Introduction

What Is the Constitution?

The United States Constitution is a written plan that says what our government should do. It also says how our government is to be organized and run.

The Constitution describes what members of our government may do. It also says what they may not do. The Constitution helps prevent the government from violating our rights. Our Constitution is the highest or supreme law of our land. Even the president, Congress, and the Supreme Court must obey the Constitution. In our country, everyone must obey the law.

Our Constitution was written in Philadelphia more than two hundred years ago. We need to understand our Constitution to know our rights and responsibilities as citizens.

This book is not like most history books. Most history books tell the story of people and events of the past. This book is a history of ideas. It explains the most important ideas of our Constitution and tells you how they were developed.

This book will help you understand some of the basic ideals, or goals, of our nation. These ideals include the belief in liberty and justice for all people. You also will learn about your responsibilities as a citizen to help make these ideals a reality for everyone.

The title of each lesson asks an important question about government. After you have finished the lesson, you should be able to answer the question. The answers to the questions will help you understand why the Constitution is important for you.

Your Constitution protects your rights. Here are some of the rights it protects. And here are some of the responsibilities that come along with those rights:

- You have the right to believe in any religion you like. And you are free not to believe in a religion. You are responsible for respecting other people’s right to believe what they wish.
- You have the right to tell others your beliefs and ideas. You are responsible for not saying things that could result in serious harm to other people or damage to their property.
- You have the right to the same opportunity others have to do something you want to do. You are responsible for respecting the same right for other people.
- If you are accused of breaking a law, you have the right to be treated fairly. You are responsible for not breaking laws.
- You have the right to ask your government to do things to make things better. You also have the responsibility to not ask for things that are unreasonable and unfair.
- When you are eighteen, you will have the right to vote for people to represent you in your government. You have the responsibility to vote for people who are reasonable and fair.
- When you are an adult, you will have the right to try to get people to elect you to be in government. You have a responsibility to be reasonable and fair when you tell people why they should vote for you.
What were people like in the British colonies in America during the 1770s?

LESSON PURPOSE

More than two hundred years ago, there were British, Dutch, French, and Spanish colonies in North America. In this lesson, you will learn how people lived in the British colonies. We want to learn about these colonies because they became the United States of America. They were the first thirteen states. This lesson will help you know about the people who wrote our United States Constitution.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

When you have finished this lesson, you should be able to

- describe what life was like for the average American living in the colonies
- explain how living in the colonies influenced people’s ideas about government, and
- explain what the term *Founders* means.

TERMS TO KNOW

- colony
- diverse
- Founders
- indentured servant
- plantation
- self-sufficient
- slave
- subject
Who ruled the thirteen colonies?

In the year 1770, our country did not exist. There was no United States of America. The people who were to create our country lived in thirteen British colonies. A colony is a territory ruled by another country.

The colonists were subjects of Great Britain. Being a subject means that you are under the authority of a government. Great Britain owned and ruled the colonies. The British colonies were on the Atlantic coast of North America. Great Britain was across the ocean more than three thousand miles away.

What was it like to live in the colonies in the 1770s?

When people came from Europe to America, they saw that America was different from where they had lived before. America was a very large place compared to most nations in Europe. There was a great deal of open, unsettled space. The British colonies spread from what is now the state of Maine in the north to Georgia in the south.

There was space in America for people to settle and to own land. In Europe, only the rich could afford to buy land. In the colonies, land was cheap. People came with the hope of owning their own land. Owning land meant that you could farm to support your family. The number of people who
lived in the colonies grew quickly. In 1775, there were 2.5 million people. Fifteen years later, there were almost 4 million people.

**Who lived in the colonies?**

Because many settlers came to the colonies from Great Britain, they spoke English. They dressed like the British. They followed many of the British customs.

Some colonists were not like the British. They came from many other countries, such as France, Germany, Holland, and Sweden. Each group of settlers brought with them their own customs and ways of life.

Native Americans and their ancestors had lived on the land for thousands of years before the colonists arrived. They had their own customs and ways of life. The settlers called these people Indians. Some Native Americans accepted the settlers and lived peacefully with them. Others fought the settlers. After many battles, some Native Americans were moved from their land by force. Moving Native Americans from their land continued for the next hundred years.

Half a million African people and their descendants also lived in the colonies. They were 20 percent of the population. Most of these people had been brought from Africa to work as slaves. A **slave** is a person who is forced to work without pay and who is not allowed to have any rights.

The colonists treated the slaves as if they were property. Most of the enslaved people were in the Southern Colonies, but slavery existed in all thirteen colonies.

The colonies became home for people from many places and backgrounds. The people brought with them diverse ideas. **Diverse** means to be unlike one another. People held diverse ideas about religion, government, and rights. This diversity helped create a society that was different from society in Europe.

**How did the colonists live?**

Most Americans in the 1770s were farmers, but not all farms were alike. In the New England Colonies, the cold climate made farming more difficult.

A farm might be only a small fifty-acre patch of rocky soil. On such a farm, family members did all the work themselves. Sometimes they hired a person to help them. Some farmers had an indentured servant. An **indentured servant** was a person who exchanged his or her
What do you think life was like on a small Northern farm? How was life on a large Southern plantation different?

work for a number of years to pay for the trip from Europe to the colonies.

