Lee Ann Potter

“Our founders believed that the study of history and citizenship should be at the core of every American’s education; yet today our children have large and disturbing gaps in their knowledge of history.”

—President George W. Bush, September 17, 2002

“OUR DOCUMENTS: A National Initiative on American History, Civics, and Service” seeks to fill the gaps that President Bush referred to in his 2002 Constitution Day remarks. The project revolves around one hundred milestone documents drawn primarily from the holdings of the National Archives—from the thousands of public laws, Supreme Court decisions, inaugural speeches, treaties, constitutional amendments, and other documents that have influenced the course of U.S. history. Educators and students can participate in this initiative in a number of ways, including integrating the documents into classroom instruction and participating in national competitions.

Integrating the Documents into Classroom Instruction
As a starting point, educators are encouraged to visit www.ourdocuments.gov, view the high-resolution images of the milestone documents, read the transcriptions and brief explanations, share and discuss the documents with students, and develop instructional activities that focus on the documents.

Although each of the one hundred documents can serve as a powerful teaching tool, one teaching method may be more effective with a particular document than another. The following fifteen teaching suggestions may be helpful for introducing the milestone documents (and other primary source documents) to students.

Focus Activity
Introduce document analysis as a regular activity at the beginning of each class period to focus student attention on the day’s topic.

For example: Place a transparency of a document on an overhead projector for students to see as they enter the room; or meet students at the door, hand them a document, and as soon as the bell rings, begin a discussion.

Group 360. Also featured are the Cancelled Check for Alaska, from Records of the Accounting Officers of the Department of the Treasury, Record Group 217; and Thomas Edison’s Patent Drawing for the Electric Lamp, from Records of the Patent and Trademark Office, Record Group 241. All are in the holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration.

One Hundred Milestone Documents in U.S. History
The list begins with the Lee Resolution of June 7, 1776, a simple document resolving that the United Colonies “are, and of right, ought to be free and independent states . . .,” and ends with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a statute that helped fulfill the promise of freedom inherent in the first documents on the list. The remaining milestone documents are among the thousands of public laws, Supreme Court decisions, inaugural speeches, treaties,
Brainstorming Activity
Launch a brainstorming session prior to a new unit of study with a document. This will alert students to topics that they will study.

For example: Distribute one or more documents to students. Ask them what places, names, concepts, and issues are contained in the documents, as well as what questions the documents prompt. Write these on a sheet of butcher paper. Keep this list posted in the room for the duration of the unit. Check off items as the students study them.

Visualization Exercise
Encourage students to visualize another place or time by viewing and analyzing graphical materials.

For example: Post around your classroom photographs, maps, and other visual materials created during the period that you are studying. Change these images as the units change.

Project Inspiration
Let documents serve as examples for student-created projects.

For example: The Original Design of the Great Seal of the United States, milestone document #5 (featured in this article, p. 398), could be used for this purpose. Provide students with a copy of the document, and assign them to research the symbolism contained in the design. Next, ask them to design a seal of their own, integrating modern-day symbols to represent the characteristics that the nation’s founders included in the Great Seal.

Dramatic Presentation Activity
Use documents to inspire dramatic presentations by your students.

For example: Share with students a presidential speech (such as President George Washington’s First Inaugural Speech, milestone document #11), and ask a student volunteer to deliver the speech to the class; or ask a student to present a dramatic reading of a letter; or assign students

The Cancelled Check for Alaska, 1868
to write a script containing quotes from primary source documents.

Writing Activity
Use documents to prompt a student writing activity.
For example: Share with students a letter and ask them to either respond to it or write the “original” letter that may have prompted that one.

Listening Activity
Allow sound recordings to give students the sensation of being present at a historical event.
For example: Dim the lights in your classroom while you play a sound clip from an event, and ask students to describe or draw the scene and/or the emotions in the voices.

