

# The Constitution In Action

Lee Ann Potter

## Question:

*What do the following historical documents have in common?*

- An 1847 credential certificate naming Sam Houston as an elected Senator from Texas ;
- A 1904 patent drawing for a game board; and
- A 1958 letter to President Dwight Eisenhower suggesting a new design for the American flag following the admission of Alaska to the Union.

## Answer:

*The Constitution, of course!*

Student visitors to the new Constitution in Action Learning Lab in the Boeing Learning Center at the National Archives would have little trouble coming up with this correct answer. Middle school students take on the roles of archivists and researchers collecting and analyzing primary sources from the holdings of the National Archives. Through this experience they gain a greater understanding of the importance of the Constitution to the operation of our government and to our daily lives.

The Constitution in Action Lab is the latest addition to the National Archives Experience in the agency's flagship building on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Tested during the spring of 2007, the lab will open for regular sessions this month, providing a whole new definition to the words "field trip."

The trip to the National Archives really begins back in the classroom. There, groups of up to 36 students are divided into 6 teams, and each team is assigned a particular segment of the Constitution about which they will

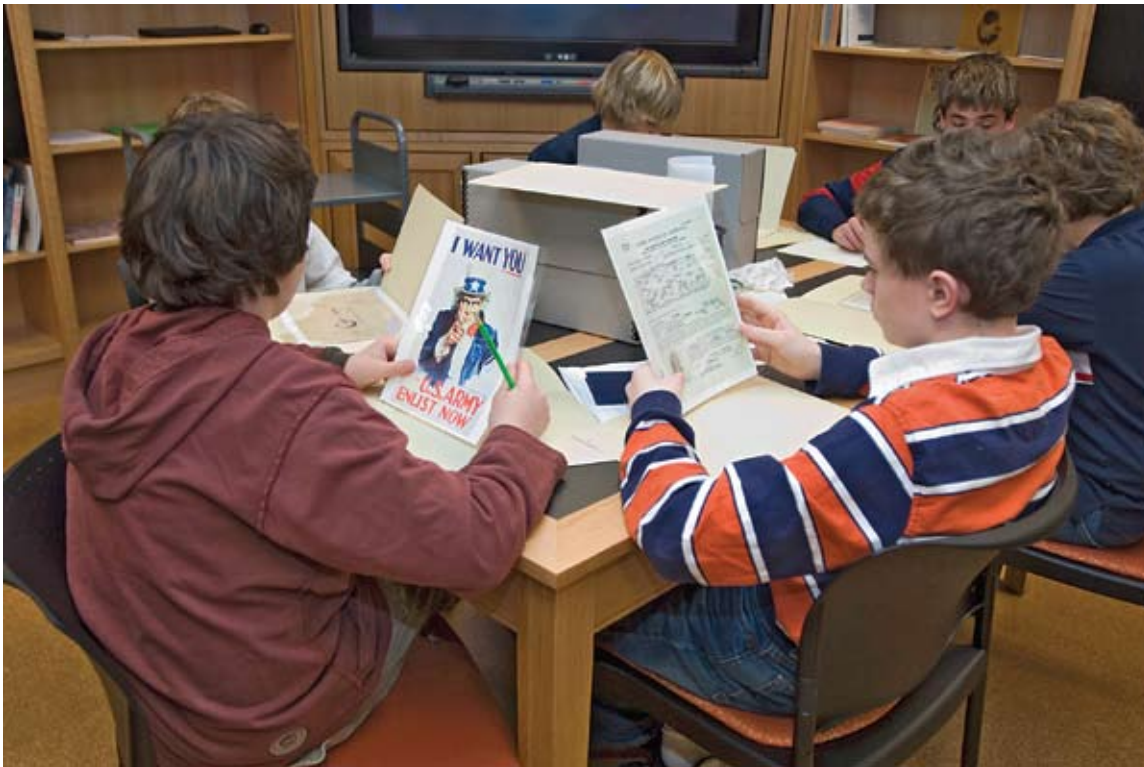
become experts. In class, prior to the fieldtrip experience, students study the charter document and become familiar with its organization, content, and significance. Before they get on the bus, they know they are going to be participating in a 2-hour activity that has something to do with the Constitution, but exact details are deliberately kept a mystery.

So when the students are ushered into the "briefing room," there is an air of expectation. An education specialist sets the scene and starts the film that takes the students on a journey inside the Oval Office (filming was made possible thanks to the re-creation of the Oval Office located in the Jimmy Carter Library in Atlanta, Georgia). A fictitious president, whose face is never shown on camera, is meeting with "Bob," his historically-challenged communications director. In one hour, Bob is scheduled to announce the administration's Constitution Day campaign, but Bob reports that he is not ready. The president helps Bob understand the key message of the campaign: that the Constitution is not simply an

old document, but that it has been, and continues to be, an active document in all of our lives. Bob and the president discuss a number of instances of the Constitution in action, but Bob needs more examples, and he hasn't got much time. So the president tells him to relax, that there is likely to be a group of young researchers at the National Archives who can help him locate more examples of the Constitution in action. The film ends with the president picking up the telephone receiver, as if to call on the students watching the film.

