

# The Articles of Confederation and Shays' Rebellion

## Curriculum Unit for US History Survey Class

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Presented as an assignment for the Teaching American History Program: "A More Perfect Union"

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### Introduction:

Historian John Fiske entitled his famous study of the 1780s "The Critical Period." Although his interpretation of that era has been modified over the last century, the significance of that decade and the importance for citizens' knowledge has not diminished. In some ways, a sophisticated understanding is even more important as we run through the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The basic economic principles underlying the crisis of the 1780s also arms the students with terminology for understanding current personal and national economic problems. This unit is designed to give students a better foundation than simply reviewing the "Founding Fathers" in a way that makes the transition to Constitution seem inevitable and/or "preordained."

### National Standards:

#### STANDARD 2

The impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society.

#### Standard 2A

The student understands revolutionary government-making at national and state levels.

Grade Level	Therefore, the student is able to
5-12	Analyze the arguments over the Articles of Confederation. [Examine the influence of ideas]
9-12	Compare several state constitutions and explain why they differed. [Analyze multiple causation]
7-12	Assess the accomplishments and failures of the Continental Congress. [Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas]
7-12	Assess the importance of the Northwest Ordinance. [Interrogate historical data]

#### Standard 2B

The student understands the economic issues arising out of the Revolution.

Grade Level	Therefore, the student is able to
7-12	Evaluate how the states and the Continental Congress dealt with the revolutionary war debt. [ <b>Utilize quantitative data</b> ]
5-12	Analyze the factors that led to Shay's Rebellion. [ <b>Analyze multiple causation</b> ]
7-12	Explain the dispute over the western lands and evaluate how it was resolved. [ <b>Draw upon data in historical maps</b> ]
9-12	Explain how the Continental Congress and the states attempted to rebuild the economy by addressing issues of foreign and internal trade, banking, and taxation. [ <b>Formulate a position or course of action on an issue</b> ]

### Standard 2C

The student understands the Revolution's effects on different social groups.

Grade Level	Therefore, the student is able to
7-12	Compare the reasons why many white men and women and most African American and Native Americans remained loyal to the British. [ <b>Consider multiple perspectives</b> ]
5-12	Compare the revolutionary goals of different groups—for example, rural farmers and urban craftsmen, northern merchants and southern planters—and how the Revolution altered social, political, and economic relations among them. [ <b>Compare and contrast differing values, behaviors, and institutions</b> ]
5-12	Explain the revolutionary hopes of enslaved and free African Americans and the gradual abolition of slavery in the northern states. [ <b>Examine the influence of ideas</b> ]
7-12	Analyze the ideas put forth arguing for new women's roles and rights and explain the customs of the 18th century that limited women's aspirations and achievements. [ <b>Examine the influence of ideas</b> ]
9-12	Explain how African American leaders and African American institutions shaped free black communities in the North. [ <b>Assess the importance of the individual</b> ]

### STANDARD 3

The institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how they were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

### Standard 3A

The student understands the issues involved in the creation and ratification of the United States Constitution and the new government it established.

Grade Level	Therefore, the student is able to
5-12	Analyze the factors involved in calling the Constitutional Convention. [ <b>Analyze multiple causation</b> ]
7-12	Analyze the alternative plans considered by the delegates and the major compromises agreed upon to secure approval of the Constitution. [ <b>Examine the influence of ideas</b> ]
9-12	Analyze the fundamental ideas behind the distribution of powers and the system of checks and balances established by the Constitution. [ <b>Examine the influence of ideas</b> ]
5-12	Analyze the features of the Constitution which have made this the most enduring and widely imitated written constitution in world history. [ <b>Examine the influence of ideas</b> ]
9-12	Compare the arguments of Federalists and Anti-Federalists during the ratification debates and assess their relevance in late 20th-century politics. [ <b>Hypothesize the influence of the past</b> ]

Source: <http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/era3-5-12.html#C>

## **Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks:**

USI.6 Explain the reasons for the adoption of the Articles of Confederation in 1781, including why its drafters created a weak central government; analyze the shortcomings of the national government under the Articles; and describe the crucial events (e.g., Shays’s rebellion) leading to the Constitutional Convention. (H, C)

*Seminal Primary Documents to Read:* the Northwest Ordinance (1787)