Creating a Documentary
Use vintage film footage to encourage student-created documentaries.
For example: In place of a traditional unit assessment, assign student groups to create ten-minute documentaries about the time period they have just studied. Ask them to incorporate film footage, photographs, sound, and quotes from other primary sources.

Cross-Curricular Activity
Use documents to suggest and reinforce collaboration with a colleague in another department on student assignments.
For example: If a physics teacher assigns students to create an invention, share with students a patent drawing, such as Thomas Edison’s Patent Drawing for the Electric Lamp (1880), milestone document #46 (featured in this article). Ask students to draw a patent for their invention along with a specification sheet describing its design and intended purpose. Or share documents with students related to the novels (or authors) that they are reading in language arts.

The Northwest Ordinance, 1787

Continued on page 395
An Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States, North-West of the River Ohio.

BE IT ORDAINED by the United States in Congress assembled, That the said territory, for the purpose of temporary government, be one district; and, however, to be divided into two districts, as future circumstances may, in the opinion of Congress, make expedient.

While ordained by the authority aforesaid, that the states both of resident and non-resident proprietors in the said territory, dying intestate, shall descend to, and be distributed among their children, and the descendants of a deceased child in equal parts; the descendants of a deceased child or grandchild, to take their share of their deceased parent in equal parts among them; and where there shall be no children or descendants, then in equal parts to the next of kin, in equal degrees; and among collaterals, the children of a deceased brother or sister of the intestate, shall have in equal parts among them their deceased parents share; and there shall be no case be a distinction between kindred of the whole and half blood; and in all cases to the widow of the intestate, her third share of the real estate for life, and one third part of the personal estate; and this law relative to defants and dower, shall remain in full force until altered by the legislature of the district. And until the governor and judges shall adopt laws as herein after mentioned, estates in the said territory may be divided or bequested by wills in writing, signed and sealed by him or her, in whom the estate may be, being of full age, and attested by three witnesses; and real estates may be conveyed by levies and releases, or bargain and sale, signed, sealed, and delivered by the person being of full age, in whom the estate may be, and attested by two witnesses, provided such wills shall be duly proved, and such conveyances be acknowledged, as the execution thereof duly proved, and recorded within one year after proper magistrates, courts, and registrars shall be appointed for that purpose; and personal property may be transferred by delivery, saving, however, to the French and Canadian inhabitants, and other foreigners of the Kingdom of France; and the neighbouring villages, who have heretofore professed themselves citizens of Virginia, their laws and customs now in force among them, relative to the defeit and conveyance of property.

It is ordained by the authority aforesaid, that there shall be appointed from time to time, by Congress, a governor, whose commission shall continue in force for the term of three years, unless sooner removed by Congress; he shall reside in the district, and have a freehold estate therein, in one thousand acres of land, while in the exercise of his office.

There shall be appointed from time to time, by Congress, a secretary, whose commission shall continue in force for four years, unless sooner removed, he shall reside in the district, and have a freehold estate therein, in one hundred acres of land, while in the exercise of his office; it shall be his duty to keep and preserve the acts and laws promulged by the legislature, and the public records of the district; and the proceedings of the governor in his executive department; and transmit authentic copies of such acts and proceedings, every six months, to the secretary of Congress: There shall also be appointed a court of three judges, being of age, any two of whom being to form a court, who shall have a common law jurisdiction, and reside in the district, and have such a freehold estate in five hundred acres of land, while in the exercise of their office, and their commissions shall continue in force during good behaviour.

The governor and judges, or a majority of them, shall adopt and publish in the district, such laws of the original states, criminal and civil, as may be necessary, and be suited to the circumstances of the district, and report them to Congress, from time to time, which laws shall be in force in the district until the organization of the general assembly shall, unless disapproved of by Congress; and afterwards the legislature shall have authority to alter them as they shall think fit.

The government for the time being, shall be commander in chief of the militia, appoint and commission all officers in the same, below the rank of general officers; all general officers shall, be appointed and commissioned by Congress.

