

The Grand Federal Edifice

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During the ratification process several metaphors for the Constitution were used to describe the new plan of government. These concepts and images traveled speedily through newspapers and pamphlets and, owing to the allegorical temper of the age, soon became commonly accepted synonyms for the Constitution. Antifederalists often described the Constitution as the gilded pill, poison, and the many-headed monster. Federalists used such terms as the noble fabric, the wedding suit, a gold mine, a vine, and a ship. For the most part, architectural metaphors predominated in the debate over the Constitution and gave rise to the only visual treatment of the political process.

The architectural metaphor appeared verbally before it was illustrated. Francis Hopkinson, a noted poet, musician, and composer who had signed the Declaration of Independence for Pennsylvania, provided an example in a lengthy allegory, "The New Roof," in which he cast in structural terms the arguments for and against the new political structure (CC:395). To the protest that the states would be annihilated under the new federal government, he responded, "The intention really was to make a firm and substantial roof by uniting the strength of the 13 rafters; . . . the existence of each and all were essentially necessary to the existence of the whole fabric as a roof." His essay appeared in the *Pennsylvania Packet* on December 29, 1787, and was reprinted in at least fourteen other newspapers within four months and in the August 1788 issue of the nationally circulated magazine, the *American Museum*, which was the first printed source to attribute authorship to Hopkinson. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* on February 6, 1788, published an elaboration by Hopkinson entitled, "The Raising: A New Song for Federal Mechanics," that also was reprinted frequently (CC:504). In this song of many stanzas Hopkinson was more specific in detailing how the parts—plates, girders, joists, rafters, king posts, braces, and purlins—are set in place. Finally, the turret (a windowed cupola, no doubt) is raised, and the refrain ends, "Our Roof is now rais'd, and our song still shall be—/ A Federal Head, o'er a people still free." Antifederalists used Hopkinson's concept to

illustrate the "absurdity" of the new Constitution which, by annihilating the state governments, would become a roof "suspended in the air after the walls have fallen away" (*Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer*, February 2, 1788).

Another architectural metaphor, the pillar, first arose at the Constitutional Convention on June 16, 1787. In analyzing a plan offered for the design of the new government, James Wilson of Pennsylvania described the state legislatures as the pillars of the national legislature. While the term "pillar" can mean almost any kind of vertical support, in the late eighteenth century it evoked the image of a classical column; indeed, it was virtually interchangeable with the word "column." Not only was the column a symbol of strength, but since antiquity it served also as an abbreviation for the whole support erected under a roof. This is certainly the sense of Wilson's likening the state legislatures to pillars.

This image was developed in an article in the *Massachusetts Gazette* of December 7, 1787, in which the states were compared with thirteen free-standing columns, all of the finest workmanship but facing destruction from weather and the "attacks of *anarchy . . . and of despotism*" (CC:329). With the new Constitution, however, "they receive the heaven-descended DOME, supporting and supported by the noble structure." Then, reporting on the ratification of the Constitution by Georgia and Connecticut, on January 15, 1788, the newspaper announced the addition of the fourth and fifth pillars to "that GRAND REPUBLICAN SUPERSTRUCTURE, the FEDERAL CONSTITUTION." The change from "column" to "pillar" and the grandiloquent title for the edifice reflected the idea of a Boston editor, Benjamin Russell (CC:vol. 1, xxxvi-xxxvii; vol. 3, 564-67).

Russell, an ardent Federalist, treated ratification as a continuing structural process. In his newspaper, the *Massachusetts Centinel*, on December 26, 1787, he characterized the ratification by Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey as the first, second, and third pillars raised for a "great FEDERAL SUPERSTRUCTURE." Antifederalist "Helvidius Priscus" compared "the three pillars lately erected" to "the hanging towers of Pisa, to be propped up and cemented by the blood of posterity." Americans would never forsake their rights "to set down passively under a tottering pile, erected on pillars of porcelain" (*Boston Independent Chronicle*, January 10, 1788; CC:436). Russell, however, maintained his conception through successive announce-

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States—like the gen'rous vine supported live,
The strength they gain is from th' embrace they give
THE FEDERAL PILLARS.

