

# First Congress Unit - Lesson 6: Assumption Issue and Residence Bill

## Congress Compromises “to form a more perfect Union:” The Assumption Issue and Residence Bill

*“This was perhaps the most disorderly day ever We had in Senate.”*

- **Diary of [Senator] William Maclay**

Two of the most significant issues debated at the First Federal Congress dealt with whether the national government ought to assume the debts of the states (“assumption plan”) and where the nation’s permanent capital ought to be located (Residence Bill). Both topics raised questions about the powers of federal versus state power (federalism) and created considerable tensions between the northern and southern states (sectionalism).

After heated debates that included threats of disunion, Congress enacted the Compromise of 1790 and demonstrated its role in helping to promote national unity. In this lesson, students will simulate a session of the First Federal Congress to consider the two issues – Assumption and Residence. Will the students produce a similar compromise?

**Targeted Audience:** Students of early American history and government.

**Goals:** This lesson is designed to help students understand **(a)** the roles that Congress plays in strengthening and perpetuating the Union, **(b)** the role that compromise plays in representative government and the work of Congress, and **(c)** the overarching problems of sectionalism and federalism in the First Federal Congress.

### Focus Questions

- What were the basic elements of the assumption plan and how did it contribute to the emerging sectional differences within the United States?
- How did the Residence Bill contribute to the emerging sectional differences within the United States?
- What role did the First Federal Congress play in temporarily reducing the sectional tensions that existed within the United States and in helping to “create a more perfect Union?”

**Time to Complete:** 1-2 class periods.

### Standards Addressed

## 1. Delaware

- **Civics Standard 1 (Grades 6-8):** Students will analyze the different functions of federal, state, and local governments in the United States.
- **Geography Standard 4 (Grades 6-8):** Students will explain how conflict and cooperation among people contribute to the division of the Earth's surface into distinctive...political territories.

## 2. National

- **Grades 5-8:** Students should be able to explain how and why powers are distributed and shared between national and state governments in the federal system.

## Materials Needed

- Classroom sets of Handout 1.
- Handouts 6-2 through 6-8 (see **Unit Resources**).

**Terms to Know:** credit, creditor, assumption, centrality, seat of government, residence, compromise, dissolution, consolidation.

## Procedures

**1. Entry Activity:** As students enter the room display the following prompt on the overhead and ask the students to provide a written response on a 3"x5" index card:

“A committee has been meeting to plan the next school dance. The committee is divided on two issues. Group A wants to hold the dance in the school gym to keep costs down while Group B wants to hold the dance off school grounds. Group A also want students to pay the entire cost of the dance ticket while Group B want to hold fundraisers to pay most of the cost of the tickets. You have been appointed to a special committee to help the dance committee resolve its dispute. Recommend a solution.”

This activity is designed to get students thinking about multiple problems and opportunities for compromise. After you have collected the cards, ask some students to volunteer their recommendations and discuss the merits of each. Don't emphasize any compromises. Just have the students store it as prior knowledge before beginning this lesson.

**2. Assign Roles and Distribute Role Cards (see Handout 6-2 - see Unit Resources):** Since the House originally defeated the Assumption plan on April 12, 1790, by a close vote of 31-29, you are encouraged to have approximately 51% of your class (mainly representatives from southern states) play the role of opponents of the assumption bill.

*(Note: Don't tell the students but, by a margin of one vote, the Senate attached the assumption bill to the funding bill and it was later passed when Congress agreed to move the nation's capital to a southern location.)*

**3. Parliamentary Rules:** Distribute copies of Handout 1 (see **Unit Resources**) so that the students can refer to them during the debates.

**4. Lesson Description:** Tell the students that they will continue their mock congress today. However, suggest that, since they are now familiar with how the simulation works and you want to move forward with the unit, you are going to have them consider two proposals today instead of one. Do not tell them that you are really presenting them with the two resolutions to see if they can formulate a compromise that achieved the same ends as the Compromise of 1790.

