

An American flag is shown in the background, waving. The flag has a blue canton with white stars and red and white stripes. The entire scene is enclosed in a black oval border.

In the United State we have celebrated Independence Day and President's Day since the 1870's. In 2005, we began to celebrate Constitution Day. Constitution Day is an American holiday honoring the day that 39 delegates to the Constitutional Convention signed the United States Constitution. This Historic Date was September 17, 1787.

We the People

of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do hereby constitute and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Article I

Section 1. All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.

Section 2. The House of Representatives shall be composed of Members chosen every second Year by the People of the several States, and the Electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

They shall have the Privilege of Speech or Debate, in either House, for any Speech or Debate thereon in either House, and shall, except when sitting in either House, be considered as Deputies from their respective States.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

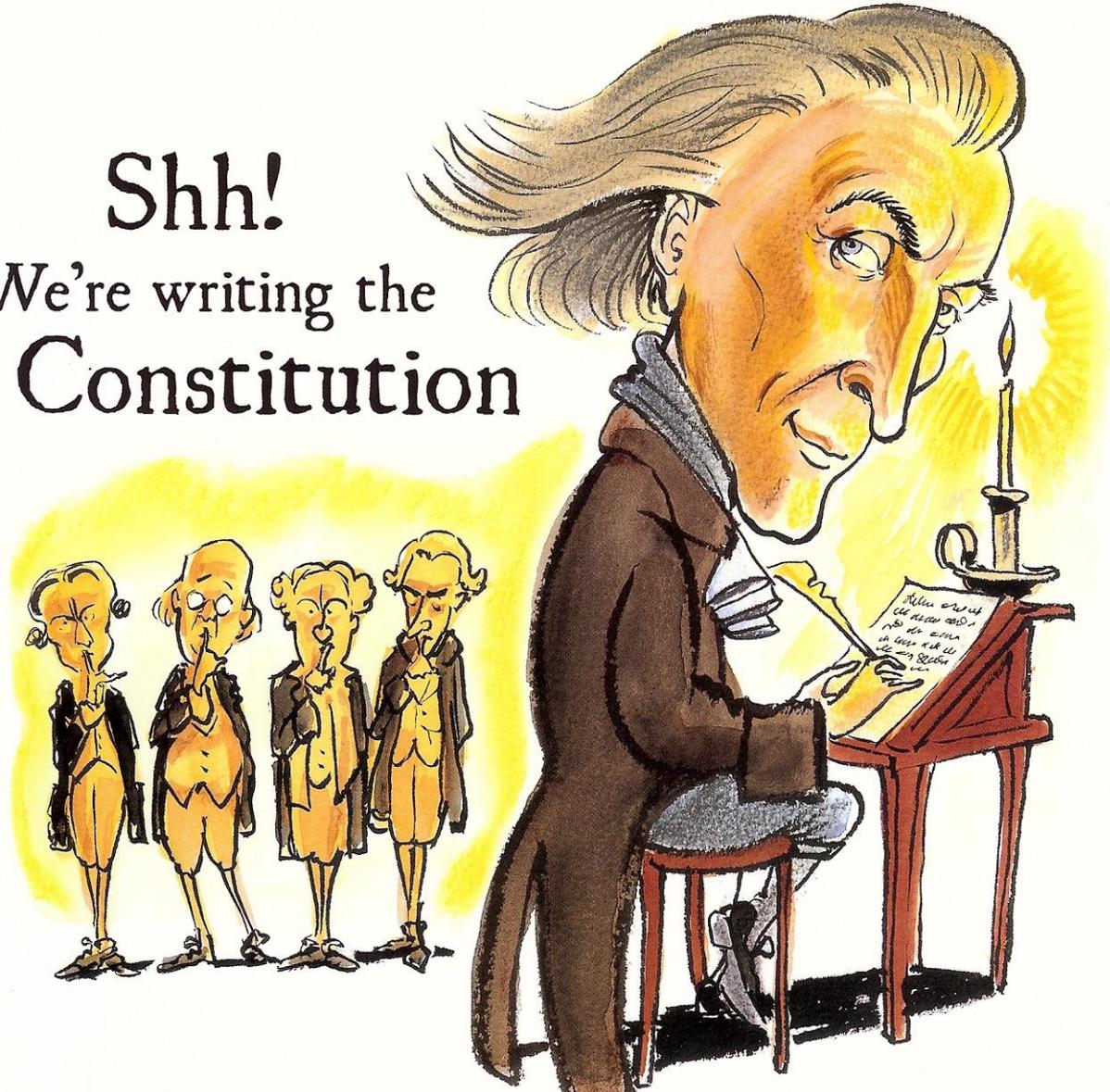
Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

