SS.8.A.3.9, SS.8.A.3.15, SS.8.E.2.3, LA.8.1.6.1, LA.8.1.6.2, LA.8.1.6.3

What problems did the government face under the Articles of Confederation?

A growing number of Americans became convinced that the government under the Articles of Confederation was too weak to deal with the country's problems. Among these problems were serious economic difficulties.

After the Revolutionary War, the United States went through a **depression**, a period when economic activity slows and unemployment increases. Wartime damage to Southern plantations led to a sharp drop in rice exports. Trade also fell off when the British closed the West Indies market to American merchants. The little money the government did have went to pay debts to foreign countries. This resulted in a serious shortage of money in the United States.

Shays's Rebellion

Economic troubles hit farmers hard. Unable to sell their goods, they could not pay their taxes and debts. This led state officials to seize farmers' lands and throw them in jail. This treatment angered many farmers. Some began to view the new government as just another form of tyranny. They wanted the government to issue paper money and make new policies to help those in debt. A group of farmers in Massachusetts made this plea to state officials:

"Surely your honours are not strangers to the distresses [problems] of the people but . . . know that many of our good inhabitants are now confined in [jail] for debt and taxes."

—from "Petition from the Town of Greenwich, Massachusetts"

Resentment boiled in Massachusetts. In 1786 angry farmers led by former Continental Army captain Daniel Shays forced courts in the western part of the state to close. The goal was to stop judges from legally taking away farmers' lands.

The farmers' revolt grew. In January 1787, Shays led a force of about 1,200 supporters toward the federal arsenal, or weapons storehouse, in Springfield, Massachusetts. The farmers wanted to seize guns and ammunition. The state militia ordered the advancing farmers to halt and then fired over their heads. The farmers did not stop. The militia fired again, killing four farmers.

Shays and his followers fled, and the uprising was over. Still, Shays's Rebellion frightened Americans. Concern grew that the government could not handle unrest and prevent violence. On hearing of the rebellion, George Washington wondered whether "mankind, when left to themselves, are unfit for their own government."

Slavery in the New Republic

The Revolutionary War called attention to the clash between the American belief in liberty and the practice of slavery. Between 1776 and 1786, 11 states—all except South Carolina and Georgia—outlawed or taxed the importation of enslaved people.

Slavery existed and was legal in every state. In the North, however, it was not a major source of labor. People in that region began working to end slavery in America. In 1774 Quakers in Pennsylvania founded the first American antislavery society.

Six years later Pennsylvania passed a law that provided for the gradual freeing of enslaved people. Between 1783 and 1804, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, and New Jersey passed laws that gradually ended slavery there.

Still, free African Americans faced discrimination. They were barred from many public places. Only a few states gave them the right to vote. Most of their children had to attend separate schools from white children. In response, free African Americans set up their own churches, schools, and aid groups.

Slavery continued to spread south of Pennsylvania. The plantation system depended on slave labor, and many white Southerners feared their economy could not survive without it.

That fear did not stop a number of slaveholders from freeing enslaved people. The number of free African Americans increased in Virginia after that state passed a law that encouraged **manumission** (man • yuh • MIH • shuhn), the freeing of individual enslaved persons.

Around this time, American leaders were deciding that the Articles of Confederation needed to be strengthened. The question of slavery would make those discussions more difficult.

Explaining Why did farmers in Massachusetts rebel in 1787?

The Constitutional Convention

SS.8.A.3.9, SS.8.A.3.10, SS.8.C.1.4

How did leaders reshape the government?

Although the American Revolution led to a union of 13 states, it had not yet created a nation. Some leaders were satisfied with independent state governments that were similar to the old colonial governments. Others wanted a strong national government. They demanded a change in the Articles of Confederation. Among the leading Americans supporting reform were James Madison, a Virginia planter, and Alexander Hamilton, a New York lawyer.

The Convention Begins

In September 1786, Hamilton called for a **convention**, or meeting, in Philadelphia to discuss trade issues. He also suggested that this convention consider what possible changes were needed to make "the Constitution of the Federal Government adequate to the exigencies [needs] of the Union."

George Washington at first was not enthusiastic about the meeting. Then, news of Shays's Rebellion made Washington change his mind. He agreed to attend the Philadelphia convention, and the meeting took on greater importance.

The Convention began in May 1787 and continued through one of the hottest summers on record. The 55 delegates included planters, merchants, lawyers, physicians, generals, governors, and a college president. Three of the delegates were under 30 years of age, and one, Benjamin Franklin, was over 80. Many of the delegates were well educated. At a time when few people went to college, 26 of the delegates had college degrees.

Native Americans, African Americans, and women were not represented at the Convention. These groups were not considered part of the political process at that time.

Having Washington and Franklin at the Convention guaranteed public trust. Trust was important, because the convention did not just **amend**, or revise, the Articles of Confederation. It produced an entirely new constitution. Some questioned whether the Convention had such authority.

Yet the work went on. Two men from Philadelphia also had key roles. James Wilson did important work on the details of the Constitution, and Gouverneur Morris polished the final draft. James Madison, who was a keen supporter of a strong national government, kept a record of the convention's work. Madison is often called the "Father of the Constitution" because he was the author of the basic plan of government that the Convention adopted.

