

## The First Constitution

*“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence [sic], promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”*

The Preamble the U.S. Constitution, written so long ago, is familiar to most Americans today. However, many do not realize the fact that this document was not America’s first government. That title belongs to the Articles of Confederation, the document that governed the United States in its earliest years.

Finalized in 1777 after many drafts, and ratified in 1781, the Articles sought to fit the needs of Americans embarking on a new journey of freedom for the first time. Written in a time of war with Great Britain, the Articles created a bond between the states for the common defense of the new nation. This bond, however, proved to be a weak one. Fears of too powerful a central authority and desire for state supremacy hindered the effectiveness of the document to govern.

The Articles of Confederation did give Congress certain powers: to make treaties, to make war and peace, to maintain an army and navy, to coin money, to establish a postal service, and to manage Indian affairs. The Congress under this document also accomplished the Northwest Ordinance, creating a guide for future development of that territory and admittance of states into the union.

While given the above mentioned powers, this new government was plagued by the restrictions placed upon it by the Articles. Congress could not collect taxes, regulate trade, enforce the laws with an executive, or set up a national court for legal disputes. Furthermore, in order to amend the document, all states had to unanimously approve, and nine of thirteen were needed to pass laws. Poor attendance and lack of cooperation and unity made this nearly impossible.

Weakened also by economic and foreign relations problems it was evident this new government needed a change. The catalyst for that change came with Daniel Shays and his rebellion of farmers in Massachusetts, victims of heavy taxation and heavy debt. Fear of anarchy and rebellion in other states finally led delegates to Philadelphia to amend the articles. It became evident, however, that a stronger national government was indeed necessary and an entirely new plan for government was drafted.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Discussion Questions:

1. What was the name of the first document that governed the United States?
2. What powers were given to Congress under this document?
3. What restrictions were placed upon Congress by this document?
4. What factors made it nearly impossible to amend this document?
5. Describe the event that served as the “catalyst” for changing the document: