

Writing the U.S. Constitution Reading



Figure 1

In 1776, the **Declaration of Independence** made official the colonists' separation from Britain. The colonies became independent states and established their own governments. Most states rewrote their colonial charters and created state constitutions that outlined the rights of their citizens and set limits on the power of government. As states formed their governments, the **Continental Congress** also developed a plan for the nation.

In 1777, the Continental Congress drafted the **Articles of Confederation**. Under the Articles, a loose association of states was created to ensure that the central government would not become too powerful and threaten the people's individual freedoms. The Articles were ratified and put in place in 1781. There were both **strengths and weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation**. But, despite its shortcomings, the Articles of Confederation created a national government that had some important successes. One of the most important was the national government's successful passing of the **Northwest Ordinance**. This established principles for further expansion of the United States.

Under the Articles, America experienced what historians called a "Critical Period" between 1781 and 1787. The nation faced an economic crisis. The national **currency** was worthless after the American Revolution, and states refused to share taxes with the national government. As a result, the country fell into an economic depression as it struggled to pay

its bills. The depression hurt farmers, and many of them lost their land. In seeking to limit the powers of the central government, the Continental Congress created conditions where the national government had too little power to govern effectively. It was not until a crisis arose in Massachusetts in 1786, known as **Shay's Rebellion**, that these weaknesses were amplified. Many Americans saw the rebellion as a sign that the Articles of Confederation were ineffective and needed to be revised.



Figure 2

In 1786, a meeting of representatives at Annapolis called for a convention to revise the Articles. The **Constitutional Convention**, a meeting of delegates from each state, opened on May 25, 1787 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with 55 delegates from 12 states. Rhode Island did not send a delegate. Although delegates originally convened to amend the Articles of Confederation, after much debate, they decided to write a new **Constitution**. Delegates, however, could not agree on some key issues. Two of the most important issues included how states would be represented in the new national legislature and how slaves should be counted in the population.

Two groups proposed two different plans, the **Virginia Plan (large states)** and the **New Jersey Plan (small states)**. For a while, it seemed that the Convention would fall apart without adopting any plan. After much debate, the leaders agreed to the **Great Compromise, the Three-Fifths Compromise**, and not to outlaw the slave trade for at least 20 years. Finally, on September 17, 1787, the Constitution was ready to be signed. Each side, in an admirable show of **civic virtue**, gave up some demands to create "a more perfect union."