

# Sesquicentennial of the Constitution

## 1787 to 1937

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**P**REPARATIONS have already begun for the celebration of the sesquicentennial of the framing and adoption of the federal Constitution on a scale which will dwarf the 3,500,000 ceremonies of the Washington bicentennial into comparative insignificance. Sol Bloom has been appointed director-general of the celebrations lasting from September 17, 1937, to April 30, 1939, an appointment that indicates that celebrations will be on the same mammoth scale as were those of the Washington bicentennial, which he directed five years ago.<sup>1</sup> Every date between the anniversary of the signing of the Constitution on September 17, 1787, and its ratification by Rhode Island on May 29, 1790, will be capitalized as a significant occasion for a celebration. The climax of this nineteen-month pageant will be the celebration on April 30, 1939, of the anniversary of the inauguration of George Washington as first President of the United States, an event around which the world's fair in New York City is being planned.

A study of the Constitution now constitutes an integral part of nearly every high-

<sup>1</sup> Materials may be obtained by addressing the Constitutional Sesquicentennial Office, 1451 Broadway, New York City.

In this article a teacher of history at Brunswick School, Greenwich, Connecticut, offers timely suggestions for the planning of a worthy celebration of this important anniversary.

school social-studies curriculum, whether the work is carried on in American history, civics or government, problems of democracy, or economics classes. The sesquicentennial should intensify our interest and focus our attention on the significance of this document in our national life. The celebration will be made more interesting and likewise more difficult for teachers to discuss, coming as it does at a time of bitter controversy over the scope and meaning of the Constitution. Such a situation, however, should not serve as an excuse for evading the opportunity of making the study of the Constitution vital and timely. Teachers should begin now to assemble material, decide upon major emphases, and plan methods of approach. If these tasks are postponed, much valuable material will be overlooked, and calm deliberation will be replaced by hurried preparation in an atmosphere of celebration and festivity, an atmosphere seldom conducive to careful judgment and impartial reasoning.

**T**HE objectives and emphases for each school will of necessity be determined by those in charge of such study, with local situations acting as influential factors. This paper is not concerned chiefly with those attitudes and objectives. The writer can not continue with a discussion of methods of approach and materials, however, without one warning. Political celebrations, like political campaigns, tend to deteriorate as they are prolonged. Education succumbs to propaganda; knowledge and learning to rhetoric and oratory. This often appears



even though the efforts of those in authority try to curb such tendencies. Teachers can, if they will, act as important agencies in preventing such a lamentable situation in the forthcoming celebration.

#### METHODS OF APPROACH

THREE major methods of approach to the study of the Constitution suggest themselves. The first combines the study and use of parliamentary procedure, dramatics, and the biographical approach to history, through re-enactment of the Constitutional Convention and subsequent events dealing with the Constitution. The class, classes, or schools participating should be divided into state delegations and be assigned the names of actual representatives to the Convention.

Especially good material on these persons will be found in James Madison's "Journal of the Constitutional Convention,"<sup>2</sup> undoubtedly the most important book on the subject of the Convention. Max Farrand's *Fathers of the Constitution*<sup>3</sup> and the same author's *Framing of the Constitution*<sup>4</sup> likewise contain much valuable biographical data. The chapters in Charles A. Beard's *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* on "The Political Doctrines" and "The Economic Interests" of the delegates will serve as further aids.<sup>5</sup>

Upon the basis of these and other facts the students may then write their own proceedings and conduct their own convention, dramatize their study in their own play, or use the plays already written by

others. One of the best of those already in print is the one by Margaret Porch Hamilton, *The Federal Constitution*.<sup>6</sup>

A second approach closely allied with the first is through debates, round tables, panel and forum discussions. Here the emphasis might be placed on the amendments and present-day controversies over interpretation, whereas the dramatization would probably concern itself largely with the historical phases of the Constitution. This second method adapts itself well to classes in problems of democracy and civics or government courses, while the first method is recommended especially for history groups. Such topics as "The Proposed Child Labor Amendment," "The Proposed Constitutional Amendment on Social Security Measures," "The Enforcement of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments," or "The Powers of the President" might serve for discussion.

The third method of presenting the Constitution is one of independent study, based possibly on such topics as "The Freedom of the Press," "Freedom of Speech," "Property Rights and the Constitution," "The Influence of the French and English Writers on the Constitution," "The Ratification of the Constitution," and "The Bill of Rights."<sup>7</sup> Gertrude Wolff's *One Hundred Questions on the United States Constitution*<sup>8</sup> should serve as a handy guide to teachers pressed for time.

THE materials to be used in any of these studies will not vary greatly. First of all there should be several up-to-date textbooks in American history, supplemented by copies of recent American government texts. These will provide variations on

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of the Constitutional Convention*, New York: Putnam, 2 vols., 1908; *The Debates on the Federal Convention of 1787*, ed. by G. Hunt and J. B. Scott. Publication of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Division of International Law. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1920; and elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> *Chronicles of America Series*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1921.

