8.3 Shays's Rebellion and the Need for Change

arsenal a place where weapons and ammunition are stored

Under the Articles of Confederation, the new nation also had serious money problems. The paper money printed by Congress during the war was worthless. Congress had the power to make coins that would not lose their value. But it lacked gold or silver to mint into coins.

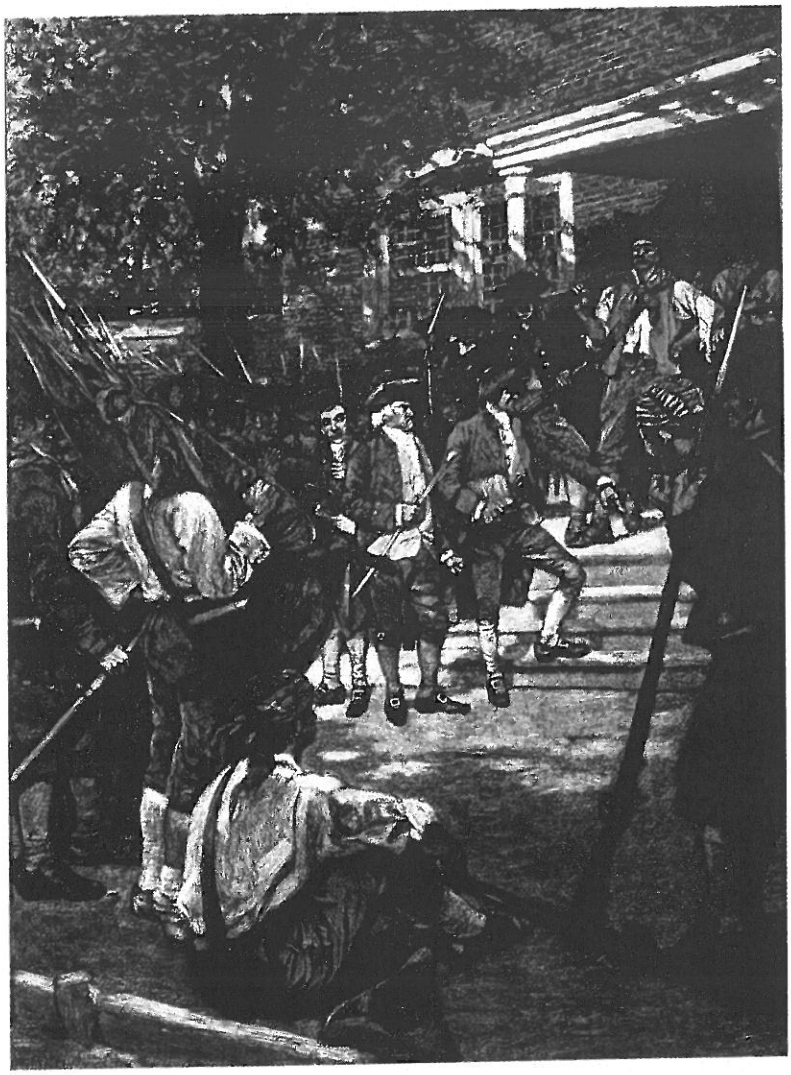
The states reacted to the money shortage by printing their own paper currency (money). Before long, bills of different sizes and colors were floating from state to state. No one knew what any of these currencies were worth, but most agreed that they were not worth much.

Massachusetts Farmers Rebel

The money shortage was particularly hard on farmers who could not earn enough to pay their debts and taxes. In Massachusetts, judges ordered farmers to sell their land and livestock to pay off their debts. Led by Daniel Shays, a hero of Bunker Hill, Massachusetts farmers rebelled.

First, Shays and his followers closed down courthouses to keep judges from taking their farms. Then they marched on the national **arsenal** at Springfield to seize the weapons stored there. Having disbanded the Continental Army, Congress was unable to stop them.

Massachusetts ended Shays's Rebellion by sending militia troops to Springfield to restore order. To many Americans, however, the uprising was a disturbing sign that the nation they had fought so hard to create was falling apart. "No respect is paid to the federal [national] authority," Madison wrote to a friend. "It is not possible that a government can last long under these circumstances."



