



## FIELD WORKBOOK LEAFLET

A service of the Young Yorker Program. Young Yorkers are junior members of the New York State Historical Association.

STUDENT EDITION

New York State Historical Association.

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# Town Meetings Teach the Bill of Rights

by Marianne Malecki

Perhaps you have heard of the U.S. Constitution. The U.S. Constitution is a written document. It is also a plan for our national government and sets up rules for how our country is governed. In 1989, our nation celebrated the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. A bicentennial is a 200th anniversary. So our Constitution has been our plan of government for more than 200 years now.

Over 200 years ago when our country's leaders were meeting to create this new plan for our government there was a lot of talking. People had different ideas about what should be a part of this new plan of government. There were many meetings, speeches, debates, and compromises made. A compromise is an agreement that accommodates two or more points of view. Finally, on September 17, 1787, the new U.S. Constitution was approved at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia by the delegates from the 13 states. Now each of the states had to ratify the new constitution. This was not an easy decision and the talking continued.

Each of the states had to have its own convention to meet and talk about the new Constitution, and then vote to approve it or not. These meetings took almost a year. On December 7, 1787 Delaware approved the Constitution, the first state to do so. Other states followed.

Ratification was needed from nine of the 13 states in order for the Constitution to become the law of the land. On June 21, 1788, New Hampshire became the ninth state to approve the Constitution. Some felt that the states should approve the Constitution thereby showing a strong support from everyone for this new plan of government. Neither Virginia or New York had approved the Constitution. Virginia was the largest state and had some of the country's best known leaders: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. Virginia approved the new Constitution on June 25, 1788, but with suggested amendments. These amendments included a bill of rights and liberties for the people.

Still, New York State had not decided. As in other states, some delegates to the state convention thought

that the new Constitution should have a list of rights for the people written in as a part of this new plan of government. Others did not think this was important or needed. News rushed north after Virginia's approval while the debates went on in New York State. Finally, on July 26, 1788, New York State approved the new Constitution, but with many amendments.

After more discussion, the United States Congress agreed on a group of amendments to be added to the Constitution. This group of amendments was known as the Bill of Rights and was sent to the states to be approved. New Jersey became the first state to approve the Bill of Rights on November 20, 1789. New York State approved the Bill of Rights on February 27, 1790. It was the seventh state to do so. Then, after much discussion, Virginia brought the Bill of Rights into effect when it became the 11th state to approve them on December 15, 1791. Today we celebrate December 15th as Bill of Rights Day.

Much of the work in writing, changing and approving our new Constitution was done by people in meetings. Meetings gave people a chance to talk about their ideas, discuss different points of view, and work out their differences. Through all of our history, people have joined together to talk about ideas, problems, and concerns. Even today a great deal of government work is done in meetings. You may have seen our U.S. President on television talking with the others in a meeting. All of our leaders, including our local leaders, meet with other officials and citizens to talk about ideas, problems, and ways to help people.

In New York the state is divided into 62 counties. Each county is made up of a number of towns and/or cities. Each town may include many villages, while each city may be divided into a number of wards. So every New York State resident lives in either a city or town, and for each of these there is a local government.



The Bill of Rights is a list of rights and privileges granted to every citizen of this country. Here is a summary of these rights:

The drawings here represent some of the rights we have from the Bill of Rights. Next to each picture write about what right(s) each picture represents.

