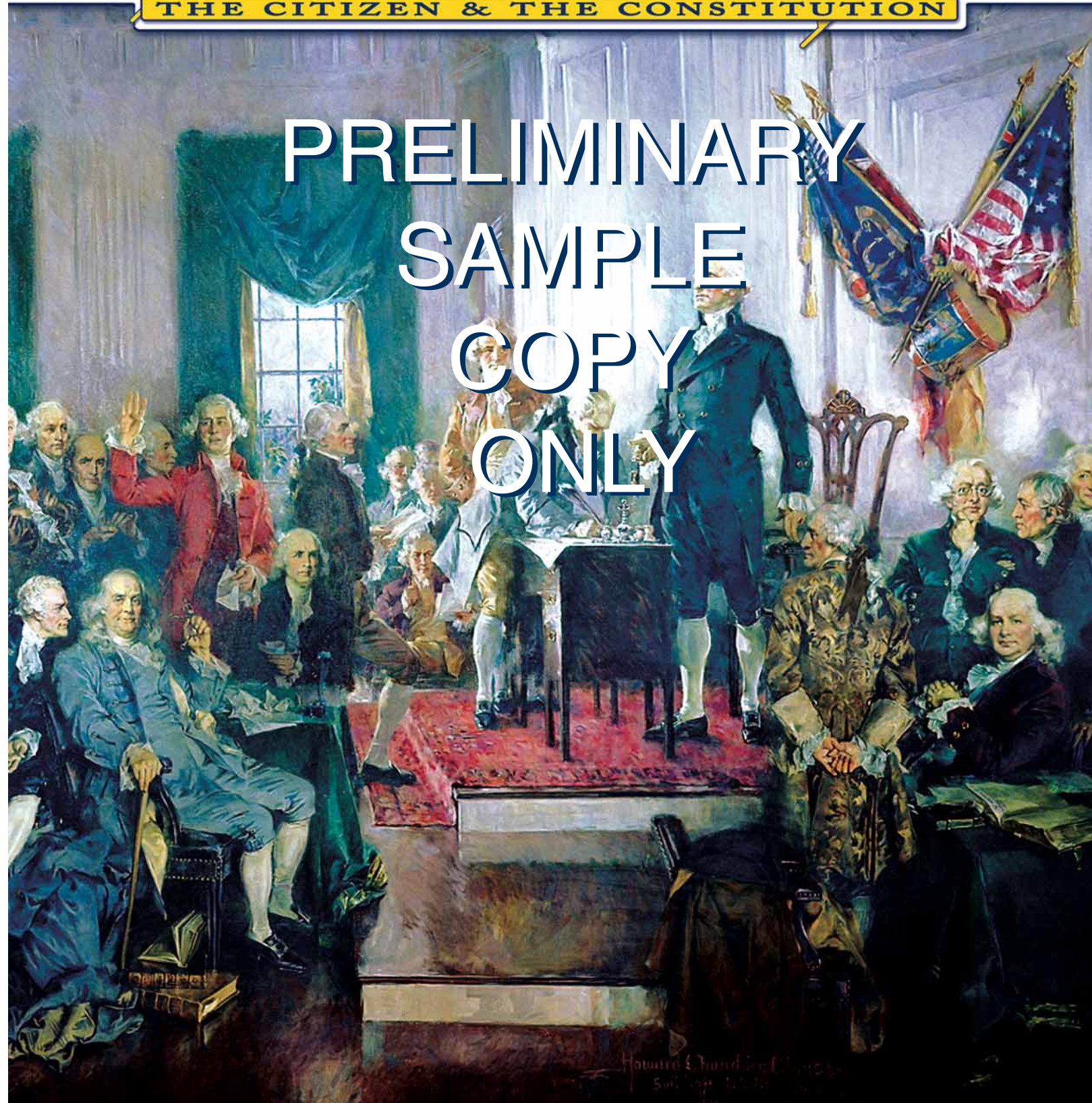


We the People

THE CITIZEN & THE CONSTITUTION

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We the People

THE CITIZEN & THE CONSTITUTION



HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL



CENTER FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

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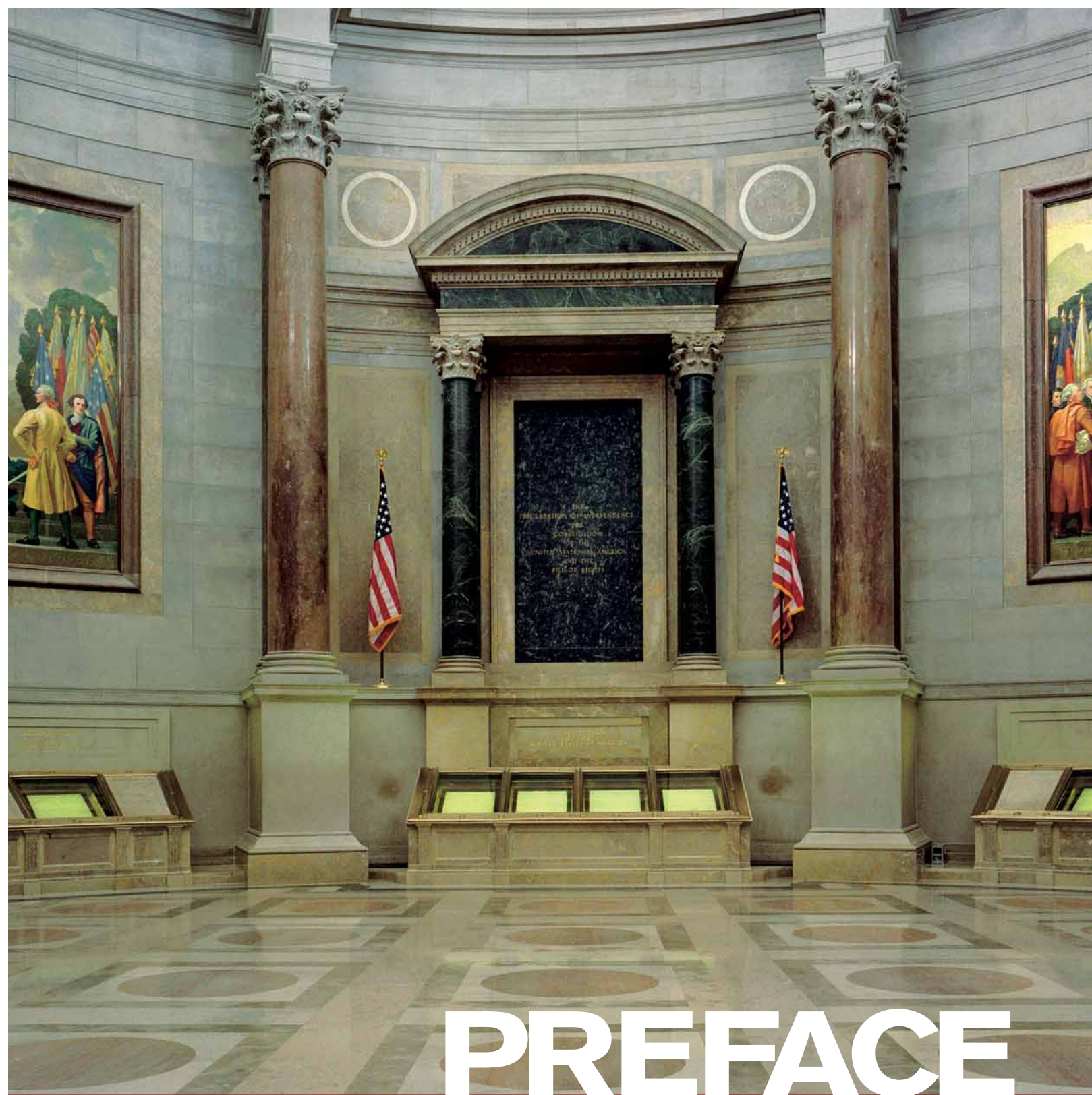
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PREFACE

Each year thousands of people visit our nation's capital, Washington, D.C. They come as individuals, in families, and in school groups. Most are American citizens. Some are citizens of other countries. Among the most popular attractions for these visitors is a massive granite and limestone building located on Pennsylvania and Constitution Avenues, about halfway between the White House at one end of Pennsylvania Avenue and the U.S. Capitol at the other end. This stately neoclassical building is the National Archives.

AMERICA

The main entrance to the National Archives is on Constitution Avenue. Visitors climb a broad flight of stairs, flanked by statues representing “Heritage” and “Guardianship.” They pass through a tall colonnade and then through the entrance itself, which is guarded by one of the largest pair of bronze doors in the world. Each door stands slightly more than thirty-eight feet high, spans almost ten feet in width, is eleven inches thick, and weighs six and a half tons. Continuing through a foyer, visitors reach the most important room in the Archives: the Rotunda. Except on the most crowded days the peacefulness of this room contrasts sharply with the harsh daylight and traffic noise of the street outside. It is a place that commands silence and respect.

Along the wall opposite the Rotunda’s entrance is a set of bronze, marble, and glass display cases. The contents of these secure cases are preserved in inert helium gas. Each evening after the Archives closes its doors to the public, the contents of these cases are lowered by a hydraulic lift into a vault below. Every morning the contents are raised once again for public view.

The objects of all this care and attention are three documents. They are old. The parchment has been stained and frayed by the ages. The ink has faded. But the scars of time cannot diminish their importance. These three documents are our nation’s charters: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States of America, and the Bill of Rights.

