

BROADSIDE

A Journal of the Wars for Independence for Students

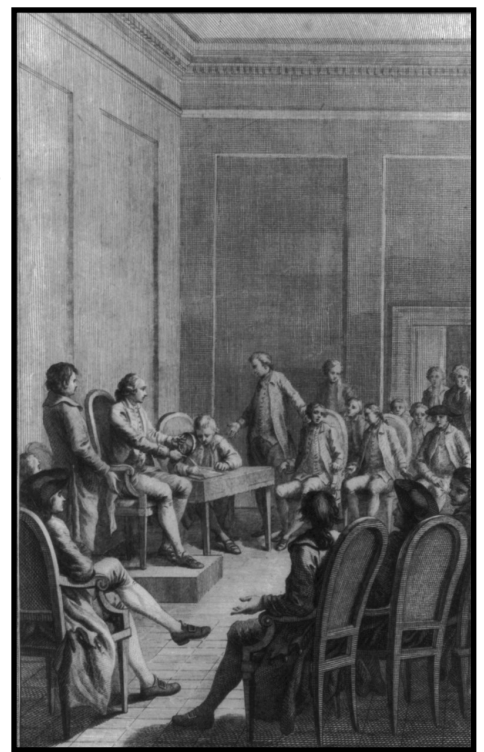
THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESS

The First Continental Congress

From 1774-1789, there were three separate convenings of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. The First Continental Congress met in Carpenter's Hall from September through October, 1774 principally to diffuse the growing crisis with Great Britain that had seriously escalated in the wake of Parliament's treatment of Massachusetts after the Boston Tea Party when Parliament issued the Intolerable Acts, which closed the port of Boston and suspended the colonial legislature in Massachusetts and sent thousands of British troops to occupy Massachusetts. Twelve of the thirteen American colonies sent fifty-six representatives to this Congress among which included George Washington and Patrick Henry from Virginia, Benjamin Franklin from Pennsylvania, and John and Sam Adams from Massachusetts. The purpose of this assembly was simply an effort to show colonial solidarity against what was believed to be an encroaching and over reaching behavior by Parliament and King George III. Discussion of independence was not an issue for this meeting. What was decided was that the colonies would engage in economic retaliation boycotting the purchase of British goods and sending the King a redress of grievances. The delegates agreed to reconvene in May 1775 should their petitions and requests not be addressed.

Parliament did debate the merits of colonial concerns, but refused to expressly recognize their petitions. When King George III opened a meeting of Parliament in November 1774 he roundly renounced and condemned Massachusetts. Taking this as a hint it was agreed across the colonies to reconvene in Philadelphia in May 1775. This time all thirteen colonies were represented, meeting in the Pennsylvania State House now Independence Hall. Also by this time hostilities had opened between colonial patriots in Massachusetts and British troops with blood being spilled at Lexington and Concord in April.

To ease tensions conservative members of Congress, led by Pennsylvanian John Dickinson, drafted the Olive Branch Petition sent directly to the King but at the same time that he was receiving the Olive Branch Petition he was receiving the news of the battle of Bunker Hill outside of Boston in which hundreds of his troops had been slaughtered in pyric victory. With the battle of Bunker Hill reconciliation between England and her American colonies was no longer possible. Congress appointed Virginian, George Washington, who appeared at Congress dressed in his Colonial Militia uniform as commander-in-chief of what was called the Continental Army. Washington was dispatched to Boston to take control of and organize the militia mob outside of Boston that had assembled their after the Lexington Alarm of April into an organized fighting force. At the time Congress was split into two factions the radicals led by John Adams who began to promote American independence and the conservatives led by Dickinson who wanted to continue to seek ways to restore harmony between the colonies and England. But events quickly overtook matters as patriot forces in May 1775 seized Fort Ticonderoga in upper New York, and Washington with use of artillery pieces secured from Fort Ticonderoga forced the British to evacuate Boston in March 1776. By July anticipating British moves to take control of New York City Washington's nascent army moved south to meet the threat. On July 4th Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence Washington had his men assembled outside New York to hear the document read. A full scale war was now underway and Congress found itself an ad hoc government.



