

Congressional Involvement in the Celebration of Anniversaries of the Declaration of Independence

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Congressional Involvement in the Celebration of Anniversaries of the Declaration of Independence

On July 4, the United States celebrates Independence Day, the federal holiday recognizing the anniversary of the 1776 signing of the Declaration of Independence. For four anniversaries—the centennial (100th) in 1876, sesquicentennial (150th) in 1926, bicentennial (200th) in 1976, and semiquincentennial (250th) in 2026—Congress created a commission to coordinate the nationwide celebration. For two anniversaries—the centennial in 1876 and the sesquicentennial in 1926—Congress authorized an international exhibition in Philadelphia to showcase the United States and to invite the world to celebrate with Americans.

For the 250th anniversary in 2026, Congress in 2016 authorized the United States Semiquincentennial Commission “to provide for the observance and commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States and related events through local, State, national, and international activities planned, encouraged, developed, and coordinated by a national commission representative of appropriate public and private authorities and organizations.” The United States Semiquincentennial Commission has begun programs to celebrate the upcoming 250th anniversary. Additionally, Congress has authorized the redesign of circulating coins for 2026 and the creation of a time capsule to be buried in Philadelphia to mark the semiquincentennial.

This report provides an overview of congressionally authorized activities for five milestone celebrations of the Declaration of Independence—the upcoming semiquincentennial (250th anniversary in 2026), the bicentennial (200th anniversary in 1976), the sesquicentennial (150th anniversary in 1926), the centennial (100th anniversary in 1876), and the jubilee (50th anniversary in 1826). For each anniversary celebration, the report discusses congressional involvement in the planning of anniversary festivities and other congressionally authorized actions and activities.

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Introduction

On July 4, the United States celebrates Independence Day, the federal holiday recognizing the anniversary of the 1776 signing of the Declaration of Independence.¹ John Adams believed that the Declaration of Independence was not only a document declaring American independence from Great Britain, but that it “would be celebrated ‘by succeeding generations ... as the day of deliverance ... with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other from this time forward forevermore.’”²

In 2007, Senator Robert Byrd noted the importance of the 4th of July during a speech to the Senate. He said:

Fourth of July celebrations are a wonderful time to glory in all that is good about the United States. Flags and fireworks, picnics and parades, mellow afternoons and martial music—everything about Independence Day is grand. As we join together to remember the bravery that led our Founding Fathers to draft the Declaration of Independence, the long struggle to win our freedom, and the enlightened wisdom that resulted in our unique and wonderful Constitution, the love of our Nation that is the true spirit of patriotism is renewed. Surrounded by the happy faces of our diverse population enjoying their small town parades, music under the stars, family picnics and the grand finale of the fireworks displays, we can be sure that our Founding Fathers chose well when they gambled on a new nation in which “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.”³

For certain milestone anniversaries (i.e., every 50 years), Congress has authorized broader celebrations, often as a reminder that the “Declaration of Independence was more than an assertion of political independence.... It kindled a revolution in the hearts and minds of men that continues to this day.”⁴ To coordinate a nationwide celebration, Congress has historically

¹ 5 U.S.C. §6103. For more information on federal holidays, including Independence Day, see CRS Report R41990, *Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices*, by Jacob R. Straus.

² Massachusetts Historical Society, “Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams,” July 3, 1776, https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=102&pid=17. See also, Andrew Burstein, *America’s Jubilee: How in 1926 a Generation Remembered Fifty Years of Independence* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), p. 136. On July 4, 1776, the *New Hampshire Gazette* reported on John Adams’s prediction of future celebration of the signing of Declaration of Independence. The article noted that:

Yesterday the greatest question was decided which was ever decided among men. A resolution was passed unanimously, “That these United States are, and of right ought to be free and independent States.”

The day is passed.—The 4th of July, 1776, will be a memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe it will be celebrated by succeeding generations, as the GREAT ANNIVERSARY FESTIVAL! It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to the Almighty God. It ought to be solemnized with pomp, shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations—from one end of the continent to the other, from this time forever! You will think me transported with enthusiasm; but I am not. I am well aware of the toil, and blood, and treasure it will cost to maintain this declaration, and support and defend these States; yet through all the gloom I can see a ray of light and glory. I can see that the end is worth more than all the means; and that posterity will triumph, although you and I may rue, which I hope we shall not.

The New Hampshire Gazette (Portsmouth, NH), July 4, 1826, accessed via Library of Congress, “Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers,” <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025588/1826-07-04/ed-1/seq-3>.

³ Sen. Robert Byrd, “Independence Day,” remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 107 (June 29, 2007), pp. S8738-S8739, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-153/issue-107/senate-section/article/S8738-1>.

⁴ U.S. President (Lyndon B. Johnson), “American Revolution Bicentennial Commission,” *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, July 8, 1966, pp. 907-908.

authorized a federal commission with instructions to hold events in Philadelphia, the site of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776.⁵

This report provides an overview of congressionally authorized activities for five milestone celebrations of the Declaration of Independence—the upcoming semiquincentennial (250th anniversary in 2026), the bicentennial (200th anniversary in 1976), the sesquicentennial (150th anniversary in 1926), the centennial (100th anniversary in 1876), and the jubilee (50th anniversary in 1826). For each anniversary celebration, the report discusses congressional involvement in the planning of anniversary festivities and other congressionally authorized actions and activities. The report will be updated as needed if additional activities are authorized for the upcoming 250th anniversary.

Semiquincentennial—250th Anniversary (2026)

In 2026, the United States is to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The semiquincentennial celebrates “the development of the national heritage of the United States of individual liberty, representative government, and the attainment of equal and inalienable rights.”⁶ Semiquincentennial celebrations are scheduled to occur across the country.⁷ These celebrations are to be sponsored by governments, civic associations, and private groups.

United States Semiquincentennial Commission

In July 2016, Congress created the United States Semiquincentennial Commission “to provide for the observance and commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States and related events through local, State, national, and international activities planned, encouraged, developed, and coordinated by a national commission representative of appropriate public and private authorities and organizations.”⁸ The Semiquincentennial Commission includes 37

⁵ For more information on Independence Hall, the site of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, see U.S. Department of State, “Pennsylvania State House (Independence Hall), Philadelphia Intermittently from May 10, 1775 to March 1, 1871,” <https://history.state.gov/departments/history/buildings/section3>. For more information about the signing of the Declaration of Independence, see U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, “Declaration of Independence (1776),” <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/declaration-of-independence>.

⁶ P.L. 114-196, §2, 130 Stat. 685 (2016), as amended by P.L. 116-282, 134 Stat. 3386 (2020). The commission is scheduled to operate until December 31, 2027.

⁷ For example, see U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, “America250 and United States Conference of Mayors Launch Task Force Recruiting Cities for 250th Anniversary Planning,” press release, November 20, 2024, <https://america250.org/news/america250-and-united-states-conference-of-mayors-launch-task-force-recruiting-cities-for-250th-anniversary-planning>.

⁸ P.L. 114-196, §2(b). In addition to the Semiquincentennial Commission, on January 29, 2025, President Donald Trump issued an executive order to establish the White House Task Force on Celebrating America’s 250th Birthday. The task force consists of the President (chair), Vice President (vice chair), the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, the Secretary of Education, the Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Legislative Affairs, the Cabinet Secretary and Deputy Chief of Staff, the Director of Speechwriting, the Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the heads of such other executive departments, agencies, and offices that the chair or the vice chair may, from time to time, designate or invite to participate. The executive order further requires agencies to report to the task force on 250th anniversary plans by March 1, 2025. The task force is scheduled to terminate on December 31, 2026. Executive Order (E.O.) 14189 of January 29, 2025, “Celebrating America’s 250th Birthday,” 90 *Federal Register* 8849, February 3, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/03/2025-02231/celebrating-americas-250th-birthday>.

members, including 24 who were appointed by congressional leadership and 13 federal officials who serve as ex-officio members.⁹

In 2019, the Semiquincentennial Commission issued its first report. The report highlighted the commission's early planning for the semiquincentennial celebration, including projections for "a monumental initiative—likely surpassing any previous commemoration in our history."¹⁰ In 2021, the Semiquincentennial Commission established three key themes and goals to inspire "the American Spirit within all Americans and each American, grounded in our nation's founding principles, for our continuing journey to a more perfect union."¹¹ They are described in the report as follows:

Educate—Spark deeper awareness of our founding principles, our history, and our democratic process builds broader appreciation of one another—our unique stories and our common humanity. Together, these contribute to a better understanding of who we are, where we came from, and where we are headed. How will Americans learn about our nation, our institutions, and each other?