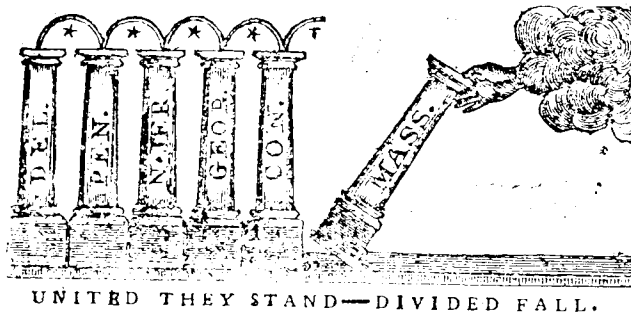


Fig. 1. *The Federal Pillars*, from the *Massachusetts Centinel*, January 16, 1788.

ments of additional pillars raised as the remaining states ratified the Constitution. He also described the Constitution as dome, fabric, edifice, and temple, usually with the adjectives “great” or “federal” and with a profligate use of capital letters and italics.

It was Russell who first gave visual form to the architectural metaphor by having his engraver prepare a woodcut with five pillars connected by arches at the top and with a star under each arch. (Fig. 1.) Following the sequence of ratification, each pillar bears the name of a state. In its first printing (January 16, 1788), the row of pillars was accompanied by another pillar labeled “MASS.” standing at a precarious angle, but upheld by the hand of God emerging from clouds. The illustration was reprinted on January 30 during the final week of the Massachusetts ratifying convention. Then, on February 9, the *Centinel* announced Massachusetts’ ratification and printed a new illustration. The “MASS.” pillar, a newly cut block, joined the first five pillars. Russell continued adding pillars as each convention voted for ratification: Maryland (May 7), South Carolina (June 11), New Hampshire (June 25), Virginia (July 5), and New York (August 2). Each illustration was accompanied by an account, sometimes two and three columns in length, of the ratification by the state convention concerned.

In several of Russell’s illustrations, pillars receive a lift from the hand of God emerging from clouds, an old artistic device. The earliest known use of this motif was on an Assyrian monument of the twelfth century B.C.; it recurred throughout the ages, and in contemporary New England it appeared even on tombstones. It was repeatedly used verbally in the ratification debate, most conspicuously just preceding the vote on ratification in the Pennsylvania convention when Dr. Benjamin Rush urged a unanimous vote for the Constitution. According to the *Pennsylvania Herald* (December 15, 1787; CC:357), Rush asserted “that he as much believed the hand of God was employed in this work, as that God

had divided the Red Sea to give a passage to the children of Israel, or had fulminated the ten commandments from Mount Sinai!” (RCS:Pa., 593). Within two months twenty newspapers—including Russell’s *Massachusetts Centinel*, December 29—reprinted Rush’s speech. Only a couple weeks later (January 16, 1788), Russell published his first illustration in which the Massachusetts pillar received this divine assistance. (Fig. 1.)

A special device appeared in the references to New Hampshire. On February 13, 1788, the first day of that state’s convention, the pillar is lifted free of the ground by the hand of God, and a news item a week later (February 20) reports that ratification is near. But on February 27 the pillar remains at the same angle, for the convention recessed. (Fig. 2.) The pillar now rests on a low stool, and although a pointing finger highlights the prediction “It will yet rise,” it remains inclined in the next four illustrations (March 1, May 7, June 7 and 11). Following the second session of the convention and its vote for ratification, the pillar appears upright (June 25), risen from what the text below calls the “*stool of repentance*,” on which it hath done penance these four months,” a reference to the seat reserved for

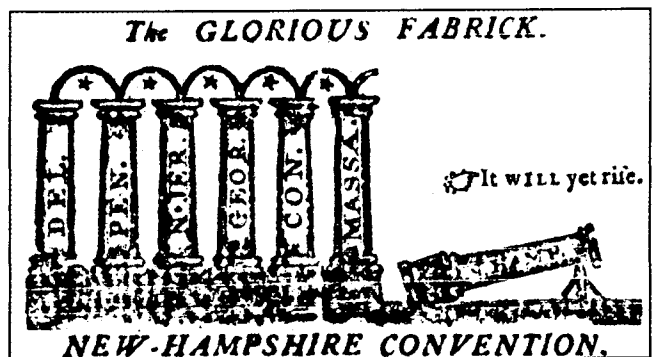
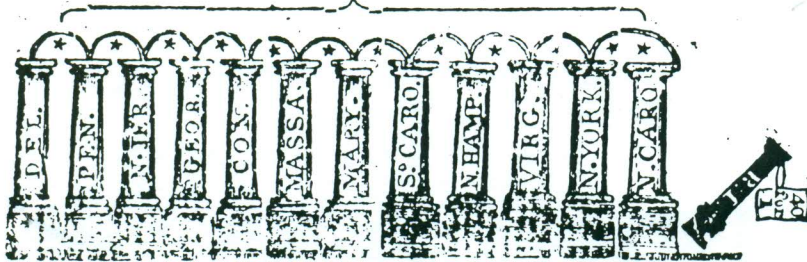


Fig. 2. *New Hampshire on the “stool of repentance,”* from the *Massachusetts Centinel*, February 27, 1788.

transgressors, a stool located conspicuously in a church. As if to avoid this fate for Virginia’s pillar, partially raised by the hand of God, a note predicts “If it hath not—it will rise.”

