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Birth of the Nation: The First Federal Congress, 1789-1791. First Federal Congress Project.

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Exploring the First Federal Congress

The significance of the First Federal Congress is brought to life for students, teachers, and the general public in this World Wide Web site, hosted by the Department of History at The George Washington University. Charlene Bangs Bickford, co-editor of <cite>The Documentary History of the First Federal Congress</cite>, as well as curator of the online exhibit, has done an excellent job in presenting historical documents that offer a diverse view of the activities of the Congress' first session. While most of the exhibit is clear and easy to view, a few technical problems detract from the "user-friendliness" of the site. <p> The exhibit's stated intent is to "provide an overview of the work of and issues faced by this seminal Congress," and the site generally meets this goal. The activities of the First Federal Congress are approached both topically and chronologically. Scanned illustrations and original documents, including engravings, letters, newspaper articles, paintings, portraits, and speeches provide a concise overview of the exhibit's major topics, which range from "New York as the Seat of Government," to "Amendments to the Constitution," and "The Compromise of 1790." In all, thirteen topics are explored, each using a combination of primary source documents to flesh out the picture. <p> Students and teachers of American history will find a wealth of information in these web pages. When, for one example, the exhibit explores the "Creation of the Executive" [branch], various documents lay open the contemporary arguments. In order, this panel offers a nine documents, including a graphic image of the 20 June 1789 <cite>New York Daily Advertiser</cite> article containing the speech of Georgia's Representative James Jackson regarding the removal of cabinet members, a letter from William Smith of South Carolina to Edward Rutledge about impeachment, a portrait of Richard Henry Lee, Senator from Virginia, an annotated copy of the bill establishing the Department of Foreign Affairs, an image of the Richmond Hill mansion, home of John Adams while Vice-President, another newspaper clipping from the <cite>New York Daily Advertiser</cite> discussing the House debate on the creation of the Treasury Department, an excerpt of Gouverneur Morris' letter to William Carmichael advocating control of the Treasury Department in a single man, the final Treasury Act, and a contemporary engraving of George Washington's Cabinet. All in all, the panel presents a clear overview of the issues surrounding the creation of the Executive Department. Other "panels" present similar information on the wide range of topics discussed at the First Federal Congress. <p> While the choice of documents and images at this web site is excellent, there are some technical problems that render using the site irritating–if not difficult–to use. Transcription of difficult to read documents is not always present, and indeed many documents offer no transcription at all. This is especially disconcerting when viewing images of letters or newspaper clippings that are not always clear at either SVGA (800x600) or XGA (1024x768) resolution. Additionally, images are often large (in terms of bytes), and take quite a while to display–especially if the user is connecting to the site through a modem from home. Large, readable images often take longer than two minutes to display, and there is no warning

that such long download times may be anticipated. This can definitely detract from the effectiveness of the site for those without T-1, ISDN, or cable/satellite modem access to the World Wide Web. <p> Another problem with the First Federal Congress site concerns its indexing. While the main panel pages contain a link to a "Table of Contents," there is not a single page on the site providing links to all the documents, in other words, there is no complete index. While this may be intentional, it is cumbersome. The "Table of Contents" link takes the user to an index for the panel only, and does not allow for the viewing of the entire index at once. The intent here may be to guide the user through the site, but the slowness of page and image loading may cause users some irritation at waiting to see what displays. Finally, there should be a more prominent link to the Mini-Edition of the <cite>Documentary History of the First Federal Congress</cite> (`http://mep.cla.sc.edu/fc/fc-table.html`), hosted by the Model Editions Partnership. This site contains a good number of online documents, and serves to complement the Online Exhibit of the First Federal Congress Project. <p> The First Federal Congress Project's Online Exhibit certainly is beautifully designed, with well-chosen text documents, good contemporary illustrations, and tasteful backgrounds. While it is not a "work in progress," it has the potential for being a tremendous resource for teachers of history. Closer collaboration (e.g., providing clear links) to the <cite>Mini Edition</cite>, as well as tightening the mechanics of the site would improve it greatly, and lead to an increased exposure of this valuable resource to the general public.

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