

# 1 The Confederation Era

## TERMS & NAMES

Wilderness Road  
 republic  
 Articles of  
 Confederation  
 Land Ordinance  
 of 1785  
 Northwest Territory  
 Northwest  
 Ordinance  
 Shays's Rebellion

### MAIN IDEA

The Articles of Confederation were too weak to govern the nation after the war ended.

### WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The weakness of the Articles of Confederation led to the writing of the U.S. Constitution.

## ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

In 1775, Daniel Boone and 30 woodsmen cut a road over the Appalachian Mountains into Kentucky. They hacked through brush, chopped down trees, and bridged creeks. They labored like this for about 250 miles. Eventually, they arrived in a grassy meadow along the banks of the Kentucky River. Felix Walker, a member of Boone's party, described what they saw.

### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

On entering the plain we were permitted to view a very interesting and romantic sight. A number of buffaloes . . . supposed to be between two and three hundred, made off . . . in every direction. . . . Such a sight some of us never saw before, nor perhaps ever may again.

Felix Walker, quoted in *The Life and Adventures of Daniel Boone*

Boone was one of the earliest American settlers in Kentucky. In the late 1700s, most Americans thought of Kentucky as the wild frontier. Some, like Boone, looked at the frontier and saw a world of opportunity. Exploring and governing these lands was only one of the many challenges that faced the new government of the United States.

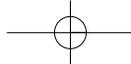


Early travel to Kentucky is shown in this detail of *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers Through the Cumberland Gap* (1851–1852) by George Caleb Bingham.

## Moving West

The trail into Kentucky that Daniel Boone helped build was called the **Wilderness Road**. This road was not easy to travel. It was too narrow for carts or wagons, but it became the main road into Kentucky. The settlers came on foot or on horseback. Settlers were drawn to Kentucky's rich river valleys, where few Native Americans lived. But some Native Americans, such as the Shawnee, did live, hunt, and fish in the area.

Tensions between Native Americans and settlers led to violent confrontations. But the settlers did not stop coming. By the early 1790s, about 100,000 Americans lived there. While settlers headed into the Western territories, the people in the East began to create new state governments.



## New State Governments

Once the American colonies declared independence, each of the states set out to create its own government. The framers, or creators, of the state constitutions did not want to destroy the political systems that they had had as colonies. They simply wanted to make those systems more democratic. Some states experimented with creating separate branches of government, giving different powers to different branches. By creating separate branches, Americans hoped to prevent the government from becoming too powerful.

Some states included a bill of rights in their constitutions as a way to keep the government under control. The idea of a bill of rights came from the English Bill of Rights of 1689. This was a list of rights that the government guaranteed to English citizens.

Although not all the states had a bill of rights, all of them did have a republican form of government. In a **republic**, the people choose representatives to govern them.

### Background

Two states, Connecticut and Rhode Island, kept their old colonial charters as their constitutions. The other 11 states wrote new constitutions.

## The Articles of Confederation

While the states were setting up their governments, Americans also discussed the form of their national government. During the Revolutionary War, Americans realized that they needed to unite to win the war against Britain. As Silas Deane, a diplomat from Connecticut, wrote, “United we stand, divided we fall.”

In 1776, the Continental Congress began to develop a plan for a national government. Congress agreed that the government should be a republic. But the delegates disagreed about whether each state should have one vote or voting should be based on population. They also disagreed about whether the national government or the individual states should control the lands west of the Appalachians.

The Continental Congress eventually arrived at a final plan, called the **Articles of Confederation**. In the Articles, the national government had few powers, because many Americans were afraid that a strong government would lead to tyranny, or oppressive rule. The national government was run by a Confederation Congress. Each state had only one vote in the Congress. The national government had the power to wage war, make peace, sign treaties, and issue money.

But the Articles left most important powers to the states. These powers included the authority to set taxes and enforce national laws. The Articles proposed to leave the states in control of the lands west of the Appalachian Mountains.

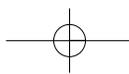


*“United we stand,  
divided we fall.”*

Silas Deane

### Reading History

**A. Reading a Map** Look at the map on page 207 to see which states claimed territories in the West.



The Continental Congress passed the Articles of Confederation in November 1777. It then sent the Articles to the states for ratification, or approval. By July 1778, eight states had ratified the Articles. But some of the small states that did not have Western land claims refused to sign.

