



# AN ONGOING REVOLUTION

A Summary of the Interpretive Plan of the Museum of the American Revolution





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**The Museum of the American Revolution’s** Interpretive Plan represents more than a decade of work in creating the Museum, producing educational programming, and learning from the field and from our guests about what works. It outlines the interpretive pillars that underpin our interpretation in the Galleries, special exhibitions, other spaces, publications, resources, and online, and demonstrates how these are activated in educational programming. It is a living document that will evolve and change as we learn more from our audiences and head towards the nation’s 250th anniversary, the Museum’s first major milestone.

This summary of the Interpretive Plan discusses our key Interpretive Pillars, how we think about our work, and how we define many of our key terms. The full Interpretive Plan, available upon request, includes a large section discussing each Museum Gallery and special exhibition.



## INTRODUCTION

**The Interpretive Plan** captures information about the conception and creation of the Museum's core Galleries and exhibitions that may not be apparent at first glance. In order to consolidate our interpretive style and beliefs, it articulates six interpretive pillars that undergird our educational work. The bulk of the plan, not included here, is a guide to the Museum's core Galleries that discusses their historical context and their interpretive aims. Finally, a set of key terms provides commentary on many of the most common words and phrases used in and by the Museum. This is important because words matter in interpretation. Whether we use "patriots" or "revolutionaries," for example, informs how we think about the people in our story.

The plan is intended to inform the work of Museum staff across departments but also for the use of museum professionals, academics, teachers, and members of the public who are interested in museums and the interpretation of the American Revolution. Internally, it complements the Museum's robust slate of trainings and the Interpretive Manual, which contains thousands of pages of resources, outlines, and program scripts. It draws from and aligns with the Museum's strategic plan published in 2019 that articulated the institutional mission, vision, and values as following.



## MISSION

The Museum of the American uncovers and shares compelling stories about the diverse people and complex events that sparked America's ongoing experiment in liberty, equality, and self-government.

## VISION

To ensure that the promise of the American Revolution endures.

## VALUES

Below are the core beliefs that define our organization's character and guide our conduct, both internally and externally. They are critical to the organization's success.

### Integrity

We commit to being truthful, ethical, accountable, and transparent in all we do. When we make mistakes, we will acknowledge and learn from them.

### Inclusivity

We promise to face hard truths, have open dialogue about the complexities of our nation's history, and lift up stories that have often gone untold. We want all people to know that they belong here and that we are dedicated to meeting their unique needs.

### Collaboration

We believe that we are stronger together and strive to develop meaningful relationships and partnerships. We will empower each other and communicate openly to build trust.

### Discovery

We embrace creativity, bold innovation, and a spirit of discovery. We will cultivate an environment that supports passion, curiosity, and risk-taking, and is nimble to adapt as the world changes.

### Empathy

We believe in embracing the voices, viewpoints, and experiences of others and creating thoughtful, personal connections. We will foster a culture of trust, kindness, and respect.

### Stewardship and Sustainability

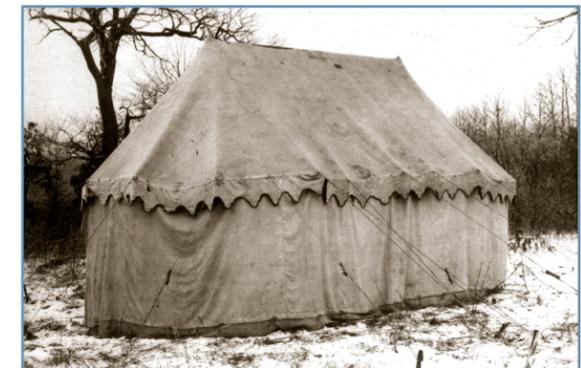
We believe that history matters; a strong sense of our place in time informs everything we do. We are committed to preserving both our cultural and environmental resources for present and future generations.



## A HISTORY OF THE MUSEUM

**The Museum of the American Revolution**, which opened in Philadelphia on April 19, 2017, is actually a hundred-year-old startup. In the early twentieth century, an Episcopal priest in Norristown, Pennsylvania, Reverend W. Herbert Burk, dreamed of creating a cathedral as well as a museum to commemorate George Washington and the American Revolution. He set about collecting funds and established the Valley Forge Memorial Chapel, which still stands today, and the Valley Forge Historical Society. The Society collected and preserved thousands of objects and artworks related to the Revolutionary era, including George Washington's sleeping tent and William Trego's iconic 1883 painting *The March to Valley Forge*.

