

# VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF HISTORY & CULTURE

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## A Time for Civics Education

In just two years' time, the United States of America will mark its 250th anniversary—a historic moment we should embrace by together reflecting on our past and investing with great purpose in our future.

This anniversary of our nation's founding provides us a rare and timely opportunity to renew our commitment to educating Americans about our system of democratic self-government through the power of history and civics. Our nation needs and deserves an engaged citizenry—one informed by a full understanding of our shared past...one that encourages an awareness of, and commitment to, the rights and responsibilities we share as citizens.

The Virginia Museum of History & Culture (VMHC), Virginia's oldest museum and one of the most distinguished history museums in our nation, will mark America's 250th with a dramatic investment in history and civics leading up to and beyond 2026. The VMHC will commemorate this American milestone with a meaningful portfolio of exhibitions (both at the VMHC and traveling around the state), public programs, publications and scholarship, and a variety of meaningful initiatives to document and preserve Virginia's past. By joining forces with the John Marshall Center for Constitutional History & Civics, the VMHC will also be a new, leading, statewide hub for the study of civics—creating a lasting legacy of this commemoration that will serve not only this generation, but also generations to come.

This Independence Day, as the VMHC hosts one of the largest citizenship naturalization ceremonies in the Commonwealth—bringing together new citizens who have demonstrated a strong, foundational understanding of American history and civics—it will also proudly launch *Civics Connects*, a free, comprehensive, and classroom-ready resource thoughtfully designed to help instill this same understanding for all of Virginia's middle school students.

Even before the pandemic's learning-loss epidemic, civics education had been losing ground for some time. America's resulting "civics crisis" is evidenced in low standardized test scores and in countless recent polls that reveal not only a lack of knowledge about democratic principles and systems but, perhaps even more concerning, young America's apathy about democratic forms of government. Only about one in three Americans can pass the U.S. Citizenship Test, which requires correct answers to only 60 percent of its questions (Institute for Citizens & Scholars). Less than half of U.S. adults can name all three branches of government, and about one in four respondents cannot identify even one (University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center). And, perhaps worst of all, about half of young Americans do not believe democracy is preferable to other forms of government (The Economist/YouGov).

Against this challenging backdrop and in step with the vast educational opportunities afforded by America's 250th, *Civics Connects* will provide Virginia students with a major new toolkit for inquiry-based exploration and discovery. This first-of-its-kind educational resource portfolio will provide a sweeping foundation of civics, will cover all Virginia standards of learning for civics and economics in the middle grades, and align with broader national standards. Designed with significant input from Virginia educators, this robust resource includes lesson plans, interactive slides, classroom activities, and videos that feature Virginia middle schoolers as civics investigators visiting the Virginia Capitol, VMHC, and other important

sites around the Commonwealth—and even the National Archives and The White House—on a quest to understand America’s founding documents and world-changing ideas, its principles of democracy, and our collective responsibilities and rights under the Constitution. This program will also provide opportunities to connect students with subject matter experts and special museum experiences.

A Civics Ambassador Corps, comprised of educators selected from across the Commonwealth, will help pilot and promote the program beginning with the upcoming 2024-25 academic year, a year where Virginia schools will begin to transition from the 2015 Standards of Learning to those approved in 2023, and will begin the Virginia Department of Education-recommended shift of civics from an eighth-grade course to one taught in the seventh grade. Designed to help learning thrive, rather than falter, throughout this transitional period and beyond, *Civics Connects* will help ensure that all Virginia middle school students begin their high school careers with foundational civics knowledge upon which to build, and from which to inspire a lifetime of engaged citizenship.

The VMHC calls on all Virginians and Americans to meet this moment—unique in our lifetime—by prioritizing history and civics at home and in our daily lives, and by empowering our schools and educational organizations, like the VMHC, to do the same.

*Jamie O. Bosket is the President & CEO of the Virginia Museum of History & Culture (VMHC).*

*On July 4, the public is invited to the VMHC’s Citizenship Ceremony at 11 a.m. The ceremony will be followed by live music, refreshments, a gallery scavenger hunt, and a display of rare artifacts.*

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