Chapter 7 Lesson 1

The Articles of Confederation:

Freeing themselves from British rule, the 13 states needed a plan for government that would satisfy all their needs.

States Write Constitutions:

In May 1776, the Second Continental Congress (Congress), asked the states to organize their governments. Each state adopted a state constitution. Eight states drafted constitutions before the end of the year, New York and Georgia followed in 1777 and Massachusetts in 1780. Connecticut and Rhode Island decided to use their colonial charters.

Limits on Power:

After years of British rules, Americans were determined not to place too much power in the hands of one ruler or one body. They crafted constitutions that limited the power of the governor. Pennsylvania’s actually replaced the position with a 12 person council. They divided power between the governor and the legislature (bicameral). The first state constitutions aimed to keep power in the hands of the people. For example, voters chose legislators and states held elections often. In most states, only white males who were at least 21 years old could vote. They also had to own a certain amount of property or pay a certain amount of taxes. Some states allowed free African American males to vote.

State legislatures became the most powerful branch of government, they attempted to make taxes fair for everyone but disagreements arose. The shift from British colonies to self-governing states held may challenges.

A New Republic:

In addition to state governments, the American people had to form a national government. People agreed a republic would be best. They could not agree, however, on what powers the new republic should have.

Most Americans wanted a weak central government at first. They wanted each state to remain free to act independently. They only wanted to rely on a central government to wage war and to handle relations with other countries.

The Articles of Confederation:

In 1776, the 2nd Continental Congress appointed a committee to draw up a plan for a new central government: The Articles of Confederation. The Articles were adopt in November 1777 after much discussion and became the country’s first constitution. The Articles established a weak central government allowing the state to keep most of their power. The Articles were “a firm league of friendship” in which each state retained “its sovereignty, freedom and independence.”

The Articles gave Congress limited powers, Congress could conduct foreign affairs, maintain armed forces, borrow money, and issue currency. They did not have the power to regulate trade, force citizens to join the army, or impose taxes. If Congress needed to raise money or troops, it had to ask the states. States were not required to contribute.

The new central government had no chief executive. Under the Articles government carried on its business, such as selling western lands, through congressional committees. All the states had to approve the Articles and any amendments. Not everyone was in favor of the Articles. Under the Articles, each state had one vote regardless of population, states with large populations believed they should have more votes.

Disputes over land also threatened to block approval of the Articles. By the 1780’s, seven of the original states lay claim to areas in the West. Maryland refused to approve the Articles until New York, Virginia and other states abandoned their land claims west of the Appalachian Mountains. This done, Maryland joined the 12 other states in approving the Articles. On March 1, 1781, the Confederation formally became the government of the United States of America.

The Confederation Government:

It soon became clear that the new national government was too weak to handle the problems facing the United States. The weak government could not pass laws unless 9 states voted in favor of it. Changing the Articles required the approval of all 13 states, it made it difficult to pass laws when there was any disagreement.

Even with these challenges, the new central government was able to make some key achievements. Americans negotiated a peace treaty with Britain and expanded foreign trade. The Confederation also helped with settling and governing the country’s western lands.

Policies for Western Lands

The Articles did not have a way for new states to be added to the Union. Yet land west of the Appalachian Mountains were being settled. These settlers wanted to organize their lands as states and join the US.

Under the terms of the Treaty of Paris, the British gave up control of land north of the Ohio River and west of the Appalachian Mountains. Many people were eager to settle this area and the government had to establish policies for settlement of this land. They also needed a way to turn territories into states.

Ordinance of 1785

1785, the Confederation passed an ordinance or law that set up a process to survey and sell lands north of the Ohio River. The new law divided this large area into townships 6 miles they were further divided into 36 sections of 640 acres. The government would sell each section at public auction for at least a dollar an acre. Concerned about lawless people moving into these western lands, Richard Henry Lee, the president of the Congress urged that “the rights of property be clearly defined” by the government.

The Northwest Ordinance

Northwest Ordinance passed in 1787 created a single Northwest Territory from lands north of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River. The lands were to be divided into 3 to 5 small territories. When a territory had 60,000 residents the people could seek statehood, each new state would have the same standing as the original 13 states. The NW Ordinance had a bill of rights for the settlers, guaranteeing freedom of religion and trial by jury. It also stated, “There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in said territory.” This clause was the first attempt to stop the spread of slavery in the US. These two laws were an attempt to make the settlement of the Northwest Territory orderly and peaceful. In general it was successful.

The US would try this approach again in the South. In 1798 it created the Mississippi Territory from land west of Georgia. The government organized the territory the same way except slavery was legal.

Land Act of 1800

In 1800, the Land Act was passed. It made it easier for people to buy land in the territory. It made it possible for people to pay for land a little bit at a time. A person was required to buy at least 320 acres of land at $2 per acre, paying half up front and the rest in 4 yearly payments.

Problems at Home and Abroad

Financial problems hounded the Americans. The money printed during the war, “continentals” had seriously depreciated by 1781. People began to realize that the money could not be exchanged for gold or silver causing further devaluation. In 1779, it took 40 continentals to buy a single Spanish silver dollar, by 1781 it took 146 continentals to buy the same amount. At the same time the cost of food and other goods soared, this caused food riots in Boston and some other areas.

In the 1780’s Congress faced a large debt, during the war Congress faced a large debt. They owed money to US citizens, foreign governments and even soldiers. Without the power to tax the Confederation could not easily raise funds to pay these debts. The Congress asked states for the money but could not force them to pay, the states provided less than half the money the federal government asked them to contribute.

Plan for Import Tax

Congress faced a collapse of the country’s finances. In 1781, it created a department of finance led by Philadelphia merchant Robert Morris. Morris proposed a 5 percent tax on imported goods to help pay the nation’s debts. The plan required a change to the Articles, 12 states approved the plan but Rhode Island opposed it. A single no vote was enough to block the plan. A second effort in 1783 also failed to win approval by all the states. The financial crisis grew worse.

Relations with Britain

Trouble with foreign governments also revealed issues with the Articles. Americans complained that the British were blocking trade with the West Indies and other British markets. In the Treaty of Paris, Britain had promised to withdraw troops from lands east of the Mississippi River, however the British continued to occupy several forts in the Great Lakes region.

1785, Congress sent John Adams to London to discuss these issues. England was unwilling to talk, they pointed to the failure of the US to honor its promises made in the Treaty of Paris, the claim that Americans had agreed to pay Loyalists for the property taken from them during the war. Congress had proposed the states pay the Loyalists, the states simply refused and Congress could do nothing about it.

Relations with Spain

The US had an even more pressing problem with Spain. Spain wanted the Americans to stop expanding into the territories owned by Spain. To do this they closed the lower portion of the Mississippi River to American shipping in 1784. Western settlers could no longer use the Mississippi, which they used to ship their merchandise.

In 1786, American diplomats reached a new trade agreement with Spain, however representatives from the Southern states blocked the agreement because it did not address the blockade of the Mississippi River. The weaknesses of the Articles worried many influential leaders including George Washington.