

Wednesday's

Editorials, Columns & Letters

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Paper 'n Ink...

another special day goes by...

by Lynn Brisendine

"We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

When you think about it, it's really a pretty big deal. One that I'm ashamed to admit got by me and apparently most everyone else.

This past Monday, Sept. 17, was National Constitution Day. Were you aware of it?

I wouldn't have been, except on Monday morning I was reading through the stack of Texas newspapers I get each day and perused a letter to the editor taking everyone to task who wasn't preparing to celebrate the occasion of such a noteworthy event.

The Constitution is an amazing document, which lays out the structure of government we all depend upon and was presented for the states to consider on Sept. 17, 1787. And while it is an inspired document the Amendments, at least the first 10, were not added until four years later in 1791.

This action made the original document meaningful in the extreme to the average citizen, and still does.

I suppose a lot of people think that everything with meaning for the United States of America took place in 1776. After all, that is the year and July 4th the date that holds the most significance to every American who is proud to be an American.

But, that isn't what transpired those 236 years ago. The actual war between the Colonies and the English Crown began in 1775. The Declaration of Independence was signed of course the next year on July 4th.

The war lasted six brutal years with one out of every 25 American citizens losing their life during the conflict. It was a war which most of the rest of the world thought would be over as quickly as the British force arrived. The Red Coats were considered the best soldiers in the world at the time. And they had some famous Generals who, it was thought, would make mincemeat of the rag tag Rebels led by backwoods fighters at the best.

Thankfully, the odds makers in the 18th century were wrong and after six harsh years and a lot of death and suffering, the British went back home a defeated army.

Even after they were defeated, it took the English Royals two more years to admit defeat and sign a treaty ending the rebellion.

While all of this was going on, some pretty sharp folks were meeting to discuss the way the new country should be formed, governed and

enjoyed by the victors.

The Constitution in its written form, a process that took years, was passed at a Constitutional Convention and put forth to the states for ratification. A task that took another year and finally drew nine votes of approval before it was recognized as the official document.

Under its auspices, a national election took place and George Washington became the first President in 1789.

All of this took place first in New York City, our first Capital. That was changed in 1790 when the Capital city was moved to Philadelphia. And that was the location of the amendment actions in 1791 that resulted in making the Constitution meaningful to the average citizen.

It was a lengthy transition, lasting from 1775 until 1791 that the documents we continue to live by and rejoice in took to write, rewrite, debate, and rewrite again until the documents were accepted by the majority.

While the documents are considered inspirational and in many instances sacrosanct, they have been amended, after the first 10, another 17 times. In my lifetime we have seen six amendments approved. The last being the 27th which concerns compensation of members of Congress. It was ratified in 1992.

So, the process really happened over a period of 217 years.

I think it should be noted as well that George Washington took the document and laid out some exacting requirements for the office he held which have also, for the most part, held sway well over two centuries.

Washington was an amazing man who truly was the country's first superstar. He was held in such high regard that many thought he could have been named King of America, a title and job description he turned down, thankfully.

We have seen many crises come and go in the country over those 236 years. And several times one group or another has demanded things be changed. But, and again thankfully, strong voices prevailed to observe and defend that document that begins with We the People...

I know that we have entirely too many "days of celebration" in this country. It seems that every week sees some kind of observation take place. Some of them are entirely silly. But this one, which most of us simply allowed to go by without a hint of recognition, is one that we should observe and offer thanks to Heaven so many bright people lived so long ago. Happy Birthday to the rights of Americans.



Thinking in Type:

By Brian Brisendine

This week 225 years ago, September 17, 1787 to be exact, the Constitution of the United States was formally adopted by the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.

The Federal Convention actually convened in Philadelphia's Independence Hall on May 14 of that year to revise the Articles of Confederation.

By June it became clear that, rather than amend the existing Articles, the Convention would draft an entirely new frame of government.

All through the brutally hot and humid summer, in closed sessions, the delegates debated, and redrafted the articles of the new Constitution.

After intense debate, luminous American figures including George Washington, James Madison and Benjamin Franklin approved a final draft of the Constitution that, once ratified by the States, would become the foundation for the great republic of the United States of America.

Among the chief points at issue were how much power to allow the government, how many representatives in Congress to allow each state, and how these representatives should be elected.

Those men are now some of the most famous people to have ever lived.

Washington would become our first and most revered President. He chaired the constitutional convention.

He was, in his day, a bigger celebrity than any Hollywood movie star our public fawns over today.

When he traveled the countryside during and after his term as President, every town in his path would throw an impromptu celebration or parade in his honor.

Madison was an international

dignitary who did more work behind the scenes with foreign governments than anyone else to establish this nation.

He was the primary author of the framework of our Constitution.

Franklin was an 18th century renaissance man.

He was a writer, a philosopher, a scientist, an inventor and a journalist.

Now, 225 years later, looking back on the significance of what occurred the day they signed the document, I'm struck by the challenge that those Convention delegates faced.

The reality that, despite the huge amount of work that lay behind them, the real effort was still ahead.

Despite the tremendous effort it took to obtain approval within the Convention for the Constitution, the task of ratification was monumental.

It is fair to say that while a Constitution had been adopted, the fight to defend it was only just beginning. That effort continues to this day.