Many places and place names in our land have a special meaning to Americans: Plymouth Rock ... Valley Forge ... Independence Hall ... Gettysburg ... the Black Hills ... Selma ... Cape Canaveral. But if there were one place especially significant to all Americans, perhaps it would be here, in this room, in this building, the National Archives. Enshrined in these cases are not merely three important documents but also the essence of what America is all about, of what it means to be an American.

In these documents we find what defines us as a nation. We are not defined by religion, race, ethnicity, language, or national origin. We are defined by common commitments to the ideals contained in these documents. We are held together by our shared belief in values such as liberty, equality, and justice.

Our history has been a great adventure in ideas. This textbook will introduce you to that adventure. The individuals who founded this country believed in the importance and the power of ideas to change people’s lives.

You will learn where the ideas about liberty, equality, and justice come from and what they meant to the nation’s Founders and to the Framers of our Constitution. You will learn about the basic principles of government intended to protect each individual’s right to the enjoyment of those ideas. You will learn what it means to be a citizen of a country committed to them.

The American historian Richard Hofstadter observed that America is the only nation that began in perfection and aspired to progress. The ideas on which America was founded may have been perfect, but we as a people have ever fallen short of perfection in realizing them. Our history is the story of a nation attempting to realize more perfectly the ideals on which it was founded. In a sense, the pursuit of those ideals is never ending. Each generation, in its own way, has sought to live up to the promise of the nation’s founding, to realize for the future the perfection of the past. Eventually it will be your quest, as the rising generation of American citizens. You also will strive, in the words of poet Langston Hughes, to “let America be America again/The land that never has been yet.”