

THE CRITICAL PERIOD

Great Britain and the United States signed the Treaty of Paris in 1783 ending the Revolutionary War. In the years which followed, the new American government faced many difficult problems. The United States was deep in debt because huge sums of money had been borrowed from France and other countries to carry on the Revolution. The "central government" -- the government for all of the states -- was weak because most of the power had been given to the individual states. Numerous disputes arose between the states. An economic depression threatened many citizens with the loss of their farms, homes, and jobs.

These years of troubles from 1783 to 1789 came to be known as the "Critical Period." In 1789 the United States Constitution went into effect. George Washington took the oath of office and became the first American president. The government began to grow stronger and earn the respect of foreign nations.

Articles of Confederation (1781-1789)

In 1781 Congress adopted a plan of government called the Articles of Confederation. It was the first "constitution" -- written plan of government -- for the United States. According to the Articles of Confederation:

1. There was one branch of government -- the "legislative branch" consisting of a Congress that made the laws. There was no "executive branch" (president) to carry out the laws, and no "judicial branch" (system of courts) to explain the laws and settle disputes between states.
2. Each state sent 2 to 7 delegates to Congress, but each state had just one vote.
3. Congress had the power to:
 - a. declare war and make peace
 - b. send ambassadors to foreign countries
 - c. form alliances with other countries
 - d. manage Indian affairs
 - e. establish post offices and coin money
 - f. regulate trade with other countries
 - g. borrow money and ask the states to pay taxes
 - h. determine the size and use of the army and navy
 - i. pass new laws and make important decisions with the approval of 9 of the 13 states
 - j. set up courts to hear cases involving piracy or capture on the high seas
4. Congress did not have the power to:
 - a. require the payment of taxes
 - b. control trade between states
 - c. make the states work together to solve problems affecting the whole country
5. Each state had the right to:
 - a. have its own constitution
 - b. organize its own armed force (the state militia)
 - c. print its own money
 - d. hold complete control over all affairs within the state
 - e. make treaties with the Indians, other states, and foreign countries
 - f. have all powers not specifically granted to Congress
6. Amendments (changes or additions) to the Articles of Confederation required the approval of all 13 states.

Given the way the government was organized under the Articles of Confederation, which of the following could have happened in the United States during the Critical Period? Write yes if it could have happened. Write no if it could not have happened.

- (1) _____ Laws were not always enforced because there was no president to see that they were carried out.
- (2) _____ Many disputes between states and between citizens of different states went unsettled because there were no federal courts to hear the cases.
- (3) _____ Many states refused to pay the full amount of taxes requested by Congress.
- (4) _____ Congress never had enough money to run the government, settle its debts, and pay its soldiers.
- (5) _____ Congress and the individual states printed so much paper money that it became almost worthless.
- (6) _____ Money in one state was different from money in another state.
- (7) _____ States argued over navigation rights on rivers along their boundaries.
- (8) _____ Foreign countries refused to make trade agreements with the United States because Congress could not get all of the states to obey them.
- (9) _____ States placed heavy taxes on products from other states so that their citizens would buy cheaper goods from businessmen within their own state.
- (10) _____ Virginia, Massachusetts, and other states with large populations resented the fact that each state regardless of its size had 1 vote in Congress.
- (11) _____ It was difficult to get new laws passed.
- (12) _____ Boundary disputes between states nearly led to armed conflict.
- (13) _____ It was difficult to make changes in the Articles of Confederation.
- (14) _____ The weak central government could not keep the states from acting like 13 independent countries.
- (15) _____ Foreign countries had little respect for the United States.
- (16) _____ George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and other leaders became dissatisfied with the Articles of Confederation.
- (17) _____ A meeting was held to write a new constitution for the United States.

The Articles of Confederation had many serious weaknesses and eventually was replaced by the United States Constitution. In your opinion, what were the five most serious weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation?

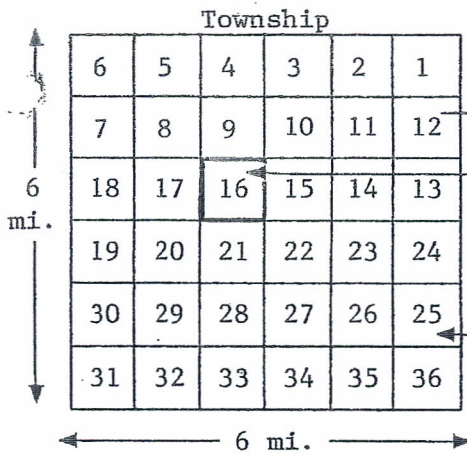
- (1) _____
- (2) _____
- (3) _____
- (4) _____
- (5) _____

Land Ordinance of 1785

After the Revolutionary War, many pioneers crossed the Appalachian Mountains and settled in the Northwest Territory. The Northwest Territory included the present-day states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Other pioneers moved into the Southwest Territory which today is made up of Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama. These two territories lay between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, the western boundary of the United States.