Engage—Government of, by, and for the people enables Americans to invigorate the civil dialogue that perpetually reshapes our nation. We have the right—and responsibility—to take part in the ongoing American experiment. Civic engagement takes many forms. How will Americans get involved in their communities and continue to shape our nation?

Unite—Coming together as a nation recognizes the power of our diverse stories while never losing sight of our common bonds as Americans. This unity is reflected in our democratic institutions, voluntary associations, and collaborative enterprises. Ideally, we act in concert to promote the common good even as we exercise our individual rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness while honoring the freedom of others to do the same. How will Americans join in expressions of unity that respect individual liberty?¹²

⁹ Congressional appointments to the Semiquincentennial Commission include appointments by the Speaker of the House, House minority leader, Senate majority leader, and Senate minority leader. Each House or Senate leader appoints two members of their respective chamber and four public citizens. P.L. 114-196, §4(b). Additionally, the President designates the Semiquincentennial Commission chair from among the appointed members. P.L. 114-196, §4(b)(3)(E). The 13 federal officials that serve as ex-officio members are the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of State, the Attorney General, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Education, the Librarian of Congress, the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, the Archivist of the United States, the chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, the chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the Chief Justice of the United States, and an Associate Justice or former Associate Justice appointed by the Chief Justice. P.L. 114-196, §4(b)(4); and P.L. 116-282, §2(a)(1). The Semiquincentennial Commission has named President George W. Bush and Mrs. Bush and President and Mrs. Obama as honorary national co-chairs. U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, "America250 Announces Presidents Bush & Obama, First Ladies as Honorary National Co-Chairs," press release, August 1, 2024, <https://america250.org/news/america250-announces-presidents-bush-obama-first-ladies-as-honorary-national-co-chairs>.

¹⁰ U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, *Inspiring the American Spirit: Report to the President*, December 31, 2019, p. 22, <https://america250.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Inspiring-the-American-Spirit-Report-to-the-President-1.pdf>. The Semiquincentennial Commission stated that it had the potential to

engage nearly 350,000,000 Americans and millions of friends worldwide by 2026; recognize and include the "many" Americans in our "one" nation; spark the imagination and promise of our youth; honor and thank active duty military and veterans for their service and sacrifice in defense of liberty and our country; produce more than 100,000 programs engaging participants at the local, territorial, state, tribal, regional, national, and international levels; attract billions of dollars in resources that will ripple through our local, state, and national economies to positive effect; and extend over a multiyear crescendo reaching its peak on the Fourth of July 2026.

¹¹ U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, *Report to the President, A Five Year Update: 2016-2021*, January 31, 2022, p. 4, <https://america250.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Report-to-the-President-II-FINAL-2.16.22.pdf>.

¹² U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, *Report to the President, A Five Year Update: 2016-2021*, p. 5.

In the lead-up to 2026, the Semiquincentennial Commission is sponsoring programs to engage citizens in the semiquincentennial celebration. These programs include the following:

- **America’s Field Trip** engages school age students. The America’s Field Trip contest “invites students across the country in grades 3-12 to be part of America’s 250th anniversary by sharing their perspectives on what America means to them” through the submission of writings or original artwork.¹³ In 2024, “thousands of students from across the country submitted inspiring entries.... A panel of current and former educators selected 150 students as awardees, hailing from 44 states and territories”¹⁴ to see iconic American landmarks and historical sites.¹⁵
- **Our American Story** celebrates the American story. The America 250 Commission is taking nominations for “history’s unsung champions.”¹⁶ Our American Story “is an oral and visual storytelling project aimed at collecting and preserving our nation’s stories.”¹⁷
- **America’s Invitation** provides “A unique opportunity for Americans to share their stories and their hopes and dreams for the future of our country. Together, these stories create a portrait of America at 250 years.”¹⁸ Submissions can include individual “reflections on our past, present, and future. We will use these stories to tell the American story on social media, through videos and to create the most inclusive commemoration in our history.”¹⁹

Other Congressionally Sponsored Semiquincentennial Celebrations

- **Semiquincentennial Circulating Coins.** In 2021, Congress enacted the Circulating Collectible Coin Redesign Act to authorize the temporary redesign of all circulating coins for the 2026 semiquincentennial.²⁰ Specifically, the law

¹³ U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, “America’s Field Trip,” <https://america250.org/fieldtrip>. For the 2025 America’s Field Trip contests, applications can be submitted through the commission’s website at <https://america250.org/fieldtrip/application>. Applications for the 2025 contest are due on April 16, 2025.

¹⁴ U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, “America’s Field Trip Awardees,” <https://america250.org/fieldtrip/awardees>.

¹⁵ In 2024, first place winners were able to choose “unique and unforgettable field trip experiences” to the Statue of Liberty, Yellowstone National Park, Rocky Mountain National Park, the National Archives and the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Museums, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the American Village in Alabama. U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, “America250 Announces First-Ever ‘America’s Field Trip’ Awardees,” press release, July 8, 2024, <https://america250.org/news/america250-announces-first-ever-america-s-field-trip-awardees>.

¹⁶ U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, “Nominate History’s Unsung Champions,” <https://america250.org/nominate>.

¹⁷ U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, “Nominate History’s Unsung Champions.”

¹⁸ U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, “America 250 Years in the Making,” <https://america250.org>.

¹⁹ U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, “Share Your Story,” <https://america250.org/share-your-story>.

²⁰ P.L. 116-330, §3, 124 Stat. 5102 (2021). For more information on the role of Congress in the design of coins, see CRS In Focus IF10533, *Congressional Involvement in the Design of Circulating Coins*, by Jacob R. Straus.

provides guidance for any redesign of the quarter dollar and dollar coins,²¹ and allows the Secretary of the Treasury to redesign other circulating coins.²²

- **Philadelphia Time Capsule.** In 2016, Congress authorized the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission to create a time capsule containing “a representative portion of all books, manuscripts, miscellaneous printed matter, memorabilia, relics, and other materials relating to the United States Semiquincentennial,” to be buried on Independence Mall on July 4, 2026, and unearthed on the 500th anniversary of the United States on July 4, 2276.²³

Legislative Proposals for Semiquincentennial Celebrations

- **Joint Session of Congress in Philadelphia.** In the 118th Congress (2023-2024), proposed legislation would have authorized a joint session of Congress at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia on July 2, 2026, to commemorate the Declaration of Independence.²⁴
- **Congressional Time Capsule.** In the 119th Congress (2025-2026), legislation (H.R. 469) to authorize a congressional time capsule has passed the House.²⁵ The

²¹ P.L. 116-330, §3. The law further specifies that redesign of the quarter’s reverse may include “up to five different designs emblematic of the United States semiquincentennial.” At least “one of the ... designs must be emblematic of a woman or women’s contribution to the birth of the Nation or the Declaration of Independence or any other monumental moments” in American history. For dollar coins, the U.S. Mint is authorized to issue coins “with designs emblematic of the United States semiquincentennial.” Any Semiquincentennial \$1 coins issued would be in addition to the regular issuance of Native American and American Innovation \$1 coins (§3).

