

# **Teaching an Understanding of the Origins and Development of the U.S. Constitution to Fifth Grade Students**

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Address**

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## Abstract

As we teach fifth grade, where the typical child is ten or eleven and just learning that there is such a thing as a distinct subject area, we created a child centered, learning styles unit that lays the ground work and builds the passion for future learning in Social Studies. They are just finished with the primary years where they have been taught the skills to actually decode (read), and encode (write). Fifth grade is really the first year of using these skills primarily to learn information in the subject areas.

Our project consists of a three week unit which allows the students to travel through the Revolutionary Period starting with the first meeting of the Second Continental Congress and ending with the Bill of Rights. It includes readings about the period, age appropriate activities to engage students in learning, a hands on field trip that allows the students to travel back into time where they role play as one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and a culminating project about the Constitution that offers choices for different learning styles.

## Background for Teachers

Students will have just finished a unit on the “Road to Revolution.” They will have examined many of the reasons that the colonists had begun to think of themselves not as Englishmen, but as Americans. They will have studied events/ protests such as: Proclamation of 1763, Townshend Acts, Sons and Daughters of Liberty, Boston Massacre, Committees of Correspondence, Stamp Act/ Stamp Act Congress, Boston Tea Party, First Continental Congress and the Battle of Lexington and Concord.

The new unit begins with the meeting of the Second Continental Congress, as a reaction to Lexington and Concord. Students learn about the changing attitudes of the colonists, which were also greatly influenced by the writing of “Common Sense” by Thomas Paine. They then learn about the debate that led up to the decision to choose the committee and eventually write the Declaration after the king and Parliament’s reaction to the Olive Branch Petition.

Simultaneously to this study, students will take on a persona of a signer of the Declaration of Independence and truly experience what it was like to be a member of the Second Continental Congress. They will prepare through many activities to role play their chosen signer when they attend the “mock” Second Continental Congress at the Quincy Adams Historical Site in the spring.

Following their experience at the Second Continental Congress, students will finish the unit on the revolution to the Treaty of Paris 1783. The final unit will focus on the birth of the nation with a study of the Articles of Confederation and the writing of the Constitution.

## Historical Background

English or American, that was the question in the year 1776. Beginning in the year 1763, the colonists had begun to question their ties to Britain. Many events had occurred that made the colonists very angry about British control in the colonies.

In 1754, the French and Indian War had been fought between the French and the British, which included the colonists. This war was fought over disputes regarding the territory in the Ohio River Valley. The French and the English each had Indian allies. The colonists fought this war as British citizens. After British victory, King George III passed the Proclamation of 1763. This proclamation prohibited colonial settlement in these lands, which had been newly won from France. Colonists were furious because the population in the original colonial territory was growing, and there was a need for expansion into these new lands, which were set aside as Native American hunting grounds.

To make matters worse, King George III and Parliament further infuriated the colonists by passing tax laws to pay war debts. The first one of these was the Sugar Act of 1764, quickly followed by the Stamp Act of 1765. As a result of the protest meeting, the Stamp Act Congress, Parliament did repeal the Stamp Act. But in 1767, the Townshend Acts were passed by Parliament. The colonists were angered by the taxes and laws, but were more infuriated that they did not have representation in Parliament. Many colonists began to protest the injustice of their treatment by the mother country.

Throughout the thirteen colonies, people met in groups to vent their frustration about the new laws and taxes. Boston, in particular, became a hotbed of rebellion. Leaders like Sam Adams and John Hancock began to foment rebellion among the Bostonians. Protest groups called the Sons and Daughters of Liberty were born. Members of these groups advocated

everything from violent protests to boycotts and more civil disobedience. The cry, "No taxation without representation" originated by James Otis of Massachusetts, quickly became the slogan of the rebels, who now called themselves Patriots. Similar groups existed in the other colonies. News of these protests reached London.

