

MAKING HISTORY AT 250

Annual Update on
Semiquincentennial Planning

July 2024

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

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A Note from the President & CEO

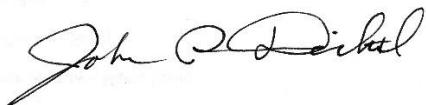
Much has changed since AASLH first began its efforts to prepare the field for the United States' 250th anniversary. Back in 2016, when we started our work, Congress had not yet appointed members to the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission and no state or local level efforts had yet emerged. Few people in the field were thinking about an anniversary that was then eight years away.

Today, the federal commission (through America250) is planning major national programs, while nearly fifty states and territories have established their own commissions for observing this anniversary. Federal agencies, national nonprofits, and state and local organizations are all planning in earnest to mark the Semiquincentennial and consider its meaning for Americans. Everyone from local tourism bureaus to professional sports leagues to international corporations have begun to consider how they will participate in the anniversary.

Yet for all that has changed over the past eight years, AASLH's focus has remained steady. We hope that our field uses this anniversary as an opportunity to explore our nation's history in all its depth and complexity with Americans in communities across the country. Research shows that the vast majority of Americans want a more honest, more complete story of our past; history organizations must show that we are up to the challenge. This is our time to share a history in which everyone feels a sense of belonging.

In addition, we must continue to leverage this moment to strengthen the field for the next generation. I realize that right now it may be difficult to think further than the upcoming presidential election. No matter what happens in November, however, the work of doing history will need greater financial and community support in the years to come. There will be no greater opportunity to secure it than the Semiquincentennial.

The coming year will be critical. With just two years until July 4, 2026, the time is now to ensure we make the most of it. We hope you'll use this time, and the new resources forthcoming from AASLH and others, to help create a better, stronger, more vibrant history community. With thoughtful planning and a bit of ambition, we can ensure the 250th anniversary creates a lasting legacy.



John R. Dichtl

President & CEO

American Association for State and Local History

National Planning

Just a few years ago, all of the national level plans for the Semiquincentennial could be described in a few sentences. Thankfully, that time has now passed. Over the last year, several new national initiatives have gotten underway, while many more have come into sharper focus. It has become clearer than ever that the 250th anniversary will be a major event all throughout the United States.

America250, the official nonprofit arm of the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, has redoubled its efforts to make the anniversary as inclusive and participatory as possible. They've continued to raise awareness of the event around the country, bringing in "National Resource Partners" from across the nation's nonprofit sector (including AASLH) and securing sponsorships for several important national initiatives. They have launched a national scholastic competition for American students and are planning several other major projects. You can read more about the Commission's plans from Chair Rosie Rios on **page 3**.

Elsewhere, across the museum, history, education, and civic sectors, many national programs and initiatives have emerged to mark this anniversary. To name just a few:

- The **National Park Service** (NPS) has introduced a number of different efforts tied to the commemoration, including its ongoing Semiquincentennial Grant Program; a national effort to transcribe Revolutionary War pension records (in partnership with the **National Archives and Records Administration**); and a new guide for educators looking to use historic places in their lesson plans.
- Youth civic engagement nonprofit **Made By Us** has launched "Youth250," providing workshops, a toolkit, and a nationwide Youth Advisory Board to assist organizations seeking to better understand how young adults engage with history and civics.
- The **Federation of State Humanities Councils**, in partnership with several state humanities organizations, have initiated a series of community conversations across the country to discuss how Americans from all places and backgrounds can come together to mark the 250th anniversary.
- A national grassroots coalition of service, museum, and civic institutions are creating the **National Museum and Center for Service** to create inspiring, inclusive, and enduring exhibitions highlighting examples of service in states and communities across the nation.
- Both the **New America Foundation** and the **American Academy of Arts and Sciences** have started new initiatives to provide resources and community to those trying to share more inclusive, more comprehensive narratives of American history.

Many other entities—including federal agencies such as the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Library of Congress, Smithsonian Institution, National Archives and Records Administration, along with national nonprofits like the National Constitution Center, Colonial Williamsburg, and many others—have ambitious plans that will be unveiled in the coming year.

Many of these projects offer ways for state and local organizations to connect and participate. As July 4, 2026 draws nearer, we expect to see the launch of many more initiatives. You can browse more national 250th anniversary projects using AASLH's new **National Initiative Tracker**.

