THE FIELD GUIDE *for the* SEMIQUINCENTENNIAL

MAKING HISTORY AT 250

AASLH AMERICAN ASSOCIATION *for* STATE *and* LOCAL HISTORY

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AASLH AMERICAN ASSOCIATION *for* STATE *and* LOCAL HISTORY

The American Association for State and Local History is a national professional association dedicated to helping the history community thrive. For the better part of a century, AASLH has provided leadership and resources to its members who preserve and interpret history to make the past more meaningful to all people.

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THEMES
for the
250TH COMMEMORATION:

Unfinished Revolutions

Power of Place

We the People

American Experiment

Doing History

A Vision for the Semiquincentennial

BY JOHN R. DICHTL
President & CEO, AASLH

The people, events, and ideas of the Revolutionary era profoundly changed the world. In the 250 years since, we have often struggled to live up to the lofty ideals expressed in our founding documents. Between now and 2026, the United States will prepare to address this challenge as we plan for the Semiquincentennial anniversary of our Declaration of Independence. This moment is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to renew public engagement with history. It is a chance for Americans to learn about and reflect upon the full sweep of our nation's past, celebrating examples of liberty, courage, and sacrifice while reckoning with moments of injustice, racism, and violence. The occasion calls on us to use knowledge of our country's past—beginning millennia before 1776 and continuing to the present—to build a stronger future.

We must make sure that Americans of all ages and backgrounds and in all places see themselves in history.

When we commemorate the Semiquincentennial, we must make sure that Americans of all ages and backgrounds and in all places see themselves in history, appreciate its relevance, and understand how the diverse people of the past all contributed to the American story of liberty and prosperity. The Semiquincentennial can help us to show audiences not just that history matters, but that *their history* matters. Through the stories we share, this anniversary can encourage patriotism and pride in American resilience while also fostering critical awareness of our faults, past and present. This commemoration is a chance to deepen people's appreciation for history, broaden their perspectives on who and what counts in the American story, and remind them of this nation's unique contributions to the world.

We should approach the 250th anniversary with a shared commitment to the common cause of an inclusive, democratic society.

The Semiquincentennial will be whatever we decide it should be, and so over the next five years, we—scholars and educators, historians and museum professionals, and communities everywhere—must think carefully and critically about how we commemorate our nation's history. As history professionals and citizens, we should approach 250th anniversary activities with a spirit of empathy and humility; with love of country and a desire to rekindle civic friendships; with respect for historical expertise and the perspectives of our fellow community members; with a forthright recognition of our obligations to our fellow citizens; and with a shared commitment to the common cause of an inclusive, democratic society.

It is in that spirit that I am proud to introduce ***Making History at 250: The Field Guide for the Commemoration***. In the pages that follow, you'll find guiding themes, ideas, goals, and information to help our field prepare for the 250th. At the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), we hope the Semiquincentennial will transform and strengthen the history community, helping us create stronger programs, serve new audiences, and attract new sources of public and private funding. We hope it puts history and history organizations at the center of important conversations in their communities, allowing meaningful dialogue, informed debate, and mutual understanding to replace rancorous partisan conflict. We hope it will enable our diverse and dynamic field to continue to adapt and grow, and to prove that history organizations and history professionals are invaluable to American society. We hope you will join us in making history.

Sincerely,

250 Years and Counting

BY SARA CURETON
Executive Director, New Jersey Historical Commission
Chair, AASLH 250th Anniversary Coordinating Committee

Recently I met with several colleagues to develop a presentation on marking anniversaries. After realizing that I was the oldest member of the group and the only one around for the Bicentennial of the American Revolution in 1976, I reflected on the meaning of that anniversary for me. I was fascinated by it. I looked forward to each of the "Bicentennial Minutes," a series of television segments that aired from 1974 to 1976, and I longed to visit historic Philadelphia and Boston. I aspired to one day take part in preserving the objects and places that witnessed the dramatic events that led to the founding of the United States. The lessons I took away from that anniversary were that history is endlessly interesting and impactful; that preserving historical collections is a worthy cause; and that research that enables all to understand the past more fully and accurately is essential. I am not sure that these are the lessons that Bicentennial planners hoped I would learn, but that's the thing about commemorations: everyone experiences them differently.

