
NATIONAL HISTORY CLUB

For Middle and High School Students of History

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Of Anniversaries and Foundations

By **Jane Kamensky**, President and CEO of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.

The United States will celebrate a big birthday on July 4th, our 250th. That many candles demands a giant sheet of cake, as befits the oldest continuous constitutional democracy in the world. We will indeed cut a really big cake here at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello next summer, because the anniversary commemorates the date of the Declaration of Independence, of which Jefferson was the principal author. As we say in these parts: Our Guy Wrote It.

If you go to see the original, signed copy of the Declaration in

the hall that houses our Charters of Freedom in the National Archives in Washington, DC, you'll find the parchment softened and faded to the point where it's hard to read. Our job, together, is to make it live again, as bright and vivid as the day the ink first flowed.

Most of you haven't yet turned twenty, so 250 years – a quarter millennium! – probably seems like an awfully long time, and the year 1776 impossibly far away from your lives. But if you think about that span in human generations, which I, as a historian of family life, tend to do, that ocean of time shrinks to a puddle.

A generation lasts roughly 25 years. Thomas Jefferson reckoned a generation at 19 years, though American women in his day tended to give birth younger than they do today, when the average age for first-time motherhood is just over 27. So 250 years is roughly ten generations.

You probably know your grandmother, whose birth sits two generations back from yours. During her lifetime, the United States became a multi-racial democracy, courtesy of the Civil

Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Keep peeling back the layers to think about the world of her grandmother, four generations of American life ago. She was probably alive in 1920, when women in the United States first gained full citizenship, their right to vote guaranteed by the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Your grandmother's grandmother's grandmother – now we're six generations in the past – may have lived through the Civil War, when eleven American states took up arms against the federal union, in defense of the pernicious institution of race-based, hereditary slavery, which had been a fact of American life since the 1600s. At Gettysburg, after a Union victory, President Abraham Lincoln likewise reckoned in generations, hearkening back “four score and seven years” – 87 years – to the moment when “our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” He too was looking backward, toward the Declaration.

Keep traveling back in your mind's eye, as Honest Abe did: your grandmother's grandmother's

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grandmother's grandmother – 8 generations ago – might have celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Jefferson's Declaration, on July 4, 1826, which, poetically, was the day Jefferson and John Adams both died. By then the number of United States had nearly doubled, from 13 to 24, and the population of the country, which had stood at about 2.5 million, one in five of them enslaved, in 1776, had more than quadrupled, to about 12 million, of whom roughly one in six remained in bondage.

Finally her grandmother, ten generations ago, could have been alive, or maybe even present at the beginning: the moment a ragtag group of mostly young men representing 13 rebellious colonies gathered in a sweltering room in Philadelphia to hammer out their differences, and finally pronounced themselves wed, as “these United States”: “one people.” Their vows of union followed a declaration of divorce: a meticulous listing of reasons why they must, after years of trying to do otherwise, “assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal & station” to which “the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitled them.” That was the work of the Declaration of Independence, not so very long ago after all.

This exercise in time travel is a bit like lopping off the stories of a building until we reach the foundation. The ideals expressed by the Declaration were and remain America's foundation – the cornerstone of the building. And the first thing you should do if you want to preserve a building is check its foundation to see how it's holding up under the onslaught of time.

That's why my Monticello colleagues and I created Declaration Book Club, which you can find free, online, at www.monticello.org/bookclub. The Book Club is a history lesson and a civics renewal mission in a box: a kit with all the tools you'll need to wrestle with the Declaration, to understand its promises, and to take stock of the compromises that carted important material away from our foundation. It offers timelines, guiding questions, and short readings (less than 100 pages in total) to anchor three sessions of discussion among any group, from your family dinner table to your sports team or classroom.

We start with the world of your grandmother's grandmother's grandmother's grandmother's grandmother, in 1776, digging into the Declaration itself, those 1330-plus words that made us a nation. Read it aloud, as it was meant to be: the Declaration was everywhere declaimed, from balconies and courthouses, on street corners and beside battlefields. Meant to be spoken, it's pithy, almost poetry. The preamble, beginning *When in the course of human events* and concluding with *let facts be submitted to a candid world*, runs just over two hundred words: about two minutes of measured reading. Those words were and remain our statement of purpose—the what that distinguishes these United States, our noblest aspirations.

