In the early 1760s, American colonists scattered in ribbon-thin settlements along the Atlantic coast began a 30-year debate over the nature of government and how best to preserve their liberties. Halfway through that debate, the 13 mainland colonies joined together to declare their independence from the British Empire. After eight long years of fighting, Great Britain recognized American independence.
Only four years after achieving independence, however, the American experiment in self-government was foundering. Repeated attempts to strengthen the powers of Congress and to revise the Articles of Confederation, the country’s constitution, failed. A deep postwar depression aggravated by a huge public debt and British trade restrictions led to political unrest, radical economic proposals in the states, and widespread violence that threatened the Union and the country’s republican form of government. To address these concerns, Congress called a convention specifically to revise the Articles. Amid great public attention, the delegates assembled in Philadelphia, where they met in secret, closed-door sessions in the State House from late May through mid-September 1787. Instead of amending the Articles, however, the delegates proposed an entirely new system of government, one never really tried before.

Among the many great treasures of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania are two manuscripts and four printed documents that trace the genesis of the new form of government proposed by the convention. The first three documents anticipate the report of the Committee of Detail, which organized and arranged the first draft of the Constitution, the fourth is the convention’s penultimate draft of the Constitution, while the last two documents are printings of the final version of the Constitution and its accompanying documents.

Edmund Randolph, governor of Virginia, began debate over this new form of government by presenting his delegation’s outline of a radically new constitution. About two weeks later, delegates from some of the smaller states offered an alternative plan that consisted of amendments to the Articles of Confederation. Two days later, on June 13, Alexander Hamilton proposed an ultraconservative plan (lifetime tenure for the president and senators, etc.), which, by comparison, made the Virginia Plan seem moderate. The convention voted to continue debating the Virginia Plan.

After meeting for two months, the convention voted unanimously to submit its proceedings to a Committee of Detail consisting of five delegates—John Rutledge of South Carolina (chair), James Wilson of Pennsylvania, Edmund Randolph of Virginia, Nathaniel Gorham of Massachusetts, and Oliver Ellsworth of Connecticut. On July 24 the convention submitted a document in Wilson’s handwriting listing the resolutions that had already been accepted by the convention to this committee, and, before recessing for 10 days, instructed the committee to report a draft constitution when the convention reassembled.

During the recess, the Committee of Detail considered the approved resolutions and a few other documents, added some new provisions, and deleted others. The committee submitted its manuscript draft constitution, also in Wilson’s handwriting, to the convention’s printers, John Dunlap and David C. Claypoole of the Pennsylvania Packet, a daily Philadelphia newspaper. The printers sent the committee a proof copy of its report,
which Governor Randolph annotated with 11 corrections. This annotated proof copy, owned by HSP, is the only such report known to exist. The printers corrected their proof copy and printed enough copies of the report for all of the convention’s delegates. The committee submitted its printed report to the reassembled convention on August 6.

The Committee of Detail report served as the cornerstone for the convention’s ongoing debate, and on September 10 George Washington’s annotated copy of the printed report, with additions and deletions made over the following month by the convention, was submitted to a five-man Committee of Style. Elected on September 8, the committee consisted of William Samuel Johnson of Connecticut (chair), Alexander Hamilton of New York, James Madison of Virginia, Rufus King of Massachusetts, and Gouverneur Morris of Pennsylvania. Morris did most of the work of the committee, which included rewriting the 23 articles and 40 sections of the revised Committee of Detail report and reducing them to 7 articles and 21 sections. Morris also completely revised the Constitution’s preamble, changing its introductory phrase from “We the People of the States of New-Hampshire, Massachusetts . . .” to “We the People of the United States.” The committee submitted its printed report to the convention on September 12. HSP’s copy of this report, one of only 14 to survive, had belonged to Delaware delegate Jacob Broom.

The convention made over 20 changes to the Committee of Style report. Then, on Saturday, September 15, the delegates voted to adopt the Constitution and ordered both an engrossed copy on parchment and printed copies to be distributed to the delegates and sent to Congress and the states. On Monday, September 17, the engrossed and printed copies of the Constitution were ready.

Edmund Randolph’s proof copy of the Committee of Detail’s report, with corrections. On this page Randolph inserted the word “in” after “December” in the last line of Article 2 and changed “chuse” to “choose” in Article 4 section 6.