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Daniel Shays, shown at the top right, and his followers closed down courthouses to prevent judges from seizing their land when they could not pay their debts. Many American leaders saw the rebellion as a sign that the government under the Articles of Confederation was not working.

A Call for a Convention

Shays's Rebellion shocked Congress into calling for a convention to consider "the situation of the United States." Each state was invited to send delegates to Philadelphia in May 1787, "for the sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation."

Madison was ready. For the past year he had devoted himself to the study of governments, both ancient and modern. The lesson of the past was always the same. A nation that was made up of many groups needed a strong central government, or it was soon torn apart by quarrels. The question was, would Americans heed this lesson?

8.4 Opening the Constitutional Convention

Philadelphia was already hot and sticky when delegates began drifting into the city. On May 25, the Constitutional Convention met for the first time in the east room of the Pennsylvania State House (later known as Independence Hall). The Declaration of Independence had been debated in this very room just 11 years earlier. The delegates would meet in the east room all summer on days so steamy that, as one visitor wrote, "the slightest movement is painful."

The delegates' first action was to elect George Washington president of the convention. No man was more admired and respected than the former commander in chief of the Continental Army. When the war ended, Washington could have used his power and popularity to make himself a king. Instead, he went home to Virginia to resume his life as an ordinary citizen. But despite his reluctance to return to public life, Washington would play a key role by presiding over the convention and lending it his prestige.

The Delegates Fifty-five delegates from 12 states attended the convention. Rhode Island, which prided itself as "the home of the otherwise minded" and feared a strong national government, boycotted the meeting.

Some leaders of the revolution were missing. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were representing the United States in Great Britain and France. Others who did not attend included Sam Adams, John Hancock, and Patrick Henry. They feared a strong national government would endanger the rights of states.

The delegates to the Constitutional Convention met on May 25, 1787, in the same hall where the Declaration of Independence was signed. Today, the building is called Independence Hall.

