

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Marvin Pinkert
Interviewer: Austin McManus
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MR. MARVIN PINKERT: There are several ways to look at it, but probably the place to begin is with Archivist John Carlin. John had a challenge to face. There was going to be, he knew that for reasons of both security and preservation, the cases for the three Charters, the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights were going to have to be re-encased.

When they went to come up with solutions to re-encase the Charters, it ended up removing an entire floor of stacks from the archives. When they removed the floor of stacks, there were 14-foot spaces behind the three charters and no concept of what would actually go in that space. Carlin invited one of his Presidential Library directors to come up with a plan, called the American Idea. I assume there is a copy at the Archives.

He called together a group of museum-wide people in the summer of 2000 to get their opinion about this exhibit, which was an audio-animatronic journey from Runnymede to the Bill of Rights. They asked him two questions. John, why do you want to do this? The second was, if you're absolutely determined to do a high-tech exhibit, don't you think you should have someone on your team with a background in doing high-tech exhibits? The first was a really good question because, to this day, I can't think of a really good reason why the Archives would have invested in an audio-animatronic exhibit from Runnymede to the Bill of Rights. The second was even better for me, because John went on a search for someone who would lead his museum team who was a bit more familiar with what was deemed technologically advanced exhibits.

That turned out through the auspices of Dr. Franco, who was one of the people in the room to name me, and John said that he would hire me. That is why some of the documents actually pre-date my official arrival at the museum. By the way, John, in his first meeting where I was present, wanted to reassure the Records Services side of the house that there would never be a museum at the National Archives, just to give you something of the flavor of the environment. That was part of the reason it was called the National Archives Experience and the other part is I wanted to emphasize the experience side of it. Stop me if it's too much detail.

MR. MCMANUS: No, go ahead.

MR. PINKERT: Okay. When I arrived, I looked at the situation and said, "Well what is the problem that we're really trying to solve?" It came to me after several conversations with John that the issue was, for those people coming into the building, and we later proved this through a study, had no idea where they were. They didn't know that the National Archives was a separate agency from the rest of the Federal Government. They thought it was a part of the Smithsonian, maybe, or maybe part of the Library of Congress. Secondly, there were some who correctly identified the National Archives was its own government agency. When you asked them what the National Archives did, the answer was it protected the Constitution, Declaration, and the Bill of Rights. The fact that their family records were located here and that people had suggested that general visitors were not important to the Archives; maybe they'd

have to give the Charters back to the Library of Congress. James H. Billington was willing to accept them, or maybe they would want to go to the Smithsonian. There were active, behind-the-scene efforts happening to take the Charters away from the National Archives. John had enough good sense to know that that would have been disastrous in terms of the long-term image and support for the National Archives despite the fact that there were concerns going beyond the strategic plan that the Archives had adopted in 1997. There was sentiment to do something to keep the Charters, so I contested to John that what we really wanted was an exhibit that dealt with what else the Archives did, the importance of records, why records matter, which became the theme of the exhibit very quickly.

It had a theme, but it had no vision of what it could be. Through that early spring of 2001, as we brought Gallagher and Associates design firm aboard, one of the moments that stuck in my mind is when we started to do focus groups with board members of the Foundation, which pre-existed the creation of the National Archives Experience. The Foundation had been created by the Center for Legislative Archives in 1991, but we were about to convert them into a support group for the National Archives Experience, so we sat down with them and we asked them, what causes you to join the Foundation? What is that you get out of this? One gentleman turned and said, "Well, they take you upstairs into the stacks and then from the stacks they take you into a room that's a vault and they put a record in front of you that is from, you know, Thomas Jefferson, his own hand, and it is such a spectacular experience." That moment I knew what we were going to do with the exhibit and it was when we decided that we wanted to have that experience for a million people and the way to do it was to create a Public Vault. That's the point of origin for the project.

