**Articles of Confederation**

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| ***Articles of Confederation*** | |
| Page I of the Articles of Confederation | |
| **Created** | November 15, 1777 |
| [**Ratified**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ratification) | March 1, 1781 |
| **Location** | [National Archives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Archives_and_Records_Administration) |
| **Author(s)** | [Continental Congress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continental_Congress) |
| **Signatories** | Continental Congress |
| **Purpose** | First constitution for the United States; replaced by the current [United States Constitution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Constitution) on March 4, 1789 |

The **Articles of Confederation**, formally the **Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union**, was an agreement among the 13 founding states that established the United States of America as a confederation of sovereign states and served as its first constitution. Its drafting by the [Continental Congress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continental_Congress) began in mid-1776, and an approved version was sent to the states for ratification in late 1777. The formal ratification by all 13 states was completed in early 1781. Even when not yet ratified, the Articles provided domestic and international legitimacy for the Continental Congress to direct the [American Revolutionary War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Revolutionary_War), conduct diplomacy with Europe and deal with territorial issues and Indian relations. Nevertheless, the weak government created by the Articles became a matter of concern for key [nationalists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annapolis_Convention_(1786)). On March 4, 1789, the Articles were replaced with the [U.S. Constitution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Constitution). The new Constitution provided for a much stronger national government with a chief executive (the president), courts, and taxing powers.

**Background and context**

The political push to increase cooperation among the then-loyal colonies began with the [Albany Congress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albany_Congress) in 1754 and [Benjamin Franklin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Franklin)'s proposed [intercolonial collaboration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albany_Plan) to help solve mutual local problems themselves; the Articles of Confederation would bear some resemblance to it. Over the next two decades, some of the basic concepts it addressed would strengthen and others would weaken, particularly the degree of deserved loyalty to the crown. With [civil disobedience](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston_Tea_Party) resulting in coercive and [intolerable acts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intolerable_Acts), and [armed conflict](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Bunker_Hill) resulting in dissidents being [proclaimed rebels](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proclamation_of_Rebellion) and outside the King's protection, any loyalty remaining shifted toward independence and how to achieve it. In 1775, with events outpacing communications, the [Second Continental Congress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Continental_Congress) began acting as the [provisional government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Provisional_government) to run the [American Revolutionary War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Revolutionary_War) and gain the colonies their collective independence.

It was an era of constitution writing—most states were busy at the task—and leaders felt the new nation must have a written constitution, even though other nations did not. During the war, Congress exercised an unprecedented level of political, diplomatic, military and economic authority. It adopted trade restrictions, established and maintained an army, issued fiat money, created a military code and negotiated with foreign governments.

To transform themselves from outlaws into a legitimate nation, the colonists needed international recognition for their cause and foreign allies to support it. In early 1776, [Thomas Paine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Paine) argued in the closing pages of the first edition of [*Common Sense*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Sense_(pamphlet)) that the “custom of nations” demanded a formal declaration of American independence if any European power were to mediate a peace between the Americans and Great Britain. The monarchies of France and Spain in particular could not be expected to aid those they considered rebels against another legitimate monarch. Foreign courts needed to have American grievances laid before them persuasively in a “manifesto” which could also reassure them that the Americans would be reliable trading partners. Without such a declaration, Paine concluded, “the custom of all courts is against us, and will be so, until, by an independence, we take rank with other nations.”

Beyond improving their existing [association](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continental_Association), the records of the [Second Continental Congress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Continental_Congress) show that the need for a declaration of independence was intimately linked with the demands of international relations. On June 7, 1776, [Richard Henry Lee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Henry_Lee) introduced a resolution before the Continental Congress declaring the colonies independent; at the same time he also urged Congress to resolve “to take the most effectual measures for forming foreign Alliances” and to prepare a plan of confederation for the newly independent states. Congress then created three overlapping committees to draft the [Declaration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Declaration_of_Independence), a [Model Treaty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Model_Treaty), and the Articles of Confederation. The Declaration announced the states' entry into the international system; the model treaty was designed to establish amity and commerce with other states; and the Articles of Confederation, which established “a firm league” among the thirteen free and independent states, constituted an international agreement to set up central institutions for the conduct of vital domestic and foreign affairs.