More than a year and a half went by before Russell used his illustration for the last time. (Fig. 3.) Then, following ratification by North Carolina, the *Centinel* (December 16, 1789) showed twelve columns connected one to the other by arches and topped with a long horizontal brace above which is the Great Seal of the United States—a spread eagle, with a shield of stars and stripes, holding in its beak a ribbon with the words *E PLURIBUS UNUM*. The brace and shield evidently symbolize “the beautiful Dome” mentioned in the verses below, where another metaphor identifies the Constitution as the “*GREAT PALLADIUM*” that



The GREAT PALLADIUM of our happy land
 Connects "the Union" by a "golden chain;"
 Which kept entire, these Federal States shall stand
 As long as Time's old annals shall remain:
 And nations see with joy, the beauteous Dome,
 "COLUMBIA's boat, and FREEDOM's hallow'd home."

Fig. 3. The Great Palladium, from the Massachusetts Centinel, December 16, 1789.

binds the union by a "golden chain."

Frequently Russell added text to the illustrations, a set of verses, a quotation, a pithy editorial comment. Two poetic lines over the first illustration (January 16, 1788) employ another metaphor in likening the states to vines that are strengthened as they embrace each other. The illustration (June 25) following the ninth positive vote, New Hampshire's, is surrounded at top and sides by the text from Article VII of the Constitution stating that "The ratification of the Conventions of nine States, shall be sufficient for the establishment of this Constitution." A brief sentence in Latin, *ACTUM EST*, "It is done," serves as title for the illustration. The "erection of the Eleventh PILLAR of the great National DOME," New York's (August 2), evoked the editor's eloquence in a long title in which he felicitated "OUR DEAR COUNTRY." (Fig. 4.) A dozen lines of verse underneath offer a cornucopia of metaphorical benefits to come under "the beauteous DOME." The last line predicts the return of the Golden Age referred to in the Latin sentence under the decorative device across the top, *REDEUNT SATURNIA REGNA*, "The Saturnian Kingdom returns." Though the tilted column of North Carolina requires the supporting hand of God, a text informs us, "Rise it will."

Earlier history as well as present circumstances lay behind the special treatment Russell gave Rhode Island. The first reference to this state (August 2, 1788), represented by a cracked and toppling column, includes an editorial judgment signaled by a pointing finger, "The foundation good—it may yet be saved." (Fig. 4.) Russell's last illustration (December 16, 1789) shows the

state as a column only half the size of the others, black, and tipped over to a dangerous angle by a weight labeled "40 for 1." (Fig. 3.) The recalcitrance of Rhode Island centered around its plan for the redemption of its state debt with depreciated state paper money. The "40 for 1" weight refers to the ratio that the Continental Congress set for Continental currency on March 18, 1780—in essence a repudiation of paper money by Congress. The strongly Federalist editor did not need words to express his scorn for the state, nevertheless an article lower down on the page reports several defamatory comments, including a reference to paper money. When ratification finally was voted by Rhode Island, Russell observed it with only a brief news item (June 2, 1790), but editorializing, "the FEDERAL DOME is rendered

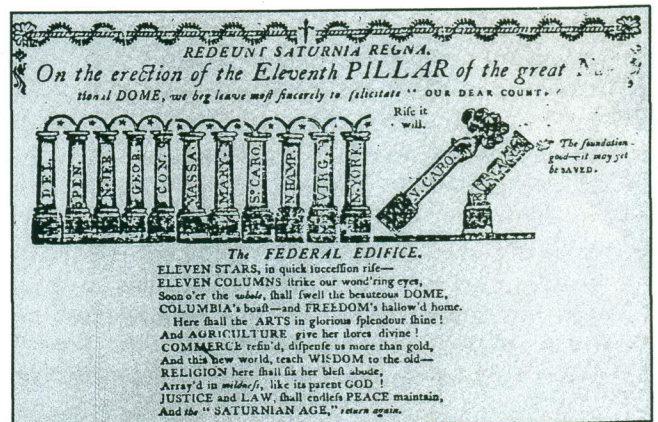


Fig. 4. The Eleventh Pillar, from the Massachusetts Centinel, August 2, 1788.

still more complete.”

