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Note on the Adjournment of the New Hampshire Convention

Throughout America, it was generally believed that the New Hampshire Convention would ratify the Constitution with little opposition. After the Massachusetts Convention ratified the Constitution on 6 February, New Hampshire's acceptance of the Constitution seemed even more certain. Everyone expected New Hampshire to follow the lead of its influential neighbor. On 15 February James Madison in New York wrote that "The Convention of N Hampshire is now sitting. There seems to be no question that the issue there will add a *seventh* pillar, as the phrase now is, to the fœderal Temple." Five days later the Federalist *Massachusetts Centinel*, even though it was known that there was opposition to the Constitution in the New Hampshire Convention, predicted "that the New Hampshire Pillar will . . . be added as another supporter of the FEDERAL SUPERSTRUCTURE."

As the Convention neared, however, some New Hampshire Federalists began having misgivings. On 11 February President John Sullivan, who had been elected to represent Durham in the state Convention, believed that prospects for New Hampshire's ratification were "not so favorable as I expected." When the Convention met in Exeter on 13 February, Sullivan's fears were soon realized—a majority of the delegates opposed the Constitution. Estimates placed Federalist strength at between 30 and 48 of the 108 delegates in attendance. A number of Federalist delegates lamented that "the only thing that can be done to prevent its [i.e., the Constitution's] rejection is to have an adjournment of the Convention." Adjournment was Federalist's only recourse as many towns had instructed their delegates to vote against the Constitution. According to delegate John Langdon of Portsmouth, these instructed delegates felt bound to vote against ratification even though some of them (estimates ranged from about 7 to 30 delegates) had become supporters of the Constitution. Others believed that delegates who were also state legislators were afraid of "incurring the displeasure of their constituents" who might vote them out of office in the upcoming elections in March. Delegates hoped that they could get their constituents to change their instructions. Therefore, on 22 February John Langdon moved that the Convention "adjourn to some future day." The Convention voted 56 to 51 to adjourn and to meet in Concord on 18 June. John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, formerly an antifederalist and now an observer of the New Hampshire Convention debates, wrote in his diary that the motion "was the offspring of the fears of the federal party; and was faintly opposed by the other faction, who appeared to be equally fearful of the event; though more confident of their numbers."

Americans everywhere wondered what effect New Hampshire's adjournment would have on the prospects for ratification of the Constitution. Federalists tried to interpret the adjournment

as positively as possible and predicted publicly that the Convention would ratify the Constitution when it reconvened in June. antifederalists emphasized that the adjournment was the first public rejection of the Constitution. For instance, the *New York Journal*, 3 March, reported that the adjournment “alone, prevented a rejection of the system; and there is no great probability, that, in June, it will have a greater number of friends than it now has.”

Some observers thought the adjournment to the inland town of Concord benefited antifederalists. A letter dated 12 March, and allegedly written by Pennsylvania antifederalist George Bryan, declared that the move “100 miles farther inland . . . bodes no good to the *fœderal* party, as they falsely call themselves.” A satirical letter from James de Caledonia (James Wilson) to James Bowdoin expressed the same idea: “But I find the country members have carried the convention farther back in the country at least 100 miles, to a place called *Concord*. How, in the name of wonder, could you suffer this to take place. . . .” When Federalist Nicholas Gilman, a New Hampshire delegate to Congress, heard that the Convention would reconvene in Concord, he lamented that “the field assigned for the scene of action is so much in favor of the adverse party.” Federalist Samuel A. Otis, a Massachusetts delegate to Congress, worried that the Convention’s “adjournment into the Wilderness augurs ill.”

Concord was chosen not to benefit antifederalists, but because the legislature was scheduled to convene there on 4 June. The choice of Concord would be convenient for those Convention delegates who also served in the legislature. The legislature met on 4 June and adjourned on 18 June, the opening day of the second session of the Convention.

On 24 February news of the adjournment reached Boston, where several prominent Federalists expressed their disappointment but predicted that New Hampshire would ratify in June. The next day the antifederalist Boston *American Herald* erroneously reported that the New Hampshire Convention had voted not to ratify the Constitution and that, after reconsidering the question, it had voted to adjourn. On the 26th the *Herald’s* erroneous report was refuted by a correspondent in the *Massachusetts Gazette*. The next day the *Massachusetts Centinel* also published a lengthy refutation of the *Herald’s* report that was widely reprinted.

