

The New York Federal Republican Committee Seeks Interstate Cooperation in Obtaining Amendments to the Constitution, 18 May–6 August

The first significant interstate cooperation in proposing amendments to the Constitution failed. On 27 December 1787 Virginia Governor Edmund Randolph, at the behest of the Virginia legislature, made an overture to the other states to cooperate in obtaining amendments. It was not until 7 March 1788 that Randolph's letter reached its destination in New York, a state where the sentiment for amendments was strong. The letter was presented to the New York legislature on 10 March, but the legislature, which had called a state ratifying convention on 1 February, took no action. On 8 May New York Governor George Clinton wrote Randolph complaining about the two-month delay in receiving the letter. By the time that Clinton wrote Randolph, seven states had ratified the Constitution and only two more were needed to adopt the Constitution. The South Carolina Convention was scheduled to convene on 12 May, Virginia's on 2 June, New York's on 17 June, New Hampshire's on 18 June, and North Carolina's on 21 July. Rhode Island alone had refused to call a convention.

Intent on adopting amendments before the Constitution was ratified by nine states, New York Antifederalists realized that time was running out. Consequently, in mid-May the Federal Republican Committee of New York, a group of Antifederalists in and around New York City, wrote letters to prominent Antifederalists in New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and North and South Carolina calling for cooperation in obtaining amendments to the Constitution before it was ratified. Pennsylvania and Maryland had ratified in December 1787 and April 1788, respectively, but there was substantial support in each for amendments. Accompanying these letters, which were signed by John Lamb, the committee's chairman, were Antifederalist publications, among them a lengthy pamphlet—*An Additional Number of Letters from the Federal Farmer to the Republican*. Because either Lamb or the Federal Republican Committee delayed transmitting the letters, all but two of them finally reached their destinations between 7 and 20 June. It was also rumored that John Lamb had written to Governor John Collins of Rhode Island, enclosing "a large packet of pamphlets against the proposed constitution" (*Newport Herald*, 29 May, and 12 June. See also *Massachusetts Centinel*, 7 June.). The Lamb Papers at the New-York Historical Society, however, contain no reply from Collins or any other Rhode Islander.

The New York Federal Republican Committee, targeting Virginia as the most important state, addressed letters to Patrick Henry, George Mason, and William Grayson, among "the most influential Delegates" to the Virginia Convention. The committee also wrote to Richard Henry Lee, possibly because it assumed (incorrectly) that Lee would also be a delegate. Fearful lest the letters be intercepted if sent through the post office, the letters were carried to Richmond by Eleazer Oswald, the highly partisan Antifederalist printer of the Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*. Only in the case of Virginia does it appear that a special carrier was employed. While Oswald was en route, the committee learned that New York Antifederalists had won a landslide victory in the election of convention delegates and that South Carolina had ratified the Constitution. Therefore, on 6 June the committee again wrote to Virginia and New Hampshire

Antifederalists, hoping that the news of the New York election would stimulate “a communication” among the conventions of New York, Virginia, and New Hampshire.

Eleazer Oswald arrived in Richmond on 7 June. Presumably, the delivery of the letters had been scheduled to coincide with the first days of the Virginia Convention. Federalist convention delegates, such as James Madison and Henry Lee of Westmoreland County, knew about Oswald’s arrival, his meetings with Virginia Antifederalists, and the movement to obtain amendments prior to ratification. (See Madison to Alexander Hamilton, 9, 16, and 20 June, and Lee to Hamilton, 16 June. See also Robert Smith to Tench Coxe, 31 July.

On 9 June, or shortly thereafter, Eleazer Oswald started back for New York, carrying letters from William Grayson, Patrick Henry, and George Mason responding to Lamb’s May letters. The Virginians, all writing on 9 June, informed Lamb that they had formed a “Comm[itt]ee of Opposition” or a “Republican Society” and had drafted some amendments to the Constitution. Other amendments were being prepared. George Mason, the chairman of the committee, enclosed a copy of the amendments. There is no evidence that Virginia Antifederalists ever responded to the 6 June letter of the New York Federal Republican Committee.

The three Virginians expressed concern that their state Convention was evenly divided between Federalists and Antifederalists. If ratification could be postponed, Mason told Lamb “that an official Communication will immediately take place between the Conventions of this State and yours.” He also said that, at the present time, Virginia did not have an Antifederalist organization equivalent to the Federal Republican Committee of New York. If such an organization “should hereafter become necessary,” Mason continued, “it is hoped that System and Order will every where appear suitable to the Importance and Dignity of the Cause.” According to Patrick Henry, if the Virginia Convention ratified the Constitution, the state’s Antifederalists should form their own Republican Society, perhaps composed of multiple associations because of “our dispersed Situation.” Before leaving Richmond, Oswald told the Virginians that in the future they could safely write the Federal Republican Committee by addressing their letters to Captain Jacob Reed, Jr., of New York City. In his letter, Mason advised Lamb to address future correspondence by way of George Fleming, a Richmond merchant.

