

# Resolution and Letter to Congress from the Constitutional Convention



Lee Ann Potter

**The United States Constitution** is the longest-lasting written national constitution in the world. Its four parchment pages serve as the blueprint for a government under which more than 290 million Americans live. Its brevity and eloquence have inspired many other national constitutions. It is the document that established our three branches of government (legislative, executive, and judicial). It created our bicameral legislature (the House and Senate), and ensures a balance of power in our government through a careful system of checks and balances. Nearly one million people from around the globe visit the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C., annually to see the original, signed Constitution, along with other significant documents including the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. The United States Constitution holds great significance for the American people and for others around the world. But, when it was first drafted during the summer of 1787 by 55 delegates from 12 of the 13 states, the document's future, and that of the government it established, was uncertain.<sup>1</sup>

This treasured document was then part of a six-page report that the delegates to the Philadelphia convention submitted to Congress after 87 days of deliberations. In addition to the four-page Constitution that was signed by 39 of the delegates, the report also included a resolution of the convention written on a single parchment page, and a letter of transmittal from George Washington, the president of the convention.<sup>2</sup>

Washington's letter essentially explained to Congress how and why the convention arrived at the final Constitution, rather than simply at a revision of the Articles of Confederation, as had been its original charge. The resolution explained to

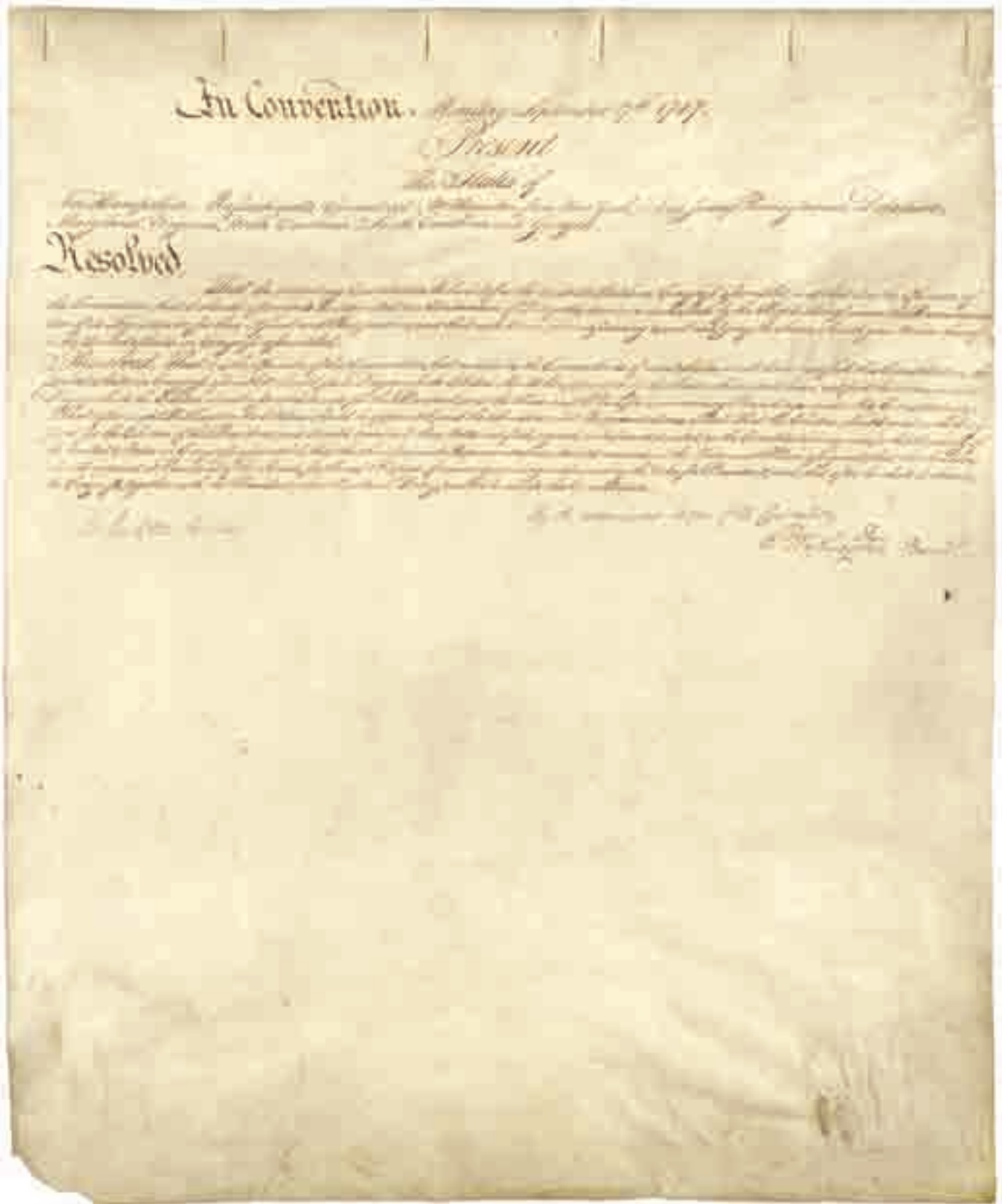
## Transcription of the Resolution

Present The States of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Mr. Hamilton from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.

Resolved, That the preceding [sic] Constitution be laid before the United States in Congress assembled, and that it is the Opinion of this Convention, that it should afterwards be submitted to a Convention of Delegates, chosen in each State by the People thereof, under the Recommendation of its Legislature, for their Assent and Ratification; and that each Convention assenting to, and ratifying the Same, should give Notice thereof to the United States in Congress assembled.

Resolved, That it is the Opinion of this Convention, that as soon as the Conventions of nine States shall have ratified this Constitution, the United States in Congress assembled should fix a Day on which the Electors should be appointed by the States which shall have ratified the same, and a Day on which the Electors should assemble to vote for the President, and the Time and Place for commencing Proceedings under this Constitution. That after such Publication the Electors should be appointed, and the Senators and Representatives elected: That the Electors should meet on the Day fixed for the Election of the