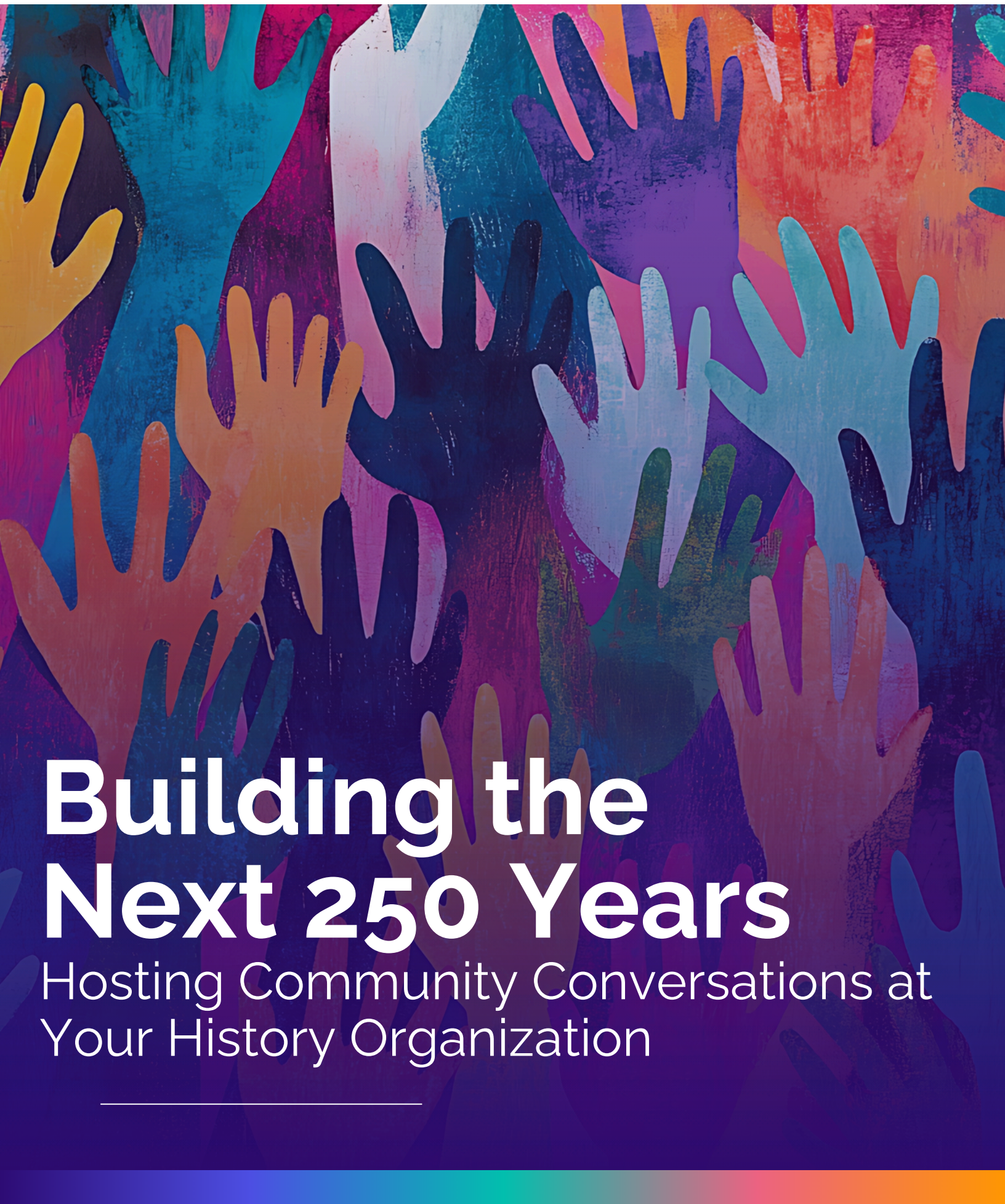




Building the Next 250 Years

Hosting Community Conversations at
Your History Organization



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Introduction

In the U.S. Semiquincentennial era, a more complete and accurate understanding of American history is under extraordinary pressure. NxtLevel and the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) are collaborating on this new resource to ensure that history remains a vital part of public civic discourse and that the conversations we have about that history are informed, community-driven, and reflective of the full American experience. **This guide provides tested logistical recommendations and flexible discussion topics to give history organizations of all kinds a foundation for facilitating an effective community conversation.**