Message from U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission Chair Rosie Rios



With just two years until the 250th Anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, America250 has been working around the clock to create the largest most inclusive commemoration in history. Over the past year, we have been rolling out new programs including **America's Invitation** – our sustained national [public engagement effort](#) asking Americans to share their reflections on the past and their hopes and dreams for the future. In December, we partnered with organizers in Boston to mark the 250th Anniversary of the Boston Tea Party with a weekend of celebrations beginning with a naturalization ceremony at Faneuil Hall and ending with a dramatic recreation of the destruction of the tea in Boston Harbor. And in March, we launched the pilot of **America's**

Field Trip, a [nationwide scholastic contest](#) designed to engage America's youth in the Semiquincentennial, sponsored by **The Bank of New York Mellon**. Thousands of students submitted applications, and awardees are participating in once-in-a-lifetime field trip experiences this summer.

Throughout the year, we have been focused on developing large-scale, high-impact programming that educates, engages, and unites communities from sea to shining sea. I am pleased to share that the Commission unanimously approved our **Playbook** in March, and we are preparing for the next iteration detailing our multi-year and multi-partner programming efforts as part of the two-year count up.

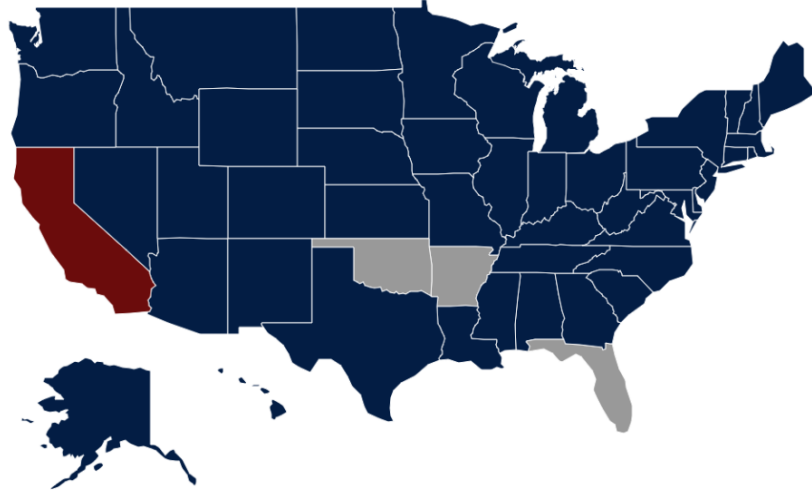
None of our work would be possible without the tremendous support of partners like **AASLH**, who as an America250 National Resource Partner, helps keep American history alive at the local level around the country. In addition to AASLH, we are pleased to welcome several new National Resource Partners, including **More Perfect**, **iCivics**, **National Women's History Museum**, **National Congress of American Indians**, and **Meridian International**. In addition, I am thrilled to share that in partnership with state officials, America250 has also supported the establishment of nearly 50 State and Territory Commissions to organize and promote local commemorative activities in collaboration with America250. Adding to this momentum, the Congressional America250 Caucus is well on its way to becoming the largest on Capitol Hill, with more than 160 members. Finally, **Walmart** has come on as a Founding Sponsor for America250, providing support for two of our tentpole initiatives: national service and volunteerism program and an oral history project.



Our team remains laser-focused on the work ahead, and we could not be more thrilled to work with AASLH to engage organizations at the state and local levels as we continue our journey to 2026. We invite you to visit America250.org to learn more about our programs and get involved in the most inclusive commemoration and celebration in our country's history.

State Planning

Semiquincentennial planning at the state level has progressed considerably since last summer. There are now 48 state and territorial 250th anniversary commissions, out of a possible 56. That represents an increase of 14 from this time last year. They continue to take a range of different forms. Some exist as stand-alone entities with representatives from across the state, while others tap existing state agencies, private nonprofits, or public-private partnerships to take on this central role in planning for 2026. AASLH fully expects that all 50 states, and likely the 6 territories as well, will all establish 250 commissions by 2026.



You can learn more about

● Commission ● No Commission ● Action Pending

planning in your state, including links to state commissions, at [AASLH.org/250](https://www.aaslh.org/250).

