



BECOMING THE UNITED STATES: COLONIAL AMERICA TO RECONSTRUCTION

Exhibition Guide

Developed by

THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE *of* AMERICAN HISTORY

with funding from the United States Department of Education

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GENERAL INFORMATION

Becoming the United States: Colonial America to Reconstruction is a traveling exhibition developed by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. This exhibition was created as part of the “A More Perfect Union” project, funded by the United States Department of Education. Denver Brunsman served as scholarly advisor for this exhibition.

Format

The exhibition is composed of seven retractable vinyl panels. Each panel measures 81 inches tall and 33 inches wide. It requires a total of 18-21 running feet and can be displayed separately or together. Detailed setup instructions are provided to the venue’s coordinator upon shipment. Setup instructions can also be found on the [FAQ page of the GLI Traveling Exhibitions website](#).

Rental Security

Exhibitions may be displayed in any open areas, but preferably not in a hallway. No exhibition is to be displayed outdoors or in a tent or other temporary structure. It is preferable that a staff member is in the room with the exhibition when it is open to students or guests. If a borrower causes damage or loss of any part of the exhibition, then that institution will be responsible for paying the replacement or restoration costs. The value of the *Becoming the United States: Colonial America to Reconstruction* exhibition is \$2,250. Some institutions choose to add a rider to their insurance policy.

Shipping

The exhibition is shipped in a wheeled, plastic case measuring 39 inches x 14 inches x 14 inches and weighing approximately 75 pounds. GLI will be responsible for arranging shipping via FedEx. A week before your loan period ends, we will provide a return label and instructions.

Reporting

Each site is required to complete a condition report upon receipt of the exhibition and again after the exhibition has been packed for return. Condition reports will be sent to the venue coordinator via email.

Questions

If you have questions please contact

Traveling Exhibitions Program
exhibitions@gilderlehrman.org
Phone (646) 366-9666 ext. 164

EXHIBITION CONTENT

Panel One: Becoming the United States: Colonial America to Reconstruction

Introductory Text

American society is an unfolding experiment. Throughout U.S. history, individuals and groups have contributed to who we are as a country. This exhibition explores our past from the first interactions between American Indians, Europeans, and Africans to the Reconstruction of the United States after the Civil War.

“De Soto’s Discovery of the Mississippi” engraving by Johnson, Fry & Co., New York, 1858. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC08878.0002)

Colonial America

Letter from Sebastian Brandt to Henry Hovener, January 13, 1622. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00708)

“My brother and my wyfe are dead aboute a yeare pass’d . . . [I] doo nowe intend every daye to walke up and downe the hills for good Mineralls here is both golde silver and copper”

“The First Landing of the Pilgrims,” engraving by Martin, Johnson & Co. New York, ca. 1856. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC08878.0005)

Engraving of the transportation of enslaved Africans to the Americas, ca. 1800. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLI09791.0034)

“A Map of British and French Dominions in North America,” by John Mitchell, London, 1755. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03556)

Panel Two: The American Revolution

Introductory Text

The American Revolution brought the English colonies together for a common cause. Britain imposed new taxes such as the Stamp Act and other laws that seemed unfair. These kinds of laws made the colonists angry, inspiring them to fight to be free from British rule. After a long, bloody, and expensive war, colonists created a new, independent country, the United States of America.

Colonists Rebel

“The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King-Street Boston,” engraving by Paul Revere, Boston, 1770. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01868)

“The Bostonian’s Paying the Excise-Man,” engraving by Philip Dawe, London, October 31, 1774. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04961.01)

Broadside announcing the Declaration of Independence. William James Stone, Washington DC, January 1, 1823. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00154.02)

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

The Struggles of War

Letter from George Washington to the Convention of New Hampshire, December 29, 1777. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03706, p. 3)

“We had Camp on the 23rd Inst by a Field Return then taken, not less than 2898 men unfit for duty by reason of their being barefoot and otherwise naked.”

