



RevolutionNJ

ENGAGE THE PAST. SHAPE THE FUTURE.

The **Revolution NJ Interpretive Framework** serves as a structure that the initiative's planners and anyone interested in developing programs or content for the 250th anniversary (curators, educators, students, scholars, site stewards, re-enactors, public historians, librarians, community organizers, and more) can use to help develop goals, audience takeaways/learning objectives, thematic focuses, and key narratives and content. The framework is meant to act as a foundation for creating inclusive, goal-driven, audience-centered programs, events, and activities that can be tailored to the needs of an individual or organization.

We invite New Jerseyans statewide to use the framework to engage their communities in exploring the complex, pivotal history of the American Revolution, its context, and its legacy.

What is an interpretive framework?

An interpretive framework is a distillation of the goals, organizing principles, and curatorial vision of a program. It creates a roadmap for layering audience takeaways, narrative themes and stories, and supporting assets (e.g. artifacts, quotes, audiovisual materials, etc.—even participants in a live program).

What helped shape the Revolution NJ Interpretive Framework?

1. The initiative's official **mission statement** and **goals**:
 - Tell a diverse and inclusive story about America's past that invites participation from all New Jerseyans.
 - Encourage the growth of organizational capacity at the state's history organizations so that they are better able to attract and serve visitors, both during and after Revolution NJ.
 - Promote heritage tourism in New Jersey in order to increase its positive impact on economic and community development.
 - Elevate the value placed on history education in our K-12 schools and universities.
 - Demonstrate how understanding the complexity of our history helps us to respond to the present and prepare for the future.
 - Increase public and private funding for history in New Jersey.
2. **Community feedback** from public meetings, listening sessions, surveys, and more.
3. Conversations with **experts** from a 2020 Scholars Summit, the Revolution NJ Steering Committee, and the Revolution NJ Advisory Council. Their **key lessons** include:
 - Scholarship of the Revolutionary era has moved beyond generals, soldiers, battles, leaders, and military and intellectual history to a greater focus on stories of African Americans, Native Americans, women, and other underrepresented people; questions of land and water; social and cultural history; the complexity and divisiveness of the era; and its global context.
 - We must directly address the process of creating history itself and of myth-making. We must be transparent about who creates historical narratives, the interpretive choices they make in doing so, and the research and sources behind their choices.
 - Avoid viewing the Revolution and "Founding Fathers" in terms of "good" vs. "bad."

What is the purpose of an interpretive framework?

- To provide a path for programmatic planning and implementation that offers clear standards and opportunities for course correction along the way
- To delineate a program's key themes, storylines, and narrative points
- To define intended audience takeaways/learning objectives
- To discern which assets and elements are within the scope of a program and what format and/or products would best suit the program

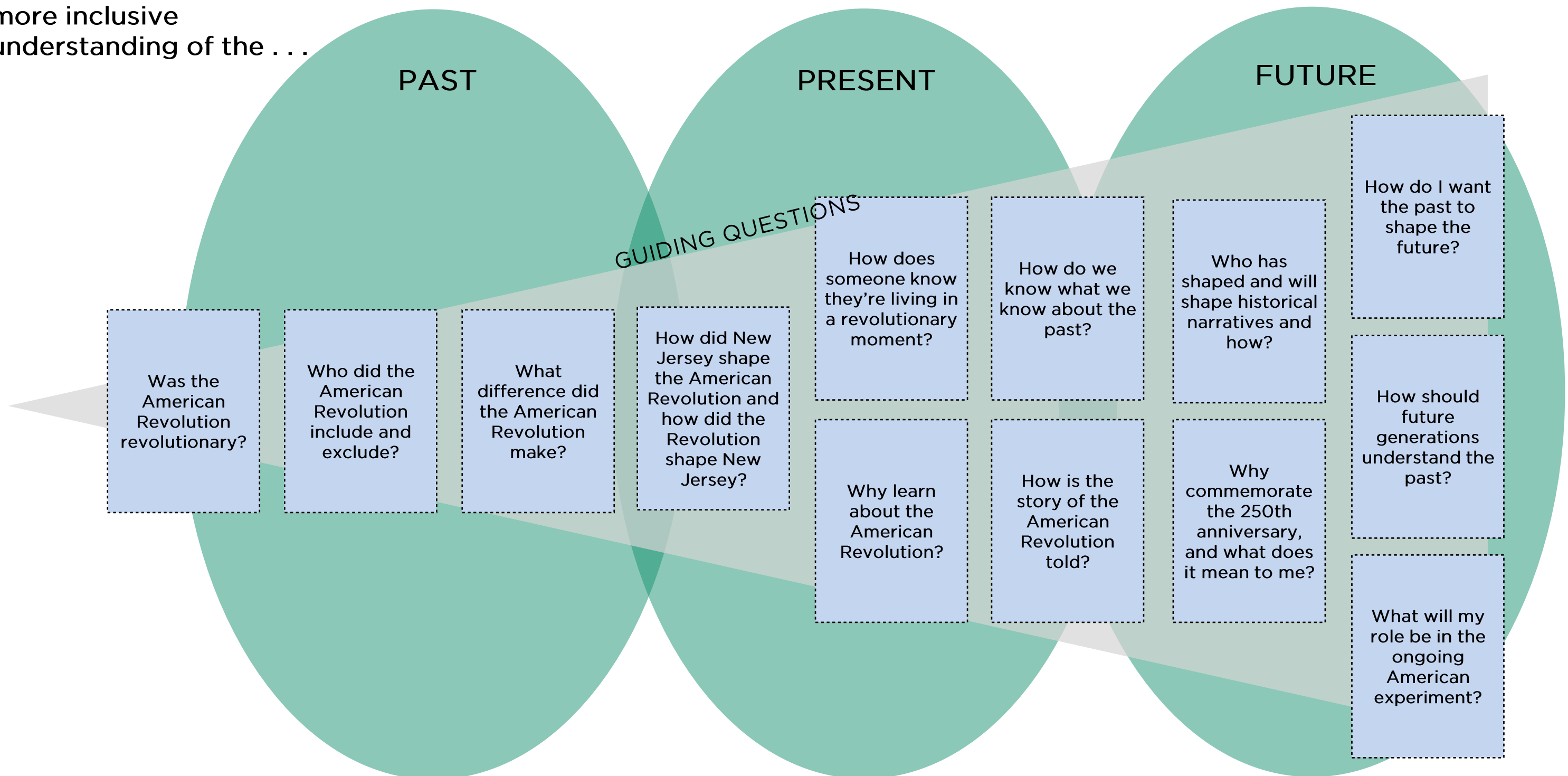
Using the Revolution NJ Interpretive Framework:

- The interpretive framework's core is a series of **Guiding Questions** set in a loose chronological progression. The questions and their organization support designing programs for a more inclusive, nuanced understanding of the past, present, and future.
- A set of **Key Themes** (with accompanying keywords) provides lenses to begin addressing the Guiding Questions and explore possible answers. These themes can also link to concrete narratives about people, places, patterns, and events to populate your programs and content.
- Use the Guiding Questions and Key Themes to inspire, not restrict, your work. You may need only some of them, develop different ones, or reorder them. **Be creative, and find your way into Revolution NJ!**
- We've designed three representations of the interpretive framework:
 - The **concept diagram** is a simplified visual rendering, a skeleton around which you can build themes and content.
 - The **interpretive table** offers more detail, laying out the purpose of each Guiding Question, elaborating on Key Themes, and suggesting sample stories and approaches to populate program content.
 - The **interpretive outline** offers further detail and thorough rationales for the Guiding Questions and Key Themes that will bolster your programs.
- We will be available to **support you** in using this interpretive framework and will offer **resources** to complement it.

