



**America 250 | CT Commission Meeting
Wednesday, July 16, 2025 at 10:00 AM
Manchester History Center, Manchester, CT
Minutes**

Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6DSnAhyFsk>

Attendees

Commissioners

Denise Merrill (Chair) (In Person)
Jason Mancini (Vice Chair) (In Person)
Amrys Williams (In Person)
Andy Horowitz (In Person)
Arienne Orozco (In Person)
Deborah Schander (In Person)
Tom Scanlon (In Person)
Margaret Khan (In Person)
Nicolas Angeli (In Person)
Steve Armstrong (In Person)
Michael Werner (In Person)
Catherine Labadia (Virtual)
Jonathan Slifka (Virtual)
Maisa Tisdale (Virtual)
Merle McGee (Virtual)
Rob Kret (Virtual)
Sally Whipple (Virtual)

Staff

Cyndi Tolosa (In Person)
Megan Baker (In Person)
Rachel Gonzalez (In Person)
Misa Giroux (Virtual)
Becky Vitkauskas (Virtual)
Mike Kemezis (Virtual)

Members of the Public

Aaron Marcavitch (In Person)
Lee McFadden (In Person)

The meeting started at 10:11 a.m.

Welcome

Chair Denise Merrill opened the meeting with a few words of thanks to the Manchester Historical Society for hosting and brief remarks on Connecticut's commitment to the ideals of the Declaration in its commemoration as July 4, 2026, is quickly approaching.

Approval of Minutes from [April 16, 2025 Meeting](#) [Attachment A]

Motion: Steve Armstrong

Second: Amrys Williams

Discussion: None

Vote: Yes (16), No (-), Abstain (-) [M. Tisdale joined the meeting after this vote was made]

National/Regional Update

This section begins at 3:09 in the recording.

Vice Chair Jason Mancini opened a discussion on the Connecticut commission's relationship with national efforts, noting that with a change in the tone of the federal government's efforts has come some contention. He reiterated that the state's commission and CT Humanities work is non-partisan, and that his hope is for our work to continue to serve as a model for that. Finally, he confirmed that the commission has not set forth any mandates for work that must be done by organizations or towns around the state - rather, that its role has been to offer guidance and encourage groups to plan around the themes of the commission and prioritize access and inclusion to ensure all of Connecticut is represented and reflected in the commemoration. There were no further comments from the commission on this topic.

Cyndi Tolosa provided an update on the work being done by the White House Task Force and the America 250 Commission, which are two separate entities but have been operating closely together in recent months. C. Tolosa & Rachel Gonzalez attend meetings to learn about initiatives and are sharing that information with affiliates and town committees. Upcoming initiatives led by federal entities include:

- State fairs - incorporate elements of America 250 into a state fair - this is being done in cooperation with the Governor's office and state Department of Agriculture
- America 250 national convening in Washington, D.C. - July 28-30, 2025
- America Waves - U.S. flag traveling to military cemeteries in all 50 states & sites overseas. Do not yet have a date for when it will be in Connecticut, but will share details when available.
- The Story of America video series - produced by the White House Task Force in collaboration with Hillsdale College & posted on their website
- Founders Museum at Eisenhower Executive Office Building with a printable version available to organizations which wish to use it
- Links to websites for additional details:
 - [White House Task Force](#)
 - [America 250](#)

C. Tolosa also shared updates on activities that are being coordinated by other state commissions, with a request that commissioners indicate whether they are interested in Connecticut's participation in these activities. These activities include:

- Bell-ringing on July 4, 2026 - 13 times at 2:00 p.m. local time or a coordinated time across the country
There was no discussion on this, but general agreement that Connecticut should share this initiative with local committees.
- America's Potluck - July 5, 2026 - encourage communities to host potlucks
Discussion on this initiative included involving the CT Restaurant Association or considering a version of an "Election Cake" as a nod to Connecticut's history.
- Declaration of Independence Reading - July 8, 2026 - A nationwide reading of the Declaration of Independence on the 250th anniversary of the first public reading in 1776
C. Tolosa noted that the commission has partnered in the past with the Beinecke Library for their reading of the Declaration, which includes readings from The 1848 Declaration of Sentiments and "What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July" by Frederick Douglass to develop context, as well as excerpts from *The Life of William Grimes* to connect to Connecticut's own history. Staff is recommending that Connecticut participate in this narrative and encourage other organizations/towns to follow a similar model to allow for a more robust event.

The commission generally agreed that Connecticut should participate in some capacity. Discussion included a recommendation to partner with the Connecticut State Library, as they have an original copy of the Declaration. Andy Horowitz recommended a "Bring Your Own Founding Document" model which encourages organizations to participate and select their own documents to include in the event - this type of event could then be converted into an opportunity to spread awareness and encourage reflection around the state.