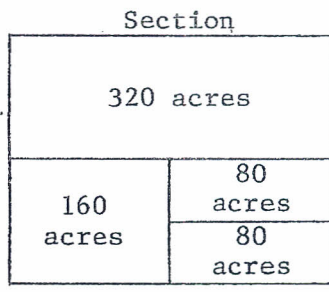
For many years, seven states along the Atlantic Coast had claimed that their western boundaries extended to the Mississippi River and beyond. Some state claims overlapped and led to bitter disputes. Finally, the states agreed to give up their claims, and the Western lands were taken over by the United States government.

To control the settlement and development of the Northwest Territory, Congress passed two important laws -- the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance. The Land Ordinance of 1785 established definite boundary lines so there would be no confusion and legal disputes over land ownership. The diagram on the next page shows the way in which Western lands were to be divided and sold. Study the diagram, then answer the questions. Some questions are based on the background reading in this section.



To be sold to support public schools.

Each section had 640 acres.



- Sale of Land
1. The land was auctioned off by section to the highest bidder.
 2. The minimum cost per acre was \$1.
 3. Land companies purchased sections and divided them into smaller lots which were sold to settlers.

Complete the following sentences:

- (1) The United States government gained control of the _____ lands when seven states gave up their claims.
- (2) The Land Ordinance of 1785 provided for the division and sale of lands in the _____.
- (3) Land was organized into _____ that measured 6 miles from north to south and 6 miles from east to west.
- (4) A township was made up of 36 _____ that were each one square mile in size.
- (5) Each _____ contained 640 acres.
- (6) A land company, or an individual purchaser, had to buy _____ acres of land at a time from the government.
- (7) Although land was sold at auction to the highest bidder, the smallest amount of money that could be paid for one section was _____.
- (8) Most settlers bought their land from _____ which had purchased sections and divided them into smaller and less expensive lots.
- (9) A quarter section consisted of _____ acres.
- (10) One section in each township was sold to raise money for the support of _____.

Northwest Ordinance (1787)

The most important achievement of the Congress under the Articles of Confederation was the passage of the Northwest Ordinance in 1787. This law set the guidelines for governing U.S. territories and admitting new states to the Union. The Northwest Ordinance was first written to provide a plan of government for the Northwest Territory, but it extended to other territories as well. According to the Northwest Ordinance:

1. A "territory" -- land not yet a state -- would have a temporary government chosen by Congress consisting of a governor and three judges.
2. When 5,000 adult males had settled in the territory, the voters could elect representatives to a legislature that would make laws for the territory.
3. When 60,000 people lived in one part of the territory, that area could ask Congress to become a state.
4. The Northwest Territory was to be eventually divided into three, four, or five states.
5. Settlers were guaranteed freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and other basic rights.
6. Slavery was not permitted in the territory.
7. Towns were encouraged to establish public schools.

Based on the information in this section on the Northwest Ordinance, and information in the previous section on the Land Ordinance of 1785, decide whether the following statements are true or false.

- (1) _____ The Northwest Ordinance established a democratic form of government.
- (2) _____ Slavery was forbidden in the Northwest Territory.
- (3) _____ All government officials were elected by the people.
- (4) _____ The Northwest Ordinance gave settlers a bill of rights.
- (5) _____ The Northwest Ordinance was a major accomplishment of the Congress under the Articles of Confederation.
- (6) _____ A territory could apply for statehood as soon as 5,000 adult males had settled there.
- (7) _____ Congress wanted to see public schools established in the Northwest Territory.
- (8) _____ The Supreme Court decided whether a territory could become a state.
- (9) _____ Three states were eventually made from the Northwest Territory.
- (10) _____ The Northwest Ordinance established guidelines for admitting new states into the Union.

Constitutional Convention (1787)

During the 1780's, the farmers of western Massachusetts faced serious financial problems. They were having a difficult time paying back the money they had borrowed to buy their farms. High taxes made matters worse. Instead of helping the farmers, the government of Massachusetts ordered that hundreds of farms be sold to pay off debts and back taxes. Once their land had been taken away, the farmers lost the right to vote because they no longer were property owners.

Filled with frustration, more than a thousand angry farmers took up arms and closed a number of courts that had ordered the sale of their land. The leader of the rebels was Daniel Shays, a former Revolutionary War officer. After several skirmishes with the state militia, Shays' Rebellion came to an end. Although the farmers were defeated, the rebellion added to the growing demand that the government under the Articles of Confederation be changed. Many Americans wanted a stronger central government that could keep order and solve problems.

Pretend that you are an American citizen living in Boston, Massachusetts in 1787. Shays' Rebellion, in your opinion, is just another example of the many problems faced by the government under the Articles of Confederation. You believe that a Constitutional Convention should be held to draw up a new plan of government to replace the Articles of Confederation. You have decided to write a letter to the editor of the "Boston Gazette," the state's largest newspaper. You hope that your letter will convince other people of the need to have a new constitution for the United States. Write your letter in the spaces below. Call attention to many of the problems -- listed on pages 1 and 2 -- that have developed under the Articles of Confederation.