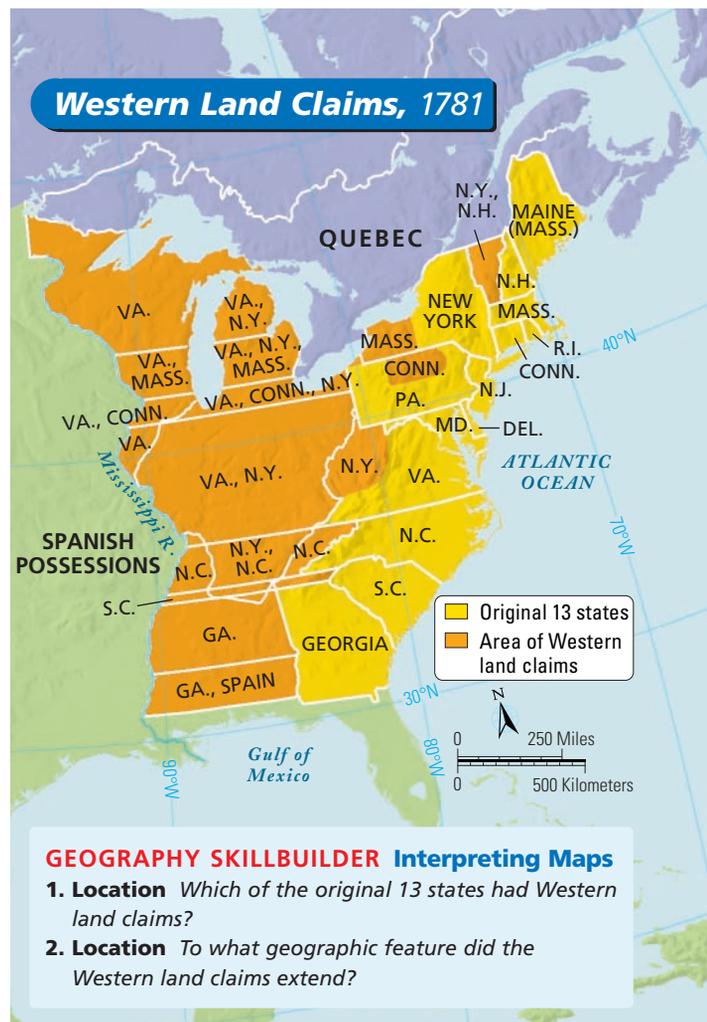
These states felt that unless the Western lands were placed under the control of the national government, they would be at a disadvantage. The states with Western lands could sell them to pay off debts left from the Revolution. But states without lands would have difficulty paying off the high war debts.

Over the next three years, all the states gave up their claims to Western lands. This led the small states to ratify the Articles. In 1781, Maryland became the 13th state to accept the Articles. As a result, the United States finally had an official government.

### ReadingHistory

#### B. Finding Main Ideas

Why did the states without Western land claims want the other states to give up their claims?



## The Northwest Ordinance

One of the most important questions that the Confederation Congress faced was what to do with the Western lands that it now controlled. Congress passed important laws on how to divide and govern these lands—the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance (1787). (See Geography in History on pages 210–211.)

The **Land Ordinance of 1785** called for surveyors to stake out six-mile-square plots, called townships, in the Western lands. These lands later became known as the **Northwest Territory**. The Northwest Territory included land that formed the states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin and part of Minnesota.

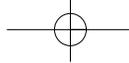
The **Northwest Ordinance** (1787) described how the Northwest Territory was to be governed. As the territory grew in population, it would gain rights to self-government. When there were 5,000 free males in an area, men who owned at least 50 acres of land could elect an assembly. When there were 60,000 people, they could apply to become a new state.

The Northwest Ordinance also set conditions for settlement in the Northwest Territory and outlined the settlers' rights. Slavery was outlawed, and the rivers were to be open to navigation by all. Freedom of religion and trial by jury were guaranteed.

The Northwest Ordinance was important because it set a pattern for the orderly growth of the United States. As the nation grew, it followed this pattern in territories added after the Northwest Territory.