<sup>4</sup> New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1913, based on his *Records of the Federal Convention*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 3 vols., 1911, also 1934.

<sup>5</sup> New York: Macmillan, 1935; see also reviews by Professor Phillips Bradley in this issue of *Social Education*.

<sup>6</sup> From Mrs F. M. Hamilton, 455 Park Avenue, Leonia, New Jersey, for 50c a copy, 30c each from two to twenty, and 20c each for more.

<sup>7</sup> Gertrude Hartman, *The Making of the Constitution*. New York: Social Science Publications, 1936, reviewed in the January issue of *Social Education*.

<sup>8</sup> Pamphlet 22 of the Modern Social Problems Series issued by American Education Press, Columbus, Ohio.



basic materials in content, interpretation, and emphasis. General histories, such as those of Edward Channing, James Ford Rhodes, and John Bach McMaster will be helpful, although not essential. Parts of James Truslow Adams' *Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1931) and Charles and Mary Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization* (one vol. ed. New York: Macmillan, 1933) may be valuable. To supplement these should be the source books already mentioned, and also Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay's "Federalist" papers,<sup>9</sup> David S. Muzzey's *Readings in American History*,<sup>10</sup> Volume III of Albert B. Hart's *American History Told by Contemporaries*.<sup>11</sup> Every student should have access to studies of the Constitution presenting divergent views, such as James M. Beck's *The Constitution of the United States*,<sup>12</sup> Charles A. Beard's *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*,<sup>13</sup> and Robert Livingston Schuyler's *The Constitution of the United States*.<sup>14</sup>

The list of other books on the Constitution could be almost unending, to say nothing of the pamphlets and magazine articles available. Raymond Garfield Gettell has written a small, inexpensive book giving a concise account of the Constitution, its background and history, *The Constitution of the United States*.<sup>15</sup> Frank A. Magruder and Guy Shirk Clair have a more detailed and difficult book, *The Constitution*.<sup>16</sup>

The more recent publications have many of them been critical in tone and are valuable for those emphasizing present trends

and possible changes. One of them is William Y. Elliott's *Need for Constitutional Reform*,<sup>17</sup> a book written by a Harvard professor of government and member of the "Brain Trust." Irving Brant's *Storm Over the Constitution*<sup>18</sup> is somewhat similar in tone and considerably shorter. Henry A. Wallace interprets the Constitution from the standpoint of a New Dealer in *Whose Constitution?*<sup>19</sup> No mention of materials would be complete without reference to books treating the relationship between the Constitution and the federal Supreme Court. Andrew C. McLaughlin's *A Constitutional History of the United States*,<sup>20</sup> Howard Lee McBain's *The Living Constitution*, especially for teachers,<sup>21</sup> Ernest Sutherland Bates' highly recommended and recent study, *The Story of the Supreme Court*,<sup>22</sup> Edwin S. Corwin's *John Marshall and the Constitution* and his *Twilight of the Supreme Court*,<sup>23</sup> and Charles Evans Hughes' *The Supreme Court*<sup>24</sup> would constitute a small reference library on that subject. For teachers wishing to test the attitudes of their class towards this famous document, there is L. I. Thurstone's *Attitude Test on the Constitution of the United States*,<sup>25</sup> which can be given to advantage in Forms A and B before and after such a study as a profitable check on the accomplishments of such a unit. Mata V. Bear's *Test on the United States Constitution*<sup>26</sup> is arranged for grades 8 to 12 and, since it takes less than a forty-minute period, is a good test for comparison of results with other schools.

<sup>17</sup> New York: McGraw-Hill, 1935.

<sup>18</sup> Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1936.

<sup>19</sup> New York: Reynal Hitchcock, 1936.

<sup>20</sup> New York: Appleton-Century, 1935.

<sup>21</sup> New York City: The Workers Education Bureau Press, 1927.

<sup>22</sup> Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1936.

<sup>23</sup> New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1934.

<sup>24</sup> Garden City: Garden City Pub. Co., 1936.

<sup>25</sup> Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1931.

<sup>26</sup> Bloomington, Illinois: Public School Publishing Co., 1930.

<sup>9</sup> Various published as, for instance, *The Federalist*, New York: Dutton, 1911.

<sup>10</sup> Rev. ed. New York: Ginn, 1921.

<sup>11</sup> New York: Macmillan, 1929.

<sup>12</sup> Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1936 edition.

<sup>13</sup> *ante*

<sup>14</sup> New York: Ginn, 1924.

<sup>15</sup> New York: Macmillan, 1923.

<sup>16</sup> New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933; the October issue of *Building America* on "Our Constitution," for 30 cents from 425 West 123rd Street, New York City.