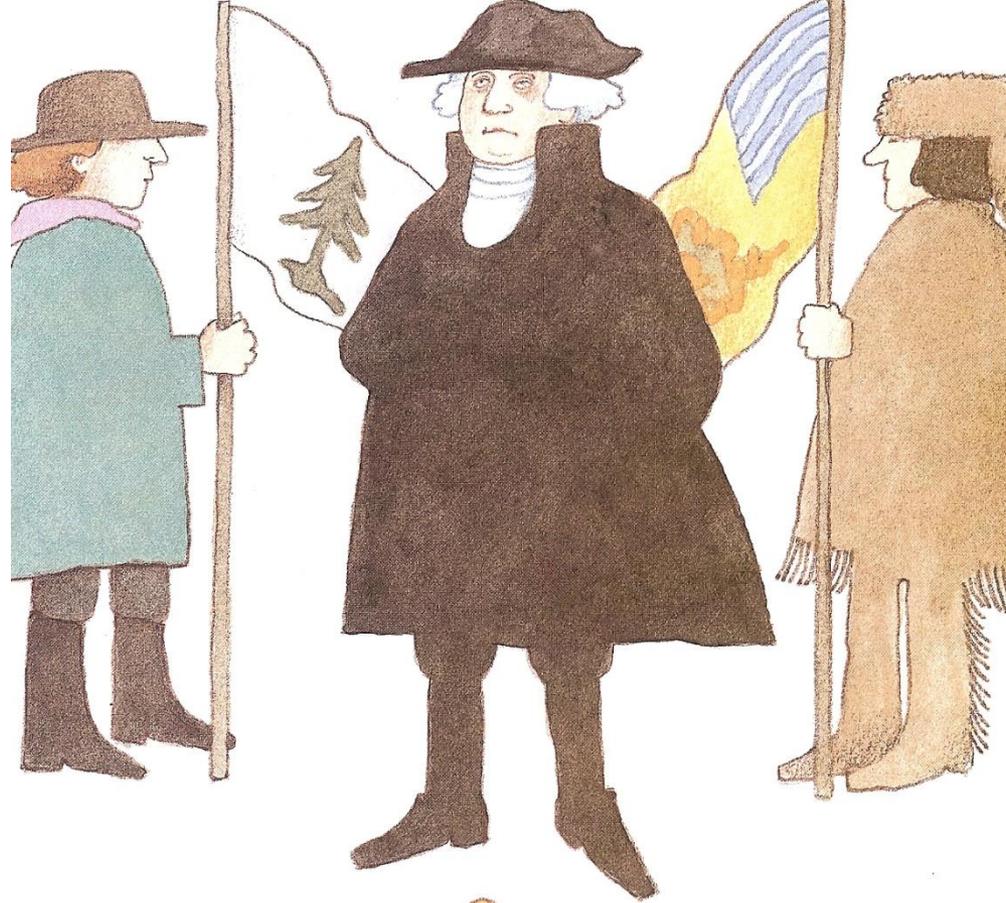
Representatives and electors in each State shall have the Qualifications requisite for Electors of the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature.

The following is a summary of Jean Fritz's *Shh!! We're writing the Constitution*. It is the story about how the Constitution came to be written and ratified. I have taken key parts from the book to make this presentation.

NEWBERY HONOR-WINNING AUTHOR
JEAN ★ FRITZ

Shh!
We're writing the
Constitution





After the Revolutionary War, most people in America were glad that they were no longer British. Still, they were not ready to call themselves Americans. The last thing they wanted was to become a nation. They were citizens of their own separate states, just as they had always been: each state different, each state proud of its own character, each state quick to poke fun at other states. To Southerners, New Englanders might be “non-account Yankees.” To New Englanders, Pennsylvanians might be “lousy Buckskins.” But to everyone the states themselves were all important. “Sovereign states,” they called them. They loved the sound of “sovereign” because it meant that they were their own bosses.

