

## Learning Goals

**Grades:** K–12  
**Social Studies:**  
*Civic ideals and practices: The ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.*

How primary documents available online  
can enrich civic education.

by Jeff Carter

# Founding Documents

**F**or many civics teachers, classroom use of primary documents—such as the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, or Bill of Rights—is a tried and true approach to helping students understand their rights and responsibilities as U.S. citizens. “When I taught,” says Lee Ann Potter, director of education and volunteer programs at the National Archives, “I used to put a document up on my overhead projector, so it was the first thing my students saw when they came into my room. It was a great way to focus their attention on what it was we were going to talk about that day.”

The growth of the Internet in recent years has allowed teachers to move beyond the overhead projector. The Web now provides teachers with access to primary source materials that were once only available to archivists and historians. Students can read and discuss the content of documents that are fundamental to the establishment of our system of government. They can also find materials that help them delve deeper into the historical context of the creation of these foundational documents, their changing meaning over time, and their relevance to students’ lives today. “The right document can introduce students to what it is you need to teach,” says Potter, “or help tell the rest of the story of something that you have to teach.”

### Teaching with Documents

Potter, whose job includes developing both educational materials and publications based on archival documents, is perhaps known best for her column “Teaching with Documents” which appears in each issue of the National Council for the Social Studies magazine

**Lee Ann Potter**  
National Archives and Records Administration  
College Park, MD  
leeann.potter@nara.gov

**Joan Brodsky Schur**  
The Village Community School  
New York City, NY  
S4Schur@aol.com

**Laura Erikson**  
Sierra Vista Junior High School  
Canyon Country, CA  
lericks@hartdistrict.org

## “The study of primary sources develops skills needed to maintain a free society.”

*Social Education.* These articles introduce teachers to the use of primary sources as a teaching method that exposes students to at least three important historical concepts and skills. First, students realize that written history reflects an author’s reconstruction and interpretation of past events. Therefore, students learn the need to evaluate historical accounts carefully to recognize their subjective nature. Second, primary sources enable students to touch the lives of people in the past directly. Third, as students use primary sources, they develop a wide range of important analytical skills.

Potter believes that the most important educational benefit of the study of primary sources is the development of broad cognitive and analytical skills. Interpreting historical documents helps students analyze and evaluate contemporary sources. By scrutinizing those sources, students acquire the ability to understand and make appropriate use of many sources of information. They learn to recognize how points of view and biases affect evidence, what contradictions and other limitations exist within a given source, and the extent to which sources are reliable and informative. Potter notes that the development of these skills is important not only to historical research, but also to a citizenry capable of evaluating the information needed to maintain a free society.

### Democracy in Action

Primary documents are powerful tools for increasing the understanding of how our government works, as well as encouraging political discussions and civic action. Joan Brodsky Schur, who has taught American history for almost 20 years at the Village Community School in New York City, has helped students understand the process that went into the writing of the American Constitution through excerpts from James Madison’s notes on the Constitutional Convention. “He was one of the note-takers of the actual proceedings, and I did a lot with a document in which he’s talking about the debates on slavery,” she says. “Using that document was partly the basis for holding our own constitutional convention and re-looking at the slave issue.”

Schur has also used primary documents to demonstrate the impact of civic activism. For example, she wrote a lesson on anti-lynching efforts during the post-Reconstruction era that incorporated news clippings and other documents available online from the Library of Congress’ online library, American Memory Project. “From those news clippings,” she says, “kids can identify the problem and who participated in trying to end it. What people did through their local courts, and what legislation they tried to get passed at the state level.

“It gives a sense of civic participation at a lot of different levels of American society,” she continues, “and what was effective and why the problem continued. It was really through the analysis of those primary documents that students had a sense of the magnitude of the problem and the effect that citizens could have on changing it.”

The judicious use of primary documents also tends to

## teaching tools

### Links

#### The Avalon Project at Yale Law School

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm>  
An extensive collection of primary documents in law, history, and diplomacy spanning several centuries.

#### C-SPAN

<http://www.c-span.org>  
The site includes an archive of videotaped congressional hearings.

#### Center for Civic Education’s National Standards for Civics and Government

<http://www.civiced.org/stds.html>

#### Library of Congress American Memory Project

<http://memory.loc.gov>

#### The National Archives and Records Administration’s Digital Classroom

[http://www.archives.gov/digital\\_classroom](http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom)

#### The National Security Archive

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv>

#### Our Documents

<http://www.ourdocuments.org>

encourage student discussion and debate. Potter cites Richard Nixon’s resignation letter as a one good example. “It’s written to Henry Kissinger, the secretary of state, and it says simply, ‘Dear Mr. Secretary, I hereby resign the office of President of the United States, Sincerely, Richard Nixon.’ The only notation on the document, other than Nixon’s signature, is Henry Kissinger’s initials and the time: 11:35. And that’s it. That’s all there is to this document.

