

Creating a Republic

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

American revolutionaries had utopian hopes of establishing new forms of government after declaring independence in 1776. Some pushed for governments that promoted democracy greater than what they had experienced under British colonial rule. Other revolutionaries recoiled from the idea of majority rule—the basic principle of democracy—fearing that it would effectively promote “mob rule” that would bring about the ruin of American independence.

Throughout the 1770s and 1780s, American revolutionaries attempted to define how governments would operate. Most believed that a republic should replace the British monarchy, but there was much debate in determining who could participate in American political life.

Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Introduction

Upon declaring independence, American revolutionary leaders had the opportunity to create new governments in the United States, but they confronted some longstanding challenges:

- Challenges from within their own ranks or, in other words, divisions among revolutionary leaders themselves.
- Challenges from below or, in other words, challenges from ordinary men and women who demanded participation in the political process on the grounds that “all men are created equal.”

The issue of creating a republic revolved around two important questions related to these challenges:

- How to establish authority within the respective states? In other words, how could revolutionary leaders create state governments that effectively replaced British colonial authority?
- How to establish a government that promoted the interests of the nation or, in other words, a government that protected the *United States*?

To examine how revolutionaries addressed these questions, we turn first to state governments.

2. State Governments

In 1776, **John Adams** urged the 13 independent colonies—soon to be states—to write their own state constitutions. Adams did not advocate democracy, however. Rather, in *Thoughts on Government*, he wrote, “there is no good government but what is republican.” Fearing the potential for tyranny with only one group in power, he suggested that each state implement a **republic**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

John Adams

2nd president of the United States and leading figure in the Federalist Party in the 1790s, served as vice president under George Washington



TERM TO KNOW

Republic

A government without a king; one in which elected representatives protect the public interest. Furthermore, to ensure that a single group or interest could not consolidate power, Adams insisted that each state government feature a sufficient system of **checks and balances**.



TERM TO KNOW

Checks and Balances

A governmental system that ensures a balance of power among respective branches of government, typically the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

The state constitutions of the new United States illustrated different approaches to addressing Adams’s concerns.

One impulse was to write state constitutions that embraced democratic principles by limiting the power of the executive branch in an attempt to prevent tyranny and to reflect the will of the people.

Pennsylvanians wrote the prototype for this approach, completing their state constitution in September 1776. It began by echoing the Declaration of Independence and stating the reasons for breaking with the king. It then included “A Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants of the Commonwealth or State of Pennsylvania” that guaranteed liberty to the people, including rights concerning religious toleration and freedom of speech. It also declared, “That all power being originally inherent in, and consequently derived from, the people; therefore all officers of government, whether legislative or executive, are their trustees and servants, and at all times accountable to them.”

Subsequent provisions within Pennsylvania’s constitution put these ideals into practice. Executive authority rested in the hands of a president and a council. The president was elected annually, while members of the council were elected on a rotating basis every three years.



DID YOU KNOW

Pennsylvania had a one-house—or unicameral—legislature rather than a two-house—or bicameral—legislature.

To counter the authority of the executive and to reflect the will of the people, much of the government’s power in Pennsylvania rested within the state legislature. Members of the legislature were elected on an annual basis and, to further make sure that government accounted for the people’s interests, the legislature held open-door sessions and posted proposed legislation in public spaces to foster debate.

Under Pennsylvania’s 1776 constitution, no law could become permanent until it had been passed by two

successive legislatures.