Then dig into the longer more fiddly bits: the list of Congress's 27 grievances against the British Parliament and especially against King George. They're highly specific, each one referencing actions that the colonists believed had forced them to this point of divorce from the crown and remarriage to each other. Rather than trying to index each grievance to its precipitating cause – though you as committed history students could do that! – try to hold them up to a mirror: if this is a list of indicators that government has gone bad, what then does good government look like? What must a free people expect from their leaders? How do they hold them to account?

By offering a composite portrait of tyranny, the grievances sketch its negative image, a portrait of virtue. To see that portrait full in the face, you'll want to look at the 28th grievance, a paragraph consisting of 168 words that was deleted in its entirety between Jefferson's draft and Congress's deliberations, the longest single revision in the document:

[H]e has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, & murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.

When you flip the grievance, you see that a virtuous King did not traffic enslaved human beings across the Atlantic. And a virtuous republic must “attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce.” Some of the delegates—including Jefferson, who himself practiced slavery at scale—wanted the United States to take form without that noxious traffic in people. The price of the union was that they failed.

The second meeting takes you forward in time, to 1826, the Declaration’s granddaughters’ generation. The readings, both primary and secondary sources, take stock of what these not-quite-United States had got up to during five decades, and asks you to think about the way that memory was beginning to shape the history of our founding. Then as now, anniversaries mattered.

The final session takes place in this day – our day – now that the generations of grandmothers have time traveled in the other direction, reassembling to make you. Following the Declaration’s still unfinished legacies through the decades and around the world, we ask you to consider the power of this ancient yet living text, and to ask yourselves what you declare. Your classroom, your siblings, your generation are the founders of the future, building upon that long ago cornerstone to erect a sound, sustainable building that has not yet reached its capstone.

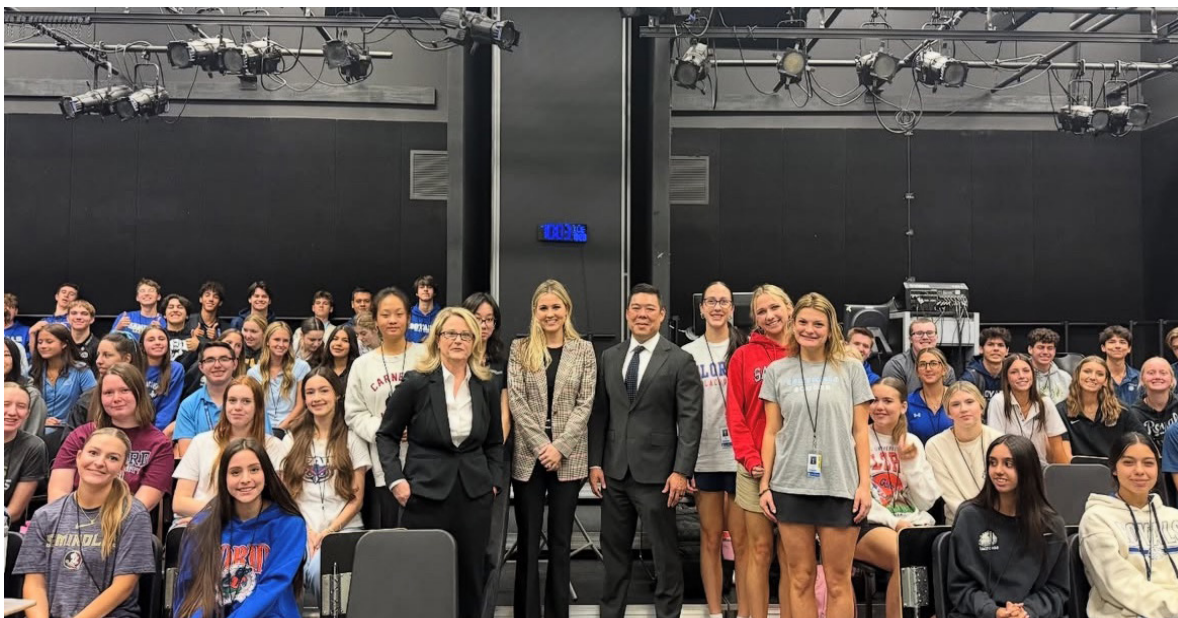
How will you help the nation not only speak but live its self-evident truths: “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness?” There’s an invitation hidden in that sentence, perhaps the most famous in the whole of American literature, in the phrase among these. “Among these” reminds us that Jefferson and his editors gave the candid world a list of certain inalienable rights, not all the inalienable rights with which humans were vested at birth. What other rights would you include in that set? What duties and obligations will you impose upon yourself and your peers to help the government, which rests upon your consent, to secure them?

