



CONSTITUTION DAY:

Celebrating With Your Students

BY GARY LAND

Because the U.S. Constitution is the foundation of America's system of government and also its citizens' rights and liberties, it is imperative that teachers and students in Adventist schools should understand it well.

Most American teachers recognize that the United States Constitution is the fundamental law of the land, but how much do they really know about the document? In the fall of 2008, my American Government class students at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, had trouble identifying the three branches of government (executive, legislative, judiciary); listing the terms of office for the president (four years), senators (six years), and representatives (two years); and describing the First Amendment (freedom of speech, press, and religion). And, because it was a presidential election year, many asked questions regarding how the electoral college worked and why America has such an institution. Several confused the Constitution with the Declaration of Independence, believing that the former grounded our “unalienable

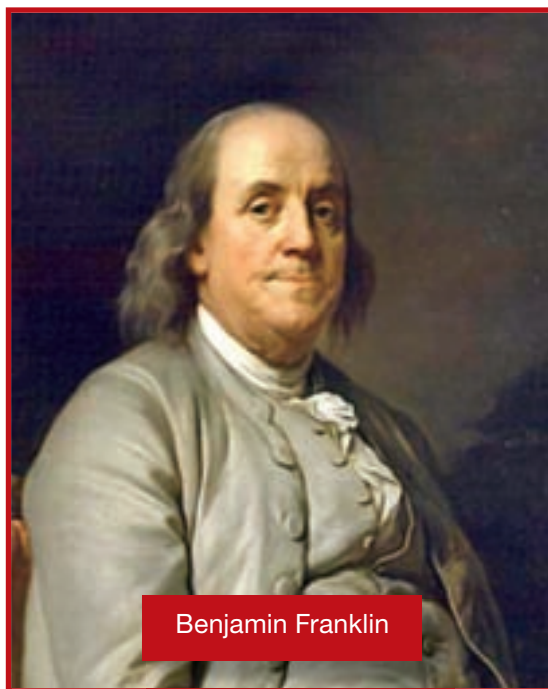
Rights” to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” in the “laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.”

Although (hopefully) my students grasped the Constitution better after reading it and discussing it in class, they were not alone in their lack of information and understanding. In response to a questioner, a student at American University commented, “We haven’t learned about the Constitution that much since before college. You kind of forget this stuff.”¹ With the emphasis given to testing mathematics and reading by the No Child Left Behind Act, organizations such as the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) have become increasingly concerned with the neglect of history and civics in America’s educational system.² One journalist concluded that, “Many high schoolers lack knowledge about their most basic civil liberties.”³ A survey of high school students that focused specifically on the First Amendment found that three-quarters of them “don’t know how they feel” about the amendment or that they “take it for granted.” Perhaps more worrisome, they “support individual free expression rights that directly affect or interest them; they’re less supportive of rights that are less relevant to their lives.”⁴

Ignorance about the Constitution even extends to people elected to Congress, according to Senator Robert C. Byrd, Democrat from West Virginia, who claims that “many members of Congress ‘do not come really with, in so many instances, a basic knowledge of the Constitution and, of course, with a love and reverence for it.’”⁵

Because the U.S. Constitution is the foundation of America’s system of government and also its citizens’ rights and liberties, it is imperative that teachers and students in Adventist schools should understand it well. As Tam Taylor of the Center for Civic Education observes, students at all grade levels “can enjoy learning about their rights and responsibilities, and even those in the early grades can grasp concepts such as justice and authority. ‘Kids deal with that on the playground every day,’” he says.⁶ To address these concerns, Senator Byrd in 2004 added an amendment to an appropriations bill establishing September 17 as “Constitution and Citizenship Day.”

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Benjamin Franklin

Constitution Day

Commemorating the “formation and signing” of the Constitution in 1787, the day also recognizes those “who, by coming of age or by naturalization, have become citizens.” This law has special significance for educational institutions, for it requires all schools that receive federal funds to “hold an educational program on the United States Constitution” for its students each September 17.⁷ In its “Notice of Implementation,” issued in May 2005, the U.S. Department of Education stated that although it could only regulate those institutions to which it provided funding, the law applied to schools receiving federal funds of any kind.⁸ The law does not specify how the Constitution is to be taught, nor does it appropriate funds for Constitution Day activities.

Background

Byrd’s law built on more than a half century of effort to promote understanding of the Constitution. In 1939, newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst began advocating adoption of a day to celebrate United States citizenship, a proposal enacted by Congress in 1940 as “I Am an American Day,” which was to be celebrated on the third Sunday in May. Twelve years later, in 1952, President Harry Truman moved the date to September 17, the day on which the Constitution was

signed, and renamed it “Citizenship Day.”

About the same time, Olga T. Weber, a resident of Louisville, Ohio, had become concerned that Americans were not sufficiently aware of their freedoms. In 1951, she began distributing the Constitution, along with other patriotic materials, to individuals and institutions in her home town. At her urging, the mayor proclaimed September 17, 1952, as Constitution Day. Mrs. Weber then successfully lobbied the Ohio state legislature in 1953 to make the day a state holiday. Later that same year, she asked the United States Senate to establish September 17-23 as Constitution Week.

In 1955, the Daughters of the American Revolution, an organization of women whose ancestors were patriots during the War for Independence, also urged Congress to adopt Constitution Week, which it enacted into law the following year. In August 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower proclaimed

September 17-23, 1956, as the first Constitution Week. Claiming credit for this new law, in 1957 the City Council of Louisville declared their city “Constitution Town,” and in 1958, the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society installed four historical markers describing the town’s role in the establishment of Constitution Week. Interestingly, neither the Daughters of the American Revolution nor Louisville mention the other’s role in the establishment of this commemoration.⁹ The 2004 law added the phrase “Constitution Day” to Truman’s previously established title so that now “Constitution Day and Citizenship Day” inaugurate “Constitution Week.”¹⁰ To simplify things, most people simply refer to the celebration as “Constitution Day.”

Although some educators have protested the mandate, believing that the Federal Government should not dictate the



George Washington addresses the Continental Congress, 1774.

curriculum,¹¹ others have supported the law. Ted McConnell, director of the National Campaign to Promote Civic Education, regards Constitution Day “as ‘an imminently teachable moment’ for civic education.” Peggy Altoff, when president-elect of NCSS, further stated that it “is a fine idea . . . unless it becomes the only education on the constitution that occurs within a school or a district.”¹² Similarly, while Aaron Siegel of the Freedoms Foundation thinks that the Day “‘is a wonderful idea,’” he also believes that “‘The Constitution is a document that should be visited by young people in a formalized program on a regular basis.’”¹³

What Is a Teacher or School to Do?

Surely, enhancing students’ understanding of the basis for U.S. democracy will help equip them to be participating citizens. So how should a teacher or school approach the document in order to improve student understanding? The Constitution, after all, is a legal statement, not the sort of reading that easily attracts students at any level of education. Fortunately, the Internet provides information about interesting activities that schools have incorporated into their observance

of Constitution Day and offers resources that educators can apply in the classroom and elsewhere on campus.¹⁴

Elementary and Middle School Activities

The earliest grades perhaps offer the greatest challenge, but Michael Gravois has pulled together a number of ideas:

- For grades K-2, he suggests discussing the Preamble with the students and then, to illustrate how each individual is part of a larger whole, have the students make a paper chain flag with each young person’s name on a link.
- To help students understand some of the unfamiliar words in the Preamble, *Scholastic* published a “Preamble Puzzle” that can be reproduced and is suitable for elementary students beginning with the 3rd grade.

- Students in grades 3 to 5 also might write a constitution for their classroom modeled on the U.S. Constitution, while grades 6 to 8 could develop a program, patterned after old radio shows, that reports on the 1787 Constitutional Convention.
- Middle school students can compose short plays that explore possible responses to the Constitution by those who were not included in its guaranteed rights (slaves, women, Native Americans).¹⁵

High School

While plays and other creative activities will spark interest in the Constitution at the high school level as well, teachers can also take a more academic approach.

