

The Articles of Confederation

What You Will Learn ...

Main Ideas

1. The American people examined many ideas about government.
2. The Articles of Confederation laid the base for the first national government of the United States.
3. The Confederation Congress established the Northwest Territory.

The Big Idea

The Articles of Confederation provided a framework for a national government.

Key Terms and People

Magna Carta, p. 114
English Bill of Rights, p. 114
constitution, p. 115
Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, p. 115
suffrage, p. 115
Articles of Confederation, p. 116
ratification, p. 116
Land Ordinance of 1785, p. 117
Northwest Ordinance of 1787, p. 117
Northwest Territory, p. 117



HSS 8.3.2 Explain how the ordinances of 1785 and 1787 privatized national resources and transferred federally owned lands into private holding, townships, and states.

HSS 8.9.3 Describe the significance of the Northwest Ordinance in education and in the banning of slavery in new states north of the Ohio River.

If YOU were there...

You live in a town in New England during the 1770s. In the town meeting, people are hotly debating about who will have the right to vote. Most think that only men who own property should be able to vote. Some think that all property owners—men and women—should have that right. A few others want all free men to have the vote. Now it is time for the meeting to decide.

How would you have voted on this issue?

BUILDING BACKGROUND At the time of the Revolution, each of the 13 states had its own government. The rights of citizens varied from state to state. In their town meetings, people often argued about exactly what those rights ought to be. Solving such issues was one step in moving toward a national government.

Ideas about Government

The American colonies had taken a bold step in declaring their independence from Great Britain in July 1776. Their next political goal was to form a new government. To do so, the American people drew from a wide range of political ideas.

English Laws and the Enlightenment

One source of inspiration was English law. England had limited the power of its kings and queens in two documents. These were Magna Carta and the English Bill of Rights. **Magna Carta** was a document signed by King John in 1215, made the king subject to law. The **English Bill of Rights**, passed in 1689, declared the supremacy of Parliament. It kept the king or queen from passing new taxes or changing laws without Parliament's consent. As a result, the people's representatives had a strong voice in England's government.

Americans were also influenced by Enlightenment—a philosophical movement that emphasized the use of reason to examine old

ideas and traditions. Philosopher John Locke believed that a social contract existed between political rulers and the people they ruled. Baron de Montesquieu argued that the only way people could achieve liberty was through the separation of governmental powers.

American Models of Government

Americans had their own models of self-government to follow, like town meetings, the Virginia House of Burgesses, and the Mayflower Compact. In 1639 the people of Connecticut drew up the English colonies' first written **constitution**. A constitution is a set of basic principles and laws that states the powers and duties of the government. In addition, the Declaration of Independence clearly set forth the beliefs on which Americans thought government should be based.

