Historical Background

The phrase “Founding Documents” refers to a group of documents that were essential to the formation of the United States in the late eighteenth century. The core of the Founding Documents, what the National Archives refers to as “Charters of Freedom,” consists of the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. These three documents, however, were not created spontaneously and fully-formed, but evolved through negotiations and debate on the part of colonial leaders.

So, what did the Founding Documents actually “found”? In other words, why are they so significant? Obviously, they established the independence of a new nation from its British colonial rulers, in direct reaction to a series of unpopular British policies. The Founding Documents established what form the new government would take and what its powers would be. The equality of (white) men regardless of landownership, checks and balances among three branches of government, and freedom of speech were enshrined in American history through these documents. This experiment in self-government would serve as an example and inspiration to nations around the world interested in building democracies.

Additional Links

- February 2014 TPS-MTSU newsletter: Founding Documents
- Primary Documents in American History: The American Revolution and the New Nation, 1763-1815
- The American Founders Online: An Annotated Guide to Their Papers and Publications
- The Charters of Freedom (from the National Archives)
- Documents from the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention, 1774-1789
- “Preparing for Revolution” (lesson plan from TPS-MTSU)

Suggestions for Teachers

The founding documents are must-reads for many classrooms. Their length, vocabulary, and complexity of thought, however, make them difficult for many students to grasp. In this case, a good approach is to break the text down into small chunks of about 4-5 lines and have students concentrate on their chunks in small groups. Older students can use the analysis tools for printed texts and manuscripts as a way to think critically about the documents. See our February 2014 newsletter for more ideas!

The repeal, or the funeral of Miss Amc=Stamp [1766 or later]

Presidential papers:

- George Washington Papers
- Thomas Jefferson Papers
- James Madison Papers
- Adams Family Papers (from the Massachusetts Historical Society)
- Benjamin Franklin’s Papers (from Yale) and Autobiography
THOMAS PAINE

- The American Crisis [1776], page 1
- More Thomas Paine writings
- “Thomas Paine and Common Sense” lesson idea from February 2014 TPS-MTSU newsletter (top of p. 2)

ABIGAIL ADAMS

- Full text of “Remember the ladies…” letter, March 31, 1776 (from PBS)
- More letters from Abigail to John Adams

Patrick Henry, “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death” speech, March 23, 1775 [The Avalon Project]

Give me liberty, or give me death!: Patrick Henry’s speech in the Virginia Convention of 1775 [sound recording]

Patrick Henry Was Born [America’s Story]

"Give me liberty, or give me death!" Patrick Henry delivering his great speech on the rights of the colonies, before the Virginia Assembly, convened at Richmond, March 23rd 1775, concluding with the above sentiment, which became the war cry of the revolution. [1876]

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Other versions of the Declaration of Independence:

- **Fragment of the earliest known draft of the Declaration of Independence**, written by Thomas Jefferson in June 1776 ([1st page], [2nd page], and click here for transcription)

- [First printed edition that shows the names of all the signers] **In Congress, July 4, 1776. The unanimous declaration of the thirteen United States of America.** *Click PDF to read transcription.

- [First printed copy of final version] from Statutes at Large, 1845.

Related links:

- **Primary Documents in American History: Declaration of Independence** (Web Guide)

- **The Declaration of Independence: Rewriting the Rough Draft** (blog post)

- “**The Declaration of Independence: Created Equal?**” (lesson plan)

- “**The Declaration of Independence: From Rough Draft to Proclamation**” (lesson plan)

- **The Declaration of Independence** (America’s Story)

- **Creating the Declaration of Independence** from Creating the United States (exhibition)

- “**Fanning the Flames of Patriotism**” from “To Form a More Perfect Union” (essay)

- **Declaring Independence: Drafting the Documents** (exhibition)
ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION

Articles of confederation and perpetual union between the states of New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island, and Providence plantations, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South [1777; click here for transcription of all four pages]

See also:
- “The Articles of Confederation: The First Constitution of the United States” (blog entry)
- “The Articles of Confederation” (lesson idea from TPS-MTSU Founding Documents newsletter, bottom of p. 3)
- Articles of Confederation (from the World Digital Library)
- “Identifying Defects in the Confederation” from To Form a More Perfect Union (essay)

