



## An Interview with Jason Ross: The Bill of Rights

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Michael F. Shaughnessy  
Eastern New Mexico University  
Portales, New Mexico



### 1) Dec 15 is known as “Bill of Rights Day “. When did this celebration come about?

Bill of Rights Day became a federal observance in 1941 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. 1941 marked the 150th anniversary of the ratification of those first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution, amendments that spelled out our freedoms as well as our rights.

### 2) Now, for historians, who exactly wrote the Bill of Rights or are they a “work in progress”?

There is no single author of the Bill of Rights. Perhaps the best way to approach the question is to think of James Madison as the “editor” of the Bill of Rights. When the Constitution was sent to the states to be ratified, delegates from nine state conventions drafted lists of rights they thought should be added to the Constitution. These proposed rights were not invented by those responsible for ratifying the Constitution, but were themselves compiled from key documents from the English tradition of liberty including Magna Carta, the English Bill of Rights, and various colonial framing documents, among others. Madison did the difficult work of sorting through this list of rights – some of which had been claimed by Englishmen for over 500 years – to settle on a list that clearly and powerfully communicated the American commitment to individual liberty.

### 3) Most students and historians know about the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution- but how does the Bill of Rights fit in to this triumvirate of documents?

In a sense, the Bill of Rights is the citizens' Constitution. Few of us will ever have positions of power in the national government created by the Constitution, so the structure and provisions of the Constitution – as important as they are – may seem hard for citizens to embrace. But every day, every citizen enjoys the protections of the Bill of Rights – when we speak our minds, exercise our faiths, or take comfort in the sanctity of our homes.

We can see how important these protections of individual liberty have been to Americans when we look at the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration listed a series of complaints that the English Crown has denied their rights, and concluded from this list of grievances that the king was “a tyrant... unfit to be the ruler of a free people.” American citizens insisted that many of the rights they accused the King of denying them must be guaranteed by a Bill of Rights.

### 4) Why does the average citizen need to know about the Bill of Rights?

Citizens should know about the Bill of Rights because our liberties depend on it. If citizens don't learn about the Bill of Rights, we will never know when rights that previous generations of Americans had enjoyed are being threatened. Even worse, if citizens don't learn about the Bill of Rights, they may support policies that threaten rights that previous generations of Americans had enjoyed.

### 5) Are there any particularly good books that you would recommend for social studies teachers?

The Bill of Rights Institute publishes two curriculum supplements that give social studies teachers engaging and easy to use lessons on the Bill of Rights. “The Bill of Rights and You: Rights and Responsibilities” and “The Bill of Rights for Real Life”. Both titles contain 21 lessons covering the whole range of liberties protected by the Bill of Rights. “The Bill of Rights and You” is designed for an advanced high school audience; “The Bill of Rights for Real Life” is designed for a younger high school or a middle school audience.

**6) As I recall, it was James Madison who first introduced the proposed Bill of Rights in the House of Representatives on June 8, 1789. How long before they were entirely ratified?**

James Madison proposed the Bill of Rights on June 8, 1789, and Congress approved the amendments on September 25, 1789. The state of Virginia was the eleventh state – and the final state necessary – to ratify the Bill of Rights, on December 15, 1791.

**7) And now on to Dec 15, 1791, Virginia was the first state to ratify the Bill of Rights and as I understand, 10 of the 12 proposed amendments became part of our Constitution. What were the two that were not approved, and what is your understanding as to why?**

The first of twelve proposed amendments dealt with the size of representative districts. This failed to win the approval of enough states.

The second proposed amendment prevented Congress from raising its own salary within a term. This amendment was ratified as the 27<sup>th</sup> Amendment on May 7, 1992.

**😊 Do you have a web site where teachers can get more information and learn more about the Bill of Rights and the ramifications and repercussions of the Bill of Rights?**

Teachers can visit our new site focused on the Bill of Rights, [www.BillofRightsDay.com](http://www.BillofRightsDay.com) which is focused on the text of the first 10 Amendments, landmark Supreme Court cases and decisions based on those Amendments, and various games and resources for students and educators.

**9) What have I neglected to ask?**

What else does the Bill of Rights Institute do?

The Bill of Rights Institute focuses on providing top-quality educational curricula and seminars, focused on the Founding documents, to teachers and students across America. The mission of the Bill of Rights Institute is to educate young people about the words and ideas of America's Founders, the liberties guaranteed in our Founding documents, and how our Founding principles continue to affect and shape a free society.

**Jason Ross** is Vice President of Education Programs regarding the Bill of Rights Day. More Information can be found at [www.BillofRightsDay.com](http://www.BillofRightsDay.com)