State-level activity is accelerating quickly. With so many different state commissions, and so many different approaches, below is just a sampling of the kinds of programs and initiatives states are developing:

- **Grants for small organizations**, administered directly by the state commission or in partnership with existing state-level granting agencies. Several states have already issued grants, with many more planning to do so in the coming year.
- **Educational materials**, including curriculum guides, teacher trainings, and student programs to help K-12 students and educators connect directly with the themes and content of the Semiquincentennial commemoration.
- **Guidance to counties and localities** to help them establish local-level commissions and connect their ideas and plans to statewide commemoration efforts.
- **Investments in infrastructure**, such as improving access and interpretation at historic sites, reinvigorating historical marker programs, and seeking new, lasting sources of funding for the work of history and culture.
- **Commitment to inclusion**, through programs and initiatives that tell everyone's stories and create spaces in which everyone feels like they belong. The breadth of the commemoration effort makes clear this anniversary is not solely about the Declaration of Independence, the founding era, or the thirteen colonies. It's about creating opportunities for people to come together, engage with our shared history, and create a lasting legacy for the future.

State commissions have also begun to work together nationally and regionally on cooperative efforts. For example, several states plan to participate in an initiative spearheaded by the

Wisconsin Commission, called “**Two Lights for Tomorrow.**” This initiative will see statehouses and other participating institutions prominently feature two lights on the night of April 18, 2025, not just to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Paul Revere’s famous ride, but to initiate a day of service that will begin the following morning. Other states have been meeting as regional groups to identify additional opportunities for collaboration.

States continue to draw on a range of different types and amounts of funding to support 250 planning. Some state legislatures have provided a significant outright appropriation to fund the 250th, while others have sought or passed new taxes on things like hotels and rental cars to finance the effort. Still others have turned to private fundraising and sponsorship. Most states are combining several of these approaches at once to maximize the funding available for 250 activities. AASLH’s research into state-level 250th funding last year made apparent that start-up funding for commissions is a crucial component to successful state level 250th planning, even if future money came from other sources. *For more detail about different state-level funding approaches, see AASLH’s [2023 report on 250th anniversary planning](#).*

State commissions regularly communicate with one another to identify opportunities and address challenges. Through a quarterly meeting and online discussion space organized by AASLH, state commission representatives frequently share ideas, collectively problem solve, and identify new areas for partnerships. They discuss everything from practical matters like executing partnership agreements and funding grant programs, to more conceptual matters like creating inclusive programs and countering political polarization. In 2024, state commission representatives will convene in person a total of four separate times. In April, 250 stakeholders convened in Williamsburg, Virginia, for the second annual “A Common Cause to All” meeting, organized by the VA250 Commission and Colonial Williamsburg. State commissioners will gather again at an America250 convening in July (Washington, DC) and twice in September: at the AASLH Annual Conference (Mobile, AL) and a national gathering organized by America250PA (Philadelphia, PA).

These state level efforts to prepare for the Semiquincentennial will have a major impact on the final scope, direction, and impact of this commemoration.

AASLH Activities

Over the last year, AASLH expanded on its leading role preparing the history community for the 250th anniversary. Now in our eighth year providing leadership and resources to help the field make the most of the Semiquincentennial, AASLH regularly develops programs and publications, convenes stakeholders, conducts advocacy, and provides insights to influence planning efforts across the country. Since 2016, AASLH has continually emphasized that this anniversary offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make progress in American society by creating opportunities to engage with our whole history, and to strengthen the field by identifying new sources of interest and investment.

AASLH continues to convene quarterly meetings of both a national advisory committee and a group of state 250th commission representatives, providing important opportunities for

collaboration and coordination. In addition, we regularly gather feedback from across the field, especially from small history organizations, to ensure their interests and concerns are reflected in national planning efforts.

