

# The Articles of Confederation

1. What is a constitution? (193)
2. Why were the Americans cautious? What did they do about it? (193)
3. In most states, who could vote? How about African-Americans? (193)
4. Which branch of government was the most powerful in the states? Which was the weakest? (193)
5. What is a republic? (193)
6. What was the Articles of Confederation? (194)
7. How did the Ordinance of 1785 divide the land north of the Ohio River? (196)
8. How much was the land? (196)
9. How many territories was the Northwest Territory divided into by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787? (196)
10. Under the Northwest Ordinance, how could a territory become a state? (196)
11. Would the new states have equal rights as the old states? (196)
12. What did the Northwest Ordinance include in their Bill of Rights? (196)
13. The Northwest Ordinance was the first attempt to stop what? (196)
14. What did the Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance open? (196)
15. What financial problems faced the new country? (197)



## State Constitutions

In May 1776 the Continental Congress asked the states to organize their governments, and each moved quickly to adopt a state **CONSTITUTION** or plan of government. By the end of 1776, eight states had drafted constitutions. New York and Georgia followed suit in 1777, and Massachusetts in 1780. Connecticut and Rhode Island retained their colonial charters as state constitutions.

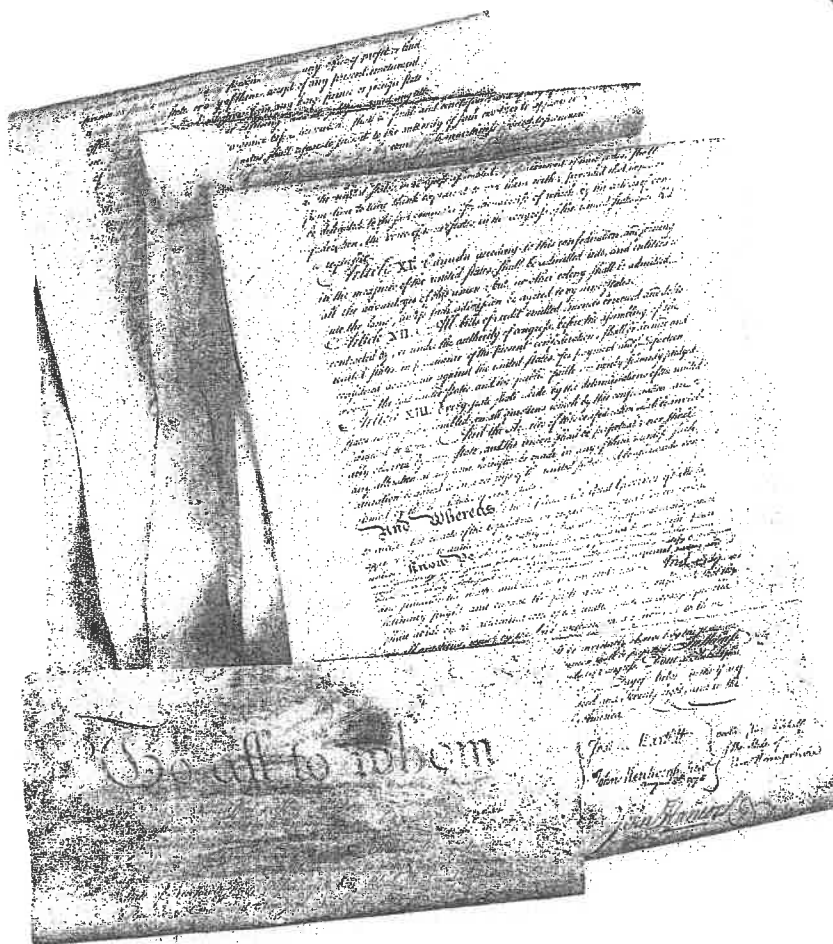
Their experience with British rule made Americans cautious about placing too much power in the hands of a single ruler. For that reason the states adopted constitutions that limited the power of the governor. Pennsylvania even replaced the office of governor with an elected council of 12 members.

## Limiting Power

The states took other measures against concentration of power. They divided government functions between the governor (or Pennsylvania's council) and the legislature. Most states established two-house, or **BICAMERAL** legislatures to divide the power even further.

