

George Washington's Printed Draft of the Constitution and Mike Wilkins's *Preamble*

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On Monday, July 23, 1787, nearly two months after the Constitutional Convention began in Philadelphia, delegates established a Committee of Detail, with John Rutledge of South Carolina as its chairman. Committee members included Nathaniel Gorham (MA), Oliver Ellsworth (CT), Edmund Randolph (VA), and James Wilson (PA). Their job was to prepare a report and a printed draft of a Constitution “conformable to the proceedings of the convention.” In other words, they were to bring some sort of order to the resolutions that had been approved to date.

Two weeks later, on August 6, the committee did submit a printed rough draft to the delegates for their consideration. In this draft, the Preamble began, as the Articles of Confederation had, with a list of the 13 states in order from north to south. It read

We the People of the States of New-Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode-Island and Providence Plantation, Connecticut, New-York, New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North-Carolina, South-Carolina, and Georgia, do ordain, declare and establish the following Constitution for the Government of Ourselves and our Posterity.

Featured in this article is the first page of George Washington's copy of the draft. Serving as the president of the convention, he annotated his copy, as did the other delegates, reflecting the discussion and noting changes proposed during the next five weeks.

On September 8, the delegates appointed a final committee, the Committee of Style, comprised of Chairman William Samuel

Johnson (Conn.), Alexander Hamilton (N.Y.), James Madison (Va.), Rufus King (Mass.), and Gouverneur Morris (Penn.), to “revise the stile [*sic*] of and arrange the articles which have been agreed to by the House.”

Just four days later, the committee submitted its draft to the convention. In this draft, the Preamble had undergone major changes—primarily at the hand of Gouverneur Morris. First, rather than listing each of the states individually, now the charter began with “We the People of the United States.” The state names were omitted in part because the delegates did not know which states would ratify the Constitution, and future states were expected to join. This change also strengthened the idea of popular sovereignty—that the new government's power came from the people rather than the states.

Second, the Preamble had expanded from 44 words that simply introduced the document, to a total of 52 words that not only explained the document's intention, which was to establish a new government for the United States, but eloquently articulated the purposes of that new government. Those purposes included establishing justice, insur-

ing domestic tranquility, providing for the common defense, promoting general welfare, and securing the blessings of liberty.

On September 15, the delegates were in agreement and ordered that a final draft be engrossed on parchment. On September 17, thirty-nine delegates signed the Constitution and sent it to Congress for its approval, before it would be sent to the states for their ratification.

Almost immediately, reaction to, and interpretation of, the Preamble began. On June 4, 1788, Patrick Henry challenged the delegates' authority to speak for the collective populace. During Virginia's ratifying convention in Richmond, he asked, “What right had they to say ‘We the People’...Who authorized them to speak the language of ‘We the People’ instead of ‘We the States’? States are the characteristics and the soul of a confederation...The people gave them no power to use their name.”

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Lucy Stone, a pioneer in the women's rights movement, questioned the Preamble's essential exclusion of certain individuals. She wrote, “We the People? Which ‘We the People’? Women were not included.”

And in 1987, in honor of the document's bicentennial, conceptual artist Mike Wilkins presented his interpretation of the relationship between the individual and the collective population embodied in the text. He did so in a sculpture known as *Preamble*, an image of which is featured in this article.




Mike Wilkins, *Preamble*, 1987, painted metal on vinyl and wood, 96" × 96", Smithsonian American Art Museum

Wilkins carefully arranged personalized “vanity” license plates from all 50 states and the District of Columbia in nine horizontal rows against an 8-foot-square base of padded green vinyl. He positioned them alphabetically by state from left to right, beginning with Alabama and ending with Wyoming. Each individual license plate tells a story about its respective state, yet most of the shorthand phrases are not that easy to decipher. When read collectively, however, starting in the top left corner, a pattern emerges. By the end of the first row, it is apparent that Wilkins was phonetically spelling out the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution. WE TH (Alabama) and PUL (Alaska) stand for the words “We the People...” and so forth. There are 51 license plates in this artwork and 52 words in the Preamble. So in a fashion, the sculpture celebrates the spirit of *E Pluribus Unum* (“Out of Many One”), expressing the way that each state and the capital work together to form the United States of America.

