

# PREFACE

## Getting a Nation Started



“A greater drama is now acting,” wrote Washington, “...than has heretofore been brought on the American stage.”

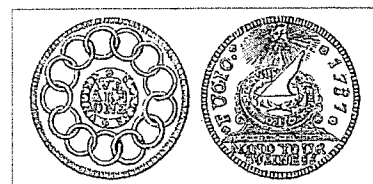
In a preface (PREFF-iss), the author is supposed to tell you what is coming in the chapters ahead. If you don't like the sound of it, you can stop reading. Well, this preface is here to tell you to read on. For this is a good book, full of stories. It is about the beginning of a nation, our nation: the United States of America.

It wasn't easy getting the country started. Mistakes were made—some big mistakes. But, mostly, we did a good job of it. Maybe it was because we had remarkable political leaders. Here are some of their names: George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, James Monroe, John Marshall. No nation has had a more impressive group of founders. They had strong ideas and strong differences. But they are only part of the story.

Imagine life in 1789. The United States has a just-written, untried constitution. A new century is soon to begin. Our young country has a president—instead of a king—and that is an idea that needs some getting used to. Never before have people written their own constitution. Never before have so many been able to vote. Never before has a nation offered its citizens complete religious liberty.

Yet, in 1789, those voting citizens are mostly white men who own property. Why should that bother some people? That is the way it is done in England. Besides, everyone knows that in the United States ordinary people can and do own land. And that is astounding in this 18th century.

It is the Constitution's words that are bothersome. The Constitution



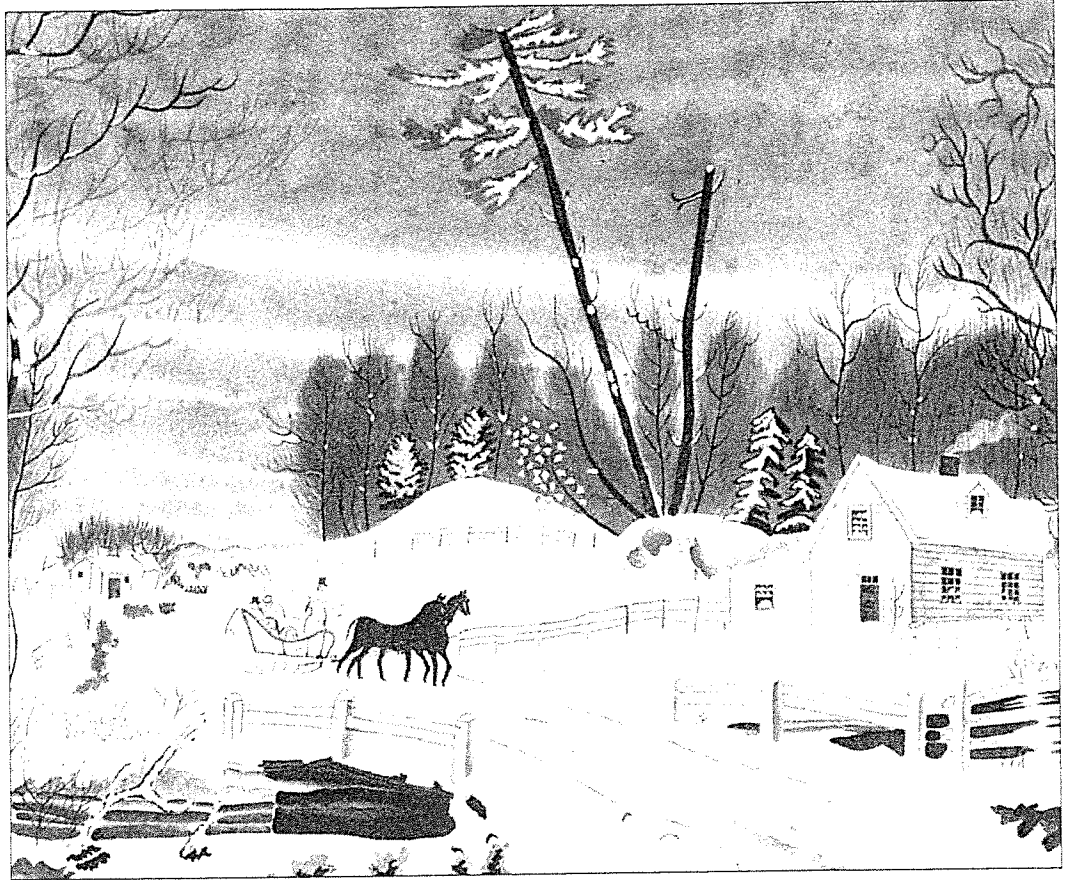
**The first official U.S. coin, minted in 1787, has a ring of 13 interlocking circles and the motto “We Are One.” On the other side is the phrase “Mind Your Business.” It is said to have been suggested by Benjamin Franklin.**

## Democracy?

**D**o you believe in democracy—government of the people, by the people, and for the people? Today, most Americans do. But that wasn't so in times past. Democracy was an idea that took some getting used to. Many people thought it wouldn't work.

