



We the Museum

Episode 6:

Unfinished Revolutions: Museums & America's 250th (with Madeleine Rosenberg)

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

The 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence is almost here. How can museums and history organizations use the Semiquincentennial to promote a fuller story of American history, practice ethical commemoration, increase visitation, and boost funding for the field? In this episode, I discuss these questions with Madeleine Rosenberg, Pomeroy Foundation Semiquincentennial Manager at the American Association for State and Local History.

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Hannah Hethmon (Narration): *Welcome back to We the Museum: a podcast for museum workers who want to form a more perfect institution.*

I'm your host, Hannah Hethmon, Owner and Executive Producer at Better Lemon Creative Audio, where I make podcasts for museums, history organizations, and other cultural nonprofits.

My first job in the public history/museum field was at AASLH, the American Association for State and Local History. I left that position in 2017, and soon after started making podcasts for the

field, which I've been doing ever since. The reason I bring this up is because I was around at AASLH for the first conversations about the upcoming Semiquincentennial, the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Back then, we were still a decade out from 2026, and there was plenty of time to plan. Now, it's only 3 years away, and for any institutions who want to capitalize on the event, the time to start is probably now.

To learn more about the 250th and how we can ethically and truthfully engage with this anniversary, I spoke to Madeleine Rosenberg at AASLH. I asked her why we should care about the Semiquincentennial, how we can practice ethical commemoration, how to make this a catalyst for more inclusive history, and what resources are out there for museums who want to get involved.

While AASLH's focus is public history institutions, I think this conversation will be useful to the wider field. Art museums, natural history museums, and parks —you all have objects and stories to share when it comes to reflecting on and examining America's history before, during, and after the Revolutionary period.

Before we jump into that conversation, I want to shout out our show sponsor, Landslide Creative. This podcast would not be happening without their support. Landslide Creative provides custom website design and development for museums who want to increase their engagement and connect with their visitors, donors, and volunteers. With a custom website designed for the unique needs of your museum, you can stop fighting with your website and focus on growing your impact. Head over to LandslideCreative.com to learn more.

Alright, let's talk commemoration and the 250th:

Madeleine: Hello, thanks for having me on the show. I'm Madeleine Rosenberg. I'm the Pomeroy Foundation Semiquincentennial Manager at the American Association for State and Local History. My job primarily entails leading AASLH's efforts to help ready the field for the 250th anniversary of the United States, which is coming up in 2026. So, the 250th of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. On a day-to-day basis, what I'm doing is supporting strategy and vision setting for the anniversary, leading development of resources and programming, especially for small organizations. I support state-level planning and activities and convene key networks, and I also work on current and new partnerships for this 250th anniversary. Semiquincentennial is another word you might hear.

For those of you who don't know, AASLH is the national professional association for public history institutions and the staff and volunteers who make them run. We provide professional

development programs, resources, advocacy, publications and research and more for about 5,500 institutional and individual members. That's what we do.

Hannah: So, the Semiquincentennial is a follow up from the Bicentennial-- the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration, which was obviously back in the '70s. Now I think for older members of our field, the idea of the 250th is inherently exciting. They lived through the Bicentennial a lot of them as kids or young people, and I think for a lot of them that energy around history and preservation is what inspired them to make history a career. I've met a lot of people in their late 50s or early 60s who were like, "This is why I went into public history." And that was the birth of public history as a bigger field as well. I'm kind of curious to start off by, how do you think the 250th will be different? And what makes it different from the Bicentennial? Just to get us started off with comparing those two.

Madeleine: Sure. Yeah. I've also met many people in our field who cite the Bicentennial as what inspired them to join the field. We also know that a huge portion of the 20,000 or so history organizations and sites that exist in the US now were formed in the Bicentennial era. And as you said, it was a huge time for history. The state humanities councils were established, there was a spike in public interest in history and geology and historic preservation, and the public history field itself was formalized. But I think as you are probably alluding to, there were also a lot of critiques of the Bicentennial period or efforts, with people objecting to it not being representative of their experiences or perspectives, not being as inclusive or pluralistic as it should be, being too triumphalist and tone being politicized. And ultimately what you saw was a lot of local and grassroots' Bicentennial efforts that were formed to complicate and broaden and supplement the national efforts of the Bicentennial. I do think that there is a lot of emphasis in our public memory of the Bicentennial on those few national efforts-- you hear people talking about the tall ships or things like that-- but there were also many grassroots and local efforts where communities really made that their own. And I'm emphasizing that because I think that's one of the aspects that we'd really like to see even more of for the Semiquincentennial. We think that the 250th can and will mark not just the 250th signing of the Declaration of Independence, but we want to see it as an opportunity to engage with history of what's now known as the United States beginning millennia before 1776 and then through to 1776 all the way to the present day. And we want to see Americans of all beliefs and backgrounds engaging with this anniversary from all over the country, whether they're in one of the states that have perhaps really direct ties to the Revolutionary era or not. But we want to see everyone feel like their history matters because of this anniversary. So I think that grassroots element and that more pluralistic element is something that we'd really like to see emphasized in the Semiquincentennial and I hope will be different. And I'm sure we'll get into this more... I think that the 1970s were a very complex political and social and cultural time, and this is also an extremely complex political and social and cultural moment. So I think that

that context is going to have to shape 250th planning. It already is and I think it's sort of inextricable from what the 250th will be.

Hannah: A lot of people also have that memory of it or knowledge of it as a very patriotic, celebratory, flag-waving kind of moment. And that can create some ambivalence. So I guess to kind of go into a pretty blunt question, why should we care? [laughs] For history workers, for the public, for museums, do we really need to mark this anniversary? Why is important? Why should we care or get involved or participate?

Madeleine: That is a totally valid question. What I would say is that anniversaries are high-profile opportunities to draw focus and to center attention and that they are moments for reckoning and reflection and hopefully, inspiration. Ultimately, anniversaries are what we make of them, and the 250th is going to be what we make of it. So at AASLH, we really do think that the 250th has transformative potential, that it's a once-in-a-generation chance to do two really important things—do lots of things, but there's two that we're focusing on for our vision of the 250th. The first is that we think it can help society progress towards justice through a full and honest telling of American history through an inclusive approach to American history. And second, we're focusing on its potential to strengthen the history field by attracting interest and investment.

Hannah: I think that's a good place to start from. Like, people are gonna be talking about this so why not make it an opportunity? Why not have the people who are doing inclusive history stand up and make sure that that's the type of history that's being discussed? And why not use this to get more money and support for the field? We certainly need it, you know.

So kind of going back to the idea of the inclusive history and history that moves us towards justice, we find ourselves—as you've alluded to—in a moment of a highly visible pushback against inclusive history. I mean, every day, even since I wrote these questions a week ago, the pushback is more and more. So in light of that and this ongoing work of a lot of people in the field to tell a fuller story of American history, how do we use what could very easily be a mainstream telling of history to generate interest in history that isn't just celebratory of a period where there's slavery, Native genocide and a whole bunch of injustices? How do we use this moment that feels like it could be a celebration to do realistic history that is honest and truthful?

Madeleine: Yeah, we really do believe that the 250th is a time where more than ever we need to be continuing to push forward towards a reckoning with all of American history and as you're saying, do it in an honest and nuanced way that takes hit on all of the contingencies and complexities and tensions and ambiguities in American history. As you're saying, there's a small powerful minority of people in this country working very hard to hinder that progress towards

inclusive history and towards a full honest telling of American history, whether it's through censorship or book bans or teacher intimidation.

And we think that we can use the 250th as a time to bolster our efforts to overcome that disruption of American history and to share a full story of the United States with all of its complexity, and to use that history to help illuminate the present and contemporary challenges that we're facing. So beyond just using the 250th as a sort of high profile focal point-- because I think there's a value in and of itself of it being a platform-- I think as part of this anniversary, we need to start from a place of being really thoughtful about what marking the birthday of the Declaration of Independence means, and be open to the fact that it means different things to different people.

We also need to be transparent about the fact that there is a significant disconnect between the ideals associated with the Revolutionary era and experiences of lots of people in our society over time through the present day. I think having that mindset of just being open and engaging with the different meanings that this anniversary can have for different people and the different experiences people have had can inform our planning conversations, the resources we develop, the programs that different history organizations put on curricula and lesson plans or whatever people do, but I think going into this thoughtfully and critically and being open to nuance will go a long way in making this anniversary multi-dimensional and inclusive.