- The National Archives encourages teachers to explore with their students documents relating to the writing, ratification, and implementation of the Constitution. Those living in one of the original 13 states might find it especially interesting to see how the political battle for ratification developed in their own area.

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- Another unusual angle suggested by the National Archives is to research the relationship of adoption of the Constitution to the re-establishment of the United States Navy.¹⁶
- On September 17, the Supreme Court holds an annual “Conversation on the Constitution” between some of the justices and high school students that is available in streaming video as well as on a recording that teachers can supplement with a variety of other resources, including two interactive games.¹⁷

Finally, students at all levels will enjoy making and displaying posters. In 2008, Constitutionfacts.com sponsored its second annual poster contest for K-12 students, asking them to show how they had “benefitted from the freedoms embodied in the U. S. Constitution.”¹⁸

College and University

Probably the widest ranges of activities have occurred at colleges and universities, which hold one-day events or



schedule week-long activities. Many schools keep their observance simple by sponsoring a speech or panel discussion, sign up for satellite and online broadcasts provided by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, or hold mass readings of the Preamble to the Constitution. With 2008 being an election year, some institutions planned voter registration drives.

But other events have taken place as well:

- In 2005, the University of the Arts in Philadelphia took an interactive approach by displaying giant posters of the Bill of Rights at high-traffic areas on the campus. Attached to the posters were large pads of paper on which people could write their own revisions or additions to the amendments.

- In 2008, Brooklyn College established an exhibit with replicas of the United States Constitution and other historic documents, North Georgia College and State University sponsored an essay contest on the question of “Should the Bill of Rights Apply to Illegal Immigrants?” and the University of Arkansas at Monticello held a debate on whether “The U.S. Constitution should be overhauled.” Reaching beyond its own student body, Indiana University Northwest opened its political science classes to the public.

- Some colleges have struggled with the problem that Constitution Day occurs before school opens. In these cases, the Department of Education has suggested that they hold an event as early as possible after school begins. Although the 2005 Constitution Day occurred the day before classes began, Washington State’s Tacoma Community College displayed posters and distributed bookmarks with information about the Constitution.¹⁹

Libraries

Finally, in addition to classroom teachers, libraries at all levels can use Constitution Day to become more visible in their school and community. Books and other displays, bibliographies made available on the library Web page, bulletin boards, and special programs in the library, as well as collaborative efforts with faculty will bring attention to both the Constitution and the library.²⁰

An Opportunity for Seventh-day Adventists

Clearly, there are many possibilities for observing Constitution Day, but the commemoration also provides a unique opportunity for Seventh-day Adventists. With our denomination’s historic devotion to separation of church and state,

it seems only natural that Adventist schools at all levels use Constitution Day as a time to explore the meaning of religious freedom in the United States. Perhaps the Department of Education and the Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty could develop a Website with lesson plans and other materials focusing on the free exercise clause of the First Amendment. Such a resource would be of great service to teachers in the denomination’s schools, colleges, and universities, but also would provide an avenue for promoting understanding of religious liberty. Beyond simply observing a day because Federal law requires it, we would be helping fulfill our mission as Seventh-day Adventist educators. ✍



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This article has been peer reviewed.

Resources

Websites: The following Websites offer lesson plans, documents, and additional teaching materials, as well as links to other useful sites. All were accessed on December 14, 2008.

Annenberg Media: <http://www.learner.org/resources/series72.html>

Annenberg Classroom: <http://www.annenbergclassroom.org/Chapter.aspx?Id=61>

A to Z Teacher’s Stuff: http://www.atozteacherstuff.com/Themes/Constitution_Day/

Ben’s Guide to U.S. Government for Kids: <http://bensguide.gpo.gov/k-2/index.html>

Bill of Rights Institute: <http://www.billofrightsinstitute.org/>
Committee for Citizen Awareness: <http://www.citizenawareness.org/>

Congressional Quarterly Press: <http://www.cqpress.com/context/>

Constitutional Rights Foundation: <http://www.crf-usa.org/foundations-of-our-constitution/>

C-Span: <http://www.c-spanclassroom.org/VideoDetail.aspx?category=C>. Accessed December 2, 2009.

