

Creating a New Government**Biography**

William Paterson

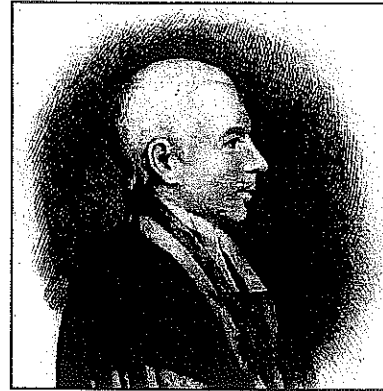
1745–1806



WHY HE MADE HISTORY A delegate to the Constitutional Convention, U.S. senator, New Jersey governor, and Supreme Court justice, William Paterson played a key role in the development of the United States as we know it today.



As you read the biography below, think about why Paterson believed that small states should have the same powers as large states. Does the Paterson Plan still play a part in balancing power in Congress?



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One of the key questions to arise during the first Constitutional Convention was the balance of power between small and large states. The man who spoke up on behalf of the small states was a lawyer from New Jersey whose political life was only beginning.

William Paterson was born in 1745 in County Antrim, Ireland. His family immigrated to New Jersey in 1747 and settled in Princeton. There he entered the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, at the age of 13. After graduating, he studied law under Richard Stockton, a prominent lawyer. Paterson began practicing law in 1769. He told his brother that his main goal was, “to live at ease, and pass thro’ [through] life without much noise and bustle.” That was not to be.

A critic of the British government, Paterson became a deputy to the New Jersey provincial congress in 1775. After independence was declared, he was appointed New Jersey’s first attorney general.

Paterson married Cornelia Bell in 1779 and they had three children. A few years later his wife and a daughter died within five months of each other. Paterson remarried in 1785.

In 1787 Paterson led the New Jersey delegation to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Another convention delegate described Paterson as,

one of those men whose powers break in upon you and create astonishment. He is a man of great modesty, with looks that bespeak talents of no great extent—but he is a classic, a lawyer, and an orator—and of a disposition so favorable to his advancement that everyone seemed ready to exalt him with their praises.

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When the large states proposed the Virginia Plan, with a national legislature elected in proportion to each state's population, Paterson countered with a small state plan. The New Jersey Plan, also called the Paterson Plan, proposed a government with one legislative body with equal representation from each state.

The two plans were eventually combined into the government we know today—a House of Representatives with members elected according to each state's population, and a Senate with equal numbers of representatives for each state.

Having helped to craft the Constitution, Paterson was instrumental in getting it ratified by New Jersey. He was elected as one of New Jersey's first two U.S. senators, and in that capacity helped write the Judiciary Act of 1789, which set up the American judicial system.

From 1790 to 1793 Paterson served as governor of New Jersey. He helped write and codify many of the laws and legal practices for that state. He stepped down from that position when President George Washington nominated him as an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

A supporter of a strong central government, Paterson participated in a number of groundbreaking decisions, including the *Marbury v. Madison* decision that established the principle of judicial review.

A noted and respected statesman, Paterson did not live the quiet life he had once sought. He died at age 60 while still serving as a Supreme Court justice. The city of Paterson, New Jersey, was named after him.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** What was the Paterson Plan? How did it differ from the Virginia Plan?

2. **Analyze** Why did delegates to the Constitutional Convention create a legislature with two different bodies?

ACTIVITY

Who are your congressional representatives today, both to the House of Representatives and to the Senate? Do some research on their backgrounds and what they represent. Discuss the issues and problems that they have worked on that affect the people of your state.