



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on June 1, 2023

# Rhode Island: First to Fight for Freedom, Last to Join the Union

Where is Rhode Island?

That is not a question anyone at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 would have asked. Not because they didn't want Rhode Island to be represented at the meeting or because no one knew what was happening in Rhode Island that would have kept their delegates from attending this august conference.

No. No one would have asked because every one of the delegates meeting that May in Philadelphia knew that Rhode Island would not be electing representatives to send to the convention, and they knew why.



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First, one must understand a little of Rhode Island's history of resistance. In 1772, a full three years before the "shot heard 'round the world" was fired in Lexington, Massachusetts, a group of Rhode Islanders took what some considered the first forceful attack on British tyranny in the American Colonies.

The HMS *Gaspee*, a British customs schooner, patrolled the waters near Providence, Rhode Island, enforcing trade regulations. Infamous for its aggressive tactics, the ship frequently seized vessels suspected of smuggling. On the night of June 9, 1772, a group of local Colonists, led by John Brown, orchestrated a daring plan to capture and burn the *Gaspee*. Under cover of darkness, they ambushed the vessel, overpowering its crew and setting it ablaze. Not surprisingly, the incident sparked outrage among British authorities and served as an example for other Colonists fed up with unconstitutional British acts against the 13 Colonies, as well as for increased forceful resistance against British rule throughout the Colonies.

Although Rhode Islanders had burned the British sloop *Liberty* in 1769, it was the so-called *Gaspee* Affair that solidified Rhode Islanders' reputation as recalcitrant defenders of their rights, as well as the attention of other Colonies who were considering their own response to British despotism.

Next, Rhode Island was the first of the 13 Colonies to declare its independence from the British rule. [Here's the story](#) as published by the Rhode Island Secretary of State:

At the Old State House on Benefit Street in Providence, the Rhode Island General Assembly officially ended the colony's allegiance to Great Britain through legislation passed on May 4th, 1776. The original act is in the keeping of the Secretary of State and is kept at the State Archives. The Encyclopedia Americana lists Rhode Island as the first colony to declare its independence (1996 Deluxe Library Edition, Vol. 23, p.485). Rhode Island was the first of the American colonies to repeal by official legislative act its allegiance to King George III of England.



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So, just these few examples should serve — and did serve the men gathered in Philadelphia that May — to show that Rhode Island’s absence from the meeting was not that surprising.

The absence of Rhode Island from the Constitutional Convention of 1787 can be attributed to a combination of political, economic, and regional factors. Despite being one of the original 13 Colonies, Rhode Island chose not to send delegates to the convention, making it the only state to abstain from participating in the seminal event that shaped the U.S. Constitution.

At the time, Rhode Island was governed by a state charter that had been in place since 1663. This charter granted the state significant autonomy and a high degree of self-governance, which bred a sense of independence among Rhode Islanders. The state’s political leaders were wary of relinquishing this autonomy and were skeptical of any increase in centralized authority that could be empowered to threaten their sovereignty. Therefore, the idea of a stronger federal government, which was one of the main goals of the principal promoters of the Constitutional Convention, did not square with Rhode Island’s regard for its own interests as a sovereign republic, and one intent on remaining so.

Another crucial factor that influenced Rhode Island’s decision was its economic structure. The state’s economy was heavily reliant on trade, particularly with other countries. Rhode Island had a thriving maritime industry and benefited from its status as a major center of commerce. The proposed Constitution threatened to disrupt this trade by granting the federal government the power to regulate commerce and impose tariffs. Rhode Island feared that a stronger federal government would prioritize the interests of larger states — as it rightly reckoned that a new Constitution could not be adopted without the approval of the larger states — and potentially impose regulations that could harm its economy. Simply put, the state’s concern for its own economic health and independence played a significant role in its decision to abstain from the convention in Philadelphia.

Additionally, Rhode Island’s relative size and geographical situation contributed to its absence from the convention. The state had a unique position, located between larger and more populous states such as Massachusetts and Connecticut. This proximity to powerful neighbors created a sense of vulnerability and, along with a history of being unafraid to strike out on its own, fostered a regionalist sentiment among Rhode Islanders. The small size and relative lack of influence of Rhode Island meant that it rightly feared political and economic marginalization from its more populous and prosperous neighbors. This sentiment, combined with concerns over losing its sovereignty and economic stability, further fueled the state’s decision not to send delegates to the convention.

Once the business of “amending the Articles of Confederation” had concluded — with the creation of an entirely new form of government for the union — a copy of the proposed Constitution was sent to the state government of Rhode Island for its consideration, as required by the Congressional Resolution that authorized the convention, as well as Article VII of the newly drafted Constitution.

Unlike her sister states, Rhode Island did not hold a convention to decide the question of whether to ratify the new Constitution. Rhode Island, rather, chose to call for a referendum to be held in each town in the state and for the people themselves to vote yea or nay. This method of settling the question of ratification did not sit well with many powerful Federalists (supporters of the proposed Constitution), as they recognized that it would be harder to influence meetings of freemen to be held in each of the state’s 30 towns.

Nevertheless, Rhode Island proceeded with its own manner of considering the new Constitution, and here’s the result of that procedure, as [described by the governor of Rhode Island](#) to the president of



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Congress:

Sir, The Report of the Convention assembled in Philadelphia, being transmitted by the Secretary of Congress, was received by us at October Session last; & 1000 Copies thereof were ordered to be printed and sent into the respective Towns within this State, that the People at large might have a full Opportunity of considering and communing upon so important an Object; which was immediately done. — And at February Session last the Consideration thereof was submitted to the Freemen of this State by the inclosed Act: And, the Returns from each respective Town being delivered in, it appears that the Yeas for adopting the Constitution for the United States were Two Hundred and Thirty seven, and the Nays Two Thousand Seven Hundred and Eight....

The final tally was 237 votes in favor of adopting the proposed Constitution, with 2,708 votes against ratification of that document.

Now, as most of you likely know, Rhode Island did eventually ratify the Constitution drafted in Philadelphia in 1787. However, did you know that it was the very last state to do so? It was so late to do so, in fact, that the government created by the Constitution of 1787 was already fully functioning with a president (George Washington), a Congress, and a Supreme Court! In fact, it had been functioning for more than a year before Rhode Island ratified it and joined the union on May 29, 1790.

Never one to follow the crowd or to wait for it, Rhode Island has earned its reputation as a fearless defender of liberty.

This is the fourth article in our [summer series](#) on the 1787 Constitutional Convention.



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