

# MAKING HISTORY AT 250

## An Update on U.S. Semiquincentennial Planning

July 2023



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION  
*for* STATE *and* LOCAL HISTORY

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## A Note from the President & CEO


This year's 4th of July kicks off the three-year countdown to the U.S. Semiquincentennial in 2026. This annual report—the fifth of its kind from the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH)—seeks to answer two central questions: What is the state of planning? And what work is left to be done?

In many ways, the last year has been one of considerable progress for 250th preparations: the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission welcomed a new chair, state commissions multiplied, and a sense of urgency and interest gained traction across the history field. AASLH, which for several years has spearheaded efforts to help the history community prepare for the 250th, has substantially increased its capacity to lead through a major grant from the William G. Pomeroy Foundation. This support has had an exponential effect, resulting in increased staffing, research, programming, and advocacy in support of the 250th.

On the other hand, dwindling resources and controversies over history education nationwide are testing the bandwidth of our field. Understandably, the vast majority of history organizations and sites have not yet thought about preparing for the 250th or have done some preliminary thinking but taken no action, according to a 2023 AASLH survey of history organizations. If an organization is not plagued by concerns about securing funding in an unpredictable economy, then it is likely worried about navigating polarized opinions in a hazardous political environment. Moreover, the history field faces the challenge that much of the public shows limited awareness or appetite for the upcoming anniversary.

What are we to make of these fits and starts? The answer lies in remaining focused on the once-in-a-generation promise of this anniversary. The Semiquincentennial is a vital opportunity to help American society progress towards justice through an inclusive approach to history and to strengthen the history field by attracting interest and investment. We believe the 250th is a chance for people all over the country and of all ages, beliefs, and backgrounds to rise above the fractured, hostile nature of our current discourse and engage with the full sweep of American history. Only by grappling honestly with the whole story, in all of its breadth and complexity, can we illuminate present-day challenges and reach towards that “more perfect Union.”

By planning intentionally and collaboratively, and by striving for a relevant and inclusive Semiquincentennial, we can make the most of 2026. We hope you use this report to help make that happen.



**John R. Dichtl**

President & CEO

American Association for State and Local History

## National Planning Update

Over the past year, the most significant news to come out of the national planning landscape has been the appointment of Rosie Rios, former Treasurer of the United States, as Chair of the U.S.

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*[U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission] Chair Rios has signaled an interest in reasserting the Commission's central vision for the Semiquincentennial and smoothing America 250's operations.*

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Semiquincentennial Commission. Despite past controversy and ongoing lawsuits, the Commission and its nonprofit arm, the America 250 Foundation, have undergone an organizational restructuring since last summer. In August 2022, Chair Rios, a Commission member, replaced Dan DiLella, who had been chair since 2018. Chair Rios also became the chair of the America 250 Foundation, and Emily Sexton, the foundation's chief legal officer, became its president, replacing President and CEO Joe

Daniels. Chair Rios has signaled an interest in reasserting the Commission's central vision for the Semiquincentennial and smoothing America 250's operations. For this report, AASLH reached out to Chair Rios to offer insights on national planning activities:

### A Message from U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission Chair Rosie Rios

*America250 has been laser-focused on our core mission—to plan and orchestrate the most inclusive anniversary in our nation's history. Our team has been hard at work gearing up for the Semiquincentennial, listening to Americans across the country about what they want the 250th to look like, honing our message, and recruiting states and territories to form America250 entities that will help ensure an anniversary that includes all Americans. Of course, this multi-year, nonpartisan effort will not be possible without the work that organizations like AASLH do to keep American history alive at the state and local level.*



*After months of preparation, this July 4th will mark the official launch of a sustained, nationwide public awareness campaign—titled America's Invitation—encouraging every American to get involved in commemorating this historic milestone. America's Invitation is rooted in a call-to-action inviting the public to share their own American stories—about their communities, culture, neighborhoods, as well as their hopes and dreams for the future—through photos, videos, artwork, poems, songs, letters, emails, or on social media. We believe that every community, every person, and every story adds something to the fabric of America—just as each submission to America's Invitation will add to the portrait of our nation as we approach 250.*

*Starting on July 4th, we invite all AASLH members to visit [www.america250.org](http://www.america250.org) and participate in America's Invitation by sharing your story, your slice of Americana, or your hopes for our country's future. This is the first step in a multi-year effort to commemorate the 250th, and we're excited to continue developing events and activations along with our partners on the ground as we collectively reflect on our nation's past, honor the contributions of Americans from all walks of life, and look to the future for the next generation and beyond.*



Tall ships during the Bicentennial in New York City. Photograph by Gotfryd, Bernard. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2020734397/>.

Work at the national level continues beyond the efforts of the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission and America 250. In August 2021, 21 federal agencies signed an interagency memorandum of understanding with American 250 that commits them to planning, creating, and collaborating on 250th anniversary programming.

For 2024, the **National Park Service** (NPS) has [dedicated funds](#) for “diverse programming that promotes shared stories and experiences and strengthens common bonds . . . leading up to July 4, 2026.” NPS also offers preservation-based support through its Semiquincentennial Grants Program, begun last year, for “restoring and preserving State owned sites and structures listed on the National Register of Historic Places that commemorate the founding of the nation.”

The **Institute of Museum and Library Services** (IMLS) recently announced a partnership with PBS Books. Together they will produce [“Visions of America: All Stories, All People, All Places.”](#) a “series of videos and virtual conversations that explores our post-pandemic nation with a renewed interest in the places, people, and stories that have contributed to the America we live in today.” Kicking off with conversations about topics including the durability of the U.S. Constitution and the 75th anniversary of the desegregation of the military, the series will continue this fall with video tours of lesser-known historical sites led by IMLS Director Crosby Kemper.

Expanding on its “A More Perfect Union” initiative, which focused on projects that enhance our understanding of the country’s founding period, the **National Endowment for the Humanities** (NEH) has launched a much broader agency-wide program. NEH’s “American Tapestry: Weaving Together Past, Present, and Future,” which incorporates the earlier initiative, will use the humanities to strengthen democracy, advance equity for all, and address our changing climate.

These are just a few of the federal-level efforts underway to prepare for the Semiquincentennial. We anticipate seeing an increase in announcements of these sorts of national initiatives in the coming years.





Over the past year, we have also seen an increase in inquiries related to the nature and extent of state-level funding available to support 250th planning. In response, AASLH engaged consultant Brian W. Martin to conduct a pilot study of six states to learn more about this issue. The state entities selected for the pilot (Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania) reflect varied stages of development, organizational structure, geographical distribution, and perceived funding levels. With these differences in mind, Dr. Martin gathered information from public sources and spoke with officials and staff. Though this research precludes precise comparisons or definitive conclusions, initial findings support planning by state commissions and inform those developing 250th programming.

**Observation 1**

**Start-up funding fuels organizational launch.** The sources and scale of start-up funding vary in relation to organizational structure, with state agencies more able to reprogram and redeploy existing resources to get things moving. In other instances, leadership donations to unfunded commissions and nonprofit partners primed the pump. The lack of sufficient start-up funding may not completely stall the launch of a 250th planning entity, but in the case of one pilot state it has hampered organizational and program development for years. The newest unfunded entities struggle to gain traction, with one agency in the pilot even paying out-of-pocket to post legal notices for commission meetings. This finding may prove useful to the approximately 17 states yet to form an official 250th entity and focus those still in the early stages, spurring them to prioritize funding for staff or contractors to execute next steps.

**Observation 2**

**Reliance on multiple sources of funding helps with momentum.** While not the only factor driving momentum, the two most well-funded and active states in our pilot have multiple funding streams:

North Carolina	Pennsylvania
<p><b>State appropriations</b></p> <p>For FY2022 to 2023, \$92,231 for one position, benefits, and travel, and \$200,000 in non-recurring funds for travel, education materials, archaeology projects, and 250th waysides</p> <p style="text-align: center;">+</p>	<p><b>Commonwealth support</b></p> <p>\$2,155,000 allocated from 2019 to 2023</p> <p style="text-align: center;">+</p>
<p><b>Lapsed salary spending</b></p> <p>For FY 2021–22 and FY 2022–23, \$357,101 available, with \$131,200 used for temporary 250th positions and remainder for programs</p> <p style="text-align: center;">+</p>	<p><b>Fundraising from private sources</b></p> <p>\$1,800,000 raised from 2019 to 2023, with commitments through 2027 of \$1,537,100</p> <p style="text-align: center;">+</p>
<p><b>Federal community project funding</b></p> <p>\$142,000 in FY 2023–24 to develop 250th primary document sets through National Archives-NHPRC</p> <p style="text-align: center;">+</p>	<p><b>In-kind contributions</b></p> <p>\$325,000 raised from 2019 to 2023</p> <p style="text-align: center;">+</p>
<p><b>Grants</b></p> <p>\$10,000 from America 250 for branding; \$500,000 NPS Semiquincentennial Grant for preservation</p>	<p><b>Semiquincentennial license plate revenue</b></p> <p>Fund established by law in 2022</p> <p style="text-align: center;">+</p>
	<p><b>Infrastructure funding</b></p> <p>Selection of infrastructure improvement projects to welcome 250th visitors and serve future generations closes December 2023</p>

North Carolina also has a funding prospectus for corporations and foundations currently under review. To date, Pennsylvania has spent most of its funds on operations, programming, project launches, and marketing and is pursuing a \$2.5 million appropriation for FY 2023–24.

### Observation 3

**All states face the perennial “chicken/egg” conundrum of which comes first: viable program concepts or seed funding for program planning.** Start-up funds, when available, help solve this puzzle by underwriting marketable and actionable plans. Some states plan to rebrand proven and funded programs to embody Semiquincentennial-related themes and potentially attract additional resources to expand program scale or reach. States may also consider collaborating with other states to identify program concepts already under development or executed that could be “franchised” with some economies of scale and risk mitigation for funders and states.

### Observation 4

**Most states struggle to envision the financial scale of the commemoration.** As one state official put it, “How much do you plan when you don't know what you can afford? And how do you know what to ask for if you aren't sure how big to plan?” The Colorado planning commission found state revenue and

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expenditure data from the Bicentennial era useful in setting inflation-adjusted expectations at between \$10 and \$20 million for its America 250-Colorado 150 commemoration. Other states could use readily available federal Bicentennial financial data to approximate an inherently conservative scale. For the six pilot states, the average total value for in-state projects that received some federal matching funds during the Bicentennial was \$10,750,000 in 2023 dollars.

Some states might find the financial record of recent statehood anniversaries helpful, but the Bicentennial numbers suggest that the scale of 250th funding will be orders of magnitude greater than, say, the Nebraska's 150th marked in 2017 with roughly \$325,000 in state funds over five years offset by \$181,000 in special license plate revenue.

### Observation 5

**Interstate collaboration along various dimensions may help everyone's limited resources go farther.** Representatives of each of our pilot states suggested some form of collaboration when asked what they wanted to know about funding in other states. Such collaboration could begin with the “franchised” program concept mentioned above, but it might also include sharing intrastate fundraising approaches, using comparable funding data to spur leaders and funders “to keep up with their neighbors,” identifying model grant policies and procedures to support local programming, etc. Many states already collaborate along these lines, and AASLH regularly convenes leaders of state 250th planning.



## AASLH Activities

This past year saw further expansion of AASLH’s leading role in preparing for the 250th anniversary, as we continued to make available new and existing programs and resources, convene key networks, and promote a vision of the 250th anniversary that makes the most of this rare opportunity. Our mounting efforts to use the Semiquincentennial to help American society progress towards justice through an inclusive approach to history and to strengthen the history field have been made possible in large part by a generous grant from the William G. Pomeroy Foundation. The grant, a four-year, \$400,000 gift, is the largest known gift from a private philanthropic foundation to support the commemoration.