**Drafting**



Articles of Confederation 200th Anniversary commemorative stamp

First issued in York, Penn., 1977

On June 12, 1776, a day after appointing a committee to prepare a draft of the [Declaration of Independence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Declaration_of_Independence), the Second Continental Congress resolved to appoint a committee of 13 to prepare a draft of a constitution for a union of the states. The committee met repeatedly, and chairman John Dickinson presented their results to the Congress on July 12, 1776. There were long debates on such issues as sovereignty, the exact powers to be given the confederate government, whether to have a judiciary, and voting procedures. The final draft of the Articles was prepared in the summer of 1777 and the Second Continental Congress approved them for ratification by the individual states on November 15, 1777, after a year of debate. In practice, the Articles were in use beginning in 1777; the final draft of the Articles served as the [de facto](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_facto) system of government used by the Congress ("the United States in Congress assembled") until it became [de jure](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_jure) by final ratification on March 1, 1781; at which point Congress became the [Congress of the Confederation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congress_of_the_Confederation). Under the Articles, the states retained sovereignty over all governmental functions not specifically relinquished to the national government. The individual articles set the rules for current and future operations of the United States government. It was made capable of making war and peace, negotiating diplomatic and commercial agreements with foreign countries, and deciding disputes between the states, including their additional and contested western territories. Article XIII stipulated that "their provisions shall be inviolably observed by every state" and "[the Union shall be perpetual](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perpetual_Union)". John Dickinson and Benjamin Franklin's handwritten drafts of the Articles of Confederation are housed at the National Archives in Washington, DC.

**Operation**

The Articles were created by delegates from the states in the Second Continental Congress out of a need to have "a plan of confederacy for securing the freedom, sovereignty, and independence of the United States." After the war, nationalists, especially those who had been active in the Continental Army, complained that the Articles were too weak for an effective government. There were no president, no executive agencies, no judiciary and no tax base. The absence of a tax base meant that there was no way to pay off state and national debts from the war years except by requesting money from the states, which seldom arrived.

In 1788, with the approval of Congress, the Articles were replaced by the [United States Constitution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Constitution) and the new government began operations in 1789.

**Ratification**

Congress began to move for ratification of the Articles of Confederation in 1777:

"Permit us, then, earnestly to recommend these articles to the immediate and dispassionate attention of the legislatures of the respective states. Let them be candidly reviewed under a sense of the difficulty of combining in one system the various sentiments and interests of a continent divided into so many sovereign and independent communities, under a conviction of the absolute necessity of uniting all our councils and all our strength, to maintain and defend our common liberties...

The document could not become officially effective until it was [ratified](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ratification) by all 13 colonies. The first state to ratify was [Virginia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia) on December 16, 1777.

Dates of ratification are given as follows in *American Constitutions*:

| **#** | **State** | **Date** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| !C 1 | Virginia | 01777-12-16December 16, 1777 |
| !B9993068528194 2 | South Carolina | 01778-02-05February 5, 1778 |
| !B9989013877113 3 | New York | 01778-02-06February 6, 1778 |
| !B9986137056388 4 | Rhode Island | 01778-02-09February 9, 1778 |
| !B9983905620875 5 | Connecticut | 01778-02-12February 12, 1778 |
| !B9982082405307 6 | Georgia | 01778-02-26February 26, 1778 |
| !B9980540898509 7 | New Hampshire | 01778-03-04March 4, 1778 |
| !B9979205584583 8 | Pennsylvania | 01778-03-05March 5, 1778 |
| !B9978027754226 9 | Massachusetts | 01778-03-10March 10, 1778 |
| !B9976974149070 10 | North Carolina | 01778-04-05April 5, 1778 |
| !B9976021047272 11 | New Jersey | 01778-11-19November 19, 1778 |
| !B9975150933502 12 | Delaware | 01779-02-01February 1, 1779 |
| !B9974350506425 13 | Maryland | 01781-03-01March 1, 1781 |

The ratification process dragged on for several years, stalled by the refusal of some states to rescind their claims to land in the West. [Maryland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maryland) was the last holdout; it refused to go along until [Virginia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia) and New York agreed to [cede their claims](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_cessions) in the [Ohio River](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ohio_River) Valley. It took a little over three years for all states to ratify.

The Articles provided for a blanket acceptance of [Province of Quebec](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Province_of_Quebec_(1763%E2%80%931791)) (referred to as "Canada" in the Articles) into the United States if it chose to do so. It did not, and the subsequent Constitution carried no such special provision of admission.

**Article summaries**

Even though the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution were established by many of the same people, the two documents are very different. The original five-page Articles contained a preamble, 13 articles, a conclusion, and a signatory section. The preamble states that the signatory states "agree to certain articles of Confederation and perpetual Union" between the 13 states. The following list contains short summaries of each of the 13 articles.