**5. Setting the Stage:** Create a mindset for the debate on Assumption by asking the students how they would feel if you told them that you were going to pay any debts that they had. Ask them how this would make them feel about you if you really did repay all of their debts?

**6. Distribute Legislative Brief: The Assumption Bill (Handout 6-3 - see Unit Resources):** Ask students to read their briefs then clarify any questions they may have about its contents.

### **7. Debate**

**8. Table the debate on assumption and introduce the Residence Bill:** Before students have a chance to vote on the assumption proposal, suggest that one of them make a motion to table this bill so that the second bill of the day can be discussed before the class period ends. Suggest that they can continue debate on either bill once the Residence Bill brief has been read and discussed.

**9. Mapwork:** Distribute copies of Handout 6-4 (see Unit Resources) - Map of United States in 1790. Tell the students that their understanding of the Residence Bill requires some geographic knowledge about the United States in 1790. Ask the students to use their pencils and place a dot or star on the map where they estimate the “center” of the 13 United States was in 1790.

Ask a few students to share their estimations without explaining why an estimation of “centrality” is important for the pending debate. If the students do not raise the question, ask them what criteria they used to determine "centrality?" Did they consider land area? More specifically, did they consider the western lands? Did they consider the center of population? Did they consider the center (concentration) of the nation’s wealth?

**10. Distribute Legislative Brief 3 – Residence Bill (Handout 6-5 - see Unit Resources):** Ask student to read their briefs then clarify any questions they may have about its contents.

**11. Distribute Copies of Handout 6-6 (“Residence Bill - Points to Consider”):** Have students read over the points and suggest that they may propose any site within the United States as a site for the capital of the United States. This may be a good time for a caucus. Students may want to ask other “lawmakers” about their preferences and/or lobby for their own proposals.

**12. Debate:** Allow students to begin debate on the Residence Bill while suggesting that they must keep the assumption proposal in the back of their minds. Remind them that both bills will require action.

### **13. Vote**

### **14. Debrief**

- a. Reteach.** One of the problems that can occur when using simulations as a method of instruction is that students may "learn" that what they did during the simulation actually occurred in history. Be sure that the students conclude the lesson with the understanding that the sectional debates over Assumption and the Residence Bill were so intense that some congressmen spoke of disunion. Had it not been for the compromise ("Compromise of 1790") in which the north got the Assumption Plan in exchange for the agreement to move the nation’s capital temporarily to Philadelphia then permanently to the Potomac, the future of the Union would have been far more uncertain than it already was.
- b. Reflect.** Ask students:
  - which aspects of the Assumption plan & Residence Bill caused sectional conflict?
  - what role did cooperation play in the decision to locate the U.S. capital on the banks of the Potomac River?
  - what does the compromise of 1790 tell us about the functions of the federal government?
  - what they learned about the role that Congress plays in the American system of government?

## **Extension Activities**

After the students have voted on the Assumption plan and Residence bill, ask them to put a circle on map (see Handout 6-8 - see Unit Resources) where they estimate the current geographic center of the United States to be. Then, have them use the maps to plot the changing center of population from 1790-2000. Information about the changing centers may be found on Handout 6-8 (“Population Centers from 1790-2000.”)

Finally, have them debate whether they nation’s capital ought to be moved to a more central location. You may want to assign some of them the role of a congressperson or Senator from various western states to insure a range of opinions.

## **Teaching Tips**

1. Do not tell the students about the compromise reached by the First Federal Congress. See if they discover the opportunity on their own.
2. If the students do not request a caucus during these debates, you may want to organize one as the "presiding officer." Two or three caucus groups representing the northern and southern (and possibly middle) state delegations will be particularly useful for the goals of this lesson. It is during these caucuses that you may want to plant the idea of a compromise in the minds of one or two of the congressmen (unless the students come up with it on their own).

### **Recommended Readings/Works Cited**

- Bickford, Charlene Bangs and Bowling, Kenneth R. Birth of the Nation: The First Federal Congress 1789-1791. Madison House Publishers. Madison, WI. 1989.