

Unit: The Constitution & A New Nation

Lesson: The Articles of Confederation

Name _____

A New Country is Born



Opening of the first meeting of the Continental Congress c.1860

The American Revolution ended in 1783 with the signing of the Treaty of Paris, and the United States had gained its freedom from Great Britain. However, the government of the United States began to take shape before the war ended. Some state **constitutions** were already written, and the **Continental Congress** was established in 1774. The Continental Congress included one representative from each of the thirteen states. During this time

period, state governments had more power than the Continental Congress, and most colonists were afraid of having a strong central government. The members of the Continental Congress decided the **federal** government needed written rules for how it was structured and would function. As a result, the **Articles of Confederation** were passed in November 1777. However, they would not be ratified by all states until March 1781.

The First US Constitution is Written

The Articles of Confederation became the first national constitution of the United States, and the **Confederation Congress** was established. The Confederation Congress was a national **legislative** body that had the power to make foreign alliances and treaties, print money, establish a postal service, resolve disputes between states, manage Native American relations, maintain the army and navy, and declare war. States retained their sovereignty, or power to govern themselves, and kept every right not specifically given to Congress. The United States became a **confederation** of states trying to work together, with the states maintaining their power and independence.



Map of the United States c.1784

Strengths of the Articles of Confederation

Even though the Articles of Confederation eventually failed, there were some successes. Congress signed a treaty with France in 1778 for war support; the Treaty of Paris was negotiated and signed in 1783; the United States gained independence from Great Britain with a victory in the American Revolution; the Departments of Foreign Affairs, War, Marine, and Treasury were established; and the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 laid the foundation for

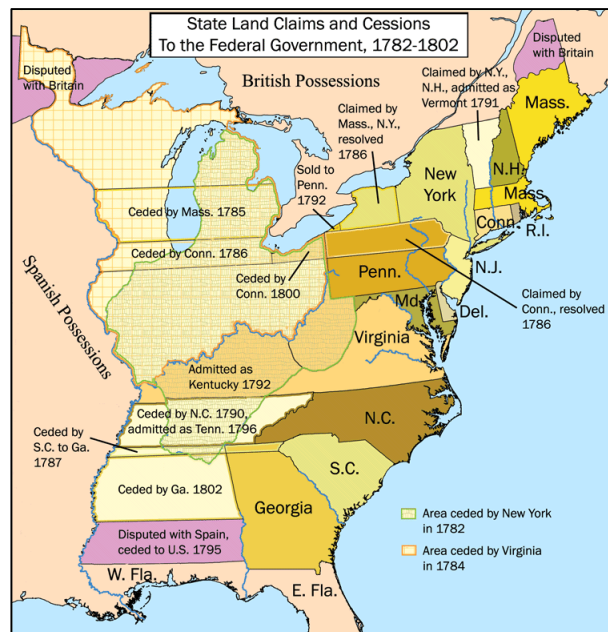
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westward expansion, slavery limits, public education, and the path to statehood.



Example tract of land subdivided c.1798

would then sell the land to settlers who wanted to move west. Not only did the Land Ordinance of 1785 generate funds to pay off the war debt, the United States was also able to acquire funds to establish public schools, build roads, and pay for military protection.

In 1787, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was passed. This allowed settlement in the Northwest Territory. This region was west of the Ohio River and included the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley regions. Eventually this territory would become the states of Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Illinois. Slavery was banned in this region, and freedom of religion was guaranteed. Like the Land Ordinance of 1785, the Northwest Ordinance placed importance on public education. Children were now encouraged to attend school, and children began to learn more than just reading and spelling.