1. Establishes the name of the confederation with these words: "The Style of this confederacy shall be 'The United States of America.'"
2. Asserts the sovereignty of each state, except for the specific powers delegated to the confederation government, i.e. "Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every power, jurisdiction, and right, which is not by this Confederation expressly delegated."
3. Not being sovereign, it does not call the United States of America a "nation" or "government," but instead says, "The said States hereby severally enter into a firm league of friendship with each other, for their common defense, the security of their liberties, and their mutual and general welfare, binding themselves to assist each other, against all force offered to, or attacks made upon them, or any of them, on account of religion, sovereignty, trade, or any other pretense whatever."
4. But to instill a national feeling, "the better to secure and perpetuate mutual friendship and intercourse among the people of the different States in this union," it establishes [equal treatment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equality_before_the_law) and [freedom of movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_movement) for the free inhabitants of each state to pass unhindered between the states, excluding "[paupers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pauper), [vagabonds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vagabond_(person)), and [fugitives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fugitive) from justice." All these people are entitled to equal rights established by the state into which he travels. If a crime is committed in one state and the perpetrator flees to another state, he will be [extradited](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extradition) to and tried in the state in which the crime was committed.
5. Allocates one vote in the [Congress of the Confederation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congress_of_the_Confederation) (the "United States in Congress Assembled") to each state, which is entitled to a delegation of between two and seven members. Members of Congress are appointed by state legislatures. Also, individuals may not serve more than three out of any six years.
6. Only the central government is allowed to conduct foreign political or commercial relations and to declare war. No state or official may accept foreign gifts or titles, and granting any title of nobility is forbidden to all. States are restrained from forming sub-national groups. No state may tax or interfere with treaty stipulations [already proposed](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Model_Treaty). No state may engage in war, without permission of Congress, unless invaded or that is imminent on the frontier; no state may maintain a peace-time standing army or navy, unless infested by pirates, but every State is required to keep ready, a well-regulated (meaning well trained), disciplined, and equipped militia, with sufficient public stores of a due number of field pieces, tents, a proper quantity of arms, ammunition and camp equipage.
7. Whenever an army is raised for common defense, colonels and military ranks below colonel will be named by the state legislatures.
8. Expenditures by the United States of America will be paid by funds raised by state legislatures, and apportioned to the states based on the real property values of each.
9. Defines the sole and exclusive right and power of the United States in Congress assembled to determine peace and war; to exchange ambassadors; to enter into treaties and alliances, with some provisos; to establish rules for deciding all cases of captures or prizes on land or water; to grant [letters of marque and reprisal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letter_of_marque) (documents authorizing [privateers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Privateer)) in times of peace; to appoint courts for the trial of pirates and crimes committed on the high seas; to establish courts for appeals in all cases of captures, but no member of Congress may be appointed a judge; to set weights and measures (including coins), and for Congress to serve as a final court for disputes between states.
10. "The [Committee of the States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee_of_the_States), or any nine of them, shall be authorized to execute, in the recess of Congress, such of the powers of Congress as the United States in Congress assembled, by the consent of the nine States, shall from time to time think expedient to vest them with; provided that no power be delegated to the said Committee, for the exercise of which, by the Articles of Confederation, the voice of nine States in the Congress of the United States assembled be requisite."
11. If "Canada" (as the British-held [Province of Quebec](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Province_of_Quebec_(1763%E2%80%931791)) was also known) accedes to this confederation, it will be admitted.
12. Reaffirms that the Confederation accepts war debt incurred by Congress before the existence of the Articles.
13. Declares that the Articles are perpetual, and can only be altered by approval of Congress with ratification by all the state legislatures.

While still at war with Britain, the Founding Fathers were divided between those seeking a powerful, centralized national government (the "federalists"), and those seeking a loosely structured one (the "anti federalists"). Jealously guarding their new independence, members of the Continental Congress arrived at a compromise solution dividing sovereignty between the states and the central government, with a [unicameral](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unicameral) legislature that protected the liberty of the individual states. While calling on Congress to regulate military and monetary affairs, for example, the Articles of Confederation provided no mechanism with which to compel the States to comply with requests for either troops or revenue. At times, this left the military without adequate funding, supplies or even food.

**The end of the Revolutionary War**

The [Treaty of Paris (1783)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Paris_(1783)), which ended hostilities with Great Britain, languished in Congress for months because several state representatives failed to attend sessions of the national legislature to ratify it. Yet Congress had no power to enforce attendance. In September 1783, George Washington complained that Congress was paralyzed. Many revolutionaries had gone to their respective home countries after the war, and local government and self-rule seemed quite satisfactory.

**Function**

**The Army**

The Articles supported the Congressional direction of the [Continental Army](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continental_Army), and allowed the states to present a unified front when dealing with the European powers. As a tool to build a centralized war-making government, they were largely a failure: Historian Bruce Chadwick wrote:

George Washington had been one of the very first proponents of a strong federal government. The army had nearly disbanded on several occasions during the winters of the war because of the weaknesses of the Continental Congress. ... The delegates could not draft soldiers and had to send requests for regular troops and militia to the states. Congress had the right to order the production and purchase of provisions for the soldiers, but could not force anyone to supply them, and the army nearly starved in several winters of war.