President, and should transmit their Votes certified, signed, sealed and directed, as the Constitution requires, to the Secretary of the United States in Congress assembled, that the Senators and Representatives should convene at the Time and Place assigned; that the Senators should appoint a President of the Senate, for the sole Purpose of receiving, opening and counting the Votes for President; and, that after he shall be chosen, the Congress, together with the President, should, without Delay, proceed to execute this Constitution.

By the Unanimous Order of the Convention  
Go. Washington Presidt.  
W. Jackson Secretary.



In Convention, Monday September 28th 1787.

Present

The States of

Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.

Resolved

That the following be the first article of the Constitution of the United States: We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do hereby ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States in and under the Authority of the People of the United States.

Done at Philadelphia the 28th day of September 1787.

By the Convention, G. Mifflin, President.

Attest: J. Mifflin, Secretary.

## Transcription of Washington's letter

Sir. We have now the honor to submit to the consideration of the United States in Congress Assembled, that Constitution which has appeared to us the most advisable [*sic*].

The friends of our Country have long seen and desired, that the power of making war, peace and treaties, that of levying money and regulating commerce, and the correspondent executive and judicial authorities should be fully and effectually vested in the general government of the Union: but the impropriety of delegating such extensive trust to one body of men is evident. Hence results the necessity of a different organization.

It is obviously impracticable in the foederal [*sic*] government of these States, to secure all rights of independent sovereignty to each, and yet provide for the interest and safety of all. Individuals entering into society, must give up a share of liberty to preserve the rest. The magnitude of the sacrifice must depend as well on situation and circumstance, as on the object to be obtained. It is at all times difficult to draw with precision the line between those rights which must be surrendered, and those which may be reserved; and on the present occasion this difficulty was increased [*sic*] by a difference among the several States as to their situation, extent, habits, and particular interests.

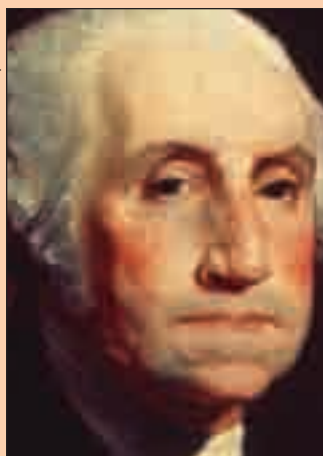
In all our deliberations on this subject we kept steadily in our view, that which appears to us the greatest interest of every true American, the consolidation of our Union, in which is involved our prosperity, felicity, safety, perhaps our national existence. This important consideration, seriously and deeply impressed on our minds, led each State in the Convention to be less rigid on points of inferior magnitude, than might have been otherwise expected; and thus the Constitution, which we now present, is the result of a spirit of amity, and of that mutual deference and concession which the peculiarity of our political situation rendered indispensable.

