

COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

RICHMOND

For Immediate Release
December 15, 2016

Contact: G. Paul Nardo
(804) 698-1619
gpnardo@house.virginia.gov

Susan Clarke Schaar
(804) 698-7400
sschaar@senate.virginia.gov

U.S. Bill of Rights Marks 225th Anniversary

- First 10 Amendments ratified into U.S. Constitution at Virginia State Capitol on Dec. 15, 1791 -

STATE CAPITOL, RICHMOND, VA – Today marks the 225th anniversary of the ratification of the Bill of Rights in Virginia’s historic State Capitol on December 15, 1791. Drafted by Virginian and founding father, James Madison, who was inspired by his colleague George Mason’s revolutionary Virginia Declaration of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution were penned in direct response to calls from the states for greater constitutional protection for individual liberties.

In September 1789, the U.S. Congress sent a copy of the 12 proposed amendments to the U.S. Constitution to each state, including Virginia. In the Virginia State Capitol on December 15, 1791, the Virginia General Assembly finished approving 10 of the amendments, making Virginia the eleventh and final state needed to ratify what is widely known as the Bill of Rights. Since this action meant at least three-fourths of the then-existing 14 states had ratified them, the 10-approved amendments became part of the United States Constitution.

“The Bill of Rights is an abiding testament to the important individual rights Americans enjoy as citizens of the United States,” said G. Paul Nardo and Susan Clark Schaar, Clerks of the Virginia House of Delegates and Senate of Virginia respectively. “Virginia’s manuscript on parchment is one of only 12 surviving original signed copies of the Bill of Rights and is held in trust by the Library of Virginia for the citizens of the Commonwealth. Today is a yet another occasion to recognize our Commonwealth’s many contributions to American history.”

According to the Bill of Rights Institute, one of the many points of contention between Federalists and Anti-Federalists regarding the Constitution, was its lack of a bill of rights that would place specific limits on government power. Federalists argued that the Constitution did not need a bill of rights, because the people and the states kept any powers not given to the federal government. Virginians George Mason, Patrick Henry and other anti-Federalists held that a bill of rights was necessary to safeguard individual liberty.

Madison was tasked by the U.S. Congress with the job of going through and making changes directly to the U.S. Constitution itself. But several of his colleagues objected that Congress was overstepping its authority in making those changes to the original wording. Instead, Madison’s changes were presented as a list of amendments that would follow Article VII. Ultimately, the House approved 17 of these amendments and the Senate approved 12 amendments.

The intention of the Bill of Rights is to safeguard due process in court proceedings and to list the limits on government power, including protections for what the Founders saw as the natural right of individuals to speak and worship freely and the natural right to be free from unreasonable government intrusion in one’s home. These and many other specified human liberties are safeguarded today, thanks to the work of those prescient American leaders of the late 18th century.

###