



THOMAS JEFFERSON'S

Poplar Forest

Conversations on the Declaration of Independence A Planning Update on an Initiative for 2026

Impetus & Background

In 2026, the United States of America will mark the 250th anniversary of our founding – July 4, 1776, when the United States announced itself as a new nation with the issuance of the Declaration of Independence. As in previous major anniversaries of the founding, broad public attention will turn to the people who sought to create a nation founded on the ideals of equality, rule of law, and self-governance, and then achieved that vision. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, will be central to the commemoration as the voice of the founding's highest ideals.

In late 2023, Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest (Jefferson's newly restored retreat home near Lynchburg, Virginia) launched an outreach effort to organizations and institutions with a direct connection to Thomas Jefferson, proposing a series of insightful discussions exploring the many facets of the Declaration of Independence, focused on its origins, immediate impact and legacy.

Content Development

Through a series of programs and events, this initiative seeks to deepen the understanding and relevance of the Declaration and Thomas Jefferson in today's world. Topics may include but are not limited to:

- The origin. Explore the sources of the “self-evident truths” that all men are created equal, that they possess inalienable rights, and that government derives its powers from the consent of the governed. Explore how these ideas came to colonial North America and how Jefferson was exposed to them in his education and reading.
- The immediate impact of the Declaration. Most historians conclude that, almost immediately, people in all walks of life – enslaved, women, non-landowners, etc. – viewed the concepts of equality and self-evident rights as having broad applicability, changing their role in society. In northern states, laws were passed that soon brought about the end of slavery in those states. Evaluate how the Declaration started to affect American society.
- The Declaration in the World. Explore the impact of the Declaration on other societies and nations around the world. One scholar, David Armitage, has identified over 100 “declarations” around the globe that reflect the influence of the Declaration of Independence.
- The Relevance of Declaration in the 21st century. Explore the relevance of the Declaration in American society and law today. Now 250 years old, has the Declaration been largely superseded by the Constitution and subsequent centuries of legislation and jurisprudence? Does it have a place in resolving today's issues?



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Project Status

A first step toward implementation occurred at a planning meeting held at Poplar Forest March 4-5, 2024 with prospective partner organizations- a consortium of museums, libraries, colleges/universities and historic properties. Discussions focused on: engaging additional partners, outreach within communities, in-person and digital program components, event components and complementary activities, funding, marketing and timing for the launch of the initiative.

Goals are framed around a desire to educate, engage and inspire Americans across all ages and communities. Specific goals that came out of the planning meeting include:

- Increase understanding of the Declaration of Independence as a document that belongs to all of us
- Reaching a broad audience
- Creating a resource that lives on beyond programs and events
- Connect content to Virginia's Standards of Learning
- Create a guidebook for other states to use as a model
- Increase/attract civic engagement from a new generation
- Leverage the power of place through connections to institutions and their specific missions and connections

The group of initial partners will meet again on May 13, 2024 to continue work on concept and budget development, in preparation for presenting this initiative to potential funders.

For more information about the initiative and ongoing planning efforts, please contact:

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About Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest

One of only two homes Thomas Jefferson designed for his personal use, the Poplar Forest retreat was the place where Jefferson "came to indulge in the life of the mind and renew his personal creativity." Jefferson and his wife, Martha, inherited the Bedford County plantation known as Poplar Forest from her father in 1773. Construction of the retreat began in 1806 and continued for nearly two decades. Jefferson visited the retreat three or four times a year, primarily during planting seasons once his presidency ended in 1809. During its operation as a plantation from the 1760s to Emancipation, Poplar Forest was home to 317 enslaved individuals.

Designated a National Historic Landmark by the Secretary of the Interior, and nearly lost to development, Poplar Forest was rescued in 1984 by a group of local citizens who sought to preserve it for the cultural and educational benefit of the public. After nearly four decades of research and restoration, the neoclassical architecture of the octagonal house and portions of the designed landscape have been returned to Thomas Jefferson's design. Efforts to restore the plantation landscape and the places and spaces inhabited by Poplar Forest's enslaved community are ongoing.

Poplar Forest is open daily through December 30 from 10:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. For more information about Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, visit poplarforest.org or call 434.525.1806