



The Articles of Confederation

1777-1787



The Importance of State Constitutions

- These documents set an important precedent, in that, each allowed for the people to ratify it, or approve it— after it had been drafted at a special convention— by a popular vote.
- As early as the 1780s, judges at the state level were declaring laws unconstitutional, including slavery in Massachusetts, because it violated their state constitution—authored by John Adams and it is the oldest in continuous existence.
- These early documents embodied republican principles, increased the size of their legislatures, while limiting the powers of the governors.
- The early state constitutions also made taxation more progressive, prohibited monopolies, and reformed inheritance laws. Each also guaranteed religious freedom.

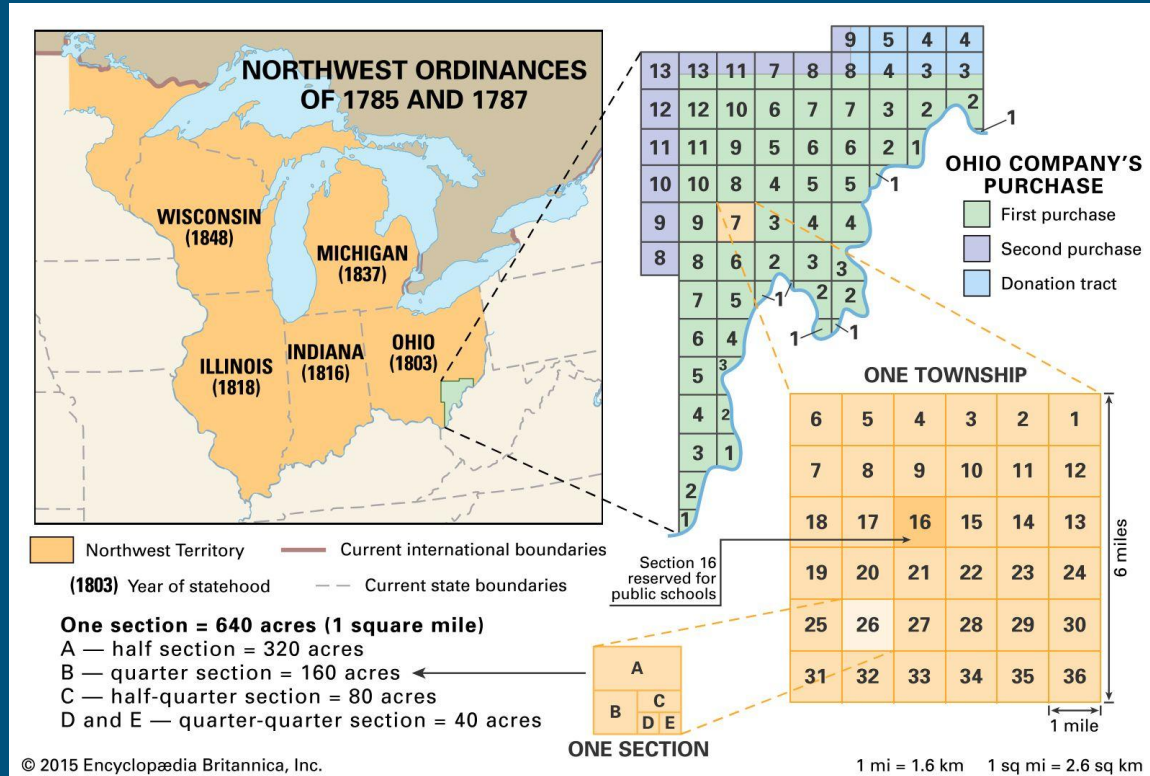
The Articles of Confederation

- It created a weak central government. It featured a legislative branch and was largely modeled after the Continental Congress which had prosecuted the war effort. It had no separate executive or judicial branches. The legislature consisted of a single house– each state received one vote.
- The national government did not have the power to tax, to regulate commerce, or to force the states to send troops for the national defense.
- Any proposed amendment required unanimous approval– meaning, only one major piece of legislation was passed, which was the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787

- Drawing on earlier work by Thomas Jefferson, this act established the framework for governing the Northwest Territory (land acquired after the Revolutionary War), admitting new states into the Union, and for protecting the civil liberties of new settlers.
- It also banned slavery in the new territories which would eventually become the northern states of Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, and parts of present-day Minnesota.
- Ironically, this act was passed in the summer of 1787 (on July 13th) at a time when the new Constitution was beginning to take shape.

Map of the Northwest Territory, 1787



Thought Questions

- What inspired the creation of our U.S. Constitution?
- Why was the creation of the U.S. Constitution necessary?
- What is the importance of the U.S. Constitution?