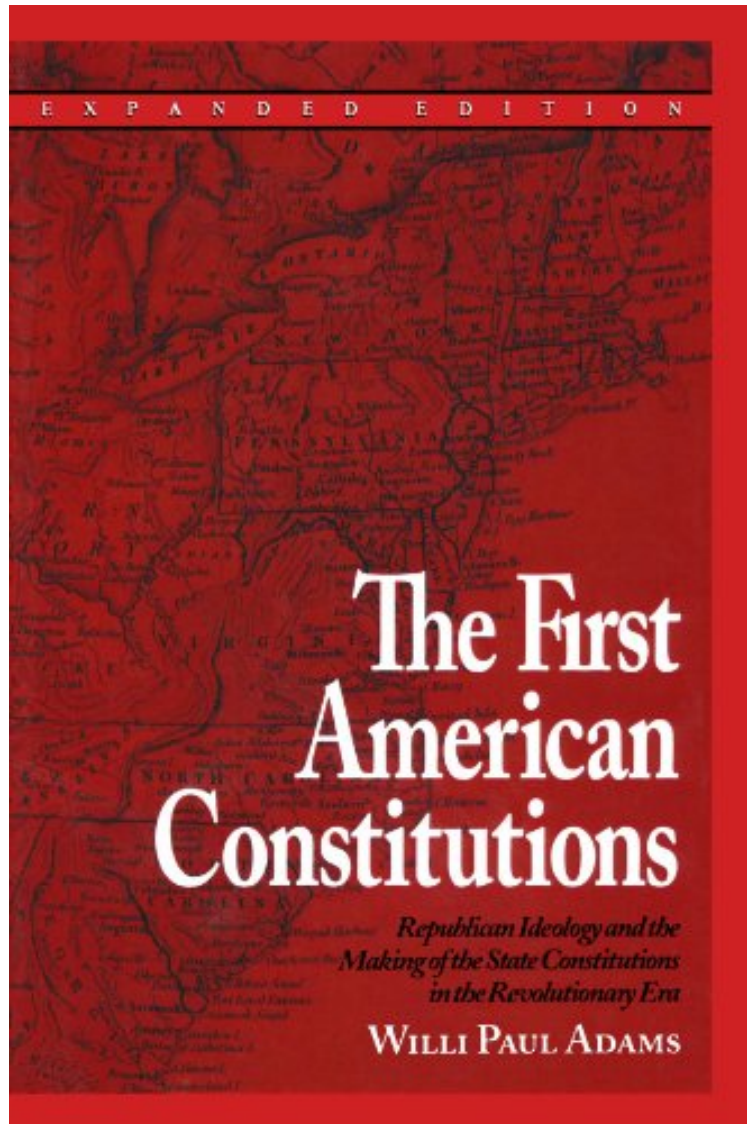


[Mobile book] The First American Constitutions: Republican Ideology and the Making of the State Constitutions in the Revolutionary Era

# The First American Constitutions: Republican Ideology and the Making of the State Constitutions in the Revolutionary Era

