

★ Adoption of Bill of Rights, 1791

Importance: The first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, known as the Bill of Rights, set out to protect the basic rights of American citizens.

During the discussions over the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, the Antifederalists argued that no government could be trusted not to infringe on the liberties of its citizens unless those liberties were spelled out in the document that framed that government. Although the states did ratify the U.S. Constitution by June 1788, a number of them approved it only on the promise that amendments would be added immediately to include a listing of citizen rights. One of the first jobs of the new Congress was to consider possible amendments to the Constitution.

Dozens of amendments were proposed by the different states. Congress had to sort through those proposals and send a manageable list of amendments to the states for ratification. Twelve amendments were proposed; by 1791, the states had ratified ten of them. They are what we know today as the Bill of Rights.

Among other things, these amendments guaranteed freedom of religion, speech, and the press; the right to bear arms; the right not to quarter soldiers; the right of people to be secure against unreasonable searches and seizures; immunity from arbitrary arrest; trial by jury; and protection from cruel and unusual punishments. The 10th Amendment reserved for the states all powers not delegated to the federal government.