NOTE: If you would like to print this document, please do so on 11x7" (Tabloid) paper or scale it to fit on conventional 8.5x11" (Letter) paper.

Tool 1: Concept Diagram

Design programs for a more inclusive understanding of the . . .



KEY THEMES	Exclusion/Inclusion	Property and Sovereignty	"Revolutionary Ideals"	Political Participation	Movement of People	New Jersey as a "Battleground"	The Historical Process
Consider <u>all</u> of the Guiding Questions through lenses including . . .	Race and Ethnicity Indigeneity Gender Sexuality Ability Class National origin	Nationhood Land and Water Slavery and Freedom Taxation Empire	Liberty Pursuing Happiness Equality Justice Self-determination	Representation Direct Democracy Voting Rights Civic Engagement Census and Gerrymandering Protest	Migration Immigration Displacement Slavery Local and Global	Patriots, Loyalists, and Other Positions Elections Service Grassroots Activism Religion Civil War(s) and War Zones	Origin Myths Interpretive Choices Collective Memory Dominant Narratives Agency, Contingency, and Causality Commemoration "Founding"

For a detailed explanation of the Key Themes, please see pages 6 and 7 of this

Tool 2: Interpretive Table

Guiding Question	Interpretive Purpose
Was the American Revolution revolutionary?	Illuminates contrasting definitions of “revolution” and considers whether and how the American Revolution does or does not fit such definitions.
Who did the American Revolution include and exclude?	Invites critical thought about which people were explicitly or implicitly included in the stated ideals of the American Revolution and which people were willfully or passively left out.
What difference did the American Revolution make?	Explores what changed (socially, politically, electorally, culturally, etc.), what did not, why, and for whom, as a result of the American Revolution.
How does someone know they’re living in a revolutionary moment?	Considers role of hindsight, perspective, contingency, causality, and agency in shaping how people understand the time they are living in, as well as how it is subsequently remembered.
How did New Jersey shape the Revolution and how did the Revolution shape New Jersey?	Explores the unique attributes of and confluence in factors of New Jersey that gave it a critical role in the American Revolution and invites consideration of the local implications of an era typically understood in a national framework.
Why learn about the American Revolution?	Offers opportunity to unpack assumption that the Revolution is inherently significant by finding causal and other connections between the past and present, while encouraging broader thoughts on meaning of what from the past “deserves” our attention.
How do we know what we know about the past?	Illuminates the centrality of evidence and research to the historical process, provoking a deeper understanding of how we develop historical knowledge and how we can hold historical narratives and claims accountable.
How is the story of the American Revolution told?	Invites consideration of which dominant narratives of the Revolution remain prevalent and have shaped common understandings of the era, its consequences, and its legacy.
Who has shaped and will shape historical narratives and how?	Deepens understanding of historical narratives by showing that they are a product of choices, often made by people in positions of power.
Why commemorate the 250th anniversary, and what does it mean to me?	Investigates ideas of commemoration and collective memory by provoking critical thought about why these historical anniversaries—especially the Revolution—should matter to individuals in the present and about how to make them meaningful.
How do I want the past to shape the future?	Invites applications of lessons from how and why the Revolution and other historical eras unfolded as they did to goals for the future.
How should future generations understand the past?	Encourages ideas about new, more inclusive and nuanced narratives of the Revolution and past to provide a sounder foundation for understanding change over time and therefore how we can shape the future.
What will my role be in the ongoing American experiment?	Draws a connection between the period of the American Revolution, its legacy, and the unanswered question of how American society can live up to and expand upon the stated ideals of that era.

KEY THEMES

Exclusion/Inclusion

Since its formal founding (and before), the U.S. has been a society that benefits only some—often at the expense of others. Freedom, rights, power, and success have varied for people depending on their race, ethnicity, indigeneity, gender, sexuality, class, religion, national origin, and other factors.

Property and Sovereignty

Much of U.S. history has hinged on battles over who gets to control land and other resources, communities, and individuals.