With these illustrations Benjamin Russell used a visual argument for ratification, for the row of columns immediately gave form to the image of strength and support. His illustrations offered something further not expressed in text. Just as a modern fund raiser might use such a device as a thermometer, the editor employed the pillars to catch the eye. Instantly the viewer grasps what has been accomplished and calculates what remains to be done. The abstract, far-flung political process becomes a simple tally, even divine intervention is concretized, and the whole receives an intriguing title: “*The FEDERAL EDIFICE.*”

Russell's idea was adopted in several other papers. The weekly Boston *Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser* borrowed not only the idea, but the actual engravings, using them a few days after Russell had printed them. Beginning on February 7, 1788 (and continuing on February 28, May 8, June 12 and 26, July 10; December 17, 1789; and June 3, 1790), the *Chronicle* showed most of the stages of the process. A number of slight variations appear, with perhaps the most interesting one occurring when the ninth column, New Hampshire's, is raised (June 26, 1788). At the right end a reference is made to the bandwagon effect; from the tilted column of Virginia radiating lines shine over the horizontal column of New York, accompanied by the comment, “The Attraction must be irresistible.” This newspaper did employ the illustration, as Russell did not, when Rhode Island finally ratified (June 3, 1790), showing all thirteen columns. Russell, in turn, borrowed from the *Chronicle* the engraving of the Great Seal of the United States used in his illustration with the twelfth column. (Fig. 3.)

Editors in other cities took up the imagery, but in a sporadic manner rather than following the whole process. The Concord *New-Hampshire Spy* (June 24, 1788) marked New Hampshire's ratification with an illustration clearly derived from the *Centinel's*. (Fig. 5.) The illustration is titled: “SOLI DEO GLORIA.” In addition to nine standing columns, that of Virginia is held in the hand of God, while three stars stand in waiting at the lower right. Overhead is the proclamation “UNITED, WE STAND—DIVIDED, WE FALL.” An aquiline shape emerges from the band of clouds, suggestive of the line under the illustration, “*Fame claps her wings, and sounds it to the skies.*” Two days later the borrowed engraving and textual account reappeared in the *New Hampshire Gazette*. The latter paper, on July 10, printed an illustration with ten pillars marking Virginia's ratification.

The Springfield, Massachusetts, *Hampshire Chronicle* used the metaphor twice with its own engraving. On July 9, 1788, the *Chronicle* depicted ten upright pillars. North Carolina's pillar is nearly raised, with

the observation “*It is truly Federal.*” New York's pillar reclines, but partially off the ground, with the note “*We hope it will rise.*” Finally, Rhode Island's pillar topples over, characterized as “*Poor Roque-Island!*” On August 6, New York's column is raised and North Carolina's is partially upright, with the note “*It will soon rise.*” (Fig. 6.) The pillar of Rhode Island appears at the right end, small, black, and upside down, labeled “*Seat of the Beast!*” This image, summarizing the opinion held by neighbors of Rhode Island, clearly was the source for Russell's treatment of the state in his last illustration. (Fig. 3.)

Enlarging the concept in its engraving, the *Charleston City Gazette* represented a great dome, supported

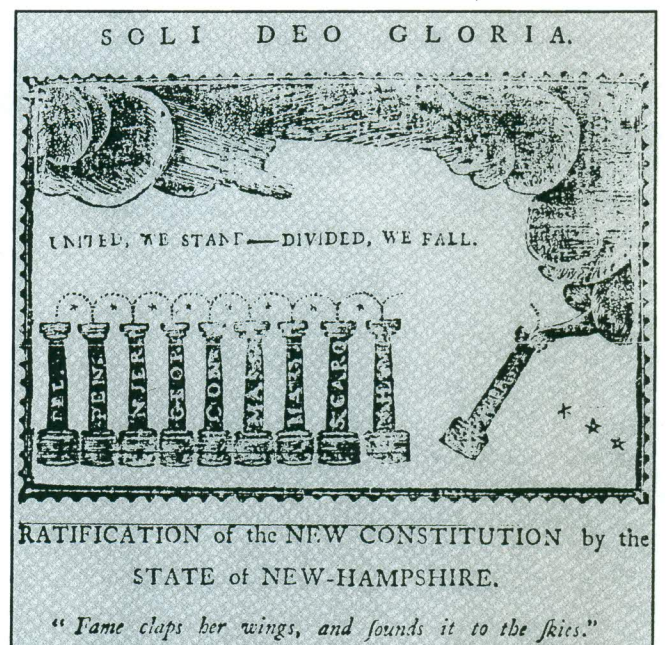


Fig. 5. *Ratification, from the Concord New-Hampshire Spy, June 24, 1788.*

on columns and topped by the figure of Fame with her trumpet. (Fig. 7.) The illustration appeared five times, beginning (May 28, 1788) with the eighth column, South Carolina's, and continuing through the twelfth (July 16 and 22, August 11; December 16, 1789). Two lines under the illustration with the tenth pillar again evoke the religious motif: “If Angels from the skies descend, / 'Twill be the federal building to defend.” Though brief, the series is long enough to show that the columns were added in a geographical sequence, with Georgia at the left end and New Hampshire at the right.