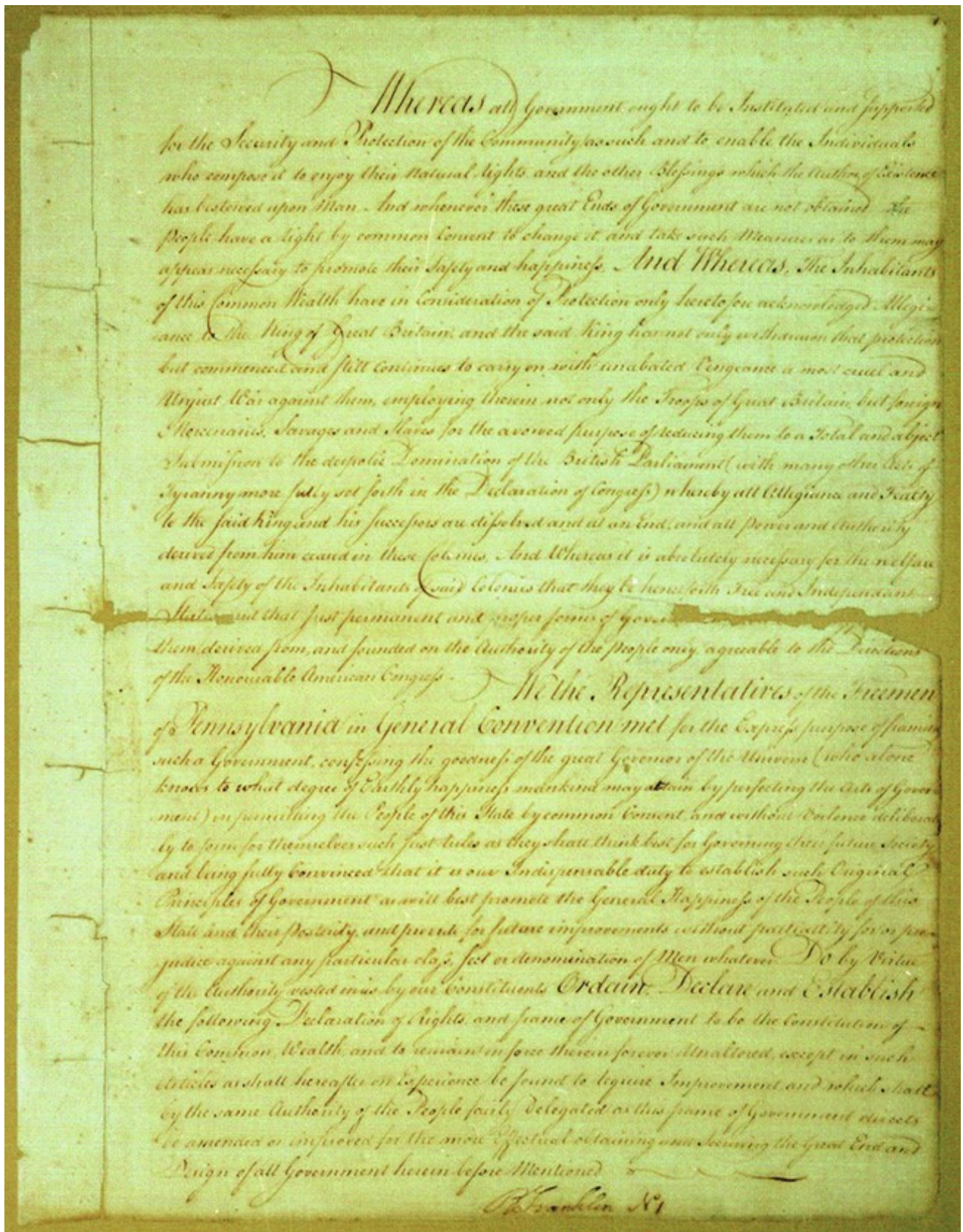
Finally, Pennsylvania had the broadest franchise—or right to vote—of any state.



DID YOU KNOW

Another word for franchise is suffrage, which also means the right to vote.

The requirement to own property in order to vote was eliminated, and if a man was 21 or older, had paid taxes, and had lived in the same location for one year, he could vote. This provision opened voting to all free male citizens—White and Black—of Pennsylvania. This gave Pennsylvania the widest franchise of any state.



The Pennsylvania constitution of 1776, the first page of which is shown here, adhered to more democratic principles than other state constitutions, most notably that of Massachusetts.



