

**An Anniversary
Like No Other:**
America at 250
and the
Challenges of Democracy

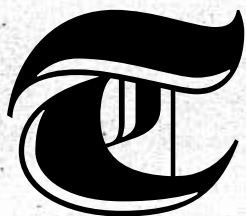
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GEORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

1776 **250** AMERICA 2026

(AX7)ATLANTA, Ga., March 10--BURNING THE CONSTITUTION--Georgia Lt. Gov. Lester Maddox burns a copy of The Atlanta Constitution Wednesday in the state Senate. Maddox, who presides over the body, was incensed at an article which accused the Senate of being in shambles with a huge backlog of legislation. He said the newspaper did not have the "guts, integrity, manhood or decency" to report the situation accurately. Maddox drew a standing ovation as he concluded a fiery speech and the burning of the newspaper. (AP WIREPHOTO)(wam41735mbr/xn) 1971

This year, the State of Georgia and the Georgia Historical Society kick off their observance of the 250th anniversary of the United States. On July 4, 2026, the document written by Mr. Jefferson in which he declared “all men are created equal,” as well as the nation that the Declaration of Independence created, will be two- and one-half centuries old.



To mark the anniversary, last fall Governor Brian Kemp signed an executive order creating the Georgia US250 Commission. Over the next three years the Georgia Historical Society, along with our official

partners—the Office of the Governor, the Georgia Department of Economic Development, and the Georgia Humanities Council—will lead the State of Georgia’s participation in this significant national commemoration.

Across the country, it will be a time of grand celebrations, as it should be. The United States is now the longest-surviving republic with a written constitution in the history of the world. The Revolution launched with the Declaration of 1776 set the world on fire and spread the flames of liberty far beyond the shores of North America. The immortal phrase “All men are created equal” has been a terror to tyrants and an inspiration for oppressed people everywhere.

The 250th anniversary of the United States is coming at a crucial and propitious time in America’s experiment in self-government. Currently, our nation is experiencing some of the most dramatic

demographic, economic, political, and social changes we have seen in half a century, testing the strength of the world’s oldest democracy. Not since the turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s has our political system endured such stress or been questioned by our own leaders. Consequently, many have lost faith in the institutions of democracy, and they fear for the future of our Republic.

This is not a partisan issue. Americans of all political persuasions are concerned about what they perceive as an erosion in the norms of conduct and the pillars that sustain how free people govern themselves. In particular, the media, the courts, elections, and the Constitution itself no longer seem to possess the confidence once placed in them. Some even wonder if democracy has failed altogether, producing unintended social and economic consequences for our country.

Public history institutions like the Georgia Historical Society are uniquely positioned to address this concern and help restore trust in our system and in each other. Using the story of the American past, we can explain how a republic functions and why democracy is preferable to any other form of government, no matter how messy and inefficient it may be. History also provides context and develops analytical thinking skills so that we can think critically about the problems facing our country—as well as those individuals who seek to govern us. By explaining how and why we got here, history can help us find answers to the big questions about the role of government in our lives and the role of America in the world.

Perhaps most important of all, history has the power to remind us of who we are as Americans. The essence of what it means to be an American is contained in the story of our nation’s journey through time. There is a good reason why nearly 90 percent of the questions on the citizenship test relate to our country’s history.

And when we tell the story of the past in all its complexity, we can inspire Americans to renew their commitment to the radical and still liberating ideals embodied in the Declaration of Independence—namely, the equality of all people and their inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—ideals that originally were narrowly applied but have an even greater meaning for all Americans 250 years later.

In that sense, the American Revolution is not a static event frozen in some remote past. It is a vibrant, powerful idea that lives to this day, continually driving us to expand human freedom and create a more perfect Union.

To address this pressing need, the Georgia Historical Society is creating a signature US250 project, *Restoring Trust in American Institutions: History and the Foundations of American Democracy*, that will launch later this year. Through a series of educational programs, public forums, scholarly publications, special exhibits, and classroom resources, GHS will educate school children and their teachers, leaders from both the private and public sectors, and the general public about the vital role that democratic institutions play in sustaining a republican form of government and how America has put its unique stamp on each of these pillars of democracy.

Hands that pick cotton... now can pick our public officials



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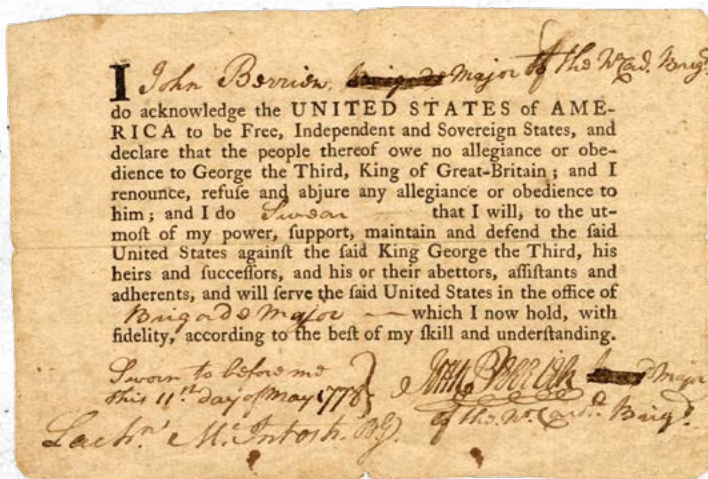
Register And Vote!

In particular the project will explore historically how a press free from governmental control has informed the American people, served as a marketplace for ideas, and held our government and our leaders accountable; how an independent judiciary has been essential to maintaining the separation of power and the rule of law; why acceptance of election results has been the *sine qua non* of democracy and self-government; and especially how our historic fidelity to the U.S. Constitution and the system of government enshrined therein has maintained the world's oldest republic and promoted freedom across the globe.

To accomplish these objectives, *History and the Foundations of American Democracy* will tell the stories of the many individuals, leaders, and organizations, both private and public, that have shaped the evolution of these foundational institutions and norms. We can no longer assume that Americans understand their nation and how our political system works. We must be deliberate about reminding them. As University of Florida president and former US Senator Ben Sasse recently told the *Wall Street Journal*, "If we're going to pass on the meaning of America to the next generation, it doesn't happen in the bloodstream. You actually have to teach what America is to the next generation."

Nearly 50 years ago, the United States observed its bicentennial. As we approached our 200th birthday in 1976, a deeply divided America was just emerging from almost two decades of turbulence and trauma caused by an unpopular and costly foreign war, a Civil Rights Movement that radically changed centuries-old race relations, a revolution in sexual mores, multiple political assassinations, and an unprecedented Constitutional crisis that resulted in the first presidential resignation. The country had been plagued by widespread social upheaval, civil unrest, riots, and violence unlike anything the nation had seen since the bloody Civil War a century earlier. Indeed, many believed the country was once again coming apart at the seams.

At that moment of multiple crises, when cynicism about government was at an all-time high and confidence in our nation and its leaders was at its lowest ebb, an exhausted America turned momentarily from its problems and focused on its 200th birthday. The commemoration and remembrance that followed helped to heal



the nation and reminded us of our unique role in the history of humankind's long and difficult struggle for freedom. Of all the accomplishments of the Bicentennial, the most important is that it helped us to remember who we are as Americans.

Now half a century later, we have the opportunity to do that again. Clearly the challenges we face today are not only different but even more dangerous in their long-term consequences than what we overcame in the years leading up to the Bicentennial. The divisions of our time run along different fault lines than 50 years ago. Today some of our leaders seem uninterested in forging compromise or finding common ground. In many ways the current definition of American political leadership itself has no precedent in our national experience or traditions. The selfless custom established by George Washington in 1783 when he willingly gave up power by returning his commission to Congress seems not only quaint but strangely out of place in 2024.

But that doesn't mean we can't find our way out of the wilderness. Just as we did during the Bicentennial, we can use the upcoming Semi-quincentennial or 250th anniversary of our nation's birth to heal and remember, and allow "the better angels of our nature," as Lincoln once said, to reassert themselves. It will take patience, it will take humility, and it will take compromise. It will take the kind of extraordinary leadership that America is known for around the globe. And it will take realizing that the alternative—lawlessness, violence, chaos, and potential dictatorship—is far worse than anything imaginable in a democratic society.

As we begin the countdown to our nation's next big birthday, the Georgia Historical Society is here to lead the conversation about who we are as a nation, where we have been, and where we are going. We are here to help restore trust in our institutions and to remind Americans of the example that our country has set for the world over the last two and a half centuries. The moral authority of America—what Lincoln called "the last, best hope of earth"—has been more powerful than all our vaunted economic strength and military might combined.

In so doing, we can help our country move confidently into the future with a renewed understanding of, and commitment to, the lofty and timeless values and ideals that unite us as Americans—values and ideals that are elastic enough to meet new challenges and are greater than any of the things that divide us.

Happy birthday America. Here's to the next 250 years of the Republic!

Editor's Note: Restoring Trust in American Institutions—the courts, the rule of law, elections, and a free press—is the focus of GHS's US250 initiative.

Lester Maddox burning The Atlanta Constitution. March 10, 1971, GHS.

Hands that pick cotton. 1970. Edwin Jackson Collection, GHS.

John Berrien Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America. May 11, 1778, GHS.

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