Because there wasn't an already existing government, the Northwest Ordinance created a government for the territory. Congress appointed a governor, secretary, and three judges to preside over it. The ordinance also established the requirements for statehood. Once a territory reached a population of 5,000 free

The United States received a large amount of western land after the American Revolution. States ceded their claims to these lands in exchange for the central government forgiving their Revolutionary War debts. The Confederation Congress then wanted to sell these lands to pay off its own war debt, so Congress passed the Land Ordinance of 1785. The Western Territory was divided into townships that were six square miles each. Each township was subdivided into 36 sections. Each of these sections was one square mile, or 640 acres. These sections were then sold at an auction for \$1 per acre, so the minimum price for one section would be \$640. Most of the buyers were land speculators who



Northwest Territory in 1787

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male adults, it could elect a representative legislature. Once the population reached 60,000 free people, it could apply for statehood. The Northwest Territory could become either 3, 4, or 5 states. Ohio became the first state under this new system. The Northwest Ordinance allowed new states to be admitted to the country as equal members of the original thirteen states.

Despite the positive outcomes of the ordinances, there were groups whose rights were ignored. Individuals who were not wealthy were largely unable to purchase land in the territories, and the Native Americans' tribal lands were taken.

Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation

Despite the successes of the Articles of Confederation, there were problems. The central government was weak. Congress could not pass or levy taxes. It also could not regulate foreign or domestic trade. There was not an accepted national currency, which contributed to the economic crisis of the new country.

Even though the Articles of Confederation established a federal government, the central government was not given much power. All states received one vote in Congress despite the size and population of the state. States with higher populations had more representatives, but they had to share one vote. This caused problems when there were major disagreements among the representatives. Another weakness was all thirteen state votes had to agree on any changes to the Articles of Confederation. A unanimous decision would be very difficult because states were more concerned with what benefited themselves and not what was best for the new country. Nine of the thirteen state votes had to approve new laws, but there was not an executive branch to enforce these laws. If a state did not want to follow a federal law, it did not have to because the states held more power than the federal government. There also was not a national judicial branch to protect the rights of US citizens. The Articles of Confederation prevented a federal government that was similar to a monarchy, but because states could act in their own best interest, the country suffered.

The economy of the new country was also in danger. Although Congress had the power to print money, it did not have the authority to levy or collect taxes. This was a problem because the war debt was growing, and the federal government did not have a way to raise funds to pay the war debt or army. Colonists paid taxes to the state, so Congress had to ask the states for money to pay for the war. However, the states were also in debt, so most did not send money. Each state also retained the

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Meeting of the Continental Congress c.1782

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right to print its own money, so states continued to print their own money. States did not always accept another state's currency or even the national currency. The lack of an accepted national currency hurt the economy of the individual states as well as the country.

Another weakness that led to the economic crisis was that Congress could not regulate or interfere with foreign and domestic trade. Towards the end of the American Revolution and following the war, Great Britain restricted trade with the United States and banned trade with its West Indies colonies. Great Britain also manufactured goods and sold them at a cheaper price to American states, making it harder for the states to sell American-made goods to one another. States traded in ways that benefited themselves, and often states were in competition with each other instead of working together.



Shays and his group are fired upon by Massachusetts militia.

Many colonists became angry with the rising debt and economic problems of the new country. In 1786, Shays' Rebellion occurred in western Massachusetts. Massachusetts had raised taxes on the land in order to pay off its war debts. Farmers were greatly impacted because they usually owned a lot of land. If someone was not able to pay the increased

taxes, he had to either give up his land or go to jail. Daniel Shays was a former Continental Army captain and farmer. He joined with other farmers and marched on a federal arsenal where weapons were stored. Massachusetts asked for federal help, but Congress did not have the authority to intervene. The Massachusetts militia was finally able to end the rebellion, but it was clear the federal government needed more power if a group of farmers could start a rebellion.

Leaders of the United States called for a meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The **Constitutional Convention** met on May 25, 1787, and George Washington was elected the president of the Constitutional Convention. They had met to amend the Articles of Confederation. However, instead of changing the Articles of Confederation, the U.S. Constitution was written.



George Washington at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 c.1856

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