State Constitutions

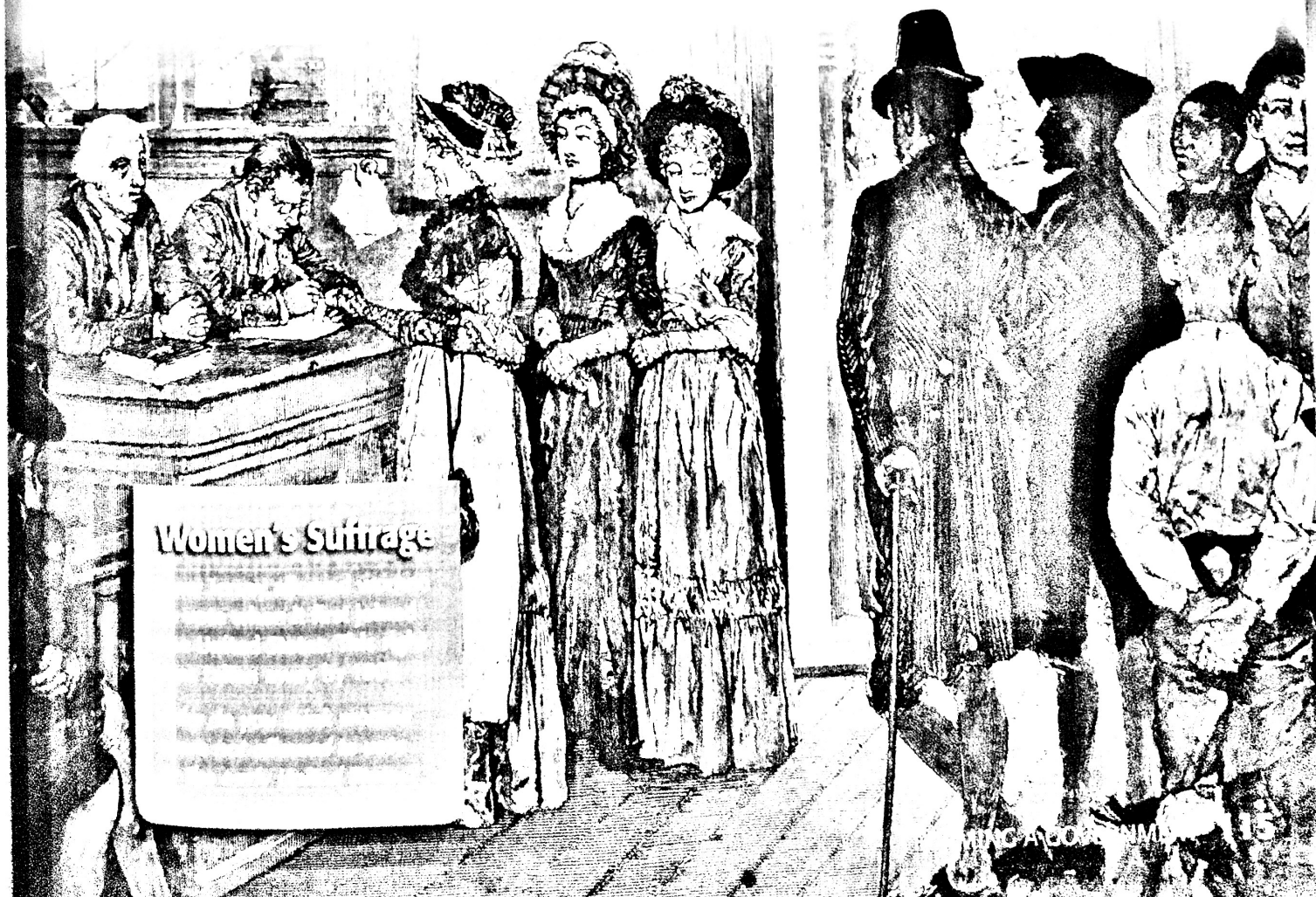
To keep individual leaders from gaining too much power, the new state constitutions created limited governments, or governments in which all leaders have to obey the laws.

Most state constitutions had rules to protect the rights of citizens. Some banned slavery. Some protected the rights of those accused of a crime. Thomas Jefferson's ideas about religious freedom were included in the **Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom**. This document declared that no person could be forced to attend a particular church or be required to pay for a church with tax money.