### Background

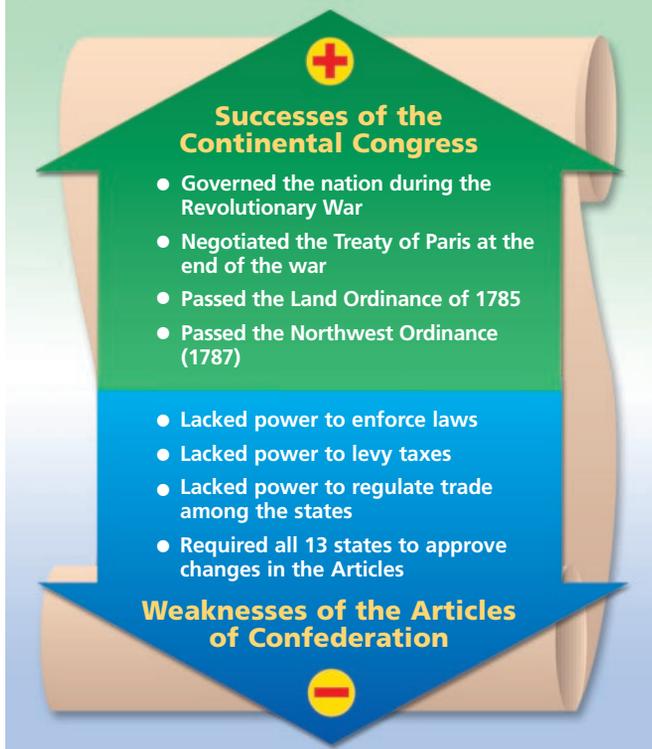
According to the Northwest Ordinance, Native Americans were to be treated fairly, and their lands were not to be taken from them.



## Weaknesses of the Articles

Aside from its handling of land issues, however, the Confederation Congress had few successes. By the end of the Revolutionary War, the United States faced serious problems, and the Confederation Congress did not have enough power to solve them.

### U.S. Government, 1776–1787



#### SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Charts

1. What do you think was the greatest success of the Continental Congress?
2. What do you think was the greatest weakness of the Articles of Confederation?

Debt was a critical problem for the government. Congress had borrowed large sums to pay for the Revolutionary War. Much of that money was owed to soldiers of its own army. Upset at not being paid, several hundred soldiers surrounded the Pennsylvania State House where Congress was meeting in June 1783. The soldiers threatened the legislators, thrusting their bayonets through the windows. The delegates were forced to flee the city. The event was a clear sign of Congress's weakness.

Even if Congress wanted to pay the soldiers, it did not have the power to levy taxes. The national government depended on the states to send money to Congress. But the states sent very little money.

Congress was not alone in facing economic crises. People throughout the nation faced hard times. In Massachusetts, the economy was so bad that people rose up in arms against the government.