²² P.L. 116-330, §3. The U.S. Mint presented coin redesigns for 2026 to the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (CFA) and the Citizens Coinage Advisory Committee (CCAC). The Mint would redesign the penny, nickel, dime, quarter, half-dollar, and dollar coins. For the Semiquincentennial one- and five-cent coin proposals, see Letter from Thomas E. Luebke, Secretary, U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, to Ventris C. Gibson, Director, United States Mint, February 23, 2024, <https://cfa.gov/records-research/project-search/cfa-15-feb-24-8>. For the Semiquincentennial dime, U.S. Constitution quarter, and Declaration of Independence quarter and half dollar, see Letter from Thomas E. Luebke, Secretary, U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, to Ventris C. Gibson, Director, United States Mint, July 24, 2024, <https://cfa.gov/records-research/project-search/cfa-18-jul-24-1>. For the Semiquincentennial dime, half dollar, suffrage quarter, abolition quarter, Constitution quarter, civil rights quarter, and Declaration of Independence quarter, see Letter from Thomas E. Luebke, Secretary, U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, to Ventris C. Gibson, Director, United States Mint, October 24, 2024, <https://cfa.gov/records-research/project-search/cfa-17-oct-24-6>.

²³ P.L. 114-196, §7(f)(1). In the 118th Congress, H.R. 9432 would have amended the time capsule section of P.L. 114-196 to clarify that the time capsule would be installed in Independence National Historical Park on July 4, 2026, and to change the word “unearthed” that the law uses to describe the review of the time capsule in 2276 to “opened.” H.R. 9432 was referred to the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability and was not considered further.

²⁴ H.Con.Res. 115 (118th Congress). H.Con.Res. 115 was referred to the House Judiciary Committee and was not considered further. On two occasions, Congress has held joint commemorative meetings outside of the District of Columbia—July 16, 1987, at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, to “honor the bicentennial of the Constitution” and commemorate “the 200th anniversary of the Great Compromise of the Constitutional Convention” (H.Con.Res. 131, 100th Congress); and September 6, 2002, at Federal Hall in New York “in remembrance of the victims and the heroes of September 11, 2001, and in recognition of the courage and spirit of the City of New York” (H.Con.Res. 448, 107th Congress; and H.Con.Res. 449, 107th Congress). For more information on the meeting locations of Congress outside of Washington, DC, see CRS In Focus IF12533, *Meeting Locations of Congress and Predecessor Legislatures*, by Jacob R. Straus.

²⁵ H.R. 469 (119th Congress) passed the House February 26, 2025. For more information, see “Semiquincentennial Congressional Time Capsule Act,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 171 (February 26, 2025), pp. H855-H857. In the 118th Congress, the House passed H.R. 6394 on December 17, 2024. For more information on H.R. 6394 (118th Congress), see U.S. Congress, House Committee on House Administration, *Semiquincentennial Congressional Time Capsule Act*, report to accompany H.R. 6394, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Rept. 118-755, part 1, November 19, 2024, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/118th-congress/house-report/755/1>; and “Semiquincentennial (continued...)”

bill would direct the Architect of the Capitol to prepare a time capsule containing material about the semiquincentennial,²⁶ bury it on the West Front Lawn of the U.S. Capitol,²⁷ and install a plaque to provide information about the time capsule.²⁸ The time capsule would be sealed until July 4, 2276, during the 244th Congress (2275-2276).²⁹

- **Semiquincentennial Commemorative Coins.** Beginning in the 117th Congress (2021-2022), legislation has been introduced to authorize semiquincentennial commemorative coins.³⁰ The bills in the 117th and 118th Congress would have authorized \$25 gold coins, \$2.50 silver coins, and \$0.25 clad coins to be issued in 2026 with surcharges paid to the America 250 Foundation.³¹

Bicentennial—200th Anniversary (1976)

In 1976, the United States celebrated the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The bicentennial celebration served as a “reaffirmation of our blueprints of government—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights—the blueprints which enable us to celebrate proudly the 200th anniversary of the oldest continuously surviving democratic republic in the world.”³² Bicentennial celebrations occurred across the country and were sponsored by local and state governments, civic associations, and private groups.

American Revolution Bicentennial Commission

In 1966, Congress established the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission to “commemorate the great struggle for freedom which occurred nearly 200 years ago when the American colonies, at great personal sacrifice, fought the Revolutionary War, and separated themselves from England, thus creating the United States as we know it today,”³³ and to “prepare

Congressional Time Capsule Act,” *Congressional Record*, vol. 170 (December 16, 2024), pp. H7154-H7156, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-170/issue-186/house-section/article/H7154-1>. In the 118th Congress, the Senate version of the Congressional Time Capsule Act was S. 3293, introduced November 14, 2023.

²⁶ H.R. 469, §2(b)(2). The legislation would direct the Architect of the Capitol to create a time capsule to include (A) a representative portion of all books, manuscripts, miscellaneous printed matter, memorabilia, relics, and other materials relating to the United States Semiquincentennial; (B) copies or representations of important legislative and institutional milestones of Congress during the time before the Time Capsule is buried; (C) a message from Congress to the future Congress when the Time Capsule will be opened; and (D) such other content as ... [the congressional leadership] consider appropriate.

²⁷ H.R. 469, §2(c)(1).

²⁸ H.R. 469, §2(c)(2).

²⁹ H.R. 469, §2(d).

³⁰ 117th Congress: H.R. 4429 and S. 2384; 118th Congress: H.R. 10170; 119th Congress: H.R. 951, introduced February 4, 2025.

³¹ H.R. 10170, §§3(a); 7(b) (118th Congress); H.R. 4429, §§3(a); 7(b) (117th Congress); S. 2384, §§3(a); 7(b) (117th Congress).

³² American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, *The Bicentennial of the United States of America: A Final Report to the People* (June 30, 1977), p. v, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015011918110&seq=15>.

³³ P.L. 89-491, 80 Stat. 259 (1966); S.J.Res. 162 (89th Congress). U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *American Revolution Bicentennial Commission*, report to accompany S.J.Res. 162, 89th Cong., 2nd sess., S.Rept. 89-1317, June 24, 1966, p. 2; and U.S. Congress, House Committee on the Judiciary, *American Revolution Bicentennial Commission*, report to accompany H.J.Res. 903, 89th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Rept. 89-1672, June 28, 1966, pp. 2-3.

an overall program for commemorating the bicentennial of the American Revolution, and to plan, encourage, develop, and coordinate observances and activities commemorating the historic events that preceded, and are associated with, the American Revolution.”³⁴

The Bicentennial Commission began with 34 members.³⁵ By 1972, to include additional voices on the commission, Congress expanded it to 50 members, including 25 from the federal government and 25 private citizens.³⁶

On July 4, 1970, the Bicentennial Commission issued its report with recommendations to create a “Festival of Freedom” to “forge a new national commitment, *a new spirit for '76*, a spirit which vitalizes the ideals for which the Revolution was fought; a spirit which will unite the nation in purpose and in dedication to the advancement of human welfare as it moves into its third century”³⁷ The Bicentennial Commission recommended that the “Festival of Freedom” include three events. As noted in the Bicentennial Commission’s report, they were:

HERITAGE '76. A nationwide summons to recall our heritage and to place it in its historical perspective. Through HERITAGE '76 programs, all groups within our society are urged to re-examine our origins, our values, and the meaning of America—to take pride in our accomplishments and to dramatize our development.

OPEN HOUSE USA. A nationwide opportunity to program activities and events which will stimulate travel and thus encourage our citizens to expand their knowledge of our country and to extend a particular welcome to visitors.

HORIZONS '76. A nationwide challenge to every American, acting individually or with others, to undertake at least one principal project which manifests the pride, the priorities, and the hopes of his community. The Commission encourages every group, especially our youth and those young in spirit, to pool their resources and their talents in a constructive effort to demonstrate concern for human welfare, happiness, and freedom.³⁸

American Revolution Bicentennial Administration

By the early 1970s, the Bicentennial Commission arguably had largely fulfilled its statutory purpose,³⁹ and the commission had “proven extremely unwieldy” because of its size (50

³⁴ P.L. 89-491, §3(a).

