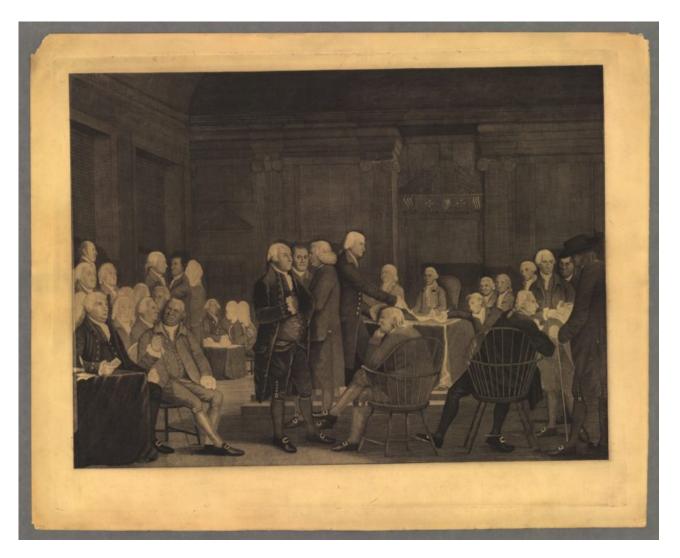# [A Century of Lawmaking For a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates 1774-1875](#)

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lawhome.html

In recent years, scholars have increasingly strived to digitize the rich documentary history of the development of the United States. Several Websites, including Yale University Law School's impressive Avalon Project, have made great strides in making available to the public many of the political tracts that shaped America's founding and the creation of the national government. Few, however, match the depth and breadth of the Library of Congress's *A Century of Lawmaking For a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates 1774-1875*. Part of the library's National Digital Library Program, this database aims to "offer broad public access to a wide range of historical documents as a contribution to education and lifelong learning." The expansion of online historical content is one component of the library's mission to

"sustain and preserve a universal collection of knowledge and creativity for future generations." Living up to these goals, the database truly offers something for all interested parties.

Four sections of documents organize the Website: the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention, Statutes and Documents, Journals of Congress, and the Debates of Congress. Each section is then divided into four subsections, offering further levels of organization which allow scholars to explore in-depth indexes as well as search each area by year. Subsections include the Letters of Delegates to Congress, the Journals of the Continental Congress, the Annals of Congress, and the Statutes at Large, to name but a few. A general search allows users to search the entire Website for information on various topics. A search of "slavery" returned 2,931 items, while the "Articles of Confederation" returned 819 items. For those scholars with more specific parameters, text searches can be qualified by the year, chamber, and session of Congress, as well as limited to any of the sixteen subsections.

Because many of the documents on the Website are transcripts, scholars have the ability to full-text search seemingly thousands of documents in a single, straightforward database, a feature sure to entice serious researchers examining the development of the American government. Browsing the seemingly countless full-text searchable documents, scholars can instantly access over 100 pieces of correspondence between John Adams and James Warren during the nascent stages of the American Revolution. Those interested in the debates surrounding the purchase and exploration of Louisiana will find many relevant items contained within the Annals of Congress as well as in the Senate and House Journals. Although some of these subsections can only be index-searched, the ease of navigation throughout the Website and the abundance of full-text searchable documents more than compensates for this minor drawback.

While the surfeit of searchable texts will undoubtedly attract researchers of various disciplines, the Website also caters to students, teachers, and interested citizens alike, providing links to summaries of major events shaping America's political development. These links, combining brief summaries with apposite documentation, include special presentations on the making of the U.S. Constitution, a timeline of American history as seen in Congressional documents (1774-1873), Indian land cessions to the United States with included maps (1784-1894), and a journal of the Congress of the Confederate States of America (1861-1865), among other useful resources. The timelines may prove especially helpful for educators seeking primary sources to supplement their lectures, as the special presentations point to volumes on the site in which the issues at stake in Congress come vividly to life. Novice researchers will also appreciate the "Citation Guide" and "Using the Collection" links as they begin their research.

In addition to providing thousands of digitized documents for public use, another wonderful feature of the Website is a link to nearly forty additional resources. The "Related Resources on the Internet" link lists pertinent

American Memory historical collections provided by the Library of Congress as well as links to transcriptions of the Federalist Papers, the U.S. Constitution, and the Declaration of Independence. Perhaps most helpful are the external Websites listed, including the aforementioned Avalon Project as well as several databases and research guides to aid even the most veteran historian. Finally, a link to the Library of Congress's "Learning Page" transports teachers to a site devoted to essential information for professional development. Most useful is a section on classroom materials, supplying teachers with an abundance of primary source sets, lesson plans, presentations, and activities to facilitate historical learning in the classroom.

Gone are the days of poring over microfilm for weeks to find data relevant to particular research interests. With this sleek Website, a few pointed searches can unveil hundreds of pertinent published documents for scholars interested in various topics related to early American history. Produced by the collaborative effort of numerous public and private institutions to provide "a digital record of American history and creativity," this portion of the American Memory project will undoubtedly inspire creativity among scholars for years to come.

Curtis Urban is a PhD student in early American history at the University of Notre Dame.