

Brawl between Federalists and anti-Federalists, July 4, 1788

Introduction

In 1787 and 1788, debates over the ratification of the Constitution took place in towns and villages across the country. To gain support, both Federalists and anti-Federalists held meetings and marches that sometimes became violent. In July 1788, Federalists marched through Albany, New York, and were stopped at Green Street by a group of anti-Federalists. According to this newspaper report, “a general battle took place, with swords, bayonets, clubs, stones, &c. which lasted for some time, both parties fighting with the greatest rage, and determined obstinacy, till at last the antifederalists being overpowered by numbers gave way and retreated.”

The New York ratification convention met in mid-June 1788. The Federalists contended that a stronger central government would provide a solid base from which New York could grow and prosper. The anti-Federalists clamored for a bill of rights and fought to preserve the autonomy of the state against federal encroachments. While the debates were contentious, the Federalists were ultimately successful in bringing New York into the nationalist camp. The anti-Federalists, however, managed to attach a list of proposed additions that had to be considered before New York would fully participate in the new government. New York became the eleventh state to ratify the Constitution on July 26, 1788.

Excerpt

It was mortifying to the federalists to observe a party of about 50 antifederalists marching in procession to a vacant lot in the skirts of the town, where, after firing thirteen guns, they burnt the constitution. The federalists . . . began a march through the principal streets of the city . . . A general battle took place, with swords, bayonets, clubs, stones, &c. which lasted for some time, both parties fighting with the greatest rage, and determined obstinacy, till at last the antifederalists being overpowered by numbers gave way and retreated.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why did the Federalists and anti-Federalists march in the streets of Albany?
2. Describe the behavior of the marchers. What does this indicate about the friction between Federalists and anti-Federalists over the ratification of the Constitution?
3. To what extent was each party justified in its actions? Explain.
4. What is the most alarming event in the news report? Support your answer with evidence in the article.

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Image

NEW-YORK, July 11.
Receipt of a letter from Poughkeepsie, dated July 8.
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happened in the city of Albany, all the parti-
of which, as far as they have come to my know-
are—That the federalists having received the
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to proceed, by a large party who had collected there
to oppose them; after a few words, a general battle
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on, where they made a second stand, and others
the country for safety. The federalists attacked
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soon gained, did great damage to the building.
of the parties were severely wounded in the
fight, and one poor man, a cooper, is supposed to
received a mortal wound from a bayonet. Se-
reports are circulating about men killed, &c.
are not to be relied on.
It gives me pleasure that I can add, that the
city is since peaceably settled.
Since writing the foregoing, I am informed
the wounded are twelve feds. and six antifeds.
among the feds. is a Mr. Graham, badly, tho'
dangerous."
The grand procession in this city, we are told, is post-
poned until the decision of the hon. convention of this
state, respecting the constitution, be known.

Report of a fight in Albany between Federalists and anti-Federalists, printed in the *Freeman's Journal*, July 16, 1788
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00259.01, p1)

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Transcript

Report of a fight in Albany between Federalists and anti-Federalists, Freeman's Journal, July 16, 1788

New-York, July 11.

Extract of a letter from Poughkeepsie, dated *July 8*. "Friday last the 4th instant, a very disagreeable fracas happened in the city of Albany, all the particulars of which, as far as they have come to my knowledge, are — That the federalists having received the news of the adoption by Virginia, last Thursday evening, proposed having a procession next day; but on the remonstrance of many of the antifederalists that it would be disagreeable to them, they gave up the idea. When the next day came, July 4, it was mortifying to the federalists to observe a party of about 50 antifederalists marching in procession to a vacant lot in the skirts of the town, where, after firing thirteen guns, they burnt the constitution. The federalists who were then collected, determined immediately to have a procession; and having arranged themselves, began a march through the principal streets of the city; they met with no interruption till they came to a narrow street in which Mr. Dennison lives (I believe Green-street) when they were ordered not to proceed, by a large party who had collected there to oppose them; after a few words, a general battle took place, with swords, bayonets, clubs, stones, &c. which lasted for some time, both parties fighting with the greatest rage, and determined obstinacy, till at last the antifederalists being overpowered by numbers gave way and retreated, many into the house of a Mr. Hilton, where they made a second stand, and others into the country for safety. The federalists attacked the house of Mr. Hilton, and in the victory, which they soon gained, did great damage to the building. Many of the parties were severely wounded in the conflict, and one poor man, a cooper, is supposed to have received a mortal wound from a bayonet. Several reports are circulating about men killed, &c. but are not to be relied on.

It gives me pleasure that I can add, that the dispute is since peaceably settled.

P. S. Since writing the foregoing, I am informed that the wounded are twelve feds and six antifeds. Among the feds. is a Mr. Graham, badly, tho' not dangerous."

The grand procession in this city, we are told, is postponed until the decision of the hon. convention of this state, respecting the constitution, be known.