

Ag Trade Important Issue When U.S. Constitution Signed

Agricultural trade was almost as important to the United States the day the U.S. Constitution was signed - Sept. 17, 1787 - as it is now, according to USDA historian Douglas E. Bowers.

The United States in 1787 was already a major exporter of agricultural commodities, as it is today, and it depended heavily on that trade to pay for the goods it had to import.

Like most nations emerging from colonial status, the United States produced primarily raw materials and imported most of its manufactured goods. Even with agricultural exports, the balance of payments was usually negative in this period - a problem we are facing again now.

Americans had a critical interest in exports from the beginning. With some 90 percent of the people living on farms, there was little internal market for agricultural goods. Even if there had been large cities, transportation within and between the states was so poor that it was often easier to ship overseas than to send goods a short distance overland.

After the Revolution, America's trade was in jeopardy. Most of the country's trading partners in Europe and the Caribbean were part of colonial systems. Great Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands and Portugal each wanted to use raw materials from its own colonies in the West Indies (Caribbean) or South America, and to restrict business from competitors. So when the United States left the British Empire, it lost much of its market for exports, and former allies like France were not eager to open their ports to a new competitor.

We now take it for granted that the national government (and not the states) has the necessary power to regulate international trade as well as interstate commerce. But 200 years ago - before the U.S. Constitution was drafted, signed and ratified - it did not, and the question of giving the national

government broad powers to regulate trade was a very debatable issue.

Under the Articles of Confederation (in effect from 1781 to 1789) the national government was too weak to negotiate real trade concessions from other countries. It could not even control America's own internal trade.

States levied individual tariffs on imported goods. And some states, including New York, erected trade barriers between themselves and neighboring states.

Western farmers had trouble shipping their produce down the Mississippi River because the Spanish did not want them to use New Orleans as a loading point for export.

In fact, trade issues caused several states to send delegates to Annapolis in September 1786 to discuss revision of the confederation Constitution. These same trade issues were a factor leading to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia the following year.

Americans had tried growing various crops for export. Some didn't work, some did. Thomas Jefferson and others had attempted to grow European-style wine grapes - without success. Silk growing had been tried in several states. There was also an effort to compete with Russia and the Baltic countries in growing flax and hemp, but these needed cheaper labor than we had in this country.

By the time of the Constitution a number of successful export crops had been introduced, each with its own market. The three primary exports were grain and grain products: wheat flour, wheat and corn, in that order. Today, our three primary agricultural exports are similar: soybeans, corn and wheat.

Grain was not used as livestock feed then nearly as much now, so corn made up only a small part of grain exports. Wheat was grown mainly in the Mid-Atlantic states,

but was also important in Virginia. Despite high tariffs in Britain and some other countries, Americans found a market for grain in Europe during the 1780's and 1790's due to crop failures and the wars on the European continent that followed the French Revolution.

There were also markets in the West Indies. Livestock was occasionally exported, as were salted meat provisions for ships and for

West Indian plantations. These came mostly from Northern states.

Southern crops benefited from more reliable markets because they competed less with European crops. Then, as now, tobacco found ready sales in most of Europe. It was produced in such quantities that by the 1780's some progressive Southern farmers were turning away from it because of soil

exhaustion and a desire to be less dependent on world prices.

Rice was grown mainly in South Carolina and was shipped to the Caribbean and Southern Europe. Exports of indigo, which made a widely used blue dye, declined after the British bonus payment to indigo growers ended. In addition, farmers clearing land throughout the new states were able to

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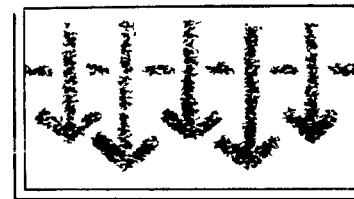
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