The Constitution would not satisfy every state completely: But the delegates believed that it would “promote the lasting welfare of that country so dear to us all, and secure her freedom and happiness.”
had to be discarded. Dunlap and Claypoole quickly printed a corrected six-page edition. HSP’s copy is one of only 11 of these original printings known to exist.

Dunlap and Claypoole’s broadside edition served as the source (either directly or indirectly) for all other printings of the Constitution. In addition to the preamble and the seven articles of the Constitution, this edition included four important new elements. On September 17, after the engrossed Constitution was read, James Wilson stood and delivered a speech written by the enfeebled Benjamin Franklin. Franklin pleaded with the three delegates who had indicated that they would not sign the Constitution (Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts and Edmund Randolph and George Mason of Virginia) to reconsider their decision and join the other 39. Franklin suggested a paragraph (originally written by Gouverneur Morris) that would precede the names of the signers. The paragraph read: “Done in Convention, by the unanimous consent of the States present . . . In witness whereof we have hereunto subscribed our Names.” Thus, the delegates, in signing the Constitution, would not necessarily be committing themselves to support the Constitution, but would only be acting as witnesses to the convention’s proposal. Even if the three nonconsenting delegates still refused to sign, this statement would give the impression that the convention unanimously consented to the Constitution. Immediately after this paragraph, added to the Dunlap and Claypoole broadside, George Washington’s name appeared as president of the convention and as a deputy from Virginia, followed by the names of the other 38 signers.

Also added, on the lower half of the fifth page of Dunlap and Claypoole’s broadside, were two resolutions passed by the convention and signed by George Washington. The first resolution called for the Constitution to be submitted to Congress and then submitted to a convention of delegates elected by the people of each state for their ratification. The states would then inform Congress of their decisions. The second resolution called for Congress, after being notified that nine states had ratified the Constitution, to establish the procedure for holding the first presidential election and assign the time and place for the meeting of the first Congress.
The last page of the Dunlap and Claypoole broadside contained a five-paragraph letter addressed to the president of Congress from the convention and signed by George Washington as convention president. This letter, written by Gouverneur Morris, was a masterpiece of political rhetoric. The letter indicated that “In all our deliberations we kept steadily in our view, that which appears to us the greatest interest of every true American, the consolidation of our Union, in which is involved our prosperity, felicity, safety, perhaps our national existence. This important consideration, seriously and deeply impressed on our minds, led each delegate to be less rigid on points of inferior magnitude, than might have been otherwise expected; and thus the Constitution, which we now present, is the result of a spirit of amity, and of that mutual deference and concession which the peculiarity of our political situation rendered indispensable.”

The Constitution would not satisfy every state completely. But the delegates believed that it would “promote the lasting welfare of that country so dear to us all, and secure her freedom and happiness.” Although Washington refrained from participation in the public debate over ratifying the Constitution, this letter under his signature was printed, along with the new Constitution, throughout the country in newspapers, broadsides, pamphlets, magazines, and almanacs. The letter strongly supported a powerful argument made by those who favored the Constitution: “If Washington supports the Constitution, who are you to oppose it?” It was a difficult question to answer.

The September 19, 1787, issue of the Pennsylvania Packet printed by Dunlap and Claypoole is widely recognized as the first public printing of the report of the convention. It contains all of the elements incorporated in Dunlap and Claypoole’s broadside. Four other Philadelphia newspapers also printed the Constitution on September 19, but the Packet used some of the same type set for the convention’s official broadside printed two days earlier. (Some evidence exists that the printer of the Philadelphia Evening Chronicle printed the Constitution on September 18 as part of his newspaper or as a broadsheet inserted with that issue. No extant copy of that issue of the Chronicle has been found, but a broadsheet by that printer has recently been discovered.) Only 25 copies of the September 19 Pennsylvania Packet have been located, almost all in libraries and historical societies. HSP’s copy has large amounts of handwritten marginalia summarizing the provisions of the Constitution.

These six treasured documents in HSP’s extraordinary holdings, taken together, show how the new Constitution evolved and how the final proposal was presented to the convention delegates, to Congress and the state legislatures, and to the American people, setting the stage for a remarkable public debate that demonstrated that human beings using reason and choice could decide what kind of government they wanted.

Pennsylvania Packet, September 19, 1787, with marginalia summarizing the provisions of the Constitution.

A View of the State House in Philadelphia, c. 1770, engraved by R. Bennett.