

MAKING HISTORY AT 250

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION *for* STATE *and* LOCAL HISTORY

An Update on U.S. Semiquincentennial Planning

July 2025

Table of Contents

A Note from the President & CEO.....	1
National Planning Update.....	2
Planning at the State Level.....	4
AASLH Activities.....	6
The Year Ahead.....	8

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A Note from the President & CEO

In 2016, when AASLH first began preparing for the U.S. Semiquincentennial, the anniversary seemed a distant horizon. Chronologically, yes, but also conceptually. With so many competing demands on our time and resources, how could the field find the capacity to add yet another priority? Against an increasingly complex political and economic backdrop, how could an anniversary of this scale and significance be meaningful to history organizations of all missions, scopes, and locations? With that far-off horizon now just a year away—and the backdrop of planning even more complex than anyone could have anticipated—I am gratified to say that the field is rising to the occasion.

The past year of 250th planning, especially since the calendar turned to 2025, has been eventful. The country weathered another high-stakes presidential election. Just days after inauguration, the incoming administration initiated what would become a slew of efforts to weaken the history field: they dismantled federal agencies vital to history work, abruptly canceled grants supporting state and local projects, and attempted to replace evidence-based historical content with incomplete, simplistic narratives. Meanwhile, the administration has also indicated a growing interest in the 250th, showing deep investment in the anniversary's symbolic power while touting a narrow vision of what American history is and how it should be commemorated and taught.

Yet despite these challenges, the history field has pressed on, continuing to plan for a meaningful, community-driven 250th—which is what this commemoration was always supposed to be. Regardless of the tumult at the national level, the Semiquincentennial remains a once-in-a-generation opportunity to spark engagement with the full sweep of American history and to revitalize our field and its institutions. The greatest strength of the 250th has always been its grassroots nature, and it is now more important than ever for history organizations nationwide to lean into that approach—to leverage the anniversary to explore the nation's whole history with and for the communities we serve. By prioritizing local communities' needs and staying aligned with fieldwide best practices, history institutions can still use the 250th to demonstrate the vital role we play in promoting civic engagement, productive discourse, and a more widely shared, evidence-based understanding of the past in all of its complexity.

I applaud the many, many history organizations nationwide staying true to this vision and refusing to cede the narrative of the 250th to those who would undermine its transformative potential to educate, inspire, and unite. AASLH looks forward to continuing to work with you in the months ahead to meet this moment.



John R. Dichtl

President & CEO

American Association for State and Local History

National Planning Update

The past year has seen two primary forces shaping 250th planning at the national level: significant challenges to federal cultural agencies, including mass layoffs and the cancellation of thousands of grants awarded to history organizations, and the White House's growing focus on promoting a narrow, exclusively celebratory vision of the 250th. Together, these developments have tested the history field on the precipice of the Semiquincentennial year. Still, 250th planning activities among both public and private institutions at the national level forge ahead.

Since inauguration, the White House has taken several actions that undermine the history community. These include an executive order attacking diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts across the federal government, resulting in the censorship of historical information at physical and digital government sites. The administration has laid off thousands of employees at the National Park Service (NPS) and has gutted the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). These developments were accompanied by the abrupt cancellation of thousands of IMLS and NEH grants, throwing the history sector—including many plans for 250th initiatives—into disarray. The White House also forced out fieldwide leaders, including the heads of the NEH, Library of Congress, and National Archives and Records Administration, actions that reshaped membership on the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission.

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All this might seem to indicate an administration that does not care about history; in fact, the opposite is true—in alarming ways. Not only has the White House attempted to defund and diminish history work nationwide, but the administration is filling the very vacuum it is creating with a limited story of America that eliminates complexity, inclusivity, and critical thinking. Through varied means, such as releasing executive orders seeking to limit effective

and accurate K–12 history education; creating misleading historical resources; reestablishing the 1776 Commission; revising remaining federal grant award requirements to promote the White House's 250th agenda; and creating Task Force 250, the administration is actively promoting an exclusionary, unproductive vision of American history, patriotism, and commemoration.

