NATIONAL HISTORY DAY 2027

INNOVATION IN HISTORY

IMPACT, INFLUENCE, CHANGE

2027 THEME NARRATIVE: INNOVATION IN HISTORY: IMPACT, INFLUENCE, CHANGE

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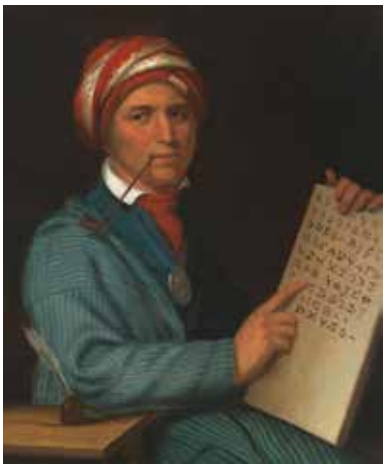
INTRODUCING THE THEME

The theme for National History Day® (NHD) 2027 is *Innovation in History: Impact, Influence, Change*. As it is with every NHD theme, it is not quite as obvious as it looks, so before we begin considering topics, let's take a closer look at the theme itself.

New technologies may be the first examples that come to mind—such as the printing press, the airplane, television, or even the microwave oven. These are all important inventions, but it's important not to confuse innovation with invention. Innovation goes beyond creating new tools or devices; to finding new ways of thinking, organizing, and influencing society.



Developed in the early nineteenth century, the Cherokee Syllabary is an excellent example that demonstrates how innovation builds on earlier invention. Sequoyah, the developer of the syllabary, did not invent writing from nothing. He built on the existing concept, which was already widespread around the globe. What makes the Cherokee syllabary an innovation is how it improved and adapted that idea for a specific community. Instead of simply making use of the English alphabet, Sequoyah created new symbols that matched syllables in the spoken Cherokee language. As demonstrated by his young daughter Ayokeh (also spelled Ayoka), it was relatively easy for Cherokee speakers to learn. This dramatically increased literacy among the Cherokee people, allowing them to use writing in their own language for their own needs—publishing texts, keeping records, and strengthening communication. Image credit: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (NPG.79.174).

To get started, let us consider the terms. Many dictionaries define the noun "innovation" as "a new idea, method, or device." The verb "to innovate" is defined as a way "to introduce a new process or way of doing things." The historian's job is to help us make sense of the newness and to understand the impact of the innovation: the intended and sometimes unintended consequences on human society and the course of human events. Historians and NHD students do so by asking questions that lead them to identify primary and secondary sources, evidence that helps them draw conclusions about a topic's significance in history.

To put it simply, innovation, at its core, is about change and the impact of that change.

EXPLORING ASPECTS OF INNOVATION: IMPACT, INFLUENCE, CHANGE

When considering the theme *Innovation in History: Impact, Influence, Change*, it is important to focus on what follows the word "Innovation." This portion of the theme is essential, as it helps students begin shaping meaningful research questions to guide their inquiry. To fully explore innovation in a historical context, we must look beyond the idea itself and examine its effects. How did people, over time, imagine, develop, and implement new ideas, technologies, or methods? And in what ways did those innovations influence societies?

Innovation can include social, political, cultural, and intellectual breakthroughs, as well as new technologies. Students should also keep in mind these questions as they consider their topics:

- What problem or need drove this innovation?
  - How has necessity helped to drive innovation? Consider war, disease, food preservation, etc.
- How was it received at the time?
  - Consider topics related to the advancement of science and medicine. Were they welcomed, resisted, or feared? What were the consequences?
- Who benefited, and who did not?
- How did it change lives and society in the short term and the long term?
- What connections can be traced between past innovations and today's world?

IMPACT INFLUENCE CHANGE

Asking research questions about impact, influence, and change over time is an important way to identify examples of innovation in history. Questions like these encourage students to move beyond simply describing an event or invention. Instead, they prompt deeper analysis—challenging students to consider how people created, refined, and adapted ideas and technologies over time.

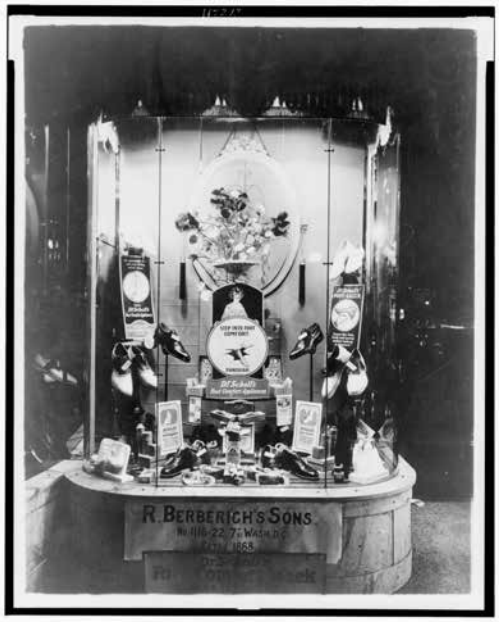
CHOOSING A TOPIC: INVENTION OR INNOVATION?

Remember that innovation is not simply an invention, but a creative and new approach to how we live, work, and think and its consequences for human society. An invention is a starting point; an innovation is an example of what happens as people keep changing, improving, and adapting that idea. *Innovation in History* examines how innovative ideas, devices, or methods have had short- and long-term consequences, changing the course of human society.

