

This Day in History... November 20, 1789

New Jersey Becomes First State to Ratify the Bill of Rights

On November 20, 1789, New Jersey became the first state in the US to ratify the Bill of Rights. It would be two more years before enough states ratified these amendments to make them part of the US Constitution.

When the US Constitution was submitted to the states for ratification, some states argued it provided too much power to the central government, which could easily abuse individual rights. They believed there should be a bill of rights to prevent such abuses.

Thomas Jefferson was among those who advocated for a "Bill of Rights" enumerating individual rights. Jefferson's position gained strength, and a compromise was reached. Individual state legislatures ratified the document with the understanding that the first national legislative meeting under the new Constitution would pass amendments guaranteeing specific individual liberties.

Though he initially opposed it, James Madison drafted the Bill of Rights. In June 1789, he presented nine articles with a total of 20 amendments. The Senate removed several amendments and added one. On September 25, 1789, the US House and Senate met in Congress Hall to ratify twelve proposals. Once passed there, they were submitted to the states on September 28.

The 12 proposals were:

Article One specified a formula for the number of seats in the House of Representatives.

Article Two restricted when changes to payment could occur for members of Congress.

Article Three granted the freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition.

Article Four gave the right to keep and bear arms to maintain a well-regulated militia.

Article Five forbid the quartering of soldiers.

Article Six granted the freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures.

Article Seven gave the right to due process, freedom from self-incrimination, and double-jeopardy.

Article Eight gave the accused the right to a speedy and public trial.

Article Nine granted the right to a trial by jury in civil cases.

Article Ten gave a freedom from excessive bail and cruel and unusual punishments.

Article Eleven guaranteed the rights of the people that weren't specifically stated in the Constitution.

Article Twelve stated that the powers not outlined in the Constitution were reserved for the states.

Less than two months after it was submitted to the states, New Jersey became the first state to ratify the Bill of Rights. They ratified 11 out of the 12 articles proposed. They rejected the second article, which was eventually approved in 1992 and became the 27th Amendment. They also approved first article. However, that article was never approved by the required number of states.

Maryland followed New Jersey, ratifying Articles One through Twelve on December 19, 1789. North Carolina ratified them all on December 22, 1789. South Carolina ratified them all on January 19, 1790. New Hampshire ratified Articles One and Three through Twelve on January 25, 1790. Delaware ratified Articles Two through Twelve on January 28, 1790. New York ratified them all on February 24, 1790. Pennsylvania ratified Articles Three through Twelve on March 10, 1790, Rhode Island ratified Articles One and Three through Twelve on June 7, 1790.

Vermont ratified Articles One through Twelve on November 3, 1791. And Virginia ratified Articles Three through Twelve on December 15, 1791. With Virginia's ratification, three-fourths of the states had ratified the Bill of Rights, making it law, and establishing Articles 3 through 12 as the first 10 Amendments to the Constitution. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson officially declared the ten accepted amendments as adopted on March 1, 1792.



This stamp was issued for the 175th anniversary of the Bill of Rights.



Stamp issued on the 200th anniversary of the House and Senate's ratification of the Bill of Rights.

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