

NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER

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THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE AT THE NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER

Philadelphia, PA – A trip to the National Constitution Center is not just a visit – it’s an *experience*. The Center tells the story of the Constitution’s past and explains the principles of its present to help visitors see that they will write the story of its future – and to inspire them to do just that.

The experience begins as the visitor enters the Center’s Grand Hall Lobby and walks toward the Richard and Helen DeVos Exhibit Hall, which houses the permanent exhibition, *The Story of We the People*.

The Story of We the People begins when the visitor is issued not a ticket, but a Delegate’s Pass – the first of many devices that reinforce the Center’s interpretive message that constitutional democracy demands participation. The Pass asks visitors to think of themselves as “Founders,” and their visit as participation in the ongoing conversation, more than 200 years old, about the nature of the American experiment in self-government.

This idea -- inviting the visitor to join the story -- is the animating idea behind the entire exhibition that follows.

The exhibition unfolds as a journey, a journey that – moving through time and into progressively larger and brighter spaces – echoes the journey of America toward its own ideals.

The first portion, *Philadelphia 1787*, provides an evocative introduction to the people, ideas, and times of the Constitutional Convention. Wisps of conversations are overheard against the backdrop of what was then America’s largest city. Artifact cases punctuating the space hold a fraction of the more than one million pieces recovered from archaeological excavations undertaken on the site of the Constitution Center prior to construction.

Next, the visitor enters the Kimmel Theater for “Freedom Rising”, the Center’s orientation experience. As the lights dim, the show begins with an actor in contemporary dress who walks into the middle of the theater and asks: “What makes us Americans?” As the story progresses, the media elements change. Filmed elements are first projected on the floor, next on a 360-degree screen around the perimeter, then on a scrim that fills the center of the space, and at key points on the audience themselves. The show ends, as it began, with a question: “What will we do with freedom?”

The visitor exits the theater on the Center’s second floor, into *The American Experience*, the main exhibit space.

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ADD ONE/VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Unusual for a museum, the gallery is circular. Also unusual, the gallery's design does not highlight artifacts – collections of things in display cases. Rather, it highlights people and ideas. The gallery itself is wrapped by a glass wall, the length of two full city blocks, on which is written and illuminated the text of today's Constitution: a design statement that it is the words and ideas of the Constitution that define and embrace us, both as a nation and as individuals.

There are three concentric rings to the exhibit. The outermost ring is the chronological story, 13 sections telling the constitutional story from 1765 until today. These stories come as a surprise to most visitors. Expecting to learn only of a sacred text handed down by a few, they find that our Constitution has also been a work in progress by the many: from the Anti-federalists who successfully demanded a bill of rights, to the 620,000 soldiers killed in the Civil War, to the marchers of the civil rights movement.

The unfolding narrative reveals that it has been millions of individual actions that have upheld and shaped our constitutional practices and freedoms. Exhibit techniques reflect that idea. Wherever possible, human stories have been chosen as entry points into the content. Stories are told using a reporter's voice, rather than an historian's: datelined, and in the present tense.

The Chronology exhibits use multiple techniques to bring the story alive: a short and general video introduction to each section; more detailed text-and-graphic based "story panels" (for the primary stories) and "reading rails" (for secondary stories and more nuanced points); maps and images; game-like computer interactives; video and audio segments (such as a reading of Sojourner Truth's speech to the Ohio Women's Rights Convention of 1851 or a mini-documentary of the Kennedy assassination and 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 central ring of the gallery treats the subject differently. It is not a chronological journey, but a thematic one, organized by the words of the Preamble itself. If the Chronology is largely "then," the Preamble is largely "now." Exhibits here are even more interactive, more oriented to a family audience.

At a replica of the Supreme Court bench, for instance, one visitor can delve into three Supreme Court cases, listening to actual oral arguments. Another, younger visitor might try on a judge's robe. A third can follow the progress of a sample case through the legal system to the Supreme Court. Another exhibit is designed to give parents an engaging way to introduce children to – and talk with them about – voting, as visitors cast their ballots for their all-time favorite president. At another exhibit in this section, visitors can watch themselves be sworn in as president. And at yet another, the American National Tree, they can delve into the stories of 100 Americans, whose actions have helped to write the story of the Constitution.

The recurring theme of the Preamble exhibits is the rights – and responsibilities – of citizenship. Another exhibit in this section, for instance, immerses visitors in the experience of serving on a jury. Another – a moving video representation of a soldier marching through history -- honors the men and women who have defended the Constitution through their military service.

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ADD TWO/VISITOR EXPERIENCE

The innermost ring of the gallery provides a third approach to the content. A maple bench ringing the theater provides seating. "Talk-back" photo essays ask 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? And a unique and groundbreaking computer program, the Interactive Constitution, lets visitors search the text that surrounds them by word or concept, providing the deepest level of content.

As the gallery ends, these three paths all converge under the penultimate phrase of the Preamble, "for ourselves and our posterity." Here the visitor enters a quiet contemplative passageway, animated by voices, spanning more than 200 years of commentary on the Constitution, pro and con. The visitor walks into this stream of history as preparation for his or her next stop.

Signers' Hall is the final component of the permanent exhibit. The room is a stylized evocation of the Assembly Room where the signers of the original Constitution met, and a rare first public printing of that document is on display in a side alcove. *Signers' Hall* is peopled with life-sized bronze statues of 42 men: the 39 delegates who signed as well as the three who refused. Visitors are encouraged to walk among them, and to consider them as humans, making choices that still influence their lives. More importantly, visitors are 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.

From *Signers' Hall*, the visitor emerges into the "present" of the Center's Grand Hall Overlook, where large screens and a news ticker display today's constitutional news, connecting the exhibit with our lives at this moment.

Admission is \$12 for adults, \$11 for seniors ages 65 and up, \$8 for children ages 4-12, and \$7.50 for groups of 20 or more. Active military personnel and children ages 3 and under are free.

Parking rates for Constitution Center visitors are \$5 for up to 1 hour, \$8 for up to 2 hours, \$11 for up to 3 hours, \$13 for up to 4 hours, and a maximum of \$17 for the day. Parking rates for the general public are \$6 for up to 1 hour, \$12 for up to 2 hours, \$14 for up to 3 hours, and a maximum of \$17 for the day.

The National Constitution Center, located at 525 Arch St. on Philadelphia's historic Independence Mall, brings the story of the Constitution to life through more than 100 interactive and multimedia exhibits, film, text, photographs, sculpture and artifacts. For more information, please call 215.409.6700 or visit www.constitutioncenter.org.

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