George Washington, however, scoffed at the idea of “sovereign states.” He knew that the states could not be truly independent and survive. Ever since the Declaration of Independence had been signed, people had referred to the country as the United States of America. It was about time, he thought, for them to act and feel united.

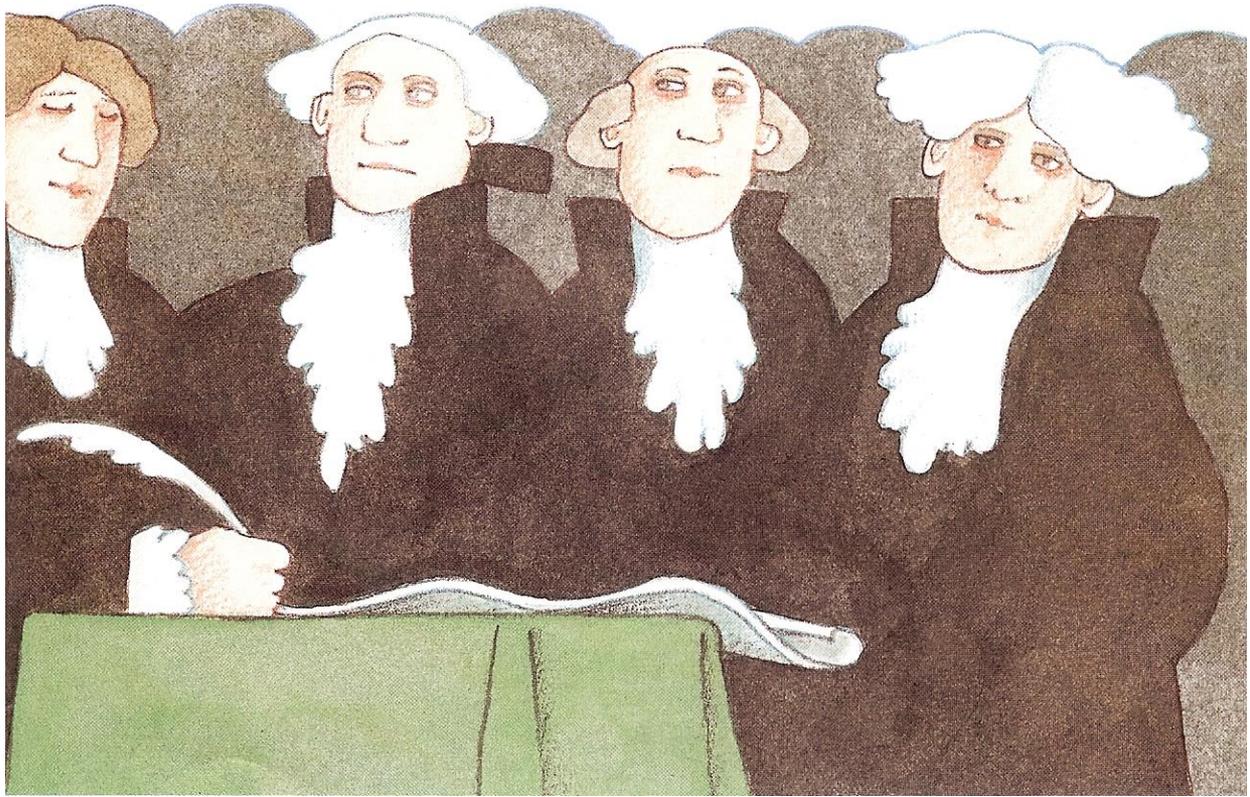
By 1786, it was becoming obvious that changes were needed. People were in debt, a few states were printing paper money that was all but worthless, and in the midst of this disorder some people could see that America would fall apart if it didn’t have a sound central government with power to act for all the states. George Washington, of course, was one who had felt strongly about this for a long time. Alexander Hamilton was another. James Madison from Virginia wanted a strong America too.



In 1786 these men, among others, suggested to the Congress that all the states send delegates to a Grand Convention in Philadelphia to improve the existing form of government. It sounded innocent. Just a matter of revising old Articles of Confederation to make the government work better. No one would quarrel with that.

