



NMAAHC opens with pride, the President and throngs who'd traveled from near, far

(A synopsis culled from VOANEWS.COM, The Washington Post and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

Speaking at September's dedication of a new U.S. museum devoted to the history of African-Americans, U.S. President Barack Obama said their history is central to America's history dating back to the country's traditional founding fathers.

"Too often we ignored or forgot the stories of millions upon millions of others who built this nation just as surely," Obama said.

At times brushing away a tear, Obama pointed out the highs and lows of being black in America, from slavery and Jim Crow segregation to voting rights and election of the first black president.

"We are not a burden on America, or a stain on America ... we are America. And that's what this museum explains," he told the thousands who had gathered on the National Mall for the event.

Others at Saturday's ceremony included former President George W. Bush, who signed the bill authorizing construction of the facility in 2003, and U.S. Representative John Lewis of Georgia, a civil rights icon who called the bronze-colored museum "more than a building, it is a dream come true."

The new museum, first proposed by a group of black Civil War veterans in 1915, is situated among war memorials and cultural institutions, with a clear sight line to the

Painful past

Many of the stories in the museum are difficult to think about.

The lowest level of the museum deals with the arrival of Africans in North America — as slaves. Generations of blacks remained in bondage to white farmers for more than two centuries, and the racial divide that system created resonated throughout the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the Black Lives Matter movement that has sprung up in response to conflicts between white police officers and black civilians today.



The museum's founding director, Lonnie Bunch, has been on the job since 2005 and had a part in deciding the museum's look: dark bronze-colored layers of metal, in contrast to the white Greek Revival structures that dominate the National Mall.

Bunch has said the building should reflect the troubled past the museum describes.

"I wanted a darker building," he told *The New Yorker* magazine in April. "There's always been a dark presence in America that people undervalue, neglect, overlook. I wanted this building to say that."

The museum's very location is a reminder of the dark past. While the National Mall, home to more than half of Washington's Smithsonian museums, is known as "America's front yard," it was also once home to slave pens, where human beings of African origin were held like cattle to be bought and sold.

Upward and outward

Because of height limits designed to preserve views of all the monuments, 60 percent of the museum is underground.

Visitors start in the basement, with the ugly history of the slavery era. As they advance to higher floors, the story grows more uplifting, although still fraught with conflict.

Media mogul Oprah Winfrey, ranked by *Forbes* magazine 21st among the world's richest women, was a major donor to the museum, contributing not only \$20 million from her charitable foundation but also a pair of slave shackles from the mid-1800s, donated from her private collection of artifacts.

Ironically, the collection also includes a pair of handcuffs used in the arrest of Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates, who was arrested outside his own home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 2009 by an officer mistakenly assuming Gates was a burglar.

Other artifacts in the collection include:

- Several items from a sunken slave ship excavated off the coast of South Africa.



- An entire slave cabin, originally found on Edisto Island in South Carolina.
- A hymnal and silk shawl owned by Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave who led hundreds of other escaped slaves to freedom through the Underground Railroad.
- The glass-topped casket used to display and bury the body of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American whose racially motivated torture and murder in 1955 touched off the Civil Rights Movement.
- A dress belonging to Rosa Parks, the woman who started the Montgomery Bus Boycott, one of the first acts of mass civil disobedience during the civil rights era.
- A PT-13D Stearman biplane trainer aircraft built in Wichita, KS and used by the U.S. Army Air Corps to train the Tuskegee Airmen, the nation's first black military flying unit.
- A trumpet played by jazz legend Louis Armstrong.
- A Cadillac convertible that belonged to rock 'n' roll singer Chuck Berry.
- Muhammad Ali's boxing gloves.
- A collection of costumes from the Broadway show "The Wiz."
- A pair of size 22 tennis shoes owned by basketball star Shaquille O'Neal.

Anecdotes from the grand opening

The Washington Post

By [Peggy McGlone](#), Michael Ruane, [Ellen McCarthy](#), [Geoff Edgers](#), [Martine Powers](#), [Lavanya Ramanathan](#), [Maura Judkis](#) and [Krissah Thompson](#)

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'Get down'

Frances Turner, 69, of Raleigh, remembers when she went to a drugstore with her mother in the segregated South to pick up a prescription. She was just a child and didn't know better, so she sat on a counter stool to wait. A white woman approached her and said, "Get down."

"I can't even remember how old I was," Turner said. "I was just very young. But I have never forgotten that."



On Saturday morning, she and a friend, Geri Floyd, 72, boarded a bus in North Carolina at 2 a.m. to get to the museum opening.

“This is historic,” said Floyd, of Henderson, N.C., as she stood before the new museum. “Oh, my God, it gives me chills to even look at it.”

Turner said: “You know, it’s something that I thought I would never see. . . . I felt like I just really wanted to be here, just to share in everything that’s going to happen.”

Fighting over the museum

Vermont Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D) recalls battling the late Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) about the museum.

“I remember just having a shouting match with Jesse Helms when he was holding it up. . . . I forget exactly what he did other than to ask why I supported it when the fact is you’re from an all-white state. I said, ‘I’m from an American state, and this is a part of American history.’ ”

Leahy had his trusty Nikon D750 camera with him. “I’m an avid photographer,” he said. “I do it just because it’s part of my history.”

But aren’t plenty of people taking pictures?

“I always like mine.”

Confused crowds

Janan Graham-Russell, 27, of Evanston, Ill., who held six passes for 2 p.m., said she was feeling anxious about getting in. “It will be fine,” she said.



Pass holders were told to go to 12th and Constitution and 17th and Constitution and then were directed back to 15th Street, where police held them behind barricades at the south side of 15th and Constitution.

At the front of the line, they were waving their computer printouts and arguing, hoping for answers about when they would get in.

“I need you all to back up,” a Park Police officer yelled.

“We are committed to going forward,” yelled back William Landis, 26, of North Carolina, who held passes for 2:15. The joke drew laughs from an increasingly tense crowd.

Son of a Gun Stew

“I want everything. I might order everything,” said Yves Joseph, 32, waiting in a long line at the Sweet Home Cafe, the museum’s cafeteria. He came down from Connecticut and was with a group from New Jersey, Philadelphia and the District. They attended the opening ceremony and hadn’t eaten since early that morning.

The cafe is divided into four stations that represent the geographic diversity in African American cooking.

“I’m curious about the Western states,” said Freddie Irby, 36. That station features Son of a Gun Stew, a dish cooked by black cowboys.

In line for lunch, Irby already had his eye on his next meal: “Do we have a chance at getting into Bad Saint tonight?”

“You’re in the wrong line,” someone in line joked.



‘History in the making’

Archie Stewart, 23, a representative of the Miss Black U.S. Ambassador Pageant, hails from Birmingham, Ala., known for some of the bleaker chapters in African American history. Decked out in a purple T-shirt and white sash on Saturday, she said she was in awe of the day’s events.

“We are the city where the four young girls died in the 16th Street church bombing,” she said, referring to the Sept. 15, 1963, incident in which members of the Ku Klux Klan dynamited a Baptist church, killing three 14-year-olds and an 11-year-old.

But she noted that there is now a civil rights museum in Birmingham, as well as the new D.C. museum. “It’s emotional for me, just to be here in the midst of all this history in the making,” she said.