The writers of the constitutions not only wanted to prevent abuses of power in the states, but they also wanted to keep power in the hands of the people. State legislators were popularly elected, and elections were frequent. In most states, only white males who were at least 21 years old could vote. These citizens also had to own a certain amount of property or pay a certain amount of taxes. Some states allowed free African American males to vote.

The state constitutions restricted the powers of the governors, which made the legislatures the most powerful branch of government. The state legislatures struggled to make taxes more fair, but there were many disagreements. Going from dependent colonies to self-governing states brought new challenges.



*The Articles of Confederation*

## Forming a Republic

For Americans, establishing separate state governments was a much easier task than creating a central government. They agreed that their country should be a **republic** a government in which citizens rule through elected representatives. They could not agree, however, on the organization and powers of their new republic.

At first most Americans favored a weak central government. They assumed the states would be very much like small, independent countries—similar to the way that the colonies had been set up. The states would act independently on most issues, working together through a central government only to wage war and handle relations with other nations.

## Planning a New Government

In 1776 the Second Continental Congress appointed a committee to draw up a plan for a new government. The delegates in the Congress realized they needed a central government to

**Read** **Explaining** Why did some states choose a bicameral legislature?



coordinate the war effort against Britain. After much debate the Congress adopted the committee's plan, the Articles of Confederation, in November 1777.

The Articles, America's first constitution, provided for a new central government under which the states gave up little of their power. For the states, the Articles of Confederation were "a firm league of friendship" in which each state retained "its sovereignty, freedom and independence."

Under the Articles of Confederation, the government—consisting of the Congress—had the authority to conduct foreign affairs, maintain armed forces, borrow money, and issue currency. Yet it could not regulate trade, force citizens to join the army, or impose taxes. If Congress needed to raise money or troops, it had to ask the state legislatures—but the states were not required to contribute. In addition the govern-

ment lacked a chief executive. The Confederation government carried on much of its business, such as selling western lands, through congressional committees.

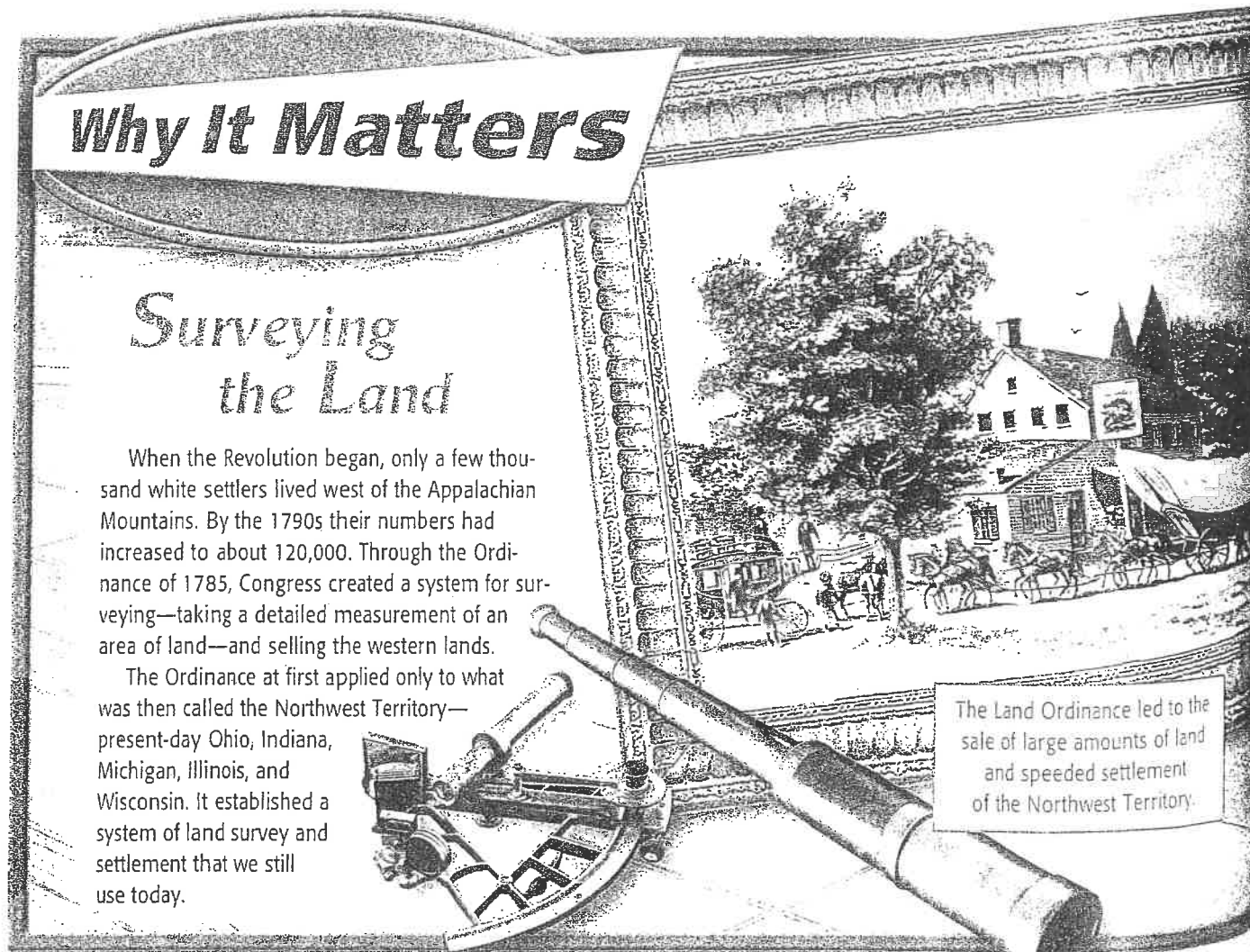
Under the new plan, each state had one vote in Congress, regardless of its population, and all states had to approve the Articles as well as any amendments. Despite this arrangement, the larger states believed that their population warranted having more votes. The states were also divided by whether or not they claimed land in the West. Maryland refused to approve the Articles until New York, Virginia, and other states abandoned claims to lands west of the Appalachian Mountains. Finally the states settled their differences. With Maryland's ratification, all 13 states had approved the Articles. On March 1, 1781, the Confederation formally became the government of the United States.