A session of the First Continental Congress at Carpenter's Hall in Philadelphia, 1774
(Library of Congress)

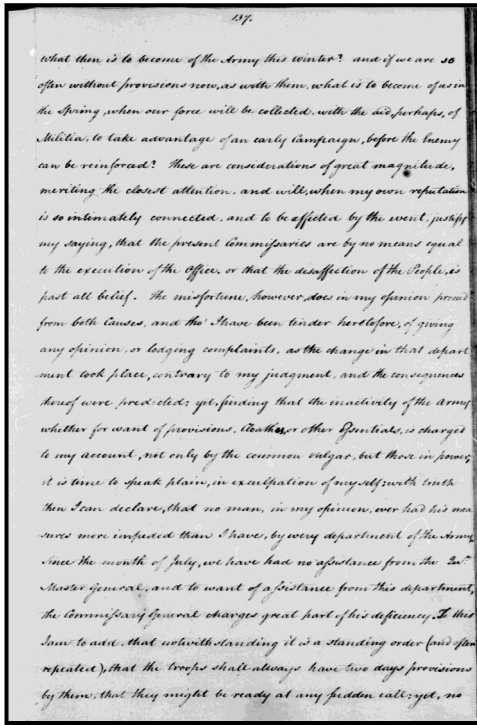
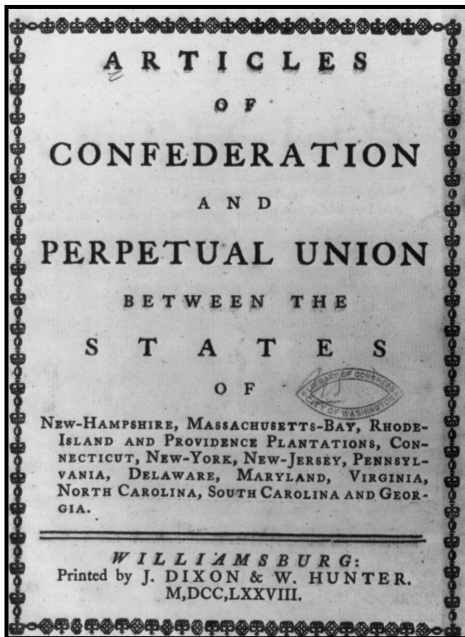


Image of correspondence between George Washington and the Continental Congress regarding army provisions, December 23, 1777 (Library of Congress)

The Second Continental Congress

This Second continental Congress which waged the politics of the period was very ineffective. Wary of a standing army Congress controlled its slim military purse string, doled out generalships based on patronage and failed to raise the revenue necessary to wage a war. Washington, an advocate of republican government always deferred to civilian authority establishing an important precedent in American history. But at the same time he and his subordinates were hamstrung as politicians bickered and played favorites at the expense of Washington and his army. The weakness of Congress during the war would shape the minds of many future leaders of the new nation serving in the Continental Army, men like James Monroe and John Marshall who would emerge as ardent nationalists in favor of a strong central government. Not until after the stunning American victory at Saratoga, New York was victory ensured as France recognized American independence and openly supported the American cause with men, money, and material. During the war Congress would convene at various locations such as Lancaster, Pennsylvania and Baltimore, Maryland as Philadelphia was occupied by British troops during the winter of 1777-1778.



The Articles of Confederation frame America's first government, 1778, officially ratified in 1781 (Library of Congress)

The Confederation Congress

On March 1, 1781 Congress approved the Articles of Confederation which served as a loose framework of government for the new nation. This Congress would convene until 1789 when the government organized as a result of the Constitutional Convention was established. The Confederation Congress was very weak with no power to raise taxes and a delegation of representatives led by a weak executive. Even though the fighting in America ceased after Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown in October 1781 and the Treaty of Peace was signed in 1783 granting American independence the government of the new nation seemed more like a failed state with the principal question being was the United States one nation or an amalgamation of thirteen independent nations. It would take the Constitutional Convention and then a Civil War in the next century to finally answer that most important of questions.

Activity

Show students an image of John Trumbull's painting *The Presentation of the Declaration of Independence*. Ask your students to investigate how this painting is a mythological interpretation of the events of July 1776, and then determine what is the biggest inaccuracy of the painting. You can view John Trumbull's painting on the Architect of the Capitol's website, using the following link: <https://www.aoc.gov/art/historic-rotunda-paintings/declaration-independence>