Hannah: Yeah. I guess there's something about that balance between drawing in people who have a reverence for history or have an interest for history. Whatever that is. Whether that's just a respect for their ancestors or the museum-goers who want to see old documents, and helping them have that fuller experience of complicating the history—I just went to the New York Public Library's little exhibition, and the big thing they have upfront outlined in some light that you're drawn to it is a page from one of Jefferson's drafts of the Declaration of Independence. It's in his own hand, there's four pages, and anyone who's a history buff will be drawn to that. But its pages outline the problems with slavery that he didn't end up including in the declaration, and so the interpretation is very complicated to look at that, and so you have this moment of reverence of the past and an important handwriting of someone who shaped the country with the complication of his involvement in slavery and his role in that, and his inability to reject that in this society he's building. So I think it's moments like that that hopefully, we can use.

Madeleine: Yeah. Yeah. And I think that going back to that first pillar of our vision of wanting to really focus on inclusive history as a way of moving towards that more perfect union, we want to see a 250th that ensures that people of all beliefs and backgrounds see themselves in the American story, that they have a deeper understanding that history matters. And not only that

history matters, but that their history matters. Because this can help create more widely shared understandings of our past and it can illuminate contemporary problems. This more inclusive approach is not only more accurate history, a lot of research shows that it's actually what most Americans want. They want the whole story, they want the complexity, they want all of it and not less of it. And so I think we're on very solid ground when we say we need to move towards this fuller picture, we need to explore the diversity, past and present, of American history. Because like I said, it's accurate and it's also going to help us move the needle and progress as a society.

Hannah: Yeah. And the fact that that's what people want, that's a great thing for people to keep in mind too and for practitioners to keep in mind. This is interesting to people. People would like to be challenged and learn new things and see new perspectives.

Hannah Hethmon (Narration): *We'll be right back to my conversation with Madeleine Rosenberg, but first, it's time for a digital minute with Amanda Dyer, Creative Director at Landslide Creative:*

Amanda Dyer: Hi, I'm Amanda Dyer, creative Director at Landslide Creative, and I've got a quick tip you can use to improve your museum website. Think of your website visitors as skimmers, swimmers and divers skimmers. Wanna get in, get the information they need, and get out as quickly as possible. Swimmers might be willing to spend a bit more time and are looking for content that piques their interest and divers wanna explore and take it all in.

Consider each of these types of visitors in the website experience just like you would in your museum experience. For skimmers, make sure the most important information can be found quickly and easily For swimmers, think about how you can use interactive content and media to encourage engagement and for divers, offer more in-depth resources, and regularly add fresh content.

You can learn more about how to design for skimmers, swimmers, and divers on our website at landslidecreative.com/skimmers.

Hannah Hethmon (Narration): *And back to the episode.*

Hannah: So, before we move on to a bit more practical considerations, I want to talk about the ethics of commemoration generally. How do we put this anniversary of this moment in the broader context of commemoration and memorialization for events both positive and tragic?

Madeleine: That is a great question. Well, I think that first off it's always good to put any anniversary commemoration in a broader context and to look past it left and right, and see if there are any lessons that we can draw from other commemorations or anniversaries to see what was effective and what was less effective. So with that in mind, in one sense I think thinking about commemoration ethically could be looking at models from the past like the Bicentennial and say, "Okay, what worked? What didn't?" And try to apply them to the 250th. For instance, like we said, the grassroots' locally driven approaches in the Bicentennial produced many of the more pluralistic aspects of that commemoration. So that can be a model when we're looking at the 250th: communities wanting to help have a voice in giving meaning to that 250th and not being told what the meaning is. In another sense, you can also look at the broader context in the present day to your left and right and say, "What's going on with commemorative efforts and conversations? And how can that inform the 250th and then make us achieve or help us achieve our goals?"

I think it's worth noting that we're in a moment of really complicated, substantive, civic discourse about our memory as a society and the stories we're telling. And that's manifesting in debates about monuments and memorials and street names and building names, and I think all of these debates have, to a certain extent, primed many members of the American public to be more attuned to the dynamics and sensitivities of public memory and commemoration. They may not use that vocabulary but I think that that's often what we're talking about. And I think it's important with the 250th to have that greater context in mind with the planning, that this is part of a larger conversation we're having as a society about what story we want to tell about ourselves, and who gets to tell it?

Hannah: Yeah. Do you think there's any value in monuments and things like that that are, at least on the surface, positive depictions? Like, even if it's Confederate Memorial, it was intended to be positive and we can then break it down from there. But what about commemorations and memorials of tragedies of things that everyone recognizes as "We're remembering this because it was bad that it happened." How do we kind of use those to understand the 250th? I can't say the word anymore. [laughs]

Madeleine: I know. I know.

Hannah: How do we use that to understand the darker sides of the 250th as well?

Madeleine: I think that we can look to commemorative efforts and anniversaries that have occurred that I think as you're saying are not marking moments perhaps that we would want to celebrate, and see what made them meaningful or effective for their communities and what made them feel like they were not only telling what happened in the past, but looking forward. I think the most effective commemorative efforts are not just about what happened, but they

really are comments on the present day and where we want to be and who we want to be. And I think that many of the more successful or effective efforts of that nature have done a really good job of making sure that the planning process is inclusive, is dynamic, is speaking to present-day issues that are affecting people's lives. I don't know if that answers your question.

Hannah: No, I think maybe that's it. I think there's something about the listening and holding space for people to maybe grieve, but not in this sense grieve, but to grieve what happened. Or to reflect on the painful parts of our history so that they can move forward by making that space, making that time, and letting people have that moment to talk about what they or their ancestors went through.

Madeleine: Yeah, absolutely. I think a big part of commemoration has to be listening, just as you said. Listening for what the commemoration means to different people, listening for what they would want to come out of a commemoration. Because I think if a commemoration is simply marking the passage of time, it's unlikely to have any lasting impact. But if you use it at the outset for reckoning, for reflection, for inspiration, then it's an opportunity for people to say, "This is where we've been, this is where we are, and this is where we'd like to go." And I think absolutely that has to be a multifaceted conversation, there have to be a lot of voices in that conversation, and there has to be room for ambiguity and people to feel differently about what the significance of a given date or moment or anniversary is.

Hannah: I think it's just about getting our heads around what commemoration and memorialization mean, and what it can encompass. Which is a lot more than we might think, especially going, "Oh, 250th anniversary in America!" This can be a lot more complicated. This can be a lot more nuanced than we might initially think.

So we've addressed the 'why' or the 'why should we care'. I want to pivot on to the 'how' and the 'what' and then talk practically about what museums and other history organizations can do to make the most of this moment. If you've been inspired by what we're talking about, okay, how do we apply that in practice? So first of all, can you tell me about what's already been done, what's in motion, who's doing things, and what are they doing?

Madeleine: Yeah, what's everybody up to? It might be helpful if I gave you a bit of an overview of the landscape of 250th planning because it's a little complicated and there is a lot going on. So formal planning efforts began at the national level in 2016 when Congress established the US Semiquincentennial Commission. That's a body that's made up of eight members of Congress and 16 private citizens and several heads of major federal agencies. The Commission then created a nonprofit arm called the America250 Foundation, and that nonprofit foundation is charged with executing the vision of the commission. Both the commission and America250 have undergone leadership transitions and restructuring recently, and what that means is that

for those of us here in the field, we're still waiting a little bit to see what the ultimate direction of the national planning bodies ends up being. But one thing that hasn't changed and has been the case since the beginning of the commission America250's founding is that this is going to be largely a decentralized grassroots commemoration. That's something we've known for several years and what that means is that we can get moving and should get moving, rather than waiting for some sort of national plan to be handed down. There's a lot going on at the state and local level, there are 32 state commissions or similar entities now that are charged with 250th planning. And then there are a handful of local or county commissions or similar entities that are forming at the more local level. It varies by State where are they are in their planning; some are just beginning, some have been working on this for years, but I'm hopeful in the next few years that we're going to see a lot of programs and activities and resources being launched. And then there are federal agencies that have their own initiatives underway, and of course there are individual museums, historic sites, etc, doing their own planning of exhibitions and public programs and whatever it might be. So that is not a very concise summary, but I think the bottom line is that there is a lot going on.

I think AASLH is trying to serve as a central point for history organizations who want inspiration, guidance, resources, or a place to begin. Because it is decentralized in grassroots and nature and that's something that we can do for the field.

Hannah: Yeah. Speaking of that, for those people who want to start getting involved and start planning, what resources are out there? What's available through AASLH, and what else is out there for them to start thinking and planning?

Madeleine: We have been working on the 250th for a very long time. In 2016, I think our activity started to push for a 250th that advances a full picture of American history, and solidifies the role of history organizations as vital community assets. So we've been doing a number of things. We are doing the vision setting and goal development that I discussed earlier on, and that's been happening for several years of convening varied members of the field to help try to give this 250th a unity, a vision, and purpose. Our most significant resource that we've developed so far has probably been "Making History at 250: The Field Guide for the Semiquincentennial" . I was going to hold it up as if you could see it, but obviously.

Hannah: It's a document. Very nice graphic design. [laughs]

Madeleine: So this is a publication that was supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and it was developed in collaboration with leading public and academic historians. This guide offers five unifying themes to help grassroots efforts for planning for history organizations. So even though it is going to be grassroots, we think this guide can give or offer an entry point for history organizations across the country, whether they are directly connected

to the Revolutionary War or whether they feel like they don't really have a connection to that era. But there are thematic connections that they can draw on. I'm happy to talk more about those themes but I'll just mention a few other things. We're also doing some programmatic planning to support the history field in their preparations for the 250th. So later this month, April 27th and 28th, we're holding a virtual summit called Commemoration Reconsidered: Ethics, Justice, and America's 250th Anniversary and it's going to touch on a lot of the themes that you and I have been discussing today, like "Does commemoration matter? Why does it matter? Why does the 250th matter? What are the ethics of it? What are the quote-unquote rules of it?" And then we're going to be holding an interpretive planning webinar over the summer to use the Field Guide to help sites with their interpretive planning efforts for the 250th.

Hannah: That's why you'll record it as well, so people will be able to access them later.

Madeleine: The webinars?

Hannah: Yes.

Madeleine: The webinars will be recorded. The webinars will be May, June, and July. And then we're having an in-person workshop in Boise at our annual meeting to encourage strategic planning that will take history organizations through 2026. So that connects to that idea that—

Hannah: And that will be in the fall.

Madeleine: Yeah, that'll be in the fall in September. It's an opportunity for sites and history organizations to work to get their organizations in order in anticipation of what we think will be increased visitation numbers in 2026 and perhaps increased funding opportunities and increased attention to our field. So the idea is that we want to get ready and get prepared.

Hannah: Awesome. So we got the summit coming up—some of those will be recorded and available. Webinars will be recorded and available later. And then some opportunities for learning and connection at the annual meeting in the fall.

So in the "Making History at 250 Field Guide", you've kind of paraphrased this but John Dichtl wrote that, "The Semiquincentennial will be whatever we decide it should be." And I guess that really means it'll be whatever questions we decide to ask about our history. So I want to take a minute to explore some of the themes and questions in the field guide that you've just mentioned that use the 250th as a jumping-off point to get people thinking critically about history. First, and maybe my favorite just because I like the title is "Unfinished Revolution.":

There's a series of themes here. Can you share a few of the questions from the Unfinished Revolutions theme that people can use?

Madeleine: Yeah, I'm glad you asked about that one because I think that theme of "Unfinished Revolutions" is one that I've heard anecdotally that resonates with a lot of different types and sizes of organizations, so that's been good to see. Some of the questions are "How have America's founding documents been used to press for social, political, and economic change?" Another one is "Beyond the revolution itself, what were other revolutionary moments in the history of our country or a given state or a given community?" We also encourage people to ask questions like, "When have members of your community advocated for liberty and equality? And how have those with power responded?" Another is, "When has there been progress, and when have there been setbacks in the fight for rights and justice?" Then we have one more-- and you can use any of these-- how might the perspectives of different individuals or groups change how we think about the ongoing process of becoming a more perfect union. So the idea is that we sort of give the theme and a brief summary that explains why it was selected and its significance, and then a host of questions that we think will offer entry points for different organizations, regardless of how connected they feel to the 250th, we feel like it's an entry point for them and their audiences.