Despite their public optimism, Federalists privately worried about the effect the adjournment might have on the states that had not considered the Constitution. Maryland’s Convention was scheduled to meet on 21 April, South Carolina’s on 12 May, Virginia’s and New York’s on 2 and 17 June, respectively, and North Carolina’s on 21 July. Rhode Island had not even called a convention. George Washington noted that the adjournment in New Hampshire would “possibly” make “Rhode Island more backward than she otherwise would have been, if *all* the New England States had *finally* decided in favor of the measure.” James Madison wrote that the adjournment was “no small check to the progress of the business” and that the “mischief elsewhere will in the meantime be of a serious nature.” Nicholas Gilman agreed: “much is to be apprehended from this unfortunate check to the tide of our political prosperity. . . . This unfortunate affair will at least give a temporary spring to the opposition and I fear its effects in other States; though I cannot doubt the final ratification in ours, if proper measures are adopted, to counteract the nefarious designs of the enemys to our Country.” Two weeks later Gilman’s worst fears seemed to be realized, as he declared that “Those that have not been in the way of seeing and hearing can hardly imagine what pernicious effects our Convention business has produced in a number of the States.” After Massachusetts ratified the Constitution, Gilman continued,

antifederalists “began to make excuses and change sides in all Quarters,” but after New Hampshire’s adjournment “they augmented their forces took possession of their old ground and seem determined to maintain it at all hazards.” Paine Wingate, Gilman’s colleague in Congress, wrote that “the ill impression on the minds of people by the adjournment is more extensive & mischievous than you would imagine. It is complained of as far as Virginia, & believed that if New Hampshire had adopted, there would not have been one dissenting state. Whereas, there is now some danger that the whole plan will miscarry.” And Antoine de la Forest, the French vice consul in New York, reported that New Hampshire’s adjournment was “a dangerous setback” that “had the most unfortunate effect on the people of the States of New York, Maryland Virginia and the two Carolinas. The opposition there has taken on new strength; *antifederalists* have stolen more easily into all the state conventions.”

Federalists were especially concerned about New York and Virginia—two important states where opposition to the Constitution was particularly strong. In New York City, the news of New Hampshire’s adjournment caused the prices of public securities to fall in early March. Samuel Blachley Webb, a New York City commercial agent, lamented “O New Hampshire, you have (perhaps unintentionally) done us much injury. —Anti-federalists lift their heads.” Confederation Secretary at War Henry Knox reported from New York City that antifederalists had been given “new life and Spirits,” while the “ardor” of Federalists had been “damped.” Rufus King wrote that “the spirit of Federalism” had been checked in the state of New York. Similar reports came from Thomas Tillotson in Dutchess County, N.Y., who noted that New Hampshire’s adjournment “has revived the drooping spirits of the Opposition.” And Richard Stockton, a Princeton, N.J., lawyer writing from Boston, described the adjournment as “a most unlucky accident.” Stockton had been “informed by a Gentleman who may be depended on that the antifederal junto in N York had agreed to give up all opposition if Hampshire adopted” the Constitution.

Virginia Federalists were particularly alarmed by the adjournment because news of the “untoward event” arrived in the state while elections (3–27 March) were being held for the Virginia Convention. George Washington believed that all antifederalist efforts in Virginia “would have proved entirely unavailing” if New Hampshire had ratified the Constitution. The news gave Virginia antifederalists the “opportunity” to demonstrate that the Constitution was not “so generally approved of in other States as they [Virginians] had been taught to believe.” antifederalists also maintained that, if Virginia rejected the Constitution, “all those [state conventions] which are to follow will do the same; & consequently, the Constitution cannot obtain, as there will be only eight States in favor of the measure.” Even some Federalists believed that the New Hampshire adjournment might destroy the Constitution’s chances of ratification. Virginian Cyrus Griffin, president of Congress, worried that “nine states will not have agreed to the System before Virginia shall be assembled; this will make her in fact the preponderating state of the union; and being so placed I fear the consequences.”

The first test of the impact of New Hampshire’s adjournment would be in Maryland, whose Convention was scheduled to meet on 21 April. Rufus King expressed the concern of most Federalists when he stated on 16 April that “we are not so confident of Maryland as we once were of New Hampshire.” On 20 April George Washington wrote Thomas Johnson of Maryland “that an adjournment, (if attempted), of your Convention to a later period than the decision of the question in this State [i.e., Virginia], will be tantamount to the rejection of the Constitution.”

