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This illustration shows George Washington, James Madison, and Ben Franklin celebrating the completion of the U.S. Constitution.

Brad Walker



A girl signs her name on a giant version of the U.S. Constitution at the National Constitution Center.

National Constitution Center

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How Teamwork Built America

Celebrate the anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution by learning how it was created.

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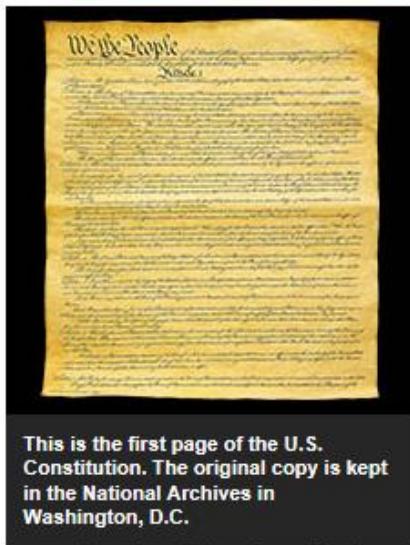
On Saturday, the U.S. Constitution turns 229! Celebrations are starting early at the National Constitution Center (NCC) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the city where this historic document was signed. At the NCC, you can sing Happy Birthday to the Constitution and meet historical figures such as James Madison, known as the Father of the Constitution. There's even a huge copy of the Constitution that you can sign.

Why all the fuss? Signed on September 17, 1787, the U.S. Constitution is one of the most important documents in our nation's history. It defines the principles and rules by which the United States is governed. Its creation took a lot of people, time, and teamwork.



MEETING OF THE MINDS

The United States won its independence from Great Britain in 1783, four years before American leaders



This is the first page of the U.S. Constitution. The original copy is kept in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Haupt Aaron/Science Source/Getty Images

came together to create the Constitution. A new system of government had been put in place then, set up in a document called the Articles of Confederation. But many people believed the system wasn't working. They thought the U.S. needed a stronger national government.

So in the summer of 1787, 55 men met in Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation. Known as delegates, these men represented their home states. They soon decided to get rid of the Articles and write a new constitution. It would set up a new government for the U.S. and describe the new way laws would be made. (It would later list the rights of the American people.)

The delegates came from different backgrounds. Some, like George Washington, were already well-known leaders. Others weren't as well-known. Many had never met. Despite their differences, the delegates used teamwork to create a plan for the new nation.

"What's amazing is how well they all worked together," says Carol Berkin, an expert on American history. "They cooperated with each other over a very important issue."

A SHARED MISSION

At the time of these meetings, the original 13 states were hardly "united" at all. There was no central government to hold the states together. There was also no president to lead the country. Many people worried that the new nation would soon fall apart.

Just as you might do on a group project in school, the delegates divided the work. When they disagreed, they found ways to compromise, or meet in the middle. For example, the delegates had different ideas about how long a president should serve. Some said a president should be in office for seven years. Others argued that the term should be much shorter than that. In the end, the delegates agreed to make the president's term four years.

"Every day, people were compromising," Berkin says. "Every day, people were saying, 'That's not exactly what my state wants, but I'm willing to give in on that if you're willing to give in on this.'"

COMPROMISE WAS KEY

The meetings lasted for four long months. Finally, on September 17, 1787, the delegates had a version of the Constitution that most of them agreed on. Thirty-nine delegates signed the historic document. Then it was up to voters in each state to ratify, or approve, it. They did just that, and in 1789, the Constitution became the law of the land.

Work on the Constitution did not end there. The delegates had set up a way for changes, called amendments, to be made to the Constitution later on. So far, 27 amendments have been added to the document.

"It's incredible to think that teamwork on the Constitution can in some ways still go on," says Berkin.

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