

Lesson 2: The Constitutional Convention

Big Ideas of the Lesson

- Delegates gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 to change and improve the Articles of Confederation. Instead they wrote a whole new Constitution.
- The delegates represented many of the best -known leaders of the country. As a group, they were better educated and richer than most Americans. Many were lawyers.
- Two important delegates were George Washington, who was chosen to lead the Convention, and James Madison, who took careful notes at the Convention.
- Basic ideas agreed upon at the beginning of the Convention included the importance of limited government, individual rights, and representative government.

Lesson Abstract:

In this lesson, students explore why the Constitutional Convention was convened and why a new Constitution was written. They begin with a review of some of the problems the new nation experienced under the Articles of Confederation. They consider two quotations and investigate different perspectives on the power of government. The lesson concludes with students reviewing some principles of constitutional government that the Framers agreed upon such as limited government, individual rights, and representative government.

Content Expectations

- 5 – U3.3.2: Give examples of problems the country faced under the Articles of Confederation (e.g., lack of national army, competing currencies, reliance on state governments for money).
- 5 – U3.3.3: Explain why the Constitutional Convention was convened and why the Constitution was written.

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects:

- RL.5.6:* Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.

Key Concepts

Articles of Confederation
consent of the governed
Constitutional Convention
Framers
limited government

Instructional Resources

Equipment/Manipulative

Chart paper

Overhead projector or document camera/projector

Student Resource

Bower, Burt, et al. *America's Past*, Social Studies Alive Program. Palo Alto, CA: Teacher's Curriculum Institute, 2010 or a similar fifth grade social studies textbook. Pp. 189, 196-200.

Fritz, Jean. *Shh! We're Writing a Constitution*. New York: Putnam Juvenile, 1996.

Teacher Resource

Egbo, Carol. *Supplemental Materials (Unit 7, Lesson 2)*. Teacher-made material. Michigan Citizenship Collaborative, 2012.

Independence Hall. Ben's Guide to Government. 3 April 2012 <http://bensguide.gpo.gov/3-5/symbols/print/independence_hall.html>.

Washington's Chair. National Park Service Museum Collections. 3 April 2012 <http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/revwar/image_gal/indeimg/armchair.html>.

Lesson Sequence

1. Begin the lesson by having students briefly review the problems the young country faced under the *Articles of Confederation*. Have students generate a class list which may include:
 - The national government was on the edge of bankruptcy.
 - Farmers under Daniel Shays had closed down courts and threatened an arsenal.
 - States were constantly disagreeing with each other over many different issues.
 - States were imposing tariffs, or taxes, on goods produced in neighboring states.
 - Britain had refused to leave some forts on American soil such as the one at Detroit.
 - Leaders like Washington were very worried about the future of the new nation.
2. Display "Analyzing Quotations", located in the *Supplemental Materials (Unit 7, Lesson 2)*. Tell students to explain in their journals what they think Madison meant in his quotation. Discuss student responses and guide them in understanding that Madison felt the *Articles of Confederation* were incapable of keeping the states together. Read the Patrick Henry quote out loud and ask students to explain in their journals what they think this quote meant. Discuss student responses and guide them in understanding that Patrick Henry feared a strong national government.
3. Explain that in 1786, some leaders called on the states to hold a convention, or an important meeting, to discuss trade problems states were having under the Articles. For example, under the *Articles of Confederation*, each state could print its own money, but money from one state was often not accepted in another state. Share the following information about this meeting which became known as the Annapolis Convention:
 - Only five states sent representatives to the meeting.