The relationship between history, memory, and memorialization has been a lively field of inquiry for scholars for some time. My personal experience is just one small example of the impact of commemoration. But there can be no doubt that this is powerful stuff. What we choose to remember, and how we remember it can influence the lives of individuals and communities. The Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia featured American innovation and technology while promoting patriotism and unity just eleven years after the end of the Civil War. The installations and entertainments also reflected prevalent nativist, racist, and sexist attitudes toward immigrants, African Americans, Native Americans, and women. The Bicentennial of 1976 featured patriotism and nostalgia, serving as an antidote for some to the bitter divisions created by the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. It also inspired the preservation of many historic sites and encouraged the professionalization of the field of public history. What will be the impact of what we commemorate for the 250th?

What we choose to remember, and how we remember it can influence the lives of individuals and communities.

Reflecting on the guiding themes and ideas that AASLH presents in this ***Field Guide,*** and on the planning underway at the state level, it seems clear that we are collectively focused on the stories that we tell, who gets to tell them, and who gets to hear them. Whose stories are already familiar? Whose have been left out? How can we explore the multiple perspectives present at any moment in time? How can we illuminate the process of "doing history," and make clear the choices that are inevitably made when interpreting the past? And how can we have respectful dialogue around the stories that are inspiring and those that are repellent? If we emerge from this anniversary with a broader awareness of the complexity of our history, and a renewed commitment to civil discourse about the most contentious issues of the past and present, what a legacy that will be. We might even use this moment to find common ground and challenge the polarization that we face today.

The 250th offers history organizations the opportunity to enhance the impact and relevance they have in their communities.

In New Jersey we are conducting listening sessions with many different communities around the state as part of our preparations for the 250th. Among the many things we have learned from these sessions is the importance of local history and historic sites to residents and neighbors. While national attention may be focused on sites directly related to the events of the American Revolution, we've been reminded that our fellow citizens are often much more interested in the historic sites in their hometowns. Communities both old and new described the deep meanings people ascribe to where they live, reflecting on the power of memories and shared experiences as they relate to place.

This anniversary and this ***Field Guide*** offer state and local history organizations the opportunity to enhance the impact and relevance they have in their own communities and use the 250th to foster dialogue and civic engagement. So good luck to us all as we plan for a 250th commemoration that will realize its enormous potential. This is an opportunity that none of us can afford to miss.

USING THE
Making History at 250 Field Guide

In this guide, you'll find several themes to encourage inclusive, relevant histories and provide cohesiveness to a multi-faceted, grassroots commemoration. Developed with direction from a diverse panel of more than twenty-five historians and museum professionals from across the United States, each of these guiding themes can be used to explore our nation's founding and the legacy of the Revolution, helping us confront hard truths about the shortcomings of our experiment in liberty and equality, while celebrating the vital principles of participatory government and constitutional rights. What is more, the themes can encourage a deep engagement with the entirety of our past, one full of moments that both inspire and challenge us. Any one of these themes can spark exhibits, community conversations, films, lesson plans, books, podcasts, and a wide range of other programs and events. We hope the themes will help create a more widely-shared story about our nation's history, one that acknowledges its many tensions and ambiguities and that informs our present and future.

The vision and themes in this guide align well with the plans laid out by other national entities shaping 250th anniversary planning. The U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission has put forward broad goals for the 250th to educate, engage, and unite all people in the United States through a broad telling of United States history. Our funder for this project, the National Endowment for the Humanities, launched a special initiative, "'A More Perfect Union': America at 250," which recognizes that every generation of Americans is tasked with improving this nation "rooted in the ideal of human equality." The ideas in this ***Field Guide*** fit neatly with these aspirations and will lend cohesiveness to a decentralized national commemoration. By using it to guide your work, you will be connected with thousands of other museums, historical societies, history departments, and classrooms across the country.

The themes can encourage a deep engagement with the entirety of our past, one full of moments that both inspire and challenge us.

We hope this guide will help you envision the kind of transformative impact this anniversary can have on our field and on the nation.

Finally, please use this ***Field Guide*** as a source of inspiration as you consider if and how your institution and community will participate in the 250th anniversary commemoration. We believe the ideas within this guide can benefit all history organizations—those already preparing for the 250th and those still unsure if there's a place for them in the Semiquincentennial commemoration. In order to fulfill the potential of America 250, every history organization in the United States should participate; the guide can serve as a starting point for institutions unsure where to begin. As we move toward 2026, there is power in working together and using similar words in planning our commemorative activities. This guide provides our field a common vocabulary for organizing our conversations about the Semiquincentennial.

