

Exhibits: A different kind of ‘access’

The National Archives, as you know, is in the “access” business. However, that word conveys different meanings to different individuals.

Three examples: A well-prepared scholar can sit in a research room poring over boxes of files. Veterans seeking benefits can obtain copies of their military records from NARA’s records center in St. Louis. An avid genealogist can browse through recently digitized documents on the Internet.

There is also a long list of customers and visitors who don’t have *specific* questions, but who do have a general interest and keen curiosity about our nation’s history and civic life. And this is where our exhibits—permanent and temporary, large and small—come in.

Many Americans, of course, come to Archives I in Washington to see the documents they have always heard and read about: the Charters of Freedom—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Now, there’s also the extensive Public Vaults, a permanent exhibition rich in records and artifacts that document the history of the nation and its people

There are other temporary—and very special—exhibits on display in the Lawrence F. O’Brien Gallery in Archives I, that appear in our Presidential libraries and regional archives, or travel to other public and private facilities around the country. For example, in less than a three-week span this fall, four major National Archives exhibits, all involving partnerships, will open in four different locations.

In Washington, the O’Brien Gallery hosts “1783: Subject or Citizen?”—the first joint venture between NARA and Library and Archives Canada. What we have done in this exhibit is use a binational perspective to put both sets of records in a new context. It opens October 3.

That same weekend at the Durham Museum in Omaha, NE, “Eyewitness,” which ran in Washington in 2005, visits its final venue of a five-city national tour. “Eyewitness,” a product of a partnership between the Foundation for the National Archives and NARA, offers moving accounts of historic events that have shaped our nation.



The Carter Library in Atlanta is the next host of “School House to White House,” a joint project of the National Archives Experience and the Presidential libraries. The stars of this show are the report cards

and essays of Presidents when they were students.

Also opening this month in Texas are exhibits in observance of the 50th anniversary of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. An exhibit at the Johnson Library focuses on NASA’s early years, while one at the Bush Library focuses on the agency’s later years. They will run until July 20, 2009.

Even as these exhibits open, there are others on the drawing board that we believe will pique visitor interest as much or more.

To celebrate the National Archives’ 75th anniversary in 2009, an exhibit called “BIG!” will feature some of our most interesting “mammoth” records, such as the full scroll of the Articles of Confederation (never before displayed in its entirety) and a giant map of the Gettysburg battlefield from 1863. “BIG!” opens at Archives I on March 13, 2009.

The Central Plains Region will host “It’s Big!,” drawing on records in its own holdings, when it moves next year to its new location in the Union Station complex in downtown Kansas City. The Southeast Regional Archives in Atlanta will present an exhibit on civil rights, “Documented Rights,” as a companion to a major 2009 symposium.

Looking ahead, we plan, in partnership with the Foundation, a major two-part exhibit beginning in 2010 to mark the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. There are, of course, many other exhibits now in NARA facilities around the country and others in the planning stage.

Quality exhibits, big and small, often require the collaboration and cooperation of staff from many parts of NARA. I have

always been impressed by what it takes to put these exhibits together. Curators, designers, and registrars as well as conservators and fabricators work as a team. And they count on contributions from other members of the Archives staff, such as archivists, technicians, and writers and editors.

As diverse as they are, NARA’s exhibits have a common thread: They stimulate visitors to ask questions about the stories of our democracy and require us to provide answers to those questions. Providing these answers helps us achieve one of the goals in our mission statement: Lifting the level of civic literacy in this country by increasing interest in the study of history, social studies, and government; thereby making these subjects more entertaining and engaging for both students and teachers.

After all, only when citizens have a basic level of civic literacy can they fully appreciate and use the records we hold and make accessible to them.

The work continues . . .

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allen Weinstein".

ALLEN WEINSTEIN
Archivist of the United States

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