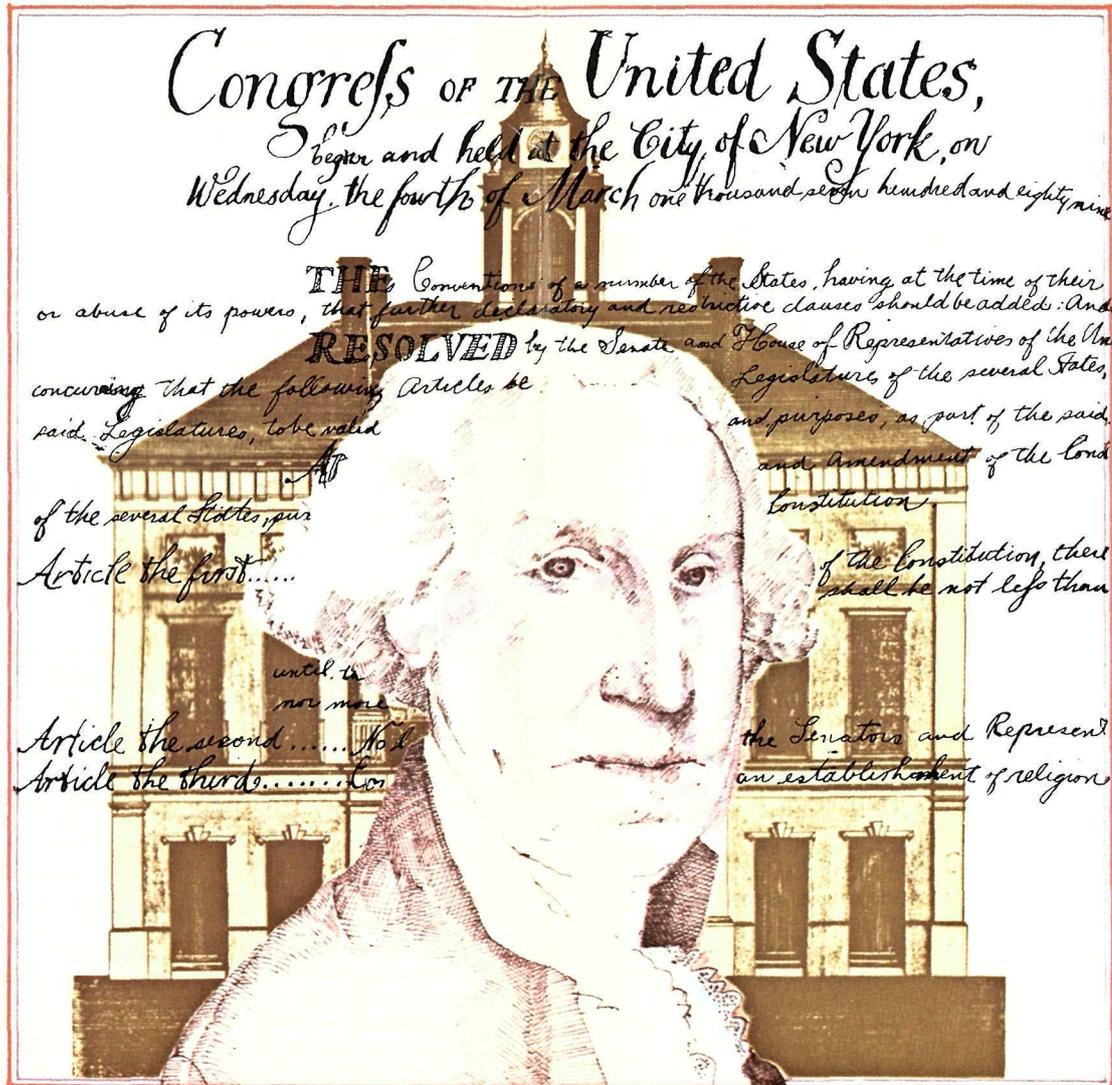


Federal Hall



Illustrated by Alan E. Cober

National Memorial, New York City

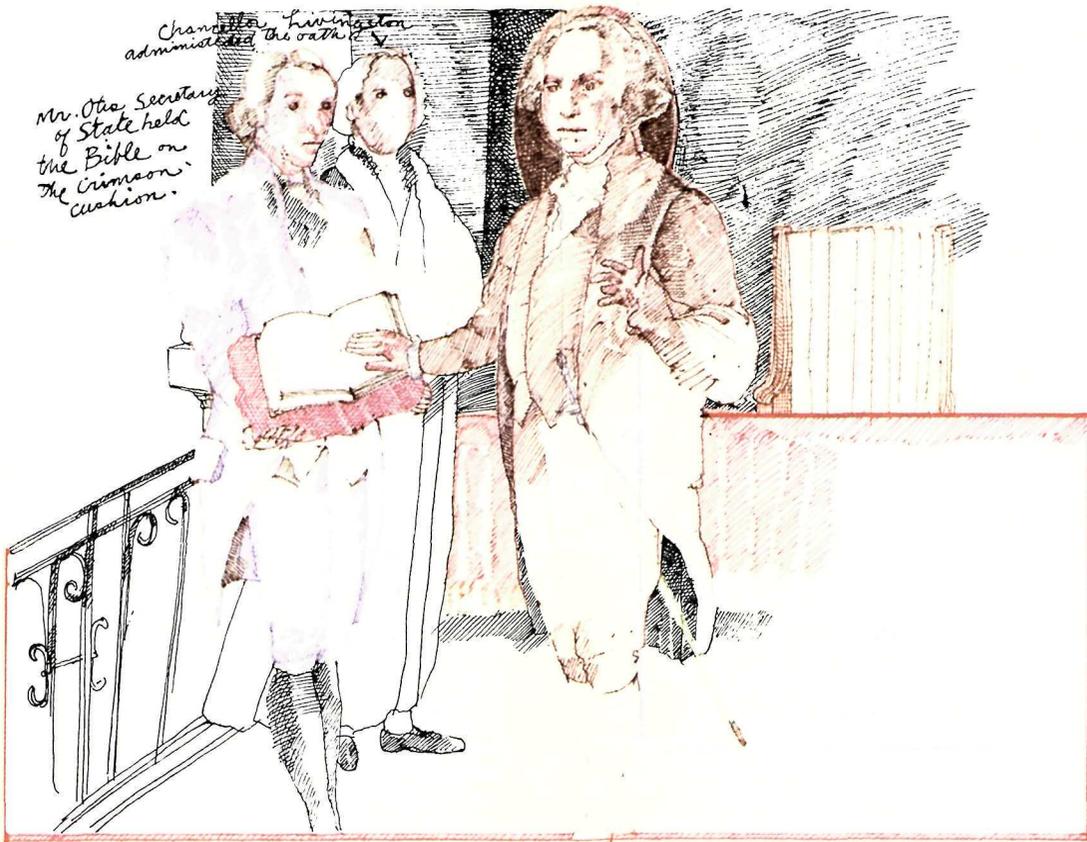
The weight of history resting on this corner of Wall Street and Nassau Street is incalculable. Luckily, there is solid rock below—nothing less could support such a burden of memory. Throughout the 18th century, this was the vital center—the very site, more often than not—of New York’s greatest events. One was significant beyond all others. At this place, the government of the United States of America, under our present Constitution, began to function on Wednesday, March 4, 1789. New York City was the first capital of the United States, and New York’s City Hall—remodelled, enlarged, and renamed Federal Hall in honor of its new, national importance—was the first Capitol, the building in which Congress met for its first session, with the first Senate in one wing and the first House of Representatives in the other.

Here, 8 weeks later, on April 30, George Washington of Virginia, wearing a suit of brown cloth manufactured in Connecticut (which he had bought to encourage American industry), with silver buttons decorated with spread eagles,

and standing on a half-enclosed, open-air balcony on the second floor, took the oath of office and became the first President of the United States. Wall Street and Broad Street were packed with citizens. All the windows and rooftops of every building with any view of the ceremony were filled with excited spectators. Washington and Robert R. Livingston, Chancellor of the State of New York, who was to administer the oath, stood close to the delicately wrought iron railing of the balcony, so that a maximum number of onlookers could see. Samuel Otis, the small, short Secretary of the Senate, stood between the two men, holding a leather-covered Bible on a crimson velvet cushion. Behind them, as a kind of backdrop, were the Vice President, John Adams; the Governor of New York State, George Clinton; the Secretary of War, Henry Knox; the Governor of the Northwest Territory, Arthur St. Clair; and perhaps a dozen other dignitaries. Washington put his right hand on the book. “Do you solemnly swear,” asked Livingston, “that you will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will, to the best of your ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States?” “I solemnly swear,” said Washington—and he repeated the oath affirmatively.

“It is done,” Livingston said. He turned to the crowd and shouted, “Long live George Washington, President of the United States!” The crowd roared back its approval.

It roared not only for President Washington and the new Republic, but for the hero of the American Revolution, General Washington, who had been Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army from June 1775 to December 1783. The crowd believed—it was probably true—that Washington’s astonishing strength of character, his courage, and his excellent judgment, had won the unlikely military victory over Great



Chancellor Livingston administered the oath.
 Mr. Otis Secretary of State held the Bible on the crimson cushion.

Britain. Many of New York's Revolutionary War leaders were present for the inauguration ceremonies, and they remembered that Federal Hall, before remodelling, had housed New York's improvised revolutionary government, the Provincial Congress, for nearly 16 months, from shortly before the battles of Lexington and Concord until the British arrived off Staten Island at the end of June 1776. The Provincial Congress had moved into City Hall without asking permission from the Royal Governor, William Tryon, and he

and his Council were compelled to meet, thereafter, on British ships in New York harbor. The New York Assembly, the Province's legislative body under British rule, discreetly decided not to meet at all.

In the crucial time between the outbreak of fighting in Massachusetts and the Declaration of Independence, those Provincial Congress sessions had shaped New York's part in the Revolution: raising troops, gathering guns and gun-

powder, fortifying the Highlands of the Hudson River, issuing money, trying to control inflation, and, above all, attempting to prepare the city and the farmlands around it on Manhattan and Brooklyn as a "disputable" field of battle. And there, in City Hall, New York men had arrived slowly at the conclusion that reconciliation with Great Britain was hopeless, and had instructed the New York delegation to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia how to vote on the crucial issue of Independence.

It was in Federal Hall, moreover, that General Washington had made one of his most famous speeches, on June 26, 1775. The Commander-in-Chief, newly elected first-ranking general of the army by the Second Continental Congress, had stopped in New York City on his way from Philadelphia to Cambridge, Mass., to take up his command. Some New Yorkers feared that Washington had secret ambitions to make himself a military dictator after the war. The Provincial Congress prevailed upon the general to delay his departure half a day in order to deliver a formal, testimonial address to him, which tucked in a nervous reference to the perils of military government. In accepting New York's compliments, Washington replied to the New Yorkers' foolish fears with a sentence that was quoted repeatedly thereafter: "When we assumed the soldier, we did not lay aside the citizen; and we shall most sincerely rejoice with you in that happy hour when the establishment of American liberty, upon the most firm and solid foundations, shall enable us to return to our private stations in the bosom of a free, peaceful, and happy country."

Washington returned to New York in April 1776, after the British had left Boston and gone to Halifax, Nova Scotia. He brought almost his entire army with him, correctly anticipating that the next British attack would be directed against New York—the ideal headquarters and naval base, from a British point of view, for King George's forces. Washington did not foresee,

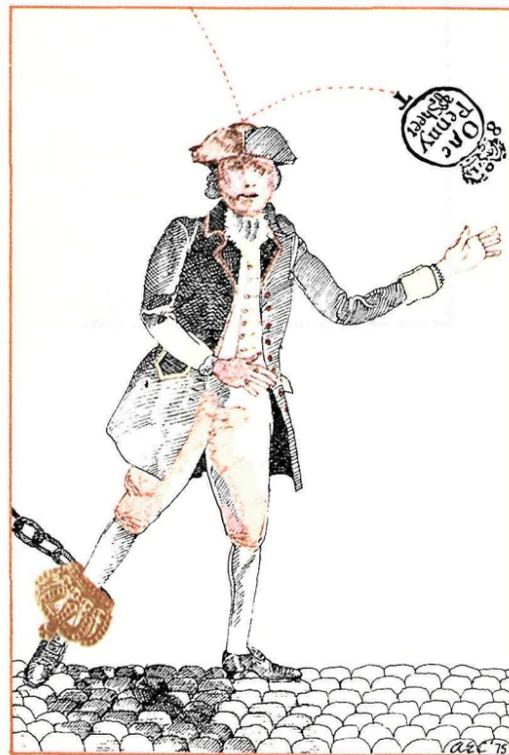
however, that the British expeditionary force would arrive in overwhelming strength—32,000 soldiers, including Hessian mercenaries, and more than 200 naval vessels. (Washington was lucky, on any given day, to have 10,000 men present and fit for duty and, except for a handful of converted merchant ships and fishing vessels, he had no navy.) The feverish efforts to fortify New York were in vain. The Provincial Congress left City Hall and moved to White Plains. Gen. William Howe's well-trained, well-equipped regiments moved from Staten Island to the south shore of Brooklyn; fought their way across Brooklyn to Brooklyn Heights; and, on September 15, 1776, crossed the East River to Manhattan. From late that afternoon until after the Treaty of Paris in September 1783, New York City was in British hands. And City Hall was one of the several important British headquarters buildings.

* In 1703, when City Hall was built, the Royal Governor of New York Province was Lord Cornbury, and New York City was a modest port town on a great natural harbor at the mouth of a splendid river. The city's population was less than 5,000, including 1,000 Indians and slaves. Wall Street, which ran from river to river, was the northern boundary of the thickly built up area. Except for City Hall, Trinity Church, and a handful of houses, everything had been built south of a protective wall, which had only recently been torn down. Broad Street, formerly divided by a canal, made a handsome, slightly curved approach to the new building. New York was at least as much Dutch as English in architectural style—it had been entirely Dutch, and named New Amsterdam, only 40 years earlier. The new City Hall, like all the other new buildings, would not have looked out of place in London: it was a two-story, red-brick structure, with wings at both ends, tall chimneys, and a cupola on top of the roof. It had rooms for the Governor's Council, the New York Assembly, courtrooms, a library, offices, a dungeon in the cellar, and a jail in the garret.

In August 1735, City Hall was the scene of John Peter Zenger's precedent-setting libel trial. Zenger, a German by birth, was a printer and the publisher of the New York *Weekly Journal*, a lively newspaper that was outspoken in its criticism of the Royal Governor, William Cosby, his Council, and his New York friends, the political faction led by Chief Justice James De Lancey. The Governor's Council, incensed in particular by some "scandalous" anti-Cosby songs the newspaper had printed, ordered the specific issues of the *Weekly Journal* burned—and so they were, on Wall Street, in front of City Hall. A few days later Zenger, formally accused of "seditious libel," was locked up in the City Hall jail where he waited 9 months for his trial to begin. Since the presiding judge was Cosby's friend, De Lancey, who began by disbarring Zenger's lawyers, Zenger's chances for acquittal seemed poor. But the *Weekly Journal's* backers, including William Smith, James Alexander, and a former Chief Justice of the colony, Lewis Morris, arranged for Andrew Hamilton of Philadelphia to assist Zenger's court-appointed lawyers. Hamilton, one of the country's most distinguished lawyers, introduced a daring new argument. He told the jury that what Zenger had printed was true, and that truthful criticism of a government was not seditious libel. The jury was persuaded. Its verdict, "not guilty," freed Zenger, and was a great first step toward freedom of the press—as it was to be established, 56 years later, in the first of the first ten amendments to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights.

that Americans had the same rights and liberties as Englishmen in England, and could not be taxed without their consent.

The first shipment of the despised stamps arrived while the Stamp Act Congress was still deliberating, and the Royal Governor, Henry Moore, never tried to have his agents sell them. He kept them locked up in City Hall, and 5 months later, in March 1766, Parliament repealed the offensive law. Meanwhile, mass meetings had been held on the Commons (now City Hall Park); a reasonably effective boycott of British



* New Yorkers were leaders in the protest against the Stamp Act, which Parliament passed in March 1765. It was a money-raising scheme, designed to defray the cost of maintaining a British army in the American colonies, but it backfired badly. The law required Americans to buy large blue paper stamps, costing from twopence to £10 apiece, and attach them to newspapers, handbills, legal documents, business agreements, marriage licenses, playing cards, and many more necessities and luxuries. (One was even supposed to buy a stamp before buying a drink in a tavern.)

New York was the first of the colonies to petition King George III and Parliament to repeal the Stamp Act, and a committee was formed to correspond with the other colonies about "impending dangers," and discuss how to resist them. On October 7, twenty-seven indignant delegates, representing 9 of the 13 colonies, convened at City Hall. This was the "Stamp Act Congress," as the meeting was called informally. They debated for 19 days, worked out a common policy, and wrote a "Declaration of Rights and Grievances," affirming the principle

goods had been organized; and the manufacture and sale of all sorts of American goods had been encouraged. A special market for made-at-home products was opened on Broad Street. Instead of imported tea, New Yorkers were urged to drink a brew of sassafras bark mixed with sage.



New York rejoiced over the news of the Stamp Act's repeal, not realizing, of course, that the King and his Ministry would continue to make similar mistakes—and worse ones—for the decade to come. The King and his Ministry, on the other hand, did not realize that the Stamp Act protest had taught the colonies to act together politically, and had forced them to improvise most of the devices the Continental Congress would use, on a larger scale, to sustain the War for Independence. The

Stamp Act Congress was, in fact, a dress-rehearsal for the Revolution.

* After the war of the Revolution was won, and before the Federal Constitution was ratified, the 13 States were loosely united under the Articles of Confederation. On March 1, 1781, the Second Continental Congress ended, and the next day "The United States in Congress Assembled" began to function, first in Philadelphia, then in Princeton, Annapolis, Trenton, and, after January 11, 1785, in New York City. It sat in City Hall. Each State had one vote, regard-

less of size or population. The Congress was an association of sovereign States rather than a national government—and that was not enough. The Congress, recognizing that fact, called for a convention to revise the Articles of Confederation, and it met in Philadelphia, starting in May 1787.

While the Founding Fathers were devising a new form of government for the unprecedented experiment, writing a constitution that would embody it, and submitting that document to the States for approval, Congress passed a most significant act, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which organized the Northwest Territory (the region northwest of the Ohio River), provided that its inhabitants had the same civil rights as the citizens of the 13 States, and established the machinery for achieving future statehood. It also guaranteed the future inhabitants religious freedom and prohibited slavery.

In late 1787, as the public debate over the proposed Constitution began, the New York City newspapers were filled with denunciations of the plan. There were five papers by then, including a daily and a semi-weekly. Alexander Hamilton, the future Secretary of the Treasury, and no relation to Andrew, the lawyer, was distressed by the fact that New Yorkers were reading mostly the negative side of the argument. He persuaded his fellow New Yorker, John Jay, and the Virginian, James Madison, to help him write a series of articles defending the Constitution, explaining each of its provisions in detail, and arguing that a strong central government, like the one the Constitution provided, was necessary. ("A nation without a national government," Hamilton wrote, "is in my view an awful spectacle.") In all, there were 85 essays in the series. Hamilton wrote the first one in the cabin of his sloop, sailing down the Hudson from Albany. Four of the New York papers—*The Independent Journal*, the *Packet*, the *Journal*, and the *Daily Advertiser*—took turns printing them, and they were reprinted throughout the States. The three authors used the pen-name "Publius" to conceal their identity. Collected and published as a book, the articles were entitled "The Federalist," and were one of this country's great contributions to political thought.

