

Encouraging Students to Consider How News of the Constitution First Spread

Lee Ann Potter

On May 27, 1787, just two days after the federal convention assembling in Philadelphia had finally achieved a quorum, George Mason, one of the delegates from Virginia, wrote a letter to his son. In it, he reported that George Washington had been unanimously appointed president of the convention, that Major Jackson had been appointed secretary by a vote of five states to two, that the credentials of the delegates were read, and that a committee had been appointed to establish the rules of the proceedings.

In addition he wrote,

It is expected our doors will be shut, and communications upon the business of the Convention be forbidden during its sitting. This I think myself a proper precaution to prevent mistakes and misrepresentation until the business shall have been completed, when the whole may have a very different complexion from that in which the several crude and indigested parts might in their first shape appear if submitted to the public eye.¹

He was right. Two days later, the delegates agreed, “That nothing spoken in the House be printed, or otherwise published, or communicated without leave.”²

While the delegates worked throughout the summer, they did so in secret. But, almost immediately after the delegates finished their work and signed the Constitution on September 17, the delegates and the press ensured that its complete text was widely shared.

On the morning of September 19th, the Constitution appeared in five Philadelphia newspapers, including *The Pennsylvania Packet*, and *Daily Advertiser*.³ It appeared in two other

Philadelphia papers on September 20 and 21. Also on the 21st, the Constitution appeared in at least two out-of-town newspapers, the *New York Daily Advertiser* and the *New-York Packet*.

On Saturday, September 22, the Constitution and the supporting documents (including the resolution of the Convention and the letter of transmittal from George Washington that accompanied the document to Congress) were printed by John McLean in New York as a separate four-page *Supplement to the Independent Journal* that is featured in this article.⁴

In 1787, no newspapers were printed on Sundays, so none appeared on September 23. But the following week saw the Constitution printed in the *Baltimore Maryland Journal*, the *Trenton (NJ) Weekly Mercury*, *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, and more. And it was published in German by two Pennsylvania papers, *The Gemeinnutzige Philadelphische Correspondenz* and the *Neue Unpartheyische Lancaster Zeitung*.

By October 6, less than three weeks after the Federal Convention, at least 55 of the approximately 80 newspapers of the period had printed the

entire Constitution and in most cases, its accompanying documents, as well.

In the following two weeks there were six more known newspaper printings. And before the first of the states, Delaware, met to discuss ratification on December 3, the printings of the Constitution likely totaled more than 150.⁵

In addition to newspapers making the Constitution available both on their pages and in the form of broadsides produced on their printing presses, the delegates also shared it widely. On September 18, George Washington sent two copies of it to France—to Thomas Jefferson (who was serving as the U.S. Minister to France) and to the Marquis de Lafayette (the French aristocrat and military leader who fought in the American Revolution and became a close friend of Washington).

To Lafayette, he wrote, “In the midst of hurry, and in the moment of my departure from this City I address this letter to you. The principal, indeed the only design of it is, to fulfil [*sic*] the promise I made that I would send you the proceedings of the Federal Convention as soon as the business of it was closed.” And he continued,

It is the production of four months deliberation. It is now a Child of fortune, to be fostered by some and buffeted [*sic*] by

continued on page 237

Proceedings of the
The United States.

SUPPLEMENT TO THE INDEPENDENT JOURNAL,

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 1787.

Copy of the Report of the Deliberation of the
FEDERAL CONVENTION.

In Convention, September 17, 1787.

S I R,

WE have now the honor to submit to the consideration of the United States in Congress assembled, that Constitution which has appeared to us the most advisable.

The friends of our country have long seen and desired, that the power of making war, peace and treaties, that of levying money and regulating commerce, and the corresponding executive and judicial authorities should be fully and effectually united in the general government of the Union; but the imprudence of delegating such extensive trust to one body of men is evident—Hence results the necessity of a different organization.

It is obviously impracticable in the federal government of these States, to secure all rights of independent sovereignty to each, and yet preserve for the interest and safety of all—Individuals entering into society, must give up a share of liberty to procure the rest. The magnitude of the sacrifice must depend as well on situation and circumstances, as on the object to be obtained. It is in all cases difficult to draw with precision the line between those rights which must be surrendered, and those which may be reserved; and on the present occasion this difficulty was increased by a difference among the several States in their situation, extent, habits, and particular interests.