DID YOU KNOW

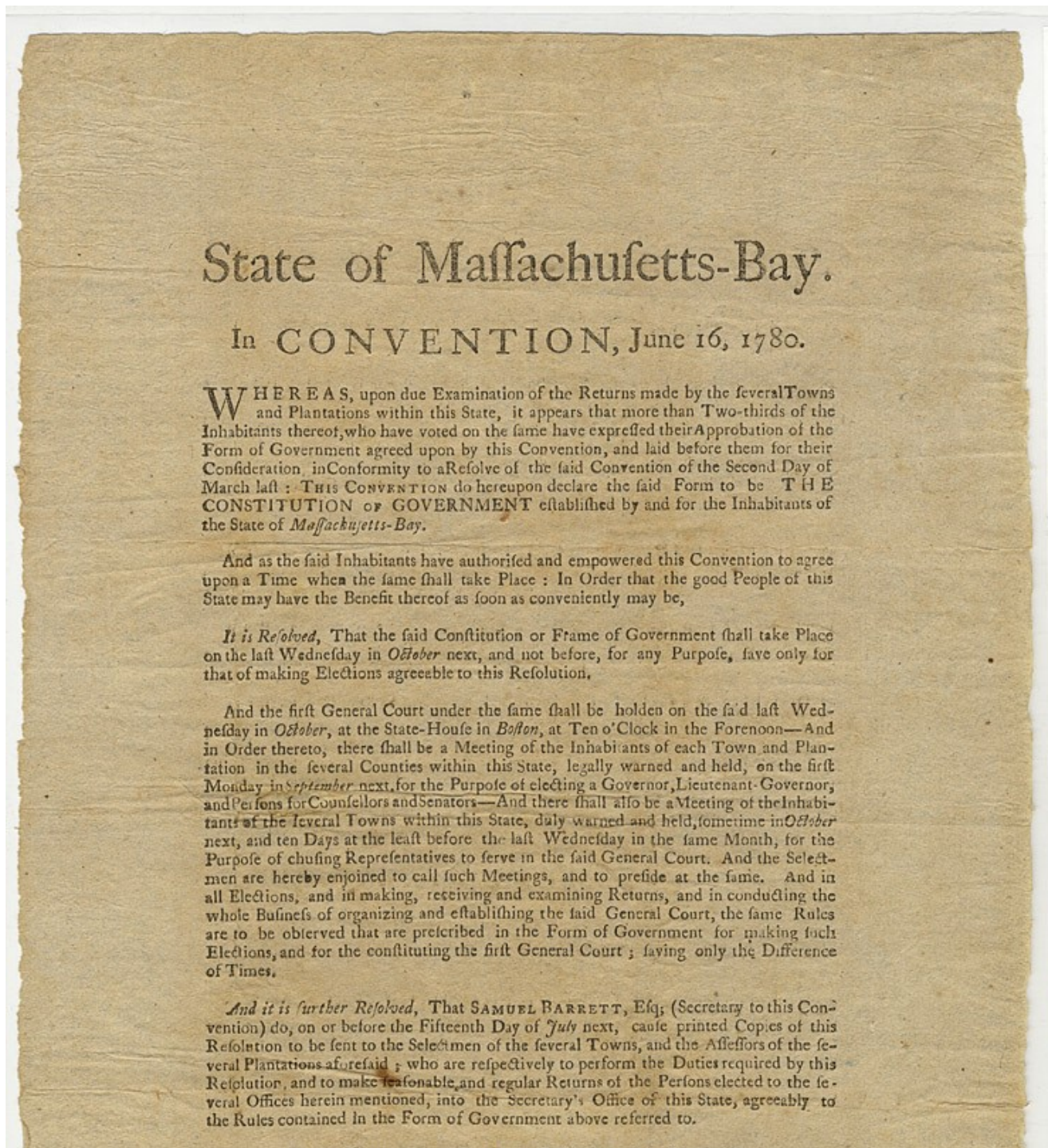
In New Jersey, revolutionaries wrote a constitution that extended the right to vote to unmarried women