MR. MCMANUS: So, you sort of touched on what I think Ray [Ruskin] was also hinting at when I talked to him. That it seems like almost from the beginning, it was never really about taking away from the Charters themselves, trying to distract from them, but rather an addition to the experience of people who weren't aware of the extent of the Archives' work, so when most--

MR. PINKERT: [Interposing] My goal was, I told John a couple of things right at the beginning. I told him that we were never going to see an increase in visitation, that the number of visitors was restricted by the number of people who pass by the Charters and that we were already at capacity, so that was a delusion that there has been an increase in visitors. What I said we could accomplish with the exhibit was not getting more people in but getting more people to have a greater depth of understanding. We went out on the mall that first year and asked people who had just seen the Charters of Freedom, where they had seen it and what that place was, and we had 25 percent correct answers. After the opening of the exhibit, we interviewed people in the new building in a similar manner. We had 75 percent correct answers, so we're about preserving the records of the Federal Government. Our goal, which was not a very dramatic one when you think about it, but very important, was that people actually visited not just the Charters but the National Archives and that we accomplished.

MR. MCMANUS: So you mentioned, just a few minutes ago, about bringing in, I think it was Gallagher. Can you talk a little bit about that?

MR. PINKERT: Yeah, Gallagher and Associates.

MR. MCMANUS: Okay.

MR. PINKERT: Patrick Gallagher was the lead designer. And we worked on a team basis. In other words, we all sat at the table. The Foundation, including their marketing folks, Gallagher and his team, and our

team all met together from the beginning to the end in creating the project.

MR. MCMANUS: Okay. So from the, was it from the onset, in terms of the design of the exhibit, was it always intended to be based on the Preamble of the Constitution the way the different aspects were broken down or was that something that was later on decided?

MR. PINKERT: Okay. It would be fair to say the division of the exhibit into sections of the Constitution was an inspiration of the Archivist of the United States, John Carlin.

MR. MCMANUS: So, what was your day-to-day job in this project from the start? Was it, did it focus on a bunch of different things and it just depended on the day, or was it geared towards the Vaults itself? My understanding is you were overseeing not just the Vaults, but also the creation of the McGowan Theater and the galleries and pretty much that entire renovation project. You were an integral part of that process.

MR. PINKERT: My job was to make it happen.

MR. MCMANUS: Right, so that--

MR. PINKERT: [Interposing] So that means doing whatever it takes. Sometimes I was a fundraiser. I had authority to go with the Foundation board to make the pitch for funds for the project. There were times that I was an exhibit project manager, making sure things came in on time and on budget. There were times when I even had some creative input, though compared to the talents that were on the team, that was a fairly meager contribution, but it was for me to lay out the vision and see that we had the resources necessary to complete that vision.

MR. MCMANUS: What were, for you personally either during the project or from your perspective as the manager at large, what were the biggest obstacles that you guys faced throughout your work on the project?

MR. PINKERT: Well, it started on the money side and then we moved ourselves across.

MR. MCMANUS: Fair enough.

MR. PINKERT: On the money side, the Foundation for the National Archives, I was the one who pressed the Foundation to pitch the project. Now, this required a lot of heavy lifting, because not only was the Foundation a little squeamish about taking on the project, at the time, they were an all-volunteer organization and they had raised a total of \$100,000 in the first 10 years of their existence. I was asking them to now raise \$22 million in three years. That's a fairly ambitious operation, so I don't think it was unreasonable for them to be a little reticent, to take some convincing. On the government side, there was a huge amount of suspicion of using the Foundation as the intermediary here, but I actually needed the Foundation not only to bring some money without walking out and saying, we're the government, would you like to give us some money? Which was the original strategy that John had, which was not working terribly well, but in addition to their fundraising capacity, I needed the Foundation's flexibility in managing the project.

In other words, as a government agency, we would have gone out and had 56-60 bidders and they would have had to be a lowest cost proposition, even if the firm's experience had been designing

windows for department stores. We needed to have a more controlled process, and so we went out, I think, to four firms and the Foundation had its ability to set its own criteria for what a firm had to be able to accomplish, and I could get a high quality firm to complete the project. I could also put things in the contract through the Foundation to make sure that things were going to be delivered on time and on budget, so I, I think that that was the set of challenges around money and around management of the project, of course, from my position were the biggest challenges. We also had a series of challenges that cannot be talked of that dealt with some of the internal politics at the Archives, and that you'll have to wait for another day to hear about.