How the actions of the White House will intersect with preexisting 250th plans remains to be seen. For example, the relationship is unclear between Task Force 250 and the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission (also known as America250), the Congressional commission established in 2016. And while America250 has continued to develop its major “tentpole” programs, the lines between these two planning bodies are becoming increasingly blurred—for instance, through the addition of new staff and sponsors with close ties to the White House, or via America250's assistance in implementing the White House's recent parade marking the 250th anniversary of the U.S. military. Meanwhile, the latter event—like the National Garden of American Heroes and Great American State Fair ideas also proposed by the administration—illuminates the types of programs this administration intends to hold in honor of the 250th: heavy on spectacle and with no clear lasting public benefit.

The activities of the White House notwithstanding, several federal cultural organizations have spent the past year continuing with 2026 plans that demonstrate an emphasis on promoting civic discourse and

finding points of entry into the anniversary for people of all experiences, beliefs, and backgrounds. These include a March Madness–style bracket run by the National Archives Foundation to engage the public in a productive debate about America’s “most important” historical document, as well as a new immersive exhibition entitled [“In Pursuit of Life, Liberty, and Happiness”](#) scheduled to be on view at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History.

National organizations in the private sector have also been pressing on with their 250th plans. Many institutions are preparing major installations, such as the Museum of the American Revolution, which will launch a marquee exhibition entitled [“The Declaration’s Journey”](#) in honor of the 250th. Notably, the exhibition will “open with a juxtaposition of two objects which each witnessed a watershed moment in the Declaration’s journey”: a chair in which Thomas Jefferson is thought to have drafted the Declaration alongside the bench on which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Through these and other rare artifacts from around the world, the exhibition will explore the Declaration’s complicated history, impact, and ongoing legacy. Meanwhile, other organizations have been developing major K–12 initiatives: the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, for example, will launch [history.org](#), a centralized digital location for trustworthy, high-quality resources to history teachers. Other notable national initiatives that have flourished over the past year include [Youth250](#), a nonpartisan initiative run by Made By Us to “capture young people’s imaginations, ideas and input” for the Semiquincentennial, as well as PBS’s promotion to local affiliates and their communities of the new Ken Burns documentary centered around the American Revolution.

Finally, the past year also saw the release of exciting new research identifying ways to advance more productive civic and historical discourse in America—a vital endeavor on the eve of the 250th. A [report](#) by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences underscored the importance of a vibrant civic culture for a healthy democracy and the key role that museums and history organizations play in cultivating it.

Another important insight came from [a new report](#) by Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement explaining how institutions can “talk bridgey”—using language that resonates broadly across audiences, creating forums where people with diverse perspectives and political views can connect with one another. In a final example, the Nationhood Lab released [“The Story of America,”](#) which leverages a

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year of research to offer a unifying national narrative for America—including core scripts and suggested language—rooted in the values of the Declaration of Independence and designed for varied audiences. All of these studies’ findings align with the recommendations from AASLH’s [Reframing History project](#), which provides a toolkit of evidence-based language and communication strategies to help history organizations communicate more effectively about history and its importance.

Taken together, the past 12 months have featured peaks and valleys in 250th preparations, illustrating the increasingly high-stakes nature of the anniversary. What was once a far-off milestone is now a rapidly approaching date on the calendar invested with growing symbolic power. For both public and private national-level institutions, the next several months will be extremely important in terms of the commemoration’s ultimate direction on the national stage.

Planning at the State Level

With a full set of 56 state and territory 250th Anniversary planning commissions finally established, the past year has proven incredibly productive for state-level planners. While dynamics at the national level are, of course, affecting the states—particularly in terms of NEH cuts to state humanities councils, many of which are deeply involved in 250th planning—the states commissions are leaning on years of preceding experience and preparation to power them past the impending finish line.