# The Bill of Rights

(1st ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution)

## First Amendment

Freedom of religion; speech; the press; and the right of assembly and petition

## Second Amendment

Right to bear arms

## Third Amendment

Security of home against the military

## Fourth Amendment

Security of the home against search and seizure

## Fifth Amendment

Liberty, property, and due process of law

## Sixth Amendment

Rights of accused persons

## Seventh Amendment

Right to trial by jury

## Eighth Amendment

Freedom from excessive bails, fines, or cruel punishment

## Ninth Amendment

Basic rights of the individual

## Tenth Amendment

Rights reserved for the states




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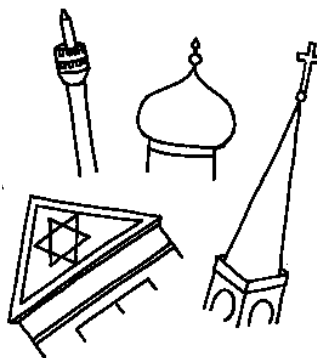
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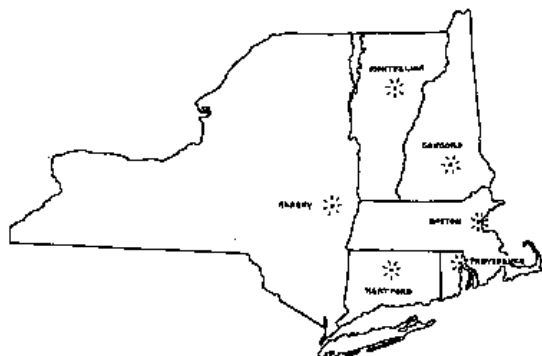
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# Young Yorker Activities

## **Bill of Rights in Action:**

Remember the Bill of Rights is the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Divide your class into amendment teams. Each team is to find stories and pictures in newspapers and magazines that talk and show about the rights for their team. So if your team has amendments one and two, your group should look for stories and pictures that talk about the rights in these two amendments. Perhaps you would like to organize an exhibit in your classroom using the materials each amendment team has collected.

## **Meet Your Community Leaders:**

Whether you live in a village, town, or city, there are many people involved in the work of your local government. With your teacher's help, you may write to a few of them and invite them to your class to talk about what they do. Your mayor, town supervisor, or city council member will all be very busy people, but they may be able to visit your school and talk with your class. Some Young Yorkers may be able and interested in visiting a local official at his or her office. Your teacher can help you plan and organize this activity. If you do this be sure to report to your class about this experience.

## **Town Meetings in the Past:**

Your local library, historical society, or museum may have records of past town meetings in their collections. With your teacher's help, try to find some of these old records. Your local librarian or historical society member may help you get copies of some town meeting records from the past. Your village, town or county historian is a person who also may have records from the past. What kinds of things were important to people? What did they talk about?

## **Town Meetings Today:**

With your teacher's help, look for the scheduled meetings of your local government. The local newspaper publishes the dates on which these meetings will be held. When does your village board, town board, city council, school board, county board of representatives meet? Perhaps your class can organize a field trip to one of these meetings, to hear and see what is discussed.

## **Town Meetings in Your School:**

Perhaps your teacher will organize a town meeting within your class to discuss your rights as citizens. If there is more than one 4th grade class in your school, other classes could

be included. Your teachers may be able to have a town meeting for each grade level in your school followed by a school-wide convention, where each grade level presents their list of rights. This may be a good way to observe Bill of Rights Day which is December 15th.

## **Glossary of New Words**

**agenda** – things to be done

**amendment** – a change or improvement in a written document

**accuse** – to charge with a fault, to blame

**appointed** – selected for an office or position

**bicentennial** – a 200th year anniversary

**citizen** – a member of a state or nation

**compromise** – to come to a settlement or agreement

**constitution** – a written document; a system of laws that describe a government

**convention** – a meeting of a group of people for a common purpose

**cruel** – harmful to body or mind

**debate** – to discuss something from two or more different sides

**delegate** – a person who represents others at a convention or conference

**elected** – chosen for an office by the votes of the people

**excessive** – beyond reasonable, extreme

**government** – an organization that makes rules to live by

**liberty** – the right to act as one chooses

**national** – of or related to a nation

**official** – a person who holds office and serves the public

**petition** – a formal written request to an official

**ratification** – the act of officially approving something, such as a treaty or constitution

**seizure** – the act of taking possession of a person or property



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