

THE AMERICAN TRADITION OF
Service

*We are a nation
born out of
service to others.*

The American Revolution created not just a new form of government, but a new idea of citizenship rooted in service, responsibility, and the belief that ordinary people can and should shape the world around them.

Our selfless commitment to service is at the heart of American ideals of **liberty, democracy, and civic duty.**

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION
A FILM BY KEN BURNS, SARAH BOTSTEIN & DAVID SCHMIDT

WETA

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BEYOND

NATIONAL MUSEUM
AND CENTER FOR
SERVICE



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Origins

The early social fabric of America was woven from threads of service by inhabitants of diverse cultures.

Indigenous peoples had long established traditions of service with their own communities and customs.

For European settlers, inspiration to serve came from many sources:

- The challenges of settling a distant land
- Their religious faith
- Philosophical writings
- Science & Enlightenment ideals
- Early governance and state constitutions

Enslaved and free Africans also brought their own traditions of service, carried with them from their homelands and necessitated by their circumstances in America.

The Colonies Unite!

The American colonies joined forces to oppose abuses of the British crown and parliament and found ways to advance their own interests while at the same time **working to serve the greater good of the whole.**

The Challenge

Throughout human history there has always been tension between serving the greater good and choosing self interest.

Could any democratic government survive if individuals and states focused primarily on selfish interests regardless of the consequences for the nation as a whole?

The new United States was able to navigate constantly conflicting visions, and stark disagreements to find balances of power and cooperation in communities, states and a new form of government.



For the Public Good

The new American government immediately put the **ethic of service** into practice.

The actions of the First Congress and President George Washington’s administration—including the passage of the Bill of Rights—were a clear manifestation of their dedication to the common good.

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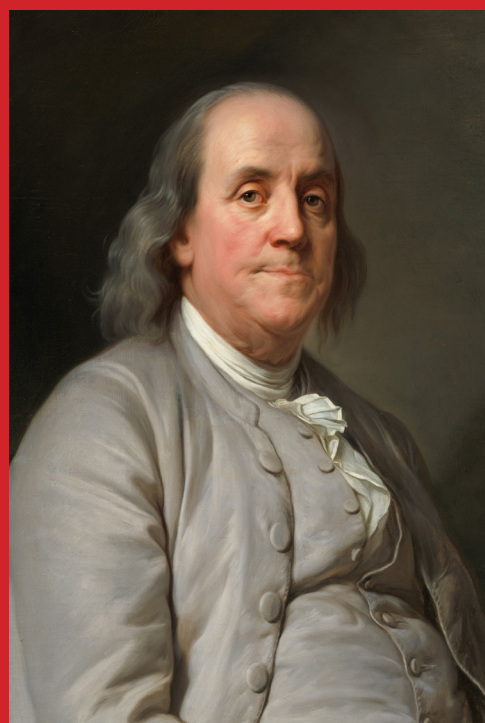
The founding generation of new Americans continued to champion and embody this service ideal.

Among them were:

Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, opposed slavery and advocated for women’s rights, urging the Continental Congress to “Remember the Ladies”.



Benjamin Franklin served through research, inventions, diplomacy, and was the founder of the first formally recognized volunteer fire company.



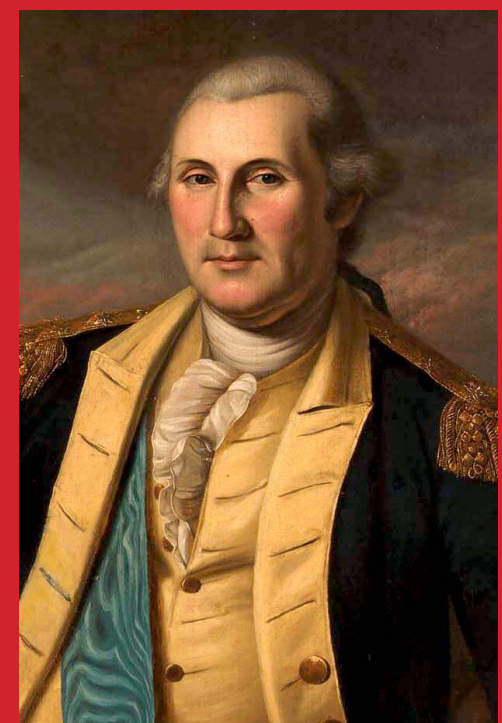
Benjamin Rush, a physician and the first professor of Chemistry in America, advocated for vaccines and used his scientific knowledge as a form of public service.



Elizabeth Freeman (“Mumbet”), in 1781, with the help of Theodore Sedgwick, she drew on founding ideals of liberty and equality to claim her own freedom and expand rights for others.



George Washington is remembered for leading the Continental Army, returning his commission to civil government, presiding over the Constitutional Convention, and voluntarily retiring the Presidency.



The Declaration of Independence

A commitment to put **service over self** is powerfully inscribed in the closing lines of the Declaration of Independence.

Service can be seen as both an early American virtue and a plan of action for creating a new nation with an innovative model of democracy.