The Constitution has afforded us a form of government rooted in the liberty of the individual.

More than two centuries later, just as our Founders, we face a never-ending struggle to defend and preserve the principles of the Constitution.

In recent years, we've seen a litany of threats to the fundamental components of the Constitution from every branch of government, from overreaching legislation to excessive regulation to judicial activism.

It is hard to fathom the foresight possessed by the framers of the Constitution.

I wonder if any of them thought it would remain the law of the land these two-and-a-quarter centuries later.

I know they could have never envisioned the growth and advances this country and the world would witness.

Their genius was in knowing that they did in fact not know what the future holds.

They made the Constitution amendable, but the process is rightly a difficult one.

The first 10 amendments, our Bill of Rights, are the basis of our laws.

I believe it notable that in more than 200 years since we were presented with the Bill of Rights, the document signed that day has been amended only 17 times.

So as we celebrate the birth of the Constitution 225 years ago, let us all remember that the responsibility to defend and preserve the principles that it set forth rests with each of us.

Your vote, regardless of how you cast it, is a powerful tool in continuing to mold the nation you feel we should be.

Whether we agree or disagree on current political issues, it's hard to argue that our Constitution isn't one of the finest documents ever committed to paper.

The work of many minds, the Constitution stands as a model of cooperative statesmanship and the art of compromise.

Boy, do we need more of that these days.

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State Capital Highlights

Compiled by Ed Sterling, Texas Press Association



Governor goes to Italy to promote Texas...

AUSTIN — Gov. Rick Perry returned to Austin on Sept. 12 following a multi-day overseas trip.

While in Italy, Perry addressed an annual international economic development forum. He touted Texas' workforce, universities and business climate and encouraged investment in and trade with Texas, telling his audience, "... we've created a fertile environment where innovators are free to create and nurture their ideas and where government stays out of the way. That's good for any type of company and it's particularly good for innovative young companies seeking firm footing during their early years."

Perry's office reported that no tax dollars were used to pay for the Italy trip. Part of the trip for the governor and first lady Anita Perry was to visit with Formula One or "F1" racing contacts. The sport is scheduled to debut on Nov. 16-18 at the new Circuit of the Americas track and facilities erected this year on the eastern outskirts of Austin. Through Comptroller Susan Combs, the state agreed to reimburse the racetrack operators \$25 million per race, provided the race generates that amount in state taxes. The reimbursement deal is good for 10 years, with one race per year.

Rister to head RRC

Texas Railroad Commission, the state's three-member energy regulatory agency, on Sept. 11 appointed Milton Rister as executive director.

Rister, who has served as director for administration for the governor's office since 2010, served as executive director for the Texas Legislative Council

from 2006 to 2009 and served as a senior advisor for Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst in 2005.

Rister's first day on the job will be Oct. 1. The Railroad Commission has 750 full-time employees and a 2012 operating budget of about \$75 million.

Revenue increases again

Texas Comptroller Susan Combs announced Sept. 12 that state sales tax revenue in August was \$2.34 billion, up 18.5 percent compared to August 2011.

"The strong business and consumer spending trend boosted the monthly sales tax revenue, as did money remitted at the close of the state's tax amnesty which ended in August," Combs said in a news release.

"The state's sales tax revenue for fiscal 2012 was \$24.1 billion, about 12.6 percent higher than the previous fiscal year. Collections from business sectors such as the oil and natural gas industry and consumer sectors including retail trade increased sales tax revenue for the fiscal year."

Further evidence of the state's overall economic health: September sales tax allocations to cities, counties, transit systems and special taxing districts showed double-digit increases.

With billions of dollars more than expected coming in, underfunded categories of the state budget could enjoy windfalls, depending on how the governor's office and the Legislature, which convenes in January, respond.

Stretch of road goes to 85

Forty miles of State Highway 130 between Austin and San Antonio now boast the highest public highway speed limit in the nation: 85 miles per hour.

The Texas Transportation Commission, which oversees the Texas Department of Transportation, approved the speed change

under a 1999 state law, Transportation Code Chapter 545.

The law says the commission may establish a speed limit not to exceed 85 miles per hour on a part of the state highway system if: (1) That part of the highway system is designed to accommodate travel at that established speed or a higher speed; and (2) The commission determines, after an engineering and traffic investigation, that the established speed limit is reasonable and safe for that part of the highway system.

Lawmaker, justice dies

Robert Alton "Bob" Gammage, 74, of Llano and originally of Houston, died Sept. 10.

Gammage was a former state representative, state senator, U.S. representative, Texas Court of Appeals judge and Texas Supreme Court justice. He ran for governor in 2006 but was defeated in the Democratic Party Primary Election.

Gammage was one of the "Dirty Thirty" — a coalition of state representatives in the 1971 Legislature who successfully fought against corruption in the upper levels of state government and spurred voters to a large-scale defection from incumbent officeholders.

A funeral service for Gammage was held in the Senate Chamber at the Texas Capitol, followed by burial in the Texas State Cemetery on Sept. 13.

If living, please respond

Secretary of State Hope Andrade, pursuant to a state law that took effect Sept. 1, 2011, sent letters to more than 70,000 Texans, asking them to acknowledge they are living by completing and returning a form within 30 days. Those who don't respond could be deleted from voter registration rolls.

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