Even after the Constitution had been ratified by all the States except North Carolina and Rhode Island, many Americans feared the power of the new government they had created. They wished that the document included explicit guarantees of personal liberties. The first Congress moved promptly to correct the omission. On June 8, 1789, Madison arose in the House of Representatives, assembled in Federal Hall, and proposed a number of amendments to the Constitution. Twelve of them passed both Houses, and were submitted to the States on September 25, 1789. Ten of the twelve—two were rejected—were ratified by mid-December 1791. Those first ten amendments, known ever since as the Bill of Rights, protect everyone, citizens and non-citizens, subject to the authority of the United States. They guarantee the rights of free speech, a free press, and free worship; the rights to assemble peaceably, to petition the Government for a redress of grievances, and to bear arms; and the right to be secure against unreasonable searches and seizures. They guarantee the legal rights the Americans had inherited from English common law: trial by jury, the right to bail, the right to indictment by a grand jury, the right to a speedy and public trial, and many others.

Madison had pointed out that a Bill of Rights might make it easier for North Carolina and Rhode Island to join the United States, and he was right. North Carolina joined in November 1789, and Rhode Island followed in May 1790.

* By 1803, the modest port had become the biggest city in the United States, with a population approaching 70,000 and growing so fast that the census-takers could hardly keep up with the count. Manhattan Island was built up as far north as the present-day Canal Street, and, on the west side, almost connected with what had been a separate village, Greenwich. The Federal Government had moved to Philadelphia in 1790, and on to Washington, D.C. in 1800. Federal Hall, as it was still called, was no longer big enough to serve the city government's needs, and construction of a larger city hall—the present City Hall in City Hall Park—began.

By 1812, when the new building was finished, old Federal Hall was crumbling, and it was sold for salvage. (No one thought that it ought to have been restored, brick by brick; but until recently, New Yorkers have been too much concerned with today and tomorrow to pay appropriate attention to their great historic places.) The handsome U.S. Customs building, which now occupies the Federal Hall site, was completed in 1842. It is a fine example of the Greek revival period in American architecture. The eight Doric columns at each end of the building, and the low, triangular pediment, recall the Parthenon, the temple to the goddess Athena on the Acropolis in Athens. In 1862, the Customs House was converted into a branch of the Independent Treasury System—the most important of six subtreasuries because it was the repository for 70 percent of the Federal Government's revenues. After 1920, when the Independent Treasury System was discarded, several governmental organizations used the building. The wide bank of steps on the Wall Street side has always been a favorite place for public rallies, political oratory, war-bond sales, and patriotic observances. (Those steps, dominated by the statue of Washington, must be among the most photographed stairs in the world.)

In 1939, the building and the land was designated a national historic site. In 1955, it was established as a national memorial—the Federal Hall National Memorial, administered by the National Park Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior. There is something at once bold and dignified in that stately facade, and the great rotunda within. Perhaps the old Customs House is a bit too solemn, considering the irreverence, rebelliousness, and passions of the men who made history at this place. And yet, boldness and dignity are eminently fitting—for those men were indubitably brave and earnest.

— Bruce Bliven, Jr.

How to Reach the Site

Federal Hall is at the corner of Wall and Nassau streets, just off Broadway. It is within convenient walking distance of South Ferry, the landing place for ferries from Staten Island, Governor's Island, and the Statue of Liberty. *By subway*, take the Lexington Avenue number 4 or 5 to Wall St.; the R to Rector St.; the M or J to Broad St.; the 7th Ave. Number 2 or 3 to Wall St.; or the 8th Ave. A or E to Fulton St. *By bus*, take the 2nd Ave. M 15 bus to Wall St. Or the M 1 or 6 South Ferry bus to Broadway and Wall. Various exhibits in the building depict the part this site played in the history of our nation.

Federal Hall National Memorial is a unit of the National Park System, which consists of more than 370 parks representing important examples of our nation's natural and cultural heritage. For more information, write the Superintendent, 26 Wall Street, New York, NY 10005, or call (212) 825-6990.

Five other areas of the National Park System are also in New York City:

Castle Clinton National Monument, in Battery Park at the lower end of Broadway.
Statue of Liberty National Monument, on Liberty Island in New York Harbor.
General Grant National Memorial, in Riverside Park at West 122nd Street.
Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace National Historic Site, at 28 East 20th Street.
Hamilton Grange National Memorial, on Convent Avenue between 141st and 142nd streets.

National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior

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