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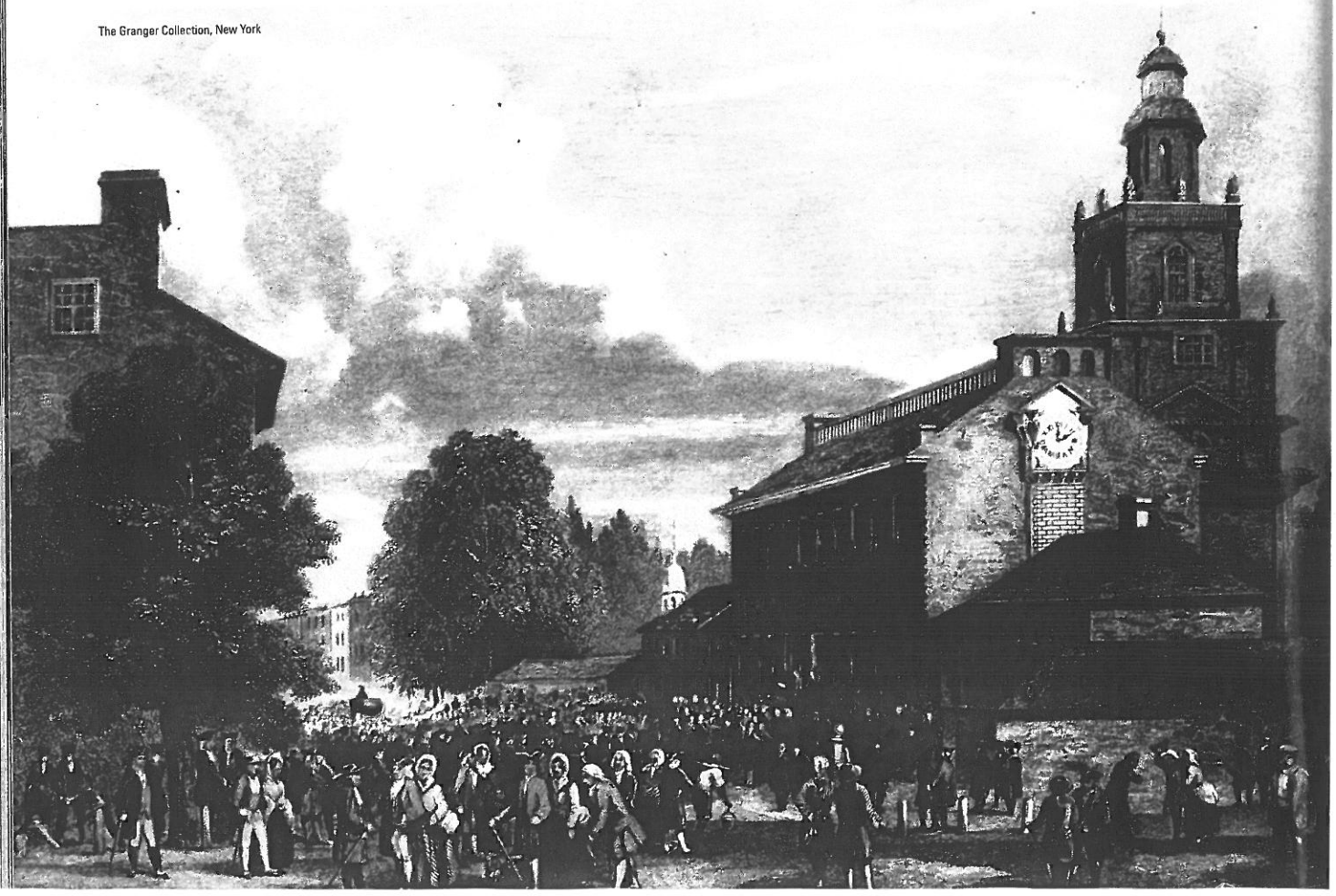
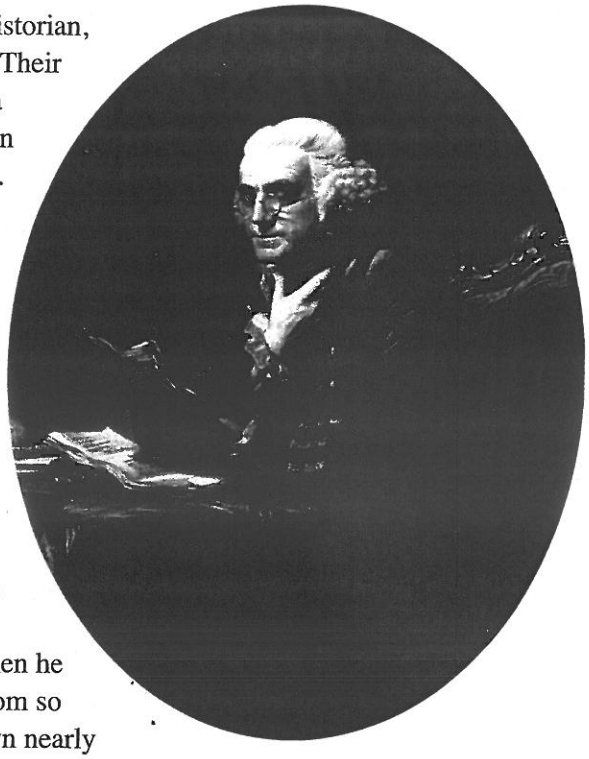


As a group, the delegates were, in the words of a modern historian, "the well-bred, the well-fed, the well-read, and the well-wed." Their average age was 42. At 81, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania was the oldest. He arrived at the convention each day in a sedan chair carried by four good-natured prisoners from a nearby jail.

Most of the delegates brought extensive political experience to the meeting. More than two thirds were lawyers. More than one in three owned slaves. Thomas Jefferson was so impressed by the ability and experience of these men that he called the convention "an assembly of demi-gods."



Benjamin Franklin, the oldest delegate to the Constitutional Convention, had doubts about the final Constitution. However, he said, "The older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment and pay more respect to the judgment of others."

The Father of the Constitution The best prepared of these "godlike" figures was James Madison of Virginia. One delegate wrote of Madison, "In the management of every great question he evidently took the lead in the Convention." Indeed, Madison's influence was so great that later he would be called the "Father of the Constitution."