In 2000, the Valley Forge Historical Society founded a new nonprofit — the National Center for the American Revolution — to shepherd the collection into a new home in a national museum, initially planned to be located within, and later on private land adjacent to Valley Forge National Historical Park. In 2009, after local residents and others expressed concerns about the location of the new museum in Valley Forge, an unusual opportunity emerged. The Center exchanged land at Valley Forge for property owned by the National Park Service within Independence National Historical Park. This exchange allowed the NPS to add undeveloped land to Valley Forge National Historical Park and the new museum to be built on an ideal site, only two blocks from Independence Hall. Renamed the Museum of the American Revolution, the project entered an intense period of fundraising, exhibition planning, and construction, opening on time and debt-free in 2017. More than 300,000 people visited during the Museum's first year of operation. In 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Museum expanded its online offerings through a new Virtual Museum and a robust slate of digital programs for all audiences.



## INTERPRETIVE PILLARS

**The American Revolution** is both a term for a historical era and the name of an ongoing aspiration for a better political community and a better world. Encounters with original objects and exposure to diverse and unfamiliar stories makes the story of the Revolution more accessible to everyone. An accessible history strengthens the relationship between the American Revolutionary era and the present aspirations of America's ongoing revolution. Six interpretive pillars guide the Museum's interpretation of the American Revolution.

As an idea, the American Revolution promises a more perfect future.

The American Revolution is ongoing.

We tell *a* story of the American Revolution, not *the* story.

A more diverse story is a more accurate story.

Historical objects present opportunities for building and practicing historical empathy.

History is about investigation and interpretation, not just facts, and there is always more to learn about the American Revolution.



## As an idea, the American Revolution promises a more perfect future.

At the root of the American Revolution is a radical optimism and a promise: that it is possible to resolve seemingly contradictory aspects of human nature and history to create a more perfect future. How can a society balance the need for good behavior with the right of free will? How can it reconcile ideas about personal liberty with rights of equality and rights of property? How can it recognize and cultivate a plethora of voices within a community that tries to speak with one voice? Eighteenth-century Revolutionaries created a republic as the best means to these ends, but they did not resolve these questions. The promise of the American Revolution exists as a “north star” which inspires and guides us today.



## The American Revolution is ongoing.

We distinguish between the Revolutionary era (1760-1800), the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), and the ongoing American Revolution (an evolving idea and influencer of events throughout American and world history). Understanding the Revolutionary War and Revolutionary era is key to understanding the ongoing Revolution and its influence in our contemporary world. The Revolution is both a story of origins in a specific era and transformations in the times since the eighteenth century: its one constant has been its capacity for change. Like us, eighteenth-century people lived in a complex, global world. Nevertheless, they changed the world, and so can we.



## We tell a story of the American Revolution, not *the* story.

We interpret the Revolutionary era using a selection of stories that will change as we acquire and borrow new objects, make new historical discoveries, and connect with new topics. This is not a comprehensive, encyclopedic, or permanent narrative; the diversity of human experiences makes this impossible. We strive to create and share new historical knowledge and interpretation in the form of exhibitions, publications, programs and digital content. Sharing this process of discovery and creation invites our audiences to have a stake in this story and make discoveries of their own.



## A more diverse story is a more accurate story.

Our interpretation builds on scholarship that reveals the rich diversity of Revolutionary America in race, class, gender, ideology, politics, ethnicity, ability, religion, and many more identities. There were many revolutions in late 18th-century America, and while the American Revolution created a nation, the promise of the American Revolution goes beyond national identity. It was and is the product of different and competing visions. Diversity has always been part of the American Revolution and is not a corrective applied in the present. This diversity creates opportunities for visitors of all ages and diverse life experiences to connect with these stories, making this history more accessible to many different people. In telling a diverse story, we create opportunities for guests to have conversations about topics such as the origins and legacies of contemporary racial identities.

## Historical objects present opportunities for building and practicing historical empathy.

We interpret the Revolution as a series of predicaments: real events that happened to real people who did not know the outcomes or what the future would hold. The immediacy of historical objects — things that witnessed events and have travelled across time for people today to examine — provides an access point to these moments in time and space, allowing us to begin to understand historical context and the many motivations of people in the past. Object-based learning creates opportunities to engage people in a dialogue about the past and their relationship to it, connecting intimate stories to larger cultural phenomenon. It encourages a sense of historical and contemporary empathy, a valuable skill for everyday life beyond museum experiences. The Museum's exhibits and programming aims to empower people to think critically, activate them to learn more, understand and respect the views of others, and enact change in their world.



## History is about investigation and interpretation, not just facts, and there is always more to learn about the American Revolution.

History is a discipline and a practice. It is driven by curiosity, investigation, and discovery. We challenge people to reexamine what they think they know about the Revolution by presenting questions as well as facts. The historical record (what survives in archives, material objects, and other primary sources) does not equal all past events and experiences, and “history” does not equal “truth.” Because we are all the products of the past and shaped by history, history should be accessible to everyone, and anyone can use this record to make new arguments about the past and present. We understand the past on our own terms, using our own words and ideas, including ones that didn't exist in the time we study. The Museum's core Galleries center on four complicated questions that we encourage our audiences to consider through deep engagement with nuanced, complex content. Simultaneously, we encourage a sense of the excitement and fun of historical discovery through drama, investigation, and serendipity.





## COMING TO TERMS WITH REVOLUTION

The conclusion of the Interpretive Plan includes a glossary of our key terms. The most important one that we use is Revolution and some closely related terms.

**Revolution** is the most complicated term of the Museum. We define it as a tumultuous process and series of events that transforms a place and a culture. In the 1770s, people used it to describe a new turn in history (a revolution) and a new way of looking at the world.

**The American Revolution** is a broad term that encompasses an evolving idea that began in the mid-eighteenth century and continues today. Perhaps the earliest use of this new term appeared in several 1776 speeches and publications by South Carolinian William Henry Drayton.

**The Revolutionary era** was about 1760-1800. Some scholars include periods before and after this, especially when talking about an international “Age of Revolutions” that often encompasses the period between about 1775 and 1848.

**The Revolutionary War** began at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, and ended with the Treaty of Paris

in 1783. We use Revolutionary War rather than War for Independence. Though the latter was and is a common term, it implies that the most important result of the war was national independence. Instead, we emphasize the much broader ideological, political, and social aims and results of the war, which extended well beyond a political independence movement.

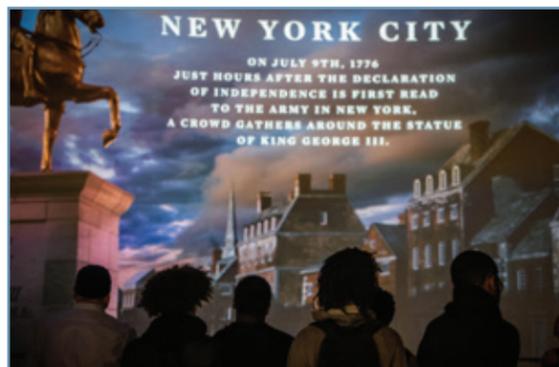
We use the term “**revolutionaries**” in two ways, reflecting that there were many revolutions in the American Revolution. Lower-case revolutionaries were people who engaged in and effected the tumultuous changes of this period, from a woman who melted down lead for musket balls to an enslaved man who ran away to join the British forces. Capitalized Revolutionaries refers to people who sided with the cause of the new United States. We use this term rather than “patriots” (in the period, someone could be a patriot and do patriotic things for the British cause, too) or “Americans” (most Americans were not in favor of the Revolutionary cause).