MR. MCMANUS: No, that's fine.

MR. PINKERT: Suffice it to say that there was a certain individual who'd been banned from participating in Archives decision-making who was nonetheless in a position to overrule decisions made by the Archives. It was a very unusual situation, and if I were to publish a tell-all memoir I will share it with the world, but this individual felt that the no item of controversy should be in the exhibit and their definition of controversy was pretty broad.

One of the first items I wanted in the exhibit was when I learned the story of how the Holocaust funding, the Holocaust reimbursements were based on discoveries in the Archives records. I thought this was a great example of what John had initially told me was one of the major messages that he wanted to deliver, which was that records matter and that records are not just things that are kept because they fill up a lot of space, but that people actually use them to assert their rights as citizens. I thought, well, here's a wonderful example and the individual I'm speaking of told me that we couldn't include a Holocaust unit unless we included a unit on Arab Americans, which left me kind of speechless. I also was told that I could not include a unit that dealt with the Freedman's Bureau records because they were too controversial.

These decisions were all near the end of the project. We were almost done with the project at the time that these decisions came down and I complied as best I could. Then I went to Archivist Alan Weinstein when he came in, which was a few weeks after the completion of the exhibit, and I asked for his permission to go ahead and amend the exhibit. That's why there is a unit on Freedman's Bureau and a unit on the Holocaust and it all worked out.

MR. MCMANUS: You talked about funding and I was going over some of the things that you sent me. It seems like from your end, the thing that you pushed on the Foundation that you wanted to get across to them as a sort of way to convince them to help with the project is the idea that it was, it centered around educating the public. Is that, would that be a--

MR. PINKERT: [Interposing] Right.

MR. MCMANUS: Okay.

MR. PINKERT: In other words, this was the inspired moment that instead of when the objection was made that there's nothing about education in the strategic plan of the National Archives, I said, great. Well, that's where we should be a part of the process because there are a lot of people who think that the records of the National Archives should be used for educational purposes. Let them fund the educational side of the Archives and you can keep the strategic plan right where it is and you can fulfill the goals of the Archives. Let those who want to, in the same way that you let researchers make use of

the records, let people who want to use the records to educate on the process of using them in that way.

MR. MCMANUS: And that seemed to be the way that you thought would be the most efficient way to convince them that?

MR. PINKERT: I think it was one of the factors that worked in both directions during the years we were working on the Public Vaults. At the time, he was thinking that he didn't want to get the Archives involved in some educational program and the Foundation was thinking that they wanted to be an educational institution, so that combination, the clarity that existed for a brief window of time is what allowed the Public Vaults to move forward at such speed. And it was easy. Every donor we went to, we would say the Archives is there to preserve and to provide access to records, but the intellectual, the ability to use these records to create a better-educated public requires private sector support, and that was very clear. Subsequent Archivists, the situation became much less clear.

MR. MCMANUS: Okay. I think that makes sense from the standpoint today. Sorry. I'm just reading over my questions, making sure I'm not missing anything here. So you came on, how long did you work at the Archives? You came on in 2000, correct?

MR. PINKERT: Yes, I came on in December 2000 and I left in April 2012.

MR. MCMANUS: Okay. So what was your, what was the majority of your work after the Vaults and the majority of that restoration was completed. Was it still overseeing the continuation of that?

MR. PINKERT: No, first of all, we did at least a dozen temporary exhibits on our own.

MR. MCMANUS: Okay.

MR. PINKERT: Everything that went into the Lawrence F. O'Brien Gallery was something that was done by the Foundation, the Archives, and me.

MR. MCMANUS: Okay.

MR. PINKERT: And then, some of my proudest accomplishments are the Digital Vaults and Docs Teach online educational tools. After we worked on those, we got permission to change the entry and create Records of Rights, and I was there up to the final design of Records of Rights. I was not there when it actually opened. For all but the last six months of my tenure, I ran both education and exhibits of the National Archives Experience.

MR. MCMANUS: Okay.