We hope history professionals will use this guide to inform strategic and interpretive planning; to guide listening sessions and conversations with members of your community; to spark discussion among your board and other stakeholders; to help make your case for support among elected officials, foundations, and individual donors; and to help you put inclusive, relevant history at the center of the 250th commemoration. We hope it will help you envision the kind of transformative impact this anniversary can have on our field and on the nation.

UNFINISHED REVOLUTIONS

In the United States, the fight for liberty, equality, and justice has a long and complex history. Through formal politics, grassroots organizing, boycott, protest, litigation, war, and a wide range of other mass and individual actions, people have continually challenged America to live up to our highest ideals—often drawing on ideas expressed in our founding documents. Before, during, and after the Revolution, people have fought for their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and worked tirelessly to secure the blessings of liberty for themselves and their posterity. This history is not a consistent march of progress, but a complex story full of both advancements and setbacks. These stories reveal the ways the Revolution began before 1776 and reverberates through to the present.

Programming for this theme can help audiences consider:

- **How** have America's founding documents been used to press for social, political, and economic change?
- Beyond the Revolution itself, **what** were other revolutionary moments in the history of our country, our states, and our communities?
- **When** have members of your community advocated for liberty and equality? How have those with power responded?
- **When** has there been progress—and setbacks—in the fight for rights and justice?
- **How** might the perspectives of different individuals or groups change how we think about the ongoing process of becoming "a more perfect union"?

POWER OF PLACE

Place offers a powerful lens through which we can view the past. It challenges us to think beyond modern political boundaries and to consider the full history of the space we now call the United States. A deep engagement with place enables us to reconsider significant questions about our history: from Indigenous peoples' past and present connections with American spaces, to a community's relationships with and use of land, waterways, and natural resources, to the profound and unequal consequences of imperial expansion and colonization across the continent. This theme encourages us to reexamine ideas about our natural and built environments and to reorient when and where we find our country's history.

Programming for this theme can help audiences consider:

- **What** was happening in your community during the Revolutionary Era?
- **How** has your "place" changed over time? Who has historically lived in your community and how did they experience major events in our past?
- **How** did the natural environment—from rivers, lakes, and oceans to mountains, deserts, and swamps—shape past events, such as settlement and migration, imperialism and expansion, or economic development and innovation? How did those events affect the environment?
- **How** can Indigenous peoples' past and present connection to places and environments inform our understanding of historical developments and contemporary challenges?
- **What** places are typically preserved today for their historic value? What other kinds of stories could be told there?

WE THE PEOPLE

Since the nation's founding, definitions of "the people," the boundaries of national belonging, and the very nature of citizenship have changed. For much of our history, the United States has excluded people—women, free and enslaved African Americans, Indigenous people, immigrants, people with disabilities, the poor, and many others—from full participation and representation in the nation's political, economic, and cultural life. Yet over time the United States has also incorporated people of different backgrounds into our society, as diverse populations have staked their claim to belonging and pressed for a more pluralistic, more equitable nation. The expansion of citizenship and belonging has never been pre-determined nor guaranteed, and changes in our population remain a subject of debate and conflict today.

Programming for this theme can help audiences consider:

- **How** did diverse people experience and influence the events of the American Revolution in different ways?
- **Who** is considered an "American"—and who gets to decide?
- **How**, when, and why have definitions of "the people" and ideas about belonging changed in the United States, in your state, or in your community?
- **When** and how did different groups of people gain the status of citizenship and what rights and responsibilities did that include?
- **Who** has been, and remains, excluded from full participation and representation in our democracy?

AMERICAN EXPERIMENT

The leaders of the founding era did not have all the answers. Though their innovations of representative democracy and rights-based constitutionalism were transformative, they knew the nation was a revolutionary experiment. They expected future generations to improve upon the republic they created. The 250th anniversary offers an opportunity to reconsider the origins of our government, democratic institutions, and broader civic life, and a chance to reflect on the ways we have changed them over time. Encouraging discussion about our democracy and civic institutions can help strengthen understanding, inspire action, and reveal ways that all of us can participate in and shape the ongoing American experiment.

Programming for this theme can help audiences consider:

- **How** "revolutionary" was the American Revolution? What kind of nation did it create?
- **How** was your local and state government organized and what were key moments in its evolution? Who did it serve—and who does it continue to exclude?
- **When** has the U.S. Constitution, your state's Constitution, or other organizing charter changed? How and why did those changes happen?
- **How** have different groups of people engaged in civic action in the past? **How** have those actions changed over time?
- **How** can understanding the origins of government inform civic engagement in the present?

