

# 34 A Philadelphia Welcome



At the Constitutional Convention, Edmund Randolph hoped for "zealous attention to the present American crisis."

Everyone agreed that Philadelphia was the most modern city in America, perhaps in the world. Boston's narrow, twisting streets reminded people of Europe's cities. But Philadelphia had straight, broad avenues that crossed each other making nice, even, rectangular blocks. Water pumps were spaced regularly on each block, and street lamps—662 of them—lit the city at night. Philadelphia's streets were paved with cobblestones or brick. Some people complained of the noise when horses' hoofs clattered over the stones, but they had

to admit it was better than having dirt roads that turned dusty or muddy with the weather. Philadelphia even had sidewalks. They were edged with posts to protect pedestrians from the traffic.

Horse and carriage traffic was heavy, and accidents were commonplace. It was to be expected: Philadelphia, with 40,000 people, was the largest city in North America. It was a city proud of itself. After all, it had 7,000 houses, 33 churches, 10 newspapers, two theaters, a university, a museum, and a model jail.

The jail was across a lawn from the imposing State House. The language that came out of the windows of the jail was not model English. Ladies covered their ears and hurried by. At the red-brick State House, the language was courtly and proper. Nearby, at the new home of the Philosophical Society, the language was scholarly. There, great men, like the famous Dr. Benjamin Franklin, discussed science and the latest ideas.

Despite their dignified Quaker beginnings, Philadelphians loved parades and celebrations. So when George Washington rode into town on May 13, 1787, to attend the convention that was to write a new constitution for the new nation, it seemed as if all 40,000 people came out



**Accident on Lombard Street  
in Philadelphia, 1787:**

*The pye from Bakehouse she  
had brought  
But let it fall from want of  
thought  
And laughing sweeps collect  
around  
The pye that's scatter'd on the  
ground.*

to cheer. Church bells rang, cannons were fired, and those who lined the streets applauded the great general who had done so much to make the country free.

James Madison was one of the first delegates to arrive in Philadelphia, but no one paid him attention. He was 11 days early for the Constitutional Convention, and he was not a celebrity. Madison came by coach from New York, and was sore and tired after being squeezed in with a dozen others on hard, backless benches. The coach, pulled by horses, took two days to make the trip. It was called the *Philadelphia Flier*.

Madison checked into Mrs. Mary House's boardinghouse: it was quiet and convenient and less expensive than the popular inns. There he could work hard without interruptions.

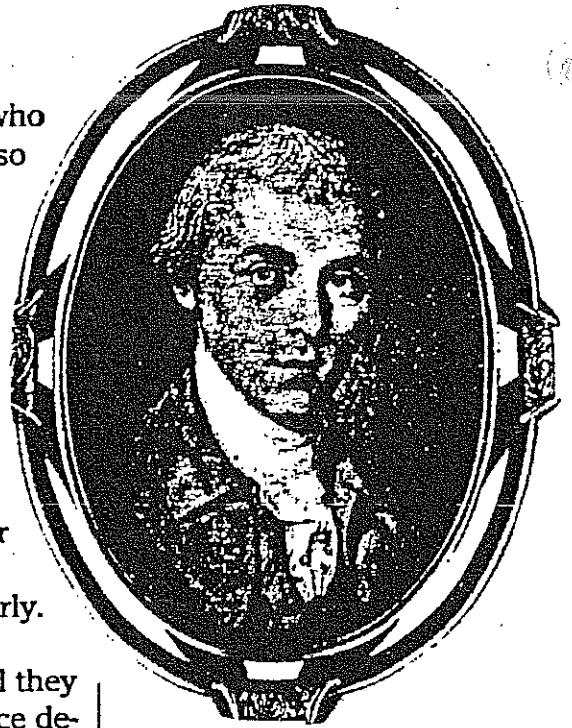
Those who knew Madison weren't surprised that he was early. They said that was typical of him. He liked to be prepared.

Some Philadelphians thought all Virginians were giants—until they saw James Madison. He was small and soft-voiced. Someone once described him as “no bigger than a half piece of soap.” But he was well put together, in mind as well as body.

His eyes were blue as a May sky. He had a boy's look and seemed even younger than his 36 years. Perhaps that was why he wore black suits and pulled his hair back and powdered it white in a style that made young men seem old and wise. People liked James Madison; his quiet, sensible ways impressed them. You could tell right away that he was a thinking man. His friends called him Jemmy.