But they did.

The first thing the delegates did was to elect George Washington president of the convention. They escorted him to his official chair on a raised platform. Then the other members of the convention took their seats at the tables draped with green woolen cloth. James Madison sat in the front of the room and as soon as the talking began, he began writing. Never absent for a single day, he kept a record of all that was said during the next four months, stopping only when he, himself wanted to speak.



They knew that there would be many arguments in this room, but they agreed that they didn't want the whole country listening in and taking sides. They would keep the proceedings a secret. So before every meeting the door was locked. Sentries were stationed in the hall. And even though it turned out to be a hot summer, the windows were kept closed. Why should they risk eavesdroppers? Members were not supposed to write gossipy letters home. Nor to answer nosy questions. Nor to discuss their business with outsiders. Benjamin Franklin was the one who had to be watched. He meant no harm but he did love to talk, especially at parties, so if he seemed about to spill the beans, another delegate was ready to leap into the conversation and change the subject.

For fifty-five men to keep a secret for four months was an accomplishment in itself. But they did.

Ellsworth of Connecticut had the most interesting news to write home. He had shaken the hand of a woman who was two thousand years old, he said. An Egyptian mummy was on display in Philadelphia but Oliver wasn't content just to look. He wondered what the flesh was like, so he took out his knife and tested it. Like old smoked beef, he reported.



DEPAOLA



The biggest stumbling block was the question of how power should be divided in the government. Should the states be represented in Congress according to the population of each state? Yes, said the large states with large populations. No, said the small states with small populations. Madison tried to point out that the large states would have no reason to gang up on the smaller states. The large states had so little in common, they would probably end up, he said, as rivals, not friends. But the small states were not convinced.

The delegates seemed to recognize how urgent it was to find a way to agree. And they did. They called it The Great Compromise. Every state would have two members of Senate (with equal votes) while the House of Representatives would have one representative for every forty thousand inhabitants. (Later this was changed to read “not to exceed one for every thirty thousand”).



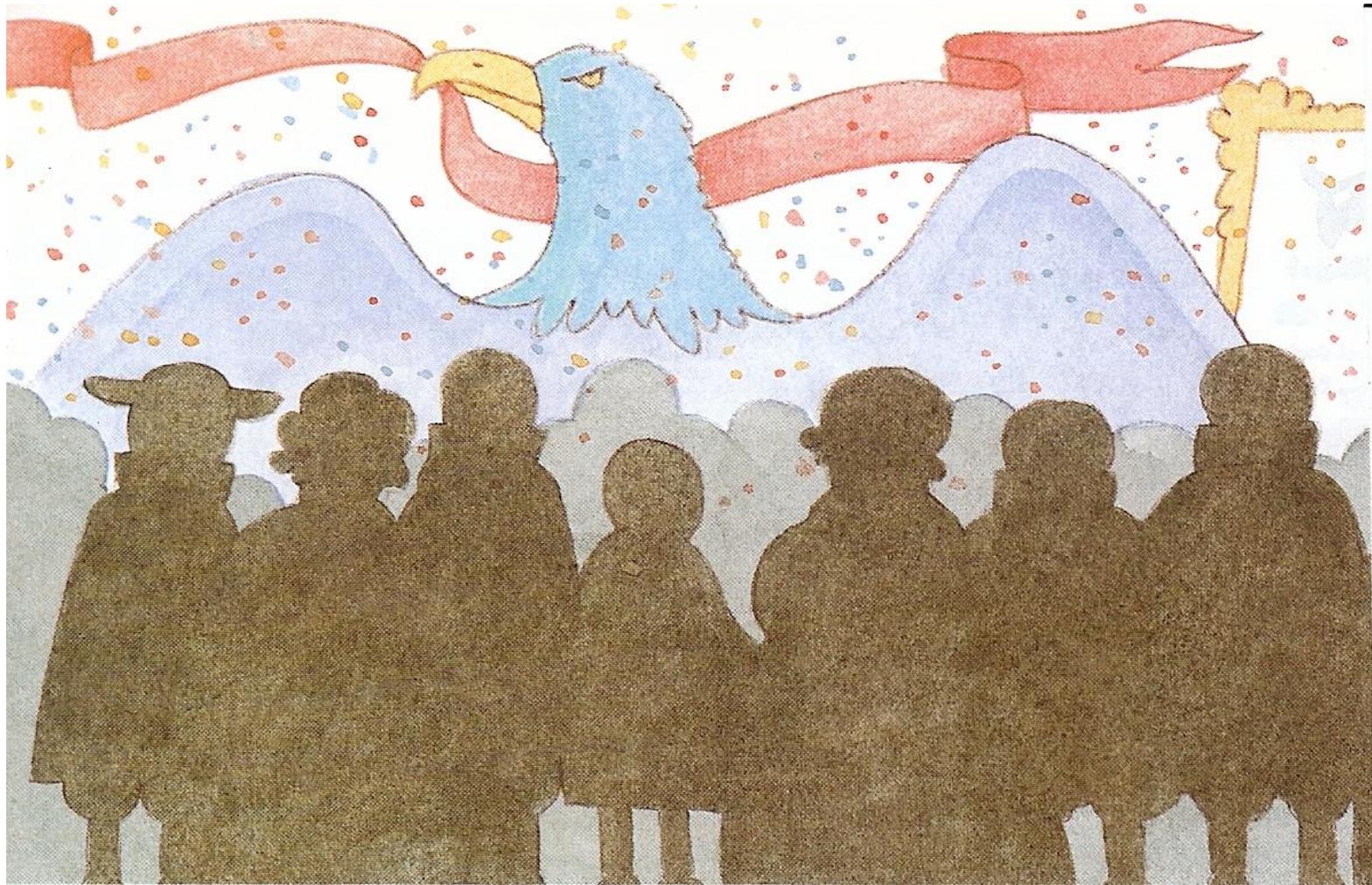
Where would the government be located? New York? Philadelphia? A special district would be set aside, they said, not more than ten miles square. But since they couldn't decide where it should all be, they decided to let the new Congress take care of it.