Madison addressed the convention more than 200 times. When he was not speaking, he took notes. Sitting near the front of the room so that he could hear everything that was said, Madison wrote down nearly every word. When collected together, his notes covered more than 600 printed pages. From this remarkable record, we know what went on inside the convention day by day.

The Rule of Secrecy At the time, however, no one outside the convention knew what was happening. After choosing a president, the delegates voted on rules for the convention. The most important was the rule of secrecy. The delegates wanted to feel free to speak their minds without causing alarm or opposition among the general public. They agreed to keep secret whatever was said in the meeting room until their work was done.

One day Washington was handed some notes that had been dropped in the hall outside the east room. Washington pocketed the paper until the end of debate the next day. Then, in his sternest voice, he lectured the delegates on the importance of secrecy. "I know not whose paper it is," Washington said as he flung the notes on his desk. "But here it is, let him who owns it take it." The notes were never claimed. Instead, they lay on Washington's desk for days.

Like Washington, the delegates took the rule of secrecy very seriously. During that long summer, not a single word about the convention debates appeared in any newspaper.

Shared Beliefs and Clashing Views Once the convention was organized, the delegates got down to business. As a group, the delegates had much in common. But they also had very different views on many of the issues facing the new nation.

To be sure, all the delegates were committed to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. The basic purpose of government, they believed, was to protect the rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of

Enlightenment the "Age of Reason" in 17th and 18th century Europe. Enlightenment thinkers emphasized using rational thought to discover truths about nature and society.

republic a country governed by elected representatives

constitution a written plan that provides the basic framework of a government

happiness." And they agreed, in the words of the Declaration, that the "just powers" of governments came from "the consent of the governed."

In part, these beliefs reflected the liberal ideas of **Enlightenment** thinkers like England's John Locke. Human institutions, these thinkers had argued, should be based on "laws of nature." Among these laws were the rights to liberty and equality. The best way to protect these rights, the delegates agreed, was through some form of **republic**.

From New England's town meetings to lawmaking bodies like the Virginia House of Burgesses, Americans had a long tradition of participating in their own government. After the Revolution, all the states had adopted **constitutions** that embraced republican ideals. Despite many differences in details, every state had some form of representative government. States had also expanded the right to vote and to hold office. These state constitutions helped to shape the delegates' thinking.

Despite delegates' broad agreement on a government "of the people," many questions were left unanswered. For example, who exactly should have a say in a truly "representative" government? Even in liberal Pennsylvania, only free, white males could vote. Some states allowed only wealthier citizens to vote or hold office. Women could not vote in any state except New Jersey. (And New Jersey women would lose the right to vote in 1807.)

Perhaps the most troubling question of all was how powerful the national government should be. Many delegates wanted to keep government close to the people by preserving the rights of the states. They feared that a strong national government would threaten individual liberty. Others, including James Madison, argued just the opposite. Look at what has happened under the Articles of Confederation, they said. If the central government is too weak, it cannot do its job of protecting liberty and property.

As they met behind closed doors, the delegates wrestled with these and other issues. Tempers often flared. Several times it seemed that the convention might collapse in failure. But as you will see, in the end the delegates found ways to save the convention—and the nation.

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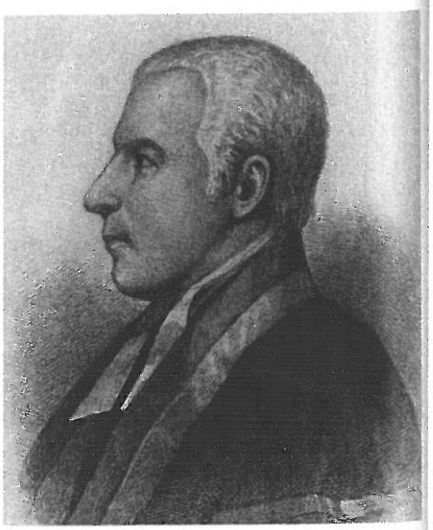

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Delegates with opposing views were Pennsylvania's James Wilson (left) and New Jersey's William Paterson (right). Wilson, one of the most vocal delegates at the convention, argued for a strong national government. Paterson tried to protect the rights of the states. Many delegates of small states shared his fear of being "swallowed up" by the larger states.