Previous to the organization of the general assembly, the governor shall appoint such magistrates and other civil officers, as the public interests and necessities shall require for the preservation of the peace of the district, or the punishment of crimes.

After the general assembly shall be organized, the powers and duties of magistrates and other civil officers shall be regulated and defined by the said assembly; but all magistrates and other civil officers, not herein otherwise directed, shall, during the continuance of the assembly, be appointed by the governor.

For the prevention of crimes and injuries, the laws to be adopted or made shall have force in all parts of the district, and for the execution of process, criminal and civil, the governor shall make proper divisions thereof—and he shall proceed from time to time, in writing, to set out the parts of the district in which the crimes shall be extirpated, into counties and townships, subject, however, to such alterations as may thereafter be made by the legislature.

So soon as there shall be five thousand free male inhabitants, of full age, in the district, upon giving proof thereof to the governor, they shall require authority, with time and place, to elect representatives from their counties or townships, to represent them in the general assembly; provided that for every five hundred five male inhabitants there shall be a representative, and, as far as the number of free male inhabitants, the right of representation increases, until the number of representatives shall amount to twenty-five, after which the number and proportion of representatives shall be regulated by the legislature; provided that no person shall be eligible or qualified to sit in the legislature, unless he shall have been a citizen of one of the United States three years, and be a resident in the district, or unless he shall have resided in the district two years, and be either freehold or free and twenty years residence in the district shall be necessary to qualify a man as an elector of a representative.

The representatives then elected, shall serve for the term of two years, and in case of the death of a representative, or removal from office, the governor shall issue a writ to the county or township for which he was a member, to elect another in his stead, to serve for the residue of the term.

The general assembly, or legislature, shall consist of the governor, legislative council, and a house of representatives.

The legislative council shall consist of five members, to continue in office five years, unless sooner removed by Congress, any three of whom to be a quorum, and the meetings of the council shall be continued in an open manner, and by any ten members, to sit: As soon as representatives shall be elected, the governor shall appoint a time and place for them to meet together, and, when met, they shall choose three persons, resident in the district, and such person as shall be a freeman in five hundred acres of land in the district, and their names shall be transferred to Congress; five of whom Congress shall appoint as councilors to serve so long as the legislature shall choose; and any vacancy shall happen in the council, by death or removal from office, the house of representatives shall meet, and shall choose three persons, resident in the district, and such person as shall be a freeman in five hundred acres of land, to fill such vacancy, and return their names to Congress, who shall fill the vacancies as they shall think expedient.
presumptuous, shall have authority to make laws in all cases for the good government of the said territory, not repugnant to the principles and articles in this ordinance established and declared. And all bills having passed by a majority in the house, and by a two-thirds vote of the council, shall be referred to the governor for his assent; but no bill of a legislative nature shall be of any force without his assent. The governor shall have power to convene, prorogue and dissolve the general assembly, when in his opinion it shall be expedient.

The governor, judges, legislative council, secretary, and all other officers as Congress shall appoint in the district, shall take an oath or affirmation of fidelity, and of office, the governor before the president of Congress, and all other officers before the governor. As soon as a legislature shall be formed in the district, the council and house, assembled in one room, shall have authority by joint ballot to elect a delegate to Congress, who shall have a seat in Congress, with a right of debating, but not of voting, during this temporary government.

And for the establishment of the fundamental principles of civil and religious liberty, which form the basis whereon our republic is built, and for the establishment of those principles as the basis of all laws, constitutions, and governments, which forever hereafter shall be formed in the said territory, to provide also for the establishment of states, and permanent government therein, and for their admission to a state in the federal council on an equal footing with the original states, at or as early periods as may be consistent with the general interest.