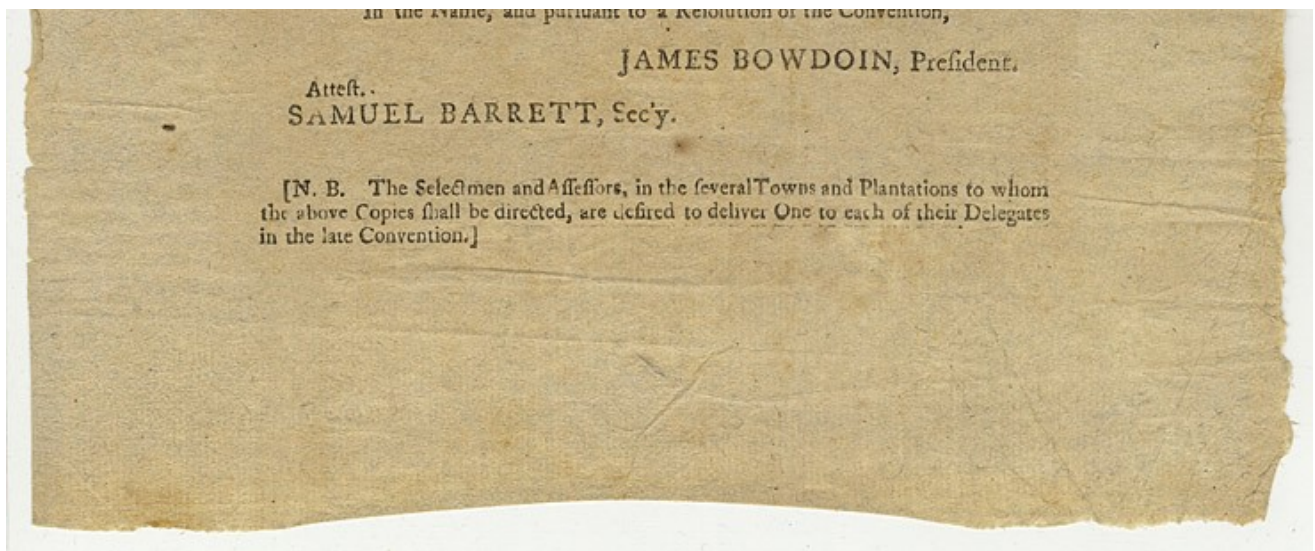
who owned property worth £50.

In contrast, the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, written largely by John Adams, was a model for more conservative state constitutions. It offered a greater balance between the different parts of government. Moreover, unlike Pennsylvania, it limited political participation to those who owned property.

The Massachusetts constitution created a stronger executive by having a governor who could command the state militia and had veto power over the state legislature. The constitution also created two legislative chambers—an upper house (or senate) and a lower house.

Also, in stark contrast to Pennsylvania, Massachusetts implemented requirements to hold office or vote that limited political participation to male property owners. To be governor under the new constitution, a candidate had to own an estate worth at least £1,000. To serve in the state senate, a man had to own an estate worth at least £300 and have at least £600 in total wealth. To vote, he had to be worth at least 60 pounds. To further keep democracy in check, judges were appointed, not elected.





Broadside declaring the ratification of the Massachusetts constitution, 1780. The Massachusetts constitution adhered to more conservative principles than the Pennsylvania constitution.



REFLECT

Imagine that you lived in the United States during the late 1770s and early 1780s, when each state was creating its first constitution. Would you have been eligible to vote or run for political office in Massachusetts? In Pennsylvania?

3. Republicanism and Political Participation

The authors of the first state constitutions in the United States believed that King George III had become a tyrant who ignored the traditional liberties of his subjects. Such disaffection toward the king helps explain why many Americans believed that a republic would be a better alternative than **monarchy** for government.



TERM TO KNOW

Monarchy

A form of government with a monarch at its head; rests on the practice of dynastic succession, in which the monarch's child or other relative inherits the throne.

While a republic offered an alternative to monarchy, it was also an alternative to **democracy**.



TERM TO KNOW

Democracy

A system of government characterized by direct representation and majority rule, where the majority of citizens have the power to make decisions binding upon the whole.

Within a democracy, majority rule could easily overpower minority rights, and many wealthy revolutionaries (who constituted a minority within the American population) feared that a hostile and envious majority could seize and redistribute their wealth.

In addition to their economic concerns, a number of leading revolutionaries opposed democracy because they believed it placed political power in the hands of individuals who had no business participating in

government.

➔ **EXAMPLE** John Adams reacted to Pennsylvania’s constitution in horror, declaring that it was “so democratical that it must produce confusion and every evil work.”

To Adams and others like him, the democratic provisions within the Pennsylvania constitution simply put too much power in the hands of men who were not prepared for self-rule, particularly members of the lower classes who did not attain the levels of education or property ownership as Adams and other revolutionary leaders had.

Adams and others argued that a proper republican form of government required its participants to feature virtuous behavior. This was a political and social philosophy that historians refer to as **republicanism**.



TERM TO KNOW

Republicanism

A political philosophy that holds that states should be governed by representatives, not a monarch; as a social philosophy, republicanism required civic virtue of its citizens.

Adams and other revolutionary leaders argued that the ownership of property such as land provided one way to measure an individual’s **civic virtue**.



TERM TO KNOW

Civic Virtue

The willingness to subordinate one’s own personal interests for the good of the public.

