Overview:

In this unit, students will discover what contributions George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, George Mason, and James Madison made to the formation of the new nation based on democracy as opposed to another monarchy or tyranny. Students will identify traits and characteristics of these figures that lead to their accomplishments. A study of the American Revolution emphasizing the role and contributions of Virginians during the conflict will have been completed prior to the start of this unit. Students will be given selections from primary and secondary sources to analyze and interpret multiple perspectives of each individual. They will then draw conclusions identifying their abilities, talents, and ambitions. Students will make connections between their contributions to the formation of the new nation and its relevance to government today.

Historical Background:

As the American Revolution ended the thirteen states were a lose confederation without a strong central government. Many Americans were penniless and the country was deeply into debt with no power to tax. Unable to pay debt, no means for providing for the national defense, or regulating trade, and no common currency, the new nation faced many problems. During these formative, uncertain years many talented and ambitious men made huge contributions that have given us the government as it is known today. Long hard debates would be waged over how much power the federal government would have, protection of states rights including the institution of slavery, and representation in Congress. Four of the most influential of men involved in this process were the Virginians, George Washington, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and George Mason. Of these four, Washington was the least educated with barely more then a grade level education. The other three were highly educated and well read.

Washington’s talents lie in his great ambition and practiced discipline. He earned his name through his integrity and his acts of selflessness leading a new nation through its revolutionary birth and into its infancy by exhibiting a classical character model for future leaders to follow.

Madison, a scholar who studied and read books from Europe on political and constitutional law for several years prior to the constitutional convention, was probably the best-informed man on political theory at the Convention. His knowledge, intelligence, and even temperament won the respect of his contemporaries. He contributed immensely to the success of the Constitutional Convention and his detailed notes over the four months of deliberations contribute largely to our knowledge of the proceedings. His great skills at compromise helped the delegates reach agreement during the difficult process of hammering out the principles embodied in the U.S. Constitution.
Jefferson was a man of many interests and was also highly educated. He was a skilled writer and political theorist. Being Madison’s mentor, he shared many of his ideas and philosophical views with him. Jefferson was a champion for separation of church and state and this principle is expressed in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom passed in 1786 while he was in France serving as minister. This document guaranteed religious liberty in Virginia. The document's ideals then became the basis for the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. As the writer of the Declaration of Independence stating the equality of all men his greatest contradiction was that he never freed his slaves.

An aristocrat who owned and managed 5,000 acres of land, Mason was a neighbor and friend of George Washington. He studied law and was active in community affairs but preferred private to public life, often refusing position in public office. He was a great defender of individual rights and wrote the Virginia Declaration of Rights and a large part of the Virginia state Constitution in 1776. A signer of neither the Declaration of Independence or the U. S. Constitution his ideals are embodied in both documents. His strong opposition to the ratification of the Constitution was based mostly on its lack of a bill of rights. Madison helped sponsor and obtain the adoption of the Bill of Rights in 1791.

Major Understanding: Students will understand that George Washington, James Madison, George Mason, and Thomas Jefferson had different skills and ambitions representative of the contributions made by each. They will understand that these men were contemporaries with varying backgrounds who didn’t always agree but were committed to making this “experiment” of a new nation be successful. Through compromise and the belief in the rights of man their leadership contributed to the formation of the democratic government we continue to enjoy today, a government “by the people.”

Objectives: Students will:

1. Identify, interpret, and analyze primary sources including paintings, sculptures, letters, notes, and excerpts from documents to understand the role of Virginia in forming the new American nation.
3. Make connections between the contributions of Washington, Madison, Mason, and Jefferson historically and the impact of those contributions today.
4. Identify the personality traits and skills of Washington, Madison, Jefferson, and Mason that suited them for the roles they played in the founding of the new nation.
5. Compare and contrast these four historical figures and complete a graphic organizer.
6. Identify documents written by Mason and Jefferson that influenced the U. S. Constitution.
8. Develop and write questions for a panel discussion. Anticipate and rehearse possible answers to questions.
9. Assume roles of historical figures and reporters to prepare for the panel discussion.
10. Create newsletter reporting the information gathered from the panel discussion.

Standards of Learning:
Skills:
VS. 1 The students will develop skills for historical and geographical analysis including the ability to:

   a) identify and interpret artifacts and primary and secondary source documents to understand vents in history.
   c) compare and contrast historical events.
   d) draw conclusions and make generalizations.
   e) make connections between past and present.
   g) interpret ideas and events from different historical perspectives.

Content:
VS. 6 The students will demonstrate knowledge of the role of Virginia in the establishment of the new American nation by:

   a) explaining why George Washington is called the “Father of Our Country” and James Madison is called the “Father of the Constitution.”
   b) identifying the ideas of George Mason and Thomas Jefferson as expressed in the Virginia Declaration of Rights and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.