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The History Galleries of The National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C.

Museum Review

Deanna Simmons

The idea for a museum dedicated to the contributions made by African Americans was born over a century before the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). In 1915, African American Civil War veterans proposed the idea of building something dedicated to those African Americans that served in wars throughout United States history. However, for decades, officials debated the idea, but it never materialized. Finally, in 2003 Congress passed the National Museum of African American History and Culture Act. This placed the museum under the umbrella of the Smithsonian Institution.

From 2003 to the opening of the museum in September of 2016, the project received considerable thought, hard work, and dedication. For those who have never been to any of the Smithsonian Museums in the heart of downtown Washington, D.C., there is very little difference in the architecture of the museums. The shape of the buildings may change, but for the most part, they are made of the same off-white colored stone or concrete. This is not true of the NMAAHC. Situated in-between 14th and 15th Streets off Constitution Avenue, there is no mistaking this incredible museum for any of the other Smithsonian Institutions.

The unique design speaks volumes to the importance of the information and artifacts that rest within the walls of the NMAAHC. The building, inspired by the Yoruban people of West Africa, appears to be a series of inverted pyramids.¹ The ironwork of nineteenth century slaves from New Orleans inspired the copper-colored design, which covers the outside of the museum. In an interview with *Architectural Digest*, lead designer David Adjaye says, “‘From the moment you see the silhouette, you’re thinking of the journey,’ . . . referring to the notorious Middle Passage of captured Africans across the ocean.”²

Due to the enormous success of the museum, free, timed daily passes are still required. The museum releases passes months in advance; however, a limited number of passes are available online on a daily basis, beginning at 6 a.m., but sell out quickly. This reviewer logged on to the website at 7:00 a.m. on March 18 to check availability and it showed a sold out date. To avoid disappointment, it is

imperative that visitors get passes in advance of a planned visit. As parking for Washington D.C. museum and memorial visits is limited, visitors should consider the Metro as the best means of transportation. However, there are parking garages close to the museum. The closest being in the Ronald Reagan building, but expect to pay at least \$25 for the entire day.

After passing through security, one enters the museum at Heritage Hall. This houses the welcome desk and the museum store. Despite the dark, copper-colored exterior, the inside is open and bright. By taking the escalator down one floor to the Concourse, visitors will find the Sweet Home Café, the Oprah Winfrey Theatre, and the entrance to the History Galleries. There are numerous museum guides willing to help visitors. As guests walk into the History Galleries, pictures of famous African Americans hanging on the walls welcome them. Guests then proceed to an oversized glass elevator that looks as though it could easily hold one hundred people. The elevator attendant instructs everyone to enter the elevator but to face the opposite side, as those doors will open to the beginning of the galleries.

Before the elevator descends, one will notice the black wall to the right with the year 2008 painted in white. As the elevator makes its way down, the years roll back. The elevator stops at the year 1400. Visitors are in Africa, because African American history did not begin in America. Walking through the exhibits, one gets the feeling that they are walking through history. The displays show Africans go from having their own lives, cultures, and identities, to becoming a profitable commodity. Although the artifacts rest behind glass enclosures, this does not diminish their statement. There are short five-minute videos playing throughout and etched into the glass are quotes, some belonging to Europeans attempting to justify the capturing and selling of Africans, and some from captured Africans themselves.

The galleries transport visitors through centuries of African American history. Beginning with their brutal capture in Africa, the exhibits help guests understand the horrifying Middle Passage ship voyages experienced by captured Africans, followed by the misery that greeted them upon arrival in the Americas. The museum displays show that enslaved Africans were sold throughout various regions in the Americas and this influenced their overall horrendous experience. Moving through the years, guests will see the important roles that blacks played in the American Revolution, the founding of the United States of America, and the years leading up to the Civil War.

One of the reasons people were fearful of the creation of a museum dedicated to the African American experience was that the ability to hide from the devastating history of blacks in America would be even more difficult. This

museum does not allow anyone to ignore or even attempt to explain away the tragedy that was the African American experience. To see actual chains that were used on men, women, and children to not only keep them from running but as protection for their captors can be more than a little jarring.

One of the artifacts, although small and easy to pass over, perfectly captures the atrocity that was the institution of slavery. At first glance, it just looks like an old tin case. Upon closer inspection, one realizes the importance of this homemade tin case. Through a slight opening, folded papers are visible. The tin case belonged to a free black named Joseph Trammell and it housed the papers that proved he was free. His freedom and safety, while not guaranteed, depended on the protection of those precious documents.

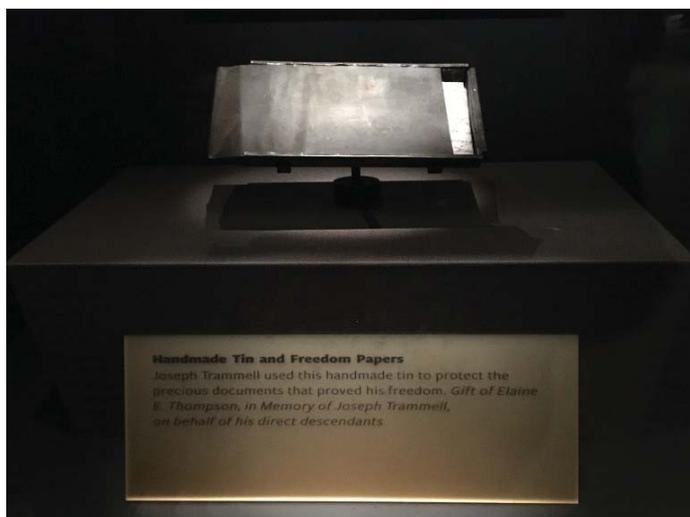


Figure 1. Author's photo of Joseph Trammell's handmade tin and freedom papers. Taken from the Slavery & Freedom Exhibit in the History Galleries, National Museum of African American History and Culture, March 16, 2017.