In a 1988 interview with the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (August 13), Wilkins spoke about the inspiration for *Preamble*. He said

that vanity plates “are sort of an Everyman’s form of self-expression, and I’d heard that the Bicentennial Commission was looking for ways to publicize the bicentennial. The two ideas just coalesced.” But implementing the idea was not as easy as it looks. Wilkins spent some time (about a year) and money (about \$3,300 on telephone calls alone) collecting the individual objects that form the cohesive whole. First he had to figure out a phonetic spelling of the Preamble and divide the text into 51 discrete sections. Then he had to think about the overall composition—color, line, space, etc.—and order a specifically worded (yet standard sized 6-by-12-inch) personalized license plate from every state in the union (plus the District of Columbia). However, each state had its own rules and laws to follow, such as how many numbers and letters were permitted on each plate and who could own them. After Wilkins’s first inquiry to each state’s department of motor vehicles, he needed to redraft the letter combinations two times (the last when he found out that a few of the plates were already taken). In addition, some states sup-

plied a license plate quickly, or at no charge, while others were reluctant to allow a non-state resident to order one, or charged the mandatory fee. And, this was all done in the days before the Internet made access to such information readily available.

The words of the Preamble are perhaps some of the most famous in the American lexicon. They help us understand the purpose of our federal government and our relationship to it. Wilkins’s artwork—viewed by thousands of museum visitors each year, and appearing on posters in countless classrooms across the country—reminds us of its content and prompts us to consider the artistic freedom that other parts of our Constitution protect. 

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Creating Preamble

I got the idea for *Preamble* about a year before the 200th anniversary of the Constitution back in September 1987. As you might expect, there were a number of stories being written about the document, its creation and the personalities who crafted it; and how the Constitution was intended to help govern a disparate group of colonies—uniting them while at the same time letting each have its own voice. It also was meant to give the country’s citizens personal freedom within a certain set of principles. It occurred to me that license plates were required by the government, but each state had its own take, its own design. And with personalized plates, individuals could express themselves within certain Haiku-like constraints.

I thought that if you could turn the Preamble into license plate-eze, as you read it, you might get a feeling of “I am unique. Where I’m from is unique. But I am also connected with other individuals and states.” That’s what got me started. I also admit I did it to try and impress my girlfriend, Sheila. We got married a year later.

The organization of the work didn’t take very long. The Preamble fit nicely into 51 license plates (the 50 states and the District of Columbia), and 51 plates would fit well on an 8-by-8-inch background. The harder part was getting all 51 DMVs to go along with the project and print up a plate with their specific part of the Preamble. I got most fairly quickly, but you need them all for the piece to work. I had to work on some states. Minnesota’s plate, for example, contained the last part of “common” and the first part of “defense,” and their DMV thought that “Un De” might be a little risqué. Another state was making their plates in a penitentiary, but there had been a riot, and they had stopped the line. When things cooled down, they were good enough to make one for me. I also had to enlist the help of a friend of mine, Perry Vasquez, an artist now living in San Diego, to construct the background for the piece. The lesson is that to finish a project the way you want it, you may have to do things that seem far afield from the original blueprint.

When I come to Washington [D.C.], I like to stand off to one side and watch people look at the work. When groups or families see it, they read parts of it to each other, pointing at their state and sharing what they decode. The fact that they want to share is the best part of it.—*Mike Wilkins*

WE the People of the States
of New-Hampshire, Massachusetts,
Rhode-Island and Providence Plan-
tations, Connecticut, New-York, New-Jersey, Penn-
sylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North-Caro-
lina, South-Carolina, and Georgia, do ordain, declare
and establish the following Constitution for the Govern-
ment of Ourselves and our Posterity.

A R T I C L E I.

The stile of this Government shall be, "The United States of America."

II.

The Government shall consist of supreme legislative, executive and judicial powers.

III.

The legislative power shall be vested in a Congress, to consist of two separate and distinct bodies of men, a House of Representatives, and a Senate; each of which shall, in all cases, have a negative on the other. The Legislature shall meet on the first Monday in December in every year.

IV.

Sec. 1. The Members of the House of Representatives shall be chosen every second year, by the people of the several States comprehended within this Union. The qualifications of the electors shall be the same, from time to time, as those of the electors in the several States, of the most numerous branch of their own legislatures.

Sec. 2. Every Member of the House of Representatives shall be of the age of twenty-five years at least; shall have been a citizen in the United States for at least ~~seven~~ years before his election; and shall be, at the time of his election, ~~resident~~ of the State in which he shall be chosen.

Sec. 3. The House of Representatives shall, at its first formation, and until the number of citizens and inhabitants shall be taken in the manner herein after described, consist of sixty-five Members, of whom three shall be chosen in New-Hampshire, eight in Massachusetts, one in Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations, five in Connecticut, six in New-York, four in New-Jersey, eight in Pennsylvania, one in Delaware, six in Maryland, ten in Virginia, five in North-Carolina, five in South-Carolina, and three in Georgia.