## Why It Matters

### Surveying the Land

When the Revolution began, only a few thousand white settlers lived west of the Appalachian Mountains. By the 1790s their numbers had increased to about 120,000. Through the Ordinance of 1785, Congress created a system for surveying—taking a detailed measurement of an area of land—and selling the western lands.

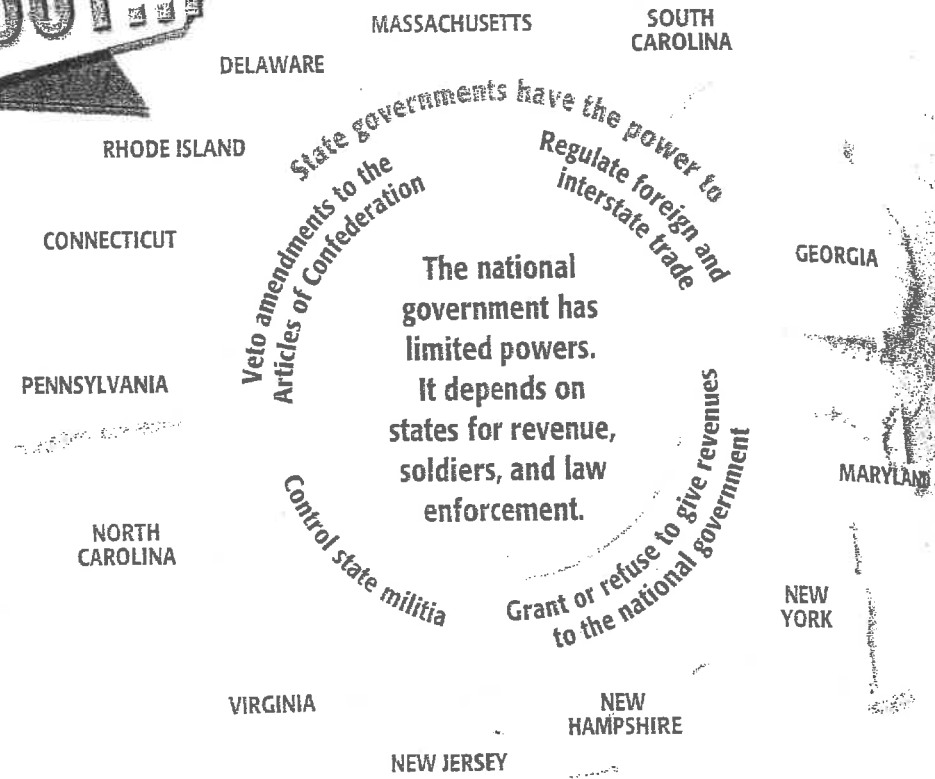
The Ordinance at first applied only to what was then called the Northwest Territory—present-day Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin. It established a system of land survey and settlement that we still use today.



