

NEWS HEADLINES

Smithsonian American History Museum Undergoing Makeover



by *Russell Boniface*
Associate Editor

The National Museum of American History, located on the National Mall, comprises approximately 750,000 square feet and includes three main exhibition levels, two office levels, and a basement. Concerns over its existing logistical layout of limited sight lines, poor lighting, clutter, and inadequate exhibit space precipitated the museum to plan an interior design overhaul. The current renovation project will cost approximately \$85 million, with \$45 million coming from federal funds to cover costs to the infrastructure and the protection of the exhibit collections during construction.

At the center of the renovation, literally, will be a three-level, skylighted atrium designed to open the building dramatically and allow for improved navigation. This includes removing marble panels that currently block the view to the museum's third floor from

below. Ten-foot-high "artifact walls" will be installed on both the first and second floors showcasing the wide range of the museum's 3 million objects. On the first floor, there will be a new exhibition gallery for the Lemel-

son Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation, a new lobby for the 275-seat Carmichael Auditorium, and new retail operations. New entrance vestibules will be created on the first and second floors to help alleviate crowding, and a new Welcome Center will be created on the second floor to improve visitor orientation. Finally, the atrium will feature a grand staircase to connect the museum's first and second floors.

A new home for the Star-Spangled Banner

At the heart of the museum's architectural transformation is the creation of a new dramatic display gallery for one of its most treasured icons—the 200-year-old woolen and cotton Star-Spangled Banner, the flag that inspired our national anthem. The new Star-Spangled Banner gallery will become the central focal point of the



NEWS HEADLINES

second floor, where more than two-thirds of museum visitors enter. The 30x34-foot flag, close to three-stories high, has hung in a variety of positions

windows to evoke the “dawn’s early light” in which Francis Scott Key saw the flag in 1814. In addition, an abstract 40x19-foot flag of lightweight,

- Better security
- Several new restrooms, including four family restrooms.



“The National Museum of American History is a fundamentally important national treasure,” states museum board chair Richard Darman. “These changes will dramatically transform the building and the presentation of its collections, inspiring millions of visitors by creating a grand, open, and easily navigated environment.”

Philanthropist donations will cover the cost of the architectural enhancements.

and locations over the years—from hanging vertically in its entirety (until unable to support its own weight) to resting flat horizontally behind glass.

The Star-Spangled Banner is one of our nation’s most treasured objects, a symbol of what this country stands for.

The Smithsonian has cared for the flag for nearly a century, and conservators’ recent examinations concluded a new environment within the museum was needed to protect it further. As a result, the new Star-Spangled Banner gallery will be designed with preservation in mind and include low light levels, a display angle of no greater than 10 degrees of elevation, stable temperature and relative humidity levels, a “clean room” environment, and physical security systems. The gallery will have floor-to-ceiling glass

reflective polycarbonate will be placed above the entrance to the gallery.

“The Star-Spangled Banner is one of our nation’s most treasured objects, a symbol of what this country stands for,” says museum director, Brent D. Glass. “Its new surroundings are part of a strategic plan to ensure the long-term preservation of the flag and revitalize the entire museum to tell the story of America and help future generations experience what it means to be an American.”

Improved infrastructure

The renovation work to the museum’s infrastructure will include:

- Replaced and relocated public and staff elevators, resulting in improved access to the lower level and the three exhibition floors
- New HVAC systems at the central core
- Upgraded fire and alarm systems
- Improved electrical systems



Reference:

Visit the National Museum of American History Web site.

[\[americanhistory.si.edu/\]](http://americanhistory.si.edu/)

Did you know . . . ?

- The American History Museum is a National Historic Landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was one of the last structures designed by McKim, Mead, and White.
- While closed for renovation, more than 150 objects from the National

NEWS HEADLINES

Museum of American History will be on view at the National Air and Space Museum in an exhibit called "Treasures of American History."

- Approximately 4 million visitors pass through the museum's doors annually, and millions more make virtual visits to the museum's Web site.
- The Star-Spangled Banner will remain in the building, inside an environmentally controlled conservation laboratory, until the flag can be moved to its new gallery.
- The National Museum of American History opened to the public in January 1964 as the Museum of History and Technology. In 1980, the Museum's name was changed to the National Museum of American History.
- In addition to historical and cultural artifacts, the museum collects and displays items from popular culture, such as Kermit the Frog and the original Scarecrow costume from The Wizard of Oz.