In all our deliberations on this subject we kept steadily in our view, that which appears to us the greatest interest of every true American, the consolidation of our Union, in which is involved our prosperity, felicity, safety, perhaps our national existence. This important consideration, seriously and deeply impressed on our minds, led each State in the Convention to be less rigid in points of inferior magnitude, than might have been otherwise expected; and thus the Constitution, which we now present, is the result of a spirit of amity, and of that mutual deference and concession which the peculiarity of our political situation rendered indispensable.

That it will meet the full and entire approbation of every State is not perhaps to be expected; but each will doubtless consider, that had no interests been above suspicion, the consequences might have been particularly disagreeable or injurious to others; that it is liable to as few exceptions as could reasonably have been expected, we hope and believe; that it may promote the lasting welfare of that country so dear to us all, and secure her freedom and happiness, is our most ardent wish.

With great respect,

We have the honor to be

S I R,

Your Excellency's most

Obedient and humble servant,

George Washington, President.

By unanimous Order of the Convention,

HIS EXCELLENCY

The President of Congress.

WE the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common Defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this CONSTITUTION for the United States of America.

ARTICLE I.

Section 1. ALL legislative powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.

Section 2. The House of Representatives shall be composed of members chosen every second year by the people of the several States, and the electors in each State shall have the qualifications requisite for electors of the most numerous branch of the State Legislature.

No person shall be a Representative who shall not have attained to the age of twenty-five years, and been seven years a citizen of the United States, and who shall not, when elected, be an Inhabitant of that State in which he shall be chosen.

Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all other persons. The actual enumeration shall be made within three years after the first meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent term of ten years, in such manner as they shall by law direct. The number of Representatives shall not exceed one for every thirty thousand, but each State shall have at least one Representative; and until such enumeration shall be made, the State of New-Hampshire shall be entitled to three, Massachusetts eight, Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations one, Connecticut five, New-York six, New-Jersey four, Pennsylvania eight, Delaware one, Maryland six, Virginia ten, North-Carolina five, South-Carolina five, and Georgia three.

When vacancies happen in the representation from any State, the Executive authority thereof shall fill such vacancies.

The House of Representatives shall chuse their Speaker and other officers; and shall have the sole power of impeachment.

Section 3. The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State, chosen by the Legislature thereof, for six years; and each Senator shall have one vote.

Immediately after they shall be assembled in consequence of the first election, they shall be divided as equally as may be into three classes. The term of the Senators first chosen shall be vacated at the expiration of the second year, of the second class at the expiration of the fourth year, and of the third class at the expiration of the sixth year, so that one-third may be chosen every second year; and if vacancies happen by resignation, or otherwise, during the recess of the Legislature of any State, the Executive thereof may make temporary appointments until the next meeting of the Legislature, which shall then fill such vacancies.

No person shall be a Senator who shall not have attained to the age of thirty years, and been nine years a citizen of the United States, and who shall not, when elected, be an Inhabitant of that State for which he shall be chosen.

The Vice-President of the United States shall be President of the Senate, but shall have no vote, unless they be equally divided.

The Senate shall chuse their other officers, and also a President pro tempore, in the absence of the Vice-President, or when he shall exercise the office of President of the United States.

The Senate shall have the sole power to try all impeachments. When sitting for that purpose, they shall be on oath or affirmation. When the President of the United States is tried, the Chief Justice shall preside: And no person shall be convicted without the concurrence of two-thirds of the members present.

Judgment in cases of impeachment shall not extend further than to removal from office, and disqualification to hold and enjoy any office of honor, trust or profit under the United States; but the party convicted shall nevertheless be liable and subject to indictment, trial, judgment and punishment, according to law.

Section 4. The times, places and manner of holding elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof; but the Congress may at any time by law make or alter such regulations, except as to the places of choosing Senators.

THE

THE STATE OF NEW YORK, in SENATE,
January 10, 1894.

REPORT OF THE COMMISSIONERS OF THE LAND OFFICE,
IN ANSWER TO A RESOLUTION PASSED BY THE SENATE
MAY 18, 1893.

ALBANY: J. B. LIPPINCOTT & COMPANY, PRINTERS.
1894.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I. GENERAL STATEMENT OF THE LAND OFFICE, 1893-94.

CHAPTER II. LANDS BELONGING TO THE STATE.