The Land Ordinance led to the sale of large amounts of land and speeded settlement of the Northwest Territory.

# ▲ MORE ABOUT...

## Government Under the Articles of Confederation



a plan proposed by Thomas Jefferson, divided the western territory into self-governing districts. When the number of people in a district reached the population of the smallest existing state, that district could \_\_\_\_\_ or apply to, Congress for statehood.

### The Ordinance of 1785

In 1785 the Confederation Congress passed an \_\_\_\_\_ or law, that established a procedure for surveying and selling the western lands north of the Ohio River. The new law divided this massive territory into townships six miles long and six miles wide. These townships were to be further divided into 36 sections of 640 acres each that would be sold at public auction for at least a dollar an acre.

Land speculators viewed the law as an opportunity to cheaply accumulate large tracts of land. Concerned about lawless people moving into western lands, Richard Henry Lee, the president of Congress, urged that "the rights of property be clearly defined" by the government. Congress drafted another ordinance to protect the interests of hard-working settlers.

### The Northwest Ordinance

The Northwest Ordinance, passed in 1787, created a single Northwest Territory out of the lands north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River. The lands were to be divided into three to five smaller territories. When the population of a territory reached 60,000, the people could petition for statehood. Each new state would come into the Union with the same rights and privileges as the original 13 states.

The Northwest Ordinance included a bill of rights for the settlers, guaranteeing freedom of religion and trial by jury. It also stated, "There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in said territory." This clause marked the United States's first attempt to stop the spread of slavery.

The Confederation's western ordinances had an enormous effect on American expansion and development. The Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance opened the way for settlement of the Northwest Territory in a stable and orderly manner.

**Explaining** What was the purpose of the Northwest Ordinance?

## Trouble on Two Fronts

Despite its accomplishments, the Confederation government had so little power that it could not deal with the country's financial problems. It also failed to resolve problems with Britain and Spain.

### Economics

#### Financial Problems

By 1781 the money printed during the Revolutionary War had **depreciated**, or fallen in value, so far that it was almost worthless. Unable to collect taxes, both the Continental Congress and the states had printed their own paper money. No gold or silver backed up these bills. The value of the bills plummeted, while the price of food and other goods soared. Between 1779 and 1781, the number of Continental dollars required to buy one Spanish silver dollar rose from 40 to 146. In Boston and some other areas, high prices led to food riots.

Fighting the war left the Continental Congress with a large debt. Congress had borrowed money from American citizens and foreign governments during the war. It still owed the Revolutionary soldiers their pay for military service. Lacking the power to tax, the Confederation

could not pay its debts. It requested funds from the states, but the states contributed only a small portion of the money needed.

#### Robert Morris's Import Tax

In 1781, faced with a total collapse of the country's finances, Congress created a department of finance under Philadelphia merchant **Robert Morris**. While serving in Congress, Morris had proposed a 5 percent tax on imported goods to help pay the national debt.

