



# A Confederation of States



## Explore These Questions

- What ideas guided the new state governments?
- What problems did the nation face under the Articles of Confederation?
- How did the Northwest Ordinance benefit the nation?

## Define

- constitution
- execute
- confederation
- ordinance
- economic depression

## Identify

- Articles of Confederation
- Land Ordinance of 1785
- Northwest Ordinance
- Shays' Rebellion

## SETTING the Scene

In 1776, the Declaration of Independence created a new nation made up of 13 independent states. The former colonies, though, had little experience working together. In the past, Britain had made the major decisions. Now, the Americans set about the business of establishing 13 state governments. Furthermore, they hoped to create a central government that all the states would follow.

## State Governments

In forming a government, most states wrote a constitution. A **constitution** is a document that sets out the laws and principles of a government. States created written constitutions for two reasons. First, a written constitution would spell out the rights of all citizens. Second, it would set limits on the power of government.

The new state governments were similar to the colonial governments. The states divided political power between an executive and a legislature. The legislature was elected by the voters to pass the laws. Most legislatures had an upper house, called a senate, and a lower house. All states except Pennsylvania had a governor who **executed**, or carried out, the laws.

Virginia limited government power by including a bill of rights in its constitution. A bill of rights lists freedoms that the government promises to protect. Virginia's bill of rights protected freedom of religion and freedom of the press. It also guaranteed citizens the right to a trial by jury. Other states followed Virginia's example and included bills of rights in their constitutions.

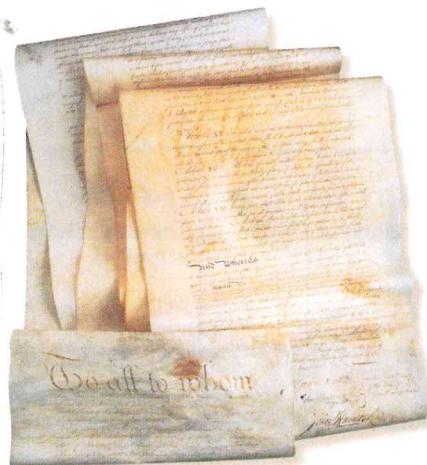
Under the state constitutions, more people had the right to vote than in colonial times. To vote, a citizen had to be white, male, and over age 21. He had to own a certain amount of property or pay a certain amount of taxes.

For a time, some women in New Jersey could vote. In a few states, free black men could vote. In no state did enslaved African Americans have the right to vote.

## A Weak Confederation

In 1776, as citizens were forming state governments, the Continental Congress was drafting a plan for the nation as a whole. Delegates believed that the colonies needed to be united by a central government in order to win independence.

It was difficult to write a constitution that all of the states would approve. They



Articles of Confederation

were reluctant to give up power to a national government. In 1776, few Americans saw themselves as citizens of one nation. Instead, they felt loyal to their own states. Also, people were fearful of replacing the “tyranny” of British rule with another strong government. Still, in 1777, after much debate, the Continental Congress completed the **Articles of Confederation**—the first American constitution. It created a **confederation**, or alliance of independent states.

### Government under the Articles

Under the Articles of Confederation, the states sent delegates to a Confederation Congress. Each state had one vote in Congress. Congress could declare war, appoint military officers, and coin money. It was also responsible for foreign affairs. However, these powers were few compared with those of the states.

The Articles limited the powers of Congress and preserved the powers of the states. Congress could pass laws, but at least 9 of the 13 states had to approve a law before it could go into effect.

