
Constitution Day:

Background & Celebration



Teacher's Guide

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**Produced
by
Colman Communications Corp.**

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CONSTITUTION DAY: Background & Celebration

Grades 7-12

Viewing Time: 13:45

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Intended Audience and Uses

Constitution Day: Background & Celebration has been produced for students in grades 7-12. Its primary purposes are to help young people appreciate our country's most basic law and to understand why and how Constitution Day is celebrated. It also can deepen student understanding of late



18th century U.S. history. Moreover, the program can help students understand the relationship between the constitution and freedom movements and revolutions in different parts of the world today. Thus, the

program can be used in U.S. and world history courses as well as contemporary issues classes.

Program Synopsis

The program begins as English rule in the thirteen North

American colonies draws to a close and the Articles of Confederation is approved in 1781. The Articles, notes the narrator, purposely established a weak national government because the authors wanted to be certain that the new government would not resemble England's, with its powerful king and privileged classes. However, it wasn't long before difficulties arose under the Articles. The inability to raise taxes and settle interstate disputes, the lack of a single currency, and no powers to make foreign treaties severely hampered economic growth in the new country. The Constitutional Convention was held to discuss the Articles' obstacles to economic and political health. The program then reviews several major issues at the meeting, such as the slavery problem and equal representation among states with varying populations. The Bill of Rights and the three branches of government established in the Constitution are also discussed. The second half of the program shows how Constitution Day is celebrated across the country, first in "Constitution Town," Louisville, OH; next in Nevada City, CA, where the largest holiday celebration in the western United States is held; and finally, at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia.



VIEWER OBJECTIVES

After viewing this video and participating in the suggested activities, viewers should be able to do the following:

1. Tell why and how the Articles of Confederation limited central governmental powers.
2. Briefly review the issues facing the framers.

3. Explain what the Bill of Rights is and name at least five rights contained in the Bill.
4. Name the three branches of our government and tell the function of each.
5. Name at least five ways Constitution Day is celebrated.

The producers encourage you to make adaptations and changes to the following lesson plan whenever you feel it will enhance your students' learning experiences. Only by tailoring the material to your unique classroom situation will you be able to maximize the educational experience afforded by these materials.



SUGGESTED LESSON PLAN

Viewing Strategies

Various strategies may be employed when showing *Constitution Day: Background & Celebration* to your

class. If you wish to use the video as a way to give general information about this holiday, you may find it useful to show the entire program in one screening, then follow up with appropriate questions (see the ***Suggested Discussion Questions*** blackline master) and/or activities suggested in this guide. Alternately, for lessons on the Constitution, only the first part of the program may be viewed.



Introduce the Program

The producers encourage you to prescreen the program to familiarize yourself with its content.

Ask the class if anyone knows what a constitution is. Does the school board have a constitution? How about the school or student council? Elicit several answers. Tell the class everyone will see a video about constitutions in a few minutes.

Pre-Viewing Activities

If you are showing the program prior to Constitution Day, ask the class if anyone knows about the holiday. If so, what? Are there any other holidays that honor a document? What about Independence Day? Is it a holiday that honors a document (the Declaration of Independence) or a specific event? Tell everyone the class will now see why our country's constitution has its own holiday.

Post-Viewing Activities

Discuss the program, using the *Suggested Discussion Questions* if you prefer. Then hand out *The Second Amendment* and have your students complete the exercise. Afterwards, discuss what the students have written. Have



your students write a class or school constitution. Be certain to have a preamble and article section. A week or so after the constitution has been written, ask the class if there needs to be any amendments. If so, add an amendment section. Divide the class into ten groups. Have each group research one bill in the Bill of Rights and then give an oral presentation or written report on the bill.

Description of Blackline Masters

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS – Gives questions that may be asked after each segment is viewed.

THE SECOND AMENDMENT – Reviews the controversy regarding this particular constitutional right.

ANSWER KEY

Video Quiz: 1. False 2. Maryland, Virginia. 3. unable to settle disputes between states, inability to raise taxes, no single currency, unable to make treaties with foreign countries
4. False 5. b. 6. Many framers believed there were some crucial right not mentioned in the Constitution, but should be guaranteed to all citizens. 7. executive, judicial, legislative 8. b. 9. Louisville 10. True

The producers acknowledge the cooperation of the following organizations: The National Constitution Center; National Park Service, Independence Hall Historic Park; Library of Congress; National Archives; Louisville, OH Constitution Committee; Nevada City, CA Chamber of Commerce; Northbrook, IL School District 27



TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO

Most Americans lived under English law during much of the 17th and 18th centuries.

The majority of those laws were passed in Parliament some 3,500 miles away, in London.