British soldiers who had been sent to secure the borders following the Proclamation of 1763, ended up in the cities to maintain British rule. Hot tempers were flaring, especially in Boston. On the night of March 5, 1770, the Boston Massacre occurred. While both sides could be accused of inciting violence, the colonists' point of view, memorialized in the engraving done by Paul Revere, provides a strong example of how propaganda swayed public opinion in the favor of the Patriots. This event was followed three years later by the Boston Tea Party which occurred on December 16, 1773. Britain's response to this event became known as the Intolerable Acts, so named by the colonists. It was clear that this disagreement between mother country and colonies would not be settled amicably.

Realizing that things were at a breaking point, the Committees of Correspondence called a meeting in Philadelphia with representatives from all the colonies. The meeting took place in September of 1774, and became known as the First Continental Congress.

This congress tried to suggest a peaceable solution to the conflicts while also preparing for a possible war. After these efforts failed, a Second Continental Congress took place much sooner than expected due to events that occurred in Lexington and Concord in April of 1775.

The publication of "Common Sense" by Thomas Paine in January of 1776 attacked King George III as a bully, and questioned rule by one person. He called for self-government, even revolution, stating that the colonists should cut their ties with Britain. This pamphlet converted many colonists to the

idea of independence. It was the Second Continental Congress that took the step of formally declaring independence from Britain.

The document that these members of the Second Continental Congress debated, and eventually wrote became known as the Declaration of Independence. The main author of the document was Thomas Jefferson who was a student of government. He was helped by four others, including Roger Sherman, Ben Franklin, John Adams, and Robert Livingston. The document went through many revisions (Jefferson actually wrote 17 drafts) as a result of discussions among the representatives to the Second Continental Congress. It was eventually accepted by Congress on July 4, 1776. The members of Congress were putting their lives and their honor on the line by creating this document. It infuriated the King and Parliament and thus led to a long and bloody war.

The American Revolution lasted until 1783 and was fought all over the colonies. Not everyone supported the cause and there was even animosity and fighting between different factions of colonists. During this fight for independence, the colonists received help from many European allies who were eager to weaken the British Empire. Americans eventually gained their independence after the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Little did they know that “uniting” these independent states would not be an easy task.

The Articles of Confederation were the first government plan for the new states beginning in 1781. Before long, it became obvious that there were many weaknesses in this plan due to the fact that the Confederation Congress had very little authority, and the states retained too much sovereignty. News of many protests and widespread discontent caused great concern. Therefore, a convention was called in Philadelphia in 1787. The finest minds and most prestigious men were given the task of altering the articles. Instead, after much debate, they wrote a new constitution that survives more than 200

years later and therefore, they rightfully earned the title of “Founding Fathers”.

## **Learning Objectives**

Students will:

- Understand the complexities of being a member of the Second Continental Congress and the compromises that had to be made in order to produce the Declaration of Independence.
- Demonstrate appreciation of the sacrifice that the forefathers made in the name of independence.
- Understand the struggles and compromises that were made to build this nation from the Treaty of Paris 1783 to the Articles of Confederation and the eventual adoption of the Constitution.

## **Content Standard Alignment: Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks**

5.16 Explain the meaning of the key ideas on equality, natural rights, the rule of law, and the purpose of government contained in the Declaration of Independence.

5.17 Describe the major battles of the Revolution and explain the factors leading to American victory and British defeat.

5.18 Describe the life and achievements of important leaders during the Revolution and the early years of the United States.

5.20 Explain the reasons for the adoption of the Articles of Confederation in 1781 and for its later failure.

5.21 Describe Shays’ s Rebellion of 1786–1787 and explain why it was one of the crucial events leading to the Constitutional

Convention.

5.22 Identify the various leaders of the Constitutional Convention and describe the major issues they debated.

5.23 Describe the responsibilities of government at the federal, state, and local levels

5.24 Describe the basic political principles of American democracy and explain how the Constitution and the Bill of Rights reflect and preserve these principles.