In the lab, the student teams, comprised of one archivist and up to five researchers each, begin their work. The student archivists are taken into a mock-up of an archival stack area, invited to wear stack coats, and briefed on records management issues. They are also reminded of the responsibilities of an archivist—to both preserve documents and make them accessible. The student archivists are to locate documents and deliver them to their researcher classmates. At the same time, the student researchers are taken to a mock up of the Archives central reading room, complete with cork floors, where they are briefed on strategies for effectively analyzing primary source documents.

When the student archivists have located their documents, contained among dozens of acid-free archival boxes, they place their boxes on carts and wheel them into the reading room for their teammates. At this point, the archivists and the researchers work together to analyze 12-15 documents that relate to their



The documents that the students study in the Learning Lab come in a variety of media including posters, photographs, and textual records.

segment of the Constitution. Their job is threefold: (1) to analyze and discuss their documents, (2) select one that they feel best illustrates a clause contained in their segment, and (3) explain how the document helps to make sense of one of the Constitution's big ideas. The big ideas include checks and balances, separation of powers, federalism, representative government, civic responsibility, and more.

Team one, for example, is assigned Article 1, sections 1-7, and one of the documents they encounter is Sam Houston's credential certificate (see page 229). Their familiarity with the Constitution may allow them to see this document as the fulfillment of what the framers meant when they wrote in Article 1, 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." If they have really been studying their Constitution, the students will also note that had Houston served after ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment in 1913, he would have been elected by the people of Texas, rather than the state legislature. In their team's discussion, they may also conclude that the document also helps to illustrate the

big idea of representative government.

Team two, focused on Article 1, sections 8-10, will come across the game board patent (see page 230). While the first thing that comes to their minds may be similarities to the game they know as Monopoly, once they have carefully read Article 1, section 8, students may see this document as being related to the clause that states Congress has the power to "promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries." Students may conclude that this power allowed Congress to create the Patent and Trademark Office that issues patent protection to inventors. Big ideas related to this document are not as obvious as with many of the others, thus the student discussions reflect genuine understanding—they know what it's not, so figuring out what it *is* becomes the real challenge.

Members of team five become the experts on Article 4. When they come across the letter and drawing to President Eisenhower (see page 230), they are reminded that in Article IV, section 3, our Constitution specifically says "New States may be admitted by the Congress

into this Union." Though the letter with its flag design does not explain the process, it is an unexpected reminder of important details associated with the admission of new states. The child's letter prompts many student teams to discuss civic responsibility; they see this big idea in the action taken by the young girl as she wrote to the president with her ideas.

Members of teams three, five, and six will also explore documents and determine their relevance. Their documents may be letters, photographs, acts of Congress, Supreme Court decisions, executive orders, or others. Once they have completed their tasks, each of the student teams select a spokesperson who will visit one of six computer stations in the reading room from which to send Bob a thumbnail image of their selected document and a voice mail message explaining the significance of their selection. When all of the student teams have contacted Bob, the archivists return the documents to the stack area, remove their stack coats, and join the student researchers in the briefing room. They have arrived at Bob's press conference when he is about to launch the Constitution in Action campaign. When

# Boeing Learning Center at the National Archives Building

## Overview

### Main objectives

- To provide educators and parents with methods and materials for using primary sources as teaching tools.
- To provide students with engaging opportunities to practice historical thinking skills and work directly with primary sources to learn historical content.
- To provide members of the general public with engaging activities that introduce them to the holdings of the National Archives and encourage further research.

### Components

1. ReSource Room—This is a materials headquarters where educators and parents can copy document facsimiles and exercises, preview materials available for sale in the Archives store, learn more about what the National Archives has to offer, exchange ideas with others, and where families can participate in onsite Archival Adventures.
2. Learning Lab—This space provides an onsite peak experience related to the U.S. Constitution for middle school students in an authentic environment that is linked to pre-visit and post-visit in-class activities.

### Key features

- Documents in a variety of formats (written documents, photographs, maps, cartoons, sound recordings, motion pictures);
- Methods and materials relate to national curriculum standards;
- Documents drive all of the activities and programs;
- Hands-on (Hollinger boxes, white gloves, Mylar sleeves);
- Welcoming atmosphere provided by trained volunteer docents and staff members.

