

We the People

EXPLORING THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

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SECTION I

The Story of the Constitution

On the following pages you will read the story of the creation of one of the most famous documents in history: the Constitution of the United States of America. Who were the men who conceived it? Why was it developed? What guidelines does it contain? What elements have kept it so successful for so many years? You will find the answers to these and other thoughtful questions as you follow the remarkable tale of the growth of the Constitution. All American citizens are greatly indebted to the learned leaders of 1787 who wrote this unique document.



The Articles of Confederation

After the Americans declared their independence from Great Britain, they realized that there was a great need for a plan of government that would unite the states. On June 11, 1776, the Continental Congress appointed a committee to devise a workable plan of unity. One month later the committee, headed by John Dickinson of Delaware, had written such a plan. It was called the Articles of Confederation. The word confederation means association, and the new document called for a “firm league of friendship” among the states.

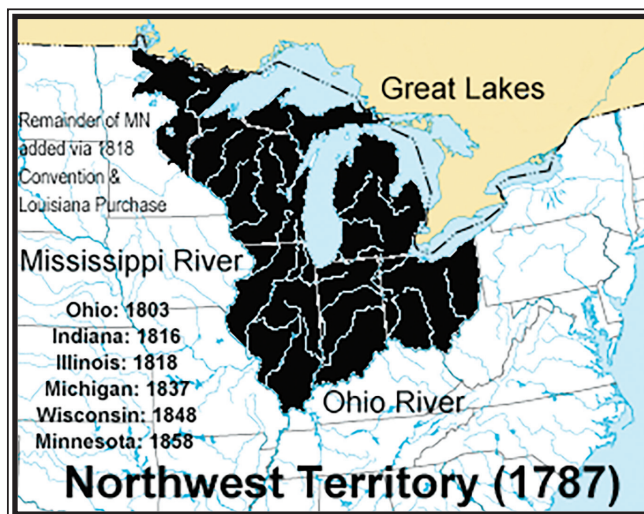
Although the Articles of Confederation were adopted by the delegates in 1777, they were not ratified by all the states until 1781. Some states approved them quickly, but others debated the provisions for years. Maryland was the last state to ratify the Articles. In March 1781, the plan was finally approved as the first constitution for the new nation.

Under the Articles of Confederation, the Congress had few powers. People were afraid to develop another strong central government. They had been opposed to the strong power of the King of England and they did not want that situation repeated in their new government. They decided to give most of the power to the individual states. Each state was given one vote in Congress, and nine votes were needed to pass a law. Any amendment to the Articles would need the approval of all thirteen states. These rulings made agreement on any proposed law quite difficult to obtain.

One law that did manage to gain approval of the Congress of the Confederation was the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. This law gave Congress the right to govern territorial lands. It offered guidelines to

help the settlers turn their lands into states. Thomas Jefferson was the author of the Northwest Ordinance. Some of its provisions are still being used today. The Northwest Territory was later divided into five states: Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio.

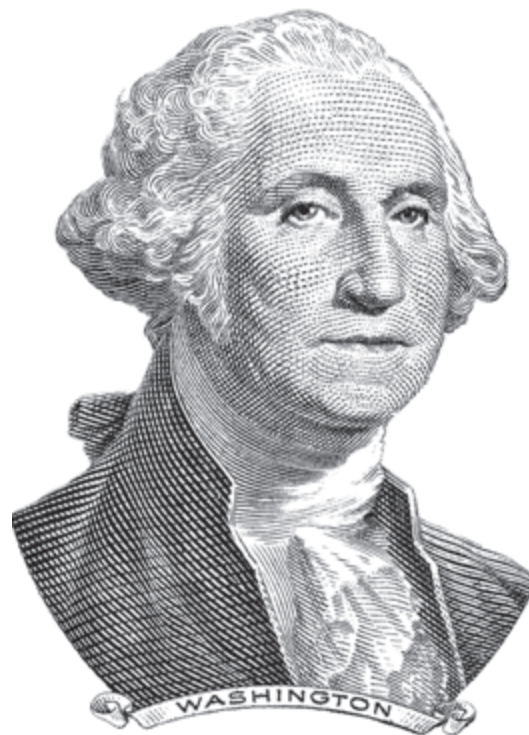
Although the Northwest Ordinance was a fine achievement, the Articles of Confederation also had many weaknesses. One major problem centered around money. Although Congress had the power to ask the states for money, it could not tax them. Because most of the states refused to contribute money, the government was usually in need. Soldiers did not receive their wages, and war debts could not be repaid. Also, each state printed its own currency; therefore, the values varied from state to state. The same coin could be worth 75 cents in New York and 50 cents in Virginia. Paper money, called Continental currency, was printed, but it had neither gold nor silver to back it and was, therefore, virtually worthless.



Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress had no power to control trade between states or between states and a foreign country. Each state passed its own set of commerce laws according to its own economic interests. Since colonial roads were poorly developed, travel was difficult. Most colonists did not often venture beyond their own state boundaries. They regarded themselves as Virginians or Pennsylvanians rather than as citizens of the United States.

Another problem concerned the armed forces. Congress did not have its own army or navy; therefore, it had to rely on the individual states to supply troops in an emergency. In 1786, Daniel Shays, a Revolutionary War soldier, led a group of one thousand disgruntled Massachusetts farmers in an attempt to seize a local courthouse. The men were protesting the seizure of their farms because of debts. The national government could not stop the uprising, and the Massachusetts troops were called in to end the rebellion.

Throughout the states, many citizens became concerned about the weakness of the national government. Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress could not seem to control quarrels that arose between states. Thoughtful leaders, such as George Washington, realized that something had to be done to hold the union together.



Constitutional Categories Game

In this activity, you are to fill in the grid with words that begin with the letters on the left. These words must fit into the categories listed above the grid. You may put more than one word in each box. Compare your completed grid with those of your classmates. Score two points for words that no one else recorded; all other answers earn one point each.

| | Vocabulary | People | Places/Events |
|---|------------|--------|---------------|
| A | | | |
| M | | | |
| E | | | |
| N | | | |
| D | | | |

Score _____ Name _____