The level of shock that one experiences from one artifact to the next varies; however, all the items, structures, and information that are on display, are equally important to telling the story of the African American. There are faces and people that are familiar and immediately recognizable, and others whose stories are less familiar. Furthermore, some of these stories and personalities have not received recognition until now. When one enters the area dedicated to the Reconstruction Period, one enters the unmistakable era of African American

history darkened by Jim Crow. This part of the museum is just as remarkable and devastating as the first. It is here that one realizes that the term “free” loosely described the status of the African American following the abolishment of slavery.

The images that are on display are even more horrific and haunting than the ones from the floor dedicated to slavery. So powerful are the displays that there is a sign that warns visitors that what they are about to view may not be suitable for children or people who are sensitive. For those that decide to proceed, an unmistakable relic greets them, a Ku Klux Klan white hood. Seeing one in images, or on television, pales in comparison to seeing such a symbol of hate and racism up close. Furthermore, surrounding the hood on display, are small images, outlined in red, that document the atrocities committed by people who often wore them.

There are images of African Americans being lynched. The most horrific ones include white citizens posing with the mangled and mutilated bodies hanging from trees or bridges by ropes, looking proud of their accomplishments. This floor also houses artifacts from possibly the greatest catalyst to the civil rights movement, the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till. With permission from his family, his original casket is on display. Per the family’s instructions, taking pictures here is forbidden. A museum worker at the entrance explains this to



Figure 2. Author’s photo of Jet Magazine featuring article on Emmett Till’s lynching. Taken from the entrance to the Emmett Till memorial exhibit. National Museum of African American History and Culture. March 16, 2016.

visitors.

The blood, sweat, and tears put into the Civil Rights Movement is well-documented throughout this floor. The importance of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X to the Civil Rights movement is on display for the world to see. Throughout history, many have attempted to tarnish the image of the Black Panthers. However, this museum shows that although their methods were sometimes uncomfortable to both black and white America, they were equally important to Black Americans fighting for the respect they demanded and deserved. The final floor of the history galleries moves through the decades leading up to the election of the first black president, Barack Obama. It also encourages guests to connect the dots from the arrival of the first slaves in North America to the killings of unarmed black men like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. The third floor displays force guests to consider whether the country has entered a post-racial era or has it entered another, more modern, civil rights movement?

The incredible amount of information, artifacts, and the sheer number of visitors is overwhelming. It is difficult to absorb everything because there is pressure to keep moving so others may get a chance to see and experience all that each floor has to offer. Despite this fact, the National Museum of African American History and Culture proves that its creation is an important addition to the Smithsonian Institute's family of museums. Even more importantly, it serves as a reminder that those black Civil War Veterans understood the importance of recognizing not only their own achievements, but also the achievements of their own people that came before them.

One quote that stood out among all the others was that of a slave named David Walker in 1829, "America is more our country . . . we have enriched it with our blood and tears."

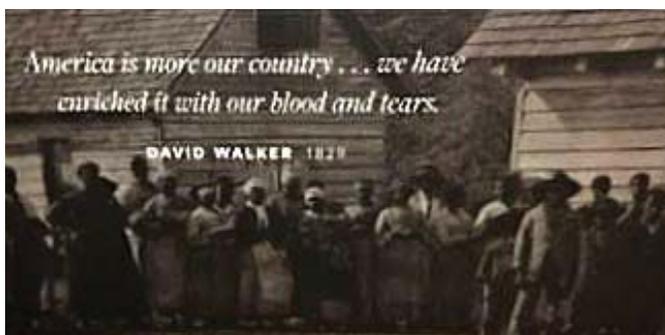


Figure 2. Author's photo taken of display wall in the History Galleries Exhibit, National Museum of African American History and Culture, March 16, 2017.

our blood and tears.”

One gets the feeling upon exiting those galleries that he was not wrong. Visitors cannot grasp the impact of the African American to the development of the United States in one visit to the museum and the floors that house that history. It is imperative that guests visit the museum with the understanding that more than one trip is required to fully capture what its creators had intended for the world to see. Even then, it may not be possible to comprehend it fully. Only with this mind set can one attempt to understand African American history.

Notes

1. The Transatlantic Slave Trade forced millions of Yoruban people from areas in Africa including Nigeria and Benin. They arrived in the United States via the Middle Passage. In addition, British, French and Spanish colonists purchased Yoruban slaves.

2. Fred A. Bernstein, “Architect David Adjaye Tells Us About Washington D.C.’s National Museum of African American History and Culture,” *Architectural Digest*, August 29, 2016, accessed March 18, 2017, <http://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/david-adjaye-national-museum-of-african-american-history-and-culture>.