

MAKING HISTORY AT 250

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

An Annual Update on the Semiquincentennial

July 2022



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A Note from the President & CEO

The Semiquincentennial of the founding of the United States' is now just four years away. At the national, state, and local levels, history organizations, civic groups, and communities are advancing plans to commemorate American history for this momentous occasion. Many other institutions and groups, however, have yet to get started. With four years left to go, the history community still has time to plan and execute big, creative, ambitious projects—but just barely. In order to take fullest advantage of the opportunities this anniversary presents, we have to begin now to put the pieces together.

In the spirit of encouraging broad, bold, collaborative thinking about the possibilities the Semiquincentennial will present to our field and the wider American public, the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) has put together this report, an update on planning for the 250th. This is the fifth such report AASLH has issued, a reflection of our early and ongoing leadership of field-wide Semiquincentennial planning and conversations.

Since 2017, when we began working in earnest to prepare the field for the 250th, AASLH has published blog posts, held listening sessions, hosted webinars and conference sessions, and regularly convened a national coordinating committee to provide space for our community to discuss what this anniversary represents and how we can make the most of it. Most notably, last summer AASLH published *Making History at 250: The Field Guide for the Semiquincentennial*. The *Field Guide* contains a set of five historical themes that can guide programming from the local to the international. We plan to continue to listen to our field, convene important conversations about the needs and roles of history institutions, and provide resources to strengthen the history community in the lead-up to 2026.

Over the past five years, however, the world has become a very different place. Increasing political polarization, the scourge of willful misinformation, a renewed movement to redress racial injustice, and a global pandemic have fundamentally altered our communities, our nation, our world, and the ways we relate to each other. This shift is particularly evident in our national discourse about history, which has grown considerably more fraught. Genuine disagreements about how to properly reckon with injustices of the past have been weaponized by elected

officials, resulting in a host of efforts to censor history in classrooms, libraries, and beyond. The strained nature of our national conversation around history has raised the stakes considerably for 2026, demanding approaches to the commemoration that can provide a foundation for a renewed commitment to American democracy.

Although much has changed over the past five years, AASLH's foundational premise for involvement in Semiquincentennial planning has not. We continue to believe that this anniversary offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to connect Americans with a fuller, more honest vision of our shared history, one that can be used across our diverse society to provide a stronger basis for civic participation. Through our actions during the Semiquincentennial, the history community can ensure all Americans see themselves, their interests, and their concerns represented in our depictions of the past, empowering them to use history to build a more just society in the future.

Whether you're well into planning or have yet to get started, we hope this report will help history practitioners everywhere get on the same page, and then get to work. Our communities and our nation depend on it.

John R. Dichtl

President & CEO

AASLH

National planning update

As the nation moves ever closer to its 250th anniversary, national commemoration plans continue to come into focus. While organizations and institutions of various kinds are approaching the Semiquincentennial in a range of different ways, much of the national planning effort is animated by the idea of sharing the diverse stories of our national past and connecting them to the 250-year long effort to become “a more perfect union.” Despite setbacks and uneven progress in the planning process, there does seem to be a broad commitment to using this anniversary to share a more inclusive vision of American history.

The **U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission** and its nonprofit partner the **America250 Foundation** have stated a commitment to make 2026 the “most inclusive commemoration in American history.” As part of that effort, some major signature programs, like a national “Young People’s Continental Congress” planned for 2024, have now been confirmed. They have also held several webinars and listening sessions exploring topics like the forced removal of Native people in U.S. history, how the Latino, Hispanic, and Chicano communities are approaching the 250th, and the value of historic preservation. America250 continues to convene several advisory councils focused on areas like history education, civics and civic engagement, youth engagement, and several other issue areas. More broadly, America250 is still in a phase focused on stakeholder engagement, coordination and support for state-level activities, fundraising, and strategic planning. Their most recent report on activities suggested they plan to shift into a more action and program focused phase sometime in 2023.

Those efforts, however, have been hindered substantially by internal dysfunction and controversy. Recent reports have alleged that the Foundation fosters a workplace hostile to women and is mismanaging its operation through conflicts of interest, cronyism, and misappropriation of federal funds. This turmoil has led to staff turnover and the withdrawal of at least one key corporate sponsor; it also seems to have hindered progress toward major national planning initiatives. These public controversies have also created internal conflict within the Commission itself, with some Commission members calling for changes in leadership and structure at the America250 Foundation.

Thankfully, the difficulties the federal Commission has encountered have been offset by substantial national progress elsewhere. In June 2022, the **Institute of Museum and Library Services** (IMLS) launched “IMLS 250: All Stories. All People. All Places.” In their announcement of the project, IMLS stated “this initiative is committed to honoring the value of all stories about our nation’s development focusing on local histories and how their actions shaped the country, while respecting regional and cultural differences and ensuring multiple voices are represented.” Likewise, the **National Endowment for the Humanities** (NEH) is continuing its “A More Perfect Union” initiative focused on supporting various Semiquincentennial projects from scholars and humanities organizations. The **National Park Service** has already launched Semiquincentennial-focused historic preservation grants, with broader plans to commemorate the 250th through programming at its sites across the country. Many other federal agencies

and entities all plan on advancing substantial initiatives related to the Semiquincentennial, though many continue to be in the early planning stages.

Other national history and civic initiatives are using the approach of the Semiquincentennial to accelerate new programs and initiatives. Examples include:

Educating for American Democracy: A coalition of leaders and educators providing tools to make civics and history education a priority and support “informed, authentic, engaged citizenship.”

Made By Us: A group of history museums and civic organizations using history to “inspire, inform, and empower Millennials and Gen Z as they shape our country’s future.” Made By Us are the coordinators of the new national “Civic Season” tradition.

Our Common Purpose: A report and initiative from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences’ bipartisan Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship. It recommends ways to reform political institutions, invest in civil society, and transform American civic culture for the Semiquincentennial.

Each of these national initiatives, while not conceived solely as history projects, offer ideas and opportunities for history institutions and practitioners of all kinds. Each project uses the approach of 2026 as an opportunity to spark action toward strengthening education and civil society.

Finally, funding remains a missing piece from national planning. While NEH and NPS have modest grant funds available for 250th anniversary projects, there has yet to be any indication of the kind of investment in history education, interpretation, and preservation that could leave a truly lasting legacy. There remains the possibility, however, that such funding could materialize in the coming years.

In sum, energy continues to build around the 250th anniversary. Even despite a lack of progress from the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, federal agencies and national coalitions are using the lead-up of this anniversary to advance several exciting new initiatives. Coupled with AASLH’s ongoing leadership of Semiquincentennial planning, such as the regular convening of our national coordinating committee, national planning progress bodes well for a meaningful and thoughtful Semiquincentennial commemoration.

How States are Preparing for the Semiquincentennial

While much of the field’s focus is on national Semiquincentennial planning efforts, most of the activity over the past year has been at the state level. In anticipation of a broadly decentralized

commemoration, twenty-nine states have already established state-level 250th anniversary commissions of one kind or another, with legislation pending in several others. These efforts span the country, including states with obvious links to the Revolutionary War like Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Virginia, but also states with a far different experience of 1776, like Nebraska, Washington, Alabama, North Dakota, and Utah.

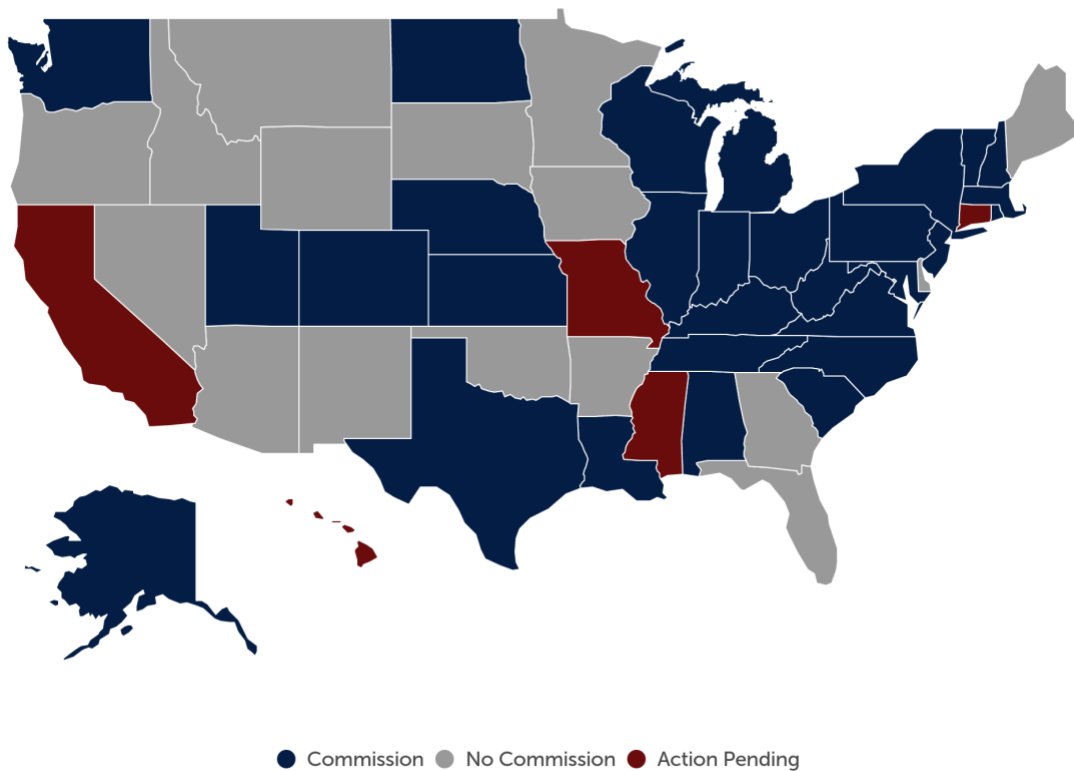


Fig. 1: State-level Semiquincentennial Commission status. You can find a full list of state commissions, along with links to relevant legislation, at [AASLH.org/250](https://www.aaslh.org/250)

These state 250th commissions will play an important role during the lead-up to 2026, and AASLH has provided encouragement and assistance as they are brought online. These entities will organize their state’s 250th commemoration, helping to coordinate activities among museums, scholars, tribal communities, heritage organizations, and others invested in history and heritage tourism. State 250th commissions will also play other roles: they may serve as conduits for distributing federal funding to local institutions, and will help provide recognition to local programs, connecting them to the national commemoration.

So far, state commissions have taken several different forms. In some states, like North Carolina, the governor or legislature have simply recognized an existing agency or organization as the official planner. New Jersey and Michigan, meanwhile, authorized a partnership between

major government agencies and private nonprofits, tasking them with leading the commemoration effort together. In other states, new, stand-alone commissions have been established through legislation. They often include elected officials, individuals appointed by legislatures and governors, as well as representatives of the professional history community, such as the leaders of state museums, historical societies, humanities councils, state universities, and others. Commissions also often include representatives from major state agencies, like tourism bureaus, Native American affairs agencies, and others.

Over the past few years, AASLH has played an active role in assisting the development of these state commemoration efforts. Very early on, AASLH helped attendees of the annual “State Historical Administrators Meeting” stay abreast of developments related to the 250th and encouraged them to establish a commission in their states. As states began to create commissions, AASLH also shared legislation from early adopters to help influence the shape of state commissions elsewhere. More recently, AASLH has also played an active role in improving the structure of state commissions. By closely tracking the introduction of legislation related to the 250th at the state level, AASLH has been able to issue advocacy alerts to state-level partners in an effort to improve bills that provided little representation for the state’s professional history community. In these efforts, AASLH has advocated for commissions that can advance a broad and inclusive telling of American history, with representation from across the public history and museum community.

AASLH continues to provide resources and leadership to these state-level commissions. AASLH’s 2021 publication ***Making History at 250: The Field Guide for the Semiquincentennial*** has helped members of state commissions consider how to approach their state’s commemoration programs and make them relevant to the residents of their respective states. In Illinois, use of the guide and its historical themes was even written into the legislation creating the state’s 250th commission. Moving forward, AASLH hopes to expand its support for state commissions, continuing to provide resources and assistance as we get nearer to 2026.

In the coming years, we expect nearly every state and territory will develop a 250th anniversary commission; the only question is if the history community in your state will be involved. If your state does not yet have a 250th commission, AASLH recommends getting in touch with state history leaders (such as state historical societies, museums, museum associations, or state historians), drawing on models from other states, and beginning to chart a path forward. Without involvement from the history and museum community, commissions will be driven by other interests, making it less likely they will reflect the depth and nuance history practitioners can bring to the statewide and national conversation.

Making History at 250

The Field Guide for the Semiquincentennial—One Year Later

Last year, on July 1, 2021, the American Association for State and Local History published *Making History at 250: The Field Guide for the Semiquincentennial*. Developed through a year of conversations with dozens of scholars, museum professionals, public historians, and others across the history community, AASLH produced the *Field Guide* to spark planning for the U.S. 250th anniversary. Full of inspiring ideas and accessible historical themes, AASLH has distributed the field guide far and wide over the past year to assist museum professionals, educators, consultants, public officials, and others beginning to consider how they will contribute to the commemoration in 2026.

