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PHILADELPHIA

While Britons were playing host to an ambitious new convention in London, Americans were paying heed to an ambitious old convention in Philadelphia. Early in 1840, fresh tales and details emerged about what had happened and what had not happened in the drafting of the US Constitution behind closed doors in the City of Brotherly Love back in the summer of 1787. These remarkable new revelations fueled a soul-searching and long-lasting national conversation about America's origins and essence.

Madison's Notes: A New Take on Philadelphia

In the opening months of 1840, less than four years after the death of ex-president James Madison, his copious notes regarding the 1787 Philadelphia Convention became widely available for the first time, as part of a three-volume set of posthumous papers published under congressional sponsorship.[1] Built upon young delegate Madison's contemporaneous jottings and fresh recollections as the Convention unfolded, the published notes and accompanying tables, citations, and appendices filled more than 1,100 printed pages. These pages both documented and dramatized the Philadelphia conclave's daily

deliberations, paraphrasing and contextualizing thousands of individual speeches and motions.

The Convention had met behind closed doors between May and mid-September 1787. As the delegates adjourned on September 17, they voted to free themselves to publicly discuss what had secretly transpired in the preceding months.[2] In the ensuing ratification year, many delegates did speak and write at length about various specifics. But other attendees kept quiet or described the conclave's conversations only in broad outline.[3] Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Americans thus had rather vague and spotty accounts of what had happened day by day, issue by issue, state by state, delegate by delegate, speech by speech, motion by motion.

The 1840 publication of Madison's notes changed all that. Americans now had a clearer picture of the Convention than ever before—indeed, a far more vivid and comprehensive account than anything available to "We the People" during the ratification process itself.[4]

Before we dive into Madison's detailed depiction, let's briefly recall America's history prior to this epic Convention, which had drawn together George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and a galaxy of other American notables to determine the fate of the New World.

Until the reign of George III, which began in late 1760, America was not an "it" but a "they." Unrelated groups of settlers from dissimilar Old World lands, embodying divergent traditions, practicing clashing religions, and dreaming of sharply contrasting kinds of new lives in the New World, founded disparate and distinct colonies at separate times—colonies with widely different climates, crops, coastlines, and cultures.

Early seventeenth-century English Puritans flocked to stony Massachusetts aspiring to build a proverbial city on a hill, a spiritual beacon for the world, led by Congregationalist churchmen and their devout spouses. Dissenters from these dissenters later broke off to found a spirited enclave of religious nonconformists and freethinkers in Rhode Island. A more ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse