
Liberty's Legacy: A Review Essay

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Between July, 1987, and June, 1988, a remarkable exhibit will tour each of the six states of the Old Northwest, offering visitors an opportunity to observe a significant collection of documents and illustrations connected with the bicentennial of two great texts of freedom: the United States Constitution and the Northwest Ordinance. The exhibit is a collaborative effort sponsored by the alumni associations of the nine Big Ten universities located within the Old Northwest and six libraries and historical societies within those states. Commencing at the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus on July 1, 1987, the exhibit is scheduled to tour in sequence the Lilly Library on the campus of Indiana University in Bloomington; the William L. Clements Library of American History on the campus of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; the Newberry Library in Chicago, Illinois; the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in Madison; and the Minnesota Historical Society in Minneapolis. Relying upon materials drawn exclusively from the collections of these six host institutions, and particularly from the Clements and the Lilly libraries, the exhibit is, like its subjects, of both regional and national significance.

The exhibition contains 122 items, 63 of which deal with the Ordinance and 59 with the Constitution, testifying to the richness and variety of source materials available within the Midwest. Materials from the Clements Library dominate the treatment of the Northwest Ordinance, while the Lilly Library's collections are paramount in the treatment of the Constitution. The exhibit, however, approaches the two documents in very different ways. Items dealing with the Constitution focus upon the critical years from the Annapolis convention in 1786 to the tardy ratification by Rhode

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Island in 1790 and explore in detail the process of writing and approving the document. Items dealing with the Ordinance on the other hand range over more than a century from the dawning concern for western issues in the 1750s to the admission of the last of the Old Northwest states, Minnesota, in 1859. The treatment of the Constitution—relying almost exclusively upon contemporary newspapers, pamphlets, and manuscripts—attests to the current significance of the study and the interpretation of basic texts by both academic and public figures. Four-fifths of the Constitutional entries focus upon the process of ratification, stressing the remarkable variety of arguments and viewpoints that emerged in the months immediately following the adjournment of the Philadelphia convention. Announcements of ratification parades stand next to heated denunciations by critics later termed Anti-Federalist, a vivid preface to the range of celebration and analysis that the planners of the exhibit undoubtedly hoped to encourage. The particular selection of pamphlet and newspaper articles further suggests that the exhibit's organizers were often influenced by the current emphasis upon the ideology of republicanism as a shaping force in explaining and producing the constitutional system.

The materials dealing with the Northwest Ordinance on the other hand show a special concern for the visual representation of the West by cartographers, engravers, and popular cartoonists, whose varied products represent fully half the items in this portion of the exhibit. Here the emphasis is upon image rather than upon text, with planners of the exhibit striving to trace the progress and accomplishments of the Northwest Ordinance within the larger context of the progress of settlement and comprehension of the trans-Appalachian West. Some viewers may question the comparatively heavy emphasis upon the Indian wars and treaties of the period between 1790 and 1815. All will be impressed, however, by the remarkable contributions of geographers and mapmakers to both official and public understanding of the background and implications of the survey and settlement provisions of the Ordinance. The exhibit is both a tribute and an invitation to interdisciplinary study.

Considerations of space in six very different host facilities imposed severe limitations upon the designers of the display itself and tended to separate the more visually striking maps and prints from the rows of printed materials. Combined with the subdued lighting necessary to preserve ink and paper, the display cases are sometimes more a feast for mind than for eye. Yet many items retain their inherent fascination: Thomas Jefferson's copy of *The Federalist* papers with his handwritten attributions of authorship, Rufus Putnam's detailed map of a model township in the new territory, and George Washington's letter accepting the presidency in 1789 are among the gems of the collection. The midwestern sense

of place shines through the exhibition, from Lord Shelburne's detailed manuscript map of the deployment of British forces in the 1760s, through Thomas Hutchinson's map of the River Ohio from Fort Pitt to the Mississippi (with detailed notation of great elephant bones at Big Bone Lick), to Fielding Lucas's map of the Michigan Territory in 1824. Gilbert Stuart's portrait of Washington, pencil sketches of the five American commissioners for the Treaty of Ghent, and James Lewis's color lithograph of the Shawnee Prophet are among the portraits that lend a human and personal dimension to the study of union, self-government, and expansion.

Those unable to visit the exhibition may still capture an excellent sense of both its content and its design through the attractive catalog prepared to accompany the tour.¹ *Liberty's Legacy* contains specific citations to each of the exhibit entries together with explanatory notes that are in most cases more detailed than the descriptive cards in the display itself. Accompanying the text are illustrations of sixty-two of the exhibit entries, fourteen of which are presented in full color. Browsers will enjoy many of the colorful and insightful details of the individual entries, although at times the link between particular items and the overall theme of the exhibit is not clearly developed. The entries properly focus upon the historical background and significance of the material in the exhibition. Quite apparent, however, is the obvious care and consideration that the donors and curators of the host institutions have shown in assembling and preserving these significant and sometimes unique materials.

Liberty's Legacy also contains two informed popular introductions to the ideas and themes raised by the documents in the exhibit. Pauline Maier's essay on the United States Constitution focuses upon the traditional theme of the critical period in American history and upon the attempts of young men of the American Revolution to find a system of government that could indeed balance order with liberty. Unlike the ratification-focused materials of the exhibition, she concentrates upon the central issues that were raised in the Philadelphia convention itself, striving to lay a foundation within which the later debates in the state conventions can be placed and understood. Maier is particularly concerned with the definition of federalism and with the complicated theoretical plans and practical compromises that resulted in, as she styles it, "a new form of government."² Her attached bibliography, like the essay

¹ *Liberty's Legacy: Our Celebration of The Northwest Ordinance and The United States Constitution* ([Columbus]: Ohio Historical Society, [1987]. Pp. 116. Illustrations, maps, recommended reading. Paperbound.)

² *Ibid.*, 70.

itself, is a tribute to the enduring influence of Max Farrand and the contemporary importance of Gordon S. Wood.

In "The Importance of the Northwest Ordinance," Peter S. Onuf summarizes many of the themes and insights that he has ably developed in his recent writings. The essay will be of particular interest to midwestern readers. Here the focus is upon union, upon the desire of eastern political leaders to incorporate the West within the American system of government, but to incorporate it under terms and conditions that would support, rather than threaten, the established political order. Onuf concentrates upon the theme of responsibility within the Ordinance, noting that its provisions for education, secure land title, and gradual development of self-government were consistent with a desire to attract settlers of substance and judgment to the Old Northwest. He is careful to point out a close link between the Ordinance adopted in New York in July of 1787 and the Constitution being framed at the same time in Philadelphia. At the same time he recognizes the fact that while the authors of the Ordinance envisioned the expansion of the American system, they also envisioned the document's own extinction as it was gradually replaced by the constitutions of the new states of the Northwest Territory. Onuf effectively suggests that the Ordinance has played both real and symbolic functions within the American Midwest and that it is best understood through appreciation of "the challenges facing earlier generations" in the process of settlement.³ He is deeply impressed by the irony inherent in a document designed to promote union and yet, in its anti-slavery provisions, ultimately capable of contributing to a sense of sectionalism.

Liberty's Legacy is, in short, public programming of a high order. In its blend of analytic interest, archival attention, and celebratory display, it suggests the rich range of approaches available to students of both national and regional culture in 1988. Just as the Revolutionary bicentennial of 1976 provided springboards to subsequent study and programming, so the Big Ten traveling exhibit invites Americans to explore and probe the role played by the great texts of 1787 in understanding both past and present in Indiana and the nation.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.