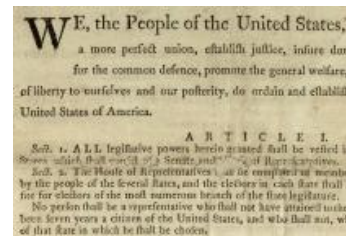


Ordinary Americans and the Constitution

by Gary B. Nash

The Constitution is so honored today, at home and abroad, that it may seem irreverent to suggest that for a great many ordinary Americans, it was not what they wished as a capstone of their revolutionary experience. This is not to say that they opposed the Constitution from beginning to end. Far from it. Rather, they were alarmed at important omissions in the Constitution, particularly a Bill of Rights. Many believed that the Constitution was the work of men of wealth and prestige who meant to submerge the most democratic features of the American Revolution. This is why historians are generally agreed that if the Constitution had been put before the electorate for an up-and-down vote—a plebescite, in effect—it would not have been ratified. Considering that the suffrage was limited to about half of the adult white men (others were not qualified for lack of property), this would have been a thumping rejection of what was seen by ordinary people as a conservative, elitist-tinged document.



Detail from the Preamble of the US Constitution printed in Philadelphia on September 17, 1787. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

With this in mind, let's consider how three large groups—African Americans, artisans, and small farmers—viewed the Constitution, and examine why these groups had deep reservations about its ability to steer the nation forward without compromising the founding principles of the American Revolution.

AFRICAN AMERICANS

Not until 1845, after Madison's long-hidden notes on the debates of the Constitutional Convention were published, would William Lloyd Garrison, a fervent abolitionist, call the Constitution a "covenant with death" and "an agreement with hell" because of the several pro-slavery clauses embodied in the document and how the delegates to the convention put them there. Enslaved African Americans—about one-sixth of the nation's population in 1790—knew that well enough, for the Constitution that began with the lofty words "To create a more perfect union" did nothing to release them and their children from slavery.

HIDE FULL ESSAY ▲

This was obvious as well to free African Americans, though their fragile position in the northern and Chesapeake states made it difficult for them to criticize the Constitution once it was ratified. And it was well known that among the Antifederalists opposing ratification of the Constitution, some were disturbed at the pro-slavery character of the document. One such person was Luther Martin, attorney general of Maryland, who railed against delaying the end of the slave trade for twenty years and lamented that the Constitution did not include a clause "to authorize the general government from time to time, to make such regulations as should be thought most advantageous for the gradual abolition of slavery, and the emancipation of the slaves." In protesting the fugitive slave clause (Article IV, Section 2) shortly after ratification, black Americans again signified their understanding that northern delegates to the

Constitutional Convention had bowed to southern slave owners.

It would take a half century before Frederick Douglass expressed what many of his black predecessors latently believed about the Constitution, and this feeling grew as the number of slaves increased rapidly in the first half of the nineteenth century. “The Constitution of the United States—What is it?” asked Douglass. “Who made it? For whom and for what was it made?” His answer was disquieting for whites but empowering for blacks:

Liberty and Slavery—opposite as Heaven and Hell—are both in the Constitution; and the oath to support the latter is an oath to perform that which God has made impossible. . . . If we adopt the preamble, with Liberty and Justice, we must repudiate the enacting clauses, with Kidnapping and Slave holding.

ARTISANS

Representing perhaps one-tenth of the population, craftsmen ranged across a great many trades, and they were far from unified in their political views. Nonetheless, most supported the Constitution. They knew that the Articles of Confederation left the Continental Congress with no taxing power, with no “energy,” with no authority to raise an army to suppress insurrections, either by black slaves or white farmers’ desperate at post-1783 demands for taxes and debt payments that they could not meet in the midst of a postwar depression. Also, they favored a shift of power from state legislatures to a federal government because it promised federal protection for the American-made goods that they produced in competition with British artisans. Tariff protection, mandated by a stronger central government, fit their needs for the public to “buy American.”

Yet a great many artisans had concerns about the Constitution. Particularly, they feared that it would usher in an era where the democratic promise of the Revolution—both in economic and political terms—would wither away.

The artisans’ economic concerns centered on equal access to capital, land, and education and the chance to achieve what they called a “decent competency.” Believing in the virtuousness of productive labor and the indispensability of laboring people to the community, many artisans deplored what they saw as a growing tendency of the rich to feed off the poor while casting aspersions on “the sheeplike masses” and “the vulgar herd.” If the Constitution facilitated the rise of a super-wealthy commercial elite, the day was not far off before the small producers’ dream of social justice and a rough economic equality would be shattered. George Bryan, writing as “Centinel,” put it plainly. He opposed the Constitution because it played into the hands of the “aristocratic juntos of the well-born few, who had been zealously endeavoring since the establishment of their [colonial] constitutions, to humble that offensive upstart—equal liberty.”

