

In a small hotel in Paris, three Americans took turns with a quill pen and red wax, signing and sealing an official document. It was September 3, 1783, and these men — John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and John Jay — were signing the peace treaty that ended the war between England and its American Colonies. The Revolutionary War was over, and the United States of America was now truly free. But although eight years of conflict had ended, America's internal struggles were just starting. Let us begin by returning to the year 1776....

THE NEW NATION IN TROUBLE

by Craig E. Blohm

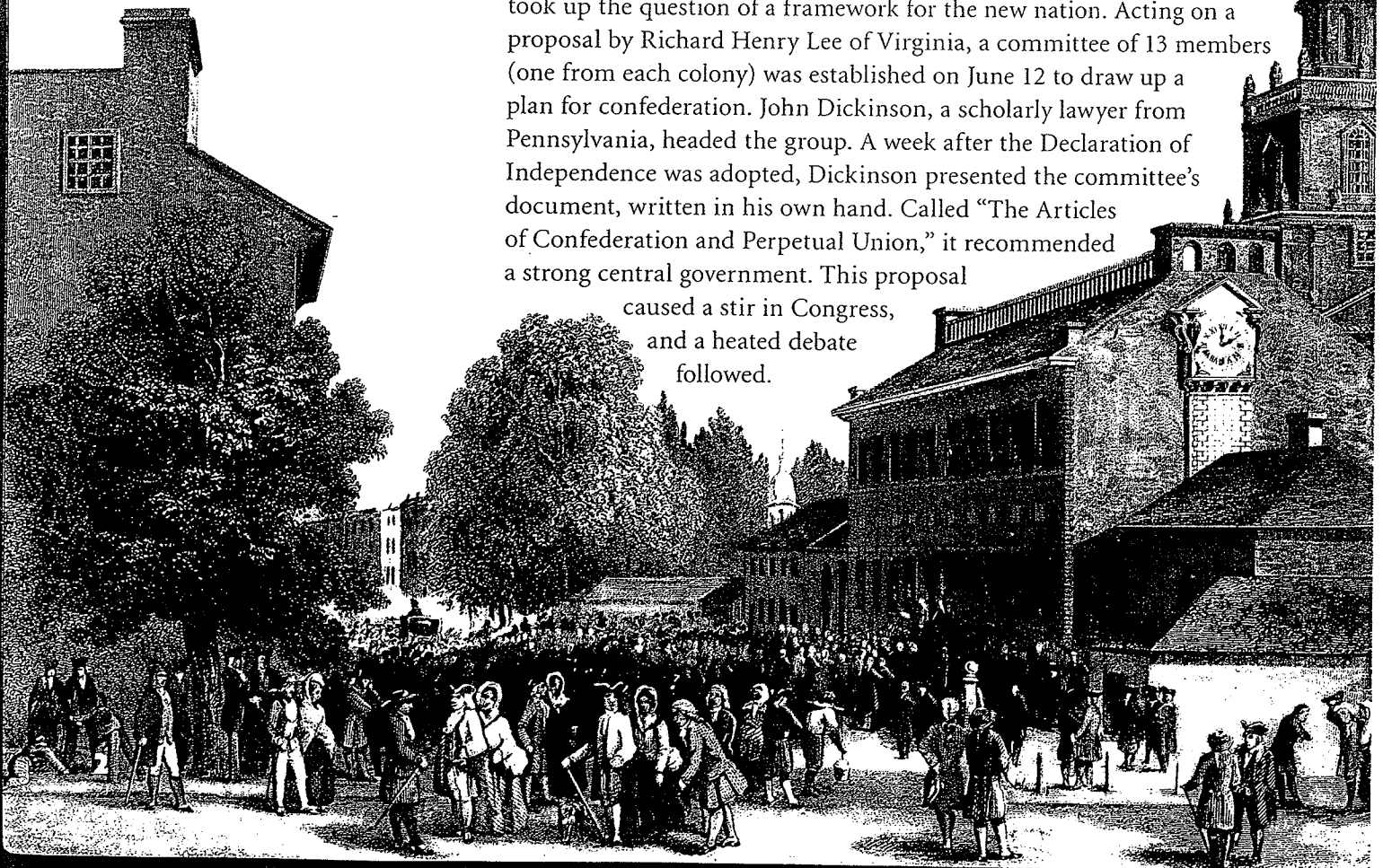
In 1787, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention spent four hot months behind the closed windows of the Pennsylvania State House, later dubbed Independence Hall.

