Making Their Mark

SIGNATURES, FAMOUS AND ORDINARY,
SET AMERICA'S COURSE AND REVEALED THEIR OWNERS
The act of signing your name can be routinely simple, or it can be the stroke of a pen that changes many lives—and the course of history.

We sign for credit card purchases many times each week. We write our names and a message on cards to colleagues retiring, getting married, or ailing. We provide our signatures to acknowledge the receipt of a package. We affix our signatures to petitions with thousands of other citizens.

Our actions probably don’t change the world much.

But some figures in American history have, with a simple stroke of a pen, changed the world for thousands or millions of people, for better or worse.
John Hancock signed his name so large, and with such flair, on the Declaration of Independence that “John Hancock” has become a synonym for signature.

President Harry S. Truman signed two executive orders in 1948 that desegregated the nation’s armed forces and the federal workforce. Within a year, 18 agencies had desegregated, and some agency heads who had not cooperated were removed from their positions.

President Thomas Jefferson, who held deeply contradictory beliefs about the morality and legality of slavery, signed legislation abolishing the international slave trade and hoped to finally settle one aspect of the contentious issue of slavery.

These signatures, as well as many others and a wide range of artifacts, are part of a new exhibit at the National Archives Museum in Washington, D.C., “Making Their Mark: Stories Through Signatures,” which runs through January 5, 2015, in the Lawrence F. O’Brien Gallery.

“Making Their Mark: Stories Through Signatures” is made possible in part by the Foundation for the National Archives with the generous support of Lead Sponsor AT&T. Major additional support is provided by the Lawrence F. O’Brien family and members of the board of the Foundation.

The exhibit draws on the billions of government records and artifacts from 19 National Archives facilities nationwide to showcase a unique collection of signatures—and signature artifacts—and tell the stories behind them.
Actress Katharine Hepburn wrote to the U.S. Board of Parole on behalf of screenwriter Ringgold Wilmer “Ring” Lardner, Jr., on September 1, 1950. Lardner and nine others had been found guilty of contempt of Congress and were blacklisted from Hollywood by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

“This sweeping exhibit is an opportunity to showcase not only notable signatures, but the signatures and stories of people unknown to history, and how they have made their mark on the American narrative,” said Jennifer Johnson, the curator of the exhibit.

“Making Their Mark” uses items from all over the country,” Johnson added, “and these records allow visitors to see the scope and breadth of the records the National Archives preserves.”

Many of the treasured documents in the immense holdings of the National Archives are inscribed with signatures.

Many of the signatures are notable, such as those of the 56 men, including John Hancock, who signed the Declaration of Independence, becoming traitors in the eyes of George III. Others are famous individuals, such as legendary actress Katharine Hepburn and baseball great Jackie Robinson.

Hepburn, noted for her portrayals of fearless women, wrote a letter to the U.S. Board of Parole in 1950 asking that screenwriter Ring Lardner, Jr., be granted parole. Lardner had been jailed for refusing to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee investigating communism in Hollywood.

By doing so, Hepburn was putting herself and her career at risk. Nonetheless, she went on to enjoy a long and acclaimed film career despite the letter.
Then there are signatures of those whose marks on history may have been fleeting but reveal the world around them. In World War II, a Japanese American inside an internment camp signed a loyalty questionnaire. In 1938 a Jewish tailor amid the increasing Nazi presence in Europe wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt pleading for help in leaving Hungary because of “political happenings.”

In the 19th century, Texas landowner Polly Lemon petitioned Congress but, unable to sign her name, only signed with her mark, an “X.” So did Harriet Tubman, who served as nurse, cook, spy, and scout for the Union during the Civil War. Decades after the war, a determined Tubman, signing with an “X,” sought a pension for her services during the war.

Frederick Douglass wrote to President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 asking that his son, the first African American to enlist in the Union Army from New York, be discharged because of illness.

Above: The cigarette holder was one of President Franklin Roosevelt’s signature accessories. Left: In his letter to the Continental Congress on December 20, 1783, at the end of the Revolutionary War, Gen. George Washington asked how he should offer his resignation, “whether in writing or at an audience.” His deference to Congress set an important precedent for civilian rule. Right: General Eisenhower wearing an “Ike jacket,” 1943. After the general had the standard army jacket shortened and tailored, it became standard issue after November 1944.
When NASA proposed in a memo that the United States and Russia cooperate through an exchange of visits, five of the seven astronauts signed the memo.

The original Mercury Seven, 1960, were to be the first American men in space. Eisenhower's "short snorters," a collection of 19 bank notes, representing over 10 countries and signed by over 90 men and women. Servicemen adopted the tradition of signing and exchanging currency and then sharing a drink with those they met along the way. Opposite: Harriet Tubman's general affidavit relating to her claim for a pension, ca. 1898. She signed with her "X," claiming $1,800 for her wartime service as a nurse, cook, and scout.
My claim against the U.S. is for three years' service as nurse and cook in hospitals, and as commander of several men (eight or nine) as cooks, during the late war of the Rebellion, under directions and orders of Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War, and of several Generals.

