One of the greatest of the Founding Fathers, James Madison earned the title "Father of the Constitution": he organized the interstate conventions at Mt. Vernon and Annapolis that led to the Constitutional Convention; he created much of the Virginia Plan, used as the basis for the final version of the U.S. Constitution, and contributed immensely to the Convention’s success; he led the group that won ratification of the Constitution in Virginia; and he wrote Federalist Papers that lucidly explained the value of the system of government embodied in the Constitution. And in the First Congress he sponsored and obtained adoption of the Bill-of-Rights Amendments.

In the 1780s Madison recognized that the States must have a united commercial policy in order to deal effectively with foreign nations, and, not daring to hope for as much as a new constitution, he helped organize the interstate conventions at Mt. Vernon and Annapolis, which were to deal solely with commercial matters. At Annapolis, Madison, Hamilton and others were able to call for the convention in Philadelphia.

Several years before the Convention Madison began studying books on political philosophy and constitutional law that Thomas Jefferson sent him from Paris. He was well prepared to help draft the Virginia Plan, with its proposal for a truly national government. At the Convention he was clearly the best informed on political theory, and his vast knowledge, ready intelligence, and quiet reasonableness won him the respect—and the ear—of every delegate.

Besides taking the most complete notes of the proceedings of the Convention, Madison himself was involved in almost all deliberations of important points. With George Mason, Madison insisted that the people, rather than the State legislatures, must elect at least one branch of the national legislature—thus creating an entirely new political relationship that would give the citizen of every State direct representation in the national government.

More than any other man, Madison helped devise the unique division of powers between the national and State governments that was finally adopted. With a profound understanding of the needs of the States, he served as a moderating force between George Mason, the champion of individual liberty, and Alexander Hamilton, the champion of a strong central government. From the Virginia Plan to the Bill of Rights, no man contributed more.

Once the new government was formed, Madison continued to contribute: in the First Congress he helped prepare the legislation that established the departments of the Executive branch; in 1798 he wrote the “Virginia Resolution,” which challenged the constitutionality of the Alien and Sedition Acts; as Secretary of State he was involved in the purchase of Louisiana Territory; and, as President, he led the nation through a war with England that cost him popularity but finally settled the question of American independence.
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1751  Born Mar. 16 Port Conway, Va.  
1771  Graduated from College of New
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1776  Member, Virginia Convention
1778–79 Member, Governor's Council
1780–83 Member, Congress of
   Confederation
1784–86 Member, Virginia legislature
1786  Delegate to Annapolis Convention
1787  Delegate to Constitutional
   Convention
1788  Member, Virginia Ratification
   Convention
1789–97 Member, U.S. Congress
1799–1800 Member, Virginia legislature
1801–09 U.S. Secretary of State
1809–17 President
Weekly Reading #13

Article #2: What Was Shay’s Rebellion?

Rebellion, as the Founding Fathers quickly discovered, is a catchy tune. Besides independence, the end of the war had brought economic chaos to America. As with most wars, the Revolution had been good for business. Everybody works, soldiers spend money, factories turn out ships and guns, armies buy supplies. That’s the good news. The bad news is that after war comes inflation and depression. The years immediately following the Revolution were no different. America went through bad economic times. Established trading patterns were in disarray. Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress had no power to tax. In the thirteen states, where power was centered, the separate currencies were a shambles.

While the situation was bad almost everywhere, in Massachusetts, the home of the Adamses and birthplace of the patriot cause, the economic dislocation boiled over into bloodshed between Americans. Like the prewar Bacon’s Rebellion, the Regulator Movement in the Carolinas, and the Paxton Boys of Pennsylvania (see pages 62–64), this “little rebellion” (Jefferson’s phrase) was a sign of class conflict, a symptom of the economic tension that had always existed in America between, on one side, the working-class frontier farmers, inner-city laborers, the servant class, smaller merchants, and free blacks, and on the other side the bourgeoisie, the landed, slaveholding gentry, and international merchants of the larger cities.

When Massachusetts passed a state constitution in 1780, it found few friends among the poor and middle class, many of them veterans of the Continental Army still waiting for promised bonuses. When they learned that they were now barred from voting and holding office, they must have wondered what they had been fighting for. As the economy worsened, many farms were seized to pay off debts. When the local sheriffs looked to the militia to defend the debt courts against angry crowds, the militia sided with the farmers.

In the summer of 1786, an army veteran named Daniel Shays emerged on the scene. With 700 farmers and working-class people, Shays marched on Springfield and paraded around town. Onetime radical Sam Adams, now part of the Boston Establishment, drew up a Riot Act, allowing the authorities to jail anyone without a trial. Revolt against a monarch was one thing, said Adams, but against a republic it is a crime punishable by death.
Shays soon had a thousand men under arms and was marching on Boston, the seat of wealth and power. Then General Benjamin Lincoln, one of Washington’s war commanders, brought out an army paid for by Boston’s merchants. There was an exchange of artillery fire, leaving some casualties on both sides, and Shays’s army scattered. Lincoln’s army pursued the rebels, but refrained from attacking when the rout was assured. A harsh winter took its toll, and the army disintegrated. Some of the rebels were caught, tried, and hanged. Others were pardoned. Shays, on the run in Vermont, was pardoned, but died in poverty in 1788.

Writing from the safe distance of Paris, Thomas Jefferson said of the uprising, “A little rebellion now and then is a good thing. . . . God forbid that we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion. . . . The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.”

Lacking cohesion and stronger leadership, the Shaysites disintegrated. However, several of the reforms they had demanded were made, including the end of the state’s direct taxation, lower court costs, and the exemption of workmen’s tools and household necessities from the debt process.