

◆ ◆ THE DEBATE OVER THE U.S. ◆ ◆ CONSTITUTION IN NORTH CAROLINA

PART 5: MEET THE FEDERALISTS

LEARNING OUTCOME:

Students can:

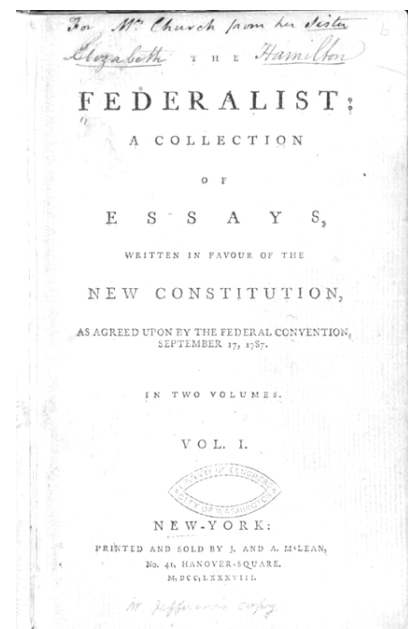
- ◆ *Describe the specific contributions of three influential North Carolina Federalists during the 1787 Philadelphia Convention and the national debate over the federal Constitution that followed that convention.*

Today, people who study the debate over the U.S. Constitution are more likely to learn about the Federalists rather than the Anti-Federalists. In part, this imbalance is because the Federalists won the debate. The federal Constitution that was written in Philadelphia in 1787 was ratified by all 13 states — it is the Constitution that we still have today. (Be sure to recognize that these Federalists are different from the Federalist Party that emerged in the 1790s.)

Students are also more likely to have heard about the Federalists because of the 85 newspaper articles that were written to persuade Americans to support the proposed new Constitution. After the U.S. Constitution became the supreme law of the United States, these newspaper articles were combined into a book titled the Federalist Papers. Although the articles were first published anonymously in New York newspapers, we now know who the authors were. Alexander Hamilton wrote 51 of them, James Madison wrote 29, and John Jay wrote five. All three of these leaders participated in the 1787 Philadelphia Convention where the Constitution was written. In fact, James Madison is credited with writing the first draft of the Constitution. Moreover, all three leaders went on to play important roles in the federal government that the Constitution created. James Madison went on to be the fourth president of the United States. John Jay became the first chief justice of the United States Supreme Court. Alexander Hamilton was the country's first secretary of the treasury.

The Federalist Papers are more than just a relic from the past. The Constitution is the supreme law of the United States, so its words determine the powers of the government and the limits of those powers. Since the Federalist Papers explain the original meaning of the U.S. Constitution as it was understood by the people who wrote it, even today, lawyers and judges throughout the United States use the Federalist Papers to determine what the words of the Constitution actually mean. The Federalist Papers are also studied as a work of political theory. The 85 articles explain the theories on which the U.S. system of government is based.

In 1787 and 1788, during the national debate over the U.S. Constitution, many North Carolinians sided with the Anti-Federalists. However, some of North Carolina's most politically influential leaders were Federalists. Three of North Carolina's most prominent Federalist leaders were James Iredell, Hugh Williamson, and William Richardson Davie. Considering each of their unique perspectives on the U.S. Constitution will help readers better understand the broader debate over the proposed new Constitution that took place in



The Federalist Papers

1787 and 1788 in North Carolina and throughout the United States.

Federalists:	Anti-Federalists:
Supported the new (1787) Constitution, which would give the U.S. government more power than the state governments.	Opposed the 1787 Constitution. They wanted to keep the Articles of Confederation, which gave state governments more power than the U.S. government.

HUGH WILLIAMSON (1735–1819)

The most prominent North Carolina Federalist was a well-educated medical doctor and political leader named Hugh Williamson. He had studied mathematics at the College of Philadelphia (which later became the University of Pennsylvania) and then went on to study medicine at a university in Europe. After graduating from medical school, Williamson returned to Philadelphia and began working as a doctor. He also joined the Philosophical Society, which had been founded by Benjamin Franklin.



Hugh Williamson

In 1775, Williamson happened to be in Boston when the Boston Tea Party occurred. Afterwards, Williamson travelled to London, where he wrote an essay defending the protesters in Boston. The essay was titled “The Plea of the Colonies on the Charges Brought Against Them by Lord Mansfield, and Others, in a Letter to His Lordship.”

During the American Revolutionary War, Dr. Williamson was on a ship on his way to South Carolina, but the ship was forced to stop in Edenton, North Carolina, to avoid the British navy. Williamson stayed in North Carolina and was soon chosen to be the state’s **surgeon general** (a government official who is in charge of all doctors working on behalf of the state government). After the war, Williamson served in the North Carolina General Assembly and the U.S. Congress that had been created by the Articles of Confederation.

In 1787, the North Carolina General Assembly chose Dr. Williamson to participate in the 1787 Philadelphia Convention. Throughout the convention, he served on five committees and was one of the convention’s most active members. After the convention, he wrote several essays in support of the proposed new Constitution. For reasons that were beyond his control, he was absent from the 1788 Hillsborough Convention, but he participated in the 1789 Fayetteville Convention and was one of the most persuasive Federalist speakers at that meeting. Williamson’s persistence and eloquence paid off. At the end of the Fayetteville Convention, representatives from throughout North Carolina voted to **ratify** (approve) the U.S. Constitution.

