

Colonial Origins of the American Constitution

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"Local government in colonial America was the seedbed of American constitutionalism." So begins the introductory essay to this landmark collection of eighty documents created by the American colonists—and not English officials—that are the genesis of American fundamental law and constitutionalism. Most of these documents, commencing with the Agreement of the Settlers at Exeter in New Hampshire, July 5, 1639, and concluding with Joseph Galloway's Plan of Union, 1774—"the immediate precursor to the Articles of Confederation"—have never before been accessible to the general reader or available in a single volume. As Professor Lutz points out, the documents are chosen to make possible "a careful examination of [the American] people's attempt at self-interpretation." All of the principal colonial documents are included, as are all documents attempting to unite the colonies, beginning with the New England Confederation of 1643. Bicameralism, popular sovereignty, the separation of powers, checks and balances, limited government, and religious freedom—in sum, the hallmarks of American constitutionalism—were first presented to the world in these writings.

Donald S. Lutz is Professor of Political Science at the University of Houston.

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