“Revolutionary Ideals”

The stated ideals of the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution are abstract terms with different meanings for different people. The extent to which the U.S. has lived up to these ideals to form a “more perfect union” is an ongoing debate.

Political Participation

The Revolution focused largely on what it would mean to be represented and participate in a free and just society. Fights about what representation and participation mean continue today.

Movement of People

New Jersey has long been the site of the movement of people—whether they moved out of need or want, were forced or coerced to move, or found borders moving around them. This movement shaped historical moments from before, during, and after the Revolution.

New Jersey as a “Battleground”

Some of America’s greatest physical and ideological conflicts have come into sharp relief in New Jersey history.

The Historical Process

History is made up of stories we choose to tell about the past based on evidence. Starting the U.S. story at 1776 is an interpretive choice that affects how we understand the past, and may mean elevating the narratives of some over others.

Tool 3: Interpretive Outline

Overview

The Revolution NJ interpretive framework serves as a structure that the initiative’s planners and anyone interested in developing programs or content for the 250th anniversary can use to help develop goals, audience takeaways/learning objectives, thematic focuses, and key narratives and content. The framework is meant to act as a foundation for creating inclusive, goal-driven, audience-centered programs, events, and activities that can be tailored to the needs of an individual or organization.

Overall Audience Takeaways/Learning Objectives (“Audiences of Revolution NJ and others using this interpretive framework to build programs will . . .”)

- **Grasp** what happened in New Jersey during the Revolutionary era, in all its complexity, including commonly marginalized figures, themes, narratives, and events.
- **Understand** who was included and excluded in the stated ideals of the Revolution and how their lives changed—or did not.
- **Connect** the Revolutionary era and the present, learning to factor in historical contingencies and the benefits of hindsight when thinking about the past.
- **Understand** that people create historical narratives through a series of interpretive choices, with dominant narratives typically crafted by those in positions of power.
- **Question** the opportunities and limitations that come with commemorations and national origin myths.
- **Use** what they have learned about the American Revolution and the historical process to sharpen their own ideals and define how they hope to shape the future.

Framework Structure

The framework’s core is a series of **Guiding Questions** intended to provoke critical thinking, press on assumptions, relate to current scholarship and national discourse, and invite connections between historical narratives and today. **The questions follow a loose chronological progression from past to present to future that supports transitions from the specificity and temporal distance of the Revolution as a historical case study, to the immediacy and intimacy of considering one’s own present, to a broader view of hopes for society and the future.** The transitions between questions are intentionally fluid. As the questions develop, they amplify to become simultaneously more personal and more expansive, coinciding with the Revolution NJ goals of producing inclusive and relevant programming. Program planners can adapt the questions to their specific needs, using only a few from each set or changing the order. The questions may also inspire related ones not included here. Underpinning the Guiding Questions is a series of **Key Themes** highlighting lenses through which the questions can be filtered. They also offer a starting point for selecting and developing stories and content for programs. Ultimately, the framework is meant to inspire and support, not restrict, planning for the 250th.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Guiding Questions: Set 1 (Past)

Was the American Revolution revolutionary?

Who did the American Revolution include and exclude?

What difference did the American Revolution make?

The above questions, loosely focused on the idea of the past, invite planners and their audiences to begin with the specificity and distance afforded by hindsight in looking back at the era of the American Revolution. These questions ask people to think critically about dominant narratives of the Revolution, including whether it in fact involved radical change and, if so, for whom and why.

Guiding Questions: Set 2 (Present)

How does someone know they’re living in a revolutionary moment?

How did New Jersey shape the American Revolution and how did the Revolution shape New Jersey?

Why learn about the American Revolution?

How do we know what we know about the past?

How is the story of the American Revolution told?