edHelper.com: http://www.edhelper.com/Constitution_Day.htm?gclid=CM-G3KHTk5cCFYwh3godoUypDA

Education World: http://www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson/lesson347.shtml

Library of Congress, American Memory: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/continental/>

Library of Congress, The Learning Page: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/constitu/conintro.html>

Library of Congress, Thomas: <http://thomas.loc.gov/teachers/constitution.html>

LLRX.COM Law and Technology Resources for Legal Professionals: <http://www.llrx.com/columns/govdomain37.htm>

National Archives: <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/charters.html>
National Constitution Center: <http://constitutioncenter.org/constitutionday/>
National Endowment for the Humanities: http://edsitement.neh.gov/ConstitutionDay/constitution_index2.html
U.S. Constitution Online: <http://www.usconstitution.net/>

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Middle School

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High School and Adult

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Rakove, Jack N. *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York: Knopf, 1996).
Monk, Linda R. *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution* (New York: Hyperion, 2003).

Although this article focuses on Constitution Day in the United States, several other countries also celebrate a similar day. The Wikipedia entry on "Constitution Day" provides a number of links to Websites on these days around the world: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_Day.

1. Jennifer Jacobson, "That Confounding Constitution," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 7, 2005).
2. Joetta L. Sack and Andrew Trotter, "Schools to Tackle a New Mandate: Teaching About U.S. Constitution," *Education Week* (September 7, 2005), p. 9.
3. Donna Krache, "Constitution Day Ushers in Mandate to Teach the Constitution," CNN.com (September 16, 2005): <http://www.cnn.com/2005/EDUCATION/09/16/constitution.day/>. Accessed December 14, 2008.
4. "Study: First Amendment Still Left Behind in Schools": <http://www.firstamendmentfuture.org/> (accessed December 14, 2008). See also Michelle R. Davis, "First Amendment Literacy," *Education Week* (September 16, 2007).
5. Sack and Trotter, *Education Week*, op cit., p. 9.
6. Melissa Ezarik, "Curriculum Update: Sept. 17: Schools Must Teach Constitution," *District Administration* (August 2005), p. 64.
7. Laws: Cases and Codes: US Code: Title 36: Section 106: http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cascode/uscodes/36/subtitles/i/parts/a/chapters/1/sections/section_106.html (accessed December 9, 2008); Public Law 108-447, 108th Congress, http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=108_cong_public_laws&docid=f:publ447.108. Accessed December 17, 2008.
8. *Federal Register*: May 24, 2005 (70:99), FR Doc. 05-10355: <http://www.ed.gov/legislation/FedRegister/other/2005-2/052405b.html>. Accessed December 9, 2008.
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10. For example, see President George W. Bush's 2008 proclamation: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/09/20080917.html>. Accessed December 9, 2008.
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12. Donna Krache, "Constitution Day Ushers in Mandate to Teach the Constitution," op cit.
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14. For example, see Linda C. Joseph, "We the People: Constitution and Citizenship Day," *MultiMedia & Internet@Schools* (September/October, 2005), pp. 12-15.
15. Michael Gravois, "Teaching the Constitution," *Instructor* (September 2005), pp. 62-65.
16. "Teaching With Documents: Observing Constitution Day": <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/constitution-day/>. Accessed December 14, 2008.
17. "Constitution Day Is Every Day at the Federal Courts": <http://www.uscourts.gov/outreach/resources/constitutionday.html>. Accessed December 14, 2008.
18. "Constitution Day 2008 Poster Design Contest": <http://www.constitutionday.cc/>. Accessed December 14, 2008.
19. Mary Lou Santovec, "Campuses Create a Variety of Constitution Day Activities," *National On-Campus Report* (September 1, 2005); Anne K. Walters, "College Scramble to Plan Events to Comply with Federal Mandate for Constitution Day," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 2, 2005); National Constitution Center, All Constitution Day Events Resources: http://constitutioncenter.org/constitutionday/Resource_List.aspx?type=5; American Association of State Colleges and University, American Democracy Project: <http://www.aascu.org/programs/adp/constitution.htm>. All accessed December 14, 2008.
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