The Continental Congress, before the Articles were approved, had promised soldiers a pension of half pay for life. However Congress had no power to compel the states to fund this obligation, and as the war wound down after the victory at Yorktown the sense of urgency to support the military was no longer a factor. No progress was made in Congress during the winter of 1783–84. General Henry Knox, who would later become the first [Secretary of War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secretary_of_War) under the Constitution, blamed the weaknesses of the Articles for the inability of the government to fund the army. The army had long been supportive of a strong union. Knox wrote:

The army generally have always reprobated the idea of being thirteen armies. Their ardent desires have been to be one continental body looking up to one sovereign. ... It is a favorite toast in the army, "A hoop to the barrel" or "Cement to the Union".

As Congress failed to act on the petitions, Knox wrote to Gouverneur Morris, four years before the Philadelphia Convention was convened, "As the present Constitution is so defective, why do not you great men call the people together and tell them so; that is, to have a convention of the States to form a better Constitution."

Once the war had been won, the [Continental Army](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continental_Army) was largely disbanded. A very small national force was maintained to man the frontier forts and to protect against [Native American](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_peoples_of_the_Americas) attacks. Meanwhile, each of the states had an army (or militia), and 11 of them had Navies. The wartime promises of bounties and land grants to be paid for service were not being met. In 1783, [George Washington](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Washington) defused the [Newburgh conspiracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newburgh_conspiracy), but riots by unpaid [Pennsylvania](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pennsylvania) veterans forced Congress to leave Philadelphia temporarily.

The Congress from time to time during the Revolutionary War requisitioned troops from the states. Any contributions were voluntary, and in the debates of 1788 the Federalists (who supported the proposed new Constitution) claimed that state politicians acted unilaterally, and contributed when the Continental army protected their state's interests. The Anti-Federalists claimed that state politicians understood their duty to the Union and contributed to advance its needs. Dougherty (2009) concludes that generally the States' behavior validated the Federalist analysis. This helps explain why the Articles of Confederation needed reforms.

**Foreign policy**

Even after peace had been achieved in 1783, the weakness of the Confederation government frustrated the ability of the government to conduct foreign policy. In 1789, [Thomas Jefferson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Jefferson), concerned over the failure to fund an American naval force to confront the [Barbary pirates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbary_Coast), wrote to [James Monroe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Monroe), "It will be said there is no money in the treasury. There never will be money in the treasury till the Confederacy shows its teeth. The states must see the rod.”

Furthermore, the [Jay–Gardoqui Treaty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay%E2%80%93Gardoqui_Treaty) with [Spain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spain) in 1789 also showed weakness in foreign policy. In this treaty — which was never ratified due to its immense unpopularity — the United States was to give up rights to use the [Mississippi River](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mississippi_River) for 25 years, which would have economically strangled the settlers west of the [Appalachian Mountains](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appalachian_Mountains). Finally, due to the Confederation's military weakness, it could not compel the [British army](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_army) to leave frontier forts which were on American soil — forts which, in 1783, the British promised to leave, but which they delayed leaving pending U.S. implementation of other provisions such as ending action against [Loyalists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loyalist_(American_Revolution)) and allowing them to seek compensation. This incomplete British implementation of the [Treaty of Paris (1783)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Paris_(1783)) was superseded by the implementation of [Jay's Treaty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay%27s_Treaty) in 1795 under the new [U.S. Constitution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Constitution).

**Taxation and commerce**

Under the Articles of Confederation, the central government's power was kept quite limited. The Confederation Congress could make decisions, but lacked enforcement powers. Implementation of most decisions, including modifications to the Articles, required unanimous approval of all thirteen state legislatures.

Congress was denied any powers of [taxation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taxation): it could only request money from the states. The states often failed to meet these requests in full, leaving both Congress and the Continental Army chronically short of money. As more money was printed by Congress, the continental dollars depreciated. In 1779, George Washington wrote to [John Jay](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Jay), who was serving as the president of the Continental Congress, "that a wagon load of money will scarcely purchase a wagon load of provisions." Mr. Jay and the Congress responded in May by requesting $45 million from the States. In an appeal to the States to comply, Jay wrote that the taxes were "the price of liberty, the peace, and the safety of yourselves and posterity." He argued that Americans should avoid having it said "that America had no sooner become independent than she became insolvent" or that "her infant glories and growing fame were obscured and tarnished by broken contracts and violated faith." The States did not respond with any of the money requested from them.