WILLIAM RICHARDSON DAVIE (1756–1820)

Another influential North Carolina Federalist was William Richardson Davie (1756–1820). He had born in England, but his family moved to South Carolina in 1764.¹ Davie attended school in Charlotte, North Carolina. He joined the American Revolution as a young man and was seriously wounded. However, he returned to the fight and became a colonel in 1780.



William R. Davie

After the war, Davie settled in the town of Halifax, North Carolina, where he worked as a lawyer. In 1787, the North Carolina General Assembly chose him to be one of the state’s delegates at the Philadelphia Convention. Throughout the convention, Davie did not speak much. He often let Hugh Williamson speak for the North Carolina delegation. However, Davie played an important role in one of the most important decisions at the 1787 convention.

Davie was a member of a committee that debated how to set up the legislative branch of the new federal government. This committee considered the “Connecticut Compromise,” which was a proposal by a representative from the state of Connecticut to create a Congress with two chambers: a Senate made up of two members per state and a House of Representatives in which each state’s representation would be based on its population. Representatives from small states generally liked this plan, but many of the representatives from larger states preferred an alternative plan proposed by a representative from Virginia. North Carolina was the only large state willing to accept this compromise. Because of Davie’s deciding vote, the Connecticut Compromise became part of the U.S. Constitution.

After the U.S. Constitution was ratified, William Richardson Davie continued to play an important role in North Carolina politics and education. For example, he encouraged the North Carolina General Assembly to create the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which was the first university sponsored by a state government in the United States. Davie also became the first president of the University of North Carolina.

JAMES IREDELL (1751–1799)



James Iredell

During the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, North Carolina representative James Iredell distinguished himself by writing a reply to a Virginia delegate named George Mason who refused to sign the Constitution. Mason wrote and distributed a list of 16 “Objections to This Form of Government.”² Mason expressed a variety of concerns in this letter. For example, Mason thought the U.S. Senate would have too much power. He also worried about the role that the vice president of the United States would play in the U.S. Senate. Mason thought that the vice president’s power to break a tie vote in the Senate violated the principle of the separation of powers. Mason’s

biggest concern, however, was that the proposed Constitution did not guarantee many individual rights. “There is no declaration of any kind, for preserving the liberty of the press, or the trial by jury in civil causes [lawsuits]; nor against the danger of standing armies in time of peace,” he wrote.

In his response, titled “Answers to Mr. Mason’s Objections to the New Constitution,” James Iredell replied that most states already had a bill of rights in their state constitutions.³ He pointed out that the powers of the U.S. government were clearly stated in Article I of the Constitution, so the U.S. government “certainly cannot act beyond the warrant [limits] of that authority.” In other words, additional limits on the U.S. government’s power were unnecessary because Article I of the Constitution allowed the U.S. government to make only certain types of laws for the country.

George Mason also argued that the Constitution would allow the U.S. government to “inflict unusual and severe punishments” because there was no ban on it. Mr. Iredell replied:

The expressions “unusual and severe” or “cruel and unusual” surely would have been too vague to have been of any consequence, since they admit of no clear and precise signification.

What he meant was that banning cruel and unusual punishment wouldn’t actually protect people because Iredell thought the expression “cruel and unusual” was too vague. It would be a matter of opinion whether or not a punishment was “cruel and unusual.” (Even so, when the Bill of Rights was added to the U.S. Constitution, it included a ban on “cruel and unusual punishment.”)

Iredell believed that the U.S. Constitution would protect individual rights even without a bill of rights. However, the people of North Carolina disagreed. At the Hillsborough Convention of 1788, representatives from throughout North Carolina voted that they would consider the U.S. Constitution only if a bill of rights was added. At least in part because of this insistence on the addition of a bill of rights, James Madison

and other influential federalists promised to add one to the Constitution. The people of North Carolina eventually did ratify the U.S. Constitution, but only after the constitutional amendments that became the U.S. Bill of Rights were passed by the U.S. Congress and presented to the states for ratification.

In the end, the Federalists won the debate over the Constitution. But North Carolina's Anti-Federalists won the debate over the Bill of Rights.

READING REVIEW QUESTIONS:

Explain why the Federalist Papers are still important today.

Describe the Connecticut Compromise and explain William Richardson Davie's role in its inclusion in the U.S. Constitution.

Write a paragraph summarizing James Iredell's "Answers" to George Mason's "16 Objections to this Form of Government."

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jeff Broadwater, "William Richardson Davie (1756-1820)," North Carolina History Project, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/william-richardson-davie-1756-1820/>.
- 2 George Mason, Objections to *This Form of Government*, September 1787, <https://www.archives.gov/files/legislative/resources/education/bill-of-rights/images/mason.pdf>.
- 3 James Iredell ("Marcus"), *Answers to Mr. Mason's Objections to the New Constitution*, <https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch14s36.html>.