

NHD Annual Theme Innovation in History: Impact, Influence, Change

Each year, National History Day® (NHD) picks a special theme to help students like you explore history. The theme for the 2026-2027 school year is ***Innovation in History: Impact, Influence, Change***.

To begin your NHD project, the first step is to select a topic that fits this theme. It is important to show how your topic connects to the theme throughout your project, so choose one with a strong connection. This guide here is to help you find one that fits and one that you find interesting! Remember, everything has a history, so pick something that grabs your attention and makes you curious to learn more.

Your topic can come from any time period or place in the world. Just make sure to check with your teacher first in case they have any rules or suggestions about what you can choose.

Understanding the Theme

Many students might first think about new technologies when they hear this year's theme. You may think of **inventions** like the printing press, computers, or televisions. These inventions are important, but it's also important to remember that **innovation** is more than creating new tools or machines. Innovation can be new ways of thinking, new ways of organizing ideas, or new ways of influencing society.

To understand the theme better, let's take a closer look at the different definitions of innovation.

- **Innovation** (noun) – A new idea, method or device.
- **Innovation – To Innovate** (verb) - To introduce a new process or way of doing things.

Simply put, an invention is something completely new, while an innovation is an improved or new way of doing something that creates change.

Exploring the Historical Context

For this year's theme, *Innovation in History: Impact, Influence, Change*, there are three key words: **impact**, **influence**, and **change**. These words can help you come up with strong research questions as you explore your topic.

For a National History Day project, you need to explain the **historical context** of your topic. Historical context means the bigger picture—the background, setting, and environment in which your topic took place.

When you study innovation in history, don't just focus on the new idea itself. Think about what happened because of it. How did the idea, technology, or method develop or change over time? How did people create it or decide to use it? How did this innovation affect society?

Asking questions like these about your topic will help you understand it more deeply and move beyond just describing an event or invention.

Choosing a Topic: Invention or Innovation

Remember that innovation isn't just an invention. It can be a new and creative way of living, working, or thinking, and it can have important effects on society. Innovations can be cultural, social, political, or intellectual breakthroughs, as well as new technologies.

Inventions are a great place to start, but innovation is what happens when people continue to change, improve, and adapt to an idea. Innovation in history looks at how new ideas, devices, or methods create both short-term and long-term effects that can shape the direction of human society

For example, how have scientists and doctors been able to view the inside of the human body? In 1895, German Professor Wilhelm Roentgen discovered that electricity, when passed through a glass vacuum tube, gives out invisible rays that can pass through the human body. After publishing these new invisible "X" rays, American scientists began their own experiments. Here in North Carolina, Henry Louis Smith, a Davidson College professor, realized that his school's laboratory contained the same equipment Roentgen had used. Smith quickly started his own experiments, becoming one of the X-ray pioneers in the United States. He was also one of the first to use x-rays to locate a foreign body in a patient. The invention of the X-ray is a great example of innovation, but with a History Day project let's take it a step further. You also want to ask what difference did it make? What were the impacts? How did people react to the innovation when it first came out?

You should ask similar questions about the impact of innovation with your own topics. How and why did innovation change the way people lived? What were the consequences?

