

WHAT HISTORY ASKS OF US IN 2026

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On New Year's Day 2026, our country begins the celebration of the 250th anniversary of its founding, as Dexter Southfield School marks the centennial of its own founding. Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough once wrote, "History is who we are and why we are the way we are." In this year of milestones, that sentence feels less like reflection and more like responsibility—an invitation to honor those who came before us while asking what we are prepared to carry forward.

"The marvelous thing about the past," McCullough once said, "is whenever you reach down into it, all you find is life." History is alive with people who argued, failed, tried again, and still believed their participation mattered. That belief feels especially urgent today, when civic participation is too often replaced by performance.

McCullough believed history prepares people for citizenship. Democracies endure, he argued, only when citizens recognize how fragile institutions are and how easily freedom erodes when people withdraw. Patriotism, rightly understood, is not something one declares; it is something one practices.

Founded in 1926, Dexter was built by families who believed education

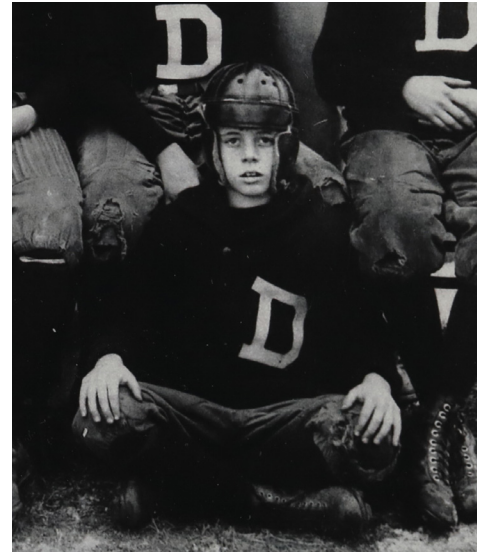
was more than preparation for success. It was formation for citizenship. Schools shape intellect and character; strong democracies depend on such institutions.

Among Dexter's students was a young John F. Kennedy. Long before he inspired a nation, he was shaped by a school that valued history, debate, rhetoric, public speaking, athletics, and service. The habits he encountered—standing for the hard right against the easy wrong—helped form the leader he would become.

History is clear: Kennedy, like all leaders, was imperfect. But history does not remember perfection. It remembers those who stepped forward in support of the greater good. When Kennedy urged Americans in 1961 to "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," he issued a call to engagement and shared responsibility. That challenge still resonates.

McCullough believed democracy depends on people who show up in their communities and their institutions to have important conversations that shape the future.

As we mark the founding of our country alongside the founding of our school, we are reminded why history matters. McCullough once described himself as a "short-term



John F. Kennedy as a Dexter student

pessimist and a long-term optimist," acknowledging turbulence while insisting that progress remains possible when people stay engaged.

History does not belong only to those who came before us. It is a gift entrusted to those willing to carry forward the lessons and sacrifices. Sixty-five years ago, President Kennedy declared that "the torch has been passed" as an invitation. That torch is still being passed in classrooms and communities, in conversations and commitments, and in the daily choices that shape our shared future.

As we enter this milestone year, may we accept that inheritance with gratitude and courage and use it in service of the institutions and civic life that sustain our country. History asks no less of us.