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## **Norwalk Public Schools Celebrates America250 with Scavenger Hunt Exploring Norwalk's Founding and Revolutionary History**

Norwalk, Conn. (May 6, 2026) – In celebration of America250, Norwalk Public Schools is proud to share one of its most beloved learning traditions, an engaging scavenger hunt created by Roton Middle School social studies teacher Dean Vaccaro that has inspired generations of students to explore the rich history of our city.

NPS invites the community also to take part in the scavenger hunt by visiting the district website at [bit.ly/norwalkscavengerhunt](http://bit.ly/norwalkscavengerhunt) and explore the same historic sites alongside students. Community members are encouraged to share their experience by taking photos or videos as they complete the scavenger hunt and tagging Norwalk Public Schools on Facebook or @norwalkschoolsct on Instagram.

A group of Vaccaro's eighth grade students started their scavenger hunt assignment on May 5 at Mill Hill Historic Park, locating the "Founding of Norwalk" sign. The assignment will take them across the city, exploring significant historical sites connected to America's founding and the American Revolution, including the Founding of Norwalk and the Burning of Norwalk.

"I've lived in Norwalk my whole life, but I don't really know too much about the history, so I'm looking forward to learning more about where I've lived all my life," said student Charlie Depanfilis.

"I was surprised about the street name changes and islands, like the archipelago. They're very interesting to learn about. I never heard of the names before," said student Leah Rose Funke.

"I like how we get to go around to different sites around the town and learn about it that way, which is different from any other project we've done this year in school, and just learning about the town. It's really cool," said student Charles Ryan.

Students shared the experience with community members including Norwalk City Council member Richard Dellinger; Diane Jellerette, executive director of the Norwalk Historical Society; Jo-Anne Schultz, president of the Norwalk Historical Society Board; Sarah Kline, who leads the The Little Red Schoolhouse Program for the Norwalk Historical Society, and Rob Pennington, Assistant Superintendent of Schools for Norwalk Public Schools.



“We do so much learning inside the four walls of the classroom with books, notes, and Chromebooks. What I love most about these projects is that students get to learn and explore beyond the classroom—beyond the walls of the school—by traveling around their hometown, finding and exploring hidden treasures,” Vaccaro said.

Please see the next page for more information about the Norwalk History Scavenger Hunt.

### **About America250**

Norwalk Public Schools is proud to participate in the City of Norwalk’s celebrations of the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776.

The Semiquincentennial offers an opportunity to reflect on the nation’s journey, celebrate its achievements, and envision its future. From coast to coast, Americans will engage in events that highlight the country’s diverse history and shared values.

Norwalk, Connecticut, holds a significant place in Revolutionary War history. On July 11, 1779, the Battle of Norwalk occurred as part of British General William Tryon’s raids on Connecticut towns. The British forces attacked Norwalk, leading to extensive destruction.

Additionally, in 1776, American patriot Nathan Hale embarked on his fateful intelligence-gathering mission from Norwalk, highlighting the town’s role in the fight for independence.

Residents and visitors of Norwalk can look forward to a variety of events and activities that honor the city’s rich history and contributions to America’s founding. To learn more about Norwalk’s plans to participate in the nationwide Semiquincentennial celebrations, visit the Visit Norwalk website.



## **Roton Middle School's Historic Scavenger Hunts**

### **How it Began**

Roton Middle School has two Scavenger Hunts. In seventh grade, students complete the “Beyond Names on a Wall” project. In line with Memorial Day, the project honors the fallen soldiers by exploring Norwalk’s memorials. In eighth grade, students complete the “Scavenger Hunt of Norwalk History.”

Being a third-generation Norwalker, Dean Vaccaro had the desire to create the scavenger hunts during his first year as a teacher at Roton Middle School. Almost 20 years later, he continues to assign the project yearly.

“There are these really cool historical monuments and markers that parents and students drive by on a daily basis without knowing much about them. I wanted to create a fun, interactive project where students, together with their parents, could explore these monuments and uncover the ‘history in their own backyard,’” Vaccaro said.

During his first year, Vaccaro traveled around Norwalk with his wife Tracey and their three children Matthew, Julia and Avery. They explored the local monuments, took pictures, went out to lunch, played at the parks and through that excursion, Vaccaro created the scavenger hunts.

### **Curriculum**

Norwalk has an incredibly rich and interesting history, and it closely mirrors the history of the United States of America. The eighth grade social studies curriculum begins with Colonial America and continues through the Civil War and Reconstruction. The scavenger hunt follows this same time period. Local historians have stated some of the largest battles or attacks in Connecticut during the American Revolution occurred in Norwalk. Norwalk has five or six monuments dedicated by the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.), which students explore through this project.

The scavenger hunt starts with the “Founding of Norwalk”, as shown in the Roger Ludlow monument on Gregory Blvd and the famous WPA mural in City Hall of Ludlow and Chief Mahackamo. An extra credit piece has students travel through Colonial times, finding the monument that pays tribute to the “Founding Families of Norwalk” and their original Puritan leader, Rev. Thomas Hanford – most of whom are buried at the East Norwalk Historical Cemetery on East Avenue.



Following this, students engage in role playing, taking on the role of either a Patriot or Loyalist who happened to be tending their cows at Cow Pasture (today's Calf Pasture Beach) on July 10, 1779. They spotted the British ships out by the Norwalk islands as they were getting ready to invade Norwalk with 2,600 British and Hessian troops. The role playing and exploration continues as students travel towards today's City Hall to find the "Grumman's Hill" D.A.R. monument where British General Tryon watched his troops attack and burn the town.

The Scavenger Hunt ends with students helping to fight off the British at the "Battle of the Rocks" D.A.R. monument on France Street, where the local militia heroically fought off the British, forcing them to retreat.

### **How Students Engage**

"What I love about this project is that students get to explore Norwalk's rich history together with their parents, making it more of a family-oriented learning experience," Vaccaro said.

Students are encouraged to work in small or large groups with other students, making it an enjoyable shared experience of learning beyond the walls of the classroom. They scavenge to locate the sites and monuments. They role play. They take pictures and/or video to act out specific scenes or events. Many of the questions are critical-thinking questions, calling on students to use their creativity and higher-order thinking skills. Equally important, students and their families enjoy themselves and have fun, meeting up with other Roton families along the way.

### **Special Mention -- Gerard Horn, Vaccaro's Former Student**

From Vaccaro: "Several years ago, when I assigned the project as usual, I heard a story of a local historian discovering a long forgotten and buried D.A.R. marker about a famous Norwalk Oak Tree. The tree was considered the second largest red oak in the country back then and lived to be 300 years old until it was cut down in the 1970s. Apparently, there was some big ceremony in the 1950s or 1960s, and the marker was dedicated.

When my student, Gerard Horn, heard this story in my class, he decided to make it his Eagle Scout project to clean up the tiny park where the marker is. He cleared all the brush, put up a wooden fence, cleaned up the marker, and added a stone walkway plus decorative white stones. There was a story about this in the Hour.

What I love about this story is that the Norwalk Oak Tree lived to witness every historical event starting with the local Native Americans in Norwalk, to Colonial times, to the Revolution, to the creation of the Constitution, to the Civil War, both World Wars, birth of radio, television, early computers and more, all over 300 years!"