

Voices of the 250th Interview with Eve Mandel 06-04-2026

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Eve Mandel and Clifford Robinson conducted on June 4, 2026. The interview took place at the Princeton Public Library as part of the Voices of Princeton Project's Voices of the 250th collection.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

TRANSCRIPT

Cliff Robinson [00:00:00] Good morning. My name is Cliff Robinson. Could you please state your name?

Eve Mandel [00:00:04] I'm Eve Mandel. I'm the Director of Programs at the Historical Society of Princeton.

Cliff Robinson [00:00:10] So, how did you come to Princeton, and how long have you been here?

Eve Mandel [00:0 0:13] I have been working at the Historical Society for 15 years.

Cliff Robinson [00:00:17] Excellent. So, coming into the questions about the semiquincentennial, I'll ask you, as you look around at how the 250th is being marked, whether it's here in Princeton, throughout the state, or nationally, what has caught your attention?

Eve Mandel [00:00:31] The amazing thing about the commemoration today, I've been doing a lot of research in what was done for the bicentennial, and there were incredible works of art that were created, and they're on view at the State Museum in Trenton. You've got the “Ten Crucial Days” portfolio of print makers. They also did a bicentennial collection as well. There was a quilt that was made that Princeton YMCA had a quilt making class for adults, and they each made a square, and they put it all together. So, there were these incredible works of art

community programs that came together, but on view in that exhibit at the State Museum, you can also see tons of tchotchkes. I feel like it was a lot about… there was definitely patriotism, but just like, how many things can we sell that have 200 on it, or the bicentennial, so it seemed like for the bicentennial, there was a lot of just pro America, and today I think locally, especially in Princeton, we're looking at it in a different lens, like, how is this experiment of democracy still working? What are the untold stories that were not talked about 50 years ago for the bicentennial? The community effort, for example, the public library's program on Jefferson and Race with Annette Gordon Reed, where she talked about the goals of the founders, but how that fell short. So we're really taking, I think, a closer look at those untold stories, and how America hasn't necessarily been successful for everyone. How they haven't had independence and freedom for everyone since it was founded. So it truly is still an experiment. I think that the celebration right now is looking at its failures as well as its successes. It's definitely more introspective than it's been for the bicentennial. The interesting thing also, just for me, I'm very excited about the 250th in Princeton. We're all so excited, there's so many amazing collaborations for it, but when I tell friends about it, they don't see any reason to celebrate. And I think they're looking at it from that this time America is maybe not going to stay a democracy, like there's a fear, a general fear about that. People are constantly telling me when I talk about, oh, are you going to go to Philadelphia for the 250th or do you want to come to Princeton, they're just, they don't see a reason to celebrate. And I just think that's really sad, because I think everyone was really excited to celebrate 50 years ago, and we're looking at it in a different way today.

Cliff Robinson [00:01:18] Thank you. Does any particular part of the 250th observance stand out to you, from what you've said?

Eve Mandel [00:03:17] I think the collaborations that we have with so many different organizations. Everyone wants to work together and share in this excitement. We want to look for new research and tell those untold stories. I just went to the exhibit at Princeton University at Firestone Library, and how amazing is it you have these documents, the Declaration of Independence, original, and the Constitution, the original thing, but then also telling these inclusive stories about the enslaved man Prime, who lived at Bainbridge House, and poetry by Phillis Wheatley, and Native American stories. And so it's very much a celebration of the founding, but also telling those more untold stories from the past.

Cliff Robinson [00:04:07] Thanks. So, I think you've already spoken to this, but I'll ask it again just to make sure we're clear on it. How do you feel the 250th should be observed?

Eve Mandel [00:04:17] I think it's important to celebrate all the stories. I mean, the immigrant stories coming in America, really, it's always been a melting pot, and it's been about people aspiring to have the American dream. It should be something that people can reach, that's a celebration, but it definitely seems to be this cloud hanging over that maybe not everybody can have the American dream, not everybody has been welcomed into the country. So, it does seem like we're at a turning point in our history, that it's important to mark it, and to recognize it, and hopefully when we're celebrating again 50 years from now, we'll have an even bigger reason to celebrate it.

Cliff Robinson [00:0 4:59] Thank you. Yeah, that actually opens on to my next question. So, thinking about 1776, 1976, and today, how do you see the political trajectory of the United States? What feels like progress to you, and what feels unfinished?

Eve Mandel [00:05:14] The first thing that came to mind is, I worked at the National Constitution Center before I came to the Historical Society, and they had this video about America and democracy, and kind of telling that story, and I was in that theater watching it with a group of elementary school kids. They were probably like first graders. They were from a school in Philadelphia, the majority of the students were Black, and when Barack Obama came on, they had Barack Obama's inauguration speech, they just all cheered. They were pretty much quiet the entire movie, and then when he came on, they cheered, and I remember feeling so proud to be a part of the country that we had made progress, and so I don't think that if that video was made today, certainly we wouldn't necessarily have that same enthusiasm, and so, I was so heartened when I experienced that. I would hope that we have that for the future.

Cliff Robinson [00:06:17] Okay. Thank you. So, is there anything else that we haven't talked about, but you wish to include? For example, are there stories about Princeton's past which you feel aren't well known enough?

Eve Mandel [00:06:28] The Native American stories, we want to start to tell more and more. I think we're making progress there. Especially in the last few years, I think we've made a lot more progress. We're trying to; we tell those on our walking tours. But yeah, I'm always

surprised at the stories people don't know coming into Princeton, so we just have to keep sharing those, the history, and more and more people will know about it.

Cliff Robinson [00:06:50] Okay. Thank you so much, Eve.

Eve Mandel [00:06:52] Thank you.

[END TRANSCRIPT]