

'Monday, 17th . . . Received Unanimous Vote'

Constitution of the U.S.

George Washington, suffering painfully from rheumatism in his shoulder, arrived in Philadelphia on the bright Sunday afternoon of May 13, 1787, full of foreboding for the future of people he had led to victory only six years before. What he had seen so far of the squabbling, even belligerent confederation which went under the misleading name of The United States of America had given the 55-year-old hero little reason to hope for much from the scheduled "Federal" convention.

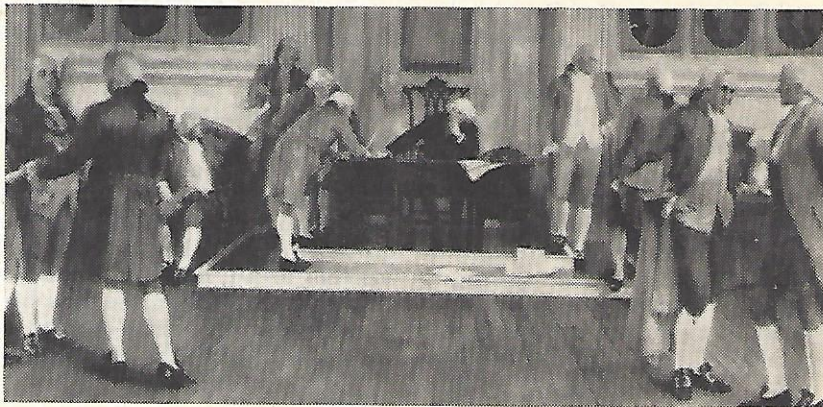
"It is too probable," he confided wearily to friends on the eve of the assembly, "that no plan we propose will be adopted. Perhaps another dreadful conflict is to be sustained . . . Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair. The event is in the hand of God."

Others shared his doubts. The 81-year-old Benjamin Franklin (so fragile that he had to be carried in a sedan chair) had written to Thomas Jefferson that: "I hope Good from their meeting. [The meeting of the delegates of the Constitutional Convention.] Indeed if it does not do Good it must do Harm, as it will show that we have not Wisdom enough among us to govern ourselves . . ."

Yet their pessimism was unfounded; this week—on Sept. 17—falls the 175th anniversary of the signing of the Constitution of the United States, the oldest written national constitution in the world.

No fireworks would be set off to mark this day, no Fourth of July oratory, no special flying of flags. The day has never called for particular observances, just as the document itself—with its cool, logical efforts to reconcile the irreconcilables of liberty and order under a practical set of checks and balances—never set fire to the imaginations of men in the way that the ringing principles of the Declaration of Independence set them aflame.

Yet, weighed as a human accomplishment, the Constitution must be ranked above the Declaration of Independence,



Signing the Constitution (by Albert Herter) : Still a momentous work

manifesting as it does the ability of free and sovereign states to bring themselves out of anarchy and into the rule of law; it has a relevance to the twentieth century of far greater magnitude.

Beginning on May 25, and barring only a ten-day recess in August, the delegates met in the high-ceilinged Assembly Room all through the long hot days of the Philadelphia summer.

Questions: Plaguing them were questions that seemed both innumerable and insurmountable: Should representatives to the Federal legislature be elected by the people or by the state legislatures? Should small states have representation equal to the large ones? And what of the Executive—should it not be a committee of three? Would not a single Executive smack of monarchy?

It was finally on Saturday, Sept. 8, that the tired assembly found itself far enough advanced to appoint a Committee of Style to put a draft into final form. (The "finish" given to the Constitution, James Madison said later, "fairly belongs to the pen of Mr. [Gouverneur] Morris.")

Line-by-line reading of the draft was begun four days later—on the 12th—and continued until 6 o'clock in the afternoon of the 15th when, after they had sat for seven hours without recess, food, or

drink, Madison was able to record: "On the question to agree to the Convention, as amended, all the states ay."

On the following Monday they gathered in the Assembly Room for the signing. Most, but not all, stepped forward to fix their signatures below that of Washington—proceeding in the traditional order of the states, from north to south.

It was later the same evening that the tall Virginian, George Washington—who had occupied the President's chair so patiently—was to sit down at his writing table and make this plain but triumphant entry in his diary: "Monday, 17th. Met in Convention, when the Constitution received the unanimous vote of eleven states and Colonel Hamilton's from New York . . . and was subscribed to by every member present except Governor Randolph and Colonel Mason from Virginia, and Mr. Gerry from Massachusetts. The business being thus closed, the Members adjourned to the City Tavern, dined together, and took cordial leave of each other; after which I returned to my lodgings, did some business with and received the papers from the Secretary of the Convention, and retired to meditate on the momentous work which had been executed . . ."