Letter from Lucy Knox to Hannah Urquhart, ca. April 1777. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC02437.03405)

“Surrender of Cornwallis,” by James S. Baillie, New York, 1845. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC02918.02)

Panel Three: The United States Constitution

Introductory Text

In the Summer of 1787, after long debates in a closed, hot room in Philadelphia, delegates representing the states wrote the new U.S. Constitution. It lays out how the government would function. Ten amendments called the Bill of Rights were soon added to protect individual liberties. The United States was no longer a confederation of thirteen separate states, but a unified country.

The Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union between the States, printed by Francis Bailey, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1777. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04759)

U.S. Constitution [first draft] with notes by South Carolina delegate Pierce Butler, printed by Dunlap & Claypoole, August 4, 1747. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00819.01, p. 1)

U.S. Constitution signed by Benjamin Franklin for his nephew Jonathan Williams printed by Dunlap & Claypoole, September 17, 1787. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC03585).

Letter from Mercy Otis Warren to Catharine Macaulay, September 28, 1787. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01800.0, p. 2)

“There are still many among us who revere [Liberty] too much to relinquish . . . the rights of man for the Dignity of Government.”

George Washington, painting by Rembrandt Peale, oil on canvas, ca. 1852. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09119.01)

Panel Four: Western Migration

Introductory Text

Acquiring land through the Louisiana Purchase and a war with Mexico, the United States more than tripled in size by 1850. Between the 1840s and 1860s, more than 350,000 brave pioneers made the dangerous journey by wagon and on foot to reach the West, looking for a better life. Settlers filled the land with farms, ranches, and towns—a process that was sped up by the transcontinental railroad. This expansion increased conflicts with American Indians and between people who were for and against slavery.

Expanding the Country

Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (mural study U.S. Capitol), oil on canvas, 1862. Lewis is shown on the bottom left and Clark on the bottom right. (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of Sara Carr Upton, 1931.5.1)

“*History of the expedition*”, Lewis Meriwether, Philadelphia, 1814. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04051.01)

“We had not gone far from this village when the fog cleared off, and we enjoyed the delightful prospect of the ocean: that ocean, the object of all our labours, the reward of all our anxieties.”
–Meriwether Lewis, 1804

“General Scott’s Victorious Entry into the City of Mexico.” engraving by N. Currier, New York, 1847. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC02918.01)

A New Map of Texas, Oregon and California, printed by S. Augustus Mitchell, Philadelphia, 1846. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC02130)

Hosea B. Horn, *Horn’s Overland Guide* (New York: J. H Colton, 1852) (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04152.01, p. 49)

“Supply Trains” (from Andrew J. Russell, *The Great West Illustrated in a Series of Photograph Views across the Continent*, New York, 1869. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04348.27)

Panel Five: American Indians in a Changing World

Introductory Text

The arrival of Europeans bringing new diseases destroyed many American Indian cultures in the New World. In addition, Europeans took tribal lands and forced the Native peoples to move to reservations. Yet, despite these challenges, American Indians worked hard to safeguard their traditional cultures and fight for their rights.

Loss of Lands

Receipt of land sale by the Six Nations, 1769. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC02548)

Washakie and Eastern Shoshones at the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming, photograph by William H. Jackson, 1871. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04490.00125)

Laguna Pueblo, New Mexico in the nineteenth century, cyanotype, n. d. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09860)

Map of American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States, U.S Census 2010. (United States Census)

The Cultural Impact

Two photographs of three Dakota boys at the Carlisle School in Pennsylvania, Wounded Yellow Robe, Henry Standing Bear, and Timber Yellow Robe, by John N. Choate, 1879. (National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution)

Panel Six: The Civil War

Introductory Text

The Civil War transformed the United States. The fight between the Union and the Confederacy was the bloodiest war in the nation's history. As many as 750,000 American men died. The war lasted over four years, and just as it ended, President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. As a result of the war, slavery was abolished, freeing four million African American men, women, and children.

The United States Divided

"The Union Is Dissolved" broadside announcing the secession of South Carolina, 1860

"The union now subsisting between South Carolina and other states . . . is hereby dissolved."