It is hereby declared and declared by the authority aforesaid, that the following articles shall be considered as articles of compact between the original states and the people and states in the said territory, and forever remain unalterable, unless by common consent, to wit:

Article the First. No person, demoting himself in a peaceable and orderly manner, shall ever be molested on account of his mode of worship or religious sentiments in the said territory.

Article the Second. The inhabitants of the said territory shall always be entitled to the benefits of the writ of habeas corpus, and of the trial by jury, of a representative representation of the people in the legislature, and of judicial proceedings according to the course of the common law; all persons shall be liable to be called for capital offenses, where the proof shall be evident, or the presumption great; all fines shall be moderate, and no cruel or unusual punishments shall be inflicted; no man shall be deprived of his liberty or property but by the judgment of his peers, or the law of the land; and all the public exigencies make it necessary for the common preservation to take any person's property, or to demand his particular service, full compensation shall be made for the same; and in the just preservation of rights and property it is understood and declared, that no law ought ever to be made, or have force in the said territory, that shall in any manner whatever interfere with, or affect private contracts or engagements, bona fide and without fraud previously formed.

Article the Third. Religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged. The utmost good faith shall be observed towards the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and in their property, rights and liberty, they never shall be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress; but laws founded in justice and humanity shall from time to time be made, for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with them.

Article the Fourth. The said territory, and the states which may be formed therein, shall forever remain a part of this confederacy of the United States of America, subject to the articles of confederation, and to such alterations therein as shall be constitutionally made; and to all the acts and ordinances of the United States in Congress assembled, conformable thereto. The inhabitants and settlers in the said territory shall be subject to pay a part of the federal debts contracted or to be contracted, and a proportional part of the expences of government, to be apportioned on them by Congress, according to the scale common rule and method by which apportionments thereof shall be made on the other states, and the taxes for paying their proportion, shall be laid and levied by the authority and direction of the legislature of the said district or districts or new states, as the case may be, within the time agreed upon by the United States in Congress assembled. The legislature of the said district, or new state, shall always interfere with the primary disposal of the soil by the United States in Congress assembled, nor with any regulations Congress may find necessary for securing the title to such soil to the bona fide purchasers. No tax shall be imposed on the property of the United States; nor can a state demand real or personal property from the United States; and the carrying places between the same shall be common highways, and forever free, as well to the inhabitants of the said territory, as to the citizens of the United States, and those of any other state which may be admitted into the confederacy, without any tax, impost or duty thereon.

Article the Fifth. There shall be formed in the said territory, not less than three nor more than five states; and the boundaries of the states, as soon as Virginia shall alter her act of cession and consent to the same, shall become fixed and established as follows, to wit: The western boundary of the said territory shall be bounded by the Mississippis, the Ohio and Wabash rivers; a direct line drawn from the Wabash and Pot Vincents's day north to the territorial line between the United States and Canada, and by the said territorial line to the lake of the Woods and Mississippis. The middle state shall be bounded by the said direct line, the Wabash from Pot Vincents's to the Ohio by the Ohio, by a direct line drawn from the said day south of the Great Miami to the said direct line. The eastern state shall be bounded by the said direct line, the Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the said territorial line. Provided however, and it is further understood and declared, that the boundaries of the said states, shall be subject to alteration, so that if Congress shall hereafter find it expedient, they shall have authority to form one or two states in that part of the said territory which lies north of an east and west line drawn through the forty fourth degree of latitude of lake Michigan; and whenever any of the said states shall have any thousand free inhabitants therein, such state shall be admitted by its delegates into the Congress of the United States, on an equal footing with the original states in all respects whatever; and shall be entitled to form a permanent constitution and state government; Provided the constitution and government so to be formed, shall be republican, and in conformity to the principles contained in this articles; and so as can be consonant with the general interest of the confederacy, such admission shall be delayed at an entire period, and when there may be a sufficient number of free inhabitants in the state, than twenty thousand.

Are the Sixth. There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted. Provided always, that any person escaping into the same from justice in any other state, or being therelawfully claimed in any one of the original states, such fugitives may be lawfully seized and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid.