More specifically, here's just a sampling of AASLH's Semiquincentennial activities over the past year:

- **National Resource Partner:** America250 [named AASLH a "National Resource Partner,"](#) an official designation given to only a small number of leading national nonprofit organizations in their respective fields. Through this role, AASLH is amplifying announcements from America250 to the public history community and ensuring that the perspectives of history organizations are well represented in America250's ongoing planning.
- **Sharing the *Field Guide*:** Through 2024, AASLH has now mailed out more than 30,000 copies of *Making History at 250: The Field Guide for the Semiquincentennial*. This guide contains broad historical themes and conceptual guidance to ensure every organization can participate in the 250th, and helps them to prioritize an inclusive vision of American history. The wide distribution of both print and digital versions of this guide has facilitated its use in states, communities, and institutions across the country, providing cohesiveness to an otherwise grassroots commemoration effort.
- **Polarization Summit:** In February 2024, more than 500 people attended "Doing History in Polarized Times," a virtual summit convened by AASLH. Political polarization continues to be one of the biggest challenges facing 250 planners, while fostering mutual understanding across diverse populations represents one of their major goals. This virtual summit provided an overview of research on the issue and practical recommendations for addressing it.
- **Federal Advocacy:** AASLH, along with partners at the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History and the Normandy Group, led a major congressional advocacy effort to try to secure robust support for history organizations. Calling for increased funding for agencies like the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), National Park Service, and others with a major role in funding history and culture in the United States, our advocacy focused especially on the need for new funding that can be distributed at the state level, where it is more accessible to small organizations.
- **Speaking to the Field:** Representatives from AASLH have spoken about our vision for the 250th anniversary to a wide variety of audiences across the country, including historians, journalists, and museum professionals. Last July, AASLH President & CEO John Dichtl was [quoted in a major article about Semiquincentennial planning in the *New York Times*](#) and we expect more such articles to be published soon. AASLH has also addressed the 250th in a number of keynote addresses and conference sessions, including with: American Alliance of Museums' "Museums Advocacy Day"; National Park Service Friends Alliance; Maryland 250; New Jersey Historical Commission; Tennessee Association of Museums; West Virginia Association of Museums; and more. This heightened visibility allows AASLH to put the priorities of the history community front and center as conversations about the 250th gain traction.

In the year ahead, AASLH is planning several more publications, resources, and activities to continue to assist the field in its preparations for 2026. These include:

- **Program handbook:** On July 1, 2024, AASLH published the *250th Anniversary Program Handbook*. Responding to a frequently expressed need from across the field, this publication provides more than 30 low-cost, sustainable program ideas to assist small organizations still seeking direction for their Semiquincentennial programming.
- **New Workshops:** Over the next year, AASLH will develop and offer a new workshop series designed to help small history organizations plan for the 250th anniversary. Drawing on the *Making History at 250 Field Guide* and the new *Program Handbook*, these workshops will help small organizations conceptualize and plan their Semiquincentennial initiatives in a way that aligns with their mission and capacity. In addition to offering them at several state museum association gatherings, AASLH will also offer a virtual version of the workshop and provide a template so that other museum service organizations can offer the workshop as well.
- **National Initiative Tracker:** AASLH recently launched a “[National Initiative Tracker](#),” a new digital tool that provides a birds-eye-view of national Semiquincentennial efforts. Featuring national programs in the museum, history, education, and civic space, this new resource will help practitioners and planners across the history and museum community to see the national picture more clearly and better understand how their own efforts fit in.
- **250 Website Updates:** AASLH also continues to update the resources and information available at [AASLH.org/250](https://aaslh.org/250). We’ve added direct links to many state commission websites, a reflection of the growing sophistication of state planning. Additionally, to assist organizations beginning their planning for 2026, we’ve published a new, more substantial list of resources that might help those efforts, including articles, blog posts, webinar recordings, technical leaflets, and more.

Much of this work has been made possible thanks to a generous four-year, \$400,000 gift from the [William G. Pomeroy Foundation](#).

Looking to the Year Ahead

The next year will profoundly shape the 250th anniversary commemoration. With two years left until 2026, stakeholders in the history community and beyond—from funders to museums to federal agencies to community organizations—still have an opportunity to collaborate and plan big, ambitious programs. There’s still time to ensure this anniversary includes all people, and all stories, all across the United States and beyond. There’s still a chance to leverage the 250th to secure greater support, build stronger foundations, and enact transformative changes within and beyond our field. But, if groundwork for those initiatives is not laid between now next summer, it may be too late to take full advantage of the Semiquincentennial.

That’s why, in the coming year, AASLH will be intensifying our efforts to raise awareness, provide leadership, guidance, and resources, and advocate on behalf of the field. With a shared commitment to history’s ability to foster connection, build understanding, and illuminate today’s challenges, we hope this anniversary—and the part you’ll play in it—will create a lasting legacy for the nation.