CHAPTER III. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL COUNTIES.

CHAPTER IV. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL TOWNS.

CHAPTER V. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL VILLAGES.

CHAPTER VI. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL CITIES.

CHAPTER VII. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL TOWNSHIPS.

CHAPTER VIII. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL CITIES AND VILLAGES.

CHAPTER IX. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL TOWNSHIPS AND CITIES.

CHAPTER X. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL CITIES AND VILLAGES.

CHAPTER XI. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL TOWNSHIPS AND CITIES.

CHAPTER XII. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL CITIES AND VILLAGES.

CHAPTER XIII. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL TOWNSHIPS AND CITIES.

CHAPTER XIV. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL CITIES AND VILLAGES.

CHAPTER XV. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL TOWNSHIPS AND CITIES.

CHAPTER XVI. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL CITIES AND VILLAGES.

CHAPTER XVII. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL TOWNSHIPS AND CITIES.

CHAPTER XVIII. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL CITIES AND VILLAGES.

CHAPTER XIX. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL TOWNSHIPS AND CITIES.

CHAPTER XX. LANDS BELONGING TO THE SEVERAL CITIES AND VILLAGES.

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CHAPTER I. GENERAL STATEMENT OF THE LAND OFFICE, 1893-94.

The Commission of the Land Office has the honor to acknowledge the receipt of the report of the Commission of the Land Office for the year 1893-94, and to express its appreciation of the thoroughness and accuracy of the same. The report shows that the Commission has done its duty in a most efficient manner, and has made a valuable contribution to the knowledge of the land resources of the State.

The Commission has been successful in its efforts to secure a more complete and accurate knowledge of the land resources of the State, and has made a valuable contribution to the knowledge of the land resources of the State. The Commission has been successful in its efforts to secure a more complete and accurate knowledge of the land resources of the State, and has made a valuable contribution to the knowledge of the land resources of the State.

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SOURCES AND STRATEGIES

from page 234

others. what will be the General opinion on, or the reception of it, is not for me to, decide, nor shall I say any thing [sic] for or against it—if it be good I suppose it will work its way good—if bad it will recoil on the Framers.⁶

James Madison sent the Constitution as an enclosure with a letter to Edmund Pendleton, a friend and colleague who had served in the First Continental Congress, on September 20. He wrote,

I have waited for this opportunity of inclosing you a copy of

the proposed Constitution for the U. States. I forbear to make any observations on it; either on the side of its merits or its faults. The best Judges of both will be those who can combine with a knowledge of the collective & permanent interest of America, a freedom from the bias resulting from a participation in the work.⁷

Begin a class discussion with your students about how they hear and access news today. Then share with them information from this article along with copies of (or links to) the four-page *Supplement to the Independent Journal*. Lead a class discussion with students about the supplement. They might find it interesting

that the newspaper simply reprinted the complete text of the Constitution and the accompanying documents without additional editorial information or reaction. You may also wish to share the letters from Mason, Washington, and Madison and encourage a discussion about reflection time and its value in allowing discourse and the forming of opinions.

You might also encourage students to conduct original research to find out more about how news of the Constitution spread. For example, they could investigate its appearance in foreign newspapers or its mention in other manuscript collections. They might also look into when newspapers began publishing reactions to the document. Informing them that the first of the 85 Federalist Papers, written

Additional Constitution-related Resources from the Library of Congress



In addition to newspapers and manuscript collections such as those featured in this Sources and Strategies article, the Library of Congress makes available numerous other Constitution-related resources that might be particularly useful as you and your students prepare for **Constitution Day, September 17**. Some relate specifically to the U.S. Constitution, while others relate to the founding documents of other nations, including sovereign Indian nations. Here are four that may be of particular interest:

Research Guide

Constitution of the United States: Primary Documents in American History

<https://guides.loc.gov/constitution>

This guide provides access to digital collections at the Library of Congress, external websites, and print materials related to the Constitution.

Research Guide

Framing of the United States Constitution: A Beginner's Guide

<https://guides.loc.gov/framing-us-constitution>

This guide contains sources regarding the creation and ratification of the United States Constitution.

The Constitution Annotated

<https://constitution.congress.gov>

The Constitution Annotated provides a comprehensive overview of how the Constitution has been interpreted over time. It includes legal analysis and interpretation of the United States Constitution based on a comprehensive review of Supreme Court case law.

