

# Philadelphia Celebrates

## Three Great Anniversaries 1876, 1926, 1976

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### Introduction

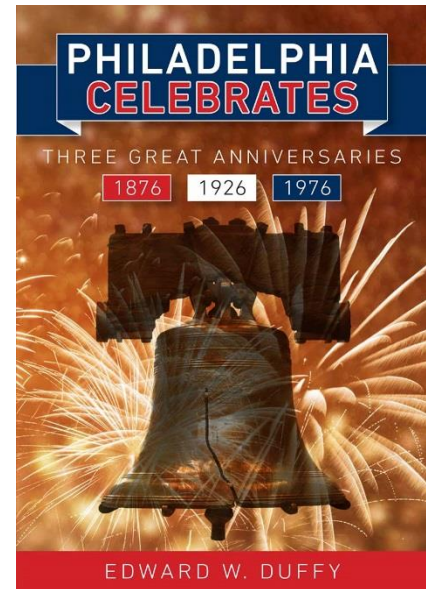
The City of Philadelphia's celebrations of the anniversary of the Declaration of American Independence in 1876, 1926 and 1976, the largest peacetime events in its history, required extraordinary efforts to plan and implement, and each brought out the best and the worst of its organizers. The Centennial celebration has been judged to be the most successful, the Sesquicentennial regarded as a failure that could have been avoided if its citizens had been listened to, and the Bicentennial celebration actually more controversial than the "Sesqui." With 2026 appearing on the horizon as yet another milestone to consider celebrating, it may be useful to examine how these prior events unfolded, to see if they have lessons for the planners of the next commemoration.

It is not too early to begin considering what this commemoration might entail. From the vantage point of 2016, the 2026 celebration of the 250th anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence may seem remote, rather like a parachutist's first observation of the countryside after leaping from the airplane, but much more quickly than he first realizes it, his period of contemplation is over, the time for landing is fast upon him, and he must immediately employ all of his skills and attention if he is to avoid catastrophe. Some variation of this no doubt will be experienced by the planners of Philadelphia's 2026 celebration. An understanding of how the planning of each of the three prior celebrations of the Declaration of Independence was handled, or mishandled, may allow the 2026 celebration organizers the benefit of the experiences of those who went before them.

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Philadelphians have shown a pronounced ambivalence toward hosting large-scale celebrations. In the run-up to the Sesqui there was actually a 15,000-member Anti-Sesquicentennial Celebration League. The majority of Philadelphians at that time wanted an "old home week" celebration centered on Independence Hall, while the mayor's contractor friends demanded world's fair construction contracts. During planning for the Bicentennial, it became apparent that the organizers' preferred alternative site, a platform to be constructed over 30th Street Station's railyards, was a non-starter with the federal government. The organizers' frantic efforts to find another site brought out Philadelphians' true feelings about the event, easily summarized as "not in my neighborhood."

The best advice for a future event that can be gleaned from Philadelphia's celebration planning history comes from Mayor Tate and from the city's development



coordinator, William Rafsky. Tate said that for Philadelphia to host a successful event, its residents must be solidly in support of it. Bill Rafsky, responding to an early disagreement among the Bicentennial planners regarding the celebration's theme and location, warned that it would be far more productive to obtain recommendations from a wide variety of sources before attempting to make any basic decisions.

Philadelphia has much to recommend it, as was recognized in November 2015 when the Organization of World Heritage Sites named it America's first World Heritage City. Its historic area has continued to be preserved and transformed into a more tourist-friendly environment, and its downtown boasts a large and growing residential population which is expanding the definition of "Center City" well into South Philadelphia from Passyunk Square to Point Breeze, northward into Northern Liberties, Francisville and Kensington, while westward across the Schuylkill River a new city is taking shape. Its increasing downtown residential population attracts restaurant and retail development that tourists find delightful. One might say that Philadelphia's "municipal bird" is the construction crane. Its public transit system is among the best in North America, and Amtrak has on its drawing boards system improvement alternatives that if implemented, will put Philadelphia's intercity travel convenience on a level with northern Europe and eastern Asia. The physical city is already getting set for display in another celebration.

The ideals associated with America's declaration of independence remain timeless. What President Gerald Ford described in 1976 as the start of our "American Adventure" continues to reverberate, "stirring the imagination and quickening the hopes of men and women around the world" (6) from Independence Hall's role in 1776 to the birth of American feminism here in 1876 with Susan B. Anthony's Declaration of Women's Rights, to the first gay rights demonstration here on July 4, 1965 (7). Independence Hall has also played a remarkable international role as well, with delegations visiting it on their way to the first meetings of the League of Nations, the 1919 Korean Declaration of Independence having been written here in blood. There is so much for so many to celebrate in the timeless liberty that Independence Hall represents. The question is whether Philadelphians can craft a celebration concept that Philadelphians will enthusiastically support.