They made provisions for the new states to join the Union and specified how additions or changes to the Constitution could be made in the future. These would be called amendments but under no circumstances were they to change the type of government the delegates had created. The delegates didn't want any American dukes or lords suddenly popping up in their society. "no Title of Nobility," they said, "shall be granted by the United States."



On September 8 the Constitution was sent to a committee to write up in final form. Four days later revised and very elegant sounding Constitution was presented to the delegates. “We the People”, it began. All at once some had last minute thoughts. They had not included a Bill of Rights which spelled out the rights of individual persons, it was pointed out. There was no mention of freedom of religion, freedom of speech, trial by jury-all those rights which they’d cherished and which many states had listed in their state constitutions.

Now it was up to the country. After so much secrecy, people didn’t know what to expect, but once they had read the Constitution they were quick to take sides. Those who were for it called themselves Federalists. Those against were called Anti-Federalists.

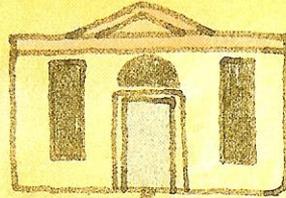


It took more than six months for the states, one by one, to call their conventions, debate and vote. Meanwhile Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and another strong Federalist, John Jay began writing newspaper articles explaining just how the new Constitution would work.

They showed how the different branches of government would serve as a check on each other so that no one branch or no one person could become too powerful. Every bill the House of Representatives passed, for instance, had to go to the Senate for approval. If it made it through the Senate, then it had to go to the president for his signature. But the House and Senate still had another chance. If two-thirds of their members voted for it, then it would pass anyway. A final Big Check lay in the Supreme Court which could in the course of legal proceedings decide if a new law (even a state law) was constitutional or not.

The people had controlling power. Every four years they would be electing their president and at stated intervals they would also be electing their representatives to Congress. The arguments of the Federalists were so strong and so well written that many people gradually grew used to the idea of becoming a nation.