First and foremost, the guide emphasizes to the history community that the 250th anniversary is an opportunity to explore the full sweep of the American past, “beginning millennia before 1776 and continuing to the present.” It encourages the history community to think beyond a narrow focus on the American Revolution and “founding fathers,” and instead calls on the field to use the Semiquincentennial to engage our audiences with a more complete, more honest vision of American history. In his introductory letter to the guide, AASLH President & CEO John Dichtl urges the field to use 2026 as a moment for “celebrating examples of liberty, courage, and sacrifice while reckoning with moments of injustice, racism, and violence.” The *Field Guide* offers ways that professionals and volunteers throughout the history community can use the Semiquincentennial to encourage critical engagement with our national past and to build a more widely shared understanding of our diverse and complex history.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the *Field Guide* is its five historical themes. In developing the guide, AASLH spoke with dozens of professionals with different backgrounds and perspectives. We asked them: *how has our understanding of the past has changed since the Bicentennial era? What kinds of topics or questions about American history should be the focus of programming in 2026?* The result is a set of themes that can serve as a foundation for everything from exhibits to community conversations to digital programming of all kinds. As we state in the *Field Guide*, these themes are intended “to encourage inclusive, relevant histories and provide cohesiveness to a multi-faceted, grassroots commemoration.” The themes are:

- We the people
- Power of place
- American experiment
- Unfinished revolutions
- Doing history

Along with a short description of each theme, the *Field Guide* also includes several guiding questions. These questions offer points of entry for all kinds of institutions to connect their specific areas of expertise and the interests of their audiences to the national thematic framework—no matter where they’re located. The “We the People” theme, for example, asks us to consider: “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?” Across the five themes are more than two dozen such questions, any one of which can be used to guide programming for the Semiquincentennial and spark conversation in the lead up to 2026.

The *Field Guide* has already begun to shape programming around the country. Thanks to support from both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the William G. Pomeroy Foundation, AASLH has printed and distributed more than *twenty thousand copies* of the guide, mostly to small history organizations, in addition to the thousands more who have accessed the guide in digital format. The guide and its themes are being used across the country to spark conversations among community members, state, county, and local 250th commissions, and programming plans at a wide variety of history organizations. Multiple state commissions have requested copies for their planning meetings, and it’s even being written in to legislation: in Illinois, legislations explicitly directs the state Commission members to consider the themes of the *Field Guide*. Further, AASLH is using the *Field Guide* themes to organize the next several Annual Conferences; the theme of the 2022 conference in Buffalo is “Power of Place.”

By providing a common set of historical questions to organize 250th programming and conversations, the *Field Guide* can facilitate collaborations between institutions and across states and regions. More broadly, the ideas in the *Field Guide* offer a way for historians, museum professionals, and history practitioners of all kinds to begin thinking about how they or their institution will contribute to the Semiquincentennial. This anniversary presents the nation with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to renew engagement with our national past and use history to help make progress toward a more just society; the *Making History at 250 Field Guide* can help all of us take part.

Beyond 250

The next four years are not just a chance to prepare for the Semiquincentennial; they’re an opportunity to think about the future and to re-envision what our field is and does. It’s an opportunity to step back and think deeply about who our institutions serve, how we serve

them, and how we can enhance our collective impact. What kinds of changes—in our field, in our communities, and in our nation—do we hope this anniversary can help us bring about?

In short: *what kind of legacy will this anniversary leave?*

With an increase in interest and funding, and with some creative and ambitious thinking by members of our field, we can develop some exciting answers to these questions. Not only does the Semiquincentennial offer an opportunity to share a fuller history with our audiences, it presents a chance to leverage the interest and excitement for history into lasting change. That could mean advocating for billions in new public investment in the nation's historical infrastructure or generating a new commitment to protect historical resources from the effects of climate change or reinventing how history institutions operate in partnership with other community organizations. With big thinking and advance planning, the history community can use the next four years as an opportunity to accelerate truly transformational changes.

But those changes will not happen on their own. It will take collective, concerted effort from all of us. Over the next four years, the approach of the 250th anniversary will present our field with rare opportunities to generate new ideas, secure new sources of funding, and capture public energy and attention. Creative thinking and planning now can ensure we are all prepared to make the most of it, and to use this anniversary to strengthen the history community for decades to come.