



Bush reopens American history museum

Facility closed 2 years during \$85 million facelift, will open to public Friday

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WASHINGTON - The Star-Spangled Banner is so threadbare you can see through tattered sections of its bold stripes and bright stars to the table on which it rests at the overhauled National Museum of American History opening this week.

The museum, which draws millions of visitors, has been closed for more than two years while it underwent an \$85 million facelift. It will reopen to the public Friday with a three-day festival.

Once overlooked by some visitors as it hung near the museum entrance, the nearly 200-year-old flag that inspired the words of the national anthem is now the centerpiece of the reinvented museum. The flag gallery's carefully controlled climate will help preserve the fragile fabric that has deteriorated over time.

Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley, who often speaks about the 1814 British attack on Baltimore's Fort McHenry when Francis Scott Key penned "The Star-Spangled Banner," said he got teary seeing the new flag display. He spoke of the flag as if it were an old friend.

"My mom used to bring me down here as a little boy when she hung in the entrance to this museum," O'Malley said as he gazed at the 30-by-34 foot flag. "One could almost sit here for hours just staring at this magnificent icon of American triumph through great adversity."

At a rededication ceremony for the 44-year-old museum Wednesday, President George W. Bush urged all Americans to visit the museum, which he called a "fantastic place of learning."

"Ever since President James K. Polk laid the Smithsonian's cornerstone in 1847, it has been one of our nation's greatest centers of knowledge," Bush said.

Architects reorganized the central core of the museum to make it easier to navigate and to help visitors find what they're looking for. They sliced through the five-story building to create a central skylit atrium and knocked down walls in what was once a dark entryway.

Six landmark objects — including an 1865 telescope from Vassar College, a statue of George Washington, and a "Dumbo" car from a 1960s Disneyland ride — now mark the wings of the three exhibit floors to help orient visitors to the themes that organize the galleries.

Many of the changes address a 2002 blue-ribbon commission report that criticized the museum for its clutter, confusing layout and its less-than-inclusive presentation of history.

New artifact walls have been built into the museum's central core to showcase a rotating selection of the museum's 3 million objects — from a display on how Asian immigrants faced discrimination in the United States to a C-3PO costume from the "Star Wars" movies.

"This building is now rendered more spectacular than ever," said historian David McCullough, who is on the museum's advisory board. "At a time when so much else all around us is synthetic ... here is the treasure house of all historic American treasure houses of the real thing."

The museum's permanent exhibits will be renovated over time, and the popular exhibit of first ladies' gowns will reopen in December. Curators have already added President-elect Barack Obama to the museum's timeline of American presidents.

Favorite exhibits, such as Dorothy's ruby slippers from "The Wizard of Oz," will again be on view. Other

displays representing iconic moments in U.S. history include the Woolworth's lunch counter from Greensboro, N.C., that became a symbol of the nation's civil rights movement in 1960 and Muhammad Ali's boxing gloves.

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell will open the museum Friday with a reading of President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The White House has loaned the last-known copy of the speech written in Lincoln's hand to the museum for six weeks.

The renovation of the 44-year-old Smithsonian Institution landmark was accomplished with \$46 million in federal funds and \$39 million in private donations. Before the overhaul, the museum had become one of the more tired-looking and outdated in the Smithsonian collection.

Part of the reopening ceremony included a naturalization ceremony for five new U.S. citizens.

Sami Malaeb, a history teacher who immigrated to Alexandria, Va., from Lebanon six years ago, said the ceremony was his first visit to the museum.

"I know my history for America," Malaeb said. "It's a great, great story."

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