

NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER

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THE NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER PERMANENT EXHIBITION OVERVIEW *The Story of We the People*

Introduction

The National Constitution Center is an independent, non-partisan, and nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing public understanding of, and appreciation for, the Constitution, its history, and its contemporary relevance, through an interactive, interpretive facility within Independence National Historical Park and a program of national outreach, so that “We the People” may better secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.

Freedom Rising

“Freedom Rising” is a state-of-the-art multimedia theater experience designed to connect visitors—in a direct, engaging, and unforgettable way—with the story of the U.S. Constitution. This 350-seat theater-in-the-round production incorporates one actor, 360° projection, surprise scenic elements, theatrical lighting, and a dynamic surround soundtrack. The production creates a stirring environment in which visitors come to see themselves as a force in the life of the Constitution and the Constitution as an on-going force in all our lives in this country.

The 17-minute production highlights the two great themes of the exhibition, orienting visitors to the Center’s experience. The exhibit tells the story of “We the People” in two senses of that phrase:

First, the exhibit takes the Constitution’s deepest meaning to be its vision of “popular sovereignty,” or rule by the people. The exhibit explores how that basic American principle has shaped our nation’s history. Everything in the exhibit underscores the message about the importance of active citizenship. The second sense in which the exhibition is about “We the People” is the way the definition of citizenship has expanded over more than two hundred years of American history. Those who were left out of the meaning of “We the People” back in the 18th century – white men without property, women, African Americans, other people of color – have gradually been included in “We the People.”

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ADD ONE/EXHIBIT OVERVIEW

Three Pathways

There are three pathways through the exhibition:

- The historical story of “We the People” is told along the outside wall. The Constitution itself is etched on glass above the display cases. It is 450 feet long and circles the entire exhibit gallery.
- The central pathway, called the Preamble Path, is organized loosely around the phrases of the Preamble to the Constitution. It is about the Constitution today and how it works.
- The third path through the exhibit is along the inside wall. This is where we ask visitors to tell us what they think by answering a series of questions about war, justice, and other large issues.

Outside Wall

The story begins at the time of the American Revolution with the Stamp Act crisis, and it concludes with today. In this sense, the exhibit offers a panorama of American history, through the lens of the Constitution. The Constitution is etched on glass above the display cases. The message this conveys is that all the events chronicled in the cases below have written the Constitution that hovers above them. The unfolding narrative of the outside wall reveals that it has been millions of individual actions that have upheld and shaped our constitutional practices and freedoms. Wherever possible, personal stories have been chosen as entry points into the content.

The chronological exhibits use multiple techniques to bring the story alive: a short general video introduction to each section; more detailed text-and-graphic based story panels and reading rails; maps and images; game-like computer interactives; video and audio segments, including a reading of Sojourner Truth’s speech to the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention of 1851 and a mini-documentary of the Kennedy assassination and the subsequent adoption of the 25th Amendment; selected artifacts; and walk-in immersive environments that render key ideas, moments, and stories in three dimensions. For instance, visitors can enter a recreation of the floor of the Senate during the impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson and listen to the debate, or they can step into a 1940s living room and hear one of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s famous fireside chats playing on the radio. The Founder’s Library is another walk-in with an immersive environment. It presents a sampling of the books that the Library Company of Philadelphia made available to the delegates of the Constitutional Convention. Visitors press a button to get a brief excerpt and explanation of each book. As they listen, they get a sense of the intellectual origins of the Constitution, the thinkers and ideas that influenced the delegates as they went about their work.

Preamble Path

The central pathway through the exhibition explores how our constitutional system works. Visitors have the opportunity to participate in some of the great rites of democracy. They can vote for their favorite president. They can serve on a jury. They can be sworn in as president at the Oath of Office. They can put on a judge’s robe, sit at a replica of the Supreme Court bench and decide landmark cases, selected to illustrate the broad range of constitutional issues that come before the court. *Katz v. U.S.* is a wiretap case involving the Fourth Amendment and issues of privacy; *Texas v. Johnson*, the flag-burning case, tested the protection of the First Amendment; *U.S. v. Nixon*, the Watergate tapes case, involved separation of powers and executive privilege.

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ADD TWO/EXHIBIT OVERVIEW

The exhibits in the central pathway are the most immersive and highly interactive in the museum. They were designed with families in mind. Rather than provide a chronological journey like the Outside Wall, this path is a thematic one, organized by the words of the Preamble itself. For example, “We the People” is represented by the American National Tree. This exhibit tells the stories of 100 Americans – a few of them well known, but most of them unheralded – whose actions have helped to write the constitutional story. Their faces stream by on the screens below, and when visitors see a face that interests them, they can touch the screen and hear that person’s story.

Inside Wall

The innermost ring of the exhibition provides “talk-back” photo essays asking visitors to consider the sort of broad questions the Founders considered: What makes us Americans? Have we established equal justice? What makes us feel free? Visitors can respond to these questions by writing their answers on Post-It notes, providing a way to make their opinions part of the exhibit. This technique is used again at the Town Hall Wall, where visitors are engaged with issues in the news. The inner wall also has benches and computer terminals where visitors can use the Interactive Constitution to access a clause-by-clause gloss on the Constitution and explore Supreme Court cases and constitutional principles.

Signers’ Hall

Signers’ Hall is a stylized evocation of the Assembly Room where the signers of the Constitution met on September 17, 1787. The room in the Pennsylvania State House (today called Independence Hall) is occupied by life-sized bronze statues of 42 men: the 39 delegates who signed as well as the three who dissented. Extensive research was conducted to make the statues as lifelike and accurate as possible. They are based on portraits and written descriptions of what the men looked like. Visitors are encouraged to walk among them, and to consider them as real people, making choices that still influence their lives. Visitors are also asked to make the same choice the Framers faced: to sign, or not, today’s Constitution. Visitors who elect to sign, metaphorically place their signatures next to those of the Framers. Visitors who elect to dissent are invited to state their reasons, and join an equally honorable American tradition.

First Public Printing of the Constitution

An alcove adjacent to *Signers’ Hall* houses a rare first public printing of the Constitution. The *Pennsylvania Packet* Constitution was published on September 19, 1787, just two days after the Constitution was signed in Independence Hall. There are fewer than 20 known copies of this document in the world. It is particularly appropriate that this copy is on view at the National Constitution Center, because this was how “We the People” first learned about their new form of government.

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