Congress had also been denied the power to regulate either foreign trade or [interstate commerce](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interstate_commerce) and, as a result, all of the States maintained control over their own trade policies. The states and the Confederation Congress both incurred large debts during the Revolutionary War, and how to repay those debts became a major issue of debate following the War. Some States paid off their war debts and others did not. Federal assumption of the states' war debts became a major issue in the deliberations of the Constitutional Convention.

**Accomplishments of the Confederation**

Nevertheless, the Confederation Congress did take two actions with long lasting impact. The [Land Ordinance of 1785](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_Ordinance_of_1785) and [Northwest Ordinance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northwest_Ordinance) created territorial government, set up protocols for the admission of new states, the division of land into useful units, and set aside land in each township for public use. This system represented a sharp break from imperial colonization, as in Europe, and provided the basis for the rest of American continental expansion through the 19th Century.

The [Land Ordinance of 1785](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_Ordinance_of_1785) established both the general practices of land surveying in the west and northwest and the land ownership provisions used throughout the later westward expansion beyond the [Mississippi River](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mississippi_River). Frontier lands were surveyed into the now-familiar squares of land called the [township](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Township) (36 square miles), the [section](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Section_(United_States_land_surveying)) (one square mile), and the quarter section (160 [acres](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acre)). This system was carried forward to most of the States west of the Mississippi (excluding areas of [Texas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texas) and [California](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California) that had already been surveyed and divided up by the [Spanish Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Empire)). Then, when the [Homestead Act](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homestead_Act) was enacted in 1867, the quarter section became the basic unit of land that was granted to new settler-farmers.

The [Northwest Ordinance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northwest_Ordinance) of 1787 noted the agreement of the original states to give up [northwestern land claims](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/State_cessions), organized the [Northwest Territory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northwest_Territory) and thus cleared the way for the entry of five new states, and part of a sixth to the Union. To be specific, [Massachusetts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massachusetts), [Connecticut](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Connecticut), [New York](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York), [Pennsylvania](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pennsylvania), and [Virginia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia) gave up all of their claims to land north of the [Ohio River](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ohio_River) and west of the (present) western border of Pennsylvania. Over several decades a number of new states were formed from this land: [Ohio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ohio), [Indiana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indiana), [Illinois](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illinois), [Michigan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michigan), and [Wisconsin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wisconsin), and the part of [Minnesota](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minnesota) east of the Mississippi River. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 also made great advances in the abolition of slavery. New states admitted to the union in said territory would never be slave states.

**America under the articles**

The peace treaty left the United States independent and at peace but with an unsettled governmental structure. The Articles envisioned a permanent confederation, but granted to the Congress—the only federal institution—little power to finance itself or to ensure that its resolutions were enforced. There was no president and no national court. Although historians generally agree that the Articles were too weak to hold the fast-growing nation together, they do give credit to the settlement of the western issue, as the states voluntarily turned over their lands to national control.

By 1783, with the end of the British blockade, the new nation was regaining its prosperity. However, trade opportunities were restricted by the mercantilism of the British and French empires. The ports of the British West Indies were closed to all staple products which were not carried in British ships. France and Spain established similar policies. Simultaneously, new manufacturers faced sharp competition from British products which were suddenly available again. Political unrest in several states and efforts by debtors to use popular government to erase their debts increased the anxiety of the political and economic elites which had led the Revolution. The apparent inability of the Congress to redeem the public obligations (debts) incurred during the war, or to become a forum for productive cooperation among the states to encourage commerce and economic development, only aggravated a gloomy situation. In 1786–87, [Shays' Rebellion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shays%27_Rebellion), an uprising of farmers in western Massachusetts against the state court system, threatened the stability of state government.

The Continental Congress printed paper money which was so depreciated that it ceased to pass as currency, spawning the expression "not worth a continental". Congress could not levy taxes and could only make requisitions upon the States. Less than a million and a half dollars came into the treasury between 1781 and 1784, although the governors had been asked for two million in 1783 alone.

When Adams went to London in 1785 as the first representative of the United States, he found it impossible to secure a treaty for unrestricted commerce. Demands were made for favors and there was no assurance that individual states would agree to a treaty. Adams stated it was necessary for the States to confer the power of passing navigation laws to Congress, or that the States themselves pass retaliatory acts against Great Britain. Congress had already requested and failed to get power over navigation laws. Meanwhile, each State acted individually against Great Britain to little effect. When other New England states closed their ports to British shipping, Connecticut hastened to profit by opening its ports.

By 1787 Congress was unable to protect manufacturing and shipping. State legislatures were unable or unwilling to resist attacks upon private contracts and public credit. Land speculators expected no rise in values when the government could not defend its borders nor protect its frontier population.

