

COMMENTS ON "THE ROLE OF THE GEORGIA DELEGATION IN THE FEDERAL CONVENTION"

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I'm a student in an American history survey course. I've been given a paper to read with the instructions, "Make a list of questions that come to your mind after you have read through the paper." The paper is entitled, "The Role of the Georgia Delegation in the Federal Convention of 1787" by Dolphus Whitten, Jr. I have read it. The following ideas come to mind.

The political factions in Georgia from which the delegates were chosen are identified by name only. This is curious. Were they social groupings, economic groupings, were they followers of an individual politico, or were they geographic groupings? The fact that the Georgia General Assembly made a concerted effort to include representatives from each in the Philadelphia delegation gives these factions important status. I want to know more. What happened to Pendleton of the McIntosh faction and to George Walton of the Walton Faction? Why didn't they show up in Philadelphia? Six were chosen but only four attended.

Each of the Georgia delegates either came from another state to live in Georgia or lived in another state--or country--for a formative period on his life. Did this fact have any effect on his voting pattern or the alliances he established in Philadelphia? Did Georgia's government have to rely on "transplants" in the late eighteenth century and if so, why? Does this affect their role in the Convention?

Obviously, since no official record of the proceedings at Philadelphia existed, William Pierce made a real contribution with his written sketches of the delegates. Did he finish the job and then leave, never to return to the deliberations? What affected his decision?

The committees at Philadelphia hammered out the Constitution. What were the important committees that Georgians belonged to and can we know what their positions in the debates were? Did the Georgians' votes in the Convention always reflect their positions taken during the committee work?

The voting record of the Georgia delegation compared with other southern states plus Massachusetts and New Hampshire is a curious mix. Obviously log-rolling took place. On what questions?

Where did the Georgians win and where did they lose in the compromise game?

And, finally, from my position as that obnoxious, probing student, did Georgia's delegates really support a strong central government knowing that benefits to Georgia would result?

Now, if I may, I shall assume another role, that of a colleague of Dolphus Whitten.

This paper on the Georgia delegation to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 identifies the individuals who attended and participated in the Philadelphia meeting. It associates each member with the reality of Georgia factional politics in the late eighteenth century, but it does not develop adequately the meaning of these factions and how the general assembly arrived at that basis for appointment. The biographical sketches tell us interesting things while omitting important information about the political and social experience of the individuals.

Given the numerous national congresses of the eighteenth century (the Albany Congress, the Stamp Act Congress, the First and Second Continental Congresses, the Congress of the Articles of Confederation) the delegates to Philadelphia from Georgia may or may not have been the leaders of the state with a proven track record in national meetings. It would be helpful to know more about this.

Savannah's William Pierce, a member of the Walton faction, is one of the intriguing delegates to Philadelphia. Pierce left Philadelphia with William Few, another Georgia delegate, to conduct business in New York. They never returned to the hot, stuffy room in Philadelphia. For someone who took the time to write vignettes of many of the "55", what was there in New York to detract him from Philadelphia? Other delegates who left Philadelphia, never to return, were motivated by political views and sentiments. For example, John Lansing and Robert Yates of New York had been made delegates by Governor George Clinton to "spy" on Alexander Hamilton. They left Philadelphia in disgust over what was happening to state sovereignty in the centralizing of power in the federal government.

But back to the question at hand. The story of William Pierce creates interest. According to Forrest McDonald in *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, he was the one of the Georgia delegation whose sense of "nationalism was undiluted." He is associated with that faction, led

by George Washington, who thought nationally when those around him were thinking locally.

Among the Georgia delegates, the only one who evidenced sympathy with his state of birth was Abraham Baldwin. Forrest McDonald recalls that Baldwin, "adhering to his native Connecticut," voted to support the proposal for equal representation in the Senate while Houston voted against it. He, like most Southerners, wanted representation in Congress to be based on property. This split in the Georgia vote created a deadlock and a special compromise committee that accepted Ben Franklin's proposal that the states be represented equally in the Senate with the House originating all bills for raising and spending money.

There seemed to be some latent influence of London, England, on William Houston. One of the debates in Philadelphia centered around the question of whether government in a republic operated on principles of virtue or on principles of self-interest. Many in Philadelphia were affected by the former position--virtue activated a republic. The crux of the matter stemmed from the question: would members of Congress be allowed to hold their seat and simultaneously accept appointive positions in government? Among those adopting the British Parliamentary tradition was Houston. He supported the minority who believed that dual office holding should be permitted. For them, self-interest benefitted the republic.

Individual men--and what a shame, no women--took their views to Philadelphia and hammered out a series of compromises that, according to McDonald, were unavoidable. These compromises that are the Constitution resulted from the physical conditions under which the men met. "An average of close to 40 men, most of them obese, crowded into a modest-sized and not well ventilated room from five to seven hours a day during an intensely hot and muggy summer--ensured that those compromises would not always be accepted with good grace." They were a diverse group, men of public affairs who were not very compatible trying to reconcile eighteenth century views on liberty with emerging views on property. That was a tough task. But they were an educated group of men who often used political theorists to bolster their arguments. In reality, they were often using those theories to justify positions they had already assumed for non-theoretical reasons. The Constitution of the United States was an experiment that has worked.