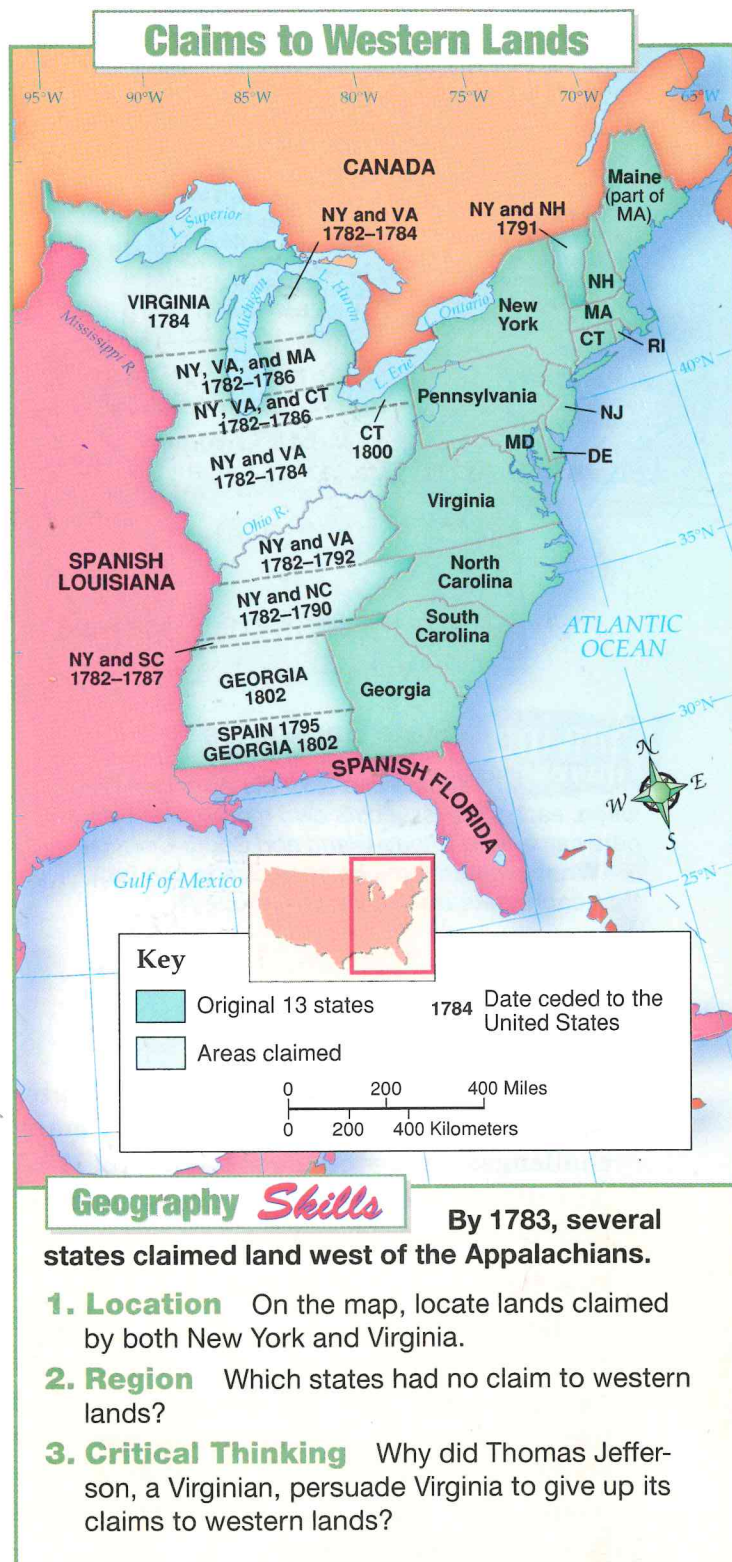
Congress had little economic power. It could not regulate trade between states nor could it regulate trade between states and foreign countries. It could not pass tax laws. To raise money, Congress had to ask the states for it. No state could be forced to contribute funds.

The new confederation government was weak. There was no president to carry out laws. It was up to the states to enforce the laws passed by Congress. There was no system of courts to settle disputes between states. The Articles created a very loose alliance of 13 states.

### Dispute over western lands

A dispute arose even before the Articles of Confederation went into effect. Maryland refused to ratify the Articles unless Virginia and other states gave up their claims to lands west of the Appalachian Mountains. Maryland wanted these western lands turned over to Congress. In this way, the “landed” states would not become too powerful.