USI.7 Explain the roles of various founders at the Constitutional Convention. Describe the major debates that occurred at the Convention and the “Great Compromise” that was reached. (H, C)

### *Major Debates*

- A. the distribution of political power
- B. the rights of individuals
- C. the rights of states
- D. slavery

### *Founders*

- A. Benjamin Franklin
- B. Alexander Hamilton
- C. James Madison
- D. George Washington

*Seminal Primary Documents to Read:* the U.S. Constitution

Source: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/hss/final.doc>

## **Recommended Time:**

This unit can be adapted for use in 3-5 traditional 45-50 minute class periods. If block scheduling is used, the materials can be modified appropriately. Harwich High School uses a hybrid schedule with a 90 minute block rotating into a traditional schedule every sixth day. This program was designed to include one of those blocks for the group projects described.

## **Materials:**

1. Class textbooks: Garraty’s American Nation or Glencoe’s American History: The Modern Era
2. Internet Accessible Computers in the classroom.
3. PowerPoint presentation on digital projection or from the website
4. Documents from Michael Kammen’s “The Origins of the American Constitution.” NY: Penguin Books, 1986.

**Objectives:**

1. Students will be able to explain the structure of the Confederation government.
2. Students will show an understanding of basic economic terms such as supply/demand, inflation/deflation.
3. Students will boost their analytical skills by reading and discussing complex primary documents.
4. Students will gain the skills to evaluate historical events while avoiding “presentism.”
5. Students will improve their writing skills by producing a sophisticated essay using the following rubric:  
<http://www.harwich.edu/depts/history/Rubrics11,12.html>  
<http://www.harwich.edu/depts/history/Rubrics11,12.html>

**Background:**

1. The previous units will include learning about the causes of the Revolution, the Revolutionary War, and the overall impact of the war (social change, state constitutions, “forgotten” groups).
2. Students will be assigned to read the chapters in the textbook that cover the Confederation and the Constitutional Convention. Students in each level of the survey class have a text that is appropriate to their reading level.

**Procedure:**

1. Teacher will present the PowerPoint Presentation on the Confederation and Shays’ Rebellion that is attached to this unit. It will also be posted on the class website for later review and analysis:  
[www.harwich.edu/depts/history/pp/ConfedShays\\_files/frame.htm](http://www.harwich.edu/depts/history/pp/ConfedShays_files/frame.htm)
2. Teacher will also lead a discussion of the economic concepts of “supply and demand” and “inflation and deflation.”
3. Pair/Share. Students will briefly join with a classmate to reflect on this question: “Did Shays’ and his followers have a legitimate gripe?” Historical Habits of Mind: “Sympathy” and “Judgment with Modesty.”

**Primary Source Analysis:**

1. ‘Long Block’ Group Activity.
2. Divide class into groups of 3-5 students
3. Each group will focus on reading, discussing and evaluating the documents in Kammen’s collection that refer to Shays’ Rebellion. Copies are attached to this curriculum unit.
4. Each group will pick a spokesperson who will report back to the class on the findings of the group.

5. Class Discussion to expand on the meaning of the documents and their connection to the wider historical events.

**Assessment:**

1. Students will take a full period test the covers both the Confederation and Constitutional Convention. It will include objective and free response sections. Essay questions might include the following: a. Explain the economic roots of Shays' Rebellion. b. Compare and contrast the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution of 1787. c. Evaluate the successes and failures of the Confederation government. d. Assess the validity of the following statement: "The Articles of Confederation was doomed to failure because it did not provide enough centralized authority."
2. Students will write an essay using the primary documents that were the focus of the group projects and presentations. Did the attitude towards Shays' Rebellion expressed by the authors of the documents reflect the stance of the authors toward the demand for a more powerful national constitution? Provide evidence from the resources to defend your answer.

**Extension Activity:**

Extra credit options related to other units (2-3 page essay): Compare and contrast Shays' Rebellion with another uprising/movement in American history: Whiskey Rebellion, Populists, Bonus March, Coxey's Army, Greenback Party.

**Handouts**

'Shays's Rebellion and the Ratification of the Federal Constitution in Massachusetts' by Richard D. Brown. Included in *Beyond Confederation* edited by Richard Beeman, Edward Carter, and Stephen Botein. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987.