

First Congress Unit

Unit Introduction

By July of 1788, eleven of the 13 states that comprised the infant “United States” of America had ratified the country’s recently written second plan of government. Despite the fact that North Carolina and Rhode Island were still holding out, Article VII of the Constitution required only 9 states approval before it went into effect. Eager to launch the new ship of state, the first federal elections began in September and did not end until December of 1790 when the last of the 13 states to ratify—Rhode Island—sent its lone representative to Federal Hall in New York. By the time Benjamin Bourn arrived, Congress had already completed the first of its three sessions. Yet, he was still in time to participate in the greater part of the federal legislature’s most critical work.

Although the proceedings of the First Federal Congress (FFC) were scheduled to begin in New York on March 4, 1789, the ongoing ratification debates and difficulties of travel to the “present” capital prevented a quorum from being reached for five weeks. When the first Congress adjourned in March of 1791, the sixty-five representatives and 26 senators found themselves in a new, temporary capital—Philadelphia. The change in location symbolized the new direction in which the FFC had steered the nation.

The first Postmaster of the United States, Samuel Osgood, once suggested that the work of the FFC compared to that of “a second convention.” In the final analysis, his analogy is probably not exaggerated. The FFC gave practical meaning to the brilliantly conceived but frequently ambiguous phrases

of the United States Constitution and passed legislation that allowed the “federal ship Union” to remain afloat in the stormy waters of the late 18th Century. Indeed, future Supreme Court Justice James Iredell’s prediction that “[T]he first session of Congress will probably be the most important of any for many years” now seems remarkably accurate. (Bickford & Bowling, 5).

The Unit

This unit contains eight lessons that focus on major bills, amendments, & issues debated by the FFC. Most of the lessons are part of an ongoing simulation or, more specifically, mock Congress. The primary goal of the instructional activities is to help students understand some of the roles that Congress plays in our government as illustrated by some of the debates that took place at the First Federal Congress.

The scope of information that is available for students to learn about the FFC is enormous. Fourteen weighty volumes of the Documentary History of the First Federal Congress have already been published and three more are in the works.

Logically, therefore, it was not possible to design a unit that covered all of the major issues that confronted the FFC nor was it possible to design a unit that reveals all of the roles that Congress plays in our federal government. The lessons included in this unit offer a sample of what took place over a two-year period of time from 1789-1791.

Nevertheless, there is one curricular decision that begs explanation. Perhaps the most significant topic slighted involves the role that the FFC played

in giving Americans their Bill of Rights. You will find that Lesson 2 touches tangentially on the FFC's "amendments" or rights debates but even that lesson's goals did not include a deep exploration of the Bill of Rights. The decision to limit an examination of the Bill of Rights was a conscious one based on the constraints of time and space as well as a belief that an American student's understanding of his or her rights and their history is so important that it ought not be overshadowed or possibly blurred by parallel explorations.