This second set of questions, underpinned by the idea of the present, encourages planners and their audiences to move from considering the American Revolution in and of itself to spurring explorations of the Revolutionary era in relation to oneself and to today. These questions invite people to consider the value of sources, imagine themselves in various positions, to extrapolate themes from the Revolutionary era that persist today, to deepen their understanding of New Jersey’s role in broader national narratives, to debate why the Revolution should be a common case study (let alone a defining national story), and begin to think through larger questions of historical interpretation by asking how dominant narratives of the Revolution can be researched and told.

Interpretive Outline is continued on the following page.

Tool 3: Interpretive Outline (continued)

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Guiding Questions: Set 3 (Present/Future)

Who has shaped and will shape historical narratives and how?

Why commemorate the 250th anniversary, and what does it mean to me?

The third set serves as a conceptual transition from past to present. Use these questions to address larger explorations of collective memory, hindsight and contingency, accuracy and change over time, the construction of historical narratives and origin myths, and the meaning of commemoration. While still asking audiences to think about themselves in the present, these questions expand the perspective to invite conversations about the power and choices involved in crafting historical narratives and what we lose or gain in choosing what to commemorate and when. The questions also invite considerations of the role of “ordinary” people in effecting change—in the 18th century, in subsequent eras, and today.

Guiding Questions: Set 4 (Future)

How do I want the past to shape the future?

How should future generations understand the past?

What will my role be in the ongoing American experiment?

The fourth and final set of Guiding Questions invites people to look forward and around themselves. Having progressed from thinking about the Revolution and its complexity to considering its implications on the present and on oneself, the questions now encourage an application of these ideas to the future and broader society. Ideally, these last questions will orient people toward persistent curiosity and connection, coinciding with the Revolution NJ vision of creating a sustainable legacy of critical thought, ongoing learning, and civic engagement. The questions should also help people understand that because things have changed in the past, they can change again in the future.

In addressing the Guiding Questions, we recommend that programs challenge audiences to filter their responses and interactions through several **Key Themes**. These themes, though not necessarily comprehensive of all possible topics related to this interpretive plan and to the American Revolution, represent many of the vital narrative threads and areas of research characterizing the latest scholarship and public discourse. **These themes are meant to include New Jerseyans of varied backgrounds, identities, experiences, and perspectives to find a way into the anniversary and to consider it critically—while growing comfortable with the innate ambiguity of history and the process by which history is told.**

KEY THEMES

Exclusion/Inclusion

All societies draw lines guiding who is included and who is excluded, and to what degree. In the U.S. and New Jersey, these lines and the relationship between them have appeared starkly and shifted frequently over time. The formal creation of the U.S. was a radical proposition—a country founded on promises of freedom and equality; however these promises were not only unevenly applied, but often one group’s freedom relied on the exploitation of others. Rights for white men have often been achieved and protected according to foundational racist ideology that propelled the subjugation of Black people and the dispossession and erasure of Native American nations. The country’s foundational documents left out women for centuries, while the same documents’ elevation of citizenship and property as the basis for political equality have often excluded immigrants and the poor. Since its establishment, the story of the U.S. has been one of negotiation between those in power and those without—a story that comes forth in the experience of the Revolution for different Americans, the institution of slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction, different civil rights movements, and debates today about topics including wealth distribution, education, immigration, and representation.

Property and Sovereignty

Ownership over land, water, other resources, and determination of one’s own destiny have been common threads in U.S. history. The end of the Revolution signified international recognition of former colonists’ control of American land, but other people claimed that land too. The rise of one nation served to undermine and displace hundreds of Native American tribal nations that had occupied the same place for millennia. Conflict over land, water, property, and sovereignty extend elsewhere. Prior to the Civil War, the prospect of new states joining the union meant confronting the question of whether the federal government could regulate the holding of Black people as “property.” During Reconstruction and beyond, supporters of white supremacy installed *de facto* and *de jure* barriers to Black people owning homes—and such efforts persist today. For centuries, women’s ability to own property or make their own financial, professional, or health decisions was strictly curtailed. Drawing the line between individual property rights and the State’s sovereign authority over its land has animated many struggles. These threads, dating back to the Revolution and before, continue to characterize public discourse. New Jersey, with abundant natural resources, a strong “home rule” tradition, and hundreds of municipalities, embodies these debates.