One by one, the states gave up their western claims. Only Virginia held out. However,

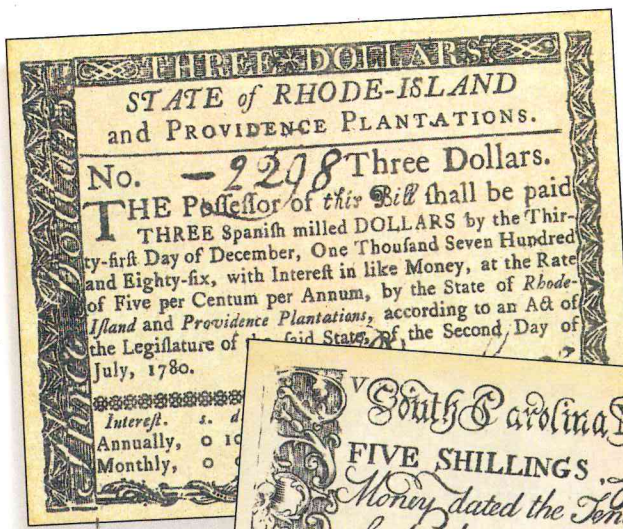


### Geography Skills

By 1783, several states claimed land west of the Appalachians.

- 1. Location** On the map, locate lands claimed by both New York and Virginia.
- 2. Region** Which states had no claim to western lands?
- 3. Critical Thinking** Why did Thomas Jefferson, a Virginian, persuade Virginia to give up its claims to western lands?

Thomas Jefferson and other leading Virginians saw a great need for a central government. They persuaded state lawmakers to give up Virginia’s claims in the West. At last, in 1781, Maryland ratified the Articles of Confederation, and the first American government went into effect.



## Viewing HISTORY

### State Banknotes

During and after the American Revolution, each state issued its own money. The bills here came from Rhode Island and South Carolina.

★ **What problems might arise due to the fact that each state issued its own money?**

## Troubles for the New Nation

By 1783, the United States had won independence. The new nation faced many challenges, however. From 1783 to 1787, Americans had reason to doubt whether their country could survive.

### Conflicts between states

Despite its weaknesses, the Articles might have succeeded if the states could have put aside their differences and worked together. Many conflicts arose, however. New Hampshire and New York both claimed Vermont. Most states refused to accept the money of other states.

The Articles did not provide a way for states to settle such disputes. Noah Webster, a teacher from New England, warned:

“So long as any individual state has power to defeat the measures of the other twelve, our pretended union is but a name, and our confederation, a cobweb.”

## Money problems

As a result of borrowing during the Revolution, the United States owed millions of dollars to individuals and foreign nations. Since Congress did not have the power to tax, it had no way to repay these debts. Congress asked the states for money, but the states had the right to refuse. Often, they did.

During the Revolution, the Continental Congress solved the problem of raising funds by printing paper money. However, the money had little value because it was not backed by gold or silver. Before long, Americans began to describe any useless thing as “not worth a Continental.”

As Continental dollars became worthless, states printed their own paper money. This caused confusion. How much was a North Carolina dollar worth? Was a Virginia dollar as valuable as a Maryland dollar? As a result, trade became difficult.

## Other nations take advantage

Foreign countries took advantage of the confederation’s weakness. Britain, for example, refused to withdraw its troops from the Ohio Valley, as it had agreed to do in the Treaty of Paris. Spain closed its port in New Orleans to American farmers. This was a serious blow to western farmers, who depended on the port to ship their products to the East.

## Organizing the Northwest Territory

Despite its troubles, Congress did pass important **ordinances**, or laws, concerning the Northwest Territory, the name for lands lying north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi. The principles established in these laws were later applied to other areas of settlement.

### Townships and sections

The **Land Ordinance of 1785** set up a system for surveying and settling the Northwest Territory. The law called for the territory to be surveyed and then divided into townships.

