

We the People

of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, We ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.



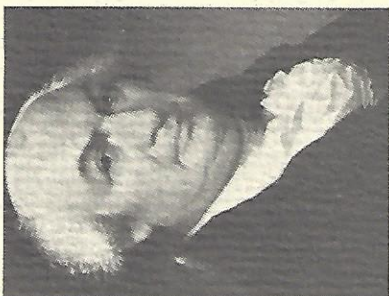
“I sincerely believe it is the best that could be obtained... and with a constitutional door opened for amendment hereafter, the adoption of it... is in my opinion desirable.”

James Madison



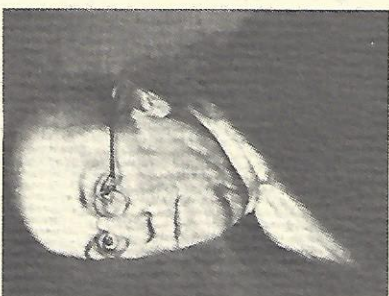
“We should consider that we are providing a Constitution for future generations and not merely for the circumstance of the moment.”

James Wilson



“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union.”

Gouverneur Morris



“I consent, Sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better and because I am not sure that it is not the best.”

John Franklin



“... What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?”

James Madison



“... What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?”

James Hamilton

GEORGE WASHINGTON 1732-1799

"First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen," George Washington, more than any other single American, was responsible for making the War of Independence a success. After the war, he worked to persuade Americans that they needed a stronger national government. By coming to Philadelphia in 1787 and presiding over the Constitutional Convention, Washington lent it his great prestige and authority. He effectively held the Convention together, and his approval and signing the Constitution was a great impetus when it came to ratification by the states. Following ratification, Washington was unanimously chosen as our first President; the Constitution went into effect with his inauguration on April 30, 1789. For two terms he governed with dignity and restraint, providing the stability and authority our emergent country needed. After John Adams became our second President, Washington returned to Mount Vernon. He was 67 when he died in 1799. In his will, he emancipated his slaves.



George Washington, 1835
oil portrait by Rembrandt Peal.
Courtesy of The New-York
Historical Society

JAMES WILSON 1742-1798

James Wilson, speaking with a Scotch burr, was one of the most vocal delegates at the Constitutional Convention. He was an effective spokesman for a strong central government and for voting in Congress proportioned to population. He also believed in the right of the people to elect their own President, Representatives, and Senators. Wilson helped frame the specific provisions of the Constitution, and was directly responsible for the provision whereby the executive power is vested in a single person. Before the Convention, he was a lawyer, a member of the Continental Congress, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. After the Convention, he worked for the ratification of the Constitution, was a law professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and a member of the first United States Supreme Court.



James Wilson
oil portrait by James Peal.
Courtesy of The Library
of Congress.

GOUVERNEUR MORRIS 1752-1816

Gouverneur Morris, because of his extraordinary writing and organizational abilities, was largely responsible for the final wording and organization of the Constitution. In fact, the preamble of the Constitution came from his fluent pen. A wealthy and successful lawyer-businessman, Morris represented Pennsylvania at the convention. Witty, brilliant, flamboyant, he was a talker who made more speeches than any other delegate. A skilled compromiser, he fought vigorously for a strong central government and for a single executive directly elected by the people. Earlier, in 1776, he helped draft New York's constitution, signed the Articles of Confederation, and was active in the Continental Congress. He later served in the U.S. Senate and was a Minister to France.



Gouverneur Morris, 1815
oil portrait by Ezra Ames.
Courtesy of The New-York
Historical Society.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN 1706-1790

At 81, Benjamin Franklin was the elder statesman and one of the most original, delightful and revered members of the Constitutional Convention. In failing health, he was carried to the Convention in a sedan chair. He was too weak to deliver his final statement and had James Wilson read it. Franklin's presence lent prestige to the Convention; his wit and wisdom served as a tension breaker. During his long life, this self-made man was a publisher, printer, essayist, author, inventor, scientist, businessman, philosopher, sage, politician, diplomat and humanitarian. As early as 1754 Franklin urged a central government for America in his plan of union at the Intercolonial Conference at Albany, New York. He was a member of Congress in 1776, and signed the Declaration of Independence. In addition, he helped to negotiate and signed the Treaty of Paris between England, France and The United States which finalized our independence from England. Because of the respect in which he was held, his name on the Constitution was a major factor in winning its ratification by the states.



Benjamin Franklin, 1785
oil portrait by Charles Wilson Peal.
Courtesy of The Library
of Congress.

JAMES MADISON 1751-1836

James Madison, the "Father of the Constitution," was one of the most thoroughly prepared and erudite members of the Convention. His leadership was influential in guiding the debates. A brilliant political philosopher, scholar and nationalist, he helped lay the groundwork for the Convention as well as the Constitution. Madison's daily detailed journal is the best single record we have of the Convention. He led the fight for ratification in Virginia, contributed twenty-six essays explaining and defending the Constitution in The Federalist. As a U.S. Representative, he helped frame and insure the passage of the Bill of Rights. Along with Thomas Jefferson, he formed the Republican Party. He also served as Secretary of State, and in 1808, he was elected the fourth President of the United States.



James Madison, 1835
oil portrait by Asher B. Durand.
Courtesy of The New-York
Historical Society

ALEXANDER HAMILTON 1755-1804

Alexander Hamilton, nicknamed "The Little Lion" because of his great courage and his short stature, was George Washington's right-hand man in war and in peace. A brilliant politician-lawyer and ardent nationalist, Hamilton wrote the report at the Annapolis Convention that was instrumental in the convening of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in May of 1787. In the Revolutionary War, Hamilton served as a Captain of Artillery, and as a Lt. Colonel of Light Infantry. He was a member of the Continental Congress, the New York Legislature, as well as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and a signer of The Federalist Papers, a series of essays explaining and defending the Constitution. He was a powerful force behind the ratification of the Constitution in New York. As the first Secretary of the Treasury he established the system of funding the national debt. Hamilton helped organize the Federalist Party. He was killed in a duel with Vice President Aaron Burr in 1804.



Alexander Hamilton, 1804
oil portrait by John Trumbull.
Courtesy of The New-York
Historical Society.