5.25 Identify the three branches of the United States government as outlined by the Constitution, describe their functions and relationships, and identify what features of the Constitution were unique at the time

5.26 Identify the rights in the Bill of Rights and explain the reasons for its inclusion in the Constitution in 1791.



## **Procedures / Learning Activities**

(Designed for forty minute social studies periods over a two to three week time frame)

### **DAY ONE**

- Begin with a review of the events leading up to the Declaration of Independence mentioned in the Historical Background. Students will have just finished a unit about these events.
- Students will view the Discovery Education streaming video: “The American Revolution from Colonies to Constitution: The Road to Revolution.” This will prepare them for the final review activity on day two.

### **Day TWO**

- The main activity for today will be to create a virtual shot heard around the world. Students will randomly receive an event written on paper that led up to Lexington and Concord. Students will also receive a balloon that they will blow up and using a marker, write their event on the balloon.
- Students will take their balloon and come together as a class and form a semi-circle/timeline of the events written on the balloons. They will then have to explain how their event led up to the American Revolution. (Some time may be needed for students to review their event)
- As a culmination, students will pop their balloons simultaneously to create the “shot”. Discussion should follow.

## DAY THREE

- We will use the book, *The Declaration of Independence: The Words that Made America*, as a read-aloud. During the read aloud, we will have a whole class discussion of the language and meaning of the document, separating it into parts according to arguments presented, and record this discussion on large chart paper to be used on Day Four. Students will be guided to examine the four distinct parts. The **PREAMBLE** explains that the Second Continental Congress believed that the colonies had the right to break away from Britain. The **STATEMENT OF RIGHTS** tells what rights the members of the Continental Congress believed all people have (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness), and that these rights cannot be denied. If a government does deny these rights, then the people can change that government or replace it with a new government that insures these rights to all people. The **CHARGES AGAINST THE KING** section delineates more than twenty-five complaints against King George III. It further asserts that all attempts at reconciliation have been ignored by the King, Parliament, and the British people. The **STATEMENT OF INDEPENDENCE** part names the United States as a free country, complete with the rights that independent states possess. The document ends with a mutual pledge among the members of the Second Continental Congress.

## DAY FOUR

- Class will begin with a review of the parts of the Declaration listed on chart paper. Attention will then be given solely to the final line, “We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.” The importance of this line, and appreciation of the personal risk the signers were taking will be included in this discussion.

- As a class, students will examine the names, listed by colony, on their typed Declaration, and then find that signature on their copy of the original version.
- Each student will then, through a lottery, be assigned the persona of one of the signers.  
Students will receive materials provided by The Quincy Adams National Park to research their signer.
- Students will complete scavenger hunt for homework (see addendum)

### **DAY FIVE**

- Students will be grouped according to colony of origin of their signer/representative to the Congress. They will share with each other information about their signers. This information will have been recorded on the Scavenger Hunt paper, received on Day Four. They will determine which parts of the Declaration would be most important to that particular colony, based on the information they have just obtained through research.
- Whole class discussion will examine the various, diverse points of view of the colonies and the regions where they are located. Students will be assigned the task of writing a journal entry from the point of view of their signer about their regional preferences in the Declaration.

### **DAY SIX**

- Students will share journal entries with the other members of their colony group.
- They will find common threads or concerns.
- Students will individually be given the task of writing dialogue that will reflect the colony's desires for inclusion in the Declaration. This dialogue is intended to guide their discussion when they re-enact the Second Continental Congress on day seven.
- Students will review and improve their dialogue, coordinating it with that of their fellow colonists, in

preparation for tomorrow's interactive, mock Second Continental Congress.

- Students will watch the episode of Liberty's Kids "First Fourth of July."

## **DAY SEVEN**

- The class will take a trip to Quincy, where the children will be re-enacting the Second Continental Congress. Each child will represent one of the signers, and will sit with the other delegates from his/her colony. Children will be asked guiding questions by the presenter, and will use their prepared dialogue to enter the discussion of the issues.