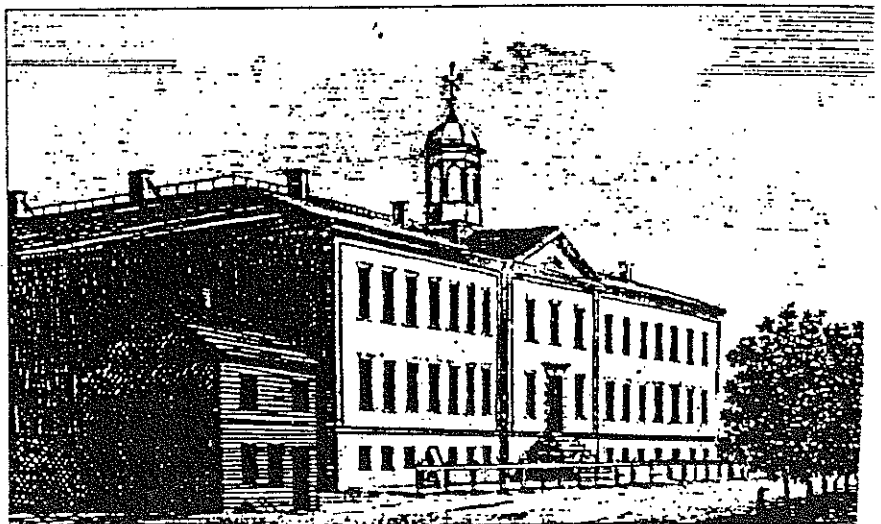
Jemmy Madison was the oldest of 12 children born to a plantation-owning Virginia Piedmont family. While most Virginians went to the College of William and Mary, Madison chose to go north to Princeton, which was then called the College of New Jersey. That gave him ideas and friends he might not have had if he had stayed close to home.

At first he thought he would be a minister of the church. Then he changed his mind and studied law; he said it was so that he could “depend as little as possible on the labor of slaves.” It turned out that he didn't like reading books of law. He gave that up and spent the rest of his life as a political leader. It was the labor of



James Madison was 27 years old when he helped write Virginia's constitution.

Philadelphia's Walnut Street Prison was toured by visitors from Europe, who came to admire its humane conditions.



### James Madison

*This is how William Pierce, a Georgia delegate, described Madison:*

**M**r. Madison is a character who has long been in public life; and what is very remarkable is that every person seems to acknowledge his greatness. He blends together the profound politician with the scholar...and though he cannot be called an orator, he is a most agreeable, eloquent, and convincing speaker. From a spirit of industry and application which he possesses in a most eminent degree, he always comes forward the best informed man of any point in debate. The affairs of the United States, he perhaps, has the most correct knowledge of, of any man in the Union....He is easy and unreserved among his acquaintance, and has a most agreeable style of conversation.

slaves that allowed him the freedom to do what he wished. Madison hated slavery, but he didn't know what to do about it.

More than anyone else, it was Madison who got this convention organized. He wrote letters to Washington, to Jefferson, to Adams, and to others, urging them to attend. The convention was supposed to revise the Articles of Confederation, but Madison thought rewriting it a poor idea. He believed the Articles should be scrapped—thrown out—and a whole new constitution written. He knew he would have to convince a lot of delegates of that, so he went about it the way he knew best—by studying.

Madison was a scholar. He read all he could find about governments all over the world and throughout history. Long before the convention got started, he wrote to his good friend Thomas Jefferson and asked for help. Jefferson had taken Franklin's place as America's minister in France. Jefferson sent Madison books—hundreds of books—and he sent his ideas.

Madison read about the governments of ancient Greece and Rome and of other places and times. Then he took the best ideas he found and wrote them in notebooks that he brought with him to the convention.

By this time, the other delegates were in Philadelphia and ready to get started. Madison and the Virginians set to work discussing a new plan of government that Madison had written. They agreed to have Virginia's popular governor, Edmund Randolph, present the plan to the Constitutional Convention. It was called the Virginia Plan, and it made things much easier for all the delegates at the convention. When they began their meeting, they had a document in front of them. It gave them a starting point; it helped speed up the process.

And that summer anything that made work easier was appreciated. Some people said 1787 was the hottest summer in Philadelphia's history. They were exaggerating. It was probably no hotter than usual in Philadelphia that summer—but it was hot.

Philadelphians shopped for groceries at the city's Country Market Place.





## A PHILADELPHIA WELCOME

After reading the handout, "A Philadelphia Welcome" answer the following questions as completely as possible.

1. What are some things that made Philadelphia, America's most modern, progressive city in 1787?
2. Who did the city honor with a parade & celebration in May of 1787? Why was this individual so honored and celebrated?
3. How long did it take to travel from New York to Philadelphia by coach in 1787? (distance 150 miles)
4. James Madison might have been the most important and influential delegate at the Convention. Why wouldn't he have 'stood out' in any way?
5. Who did Madison get help from and correspond with when he was working on a plan for a new constitution?
6. Many famous Americans like Madison, Franklin, Washington and Hamilton attended this important gathering in Philadelphia. Why wasn't Thomas Jefferson a delegate at the convention?