These are existential questions that look toward the tricentennial, in 2076. Born in 1963, I’ll be gone. But you’ll still be here, perhaps with grandchildren of your own. What do you want for them? Monticello – as Jefferson did – trusts the young people who will govern us far into the future to devise new and, perhaps, better answers than the ten generations who have wrestled with them to date. So download Declaration Book Club, dig into the readings, and sit down with your class or your club to discuss the words that make us a country. My colleagues and I would love to hear from you about your deliberations and your proposals. There’s cake waiting for you at Monticello on July 4. ■

Access to the NHC network, which includes chapters in 47 states and over 19,000 members, is a great benefit of joining the NHC. We encourage you to read about other chapters in your state or across the country and explore new opportunities!



Brownsburg High School (IN) at a presentation in September at the local 9-11 Memorial. The beam is from one of the Twin Towers and is placed to face east pointing towards NYC.



The First Academy (FL) hosted a Law & Justice Forum this fall for their Upper School Students! Judge Chiu, a Ninth Judicial Circuit Court Judge, and Savannah Young '14, Associate Attorney at Greenberg Traurig, shared their experiences in law with the students.



Frankton High School (IN) traveled to Boston in October to visit numerous sites, including the Freedom Trail, Fenway Park, the city of Salem, and more! Here they are at the grave of Ralph Waldo Emerson in Concord.



Lewis and Clark Middle School (MO) at the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum in nearby Independence. This school year they are focusing their activities on the Civil War, primarily on the impact of the war in Missouri.



Houston County High School (GA) met this fall and had a "Medieval Feast and Jousting Tournament." The students made shields while watching a Knight's Tale and they then had a jousting tournament with shields, pool noodle jousting poles, and some chair horses.



Vandergrift High School (TX) is our newest Club from Austin, Texas, and has over 45 members already! If you'd like to follow what the group has going on you can do so on their Instagram account: [@nationalhistoryclub.vhs](https://www.instagram.com/nationalhistoryclub.vhs).



Bethlehem Catholic High School (PA) visiting Coal Mine #9 in nearby Lansford, learning more about labor issues from the Gilded Age.



Brown County High School (IN) attending America 250, hosted by the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site.



Henry Clay High School (KY) during their 10th annual ADA Halloween Fundraiser, where they raised \$3,400 (over \$35,000 during the past decade)!



Rainier Jr/Sr High School (OR) learning about the Lost Colony of Roanoke from guest speaker Matt Gabbard of the Lost Colony Play.

VETERANS DAY EVENTS



The **Newnan High School (GA)** History Club placed more than 2,000 flags on the front lawn of campus to honor local vets on Veterans Day.



Moline High School (IL) hosted the Military Veterans Memorial group, where their entire school was able to see a range of artifacts.



York Comprehensive High School (SC) sold over 150 flags for their Field of Flags fundraiser. Money raised went to a local veterans organization.

📖 DECLARATION BOOK CLUB 📖

Thomas Jefferson was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, which created the United States. To celebrate the Declaration's upcoming 250th birthday on July 4, 2026, Monticello is launching Declaration Book Club, featuring short readings, lively videos, and probing questions to spark discussion of our past, present, and future as one people, created equal. What did Jefferson and his cosigners declare in 1776—and how do you pursue life, liberty, and happiness today?

To find out more please scan the QR code below!