The investment from the William G. Pomeroy Foundation allowed AASLH to bring on a full-time staff member charged with overseeing 250th related efforts. With this greater capacity, AASLH has introduced new professional development opportunities focused on the 250th. The first of these was AASLH’s inaugural virtual summit, “Commemoration Reconsidered: Ethics, Justice, and America’s 250th Anniversary,” aimed at engaging with those feeling understandably skeptical, cynical, or otherwise apprehensive about the 250th. Held in April 2023, the two-day event considered what we should commemorate, how, and why. As debates over public memory increasingly animate civic discourse, the virtual summit positioned the upcoming Semiquincentennial as a chance to consider lessons from the past and present as we envision a more inclusive approach to commemoration. More than 330 people registered for the event, which featured scholars and practitioners from across the field thoughtfully exploring the thorniest questions of commemoration and the 250th.



Promotional graphic for AASLH’s virtual summit featuring keynote speakers Erica Armstrong Dunbar, Stacey Halfmoon (Caddo), and Karin Wulf and moderator Paul Farber.

In May, AASLH launched a three-part webinar series on interpretive planning for the 250th intended for practitioners looking for a way to connect the commemoration to their site or organization. The series, made possible with support from the Classical American Homes Preservation Trust, will conclude in late July after sessions offering best practices in interpretive planning, connections to fieldwide themes, and

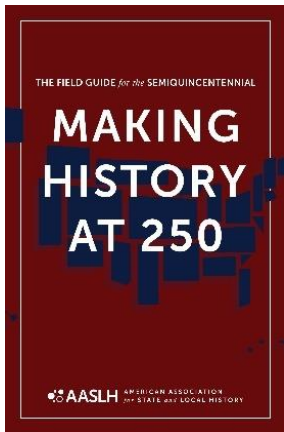
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*This suite of programming provides both content and skills in support of 250th interpretive and strategic efforts.*

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the chance to find inspiration and workshop ideas with fellow practitioners. AASLH is following the series with a full-day workshop at our 2023 Annual Conference in Boise, Idaho, centered around strategic planning for 2026. The workshop will help attendees make the most of the 250th by learning about strategic planning best practices and skills. AASLH is also planning several panel sessions for Boise on topics related to the Semiquincentennial, including a session on case studies in state-level planning and one on thinking critically about

Revolutionary era imagery and symbols. All together, from the virtual summit to the panels in Boise, this suite of programming provides both content and skills in support of 250th interpretive and strategic efforts while making the case that the anniversary is a momentous occasion for both history organizations and the audiences they serve.



While planning and implementing these virtual and in-person programs, AASLH has continued its distribution of a vital planning resource, *Making History at 250: The Field Guide for the Semiquincentennial*. First published in 2021 with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the *Field Guide* presents five historical themes offering unity of vision and purpose for what will otherwise be a primarily grassroots,

decentralized commemoration. The guide offers meaningful entry points to the commemoration for history organizations of all types, sizes, and locations. AASLH has distributed more than 20,000 copies of the *Field Guide* since it was first published, and in early 2023 we were notified that we had received a Chair's Award from the NEH to print and circulate approximately 10,000 more copies. This grant will allow AASLH to meet the ongoing demand for a publication that appears to have become a trusted tool for 250th planners.

### The *Field Guide* in the Field

- Inspired themes in the [New York State 250th Commemoration Field Guide](#)
- Incorporated into graduate course on interpreting historic house museums at George Washington University
- Influenced 250th interpretive vision of Delaware's Historical and Cultural Affairs Division for the John Dickinson Plantation and New Castle Court House
- Informed 250th strategic framework of Northern Neck region of Virginia
- Cited as potential organizing structure in Illinois State legislation creating Illinois 250th Commission
- Inspired themes for Washington State's Semiquincentennial Committee

AASLH has complemented its work developing programs and resources by maintaining its role as a convener of key groups over the last year, including our 250th Anniversary Coordinating Committee and the network of state commissions mentioned above. These networks are critical avenues for trading information and identifying issues common to planners nationwide. They also represent frequent opportunities to hear from an array of leaders from the field, ensuring that AASLH's efforts remain aligned with the latest trends in the field and with our vision for the 250th anniversary, which was collaboratively formed with feedback from many members of these networks.



