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In the spring of 1789 the newly elected members of the First Federal Congress began to straggle into New York City. In September 1788 the Confederation Congress had adopted a resolution that the new Congress should meet in New York City on 4 March 1789. Although the new Congress was scheduled to convene on 3 March 1789, on that date only eight senators and thirteen representatives reported to Federal Hall. Still needed were four senators and seventeen representatives. Delayed by muddy roads, spring rains, and the lackadaisical precedent set by the Confederation Congress, members of the House failed to reach a quorum of thirty until April 1. (The significance of the date was not lost on some members.) The Senate achieved a quorum of twelve members on April 6.

In anticipation of the arrival of Congress, New York’s city fathers had embarked on a frantic building program to remodel Federal Hall as a meeting place for Congress, and construction had already begun on a new residence for the president. New buildings were being erected all over the city, sidewalks were being put down, and lighting was being installed. The city seemed constantly under construction. The city’s efforts made little impression on its new residents. To some they were a devious attempt to undermine another location’s attempt to acquire the new nation’s capital. Perennially caustic William Maclay of Pennsylvania, a leading proponent of
Philadelphia as the future site for the capital, found the construction on Federal Hall “an attempt to keep Us here, with the Jimcrackery and Gingerbread of an old building now Vamped up. If they succeed in this, next thing, I expect, will be Whistle and Bells for Us” (15:78). Many, if not most, of the congressmen found the city uninviting, from its air, to its accommodations, to its morality, and references abound to the members’ distaste for life in New York. Shortly after his arrival Elias Boudinot wrote his wife that he had arrived “safe in this dirty City—The difference of the wholesome Country Air, from the Stench of the filthy Streets was so apparent, as to effect our smelling Faculties greatly.” Maclay called it “this vile place.” “It will,” Boudinot later warned his wife, “be very expensive indeed and great dissipation will take place” (15:557–58, 15:274–75, 15:183–84). Fisher Ames of Massachusetts complained that “While I am shut up here in this pigsty, smelling the perfumes from wharves, and the raking of gutters, I long for the aid & company of Springfield.” Few members brought their families (largely because of the expense of living in the city; most obtained lodgings in the city’s fewer than two dozen boarding houses). As their letters show, they found them expensive, uncomfortable, and lonely. Often they complained that the high costs of living in the city bit deeply into their finances, especially since most were compelled to neglect affairs at home. Those congressmen whose families accompanied them usually rented houses and found the city highly expensive and morally bankrupt.

The weather pleased no one. George Thatcher complained to his wife in May that “we have not had a warm spring-like day since march . . . I have no fire in my chamber and it is too cold to write without one” (15:555). A rainy, chilly spring morphed into a summer heat wave that closed theaters, churches, and other places of assembly. New York was experiencing one of the hottest summers on record. The bitter comments during the debates over amendments in August were occasionally attributed to New York’s sizzling weather. According to William Smith of Maryland “very high words passed in the house on this occasion, & what nearly Amounted to direct challenges, the weather was excessive hot, & the blood warm. On the change in the Air the heat of debate Subsided, & all are now in good humor” (16:1375–76). Health problems were blamed on the city. In June George Clymer wrote that “for the first month I was not in good health, from the extreme badness and unwholesomeness of the air.” In mid-July he noted that “the thermometer has daily stood from 88 to 91 the effect of which with the fumes of a non-elastic air has been fatal to many people” (16:756, 1344). Maclay com-
explained, “I will not be perfectly contented while Congress remains in this place, and I have never had a series of worse health than since I came here. . . . One of my knees is now swelled a third above the common size with the Rheumatism, a disorder for which, I am told, this place is famous” (15:216–17). Most members found the citizens of New York little more attractive than their city, and certainly many would have agreed with John Adams’s judgment that New Yorkers “talk very loud, very fast, and altogether.” By the time the First Congress moved to Philadelphia in 1790, however, parties, balls, trips to the theater, and other of the city’s amenities had won over many of the most ardent critics in the Congress.

With publication of the official records and debates completed in the first fourteen volumes of The Documentary History of the First Federal Congress, the editors have turned to the final series—the publication of letters concerning the activities that surrounded the first Congress. The three current volumes cover Congress’s first session, March to November 1789. From the more than 13,000 documents that have been collected for this series, letters have been chosen for publication that throw light on the working of both houses, that describe the social and political views of the members, incoming letters that express cogent views and inform the members of the opinions and expectations of their constituents, and newspaper items written to or by members that reveal new information about the activities of Congress. The editors do not necessarily print each letter in full, concentrating rather on those portions of letters relevant to Congress. Some letters are printed in their entirety, some have pertinent parts extracted, and others are simply listed. Letters do not always confine themselves strictly to matters dealing with Congress. Correspondence from outside observers, such as the Comte de Moustier’s perceptive description of President Washington’s inauguration, fill in the picture of life in New York in the early days of the new government (15:403–6). The current three volumes have gone beyond their mission, covering not only the politics of the new Congress’s first session, but presenting an unparalleled glimpse of the institutional and political life of the new nation and of its social milieu as well. Personal letters are, of course, the most revealing, but the volumes also include the circular letters to constituents that played to a wider audience, explaining the incumbent’s political positions and seeking local support.

