

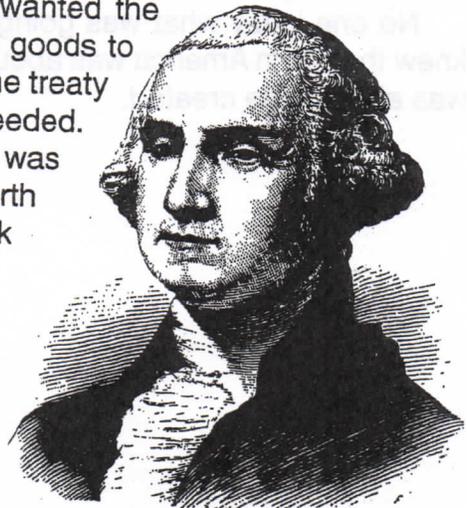
Calling the Constitutional Convention

Imagine the thrill Jones felt when he opened an official-looking envelope informing him that he had been chosen to represent his state in the Confederation Congress. He showed it to his wife, and she said, "Who's going to run the farm while you are away?" He showed it to his children, and when he told them it meant he would be away for months at a time, they started crying. He showed it to the storekeeper, who laughed and said, "I have more money in my cash box than they have in their treasury." He talked to his state senator who told him ten other men had turned down the honor before it was offered to Jones. Then he reminded Jones that his salary was to come from the state, and before he did anything in Congress, he had better check with the state first. Otherwise, they might fire him or refuse to pay his expenses.

Jones took the job anyway and made the long trip to wherever Congress was meeting at the time. If he went by a sailing ship, there was no certainty when he would arrive. If he rode his horse, it meant several nights of lodging with farmers along the way or sleeping in flea-infested inns. At last he arrived and found there were not enough delegates present to do any business. Sometimes, only three to five delegations were there, and the Articles required that nine states be represented. After listening to the clerk read letters of complaint from former soldiers who needed to be paid or letters from ministers (ambassadors) in foreign countries telling them the ruler needed a payment on their debt, there was nothing more to do, so they adjourned. Tomorrow, perhaps enough delegates might arrive from other states so they could do some business. After a few weeks of this, Jones knew why the other ten men had turned down the honor of serving in this job. It did not take long for him to resign.

Jones was facing only a small portion of American problems however. States were having their troubles too. New Jersey was furious with a New York tax on eggs imported from other states. Virginia and Maryland argued over which was to control trade on the Potomac River. There were arguments over borders between Maryland and Pennsylvania. Each state acted only in its own interest and did not care about what was good for the nation. Westerners were furious about the Jay-Gardoqui (gar-do-key) treaty. It would allow American ships to trade with Spain, if the United States gave up use of the Mississippi River for 25 or 30 years. New England ship owners wanted the trade, but the westerner would have no way to get his goods to market. The Southern states sided with the West, and the treaty got only a 7 to 5 vote of approval, short of the number needed.

The rich and poor distrusted each other. The nation was divided between agricultural versus trading states. North and South argued over slavery. Big states like New York and Virginia thought they should have a bigger role in making decisions than small states like Delaware and Rhode Island. The unity that had won the Revolution was gone. Leaders like Washington, Madison, and Hamilton feared that, unless something happened soon, the nation would split apart.



To make the changes needed required taking advantage of opportunities to meet and discuss issues in a calm way. The first break occurred in 1785 when Maryland agreed to talk about trade on the Potomac River with Virginia. Washington invited the delegates to meet at his home, and the meeting became known as the MOUNT VERNON CONFERENCE. It went well, and as it was closing, James Madison suggested that it would be helpful if the trade problems between all the states could be discussed. A meeting was scheduled to do that, and it was to be held at Annapolis, Maryland.

Only five states sent delegates to the ANNAPOLIS CONVENTION in 1786. They were unable to do much, but Alexander Hamilton of New York and James Madison proposed that a meeting be held in 1787 at Philadelphia to consider ways to make the American government work better.

An event occurred at this point that had a great effect on what happened next. The state legislature of Massachusetts had raised taxes on land so high farmers could not survive. In 1786, Daniel Shays, a war veteran, led the farmers in attacks on court rooms where farmers were about to lose their land. When they marched to Springfield to take guns from the armory, they were stopped by a volley from militia. Washington and others recognized that incidents like this could occur throughout the country. Leaders began to see an urgency in sending delegates to Philadelphia. Congress gave its approval for the meeting on February 21, 1787, but only for "the purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation." By that time, five states had already chosen their delegates.

Most of those chosen took the assignment seriously. Washington did not want to make the trip, but felt he must; his decision to attend added importance to the gathering. Alexander Hamilton was known to favor a strong national government, so those in New York who favored strong state government sent two other delegates to keep Hamilton under control. James Wilson of Pennsylvania was one of America's best lawyers, and Roger Sherman of Connecticut was one of the best at putting a compromise together. Some delegates spent most of their time angry over something: Elbridge Gerry (Massachusetts) and Luther Martin (Maryland) in particular. To cool things down when tempers ran high was the genial Ben Franklin; his cheery disposition made people feel more at ease.

Sessions were supposed to begin May 14, but not enough of those chosen had arrived, so meetings did not begin until May 25. George Washington, to no one's surprise, was chosen president of the Convention.

No one knew what was going to happen as the doors closed, but the well-informed knew that life in America was about to change. They were right; a new form of government was about to be created.