## **DAY EIGHT**

- After a follow up discussion of the field trip to Quincy, the study of the revolution will resume with a particular focus on the major battles fought.
- Each student will receive one of these battles to research and write a summary of.

## **DAY NINE**

- The class will create a chart/timeline of the major battles with the information provided by the student experts on each battle.
- Students will use an interactive white board to show where their battle took place. Before they begin their summary, they will locate their battle on an interactive map and label the date of the battle. Students at their desks will have the same printed map and will follow the Revolution through time.
- Follow up discussion will focus on the path of the war from the north to the south and the eventual Treaty of Paris 1783 that declared official independence.

## DAY TEN

- Today's focus will be on the weaknesses with Articles of Confederation. We will begin by reading the children's book: The Articles of Confederation: The First Constitution of the United States by *Barbara Silberdick Feinberg*
- As a follow up activity, students will be placed into groups and receive graphics that illustrate the weaknesses in the Articles. They will identify which weakness each graphic is illustrating and what problems this might have caused. They will then present their graphic to the class.

## DAY ELEVEN AND TWELVE

- We will begin by dividing the children in groups to read and discuss: If You Were There When They Signed the Constitution by Elizabeth Levy, Joan Holub
- They will record interesting facts about the Convention and the Founding Fathers. These will be shared with the entire group on day twelve.
- Students will receive the layer cake sheet which will be discussed to illustrate the relationship between Federal, State, and local governments.
- Students will learn the "Constitution Rap" and the "Bill of Rights Rag" they will then be given directions for a culminating activity. They will be able to choose a final project: mobile, timeline map, game, newspaper. This project will be ongoing for the next two weeks.

## WRAP UP

- Students will present their culminating projects to the class and we will end the unit with a discussion of the Bill of Rights and performance of the "Bill of Rights Rag".

## Assessment

- Throughout this unit, assessment is ongoing. It includes classroom discussion, research about the Declaration and its signers, as well as journal writing, battle summaries, and dialogue preparation.
- Midpoint assessment: performance at the mock Second Continental Congress at the Adams Estate in Quincy, using student created dialogue
- Final assessment: Students will be graded on their final project: mobile, timeline map, game, newspaper

## **Bibliography**

**America's Story : New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997.**

**History Alive: America's Past: Palo Alto, CA: Teacher's Curriculum Institute, 2003.**

These are the fifth grade textbooks used throughout the year to cover our curriculum and teach children to understand an expository text. It is used as a jumping off point to supplementary materials.

**The Declaration of Independence: the Words that Made America, New York: Scholastic Inc, 2002.**

This is a picture book that takes apart the Declaration into individual ideas so that the children can understand its meaning.

**Discovery Education streaming video: "The American Revolution from Colonies to Constitution: The Road to Revolution." [www.discoveryeducation.com](http://www.discoveryeducation.com)**

This website provides videos connected to fifth grade American History topics.

**Jefferson, Thomas. "The Declaration of Independence." {Online} Available [http://store.ushistory.org/catalog\\_index.php](http://store.ushistory.org/catalog_index.php), January 8, 2008.**

This website offers copies of the original Declaration of Independence for sale to the general public.

**Levy, Elizabeth, If You Were There When They Signed the Constitution, New York: Scholastic, 1987.**

This book takes a very complicated subject down to level of a ten year old in an authentic fashion.

**Liberty's Kids: "The First Fourth of July". Videotape. New York: DIC Entertainment Corporation distributed by PBS Video, 2002.**

This videotape follows three fictitious children through an adventure where they are witnesses at the meeting of the Second Continental Congress.

**Pen and Parchment, Adams Historical National Park  
Publication**

This publication includes summaries of each of the signers, letters from Abigail Adams, supplementary worksheets and additional information about the attitudes and politics of the period.

