HARTFORD CONVENTION. From 15 December 1814 to 5 January 1815, a convention of delegates from throughout New England met at Hartford, Connecticut, to plan regional opposition to the Republican Party’s federal policies. Its members hoped to bring an end to a string of defeats for the Federalist Party in general and for New England Federalists in particular. In addition, they sought to gain increased governmental support for a New England destabilized by the ongoing War of 1812.

The convention numbered twenty-six delegates. They were sent by the legislatures of Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts, and by county caucuses in Vermont and New Hampshire. Some radical Massachusetts Federalists had lobbied for such an event since at least 1808, but more moderate men controlled the convention. British military successes in northern New England had prevented a fuller depiction from the newer New England states.

The agrarian, expansionist, anti-British cast of the Republican Virginia Dynasty’s policies inured to the detriment of the New England states. Those states’ economies relied heavily on foreign trade and an expanding manufacturing sector, and their self-conception was strongly shaped by the Puritan experiments at Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay. Unlike Virginia, New England stood in federal politics for hostility to the French Revolution, for foreign trade, and for a stand-pat position on westward expansion.

Following President Thomas Jefferson’s 1803 Louisiana Purchase, New Englanders began to fear that a huge new swath of territory would be settled by southerners and fall under permanent Republican control. What might have been a Republican interregnum now appeared to be only the onset of New England’s permanent reduction to minority status in the Union. The Jeffersonian embargo on foreign trade in 1807, keystone of Jefferson’s second presidential term, did great damage to New England’s economy. What made it worse was that the Republicans in Congress, who less than a decade before had complained of the Alien and Sedition Acts’ arbitrariness, gave the president extremely broad enforcement powers.

New England opposed the War of 1812, and this opposition went so deep that Massachusetts Governor Caleb Strong refused to deploy his state’s militia to defend the District of Maine against invasion. Part of the Hartford Convention’s purpose, however, was to urge the federal administration to defend New England more vigorously, and in response to Strong’s actions, Madison deployed volunteers to counter potential insurrection in Massachusetts. Nonetheless, one Hartford Convention delegate, former Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, expected Union forces to be defeated by the British in Louisiana regardless of what the convention might decide.

The convention met in secret, which aroused great hopes and anxieties, depending on the observer. In the end, it merely called for a second convention in June in case the war had not ended and proposed a set of amendments to the federal Constitution. It also lent its prestige to the notion of interposition, formerly associated primarily with the Republican Party.

On Christmas Eve 1814, in the midst of the convention, the Treaty of Ghent was concluded, and on 8 January 1815, Andrew Jackson’s forces won their famous victory at New Orleans. Amidst the paroxysms of patriotism, the Hartford Convention’s participants found themselves branded “traitors” and suspected of wanting to break apart the Union, something none of its members had considered in 1814. The Federalist Party, which had played a pivotal role in founding the Republic, was permanently wrecked by the Hartford Convention. By decade’s end, it virtually had ceased to exist.

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K. R. Constantine Gutzman
See also Federalist Party; Republicans, Jeffersonian; War of 1812.

HARTFORD WITS. Originally the Connecticut Wits, this group formed in the late eighteenth century as a literary society at Yale College and then assumed a new name, the Hartford Wits. Their writings satirized an outmoded curriculum and, more significantly, society and the politics of the mid-1780s. Their dissatisfaction with the Articles of Confederation appeared in the The Anarchiad (1786–1877), written by David Humphreys, Joel Barlow, John Trumbull, and Lemuel Hopkins. In satirizing democratic society, this mock-epic promoted the federal union delineated by the 1787 Federal Convention at Philadelphia. After the ratification of the Constitution, most of the Wits, including Timothy Dwight, became Federalist spokesmen for order and stability. Barlow, however, became a radical Republican. From a common origin, the Wits ultimately took up positions across the early Republic’s ideological spectrum.

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