

THE UNANIMOUS STATE

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THE impressive document that brought New Jersey formally into the Federal Union is a symbol of the state's ardent devotion to the "more perfect Union" that was being created. Precious, indeed, was the independence that had been won in the battles of the Revolution. But not until freedom had been guaranteed by a stable and effective form of government for a united nation was the sense of achievement complete. As the members of the ratifying convention affixed their signatures to the large, hand-scribed parchment sheets that brought their state into the Federal Union, they could take pride in the promptness and unanimity with which New Jersey had acted.

The immediate chain of events that led up to the moment of ratification began on November 23, 1786, when New Jersey became the first state to appoint delegates to the Constitutional Convention. Then followed long months of suspenseful waiting, until finally the results of the Convention's deliberations were published. When the Continental Congress on September 28, 1787, transmitted the proposed Constitution to the several states, sentiment in New Jersey was unanimous for ratification at the earliest possible moment. Soon petitions were circulating through the state expressing the view that "nothing but the immediate adoption of . . . the Constitution can save the United States in General and this State in particular from absolute ruin."

The newly elected legislature convened late in October. Governor William Livingston, who had been a delegate to the Philadelphia Convention, lost no time in presenting the Constitution to the lawmakers on October 25. The next day, recognizing that it was "the earnest wish of the good people of this State, that early and immediate measures be taken to assemble a Convention," both houses resolved by unanimous votes that a ratifying convention should be elected. Accordingly, on the fourth Tuesday in November, favored by clear, cool weather, the voters went to the polls to elect three delegates from each of the state's thirteen counties. The election went

off quietly, for there was not a voice raised in opposition to ratification.

On Tuesday, December 11, the delegates began to assemble at Francis Witt's noted Blazing Star Tavern in Trenton. By the following day all were present except Dr. Samuel Dick of Salem, who failed to attend any of the sessions. Proceeding at a leisurely pace, the Convention spent three days in organizing. Finally, on December 14, the delegates began to discuss the Constitution section by section, with the public in attendance. On the eighteenth, again by unanimous vote, the thirty-eight members present did "ratify and confirm the said Constitution."

A committee was then appointed, consisting of David Brearley, chairman, and the Reverend Dr. John Witherspoon, John Neilson, Dr. John Beatty, and the Reverend Mr. Andrew Hunter to draw up a "Form of the Ratification of the proposed Constitution." That evening Brearley reported the form that the ratification should take, and the Convention ordered:

That the Secretary be directed to cause two Copies of the Federal Constitution, together with the Form of the Ratification, etc. as agreed to, engrossed on Parchment, in a neat and correct manner, to be laid before the Convention tomorrow morning, for the purpose of signature; one for the Congress of the United States, and the other to be deposited among the archives of the State.

For their night's labor in preparing the engrossed copies, the clerks were later paid four pounds, ten shillings.

On Wednesday, December 19, the official signing took place. John Stevens, the President of the Convention was the first to sign, followed by the county delegations. After this momentous ceremony, the Convention went in procession to the Court House where the secretary "read the Ratification of the Constitution in the Hearing of the People." Meeting for the last time on the twentieth, the Convention recommended that the state cede to the United States a district ten miles square as a capital for the new Federal Union.

The ratifying document is simple in form. It begins with the statement that the delegates from the several states had completed their deliberations on September 17, and then reproduces the full text of the Constitution. Next, it cites the resolve of the Continental Congress transmitting the Constitution to the states, the resolutions of the legislature providing for the election of delegates to the ratifying convention, and the law authorizing the convention to act on the

matter of ratification. A final, brief paragraph declares New Jersey's act of ratification. Engrossed on four parchment sheets, approximately 30½ inches wide by 28 inches long, the historic document fittingly expresses the solemn importance of the decision made in behalf of the people of New Jersey on December 18, 1787.

The thirty-eight delegates who signed the ratification were men of varied backgrounds who held positions of respect in their local communities. Although few of them had been prominent prior to Independence, almost all of them had been active in serving the Whig cause. Nine had participated in the drafting of the state's first Constitution in 1776. Fifteen had served in the state Assembly, eleven had been on the Council, and seven had represented New Jersey in the Continental Congress. Notably absent were those men who had been politically active within the preceding few years. There were but two who were currently in the legislature. Most of the delegates were substantial farmers, but there were also four lawyers, two college presidents, four ministers, four iron masters, one land magnate, and a few merchants and ship owners.

The President of the Convention, John Stevens, had served on the colonial Council, in the state legislature, and as a member of the Continental Congress. Owner of a vast landed estate, he was president of the East Jersey Board of Proprietors. He distinguished himself as one of the few members of the old colonial aristocracy to cast his lot wholeheartedly with the revolutionary cause. The most active delegate in the Convention was David Brearley. When objections were raised in debate, it was he who "with a perspicacity of argument, and persuasive eloquence, which carried conviction with it, bore down all opposition." Chief Justice of the state since 1779, he had served in the Philadelphia Convention and was later to become the first judge of the United States District Court in New Jersey.

John Witherspoon, the fiery president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton University) had signed the Declaration of Independence and had been almost continually engaged in promoting the Whig cause since that time. His colleague from Somerset, Jacob Rutsen Hardenbergh, was the president of Queen's College (Rutgers, The State University) and, like Witherspoon, was an active patriot. The third member of the Somerset delegation, Frederick Frelinghuysen, had begun his distinguished career as the first tutor

of Queen's College. He had served in the militia, in the Provincial Congress, the legislature, and the Continental Congress, and was later to represent New Jersey in the United States Senate.

John Neilson of New Brunswick, the leading merchant in the assemblage, held a military commission in the Revolution and had served in both the legislature and the Continental Congress. Richard Howell, another Revolutionary veteran, was destined to become governor. John Jacob Faesch, together with Robert Ogden, Thomas Reynolds, and Thomas Anderson, was representative of the iron industry, which had contributed so much to military victory in the war. Andrew Hunter and William Woodhull, like Witherspoon and Hardenbergh, were clergymen.

The secretary of the Convention, Samuel Witham Stockton, was a graduate of the College of New Jersey. He had filled diplomatic posts abroad early in the Revolution and was to conclude an active political career as secretary of state of New Jersey.

Honored patriots, firm republicans, and loyal supporters of the Federal Union, the signers of the ratification document were representative of the hosts of Jerseymen whose dedicated services brought about the establishment of the new nation.