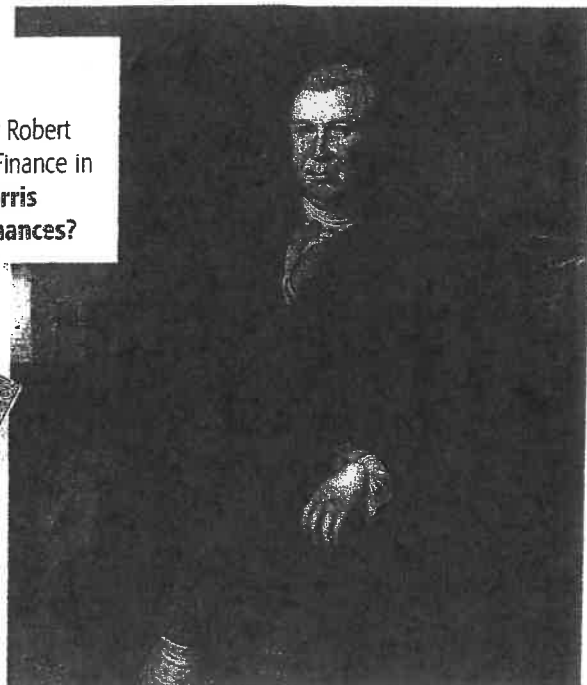
The plan required that the Articles of Confederation be changed to give Congress the power to levy the tax. Although 12 states approved the plan, Rhode Island's opposition killed the measure. A second effort in 1783 also failed to win unanimous approval. The financial crisis only worsened.

#### Problems with Britain

The weaknesses of the new American government became more evident as the United States encountered problems with other countries. In the Treaty of Paris of 1783, Britain had promised to withdraw from the lands east of the Mississippi River. Yet British troops continued to occupy several strategic forts in the Great Lakes region.

### Picturing History

Pennsylvania merchant and banker Robert Morris became Superintendent of Finance in May 1781. **What reform did Morris propose to help the nation's finances?**



Robert Morris



Continental currency





**The Forgotten President?** Who was the first president of the United States? Was it George Washington—or John Hanson? Some historians consider Hanson the first United States president because he was the first to serve in the office in 1781 under the Articles of Confederation. Other historians argue that Hanson was the head of Congress, but not until George Washington began his term in 1789 did the nation have a “true” president.

British trade policy caused other problems. American merchants complained that the British were keeping Americans out of the West Indies and other profitable British markets.

In 1785 Congress sent **John Adams** to London to discuss these difficulties. The British, however, were not willing to talk. They pointed to the failure of the United States to honor its promises made in the Treaty of Paris. The British claimed that Americans had agreed to pay Loyalists for the property taken from them during the Revolutionary War. The Congress had, in fact, recommended that the states pay the Loyalists, but the states had refused.

## Problems With Spain

If American relations with Great Britain were poor, affairs with Spain were worse. Spain, which held Florida as well as lands west of the Mississippi River, was anxious to halt American expansion into the territory it claimed. As a result, Spain closed the lower Mississippi River to American shipping in 1784. Western settlers depended on the Mississippi River for commerce. As John Jay, the American secretary of foreign affairs, had noted a few years earlier:

“The Americans, almost to a man, believed that God Almighty had made that river a highway for the people of the upper country to go to sea by.”

In 1786 American diplomats reached an agreement with Spain. Representatives from the Southern states, however, blocked the agreement because it did not include the right to use the Mississippi River.

The weakness of the Confederation and its inability to deal with problems worried many leaders. George Washington described the government as “little more than the shadow without the substance.” Many Americans began to agree that the country needed a stronger government.

**Reading Check Analyzing** Why did Spain close the lower Mississippi River to American trade?

## SECTION 1 ASSESSMENT

HISTORY  
Online

**Study Central™** To review this section, go to [www.ck12.org](http://www.ck12.org) and click on **Study Central**.

### Checking for Understanding

- Key Terms** Use each of these terms in a complete sentence that will help explain its meaning: constitution, bicameral, republic, petition, ordinance, depreciate.
- Reviewing Facts** Describe the country's financial problems after the Revolutionary War.

### Reviewing Themes

- Government and Democracy** Why did most states limit the power of their governors and divide the legislature into two bodies?

### Critical Thinking

- Predicting Consequences** What effect do you think the Northwest Ordinance had on Native Americans?
- Organizing Information** Re-create the diagram below and summarize the strengths and weaknesses of the Confederation government.

The Articles of Confederation	
Strengths	Weaknesses

### Analyzing Visuals

- Geography Skills** Study the material on pages 194 and 195 about the Ordinance of 1785. Then answer these questions. What present-day states were created from the Northwest Territory? How many sections are in a township?

### Interdisciplinary Activity

**Citizenship** Imagine you are an American citizen in the 1780s. Create a poster that defends the Articles of Confederation. Be sure to include reasons the Confederation Congress is needed.