

AASLH 250th Anniversary Working Group – Relevance
White Paper
“Emphasize history’s relevance to every American, everyday”
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BACKGROUND

The AASLH 250th Anniversary Relevance Working Group composed a committee of diverse backgrounds to discuss, debate, and create an aspirational field guide to stimulate, inspire, and provoke the greater history field as it prepares for the 250th anniversary of the United States of America.

The committee organized around several key assumptions, however, the most critical was the definition of American. The term American is defined here with a broad inclusive intent. American is a self-identifier, and is applied without regard to race, class, gender and sexual identity, immigration status, or other derivative exclusionary labels. Relevance is an inclusive topic, meant to reflect the diversity of the American demographic, with the purposes of all people seeing themselves reflected and connected to its history.

This guide offers suggestions and approaches to creating a more relevant historical space for the 250th anniversary. The guide offers clarity on its definition, and inspiration to the field.

2026, offers a unique opportunity for the field to address the public’s misunderstandings regarding the discipline of history as well as to better demonstrate history’s relevance to communities and individuals across the country.

RELEVANCE

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?”

The field of history has evolved greatly since the bicentennial, 1976. However, the American public’s perception of history remains rather narrow. History is perceived as a “luxury” field rather than a necessity like STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). As James Baldwin stated in 1965,

History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all

that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.

The challenge of relevance is to push forward Baldwin's concept by inextricably linking history to American education and the country's self-image. This may include linking history to significant current events like climate change, voting, and the economy.

In order to successfully meet this challenge, history organizations are encouraged to broaden their approach. One recommendation is for organizations to expand their definition of universal themes/ concepts like freedom, equality, and justice to include a multiplicity of perspectives. The inclusion of multiple perspectives acknowledges history's complexity. However in engaging with this approach, sites are encouraged to use alternative terms besides "difficult history." The term "difficult history" can appear dismissive of the legacy and culture of historically marginalized communities. Also, historically marginalized communities, view their histories as beautiful, heroic, and complicated in contrast to many who view that same history as difficult.

The founding of the United States of America was an experiment, there have been successes and challenges. Complicating the notion of American history compels organizations to engage in a deliberative approach that would expand the public's understanding as well as expand the conversation.

A challenge for the national commemoration will be balancing tone: telling truth but offering hope. There must be a change. The field should emphasize that the addition of new voices to the national narrative enhances not detracts from the overall story. Balance means acknowledging celebratory aspects, and encouraging critical thinking with the goal to foster deeper understanding of decisions and actions made in the past. Resilience and empathy become key concepts within both interpretation and community engagement.

GOALS

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.

IMPLEMENTATION

Suggested National projects & programming

- Sites of Revolution
 - 250 sites of revolution, either per state or whole country that tell America's complex story from different perspectives. A broad definition of revolution could be used, and states could nominate their own sites. (An estimated 4 sites per state and the District of Columbia)
- Objects of Revolution –
 - 250 objects from collections around the nation that are similarly identified and organized like the sites of revolution.
- National databases on historical context
 - Databases would provide historical context on major themes and offer suggestions for programming ideas. Suggested themes could include: immigration, freedom and equality. This would be by professionals for professionals.
- National billboard campaign promoting historical thinking
 - Campaign would challenge the public's assumptions regarding historical topics and provide historical evidence from collections around the country.
- National History Matters Campaign
 - Massive media campaign with diverse voices stating why history is important to them. Similar to the "Got Milk?" Campaign.
- Historical Thinking Education effort
 - A concentrated national effort for a year where history organizations focus on teaching historical thinking to all ages. This could include, but not limited to monthly curator talks, behind-the-scenes tours, teacher workshops.
- National symposia
 - A series of symposia hosted at sites around the country featuring a well respected and diverse group of historians who focus on the major themes of American history. This could be hosted by the state history museums.
- History documentaries
 - The production of history documentaries by major filmmakers covering major themes in American history.
- Media launch of 2026 commemoration
 - Create a media "moment" around the launch of the 2026 commemoration that takes over the national conversation in the vein of the 1619 Project by the *New York Times*.
- Revolutionary community sign

- National campaign to have communities post signs where revolutionary moments in the nation's history occurred. For instance, Oakland California where the Black Panthers were founded, or the creation of settlement houses in Chicago by Jane Addams.
- National Network of liberty trees
 - This could be a national network of interactive art installations where people answer the question "what does liberty mean to you?" and hang it on a liberty tree
 - The alternative is that people are encouraged to plant liberty trees (elms or other indigenous trees) throughout the country.
- Digital Gaming
 - The creation of digital video games and/or augmented, virtual reality related to the anniversary.
- Comic Book series
 - Drawing inspiration from classic comics, this would use historic icons to create compelling graphic retellings of known and unknown stories like Dolores Huerta, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. etc.
- Pacing guide
 - A suggested pacing guide for professionals that would address trends in nomenclature and scholarship which frequently changes over time. IE enslaved vs. slave.
- Database
 - A program for our peers
- Citizen debates
 - National series of citizen debates on certain rights, so people can articulate what rights are relevant to today. People would deliberate on whether they would be willing to stake everything on fighting for these particular rights.

Best Practice

- Broaden the definitions of history to create a more inclusive definition relevant to a wide group from Native Americans to recent immigrants.
- Cultivate and sustain relationships with local community organizations and community leaders
- Seek to define community in a variety of ways within the digital space, at the grassroots level, etc.
- Find
- Create outreach to your community beyond the traditional methods.
 - Employ social media,
 - Seek to connect current events relevant to site's history in variety of ways.
- Examine intersectionality of community to create unique programming
 - Sites are encouraged to define the unique attributes of their community and its demographic by bringing various groups of people together to celebrate the community through bake sale or community potluck.

- Examine how tourism can be a relevant and viable economic means to engage a larger audience with communities and small museums.
- Use the digital space in creative ways to link collections and interpretation to relevant issues.