

Independence Hall

On May 25, 1787, delegates from 12 states met in the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia.



A drawing of the Pennsylvania State House. It would later be known as Independence Hall.

Over the course of the next three months, delegates worked out a series of agreements and compromises that created the system of government that is still in effect today. In general, the U.S. Constitution expanded the powers of the national government. But delegates were not willing to give the national government too much power -- for example, a proposal that the national government should be able to veto new state laws was rejected.

At the insistence of delegates from southern states, the U.S. Constitution avoided bringing up the issue of

slavery almost entirely. The two major issues dealing with slavery in the Constitution were the slave trade and the 3/5ths Compromise. For the first issue, delegates agreed that Congress would not be allowed to limit the slave trade until 1809. For the second issue, delegates agreed that each slave would count as 3/5ths of a person when counting a states population (for the purposes of determining representation in the House of Representatives).

Another important issue that needed compromise was how states would be represented in Congress, an issue that had bitterly divided the larger and smaller states. Under a plan put forward by Roger Sherman of Connecticut, Congress would be broken up into two chambers -- the House of Representatives and the Senate. Representation in the House of Representatives would be based on a state's population, while representation in the Senate would be equal for every state (2 senators per state).



A famous painting showing the delegates at the Constitutional Convention. George Washington (who was president of the Convention) stands at the right looking over the other delegates. A quick survey of the delegates reveals three common characteristics -- they were all men, they were all white, and they were mostly all wealthy.

By September, the final compromises were made, the final clauses were edited, and it came time to vote. In the Convention, each state had one vote -- so the delegates from each state had to vote within themselves before deciding whether their state would be for or against adopting the Constitution. In the end, 39 of the 55 delegates supported adoption, barely enough to win support from each of the twelve states. Following a signing ceremony on September 17, most of the delegates went to the City Tavern on Second Street where, according to George Washington, they "dined together and took cordial leave of each other."

But before it was put into effect, the Constitution needed to be ratified by nine of the thirteen states. Delaware was the first to approve it in December 1787. Other states held special conventions to make their decisions. In June 1788, New Hampshire became the ninth state to vote in favor of ratification, and the Constitution went into effect. But until the influential states of Virginia and New York supported the plan, the outcome of the process was still in doubt. Virginia's convention voted in favor of the Constitution in June and New York followed in July. The last two states to agree to the Constitution were North Carolina (November 1789) and Rhode Island (May 1790).



Inside Independence Hall today.