Tool 3: Interpretive Outline (continued)

“Revolutionary Ideals”

People commonly cite the goals stated in the Declaration of Independence—life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness—and related concepts of equality and justice as the ideals of the American Revolution. Admirable and useful rallying cries as those ideals may be, they are also vague. Implementing these ideals meant defining what they meant, whom they would apply to, and how. Before, during, and since the country’s formal founding, people have wrestled with what to do when the ideals come into conflict, are differently defined, or fail to be achieved. Historically, those in power have interpreted these ideals to the benefit of white men, premising their freedom on the exploitation and disenfranchisement of women, people of color, immigrants, and other groups. All of these conflicts have played out on New Jersey soil. The American—and New Jersey—story is one of an ongoing effort to better define the “Revolutionary Ideals” and live up to their promise for everyone.

Political Participation

“No taxation without representation,” a familiar slogan of the Revolution, distills a core challenge the U.S. faced after winning the War: how to build a government that truly represented society and what participation in that structure would mean. This tricky task has played out repeatedly in debates throughout American and New Jersey history: in fights over the balance between local, state, and federal rights; in questions over the Census, gerrymandering, and whom should be counted and how; and in debates over the Electoral College. What it means to be “represented” has extended into the cultural and social sphere too, especially when it comes to media narratives and pop culture. The intertwined question of how to participate in these representative structures has also persisted—what does it mean to participate in a representative democracy? Voting rights battles, protest movements, consumer boycotts, internet “slacktivism,” and similar issues continue to characterize discourse about what it means to engage in civic society.

Movement of People

New Jersey, with one of the most diverse populations in the country, has long been the site of the movement of people—whether they moved out of need or want, were forced or coerced to move, and/or found borders moving around them. This was true during the Revolutionary era, when New Jersey residents included Native Americans, enslaved people from Africa and their descendants, immigrants from around the globe, and others. As people chose or were coerced into choosing sides during the American Revolution and contemporaneous uprisings, refugee crises developed that may sound familiar today. Relatedly, the historical myth of America as a “nation of immigrants” or “melting pot” has been a theme from before the country’s founding to the present day, presenting questions of authenticity and assimilation, what it means to be “American,” and how we can think about home.

New Jersey as a “Battleground”

New Jersey has served as a microcosm for many of the most important physical and ideological debates in U.S. history. The Revolution played out more like a civil war in New Jersey, with all the violence and disruption that a civil conflict entails. Residents chose between Patriot and Loyalist camps, switched sides, remained neutral, or were otherwise coerced into various positions. As a geographical crossroads on the East Coast, New Jersey has also served as a facing-off point for ideas of the Right and Left, North and South, Rural and Urban, pro-war and anti-war, and other significant points of division. Due to New Jersey’s colonization by the Dutch, Swedish, and English, the state was multiethnic from its inception, shaping the lived experiences of its diverse residents. New Jersey history calls attention to the breadth of these experiences and beliefs within our diverse state, showing us there is always more to the story. By examining disagreements concerning wartime pacifist strategies in Quaker communities, pro vs anti-slavery sentiments, military service vs conscientious objection, forced displacement of Indigenous people, and the rights of free African Americans, history challenges our assumptions and stereotypes about the past and present. These complexities and tensions underpin grassroots activism, peaceful protests, and other forms of civic engagement in the state, influencing participation from all sectors of society as people fought for a “more perfect union.” Considering these various battles in New Jersey history and culture provides a foundation for understanding broader conflicts in American society.