Eleazer Oswald, not wanting “to risque” the Virginia letters “with any other Person,” passed through Philadelphia and arrived in New York City on 16 June. He informed John Lamb that Patrick Henry and other Virginians had recommended that the New York Convention take the lead and appoint a delegation to meet with one from the Virginia Convention to discuss amendments. The next day, after copies were made, Lamb sent the Virginia letters to Governor Clinton at the New York Convention in Poughkeepsie, recommending that, if the New York Convention appointed a delegation to meet with a Virginia group, an express rider carry the news to Virginia immediately.

On 21 June Clinton, the president of the New York Convention, wrote Lamb that he had turned the Virginia letters over to “a Special Committee of Correspondence” chaired by Convention delegate Robert Yates. On the same day, Yates wrote to George Mason acknowledging the

receipt of the Virginia amendments and enclosing a copy of amendments to which “many” New York Antifederalists had agreed. Yates told Mason that the New Yorkers were willing to correspond with the Virginians, but that it seemed unlikely that the Virginia Antifederalists would win their struggle and that the New York Convention would probably adjourn before the Virginia response could get back to Poughkeepsie. Given the fact that it would have taken express riders about a week to get from Poughkeepsie to Richmond, Yates’s 21 June letter did not reach Richmond on 25 June, the day the Virginia Convention ratified the Constitution, or on 27 June, the day it adopted amendments.

New Hampshire Convention delegate Joshua Atherton of Amherst received John Lamb’s May letter on 10 June, and in a letter begun on the 11th and completed on the 14th he agreed that “amendments should be procured *previous* to the Adoption of the new System.” Atherton opposed the idea of recommendatory amendments in the manner of the Massachusetts Convention. He told Lamb that if the New Hampshire Convention (scheduled to reconvene on the 18th) “Could ... receive your Resolution not to adopt, without the necessary Amendments, before they have proceeded too far, together *with your amendments*, I have not the least Doubt but a great Majority would immediately close with your views and wishes.” On 20 June Atherton received the New York Federal Republican Committee’s 6 June letter. The next day the New Hampshire Convention ratified the Constitution and recommended twelve amendments, including the nine Massachusetts amendments, which with the exception of number seven are verbatim. Atherton informed the committee on 23 June that the Federalists had won a narrow victory and that “indeed they retired with few Marks of Satisfaction.” He encouraged the New York Convention to continue the fight for amendments.

Samuel Chase of Maryland answered Lamb on 13 June and affirmed his support for prior amendments, especially a declaration of rights. “A very great Majority” of Marylanders, he believed, supported amendments, “but they are depressed and inactive, they have lost all their former Spirit, and seem ready to submit to any Master.” On 21 June Rawlins Lowndes of South Carolina, who had refused a seat in the state Convention, wrote that if Lamb’s letter had arrived “in time I doubt not it might have produced very good Effect in this Country.” His fellow South Carolinian, Aedanus Burke, also lamented the lateness of Lamb’s letter. In a lengthy letter dated 23 June, Burke described how the Federalists in the South Carolina Convention won an overwhelming victory even though four-fifths of the people in the state “from their Souls detest” the Constitution. Burke concluded: “Should either Virginia or New York State reject it, the system will fall to pieces, tho other nine States may agree to it, and in such an Event, or in any other that may give us an occasion to serve the Repub. your communciation will be duly attended to by me.”

Edward Pole, one of the inner circle of Philadelphia Antifederalists, acknowledged Lamb’s letter on 21 June and briefly described the progress of ratification in the Virginia Convention (Lamb Papers, NHi). On 23 June Timothy Bloodworth of North Carolina answered Lamb’s letter and assured him that he would do everything possible to obtain amendments “necessary for the welfare of the United States, as also the security of those unalienable rights and priviledges of mankind.” Bloodworth said that “a decided majority” of North Carolinians opposed the

Constitution. For reasons he would “forebear” to give, he believed that the proposed amendments should come from New York. Bloodworth reiterated these sentiments on 1 July. On 6 August Thomas Person, also of North Carolina, remarked that ninth-tenths of the people of that state wanted “very Considerable Amendments.” Person, who received Lamb’s letter on 23 July, believed that North Carolina’s Hillsborough Convention could have totally rejected the Constitution, but instead on 2 August it chose to recommend a declaration of rights and structural amendments. Those states that had ratified, stated Person, should either refuse to send delegates to Congress or should send delegates who would insist upon amendments preserving the people’s liberties.

The letter-writing campaign of the New York Federal Republican Committee failed to obtain prior or conditional amendments. The letters to South Carolina arrived after its Convention ratified the Constitution with recommendatory amendments. The letters to New Hampshire, Virginia, and North Carolina arrived in sufficient time, but in all cases the conventions only recommended amendments. The Virginia Convention rejected prior amendments by a vote of 88 to 80 before it ratified the Constitution, while the North Carolina Convention refused to ratify. In the New York Convention, conditional amendments were defeated by a vote of 31 to 29, and, like Virginia, the Convention adopted the Constitution with many recommendatory structural amendments and a lengthy declaration of rights. Nevertheless, the letter-writing campaign of the New York Federal Republican Committee, as part of a larger Antifederalist movement for amendments, was a factor in pressuring the first Congress under the Constitution to propose amendments to the states for their ratification.

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