

Profile: James Madison

James Madison is often called the “father of the Constitution.” Born in 1751 to a Virginia farm couple, Madison was the oldest of twelve children. In 1769 he entered college and graduated two years later. When signs of revolution appeared in the colonies, Madison became a firm supporter of independence.

In the 1770s Madison entered politics and was soon elected to the Virginia assembly. In 1780 he joined the Continental Congress, at twenty-nine the Congress’s youngest member. He thought the Articles of Confederation too weak, and became a leader of the group that favored a strong central government.

During the 1780s Madison worked to have the Articles amended. When the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in May 1787, Madison became one of its most influential members. His notes on the Convention, which met in closed sessions, are a major source of information about what took place there.

Early in the Convention, Madison introduced a plan of federal organization, the Virginia Plan, that soon became the main focus of debate. Later, after a draft Constitution had been approved, he began working for its ratification. With Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, he wrote a series of essays, collectively known as the **Federalist Papers**, that stressed the advantages constitutional government would bring. The essays were widely read, and won the Constitution many new supporters.

In 1788 Madison was elected to the House of Representatives. There he proposed a series of amendments to the new Constitution that came to form the Bill of Rights. When Thomas Jefferson became President in 1801, Madison was appointed secretary of state. Finally, in 1808, at the end of Jefferson’s second term, Madison himself was elected President.

Problems with England plagued the Madison presidency. In 1812 war was declared, and in 1814 Madison himself narrowly escaped capture when the British burned Washington.

In 1817 Madison retired to private life. He later succeeded his friend Jefferson as head of the University of Virginia. James Madison died

in 1836. Former President John Quincy Adams summed up his importance this way: “It was to the mind of Madison that the union owed its existence.”

REVIEW

1. Why was it important that Madison kept notes on the Constitutional Convention?
2. What did John Quincy Adams mean when he said that the United States owed its existence to Madison’s mind?

Madison created the Virginia Plan, which called for three branches of government and the separation of powers.

