

Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788

Pauline Maier

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CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title

Winner of the George Washington Book Prize

When the delegates left the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in September 1787, the new Constitution they had written was no more than a proposal. Elected conventions in at least nine of the thirteen states would have to ratify it before it could take effect. There was reason to doubt whether that would happen. The document we revere today as the foundation of our country's laws, the cornerstone of our legal system, was hotly disputed at the time. Some Americans denounced the Constitution for threatening the liberty that Americans had won at great cost in the Revolutionary War. One group of fiercely patriotic opponents even burned the document in a raucous public demonstration on the Fourth of July.

In this splendid new history, Pauline Maier tells the dramatic story of the yearlong battle over ratification that brought such famous founders as Washington, Hamilton, Madison, Jay, and Henry together with less well-known Americans who sometimes eloquently and always passionately expressed their hopes and fears for their new country. Men argued in taverns and coffeehouses; women joined the debate in their parlors; broadsides and newspaper stories advocated various points of view and excoriated others. In small towns and counties across the country people read the document carefully and knew it well. Americans seized the opportunity to play a role in shaping the new nation. Then the ratifying conventions chosen by "We the People" scrutinized and debated the Constitution clause by clause.

Although many books have been written about the Constitutional Convention, this is the first major history of ratification. It draws on a vast new collection of documents and tells the story with masterful attention to detail in a dynamic narrative. Each state's experience was different, and Maier gives each its due even as she focuses on the four critical states of Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Virginia, and New York, whose approval of the Constitution was crucial to its success.

The New Yorker Gilbert Livingston called his participation in the ratification convention the greatest transaction of his life. The hundreds of delegates to the ratifying conventions took their responsibility seriously, and their careful inspection of the Constitution can tell us much today about a document whose meaning continues to be subject to interpretation. Ratification is the story of the founding drama of our nation, superbly told in a history that transports readers back more than two centuries to reveal the convictions and aspirations on which our country was built.



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