MR. PINKERT: One of the other things that was very important to me was that exhibits and education be considered as one and not separate from another. We had joint team meetings, there was always an educator involved to plan. I've never been able to see why education in a museum was not intrinsic to what the intended process was, and vice versa.

MR. MCMANUS: Okay. So, the Public Vaults opened more than a decade ago?

MR. PINKERT: Yes, 2004.

MR. MCMANUS: Yeah. In my discussion with Ray, he touched a little bit on things he thinks could, hypothetically if the Archives was deciding today to do an overhaul to the Vaults and change it up, he touched on something that he thought would be good to consider. To begin this approach, he said that if they were doing it now, he would go back to square one and the thing he focused on was the emphasis on digital tools for education in the exhibit space, because at the time it was cutting edge, but now, at least in his opinion, it seems somewhat antiquated. Would you agree with that assessment?

MR. PINKERT: Yes. The original lifespan of an exhibit like that was 10 to 12 years, and now, this is clearly going to be up for at least 14 years, maybe 15, and, if I had stayed, one of my tasks would have been to go back to scratch and to keep the same purpose but think through a completely different exhibit. The exhibit went through one update in about, what was that? 2009? Even that update is now too old and we just keep thinking about doing things incrementally. We won't really produce an innovation that matches today's audience, so I'm in complete agreement with Ray. I think the whole thing needs to be scrapped and we need to go back to the beginning. It's not because I don't like the exhibit. There's lots of things I liked, but everything has its time.

MR. MCMANUS: Right.

MR. PINKERT: And its time has now passed.

MR. MCMANUS: Do you think that also part of it is that people 10 to 15 years ago used the Archives, in terms of the general public, used it pretty differently than people would use it today? And so the--

MR. PINKERT: [Interposing] On the research side of the house, it's changed so dramatically. I have to laugh, because before when everything got digitized, the research side of the operation used to have a line every April for the census or similar records but we had no lines anymore. The exhibit side, the lines were around the building, and there's something about that. It was a message about what makes the records powerful on the exhibit side, and there really is no, it's not that the Declaration hasn't been digitized. It's digitized wonderfully. You can get to detail that you'll never see in person, but it is not a substitute for being in person, one on one, with the Declaration in the Rotunda.

The fact is when people question whether museums have had their day, I always point out the difference between records that are there for information and records that are part of an experience. In records that are part of an experience, there is still room for innovation on the exhibit side of the house.

MR. MCMANUS: Seems to be sort of a reversal in that sense that it seems like people, in regard to museums, maybe just in general people 10-20 years ago, were all about putting everything online and having it be accessible to everybody, and now people are so used to that, we want to see the real thing.

MR. PINKERT: Yes.

MR. MCMANUS: I personally find that pretty fascinating. And yes--

MR. PINKERT: [Interposing] I think we have never lost the need for the authentic. If we were to re-write Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, authentic would be somewhere near the top of those things that people want, and it helps explain a lot of human behavior and authentic can be authentic goods. It can be

authentic stories, but there is a real desire to be in proximity to that which is real, and the more artificial our society gets, the more that has value.

MR. MCMANUS: Interesting. Was there anything that I didn't cover or I didn't ask or you didn't say that you wanted to be able to say?

MR. PINKERT: Talking about 11 years of my life, there are a few things you have not covered, but it's probably more than enough to get you started. If there are other things that you're interested in, I have all sorts of things down in the basement that I don't know what there is a copy of in the Archives. But if there is a specific period or issue that you want more detail on, you know, I know the history. The other people were basically half the Foundation.

MR. MCMANUS: Absolutely.

MR. PINKERT: And now works for Gallagher and Associates.

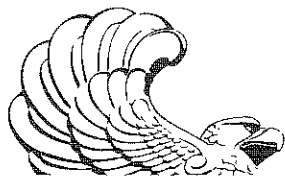
MR. MCMANUS: Say that again? I'm sorry.

MR. PINKERT: Thora Colot now works for Gallagher and Associates, so if you visit with Thora, you get a two-for.

MR. MCMANUS: Thank you again for your time. I really do appreciate it.

MR. PINKERT: No problem. Glad to be of help - -

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