The idea of a convention to revise the Articles of Confederation grew in favor. [Alexander Hamilton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Hamilton) realized while serving as Washington's top aide that a strong central government was necessary to avoid foreign intervention and allay the frustrations due to an ineffectual Congress. Hamilton led a group of like-minded nationalists, won Washington's endorsement, and convened the [Annapolis Convention](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annapolis_Convention_(1786)) in 1786 to petition Congress to call a constitutional convention to meet in Philadelphia to remedy the long-term crisis.

**Signatures**

The Second Continental Congress approved the Articles for distribution to the states on November 15, 1777. A copy was made for each state and one was kept by the [Congress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continental_Congress). The copies sent to the states for ratification were unsigned, and a cover letter had only the signatures of [Henry Laurens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Laurens) and [Charles Thomson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Thomson), who were the [President](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_the_Continental_Congress) and Secretary to the Congress.

The *Articles*, however, were unsigned, and the date was blank. Congress began the signing process by examining their copy of the *Articles* on June 27, 1778. They ordered a final copy prepared (the one in the National Archives), and that delegates should inform the secretary of their authority for ratification.

On July 9, 1778, the prepared copy was ready. They dated it, and began to sign. They also requested each of the remaining states to notify its delegation when ratification was completed. On that date, delegates present from [New Hampshire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Hampshire), [Massachusetts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massachusetts), [Rhode Island](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhode_Island), [Connecticut](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Connecticut), [New York](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York), [Pennsylvania](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pennsylvania), [Virginia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia) and [South Carolina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Carolina) signed the Articles to indicate that their states had ratified. [New Jersey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Jersey), [Delaware](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delaware) and [Maryland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maryland) could not, since their states had not ratified. [North Carolina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Carolina) and [Georgia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgia_(U.S._state)) also didn't sign that day, since their delegations were absent.

After the first signing, some delegates signed at the next meeting they attended. For example, John Wentworth of New Hampshire added his name on August 8. John Penn was the first of North Carolina's delegates to arrive (on July 10), and the delegation signed the *Articles* on July 21, 1778.

The other states had to wait until they ratified the *Articles* and notified their Congressional delegation. Georgia signed on July 24, New Jersey on November 26, and Delaware on February 12, 1779. Maryland refused to ratify the *Articles* until every state had ceded its western land claims.



The Act of the Maryland legislature to ratify the Articles of Confederation on February 2, 1781

On February 2, 1781, the much-awaited decision was taken by the [Maryland General Assembly](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maryland_General_Assembly) in [Annapolis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annapolis). As the last piece of business during the afternoon Session, "among engrossed Bills" was "signed and sealed by Governor [Thomas Sim Lee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Sim_Lee) in the Senate Chamber, in the presence of the members of both Houses... an Act to empower the delegates of this state in Congress to subscribe and ratify the articles of confederation" and perpetual union among the states. The Senate then adjourned "to the first Monday in August next." The decision of Maryland to ratify the Articles was reported to the Continental Congress on February 12. The formal signing of the *Articles* by the Maryland delegates took place in Philadelphia at noon time on March 1, 1781 and was celebrated in the afternoon. With these events, the Articles entered into force and the United States came into being as a united, sovereign and national state.

Congress had debated the *Articles* for over a year and a half, and the ratification process had taken nearly three and a half years. Many participants in the original debates were no longer delegates, and some of the signers had only recently arrived. The *Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union* were signed by a group of men who were never present in the Congress at the same time.