Arienne Orozco shared updates from a gathering of Northeast Regional 250th planners, held in Newport, RI, in early June. Key takeaways included:

- There is a real desire to work collaboratively between states - if any groups wish to get connected for something specific, Cyndi & Rachel have contact information for the group
- Fundraising has been successful in other states when capitalizing on the nostalgia of the 250th
- The group is looking for a state to host the 2026 gathering - there was discussion on whether Connecticut should explore volunteering to host. Traditionally it has been hosted in early June; in 2026 it may make sense to host earlier in the spring. Costs associated with doing so would include any rental fees for the space used, as well as catering for a lunch. In previous years, other costs have been covered by attendees. Planning would involve coordinating speakers and developing recommendations for activities around the business portion of the gathering, so it is a relatively low lift to organize. Amrys Williams recommended exploring either finding a way to combine events to make a more regional event focused on the 250th (i.e., CT League of Museums, Mass History Alliance) or deconflicting with events that typically take place the same date. Commissioners agreed to explore the possibility of hosting in Connecticut, preferably in early May, to raise visibility.

Funding Update

This section begins at 32:10 in the recording.

D. Merrill began this update by confirming that administrative support for the commission's work was continued by the Connecticut legislature for FY26.

J. Mancini shared that CT Humanities has been at work in securing corporate and foundation funding, including a grant from Travelers in support of a statewide exhibition that will be loaned out around the state. Additionally, in collaboration with the state Office of Marketing, CTH will be seeking sponsorships for the 250th section of CTVisit.com and for the planned 250th tourism trail.

Rob Kret shared that he has continued to work with the American Association for State and Local History to advocate for funding for the 250th in the federal legislature. At this time, \$150M has been allocated to the 250th and will be administered by the Department of the Interior. AASLH and others are advocating for a portion of these funds to be distributed to state commissions.

C. Tolosa shared that Give 250 Connecticut raised approximately \$22k on behalf of the 12 municipalities who chose to participate. This will serve as a trial run for a second giving event later in the fall that CTH staff hopes to open up to both municipalities and affiliate organizations, with the goal of continuing to support these groups and building on media attention. D. Merrill noted that the commission & staff will need to continue to build on existing relationships to ensure that the word of this and other events is spread widely. This giving event was most successful in municipalities that got engaged and competitive with one another, particularly in West Hartford and Portland. There were also three sponsors (Water's Edge Resort & Spa, Mystic Aquarium, and Connecticut Airport Authority) which funded four prizes - a Grand Prize (Portland), Runner Up (West Hartford), Most Unique Donors (Kent),

250th Gift (Stonington). For the fall event, CTH staff hopes to have additional sponsorships, both to increase competition and raise more funds for municipalities and organizations, as well as to help defray administrative costs - particularly for the giving day software.

CT Humanities Update

This section begins at 45:58 in the recording.

J. Mancini provided updates on the current status of federal funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities. While the details are continuing to be worked out in Congress, there are indications that the NEH will have funding available to pass to state humanities councils despite the cuts made by DOGE earlier this year. CT Humanities continues to receive funding from the state, which is being used in part to fund 250th-related humanities projects through its granting program.

Becky Vitkauskas provided an update on recent grant awards for 250th projects. Since the April commission meeting, 3 Quick Grants and 10 Planning & Implementation Grants have been awarded, for a total of \$207,726. Information on these grants is available on the CT250 website [here](#).

Recaps and Upcoming Plans

This section begins at 50:24 in the recording.

R. Gonzalez provided an update on Connecticut's participation in Two Lights for Tomorrow, a national effort to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Midnight Ride of Paul Revere. Nationwide, almost every state participated in some capacity. In Connecticut, at least 90 sites participated in illuminating two lights on April 18, 20+ sites hosted community service events on April 19, and 5+ events were held in conjunction with the effort. An image and media gallery are available [here](#).

D. Merrill provided an overview of an initiative to engage municipalities in planting trees for the 250th, similar to an initiative that was completed in 1976 for the bicentennial. Tom Scanlon is leading the working group to plan for this, which includes commissioners and partners at the UConn Extension School and the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station. He shared that the group met earlier in July and is now working to refine ideas to ensure it remains a low-cost initiative that municipalities can participate in. In addition to a white oak tree planting, the group is considering ways to engage technical schools and/or the CT state sawmill in Portland. D. Merrill added that there is opportunity to engage with schools and town committees as well. In discussion, commissioners added:

- Consider the symbolism of the charter oak tree in hiding an important document or the use of white oak barrels and incorporate a time capsule
- Engage with the Future Farmers of America to expand youth involvement
- Engage technical schools in creating prizes crafted from white oak for the more involved towns
- Connect with Red, White, & Blue Schools

C. Tolosa updated on the development of plans for July 4, 2026, in Hartford. Staff is currently working to draft a schedule for the day and will have more definitive plans in place prior to the October commission meeting. Tentatively, the day will begin with a ceremony in the Hall of Flags hosted by the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion, followed by a ceremony with local committee representatives signing a document recommitting to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence for the state archives. Currently, there are no plans for a parade. Hartford First Night will host Hartford Bonanza at Bushnell Park, and local committees will be invited to host an informational table should they wish to do so. The City of Hartford is working with organizations around the city to ensure museums, cultural centers, etc, are open to the public that day. The evening will culminate with

fireworks at Bushnell Park. Additional ideas brought forward for consideration by commissioners included:

- A flyover of the state by C-130s
- A “sail-by” of the state by Barque Eagle
- Workshopping the document that local committees sign - making the language of the recommitment document the point rather than the document itself

In addition to this event in Hartford, there will be a national expo at the National Mall on or around July 4, 2026. Details are sparse at this time; more will be shared as those details become available.

Subcommittee Updates

This section begins at 1:12:00 in the recording.

Arienne Orozco shared an update from the Governance subcommittee, which is managing the affiliate program. Currently there are 120 approved affiliates, with a goal of reaching 250. There are approximately 5-10 applications coming in per month, so additional outreach is needed. J. Mancini recommended outreach to the CTH network. M. Khan is currently working with the Connecticut Library Association to spread the word about the 250th, and will be hosting an informational session later this year.

Amrys Williams shared an update from the Community & Organizational Engagement subcommittee, which is managing outreach to municipalities. Currently, 118 municipalities have shared a contact person. CTH staff is working on draft language for a Code of Conduct for events and will share with the commission soon for feedback. A current list of municipal contacts is available on the CT250 website [here](#). For places that are not yet represented, commissioners are encouraged to reach out to encourage participation - CTH staff can provide language for this purpose.

Steve Armstrong shared an update from the Education subcommittee. Currently, a packet of lesson plans for teaching the 250th in schools is in the final stages of production, with a webinar planned for July 24. The subcommittee also plans to encourage schools to work with local committees and historical societies to complete local research projects. There will also be materials released in partnership with Red, White, and Blue Schools, and a session at the Connecticut Council for the Social Studies conference this fall.

Rob Kret and C. Tolosa shared an update from the Marketing and Tourism subcommittee. Notably, there is a website dedicated to the 250th built out on CTVisit.com which needs to be populated with content. One item that will be on this website is one or more 250th tourism trails that will be developed in cooperation with the state’s marketing and tourism office.

Public Comment

This section begins at 1:29:02 in the recording.

Aaron Marcavitch provided an update on the town of Enfield’s plans for the 250th.

The meeting ended at 11:47 a.m.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, October 15, 2025 at 10 AM, Location TBD



Attachment A

**America 250 | CT Commission Meeting
Wednesday, April 16, 2025 at 10:00 AM
Silas Bronson Library, Waterbury, CT
Minutes**

Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/live/fiFzBcD2IX0>

Attendees

Commissioners

Denise Merrill - Chair (In Person)
Jason Mancini - Vice Chair (In Person)
Andy Horowitz (Virtual)
Sally Whipple (In Person)
Deborah Schander (In Person)
Steve Armstrong (In Person)
Arienne Orozco (In Person)
Melvette Hill (In Person)
Margaret Khan (Virtual)
Jon Slifka (Virtual)
Rob Kret (In Person)
Tom Scanlon (In Person)
Anthony Champalimaud (In Person)
Amrys Williams (Virtual)
Joseph Smith (Virtual)
Merle McGee (Virtual)
Maisa Tisdale (In Person)

Staff

Cyndi Tolosa (In Person)
Megan Baker (In Person)
Rachel Gonzalez (In Person)
Misa Giroux (Virtual)
Lian Kania (Virtual)
Lizette Pelletier (In Person)

Members of the Public (In Person)

Alice Ridgway
Raechel Guest

The meeting started at 10:05 a.m.

Welcome

Denise Merrill, Chair, opened the meeting with a statement on the current status of the commemoration. She noted that federal changes are threatening the funding of CT Humanities Council, which will impact the state's commission and shared research from Nationhood Lab's "The Story of America" report to support the importance of the commission's work on the 250th.

Approval of Minutes from [January 15, 2025 Meeting](#) [Attachment A]

Motion: Melvette Hill

Second: Deborah Schander

Discussion: None

Vote: Yes (17), No (-), Abstain (-)

D. Merrill introduced Jason Mancini, Vice Chair, to advance the meeting.

April 1975 Bicentennial

This section begins at 8:00 in the recording.

State Archivist Lizette Pelletier gave a presentation entitled "American Revolution Bicentennial Commission of Connecticut, 1971-1984," which included highlights of the commemoration planning from 50 years ago.