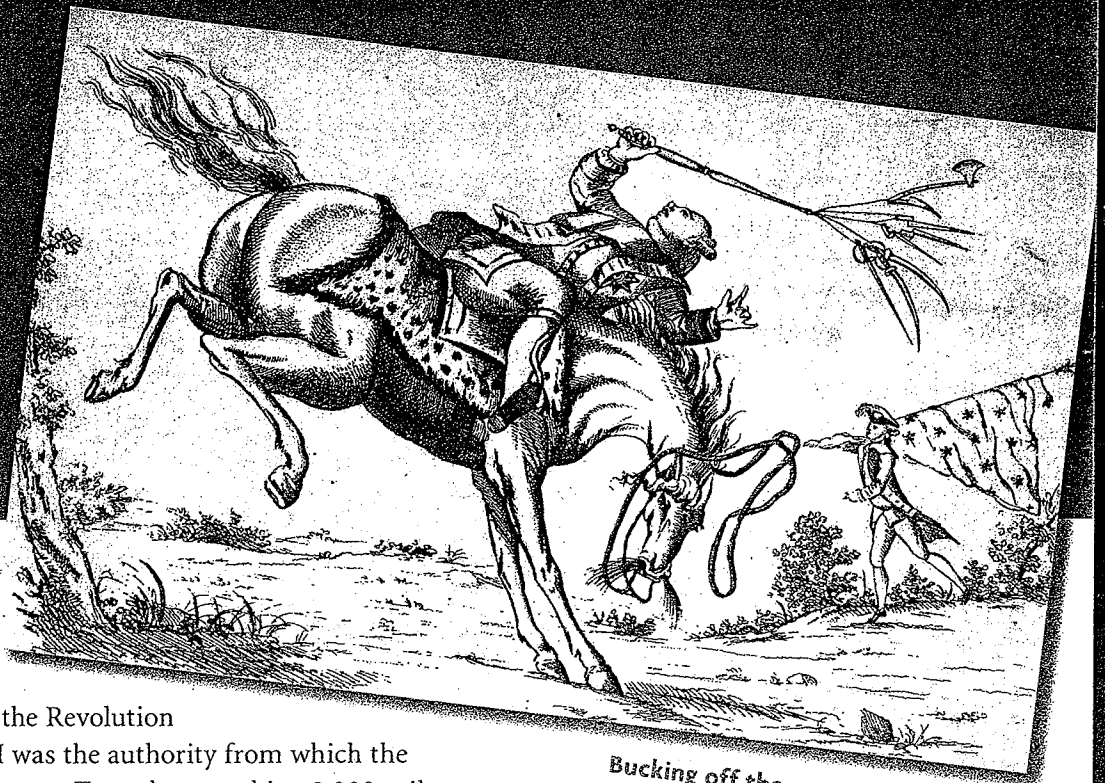
The Articles of Confederation

The 13 Colonies were not without some form of government during the Revolution. It had become clear that to pursue a war against England, some unifying element was necessary. Many Colonial leaders also anticipated the day when the war would be over and the new states would have to govern themselves.

Meeting in Philadelphia in 1776, the Second Continental Congress took up the question of a framework for the new nation. Acting on a proposal by Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, a committee of 13 members (one from each colony) was established on June 12 to draw up a plan for confederation. John Dickinson, a scholarly lawyer from Pennsylvania, headed the group. A week after the Declaration of Independence was adopted, Dickinson presented the committee's document, written in his own hand. Called "The Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union," it recommended a strong central government. This proposal

caused a stir in Congress,
and a heated debate
followed.





