



Teaching and Commemorating the United States Declaration of Independence

1776-2026

Commemorating the Declaration

About these Lesson Plans

Lessons developed for our Teaching and Commemorating the U.S. Declaration of Independence project are sponsored in part by the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Mid-Atlantic and US Territories Region Program, located at the American Historical Association. Content created and featured in partnership with the TPS Mid-Atlantic and US Territories Region does not indicate an endorsement by the Library of Congress.

Commemorating the Declaration

Estimated Time: 75 minutes

Lesson Introduction: Over the course of history, the American people have maintained a tradition of commemorating the date on which the Second Continental Congress approved the United States Declaration of Independence - July 4, 1776. These celebrations reveal a story about who we as a nation are, where we came from, and what we hope to become. In 1876, the United States marked its 100th birthday with a grand exposition in Philadelphia, showcasing inventions, national pride, and a vision of unity just a decade after the Civil War. Fifty years later, in 1926, the country celebrated its 150th anniversary in the same city, but the mood was different. America was now a modern, urban, and culturally divided nation facing new challenges — and the celebration reflected that.

In this lesson students will compare accounts of the Centennial and Sesquicentennial celebrations to explore how Americans saw themselves at two important moments in history and, in the process, identify and explain patterns of continuity and change. This prepares students for anticipating and reflecting on whether those patterns continue during the upcoming Semiquincentennial.

Delaware Social Studies Standard Addressed: History 1 9-12a: Students will analyze historical materials to trace the development of an idea or trend across space or over a prolonged period of time in order to explain patterns of historical continuity and change.

Essential Question: How do the 1876 Centennial and the 1926 Sesquicentennial celebrations show patterns of continuity and change in American identity?

Enduring Understanding: Students will understand that national celebrations reflect how a nation sees itself. Comparing the 1876 Centennial and 1926 Sesquicentennial reflects how America's identity changed over time. While both celebrations took place in Philadelphia and highlighted prominent features of that

ident, there were several key differences. The 1876 Centennial was a joyful celebration with great fanfare. It was widely embraced by the public, from prominent leaders or ordinary citizens. The newspaper coverage reflects this attitude. The 1926 Sesquicentennial, on the other hand, was much less celebrated. The event in Philadelphia was not well-attended, and the organizers faced in-fighting and economic trouble leading up to the event. The public, in the middle of intense national debates about identity, found the celebration out of touch and hoaky.

Warm-up:

1. Project the discussion question on [Slide 4](#). Ask students:
 - a. What do you do to celebrate the Fourth of July?
 - b. What might historians in the future learn about our nation from studying how people today celebrate the Fourth of July?

Activity 1: Background Information

1. Review background information on [Slides 5-6](#).
 - a. Slide 5: America turns 100 (The 1876 Centennial)
 - i. In 1876, the United States celebrated the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.
 - ii. The main celebration took place in Philadelphia, where the Declaration was originally written and signed.
 - iii. Philadelphia held the Centennial Exposition, a world's fair that showcased new inventions, industries, and art from across the U.S. and other countries.
 - iv. The event took place just 11 years after the Civil War ended.
 - v. Over 10 million people visited the exposition during its six-month run.
 - b. Slide 6: America turns 150 (The 1926 Sesquicentennial)
 - i. In 1926, the U.S. marked its 150th anniversary — known as the Sesquicentennial.
 - ii. Philadelphia hosted a large exposition to honor the occasion.
 - iii. Attendance was much lower than expected.

- iv. The country was experiencing major cultural and social change — including the Jazz Age, Prohibition, and increased immigration restrictions.
- v. The 1920s were also a time of rapid technological and urban growth.

Activity 2: Identity Frayer Model

1. Distribute [Resource #1: Identity Frayer Model](#)
2. Tell students that before they begin exploring how Americans marking the centennial and sesquicentennial, we need to explore the concept of identity. Have students complete the Identity Frayer Model to think about what identity is, elements of identity, their identity, and national identity.

Some sample responses are below:

- a. Definition: Identity refers to the qualities, beliefs, personality traits, appearance, and/or expressions that make a person or group distinct from others.
- b. Characteristics of Identity:
 - i. Multifaceted/Made of many components
 - ii. Socially constructed (we make it up)
 - iii. Fluid and evolving (changes over time)
 - iv. Contextual (the situation matters! For example: a student's identity at school might be different than at home)
 - v. Individual and collective (this will be explored in the other areas of the Frayer Model)
 - vi. Can be empowering or limiting (can lead to a sense of belonging, like being on a team. It can also lead to marginalization, stereotyping, and discrimination)
- c. Elements of my identity: will vary student to student, but they may include aspects of their family, gender identity, nationality, culture, or even hobbies/interests
- d. Elements of national identity: will vary but likely will include some of the following ideas:
 - i. Patriotism