Enrich Student Learning with Historical Markers

Empower your students to learn about community history through a primary source research project that results in a grant-funded historical marker from the William G. Pomeroy Foundation.

Our **Pomeroy Education Program** benefits students, teachers and their schools by enhancing the learning experience with free lesson plans that connect local history to the curriculum.

We work with teachers, history clubs, school districts, academic institutions, and other student-focused organizations throughout the United States.

Partner with us to turn your local history into student-led research resulting in a Pomeroy Marker!



Students receive guidance throughout their research project. Here a Pomeroy Foundation historian meets with Syracuse City School District students to discuss their work.

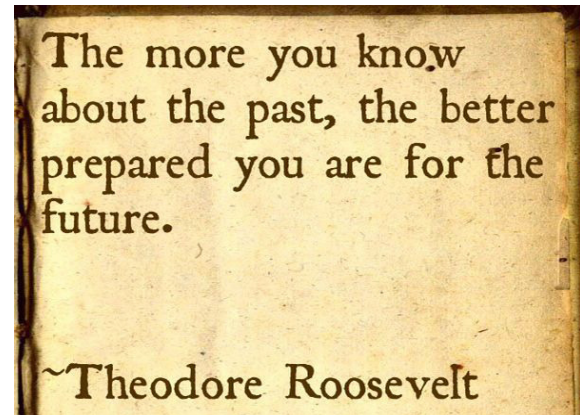


Our curriculum results in a fully funded historical marker. Students obtained one for the historic Amenia Conferences at Troutbeck in New York's Hudson Valley.

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The NHC is proud to have the support of over 60 college history departments! We hope that any of our members who are interested in majoring in history in college will visit a college's website listed down below to find out more about the history department and its offerings.



American University	Loyola University Maryland	Texas Christian University
Barnard College	Loyola University Chicago	University of Alabama
Baylor University	Marquette University	University of Alabama Birmingham
Boston College	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	University of Chicago
Boston University	Mount Holyoke College	University of Colorado
Brandeis University	New York University	University of Georgia
Carnegie Mellon University	North Carolina State University	University of Iowa
Dartmouth College	Northwestern University	UMass Amherst
Drew University	Ohio State University	UMass Lowell
Duke University	Princeton University	University of Michigan
Centre College	Rhodes College	University of Mississippi
Georgia Tech University	Rice University	University of North Carolina
Gonzaga University	Rochester Institute of Technology	University of Pennsylvania
Fordham University	Santa Clara University	University of Richmond
Franklin & Marshall College	Skidmore College	University of Rhode Island
Harvard University	Southern Methodist University	University of Texas at Austin
James Madison University	Southwestern University	University of Utah
Johns Hopkins University	Stanford University	University of Vermont
Kenyon College	Stony Brook University	Vassar College
Louisiana State University	Suffolk University	Wake Forest University
Loyola Marymount University	Swarthmore College	Wellesley College

NATIONAL HISTORY CLUB

The NHC would like to express our gratitude to the following people and organizations who make our important work possible...

John Abele	Penguin Random House
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Thomas Jefferson's Monticello	<i>The Concord Review</i>
Alexander Dreyfoos School of the Arts	The History List
American Association for State and Local History	Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund
American Civil War Museum	Patrick Allitt (Professor, Emory)
American Historical Association	Jim Belcher
Boyertown Museum of Historic Vehicles	Joan & Rick Gier
Gilder Lehrman Institute	Elizabeth Jones
HarperCollins Publishing	William Jordan (Professor, Princeton)
History 500	John Lane
Laurel Hill Cemetery	Howard Loken
Museum of Florida History	Beth & Bob Nasson
National Council for History Education	Lee Pollock
National Vietnam War Museum	Guy Rogers (Professor, Wellesley)
National World War I Museum	Henry Seng
National World War II Museum	Art Snyder
Omohundro Institute of Early American History	Rick Sperry
Organization of American Historians	Lisa Wingate

The National History Club is a 501(c)(3) organization that relies on grants and donations to support efforts. If you are passionate about history and would like to contribute to our mission of promoting history at the secondary level please contact **Robert Nasson** (rnasson@nationalhistoryclub.org).

www.nationalhistoryclub.org