Located in nearly every town and city and serving their communities with a high degree of public trust, history organizations are uniquely positioned to strengthen civic discourse and support a thriving democracy. They do so by advancing essential historical knowledge and skills—by promoting civic participation, fostering feelings of belonging, bridging divides, amplifying community voices, and addressing contemporary challenges. (You can learn more about the vital intersection between historical and civic practice through AASLH's [History & Democracy Initiative](#).)

One way history organizations can support civic discourse is by serving as welcoming hubs for generative conversations that use history to reflect on who we are and who we aspire to be. Building on that model, AASLH and NxtLevel have joined forces to leverage the key role history organizations play in repairing civic fabric by providing a guide for local organizations to host community conversations that can help enhance civic practice now and in the years ahead.

Background

In 2025, AASLH partnered with NxtLevel on a pilot project to hear directly from American communities about how they remember their history, what they value in their community, and what they hoped for as we approached our country's 250th anniversary. In total, six history organizations, representing nearly every region of the country, hosted over 120 community members in conversation. Through this pilot project, we found that community members craved these kinds of deep, intentional conversations that are rooted in mutual respect and understanding and led by trusted history institutions in their own communities.

The conversations were deeply rewarding for those who participated and for the history organizations that hosted them. If you're curious about the main takeaways from this pilot project, you can find them [here](#).

"It was an honor to partner with NxtLevel and AASLH to provide an opportunity for community members, from children to elders, to share their thoughts on America's past, present, and future. This programming played an instrumental role for our organization to strengthen our community member's sense of belonging to Florence, Alabama, and America. Our event was so impactful that we invested in facilitator training and are actively planning ways to expand on this work. If you're looking for a way to connect with and better understand the community you serve, we greatly encourage you to participate in *Building the Next 250 Years*."

—Brian Murphy and Michael Asher, Florence Arts and Museums
(Pilot Site Host)

Goal

This guide is designed to support history organizations in helping the public meaningfully engage with nation's history and democracy in the past, present, and for the next 250 years.

The community conversations held during the pilot project proven to be a powerful way to connect neighbors to one another and to strengthen the bonds between history organizations and those they serve. We hope that by asking community members thought-provoking questions—What are this community's shared values? How are those values rooted in the community's history? Is there a gap between those values and reality?—and encouraging them to engage with and listen deeply to one another, participants will draw lessons from the past 250 years and help shape the next 250.

By offering a resource for holding these sorts of conversations, we aim to inspire history practitioners fieldwide to more intentionally integrate the frame of democracy into their work and to position their organizations as essential allies in promoting civic practice and community connection. Through these conversations, history organizations can bring their neighbors together in essential discourse to collectively shape a vision for the future.

How It Works

- History organizations opt to use this free facilitation guide to design a community conversation that fits the mission, resources, and goals of their institution.
- Following their event, history organizations will fill out a [Host Site Post-Event Report Form](#) (it should take no more than 15 minutes to complete) to help NxtLevel and AASLH better understand what history organizations are seeing and hearing across the country.
- NxtLevel will synthesize feedback from host sites' reporting forms after the community conversations and provide a summary available to the AASLH community. Anonymized analysis of the conversations may also be shared with funders, policymakers, researchers, and other stakeholders.