## GALLERY INTERPRETATION

The Museum's full Interpretive Plan includes summaries and discussions of each of our core Galleries, special exhibitions, and Revolution Place. Museum President and CEO, Dr. R. Scott Stephenson, describes the Museum's core exhibition as "a movie you can walk through," referring to the narrative flow and cinematic quality of the experience. Nonetheless, our Galleries are not a movie, a book, or a painting. We employ a variety of media to present a generally chronological story, including original objects and works of art, immersive built environments, and diverse multimedia experiences. The choice to tell our stories in a physical museum space and in a chronological way makes the complex events of this period more accessible but also limits the ways we talk about the Revolution. It's harder to trace change over time in specific aspects of cultural and material culture, for example. Though we discuss changes in objects in certain spaces (like the *Arms of Independence* case and interactive and two bookend cases showing royal and republican objects at either end of the Galleries), it is harder to detect the enormous influence of the Revolution, over decades of time, on other groups of people or cultural practices. The Revolution changed how people lived in their homes, what they read, who went to school, how they painted family portraits, how they thought about the land and property they owned, how they prosecuted crime and imprisoned people, how they constructed and excluded people from their communities, and nearly every other facet of life.

In addition to a chronological narrative, the Museum's curators also constructed the Galleries around four questions. Historians have been asking questions about the Revolution since it began, and the phrasing and selection of these four is a result of our interpretation but also shapes how we view the Revolution.



### How did people become

**Revolutionaries?** This question considers how, in just over a decade, many people living in the American colonies changed their minds about the nature of society and government. How did people go from loyal subjects of a monarchy to avid supporters of a new style of government and creators of a republic?

### How did the Revolution survive

**its darkest hour?** The Revolution had many dark days, but in considering what followed after people became Revolutionaries, the Museum needed to grapple with how a fragile revolution with only limited popular support survived a massive British onslaught. Between 1776 and 1778, the Revolution was repeatedly on the brink of failure. What kept it going?

### How revolutionary was the war?

For some people, the Revolutionary War

changed everything. It transformed them from subjects to voting citizens, for example, and opened new economic and social opportunities. But for others, the war was the least revolutionary of the period's events. For them, the broader ideas of the Revolution took much longer to come to fruition. Some of the people who stood to gain the most from the Revolution — and who interpreted it most broadly — continued to struggle for rights for the rest of their lives.

### What kind of nation did the Revolution create?

Because the Museum follows the story of the Revolution well beyond the Revolutionary War, we investigate how people in the new United States thought about their country. What compromises did some of them make? Who won and who lost? How does the Revolution continue to shape our country and the world?

## KEY TERMS

The following Key Terms offer commentary on, rather than definitions of, the most common terms used at the Museum of the American Revolution. Many of these are very complicated words encompassing different and even competing ideas, and we encourage our staff — and our guests — to consider the power they have to shape our interpretation. This is where anachronism comes into play: we often use contemporary words to understand the past, shaping how we talk about it in ways that are very different from how people experienced things in the 18th century.

### Accuracy/Authenticity

People sometimes use “accurate” and “authentic” synonymously, to mean something that was or is real, realistic, or feels real. We distinguish between these two terms. Accuracy means something that is factually correct, as in “a more diverse story is a more accurate story.” Authenticity is more complicated. It can mean something that is real, like an authentic original object, something that feels realistic, like an authentic replica object, and even the overall feeling that comes with the recreation of a historical scene or environment. We strive to help people imagine the past through authentic immersive environments and both sorts of material culture: real objects on display and carefully-made replicas they can touch.

### African/African American/ People of African Descent/People of Color

The Museum uses these terms to refer to specific groups of people who lived in America. “African” refers to people born in Africa; “African Americans” and “people of African descent” refer to people who might have been born in Africa or America (often, individuals’ birthplaces remain unclear), and the Museum usually uses these terms instead of “black/Black”; “people of color” refers to non-white peoples more generally. In some cases (usually within quotation marks) we use terms in the way they appeared historically. More often, we apply contemporary labels to historical groups.

### America/Americans

In Museum usage, America usually refers to North America and especially the portion that would become the United States. “Americans” refers to all residents of this place.

### Colonies/Colonial

Europeans most often arrived in the Americas as settlers engaged in imperial colonial projects meant to establish settlements and extensions of national empires in new places. This colonialism intentionally empowered certain people over others, including native populations. The British American colonies included more than the thirteen eventual first United States. At the Museum, the adjective “colonial” usually refers to specific periods, events, or groups of people, such as a “colonial delegation.”