- ii. Democracy/voting
- iii. Freedom (possibly specific freedoms, such as freedom of speech or 1st Amendment rights)
- iv. Military strength
- v. Global influence
- vi. Diverse (many cultures, North v. South, etc...)
- vii. Innovation and technological advancements
- viii. Civic engagement/protests/civil rights

Activity 3: Reading the Sources

1. Distribute [Resource #2: Source Material](#) and [Resource #3: Graphic Organizer](#). Project Slide 8 with the directions.
2. Instruct students to read the sources and complete the graphic organizer.
Opportunities for Differentiation: You may wish to have students work in groups, or individually. You may also instruct students to only complete the first two sources (Centennial) and then discuss; complete the next two sources (Sesquicentennial) and then discuss; and then complete the reflection questions.

Activity 4: Debriefing

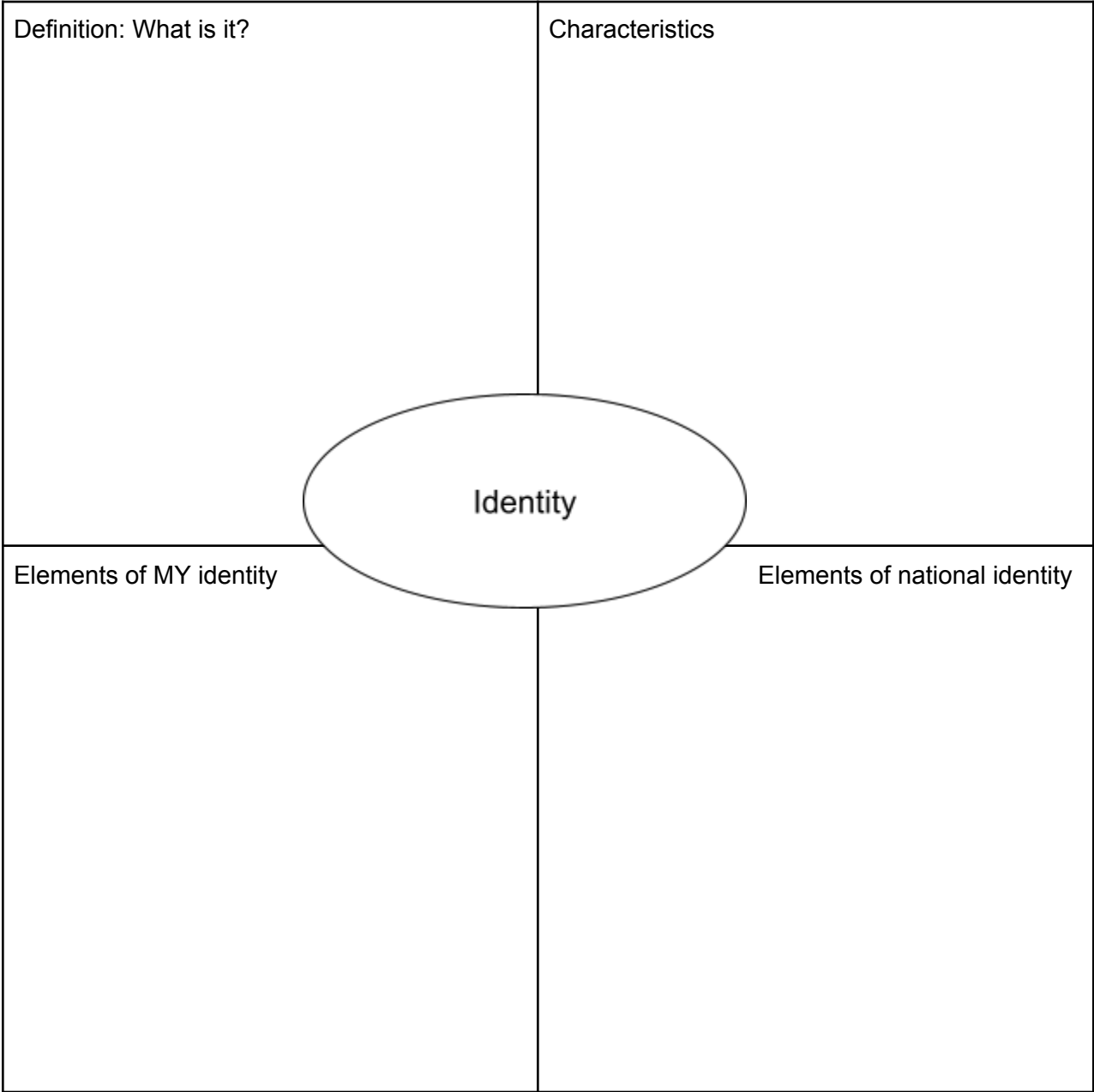
1. Use Slide 9 to have a class debriefing question.
 - a. Students should have identified that celebrations for the Centennial were very joyous, with great pageantry and significant participation from Americans.
 - b. Students should have identified that while there were some similarities between the Centennial and Sesquicentennial (location, some key figures), the celebration was also plagued by in-fighting and significantly less enthusiasm from the population.
 - c. Discuss the connection to identity. Americans were less enthusiastic about the Sesquicentennial because the 1920s was a more turbulent time and innovations in technology and culture made some people find it a little outdated. In addition, how does the earlier discussion about identity connect to our historical understanding? Americans in