**Silberdick, Barbara Feinberg, The Articles of Confederation,  
Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2002.**



**Addendums:**

**Print-outs  
for  
Classroom  
Use**

# Declaration of Independence Scavenger Hunt

Your Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*You have studied the writing and signing of the Declaration of Independence in your Social Studies class, and you have been assigned by lottery, the persona of one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. You will become this person when you get into our "time machine" for the field trip to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1776...*

*Write the name of your signer (delegate)  
here \_\_\_\_\_*

- 1. What have you learned about his early life? Where was he born? Did he go to school? What do you know about his family? ...Add any other details you find.*

2. *What did your signer do for a living? Did he hold any political offices during his lifetime?*
  
3. *How and when did he join the Patriot cause, and tell why if possible ...*
  
4. *Explain which colony he represented and given what you have learned so far about life in America at this time, what issues can you predict to be of particular interest to him as well as his region of the country at this time?*
  
5. *What happened to your signer (delegate) after he signed the Declaration of Independence?*

## *Journal Entry Directions: Second Continental Congress*

*Your*

*Name* \_\_\_\_\_

*Your*

*Signer* \_\_\_\_\_

*Colony* \_\_\_\_\_

*Today in class you met with other members of the Second Continental Congress who share the same regional concerns as you. Write a journal entry from the point of view of your signer about the slavery clause in the Declaration of Independence and the clause that denounces the British People. Include the arguments will you plan to make for/against these parts of this document during discussion.*

## American Revolution Battles Paragraph Assignment (Expository)

You will receive the assignment of one of the following major battles of the American Revolution.

Research your assigned battle a paragraph about it. Be sure to include: the name of the battle, the location of the battle, the generals on each side, the reason it was fought, who was victorious and at least one interesting fact about your battle. Remember to use your EmPOWER steps to plan and write your paragraph...

Write your final draft in your best cursive on white-lined paper with margins or you may word process. You will receive a grade for Language Arts and for Social Studies.

You will also be expected to “teach” the class what you found out about your particular battle.

