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By **TOM WALKER** | September 16, 2012

Keeping the republic: We are heirs of America's legacy of liberty

On Sept. 17, 1787, the Constitutional Convention ended. The 81-year-old Benjamin Franklin stepped outside what is now known as Independence Hall. There a woman believed to be Eliza Powel asked Franklin what form of government had the framers produced. His famous reply was a simple yet powerful challenge. It is, he said, "... a Republic, if you can keep it."

As America commemorates the 225th anniversary of the United States Constitution on Monday, there are alarming signs we face a growing national historical amnesia that endangers the well-being of America's legacy of liberty and self-government.

The latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (2010) found that 55 percent of America's high school seniors did not meet even a "basic" attainment level in American history. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni found that 81 percent of seniors at our nation's "top 55" colleges received a "D" or "F" on a basic high-school level test on U.S. history. Other credible national studies confirm a troubling historical and civic illiteracy.

Why does this matter?

First, American history is our national memory. History is made of the stories of America's extraordinary quest for liberty. Through history we learn of the founding values—the self-evident truths—found in our Declaration of Independence: that life and liberty are endowments vested in each human being by our Creator. Through history we remember the revolutionary principle that government derives its authority only by the consent of the governed. We discover the men and women in every generation who have championed liberty — from Concord Bridge in 1775 to the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965—and those who have defended it on battlefields by selfless service and sacrifice.

Second, American history and civics forge our national identity. We are a nation

that from its beginning embodied the motto *E Pluribus Unum*—from many, one. America was built by generations of freedom-seekers inspired by the promise of liberty. The Bradley Report on America's Identity Crisis (2008) found that 84 percent of Americans believe in a unique American identity but two-thirds of us worry that our shared American identity is weakening. Though we have deep partisan divides, we recall Washington's farewell admonition to "fellow countrymen" that we proudly share the name "American." That shared identity is a source of national strength in times our country has faced adversity.

Finally, America remains an experiment. When the framers finished the Constitution, they did not know if it would be ratified, and if ratified, they did not know if it would take root as America's great charter of self-government. Franklin said ours is a republic, but added the warning, "... if you can keep it." George Washington asserted the "preservation of the sacred fire of liberty" and the "destiny of the republican model of government" are staked in an "experiment in the hands of the American people." The experiment is never resolved once and for all. These revolutionary principles of liberty and self-government are tested anew in each generation.

National amnesia endangers our country. How devastating it is for an individual to lose one's personal memory. Memory anchors a person's very identity. How far worse it is for a nation to lose its shared memory and identity.

To reclaim our national memory and identity, the American Village Citizenship Trust believes we must renew teaching youth American history and civics. For in the words of Washington, they are the "future guardians of the liberty of this country."

On this Constitution Day, may we remember we are not only heirs of America's legacy of liberty and self-government, we are also its stewards—the "keepers of the Republic."