This past year saw perhaps the greatest degree yet of communication and collaboration among state planners. This included the third and final convening of state 250th planners at the annual [“A Common Cause to All”](#) event hosted by the VA250 Commission. Nearly 600 attendees from 40 states met in Williamsburg, Virginia, to discuss opportunities and challenges presented by the anniversary. Attendees also used the gathering to forge and strengthen ties across the country. The event featured speakers from the history, civics, education, law, and journalism sectors, as well as a special preview of Ken Burns’s new documentary, “The American Revolution.” The legendary documentarian was there to present the film himself, and attendees had the chance to view the preview on the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg, alongside approximately 3,000 members of the public. AASLH President & CEO John Dichtl moderated a panel at “A Common Cause to All,” and, by attending the convening, AASLH staff were able to witness firsthand the tremendous camaraderie and creative exchange that has developed among state planners over the years.



Representatives from state 250th commissions at third annual “A Common Cause to All” convening in Virginia, March 2025.

This year also saw state level planners deliver a striking reminder of what the 250th can be: the initiative [Two Lights for Tomorrow](#). This multi-state project served as both a formal kick-off for the 250th and a symbolic call to action. Inspired by Revere’s “two if by sea” signal from 1775, participants were invited to shine two lights from state houses, museums, community buildings, private homes, and other landmarks across the country. The goal: a coordinated display of reflection on our shared past and a recommitment to building a “more perfect union.” What made Two Lights for Tomorrow stand out was

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not just its poignant symbolism, but its origins and execution. The project grew out of brainstorming conversations at one of “A Common Cause to All” convenings—not from a top-down mandate from national planning bodies. Moreover, the initiative was innovative and flexible in its approach: simple yet impactful, grounded in Revolution-era imagery but easily adapted into a universal message relevant to Americans of all locations, beliefs, and backgrounds. Ultimately, organizers counted at least 235 nationwide participants at the state, local, and institutional level.

Two Lights for Tomorrow offers a compelling model for how to move forward with 250th planning. Even in the face of increased efforts to control the narrative of the U.S. 250th, there is no need for state and local planners to abandon their thoughtful, community-based work.

This emphasis on thematic resonance and broad participation is evidenced by the many other state-level 250th projects that gained traction over the past 12 months. Colorado, for example, formally launched its initiative marking both the Semiquincentennial and the state's 150th anniversary of statehood, enjoying a blitz of media coverage and public excitement. Meanwhile, other states launched specific programs long in development, such as North Carolina's new teacher fellowship program or the Murals Across Ohio initiative. After so many years of discussion and deliberation, it has been exciting to see so many projects begin to come to fruition.

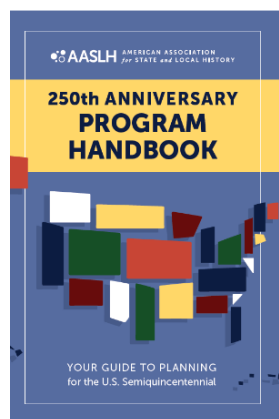


State commissions meet-and-greet at AASLH annual conference, September 2024. Photograph by Dana Davis.

Finally, this past year also saw state-level 250th planners give further consideration to outreach and legacy. These efforts include holding convenings for counties and municipalities, developing branding and publicity kits for broad use, and the development of state-level resources and program ideas for local communities to join. AASLH was also pleased to help facilitate two outreach opportunities, first via an in-person meet-and-greet at the AASLH 2024 annual conference in Mobile, Alabama, and then virtually during the online event 250 Con (more on that below) in February 2025. With AASLH's support, state commissions also continued conversations about meaningful ways to propel the legacy of the Semiquincentennial forward, including identifying common metrics for evaluating the impact and reach of anniversary efforts that can be compared both across regions and nationally. We expect to continue these conversations with state 250th commissions over the coming months and develop a plan that can be implemented in early 2027. Designing a common method for measuring the outputs and outcomes of Semiquincentennial activities will help support advocacy efforts, institutional planning, and conversations with stakeholders for many years to come.

AASLH Activities

Over the past 12 months, AASLH has further solidified its leadership of the history community in planning for the Semiquincentennial, not only by continuing to provide vision, resources, and programs to advance preparations, but by ramping up our advocacy for the field in the face of new challenges.



Last July, AASLH released its second signature Semiquincentennial resource, the [250th Anniversary Program Handbook](#). Responding to a frequently expressed need from across the field, this resource features more than 30 low-cost, sustainable program ideas to provide direction and inspiration to small history organizations of all sizes, scopes, and locations as they prepare for 2026. Together with the [Making History at 250 field guide](#), these companion tools offer both conceptual and concrete guidance for organizations to develop programs and services that can serve their varied audiences. In addition to printing 20,000 hard copies of the handbook and distributing thousands more virtually, AASLH broadened the reach of this new resource via a series of workshops facilitated by Prycer Consulting. Held online several times and in-person at AASLH's 2024 annual conference and at various regional museum conferences, the workshop offered practitioners the chance to explore the handbook and field guide and learn how to effectively apply these tools to their organization. Meanwhile, AASLH continued to distribute copies of the field guide throughout the year; between the field guide and new handbook, AASLH has disseminated over 50,000 hard copies—and thousands more digitally—of these vital resources to the field.

In addition to holding 250th planning workshops throughout the year, AASLH designed a galvanizing and unifying moment for the field in the form of the large-scale online event [250 Con](#). Held in February 2025, the convening served as a platform for attendees to learn about national and state planning opportunities, identify actionable ways to participate, and join their peers in generating enthusiasm for this once-in-a-generation milestone. The two-day event, which saw over 500 registrants, kicked off with a keynote conversation featuring the leaders of the Smithsonian Institution and Library of Congress, followed by “lightning rounds” of major Semiquincentennial initiatives, breakout sessions for networking and learning, and a virtual meet-and-greet with state 250th commissions. [Sessions recordings](#) are available on AASLH's website.



In addition to spending the last year developing further resources and programs for planners, AASLH began exploring how to further and, eventually, measure the anniversary's legacy after 2026. As part of this effort, AASLH embarked on a special partnership with Wiki Education to offer free training courses for history practitioners to improve and expand the historical content on Wikipedia in advance of the 250th. Wikipedia sees 500 million monthly readers and plays an outsized role in shaping the answers generated by search engines and AI assistants. This makes the accuracy, completeness, and integrity of the historical content on Wikipedia vitally important, especially as more people than ever search online for information about American history in 2026. The joint online course offered by Wiki Education and

AASLH, [“250 by 2026,”](#) teaches best practices in contributing evidence-based, comprehensive information to Wikipedia, helping millions of readers access well-sourced information and better understand the value of history for years to come. These courses will continue to be offered into 2026.

AASLH paired this kind of legacy-oriented program development with early conversations with state 250th commissions representatives about how to create common metrics for measuring the impact of anniversary initiatives in a meaningful way. While these conversations are ongoing, they signify an inevitable evolution in both state-level planners’ and AASLH’s thinking as the horizon of 2026 approaches. These conversations have taken place as part of AASLH’s continued role as a convener of key 250th networks. We spent the past year meeting quarterly both with our National 250th Coordinating Committee and group of state 250th commissions to foster coordination and deepen relationships. We are eager to continue those conversations throughout this final year of planning.

The worrisome activity at the national level has, of course, shaped AASLH’s 250th activities over the past year. In the face of these challenges, AASLH has ramped up its efforts to promote the collaboratively set vision for the 250th the field has embraced for years: a commemoration that helps American society progress towards justice through more complete, accurate history and one that strengthens the history field by investing in its conceptual and physical infrastructure. AASLH’s work in this regard includes bolstering ties with journalists, advocating for investment in 250th work, and reaching out to cross-sector partners to share information and discuss areas of alignment. As part of this effort, AASLH’s CEO & President John Dichtl was quoted in [two New York Times articles](#) and also helped lead advocacy for federal funding for IMLS and the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission in support of 250th activities.