*John Dichtl, president and CEO of AASLH, speaks at the 2023 Heritage Chocolate Society conference.*

In terms of that vision, AASLH has been actively promoting its two pillars—progressing towards justice through inclusive history and strengthening the field—by presenting at conferences, trainings, and other events throughout the past year. Staff members have been invited to speak about the Semiquincentennial in-person and virtually in venues including: the Heritage Chocolate Society's annual meeting (which focused on the 250th), a 250th planning meeting of the Heart of the Civil War National Heritage Area, the American Alliance of Museums' Museums Advocacy Day, VA250's "A Common Cause to All" meeting, the New Jersey Association of

Museums' annual conference, the Field Service Alliance's yearly spring training, and the ["We the Museum" podcast](#). This heightened visibility allows AASLH to put the priorities of the history community front and center as conversations about the 250th gain traction. We expect to continue these efforts in the coming year, as well as to broaden their scope to include print publications.

## Looking to the Year Ahead

While the field has undoubtedly made progress over the last twelve months in preparing for the 250th, the question remains: what is left to be done? Specifically, what should be our priorities for the year ahead? Shaped by conversations with planners from across the country, AASLH recommends the following:

### 1. Increase awareness and interest

Most Americans are still unaware of the coming 250th anniversary and, if they are aware, they do not necessarily see the anniversary as relevant to their lives. This is especially true of younger generations, according to the national coalition of history organizations [Made By Us](#). History organizations and other cultural institutions should begin building interest now and highlighting the relevance of the 250th to their communities. Raising public awareness, we know, is a priority for the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission. The field can help spread the word by encouraging marketing efforts, writing op-eds that emphasize the [anniversary's potential](#), and [forming local planning commissions](#).

### 2. Further develop organizational capacity

It takes time for organizations to conduct the strategic and interpretive planning necessary to ensure a meaningful 2026 for new and existing audiences. Now is the time for history institutions to invest in professional development opportunities to help position themselves accordingly. Consider enrolling in AASLH's [Standards and Excellence Program \(STEPS\) for History Organizations](#) or other offerings available via our [website](#), or at our [Annual Conferences](#). Keep an eye on our [250th webpage](#) to see programs highlighted that are specifically related to the 250th. Organizations can also reach out to their [state 250th commissions](#) and/or [state humanities councils](#) to see what resources might be available.

### 3. Push back on efforts to limit whole history

The past year has witnessed ongoing attempts to restrict access to a full, honest portrayal of American history. These efforts undermine the rare chance the 250th offers for the country to engage with our past in all its depth and complexity, helping people of all backgrounds and perspectives see themselves in the American story. Not only is this [more complete approach to history](#) what [most Americans want](#), it also plays an essential role in facilitating progress toward justice in American society. AASLH's [Reframing History toolkit](#) offers evidence-based strategies for communicating more effectively about history. You can also find information and resources about whole history and opposing censorship from organizations such as [Learn from History](#), [Educating for American Democracy](#), and [PEN America](#).

### 4. Advocate for funding for history organizations and sites

The Semiquincentennial presents a critical moment to strengthen the institutions that preserve and share American history. The more than 21,000 history organizations and sites in this country are vital to our communities, providing venues for millions of people to develop critical thinking skills as they learn about the past and assess contemporary challenges. Moreover, history organizations and sites are overwhelmingly small, operating on shoestring budgets and often run entirely by volunteers. Now is the time to advocate for increased funding for the field to ensure

that our historical structures, objects, and stories are preserved for generations to come. You can help advocate for funding this by participating in efforts such as [Museums Advocacy Day](#) or contacting your Member of Congress to encourage them to join the [America 250 Caucus](#).

#### **5. Ongoing growth of collaboration**

We have seen an increase in [communication and coordination](#) between [250th planners](#) over the last year, whether it comes in the form of partnerships between institutions or informal regional associations formed by state commissions. This sort of collaboration is an invaluable tool, as it offers fertile ground for sharing ideas, building relationships, troubleshooting common problems, avoiding unnecessary duplication of efforts, and more. It can also help in providing a united front to stakeholders such as funders and policymakers. We hope the coming year sees even more of this sort of cooperation. AASLH's annual conference, committees, and informal networks will continue to be venues for bringing planners together.

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