



Constitution Community: Expansion and Reform, 1801-1861. Constitution Community.

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Review of Expansion and Reform, 1801-1861

The web pages reviewed here are a service of the Constitution Community, a joint effort between teachers in secondary education and the National Archives and Records Administration. The express purpose of the Constitution Community website is to “[develop] lessons and activities that address constitutional issues, correlate to national academic standards, and encourage the analysis of primary source documents.” To date, there are four sets of lessons that have been developed: *Revolution and the New Nation*, *Expansion and Reform*, *Civil War and Reconstruction*, and *The Development of the Industrial United States*. The section under review here is *Expansion and Reform, 1801-1861*. Topics included in this section include expansionism, regionalism, foreign policy, women’s suffrage, and Indian relations. Each topic provides an outline of what constitutional issue it is addressing; the national standards that it meets; the historical background of the subject; a collection of primary sources (documents, photographs, etc.) for the student to analyze; and teaching activities. A brief summary of each topic will suffice for this review. Interested teachers and students should visit <http://www.nara.gov/education/cc/> for a more in-depth look. The first section, written by Douglas Perry, looks at the Lewis and Clark expedition. The main themes are expansionism and foreign policy. Primary sources included for perusal are messages from Thomas Jefferson concerning the purchase of the Louisiana Territory; documents from the Lewis and Clark trek; and modern photographs of the area covered by the expedition. The teaching activities emphasize the ideas of Manifest Destiny and environmental protection. Kerry C. Kelly presents the growth of regionalism in the second section. The constitutional issue addressed is national versus states’ rights. The only source provided is an 1839 anti-railroad poster from Philadelphia. Teaching activities focus on an analysis of the poster and the effects of propaganda. In the next section, Tom

Gray uses the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to explore the theme of United States foreign policy. Primary sources given include the actual treaty, Lincoln’s “Spot” Resolutions, and a photograph of the boundary marker. Teaching activities center on an analysis of the short- and long-term causes and consequences of the Mexican-American War and the fairness of the treaty stipulations. Section four was written by Linda Simmons and discusses the themes of suffrage and freedom of speech and petition. The topic discussed is the petition of woman suffragist, Amelia Bloomer, an Iowa resident. The primary source for this section is Bloomer’s petition to Congress. Teaching activities stress the use of the Web for researching and compiling information about Bloomer; the difference in issues that Americans were debating at the beginning and end of the nineteenth century; and other audio-visual activities related to the topic. The final section, compiled by Linda Darus Clark, presents the Sioux Treaty of 1868 for the purpose of examining relations between the United States and the various Native American groups. Primary sources used consist of the 1868 treaty, and accounts of the Battle of the Little Big Horn. For teaching activities, the student is asked to analyze a photograph of Spotted Tail, a Sioux Indian, and comment about his clothing and demeanor. They are also directed to analyze the treaty and determine the advantages and disadvantages of the terms for each side. *Expansion and Reform* fails to achieve the promised objectives. Two of the topics in the section fall outside of the 1801-1860 time period (Bloomer’s petition and the Sioux treaty of 1868), a problem that is easily resolved by expanding the years covered. More fundamental difficulties with the project exist, however. In some instances, it is perplexing to see how the documents and activities address the constitutional issue under question. For example, an anti-railroad poster does little to explain the difference between national and state constitutional powers. Drawing images of political and social factors that influenced Amelia Bloomer seems too

childish an activity for the focus group that the Constitution Community is trying to reach. Some of the activities also fail to challenge the student to examine critically the primary sources, which is one of the main objectives of the project. Other shortcomings exist. The project on regionalism is based on one anti-railroad poster. There are numerous other exhibits of regionalism that should have been employed for this particular area. Basing an entire group of activities on one poster shows a lack of imagination. Another instance with which this reviewer takes issue is the emphasis on the petition of Amelia Bloomer in the section on women's suffrage. It seems that Bloomer's petition would fit better in a section on life in the American West. There are numerous other examples of women's suffrage documents that might give students a better understanding of how and why the suffrage movement gained momentum during this period,

such as the speeches of Susan B. Anthony or the Seneca Falls Convention declaration of women's rights. In general, the activities fall short in challenging the student to think and analyze, with some notable exceptions. These include the section on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and parts of the section on the Sioux Treaty of 1868. Having to evaluate the causes, consequences, and benefits of these two treaties allows the students to realize that there is not just one answer or viewpoint to historical events. The authors of the other three subjects would have done well to implement the same goal. Overall, the *Expansion and Reform* section of the Constitution Community project promises much, but provides little. With access to the NARA online records, this project has great potential. The Constitution Community editors should determine how best to develop their idea to its greatest benefit.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

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