Revisiting the Founding Era Final Report

The Central Library of Rochester & Monroe County was awarded a Revisiting the Founding Era Grant. The grant was designed to give local leaders the resources and support they need to create engaging community conversations around ideas and themes that continue to influence our lives today. Revisiting the Founding Era is a three-year national initiative of The Gilder Lehrman Institute (GLI) of American History, presented in partnership with the American Library Association and the National Constitution Center, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. There were 96 total libraries chosen for the grant (representing 45 of the 50 states), this includes 11 libraries in New York State.

Central received a $1,000 stipend to support costs associated with implementing programs; 10 copies of a 100-page reader with selected primary source documents from GLI in print and digital formats; professional development training via a required webinar; access to a public facing website with the 100-page reader in downloadable PDF format, videos, additional primary sources, and links to materials on the GLI website; a site support notebook, developed by GLI, with programming ideas, instructions for how to connect with humanities scholars and further reading; downloadable and customizable marketing and promotional materials to invite participation in your local programs; and programming support from GLI.

The facilitator and panelists received copies of Revisiting the Founding Era: Readings from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. This publication calls on Americans today to re-examine documents and ideas from that turbulent period with an eye to their endurance over time and their relevance to the 21st century. The grant required that The Reader be drawn upon for inspiration for the two required programs, one teen/young adult and one adult.

**Adult Program**

A panel discussion on “Creating the Constitution” took place on Wednesday, September 26th from 7 to 8:30 pm. The discussion was facilitated by Dr. Timothy Kneeland, chair of the Nazareth College history department, and discussed the following, among other things:

- If a new constitution convention were called in your lifetime, what issues do you believe would be on the agenda and which would be the most controversial?
- Is federalism still a source of conflict and tension within American politics? What contemporary issues raise problems between the states and the federal government? What solutions would you propose?
- In the 18th century, political debate took place in pamphlets, newspapers, and often in taverns. Where do these debates take place today - and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these modern forums?

There was a lively, civil discourse between our panelists:

- **Adam Chodak** – Managing Editor, WROC-TV
More than 50 people attended the discussion. Attendees were highly engaged, many of whom brought journal articles and notes on specific issues they wanted to discuss. There was a 20 minute Q&A period after the one hour debate and we did not have time to get to everyone’s questions and comments.

The panelists submitted the following comments after the discussion:

“I second that. It was an honor, and an enjoyable evening. (Sorry I couldn’t let the ‘only God can save us’ go unanswered.) Thanks to all for the evening – and the lessons I learned as one who, admittedly, has not returned to my studies of the Constitutional creation in a while. If one learns of a good tavern for the next round, let me know.” - Gary Craig

“I was honored to participate with such a talented panel, where everyone gave their best. Thank you.” – Scott Smith

“It was fun! Thanks for inviting me to be part of this.” – Timothy Kneeland

“I did enjoy the evening and I believe that between the group of us we did provide some useful food for thought. Lord knows we’re going to need an engaged citizenry in this country if we are going to recover from the damage that we’re currently witnessing.” – Hubert Van Tol

“Set a date and name of the tavern and I’ll try to be there! Good crew, great discussion. I feel privileged to have been a part of it.” – Adam Chodak

The event in its entirety can be viewed here: https://youtu.be/MUpBfLB9EvE

**Young Adult Program**

The grant coordinator spent an afternoon with a class from the Rochester City School District’s Office of Adult and Continuing Education Services (OACES). The class was for young adults who are new Americans and are learning English as well as the requisite knowledge to pass the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC, formerly known as the GED). 21 young adults who participate in a special program for new Americans. Students came from the following countries:
Our first activity was to review the Bill of Rights and discuss if they had similar rights in their home country. The most oppressive country represented was Eritrea. According the Human Rights Watch thousands of Eritreans flee the country monthly to avoid “national service,” conscription that lasts indefinitely. Eritreans are subject to arbitrary arrest and harsh treatment in detention; no means exist to challenge detention or other abuses. Eritrea has had no national elections, no legislature, independent press, or independent civil society organizations since 2001. Religious freedom is severely curtailed. A United Nations Commission of Inquiry in 2016 found the government manifested “wholesale disregard for the liberty” of its citizens. In 2018, a United Nations Special Rapporteur reported that human rights violations “continue unabated.” After these discussions one realizes how we take our liberties and individual freedoms for granted.

The group spent 20 minutes reading the U.S. Constitution; each student was given a pocket-sized constitution to keep as well as a key chain with an American flag on it. Then, they broke into two groups and drafted a constitution for an imaginary new country. The students were highly engaged and took their assignment to create a constitution very seriously. I loved learning about the government structure and human rights of their home countries. Each group had to elect a "president" to present the constitution to the class.

Both groups spent a lot of time discussing guns. One group thought guns should be allowed, but only if the gun owner proved to be mentally fit. The other group said no guns at all, just flowers.

Both groups were profoundly disillusioned by the U.S. electoral college. They found it difficult to understand how Hillary Clinton got more votes than Trump, but didn't win. Both ensured that the winner of the popular vote would win the election in their constitutions.
This comment was submitted by teacher Pamela Viera after the program:

“It was truly a pleasure having you and my students were so extremely engaged and enjoyed the activity so much. You are a wonderful resource with such very pertinent information. I certainly hope that you will be able to return with another presentation in the future on voting. I am glad this connection has been made. Again, thank you very much.”

Student groups discussing their constitutions: