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A People's Journey, A Nation's Past: The National Museum of African American History and Culture

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Abstract

On September 24, 2016, the National Museum of African American History and Culture was opened to the public after almost two decades of planning and more than a century of fighting for a memorial for African Americans. Starting in 1915, when a group of United States Colored Troops sought a memorial for their fallen soldiers, African Americans have worked to have their history remembered on a national scale. A congressional commission for a museum dedicated to African Americans was signed in 1929 by Calvin Coolidge, but the stock market crash in October prevented the museum from being built. The memorial was pushed to the back burner until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s galvanized the need for a museum again. In 1986, a joint resolution proposed by Representatives Mickey Leland of Texas and John Lewis of Georgia as well as Senator Paul Simon of Illinois marked the beginning of the modern fight for a museum dedicated solely to African Americans.

[*excerpt*]

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A People's Journey, A Nation's Past: The National Museum of African American History and Culture

By *Danielle Jones '18*

On September 24, 2016, the National Museum of African American History and Culture was opened to the public after almost two decades of planning and more than a century of fighting for a memorial for African Americans. Starting in 1915, when a group of United States Colored Troops sought a memorial for their fallen soldiers, African Americans have worked to have their history remembered on a national scale. A congressional commission for a museum dedicated to African Americans was signed in 1929 by Calvin Coolidge, but the stock market crash in October prevented the museum from being built. The memorial was pushed to the back burner until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s galvanized the need for a museum again. In 1986, a joint resolution proposed by Representatives Mickey Leland of Texas and John Lewis of Georgia as well as Senator Paul Simon of Illinois marked the beginning of the modern fight for a museum dedicated solely to African Americans.

The representatives faced strong opposition from Congress about the museum. Perhaps the strongest opposition came from Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) who argued in 1996 that "once Congress gives the go ahead for African Americans, how can Congress then say no to Hispanics, and the next group, and the group after that?" Helms even went as far as stating that as long as he was in the United States Congress, there would be no museum. Despite this uphill struggle, in 2001 President George W. Bush signed House Resolution 3442, establishing a commission to develop a plan of action for the creation of the museum. In 2006, the location of the museum was finalized, and in 2009 the architectural group Feelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup was announced as the winner of the design competition held in January of that year. On February 22, 2012 the ground breaking ceremony for NMAAHC was held.



A view of the museum's stunning architecture. Photo credit: Douglas Remley / Smithsonian.

Everything about museum was intentional from the site selection to the architectural styles to the flowers planted in the green spaces outside. When you arrive at the National Mall, the museum is first thing to catch your eye. Made of bronze metalwork meant to resemble the basket weaving of the Yoruba people, the building looks like it's on fire when the sun catches the bronze at the right angle. The unique corona stands out from the historical marble and brick buildings it is surrounded by. To say that this makes an impact is an understatement. I felt chills running up my body seeing for the first time; having worked on chronologies and interviews of African American Smithsonian workers all summer, finally having the chance to see the building that I had learned so much about was incredibly moving. When you enter the building, you have two options. The culture galleries are on the top three floors of the building, displaying artifacts like Chuck Berry's Cadillac and Coretta Scott King's Congressional Medal of Honor. The history galleries are three stories underground, starting with the arrival of European slave traders in Africa and tracing the history of African Americans to modern times.

I chose to explore the history section, knowing that it held some of the most powerful objects in the museum. After going down to the history floor, you are guided into a waiting room where famous images of African Americans serve as a visceral reminder of what you are about to experience. You are then put on an elevator that takes you down three stories to the beginning of the exhibit. From the moment you step out of the elevators you are assaulted with imagery

and artifacts. On one wall, European economic development; on the other, African cultures in the 1400s. The walls form a wedge that leads you directly to the first of many emotional rooms in the museum, one containing a replica slave ship. As you walk through the room, you hear the voices of slaves who survived shipwrecks, and once you see the slave ship you learn more about the slave trade in the Americas. The walls are inscribed with the names of slave ships, the countries they came from, the dates the ships left Africa, the number of slaves originally on board, and the number who survived the trip. After leaving the origins of the slave trade, you are guided through the role of African Americans in the Revolutionary War. Then you are introduced to famous African Americans between the Revolutionary Era and the 18th century like Phillis Wheatly and Toussant De'Jourveature. After turning the corner, you are greeted by a slave cabin from Point of Pines Plantation on Edisto Island, South Carolina. After reading reflections of slaves and the role of African Americans in the Civil War, you are given the chance to pause and reflect on the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments before moving to the second floor of the exhibit.

The second floor of the museum explores the Segregation Era of the United States. Your experience is dwarfed by a Pullman Car and a prison tower from the Angola State Penitentiary, both of which the museum was built around. After journeying through the Civil Rights Movement, starting directly after World War I and ending with the Black Power movement, you exit and are greeted by a mock Woolworth counter, made to represent the original Woolworth counter in Greensboro North Carolina that witnessed the first student sit ins in 1960. You are given the opportunity to sit and watch a moving video of powerful images and speeches of the Civil Rights Movement.

Tucked into a corner of the second floor is perhaps the most powerful exhibit of the entire museum: Emmitt Till. A small glass case sits tucked onto a wall; the top of the exhibit reads "Chicago Teen Brutally Slayed in Mississippi." After reading parts of the famous *Jet* article that published images of Till before and after his slaying (something that had not been done before), you are greeted by a Smithsonian worker who tells you that cell phones need to be put away when you enter the door. Despite the articles and books I had read about Emmett Till's death, nothing prepared me for the exhibit. Surrounded by pictures of the memorial service and the trail of Till's murders, the original casket Till was buried in sits on a pedestal, open in the same manner as it was at the memorial. After gazing at the casket and reflecting, you are guided around the corner to a short film that reflects on the aftermath of the murder and Till's legacy, narrated by Mamie Till.

The exhibit is a stark reminder of the dangers of being an African American in the United States. After reading about only a few of the African Americans who were injured or killed during the long struggle for Civil Rights, seeing Till's casket pushed me over the edge. It's hard to fully identify with the experience of growing up during the Civil Rights movement and even harder to

imagine growing up facing the racism that African Americans faced and are still facing now. The entire museum forces you to reflect on the struggles that African Americans endured to get where they are today. In an effortlessly weaving together of personal stories and historical events, the impact that African Americans had on the development on a country that doesn't always give them due credit becomes starkly apparent. The Civil Rights Movement and the works of African Americans helped lead to decades of social change, and finally, African Americans are getting a place they can call their own.

If you don't get chills entering the building, you will be struck by how much the museum forces you to think and consider the impact of your actions when you leave. Days later I am still processing what it was like to witness shards of glass from the 16th Street Baptist Church, the dress Rosa Parks wore on the day she started the bus boycotts, some of Martin Luther King's personal belongings, and thousands of other treasures donated by African Americans to the museum. This museum not only stands as a celebration of the African American past that served as a vital foundation of the United States but as a permanent reminder that the impact African Americans have on this country will continue. As Director Lonnie Bunch III said, "there is nothing more powerful than a people, than a nation, steeped in its history. And there are few things as noble as honoring our ancestors by remembering." And I will continue to reflect and remember how much it means to me that I have the opportunities I have today because of the struggles and burdens faced by those before me.

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NMAAHC.org

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