Revolutionary leaders believed that only landholders and other property owners possessed the economic independence necessary to make impartial decisions related to governance. By the same token, this logic argued that the lower classes who did not own property should have very little to do with government. Revolutionary elites assumed that the lower classes lacked sufficient education and struggled to get by in their daily lives, which made these individuals more likely to become corrupted by personal motives or interests.

According to Maryland’s constitution, written in 1776, a man had to own at least £5,000 worth of personal property to be state governor and possess an estate worth £1,000 to be a state senator. This latter qualification excluded over 90 percent of the White males in Maryland from political office.



DID YOU KNOW

Amidst the debate concerning virtue and governance, most revolutionary leaders ignored women. During the colonial period and early history of the United States, the legal status of women was defined as *coverture* (or *femme covert*), which meant that a woman’s identity was covered by her father or husband. As a result, the majority of American women had no legal, economic, or political status independent of their fathers or husbands.

In other words, unlike a democracy, in which the mass of non-property holders could exercise the political right to vote, John Adams and other revolutionary leaders envisioned republican governments that limited political rights and opportunities to men like themselves—the elite within American society.

4. The Articles of Confederation

Shortly after declaring independence from Great Britain in 1776, most revolutionaries pledged their greatest

loyalty to their respective states. Recalling their experiences during the British imperial crisis of the 1760s and 1770s, they feared a strong national government and took some time to adopt the **Articles of Confederation**, which favored state sovereignty rather than a strong centralized government.