DOING HISTORY

To renew public engagement with history, we—scholars, curators, educators, historians, archivists, preservationists, and more—must invite our publics to participate in the process of doing history. The 250th anniversary challenges our field to explain how we interpret evidence and craft narratives about the past, engaging in open conversations about what history is, the many ways it is done, and why it matters. By more transparently communicating our methods for learning about the past, we can help audiences better understand how new questions, evidence, and perspectives inform our histories, how they can better do history in their own lives, and how these histories can speak to present-day challenges. Sharing how we do history will also require us to explain silences and exclusions in our archives and collections, and to communicate how oral history, community knowledge, and the perspectives of other disciplines also inform our understanding of the past. Inviting audiences to engage with the historical method can help them see more clearly the value of inclusive narratives and become more comfortable with the ambiguous, contested, and always-evolving nature of history.

Programming for this theme can help audiences consider:

- **What** is history? **How** is it different from "the past"?
- **How** do history professionals use different kinds of sources—written records, oral traditions, material culture, archaeological evidence, folkways—to make sense of the past?
- **Whose** stories have been collected in archives and museums and whose have been excluded? **How** has that influenced the way history is typically told?
- **How** can the inclusion of multiple perspectives and experiences clarify our understanding of the past?
- **How** can we use evidence from the Revolutionary era to uncover and discuss the lives of individuals traditionally silenced by the written record?

PLANNING *for the* Semiquincentennial

National Planning

Over the past few years, national planning for the 250th anniversary has progressed considerably. In 2016, Congress created the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission. The Commission includes sixteen private citizens, eight members of Congress, and several ex-officio members representing major cabinet departments and federal agencies.

In December 2019, the Commission—along with its nonprofit partner the America 250 Foundation—published ***Inspiring the American Spirit***, a detailed report outlining their vision for the Semiquincentennial commemoration. In it, they describe their expectation that the 250th will reach "all Americans and each American" through a decentralized, grassroots commemoration program. The report lays out the Commission's hope that the America 250 commemoration will involve inclusive programs that inspire Americans to renew and strengthen our experiment in democracy. The report notes as well that July 4, 2026 will be the peak of the 250th commemoration. The Commission and America 250 have conducted

The Semiquincentennial will reach Americans through a decentralized, grassroots commemoration.

listening and planning sessions with stakeholders around the country over the past few years (including many AASLH members), and are currently expanding capacity, building partnerships, and preparing for a more public phase of the commemoration beginning in 2021.

Beyond the work of the Commission, many other national organizations have begun building a foundation for 2026 as well. AASLH, for example, has organized listening sessions at conferences such as the Association of African American Museums, the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums, and our own Annual Meeting, seeking to understand the hopes, expectations, questions, and concerns of our diverse and dynamic field. In 2019, AASLH convened several working groups to identify and describe the impact this anniversary could have on our field and on the nation. AASLH also created and continues to convene a national "Coordinating Committee," a group representing more than thirty national organizations, federal agencies, and other stakeholders invested in the 250th anniversary commemoration, facilitating communication and coordination across the history community.

Local, state, and national entities have the opportunity to shape the Semiquincentennial into a truly remarkable experience.

Others have begun outlining plans as well. The National Endowment for the Humanities has created "A More Perfect Union," an endowment-wide initiative that "encourages projects that explore, reflect on, and tell the stories of our quest for a more just, inclusive, and sustainable society throughout our history." The Institute of Museum and Library Services, National Archives and Records Administration, National Park Service, Smithsonian Institution, and other federal entities have all begun preparing for 250th anniversary-related activities, several of which are described in appendices to the ***Inspiring the American Spirit*** report. In addition, two recent major publications—***Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*** and

Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for All Learners—both use the 250th anniversary to provide inspiration and urgency around sweeping changes to democratic institutions, education, and other aspects of the nation's civic life. In the coming years, many more organizations and individuals are likely to begin using the 250th anniversary as an opportunity to explore big ideas and transformational changes.

State and Local Planning

Semiquincentennial planning is proceeding at the state and local level as well. Across the country, many states have formally established state-level 250th commissions or designated lead entities and many more are likely to join in the years ahead. Through partnership with the Commission and national organizations like AASLH, these state-level planning bodies will lead their state's commemoration efforts and will provide guidance to local institutions, offer official recognition to local level programming, serve as a conduit for federal funding, and play broader organizing roles. Planning has begun to take shape at the county, local, and institutional level as well, and such planning will likely expand in the coming year as the nation enters a more public phase of preparations for the Semiquincentennial.