Hannah: And I like that too because it allows for different timeframes; museums that may be talking about civil rights history, that's part of ongoing revolution. Museums that are having an exhibition on protests from the last few years, you know, these are all connected to those themes that can kind of make that connection back through history without it just being like, "Well, if your museum doesn't do anything about the Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, then this isn't for you." It is. So we're talking about using it to explore themes across history.

Then some of those other themes are "Power of Place." I really like that one. "We the People," "American Experiment," and then last, "Doing History." The "Doing History" theme has questions like, "How do history professionals use different kinds of sources to make sense of the past?" And this kind of harks back to the role of the Bicentennial in boosting the public history field itself, the doing of history. Do you want to say a little bit about why AASLH is recommending a focus on the process of history as part of this commemoration?

Madeleine: Yeah, I also really like that theme. [laughs] I can say that because I didn't write the guide. Yeah. So doing history, part of that is an effort to, as you said, reinvigorate public engagement with history and get people excited about history, by pulling back the curtain on the process: how we collect the evidence about the past, how we interpret it, how we synthesize it into narratives, and then how those narratives are presented in books or

exhibitions or however members of the public ultimately encounter history. We think that that process is not just innately interesting to people who are curious about how things work, but we also think it helps the public understand what history is and why it matters. And that can expand critical thinking skills and historical literacy skills, as well as help people see the relevance of history to present-day concerns. It's also connected to helping the public see the value of inclusive history and become more comfortable with ambiguity, complexity, nuances, and the fact that history is ever-evolving in nature. So I think it's those two things of just deepening engagement with history, but it has this output of benefit for members of the public in terms of giving them skills to navigate what has become an increasingly complex terrain for a lot of people.

Hannah: And of course, AASLH has an entire podcast on that theme produced by me called Reframing History. [Madeleine laughs] You can check it out wherever you get podcasts, I had a lot of fun making that one.

Final question: for anyone listening who works in a museum or a history museum or an art museum or wherever they work that they want to get involved, when should they start getting involved in the 250th planning? And what is a good first step?

Madeleine: I would encourage people who want to get involved to get involved now. I think that 2026 might seem like it's a long way away, but it's actually not. And especially, you know, we talked a lot about doing commemoration ethically and effectively, and a huge part of that is listening work. And that has to happen upfront. So for those who want to plan, I would say start now, start talking, start listening, start engaging to sort of figure out what it's going to look like for you and your audiences or stakeholders or whoever they may be. A good way to get started is to go to AASLH's website—sorry to plug ourselves but we have a lot of great first steps there. You can go to aaslh.org/programs/250th. And we have our Field Guide and it's available free, and there you can learn about our upcoming programs, you can learn more about what state commissions exist. Another thing you can do that is maybe less so promotional [laughs] is try to find out if your state has a commission and you can contact them and see what they're up to. You could find out if your county or your municipality or whatever it might be, if there's a commission for the 250th and then see what they're up to and see if it's of interest to you. But we just encourage you to see it as an opportunity, because we really think it could have a long-lasting impact.

Hannah: Thank you. That's it for me. Thank you for being on the podcast.

Madeleine: Well, thank you. I really enjoyed it.

Hannah (Narration): *Thanks for listening to We the Museum. You've been listening to my conversation with Madeleine Rosenberg, who leads Semiquincentennial planning efforts at AASLH, the American Association for State and Local History.*

For show notes and a transcript of this episode, visit the show website: WeTheMuseum.com. In the show notes, I've linked to all the resources mentioned in this episode.

Also, don't forget to check out Reframing History, the six-part podcast series history communication that I produced for AASLH last year.

Once again, a big thank you to our show sponsor, Landslide Creative. Making a podcast takes a lot of time and energy, and I wouldn't be able to set aside the space to make this show without Landslide Creative's financial support. If your museum is considering a new website, definitely make Landslide Creative your first stop.

Finally, I've been your host, Hannah Hethmon. As Owner and Executive Producer at Better Lemon Creative Audio, I help museums around the world plan, produce, and edit podcasts that advance their missions. Find out more about my work at BetterLemonaudio.com