"This guide offers a valuable resource for initiating or deepening community engagement through dialogue. For TMA, it provided an opportunity to build capacity, expand the museum's role as a gathering space, and strengthen relationships with both longstanding partners and new community members. These intimate conversations yielded insights to cultivate a more inclusive and collaborative museum experience that fosters connection, understanding, and meaningful civic discourse."

—Marianna Pegno, Tucson Museum of Art and Historic Block
(Pilot Site Host)



Event Needs

Logistical Decisions

Before moving forward with holding a community conversation, you'll want to nail down the basics. Think about when and where your community can best come together—a date and time that works for your audiences and a location that feels inviting. Those answers may be different for different community members.

You'll also want to decide on the format that feels most comfortable for your organization and intended participants. When choosing a format, think about why you are engaging in these conversations and your desired impact.

- **Date / Time** — Early evening events can improve access for people on typical office schedules, and if you can offer childcare or are willing to include children, it can help those with care-giving responsibilities. Morning and midday events can improve accessibility for people with non-office work schedules, retirees, students, parents with children in school, and others who may find evening events difficult to attend.
- **Location** — All of our pilot organizations decided to host their events on their premises as a trusted and familiar location for participants. If hosting your event on-site isn't an option, consider partnering with a nearby library or business likely to make attendees feel welcome.
- **Format** — Any format is fine, and we recommend keeping the event to no more than two hours. Options include:
 - **Intimate conversation (8–15 people):** Works best as a semi-guided conversation involving more direction from both participants and facilitators.
 - **Larger roundtable conversation (20+ people):** Allows for some questions to be tackled with the big group and others to be handled in a few small groups.
 - **Town hall (50+ people):** Most effective as presentation or share-out with a Q&A or opportunity for feedback.
- **Compensation** — It's important to show you are appreciative of people's time. While paying people will not be an option for most organizations, there are low and no-cost options too:
 - Complimentary tickets
 - Swag
 - Discounts to museum stores or membership
 - Coupons to neighborhood businesses
- **Catering** — Our pilot organizations offered light snacks and beverages to participants (pastries, coffee, snacks, water, etc.), and we recommend doing so if your budget permits.

Audience

One of the most important choices you'll make is who is invited to be in the room. A rich, representative conversation depends on bringing together a thoughtful mix of community members. Consider who might be underrepresented in your community, and make a deliberate effort to include them in order to have a robust conversation.

At least the first time, many of our pilot locations opted to host events with community members already involved with their institutions, such as volunteers, partner organizations, board members, and participants from past events.

Audience (continued)

Ask yourself:

- What mix of people would you like to invite (demographics including age, race/ethnicity, gender, occupation, ability, etc.)?
- Who has been historically left out of these conversations that would provide a needed perspective?
- What is the best way to reach your audience?

Once you've identified your audience, choose outreach methods most likely to reach them. Promote the event using the communication channels your community already trusts, whether that means email newsletters, social media, flyers, partner organizations, word of mouth, or direct invitations.

We also recommend keeping track of expected attendance, either by asking people to RSVP directly via email or by using an online event registration form. Tracking RSVPs will help you plan for seating, materials, refreshments, and any accessibility or childcare needs, while also giving you a clearer sense of who will be in the room and whether additional outreach is needed.

Pre-Event Preparation

Once the logistics are decided, hold a planning call to ensure your team is on the same page about greeting participants, making introductions, facilitating the conversation itself, etc. It can also be helpful to decide who will take notes so that those facilitating can be fully present with participants and the conversations. If you plan to break participants up into smaller groups, you should assign a note-taker for each group. You can also use this planning meeting to evaluate your RSVP list, consider which format you would like to follow, and determine whether there are specific discussion questions you would most like to delve into.

Our pilot sites found that participants appreciated having at least some of the discussion questions printed out. Following up with attendees prior to the meeting with details, a confirmation, and protocols and/or an outline of discussion topics could also help ensure that attendees feel supported in their participation.

