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A 100-YEAR QUEST

John Lewis spent 15 years fighting for the museum — now the dream is realized

By John Lewis

• Originally Published September 15, 2016

I first learned there was an effort to establish a national museum dedicated to preserving African American history and culture during my first term in Congress after being elected in 1986. My colleague Rep. Mickey Leland (D-Tex.) discovered that the most recent legislative efforts had run aground a few years earlier because of an attempt by Rep. Clarence Brown (R-Ohio) and Sen. John Glenn (D-Ohio) to take the project to Wilberforce, Ohio. Mickey resurrected the idea and asked me to co-sponsor it in 1988.

I have loved history ever since I was a boy. It started when I was so young. To celebrate Carter G. Woodson’s innovation — then called Negro History Week and now called Black History Month — my teachers would ask us to cut out pictures in magazines and newspapers of famous African Americans, such as Rosa Parks and George Washington Carver. Growing up in Alabama near Tuskegee Institute, reading about Carver and Booker
T. Washington, attending Fisk University later with its world-class art collection and Jubilee Singers who had sung for Queen Victoria, I knew the power of legacy. Mickey did not have to ask me twice. I was on board to push the museum bill through.

Unfortunately, he was killed in a plane crash less than a year later. So the baton was passed to me. I introduced the museum bill in every session of Congress for 15 years. I got it through the House in 1994, but Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) mounted a filibuster against the bill. My Senate partners asked to meet in my office one day. They said, “John, we have the votes to get this through the Senate, but we just don’t have anything to trade Jesse.” That push did not lead to passage, but I had gotten closer than I ever had before.

Giving up on dreams is not an option for me. Optimism is essential to the philosophy and discipline of nonviolence, so hope in the face of challenge is the only alternative I see. I knew that if I was persistent and consistent, I would at least play my role well in this effort, but at most I could win a victory for humanity.

So I continued to introduce the legislation in every session of Congress and worked to find a way to get the bill through. Ultimately, I made a key alliance with Sen. Max Cleland (D-Ga.), Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) and Rep. J.C. Watts (R-Okla.). The bill won passage in the House and Senate and was signed into law in 2003 by President George W. Bush. My final drive to the finish line was the completion of a dream first launched by visionary supporters of black Civil War veterans exactly 100 years ago.

On May 24, 1916, the National Memorial Association held a meeting in Washington at 19th Street Baptist Church, a nearly 180-year-old congregation still in existence today. Its members discussed the creation of “a beautiful building” they hoped to establish on the Mall. Their goal was “to commemorate the deeds American [N]egroes wrought for the perpetuation and advancement of the Nation,” celebrating their contribution to America in “military service, in art, literature, invention, science, industry” and other areas of life. On this Sept. 24, exactly 100 years and four months later, the National Museum of African American History and Culture will finally open in Washington, D.C., prominently placed at the foot of the Washington Monument.

Millions of black men and women built this country through hard labor, sacrifice and suffering, through creativity and ingenuity, sheer willpower and enduring faith. They have fought in every war and defended the principles of democracy knowing they would not share in the victory. They did this not because they anticipated any benefit, but because they believed in something greater than themselves. That faith in the unseen and their ability to make a way out of no way is a demonstration of the character it took to build this nation, and that is why this museum deserves a prominent space among the memorials to the founders of this country.

People know so little about African American history. We want to try to hide nearly 400 years of history from ourselves, as though it will somehow disappear if we never mention it. But all around us we see pockets of the past erupting before our very eyes.

Some people thought that the hostility and angst around issues of race, for example, no longer existed in America, to the degree that they actually believed we were living in a post-racial society. Why? Because we spent the latter part of the 20th century burying any discussion of a racial divide and refusing to admit that antagonism
was still festering beneath the surface in our society. We vilified people who suggested race could be a cause of conflict, believing our denial would somehow make the problem go away.

But the upheavals in our society today demonstrate that avoiding the truth is impossible. Covering a wound without treating it with medicine first only makes it fester and increases the danger of infection. Actually, it is confronting the truth that leads to liberation from our past. Yes, it may require an adjustment in our thinking, but in the final analysis the truth can lead to only one conclusion: We are one people, one family, the American family. We all live in one house, the American house, the world house. It will lead us to see the divine spark that resides in each and every one of us and is a part of the entire creation. It will lead us to see that we are more alike than we are different, that we are not separate, but we are one. That is why this museum can have a healing effect on our society.

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

Those are some of my favorite words by John Keats, and they resonate so clearly in this case. Only the truth has the power to lead us to the beauty we seek in our democracy. Only then can we build a Beloved Community in America.

Our Declaration of Independence declares each and every one of us has a divine legacy that nothing and no one can take away. So much of the American story is the legacy of our attempts to realize that truth through democracy, and almost all of our conflict has been founded in the foolhardy ambition to try to subvert that mission. Once we push the haze of myth away, we will see the truth of ourselves in each other. When we see ourselves in each other, then injustice and oppression are not so easily perpetrated.

Let the truth speak to our hearts and minds. Let this museum share the complete, unvarnished truth, without whitewash or avoidance, without sweeping the discomforting parts in some dark corner or under a rug. Let the curators and directors create ingenious ways to expose ourselves to ourselves so we can light the way to a more inclusive, truly democratic society.

Ultimately the African American story is a collection of some of the most inspiring stories in human history that demonstrate the invincible nature of every human spirit. It is the story of those who were denied equality but who laid down their lives in every generation to redeem the soul of America.

“When the history books are written in future generations,” Dr. King once said, “the historians will have to pause and say, ‘There lived a great people — a black people — who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.’ ”
KidsPost

African Americans have shaped history, and history has shaped them

There’s a lot to see at the new Smithsonian museum on the Mall in Washington. And we mean a lot!

Staff members have been collecting important objects, papers, photos and stories for years to prepare for the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

When the museum finally opens Saturday, visitors will explore its eight public floors — four of which are underground — and see more than 3,000 items of historical interest. They are just a sliver of the nearly 40,000 items in the museum’s growing collection. They tell the story of African Americans, from the transatlantic slave trade that began in the 15th century, through the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ‘60s, right up to today.

It is at times a story of great sadness, but also one of joy and hope. And it’s not intended for black people only. Museum director Lonnie Bunch says he wants all Americans to come learn how the African American experience has changed and enriched this country for everyone.

What will you see there? Here’s a quick tour:

From the time of slavery, you can see a slave cabin from the 1800s, iron ankle shackles worn by a child, Harriet Tubman’s hymnal and shawl, and an 1855 ad offering 56 slaves for sale, including a 20-month-old named Henry and his parents, described as “superior” cotton pickers.

One large display has a statue of President Thomas Jefferson standing before a tall wall of blocks. Each block has the name of one of the 170 or so slaves he owned in 1776, when he wrote the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that “all men are created equal.” Over his lifetime, Jefferson owned more than 600 slaves.

The history lesson continues through the Civil War of the 1860s, when slavery ended, and into the Jim Crow era. Jim Crow was the name used by a white singer and dancer who dressed as a black slave and pretended to be a fool. The name was given to racist laws that states used to portray black people as inferior and keep them apart from white people. This action, called racial segregation, didn’t end until the 1960s.

Many uplifting displays offset the dark shadows of slavery and racism. Look up and you see an open-cockpit plane used to train the black World War II pilots known as the Tuskegee Airmen. Elsewhere, you enter modern times and learn about art, clothing, food and music created by black artists, including hip-hop musicians.

Young visitors will delight in the sports gallery. Among its treasures are track star Carl Lewis’s Olympic medals, a leotard worn by gymnast Gabby Douglas, Jackie Robinson’s Brooklyn Dodgers baseball jersey and boxer Muhammad Ali’s warm-up robe. You can stand next to a statue of tennis icons Serena and Venus Williams or under a statue of basketball Hall of Famer Michael Jordan scoring over your head.