³⁵ P.L. 89-491, §2(b). The Bicentennial Commission’s initial membership included 8 Members of Congress—4 Senators (appointed by the President of the Senate) and 4 Representatives (appointed by the Speaker of the House)—17 private citizens (appointed by the President), and 9 directly designated officials who served as ex-officio Bicentennial Commission members. The directly designated ex-officio officials were the Secretary of State; the Attorney General; the Secretary of the Interior; the Secretary of Defense; the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare; the Librarian of Congress; the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution; the Archivist of the United States; and the Chair of the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities (P.L. 89-491 §2(b)(3)).

³⁶ P.L. 90-187 (81 Stat. 567 [1967]) added the Secretary of Commerce to the list of ex-officio members. P.L. 91-528 (84 Stat. 1389 [1970]) added the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and the Secretary of Transportation as ex-officio members of the commission. P.L. 92-236 (86 Stat. 42 [1972]) further amended the commission’s statute to increase the total membership to 50, including the addition of the Secretary of the Treasury as an ex-officio member. Additionally, the amendments increased the number of presidential appointments to 25 and added 4 members of the federal judiciary appointed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

³⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate, *America’s 200th Anniversary*, report of the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., S.Doc. 91-76, July 6, 1970, p. 5 (hereinafter Bicentennial Commission, *America’s 200th Anniversary*).

³⁸ Bicentennial Commission, *America’s 200th Anniversary*, p. 6.

³⁹ U.S. Congress, House Committee on the Judiciary, *Establishing the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration and for Other Purposes*, report to accompany H.R. 7446, 93rd Cong., 1st sess., H.Rept. 93-226, May 24, (continued...)

members).⁴⁰ In 1973, Congress replaced the Bicentennial Commission with the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration (ARBA).⁴¹ Congress directed the ARBA to “prepare an overall program for the commemoration of the bicentennial of the American Revolution.”⁴²

Led by an administrator, a deputy administrator and a 25-member advisory council,⁴³ the ARBA was tasked with ensuring “a balanced program for the bicentennial commemoration, encompassing the themes of ‘Heritage ’76,’ ‘Festival USA,’ and ‘Horizons ’76’” outlined by the Bicentennial Commission, and with maintaining the “master calendar of events of local, State, National, and international significance” between March 1975 and December 31, 1976.⁴⁴

Joint Committee on Arrangements for the Commemoration of the Bicentennial of the United States

While the Bicentennial Commission and the ARBA focused on the coordination of nationwide celebratory activities, Senator Edward Brooke, who also served as the chair of the American Revolution Bicentennial Board, argued that “Congress should play a significant and substantive role in honoring the Nation’s 200th birthday and assisting the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration by involving all of our citizens in this Bicentennial celebration.”⁴⁵ To accomplish his goal, Senator Brooke introduced a concurrent resolution to create the Joint Committee on Arrangements for the Commemoration of the Bicentennial of the United States of America.⁴⁶

1973, p. 3. For a copy of the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission Report, see U.S. Congress, House, *America’s 200th Anniversary*, Report of the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess., H.Doc. 91-76, July 6, 1970.

⁴⁰ Rep. M. Caldwell Butler, “Establishing the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration,” remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, vol. 119, part 15 (June 7, 1973), p. 18510.

⁴¹ P.L. 93-179, 87 Stat. 697 (1973).

⁴² U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Establishing the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration and for other Purposes*, report to accompany H.R. 7446, 93rd Cong., 1st sess., S.Rept. 93-449, October 8, 1973, p. 4.

⁴³ P.L. 93-179, §2(b)-(c); §3(a). Not more than 15 of the council’s 25 members could be from the same political party. Further, the law provided that “members of the Council shall be chosen from private life and shall be broadly representative of the Nation’s people. In appointing persons to the Council, the President shall give due consideration to the contributions, among others, of the Nation’s youth, women, elders, racial and ethnic minorities, artists and craftsmen, and learned professions.” Additionally, the law established an 11-member American Revolution Bicentennial Board to aid in the development of policy and guidelines to carry out the act and give final approval to grants made by the ARBA. The board included the ARBA administrator, two Members of the House appointed by the Speaker, two Senators appointed by the President of the Senate, the chair and vice chair of the council, the Secretary of the Interior, and three individuals from state bicentennial commissions or comparable state bodies appointed by the President. P.L. 93-179, §10.

⁴⁴ P.L. 93-179, §4(a).

⁴⁵ Sen. Edward Brooke, “Senate Concurrent Resolution 44—Submission of a Concurrent Resolution Providing for the Appointment of a Joint Committee on Arrangements for Commemoration of the Bicentennial,” remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, vol. 121, part 12 (May 22, 1975), p. 16009.

⁴⁶ S.Con.Res. 44 (94th Congress). Senator Edward Brooke (MA) introduced the concurrent resolution in May 1975. The Senate Committee on Rules and Administration reported the resolution on June 11, 1975, and the Senate considered and agreed to the resolution on June 13. On June 23, the House amended and agreed to the resolution, sending it back to the Senate. On July 30, the Senate further amended the resolution. On September 5, the House agreed to the Senate’s amendment. For more information, see U.S. Congress, Senate Rules and Administration Committee, *Providing for the Appointment of a Joint Committee on Arrangements for the Commemoration of the Bicentennial of the United States of America*, report to accompany S.Con.Res. 44, 94th Cong., 1st sess., S.Rept. 94-190, June 11, 1975. For a record of the congressional debate, see “Joint Committee on Arrangements for Bicentennial,” *Congressional Record*, vol. 121, part 14 (June 13, 1975), p. 18853; “Motion Offered by Mr. Long of Louisiana,” *Congressional Record*, vol. 121, part 16 (continued...)

The Joint Committee on Bicentennial Arrangements was comprised of the House and Senate majority and minority leaders, the Members of Congress who were also members of the American Revolution Bicentennial Board, two Members of the House appointed by the Speaker, and two Senators appointed by the President of the Senate.⁴⁷

The House and Senate tasked the Joint Committee on Arrangements with several activities, including to

- (1) coordinate the planning and implementation of Bicentennial activities and events of the Congress with the activities and events of other governmental and nongovernmental groups;
- (2) consult with the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate to provide for representation of the Congress at appropriate Bicentennial ceremonies and events; and
- (3) develop and implement programs to inform and emphasize to the Nation the role of the Congress, as the representative of the people, from its historic beginnings in prerevolution days through two hundred years of growth, challenge, and change.⁴⁸

The Joint Committee on Arrangements also published two books: *Black Americans in Congress, 1870-1976*,⁴⁹ and *Women in Congress, 1917-1976*.⁵⁰

Other Congressionally Sponsored Bicentennial Celebrations

- **Bicentennial Coins.** To celebrate the bicentennial, Congress authorized special designs of the quarter, half-dollar, and dollar for 1976.⁵¹ Congress specified that the bicentennial coins maintain the same obverse as then-circulating coins, but include two dates—1776 and 1976—rather than the standard single date. Further, “the reverse side of all dollar, half-dollar, and quarter-dollar coins ... shall bear a design determined by the Secretary to be emblematic of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution.”⁵²

(June 23, 1975), pp. 20263-20264; “Joint Committee on Arrangements for the Bicentennial,” *Congressional Record*, vol. 121, part 20 (July 30, 1975), pp. 26057-26058; and “To Provide for Appointment of Joint Committee on Arrangements for Commemoration of Bicentennial of United States of America,” *Congressional Record*, vol. 121, part 21 (September 5, 1975), p. 27723.

⁴⁷ S.Con.Res. 44, §2(b). The resolution provided that neither the two Representatives appointed by the Speaker of the House nor the two Senators appointed by the President of Senate could be from the same political party (§2(b)(iii)&(iv)). The members of the Joint Committee on Bicentennial Arrangements were Reps. Lindy Boggs (LA) (chair), Thomas “Tip” O’Neill Jr. (MA), J.J. Pickle (TX), John Rhodes (AZ), M. Caldwell Butler (VA), and Marvin Esch (MI); and Sens. Edward Brooke (MA) (vice chair), Mike Mansfield (MT), Hubert H. Humphrey (MN), Joseph Montoya (NM), Hugh Scott (PA), and Roman Hruska (NE). U.S. Congress, 1976 *Official Congressional Directory*, 94th cong., 2nd sess., January 19, 1976 (GPO, 1976), p. 327, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CDIR-1975-12-19/pdf/CDIR-1975-12-19.pdf#page=363>.