Liberty also meant political rights. The artisans had found their voice during the Revolution, throwing off deference to wealthy leaders, and coming to play important positions on seaport committees charged with enforcing boycotts against British products. They had insisted that they were a part of the body politic—to be enfranchised, allowed to run for office, and given respect for their service to the community. At the time of Constitution-making, they were beginning to form mechanic organizations, which would soon become nodes of political consciousness. All of this seemed at risk as the ratification debates engaged the public.

In some towns, especially in the interior, artisans and small shopkeepers fiercely opposed ratification of the Constitution. In Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for example, reported William Petrikin, an ordinary man,

“almost every day some new society [was] being formed” to block “this detestable federal conspiracy.” A volunteer militia company that he led even pledged “to oppose the establishment of the new Constitution at the risk of our life and fortunes.” Crowd action occurred only rarely during the ratification process, but sentiments ran strong against what thousands of ordinary citizens saw as a retreat from the liberties they had gained during the Revolution.

By the late eighteenth century, most artisans had drifted away from the Federalist Party into the Jefferson-led Democratic-Republican Party because some of the features of the Constitution that worried them at the time of its creation came to the fore under the first several Congresses and the presidencies of Washington and Adams. As one New York City sailmaker declaimed at a Fourth of July celebration in 1797, “Wherever the wealthy by the influence of riches are enabled to direct the choice of public officers, there the downfall of liberty cannot be very remote.” Proud to live “by the sweat of their brows,” the artisans passed down their fears of concentrated economic and political power—the enemy of a society of equal opportunity and social justice—to industrial laborers who by the 1820s were confronting capital in its expansive, freewheeling form.

SMALL FARMERS

When Amos Singletary, the rough-hewn farmer from Worcester County, Massachusetts, rose before the state’s elected convention gathered in 1788 to decide on whether to ratify the Constitution, he spoke without benefit of any schooling. But standing behind the plow, he had developed a wealth of feelings and political instincts. Singletary may have appreciated that a written constitution was in itself a landmark event in the Western world, and he may have celebrated the fact that conventions of delegates elected by their constituents were charged with deciding on the wisdom of the document. These, after all, were breathtaking innovations in putting the power in the people—or, as was the case in Massachusetts, to give a say in political matters to about half the white adult males who qualified through property ownership.

But gnawing at Singletary’s innards was something born of his lifelong experience with the men of wealth in western Massachusetts. He, like most debt-ridden farmers tilling marginal lands in New England, had just left behind a wrenching, blood-filled civil insurrection born out of desperation. “These lawyers, and men of learning, and moneyed men, that talk so finely, and gloss over matters so smoothly, to make us poor illiterate people swallow down the pill,” he sputtered, “expect to get into congress themselves; they expect to be managers of the Constitution and get all the power and all the money into their own hands, and then they will swallow up all of us little folks, like the great Leviathan. Mr. President; yes just as the whale swallowed up Jonah. This is what I am afraid of.”

Singletary did not speak for all farmers and probably not for most of the commercially successful men of the plow. But he spoke for the hardscrabble families who eked out a living far from commercial markets. Such men toiled on the frontiers of the new nation, especially in the Appalachian hill country from Maine to Georgia. As small agricultural producers, they feared and hated what they regarded as moneyed, parasitical men who did not live by their own labor but handled money, speculated in land, bore hard on debtors to whom they made loans, and paid low taxes in relation to their wealth.

Many ordinary farmers did support the Constitution because they accepted the Federalists’ arguments that the nation was languishing under a government with insufficient power to levy taxes for national defense, conduct a muscular foreign policy, and devise national solutions to other national problems. The promise of the addition of a Bill of Rights, the lack of which was a bone in the throat of a majority of people, set at ease many who feared the aristocratic tendencies of the Constitution and the transfer of

power from state legislatures to a federal Congress. But decade after decade, usually in times of economic stress, agrarian radicals would step forward in every part of the expanding nation to seek redress for grievances that were rooted, in their view, from a narrow, aggrandizing minority of wealthy Americans who benefited the most from the Constitution.

Gary B. Nash is professor emeritus of history at the University of California, Los Angeles. His books include *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness and the Origins of the American Revolution (1979)*, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America (2005)*, and *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution (2006)*.
