

THREE MEN

Architect of the Capitol



The one thing the Constitutional Convention delegates found easy to agree on was George Washington's election to preside over the convention.

THREE PLANS

The men who came together at the Pennsylvania State House in 1787 were a diverse group. Some were farmers; others were lawyers. Some were well-educated; others were self-taught. They did not all know one another, and they represented states with different interests. A few had strong opinions about what had to be accomplished at the Constitutional Convention. Others were undecided about the future course of the country. Some thought they would simply be rewriting the weak Articles of Confederation, while others hoped to discuss a new framework for self-government. Despite their differences of background and opinion, they all came willing to work, listen, argue, and most important, compromise. And these qualities enabled them to achieve something remarkable.

FAST FACT ALTHOUGH 74 DELEGATES WERE APPOINTED TO THE CONVENTION, ONLY 55 ATTENDED SESSIONS.

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Virginia's
Edmund Randolph

The convention was supposed to open in mid-May, but not all the delegates had arrived in Philadelphia by then, so the date kept getting pushed back until there was a **quorum**. By May 25, the delegates were ready to begin work. The first order of business was easy—the unanimous election of George Washington as president of the convention. The many decisions that followed proved much more difficult to make.

While there was general agreement that the states should be united under a national government, feelings about how that government should be structured varied greatly. Some delegates continued to believe that the states should hold most of the power. Others were convinced that the country needed a strong central government to rescue it from its economic troubles and gain the respect of foreign powers.

VIRGINIA OFFERS THE FIRST PLAN

A few days before the convention opened, James Madison and Governor Edmund Randolph of Virginia met with Robert Morris and other representatives from Pennsylvania to prepare a plan to put in front of the delegates. Although Madison probably wrote it, the 34-year-old Randolph presented it.

As one of Washington's aides-de-camp during the Revolution and Virginia's former attorney general, Randolph had proven himself a popular leader and a gentleman. Those qualities were apparent on May 29 as he

eloquently announced the 15 resolutions set forth in Madison's Virginia Plan. It called for a "supreme Legislative, Executive and Judiciary." The legislature would be bicameral (composed of two houses), with the lower house elected by the people and the upper house elected by members of the lower. The number of seats allotted each state in both houses would be determined by that state's population or wealth. An executive officer would be appointed by the legislature and the judiciary.

Delegates from the smaller states, however, did not like the idea of a legislature based on "proportional representation." Nearly half of the nation's population lived in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. They argued that if seats were apportioned according to a state's population or wealth, the smaller states would not be represented fairly, and the larger states would rule the country.

Over the next two weeks, the delegates, who were sitting as a **committee of the whole**, debated the Virginia Plan. Latecomers from some of the smaller states lent their support to the opposition, but the larger states would not relent. Then the smaller states, under the leadership of 42-year-old William Paterson of New Jersey, decided to propose a plan of their own.

NEW JERSEY'S SECOND PLAN

The son of an Irish shopkeeper, Paterson had enrolled in the College of New Jersey (later called Princeton University) when he was just 14. After graduating with a master's degree in 1766, he worked as a small-town

A **quorum** is the minimum number of members of a group necessary to make the meeting's business official.

Working as a **committee of the whole** means that the votes taken were merely recommendations to be presented to the convention for a final vote at a later date.

FAST FACT NO MORE THAN 11 STATES EVER VOTED AT THE CONVENTION. RHODE ISLAND BOYCOTTED IT AND DID NOT SEND DELEGATES AT ALL, AND AFTER TWO OF NEW YORK'S THREE DELEGATES LEFT ON JULY 10, THE REMAINING NEW YORK DELEGATE DID NOT CAST HIS STATE'S VOTE. MEANWHILE, NEW HAMPSHIRE'S REPRESENTATIVES DID NOT ARRIVE UNTIL JULY 23.



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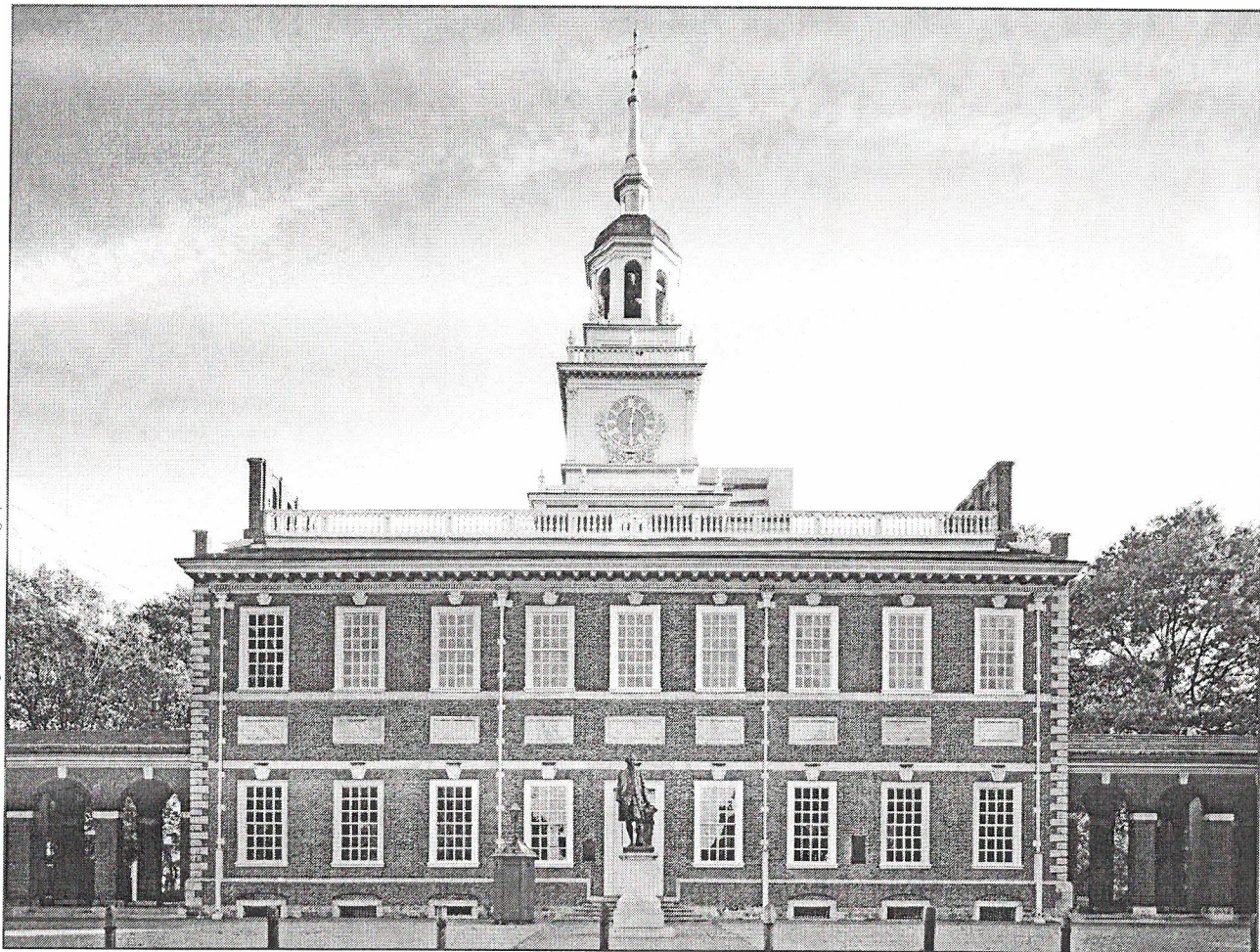
**New Jersey's
William Paterson**

lawyer. He was elected to the First Continental Congress and filled a vacancy left by the secretary. Later, he was named attorney general of New Jersey.

Paterson is probably best known for his New Jersey Plan, which he proposed to the convention on June 15. In it he called for a one-house legislature in which all states would be represented equally, as well as an executive board elected by the legislature and a federal Supreme Court. The larger states opposed Paterson's plan, and four days later, following an impassioned speech by Madison, the delegates voted 7 to 3 to reject it.

As the temperature rose inside the State House chamber, tempers grew shorter. On June 29, the convention appeared on the edge of collapse, as the debate over proportional representation deteriorated into angry mudslinging. Some of the smaller states threatened to leave if the larger states did not give in on this point.

Another vote on July 2 resulted in a tie—5 for the Virginia Plan, 5 against, and 1 undecided. The delegates seemed hopelessly deadlocked. In one final effort to resolve the problem, a committee composed of one delegate from each state was formed. Representing Connecticut was a self-made lawyer and jurist named Roger Sherman.



The men wore wool suits despite the high temperatures inside the State House in Philadelphia. Today it is known as Independence Hall.

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Connecticut's
Roger Sherman

CONNECTICUT CALLS FOR COMPROMISE

A fellow delegate wrote of Roger Sherman: “. . . no man has a better Heart or a cleaner Head . . . it is remarked that he seldom fails.”

In fact, during the debates, while those around him were losing their tempers, the 60-year-old Yankee remained calm and never lost sight of the delegates’ common goal: to create a strong and able government.

Unable to afford a college education when he was young, Sherman had studied on his own while supporting himself as a surveyor and shoemaker. He became skilled as a lawyer, mathematician, and judge and was to hold some form of political office for 50 years in a row. He also was the only person to sign all the documents on which our country was founded—the Declaration and

Resolves, the Articles of Association, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution. His extensive political experience had taught him the value of compromise.

Sherman’s idea to resolve the deadlock was simple: a two-house legislature, with seats in one house apportioned according to population, and in the other, equal representation. The convention quickly adopted Sherman’s Connecticut Compromise, and the convention was back on track.

Although the delegates would face other issues in the coming weeks, they would seem minor compared with the controversy over representation. On September 17, 1787, after 4 months of exhausting work, 38 of the delegates present signed the Constitution they had struggled to create. Oddly enough, Randolph chose not to sign, although he later urged his state to support ratification.

SLAVERY

The Founding Fathers tried to tackle the issue of slavery, but they quickly realized that there was no easy solution. They decided to focus on the difficult task of creating a strong government for the new nation, and left to the next generation the tough decisions about how to eliminate an institution that kept people in bondage.

But the question of how to count enslaved people did become the focus of heated debate. Slaves were viewed as property; they were not considered individual people with rights. Still, southerners, who owned the most slaves, wanted them counted. Northern delegates, most of whom did not own slaves, feared that this would give the southern states unfair power. In the end, the delegates worked another compromise: They agreed to count each enslaved person as “three-fifths of a person” for the basis of determining state populations and political representation.

While there were some who strongly objected to the constitution specifically because of its compromises regarding slavery, most thought it was worth the cost. We can only wonder what the founders would have done if they had known that it would take nearly 100 years and a bloody four-year civil war to put an end to slavery. Perhaps they would have agreed that this was one compromise that came at too great a price.