⁴⁸ S.Con.Res. 44, §3.

⁴⁹ *Black Americans in Congress* has been updated several times. The most recent edition was published in 2023. U.S. Congress, House, *Black Americans in Congress, 1870-2022*, 117th Cong., 1st sess. H.Doc. 118-16, October 1, 2023, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CDOC-118hdoc16/pdf/GPO-CDOC-118hdoc16.pdf>.

⁵⁰ U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on Arrangements for the Commemoration of the Bicentennial, *Women in Congress, 1917-1976*, prepared by Susan J. Tolchin, 94th Cong., 2nd sess., 1976. *Women in Congress* has been updated several times. The most recent edition was published in 2020. U.S. Congress, House, *Women in Congress, 1917-2020*, 116th Cong., 1st sess., H.Doc. 116-152, September 15, 2020, <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GPO-CDOC-116hdoc152>.

⁵¹ P.L. 93-127, 87 Stat. 455 (1973).

⁵² P.L. 93-127. The bicentennial quarter has a portrait of George Washington on the obverse and a colonial drummer on (continued...)

- **Bicentennial Medals.** In February 1972, Congress authorized the U.S. Mint to strike medals for the American Bicentennial in 1976.⁵³ Congress specified that the medals commemorate “the year 1776 and its significance to American independence.”⁵⁴ Additionally, in April 1976, Congress authorized the U.S. Mint to strike medals to commemorate “the two hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence by Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the last surviving signer of the Declaration.”⁵⁵
- **Congressional Safe.** In 1876, Congress accepted the centennial safe.⁵⁶ On January 19, 1976, at the beginning of the 2nd session of the 94th Congress (1975-1976), Representatives and Senators attended a ceremony to open the outer doors of the safe, which was then put on display for public viewing.⁵⁷ On July 1, President Gerald Ford and congressional leaders held a ceremony to open the safe’s inner glass doors.⁵⁸

the reverse. The bicentennial half-dollar features a portrait of John F. Kennedy on the obverse and Independence Hall on the reverse. The bicentennial dollar includes a portrait of Dwight D. Eisenhower on the obverse and the Liberty Bell and the Moon on the reverse. For more information on coins and medals to celebration the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, see CRS In Focus IF11926, *Coins and Medals Celebrating the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence*, by Jacob R. Straus.

⁵³ P.L. 92-228, 86 Stat. 37 (1972).

⁵⁴ P.L. 92-228, §2. The medal depicts the Statue of Liberty on the obverse with the dates of 1776 and 1976, along with the words “Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness,” and five pointed stars on the surround edge. The reverse features the Great Seal of the United States, with the Bicentennial logos, and the words “American Revolution Bicentennial” at the top and “We the People” at the bottom. CRS In Focus IF11926, *Coins and Medals Celebrating the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence*, by Jacob R. Straus.

⁵⁵ P.L. 94-257, 90 Stat. 302 (1976). For more information about the Charles Carroll of Carrollton Commemorative Medal, see State of Maryland, “Charles Carroll of Carrollton Commemorative Medal,” Maryland Manual On-Line, <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/05sen/html/senmed.html>.

⁵⁶ U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Library, *Compilation of Works of Art and Other Objects in the United States Capitol*, prepared by Architect of the Capitol, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Doc. 88-362, 1965, p. 351. Over the ensuing years, the safe was stored in National Statuary Hall, on the East Portico of the Capitol and in a storage room near the Capitol’s crypt. U.S. Congress, Office of the House Historian, “The Mysterious Centennial Safe of Mrs. Charles F. Deihm,” Historical Highlights, <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1851-1900/The-mysterious-Centennial-safe-of-Mrs—Charles-F—Deihm>.

⁵⁷ U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on Arrangements for Commemoration of the Bicentennial, “Centennial Safe,” press release, in Box 68, folder “Fourth of July (1976) – Centennial Safe Opening” of the John Marsh Files at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, p. 15, https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/sites/default/files/pdf_documents/library/document/0067/1563296.pdf. See also, Marjorie Hunter, “Centennial Safe is Opened for Public View,” *New York Times*, January 20, 1976, pp. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/centennial-safe-is-opened-public-view/docview/123028326/se-2>.

⁵⁸ At the opening ceremony, President Ford noted that

When this safe was sealed, Americans looked forward to the future, to this year of 1976. There was no doubt in their minds that a President of a free government would participate in a ceremony here in the United States Capitol Building. Just as American men and women 200 years ago looked to the future, those who sealed this safe 100 years ago also looked to the future. So it is today with Americans. But there is no safe big enough to contain the hopes, the energies, the abilities of our people. Our real national treasure does not have to be kept under lock and key in a safe or in a vault. America’s wealth is not in material objects, but in our great heritage, our freedom, and our belief in ourselves.

U.S. President (Ford), “Remarks at the Centennial Safe Opening at the Capitol,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Gerald R. Ford, 1976-1977*, Book II—April 9 to July 9, 1976 (GPO, 1979), p. 632. See also, Andrew Glass, “Centennial Safe Reposes at Capitol, Feb. 22, 1879,” *Politico*, February 22, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/02/centennial-safe-reposes-at-capitol-feb-22-1879-219466>. Similarly, Speaker Carl Albert noted connections between Congress in 1876 and in 1976. He stated that “Oliver Wendell Holmes once remarked: ‘Historic (continued...)’

- **Loan of the Magna Carta.** In 1975, the House and Senate agreed to a concurrent resolution to recognize the importance of the Magna Carta in the shaping of the Declaration of Independence, to express gratitude to “The Queen, the Parliament and the people of the United Kingdom for their loan” of the Magna Carta to the United States, and to place the “showcase donated to the United States by the United Kingdom ... to display the Magna Carta” in the Rotunda of the Capitol.⁵⁹ The gift from the United Kingdom consisted of a gold replica of the Magna Carta, a display case, and the loan of an original copy of the Magna Carta.⁶⁰
- **Luncheon for Queen Elizabeth II at the U.S. Capitol.** On July 8, 1976, Congress hosted Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip for a luncheon at the U.S. Capitol. The luncheon was held in National Statuary Hall.⁶¹

Sesquicentennial—150th Anniversary (1926)

In 1926, the United States celebrated the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The sesquicentennial celebration served to mark, in the words of President Calvin Coolidge, “the adoption of the Declaration of Independence by which the American people declared their purpose to throw off the yoke of foreign control and establish their independence. The historical importance of this immortal document is measured by the progress of the Republic which was the fruit of its promulgation.”⁶² Many sesquicentennial celebrations occurred in Philadelphia.⁶³

continuity with the past is not a duty, it is only a necessity.’ Mrs. Deihm would have echoed that sentiment. Thanks to her splendid efforts, we are once again reminded of our precious heritage and of the dedication of so many people who have contributed to our country’s freedom, strength and prosperity—200 years ago, 100 years ago, and now.” U.S. Congress, House, Speaker of the House of Representatives, “Remarks of Speaker Carl Albert, U.S. House of Representatives Opening of the Centennial Safe Statuary Hall, U.S. Capitol, July 1, 1976,” https://oucac.access.preservicea.com/uncategorized/IO_3a79ca62-8593-4b3a-b39a-3a25195a5b63.

⁵⁹ H.Con.Res. 458 (94th Congress), agreed to October 23, 1975. For text of the resolution, see U.S. Congress, House, “Magna Carta Loan for Bicentennial Celebration,” *Deschler-Brown-Johnson Precedent of the United States House of Representatives*, vol. 17, 109th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Doc. 94-661 (2011), Ch. 36, §4, p. 172, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-HPREC-DESCHLERS-V17/pdf/GPO-HPREC-DESCHLERS-V17.pdf>.

