

We the People

2003

On Constitution Day, September 17, 2002, President George W. Bush announced *We the People*, an NEH initiative that would “call upon humanities scholars, teachers, filmmakers, museums, libraries, and other individuals and institutions engaged in the humanities to develop projects on the most significant events and themes in the nation’s history and culture.” In 2003, the president announced his intent to request \$100 million over a three-year period for the *We the People* initiative. “For the ideas and ideals of democracy to be passed successfully from one generation to the next, our citizens— young and old—must know and understand the principles and practices on which our nation is built,” said NEH Chairman Bruce Cole.

More than \$2 million was spent in 2003 to enhance the teaching and understanding of American history through grants to teachers, filmmakers, museums, libraries, and other individuals and institutions.

Teachers were given opportunities to deepen their knowledge of American history through summer institutes for schoolteachers such as “History, Diversity, and Democracy in America’s State Constitutions” and summer institutes for college teachers such as “War and Morality: Rethinking the Just War Tradition for the Twenty-first Century.” Other opportunities included seminars such as “Philadelphia’s Economy in an Era of Atlantic World Revolutions,” and a faculty study project for school and college teachers in central North Dakota on the intersections of American literature and early American history.

To preserve and expand access to our nation’s historic documents, funding was provided for such projects as Collections Documenting the

History of Pennsylvania, 1616–1949 and the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, focusing on geographical differences in the vocabulary, pronunciation, and morphology of American English.

Four NEH challenge grants were awarded to help organizations secure long-term improvements in and support for their humanities programs and resources.

We the People grants were awarded to support scholarly research for editions such as *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, and the “Freedmen and Southern Society Project,” chronicling the transition from slavery to freedom in the American South. Funding was also provided for translation projects, including the Creek texts of Mary R. Haas and The New Netherland archives, which holds documents regarding the colonial governments of New Netherlands and New York from 1654 to 1680.

Through partnerships with the state humanities councils, public programs at libraries, museums, and historical organizations help disseminate knowledge to Americans. Programs in 2003 included *The Great Democratic Revolution*, a three-part television series exploring the meaning of democracy in the United States, a traveling exhibition on women in military service during World War II, and public programs in 85 rural communities in four states on the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

The first *We the People Bookshelf*, an annual list of books for young readers on a theme related to American history and ideals, was launched in 2003. The bookshelf encourages young people to



-Michael Sheldon Art Resource, NY

East Prospective View of Philadelphia, lithograph, published 1778.

read classic works of literature on great American themes. The first set of 15 books explored the theme of “courage” and was distributed to 500 public and school libraries around the nation, which will organize programs and events around these classic books to engage young readers.

To encourage high school juniors to research and analyze our nation’s history and to reflect upon important American principles and events, NEH announced the first annual “Idea of America” essay contest. Students were asked to write an essay that describes how a significant event in our nation’s history illustrates a principle of American democracy. For her winning essay on *Marbury v. Madison*, Morghan Transue of Kendall

Park, New Jersey, received \$5,000 and a medal from First Lady Laura Bush.

The annual Heroes of History Lecture offers the public an opportunity to learn about the lives and deeds of our heroes. The 2003 inaugural lecture was given by historian Robert V. Remini, a prize-winning biographer of Andrew Jackson, on the subject of “Ordinary Heroes: Founders of Our Republic.”

Richard Fonte
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We the People