"Tent Life of the 31st Pennsylvania Regiment," by Brody & Co., ca. 1861–1865. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC05137.220)

Abraham Lincoln, photograph by Alexander Gardner, Washington D.C., 1863. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00245)

The Effects of War

"I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States . . . are, and henceforward shall be free." –Abraham Lincoln, 1863

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863, a broadside designed by a 14-year-old boy in California, 1864. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00742)

"The Gallant charge of the Fifty Fourth Massachusetts Regiment on the Rebel Walls of Fort Wagner near Charleston, July 18th, 1863, and Death of Colonel Robert G. Shaw," by Currier & Ives, New York, 1863. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC02881.23)

Broadside announcing a \$100,000 reward for the capture of John Wilkes Booth, by the War Department, Washington D.C, April 20, 1865. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC004092)

Panel Seven: Reconstruction

Introductory Text

After the Civil War, the United States went through a period known as Reconstruction. Between 1865 and 1877, the country “reconstructed” the damage from the war and Confederate states were allowed to rejoin the Union. With the end of slavery, African Americans had their freedom and new opportunities. However, the reform efforts of Reconstruction were ended before African Americans reached full equality.

Thirteenth Amendment Resolution ending slavery signed by members of Congress who voted for it and by President Lincoln, February 1, 1865. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC00263)

“A New Birth Of Freedom”

“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude . . . shall exist within the United States.” –Thirteenth Amendment, 1865

“The First Vote,” *Harper’s Weekly*, November 16, 1867. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01733.09, p. 721)

Engraving of five African American members of the Reconstruction Congress, 1870. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09746)

The Calhoun Indian School, cyanotype by Richard Riley, 1870–1900s. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC05140.02.37)

Broken Promises

Freedmen’s contract between Isham G. Bailey, Cooper Hughs, and Charles Roberts, January 1, 1867. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC04522.11, p. 2)

Letter from Frederick Douglass to an unknown correspondent, November 23, 1887. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC08992, p. 2)

Frederick Douglass, by an unknown photographer, ca. 1870. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC06198)

Panel 1: Becoming the United States: Colonial America to Reconstruction

The United States was shaped over time by many people and cultures. From the first encounters between American Indians, Europeans, and Africans to the rebuilding of the nation after the Civil War, American history is an ongoing experiment in freedom, power, and identity.

Panel 2: The American Revolution

Anger over British taxes and laws united the colonies in a fight for independence. After years of hardship and war, the colonies broke away from British rule and created a new nation based on ideas of liberty, equality, and self-government.

Panel 3: The United States Constitution

In 1787, leaders debated how to create a strong but fair government. The Constitution established the framework of the U.S. government, while the Bill of Rights protected individual freedoms—principles that still guide the nation today.

Panel 4: Western Migration

As the nation expanded westward, settlers searched for land and opportunity. Railroads, farms, and towns transformed the landscape, but expansion also led to conflict, especially with American Indians, and deepened national debates over slavery.

Panel 5: American Indians in a Changing World

American Indian nations faced devastating loss of land, population, and autonomy as the United States expanded. Despite forced removals and assimilation efforts, Native peoples worked to preserve their cultures and continue to assert their rights.

Panel 6: The Civil War

The Civil War was the deadliest conflict in U.S. history, fought over slavery and the future of the nation. The war preserved the Union and led to the end of slavery, but at enormous human cost.

Panel 7: Reconstruction

After the Civil War, the nation attempted to rebuild and redefine freedom. Reconstruction brought new rights and opportunities for formerly enslaved people, but resistance and broken promises limited lasting equality—leaving challenges that continue today.

Study Guide

Becoming the United States: Colonial America to Reconstruction

For Upper Elementary Students (Grades 4–6)

Big Idea: The history of the United States is a story of change. Different groups of people helped shape the country, and their choices affected freedom, land, rights, and government.

Panel 1: Colonial America

Key Ideas:

- American Indians lived on the land long before Europeans arrived.
- Europeans came for land, trade, and resources.
- Enslaved Africans were forced to come to the Americas.