In the Middle Colonies, the soil was good for growing wheat, oats, and barley. People in the Middle Colonies also raised cows, hogs, sheep, and horses. The Middle Colonies had deep rivers. The farmers used the rivers to ship their goods to market.

In the Southern Colonies, the warmer climate made farming easier. Most of the people lived on small farms much like the people in New England. Some people lived on plantations. A plantation is a large farm that needs many workers. The slaves and other workers lived on the plantations. Some plantations had hundreds of slaves.

In the 1770s, most Americans were self-sufficient. Self-sufficient means that people raised their own food and wove their own cloth for clothes. They built homes and barns, made their own furniture and tools, and even made their own medicines. They traded any extra farm products at a local store for those few goods they could not make for themselves.
What opportunities did people have in America?

A visitor to the colonies would have been impressed by how well the people lived. They lived better than most people anywhere else in the world. There was plenty of work for everyone. The colonists worked hard, but the land was fertile and they grew plenty of food. So most colonists ate better, grew taller, and were healthier than people in Europe.

More people in the colonies could read and write than in any other nation in the world. Many owned enough property to be able to vote. More people had the right to vote than anywhere else in the world. Most of the people had a chance to earn a good living through hard work. Wealth and family name did not mean as much in the colonies as they did in Europe.

However, not all people had the same opportunities. While some people became wealthy, some remained poor. Only adult white men who owned property could vote. In most of the colonies, women were not allowed to own property. In the few cases where women did own property, they were not allowed to vote. Slaves did not have any rights.

Despite these limits, most colonists had more rights than did people in Europe. For example, the colonists could follow their religious beliefs freely. Their rights were very important to them. By 1775, the colonists worried about how to protect their rights.
What opportunities did this colonial farmer enjoy?

One farmer who wrote about his life in the colonies was Philip Taylor. Read what he wrote. Work with a partner to answer the questions that follow. Be prepared to share your ideas with the class.

We now have a comfortable dwelling. We have two acres of land planted with potatoes, corn, and melons. I have two hogs, one ewe and her lamb. The price of cows in the spring was as high as 33 dollars. No doubt, I shall have one by fall.

I am living in God’s noble and free soil, neither am I slave to others…. I have now been on American soil for two and one-half years and I have not been compelled to pay for the privilege of living. Neither is my cap worn out from lifting it in the presence of gentlemen.

1. What did Philip Taylor like about life in America?
2. What rights did he enjoy?
3. Do you think he would favor a law that does not permit people to buy or sell what they choose? Why?
4. Do you think he would favor a law that gives people more rights because they are wealthy? Why?
5. Do you think he would favor a law that gives people rights because of their family or the group to which they belong? Why?
6. What did he mean when he said, “Neither is my cap worn out from lifting it in the presence of gentlemen”?

What Do You Think?
Who governed the colonies?

American colonies were ruled by Great Britain from 1607 to 1776, more than one hundred fifty years. George III was king of Great Britain from 1760 to 1820. During much of this time, Great Britain was busy with problems in Europe. The British government did not pay much attention to the colonies. The American colonies learned to govern themselves. They had brought British customs and laws with them to America. They used these British ideas to develop their own governments. The colonists participated in their governments much more than people did in Europe.

During the 1770s, Americans thought about what kind of government they wanted. The colonists asked themselves if King George III was really protecting their rights. There were many arguments, speeches, and books about what was best for the colonies. If you had lived in America then, you would have found it an exciting time.

Who were the Founders?

There were many important leaders in early America. For example, George Washington, Patrick Henry, Abigail Adams, and Benjamin Franklin were all well known during this time. You probably have heard of these people. We call these leaders the Founders because they helped found, or establish, our country.

Abigail Adams, one of our nation’s Founders and wife of John Adams, wrote to her husband in 1776, “If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.” What do you think she was concerned about?

The Founders led the fight to free our country from British rule. They developed their own ideas about what type of government would be best for America. The next lessons will help you understand the ideas the Founders used to create our government.
Reviewing and Using the Lesson

1. What was life like for the average American colonist?

2. Why did so many Europeans want to come to live in the colonies?

3. How might living in the colonies help to influence people’s ideas about government?

4. What is the meaning of the term *Founders*?

Activities

1. Write a short story about how the colonists’ American way of life might have influenced their ideas about government. Share your story with the class.

2. Go to your library or use your computer. Find information about one of the following topics:
   - What was life like for children in the colonies?
   - What was life like for Native Americans in the colonies?
   - What was life like for women in the colonies?
   - What was life like for slaves in the Southern Colonies?
   - What was life like for indentured servants?

   *Share what you learned with your class.*

3. Find a map of the United States today. Locate the original thirteen colonies. What were the names of the thirteen colonies? Which ones were New England Colonies, Middle Colonies, and Southern Colonies?

4. On a map of the United States, locate your state. Was your state originally a British colony? Was it a French or Spanish colony? What Native American tribes lived there before the Europeans came? When did your state become part of the United States?
CHECK OUT THE WE THE PEOPLE STUDENT RESOURCE CENTER

www.civiced.org/level1student

- Lesson Purposes
- Lesson Objectives
- Terms to Know
- Biographies
- Primary Sources
- Media