

**HIS 6710**  
**Final Reflection Paper**  
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Observations on the Formation of a Town: An Eighth Grade Experiment in Democracy

While attending Teaching American History Seminar U.S. Constitution-From Colonies to a Nation, held at Castleton State College, I pondered how I would use my new- found information regarding the birth of a nation in my eighth grade Social Studies class. I wanted to be creative, connect the information to something the students cared about, and have them be able to apply their new knowledge in different situations. I decided to have the students create their own town. This town would mirror the birth of our nation. My hope was that the students, would experience similar struggles, pitfalls, and growing pains that our founding fathers encountered thereby giving them an understanding of the difficulties that were experienced at that time. I also thought that by having a town, they would own the experience and connect internally as it would be about them not figures in history that they didn't necessarily understand. I also wanted them to connect their knowledge and use their information to understand current events, specifically, how can they help to create a republic in another country, namely, Iraq. The following information contains both town meeting information and my observations and assessments on how the town worked and if it actually accomplished the goal of understanding the birth of a nation.

How we started:

The second week of school, I mentioned to the students that I wanted them to form their own town. I didn't give any more information about my expectations than that. As expected, the students were intrigued. They asked questions about the town such as, "Who will be in charge?" and "What can we do as a town?" Once the questioning started, I answered that they would be in charge and do whatever they wanted with the town. Immediately, leaders rose to the forefront. I did not know the students well yet so I didn't know what to expect as far as personalities or leadership styles. The leaders, about 4 students, decided that the town should have elections to determine who was in charge. The elections for Mayor, Assistant Mayor, Sheriff, Assistant Sheriff, Secretary, and Councilor took place the following week. As I expected, the four leaders were among those elected to the first offices.

Where do we go from here?

Now that the officers were chosen, they decided to come up with some town priorities. They asked the townspeople, all of the class that was not elected to an office, to come up with the three most important things needed in a town. At the next meeting, which was the following week, the priorities were identified as:

1. Laws/punishments
2. How are we a community? Fun/respect
3. Motto

I was surprised at the priorities. I certainly didn't think that a motto should be in the top three but I let them continue with their quest. At this time, we are reading and interpreting the

Declaration of Independence outside of town time. I asked them to think about and discuss why this document was written and how it could have implications for their town, which they have now named The Town of Rut-Vegas. We then moved on to the Constitution and dissected the Preamble and Articles. When the town met again, two weeks later, they decided to set a regular meeting date, Wednesday, and also declared the 8th of every month to be Skittles Day. I was quite amused with this last item as they still have no laws or organization to speak of but have a candy day once a month. Did the Founding Fathers run in to anything like this?

#### Researching the Founding Fathers:

At this point, we employed the costumes and information I gathered at the seminar and became the Founding Fathers for a day. Each student researched their assigned person and we held a Constitutional Convention where they grappled with the questions of :

1. Should slaves be counted, if at all?
2. Should the executive be one person or a council?

At the end of this exercise, which was great fun, the town decided to make their own Constitution. Remember, we still have no laws. They are also fighting over what the motto should be.

#### Laws:

We spent most of October, November, and December coming up with the laws for the people. One of the issues was that the town had elections every quarter. The town determined that no one person could hold the same office twice in a row and every one had to be a townsperson at least one quarter. They also decided that when taking nominations for officers, you could be nominated only for two offices and you had to take the nomination and the job if you were voted in. It was a person's civic duty to accept. Other laws established revolved around discipline, fairness and justice. For example, if you were not being a good townsperson you would get a warning. Three warnings sent you to trial where you would have to get council to represent you and consequences were determined by the townspeople. There was no appeal process. An officer could be impeached if it were thought that they were not doing their job.

#### Bureaucracy:

For the months of January and February, the town went in to a lull. I feel that there are two reasons this happened. One was that they had set their motto, made a flag, were comfortable with the laws and felt that they had no outside pressure, unlike the U.S. trying to prove itself to the world. In other words, they were complacent and apathetic about issues. The other reason is that the new administration was not strong. The mayor had difficulty holding and controlling meetings and had no agenda. The town was not moving forward. At one point, they were so bored with the process that they wanted to wage war on Mr. Patterson's town just for something to do! This apathy was recognized by the majority of the students who changed that with the final election of the town officers. The officers of the final quarter were strong leaders once again and the town got back on track.

#### Community Service:

The officers of the town felt that it was time to do something for their community. The decided to have a Battle of the Sexes Bake sale with all proceeds going to the 7th grade to help defer the cost of the graduation dance. While not entirely altruistic, the dance is for them, they were moving in the right direction. They explored community service and how the U.S. helps the world community.

Connection:

The town explored the question, Now that you have gone through the process of setting up a town or republic, what advice can you give to others who want to do the same thing? Once this question is mapped out and they have a blueprint, the next question will be, Based on what you now know about democracy, how can you help a country like Iraq build a republic? This final question will take us to the end of our school year.

Final reflection:

I was excited to see that the students grasped the concept of democracy and used it so well in their town. I also feel that they understand, by going through the difficulties of consensus and discord, how hard it is to set up and keep a government moving forward. They have a new appreciation of the government system. They learned that building a democracy is not an easy or quick process and that they play a key role in shaping policy. I was glad to see that many of the students who originally felt that their voice did not matter, came to understand that they are a very important part of the democratic process. This town increased the sense of civic understanding and pride in every student. I feel that the town was a great success and each student benefited in a unique way. I will use the town process again next year and continue to help students feel connected and understand the process of democracy and how it helps each person as well as the group as a whole.