It is ordained by the authority aforesaid, that the resolutions of the 15th of April, 1784, relative to the subject of this ordinance, and the same are hereby repealed and void and void.

DONE by the UNITED STATES in CONGRESS assembled, the 15th day of July, in the year of our Lord 1787, and of the independence the 12th.

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Current Events Activity (What Is Past Is Prologue)
Use documents to launch a discussion about an issue or news event.
For example: Select a document that relates to a person, event, or place that is currently in the news. Strip the document of information revealing the date of its creation and distribute it to students. Ask students to speculate on when it was created.

Drawing Connections Activity
Use documents to help students recognize cause and effect relationships.
For example: Provide students with two seemingly unrelated documents and ask them to connect them using other documents. One possibility might be to ask students how the Lee Resolution (milestone document #1) and the Homestead Act (milestone document #3) are connected. Student answers might include, “Three committees were set up as a result of the Lee Resolution. One committee drafted the Declaration of Independence (milestone document #2). Its principle author was Thomas Jefferson. He was the president at the time of the Louisiana Purchase (milestone document #18). The territory that became part of the United States as a result of the Louisiana Purchase Treaty included much of the land that became available for settlement under the Homestead Act.”

Integrating Geography Activity
Use documents to emphasize the site of significant events.
For example: Post a large map of the United States or of the world on the classroom wall. Each time a new milestone document is discussed, place a pin on the location where the specific document was created or where its impact was the greatest. The Northwest Ordinance, milestone document #8 (featured in this article), could be used for this purpose. Ask students to first locate the northwestern United States, and then provide the students with a copy of the document. Ask them how their perception of the “northwest” had changed.

Small-Group Hypothesis Activity
Use documents to encourage creative thinking about the significance of a particular document.
For example: Using the Cancelled Check for Alaska, milestone document

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War Department General Order 143: Creation of the U.S. Colored Troops (1863)
Gettysburg Address (1863)**
Wade-Davis Bill (1864)
President Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address (1865)**
Articles of Agreement Relating to the Surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia (1865)
Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Abolition of Slavery (1865)
Check for the Purchase of Alaska (1868)
Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868)
Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Civil Rights (1868)
Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Voting Rights (1870)
Act Establishing Yellowstone National Park (1872)
Thomas Edison’s Patent Drawing for the Electric Lamp (1880)
Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)
Pendleton Act (1883)
Interstate-Commerce Act (1887)
Dawes Act (1887)
Sherman Anti-Trust Act (1890)
Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)
De Lome Letter (1898)
Joint Resolution to Provide for Annexing the Hawaiian Islands to the United States (1898)
Platt Amendment (1903)
Theodore Roosevelt’s Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine (1905)
Sixteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Federal Income Tax (1913)
Seventeenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Direct Election of U.S. Senators (1913)
Keating-Owen Child Labor Act of (1916)
Zimmermann Telegram (1917)
Joint Address to Congress Leading to a Declaration of War Against Germany (1917)
President Woodrow Wilson’s 14 Points (1918)
Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Women’s Right to Vote (1920)
Boulder Canyon Project Act (1928)
Tennessee Valley Authority Act (1933)
National Industrial Recovery Act (1933)
National Labor Relations Act (1935)
Social Security Act (1935)
President Franklin Roosevelt’s Radio Address unveiling second half of the New Deal (1936)
President Franklin Roosevelt’s Annual Message to Congress (1941)
Lend Lease Act (1941)
Executive Order 8802: Prohibition of Discrimination in the Defense