The Debates Begin

Many delegates feared a government that called for a powerful central authority. After all, wasn't that what the Revolution was all about? King George III was the authority from which the Colonies were trying to break away. To replace one king 3,000 miles away with another on their own shores made no sense. No, the delegates felt that any federal government had to be less powerful than the individual states.

Other objections to the Articles of Confederation also were discussed. How would each state be represented? How much should each contribute to a national treasury? And what was to be done with the western territories? The debate dragged on as each point was addressed. Finally, on November 15, 1777, Congress adopted the Articles. Ratification took almost three and a half years, but on March 1, 1781, the last state, Maryland, accepted the Articles of Confederation. The United States had its first government framework. There was just one problem: It did not work.

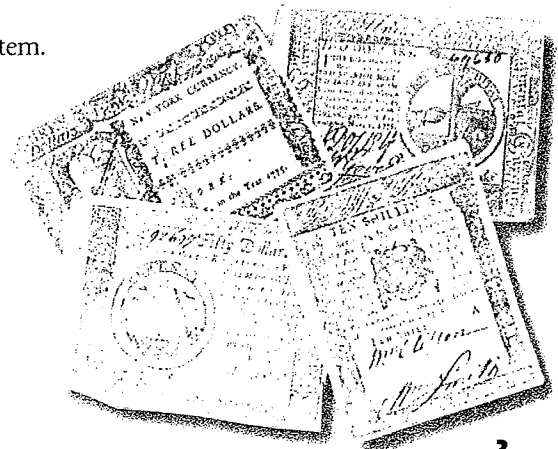
Bucking off the oppressive reign of King George III was only half the battle for America. Finding the best way to govern itself provided a whole new set of problems.

Five Weaknesses

Although Congress could pass laws and negotiate treaties with foreign nations under the Articles of Confederation, the framework had five basic weaknesses:

1. Congress could not raise money by taxing the people directly. It could only ask for contributions from the states.
2. Congress did not have the power to organize a practical money system. Meanwhile, the country was flooded with worthless paper currency.
3. Congress could not improve the flow of trade among states. Individual states were blocking products from out of state.
4. The federal government had no armed forces, except for troops whom states chose to send. It had no power to raise its own troops.
5. The federal government had no way to deal directly with its citizens. Congress could work only with state governments.

Each state had its own currency under the Articles of Confederation. These are a few examples, including New York dollars, Pennsylvania shillings, and Continental dollars.



Uncle Sam climbs a rickety ladder in this political cartoon showing the steps from the free-flowing Articles of Confederation to the firmly planted Constitution.

STEPS IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A MORE STABLE GOVERNMENT



"A Rope of Sand"

More than one of the new nation's leaders called the Articles of Confederation "a rope of sand," and they were indeed just about as effective as that. In the words of the Articles themselves, they created "a firm league of friendship between the states." In addition, "[e]ach state retains its sovereignty, freedom and independence." So the states remained powerful, while Congress was left weak. There was no chief executive or national judicial system.

Further, the passage of any important measure required the consent of nine states. To amend the Articles required the consent of all 13! The Articles of Confederation created a weak league of 13 states rather than one strong nation. And after years of war, a strong nation was badly needed.

Failed Convention

The infant nation, ravaged by war and deeply in debt, fell into a severe depression. Trade with England was drastically curtailed. The states bickered among themselves over land claims and taxes. Jobs were scarce, and people lucky enough to find work were paid low wages. Debtor prisons began filling with people who could not repay what they had borrowed. It was a rough beginning indeed.

Two states, Maryland and Virginia, had been quarreling over navigation rights to the Potomac River. After a meeting held in 1785 to settle these differences, James Madison of Virginia felt that all the states should meet to discuss America's commercial problems. Nine states accepted Madison's invitation. When the convention began in 1786 in Annapolis, Maryland, however, only five states were represented. Discouraged by the poor turnout, those present reluctantly abandoned the idea of a trade conference. Then Alexander Hamilton proposed that delegates from all the states should convene in Philadelphia in May 1787 to discuss the inadequacies of the Articles of Confederation. The stage was set for what we know today as the Constitutional Convention. Although many Americans did not yet realize it, the Articles' days were numbered. 🐾