

CREATING THE CONSTITUTION**Letter Home**

Dear Family,

Over the coming weeks, our United States history class will be reading a chapter called Creating the Constitution. The following information will give you some background on the content your student will be studying.

In 1777, the Continental Congress drafted the nation's original constitution, known as the Articles of Confederation. Under this document, the original 13 states formed a loose confederation, or alliance, of independent governments. Each state had one vote in the federal legislature, or Congress, which had little power other than to make war and negotiate foreign treaties. The states retained most government power. There was no President and no court system. In the following decade, the structure of government under the Articles betrayed a number of weaknesses. Congress could not establish a currency, regulate interstate commerce, or levy taxes, which meant that the federal government had no way to raise money to pay off foreign debt. The ensuing financial crisis in 1786 led many people to believe that the nation needed a stronger federal government.

In 1787, a Federal Convention was called to revise the Articles of Confederation. Two plans for government were presented, each with strong and weak points. Out of these two plans came the Great Compromise, which merged provisions from both plans. Under the compromise, Congress would have two houses: the Senate, with two members from each state, and the House of Representatives, with the number of representatives based on a state's population of free people. Congress would have the power to levy taxes and to regulate interstate and international commerce. However, southern states feared that they would not be represented fairly in Congress because a large proportion of their populations consisted of enslaved people. To win southern support for the new Constitution, the delegates agreed to the Three-Fifths Compromise, which counted each slave as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of taxation and representation.

On September 17, 1787, a majority of the 42 delegates at the convention signed the Constitution, establishing an entirely different structure of government. In addition to a bicameral legislature, the new plan provided for an executive branch led by a President and for a judicial branch headed by the Supreme Court. The legislative branch would make federal law, the executive branch would carry out and enforce the law, and the judicial branch would review the law. This separation of powers was designed to prevent any branch of government from becoming too powerful.

Although the document had been signed, it still had to be ratified by each of the states. Those who supported ratification and favored a strong central government came to be known as Federalists. Those who believed that the Constitution placed too much power in the hands of a few people came to be known as Antifederalists. Before they would agree to ratify the document, Antifederalists in some states demanded that a Bill of Rights be added to protect citizens against abuses of governmental power. The Congress of the Confederation agreed. In less than two years, 11 of 13 states had ratified the Constitution. A new Congress was elected and promptly drafted and passed the first 10 amendments to the Constitution, known as the Bill of Rights.

In the weeks ahead, your student may wish to share what he or she is learning with you. Please participate in your child's educational experience through discussion and involvement.

Sincerely,