**Signers**

The signers and the states they represented were:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| [**Connecticut**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Connecticut)   * [Roger Sherman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Sherman) * [Samuel Huntington](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Huntington_(statesman)) * [Oliver Wolcott](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oliver_Wolcott) * [Titus Hosmer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Titus_Hosmer) * [Andrew Adams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Adams_(congressman))   [**Delaware**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delaware)   * [Thomas McKean](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_McKean) * [John Dickinson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dickinson_(delegate)) * [Nicholas Van Dyke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicholas_Van_Dyke_(governor))   [**Georgia**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgia_(U.S._state))   * [John Walton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Walton_(1738%E2%80%931783)) * [Edward Telfair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Telfair) * [Edward Langworthy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Langworthy) | [**Maryland**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maryland)   * [John Hanson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Hanson) * [Daniel Carroll](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Carroll)   [**Massachusetts Bay**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massachusetts)   * [John Hancock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Hancock) * [Samuel Adams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Adams) * [Elbridge Gerry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elbridge_Gerry) * [Francis Dana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Dana) * [James Lovell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Lovell_(delegate)) * [Samuel Holten](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Holten)   [**New Hampshire**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Hampshire)   * [Josiah Bartlett](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josiah_Bartlett) * [John Wentworth Jr.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wentworth_Jr.) | [**New Jersey**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Jersey)   * [John Witherspoon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Witherspoon) * [Nathaniel Scudder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Scudder)   [**New York**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_State)   * [James Duane](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Duane) * [Francis Lewis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Lewis) * [William Duer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Duer_(delegate)) * [Gouverneur Morris](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gouverneur_Morris)   [**North Carolina**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Carolina)   * [John Penn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Penn_(delegate)) * [Cornelius Harnett](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornelius_Harnett) * [John Williams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Williams_(delegate)) | [**Pennsylvania**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pennsylvania)   * [Robert Morris](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Morris_(merchant)) * [Daniel Roberdeau](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Roberdeau) * [Jonathan Bayard Smith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Bayard_Smith) * [William Clingan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Clingan) * [Joseph Reed](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Reed_(jurist))   [**Rhode Island and Providence Plantations**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhode_Island)   * [William Ellery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Ellery) * [Henry Marchant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Marchant) * [John Collins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Collins_(delegate)) | [**South Carolina**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Carolina)   * [Henry Laurens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Laurens) * [William Henry Drayton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Henry_Drayton) * [John Mathews](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Mathews_(lawyer)) * [Richard Hutson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Hutson) * [Thomas Heyward Jr.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Heyward_Jr.)   [**Virginia**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia)   * [Richard Henry Lee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Henry_Lee) * [John Banister](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Banister_(lawyer)) * [Thomas Adams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Adams_(politician)) * [John Harvie](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Harvie) * [Francis Lightfoot Lee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Lightfoot_Lee) |

Roger Sherman (Connecticut) was the only person to sign all four great state papers of the United States: the [Continental Association](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Continental_Association), the [United States Declaration of Independence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Declaration_of_Independence), the Articles of Confederation and the United States Constitution.

Robert Morris (Pennsylvania) was the only person besides Sherman to sign three of the great state papers of the United States: the [United States Declaration of Independence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Declaration_of_Independence), the Articles of Confederation and the United States Constitution.

John Dickinson (Delaware), Daniel Carroll (Maryland) and Gouverneur Morris (New York), along with Sherman and Robert Morris, were the only five people to sign both the Articles of Confederation and the United States Constitution (Gouverneur Morris represented Pennsylvania when signing the Constitution).

**Presidents of the Congress**

The following list is of those who led the [Congress of the Confederation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congress_of_the_Confederation) under the *Articles of Confederation* as the [Presidents of the United States in Congress Assembled](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_the_United_States_in_Congress_Assembled). Under the Articles, the president was the presiding officer of Congress, chaired the [Committee of the States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee_of_the_States) when Congress was in recess, and performed other administrative functions. He was not, however, an executive in the way the successor [President of the United States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_the_United_States) is a chief executive, since all of the functions he executed were under the direct control of Congress.

| **President of Congress** | **Office Start** | **Office Exit** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| [Samuel Huntington](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Huntington_(statesman)) | March 1, 1781 | July 9, 1781 |
| [Thomas McKean](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_McKean) | July 10, 1781 | November 4, 1781 |
| [John Hanson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Hanson) | November 5, 1781 | November 3, 1782 |
| [Elias Boudinot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elias_Boudinot) | November 4, 1782 | November 2, 1783 |
| [Thomas Mifflin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Mifflin) | November 3, 1783 | October 31, 1784 |
| [Richard Henry Lee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Henry_Lee) | November 30, 1784 | November 6, 1785 |
| [John Hancock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Hancock) | November 23, 1785 | May 29, 1786 |
| [Nathaniel Gorham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Gorham) | June 6, 1786 | November 5, 1786 |
| [Arthur St. Clair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_St._Clair) | February 2, 1787 | November 4, 1787 |
| [Cyrus Griffin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyrus_Griffin) | January 22, 1788 | November 2, 1788 |

*For a full list of Presidents of the Congress Assembled and Presidents under the two Continental Congresses before the Articles, see* [*President of the Continental Congress*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_the_Continental_Congress)*.*