1876 more strongly identified with the Centennial celebrations and what they represented. By the 1926s Americans were more divided. Their sense of identity was fractured so uniting under a single celebration

Check for Understanding

1. [Resource #4: Transfer Task](#) - Prompt: You are on a committee tasked with planning a special event to commemorate the Semiquincentennial: the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.
 - a. What is the best way to celebrate the Semiquincentennial? (Give examples of events and locations, decorations, music, distinguished guests, and more)
 - b. What story about American identity will this convey to future generations?
 - c. How does your celebration reflect continuity and change? Which trend is more dominant and why?
 2. Encourage students to think about our identity today and what specific things could communicate that.
 3. Discuss: Have students share out and reflect. How much diversity of ideas were there in the class? How do these compare with the actual plan for the Semiquincentennial? How do their plans compare to the 1876 Centennial and 1926 Sesquicentennial? What are the patterns of continuity and what are the patterns of change?
- [Resource #1: Frayer Model](#)
 - [Resource #2: Source Material](#)
 - [Resource #3: Graphic Organizer](#)
 - [Resource #4: Transfer Task](#)
 - [Resource #5: Slide Deck](#)

Resource 1: Identity Frayer Model



Resource 2: Source Material

Source 1: Centennial

Citation: Chicago Daily Tribune. (Chicago, IL), May. 11 1876.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/sn84031492/1876-05-11/ed-1/>.

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|--|---|--|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">CENTENNIAL.</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Successful Opening of the Philadelphia Exposition.</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">One Hundred and Fifty Thousand People Present.</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Long Prayer by Bishop Simpson, of the M. E. Church.</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Speech by Gen. Hawley and Faint-Voiced Reply by the President.</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Theodore Thomas' Music Over- whelmed by Billows of Yell- ing Enthusiasm.</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">A Colossal Platform Filled With the Multitudi- nous Great.</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Fall of a Heavy Rain-Storm upon the Vast Un- sheltered.</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">SPECIAL REPORT.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">OPENING DAY.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">PHILADELPHIA Special Dispatch to The Tribune.</p> | <p>the n thickly conster the bru estal v Inch of climb u here. A BOY</p> <p>One l that he gettle of him an repeats he read sands v terest. The l There any of please</p> <p>who he played qualit on the disapp a plat leigh eral fully as may and let tion s there among below chestr served</p> <p>which and p lent, er h er which given Bist and c Gen. Mr. and c of th with As a tain some progr</p> <p>when clarin just was r its be blage leave the b</p> <p>The unive centl Word other and dore the The mush rende receh The choit as in and, Thon his l perf woul such</p> <p>Th varic amoi were that cern day' next to B chee sitio ever, for miss The gues ocra The</p> <p>In pi be s stra clos and wor lavh Con dres wor a his brol The tere offic</p> <p>D met pre rich trin sha ant ly and B on ing ing feel the pla to l</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">PHILADELPHIA Special Dispatch to The Tribune.</p> <p>PHILADELPHIA, May 10.—In the memory of every citizen of Philadelphia this day will remain forever green, and also red, white and blue, for never has there been such a display of bunting along her streets as on this 10th of May. For miles and miles, from housetops, from windows, and in windows, from doorways and car roofs, and even from the heads of numberless horses, our national standard has been displayed. It is safe to say that to-night every Philadelphian might sleep in a starry and stripy manner and have several thousands to spare. The supply of bunting has been exhausted, and, for a day or two, its space has been filled by sheeting and shirting goods. If the opening day had been postponed a week, we might have seen banners made of gunny-sacking and burlaps. To enumerate the houses that have been decorated to-day would be to write out the city directory, and so I forbear.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MORNING</p> <p>dawned inauspiciously, as the rain was falling, and promised to do so continually. But, soon after 7 o'clock, the clouds broke, and by 8 the sun was shining. Every possible horse and steam conveyance was in requisition. The street-cars were crowded like herring-boxes, and for hours they followed each other with great rapidity. Carriages, hacks, breaks, and wagonettes did a fine business. Butcher-carts, furniture-wagons, and baggage vans were fitted with temporary seats, and, in one instance, the owner of a second-hand hearse turned it to profit by removing its top and inserting seats for four persons.</p> <p>ATTEMPTS AT EXTORTION WERE LESS FREQUENT than was to be expected, and was mainly confined to drivers of the regular hacks. The movement of sight-seers began early and continued late, not only by horse vehicles, but by railway. The Pennsylvania Railway deposited many thousands of people in its new station at the gate of the Centennial grounds, and it brought long trains of passengers from New York and other places who came direct from their homes without seeing the Quaker City.</p> <p>Good judges have estimated that NEARLY 150,000 PEOPLE were in and around the Centennial grounds to-day. I have had much experience with crowds in various parts of the world, and am confident that there were not less than 90,000 persons within sight of the President when he read his manuscript speech. An evening paper puts the Centennial attendance to-day at 300,000, but this estimate is altogether wild, and possibly whiskified.</p> | <p>The unive centl Word other and dore the The mush rende receh The choit as in and, Thon his l perf woul such</p> <p>Th varic amoi were that cern day' next to B chee sitio ever, for miss The gues ocra The</p> <p>In pi be s stra clos and wor lavh Con dres wor a his brol The tere offic</p> <p>D met pre rich trin sha ant ly and B on ing ing feel the pla to l</p> |
|--|---|--|--|