THE CONSTITUTION

- Constitution of the United States (from the World Digital Library)
- Primary Documents in American History: United States Constitution (Web Guide)
- Constitution (Primary Source Set from Teachers Page)
- Creating the United States Constitution from Creating the United States (exhibition)
- “The Constitution: Counter Revolution or National Salvation?” (lesson plan)
- “The Constitution: Drafting a More Perfect Union” (lesson plan)
- “The U.S. Constitution: Continuity and Change in the Governing of the United States” (lesson plan)
- “Creating the Constitution” from To Form a More Perfect Union (essay)
- U.S. Constitution, September 17, 1787 (Today in History)
REATIONS TO THE CONSTITUTION

The Federalist Papers

- The Federalist Papers from Congress.gov - links to original text transcriptions of all eighty-five sections
- “The Federalist” lesson idea from February 2014 TPS-MTSU newsletter (top of p. 3)
- The Founding Fathers Unite video on the Federalist Papers (2 min 51 sec) from Hidden Treasures (Library of Congress & the History Channel)
- The Federalist Papers, October 27, 1787 (Today in History)

George Washington's first inaugural address, 30 April 1789.

- Primary Documents in American History: George Washington’s First Inaugural Address
- More pages and partial transcription available at the Creating the United States exhibition.
- George Washington’s Farewell Address [1796]

Mercy Otis Warren:

- Observations on the New Constitution, and on the Federal and State Conventions, by a Columbian Patriot, Boston, 1788. [selected pages]
- History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution [1805; selected pages; click here for limited transcription]
- Selected poems
BILL OF RIGHTS

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, two thirds of both Houses concurring, That the following articles be proposed to the Legislature of the several States, as amendments to the Constitution of the United States, all or any of which articles, when ratified by three fourths of the said Legislatures, shall be valid to all intents and purposes, as part of the said Constitution—Viz.

ARTICLE THE FIRST.

After the first examination, required by the said article of the Constitution, there shall be one Representative for every thirty thousand, until the number shall amount to one hundred; to which number one Representative shall be added for every subsequent increase of forty thousand, until the Representatives shall amount to two hundred, to which number one Representative shall be added for every subsequent increase of forty thousand persons.

ARTICLE THE SECOND.

No law, varying the compensation for the services of the Senators and Representatives, shall take effect, until an election of Representatives shall have intervened.

A bill of rights as provided in the ten original amendments to the constitution of the United States in force December 15, 1791. [n. p. 195].

ALIEN AND SEDITION ACTS

June 18, 1798.

A bill of rights as provided in the ten original amendments to the constitution of the United States in force December 15, 1791. [n. p. 195].

• Primary Documents in American History: The Bill of Rights (Web Guide)
• Creating the Bill of Rights from Creating the United States (exhibition)
• Bill of Rights from World Digital Library
• “The Bill of Rights: Debating the Amendments” (lesson plan)
• The Bill of Rights, December 15, 1791 (Today in History)
• The New United States of America Adopted the Bill of Rights (America’s Story)
• Our Documents: Bill of Rights (1791) from the National Archives, with transcription

Temple of Liberty. New York: Jared Bell, 1834. Woodcut. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (86)

• Primary Documents in American History: Alien and Sedition Acts (Web Guide)

Reactions to the Alien and Sedition Acts:
• Thomas Jefferson, et al., Kentucky Resolutions [1798]
• “Thomas Jefferson on the Sedition Act” (lesson plan) from EDSITEment!
• James Madison, et al., Virginia Resolutions [1800]
• Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions from Bill of Rights Institute [transcriptions] (1798)

Statutes at Large, 5th Congress, 2nd Session
[Naturalization Act, 1798; see page 31 of the PDF]
Teachers: Providing these primary source replicas without source clues may enhance the inquiry experience for students. This list of citations is supplied for reference purposes to you and your students. We have followed the Chicago Manual of Style format, one of the formats recommended by the Library of Congress, for each entry below, minus the access date. The access date for each of these entries is May 14, 2014.


Currier & Ives. “Give me liberty, or give me death!” Patrick Henry delivering his great speech on the rights of the colonies, before the Virginia Assembly, convened at Richmond, March 23rd 1775, concluding with the above sentiment, which became the war cry of the revolution.” Illustration. New York: Published by Currier & Ives, c1876. From Library of Congress, Popular Graphic Arts. http://www.loc.gov/item/2001700209/


Dimunation, Mark. The Founding Fathers Unite. Online Video. From the Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division. http://www.loc.gov/item/myloc5#about-this-item


CITATIONS CONTINUED...


*A bill of rights as provided in the ten original amendments to the constitution of the United States in force.* 1950. From the Library of Congress, Broadsides, leaflets, and pamphlets from America and Europe. http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/rbpebib:@field(NUMBER+@band(rbpe+24404400))