The Convention Organizes

The delegates chose George Washington to lead the meetings. Delegates also decided that each state would have one vote on all questions. Decisions would be based on a majority vote of the states present. Sessions were not open to the public. In fact, the windows were closed in the sweltering heat to keep anyone from listening in. This made it possible for the delegates to talk freely.

The Virginia Plan

Edmund Randolph of Virginia opened the Convention with a surprise. He proposed the Virginia Plan that called for a strong national government. The plan, which was largely the work of James Madison, created a government with three branches: a two-house legislature, a chief executive chosen by the legislature, and a court system. The legislature would have powers to tax, regulate trade, and veto state laws. Voters would elect members of the lower house of the legislature. The members of the lower house would then choose members of the upper house. In both houses the number of representatives would be **proportional**, or corresponding in size, to the population of each state. This would give a state such as Virginia many more delegates than Delaware, the state with the fewest number of people.

Delegates from the small states objected. They preferred a system in which all states had equal representation. Opponents of the Virginia Plan rallied around William Paterson of New Jersey. On June 15, he presented another plan. This plan amended the Articles of Confederation, which was all the Convention had the power to do.

The New Jersey Plan

Under this plan, the legislature would have a single house, with each state having one vote. Paterson argued that the Convention should not deprive smaller states of the equality they had under the Articles. The New Jersey plan gave Congress the power to set taxes, regulate trade, and elect an executive branch made up of more than one person. In sum, the New Jersey Plan favored a more powerful government than existed under the Articles—but a less powerful government than the Virginia Plan proposed.

Explaining Why did New Jersey's delegates object to the Virginia Plan?

Agreeing to Compromise

SS.8.A.3.10, SS.8.A.3.11

What compromises were reached in the new Constitution?

The delegates had to decide whether to revise the Articles of Confederation or write a new constitution. On June 19, the states voted to work toward a new constitution based on the Virginia Plan. They still had to deal with the difficult issue of representation that divided the large and small states.

The Great Compromise

The Convention appointed a committee to settle the disagreement. Roger Sherman of Connecticut suggested what would later be called the Great Compromise. A **compromise** is a settlement of a dispute by each party giving up some demands. Sherman's compromise proposed different representation in the two-house legislature. In the upper house—the Senate—each state would have two members. That is, the states would be equal in representation. In the lower house—the House of Representatives—the number of seats for each state would vary based on the state's population. Larger states would have more representation.

The Three-Fifths Compromise

Delegates from the South and North disagreed on whether—and how—to count each state's enslaved population. Including enslaved people as part of a state's population would increase each Southern state's size. This would give Southern states more seats in Congress. The Southern states liked this, and the Northern states did not. At the same time, larger populations would increase each Southern state's taxes, because states were to be taxed based on their populations. The South was not happy about this.

As a solution to this dispute, delegates agreed to what was called the Three-Fifths Compromise. As part of this compromise, every five enslaved persons would count as three persons in the state's population total. This population total would be the basis for setting taxes and representation in Congress.

The Question of the Slave Trade

The Northern states had already banned the slave trade. They wanted to prohibit it nationwide. Southern states considered slavery central to their economy. Northerners agreed to keep the new Congress from interfering with the slave trade until 1808.

Debating a Bill of Rights

State constitutions such as those of Virginia and Massachusetts had a listing of key rights and freedoms. These are known as a declaration of rights, or a bill of rights. At the Convention, some delegates worried that without a bill of rights, the new national government might abuse its power. George Mason of Virginia proposed a bill of rights to be included in the Constitution. The delegates defeated this idea. Most of the delegates believed that the Constitution carefully defined government powers and provided enough protection of individual rights.

Approving the Constitution

On September 17, 1787, the delegates assembled to sign the Constitution they had created. Three delegates refused to sign—Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, and Edmund Randolph and George Mason of Virginia. Gerry and Mason would not sign because the Constitution did not have a bill of rights. Randolph, who had put forth the Virginia Plan, felt the final document strayed too far from his own beliefs.

The other delegates did sign the document. The approved draft of the Constitution went out to the states for their approval. Under the Articles of Confederation, all 13 states would have had to accept any change. The drafters of the new Constitution decided, however, that the document would go into effect with the approval of just 9 of the 13 states.

Explaining What compromises were reached concerning enslaved people?

LESSON 2 REVIEW

Review Vocabulary

1. Use each of the two words below in a sentence that shows their meaning in this lesson. **a.** depression **b.** compromise

LA.8.1.6.1

- a. depression
- b. manumission

2. Write a sentence about the Constitutional Convention that uses both of these terms. **a.** proportional **b.** compromise

LA.8.1.6.1

- a. proportional
- b. compromise

Answer the Guiding Questions

3. Specifying What weaknesses in the national government did Shays's Rebellion reveal?

SS.8.A.3.9

4. Contrasting What was the difference between the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan concerning the legislature?

SS.8.A.3.10

5. Describing On what key issues did delegates have to compromise in order to create a Constitution that most states would accept?

SS.8.A.3.10

6. EXPOSITORY WRITING You have been asked to write a short announcement to inform your community about the Great Compromise. Summarize the key points of the agreement. Include any other details you think are important.

SS.8.A.3.10