

# The Road to the Constitution

## GUIDE TO READING

### Main Idea

In 1787 a remarkable group of American leaders from all but one state gathered in Philadelphia to address the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, but they soon decided that a new constitution was needed.

### Key Terms

**Constitutional Convention**

### Reading Strategy

#### Identifying Information

As you read, list prominent leaders and characteristics of delegates to the Constitutional Convention in a web diagram like the one below.



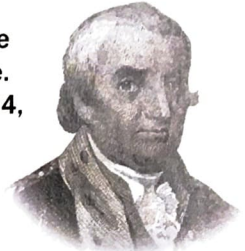
### Read to Learn

- Who attended the Constitutional Convention?
- What rules did the delegates adopt to conduct their business?



## Americans in Action

Charles Pinckney was so intent on impressing his colleagues—the other delegates to the Constitutional Convention—that he lied about his age. Pinckney's vanity led him to boast that he was only 24, allowing him to claim distinction as the youngest delegate. He was, in fact, 30 years old. In spite of certain personal qualities, Pinckney distinguished himself in the process of creating an improved plan of government for the United States.



Charles Pinckney

## A Distinguished Gathering

By early 1787, it was clear that the national government had to be strengthened. The Congress agreed there were serious problems with the Articles of Confederation. Each state was asked to send delegates to a convention in Philadelphia to fix the flaws. (This was to become the Constitutional Convention.) Only Rhode Island chose not to take part because its leaders opposed a stronger central government.

The convention began in Philadelphia's Independence Hall on May 25, 1787. Rain fell heavily during the opening week, leaving the roads to the city choked with mud. Many delegates had to travel long distances and arrived late. Once all were assembled, however, they were an extraordinary group.

Most of the 55 men present were well-educated lawyers, merchants, college presidents, physicians, generals, governors, and planters with considerable political experience. Eight of the delegates had signed the Declaration of Independence. Seven had been governors of their states, and forty-one were or had been members of the Continental Congress. Native Americans, African Americans, and women were not considered part of the political process, so none attended.

Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, 81, was the oldest delegate. He was famous as a diplomat, writer, inventor, and scientist. Most delegates, however, were still young men in their thirties or forties with great careers ahead of them. Two delegates, George Washington and James Madison, would go on to become presidents of the United States. Nineteen would

become U.S. senators, and thirteen served in the House of Representatives. Four men would become federal judges, and four others would become Supreme Court justices.

A few notable leaders were not at the convention. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were both in Europe as representatives of the American government—Jefferson in Paris and Adams in London. Patrick Henry, a prominent Virginian, was also missing. Although elected as a delegate, he was against the convention and did not attend.

**Reading Check** **Generalizing** How would you describe the delegates to the Constitutional Convention?

## Early Decisions

The delegates agreed unanimously that George Washington should preside over the convention. Widely respected for his leadership during the American Revolution, Washington would now call on speakers and make sure that the meetings ran in an orderly, efficient manner. At the start, he reminded the delegates of the importance

of their task. He warned that if they could not come up with an acceptable plan of government, “perhaps another dreadful conflict is to be sustained.”

## Operating Procedures

One of Washington’s first actions was to appoint a committee to set rules for conducting the convention. The committee decided that meetings could not be held unless delegates from at least seven states were present. Decisions were to be made by a majority vote of the states, with each state having only one vote. That meant that the delegates from each state would decide by majority rule how to cast their single ballot.

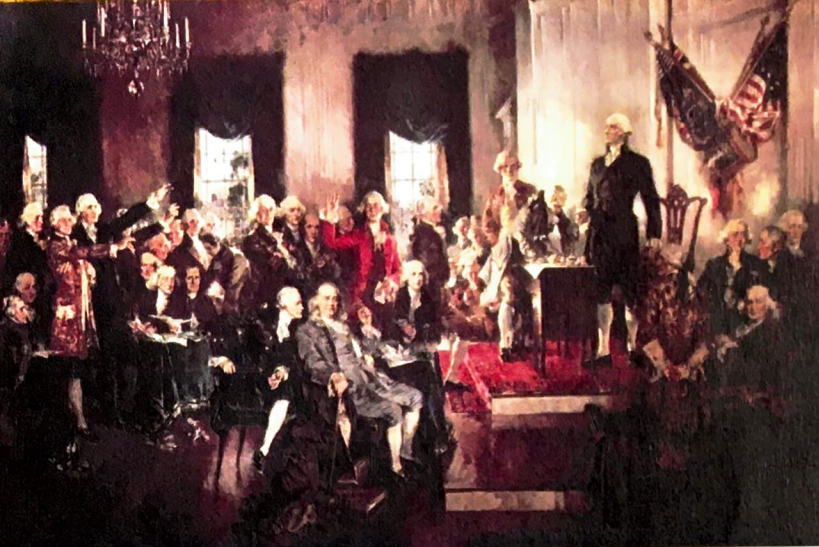
The participants at the convention also agreed to keep all discussions secret. The public was not allowed to attend meetings, the doors were guarded, and the windows were kept tightly shut despite the summer heat. Each delegate promised not to tell outsiders what was going on inside.

This secrecy rule enabled the delegates to speak freely, without worrying about the public’s reaction. That made it easier for them to bargain with one another and to

**Independence Hall** The Pennsylvania State House, later known as Independence Hall, hosted the Declaration of Independence signing and the Constitutional Convention. It is now a museum. **What was the delegates’ goal when they gathered at the convention?**







**The Constitutional Convention** Delegates to the convention had to make many compromises before working out a plan for a government acceptable to all. **What were the rules for conducting the convention?**

change their minds on the many issues debated. However, the secrecy policy also meant that no formal records of the convention were kept. Most of the details we know come from a notebook of daily events written by James Madison.

the Articles was not enough. They decided instead to discard the Articles and write a new constitution. All of the delegates set out to strengthen the national government by creating a new plan of government. Thus the meeting in Philadelphia came to be known as the **Constitutional Convention**.

## The Need for a New Constitution

The Congress had given delegates the job of revising the Articles of Confederation. They quickly agreed, however, that changing

**Reading Check Explaining** Why were no formal records kept at the Constitutional Convention?

## SECTION 1 ASSESSMENT

### Checking for Understanding

- 1. Key Terms** Write a sentence using the term below that explains the purpose of the gathering in Philadelphia.

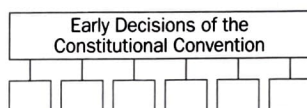
**Constitutional Convention**

### Reviewing Main Ideas

- 2. Explain** Why did Rhode Island refuse to send a delegate to the Constitutional Convention? What did the delegates have in common?
- 3. Describe** How were decisions made by the Constitutional Convention? What other decisions about operating procedures did the delegates make?

### Critical Thinking

- 4. Drawing Conclusions** If you had been a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, would you have voted for the secrecy rule? Why or why not?
- 5. Categorizing Information** Organize information about the early decisions of the Constitutional Convention by completing a graphic organizer like the one below.



### Analyzing Visuals

- 6. Infer** Examine the painting of the Constitutional Convention on this page. Who is shown leading the Convention? Why did the delegates choose him?

### ★ BE AN ACTIVE CITIZEN ★

- 7. Research** Find out about your city council and state legislature. What are the secrecy rules for those bodies? Can they meet in secret like the Constitutional Convention did? Under what circumstances can they meet without having the public present? Report your findings to the class.