Despite the rudeness of the engravings and irregularities in the inking and printing, the illustrations effec-

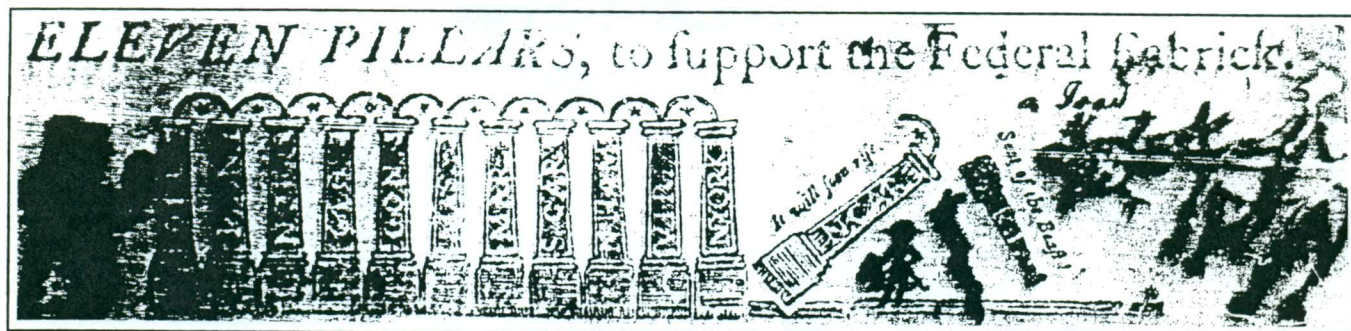


Fig. 6. *Eleven Pillars*, with drawings by an early reader, from the *Springfield, Massachusetts, Hampshire Chronicle*, August 6, 1788.

tively imaged the complex and continuing process. The idea, initiated by one editor, not only was taken up by other editors, but it reappeared in other guises. The *New York Packet*, on July 29, 1788, announced New York's ratification with a winged cherub carrying a ribboned banner with the words "ELEVENTH PILLAR!" A few weeks earlier New York's Independence Day celebrants in 1788 drank toasts to "The grand Federal Temple" and "The Tenth Pillar." In Philadelphia on the same day the architects and house carpenters paraded behind a thirty-six-foot-high structure representing "The NEW ROOF, or GRAND FEDERAL EDIFICE." A dome ten feet in diameter rested on thirteen Corinthian columns, ten (for states that had ratified) with capitals and three without. A figure of Plenty, with a cornucopia and appropriate emblems, topped

the dome. Other devices and numerous inscriptions made specific references to the ratification process. On a carriage drawn by ten white horses, the edifice figured prominently in a long procession and in the evening was conveyed in triumph to Independence Hall where it stood for several days.

Benjamin Russell celebrated the ratification with further metaphors in a long poem entitled "The Birth of Columbia," published in an extra edition of the *Centinel* (December 3, 1788). He referred to Greece and Rome, to Milton, Pope, and Thompson, to past struggles for freedom and to the recent war, to the weakness of the Confederation and to "the great politick architects" who framed "the matchless FABRICK." Even the delay of "two frail Pillars," North Carolina and Rhode Island, "Poor fractur'd States," did not restrain his exultation:

Behold the FEDERAL DOME majestick rise!
On lofty PILLARS rear'd, whose ample base,
On firm foundations laid, unmov'd shall stand,
'Till happy years unnumber'd circles run,
The TEMPLE OF CELESTIAL LIBERTY!
Who deigns from Heaven to bless our happy plains.



Fig. 7. *The Eleventh Pillar*, from the *Charleston, South Carolina, City Gazette*, August 11, 1788.

NOTE

1. I am much indebted to John P. Kaminski, editor of *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, 1787-1791*. He called my attention to most of the examples cited in this study, shared much information, and supplied many illustrations. I have benefited also from aid given by colleagues at the University of Iowa, especially Sydney V. James, Department of History, and Roger A. Hornsby, Department of Classics. For additional information, see Merrill Jensen et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, 7 vols. to date (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976-); in my text I have used in parentheses the system of abbreviated references developed for *Ratification of the Constitution*.