

Convention of 1788 ^[1]

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by John C. Cavanagh, 2006

In the summer of 1788, North Carolina faced the momentous decision of whether to ratify the newly proposed U.S. Constitution drafted at Philadelphia the previous year. The question emerged at a state ratification convention in [Hillsborough](#) ^[2], a center of political activity since colonial times. At St. Matthews Church between 21 July and 4 August, more than 270 delegates assembled, representing 7 boroughs and 58 counties in the state and its western territories.

These delegates had won their seats the previous March through special elections mandated by the [General Assembly](#) ^[3] in 1787. By a margin of two to one, the [Anti-Federalist](#) ^[4] candidates outpolled their [Federalist](#) ^[5] adversaries, and the guardians of state rights and individual liberties prevailed over the proponents of a strengthened, unified central government. Despite a particularly vigorous Federalist campaign, the election outcome probably surprised no one, as North Carolinians had enjoyed virtual self-government under the decentralized [Articles of Confederation](#) ^[6] since 1781. Even during decades of British colonial rule and eventual independence, citizens traditionally resisted any distant authority perceived to threaten their sovereignty or limit their freedoms. The federal scheme of government in the new Constitution aroused just such suspicions.

Anti-Federalist leader [Willie Jones](#) ^[7] and his followers felt obligated to protect the liberties guaranteed under the state bill of rights in the Constitution of 1776. The Federalists for their part considered it not only "incongruous, but dangerous" to enumerate individual rights. Because the number might be limitless, Federalists reasoned, attempts to specify some rights and not others would provoke needless controversy and deprive the central government of essential authority.

When the convention opened on 21 July, the outnumbered Federalist delegates had a well-prepared strategy. Although they realized that the superior debating skills of their leaders, James Iredell, [William R. Davie](#) ^[8], Archibald Maclaine, and [Governor Samuel Johnston](#) ^[9], would likely not alter the predictable outcome at Hillsborough, the Federalists brought a stenographer to record their arguments for eventual publication, hoping to produce a "salutary change" in future public opinion. For days a fiercely partisan debate ensued, one that initially put the Federalists on the defensive and threatened to dissolve the convention. The Federalists so skillfully countered their critics' objections to many issues—including direct taxes, paper money, war debts, western lands, standing armies, and the national judiciary—that the Anti-Federalists became distinctly uncomfortable. When the Federalists doggedly argued for a federal [Bill of Rights](#) ^[10], their preponderate strength finally moved the convention to recommend that a Declaration of Rights and 26 amendments be submitted to Congress. But only after other states incorporated these "great principles" into the Constitution would North Carolina embrace it.

By a vote of 184 to 84, the Anti-Federalist majority decided on 1 August neither to ratify nor reject the document; and after two more days of procedural business, the convention adjourned. The decisions reached at Hillsborough did not block the formation of the new federal government, and by then few delegates intended that they should. The North Carolinians did, however, significantly influence the eventual decision to frame and ratify a national Bill of Rights and to bring North Carolina into the Union.

References:

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