



Gregg M. Amore
Secretary of State

Primary Source Document Transcription

Made available through the Rhode Island State Archives

Declaration of Rights, 1790

Rhode Island ratified the US Constitution in May of 1790. It was the last state to do so, and the vote was closer than it had been in any other state - 34 delegates in favor of ratification and 32 opposed. At an earlier convention in March of 1790, delegates drafted a Declaration of Rights along with proposed amendments to the Constitution. Many of these ideas were integrated into the Bill of Rights and are considered core American values today.

We the delegates being a committee appointed to report the amendments necessary to the proposed Constitution of the United State of America do report that previous to the adoption of the Federal Constitution there be a Declaration or Bill of Rights asserting and securing from encroachments the essential and unalienable rights of the people of this state.

1st To wit that there are certain natural rights of which men when they form a social compact cannot deprive or divest their posterity, among which are the enjoyment of Life and Liberty, with the means of acquiring, possessing and protecting property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.

2nd That all power is naturally vested in, and consequently derived from the People; that magistrates therefore are their trustees and agents, and at all times amenable to them.

3rd That the powers of government may be reassumed by the people whensoever it shall become necessary to their happiness, that every power, jurisdiction and right, which is not by the said Constitution clearly delegated to the Congress of the United States, or to the departments of government thereof, remain to the people of the several states, or their respective State Governments to whom they may have granted the same; and that those clauses in the said Constitution which declare that Congress shall not have or exercise certain powers do not imply that Congress is entitled to any powers not given by the said Constitution, but such clauses are to be construed either as exceptions to certain specified powers, or as inserted merely for greater caution.

4th That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it can be directed only by reason and conviction, and not by force or violence, and therefore all men, have an equal, natural and unalienable right to the free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience, and that no particular religious sect or society ought to be favored or established by law in preference to others.

*This transcript is intended to capture the substance of the document.
For details of capitalization, punctuation, spelling and spacing, we recommend consulting the original document.*

5th That the legislative, executive and judiciary powers of government should be separate and distinct, and that the members of the two first may be restrained from oppression by feeling and participating the public burthens, they should at fixed periods be reduced to a private station, return into the mass of the people, and the vacancies be supplied by certain and regular elections in which all or any part of the former members to be eligible or ineligible as the rules of the Constitution of government and the laws shall direct.

6th That elections of representatives in the legislature ought to be free and frequent, and all men having sufficient evidence of permanent common interest with and attachment to the community ought to have the right of suffrage; and no aid, charge tax or fee can be set, rated or levied upon the people, without their own consent or that of their representatives so elected, nor can they be bound by any law to which they have not in like manner assented for the public good.

7th That all power of suspending laws or the execution of laws by any authority without the consent of the representatives of the people in the legislature is injurious to their rights and ought not to be exercised.

8th That in all capital and criminal prosecutions, a man hath a right to demand the cause and nature of his accusation, to be confronted with the accusers and witnesses, to call for evidence and be allowed counsel in his favor, and to a fair and speedy trial by an impartial jury of his vicinage without whose unanimous consent he cannot be found guilty (except in the government of the land and naval forces) nor can he be compelled to give evidence against himself.

9th That no freeman ought to be taken, imprisoned or disseized of his freehold, liberties, privileges, or franchises, or outlawed, or exiled, or in any manner destroyed or deprived of his life, liberty or property but by the trial by jury, or by the law of the land.

10th That every freeman restrained of his liberty, is entitled to a remedy to enquire into the lawfulness thereof and to remove the same if unlawful, and that such remedy ought not to be denied or delayed.

11th That in controversies respecting property, and in suits between man and man the ancient trial by jury, as hath been exercised by us and our ancestors, from the time whereof the mind of man is not to the contrary, is one of the greatest securities to the rights of the people and ought to remain sacred and inviolate.

12th That every freeman ought to obtain right and justice freely and without sale, completely and without denial, promptly and without delay, and that all establishments or regulations contravening these rights are oppressive and unjust.

13th That excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel or unusual punishments inflicted.

14th That every person has a right to be secure from all unreasonable searches and seizures of his person, his papers or his property, and therefore that all warrants to search suspected places or seize any person, his papers or his property, without information upon oath or affirmation of sufficient cause are grievous and oppressive, and that all general warrants for such in which the place or person suspected, are not particularly designated,) are dangerous, and ought not to be granted.

15th That the people have a right peaceably to assemble together to consult for their common good, or to instruct their representatives, and that every person has a right to petition or appeal to the legislature for redress of grievances.

16th That the people have a right to freedom of speech, and of writing and publishing their sentiments, that freedom of the press is one of the greatest bulwarks of liberty and ought not to be violated.

17th That the people have a right to keep and bear arms; that a well regulated militia, including the body of the people, capable of bearing arms, is the proper, natural and safe defense of a free state; that the militia shall not be subject to martial law except in time of war, rebellion or insurrection; that standing armies in time of peace are dangerous to liberty and ought not to be kept up, except in cases of necessity, and that at all times the military should be under strict subordination to the civil power; that in time of peace no soldier ought to be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, and in time of war, only by the civil magistrate, in such manner as the law directs.

18th That any person religiously scrupulous of bearing arms, ought to be exempted, upon payment of an equivalent, to employ another to bear arms in his stead.

This primary source comes from the Rhode Island State Archives, C#0238 – Papers Relating to the Adoption of the United States Constitution, 1785 – 1790.