That it will meet the full and entire approbation of every State is not perhaps to be expected, but each will doubtless consider, that had her interests been alone consulted, the consequences might have been particularly disagreeable or injurious to others; that it is as liable to as few exceptions as could reasonably have been expected, we hope and believe; that it may promote the lasting welfare of that country so dear to us all, and secure her freedom and happiness, is our most ardent wish.

With great respect  
We have the honor to be  
Sir  
Your Excellency's  
Most Obedient and humble servts.  
George Washington, President.  
By Unanimous Order of the Convention.

His Excellency  
The President of Congress.

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Congress what the Convention delegates hoped would happen next.

Congress received the report in New York City on Thursday, September 20, 1787, three days after the delegates had signed it. It was assigned for consideration the following Wednesday. Then, the ratification process began.

### Teaching Suggestions:

1. Following a study of the convention and the resulting Constitution, remind students that the Constitutional Convention was a meeting of delegates from 12 states—that the convention was *not* the same as Congress. Explain to them that the Constitution was the final product of the convention that the delegates sent to Congress as a report. Tell students that two other documents accompanied the four-page Constitution: a letter of transmittal that explained why and how the delegates arrived at the Constitution and a resolution that explained what delegates hoped would happen next. Ask students to choose either the resolution or the letter and instruct them to draft their own. Invite volunteers to share their documents with the class.

(For an overview of the convention see “A More Perfect Union” on the National Archives website at [www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitution\\_history.html](http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitution_history.html).)

2. Provide students with a copy of the resolution and the transcription of Washington's letter. Ask them to compare the documents they drafted in activity 1 with the actual documents.

3. Ask students to conduct research on the events that occurred relative to the Constitution between September 26, 1787, and March 1789. Direct them to annotate the resolution indicating on what dates the proposed events actually occurred. In other words, ask students to find out when each state ratified the Constitution and when elections for president and the Congress were held. Ask students if they find it surprising

that the events described in the resolution played out as they did.

4. Direct students' attention to the last line of the resolution, "... the Congress, together with the President, should, without delay, proceed to execute this Constitution." Assign small groups of students to brainstorm the first five issues they think Congress and the president addressed immediately following the Constitution's ratification. Compile a list of all of the student-generated issues on the board. Provide students with a list of the acts of the First Congress (available online from the Library of Congress at [memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwslink.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwslink.html).) and ask them to identify similarities between their issues and the issues addressed by the first laws.

5. Provide students with the following list of terms: Articles of Confederation, Virginia Plan, New Jersey Plan, and the Great Compromise. Ask students

to "read between the lines" and highlight the sections of Washington's letter that refer to each term.

6. The resolution mentions by name three of the delegates: George Washington, W. (William) Jackson, and Mr. Hamilton from New York. Invite students to conduct biographical research on the three to find out the role each one played during the convention and in the early years of the republic.

7. Divide students into 13 groups and assign each one of the first 13 states. Direct the groups to conduct research into the circumstances surrounding their state's ratification of the Constitution. Instruct one representative from each group to report their findings back to the class.

8. In Washington's letter, he states, "Individuals entering into society, must give up a share of liberty to preserve

the rest." Ask students to conduct research into the work of philosophers to determine who is credited with first articulating this concept. Ask them to write a one-page explanation of what it means to them. 📄

#### Notes

1. Rhode Island did not send delegates to the convention.
2. The location of Washington's original letter is unknown. Its text was reprinted in volume 33 of the *Journal of the Continental Congress*, page 501.

The document featured in this article comes from the General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11, at the National Archives.

*Lee Ann Potter is the head of Education and Volunteer Programs at the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC. Potter serves as the editor for "Teaching With Documents," a regular department of Social Education. You may reproduce the document shown here in any quantity. For more information, contact the education staff at NARA, NWE, 700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC, 20408-0001; [education@nara.gov](mailto:education@nara.gov).*

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