“...we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

“we hold these truths...
“to preserve these rights...
governments are created.”

“we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor”

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.— That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such Principles and organizing its Powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.— Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies, until now; but it is time, that they should declare their independence of Great Britain, that they may have a chance of amending their Constitutions and organizing their Legislatures in such a manner as to secure them lasting Peace, Safety, and Justice. We therefore the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for their support, do hereby declare, that these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connections between them and the State of Great Britain, are and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

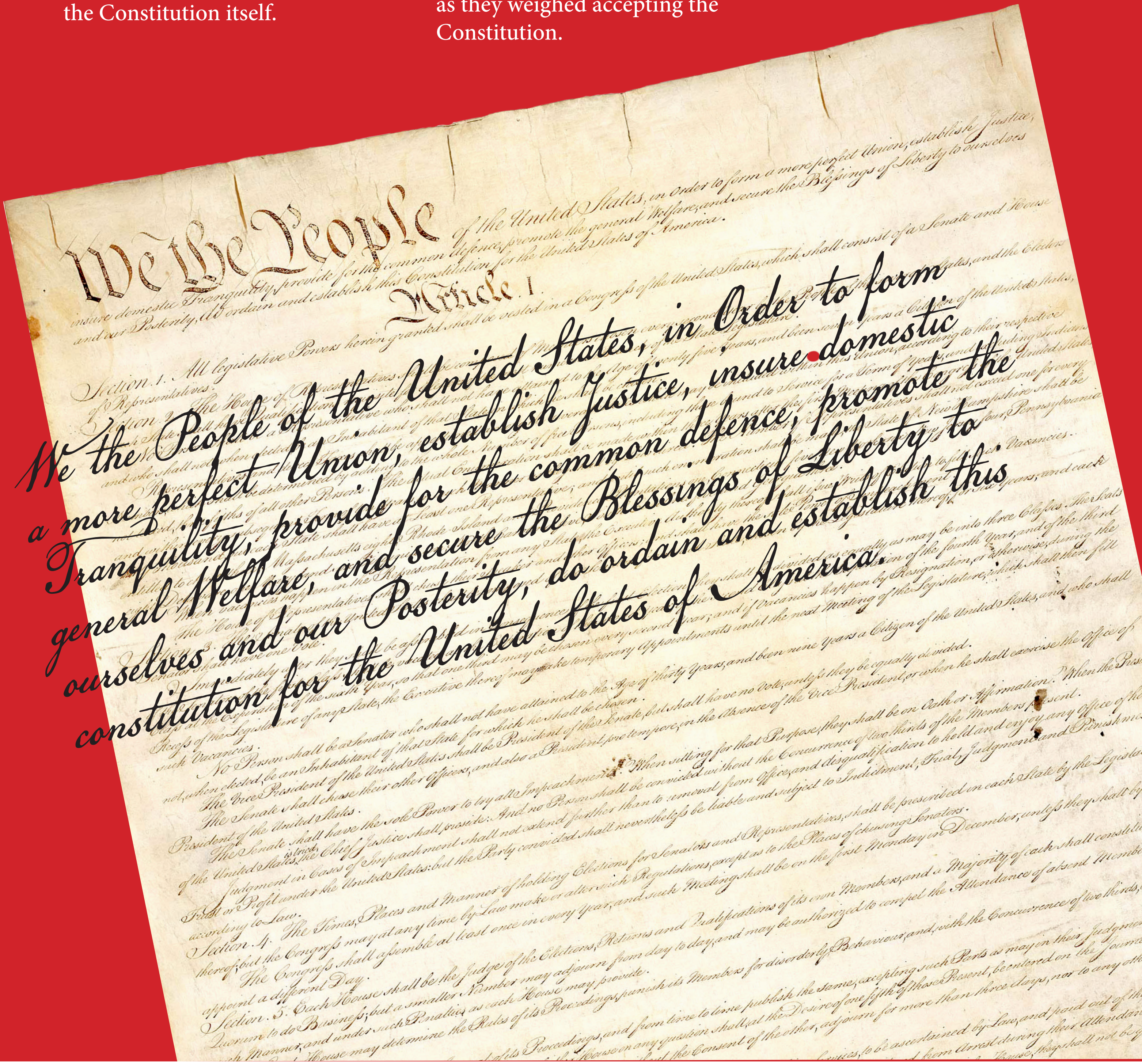
John Hancock
Samuel Adams
John Adams
Robert R. Livingston
George Washington
John Jay
Benjamin Franklin
Thomas Jefferson
Richard Henry Lee
George Mason
Patrick Henry
James Wilson
Gouverneur Morris
George Clinton
John Mifflin
Thomas Mifflin
George Ross
Cassius M. M. Mason
George Wythe
Richard Stockton
John Witherspoon
Francis Pickens
John Hart
Josiah Bartlett
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The Constitution of the United States

The spirit of service is at the heart of the US Constitution.

The document opens with the reasons and motives for creating the Constitution itself.

Visions of human connection, mutual support and helping others are revealed as shared values in the Federalist Papers and the debates of the states as they weighed accepting the Constitution.