TERM TO KNOW

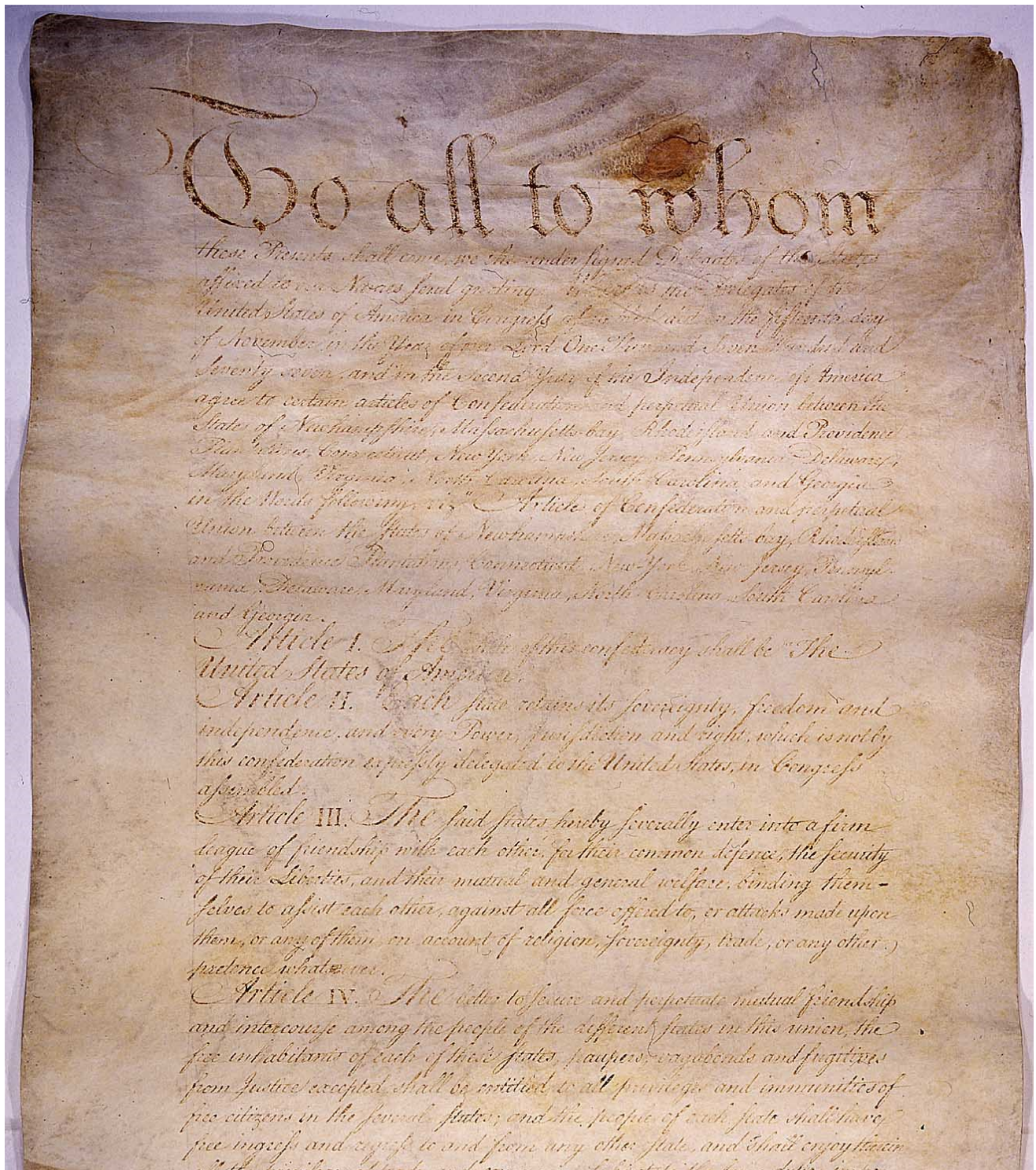
Articles of Confederation

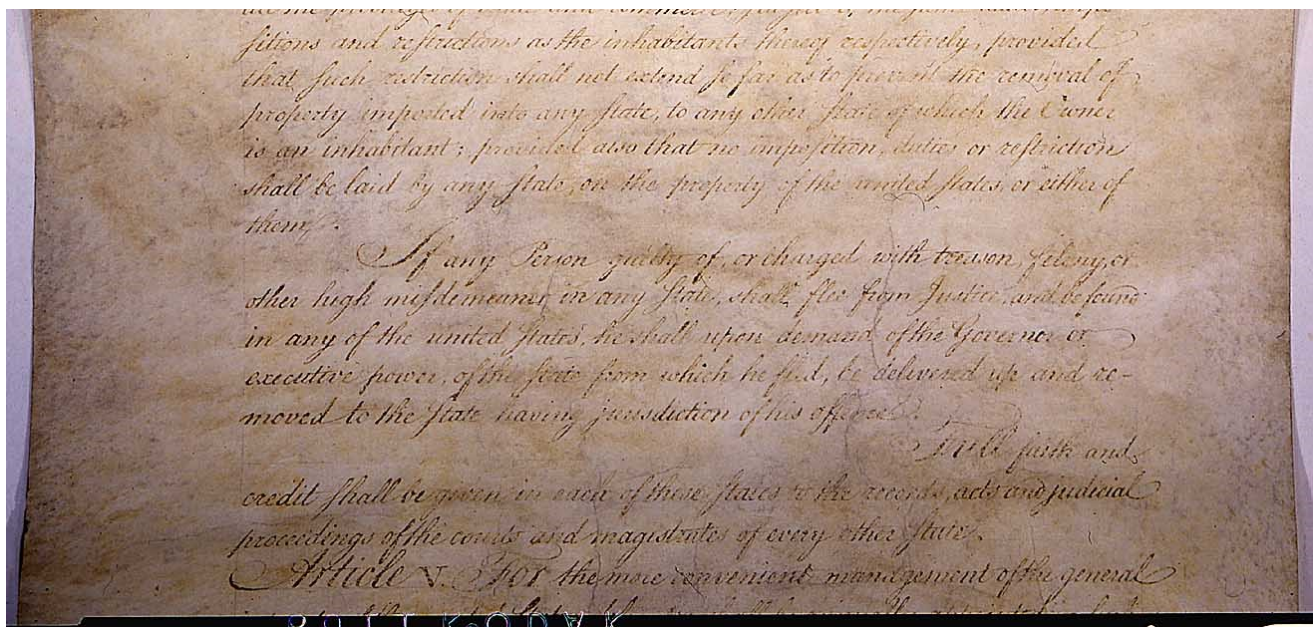
The first national constitution of the United States and the official national government between 1781 and 1788; favored state sovereignty rather than a strong centralized government.



DID YOU KNOW

The Articles of Confederation became the official form of government for the United States in 1781.





The first page of the Articles of Confederation.

Members of the Continental Congress debated over how a national, republican form of government should look. Complicating this issue, however, was the fact that Congress was currently engaged in a war with Great Britain over the very survival of American independence. Revolutionary leaders knew that the American states had to unite in order to fight the war against Great Britain. Thus, in lieu of creating a new federal government, the Articles stated that the states entered "into a firm league of friendship with each other, for their common defense, the security of their Liberties, and their mutual and general welfare...."