Such an act “would have the worst tendency imaginable, for indecision there wld. have considerable influence upon South Carolina, the only other State which is to precede Virginia, and submits the question almost wholly to the determination of the latter. The *pride* of the State is already touched upon this string, & will be strained much higher if there is an opening for it.”

Washington was not alone in his fear that the Maryland and South Carolina conventions might not ratify the Constitution, thereby endangering the prospects for ratification by the Virginia Convention. Early in April, Federalist George Nicholas of Charlottesville, Va., had urged James Madison to write his friends in Maryland and South Carolina asking them to resist attempts to adjourn their state conventions. Madison replied that he would “cheerfully execute” Nicholas’ request in order to avert “the mischievous influence here [Virginia] of such examples as N. Hampshire has set.”

Federalist fears about adjournment in Maryland were apparently well founded. On 20 April, the day before the Maryland Convention met, Baltimore delegate James McHenry wrote Washington that “Our opposition intend to push for an adjournment under the pretext of a conference with yours respecting amendments. As I look upon such a step to amount to a rejection in both States I shall do every thing in my power to prevent it.”

Despite such fears, some Maryland and South Carolina Federalists believed that those states would ratify the Constitution. Dr. Philip Thomas of Frederick, Md., thought that Maryland would ratify “by a pretty large majority” even though the opponents of the Constitution “have begun to pluck up their crests since the conflict happened in the Convention of N. Hampshire & the nefarious ‘doings’ in Rhode Island.” Judge Alexander Contee Hanson, a Maryland Convention delegate from Annapolis, asserted that “The (fatal) supineness of the federalists in New-Hampshire will occasion much trouble, altho’, upon the whole, I do not believe what has happened there will injure the cause. Whilst it gives spirits to (scoundrels and) demagogues, it rouses the friends to order and good government, and I trust, that, in no other state, will they be deceived by the apparent quiet submission of the former.” David Ramsay of Charleston, S.C., wrote that “I am more anxious since the adjournment of New Hampshire convention. . . . I countd on the support of New: Hampshire & am since doubly anxious for the vote of our State to be in favor of it. I still have a great preponderance of hope & only fear a delay in the business.”

Some Federalists worried that New Hampshire’s adjournment might even have a negative effect on Pennsylvania—a state which had already ratified the Constitution. James Madison thought that the opposition in New York “will take new spirits” and “That in Pena. will probably be equally encouraged.” Virginia delegate to Congress John Brown feared that the adjournment “will be productive of bad consequences as it will give fresh spirits & Confidence to the Malcontents who were begining to dispair & relax in their opposition—Altho Pensilva. had adopted it yet there is a very powerful party opposed who are growing very tumultuous having been exasperated by the intemperate Zeal of the friends to the Plan.” This “very powerful party” had launched a petition campaign asking the state Assembly to revoke Pennsylvania’s ratification of the Constitution and had gathered more than 6,000 signatures.

On 26 March the Federalist *Pennsylvania Gazette* printed a satirical letter, allegedly written by antifederalist leader George Bryan of Philadelphia, stating that antifederalists considered New Hampshire’s adjournment “as fatal to the business. So do its advocates here, and they are in the dumps, and some of the members of the General Convention are apologising for their conduct.

Before this news came, the party was up in the skies, as their behaviour seemed to express.” The next week “A Pennsylvanian” asked Bryan if he “*conscientiously*” believed that Philadelphia Federalists considered the New Hampshire adjournment “*fatal* to the business.”

The adjournment of the New Hampshire Convention had less impact than was anticipated. The petition campaign in Pennsylvania to revoke the state’s ratification of the Constitution was unsuccessful, as the state legislature tabled the petitions and adjourned at the end of March. The Maryland and South Carolina conventions ratified the Constitution by overwhelming majorities on 26 April and 23 May, respectively, becoming the seventh and eighth states to ratify. In mid-May Jeremiah Libbey, postmaster of Portsmouth, N.H., wrote that “several” antifederalists in the New Hampshire Convention “are said to be quite altered from Antifederal to Federal.” On 21 June the reconvened New Hampshire Convention ratified the Constitution by a vote of 57 to 47—the ninth state to ratify.

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