

## **A Visit to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture by David Jacobson**

What you get from a visit to the Smithsonian's new National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) depends on what you bring to it. Visiting in December, just three months after NMAAHC opened, I brought decades of study and immersion in African American history and culture, including a Sojourn in March 2015 and further travel with Sojourn leaders in Youngstown the following October.

Surely, I thought, entering the museum, some of the content would be familiar enough that I could skim through it. I was wrong. What I failed to factor in is that the more you know, the more you *should* know how little you know. The museum offered much more than I could consume in my eight hours there. I did not use any of the interactive exhibits, such as the touchscreens built into the Greensboro lunch counter display. I did not use the genealogy center, and I stopped to view only about 10 percent of the videos available.

It took a brisk walk-jog through the top two floors to ensure seeing, if not pausing to consider, all of the gallery content. Now that I know what I do not know, I know it would take at least two more eight-hour days to linger as long as desirable, and that's not even accounting for occasional points of diminishing returns on the ability to process information and emotion.

My host, NMAAHC Project Manager Carlos Bustamante, told me the average stay was six hours. He also told me, and I'm glad he did, a bit about the museum's design. Its corona is inspired by the three-tiered crowns used in Yoruban art from West Africa. And, wrapping the entire building in ornamental, bronze-colored metal lattices pays homage to the intricate ironwork that was crafted by enslaved African Americans in places such as Charleston and New Orleans. The most important advice Carlos offered was to start exploring the museum from the bottom up. Spoiler alerts are in effect for the rest of this article.

From the ground floor of the museum, you take an escalator down to the level that houses the Sweet Home Café. From there, you enter a glass-walled elevator accommodating about 50 visitors. Descending at a pace that matches the elevator host's speech about museum features, visitors see historic images through the elevator walls. They are told to feel free to maneuver past each other in order to see what they want, rather than necessarily waiting in line to read each placard, because the bottom floor space is "slim and dim."

The host might have added "grim." The purpose of the slim and dim environment is to reinforce the bottom floor's content, focusing on the genesis of African enslavement. Some displays explain the economic and political forces that shaped the slave trade. Others include replica sections of slave ships, displays of whips and shackles, and placards sharing overwhelming statistics of death and despair, all to be consumed amid haunting audio of first-person recollections read from journals of slaves who survived the Middle Passage and later learned to read and write.

From there the design gradually opens and widens and allows for slightly more light. That pattern continues throughout the museum. Through the progression of history, traced chronologically from bottom floor to top, the spaces widen, the sensory oppression lessens, the light grows louder, the displays more hopeful. You feel more freedom -- in parallel with the museum's narrative of increasing freedom for African Americans.

The first three floors walk you through the arc of history from the Middle Passage onward through exhibits of everyday slave life, a section on the Revolutionary War, an exploration of the paradox among those like Thomas Jefferson who led the fight for American freedom even while owning slaves, and sections on

the Civil War, Emancipation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the struggle for Civil Rights and the Obama presidency.

Sojourn folk will appreciate exhibits on John Lewis -- who was a driving force in the museum's creation -- Fred Shuttlesworth, Medgar Evers, Ella Baker (including video of her speech that informs the lyrics of the Sojourn anthem "Ella's Song" by Sweet Honey in the Rock) the Little Rock 9, and the McNair family. Larger displays include a segregated Pullman car, a plane used to train the Tuskegee Airmen, a guard tower from Angola Prison, a plywood wall from Resurrection City, and, most hauntingly, especially for Sojourn folk, an Emmett Till room containing the original open casket in which he was buried.

That back and forth from despair to hope to despair leaves you wrung and perhaps not ready for a meal at Sweet Home Café, which seems the next logical stop as you navigate upward through the museum. Fortunately, as you exit those first three history floors, a guide suggests that instead of heading straight to the cafe, you might want to visit the Contemplative Court. You do. [Here's why.](#)

At 1:30 on a Saturday, it took nearly 45 minutes to get into the cafeteria. The food is good, served cafeteria style from four stations, each representing a different U.S. geographic region and the influence of African American cuisine. The walls of the shared eating space contain photos, art displays and written reflections on the role of food, cooking, and the communion of recipe sharing in the African American experience. Sweet Home Café is enjoyable, but it is not a can't-miss experience, especially if you want to save an additional 60-90 minutes for the museum's remaining treats that *are* can't-miss.

- The African-American experience in the nation's wars from the 20<sup>th</sup> century onward. This section covers the African-American recipients of the Medal of Honor, many of whom were named after the abolition of racist policies that precluded their receiving the medal. One aisle in that section dead-ends into a window that looks through the opening of the corona's lattice-work onto the Washington Monument.
- The Power of Place. This series of rooms and twists and turns in the corridors between them focuses on specific geographies from the spine-chilling replica cell from Angola Prison to the celebratory vibe of Park Place, covering the evolution of hip-hop in the Bronx.
- The sports displays in the Community Galleries, featuring major standalone sections on Jackie Robinson and Muhammad Ali, statues depicting the 1968 Olympics protest gesture of raised Black Power fists by John Carlos and Tommie Smith, a range of other significant African-American athletes in individual diorama displays and per-sport spaces dedicated to baseball, football, basketball, boxing and golf.
- Sections on Culture, including food, dress, media, visual arts, literature, theatrical performance and a variety of musical genres (among the largest, most striking objects are the Parliament/Funkadelic Mothership and Chuck Berry's Cadillac El Dorado).

Just as time in the museum was too short to see and process everything available, so too is this article. We could go on forever, delving into detail on myriad mind-blowing displays. But by now it should be clear that you should visit NMAAHC yourself, bringing your own unique perspectives to the experience and leaving with them altered and open to reconsideration.

Don't forget to leave time for the gift shop! There is something for everyone in your Sojourn family!