*Willi Paul Adams*

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**Willi Paul Adams : The First American Constitutions: Republican Ideology and the Making of the State Constitutions in the Revolutionary Era** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The First American Constitutions: Republican Ideology and the Making of the State Constitutions in the Revolutionary Era:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A History Without Prejudice By William Saks This a well written and researched history. Ironically it is probably more accurate for having been written by a non-American. Mr. Adams is German, and therefore did not grow up being taught the federal government in the U.S. has always been the important one. By examining the declarations of the Continental Congress and the newly declared states, Mr. Adams shows that the United States started as merely an alliance of "states" as in independent nations. In analyzing the early state constitutions, he shows the states were the general governments of their time, regulating the bulk of interactions. Mr. Adams demonstrates that the core principles of the state constitutions' declarations of rights were to minimize harm to the individual to the maximum extent consistent with promoting the greater good, consistent with philosophers popular at the time such as John Locke.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. An updated reissue of a classic work in early American history. By Greg Taylor I have read about this book for a long time. If you read early American history or constitutional history, you will come across many many a reference to this book. This work started out (I believe) as Dr. Adams' dissertation and was written in German. During the Bicentennial year, it won a prize for being the best recently written work on early American history written in a foreign language. The prize was a translation in English that was originally published in 1980. For this edition, Dr. Adams updated the very useful bibliography and added two additional chapters (essays that were written afterwards that somewhat speak to the book's main theme). The main theme of the book is one that hadn't been explored enough when Dr. Adams first wrote: the influence of the early constitutions written, ratified and lived under in the original 13 colonies (and Vermont) on the United States Constitution of 1787. The plan of the book is fairly simple. In the first three chapters, Dr. Adams gives us a preparatory historical background. He covers the organization of governmental structures as we go from revolutionary committees organizing the first and second Continental Congresses, the decision for independence and the subsequent call from the Congress to create new state governments. He covers quickly the history of the writing of those constitutions and the Articles of Confederation. The body of the book is devoted to an examination of some of the main political ideas/themes of the period and how they were written in the various state constitutions. He covers popular sovereignty, liberty, equality, property, the common good, representation, separation of powers, and federalism. The new chapters are the weakest part of the book for me. The first new chapter somewhat redundantly and weakly summarizes his argument of the body of the book and the last chapter examines the republican/liberty debate in the light of his research. Really the best part of the updating is the bibliography which is organized by state as well as by subject matter and thus easily guides the obsessed reader onto further research. I like it a lot. There are many things in his discussion that I learned from and that make the book very much worth reading. I will mention only two. One of the most jarring aspects of this period for any reader is the many of the most vocal advocates of liberty and equality were slave owners. Many many contemporary British and Tory commentators noted this contradiction. "All men are created equal" wrote a man who owned almost 150 slaves. George Mason (owner of 118 slaves) wrote in the Virginia Bill of Rights the following line: "...all men are by nature equally free and independent." Adams claim is that the use of equality in this period was politically useful to the revolutionary leaders in the context of social contract theory. They wanted to establish their equality as British citizens and to deny their second-class citizen status as colonists. Thus the clauses on equality in some of our early national and state documents. Three other states (Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Vermont) also included declarations of the equality of man in their first state constitutions. Only one (Vermont) prohibited slavery. Adams basic claim is that what was revolutionarily useful later caused a variety of problems that national and state leaders tried to control (see the whole of chapter 9 for Adams' documentation of the above facts). Which leads me to the last point of the good Dr. Adams that I want to emphasize. What is clear from my reading of this book and Rakove's *The Beginning of National Politics* is that in this period we were a people scampering for solutions and justifications. There was much experimenting and sometimes just plain fudging through to make things work (see Adams on how the Massachusetts constitution got ratified). We were being led by some very thoughtful and well-read men to be sure. But they were organizing a resistance to the most powerful military on Earth at that time, they fought a revolution on a shoestring and they were creating unprecedented forms of government. There wasn't a whole lot of room for theoretical consistency. My only complaint against the book is an unfair one. If Dr. Adams' was writing the book now, he would probably have much more material to base his research on. The book leans heavily on the town records of Massachusetts because they were easily available in the Handlins collection. But like I said, this complaint may not be fair simply because comparable records from, say, South Carolina, simply weren't preserved. Willi Paul Adams' book is a learned and useful guide to that period. If you really want to understand the original intentions of our founders, this is a necessary read.

For the last twenty years this book has been cited by every serious writer on early American constitutional development. Any constitutional history of the independent United States must begin with this comprehensive study. Professor Adams combines a European perspective and a thorough knowledge of the antecedents of 1787 to create an insightful analysis of the replacement by the revolutionary generation of one government by another by they thought "constitutional" means. Acting for "the people" in 11 of the 13 rebelling states, various kinds of self-empowered committees, "congresses," or "conventions" created new constitutions and a system in which the states

dominated over the weaker Confederation government. This volume contains two new chapters: one demonstrating precedents in the state constitutions for the U.S. Constitution, and another chapter critically testing the "republicanism over liberalism" thesis against political ideas and institutional arrangements that constitute the first state constitutions. The bibliography has been updated to include the rich body of work written during the last two decades, much of it indebted to this pioneering study.

Language NotesText: English, German (translation)About the AuthorWilli Paul Adams is professor of North American history at the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies of the Freie Universitaet Berlin, Germany. He and his wife Angela Adams translated *The Federalist Papers* into German (Paderborn, 1994).