### Battles

Bennington

Saratoga

Bunker Hill

Lexington and Concord

Long Island

Princeton

Trenton

Germantown

Yorktown

Guilford Courthouse

Kings Mountain

Cowpens

Camden

Charleston

Savannah

Kaskaskia

Cahokia

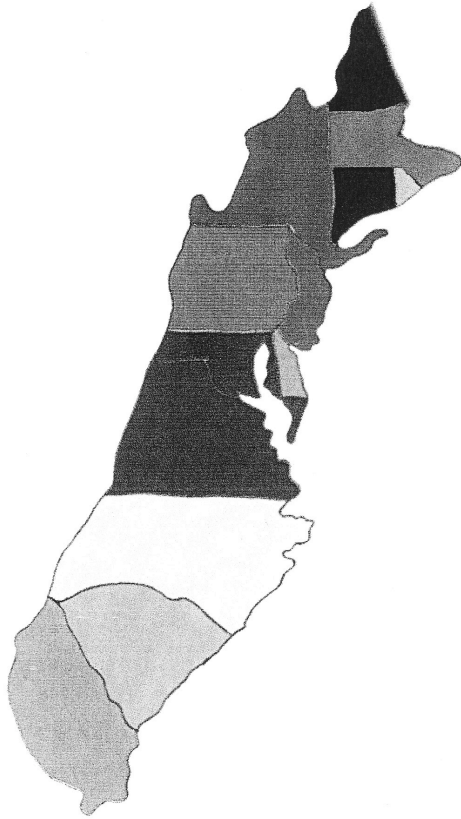
Vincennes

Brandywine

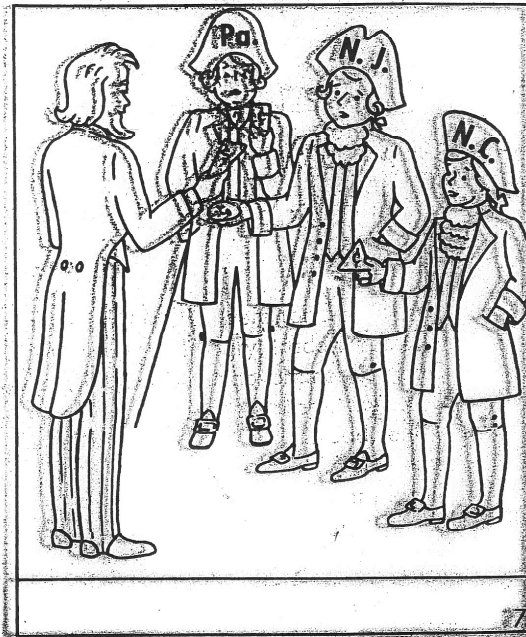
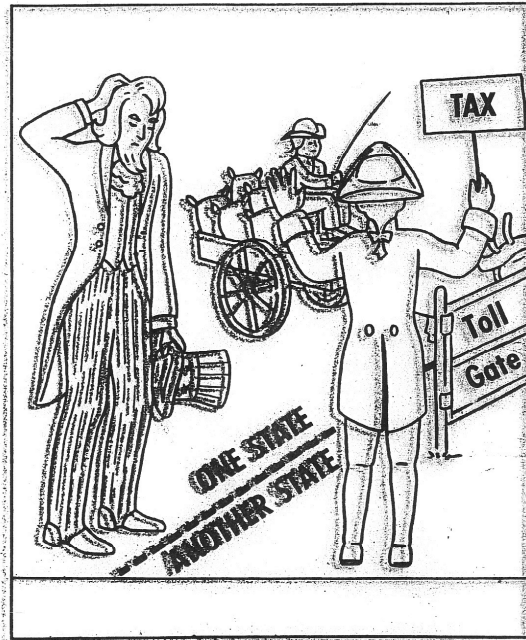
Monmouth

13colonies.gif (GIF Image, 355x618 pixels) - Scaled (94%)

<http://library.thinkquest.org/TQ0312848/Media/13colonies.gif>



### WEAKNESSES OF THE ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION



## The Constitution Rap

This is an exercise in elocution  
That tells all about the U.S. Constitution  
It was 1787 in the spring when the people got together  
just to do their thing

They called for a convention of the delegates  
Fifty-five men from the United States  
Teachers, lawyers, and shippers, too.  
They made up a government for me and you

A three-part Government would be the plan  
George Washington for President, He's our man  
Benjamin Franklin and Gouverneur Morris  
James Madison, they all worked for us

They made the laws which said "No taxation"  
"Unless the people have representation"  
Then they all got together and they made it official  
Executive, Legislative, and Judicial

Interlude  
The Constitution Rap  
The Constitution Rap  
The Constitution Rap  
The Constitution Rap

### Solo 1: The Legislative Branch

For the legislative branch, now let us pause  
These are the men who make the laws  
Congress, Congress, that's our name  
Senate and House, they play the same game





Interlude

The Constitution Rap

The Constitution Rap

The Constitution Rap

The Constitution Rap

## Solo 2: The Executive Branch

The Executive Branch is the President

The Big, Old White House Resident

And the V.P. and the cabinet are in command

They are the highest offices in the land

Interlude

The Constitution Rap

The Constitution Rap

The Constitution Rap

The Constitution Rap

## Solo 3: The Judicial Branch

Now we have a branch of a different sort

The Judicial Branch is called Supreme Court

To provide checks and balances in matters of law

Is what the president appoints his judges for...