Nafisa Weeks, Princess Courtney and Lance Spencer, students at Eliot-Hine Middle School in Northeast Washington, got an early look at the museum last week.

“It’s a great opportunity for kids to come and learn outside the history books,” Nafisa said.

“It’s more interesting in person,” Princess agreed. “It shows where we come from and our culture.”

Asked whether white students would find the museum equally interesting, Lance said: “I think all children will like the museum. It’s the history of every race.”

Important note: Some material in this museum may not be suitable for younger visitors. Signs have been posted where this material is located.

— Marylou Tousignant September 19, 2016
Read a Floor Plan

Whether planning for a visit to a museum or taking a walk through the many rooms of an art gallery, having a floor plan can make the visit more pleasant. Not all floor plans look alike.

You are given two renderings for two floors of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Compare and contrast how exhibits are represented and categories are presented.

1. Which of the two floor plans for the third floor is easiest to read?
2. Which floor plan would you use to find a restroom?
3. Name some of the items to be seen in the Sports Gallery. Which floor plan helped you?
4. If you want to learn about black farmers which gallery would you visit?
5. Contrast the two floor plans to distinguish how each serves a purpose.
Read a Floor Plan continued

The first pair of floor plans (reverse side) was for above-ground exhibits. Below are two floor plans for the lowest underground floor of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. This floor is designed to follow a chronological order, from slavery through civil rights and beyond.

SLAVERY AND FREEDOM
1400–1877

1. Which of the two floor plans helps visitors to know where to begin the chronological journey?
2. If you want to find Nat Turner’s Bible, which floor plan will help you?
3. Which floor plans indicate three ways to go to the next floor? What are the ways?
4. What two terms are used to indicate artifacts from the beginning of slavery in America?
5. Which of the two floor plans would you find most useful if you only had one?

   Explain your response.
Share Special Events and Opportunities

As a staff member of your school’s media, you have a responsibility to inform your school’s students, staff and administration. Usually, this is about school events and decisions, community involvement or honors and recognition, and academic and athletic activities. Today you are providing a public service by reporting on a new Smithsonian Institution museum — available to visit at no cost online and in person.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) officially opened to the public on September 24, 2016. Located on the National Mall between the Smithsonian Institution’s Museum of American History and the Washington Monument, it provides a particular lens through which to view, learn and interact with the American story.

Consider the Angle You Want to Take

• Do you primarily want to write a short news article that let’s readers know there is a new museum that is open to explore African American culture and learn more about American history?
• Do you want to personalize the informative article through interviews with local people who have visited the museum?
• Do you want to approach the article as a travel article, encouraging family and school trips to Washington, D.C.?
• What other approach might there be considering where your school is located and the demographics of your school population?

Does Your School or Community Have Eyewitnesses or Insiders?

Eyewitnesses will have visited the museum and can share personal reactions to exhibits or give their two to three favorite artifacts to see. Insiders are parents, relatives, or family friends who have been involved in the planning, building and preparations for the museum’s opening. Some of the possible people to interview include:
• Media staff, teachers and students who attended the Dedication Ceremony
• Media staff, teachers and administrators and students who watched the Dedication Ceremony on television
• Does your staff know someone who is volunteering at the new museum who can tell about the training to welcome visitors and to handle any difficult situations?

Prepare a minimum of five questions to ask each one of them. These may be included in a list of “Don’t Miss These,” “man-in-the-street” interviews, or contrasting views on the same topic.
An Integrated Curriculum For The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

Have additional questions prepared for the particular perspective that the interviewee will bring to the article. Remember your focus when you plan the interview questions.

Profile or Vignettes of People Who Relate to the Museum
One of the above individuals may have a unique perspective on the museum that you should not dismiss. Was someone there the day the segregation-era streetcar was lowered by crane into the unfinished museum? Wouldn’t it be fun to talk to the crane operator? What about someone who is working in the Sweet Home Café? What insider story can you get about the menu and sourcing of ingredients? Maybe someone in your area is providing the tomatoes, eggs or fish. One interview can lead to another angle.