⁶⁰ U.S. Congress, Architect of the Capitol, “Magna Carta Replica and Display,” <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/magna-carta-replica-and-display>. See also Andrew Glass, “Magna Carta Copy Presented to Congress, May 26, 1976,” *Politico*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/05/26/this-day-in-politics-may-26-1976-238687>. The copy of the Magna Carta was returned to the United Kingdom in 1977 and the replica and display case remain on display in the Capitol Crypt. Library of Congress, Law Library of Congress, “Magna Carta Replica in the Capitol Crypt,” *In Custodia Legis* (blog) post, December 14, 2014, <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2014/12/magna-carta-replica-in-the-capitol-crypt>; and United States Capitol Historical Society, “Ronald A. Sarasin: Remarks on the Magna Carta,” April 12, 2003, <https://capitolhistory.org/explore/historical-articles/ronald-sarasin-remarks-on-magna-carta>.

⁶¹ U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on Arrangements and Reception, “Queen Elizabeth II’s Visit to the United States in 1976,” <https://caddiscovery.omeka.net/exhibits/show/queen-visit-july-6-11--1976/queen-visit-july-6-11--1976>.

⁶² U.S. Congress, House, Sesquicentennial of American Independence and the Thomas Jefferson Centennial Commission of the United States, “Address to the American People by President Calvin Coolidge,” *Official Plan of the Nation-Wide Celebration of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Adoption of the Declaration of American Independence*, 69th Cong., 1st sess., H.Doc. 69-446, June 18, 1926, p. 1.

⁶³ Edward W. Duffy, *Philadelphia Celebrates: Three Great Anniversaries, 1876, 1926, 1976* (Camino Books, Inc., 2017); and James D. Ristine, *Philadelphia’s 1926 Sesqui-Centennial International Exposition* (Arcadia Publishing, 2009).

Sesquicentennial Commission

In April 1926, Congress established the Sesquicentennial of American Independence Commission to commemorate the “one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.”⁶⁴ The Sesquicentennial Commission included 19 commissioners who were required to “prepare a plan or plans for a program ... for the purpose of properly commemorating those signal events which have brought this commission into being.”⁶⁵

The commission planned an eight-day celebration from June 28 to July 5, 1926, with each day having a theme.⁶⁶ Themes included Patriot’s Pledge of Faith Day (June 28),⁶⁷ Universal Education Day (June 29),⁶⁸ Founders’ Day (June 30),⁶⁹ Greater America Day (July 1),⁷⁰ Signers’ Day (July 2),⁷¹ Monticello Day (July 3),⁷² Jefferson Centennial Day (July 4),⁷³ and Sesquicentennial Independence Day (July 5).⁷⁴

⁶⁴ Public Resolution 20, Chapter 188, 44 Stat. 327 (1926). The commission was formally named the “Sesquicentennial of American Independence and the Thomas Jefferson Centennial Commission.”

⁶⁵ Public Resolution 20, §3. The commissioners included the “President of the United States, the Vice President of the United States, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, ex officio; eight persons to be appointed by the President of the United States; four Senators by the Vice President; and four Representatives by the Speaker of the House of Representatives” (§1).

⁶⁶ U.S. Congress, House, Sesquicentennial of American Independence and the Thomas Jefferson Centennial Commission of the United States, *Official Plan of the Nation-Wide Celebration of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Adoption of the Declaration of American Independence*, 69th Cong., 1st sess., H.Doc. 69-446, June 18, 1926, pp. 3-5, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SERIALSET-08579_00_00-178-0446-0000/pdf/SERIALSET-08579_00_00-178-0446-0000.pdf (hereinafter Sesquicentennial Commission, *Official Plan of the Nation-Wide Celebration*).

⁶⁷ Patriot’s Pledge of Faith Day events included the “Echo of the Liberty Bell” at 11:11 a.m.; a flag salute; and the recitation of the Patriot’s Pledge of Faith. The Patriot’s Pledge of Faith stated:

I do hereby pledge and declare my sincere belief and devout faith in the fundamental ideals of my country so bravely proclaimed to the world by the immortal signers of the Declaration of American Independence; and in their words and noble spirit “we pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor” to the support of those ideals; and as a token of my sincerity and as an evidence of my gratitude for the blessings which that immortal document has assured to all Americans, I do hereby make this contribution for the preservation of Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson, as a national memorial to the author of the Declaration of Independence and as a patriotic shrine for the children of America.

Sesquicentennial Commission, *Official Plan of the Nation-Wide Celebration*, p. 8.

⁶⁸ Universal Education Day events included “special patriotic and educational exercises in all universities, colleges, schools, and libraries.” Sesquicentennial Commission, *Official Plan of the Nation-Wide Celebration*, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Founders’ Day events included a “special meeting of patriotic societies and kindred bodies.” Sesquicentennial Commission, *Official Plan of the Nation-Wide Celebration*, p. 4.

⁷⁰ Greater America Day honored the Louisiana Purchase through “patriotic public meetings reviewing American expansion and growth in the past and the hopes for the future.” Sesquicentennial Commission, *Official Plan of the Nation-Wide Celebration*, p. 4.

⁷¹ Signers’ Day events included “patriotic meetings, pageants, or performances recalling the signers and their heroic work.” Sesquicentennial Commission, *Official Plan of the Nation-Wide Celebration*, p. 4.

⁷² Monticello Day events included parades, meetings, and social functions to send greetings from communities to Monticello for the Centennial Record. Sesquicentennial Commission, *Official Plan of the Nation-Wide Celebration*, p. 5.

⁷³ Jefferson Centennial Day events included a national service at Jefferson’s grave at Monticello. Sesquicentennial Commission, *Official Plan of the Nation-Wide Celebration*, p. 5.

⁷⁴ Sesquicentennial Independence Day events included “national exercises at Philadelphia and at Monticello.” Sesquicentennial Commission, *Official Plan of the Nation-Wide Celebration*, p. 5.

Other Congressionally Sponsored Sesquicentennial Celebrations

- **Sesquicentennial Exposition.** Philadelphia hosted the Sesquicentennial Exposition between June 1 and December 1, 1926.⁷⁵ The Sesquicentennial Exhibition was “a world’s fair, to commemorate the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.”⁷⁶ In 1922, Congress authorized the exposition,⁷⁷ and in 1926, it authorized appropriations for government participation in the celebration.⁷⁸
- **Commemorative Coins.** In 1926, to celebrate the sesquicentennial, Congress authorized commemorative quarter-eagles (\$2.50 coins) and half-dollars.⁷⁹ Congress specified that sesquicentennial coins would include a gold quarter-eagle that featured Liberty on the obverse and Independence Hall on the reverse, and a silver half-dollar that featured Presidents Washington and Coolidge on the obverse and the Liberty Bell on the reverse.⁸⁰

Centennial—100th Anniversary (1876)

In 1876, the United States celebrated the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The centennial festivities marked a nationwide celebration of, as noted by Representative Daniel Morrell, “public-spirited and patriotic citizens of the whole country [who] demand that a fitting celebration shall take place on the centennial anniversary of the nation’s birth and ... that such celebration should embrace an imposing recognition of the nation’s progress during the first century of its existence.”⁸¹ The Centennial Exhibition took place in Philadelphia,⁸² but other celebrations occurred around the country.⁸³

⁷⁵ Martin W. Wilson, “Sesquicentennial International Exposition (1926),” *The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/essays/sesquicentennial-international-exposition>.

⁷⁶ Wilson, “Sesquicentennial International Exposition (1926).”

⁷⁷ Chapter 299, Public Resolution 69, 42 Stat. 833 (1922). In 1922, President Warren G. Harding delivered a message to Congress stating the importance of the Sesquicentennial and conducting an exhibition in Philadelphia, similar to that held for the centennial in 1876. U.S. President (Harding), “Special Message to Congress on Celebration of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of Declaration of Independence,” online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/329333>.