Royal pronouncements that granted land ownership and other privileges were proclaimed from Buckingham Palace, also in London.

But the Revolutionary War ushered in a new era.

For even as the war raged on in the North American colonies, the Americans wrote a new legal instrument -- the Articles of Confederation -- that would serve as the infant nation's primary (or highest) legal document.

Approved in 1781, the Articles established a weak national government, one with few powers.

The authors of the Articles wanted to be certain that the new U.S. government would not resemble England's, with its politically powerful king and privileged classes, which they intensely disliked.

Instead, they said the states, not a centralized government, would have most political powers.

But it wasn't long before difficulties arose under the Articles. For instance, when both Maryland and Virginia claimed the Potomac River as part of their territory, the weak national government had no powers to resolve the issue.

Moreover, the new United States congress, located in Philadelphia, was unable to impose taxes.

It could only ask states for funds to run the national government. The states, however, were reluctant to give any financial help.

Each state had its own currency, also, making it difficult for businesses to conduct interstate trade.

Thus, American commerce was hobbled.

The new national government couldn't even make treaties with foreign countries, something else that hampered business.

A group of highly-regarded Americans met in Philadelphia, PA during the summer of 1787 to discuss these impediments to economic and political health.

The meeting was called "The Constitutional Convention."

Although many in attendance said they were meeting to *revise* the Articles, others, such as lawyer and banker Alexander Hamilton, statesman James Madison and Revolutionary War hero George Washington felt that a new law should *replace* the Articles of Confederation.

Madison, known as "the father of the Constitution," studied governments in other times and other places, and then, when writing the new U.S. Constitution, chose the best parts of them to include in the new document.

Nevertheless, the people in attendance, known as the "framers of the Constitution," faced many difficulties.

One was even Philadelphia's weather. It was brutally hot during the summer of 1787, but the windows of Independence Hall, where the framers met, were closed to keep all discussions secret.

As a result, it was sweltering inside.

The framers also faced many complex questions.

One example: should the more populous states, those with large cities, have more representatives in congress than the rural states, those with smaller populations?

Elsworth: There must be an equilibrium among all the states.

Madison: But there is no such thing as "natural equilibrium." The doctrine of equal representation is not genuine and must forever silence the pretensions of the small states to an equality of votes with the large ones.

Narrator: Another example: Should the Constitution consider slaves as property or as persons?

Paterson: Negroes cannot be seen as anything but property. They are not free agents, have no personal liberty...and like other property, are entirely at the will of their master.

Mason: I cannot agree because it is simply unjust. Furthermore, the labor of a slave in South Carolina is just as productive and valuable as a freeman in Massachusetts.

Narrator: After more than four months of debate and compromise, the framers hammered out the final version of the Constitution, a document that would now be the highest law of the land.

It was ratified on June 21, 1788.

Yet, many framers believed there were some crucial rights not mentioned in the in the Constitution -- but should be guaranteed to all citizens.

And so, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution's first ten amendments, were added and then ratified on December 15, 1791.

The Bill guaranteed freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom to gather in groups of our own choice, freedom of the press, the right to a speedy trial by jury and more.

The Constitution also established our form of government, one with three branches.

A legislative branch composed of the Senate and House of Representatives would make our laws.

An executive branch would make certain that those laws were obeyed.

And a judicial branch would decide exactly what laws meant when there was a question about them, and could determine who had or had not broken a law.

The United States Constitution was something completely new in world history.

For it was the first document to grant such wide, sweeping powers to everyday people.

Moreover, its ideas inspired persons in other countries to fight for *their* freedoms.

Because our Constitution is one of the greatest documents ever written, it's celebrated on September 17th each year, with a holiday called "Constitution Day and Citizenship Day," or, more commonly, just "Constitution Day."

In Louisville, Ohio, the Constitution Day celebrations are among the town's most popular annual events.

This small northeast Ohio community calls itself "Constitution Town" because a woman who lived there more than a half century ago, Olga T. Weber, was one of the first Americans to actively encourage the establishment of the holiday.

Among the many Constitution Day activities in Louisville's celebration are a pet parade, and pet trick contest, concerts, American-themed items for sale, as well as patriotic word search games, snack foods, and craft activities such as bird feeders made from acorn squash.

There are carnival rides, too, whose dotted lights brightly punctuate the warm, late-summer dusky sky.

Half way across the country, in Nevada City, California, thousands of people jam that town's main street for what's reportedly the largest Constitution Day celebration in the western United States.

The festivities feature a big parade with costumed participants.

In addition to the parade, there are two other colorful events in the Nevada City celebration.

The first is a re-enactment of the Constitution's signing. As each "framer" signs participants and guests listen as an announcer states the signer's name and furnishes a brief biography.