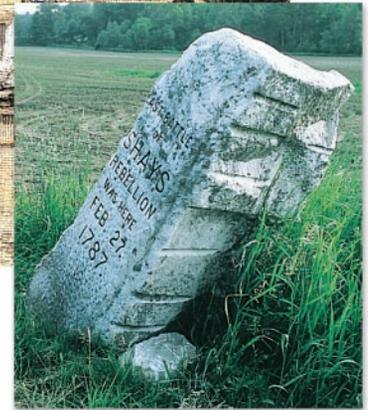
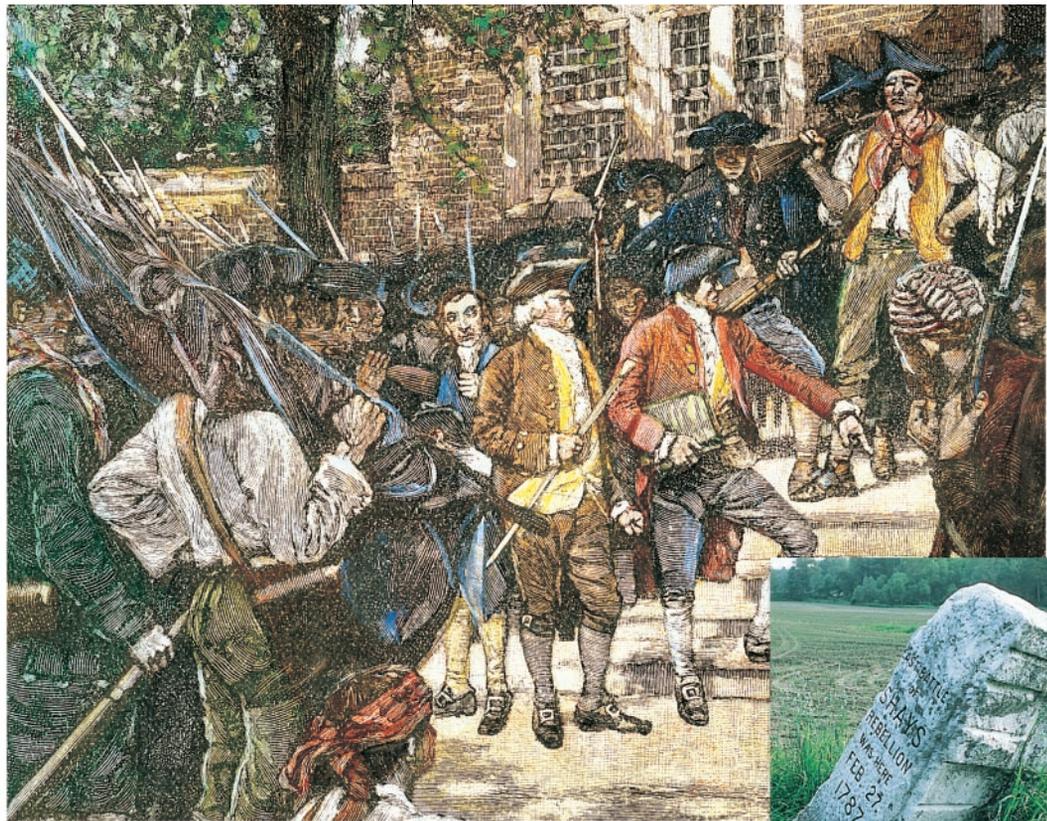
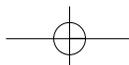
#### Reading History

**C. Analyzing Causes** How did debt cause problems for the U.S. government under the Articles of Confederation?

## Shays's Rebellion

In the mid-1780s, Massachusetts faced economic problems, as did other states. People had little money, but the state continued to levy high taxes. The average family owed \$200 in taxes per year—more money than most farmers made. Many Massachusetts farmers fell deeply into debt. Debt laws at the time were strict. Anyone who could not repay his debts would have his property auctioned off. If the auction didn't raise enough money to settle the debts, the debtor could be put in jail. In western Massachusetts, many jails were packed with debtors.

Farmers asked the Massachusetts legislature to provide debt relief. But the legislature refused—and the farmers rebelled. One of the leaders of the rebellion was a Revolutionary War veteran named Daniel Shays. He commanded a group of about 1,500 men.



In January 1787, Shays and his men marched on a federal arsenal, a place to store weapons. The arsenal was defended by 900 soldiers from the state militia. The militia quickly defeated Shays’s men. But even though the militia put down **Shays’s Rebellion**, as the uprising came to be known, the farmers won the sympathy of many people. America’s leaders realized that an armed uprising of common farmers spelled danger for the nation.

Some leaders hoped that the nation’s ills could be solved by strengthening the national government. In the next section, you’ll read how Americans held a convention to change the Articles of Confederation.

Shays’s rebels take over a Massachusetts courthouse. A stone marker rests on the spot of the rebellion.

**Background**  
In 1788, Daniel Shays was pardoned for his actions.

Section **1** Assessment

**1. Terms & Names**

**Explain the significance of:**

- Wilderness Road
- republic
- Articles of Confederation
- Land Ordinance of 1785
- Northwest Territory
- Northwest Ordinance
- Shays’s Rebellion

**2. Taking Notes**

Use a diagram like the one below to list some of the challenges Americans faced in shaping a new government.



Which challenge do you think was the toughest? Why?

**3. Main Ideas**

- a. What issues affected the Western territories between 1775 and 1787?
- b. What were three successes of the Continental Congress?
- c. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation?

**4. Critical Thinking**

**Forming and Supporting Opinions** Which side would you have supported during Shays’s Rebellion—the farmers or the officials who called out the militia? Why?

**THINK ABOUT**

- the farmers’ problems
- the farmers’ march on the arsenal
- the job of the government

**ACTIVITY OPTIONS**

**CIVICS**  
**GEOGRAPHY**

Write an **opinion article** about how the United States should govern the Western territories or draw a **map** showing how you would have divided the lands.