The project’s search for pertinent documents is more than impressive. Beginning in the early 1950s the search for documents to be included in the Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights
also incorporated a search for documents relating to the First Federal Congress, although these were narrowly defined as documents pertaining only to political matters. A number of later searches widened the scope to include documents relating to the social and at least some personal aspects of the members' correspondence. The most recent search, beginning in 1998 and still continuing, has unearthed an additional twenty-five hundred documents, many of them presenting the new information illuminating the social life of the First Federal Congress that so enriches these volumes.

Unlike the editors of the papers of individuals, who are compelled in the interests of inclusiveness to deal with what critics of editorial projects like to term "laundry lists," the editors of the Correspondence were at liberty to pick the cream of the correspondence. It shows. These are not just volumes to use for research but to read for pleasure as well. The interest level of the correspondence remains consistently high.

Opinions as to the quality of the members of the new Congress varied. Washington had observed on surveying the names of the candidates elected to the new Congress that it "will not be inferior to any Assembly in the world." Many members had served in the Continental and Confederation congresses and performed official capacities on the state level. Fisher Ames pointed out that the House of Representatives was "composed of sober, solid, old-charter folk. . . . They have been in government before, and they are not disposed to embarrass business. . . . There are few shining geniuses; there are many who have experience, the virtues of the heart, and the habits of business" (15:196–97). The members of the House were predominantly Federalist, and by the time all of the states had ratified the Constitution (August 1790), only twelve of sixty-five representatives and three of twenty-six senators were Antifederalists. The Federalists had proved their skill during the ratification process; it stood them in good stead in the First Congress, although Antifederalists of both the House and Senate had initially proved less antagonistic to the new government than their supporters had hoped. In mid-April 1789, Richard Bland Lee wrote that "general harmony as yet prevails in our Councils. And I flatter myself that liberality will mark all our measures" (15:259). But it was early, and Lee’s optimism was not to weather even the first session.

The First Congress has been widely regarded as the most important in American history. There is much merit in the view. It went into session facing a plethora of divisive issues. The Federal Convention had deliberately left many of the most important questions facing the young republic to the
new legislature, and the old Congress had bequeathed a multitude of unfinished tasks. Perhaps most importantly, it was left to the new Congress to decide whether the hope of the framers to insinuate a new philosophy of government into the nation's governing body would be realized in the abandonment of personal and regional interests and prejudices in favor of a reasoned support of national ideals. In James Madison's apprehensive opinion, "We are in a wilderness without a single footstep to guide us. It is consequently necessary to explore the way with great labour and caution. Those who follow will have an easier task" (15:953–54). The questions that lay before Congress seemed overwhelming: the creation of the great departments; the settlement of the Revolutionary War debt, which involved dealing with discrimination and the assumption of state debts arising out of the war; the location of the new federal capital; the creation of a new civil service system; the transition from the state governments of the Confederation years to the new and unfamiliar governance of the federal government. Among the greatest challenges were the establishments of a revenue system, a national bank, and a new judicial system. On many levels the members of the First Congress succeeded. Some of its accomplishments were mandated by the Constitution, but others were achieved, after long and increasingly acrimonious debate, through consensus and, more often, through compromise.

Although clearly discernible political party lines did not begin to solidify until the second and third congresses, the Correspondence during the months of Congress's first session gives some indication of the hardening of political divisions into political parties. Looming over the first session was not only the threat of Constitutional amendments but the Federalists' fear of opening the Pandora's box of a second convention. The fear of an overwhelming central government threatening personal liberty and the rights of the states invigorated the opposition. When the question of amendments came up in June 1789 it invoked debate that soon degenerated into acrimony. Oddly enough, the Federalists presented less opposition to amendments than might be expected, although most thought the Constitution itself presented enough protection to civil rights and an additional bill of rights unnecessary. Opposition to voting for a bill of rights came from an unexpected source—a contingent of Antifederalists committed to a new convention who believed such amendments would weaken their position. Equally heated were the debates on the permanent location of the new federal city. After bitter arguments, opponents to a Pennsylvania site managed to have the bill postponed.
to the next session. As Matthew Carey wrote, “Blessed are they that expect nothing, for they shall never be disappointed” (Documentary History of the First Federal Congress, 1:89).