The Historical Process

What does it mean to mark the year 1776? What do we lose and what do we gain by elevating it and dating the founding of this country to that year? These are the sorts of questions that inspire greater understanding of the historical process—the series of choices people make when crafting an interpretation of the past based on research and synthesis of primary and secondary sources. Many tend to assume that commonly known narratives (also called dominant narratives) are simply “the facts” or “what happened” in the past, but every historical narrative is the result of one or more people making choices. These choices, whether made by policymakers, textbook writers, teachers, or family and friends, involve selecting which figures, events, places, and patterns to emphasize and which to leave out. This process can, sometimes inadvertently, spread particular ideas about who and what has been important in the past. For example, American culture’s heavy emphasis on military leaders such as George Washington makes sense given his actions and career, but it has also arguably crowded out the role of other people whose non-military contributions helped colonists win the war. Relatedly, interpretations of Washington’s life that prioritize his significance as a general or president over his role as an enslaver are creating a hierarchy of what about Washington is important to know. Those of us who interpret history for others must own our choices about what we include and what we leave out, how we sequence and frame information, and which sources we use to support our interpretations. Being transparent about this process—and having reputable, documentable evidence to back it up—will better serve our audiences. This is also a central component of any commemoration, which is an interpretive choice in its own right.

Acknowledgements & Contact Information

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Revolution NJ Steering Committee

Sally Lane, Crossroads of the American Revolution Association
Maxine N. Lurie, New Jersey Historical Commission
Patrick Murray, Crossroads of the American Revolution Association
Kevin Tremble, New Jersey Historical Commission
Margaret Westfield, New Jersey Historical Commission
Iris M. Delgado, Crossroads of the American Revolution Association

Revolution NJ Advisory Council

Leslie Bensley, Morris County Tourism Bureau
Michael Blaakman, Princeton University
Varissa McMickens Blair, NowWellspring Consultants
Todd Braisted, Independent Scholar
Jessica Bush, Passaic County Department of Cultural and Historic Affairs
Eileen Defreeze, Essex County College
Erica Armstrong Dunbar, Rutgers University
Linda Caldwell Epps, 1804 Consultants (*co-chair*)
Carrie Fellows, Hunterdon County Cultural and Heritage Commission
Olivia Glenn, NJ Department of Environmental Protection
Chase Jackson, Bayshore Center at Bivalve
Joshua Lisowski, Camden County Historical Society
Jeffrey Moy, Morristown and Morris Township Library
Kristin O'Brassill Kulfan, Rutgers University (*co-chair*)
Yesenia López, NJ Hispanic Research & Information Center
Thomas Ross, Morristown National Historical Park
Jeffrey Vasser, New Jersey Division of Travel and Tourism
Edith Westpy, Bayonne School District

2020 Scholars Summit

Michael Blaakman, Princeton University
Christopher Brown, Columbia University
James Gigantino, University of Arkansas
Linnea Grim, Monticello
Scott Hancock, Gettysburg College
Jessica Marie Johnson, Johns Hopkins University
Maxine N. Lurie, Seton Hall University
Seth Rockman, Brown University
Jameson Sweet, Rutgers University
Jack Tchen, Rutgers University-Newark
Karin Wulf, Omohundro Institute and William & Mary

Help us keep the conversation going!

If you have thoughts, ideas, or questions,
please contact a member of the
Revolution NJ core project team.

Sara Cureton

Executive Director, New Jersey Historical Commission
sara.cureton@sos.nj.gov

Susan Kaufmann

Communications Manager, Crossroads of the American
Revolution
skaufmann@revolutionarynj.org

Marc Lorenc

Program Coordinator, New Jersey Historical Commission
Marc.lorenc@sos.nj.gov

Greer Luce

Chief Communications Officer, New Jersey Historical
Commission
greer.luce@sos.nj.gov

Amy Osterhout

Program Manager, Crossroads of the American Revolution
aosterhout@revolutionarynj.org

Madeleine Rosenberg

Chief Public Historian, New Jersey Historical Commission
madeleine.rosenberg@sos.nj.gov

Janice Selinger

Executive Director, Crossroads of the American Revolution
jselinger@revolutionarynj.org