Each township would have 36 sections. A section was 1 square mile and contained 640

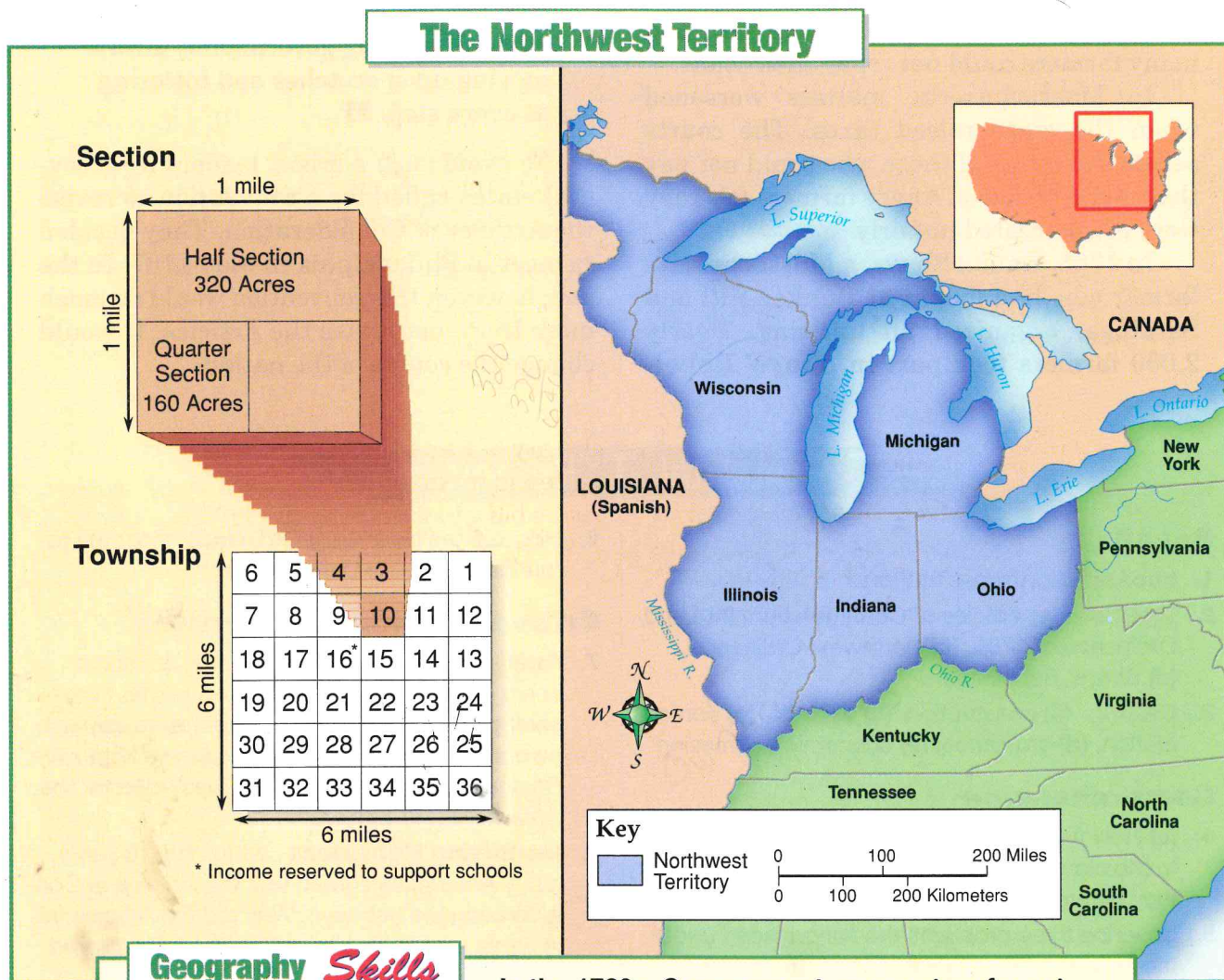
acres. (See the diagram below.) Congress planned to sell sections to settlers for \$640 each. One section in every township was set aside to support public schools.