Interlude

The Constitution Rap

The Constitution Rap

The Constitution Rap

The Constitution Rap

**All:**

Finally to help us to resolve our fight  
The Constitution founders wrote the Bill of Rights  
So if your rights you want to defend  
All you have to do is-----amend

Now when we get to 2025  
The Constitution still will be alive  
We the People of the United States  
Are the ones who make this country great

Interlude  
The Constitution Rap  
The Constitution Rap  
The Constitution Rap  
The Constitution Rap

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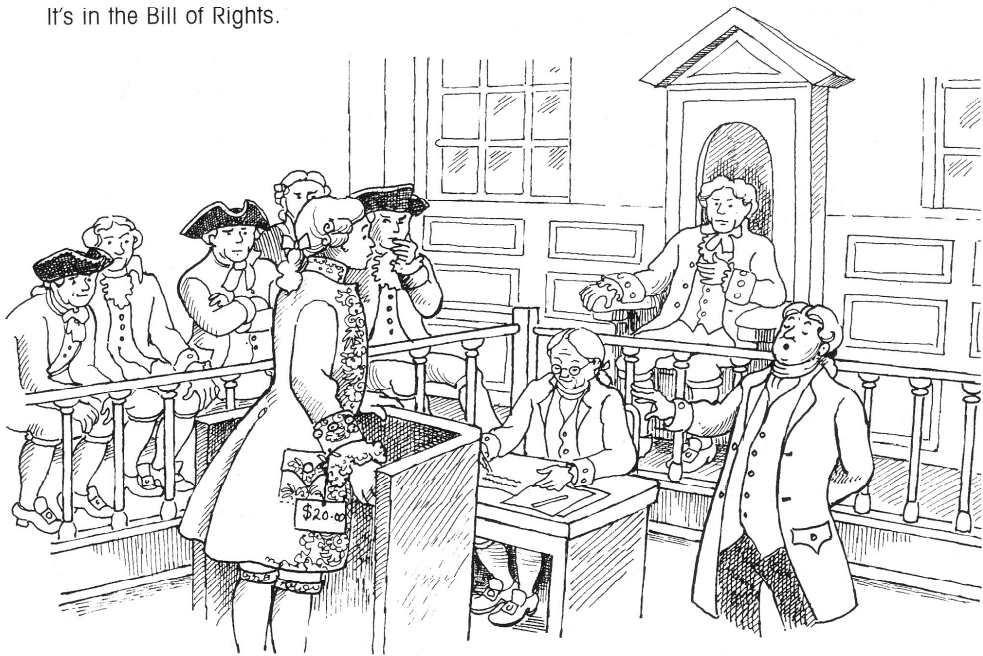
# The Bill of Rights Rag

(Bill of Rights)

Freedom of religion, freedom of speech,  
freedom of the press, and the right to meet  
together, to talk about our gripes—  
it's in the Bill of Rights.

The first ten amendments to the Constitution  
are the rights that we won in the revolution.  
The founding fathers wrote them down in black and white.  
It's all right there in the Bill of Rights.

They can't put soldiers up in your house.  
They can't come knocking and shake you down  
without permission, in the day or night.  
It's in the Bill of Rights.



# The Bill of Rights Rag

(continued)

The Fifth Amendment says you can't be pressured  
to testify against yourself if you're arrested.  
Everybody gets a fair and speedy trial.  
It says so there in the Bill of Rights.

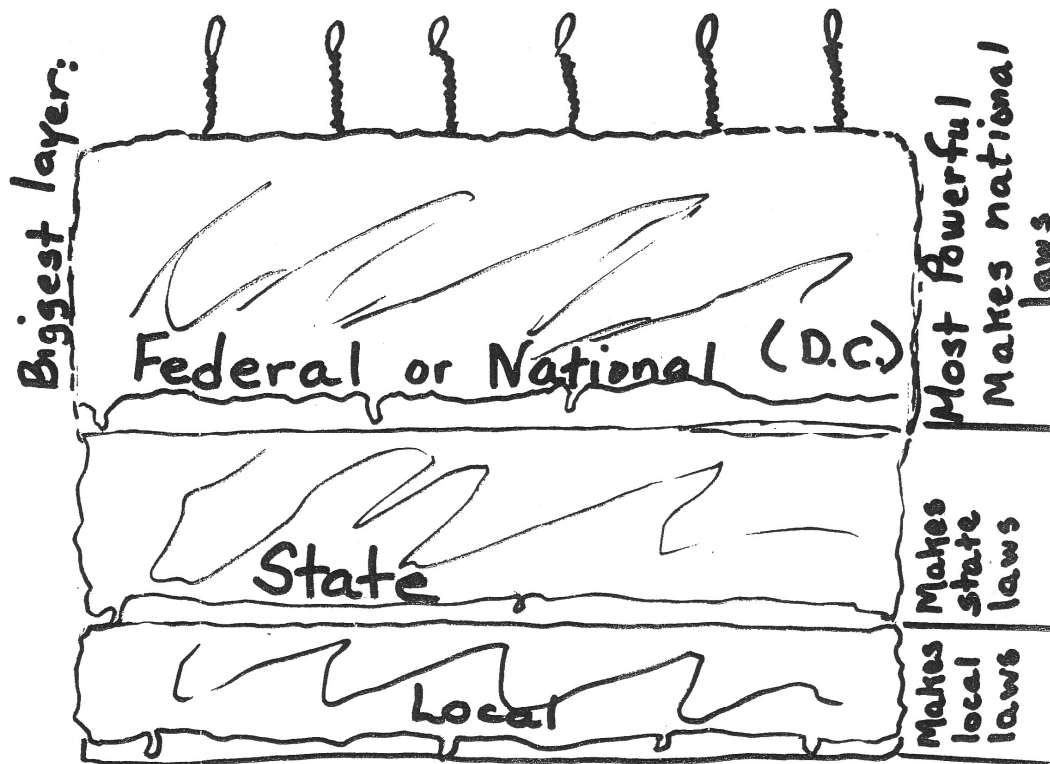
The Bill of Rights...they're there when you need 'em.  
The Bill of Rights...the Constitution guaranteed 'em.  
The Bill of Rights...it's all about freedom.  
Let's hear three cheers for the Bill of Rights!

The Eighth Amendment says always try  
to make sure the punishment fits the crime  
and don't set bail or fines too high.  
It's in the Bill of Rights.

And any other rights we forgot to mention  
belong to the people or the ones they elected  
to represent them to the powers on high.  
That's what it says in the Bill of Rights.



It's a Piece of Cake!



- A) Federal Government is most powerful; has 3 branches: <sup>535 members</sup>
- 1) legislative - Congress - 2 houses - Senate - House of Rep.
  - 2) executive - President - V.P. - Cabinet
  - 3) judicial - Supreme Court
- B) State Government - same 3 branches - has governor, not president
- C) Local Government - may have town meeting, mayor, selectman

# Constitution Project

Due : \_\_\_\_\_

Create...

- ☞ ***An illustrated timeline of an important Constitutional Convention Man's life***
  - 11" x 17" paper minimum
  - Colored, pen outlines
  - At least 7 major events, focused on key events during the time of the Constitution
  
- ☞ ***A mobile with 4-5 important figures of the Constitution***
  - Colored illustrations of important figures should hang and a descriptive paragraph should be on the back of each illustration
  
- ☞ ***A comic book about the Constitutional time with a famous "hero" of the Constitution as the main character***
  - Appropriate and historically accurate details
  
- ☞ ***A game that includes famous people, places, and/or events of the Constitutional Period***
  - Can be a board game, trivia cards (with answers on back), etc.
  
- ☞ ***A "newspaper" with 3-4 articles about people, places, and/or events of the Constitution***
  - Articles could be "current news" of the time, opinions about the convention, "features" about a person's life, obituaries (about a person who passed away), etc.
  - Each article should have a headline and at least two illustrations
  - Make an original title for your newspaper
  - Must be at least 11" x 17" paper, with articles typed
  
- ☞ ***A map of the 13 Colonies during the Revolution through Constitutional times***
  - 11" x 17" minimum size
  - Map must be hand-drawn, and colored with colored pencil
  - Include symbols for at least 7 significant locations (Lexington, Yorktown, Philadelphia, etc.), with a key

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