Local communities, state organizations, and national entities have the opportunity to shape the Semiquincentennial into a truly remarkable experience. We hope all communities and organizations will participate in this commemoration, seizing the chance to use history to address local, national, and global concerns and shape our future together. If we are to achieve the kind of impact many are envisioning for this anniversary, the time to plan is now.

We hope all communities and organizations will participate in this commemoration, seizing the chance to use history to shape our future.

BEYOND 250

We hope 250th anniversary programs will serve not just as an invitation to engage with history, but also as a call to action.

For cultural and educational institutions and history professionals of all kinds, the 250th calls on us to think about who we serve, how we serve them, and how we can have a greater impact on society. Fifty years ago, the Bicentennial era saw transformations across the history community, from scholarship to public history to historic preservation and beyond. What kinds of changes will result from the Semiquincentennial? What will be the legacy of this commemoration for the history community?

More broadly, the anniversary presents an opportunity for a profound civic renewal. It is a chance for all Americans to think about their responsibility to their fellow community members, from the local to the international, and for each of us to consider how we are fulfilling our ongoing civic responsibilities. This occasion should generate a wider appreciation for history's relevance to contemporary challenges and inspire Americans to take well-informed, good-faith steps to improve our communities, states, and nation. How can Americans use the Semiquincentennial to improve our society, strengthen our democracy, and change the world?

The answers to these questions will look different for each institution and each community. AASLH hopes that as a result of the Semiquincentennial commemoration:

- Everybody sees their story included as an important part of American history and understands the value of inclusive narratives about the past.
- People value history for its relevance to modern challenges and use historical thinking in their approach to societal problems.
- History organizations of all types and sizes emerge stronger, better supported, engaged with their communities, and using inclusive, sustainable practices.
- History education, both formal and informal, is promoted, enhanced, and restored to a place of prominence in American life.

The 250th invites us to use the triumphs and failures of our past to help us consider critical questions about our nation's future. If we act with vision, creativity, and purpose in the coming years, the Semiquincentennial presents an incredible opportunity to advance transformational change.

The 250th anniversary is a chance to make history.

THE FIELD GUIDE *for the* SEMIQUINCENTENNIAL

was prepared in collaboration with a dedicated group of scholars, public historians, and museum professionals from across the field.

Project Team

Project Director: John Garrison Marks, American Association for State and Local History
Editor: Aja Bain, American Association for State and Local History
Creative Advisor: Albert Samuels, American Association for State and Local History
Design: Gerri Winchell Findley, Go Design, LLC

Themes Advisors

Joseph Adelman, Framingham State University
Brian Balogh, University of Virginia
Kate Beane, Minnesota Historical Society
Andrea Blackman, Nashville Public Library
Christopher Bonner, University of Maryland
Julio Capó, Florida International University
Lindsay Chervinsky, Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University
John Dichtl, American Association for State and Local History
Jennifer Edginton, Illinois State Museum
Beth English, Organization of American Historians
Susan Ferentinos, Independent Consultant
Hilary Green, University of Alabama
Holly Jackson, University of Massachusetts-Boston
Ronald Angelo Johnson, Baylor University
Ashley Jordan, National Underground Railroad Freedom Center
Ashleigh Lawrence-Sanders, University of Colorado Boulder
Josie Lee, Ho-Chunk Museum
Steve Murray, Alabama Department of Archives and History
Patrick Naranjo, American Indian Graduate Program, University of California, Berkeley
Melissa Prycer, Independent Museum Professional
Daina Ramey Berry, University of Texas Austin
Stephanie Rowe, National Council on Public History
Manisha Sinha, University of Connecticut
Thomas Sugrue, New York University
Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, University of California, Irvine
Scott Wands, Connecticut Humanities
Ahmad Ward, Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park
Karin Wulf, College of William & Mary and the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture

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Additional Resources

For additional resources about preparing for the 250th anniversary, including publications, webinars recordings, blog posts, and other materials, visit **aaslh.org/250**

For additional information about the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission and America 250, visit **america250.org**

For additional information about the National Endowment for the Humanities' 'A More Perfect Union' initiative, visit **neh.gov/250**

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2021 21st Ave S., Suite 320 | Nashville, TN 37212 | 615-320-3203
info@aaslh.org | aaslh.org