### A plan for new states

Another law, passed in 1787, was the **Northwest Ordinance**. It set up a government for the Northwest Territory, guaranteed basic rights to settlers, and outlawed slavery there. It also provided for the vast region to be divided into separate territories in the future.

Once a territory had a population of 60,000 free settlers, it could ask Congress to be admitted as a new state. The newly admitted state would be “on an equal footing with the original states in all respects whatsoever.”

The Northwest Ordinance was the finest achievement of the national government under the Articles. It provided a way to admit new states to the nation. It guaranteed that new states would be treated the same as the original 13 states. In time, the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin were created from the Northwest Territory.



### Geography Skills

In the 1780s, Congress set up a system for settling and governing the Northwest Territory.

- 1. Location** On the map, locate: (a) Ohio River, (b) Mississippi River, (c) Michigan, (d) Indiana, (e) Illinois, (f) Wisconsin, (g) Ohio.
- 2. Place** What was the size of (a) a township, (b) a section?
- 3. Critical Thinking** Did the state of Wisconsin have public education when it joined the Union? Explain.

## A Farmers' Revolt

While Congress dealt successfully with the Northwest Territory, it failed to solve its economic problems. After the Revolution, the nation suffered an economic depression. An **economic depression** is a period when business activity slows, prices and wages fall, and unemployment rises.

The depression hit farmers hard. During the Revolution, there had been high demand for farm products. To increase production, farmers had borrowed money for land, seed, animals, and tools. However, when the war ended and soldiers returned home, demand for farm goods weakened. Prices fell, and many farmers could not repay their loans.

In Massachusetts, matters worsened when the state raised taxes. The courts seized the farms of those who could not pay their taxes or loans. Angry farmers felt they were being treated unfairly.

In 1786, Daniel Shays, a Massachusetts farmer who had fought at Bunker Hill and Saratoga, organized an uprising. Nearly 2,000 farmers took part in **Shays' Rebel-**

**lion.** They attacked courthouses and prevented the state from seizing farms. They even tried to capture an arsenal filled with guns. Finally, the Massachusetts legislature sent the militia to drive them off.

## A Change Is Needed

Many Americans saw Shays' Rebellion as a sign that the Articles of Confederation did not work. George Washington warned that a terrible crisis was at hand:

“No day was ever more clouded than the present. . . . I predict the worst consequences from a half-starved, limping government, always moving upon crutches and tottering at every step.”

To avoid such a crisis, leaders from several states called for a convention to revise the Articles of Confederation. They decided to meet in Philadelphia in May 1787. In the end, however, this convention would do much more than just revise the Articles. It would change the course of the nation.

## ★ Section 1 Review ★

### Recall

1. **Locate** Northwest Territory.
2. **Identify** (a) Articles of Confederation, (b) Land Ordinance of 1785, (c) Northwest Ordinance, (d) Shays' Rebellion.
3. **Define** (a) constitution, (b) execute, (c) confederation, (d) ordinance, (e) economic depression.

### Comprehension

4. (a) How were the new state governments similar to the old colonial governments? (b) How were they different?
5. Describe three problems the nation faced under the Articles of Confederation.

6. How did the Northwest Ordinance affect the future growth of the United States?

### Critical Thinking and Writing

7. **Analyzing Ideas** When Thomas Jefferson heard about Shays' Rebellion, he wrote: "The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on occasion that I wish it to be always kept alive." Do you think Shays' Rebellion was good for the United States? Explain.
8. **Identifying Main Ideas** After only 10 years, many Americans agreed that the Articles of Confederation did not work. Why did the Articles fail to serve as a lasting constitution for the United States?



**Activity Drawing a Political Cartoon** You have been asked to create a political cartoon about Shays' Rebellion. The purpose is to help explain to younger students the reasons why farmers like Daniel Shays were angry and what happened as a result of their rebellion.