Native American Constitutions and Legal Materials

<https://loc.gov/collections/native-american-constitutions-and-legal-materials/>

This Law Library of Congress collection contains a variety of Native American legal materials. The Law Library holds most of the laws and constitutions from the early nineteenth century produced by the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole who were forced to leave the Southeast for the Indian Territory after passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830. Some of these documents are in the vernacular languages of the tribes. This collection includes nineteenth-century items and those constitutions and charters drafted after the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act.

The recognition of Indian nations or tribes by the federal government formally began with the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. Today, there are 574 federally recognized sovereign Indian nations and tribes operating under constitutions and charters within the U.S. federal and state structure. The constitutional organization of tribal entities is expressed in the corporate component such as Community, Association, or Community Association, Native Village, Traditional Council, Village of Council, or Corporation added to the name of the tribe.

by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay was published on October 27, 1787, might provide them with a good start. They might look into which newspapers carried the essays. One was the *Independent Journal*, responsible for printing the Supplement featured in this article. 🌐

Notes

1. For the text of George Mason's letter to his son, see The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787 (Farrand's Records): <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llfr&fileName=003/llfr003.db&recNum=36>.
2. See The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787 (Farrand's Records): <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llfr&fileName=001/llfr001.db&recNum=42>.
3. For digitized images of The Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser, see: www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3b06077/ and www.loc.gov/item/2005692143/.
4. For digitized images of the Supplement to the Independent Journal, see: www.loc.gov/resource/bdsdcc.n002001/?st=gallery.
5. For additional information about the printing history of the Constitution, see Rapport, Leonard. "Printing the Constitution: The Convention and Newspaper Imprints, August-November 1787," Prologue, Fall 1970; available at: rapport-full-article.pdf (wisc.edu).
6. For the letterbook copy of George Washington's letter to Lafayette, see: www.loc.gov/resource/mgw2.014/?sp=154. For his letter to Thomas Jefferson, see: www.loc.gov/resource/mgw2.014/?sp=155.
7. For James Madison's letter to Edmund Pendleton, see: www.loc.gov/item/mjm023129/.
8. See also Lee Ann Potter, "Resolution and Letter to Congress from the Constitutional Convention," *Social Education* (Sept 2005).



If you try these suggestions, or a variation of them, with your students, tell us about your experience! During the last week of September, the Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog at blogs.loc.gov/teachers/ will feature a post tied to this article and we invite you to comment and share your teaching strategies.



LEE ANN POTTER is the Director of Professional Learning and Outreach Initiatives at the Library of Congress and serves as the editor of the "Sources and Strategies" feature. For more information on the education programs of the Library of Congress, please visit www.loc.gov/teachers/.



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Democracy is not a Spectator Sport	Teaching the 2020 Election: Rights and Responsibilities
Design Thinking and the C3 Framework: Social Studies Possibilities!	Teaching the EU: Bringing Modern Europe to your Classroom
Educator Strategies for Addressing Racism and Current Issues: A Perspectives Consciousness Approach	Teaching with Primary Sources to Prepare for Civic Engagement
From Headline to Homework: Teaching Current Events Through Anti-Bias Framework	U.S. Census Bureau: Statistics in Schools
Hands-on Human Geography for a Rapidly Changing Planet	Unsettling Narratives: Teaching About the Genocide of Indigenous Peoples
"IDMifying" Inquiry Instruction in Your Social Studies Methods Course	Using Music to Teach America's Wars
The Indigenous Land You Live On: Going Beyond Territory Acknowledgements	Using Music to Teach Social Protest and Social Change
KidCitizen: See, Think, and Wonder with Primary Sources	Using Popular Music in the Social Studies Classroom
The Knowledge Gap: What It Is and How to Narrow It	Using Relevant Children's Literature in the Elementary Social Studies Classroom
Lessons Learned from Controversies around the Country in World Religions Classes	What if Everything You Knew about Hinduism was Wrong?
The Library of Congress for Teachers: "Layer Upon Layer of Awesome"	Woodstock at 50: The 1960s and the Transformation of American Society Parts 1–4.
	Working Toward a Culturally Relevant Classroom
	Young People are Talking about Politics, Whether or Not They're in our Classrooms

www.socialstudies.org/professional-learning/demand-video-library