

EXHIBIT REVIEW

*N*ational Constitution Center, 525 Arch Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106.

Permanent exhibition, opened 4 July 2003. Sunday-Friday 9:30–5, Saturday 9:30–6, closed Thanksgiving and Christmas. Adults \$9, children 4–12 \$7, under 4 free, seniors, students, active military \$7. Exhibition area 67,785 sq. ft.

Internet: General information, visitor survey, virtual tour, educational resources, calendar of events, list of changing exhibits, interactive Constitution, “Citizen Action” (guide to all elected officials and daily schedule of Congress) <<http://www.constitutioncenter.org>>

The National Constitution Center opened its doors on July 4, 2003, and has seen over two million visitors come through its doors. Located near the Independence Visitor Center, the NCC is a monument to the concept of civic participation and fully engages visitors in the historical evolution of the United States

Constitution from the Stamp Act to the present. The Annenberg Center for Education and Outreach has developed educational materials for teachers with pre-visit, on-site, and post-visit resources to enhance field trips and group visits.

The National Constitution Center is an invigorating combination of traditional museum exhibits displaying historical artifacts with twenty-first century technology. The tour begins in the Kimmel Theater with a seventeen minute multimedia presentation, *Freedom Rising*, that incorporates live performance, video, and sound. Following the orientation presentation, visitors are directed to the Richard and Helen DeVos Exhibit Hall, which includes over 100 interactive and multimedia exhibits that demonstrate how the Constitution has changed since the Founding Fathers drafted it during the summer of 1787. The text of the Constitution, including all twenty-seven amendments, appears along the top of the entire exhibit area.

Upon entering the Exhibit Hall, attention is immediately drawn to the American National Tree exhibit. The American National Tree is a touch screen interactive exhibit that tells the stories of one hundred Americans whose lives reflect the spirit of the nation and reinforces the concept that the Constitution is a living, breathing document that has meaning for all Americans. The American National Tree exhibit focuses on three main themes: Equality, Citizen Voices, and Individual Liberties. Included on the American National Tree are Pennsylvanians such as William Gobitas and Jonas Phillips, along with prominent politicians, activists, religious leaders, and popular culture icons—probably one of the few exhibits that can simultaneously display both Billy Graham and Mickey Mouse.

The primary focus of the exhibits on display is “The Story of We the People.” The first section focuses upon the historical background, from reaction to the passage of the Stamp Act through the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, the Annapolis Convention, and the Constitutional Convention. In this section, visitors are exposed to two interactive thematic exhibits that appear sporadically throughout the exhibit hall: the changes in voting qualifications from 1765–1975 and Point/Counterpoint. For the voting qualifications stations, visitors are directed to select a colony or state, then they answer a series of questions related to wealth, gender, age, condition of servitude, residency, citizenship, and incarceration status to determine if they could vote during a specific point in time (e.g., women in Pennsylvania could not vote until 1919). The Point/Counterpoint stations permit visitors to listen to debates on major

issues, including declaring independence from Great Britain, restricting immigration, and protecting obscenity.

Throughout the Exhibit Hall, models and animation engage visitors as they tour the exhibit hall and learn about the interactions between branches of government. Visitors of all ages can be sworn in as president by taking the oath of office or conduct a mock press conference. In addition, museum visitors can vote in an historic presidential primary where they can select the “best president” from the ten candidates on the ballot (Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, T. Roosevelt, Wilson, F. Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, L. B. Johnson). Additional interactive exhibits include “Your State’s Story,” where you can find out when the state joined the Union, its population according to the 2000 census, and the names of the state’s governor, senators, and representatives. Another interactive area focuses on the judiciary, where visitors can try on robes worn by the Supreme Court justices and sit on the bench to make a ruling on a court case. Visitors can also access Supreme Court cases on a touch screen computer and review the details of the cases, the attorneys’ arguments, and the justices’ rulings.

While the National Constitution Center includes modern technology, it also uses low-tech Post-it notes to elicit responses to questions, including “What does it mean to be an American?” Toward the end of the displays in Exhibit Hall, visitors can post their opinions on key issues, from intelligent design to whether the presidency should be restricted to natural-born U.S. citizens. NCC staff members periodically collect the notes and compile the responses to the questions. Sample responses are available on the “Citizen Action” portion of the NCC website.

After departing Exhibit Hall, the tour guides the visitors to Signers’ Hall. Forty-two life size bronze statues of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention—thirty-nine signers and three opponents—provide visitors with an opportunity to stroll among the Founding Fathers and experience the close quarters of the Assembly Room. It is an almost surreal experience to mingle with the delegates (and particularly take notice of Washington’s height—and Madison’s short stature). In this room, visitors can both “sign” the Constitution and register their signature, or, like the Antifederalists, they can explain why they choose not to endorse the document.

The exhibit area concludes with a display of a public printing of the Constitution in the December 9, 1787, issue of the *Pennsylvania Packet*. Upon leaving the exhibit area, the full impact of the Constitution is realized when visitors notice flags from all U.S. states and territories hanging from the rafters, arranged in order of admission to the Union.

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Overall, the National Constitution Center is well worth the admission price. Visitors accustomed to the traditional object-and-label museum experience will not be disappointed, and those who seek a more engaging experience will enjoy their visit. Indeed, history does come alive through the exhibits at the National Constitution Center—and, regardless of your academic training, you will learn something new during your visit.

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