LEGISLATIVE

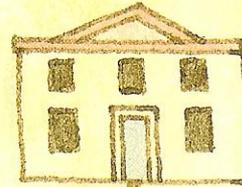
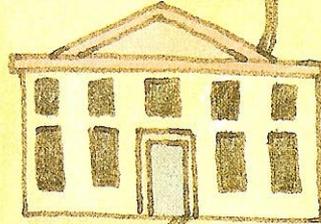


EXECUTIVE

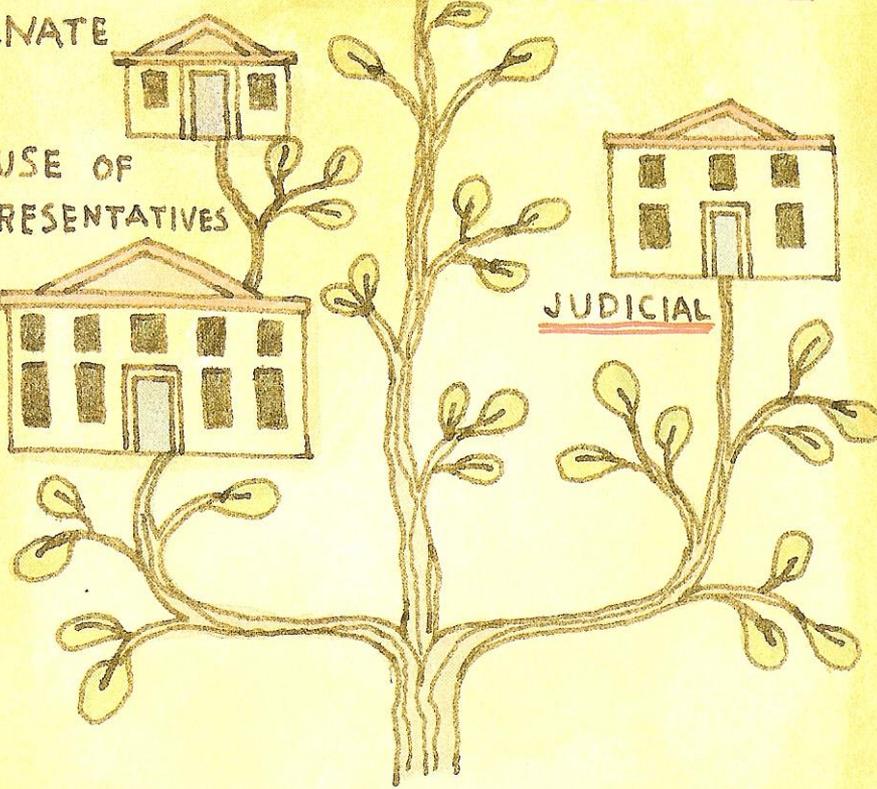
SENATE



HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES



JUDICIAL



THE VIRGINIA PLAN



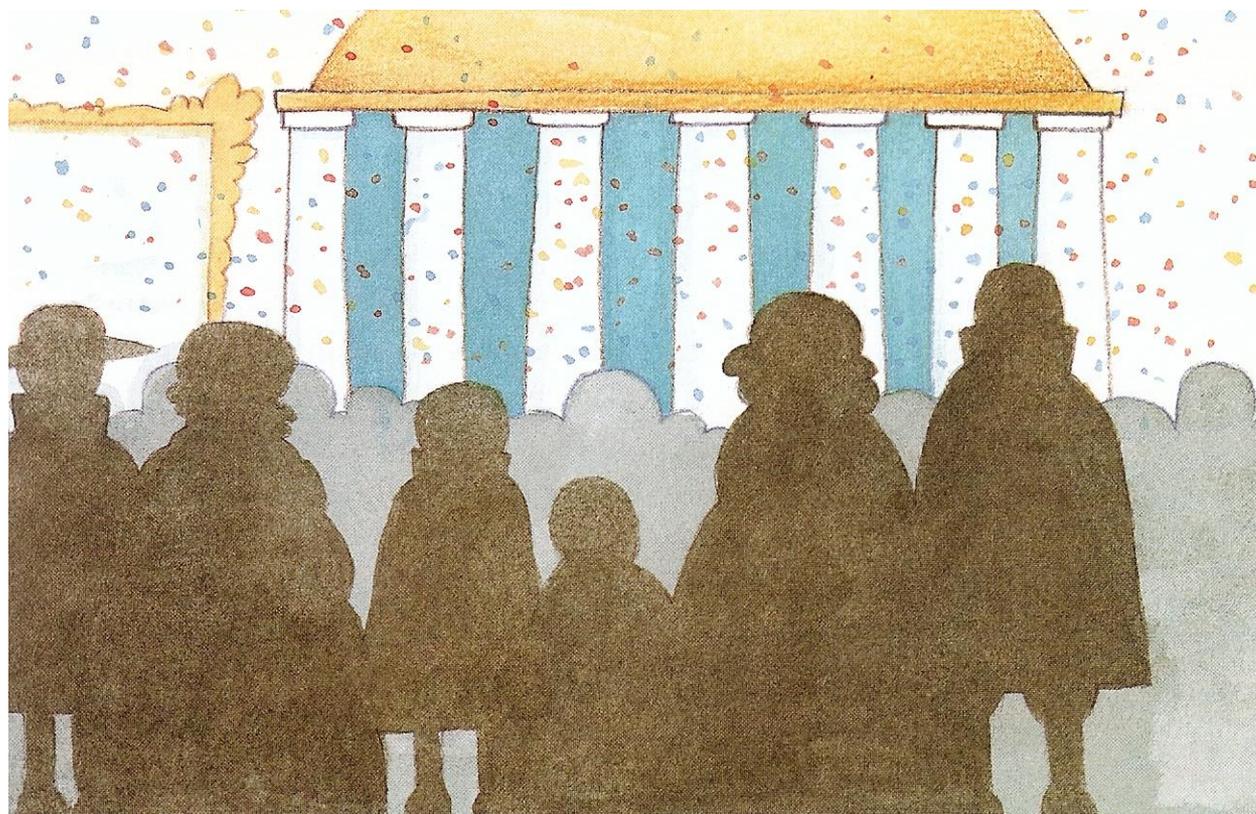
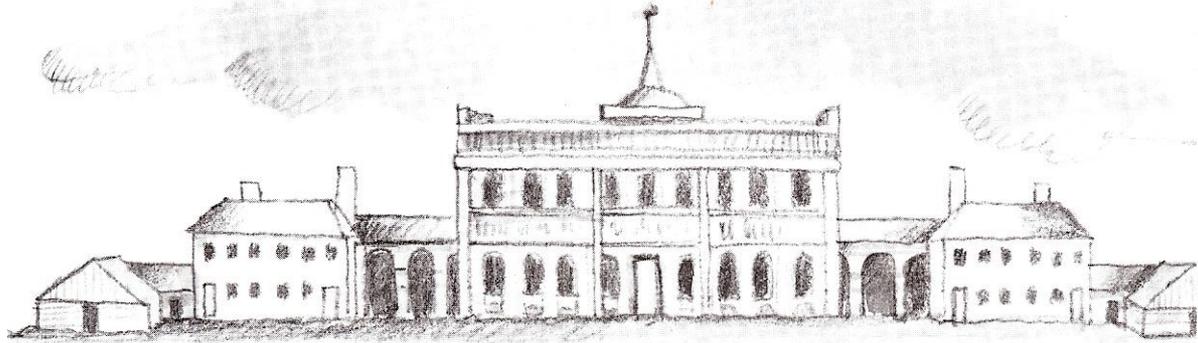
FOR THE GOVERNMENT

All over the country people argued about the Bill of Rights. In Connecticut Noah Webster, educator and compiler of dictionaries contended that such a bill would be nonsense. How could you list all the rights a person had? He asked. Would you include the right to go fishing in good weather? The right of people to turn over in bed at night?

But most people were serious about the issue and many were unhappy. Federalists tried to reassure them. Once the government was formed, they pointed out; the Constitution could easily be amended to include those rights that they wanted. All they had to do was to recommend improvements and then go ahead and ratify. If they didn't, they'd end up with neither a government or a Bill of Rights.



The country may have kicked and screamed its way into becoming a nation, but once there it celebrated. Bells pealed and cannon roared as state after state acknowledged that the Constitution they had adopted was now “the Supreme Law of the Land.”



Project by Kerry Meissenn, Student at Charter Oak State College
Special projects course, Summer 2014

Shh! We're Writing the Constitution by Jean Fritz
Illustrations by Tomie dePaola.