**Gallery**



Articles of Confederation, page 1



Articles of Confederation, page 2



Articles of Confederation, page 3



Articles of Confederation, page 4



Articles of Confederation, page 5

**Revision and replacement**

On January 21, 1786, the Virginia Legislature, following [James Madison's](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Madison) recommendation, invited all the states to send delegates to Annapolis, Maryland to discuss ways to reduce interstate conflict. At what came to be known as the [Annapolis Convention](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annapolis_Convention_(1786)), the few state delegates in attendance endorsed a motion that called for all states to meet in [Philadelphia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philadelphia) in May 1787 to discuss ways to improve the Articles of Confederation in a "Grand Convention." Although the states' representatives to the [Constitutional Convention](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitutional_Convention_(United_States)) in Philadelphia were only authorized to amend the Articles, the representatives held secret, closed-door sessions and wrote a new constitution. The new Constitution gave much more power to the central government, but characterization of the result is disputed. The general goal of the authors was to get close to a [republic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic) as defined by the philosophers of the [Age of Enlightenment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment), while trying to address the many difficulties of the interstate relationships. Historian Forrest McDonald, using the ideas of James Madison from *Federalist 39*, describes the change this way:

The constitutional reallocation of powers created a new form of government, unprecedented under the sun. Every previous national authority either had been centralized or else had been a confederation of sovereign states. The new American system was neither one nor the other; it was a mixture of both.

In May 1786, [Charles Pinckney](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Pinckney_(governor)) of [South Carolina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Carolina) proposed that Congress revise the Articles of Confederation. Recommended changes included granting [Congress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Congress) power over foreign and domestic commerce, and providing means for Congress to collect money from state treasuries. Unanimous approval was necessary to make the alterations, however, and Congress failed to reach a consensus. The weakness of the Articles in establishing an effective unifying government was underscored by the threat of internal conflict both within and between the states, especially after [Shays' Rebellion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shays%27_Rebellion) threatened to topple the state government of Massachusetts.

Historian Ralph Ketcham comments on the opinions of [Patrick Henry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrick_Henry), [George Mason](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Mason), and other [antifederalists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Federalism) who were not so eager to give up the local autonomy won by the revolution:

Antifederalists feared what Patrick Henry termed the "consolidated government" proposed by the new Constitution. They saw in Federalist hopes for commercial growth and international prestige only the lust of ambitious men for a "splendid empire" that, in the time-honored way of empires, would oppress the people with taxes, conscription, and military campaigns. Uncertain that any government over so vast a domain as the United States could be controlled by the people, Antifederalists saw in the enlarged powers of the general government only the familiar threats to the rights and liberties of the people.

Historians have given many reasons for the perceived need to replace the articles in 1787. Jillson and Wilson (1994) point to the financial weakness as well as the norms, rules and institutional structures of the Congress, and the propensity to divide along sectional lines.

Rakove (1988) identifies several factors that explain the collapse of the Confederation. The lack of compulsory direct taxation power was objectionable to those wanting a strong centralized state or expecting to benefit from such power. It could not collect customs after the war because tariffs were vetoed by [Rhode Island](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhode_Island). Rakove concludes that their failure to implement national measures "stemmed not from a heady sense of independence but rather from the enormous difficulties that all the states encountered in collecting taxes, mustering men, and gathering supplies from a war-weary populace." The second group of factors Rakove identified derived from the substantive nature of the problems the Continental Congress confronted after 1783, especially the inability to create a strong foreign policy. Finally, the Confederation's lack of coercive power reduced the likelihood for profit to be made by political means, thus potential rulers were uninspired to seek power.

When the war ended in 1783, certain special interests had incentives to create a new "merchant state," much like the British state people had rebelled against. In particular, holders of war scrip and land speculators wanted a central government to pay off scrip at face value and to legalize western land holdings with disputed claims. Also, manufacturers wanted a high tariff as a barrier to foreign goods, but competition among states made this impossible without a central government.

Political scientist David C. Hendrickson writes that two prominent political leaders in the Confederation, [John Jay](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Jay) of New York and [Thomas Burke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Burke_(governor)) of North Carolina believed that "the authority of the congress rested on the prior acts of the several states, to which the states gave their voluntary consent, and until those obligations were fulfilled, neither nullification of the authority of congress, exercising its due powers, nor secession from the compact itself was consistent with the terms of their original pledges."

**Closing down**

According to their own terms for modification (Article XIII), the Articles would still have been in effect until 1790, the year in which the last of the 13 states ratified the new Constitution. The Congress under the Articles continued to sit until November 1788, overseeing the adoption of the new Constitution by the states, and setting elections. By that date, 11 of the 13 states had ratified the new Constitution. On September 13, 1788, it published an announcement that the new Constitution had been ratified by the necessary nine states, set the first Wednesday in February 1789 for the presidential electors to meet and select a new president, and set the first Wednesday of March 1789 as the day the new government would take over and the government under the Articles of Confederation would come to an end. On that same September 13, it determined that New York would remain the national capital.

**See also**

* [History of the United States (1776–1789)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_United_States_(1776%E2%80%931789))
* [Perpetual Union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perpetual_Union)
* [U.S. Constitution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Constitution)
* This page was last modified on 15 March 2013 at 17:28.