Source 2: Centennial Fourth

Citation: The Daily Dispatch. (Richmond, VA), Jul. 4 1876.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/sn84024738/1876-07-04/ed-1/>.

CENTENNIAL FOURTH.

ONE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE NATION'S BIRTHDAY—PROGRAMME FOR THE CELEBRATION AT PHILADELPHIA—THE GRAND PAGEANTRY OF LAST NIGHT AND TO-DAY—CONTRIBUTIONS OF VIRGINIA AUTHORS TO CENTENNIAL LITERATURE—LIBERTY GUNS FIRED IN RICHMOND LAST NIGHT—HOW THE 4TH IS TO BE OBSERVED HERE.

The correspondent of the New York *Herald*, writing from Philadelphia, said in Sunday's paper:

The night of the 3d will witness a ceremonial the like of which has never been seen before in this city. It will be a grand torch-light parade of the workmen from the iron-foundries, rolling-mills, print-works, machine-shops, and similar establishments, of which this city possesses a larger number than any other in the Union.

The President of the United States has been invited, and General Collis says he will accept. An invitation has also been given to the Brazilian Emperor (Dom Pedro) and his suit. Of the Governors invited three have already promised to be here—Governor Hartranft, Governor Rice of Massachusetts, and Governor Peck of Vermont. Governor

Source 3: The Sesqui-Centennial Exposition

Citation: The Montgomery advertiser. (Montgomery, AL), Feb. 26 1926.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/sn84020645/1926-02-26/ed-1/>.

THE SESQUI-CENTENNIAL EXPOSITION

Preparations for the Sesqui-Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia have been marred from the outset by almost continuous wrangling and disagreement among those in charge. The quarrelsome manner in which the exposition has been handled is hardly befitting a project which is intended to be a world-wide celebration of the 150th anniversary of the founding of this Nation.

There have been disputes on every phase of the exposition; on its site; its size and scope; when it is to begin and how long it is to last; what it is to cost; on providing funds, granting concessions and on many other matters. As a result of some of the rows, officials have resigned and others have been discharged. At times it has looked as if there would be no Sesqui-Centennial Exposition.

Source 4: Site of the First Phone Message

Citation: The Osceola times. (Osceola, AR), Jun. 4 1926.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/sn84022982/1926-06-04/ed-1/>.



Resource 3: Graphic Organizer and Questions

1876 Centennial Sources

| | Date of the Source | How did they mark the centennial? (bullet point specific evidence from source) | What does this tell us about American identity? |
|----------|--------------------|---|---|
| Source 1 | | | |
| Source 2 | | | |

1926 Sesquicentennial Sources

| | Date of the Source | How did they mark the sesquicentennial? (bullet point specific evidence from source) | What does this tell us about American identity? |
|----------|--------------------|---|---|
| Source 3 | | | |
| Source 4 | | | |

Reflection Questions

1. What were the similarities across the sources? How does this help us understand the continuities between the two time periods?
2. What are the differences across the sources? How does this help us understand that change between the two time periods?

Resource 4: Transfer Task

Scenario: You are on a committee tasked with planning a special event to commemorate the Semiquincentennial: the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

1. What is the best way to celebrate the Semiquincentennial? (Give examples of events and locations, decorations, music, distinguished guests, and more)
2. What story about American identity will this convey to future generations?
3. How does your celebration reflect continuity and change? Which trend is more dominant and why?

Resource 5: Slide Deck

[Click here for Google Slides to accompany lesson](#)

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