Gov/AP Gov Madison’s Notes on the Federal Convention
9-12 Grades

This activity is sponsored in part by the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Eastern Region Program, coordinated by Waynesburg University.

One class period of 45 – 60 minutes
Description of activity: Students will read and analyze a portion of the preface to Madison’s Notes on the Federal Convention.

Focus Question: Why did Madison take such laborious, careful notes on the convention? How did he think they could be useful to later generations?

Context: This activity fits into a unit on Constitutional Underpinnings/Founding Documents.

Objectives: Students should be able to identify and explain Madison’s reasons for recording the debates at the Constitutional Convention. They should be able to describe the value of being able to revisit the comments and concerns of all the delegates who participated.

Virginia SOLs
STANDARD GOVT.1 a, b, c, d, e, f, g
The student will demonstrate mastery of the social studies skills responsible citizenship requires, including the ability to
a) analyze primary and secondary source documents;
b) create and interpret maps, diagrams, tables, charts, graphs, and spreadsheets;
c) analyze political cartoons, political advertisements, pictures, and other graphic media;
d) distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information;
e) evaluate information for accuracy, separating fact from opinion;
f) identify a problem, weigh the expected costs and benefits and possible consequences of proposed solutions, and recommend solutions, using a decision-making model;
g) select and defend positions in writing, discussion, and debate.

STANDARD GOVT.3a, b, c, d, e
The student will demonstrate knowledge of the concepts of democracy by
a) recognizing the fundamental worth and dignity of the individual;
b) recognizing the equality of all citizens under the law;
c) recognizing majority rule and minority rights;
d) recognizing the necessity of compromise;
e) recognizing the freedom of the individual.

STANDARD GOVT.4a
The student will demonstrate knowledge of the Constitution of the United States by
a) examining the ratification debates and The Federalist.
STANDARD GOVT.4c
The student will demonstrate knowledge of the Constitution of the United States by
c) examining the fundamental principles upon which the Constitution of the United States is
based, including the rule of law, consent of the governed, limited government, separation of
powers, and federalism.

Assessment: Students will answer analysis questions and discuss their views with the class.

Primary Sources: see below
Procedure: Students will examine the original document and then read a portion of the transcript.
They will answer analysis questions and then discuss with the class.

What you will need before implementing: This lesson would be most effective with computer
access for all students. The documents and directions should shared digitally with all students
(in Google Doc.s or another format). This activity could be accomplished with paper copy of
the materials for each student.
Preface to the Notes on the Federal Convention
James Madison
1834
https://www.loc.gov/item/mjm021295/

Read the following excerpt from the transcription of this document.

http://teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/debates/preface/

The curiosity I had felt during my researches into the History of the most distinguished Confederacies, particularly those of antiquity, and the deficiency I found in the means of satisfying it more especially in what related to the process, the principles, the reasons, & the anticipations, which prevailed in the formation of them, determined me to preserve as far as I could an exact account of what might pass in the Convention whilst executing its trust, with the magnitude of which I was duly impressed, as I was with 60 the gratification promised to future curiosity by an authentic exhibition of the objects, the opinions & the reasonings from which the new System of Govt was to receive its peculiar structure & organization. Nor was I unaware of the value of such a contribution to the fund of materials for the History of a Constitution on
which would be staked the happiness of a people great even in its infancy, and possibly the cause of Liberty throught the world.

In pursuance of the task I had assumed I chose a seat in front of the presiding member, with the other members on my right & left hands. In this favorable position for hearing all that passed, I noted in terms legible & in abbreviations & marks intelligible to myself what was read from the Chair or spoken by the members; and losing not a moment unnecessarily between the adjournment & reassembling of the Convention I was enabled to write out my daily notes [see page 18 – 61 during the session or within a few finishing days after its close – see pa. 18 62 in the extent and form preserved in my own hand on my files.

In the labour & correctness of doing 63 this, I was not a little aided by practice & by a familiarity with the style and the train of observation & reasoning which characterized the principal speakers. It happened, also that I was not absent a single day, nor more than a casual fraction of an hour in any day, so that I could not have lost a single speech, unless a very short one. Insert the Remark on the _____ slip of paper marked A. 64

[It may be proper to remark, that, with a very few exceptions, the speeches were neither furnished, nor revised, nor sanctioned, by the speakers, but written out from my notes, aided by the freshness of my recollections. A further remark may be proper, that views of the subject might occasionally be presented in the speeches and proceedings, with a latent reference to a compromise on some middle ground, by mutual concessions. The exceptions alluded to were, — first, the sketch furnished by Mr. Randolph of his speech on the introduction of his propositions, on the twenty-ninth day of May; secondly, the speech of Mr. Hamilton, who happened to call on me when putting the last hand to it, and who acknowledged its fidelity, without suggesting more than a very few verbal alterations which were made; thirdly, the speech of Gouverneur Morris on the second day of May, which was communicated to him on a like occasion, and who acquiesced in it without even a verbal change. The correctness of his language and the distinctness of his enunciation were particularly favorable to a reporter. The speeches of Doctor Franklin, excepting a few brief ones, were copied from the written ones read to the Convention by his colleague, Mr. Wilson, it being inconvenient to the Doctor to remain long on his feet.] 65

Of the ability & intelligence of those who composed the Convention, the debates & proceedings may be a test; as the character of the work which was the offspring of their deliberations must be tested by the experience of the future, added to that of the nearly half century which has passed. 66

But whatever may be the judgment pronounced on the competency of the architects of the Constitution, or whatever may be the destiny, of the edifice prepared by them, I feel it a duty to express my profound & solemn conviction, derived from my intimate opportunity of observing & appreciating the views of the Convention, collectively & individually, that there never was an assembly of men, charged with a great & arduous trust, who were more pure in their motives, or more exclusively or anxiously [devoted to the object committed to them, than were the members of the Federal Convention of 1787, to the object of devising and proposing a constitutional system which would best supply the defects of that which it was to replace, and best secure the permanent liberty and happiness of their country.] 67
According to Madison, what were his reasons for recording his notes at the convention?

What were his reasons for publishing them in 1834?

To what extent do you think these notes could be accurate?

How are these notes helpful to us today?

Can they help us make decisions about our own governance today?

Students may wish to explore the rest of the book which is available at http://teachingamericanhistory.org/convention/debates/