

Fairfax County

Semiquincentennial Anniversary of the American Revolution, the Revolutionary War, and the Independence of the United States of America

Work Group Recommendations

July 13, 2021

Introduction:

Pursuant to a Board Matter, jointly presented with Supervisor Dan Storck and Chairman Jeff McKay in October 2020, Fairfax County established a seven person Work Group charged with providing recommendations to the County Board of Supervisors for the preferred approach for organizing and leading County-wide efforts for an inclusive observance, celebration, and commemoration of the semiquincentennial anniversary of the American Revolution, the Revolutionary War, and the Independence of the United States of American.

This Work Group, led by Gunston Hall, includes representatives from Visit Fairfax, George Washington's Mount Vernon, the National Museum of the United States Army, the Fairfax County History Commission, the Fairfax County Human Rights Committee, the City of Fairfax Regional Library, and associated County history, equity, and human rights staff. The Work Group also includes representatives from the County Department of Planning and Development and from the Office of Supervisor Storck.

At this time, I want to extend my thanks to Supervisor Storck and Chairman Jeff McKay for their leadership and support of this effort, as well as to all the Supervisors for their dedicated public service.

Finally, on behalf of the Work Group, and in recognition and appreciation of their efforts, I am pleased to present this report for consideration by the Board of Supervisors.

Background and Context:

The United States Semiquincentennial Commission (www.America250.org) was established by an act of Congress in July 2016 for the purpose of inspiring all Americans and each American to participate in our greatest milestone ever—the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States. Comprised of US Senators, US Representatives, private citizens, and Ex-Officio members including Cabinet members, the Secretary of the Smithsonian, the Archivist of the US, the Librarian of Congress, and the Presiding Officer of the Council on the Arts and Humanities, this Commission is charged with orchestrating the largest and most inclusive anniversary observance in American history. In 2018, the American Battlefield Trust (www.battlefields.org) was named by the Department of the Interior as the official non-profit partner of the Commission.

In recognition of the importance of this commemoration, particularly given Virginia's central role in the revolutionary movement, an ad hoc group of individuals begin meeting in 2018 for the purpose of considering how Virginia could play in central role in the 250th. This group included representation from museums and cultural organizations, the National Park Service, tourism and marketing entities, Virginia's tribes, and others with expertise and insight specific to the 250th.

The work of this ad hoc group resulted in two critically important outcomes. First, this group secured funding from the Virginia Tourism Corporation to implement a comprehensive survey of public perceptions and ideas specific to our shared history and the 250th. Second, this group initiated the effort which ultimately resulted in the establishment of Virginia's American Revolution 250 Commission.

The purpose of Virginia's American Revolution 250 Commission is to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, the Revolutionary War, and the independence of the United States. Lead commemoration partners include the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, the Virginia Museum of History and Culture, and George Mason's Gunston Hall. The Commonwealth Commission is also comprised of 22 members, including 17 non-legislative citizen members and five ex officio members. Currently led by the Virginia Secretary of Education, this Commission began meeting in November 2020. Presently, in response to a call to action from the United States Semiquincentennial Commission, Virginia is one of 10 other states to have established similar commissions in their respective jurisdictions.

As in part expressed in the above referenced Fairfax County Board Matter, the 250th anniversary is a not only a commemoration of how our Country began, but also an opportunity to explore and understand the journey our Country has been making over the last 250 years. This journey should not only be a celebration of our history, but an expression of our nation's movement towards greater justice and equity. The 250th should also renew our commitment to fulfill the promise of the Declaration of Independence that all people "are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." As such, this is a time to commemorate what defines us as a nation and the values that we hold most dearly. While we have come far as a nation, however, we have more work to do to ensure these promises are accessible and equally available to all Americans.

Fairfax County can be a leader in creating and hosting appropriate events associated with the 250th, as well as supporting the Commonwealth's efforts to commemorate the 250th. In Virginia, and particularly in Fairfax County, the revolutionary movement was conceived and born, and Fairfax County is uniquely positioned to lead this effort on a local, regional, and national level. From our founders and revolutionary history, through ensuing decades of struggle for human, civil, educational, and environmental rights, our County and its distinctive places, stories, and people embody this history and this promise. Our County is also home to signature organizations championing these causes and telling these stories, and together with the Board's leadership through the One Fairfax initiative, the 250th anniversary offers a compelling opportunity to teach, inspire, connect, and to help each resident and each community in our County reach their full potential.

Overview of Work Group Activities:

The Work Group first met in January 2021 and subsequent meetings occurred in February, March, April, and June 2021. Each meeting benefited from full and engaged participation of the Work Group members. All meetings also followed a similar format and included time for public meeting announcements, comments from special guests, strategic dialogue around core topics, an open forum, and administrative updates. Most important were the strategic discussion and, specifically, these meetings focused on the following core topics and associated strategic discussions:

- January, 2021:
 - a. Discussion about the purpose and charge for the Work Group

- b. Review of the Commonwealth of Virginia’s American Revolution 250th Commission and the work of this Commission to date.
- c. Preliminary discussion of structure required in the report to be submitted to the Board of Supervisors and associated topics for future consideration.
- February, 2021:
 - a. Review and discussion about previous commemorations in Fairfax County (i.e. Fairfax 275th, War of 1812, American Civil War) and “lessons learned”.
- March, 2021:
 - a. Review of a research report, *Americans, Our History, and the 250th*, commissioned by the Virginia Tourism Corporation in support of the Commonwealth Commission’s work.
- April, 2021:
 - a. Discussion about additional diverse participants on the Work Group.
 - b. Discussion about a proposed committee structure for future planning efforts.
- June, 2021:
 - a. Review and discussion about the draft report to be submitted to the Board of Supervisors.

I am extremely proud of the productive, collaborative, thoughtful, and insightful discussions that occurred during the meetings of the Work Group.

Recommended Key Themes:

In March 2021, the Virginia American Revolution 250 Commission adopted key themes for the semiquincentennial. While the Commission understands and expects these themes to continue evolving in response to additional scholarship, insight, and perspective, the Commission is also confident that these themes articulate and express an important foundation for their work and the 250th commemoration more broadly. These themes are as follows:

Virginia’s history is America’s story: complex, diverse, and promising, a multicultural story that in the Revolutionary era was Native American, European, African and American, and is now so much richer for its diversity. Focusing on Revolutionary events in 1775 and 1776, the Virginia Semiquincentennial will embrace the inclusive history and narrative breadth of the era, and mark the origins of a revolutionary new nation.

- I. *Virginia is a powerfully historical place, home to sites and stories essential to our American story.*
 - *Virginia’s historic places include the stories of both prominent and ordinary people.*
 - *Virginia’s native peoples were first to shape the place that is the Commonwealth, and continue to shape Virginia and the nation.*
 - *Virginia’s honest reckoning with the paradox of our origins in both freedom and slavery aims to be a national model.*
 - *Virginia’s sites and museums reveal chapters of our founding narrative: key ideas about American governance including the first representative assembly in British America, the Virginia Resolution for Independence, Virginia Declaration of Rights, Declaration of Independence, Constitution, the Statute of Religious Freedom.*
 - *Much of American history is here in Virginia—native lands, a founding colonial settlement, the American Revolution, the Civil War, Civil Rights, and more.*
- II. *The Revolutionary challenge continues.*
 - *The American experiment has resulted in the most robust and longest democracy in history.*

- *The American Revolution was a time when passionate activists, summoning the courage to challenge centuries of an established world order, led a revolution that would change the world.*
 - *Many of those who fought for liberty—including enslaved people—were young radicals, rule breakers, optimists, justice seekers, and change agents.*
 - *American optimism and passion for change have been driving forces for progress, improvement and innovation.*
 - *The American founders could not have envisioned inclusion and diversity as we know it, but their work entitled Americans over more than two and a half centuries to fight for a more equal society.*
 - *The 250th anniversary of independence is a chance to assess our resolve to deliver on the American “promissory note” of freedom, equality, and “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”*
- III. *Here in Virginia, the American Revolution was a war, and more than a war.*
- *It was a war waged by Virginians, that divided some communities and families and brought others together.*
 - *It was a revolution of ideas, with many sources of inspiration for ideas about freedom including from European enlightenment thinkers, and Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy.*
 - *It was a revolution of expressions of liberty, including from enslaved people seeking freedom and Native Americans asserting sovereignty.*
 - *It was a struggle that produced a promise of equality in the Declaration of Independence participation on government as delineated in the Constitution, and protections defined in the Bill of Rights.*
 - *It was a struggle whose conclusion excluded most Virginians of the time, but which has inspired disenfranchised, subjugated, and disempowered groups to fight for their rights as Americans on the basis of our founding documents and the ideals they express.*
- IV. *We can tell our history to reflect the fullest American story.*
- *Virginia’s semiquincentennial of the American Revolution will serve as a continuum of recent Virginia commemorations—of 1607 and of 1619—that emphasize the challenges, diversity, and dynamism of the Commonwealth.*

The Work Group believes these themes appropriately reflect the meaning and opportunity associated with the 250th commemoration. The Work Group also believes that these themes demonstrate a critically important commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equality and that, as such, these theme will resonate with and galvanize support from among the broadest possible constituency in our County and our communities.

Accordingly,

The Work Group offers the following two recommendations regarding the Virginia American Revolution 250 Commission themes:

- 1. Adopt these themes as an important and powerful expression of the meaning, value, and importance of the semiquincentennial commemoration in Fairfax County.**
- 2. Articulate and adopt sub-themes that more specifically describe and relate to the distinctive history, culture, people, stories and places in Fairfax County.**

Recommended Preferred Approach:

Commemorations are certainly not new in our County or in our Commonwealth and individual Work Group members have participated in and the Work Group together has researched many of these recent events in order to learn and inform our work. Before considering the preferred approach of the

semiquincentennial in Fairfax County, however, it is important to first address the topic of word choice, language and message. Specifically, the Work Group believes that the most appropriate and inclusive term for the semiquincentennial, and the term that will most resonate with the largest and most diverse group of residents and visitors, is commemoration.

This belief is based on several key considerations. First, the Federal legislation creating the United States Semiquincentennial Commission clearly states that this Commission is to plan, develop, and coordinate the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States. This term and the overarching concept of a commemoration has been repeated and reinforced by subsequent communications and conversations with representatives of this Commission. As such, it is clear that what is being envisioned at the Federal level, and what is envisioned nationally, is a commemoration.

Significant research, study, evaluation, and discussion informed the decision to use the term commemoration in association with the Federal Commission. The same approach is true for the Commonwealth Commission established for the same purpose. Accordingly, since Fairfax County is planning to closely coordinate and align its work with what will be occurring nationally and throughout Virginia, we believe the use of the term commemoration is important for consistency and clarity.

Second, in 2019 the Commonwealth, under the auspices of the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC), commissioned a study titled *Americans, Our History, and the 250th*. The VTC hired the respected firm, Wilkening Consulting, to conduct this study and to prepare an accompanying report of findings. This study was comprehensive and exhaustive in its approach and the analysis conducted was objective, scientific, and inclusive of a very broad and diverse population. While there is not time in this report to detail all the findings of this critically important work, it is important to note several key outcomes specific to the question of language and terminology.

Most importantly for our purposes, this study demonstrated the following:

1. Our values, attitudes, and beliefs affect how we approach the past...and the divisions in our country extend to history.
2. That history is highly valued...but a lack of inclusion is a barrier to engagement.
3. Yet the majority hold values about our country that they honor and respect...and will want to acknowledge in 2026.

Furthermore, this study revealed that on a national scale there are two clusters of values among the broader population, traditional and neoteric (meaning new or modern ideas). The traditional cluster largely values liberty, courage, the American Dream, exceptionalism, and opportunity. The neoteric cluster values equality, diversity, and tolerance. This study further demonstrated that while there is consensus that everyone wants what is best for our families, communities and country, there are strong differences in opinions about what that means. For example, some look to the past as the ideal and others find hope in the future.

Partly because of these differences, the study found that only 30% of the broader national population are definitely planning to celebrate the 250th, while another 30% indicated they would probably celebrate the 250th. Digging a bit deeper, over 60% of the population indicated that their anticipated participation in the 250th would be celebratory, but this figure skewed heavily to those in the traditional cluster. Conversely, the possibility of the 250th only being a celebration of our past was considered inappropriate by many survey respondents in light of the very real challenges still facing our country and community today. The

neoteric cluster, which includes a significant part of the broader population, more consistently expressed a desire for the 250th to offer opportunities for a thoughtful, inclusive experience that transcends our founding, embraces our differences, explores our diverse history, and looks to the future and the possibility of increasing equality, justice, and freedom.

As noted, this study was objective and scientific, and its findings not intended to pass judgement on any perspective or opinion. Based on this analysis, however, this study recommends the use of the term commemoration in order to ensure that the event is inclusive and that it engages a broad and diverse audience. This study also recommends the 250th focus on an exploration of freedom, that it create a sense of us striving to achieve freedom and equality for all, that it use history to help teach these shared values, that it tell inclusive stories, and that it provide opportunities for all American to be part of the process that helps create a better future for all in our country.

For all these reasons, while there will clearly be much to celebrate and much that is celebratory in 2026, we believe commemoration is the preferred term for the 250th.

Regarding a preferred approach, the Work Group believes that planning for the 250th should be guided by the following core principles:

1. The charge of the planning entity should be focused on a finite time-frame and put 1776 and 2026 at the center of its work. While there is much of importance that occurred before and after 1776, we believe the focus of the commemoration should be specifically on 1776 and 2026. We believe this approach is best for several reasons. First, based on our research, commemorations that extend for multiple years run the risk of becoming disjointed, losing momentum and interest, and creating fatigue among the visiting and travelling public. By focusing on 1776, we are better able to create and sustain enthusiasm and energy around the commemoration, an outcome that will also help with branding, marketing, and generating financial and other support for the event.
2. The planning entity should function as a convener and facilitator, and serve to comprehensively coordinate, collaborate, and communicate with a broad and diverse group of partners and supporters. We believe this decentralized approach to planning and administering the commemoration will be efficient, cost effective, and perhaps most importantly, inclusive. This approach, therefore, will foster participation and affinity, while also extending opportunities and benefits to the largest number of stakeholders and constituents in our County.
3. The planning entity should be strategic, intentional, and invitational in every aspect of its work. More specifically, the planning for the 250th should rely on an informed process of strategic thinking, it should be intentional in identifying and implementing plans, and it must be invitational in offering multiple opportunities for all to engage with and participate in the process and activities.

Based on these core principles, the Work Group believes that its role should eventually transition to a planning entity, perhaps a specifically created County council or commission, that would be responsible for planning, identifying core strategies, generating affinity and support for the effort, and communicating/reporting to the County Board of Supervisors. This planning entity should increase in size and include a broad and diverse group of individuals with expertise, insight, and perspectives important to the work of the planning entity and the implementation of a successful 250th commemoration. Finally, this

planning entity should remain in effect until June 30, 2027 in order to process the “close-out” of commemoration financials and other administrative matters.

We further believe that this planning entity should be organized around the following core committees:

1. Finance Committee: Responsible for oversight, management, and accountability for all appropriated and/or raised financial resources; responsible for preparing budgets as needed in support of effort.
2. Marketing and Communications: Responsible for developing and implementing ideas and initiatives that promote the effort and associated activities; responsible for identifying and supporting partnerships and collaborations that advance the public’s awareness and support of the effort.
3. Inclusion Committee: Responsible for ensuring a diversity of perspectives, voices, ideas, and insights are invited to participate and inform the effort; responsible for ensuring the effort is implemented in ways that reflect the diversity of the community and intended audience; responsible for ensuring an equitable approach to the effort and associated activities; responsible for coordinating the effort with One Fairfax.
4. Youth and Family Engagement Committee: Responsible for ensuring a family and child centered approach to the effort; responsible for coordinating the effort with FCPS, the Fairfax County Child Care Advisory Council, scouting organizations, PTA’s, and other related entities. This Committee should also include student representation.
5. Activity Committee: Responsible for identifying, planning, and implementing civic, cultural, historical, and educational activities; responsible for developing partnerships in support of activity implementation and success.
6. Signature Event Committee: Responsible for considering the possibility of a major signature event, and planning and implementing such an event as appropriate.
7. Outreach Committee: Responsible for communicating and coordinating with appropriate organizations and entities in support of the effort.

This planning entity should also be supported by an independent advisory body. This advisory body, would support the effort by serving as grassroots organizers and advocates, by ensuring representation from underserved communities, and by providing expertise beyond that found amongst those on the formal planning entity.

Accordingly,

The Work Groups offers the following four recommendations specific to the preferred approach for commemorating the semiquincentennial:

1. **Adopt the term “commemoration” as the key identifying term and philosophical foundation for the semiquincentennial.**
2. **Transition the existing Work Group to a planning entity that will remain in existence though June 30, 2027. Increase and diversify the composition of this group.**
3. **Adopt the committee structure proposed above.**
4. **Create and convene an advisory council to support the planning entity and ensure broad and inclusive community awareness and participation. The planning entity will recommend advisors to the Board of Supervisors for appointment.**

Recommended SMART Goals:

The Work Group believes strongly in the importance and the value of specific, measureable, attainable, relevant, and time-based (SMART) goals. As such, implementing a strategic approach to the commemoration that is guided by SMART goals is essential to the program's success. The Work Group also recognizes that the identification and articulation of many associated SMART goals, such as those in support of planning, promotion, and types of activities, would benefit from more time, discussion, and perspectives than that which has informed the efforts of the Work Group to date. The structure proposed above, however, would support this process and is anticipated to result in more concrete SMART goals for aspects of the commemoration such as the types of activities to be presented.

Finally, the Work Group believes that an essential component of this approach is the identification of an independent fiscal agent with responsibility for holding, managing, accounting for, and disbursing as appropriate any funds appropriated and/or raised in support of the effort.

Accordingly,

The Work Group offers the following five SMART goals as recommendations at this particular time:

- 1. Identify an appropriate fiscal agent by September 1, 2021**
- 2. Develop an organizational structure, business plan, and preliminary multi-year commemoration budget by December 31, 2021.**
- 3. Create and implement a community based, County-wide survey of residents specific to opportunities and ideas associated with the commemoration by December 31, 2021 (also consider other similar surveys in years leading up to the commemoration).**
- 4. Collaborate with VISIT Fairfax for the purpose of learning more about travel and tourism trends specifically associated with the commemoration by December 31, 2021 (this will also be ongoing).**
- 5. Develop and implement a marketing and promotion plan to build awareness and affinity for the commemoration by April 20, 2022. Consider applying for a grant from the Virginia Tourism Corporation for this purpose as part of their fall 2021 grant cycle.**

Recommended Ways, Means, Timetables, Approaches, and Accountability:

The Work Group believes that additional information specific to ways, means, timetables, approaches, and accountability will intentionally and naturally flow from the approach and strategies referenced above.

Accordingly,

The Work Group offers the following two recommendations specific to the accountability of the planning entity:

- 1. Present a semi-annual report of planning entity activities to the Board of Supervisors and the County Executive.**
- 2. Present monthly financial reports to the County entity, department, or individual designated by the Board of Supervisors.**

Conclusion:

I was honored to serve as Chair of this Work Group and am extremely proud of everyone's thoughtful, strategic, and creative efforts in support of both our work and the production of this report. As such, I am very pleased to thank and acknowledge all those serving on the Work Group, including:

1. Julie Almacy, George Washington's Mount Vernon
2. Gretchen Bulova, History Commissioner
3. Patrick Lennon, VISIT Fairfax
4. George Alber, Human Rights Commissioner
5. Cameron Brumett, The Army Historical Foundation
6. Denice Dressel, Department of Planning and Development
7. Mary Lipsey, History Commissioner
8. Elizabeth Maurer, National Museum of the United States Army
9. Laura Wickstead, City of Fairfax Regional Library

I am also very pleased to thank Supervisor Storck and this staff team for their exceptional leadership and support of the Work Group.

Finally, I want to extend my thanks to all of you, our Board of Supervisors, for your dedicated public service and leadership on behalf of our County and all who live, work, and enjoy Fairfax County. Thank you very much, we appreciate your service, and we look forward to talking further with you all about the possibilities and potential of America's 250th commemoration.

Respectfully Submitted,

Scott Muir Stroh III
Executive Director, George Mason's Gunston Hall and;
Chair, Fairfax County Semiquincentennial Work Group
June 8, 2021