Getting Started with Finding a Topic

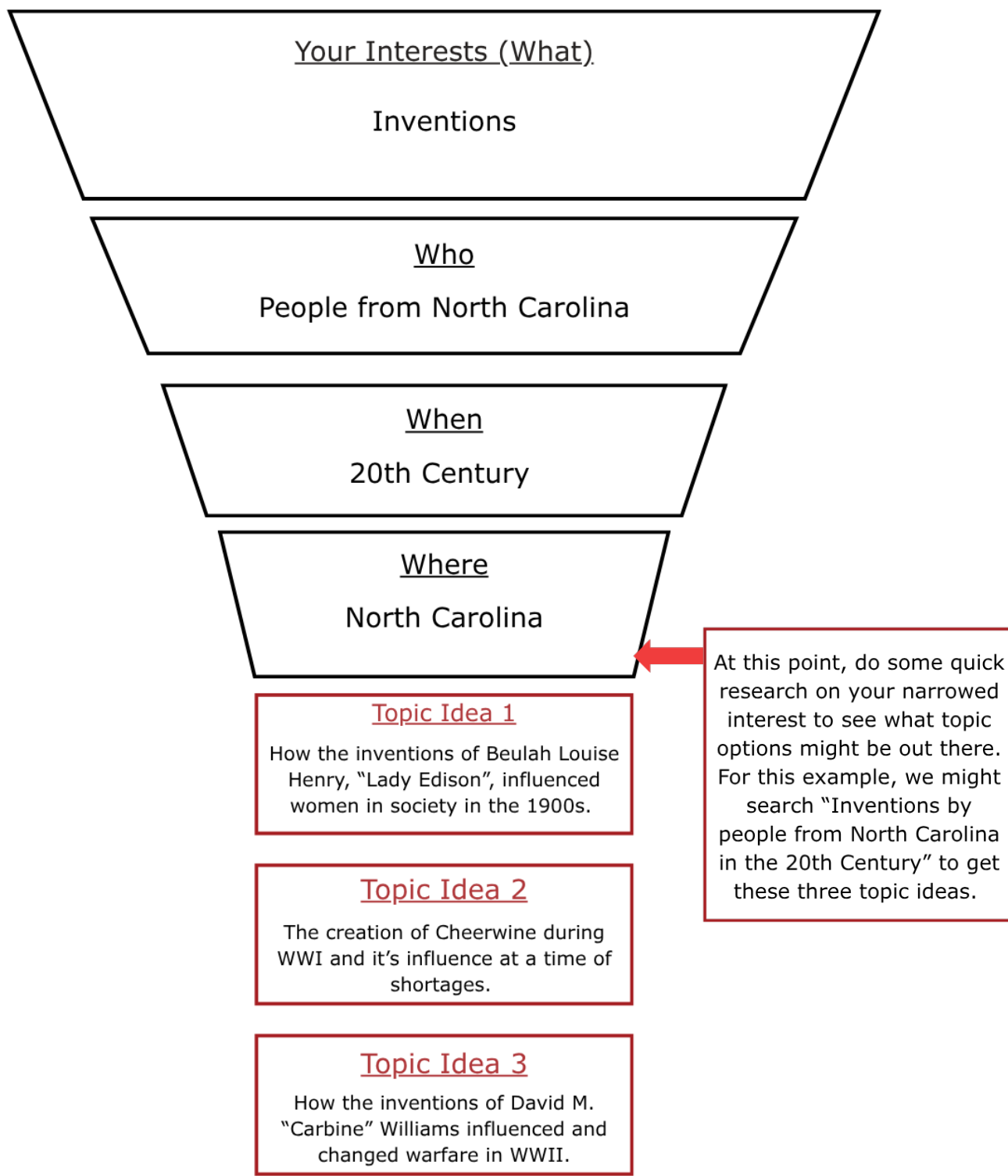
When you work on a history project, big topics can feel overwhelming. Here are some questions to help you choose a good topic:

- What problem or need led to this innovation?
- How did people react to it at the time?
- Who benefited from it, and who didn't?
- How did it change people's lives and society in both the short term and the long term?
- How can you connect your innovation to the world today? Is it still being used? Did it evolve into something new?

During your research, you will use **primary** and **secondary sources** to help answer these questions. Both are important because primary sources show what people saw or said at the time, and secondary sources help explain those events.

NHD Topic Brainstorming Funnel

The chart below shows how you can use **Who**, **What**, **When**, and **Where** questions to help focus your broad ideas into the right-sized topic for History Day. There is a blank topic funnel at the end of this guide that you can use for your brainstorming!



Topic Ideas for Innovation in History: Impact, Influence, Change

The topic ideas listed on the following pages explore possible connections to this year's theme within North Carolina History, many topics ideas overlap multiple sections, so examine the list carefully.

NCpedia.org is a great resource for learning more about these topics.

Agriculture

Creation of North Carolina State University
John Blue – Farming Inventions
Lytch Cotton Planter
Nicholas N. Nixon
North Carolina State Fair
Priestley Mangum and His Innovative Terrace
Sidney Weller, Grapes
Silas McDowell and the Thermal Zone
Southern Heritage Apple Orchard
Tarboro Pasteurization Initiative, 1918

Arts & Entertainment

Andre Leon Talley
Charles Kuralt
Charlie Clay Poole
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Percent for Art Program
Chitlin' Circuit
David Brinkley
Dell Glover
DeMille Family, The
Doc Watson
Durham Public Library
Eng & Chang Bunker
Ernie Barnes
Gullah Geechee Language, Development of
Hammocks Beach State Park, Creation of
Harry Golden & the Carolina Israelite
Ignatius Brock
Inglis Fletcher
Jan Karon
Lamar Stringfield
Levonina Frazier
Madeline Jane Jones Proctor
Marjorie Hunter
Maya Angelou
Mel A. Tomlinson
Molly McCoy Hancock
Mountain Dance & Folk Festival
NC Art Museum, Creation of
NC Society for the Preservation of Antiquities
NC Symphony, Creation of
Nina Simone

Arts & Entertainment (cont.)