National/Regional Update

This section begins at 36:15 in the recording.

Cyndi Tolosa shared an update on collaboration with regional and national commemorative groups. Details of this update are included on the [National/Regional Update](#) [Attachment B].

- Northeast Groups
- A Common Cause for All
- American Association for State and Local History
- America250
- White House Task Force

Funding Update

This section begins at 43:00 in the recording.

J. Mancini opened with an update on the federal funding landscape, commenting that the federal government has indicated they want to prioritize commemoration of the 250th, however, the funding is not there. Two weeks prior to this meeting, CT Humanities was notified by DOGE that their federal funding had been terminated. Other humanities councils around the country received the same update. CTH is working with partners to advocate for restoration of these funds.

Deborah Schander provided an update on the Institute for Museum and Library Services, where federal staff has been placed on leave and discretionary grants around the country have been terminated. Connecticut receives approximately \$2.1 million dollars each year from IMLS. A lawsuit has been filed to fight the termination.

J. Mancini noted that this funding situation is dire, and without a change, CT Humanities may not be here on July 4, 2026. CT Humanities is working to advocate with the state legislature for additional funding, and encouraged all to reach out to their legislators to advocate as well.

Rob Kret shared national efforts in collaboration with AASLH, federal lobbyists, and Congressman John Larson's office to advocate for funding for the 250th with Congress. A letter was published last week and is circulating through Congress requesting funding for IMLS for the 250th and \$50M for the national commission to be redistributed to state commissions. This effort is unlikely to be successful, but is potentially the last chance for federal funding for the commemoration before 2026. Additionally, they are working on a funding earmark.

C. Tolosa shared notes from Liz Shapiro regarding the National Endowment for the Arts. There have not

currently been any concrete changes to funding, however, DOGE had scheduled a visit with the NEA. The NEA and its affiliates are very involved in 250th commissions around the country.

C. Tolosa presented an updated FY26 plan which addresses the loss of funding and staffing limitations. Details of the updated plan can be found here: [FY26 Zero-Dollar Plan](#).

C. Tolosa shared an upcoming CT Humanities crowdfunding project planned for early July 2025 which will support municipalities in raising funds for their 250th works, titled "Give 250 Connecticut." Slides are available [here](#), and a summary of this information is available in Attachment C.

Program Recaps and Upcoming Plans

This section begins at 1:11:30 in the recording.

Rachel Gonzalez provided a recap of the Shaping a Commemoration Rooted in Belonging Conference. Details available in [Conference Recap](#) [Attachment D].

Sally Whipple provided an update on [Red, White, and Blue Schools](#), which recognizes K-12 public and private schools that go above and beyond in their delivery of civic education. Many additional resources have been developed for this year's program. Steve Armstrong, Arienne Orozco, D. Merrill, and J. Mancini made additional comments in support of the program and its connections to America 250.

Lian Kania provided an update on recent CT Humanities grants, primarily through Museum Makeover. Information on these grants is available in [CTH Grants](#) [Attachment E]. The next CTH grant deadline is coming up in May.

R. Gonzalez shared information on Connecticut's participation in Two Lights for Tomorrow, a national initiative commemorating the 250th anniversary of the Midnight Ride with two lights displayed outside of state houses nationwide on Friday, April 18, followed by a day of service on Saturday, April 19. Over 70 locations, including the state Capitol and Connecticut's Old State House, are participating on Friday evening and over a dozen service projects are scheduled for Saturday. Two press releases have been issued with a third planned. A map of participants in Connecticut is available here: [Two Lights for Tomorrow](#).

C. Tolosa shared that CTH is working with Hartford Bonanza on behalf of the commission and will be able to invite guests to the VIP tent. More information will be forthcoming.

Subcommittee Updates

This section begins at 1:28:00 in the recording.

Governance: A. Orozco welcomed Tom Scanlon as the new designee from the Office of the Governor and provided information on the current status of the affiliate program. Applications have been trickling in and the subcommittee would like to do more concerted outreach around the state, with support from commissioners who have connections with various groups. CTH staff will provide an email template, flyers, and contact information for commissioner outreach. C. Tolosa shared a list of organizations for outreach, and commissioners volunteered to conduct outreach to groups they are connected with.

Education: S. Armstrong provided an update on the educator packet that is in production. The education subcommittee will also encourage students and teachers to conduct their own research, and will be exploring platforms where that research can be shared.

Public Comment

This section begins at 1:38:50 in the recording.

Alice Ridgway shared an upcoming program regarding the commemoration of the Litchfield Alarm in Litchfield on Saturday, April 19.

The meeting ended at 11:46 a.m.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, July 16, 2025 at 10 AM
Location TBD [Eastern CT]