The question of titles for members of the executive branch assumed more attention than it deserved and gave rise to dark suspicions on the part of Antifederalists concerning the aristocratic and even monarchic leanings of the administration. Members like Henry Wynkoop deplored “This fondness for European feathers in some Gentlemen of the Senate” (15:504). In an odd—and hopeless—defense of the expediency of titles, one of the legislature’s few defenders, John Adams, wrote to Benjamin Rush in July 1789 that “there is nothing Strikes and overawes the most abandoned of the Populace so much as Titles. . . . But I must insist that Laws are made and Magistrates appointed on purpose, to create Fear, & Terror in the minds of the vicious, and if Titles will Save you the expence of Gallows, stocks, Whipping Posts, or the pain of employing them, why not use them?” (16:1154-55). Ridicule for the whole affair was fairly bipartisan, and in a lighter moment it was suggested that Adams be voted the title “His Rotundity.” In September when there was some confusion about whether the vice president’s salary was intended to be five or six thousand dollars per annum, Samuel Otis wryly observed that “as they gave him no title they should have comforted him with the other thousand” (17:1589).

The discussion of behind-the-scenes congressional activities is surprisingly frank in the members’ letters—a welcome innovation since the Continental and Confederation congresses had strongly adhered to a closed-door policy. After the Convention much of the populace had more or less adopted a wait-and-see attitude and were inclined to give the new government a chance. The supporters of the Constitution had carried on a skillful propaganda campaign through newspapers and such powerful publications as the Federalist essays. The value of George Washington’s support for the Constitution was beyond calculation. The congressmen’s constituents, hungry for news of the activities of the new government, pleaded for frankness on the part of the representatives. One correspondent wrote John Brown of Kentucky, “Pray, Sir, don’t let your letter contain mere news-paper news—give me something that I could not obtain otherwise” (15:xiv). Members of Congress responded to such requests with alacrity since they often represented large districts and had little opportunity to publicize their positions beyond correspondence with constituents and newspapers. In turn, some of the correspondents promised equal frankness in their reports to members of
Congress, who must have found the information useful, if sometimes disturbing. No matter was too small to escape their attention. Henry Van Schaack of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, promised his congressman, Theodore Sedgwick, that he would “detail to you freely and very sincerely the sentiments and present posture of our public affairs.” The matter he and his friends currently found most disturbing was the Compensation Bill then before the House. “Will the Representatives of the people allow themselves 6 dollars a day for 20 Miles Travel and six dollars a day in session .... Will not this monstrous extravagance be a prelude to pervade every Department in the Government? The President of the Senate five thousand Dollars annually—For what?” (16:962-64). Letters from constituents often indicate a surprising appreciation of the problems facing the new Congress. “... [W]hat are the credit or Interest of Individuals,” one wrote, “compared to the Weighty, important and critical business of forming a Nation; Regulating and adjusting their intricate concerns—a people naturally restive and pevish murmuring and discontented.... I’m happy in thinking your fortitude is great, and your nerves Solid” (15:162).

With the opening of a network of federal positions to service the new government’s functions, members of Congress expected that they would be inundated with requests from office seekers. They were not disappointed. By midsummer hundreds of hopeful applicants crowded the streets of New York seeking support from influential members of Congress. As letters in the Correspondence suggest, they were not shy about approaching their representatives. As is the case with applications for office to the executive, requests for support from members of Congress reveal significant aspects of the social and economic upheaval in the aftermath of the Revolution and of the hopes and aspirations of a wide sample of Americans for the new government.

The editors have been relatively frugal in the annotation of the letters in the series. In the hands of other editors many of the documents might have evoked heavy annotation. The editors of the Correspondence series have wisely practiced restraint, relying instead on the extensive material included at the beginning and the end of the three volumes. As a result many additional letters could be included. And, as compensation, the editors provide a useful “Biographical Gazetteer” at the end of volume 17, identifying “individuals who appear in the first three volumes of the correspondence series either as letter writers, recipients, or persons mentioned with some regularity within the text,” a device they had used with considerable success in the project’s earlier volumes. Occasional explanatory introductory notes also
appear. Editorial methods, criteria for selection, and details of the project’s manuscript search are clearly explained in the introduction, which also includes brief but useful essays on the significance of the letters, the papers of the members, and life in New York. At the end of volume 17 appendices list the residences of members and House and Senate Bills for the first session and give New York City weather charts. One aspect of the Correspondence that must be singled out for special mention is the cumulative index for the three volumes. In its inclusiveness and detail it is more a concordance of the volumes than an index. It is undoubtedly one of the most impressive, if not the best, of any of the current documentary editions and shows how a skillful and imaginative index can be used to supplement and indeed substitute for annotation. As always with this project, the transcription of the documents is impeccable.

It is impossible to overestimate the impact these volumes will have, not only on our knowledge of the new nation’s first legislative body, but upon our understanding of the period itself. The volumes of correspondence of the first session of the First Federal Congress only whet our anticipation for the letters still to come.