**H**enry Fearon came to America in 1818 to find out how this democratic nation was doing. Fearon had been hired by 39 English families as a kind of scout. He was to travel about and “ascertain whether any and what part of the United States would be suitable for their residence.” Those families weren't moving unless they heard good things.

He began his report on the ship, before he even landed in America. He discovered a debating society on board. “Upon one occasion,” said Fearon, “the question was, ‘Which is the best form of government, a democracy or a monarchy?’ It was strongly contested on both sides, and at length determined in favor of the former [democracy] by the [one] vote of the chairman—who was seated in presidential state on a water-cask.”



When the United States was born, all but a tiny fraction of Americans lived on farms, not in cities. During the 19th century that would begin to change.

says, *We the people*. Just who are “the people”? Some Americans say that *we the people* means all people, of every color, race, and religion. Not everyone agrees. Cautious people believe the government has already gone too far with “this democracy nonsense.” Others say it hasn't gone far enough. A few, who are courageous and determined, will work to bring freedom and fairness to all. The new constitution has a provision—an amendment process—that allows it to be changed.

Right away there are demands for changes. Right away 10 amendments are added. Those first 10 amendments are a bill of rights. We Americans don't want to take chances; we want to make sure that our freedoms are put down in words. The Bill of Rights gives us specific freedoms such as freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press.

But now, with the Bill of Rights in place, most citizens have other things on their minds. There is much to do in this newly formed nation. Ships keep bringing more and more people to America. Homes need to be built, forests cleared, and land explored.

And there are questions to be answered. No one in these United States knows what the land west of the Mississippi River is like. How

wide is it? Who lives there? What plants and animals grow in that region? Someone should find out.

Why should anyone rush? Life on the land is slow-moving. Farming methods are about the same as they have been for thousands of years. Most Americans get up at sunrise and go to bed soon after the sun sets. Only the rich have watches or clocks or can afford to burn candles. Too bad we can't warn people. They are in for some big surprises. As this 18th century turns into the 19th, an industrial revolution, begun in Europe, will find its way across the sea. It will speed the pace of life.

Optimistic and productive years are ahead of us; things will go well for us Americans—except for something that is already giving our new nation a terrible, throbbing headache. This headache is caused by greed and heartlessness. Some Americans are taking advantage of other Americans. Some Americans are enslaving other Americans. Some Americans are upset about it; others don't seem to care.

Many white Americans came to this country as indentured servants. They had to work for someone else. They weren't free to leave or do what they wanted until their indenture was finished. Some were treated like slaves. So slavery doesn't seem unusual to them. Besides, slavery has been around throughout written history. The Bible talks of slavery; the Greek and Roman republics had slavery; many European, African, and Asian countries allow slavery. People are used to slavery; most people don't question things they are used to.

They are wrong not to ask questions. Slavery is terrible. American slavery is racial. The slaves are people of color—African or Native American. Slavery is economic—slaves represent money to their owners. It is very, very difficult for slaves to win their freedom.

Nevertheless, some do become free. There is a growing population of free blacks. They have jobs as carpenters, blacksmiths, farmers, cooks, and stable workers. Some are prosperous; most are not.

But as the 19th century approaches, ideas are changing. Europe's nations are beginning to outlaw slavery. One by one, the northern states outlaw slavery. According to the Northwest Ordinance, there is to be no slavery in the western territories (although some will have it anyway).

In the southern United States a way of life depends on slave labor. If



## Negroes for Sale.

*A Cargo of very fine stout Men and Women, in good order and fit for immediate service, just imported from the Windward Coast of Africa, in the Ship Two Brothers.—*

*Conditions are one half Cash or Produce, the other half payable the first of January next, giving Bond and Security if required.*

*The Sale to be opened at 10 o'Clock each Day, in Mr. Bourdeaux's Yard, at No. 48, on the Bay.*

*May 19, 1784.*

**JOHN MITCHELL.**

The Constitution created a new form of government, but it didn't change life for most slaves. Until 1808 it was still legal to bring slaves to the United States from Africa. And it took many more years for slaves who were already in America to win their freedom.