“But it’s a wonderful document as far as teaching a civics issue, because inevitably, no matter what age group we use this document with, somebody asks the question, ‘Why did he write the letter to the secretary of state?’ And that allows us to fire back with a question that reinforces a really important civics knowledge piece, such as, what if he had resigned to Congress? What if he had resigned to his successor? What if he had resigned to the Supreme Court? It’s a great way to get into talking about checks and balances, and why it’s so important in our government and in our system that each of our three branches of government is on the same playing field. That’s how a document can get students into some of those really good civics lessons.”

## Founding Documents (continued)

Schur encourages class debate and discussion through the use of primary source materials. "I love using documents because they can really stir up controversy," says Schur. "The point is really not to teach what always has been, but to help students understand how something came to be the way it is in American government. Documents give you the multiple perspectives of people who lived through events, who didn't know how the story would end. Documents provide a way for students to enter into those controversies, and re-argue them."

### Connecting Past and Present

Potter also thinks that primary sources allow students to directly touch the lives of people in the past, and feel connected to that history. "I went to the University of Colorado for my undergraduate degree," she says, "and on the campus library there is a quote that says 'Enter here the timeless fellowship of the human spirit.' I think that's what it's like when you've got a document in front of you. It was created 200 years ago and it's still here. And you are here with it. It's almost like there's this connection between you and the past that can't exist in any other format."

Social-studies teacher Laura Erikson shows her students at Sierra Vista Junior High School in Canyon Country, Calif., the connection that the Constitution provides between events in the past and their lives today. The Constitution requires that the president report annually to Congress on the state of the union. Presidents have historically used the speech to introduce major policies. For instance, President Monroe introduced the Monroe Doctrine in one of his State of the Union addresses. When her class turns to the Monroe Doctrine, they watch the current State of the Union address, as well as video excerpts from addresses by Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Kennedy. In this way, they see that all presidents obey the Constitution and they can compare the national and international issues addressed by Monroe and the current president. They analyze how the speeches address different audiences around the world and domestically, and they see the interplay of the different branches of government.

"It's an ongoing conversation throughout the year," Erikson says. "Sometimes I read the Preamble to the Constitution and then we take turns reading different articles out loud. It's important for kids to read and hear the language of the original documents. We read the Bill of Rights, too. Let's face it, the Constitution is more than 200 years old and it's only been amended 27 times. It's important that students understand why the Constitution's authors made the amendment process difficult and why the process still works."

"Reading about history from a textbook turns the past into a closed book," says Schur. "Teaching with documents changes that. ❏"

## Our Documents

Civics education got a big boost at the beginning of the school year with the launch of a new national awareness and education campaign titled *Our Documents: A National Initiative on American History, Civics, and Service*. The *Our Documents* initiative revolves around 100 primary documents in American history drawn from the huge collection of public laws, Supreme Court decisions, inaugural speeches, treaties, constitutional amendments, and other key government documents maintained by the National Archives and Records Administration. The goal of the initiative is to encourage students, teachers, parents, and members of the general public to read these historical documents, reflect upon them, and discuss them. The focal point is the *Our Documents* Web site, which includes electronic reproductions and descriptions of the 100 milestone documents, the ability to view or print featured documents in their original format, and lesson plans and classroom activities. *Our Documents* is a cooperative partnership between the National Archives, National History Day, USA Freedom Corps, and The Corporation for National and Community Service.

Lee Ann Potter, director of Education and Volunteer Programs at the National Archives, stresses that the 100 documents selected are not necessarily *the* 100 most significant documents from our history, but those which most would agree are important, such as the Treaty of Paris, the original patent for the cotton gin, or Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. "What we're hoping to do," she says, "is encourage teachers and students to learn more about these documents and start a conversation about what makes them so significant, and why it is important that we learn about them."

*Our Documents* is designed to be a participatory initiative. Here are a few of the ways in which you and your students can get involved.

### Vote!

One of the goals of *Our Documents* is to engage students, teachers, parents, and the general public in reading historical documents and deciding which they consider the most significant. Students, teachers, and the general public are all invited to vote online for their choices.

### Our Documents National History Day Contest

National History Day is sponsoring a student competition as part of the *Our Documents* initiative. Students may enter the *Our Documents* National History Day Contest in either the junior (grades 6–8) or senior (grades 9–12) divisions. Students may participate individually, or as part of a group of up to five students. Winners of the National History Day Contest will be announced at the national contest held at the University of Maryland at College Park on June 15–19, 2003.

### Teaching Our Documents:

#### A National History Day Lesson Competition for Educators

National History Day is inviting teachers to develop and test a classroom lesson focusing on one or several of the 100 milestone documents from United States history included in the *Our Documents* initiative. Lessons should engage students in a meaningful examination of the documents within their historical context. Awards will be announced at the annual National History Day national competition on June 15–19, 2003, at the University of Maryland at College Park.

*For complete details on all facets of the Our Documents initiative, go to <http://www.ourdocuments.gov>.*