

This Day in History... December 15, 1791

Bill of Rights Becomes Law

On December 15, 1791, Virginia became the 11th state to ratify the Bill of Rights, earning the three-fourths majority needed to add the first 10 amendments to the Constitution.

Following the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, which led to the creation of the new nation's Constitution, each state had to ratify it individually. The first nine states approved the Constitution by June 1788. Although all that was needed to approve the Constitution was nine states, four others 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 the critics who advocated a "Bill of Rights" enumerating individual rights. Jefferson's position gained strength, and a compromise was reached. 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.



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



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

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. They were then submitted to the states on September 28.

Then for over two years, the states voted on the articles. New Jersey was the first, ratifying 11 of the articles on November 20, 1789. They were followed by Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, New Hampshire, Delaware, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and finally Virginia. As the 11th state to

ratify some or all of the amendments, Virginia cemented the creation of the Bill of Rights on December 15, 1791. By the state's votes, articles three through twelve were passed, and these became the first ten amendments, known collectively as the Bill of Rights. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson officially declared the ten accepted amendments as adopted on March 1, 1792.



Religious freedom is included in the first amendment.



Freedom of the press is also included in the first amendment.

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James Madison was then tasked with drafting the Bill of Rights, though he initially opposed it. Madison crafted these amendments in part based on proposals he received from each state that wished to contribute. He rejected proposals calling for structural changes in the government, and kept others that created a series of amendments protecting civil rights such as free speech. Madison also drew inspiration from the Magna Carta and Virginia Declaration of Rights.

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The rights guaranteed by the amendments are freedom of speech, the press, assembly, religious worship, and to petition for redress of grievances. The right to keep and bear arms and restrictions on the quartering of soldiers in peacetime are also included. The amendments provide for protection from unreasonable search and seizure, cruel and unusual punishment, self-incrimination, and a guarantee of due process of law and a speedy public trial with an impartial jury. In addition, all powers that are not specifically given to the federal government in the Constitution are reserved for the citizenry or states. And the listing of specific rights in the Constitution does not mean that other, non-specified rights do not exist.



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