John Dichtl, president & CEO of AASLH, speaking at the National Constitution Center, September 2024.

Finally, over the past year AASLH has brought further visibility to the 250th and history community by presenting at conferences, workshops, webinars, and other events. Our staff has spoken about the 250th in-person and virtually in venues including: “A Common Cause to All” convening in Virginia, a PA250 conference at the National Constitution Center, a New York University museum studies class, a Delaware 250 symposium, the annual conference of the New England Museums Association, a webinar for the Society of American Archivists, a meeting of the Maryland 250 Commission, trainings for the Youth250 initiative, and the annual meeting of the Council of State Governments. We paired this staff presence at various external events with a robust slate of 250th-related sessions at our own annual conference in Mobile, Alabama, in September 2024, which featured a meet-and-greet with state 250th commissions, as well as a 250th program handbook workshop and panels on topics including engaging younger generations in the 250th, civics education, healing commemorations, planning for the 250th on a shoestring budget, and place, environment, and social justice in relation to the anniversary.

AASLH is eager to help fulfill the incredible promise of the 250th as we enter the home stretch of planning. On that note, this report marks AASLH’s eighth and final annual update on the status of 250th planning. We hope these updates have been useful, and we remain excited for the programs, activities, and services that will mark this anniversary. In 2026 and 2027, we plan to offer reflections on the scope and impact of the 250th. In the years that follow, we will work to carry on the legacy of this anniversary by continuing to provide vision, leadership, and resources for history practitioners nationwide.

The Year Ahead

As we enter the final year of 250th planning, AASLH recommends the following areas of focus to help guide the field's efforts against a constantly evolving backdrop:

1. Don't cede the narrative

Executive actions to narrow or restrict history and cultural funding cannot change the sound work already underway at history organizations across the country. Now is the time for our field to redouble our commitment to full and honest history—one that is evidence-based and audience-centered. Giving up on the 250th now will only allow the meaning and legacy of this milestone to be defined by those most at odds with the history community's values and practices. This is the time to stay the course.

2. Embrace the grassroots nature of the 250th

The Semiquincentennial, by design, was always going to be a highly decentralized commemoration. In the face of new challenges at the national level, this aspect of the anniversary has become its greatest strength. We—organizations and individuals at the local level—still have the knowledge, relationships, and power to make this commemoration meaningful relevant to our communities. The year ahead is a time to prioritize relationship-building and community engagement that is thoughtful, inclusive, and tailored to our stakeholders.

3. There's no need to reinvent the wheel

Funding for history has long been tight, but that has become truer than ever over the past several months. For many organizations, this makes participating in the Semiquincentennial a daunting proposition. But there are dozens of low-resource ways to take part in the commemoration, whether that means adapting an idea from AASLH's [250th Anniversary Program Handbook](#) or keying in to a preexisting major initiative designed for local engagement. Watch [recordings from AASLH's 250 Con](#) to learn about actionable ways to join national 250th projects.

4. Stay connected with your peers—and with AASLH

The pressures of the political environment and planning for a major anniversary are too great to shoulder alone. As we embark as a field on the final year of planning, we encourage you to foster new and strengthened relationships with peer institutions, community groups, and other stakeholders supportive of your work and audiences. As the nation's home for history, AASLH is honored to provide multiple opportunities throughout the year to cultivate fieldwide relationships, including via [professional development offerings](#), [affinity communities](#), and our [annual conference](#). Whether through AASLH, your regional or state professional association, or your local community, we urge you to devote time in the year ahead to strengthening ties. These relationships can offer opportunities for exchanging valuable information, developing innovative partnerships, and providing mutual support.

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