To secure the defense of the nation, the Articles formally created a national unicameral legislature (a continuation of the Continental Congress) that oversaw the American military and foreign affairs. To further ensure a united effort against Great Britain, the Articles stipulated that the union between the states was perpetual.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Given the need to coordinate military activities across eastern North America, revolutionary leaders assumed that it was necessary for the national legislature to oversee the Continental Army.

Under the Articles, the people could not vote directly for members of the national Congress. Rather, state legislatures decided who would represent the state and each state had equal representation in Congress. There was no president or executive office of any kind, and there was no national judiciary (or Supreme Court) for the United States.



DID YOU KNOW

Any alterations to the Articles of Confederation had to be agreed upon by the Continental Congress and ratified by every state.

The Congress did not have the power to tax citizens of the United States. This power remained with the respective states. Given the fact that many colonists rebelled against Great Britain because of issues related to taxation and representation, it makes sense that revolutionary leaders chose the states to handle taxation rather than the national government.

However, this concession soon had serious consequences for the United States. During the War for Independence, the Continental Congress sent requisitions for funds to each state to provide for the

Continental Army. But the states already had an enormous financial burden on their hands because they had to pay for and supply their respective militias. Thus, during the war, the states failed to provide even half of the funding that Congress requested, which led to a national debt in the tens of millions by 1784.

➔ **EXAMPLE** At one point during the war, the Continental Congress proposed a five percent tax on all imports coming to the United States, which would have provided enough revenue to pay for the national debt. However, the proposal did not achieve unanimous support from the states when Rhode Island rejected it and the proposal was not enacted.

Establishing workable foreign and commercial policies under the Articles of Confederation also proved difficult. Moreover, Congress could not control interstate commerce, and each state could set their own import taxes on foreign goods as well as goods produced in another state.

Most historians have looked at such shortcomings and concluded that the Articles of Confederation were a weak and ineffective form of national government. However, other historians have emphasized the context in which the Articles were written, arguing that they were a practical solution for the United States while it fought for independence against Great Britain, one of the strongest empires in the Atlantic World.

The inability to tax its own citizens or to enforce treaties among the states were important weaknesses that revolutionary leaders would have to address. At the same time, however, under the Articles of Confederation, the United States won the War for Independence and the Continental Congress successfully negotiated the Treaty of Paris of 1783, which formally recognized American sovereignty. If the main purpose of government under the Articles of Confederation was to unite the states and win the War for Independence, then the Articles succeeded.



THINK ABOUT IT

What do you think: were the Articles of Confederation a weak, ineffective form of national government, or were they a practical solution given the contingencies of the War for Independence? What evidence did you use to come to your conclusion?



SUMMARY

American revolutionaries expressed great hopes toward establishing new, republican forms of government after declaring independence. The effort to create these republics occurred at the state level and the national level. Government at the state level witnessed a tension between too much democracy or too little, as seen in the constitutions of Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. Most revolutionary leaders distrusted democracy and political participation by the masses, fearing that those who did not own property lacked the virtue necessary for governing. Similar concerns toward democracy and monarchy informed the initial attempt to create a national government — the Articles of Confederation. Although the Articles helped the United States gain independence from Great Britain, important challenges remained.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Articles of Confederation

The first national constitution of the United States and the official national government between 1781 and 1788; favored state sovereignty rather than a strong centralized government.

Checks and Balances

A governmental system that ensures a balance of power among respective branches of government, typically the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

Civic Virtue

The willingness to subordinate one's own personal interests for the good of the public.

Democracy

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Monarchy

A form of government with a monarch at its head; rests on the practice of dynastic succession, in which the monarch's child or other relative inherits the throne.

Republic

A government without a king, one in which elected representatives protect the public interest.

Republicanism

A political philosophy that holds that states should be governed by representatives, not a monarch; as a social philosophy, republicanism required civic virtue of its citizens.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

John Adams

2nd president of the United States and leading figure in the Federalist Party in the 1790s, served as vice president under George Washington.



DATES TO KNOW

1776

The Declaration of Independence is signed; John Adams urges each colony to write a constitution.

1777

The Articles of Confederation is approved by the Continental Congress.

1781

States ratify the Articles of Confederation, establishing the first national government of the United States.

1783

The Treaty of Paris ends the Revolutionary War.

1789

The U.S. Constitution replaces the Articles of Confederation.