- Sample Runs of Show
 - [Smaller gathering example](#)
 - [Larger gathering example](#)
- [Sample Agenda](#) for participants and question guide

During Your Event

During the pilot, NxtLevel typically arrived an hour before the event to ensure time for set-up and to welcome any early arrivals. Blocking out at least 30 minutes after the event for clean-up and debriefing is also helpful. Items you'll likely need for the event include:

- Name Tags and markers
- Sign-in sheet
- Chairs/tables
- Pens/pencils
- Attendee Feedback Survey [here](#) (short survey for host sites' own analysis)—if attendees are willing to fill out a quick survey form following the program, having them available in hard copy is handy.
- Materials for taking notes (notes template [here](#))



Facilitation Guide

Suggested Ground Rules

This may be the first time some of your participants are engaging in this kind of community conversation. It's important to help them feel comfortable by setting some rules of engagement for the event. Feel free to come up with your own and have them printed or posted around the room as reminders. A few key suggestions from our past events:

- **Confidentiality** — Each organization should decide whether, how, and to what extent they will share the content of the conversations and clearly communicate these intentions with attendees. Some organizations may want to keep the conversations confidential, meaning that what is said in the room, stays in the room and is not shared in any way, including via recordings, social media, etc. Other organizations may decide that they would like to share recordings, clips, or recaps of the conversations more publicly. NxtLevel will keep responses from post-event reporting forms anonymous in analysis and will primarily use demographic information for any attributed insights.
- **Disagree without being disagreeable** — The hope is that these conversations are rich and participants feel open to share their thoughts. It's inevitable that participants may have different opinions; just remember, people can disagree over ideas without making personal attacks.
- **Use "I" statements** — When participants speak, they should use their own perspectives and experiences. Avoid broad generalizations of groups of people.
- **Take space and make space** — Participants should remain conscious of how much they are contributing—or not—to the conversation.

Facilitation Questions

The questions below are open-ended and intended to spark conversation among participants. You are unlikely to cover all of the questions and topics, and that's okay! Pick and choose which questions are priorities and feel right for your audience. Once you get a sense of what participants are interested in talking about, you can follow their lead before gently shifting the conversation to another area after most participants have had a chance to feel heard.

If the conversation becomes tense, we suggest openly acknowledging the tension and encouraging participants to move through it. Remain polite towards one another and find another topic to engage with. Ultimately, the goal is to gather a diverse range of perspectives, not pick at fault lines.

Potential initial questions to break the ice:

- What is your name and how long have you lived here?
- What do you love about this community?
- What is something this community offers/does that is different than somewhere else you have lived?
- What is your favorite restaurant in this town?

What would you say are the core values of this community? What do you think about values such as respect, belonging, diversity, and opportunity?

- What does belonging mean to you?
- What about this community does or does not make you feel a sense of belonging?
- What would give you a greater sense of belonging in this community?



Facilitation Questions (continued)

- Do you feel respected in this community?
- What support systems exist in this community to ensure continued respect and belonging?
- What does opportunity mean to you? How do you think that value might be reflected in this community?
- What does diversity mean to you? How do you find that value reflected in this community?

What are the values of this community?

- Do you think the values of this community include respect, opportunity, diversity, and belonging?
- Do you think those values have changed or evolved over time?
- To what extent does this community live up to its stated values?
- How can an understanding of history contribute to a sense of respect, belonging, diversity, and/or opportunity?
- Where do you see tensions between our community's stated values and their implementation—in the past and today?
- How would you like this community to stay the same? How would you like it to change?
- Is there a tension between your desire for continuity and desire for change?
- How should our community approach growth? How should our community preserve the qualities that make it special? Are there values that will need to evolve as part of that balance?

What would you say are the core values of this nation?

- What moments in our country's history do you think best reflect those values? What about in our community's history?
- How do you think our history has shaped our values?
- What do you think the commonalities between the values of your community and country are? What are the tensions between the two?
- What role can history/cultural organizations play in shaping the core values of our country and/or community?
- How do you want the values of your community and the country to evolve over the next 250 years?

