

The Preamble

The Preamble to the United States Constitution comes at the beginning of the document and explains the goals of the Constitution.

"We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

The six reasons for the new government are clearly stated, and the phrase "a more perfect Union" refers to the hope that the Constitution would do a better job than the Articles had done.

A Look Ahead

In this book, you will see the terms federal, national, and central. They all refer to our United States government in Washington, D.C. Our Constitution is a federal constitution. States also have constitutions, but we are studying only the federal Constitution for now.

The following pages show that the government has three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. You will learn what the president does, how laws are made, how the courts protect us, and many other things about our government. You will also learn how the three branches check each other's powers.

Several interesting and engaging facts about the Constitution will capture your attention and deepen your understanding of this foundational document. Despite its age, the U.S. Constitution is relatively short. It has 4,543 words, including signatures, and it is the oldest and shortest written constitution of any major government in the world. It is written on four sheets of paper, approximately 28 3/4 inches by 23 5/8 inches. The signers of the Constitution are known as the Founding Fathers. Their signatures on the document vary in size, and the term "John Hancock" has become synonymous with a bold signature.

As you study, refer to a copy of the Constitution to see each section's exact wording. You will learn about your state government at the end of this study.

Preserving the Constitution

On December 13, 1952, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were sealed in helium-filled cases, placed in wooden crates, and transported by an armored car to the National Archives Exhibition Hall in Washington, D.C. Escorting the documents down Pennsylvania and Constitution avenues were two tanks and four servicemen carrying machine guns. Two days later, at a formal ceremony, President Harry Truman declared:

"We are engaged here today in a symbolic act. We are enshrining these documents for future ages. This magnificent hall has been constructed to exhibit them, and the vault beneath, that we have built to protect them, is as safe from destruction as anything that the wit of modern man can devise. All this is an honorable effort, based upon reverence for the great past, and our generation can take just pride in it."

Charters of Freedom

The Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom is the permanent home of the Declaration of Independence, Constitution of the United States, and Bill of Rights. These three documents, known collectively as the Charters of Freedom, have secured the rights of the American people for more than two centuries. The rotunda is located in the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C., and can be visited by the general public seven days a week (except for Thanksgiving and Christmas).

QUESTIONS

- 1. What are the six goals in the Preamble?
2. What are some of the words used that refer to the United States government?
3. What are the three branches of government?
4. What is the meaning of the phrase "a more perfect Union"?

DEFINITION PROJECT

You will notice that some of the words in the Preamble are capitalized when normally they would not be. These key words are words that the Founders wanted to emphasize. On a separate piece of paper, list and define these key words to know if one is to understand the Preamble.