Sec. 4. As the proportions of numbers in the different States will alter from time to time; as some of the States may hereafter be divided; as others may be enlarged by addition of territory; as two or more States may be united; as new States will be erected within the limits of the United States, the Legislature shall, in each of these cases, regulate the number of representatives by the number of inhabitants, according to the ~~rate of one for every forty thousand.~~ *provided that every State shall have at least one Representative.*

Sec. 5. All bills for raising or appropriating money, and for fixing the salaries of the officers of government, shall originate in the House of Representatives, and shall not be altered or amended by the Senate. No money shall be drawn from the public Treasury, but in pursuance of appropriations that shall originate in the House of Representatives.

Sec. 6. The House of Representatives shall have the sole power of impeachment. It shall choose its Speaker and other officers.

Sec. 7. Vacancies in the House of Representatives shall be supplied by writs of election from the executive authority of the State, in the representation from which they shall happen.

V.

The Legislature shall meet at least once in every year, and that meeting shall be on the first Monday in December, unless a different day shall be appointed by Law.

Sec. 5. The House of Representatives shall have the sole power of impeachment. It shall choose its Speaker and other officers.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1. Provide students with a copy of the first page of George Washington's annotated copy of the Committee of Detail's draft of the Constitution. Ask them to read the document and lead a class discussion with the following questions: What kind of document is it? When was it written? Who wrote it and for what purpose?
2. Ask student pairs to compare Washington's draft copy with the final text of the Preamble (available at www.archives.gov) and the text of the Preamble to the Articles of Confederation (available at www.ourdocuments.gov). Direct them to create a list of similarities and differences between the documents and to consider what they reflect about the formation of the federal government. Invite student volunteers to share their lists and considerations with the class and share with them information from the background essay about the work of the Committee on Style.
3. Provide students with a color copy of Mike Wilkins's *Preamble* (available at americanart.si.edu). Ask them to pretend that they are a contributing author to a travel book about Washington, D.C. Tell them that they have been assigned by the book's editor to write a 500-word description and interpretation of Wilkins's artwork that is on display in the Smithsonian American Art Museum, for inclusion in the book. Encourage student volunteers to share their entries with the class. Next, share with students the side bar article written by Mike Wilkins and ask them to compare their interpretation of the sculpture with the artist's intent. Lead a class discussion about the similarities and differences, and encourage them to also consider the relationship that the First Amendment to the Constitution has to Wilkins's work.
4. Remind students that the motto of the United States is *e pluribus unum*, Latin for "out of many, one." Ask students to write a one-page explanation about how the changes made to the Constitution by the Committee on Style and Mike Wilkins's sculpture both embody this motto.
5. Describe to students the objections Lucy Stone had in the middle of the nineteenth century to the phrase "We the People." Assign groups of 3–4 students to conduct research into constitutional amendments and pieces of legislation, and create timelines highlighting significant events in the history of the United States that expanded who was and is included in "We the People." Invite them to post their timelines and describe them to the class.
6. Remind students that one of the reasons why the delegates to the Constitutional Convention removed the individual state names from the Preamble's introduction was because they anticipated that states beyond the original 13 would eventually join. Invite students to conduct research into when the states ratified the Constitution and/or joined the Union, and ask them to write the Preamble containing all of the states' names, in the order that they ratified the document or joined the Union. Ask them to evaluate the Committee on Style's revision.
7. Invite students to conduct research into the 1905 Supreme Court case *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*. Divide the class into two groups; ask one half to take on the role of Henning Jacobson and the other half to take on the role of the state of Massachusetts. Hold a debate in which both sides argue their case, or set up a mock Supreme Court simulation in which students assume the roles of attorneys and judges.
8. Point out to students that Wilkins's work uses letters and numbers in codes to express an idea that the viewer must decipher. Assign students to create their own rebuses to make a personal statement, or reflect the text of another milestone document. They can use a heavy material such as cardboard to cut out number and letter stencils and/or paint or markers. Invite students to present their work to their classmates and discuss their interpretation.
9. Build a class Wiki by assigning groups of 3–5 students each to research and write a 300-word entry about one of the following: Committee on Detail, Committee on Style, Gouverneur Morris, Patrick Henry, Lucy Stone, John Rutledge, Nathaniel Gorham, Oliver Ellsworth, Edmund Randolph, James Wilson, William Samuel Johnson, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, or Rufus King. Encourage students to read and edit each other's entries.

Note about the featured document

George Washington's annotated copy of the Committee of Detail's draft of the Constitution is in Records of the Continental and Confederation Congresses and the Constitutional Convention, Record Group 360, in the holdings of the National Archives. It is available online from the National Archives in the ARC database at www.archives.gov/research/arc/, ARC Identifier 1501555.

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Monk, Linda. *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*. Hyperion, 2003.
- Ritchie, Donald A. *Our Constitution*. Oxford University Press, 2006.