⁷⁸ Chapter 36, Public Resolution 7, 44 Stat. 133 (1926). On July 5, 1926, President Calvin Coolidge gave a speech in Philadelphia to mark the 150th anniversary. U.S. President (Coolidge), “Address at the Celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,” online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/267359>. In May 1926, the United States Postal Service issued a 2-cent stamp to commemorate the Sesquicentennial Exposition. See Smithsonian Institution, National Postal Museum, “Sesquicentennial Exposition Issue,” *About U.S. Stamps*, <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/about-us-stamps-bureau-period-1894-1939-commemorative-issues-1926-1927/sesquicentennial>.

⁷⁹ Chapter 482, Public Resolution 62, §4, 43 Stat. 1254 (1925).

⁸⁰ For more information on the sesquicentennial coins, including images, see CRS In Focus IF11926, *Coins and Medals Celebrating the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence*, by Jacob R. Straus.

⁸¹ Rep. Daniel Johnson Morrell, “International Exhibition of 1876,” House debate, *Congressional Globe*, vol. 43, part 1 (December 14, 1870), p. 103.

⁸² Chapter CV, §1, 16 Stat. 470 (1871).

⁸³ Some states created their own centennial commissions to coordinate state celebrations with the national exhibition in Philadelphia. For example, in 1875, Delaware created the Centennial Celebration of American Independence Commission. State of Delaware, “Centennial Celebration of American Independence Commission,” Delaware Public Archives, [https://archives.delaware.gov/delaware-agency-histories/centennial-celebration-of-american-independence-\(continued...\)](https://archives.delaware.gov/delaware-agency-histories/centennial-celebration-of-american-independence-(continued...))

United States Centennial Commission

In March 1871, Congress established the United States Centennial Commission to “prepare and superintend the execution of a plan ‘for holding an exhibition of American and foreign products and manufactures under the auspices of the Government of the United States,’ in Philadelphia, in 1876.”⁸⁴ The President appointed “one delegate from each State, and from each Territory of the United States.”⁸⁵

The Centennial Commission issued a series of reports detailing its work on the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Ultimately, the Centennial Commission selected Fairmount Park as the site of exhibition,⁸⁶ and arranged for “procuring a suitable design and plans for the buildings necessary for the exhibition ... [which] shall cover about fifty acres, and be so constructed that it can be open for visitors and brilliantly lighted in the evening,”⁸⁷

As planned, the Centennial Commission envisioned that the

benefits to be derived by the American people from the exhibition are by no means confined to the exhibition of American productions. The arts of design, as practiced in all parts of the world, will be represented in a manner never before possible on this continent. The products of the mechanic arts and manufactures of Europe and the eastern nations will be represented on a grand and comprehensive scale, and, what is of greater importance, descriptions or illustrations of the methods and processes of their production will be given. Thus will be afforded to the millions of mechanics and artisans, and to the pupils of technical and industrial colleges and schools who may be unable to visit foreign countries, an opportunity to examine and study all that is most valuable and instructive in foreign arts and industries.⁸⁸

In February 1874, President Ulysses S. Grant transmitted the Centennial Commission’s recommendations to Congress. In his letter to the House and Senate, President Grant noted that “it seems fitting that the one hundredth Anniversary of our Independence should be marked by an event that will display to the world the growth and progress of a nation devoted to freedom and to the pursuit of fame, fortune, and honors by the lowest citizen as well as the highest.”⁸⁹ To be successful, President Grant believed that “Congressional legislation is necessary, to make the Exposition both national and international.”⁹⁰

commission. For other examples, see Carlton C. Qualey, “Independence Centennial, 1876,” *Minnesota History*, vol. 44, no. 6 (Summer 1976), p. 223; and Homer L. Calkin, “The Centennial of American Independence ‘Round the World,” *The Historian*, vol. 38, no. 4 (August 1976), pp. 613-628.

⁸⁴ Chapter CV, §2, 16 Stat. 471 (1871). U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Appropriations, *Memorial of the United States Centennial Commission and the Centennial Board of Finance*, 44th Cong., 1st sess., S.Mis.Doc 5, December 8, 1875, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Chapter CV, §2, 16 Stat. 471 (1871).

⁸⁶ United States Centennial Commission, *The National Celebration of the Centennial Anniversary of the Independence of the United States by an International Universal Exhibition, to be Held in Philadelphia in the Year 1876*, report to Congress, February 1873, pp. 36-37.

⁸⁷ United States Centennial Commission, *The National Celebration of the Centennial Anniversary of the Independence of the United States*, pp. 2, 47-49.

⁸⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate, *The International Exhibition of 1876: Message of the President of the United States to Congress, Transmitting the Third Report of the United States Centennial Commission*, 43rd Cong., 1st sess., Ex.Doc. 30, 1874, p. 6.

⁸⁹ U.S. President (Grant), *The Centennial: The International Exhibition of 1876*, Special Message from the President to both Houses of Congress Transmitting Reports from the United States Centennial Commission, February 25, 1875, <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/public/gdcmassbookdig/centennial00unit/centennial00unit.pdf>.

⁹⁰ President Grant, *The Centennial: The International Exhibition of 1876*.

Centennial Board of Finance

In 1872, Congress created the Centennial Board of Finance to raise funds for the exhibition and manage the exhibition's money.⁹¹ To pay for the exhibition, Congress authorized the Centennial Board of Finance to issue stock and accept gifts.⁹²

Centennial Exhibition (Philadelphia World Fair)

In 1876, Philadelphia hosted the Centennial Exhibition to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia,⁹³ and to hold “an International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures, and Products of the Soil and Mine”⁹⁴ that “fulfilled an ideal of universal knowledge.”⁹⁵ The Centennial Exhibition was a “world’s fair on an epic scale constructed in West Fairmount Park ... and attracted almost 10 million visitors in the six months of its operation.”⁹⁶ In the words of one observer, it “featured a magnificent exhibition that revealed the scientific, cultural and artistic achievements” of the United States.⁹⁷

Other Congressionally Sponsored Centennial Celebrations

- **Centennial Medal.** To celebrate the Centennial, Congress authorized medals be struck to commemorate the “one hundredth anniversary of the first meeting of the Continental Congress, and of the Declaration of Independence.”⁹⁸ The medals, which were prepared at the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia for distribution by the Centennial Board of Finance, were issued as part of the Centennial International Exhibition of 1876 (i.e., Philadelphia World’s Fair). Official medals were struck in silver, bronze, and gilt. The medals featured Liberty on the obverse and “In Commemoration of the Hundredth Anniversary of American Independence” on the reverse.⁹⁹

⁹¹ Chapter CCLIX, 17 Stat. 203 (1872). See also, Bruno Giberti, *Designing the Centennial: A History of the 1876 International Exhibition in Philadelphia* (The University of Kentucky Press, 2002), pp. 30, 47.

⁹² Chapter CCLIX, §2, 17 Stat. 209 (1872). Following the Centennial Exhibition, the federal government demanded repayment of appropriated money to the Treasury. In *Eyster v. Centennial Board of Finance* (94 U.S. 500 (1876)), the Supreme Court affirmed that money should be paid into the U.S. Treasury “before any division of assets is made among the stockholders in satisfaction and discharge of the capital stock.” See also Duffy, *Philadelphia Celebrates: Three Great Anniversaries*, p. 17.

⁹³ Chapter CV, 16 Stat. 470 (1871).

⁹⁴ U.S. President (Grant), “Proclamation 215—Announcing the International Exposition for the Centennial of American Independence,” online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/203641>. See also Duffy, *Philadelphia Celebrates: Three Great Anniversaries*, p. 9.

⁹⁵ Giberti, *Designing the Centennial*, p. 2.

⁹⁶ John L. Puckett, “The Centennial Exposition of 1876: An Evolving Cultural Landscape,” West Philadelphia Collaborative History, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of History, <https://collaborativehistory.gse.upenn.edu/stories/centennial-exposition-1876-evolving-cultural-landscape>.

