Road to Ratification

In 1787, state delegates met in Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation. After two months, they emerged from their secret proceedings with a radically new plan of government: The United States Constitution.

Before the U.S. Constitution could be adopted, nine of the thirteen states had to ratify it. The states held ratifying conventions where delegates voted whether to adopt it or not.

Adopting the U.S. Constitution was not a foregone conclusion. Proponents of the document, called Federalists, advocated for it, but they faced fierce opposition from Anti-Federalists who did not want the Constitution ratified.

By Summer 1788, eight states of the nine states needed had ratified the Constitution. Virginia's ratifying convention was coming up next.

All eyes were on Virginia, where Federalists and Anti-Federalists seemed split. Nobody knew how the final vote would go, but they did know that the stakes were as high as they come: the Constitution's adoption and success might come down to Virginia's decision.

Why was Virginia's vote so crucial?
1) If it voted to ratify, it would be the 9th state, triggering the Constitution to be adopted.
2) If it voted not to ratify, other states might follow suit. Even if nine states did ratify, how could the United States succeed without its richest and most populous state, home of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and author of the Constitution himself, James Madison.

The Virginia Ratification Convention began in June 1788. The United States waited with bated breath to learn what the fate of the Constitution, and their nation, would be. To them, there was no inevitable outcome.

The Virginia Ratification Convention held its final day of debates on June 25, 1788, after about three weeks of debating. In the final day, it became clear that the Constitution's lack of a Bill of Rights was the main factor holding Federalists back from holding a majority.

The delegates compromised. They agreed to ratify the Constitution, but with the understanding that a Bill of Rights would be written and adopted.

As it turns out, New Hampshire had called a ratifying convention at the same time and voted to ratify the Constitution on June 21, four days before the Virginians, although Virginians didn't find out until after their vote. So, New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify the Constitution.

With more than the nine required states now ratifying the Constitution, including the important support of Virginia, the other states followed by ratifying the Constitution.