### Logistics

- The Learning Center is located just steps from the Rotunda, on the west side of the exhibits level of the National Archives Building.
- The ReSource Room is open Monday-Saturday, 10am to 4pm, reservations are not necessary.
- The Learning Lab is open Monday-Friday and will offer sessions at 10am and 12:30pm; reservations are required.
- For more information, send an e-mail message to [education@nara.gov](mailto:education@nara.gov).

*The Learning Center, which consists of the ReSource Room and the new Learning Lab, is part of the National Archives Experience, a set of seven interconnected components that provide a variety of ways of exploring America's records and uncovering the stories they contain. Located in the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C., the Learning Center is the result of a partnership with the agency, the Foundation for the National Archives, Gallagher and Associates, Northern Light Production, and Fablevision.*

he says “roll the film,” the students are surprised to find that Bob’s film actually features their selected documents and their voices—and the credits roll with their names!


In April 2007, 18 test groups took part in the Learning Lab’s pilot program. The 464 participants—mainly students and teachers—included fifth-grade boys, eighth-grade English as a Second Language (ESL) students, 11th-graders enrolled in an International Baccalaureate program, Teaching American History Grant recipients, and more.

Their reactions to the lab were outstanding; they confirmed that the curricular objectives set for the experience were being met. Students were practicing historical thinking skills, demonstrating understanding of the Constitution, and working collaboratively. The archives’ education team was particularly excited by the response from one Fairfax County, Virginia teacher, whose plans reflect the hopes that the National Archives education team has for this onsite experience:

While taking part in this pilot, we have been discussing taking a new approach to teaching our 7th grade curriculum next year. It would involve not only the use of more primary documents throughout the units that we teach, but also relating these documents to the parts of the Constitution that they represent. In this method, we are teaching as we would, but also tying in the Constitution for 8th grade preparation. This can also show students that a document written over 200 years ago is present throughout all of U.S. History.

Additionally, in their evaluations of the pilot program, both teachers and students commented on the value of the lab’s details. From the cork floor to the chairs in the briefing room, from the stack coats to the acid-free boxes, from the full color facsimiles to the white gloves, they found that the space itself encouraged student engagement in the content, just as the team hoped it would.



The archives staff is well aware that not every group of students who comes to the National Archives has the time to commit to this activity both onsite and in the classroom, and early indications are that the demand for sessions will exceed our available supply (staff will be conducting two labs each day). But the team is hopeful that it will inspire creative lessons that provide students with engaging opportunities to practice historical thinking skills and work directly with primary sources to learn. To this end, the team posted a modified version of the Constitution in Action lab activity, entitled the *U.S. Constitution Workshop*, on the National Archives website at [www.archives.gov/education/lessons/constitution-workshop/index.html](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/constitution-workshop/index.html). 

Photograph by Lisa Helfert



After student teams have selected a sample document, they elect a spokesperson who uses interactive computer software to send a voice message and thumbnail image of the document to the president's communications director.

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## For more information

The Learning Lab is part of the new Learning Center in the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. The Center's other component is the ReSource Room, designed for teachers, parents, and general visitors. For additional information about the ReSource room, please see "Sharing the Excitement of History," an article featured in the spring 2007 issue of *Prologue Magazine*, the National Archives quarterly, at [www.archives.gov/education/lessons/constitution-workshop/index.html](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/constitution-workshop/index.html).

For more information about the National Archives new strategic plan, in which civic education plays an important role, and the agency's nationwide education programs, see "Civic Education: Lighting the Path to the Future," by Allen Weinstein, Archivist of the United States, also in the spring 2007 issue of *Prologue Magazine*, at [www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/spring/archivist.html](http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/spring/archivist.html).

## About the featured documents

The three documents featured in this article are in the holdings of the National Archives and are available online in the ARC database at [www.archives.gov/research/arc](http://www.archives.gov/research/arc).

The 1847 credential certificate naming Sam Houston as an elected Senator from Texas comes from Record Group 46: Records of the U.S. Senate and is **ARC #306205**.

The 1904 patent drawing for a game board comes from Record Group 241: Records of the Patent and Trademark Office, 1836 -1973 and is **ARC #595519**.

And the 1958 letter to President Dwight Eisenhower suggesting a new design for the American flag following the admission of Alaska to the Union comes from the White House Central Files at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library and is **ARC #594335**.

Executive Office  
State of Texas

I the undersigned Governor of the State  
aforesaid do Certify that at an Election  
by Joint Ballot of both Houses of the  
Legislature of said State held on the  
fifteenth day of December, 1847. Sam  
Houston was elected a Senator to  
represent the State of Texas in the  
Congress of the United States for  
the term of six years - from the 4<sup>th</sup> of March  
1847 —



In testimony whereof I have  
caused the Seal of the State  
to be hereunto affixed —

Done at Austin this fif-  
teenth day of December A. D.  
One thousand Eight hundred  
and Forty Seven.

By the Governor of Pinckney Anderson  
David G Burnett

Secretary of State



