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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION  
*for* STATE *and* LOCAL HISTORY

# U.S. 250TH ANNIVERSARY ANNUAL REPORT

[WWW.AASLH.ORG/250TH](http://WWW.AASLH.ORG/250TH)

## Introduction

This Fourth of July, the history community finds itself confronting many challenges. Protests against anti-black racism and continued efforts to reshape America's commemorative landscape ask the nation to confront its history, and our work has rarely felt more urgent. Despite Americans' need to forthrightly engage with the past, however, the coronavirus pandemic has pushed some history institutions to the brink of collapse and has forced our community to face an increasingly uncertain future. As we think forward to the 250th anniversary, it's clear that support for history professionals and history institutions will be critical to achieving the inclusive, relevant commemoration the field has already begun to envision.

With new sources of support and a willingness to ask difficult questions about the past and about ourselves, historical organizations across the country can contribute in profound ways in the lead-up to 2026, helping Americans come to a more critical, more nuanced understanding of the past. The 250th anniversary offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to revitalize and transform our field and reengage the public with history. In the report that follows, we share some of the work that has already begun to help get us there and invite you to help us do more.

# AASLH PROJECTS

## NEH & AASLH: "Making History at 250"

Earlier this year, AASLH received a grant from the **National Endowment for the Humanities** to develop resources that will help historical organizations prepare for the 250th. The grant will enable AASLH to join partners throughout the nation's history community **to develop guiding themes for the commemoration, gather and share new data on the state of the field, and create new planning tools to support local historical organizations.** In addition, AASLH will continue to convene partners at fellow associations, federal agencies, and other prominent scholarly and public history organizations to strengthen communication and collaboration.

Primarily, this grant project will focus on two major efforts. The first is **a census of the nation's history organizations.** This project will—for the first time in nearly twenty years—identify and count the number of historical organizations in the United States. This census will help us measure the impact of the 250th anniversary, more effectively deliver planning and programming resources, and act as stronger advocates for our community at the federal, state, and local levels. Second, AASLH will work in collaboration with other scholarly and public history organizations **to develop a thematic framework** that can help guide 250th programming at museums and historic sites and in history classrooms at all levels. Over the next year, we plan to bring together scholars and public historians to identify major themes in American history that should receive particular focus to help ensure an inclusive and relevant 250th commemoration.

Coupled with our field-wide goals (discussed on pages 4–7), we believe these tools will provide a useful guide for history practitioners as their institutions and states begin to develop plans for "America 250." We hope to produce a comprehensive "Action Guide" in 2021.



# AASLH PROJECTS

## **Framing History with the American Public**

With funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, AASLH is working with the FrameWorks Institute, National Council on Public History, and Organization of American Historians to develop new tools for communicating history's value with the public. Over the past year, researchers at FrameWorks and our advisory board of scholars and public historians have: (1) identified gaps between how history experts and the public understand history's value; and (2) begun to develop and test new framing tools to bridge that gap and communicate more effectively. In our first phase of research, we've found that:

*"Members of the American public don't have a clear sense of who historians are and what they do. They reason that historians are like "journalists of the past" who should be reporting on past events "exactly as they happened." They assume that, for most people, history is a non-essential hobby. At the same time, the public is able to see that a shared understanding of the past can build a sense of belonging within communities and society. They are able to sometimes see that learning about the past can help society learn from its mistakes. People also recognize that museums and historical sites are valuable, though they struggle to identify exactly why that is." -Framing History Strategic Brief*

In our next research phase, we will develop and test new framing devices (like metaphors and analogies) to help us more effectively communicate history's purpose and value, such as explaining the difference between "bias" and interpretation, the importance of a shared, inclusive story of U.S. history, and the relevance of history to solving societal challenges. These new communications strategies will be essential during the lead-up to the 250th, as professionals, volunteers, and advocates across the history enterprise encounter new opportunities to engage with the public through history and to build broad-based support for new historical initiatives.

# FIELD-WIDE GOALS

## Field-Wide Goals

We believe this anniversary represents a rare opportunity to advance major change in our field. In conjunction with our 250th anniversary coordinating committee, AASLH has since 2016 been advocating for five major goals for the 250th. We hope the 250th commemoration will help the history community:

- Make history relevant to every American, every day
- Tell inclusive stories about the American past
- Enhance the public's engagement with history collections
- Strengthen history education
- Increase funding for history

Last year, AASLH convened several groups of volunteers to develop white papers on how our community can advance these goals. You'll find a short excerpt of ideas from the **relevance**, **collections**, and **education** working groups below. To view their complete recommendations, visit [www.aaslh.org/250th](http://www.aaslh.org/250th).

Our **inclusive history** and **funding** working groups – two of the most urgent areas of focus given the challenges of our current moment – continue to develop their recommendations and we hope to share them soon.

## Make history relevant to every American, every day

Led by co-chairs **Tim Grove** (Grove History Consulting/History Relevance initiative) and **Noelle Trent** (National Civil Rights Museum), this working group identified several key ways history organizations can promote the relevance of the past to challenges in the present. From their report:

2026 offers a unique opportunity for the field to better demonstrate history's relevance to communities and individuals across the country. History relevance is the meaningful and purposeful connection of history to current society and its citizens. It takes into account the diverse identities and communities which compose the American public and seeks to address the seminal question "why should history matter to me?"

Taking into consideration the definition of relevance, the goals for 2026 are for the public to:

- **Recognize history's complexity** – there are multiple perspectives on events and people from the past. Expand the public's narrow view of history.
- **Understand that historical interpretation changes with new evidence** – understand the process of historical thinking.
- **Become more comfortable with uncomfortable topics from the past**; more openness to engage in dialogue about them. "Real talk."
- **Feel that their story is important and part of history**; feel comfortable engaging with history.
- **Tell inclusive stories** about the American past

# Enhance the public's engagement with history collections

Led by co-chairs **Jessica Jenkins** (Minnetrista) and **Carrie Villar** (National Trust for Historic Preservation) this working group imagined the 250th as an opportunity to transform how institutions approach their collections and how the public engages with them. From their report:

As the nation's semiquincentennial approaches, America's collecting institutions must find more ways to facilitate meaningful interaction between their collections and the public. In order to deliver on our promises to act in the public trust, the nation's museums, archives, and historic sites must also move the needle forward on how and what we are collecting. Our collections not only need to be accessible, but also reflect the diversity of the nation they document and serve. Our nation's museums, archives, and historic sites—both large and small—must work to capture the country's past, present, and future in all of its forms.

The 250th is a time to expand the narrative around collections and move the field forward. We hope to see America's museums, archives, and historic sites:

- **Steward what they have**, with funding for digitization projects, more collaborative collecting initiatives and loan programs, and a more sustainable approach to collecting.
- **Collect for the future**, by building capacity to collect recent history, generating and modeling best practices for born-digital materials, and helping the public better preserve their own materials.
- **Use objects to tell new stories in new ways**, through material culture-centered interpretation, using objects to facilitate civic discourse, and addressing collections imbalances to create more representative and diverse collections.

## Strengthen history education

Led by co-chairs **Linnea Grim** (Monticello) and **Wendy Rex-Atzet** (Utah Division of State History), the education working group explored how the 250th can help us revitalize history education. From their report:

The 250th anniversary presents an opportunity to promote stronger history education to foster a better understanding of what this nation has achieved and propel it toward the fulfillment of the founder's ideals. Our mission is to help every young person see themselves in this history, no matter when or where their families joined the American story. Effective history education provides context and nuance through an active and inclusive examination of our shared past in all its beauty, tragedy, and complexity.

We must have bold moves in measured steps. Our revolutionary goals:

- **Raise history's profile**, reemphasizing history and humanities education in schools
- **Ensure inclusivity**, through education efforts that open the narrative of 1776 to multiple voices, from our complex past to the continuing challenges of the present.
- **Promote historical thinking and civic education in classrooms**
- **Elevate teacher training**, ensuring they are equipped with the skills and facts needed to share rich and complex stories that recognize a full range of voices and experiences.
- **Strengthen partnerships** among museums, historic sites, and schools
- **Establish foundations for teaching and learning the revolutionary era**, including sharing the full diversity of the early Republic, building local histories of 1776 through place-based explorations, and identifying connections between the founding era and 21st century communities.



# NATIONAL PLANNING

**The U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission**, along with its nonprofit partner the **America 250 Foundation**, continues to advance a national commemorative program for the 250th anniversary. Below is a short summary from the Commission of its activities over the past year:

*"Since last July, the Commission has focused on delivering its plan for the overall America 250 program, building capacity to execute that plan, and sparking awareness of and engagement in America 250. On December 31, 2019, the Commission delivered its report to the President entitled "Inspiring the American Spirit" which presents its vision for the commemoration and a largely decentralized, public-private, approach to realizing that vision. Since then, the Commission has been building the capacity necessary to implement this plan by establishing the America 250 Foundation as its nonprofit partner, raising funds, and building out the necessary programmatic frameworks to engage all Americans and each American in the largest, most inclusive commemoration in the nation's history. These frameworks will encourage and support grassroots and institutional program development across the nation, and the Commission is beginning to recognize pilot programs to inform and test these frameworks. Finally, the Commission continues to reach out through various communications channels to introduce America 250, promote its brand identity, and build productive relationships nationwide. All while adapting to the recent disruptions related to the pandemic."*

# NATIONAL PLANNING

## Commission Report Summary

The Commission's [report to the President](#) presents its vision, framework, and recommendations for the United States' 250th anniversary commemoration and offers key insights into ongoing preparation for the 250th by many federal agencies, such as the National Park Service, Smithsonian Institution, National Archives, and others. We encourage state and local history organizations to read the report as they begin to develop "America 250" plans. Some important takeaways:

### Urgency and Schedule

Perhaps the most important takeaway from the report is the urgency of advancing commemoration plans. Although the full commemoration period extends from 2020 until 2027, the report makes clear that July 4, 2026, in many ways marks the end, not the beginning, of the commemoration. The schedule in the report indicates that the Commission's planning phase will end in mid-2021, just a year away.

### Themes, Guidelines, and Frameworks

The report outlines three major themes for America 250: to Educate, Engage, and Unite. It also makes clear the commemoration will include all of American history and an expansive geographic scope.

The report presents several "participatory frameworks" to align the thousands of programs and other commemoration efforts that will be part of America 250, which the Commission envisions will be a "largely decentralized" effort. AASLH members should look in particular at the "State and Local Programs Framework." We encourage all history organizations to consider how your programming might fit with these frameworks, goals,

# NATIONAL PLANNING

and themes, and to work with colleagues in your community, state, and region to begin identifying shared goals and coordinating plans.

## **Funding**

The report also includes new details about funding for state and local projects. The Commission estimates that the full America 250 commemoration, including major “signature programs” from the Commission and major federal agencies, is likely to cost between 3 and 5 billion dollars. Less than \$600 million of that, however, is likely to flow directly through the Commission, and only a portion of that amount for state and local grants. The report makes clear that “The Commission will not be the most significant source or conduit of federal investment in America 250,” with larger sums flowing through existing federal agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, and others. While many grantmaking agencies might expand their efforts to provide funding for 250th-focused projects (as NEH has through their agency-wide [“A More Perfect Union” initiative](#)), history organizations probably should not plan to rely on major new funding from the Commission itself.

This report was written and submitted in late-December 2019, prior to the pandemic. The impact of recent events on funding and timelines remains unclear.

# STATE-LEVEL PLANNING

Across the country, states have begun preparations for more locally focused commemorations of the 250th anniversary. National planners, including the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission and AASLH, have emphasized that the 250th will be commemorated in unique ways at the state and local level. The Commission in particular, in order to facilitate its vision for a largely decentralized commemoration, distribute funding, and recognize official programming, has asked states to create Commissions or identify lead planning entities. Several states have already done so, although many others are just beginning conversations.

## 8 STATES

### Designated 250 planning entities

- Kentucky
- New Jersey
- North Carolina
- Pennsylvania
- South Carolina
- Tennessee
- Utah
- Virginia

## 2 STATES

### Introduced legislation to create state commission

- Alabama
- Massachusetts

Several other states and territories, including **Alaska, Delaware, Michigan, New York, Puerto Rico, Texas, and West Virginia**, are advancing discussions about how best to lead 250th planning. Most states have at least begun informal discussions about how to proceed.

## CONCLUSION

In 2020, historical organizations are tackling many challenges at once but should not lose sight of the 250th anniversary. With the commemoration less than six years away, our community must act now if we are to take fullest advantage of the opportunity this anniversary presents. During the 1970s, the Bicentennial commemoration transformed the nation and its cultural landscape, with the creation of new organizations, federal agencies, and entire fields of study. With creativity, ingenuity, and coordinated effort, we can help ensure the 250th has a similarly transformational impact in 2026. The past has rarely felt more relevant to contemporary challenges, while recent events have helped make clear the many ways our field must still improve. The work of our organizations is urgently needed. We encourage you to join your colleagues around the country in imagining how the 250th can help us use the past to transform the present and future.

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