Has someone from your school, your community or in your family donated an item to the NMAAHC’s collection? The museum has collected more than 36,000 items. Only a small percentage is on exhibit for the public to see during a visit. There are plans to have the entire collection digitized and available on cell phones. If you find someone who has donated a family heirloom, get the story of the item and a photograph. You could get a scoop.

Relate to Your Readers
Does your school have a very active drama or music program? Have a sports team with winning seasons or an outstanding athlete? Is your school celebrating an anniversary year? Does your community have a history related to slavery or abolition, segregation or integration, racial harmony or tensions? You might consider relating particular galleries or programs of the NMAAHC to write a more compelling article.

Include Informational Graphics and Charts
Help your readers to have perspective and provide reader aids. Check the NMAAHC website to confirm numbers, dates and artifacts on exhibit. Here are some you might include:
- Map of D.C. with inset of NMAAHC location
- Floor plan of the museum or location of the gallery you might be emphasizing
- Timeline
- Photographs

Go Beyond the Museum
If your school is celebrating an anniversary year or wanting to address its identity, you might propose the creation of a school museum. Is there a storage closet, occasionally used meeting room or a series of display cases that could be transformed into a museum? Does your school’s library or media center have a wall that could be repurposed? Could you plan rotating exhibits for a small space? What if different departments took quarters of the academic year to prepare a display?

Brainstorm milestones, special events and individuals who should be included. Has your school received gifts from international visitors or exchange students that could be displayed?

Even if space is limited for a physical exhibit space, could you create an online museum for your school? Sounds like you may also have an editorial to write.
American History and Culture Through the African American Lens

Civil Rights 1957, Carlotta Walls LaNier’s Dress

History, Culture and Art: Yoruba, West Africa. Sculpture with Three-tiered Crown

Incarceration 1930-1940s, Angola Prison Guard Tower
American History and Culture Through the African American Lens

**Arts** “Swing Low” by sculptor Richard Hunt

**History, Military Engagements** 1944, Tuskegee Airmen Training Biplane

**Reconstruction, Jim Crow Laws** 1920, Segregation-Era Southern Railway Car
American History and Culture Through the African American Lens

**Music** 1973, Chuck Berry’s Red Eldorado

**Civil Rights** 1959-1960, Lunch Counter Stool, Greensboro, N.C.

**History** 1927, Great Mississippi River Flood
History and Culture Through Multiple Lenses


They focus on three objects or artifacts:
1. The Quilt
2. A Plated-Silver Service
3. A Mural from Resurrection City, USA

When you visit the Many Lenses section on the National Museum of African American History and Culture website (https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/manylenses), select one of these artifacts.

• Every student in the specific artifact group should read the entire text. Discuss the time period, economic issues and ideas represented in the artifact.
• Within each artifact group, determine who will “be” the curator from the different museums.
• Learn your chosen museum curator’s perspective. Read the text again through the eyes and experience of that curator.
• Summarize that curator’s view of the artifact.
• As a group, prepare a class presentation of the artifact with those representing each curator telling about the article. Be sure to project your artifact so classmates can see the item you are discussing.

After the group presentations, discuss how this activity clarifies the roles and reasons for different museums to exist. What can we learn to apply to today’s tensions and conflicts?

In the National Museum of African American History and Culture collection, some artifacts are tangible reminders of America’s segregation, of black incarceration and the common post-Civil War penal labor practice of convict-leasing, of communication within and without the community, of daily life of freedmen and enfranchised women. There is celebration of community and family, of the participation in the arts, science and technology and sports, and a reflection of everyday people.

Lonnie G. Bunch III, the founding director, had hoped his father would live to visit the exhibits.

“I wanted my father to realize not so much that I did something, but that this museum was a way for average people like him to be remembered. And that his ancestors were smiling when this museum would open.”

When you visit the NMAAHC, be sure to locate your artifacts. See them in three dimensions and within the context of the gallery and floor’s theme. Don’t be hesitant to share your knowledge.