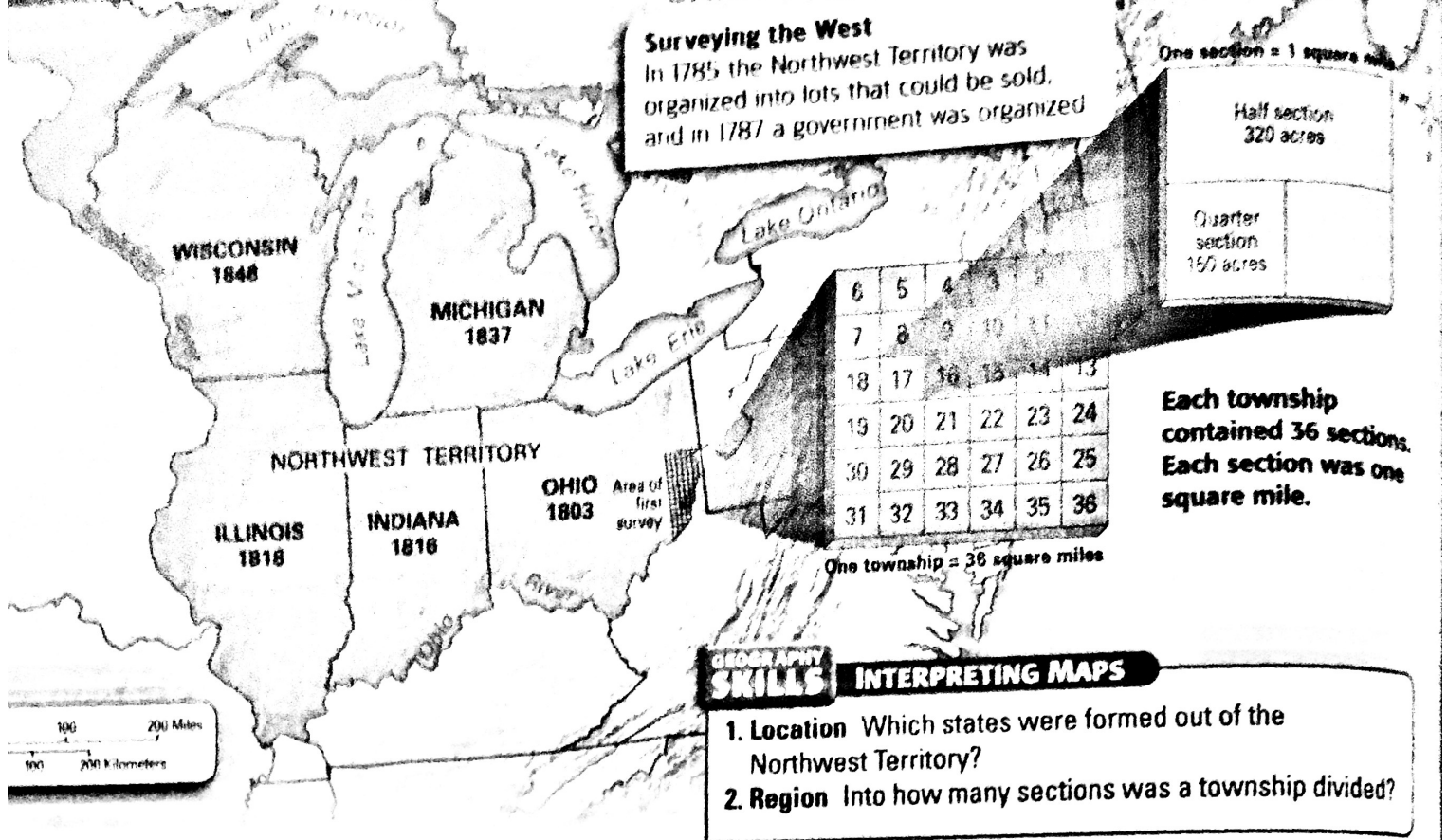
Right to Vote

Under British rule, only free, white men that owned land could vote. Many states' constitutions expanded **suffrage**, or the right to vote, by allowing any white man who paid taxes to vote. In every state, however, only landowners could hold public office. Some states originally allowed women and free African Americans to vote, but these rights were soon taken away. Suffrage would not be restored to these groups for decades to come.

READING CHECK Comparing What two principles were common to state constitutions written during the Revolutionary War?



The Land Ordinances of 1785 and 1787



Articles of Confederation

The Second Continental Congress was organized to create a national government. The Continental Congress appointed a Committee of Thirteen, with one member from each colony. This group was assigned to discuss and draft the Articles of Confederation, the new national constitution.

Under the **Articles of Confederation**, Congress would become the single branch of the national government, but it would have limited powers in order to protect the liberties of the people. Each state had one vote in the Congress. Congress could settle conflicts among the states, make coins, borrow money, and make treaties with other countries and with Native Americans. Congress could also ask the states for money and soldiers. However, states had the power to refuse these requests. In addition, the government did not have a president or a national court system.

The Second Continental Congress passed the Articles of Confederation on November 15, 1777. Then it sent the Articles to each state legislature for **ratification**, or official approval, before the new national government could take effect.

Conflicts over claims to western lands slowed the process, but by 1779 every state except Maryland had ratified the Articles. Maryland's leaders refused to ratify until other states gave up their western land claims. Thomas Jefferson assured Maryland that western lands would be made into new states, rather than increasing territory for existing states. Satisfied with this condition, in March 1781 Maryland ratified the Articles. This put the first national government of the United States into effect.

READING CHECK Summarizing What were two weaknesses in the new national government?