The Declaration of Independence boldly declared “all men are created equal”, and closed with perhaps the most powerful commitment to service ever written.

In practice many people in the new nation including women, enslaved and free African Americans, Indigenous peoples and others were not initially treated as equals.

Those who were excluded, nevertheless, served the new nation in vital ways. Without the service of **All The People**, The Revolution and the “American Experiment” would never have succeeded. As **We The People** gradually began to include ALL the people, our nation grew stronger from everyone’s service.



AMERICAN SERVICE FOR THE FUTURE

Our nation's past and future is the story of service in support of democracy.

*"We the People"
isn't just rhetoric-
it is an invitation
for every citizen to
take part in building
and sustaining a
just society.*

The founders' inclusion of the **process to amend** provided an essential tool for future generations to challenge the limits of the founding documents, ensuring the continuous, and often difficult, expansion of the American narrative toward including **ALL PEOPLE**.

The "American Experiment"—rapidly became a revolutionary model for self governance across the world. The lasting legacy of the American idea is the enduring core value of **service to others that drives the American people** and the nation itself.

SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS CARRY THE TRADITION OF SERVICE INTO THE FUTURE.

American values of service remain strong today and visions for the future inspire more Americans to expand their service to the nation while honoring our traditions.

The history of service organizations like Rotary, Peace Corps, Boys & Girls Clubs and CARE embody our modern and future passions for expanding the nation's potential while supporting our traditional ideals of liberty, democracy, and civic duty.

Harriet Tubman put the nation's founding ideals into practice by leading others to freedom at great personal risk. Photo courtesy of Library of Congress



Suffragist Margaret Foley distributing the *Woman's Journal and Suffrage News*.



1920 - With the flu spreading rapidly through the National Capital, the Red Cross Ambulance Corps is stretched to its limit. New recruits are needed behind the wheel to help battle the crisis.



Volunteer firemen practicing during an air raid drill in Lititz, Pennsylvania, 1942.



Austria 1947, Little Lubka Madenova was the lucky recipient of a CARE food package from the American Silent Guest Committee. It was a heaven-sent gift for the child whose mother is desperately ill and whose father was killed during the war.
Used with permission/CARE



"Every CARE package is a personal contribution to the world peace our nation seeks. It expresses America's concern and friendship in a language all peoples understand."

-President John F. Kennedy, 1962

Bernie Wong, founder of Chinese American Service League (CASL), engages with students in Chicago's Chinatown, reflecting her commitment to empowering immigrant families through education and community services.
Photo courtesy of Peace Corps Media Library



Teri Lutz, Peace Corps volunteer from Colorado, teaches English at the girls high school in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.
Photo courtesy of Peace Corps Media Library



Ethel Washington and Louise Beleno, senior aide, packing surgical kits as part of work of volunteer nurses aide class, 1943.



A volunteer for the Meals on Wheels program prepares to make deliveries, 1972. Photo courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration



1962, President John F. Kennedy greets Peace Corps volunteers on the White House South front lawn.



Tribal Civilian Community Corp (TCCC) and Texas Youth Conservation Corps help local residents clean up after storms and flooding.



Peace Corps Volunteer teaches an English class at Kisumu Technical School in Kenya, 1979.



THE AMERICAN SPIRIT OF SERVICE IS ACTIVE AND INSPIRING

Boys & Girls Club Photo courtesy of Mark Skalny



NASA Astronaut Cady Coleman and 4-H member Eva planting lettuce at a USDA event in Washington, DC. Photo courtesy of USDA



Habitat for Humanity, AmeriCorps NCC and Starbucks corporate volunteers build a bunkhouse for volunteers assisting in recovery efforts, Gulfport, Mississippi, 2006. Photo courtesy of George Armstrong/FEMA



HOOPA Tribal Civilian Community Corps (TCCC) and AmeriCorps Members from Minnesota and St. Louis meet in Hoboken, N.J. to receive their assignments for outreach to find Hurricane Sandy survivors who need assistance.



Volunteers at the Greenville Noon Rotary Splash for Trash waterway cleanup event



Installing a trash guard to reduce marine debris, in Ellenton, FL. with the Tampa Bay Estuary Program.



ALL AMERICANS CAN PARTICIPATE IN SERVICE TO OTHERS.

33% of seniors regularly volunteer in their communities.



Children take part in a hands-on cooking and nutrition class in Kerrville, Texas with World Central Kitchen as part of the broader flood-relief efforts in 2025. Photo courtesy of World Central Kitchen



Over **75.7** million Americans formally volunteer each year and **137.5** million informally contribute to their communities.

-The Census Bureau and AmeriCorps

Rescue officers ceasing the fire during the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, New York City. Photo courtesy of Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress



Volunteers assist with debris cleanup in Cameron, LA following Hurricane Rita



THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO CARRY SERVICE INTO THE FUTURE.

Peace Corps Volunteer cultivates a field with women from her village in Botswana



Joshua Tree National Park search and rescue team training



Volunteers of America, bell ringer, New York



The City of Greenville, NC celebrating Arbor Day as a Tree City USA Community