I claim for my services alone named the sum of Eighty thousand dollars. The sworn affidavits have recently been read over to me and are true to the best of my knowledge, information, and belief.

I further declare that I have interest in said case and am not concerned in its prosecution. and allowance.

Wm. Elzie W. Carter

Attest: James T. Davis

(Signatures of Affiants)
“Let this boy be discharged,” Lincoln wrote on the back over his signature.

Some documents are important not for the individual names but for the strength of many names brought together for a common cause. Among the petitions asking for change is a letter to President Gerald R. Ford with 75 senators signing in unity to “reaffirm the commitment . . . that has been the bipartisan basis of American policy for over 26 years and five administrations.”

Then there are those that offer a window into a very young America, such as the 1799 petition signed by all employees at the U.S. Mint, promising to return to work once the yellow fever epidemic passed. George Washington wrote to the Continental Congress humbly asking how he should resign as commander-in-chief so he could return to his home in Virginia.

As the Allied leaders met at Potsdam, Germany, in the spring of 1945 to decide the shape of the post–World War II world, President Harry S. Truman passed around his dinner program for all to sign. Two of the signers were British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet Communist Party Boss Josef Stalin.

Some signatures didn’t seem significant at the time. In 1960, a 14-year-old from Beverly, Massachusetts, wrote to President Eisenhower asking for an autographed photograph. His name was Dave Ferriero, and he was doing what millions of children have done over the years.

Today, Dave Ferriero is Archivist of the United States David S. Ferriero, the person in charge of the National Archives.

“This exhibit brings a new meaning to
24. List the names of any relatives now in the Government service, with the degree of relationship, and where employed:

None

25. What is the lowest entrance salary you will accept? Standard for special agents

26. Are you in a position to accept probationary employment at any time, without previous notice, and, if notice is required, how much? Yes - no notice necessary

27. In the event of appointment will you be willing to proceed to Washington, D.C., upon 10 days' notice and at your own expense? Yes

28. If appointed are you willing and prepared to accept assignment or transfer to any part of the United States where services are required, for either temporary or permanent duration? Yes

The photograph not larger than 3 by 4½ inches. Write your name plainly on the photograph to be taken not more than 30 days prior to date of application.

Respectfully,

[Signature]

(Richard M. Wilson)

(Note: If the applicant desires to make any further remarks or statements concerning his qualifications or in answer to any question contained in the application, the same should be made on a separate sheet of paper, numbering the remarks in accordance with the original questions.

To be subscribed to by all applicants for positions in the Federal Bureau of Investi-...

Before me by the above-named applicant, this 29 day

of April, 1937, at city (or town) of Durham, county

of Durham, and State (or Territory or District) of North Carolina.

[Signature]

(Linda E. Wilson)

(Note: Official title)

[Official Impression Seal]
our goal of increasing access to records at the National Archives,” Ferriero said. “We see signatures that, once affixed to a document, often produced a historic moment that changed the course of world history or the lot in life of a single individual.”

“Signatures can also tell us a lot about their owners and the circumstances under which they were made. Hancock was defiant, Lincoln was decisive, Tubman was determined, Hepburn was fearless, and Truman was confident—all evident in their signatures or ‘marks,’” Ferriero added.

Not everything in “Making Their Mark” is a signature on paper or parchment.

Left: Robert Rosenberg, age 10, and Michael Rosenberg, age 6, pleaded for the lives of their parents, convicted spies Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, in a letter to President Eisenhower. The Rosenberg parents were sentenced to death for passing secret information on the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union. Below left: Osama Nakata, a Japanese American internee, signed a statement, ca. 1942, that he “will not serve in the armed forces of the U.S.” until the constitutional rights of his family were restored. Below right: Japanese Americans were uprooted from their communities on the west coast and relocated to camps such as this one at Poston, Arizona, for the duration of the war.
President Franklin D. Roosevelt left many famous words, but he also sought to convey confidence for a nation pulling itself out of the Great Depression and into World War II. His famous ivory cigarette holder with a quill mouth piece was his favorite and the one he used most.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, as Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during World War II, had a signature style, in his case a jacket. He asked that the standard issue field jacket be tailored for him, and the result was the “Ike jacket,” which comes just to the waist. Countless photographs show General Eisenhower in his jacket with other generals and with his troops. It became standard issue to U.S. troops after November 1944.

President Lyndon B. Johnson was known for his ability to persuade others to agree with his point of view after giving them the signature “Johnson treatment.” His large and commanding 6-foot 4-inch frame helped him convince many people to support his position or legislation.

A famous photograph shows Johnson leaning over Senator Richard B. Russell of Georgia, his friend and mentor in the Senate. In 1964, Johnson made clear to Russell that he was going to get the landmark civil rights legislation through the Senate despite his mentor’s opposition.

A signature tells a story. It may be at the bottom of a letter, or it may be at the bottom of legislation that will change the course of history.

“Making Their Mark” invites visitors to look at a signature, imagine the moment the document was signed, and realize how the signers have made their mark on history.

A page from a Hopi (Moqui) petition signed by all the chiefs and headmen of the tribe, asking that the federal government give the tribe collective title to their lands rather than make allotments to individuals as determined by the Dawes Act.