



How Virginia Saved America

—by Richard Labunski

It is one of the most important dates in U.S. history, yet probably no more than a handful of people understand its significance. Everyone who cares about the Bill of Rights should know what happened on that day.

On Feb. 2, 1789—218 years ago—an election was held in a sprawling, eight-county district in the Piedmont of central Virginia. It is not an exaggeration to say that it was the election that saved America.

James Madison, the shy and diminutive statesman from Orange County, Va., was running for a seat in the House of Representatives in the First Congress. At 37, Madison already had helped to organize the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and to write a document that has endured for more than two centuries. In June 1788, he led the Constitution's supporters to victory at the Virginia ratification convention by an 89 to 79 vote.

The original Constitution did not have a bill of rights, a shortcoming that alarmed the people. George Mason, the author of the Virginia Declaration of Rights and a delegate at the 1787 Philadelphia convention, demanded that a list of individual rights be added, but

when his fellow delegates refused, he joined Henry in fighting adoption of the Constitution at the Virginia ratifying convention.

With ratification in jeopardy, Americans were promised that in return for approving the Constitution, the new Congress would immediately propose amendments to protect individual liberty. Madison was determined to keep that promise.

His opponents did everything they could to keep him out of the First Congress so he could not offer a bill of rights. First, Patrick Henry and his colleagues in the Virginia legislature elected two enemies of the Constitution to the U.S. Senate. Then they created a huge district from which Madison would have to seek election to the House. It included counties teeming with Anti-Federalists who opposed the Constitution and Madison. They recruited a strong opponent, future president James Monroe, to run against him.

Despite snow and brutal cold on Election Day, enough people made it to the polls

to elect Madison by only 336 votes. As a result, he was able to use his extraordinary legislative skills to persuade two-thirds of each house of Congress to forward the Bill of Rights to the states.

If Madison had lost the election, a second constitutional convention likely would have been held to answer demands for the protection of individual rights. But, unlike the Philadelphia convention, this one probably would have been dominated by opponents of the Constitution who could have undone many of the delicate compromises that gave the new nation its start.

February 2 deserves more recognition. So does the man from Virginia who overcame almost impossible odds to help create the nation we know today.

The writer, a journalism professor at the University of Kentucky, is author of *James Madison and the Struggle for the Bill of Rights*. [labunski@uky.edu.]