For example, how have scientists and doctors been able to view the inside of the human body? In 1895, German scientist Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen discovered X-rays. (Notably, this was an accidental discovery!) Soon after, doctors began using X-ray machines to see inside the human body without surgery. For the first time, they could look at broken bones while a patient was still alive. The X-ray machine is an example of an invention: it introduced a brand new tool. Students of history must take it a step further. Simply put, what difference did it make? What was the impact on medicine, human health, and industry?

The first X-ray photograph by Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen of his wife's hand. Since Röntgen's accidental discovery in 1895, X-rays have revolutionized medicine and led to innovations in treating patients. National Library of Medicine (101448275).

Of course, the X-ray machine is an obvious choice of topic in the history of medicine. Why not consider topics that are less obvious, such as shoe inserts? As Dr. Scholl explained, "when your feet hurt, you hurt all over." How did William Scholl's apprenticeship as a cobbler and later his medical degree lead him to produce an innovative medical device in the early twentieth century? What impact did his work have on health care? On industry? On individuals? Why was Dr. Scholl's invention an innovation?



Display of Dr. Scholl's shoes and "foot comfort appliances" in the window of R. Berberich's Sons, a store in Washington, DC, c.1925. Library of Congress (96521543).

Nikola Tesla changed the world with his innovative ideas about and experiments with electricity. How? What were the consequences?

Introducing the SPARK Test

For a classroom-ready resource that helps determine if a topic is an invention or innovation, refer to the SPARK test. This test was designed to help educators and students evaluate if potential topics are a good fit to explore for the theme *Innovation in History: Impact, Influence, Change*.

Find more information here: **nhd.org/theme**

MOVING BEYOND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

When we think about invention and innovation, it can be easy to identify examples that relate to machines or technology. However, we know that innovation is not just about technology. Ideas and social systems can also be invented and improved over time. Consider: What innovations changed the nature of citizenship and governance? How was the founding of the United States 250 years ago an innovative experiment in governance? What were the founders trying to change? Why? Did they succeed?

What was the impact of universal and compulsory education? How was universal education innovative? How was this innovative: what impact did public education and literacy have on society and citizenship?

This 1909 photograph by Lewis Hine shows young children in Georgia working long hours in a textile mill. Progressive Era reformers used images like this to expose unsafe conditions and argue that children needed protection through education, health care, and labor laws. What problems affecting children do you see in this image—and how might a stronger federal role in education have helped address them? Library of Congress (2018675020).

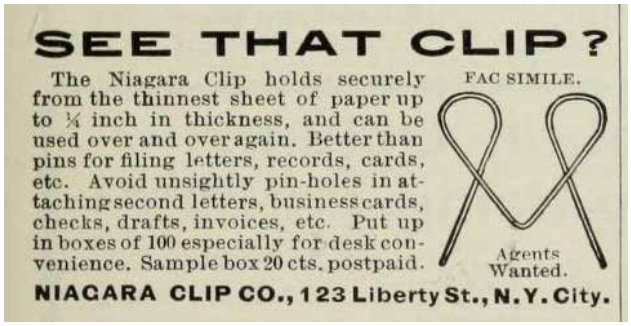
EXPLORING LOCAL HISTORIES

Students should be encouraged to think locally. If one is interested in the steam engine or electricity, how did such technology have an impact on a student's town? How did the steamboat create growth and change in small towns along the Mississippi River in the 19th century? What were the consequences of the New Deal's Rural Electronification Act (REA) on rural communities in the 1930s? Students should ask similar questions about the impact of innovation in their own communities. How and why did innovation change the way people lived? What were the consequences?

A woman uses an electric washing machine after the REA provided electricity to rural communities across the country. Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, National Archives (195877).

GUIDANCE ON CHOOSING A TOPIC

Of course, not all technological innovations are as big as designing the steam engine or bringing electricity to a rural area. History is often changed by small tools as well as by big inventions. The paper clip is a seemingly insignificant piece of technology. But stop and think for a moment. What spurred its development? How did it contribute to changes in office work and bureaucracy? How did it, along with other innovations, help create the modern office? Historically, the paper clip has done more than hold paper together. How was it used as a symbol of resistance during World War II? What was its social impact?



An advertisement for the Niagara Clip, c.1900. The design of this paper clip looks different from the typical paper clips we use today, reminding us that many inventors were experimenting with ways to hold papers or fabric together before one common design became popular.Wikimedia Commons.

Choose historical topics thoughtfully—ones that allow you to trace change over time, examine cause and effect, and assess long-term impact. While subjects like artificial intelligence (AI) may be interesting, they are not ideal for a history project because they are too recent to evaluate fully.

Instead, look to past innovations that have already shaped society in lasting ways. Developments such as early banking systems or expanding trade networks offer rich opportunities to explore how new ideas transformed the way people lived, worked, and understood the world.

Understanding a topic's significance in history requires careful attention to historical context, or the political, social, economic, and cultural climate in which a topic occurs. By examining this context, students can better analyze causes, events, and changes over time and ask important questions: How did the conditions of the time contribute to the development of this innovation or event? What factors allowed it to emerge and shape society?

Studying historical context helps explain not only how and why an innovation came about, but also its immediate effects and long-term impact.

CONCLUSION

Consider what drives innovation. Necessity often accelerates innovation in times of war, disease, or cultural exchanges.

Are innovations always positive? Not necessarily. While innovation often brings progress, it can also provoke skepticism, resistance, or unintended consequences. Students should be careful to examine how people reacted to innovation and change. The vaccine, for example, was an innovation that was not immediately accepted.

Innovation, at its core, involves change. The history of innovation is about creativity and transformation. Whether those changes are the result of technological advances or human factors is for students to interpret as they explore this theme through their projects.

To access more theme resources, go to nhd.org/theme.