Vocabulary: colony, enslaved, resources

Think About It:

How might life have changed for American Indians when Europeans arrived?

Panel 2: The American Revolution

Key Ideas:

- Colonists protested unfair British laws and taxes.
- The colonies fought for independence from Great Britain.
- The Declaration of Independence explained why the colonies wanted to be free.

Vocabulary: revolution, independence, protest

Think About It:

Why do you think people were willing to fight for independence?

Panel 3: The United States Constitution

Key Ideas:

- Leaders met in 1787 to create a new government.
- The Constitution explains how the government works.
- The Bill of Rights protects individual freedoms.

Vocabulary: constitution, amendment, rights

Think About It:

Why is it important to have rules for a government?

Panel 4: Western Migration**Key Ideas:**

- The United States expanded westward.
- Many settlers traveled long distances for land and opportunity.
- Westward expansion caused conflicts, especially with American Indians.

Vocabulary: migration, pioneer, expansion

Think About It:

What challenges do you think pioneers faced traveling west?

Panel 5: American Indians in a Changing World**Key Ideas:**

- American Indians lost land and were forced onto reservations.
- Boarding schools tried to change Native cultures.
- Native communities worked to protect their traditions.

Vocabulary: reservation, culture, tradition

Think About It:

Why is it important to protect culture and traditions?

Panel 6: The Civil War**Key Ideas:**

- The Civil War was fought between the Union and the Confederacy.
- Slavery was a major cause of the war.
- The Emancipation Proclamation helped end slavery.

Vocabulary: civil war, slavery, emancipation

Think About It:

How did the Civil War change the United States?

Panel 7: Reconstruction

Key Ideas:

- Reconstruction rebuilt the country after the Civil War.
- Slavery was abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment.
- African Americans gained new rights, but equality was limited.

Vocabulary: reconstruction, amendment, equality

Think About It:

Why do you think change can be slow after a major conflict?

Student Worksheet

Name: _____ Date: _____

Directions

Use the exhibit panels to help you answer the questions below. Answer in complete sentences unless told otherwise.

Questions

1. Draw a line to match each word with the correct meaning.

1. Constitution	A. A change or addition to a law
2. Migration	B. A movement of people to a new place
3. Revolution	C. A plan for how a government works
4. Amendment	D. A fight to create change
2. What is one reason Europeans came to North America during the colonial period?
3. Why did the American colonies decide to break away from Great Britain?
4. What is the purpose of the United States Constitution?
5. Name one challenge settlers faced while moving west.
6. **South Dakota Perspective:** How did westward expansion and U.S. government policies affect the **Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota** peoples? What could be one result of this action?
7. What was one major cause or result of the Civil War?

Teacher Answer Key

Question-by-Question Sample Answers

1. Draw a line to match each word with the correct meaning.
 1. Constitution – **C**. A plan for how a government works
 2. Migration – **B**. A movement of people to a new place
 3. Revolution - **D**. A fight to create change
 4. Amendment **A**. A change or addition to a law
2. Europeans came to North America for land, trade, resources, religious freedom, or new opportunities.
3. Colonies wanted independence because of unfair taxes, lack of representation, and strict British laws.
4. The Constitution explains how the government works and sets rules for leaders and citizens.
5. Settlers faced dangers such as long travel, illness, lack of supplies, difficult weather, or conflicts.
6. **South Dakota Perspective:** Westward expansion forced the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota peoples off their traditional lands and onto reservations; treaties were often broken, and boarding schools pressured Native children to give up their language and culture. (Accept any accurate example.)
7. The Civil War was caused mainly by disagreements over slavery and states' rights, and it resulted in the end of slavery.
8. The Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery in the United States.
9. Answers will vary. Students should describe an image or object and make a reasonable interpretation based on the exhibit.

Teacher Notes

- Accept age-appropriate wording and partial answers that show understanding.
- Encourage respectful language when discussing Native nations and historical injustices.
- This worksheet works well for gallery walks or post-visit reflection.