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Industry (1941)
- Joint Address to Congress Leading to a Declaration of War Against Japan (1941)
- Executive Order 9066: Japanese Relocation Order (1942)
- General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Order of the Day (1944)
- Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (1944)
- Manhattan Project Notebook (1945)
- Surrender of Germany (1945)
- United Nations Charter (1945)
- Surrender of Japan (1945)
- Truman Doctrine (1947)
- Marshall Plan (1948)
- Press Release Announcing U.S. Recognition of Israel (1948)
- Executive Order 9981: Desegregation of the Armed Forces (1948)
- Armistice Agreement for the Restoration of the South Korean State (1953)
- Senate Resolution 301: Censure of Senator Joseph McCarthy (1954)
- Brown v. Board of Education (1954)
- National Interstate and Defense Highways Act (1956)
- Executive Order 10730: Desegregation of Central High School (1957)
- President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Farewell Address (1961)
- President John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address (1961)
- Executive Order 10924: Establishment of the Peace Corps. (1961)
- Transcript of John Glenn’s Official Communication with the Command Center (1962)
- Aerial Photograph of Missiles in Cuba (1962)
- Test Ban Treaty (1963)
- Official Program for the March on Washington (1963)
- Civil Rights Act (1964)
- Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964)
- Social Security Act Amendments (1965)
- Voting Rights Act (1965)

All of these milestone documents are in the holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration except where noted:
* in the holdings of the New York Public Library
** in the holdings of the Library of Congress

* #41 (featured in this article), divide students into small groups. Provide them with a copy of the document, and ask them to consider “what if” that document never existed. Encourage them to share their scenarios with the class.

Self-Reflective Exercise
Use documents to prompt student understanding about how government actions and/or events of the past affect the students’ lives today.

For example: Provide students with copies of the Nineteenth Amendment (milestone document #63) and the Voting Rights Act (milestone document #100), and ask them to consider the documents’ implications on their lives.

Assessment
Incorporate documents into document-based essay questions to assess student knowledge of a topic or event.

For example: Provide students with four documents that relate to westward expansion, such as, the Northwest Ordinance (milestone document #8), the Homestead Act (milestone document #3), the Pacific Railway Act (milestone document #32), and the Morrill Act (milestone document #33). Ask them to use the information contained in the documents and their knowledge of the subject to write an essay explaining the federal government’s role in the settling of the West.

Participating in National Competitions
Further involvement in the Our Documents initiative can include participation in national competitions—one for educators and one for students.

Teaching Our Documents: A National History Day Competition for Educators invites teachers to develop and test a classroom lesson focusing on one or several of the one hundred Milestone Documents in U.S. history. Lessons should engage students in a meaningful examination of the documents within their historical context. Complete contest rules and submission guidelines are

Edison’s Patent Drawing for the Electric Lamp, 1880

Social Education 10
The Great Seal, 1782

Available online at www.ourdocuments.gov. Awards will be announced at the annual National History Day national competition June 15-19, 2003, at the University of Maryland at College Park.

Understanding Our Documents: A National History Day Competition for Students invites students in grades 6-12 to create an exhibit, documentary, paper, or performance focusing on one or more of the milestone documents and its relationship to this year’s National History Day theme, “Rights and Responsibilities in History.” Projects can be created individually, or by a group of up to five students. Student winners will also be announced at the national contest held at the University of Maryland at College Park, June 15-19, 2003. For more information about National History Day, visit the NHD web site at www.nationalhistoryday.org.

Lee Ann Potter is the head of Education and Volunteer Programs at the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. She serves as the editor for “Teaching with Documents,” a regular department of Social Education. You may reproduce the documents shown here in any quantity.

Note to the teacher

The documents featured in this article include the Adoption of the Lee Resolution, the Original Design of the Great Seal of the United States, and the Northwest Ordinance. These three come from Records of the Continental and Confederation Congresses and the Constitutional Convention, 1774-1789, Record...
Resolved. That these colonies are absolutely
ought to be free and independent states;
that they are absolved from all allegiance
to the British crown and that all political
connection between them and the State of
Great Britain is and ought to be totally
dissolved.

Resolution of 4 July 1776
须民立决议，同意
Agreed to July 2, 1776

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