Paul Green & Symphonic Dramas
Thalian Association
Thelonius Monk
Thomas Wolfe
Town Creek Indian Mound
Tryon Palace Reconstruction
Whistler's Mother
William Sidney Porter/O. Henry
Willie Otey Kay

Education

1971 Durham Schools Charette
Anna Julia Cooper
Asheville Farm School
Bill Campbell
Black Mountain College
Braxton Craven
Brimley Brothers
Charlotte Hawkins Brown
Delany Sisters
el Centro Hispano, Formation of
Elizabeth Murray Reid
Ella Baker & the SNCC
F.A. Fiske
Isabella Cannon
John Chavis
Julius Rosenwald
Leandro vs. North Carolina
Malcom X Liberation University
Manual Labor Schools
NC Aquariums, Creation of
NC Transportation Museum, Creation of
North Carolina Museum of Life & Sciences
Oak Ridge Military Academy
Pearsall Plan
Salem Academy & College
Sallie Walker Stockard
Sequoyah's Syllabary
Shaw University
Speaker Ban Law
University of North Carolina, Creation of
University of North Carolina at Pembroke, Creation of

Environment

1997 Clean Water Responsibility Act
Accessibility of Grandfather Mountain
Brown Creek Soil Conservation District
Building of Fontana Dam
Calista Fletcher Baum
Cape Fear Garden Club
Carl Schenck
Elisha Mitchell
Eno River Association
Granville County Toxic Waste Incinerator Protests
Great Smoky Mountains National Park
Isabelle Bowen Henderson
John Pickett Council
Mount Mitchell State Park, Creation of
Movement to Save the Red Wolves
North Carolina Pesticide Law of 1971
Pisgah National Forest
Rachel Carson Reserve, Creation of
Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy
Warren County's 1982 PCB Landfill Protests

Legal

Bayard vs. Singleton
Bazemore v. Bertie County Board of Elections
Clifton Earl Johnson
David Walker's Appeal
Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Formation of
Edward 'Ned' Griffin
Greensboro Massacre
Greensboro Six & the Gillespie Park Golf Course
Griggs vs. Duke Power
James Walker, Jr.
North Carolina Trails System Act of 1973
Omnibus Act of 1862
Pauli Murray
Sarah Keys vs. the Carolina Coach Company
Simpkins vs. Cone
State vs. Mann
Swann vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education

Government

Andrew Johnson
Attakullakulla
Convention of 1835
Ellen Winston
Freedmen's Conventions

Government (cont.)

George Henry White
Gertrude Weil
Golden Astro Frinks
Gourd Patch Conspiracy
Greensboro Sit-in
James Davis
James Hubert Holshouser, Jr.
Jenny Tilley
John Adams Hyman
Levi Coffin
Lillian Exum Clement
North Carolina Underwater Archeology Branch
Privies, Regulation of
Reginald Hawkins
Royal Ice Cream Sit-in
Salisbury Bread Riot
Sarah E. Small
Shoffner Act
State of Franklin
Tuscarora Petition of 1710
United States Mint in Charlotte
Wilmington Coup of 1898

Industry & Labor

1906 Formation of the NC Child Labor Committee
Abigail Carter
American Tobacco Company
Beulah Louise Henry
Black Wall Street
Bojangles
Burlington Dynamite Plot of 1934
Calcium Carbide
Charles Holmes Herty
Cheerwine
Christopher Bechtler
Commercial Fishing
Cone Mills Corporation
Crystal Lee & the J.P. Stevens Plant
Ella May Wiggins
Gold Rush in North Carolina
Hardee's
Harriet Morrison Irwin
Harriet-Henderson Cotton Mills Strike
Iron and Steel Industry
John Fulenwider
Kraft Pulp

Industry & Labor (cont.)

Krispy Kreme
Lance, Inc.
Lowe's Industries, Inc.
Lunsford Lane
Mast General Store
Moravian Cookies
Mt. Olive Pickles
Nannie W. Hunter
Piedmont Credit Union
R.J. Reynolds Company
Salt Works in NC during Civil War
Stuart W. Cramer
Student Action with Farmworkers, Creation of
Thomas Day
Vicks VapoRub

Maritime & Naval

Barbara Courtney Gouge
Barbour Boat Works
Blackbeard
George Washington Creef
Giovanni da Verrazzano
Ironclad Ships
James C. Dobbin
John G. Newton
Liberty Ships of World War II
Lighthouses in North Carolina
Lightship LV-71
Otway Burns, Jr. & Prometheus
Pea Island Life Saving Station
Regulator Marine
Revenue Cutter Service
Thomas Sparrow II
USS North Carolina
Weeksville Naval Air Station

Medical

1918 Influenza Epidemic
Annie Alexander
Artificial Limbs
Benjamin Franklin Royal
Betty Baines Compton
Clara Adams-Ender
Dorothea Dix Hospital
Dr. Amos Johnson
Dr. Annie Louise Wilkerson

Medical (cont.)

Dr. Eugene A. Stead, Jr.
Dr. John Ferrell
Dr. Robert S. Carroll
Elizabeth Blackwell
Good Samaritan Hospital
Headache Powders
Hickory Emergency Infantile Paralysis Hospital
Karl von Ruck
Leonard Medical School
Mary Lapham
McCauley Private Hospital
North Carolina Baptist Hospital
North Carolina Eugenics Board
North Carolina Medical Board
Polio Vaccination for School Attendance
Professor Henry L. Smith
Rachel Allen
Robeson County Health Department
St. Peter's Hospital

Military

35th Regiment United States Colored Troops
82nd Airborne Division
Abraham Galloway
Bluethenthal Field
Camp Davis
Camp Mackall
Confederate Conscription Act of 1862 in NC
David M. "Carbine" Williams
Dot 'Cathey' Horne
Dr. Margaret D. Craighill
Eleanor Elaine Thompson Wortz
Fort Bragg
Fort Dobbs
Fort Fisher
Fort Macon
George Earl Preddy, Jr.
Junaluska & his Path to Citizenship
Major General William C. Lee
Mary Nicholson
"Old Hickory" and the Hindenburg Line
Rose O'Neal Greenhow
U-85
World War II POW Re-education Program

Religion

Ar-Razzaq Islamic Center
Bethabara
Billy Graham
Bishop Henry Beard Delaney
Devereux Jarratt
Gourd Patch Conspiracy
Jacob Henry
Poole Bills
Quakers
Second Great Awakening
Shubal Stearns, Jr.

Science & Innovation

Astronaut Training at Morehead Planetarium
Biltmore House
Bromine Extraction
Buckminster Fuller & the Geodesic Dome
Christine Barnes Richie
Dr. Christine Darden
Dr. Joel S. Watkins
Frances & Gertrude Rogallo
Frank Gregory Hall
George Cox
George Laurer
Ham the Astrochimp
James E. Webb
John W. Kiker
Mary Maria Petty
North Carolina Rural Electrification Authority
Octagon House
Pepsi-Cola
REHANCE Printing with TS Designs
Research Triangle Park, Creation of
Richard Gatling
Rosman Tracking Station
Roxanah Yancey & Mary Hedgepeth, Human Computers
Salem's Public Water System
Samuel Beddingfield
Space Race: Projects Apollo, Gemini, & Mercury
Texas Pete
Thomas Riddick
Viola Gentry
Virginia Tucker
WBT Radio
William E. Thornton
William F. Troxler

Science & Innovation (cont.)

Wilmington Fire Department
Wright Brothers

Sports

Althea Gibson
Arnold Palmer
Charlie Scott
Dean Smith
Edwin Okoroma
Irwin Holmes
James "Catfish" Hunter
Jim Thorpe
John B. McLendon
John Isner
Mia Hamm
Michael Jordan
NC Sports Hall of Fame, Creation of
NC State University's Women's Basketball Team
Ned Jarrett
Pinehurst, Creation of
John Isner
Mia Hamm
Michael Jordan
NC High School Athletic Association
Richard Petty
Secret Basketball Game of 1944
NASCAR, Creation of
Creation of Mini Golf
NC High School Athletic Association

Transportation

Construction of Intracoastal Waterway
Emily Brown Blount
Good Roads Campaign
Great Wagon Road
Harriet M. Berry
Joseph Hyde Pratt
Linn Cove Viaduct
Mountains-to-Sea Trail
Nissen Wagon Works
Victor Green's Travel Guide and NC Oasis Sites
Wilmington & Weldon Railroad

Key Vocabulary to Remember

Change: A shift or difference in how things were before compared to how they are now.

Historical Argument: The main point you will make about your topic throughout your project that explains its connection to the theme, why it matters in history, and is supported by the evidence you find in your primary and secondary sources.

Historical Context: The background, events, and conditions that help explain what was happening at the time of your topic.

Historical Significance: Why a person, event, or idea is important and how it affected history.

Impact: A strong effect or result something has on people, events, or society.

Influence: The power to shape or affect how people think or act.

Innovate: To change or improve something that already exists, or to come up with a new way of doing something.

Innovation: A new and improved idea, method, or process that makes a difference in how people live, think, or work. It is the result of innovating.

Invention: A brand-new device, tool, or process that someone creates for the first time. It didn't exist before.

Primary Source: A source created during the time of the event, such as letters, photos, or diaries.

Secondary Source: A source created after the event that explains or analyzes it, like textbooks or articles.

Student Voice: Your own explanation and ideas about your topic that show what *you* think the evidence means, which is different from the information in the sources themselves.

Thesis Statement: Two to three sentences that introduces your topic and historical argument to the reader or viewer at the beginning of your project.