Weekly Reading # 12
Article # 1
A Philadelphia Welcome

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 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, 2 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 peo-
ple came out 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 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 that 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.
It was already warm in late May 1787, when the Constitutional Convention was officially called to order. It was just beginning to cool down in September, when the Convention finally completed its business.

Besides the heat, there were flies and mosquitoes—big, biting flies and mosquitoes. They bit right through the silk stockings that the delegates wore.

In those days, no one knew much about sanitation; they didn’t know those little pests could be dangerous. So people dropped their garbage in the streets. At night, pigs and cows were let out to eat up the garbage. They left their own droppings, and so did the horses, which filled the streets during the day.

There were no bathrooms then, just tiny outdoor rooms called...
“necessaries” or “privies”—polite names for holes in the ground. And people didn’t take baths. They thought it unhealthy. When Elizabeth Drinker, a respectable Quaker lady, tried the shower her husband put in their backyard, she wrote in her diary, “I bore it better than I expected, not having been wet at all for once, for 28 years past.”

As you might expect, Benjamin Franklin did have a bath. He never let other people’s ideas stop him from experimenting. He had a round wooden tub built and set it on large paving stones that were heated by fires circulating hot air under the stones. The idea had been developed centuries earlier in China. Ben read about it, tried it, and liked it. Benjamin Rush, who was a member of the Philosophical Society and another advanced thinker, said that the heated bath “smoothed the descent of Dr. Franklin down the hill of life and helped prolong it beyond 84 years.”

Ben Franklin was always ready to try—or invent—new ways of doing things. The rest of Philadelphia smelled. Anyone with a cold or a stuffed nose was probably lucky.

It was heaven, though, for the flies and mosquitoes. They spread germs all over town, and that led to a lot of illness. In those days babies often didn’t survive long. (Of James Madison’s 11 brothers and sisters, 5 died as children. That wasn’t unusual.) Mothers sometimes used tin nipples for their baby’s bottles—they thought that was a good thing to do—but the poor infants got lead poisoning.

Grown-ups died young, too. If you went to a doctor he might decide to take some of your blood—sometimes a lot of it. Bleeding was supposed to be a cure for disease, but it could kill the patient. (Wormlike creatures, called leeches, were sometimes used to suck your blood.)

The 55 delegates to the Convention all made it through the Philadelphia summer, so they must have been strong men. Many of them stayed at the Indian Queen, which was one of the finest taverns in America.

A visitor to the Indian Queen described it as “kept in an elegant style, and consists of a large pile of buildings, with many spacious halls, and numerous...lodging rooms.” A servant who took that traveler to his room was “a young, sprightly, well-built black fellow, neatly dressed...his shirt ruffled, and hair powdered...he brought two of the latest London magazines and laid them on the table. I ordered him to call a barber, furnish me with a bowl of water for

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The Framers—the men at the Constitutional Convention—were deciding on a government for a free people. Why were they so secret about it? **Reason 1**: they didn’t want their constitution torn apart before it was even finished.

**Reason 2**: the delegates wanted to be able to change their minds. At the Constitutional Convention, any subject—even if it had been decided—could be brought up and voted on again.

Do you think those reasons are good enough? What are the advantages of private discussions? What are the dangers of closed lawmaking? Today reporters listen to congressional debates. So can you if you visit Washington or watch cable TV.
It wasn’t until after the Civil War that screens became popular. One Philadelphian, in Ben Franklin’s time, put a hornet’s nest in his dining room so the hornets would eat the flies and mosquitoes.

At taverns like the Indian Queen, customers passed the time with games such as billiards (below), which is similar to pool. Washington loved billiards, and also playing cards—though he was careful when he played for money.

washing, and to have tea on the table by the time I was dressed.”

On the first floor of the Indian Queen, men sat at round tables in the public sitting rooms, drank toddies, lemonade, or Madeira wine, read newspapers, and exchanged gossip. (Women were not allowed in the public rooms.)

Not all the delegates could afford the Indian Queen, and some who did had to share rooms. Of course, there wasn’t air-conditioning, or even screens. If they opened the windows the flies and mosquitoes came in; if they closed the windows it was too hot. No one got much sleep. Some days they must have been grumpy.

It was a good thing that James Madison was so well prepared. On top of everything else, he did something very important to those who would live after him: he took notes. That is how we know what happened.

You see, the Convention voted to keep all its proceedings secret. George Washington enforced that rule. He had been elected president of the Convention unanimously. When Washington was in charge, everyone did what he said.

Today our sessions of Congress are open to the public and the press. Democracy usually works best in an atmosphere of openness. Some people in 1787 didn’t like the idea of secrecy. When Thomas Jefferson heard about it—remember, he was in France as ambassador—he was upset. But are there people who say the Convention never could have accomplished what it did if everyone in Philadelphia had known what was going on.

A secretary was hired to keep a record of the proceedings. His records were lost. But Madison sat close to the front, never missed a session, and copied down all the speeches. James Madison has been called the Father of the Constitution. However, he wasn’t the only important man there. In the next chapter you’ll read about a man who slurred George Washington on the back—but only once.