How do you think we can increase a sense of belonging for people in your community over the next 250 years? What about for everyone in the nation?

- What insights into the state of our country do you think the previous 250 years might offer?
- Are there concrete things you wish the community would do to make you feel a greater sense of respect, or belonging?
- What moments in our history—locally or nationally—best reflect our values?
- What is your wish for your community for the next 250 years?
- What is your wish for this country for the next 250 years?
- If you could describe your wish for this community in one word what would it be?
- If you could describe your wish for this country in one word what would it be?



Follow-Up to Your Event

The conversation doesn't end when people leave the room—in many ways, this is where the most important work begins. Take time to reflect on what you heard, document your observations, and share your experience with NxtLevel via the [Host Site Post-Event Report Form](#). Filling out this form shouldn't take more than 15 minutes to complete and can provide NxtLevel and AASLH essential information on what history organizations are seeing and hearing across the country. It will also provide important feedback on this project so that other organizations can learn from it too. You can use the [template notes document](#) for note-taking during the event in order to help with synthesis and main takeaways.

NxtLevel will synthesize all of the host sites' reporting forms into a summary approximately every 6 months. This report will be available to the AASLH community. Anonymized analysis of the discussions and takeaways may also be shared with funders, policymakers, researchers, and other stakeholders.

Be sure to also send a thank you email to attendees, ideally with some brief takeaways, within a week of the event.

Spreading Awareness

The stories and reflections from your community can inspire others across the country. Here are a few easy ways to amplify the impact of these conversations:

- Share on social channels, newsletters, etc.
- Record short reflections (30–60 seconds) from participants after the event. You can combine these videos to:
 - Share on social media
 - Share with AASLH, which can feature it on their own social media / website
 - Use to promote a future community conversation
- Connect with AASLH about sharing your findings via a blog post, conference session, or in another format

Conclusion

Every community is different, and every history organization brings its own relationships, strengths, challenges, and other factors to this work. We encourage you to adapt this guide to fit your audience, mission, and capacity. Whether you gather a dozen neighbors around a table or convene a larger public forum, what matters most is creating a space where people feel welcomed, respected, and invited to reflect together on the past, present, and future of their community.

As history organizations across the country participate in this initiative, each conversation becomes part of a larger national effort to understand how Americans see themselves, their communities, and the values they hope will guide the next 250 years. Thank you for helping make history not just something we remember, but something we actively use to strengthen civic life and shape our shared future.



Who We Are

[NxtLevel](#) is an entity deeply invested in both the ongoing fight to save diversity, equity, and inclusion and in using what we learn from that fight to inform the collaborative conversations we need to have. Through our strong foundation of partners, subject matter experts, key research, and collateral, we are committed to building community by engaging with organizations committed to this work, along with members of Congress, leading legal academics, members of the media, philanthropies, NGOs, and C-suite corporate America. We leverage this foundation as we expand our impact and respond to the constantly changing landscape—and, more importantly, build what needs to come next.

[AASLH](#) is a national membership association dedicated to helping the history community thrive. For the better part of a century, AASLH has provided leadership and resources to its members who preserve and interpret state and local history to make the past more meaningful to all people. AASLH is the professional association for history-doers. Today AASLH provides crucial resources, guidance, professional development, advocacy, new publications, field-wide research, and a sense of connectedness to over 5,200 institutional and individual members, as well as leadership for history and history organizations nationally. It is the only comprehensive national organization dedicated to state and local history. For nearly a decade, AASLH led the history field's preparations for the U.S. Semiquincentennial.

Collateral

- [NxtLevel NGO Co-Creation Document](#)
- [NxtLevel Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Video](#)
- [AASLH History and Democracy Initiative](#)
- [AASLH Making History at 250 Field Guide](#)
- AASLH Reframing History [Research Report](#) and [Toolkit](#)