

## This Day in History... September 13, 1788

# New York City Becomes America's First Capital

On September 13, 1788, New York City was established as America's first capital under the Constitution of the United States. This marked the beginning of a new era for the country, as the states moved from the loose Articles of Confederation to the stronger federal government outlined in the US Constitution.

Before New York became the capital, the United States was still struggling to find stability after the Revolutionary War. The Articles of Confederation, adopted in 1781, had provided for a weak central government. There was no permanent capital—Congress moved from city to city, meeting in Philadelphia, Princeton, Annapolis, Trenton, and New York City in the mid-1780s. But many leaders soon realized the Articles were not enough to hold the new nation together. The government could not tax citizens directly, regulate trade, or easily raise money to pay debts from the war.

In 1787, delegates from twelve states met in Philadelphia at what became the Constitutional Convention. They created the US Constitution, which established a stronger federal government with an elected president, a bicameral Congress, and a federal court system. The Constitution was ratified by enough states by the summer of 1788 to go into effect. On September 13, 1788, the Confederation Congress officially declared that the new government would begin operations on March 4, 1789, and that New York City would serve as the first capital.

New York was chosen for several reasons. It was a major port city and a center of commerce, which made it a practical place for the government to meet. Its location was also relatively central for the time, as the nation's population was concentrated along the East Coast, especially in the northern states. In addition, New York had facilities that could house the new Congress and host government functions. Federal Hall, located on Wall Street, was renovated to serve as the first capitol building under the Constitution. The city was eager to host the national government and offered accommodations to support the new administration.

*Stamp honors the 50th anniversary of the five boroughs being combined into one New York City government.*



New York City's time as the capital was brief but historic. On April 30, 1789, George Washington was inaugurated as the first president of the United States on the balcony of Federal Hall. This was a moment of great celebration, as Americans saw Washington as a unifying figure who would guide the country through its early years.

The First Congress met in New York and began passing important laws to put the new government into action. Among its accomplishments were the creation of executive departments—State, Treasury, and War—that would become the president's cabinet, as well as the passage of the Judiciary Act of 1789, which established the federal court system. Congress also adopted the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution, which guaranteed freedoms such as speech, religion, and the press.

In addition to political developments, New York became a hub of social activity during its time as the capital. Foreign diplomats, members of Congress, and prominent citizens gathered in the city, giving it a lively, international atmosphere. Washington hosted weekly receptions, called "levees," which allowed citizens and officials to meet the president. These gatherings helped set the tone for the new federal government's public image, and emphasized dignity and respectability.

Despite its success as the first capital, New York City was not destined to remain the permanent seat of government. Southern states argued that the capital should be in a more central location to balance the influence of the North. This debate led to the famous Compromise of 1790, brokered by Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison. As part of the compromise, the federal government agreed to assume the states' Revolutionary War debts—a measure favored by Hamilton and the northern states—in exchange for moving the capital to a site along the Potomac River, which would later become Washington, DC. Congress met for the last time in Federal Hall on August 12, 1790. Until the new federal district could be built, the capital was moved to Philadelphia in 1790, where it remained for ten years.

Although New York's time as the capital was short-lived, its importance cannot be overstated. The city was the birthplace of the US government under the Constitution, the site of George Washington's first inauguration, and the place where many of the country's foundational laws were passed. Its brief time as the capital helped set the stage for the growth of the federal government and the traditions of American political life.

*Stamp issued for the 175th anniversary of the Bill of Rights.*



*Stamp pictures the former national capital at Federal Hall. The building was later demolished in 1812.*



*Stamp issued for the 150th anniversary of George Washington's first inauguration.*



*Issued in 1953 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the founding of New York City, which was first known as New Amsterdam.*

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