- The delegates talked for a while and then decided a stronger national government was needed in order to regulate commerce, or trade.
 - The group asked Congress to call a second convention to improve the Articles of Confederation.
 - Congress refused to call a meeting at first. However, after Shays' Rebellion it decided a meeting was needed.
4. Display the photograph, "Independence Hall", located in the *Supplemental Materials (Unit 7, Lesson 2)*. Explain that delegates began to gather in this building in Philadelphia in May of 1787 with the intent of changing and improving the *Articles of Confederation*. Explain that this building, which was called the State House at the time, was also the place where the *Declaration of Independence* was adopted in 1776 and the *Articles of Confederation* were ratified in 1781. Explain that one of the first actions of the group was to elect George Washington president of the convention. Ask students why they think Washington was chosen. Discuss student responses and guide students in understanding that Washington was the "hero" of the American Revolution and a very respected leader. Display the photograph of "Washington's Chair", located in the *Supplemental Materials (Unit 7, Lesson 2)* and explain that this was the chair Washington used during the convention. Briefly discuss the importance of saving artifacts such as these. **Teacher Note:** Washington was one of the most trusted leaders in the nation's early years, not only because he was the Commander of the Continental Army but also because he voluntarily relinquished power at the end of the war. The significance of Washington's decision to put down his arms and return home to Mount Vernon should not be understated. It was this act that would eventually make him the only man that could be trusted with the power of the presidency under the Constitution.
5. Share the following information regarding other delegates to the convention:
- Fifty-five delegates attended. They were some of the best-known leaders in the country.
 - The average age of the delegates was 42.
 - As a group, the delegates were better educated and richer than most Americans.
 - Many of the delegates were lawyers but there were also doctors, merchants, farmers, and former soldiers.
 - Benjamin Franklin, at age 81, was the oldest delegate to attend. He was unable to walk far or ride in a bumpy carriage so he arrived at the meeting in a sedan chair carried by prisoners from the Philadelphia jail which was across the street from the State House.
 - The youngest delegate was Jonathan Dayton who was 26.
 - One of the most influential delegates was James Madison. He took notes at every meeting. His notes became the main resource for historians investigating the details of what occurred at the convention.
 - Some important colonial leaders did not attend the convention. Thomas Jefferson was in France where he was serving as ambassador. John Adams was in Britain performing the same role. Samuel Adams was ill and John Hancock said he was too busy being governor of Massachusetts. Patrick Henry refused to take part saying he did not believe a stronger national government was a good idea.

6. Explain that as delegates began to work together, they agreed to conduct the meetings in secret thinking this would allow them to make the best decisions. Windows in the building were covered and guards were stationed at the door. Display the “Quotation” from *Shh! We’re Writing a Constitution* by Jean Fritz, located in the *Supplemental Materials (Unit 7, Lesson 2)*. Read the quotation out loud and ask students to briefly describe in their journals what it was like to be at the convention. Note that pages 9 through 36 of this book can be used to supplement both this and the next lesson.
7. Explain that almost immediately after beginning to discuss the issues, the delegates decided that it was not enough to try and improve the *Articles of Confederation*. They decided to create an entirely new plan of government, a new Constitution (Word Card #7). They began by agreeing to certain basic ideas. Place students in pairs and ask each pair to come up with two ideas they think were areas of agreement. Encourage students to use what they have learned about the democratic values and principles important to the Founders of our country to come up with their ideas. Give pairs time to work and then have them share their ideas as you make a master list on an overhead or chart paper.
8. When you have completed the list, share the following which describes the main basic ideas agreed upon as the Framers, or writers of the Constitution, began to plan and create a new plan for government:
 - The government should be a government with limited powers.
 - The purpose of the government should be to protect basic rights and promote the common good.
 - A stronger national government was needed to serve these purposes. Governments of the states were still important, however.
 - The government needed to be a republic where people elected representatives.
 - There needed to be a separation of powers and a system of checks and balances so power would not be abused.

As you discuss each idea with students, be sure to explain why the members of the convention were able to agree on these ideas. This is a good time to review what students have studied throughout the year. For example, discuss how colonial experiences with a king with seemingly unlimited power led to the desire for a government with limited powers.

9. Explain that although they agreed on these basic ideas, there were a lot of issues upon which people disagreed. Three of these were: Representation in the Congress, slavery, and the relationship between the national government and state governments. Explain that in the next two lessons students will examine these issues and how they were resolved.

Assessment

An assessment “The Constitutional Convention”, which requires constructed responses, as well as a chart showing possible answers, has been included in the *Supplemental Materials (Unit 7, Lesson 2)*.