## A HISTORY OF US

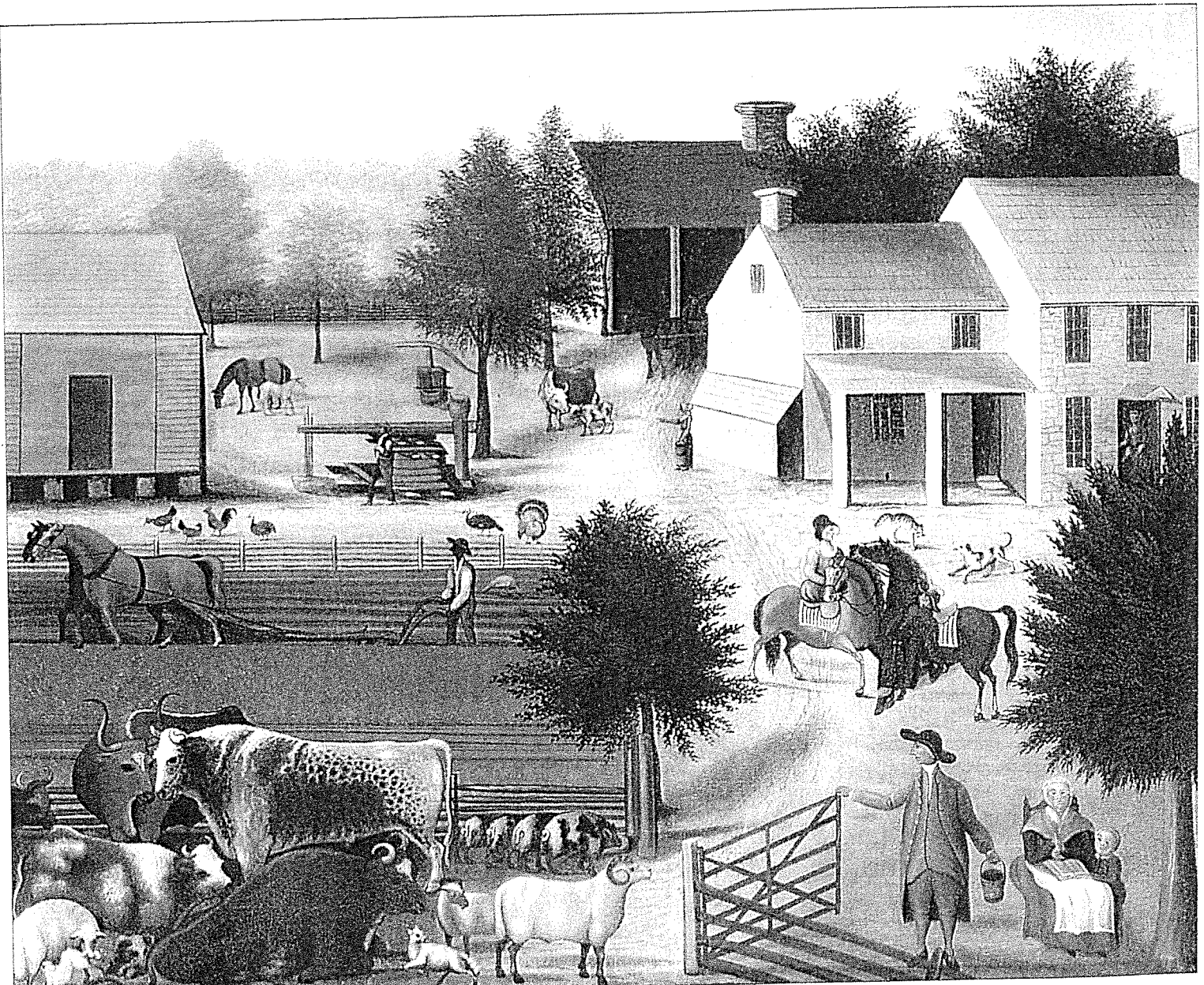
**From its beginnings, the United States was a country where ordinary people, with no inherited advantages of birth or wealth, could own their own land and work their own farms. In the 18th-century world that was unusual.**

the slave owners free their slaves, they will be giving up their wealth. People never like to do that.

Curing the headache won't be easy. There are no miracle pills around. Slavery is making some people in the North and South see things differently, and hate each other, and say so.

The American experiment in self-government may fail if this problem of injustice is not solved. How can a nation built on the idea that "all men are created equal" keep some people in chains?

It can't, of course. Our country will split apart before all its people understand that. This book is the story of America's good beginnings, and of the cruelty of slavery that will lead us to war.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Hr: \_\_\_\_\_

**Engaging in the Reading Process: Getting a Nation Started**

**Directions:** Reading is not passive but rather active. Good readers do things before, during and after reading. To that end, please answer the following questions before and after reading **Getting a Nation Started** and make **“mental moves”** throughout.

**Before Reading:** Quickly scan the title, pictures, and picture captions before answering the following:

- 1.) What type of text is this (book, magazine article, essay, newspaper article, etc.)?
  
- 2.) Based on the title and pictures, what might the topic of the text be about?
  
- 3.) What do you already know about this topic?
  
- 4.) Predict what you may learn from this text.

**After Reading:**

- 1.) Discuss at least three things you learned while reading this text.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2.) What did you find most interesting about this text?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3.) What question(s) do you still have on the topic and how/where could you potentially find the answer?