⁹⁷ Nathan Cohen, *Reprint: Magee’s Illustrated Guide of Philadelphia and the Centennial Exhibition* (Philadelphia, PA: Nathan Cohen Books, 1976 [1876]), preface. For pictures of the Centennial Exhibition, see New York Public Library, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/search/index?utf8=%E2%9C%93&keywords=centennial+exhibition+philadelphia#>.

⁹⁸ 18 Stat. 76 (1874). Chap. 288, “An act to authorize medals commemorating the One hundredth anniversary of the first meeting of the Continental Congress, and of the Declaration of Independence,” June 16, 1874.

⁹⁹ Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, “Centennial International Exhibition of 1876 Medal,” https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_1123434; and Smithsonian Institution, National (continued...)

- **Centennial Safe.** For the 1876 Centennial Exposition, Mrs. Charles F. (Anna) Deihm facilitated the creation of a safe to be filled with memorabilia from the centennial celebrations.¹⁰⁰ In 1879, Mrs. Deihm offered the centennial safe as a gift to the United States,¹⁰¹ with the expectation that it would be opened in 1976 by the President of the United States.¹⁰² In February 1876, Congress held a ceremony in the Capitol to formally close the safe.¹⁰³

Jubilee—50th Anniversary (1826)

In 1826, the United States celebrated the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. During the jubilee celebrations, Congress was between sessions and no specific legislation was enacted for the anniversary.¹⁰⁴ Instead, jubilee celebrations typically were held in towns around the country,¹⁰⁵ each with their own way of celebrating the milestone.¹⁰⁶ For

Museum of American History, “Independence Centennial medal, United States, 1876,” https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_1098997.

¹⁰⁰ Rep. Robert Casey, “Accepting Gift of the Centennial Safe, Expressing Thanks to the Donor, and Authorizing Display in the Capitol,” remarks in the House, *Congressional Record* vol. 120, part 26 (October 15, 1974), p. 35645. “Among the contents are photographs and autographs of both famous and lesser-known personalities of America’s first century. There are newspapers, books, and a great many other items such as silver, gold and mother-of-pearl pen and ink stands crafted by Tiffany’s to autograph the huge volumes the safe contains, one presented by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.” Congress formally accepted the centennial safe in 1975 with the adoption of H.Con.Res. 84 (94th Congress). See also, U.S. Congress, House Committee on House Administration, *Accepting the Gift of the Centennial Safe and Expressing the Thanks of the Congress to the Late Donor, Mrs. Charles F. Deihm, and Authorizing Its Display in the Capitol to Create Interest in the Forthcoming Bicentennial*, report to accompany H.Con.Res. 84, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess., H.Rept. 93-1398, October 1, 1974, p. 1.

¹⁰¹ U.S. Congress, Office of the House Historian, “The Mysterious Centennial Safe of Mrs. Charles F. Deihm,” Historical Highlights, <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1851-1900/The-mysterious-Centennial-safe-of-Mrs—Charles-F—Deihm/>; and U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Library, *Art in the United States Capitol*, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., H.Doc. 91-368, 1976, p. 399.

¹⁰² U.S. Congress, *Annual Report of the Architect of the Capitol for the Year Ending June 30, 1926*, 69th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Doc. 69-554, December 6, 1926, p. 10.

¹⁰³ U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Library, *Compilation of Works of Art and Other Objects in the United States Capitol*, prepared by Architect of the Capitol, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Doc. 88-362, 1965, p. 351. Over the ensuing years, the safe was stored in National Statuary Hall, on the East Portico of the Capitol and in a storage room near the Capitol’s crypt. U.S. Congress, Office of the House Historian, “The Mysterious Centennial Safe of Mrs. Charles F. Deihm,” Historical Highlights, <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1851-1900/The-mysterious-Centennial-safe-of-Mrs—Charles-F—Deihm/>.

¹⁰⁴ In 1826, the 1st session of the 19th Congress met from December 5, 1825, to May 22, 1826, and the 2nd session from December 4, 1826, to March 3, 1827. While Congress does not appear to have authorized any coinage or medals for the Jubilee, several Jubilee medals were produced by private mints. For example, see American Numismatic Society, “Lead Medal, United States, 1826–1826. 2008.22.11,” <https://numismatics.org/collection/2008.22.11>, and Stack Bowers Gallery, “1826 U.S. Semicentennial, The National Medal. HK-2. Rarity-9. Silver. AU-55 (NGC),” <https://auctions.stackbowers.com/lots/view/3-S6GK8/1826-us-semicentennial-the-national-medal-hk-2-rarity-9-silver-au-55-ngc>.

¹⁰⁵ Robert P. Hay, “The Glorious Departure of the American Patriarchs: Contemporary Reactions to the Deaths of Jefferson and Adams,” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 35, no. 4 (November 1969), pp. 543-555.

¹⁰⁶ Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), pp. 221-225.

example, local celebrations typically involved religious services,¹⁰⁷ public speeches,¹⁰⁸ and parades.¹⁰⁹

In Washington, DC, President John Quincy Adams celebrated the jubilee by first watching a parade from the steps of the White House, and then participating in a procession to the Capitol with Vice President John C. Calhoun.¹¹⁰ At the Capitol, President Adams and Vice President Calhoun listened to a reading of the Declaration of Independence by Joseph Anderson, Comptroller of the Treasury, and other speeches in the House Chamber.¹¹¹ Following the Capitol Hill festivities, the President returned to the White House for dinner and fireworks.¹¹²

The jubilee also coincided with the deaths of both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.¹¹³ Upon the death of Presidents Adams and Jefferson, the Department of War made an announcement. It read, in part,

The President with deep regret announces to the Army that it has pleased the Disposer of All Human Events, in whose hands are the issues of life, to remove from the scene of earthly existence our illustrious and venerated fellow-citizen, Thomas Jefferson.

This dispensation of Divine Providence, afflicting to us, but the consummation of glory to him, occurred on the 4th of the present month—on the fiftieth anniversary of that Independence the Declaration of which, emanating from his mind, at once proclaimed the birth of a free nation and offered motives of hope and consolation to the whole family of man.

...

It has become the painful duty of the Secretary of War to announce to the Army the death of another distinguished and venerated citizen. John Adams departed this life on the 4th of this month. Like his compatriot Jefferson, he aided in drawing and ably supporting the Declaration of Independence. With a prophetic eye he looked through the impending difficulties of the Revolution and foretold with what demonstrations of joy the anniversary of the birth of American freedom would be hailed. He was permitted to behold the verification of his prophecy, and died, as did Jefferson, on the day of the jubilee.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁷ "Celebration at Ithaca, N.Y.," *Western Luminary* (Lexington, NY), August 23, 1826, p. 63.

¹⁰⁸ "Jubilee of Independence. City Celebration," *Christian Watchman* (Boston, MA), July 7, 1826, pp. 7, 31.

¹⁰⁹ "The Year of Jubilee," *Zion's Herald* (Boston, MA), May 17, 1826, pp. 4, 20.

¹¹⁰ Massachusetts Historical Society, "4 July 1826," vol. 35, John Quincy Adams Digital Diary, <https://www.primarysourcecoop.org/publications/jqa/document/jqadiaries-v35-1826-07-p323—entry4?navmode=searchresults&doci=4&ss=Jubilee>.

¹¹¹ "Celebration of the Fourth of July," *Daily National Journal* (Washington, DC), July 6, 1826, p. 3, available from Readex: America's Historical Newspapers, <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docrf=image/v2%3A111245904D912118%40EANX-14F6DDC290C5CAF0%402388178-14F3F9FF37D4A5F8%402>.

¹¹² Massachusetts Historical Society, "4 July 1826."

¹¹³ "A Dirge: On the Death of Our Illustrious 2d and 3d Presidents," *Norwich Courier* (CT), July 11, 1826, Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=Jubilee&s=1111311111&r=43>. See also, L.H. Butterfield, "The Jubilee of Independence, July 4, 1826," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 61, no. 2 (April 1953), pp. 133-137; and Hay, "The Glorious Departure of the American Patriarchs," p. 544.

¹¹⁴ U.S. President (J. Q. Adams), "Executive Order [on the deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams]," online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/200526>.

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