And then, there's a colorful charity race with some 3,000 toy ducks that float down a river that winds through the town.

Additional sights and sounds include a Civil War re-enactment, music, and the festival's friendly mascot, Whitewater Willy!

But undoubtedly, the most impressive of all Constitution Day celebrations is held at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, PA, located near Independence Hall, where the legendary document was signed.

Not long ago, an especially exciting event was held on the Constitution's 225th anniversary.

There was a huge birthday party for it, featuring, among other things, a cake with the storied document's likeness drawn on top, with icing.

Actors dressed as famous presidents, such as Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Teddy Roosevelt gave speeches and then answered student questions afterwards.

There was a wide array of activities throughout the day, also, including folding a giant American flag, honoring the winner of a national essay contest, learning how to vote, placing one's own signature on a replica of the Constitution, seeing how documents were printed in bygone days, taking part in presentations on constitutional questions, enjoying art projects and just being silly -- with statues of the framers.

Undoubtedly for many, however, the day's most meaningful event was a naturalization ceremony during which people from other lands were sworn in as new American citizens.

Naturalization ceremonies take place across the country on Constitution Day.

In short, we celebrate this holiday in recognition of one of history's most important documents, one written by far-sighted individuals who created our national government, with its legislative, executive and judicial branches.

On this day we also celebrate the Constitution's first 10 amendments -- the Bill of Rights -- which guarantees our most basic freedoms.

But perhaps of greatest importance, we celebrate Constitution Day every September 17th as a way to remember how fortunate we are to live in a country of laws, in the United States of America.



Web Resources

The National Constitution Center

<http://constitutioncenter.org/>

The web's most comprehensive site for information and educational resources on the U.S. Constitution

The Charters of Freedom

<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution.html>

The government's official site on the Constitution

The Cornell University Law School Legal Institute

<http://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/>

Detailed annotations on the legal aspects of the Constitution

Discussion Questions – Constitution Day

For Segment One

1. Which law did Americans live under during much of the 17th and 18th centuries? (English law)
2. Where were English laws passed? (In Parliament, located in London)
3. What document served as the United States' highest law? (The Articles of Confederation)
4. Why did the authors of the Articles want a weak national government? (So it wouldn't be like England's)
5. Name four reasons why the Articles didn't work well. (couldn't solve disputes between states; didn't have a single currency; couldn't impose taxes; couldn't make foreign treaties)
6. Name three leaders of the Constitutional Convention. (Washington, Monroe, Hamilton)
7. Name three difficulties or issues facing the framers. (the weather, the slavery question, number of representatives between large and small state)
8. When was the Constitution ratified? (June 21, 1788)
9. What are the first ten amendments to the Constitution called? (Bill of Rights)
10. In what year was the Bill of Rights approved? (1791)
11. Name five freedoms guaranteed by the Bill of Rights (freedom of religion, the press, gather in groups of our own choice, speech, right to trial by jury)
12. What are the three branches of the federal government? (executive, judicial, legislative)
13. Why was the Constitution so important in world history? (the first document to grant such wide, sweeping powers to everyday people; inspired people in other lands to fight for their freedoms)

For Segment Two

1. When is Constitution Day celebrated? (September 17th)
2. What community calls itself "Constitution Town?" (Louisville, Ohio)
3. Why does Louisville call itself that? (because a woman who lived there was one of the first Americans to actively encourage the holiday)
4. How does Nevada City, CA celebrate Constitution Day? (It has a parade, a re-enactment of the Constitution's signing, charity race with 3,000 toy ducks, Civil War re-enactment, music and "Whitewater Willy.")
5. Where is the National Constitution Center located? (Philadelphia, PA)
6. Name five ways Constitution Day is celebrated there. (birthday party, actors give speeches, folding giant flag, learning how to vote, signing replica of the Constitution, art projects, etc.)

Name _____

The Second Amendment

The second amendment of the United States Constitution states that U.S. citizens have the right to keep and bear arms. When the Bill of Rights was approved, in 1791, there were a number of reasons why Americans thought the right to own guns was both valid and important. Having guns could --

- enable citizens to organize a militia system
- help in law enforcement
- help prevent the formation of a tyrannical government
- help repel an invasion
- help in self-defense

Today, the second amendment has become controversial. Some people feel it is still extremely important in helping Americans preserve their liberties and gives all citizens the right to use whatever they can to defend themselves. Others believe that today's society is very different from that of the 18th century, when the United States was mostly an agricultural country. Guns, they say, pose a real risk to people who live in urban communities. What do you think? Using the five reasons to own guns, above, write why the second amendment is necessary today **and** why it is outdated. Use the space below and the back of this paper if you need more room.