



Important Dates in U.S. Constitutional History

July 4, 1776—The Declaration of Independence is officially signed in the Pennsylvania State House (now called Independence Hall) at Philadelphia, and 13 colonies become 13 independent states.

March 1, 1781—The Articles of Confederation, a loose association of the 13 states, takes effect.

September 11, 1786—Commissioners from five states (Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York and Virginia) meet in Annapolis, Maryland, to discuss common problems under the Articles of Confederation. This Annapolis Convention becomes the prelude to the Constitutional Convention.

April 16, 1787—James Madison writes a letter to George Washington outlining the “Virginia Plan,” the blueprint of our Constitution.

May 25, 1787—The Constitutional Convention secures a quorum and convenes at Independence Hall (the very same room where the Declaration of Independence was signed) in Philadelphia for the “sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation.”

May 29, 1787—Edmund Randolph introduces the “Virginia Plan” (large-state plan).

June 15, 1787—William Patterson offers the “New Jersey Plan” (small-state plan).

July 16, 1787—The convention approves the “Connecticut Compromise” or “Great Compromise” offered by Roger Sherman.

September 17, 1787—The new Constitution is approved by 39 of the 42 delegates present (representing 12 of the 13 states) and sent to the Continental Congress, and the Convention officially adjourns.





October 5, 1787—The first in a long series of Anti-Federalist papers appears under the pseudonym “Centinel” (Samuel Bryan). Subsequent articles opposing the new Constitution included those by “Brutus” (Robert Yates) and “Cato” (George Clinton).

October 27, 1787—The first in a series of 85 Federalist essays appears under the pseudonym of “Publius” (this one written by Alexander Hamilton) supporting the new Constitution. Subsequent anonymously penned essays by Hamilton, Madison and John Jay set forth the arguments of the Constitution.

December 7, 1787—Delaware becomes the first state to ratify the new Constitution.

June 21, 1788—The Constitution becomes effective when New Hampshire becomes the ninth state to ratify the Constitution.

February 4, 1789—The first presidential election is held, but the results were not announced until April 6.

March 4, 1789—Congress convenes for the first time in New York City.

April 6, 1789—George Washington garners 69 of 69 electoral votes to become our first President and John Adams receives 34 electoral votes to become Vice President.

April 30, 1789—George Washington is sworn into office and delivers the inaugural address.

June 8, 1789—James Madison introduces a list of Constitutional amendments in Congress.

September 24, 1789—Congress enacts the Federal Judiciary Act that set the size of the Supreme Court, established three circuit courts and 13 district courts, and created the office of Attorney General.

September 25, 1789—Congress approves 12 constitutional amendments and sends them to the states for the required three-fourths approval (nine of 13 states).

February 2, 1790—The Supreme Court convenes for the first time in New York City.

December 15, 1791—The Bill of Rights (10 of the originally proposed 12 amendments) becomes law when Virginia becomes the 9th state to ratify the amendments.

Constitution Day—Senator Robert Byrd, D-West Virginia, was the driving force for Constitution Day. In 2005, Senator Byrd added a civic education amendment to an appropriations bill that subsequently became law (PL 108-447.) The law mandates that all educational institutions receiving federal funding provide annual instruction on the United States Constitution on or near September 17 (the “Constitution’s Birthday”). This year’s Hallwas Lecture is given in the spirit of the law.