

NJS Presents**Teaching NJ History****In this Issue:*****Teaching Social Studies for the 250th: Revolution NJ Envisions New Initiatives to Engage Teachers and Students*****By Kris Myers****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v8i2.291>**

This contribution to “Teaching NJ History” discusses Revolution NJ, a partnership of the New Jersey Historical Commission (NJHC), a division of the New Jersey Department of State, and the nonprofit Crossroads of the American Revolution. Specifically explored are Revolution NJ’s efforts to assess and meet the needs of teachers and students throughout the state.

History is trending! Monuments and textbooks are the source of news and debate, the annual National History Day competition is becoming the “Scripps National Spelling Bee” of the history education community, and with the 250th anniversary of the United States on the horizon in 2026, national leaders are looking to the public history community to plan a grand celebration. Initiatives by America250, Made by Us, the American Association for State and Local History, and the American Association of Museums are working hard to create national and regional commemorations for the public to participate in, sparking civic pride and reflection on the country’s complicated legacy. Revolution NJ plans to put New Jersey at the center of the commemoration.

Revolution NJ is a partnership of the New Jersey Historical Commission (NJHC), a division of the New Jersey Department of State, and the nonprofit Crossroads of the American Revolution, who were brought together in 2018 when the New Jersey State Legislature tasked

them with planning a state-wide commemoration of the 250th. While Revolution NJ is planning public events and programs for all New Jerseyans to mark the U.S. Semiquincentennial, they also proposed a more lasting legacy. One of the most suitable ways to explore our state's and nation's past is to focus its future on students who will be New Jersey's next generation of changemakers. Like the Educating for American Democracy initiative, Revolution NJ believes that an investment in developing the minds of New Jersey's students will prepare them for their future role as citizens.¹ Their "training" would go far beyond 2026 by learning NJ and U.S. history; hearing the varied perspectives of what it means to be an American; exploring, debating, and commemorating the state's and nation's past; and going into their own neighborhoods to identify the diverse people, events, and places that should be remembered.

The first step Revolution NJ took was to get a sense of where they needed to begin their focus. In early 2020, Revolution NJ sent a survey to the principals of over 2,531 K–12 public schools across New Jersey. Even in the midst of the pandemic, they received responses from 607 schools, creating a sample from which to assess social studies education. What they found in their report, *Looking Back, Looking Up, Moving Forward*, published in November 2021 (the webinar for this event is available by link on the report at www.njsocialstudies.org) is an underinvestment in social studies that has a lasting impact on the nation—particularly the perspectives of U.S. citizens long after their school days are complete. Other findings indicate that social studies are in need of resources to teach Black, Latino, and LGBTQ+ histories and on teaching the skills of "taking informed action" and "applying disciplinary tools and concepts," two key skills that should be crucial to students as future voters. Moreover, teachers stressed how controversial the teaching of social studies has become, as seen daily in media where a statue or monument can be the source

¹ Learn more about the Educating for American Democracy effort and their *Roadmap* for teachers at <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org>.

of fierce debate over distinct perspectives of what America's story is (or should be). Finally, the lasting effects of the pandemic may exacerbate the lack of connection that students have with their local or state history, as field trips, assemblies, and classroom programs have been discontinued with a slow return beyond a virtual format.

To address the need for educator resources, Revolution NJ turned to New Jersey's teachers, not only to provide them with resources to teach, but to get their ideas on how to best honor the 250th anniversary of the United States. Revolution NJ brought more than 30 teachers, program staff, and youth-services providers together to form the Educators Working Group, one of eight committees helping to shape the programs and events that will take place from 2024 through 2026. In addition to planning scavenger hunts, "tavern talks," and the dedication of new monuments (or monuments that could be), Revolution NJ is planning more than a dozen local and statewide events for students and their families to participate in.

Revolution NJ then created professional development resources for New Jersey's older students in grades eight and up, including two new programs: *Big Ideas: Concepts for the 250th*, a series of live webinars featuring a panel of humanities scholars and public history staff considering identity, how society shapes actions and beliefs, how and why to engage the public, and approaches to studying the American Revolution; and a film series titled *A Bundle of Silences: Reimagining Interpretive Approaches to the Past*, which highlights humanities scholars exploring the themes like inclusion (and exclusion), property and sovereignty, new approaches to understanding the American Revolution, and more. *Big Ideas* and *A Bundle of Silences* brings academic discussions into a public forum for exploration and debate. Additionally, Revolution NJ developed lesson plans and review questions and activities for grade 8–12 teachers to easily adapt for use in their social studies, history, and civics classrooms. These webinars and lesson plans, and

a recording of an info session to guide teachers on how to use these resources are available on the [New Jersey Historical Commission website](https://nj.gov/state/historical/revolution-nj-opportunities.shtml) at <https://nj.gov/state/historical/revolution-nj-opportunities.shtml>.

To address the growing chasm between students and state and regional history, Revolution NJ is planning a new webinar series called *Perfect Partners*, which aims to bring K–12 social studies teachers together with New Jersey public history staff. The *Perfect Partners* workshop series will include:

- “Exploring the 2020 NJSLS for Social Studies.” This webinar will offer educational program staff at public history sites the chance to learn about the 2020 NJ Student Learning Standards (NJSLS) for social studies, and discuss how historic sites can connect to teachers by connecting their programming to the standards.
- “What Do Teachers Need from the History Community?” This workshop will bring NJ K–12 teachers together with public history staff to discuss how public history sites can create resources that teachers want *and* can use.
- “Teaching for the 250th.” This will focus on how teachers can prepare for the 250th anniversary of the U.S. with new resources from Revolution NJ and by connecting to the local sources including historic sites, archives, museums, libraries, and historical societies in their communities.

Dates for the webinar series will be announced soon. To learn more about these free webinar series, please visit the [New Jersey Historical Commission website](https://nj.gov/state/historical/revolution-nj-opportunities.shtml).

New Jersey’s crucial role in the 250th anniversary of the U.S. is fitting. New Jersey’s central East Coast location makes the state the center of a lot of attention. After all, more Revolutionary War battles were fought within its borders than any other state, marking the state

as the “crossroads of the American Revolution.” New Jersey is also a state known for its people. The Garden State is the most densely populated state in the nation. And New Jerseyans are legendary—in media, history and lore. Revolution NJ, however, wants to turn its focus first toward a very specific set of the population: its children, the next generation of citizens. By investing in students and teachers, New Jersey promises to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the nation in the most impactful way possible: ensuring that they know the nation’s story—the people, principles, ideas, and challenges of U.S. citizens—so that they can carry on the history that is the United States.

Kris Myers has more than 20 years of experience in the field of public history. She currently works as the manager of Grants and Foundation Relations at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. Previously, she developed programs at the New Jersey Historical Commission, Rider University, and the Alice Paul Institute. Additionally, she has taught women’s studies and women’s history courses as an adjunct professor at Rowan College at Burlington County, Camden County Community College, and TCNJ. Kris graduated from Rowan University with a bachelor’s in history and women’s studies, and earned her MA in liberal arts from the University of Pennsylvania. Myers has lived in California, Okinawa, England, Pennsylvania, and Texas, and now resides in Mount Ephraim, New Jersey. She enjoys books, cats, chocolate, tea, British television, and, of course, history.