### Commemoration

The commemoration of a historical event or individual involves programs, ceremonies, and other acts meant to recall and preserve their memory. At the Museum, we are also interested in how memories change over time, and commemorations here often use anniversaries to inspire conversations about the legacies and contemporary meanings of historical actions and events. We also host celebrations and events that are more detached from historical anniversaries and individuals and instead use contemporary events and people to connect to the past.

### Empathy

Reaching beyond ourselves to imagine and understand the experiences and feelings of another person is one of the most important skills the Museum works to convey to people. We use historical experiences — including of people you might identify with and others who seem totally unlike you — to cultivate a sort of historical empathy. By imagining and empathizing with the experiences of people in the past, people can become empathetic person in everyday life and more ready to have empathetic encounters with others.

### Engagement/Education

The Museum is dedicated to an educational mission: we uncover and share compelling stories about the diverse people and complex events that sparked America’s ongoing experiment in liberty, equality, and self-government. Engaging people in this experience means using many different media, programs, and experiences — real and virtual — to allow different guests to connect to our stories. To be engaged in a story is to activate sometimes latent feelings of excitement, curiosity, and inquiry. Engagement also implies this experience can and should lead to longer-term relationships between the museum and the communities it serves.

### Equality

A constant struggle at the heart of the American Revolution has been defining equality and maintaining equality of opportunity, including how we balance equality with liberty and freedom. This has often involved things like determining qualifications for citizenship, balancing the legal and practical nature of equality, and debating the extent and meaning of many different forms of equality.

### Exhibition/Exhibit/Gallery

The Museum refers to its second-floor spaces as the core Galleries. This exhibition (versus exhibit, which is a single installation, case, or space) is not a set of permanent galleries. Exhibit elements change frequently as we learn more and rotate displayed objects. The Museum’s temporary exhibitions typically occur in the first-floor Patriots Gallery.

### Freedom and Liberty

In the 21st century, Americans talk a lot about “freedoms” but not as much about “liberties.” Around the time of the Revolutionary War, the words were also essentially synonymous. Nonetheless, “liberty” made more frequent appearances regarding political rights than the more ambiguous concept of “freedom.” Sometimes, these values are in direct conflict with ideas about equality.

### Heritage

In its most literal sense, heritage is something that is inherited. At its worst, heritage is treated as exclusionary: something someone can only have because of who they were born as. But we believe that the ideas of the Revolution and a sense of belonging to a larger American story are not

a birthright given to a privileged few.

Abraham Lincoln reflected on this question in a speech in 1858. He pointed out that many new Americans could not trace their bloodlines to the founders of the country:

*“But when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,’ and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.”*

It is incumbent on us all to identify and preserve cultural heritage: the objects, architecture, lifestyles, landscapes, foodways, art, and myriad other things that have value beyond their creators and first users. The Museum encourages guests of all backgrounds to feel a sense of inheritance as stewards of American Revolutionary heritage.

### History

At the Museum, we define history as the narratives people create about the past. Creating history is a process of interpretation, in which someone selects and evaluates evidence to bolster their case. The past, on the other hand, is the whole set of occurrences and ideas that once existed. Because we cannot recapture it in its entirety, we create history to make sense of what it was and what it means today.

### Interpretation

Interpretation is the process of explaining and translating ideas and feelings between people and across media. We rely on a deep understanding of surviving sources to create stories and interpretation in various forms. The Museum uses many forms of interpretation — the display of real objects, audiovisual installations, touchscreen interactives, immersive environments, films, theater pieces, and human-facilitated programs — to help guests imagine the past in all its complexity and nuance. Each guest is different, and so we offer multiple and interpersonal ways for different people to encounter history for different people.

### **Living History/Living Historian/ Living History Interpreter/Costumed Historical Interpreter**

The Museum sometimes uses an interpretive technique called “costumed living history” in which an educator wears reproduction clothing while engaging guests in a conversation, activity, or program. Sometimes, this educator uses “first-person” interpretation (pretending to be a real person from the past). More often, they use “third-person” interpretation, without any pretense and using garments as one of their interpretive tools. The Museum does not use words like “reenactor” or “reenactment,” often used by other institutions for similar things, because these words more often conjure images of a hobby activity and recreations of battles rather than interpretive techniques.

### **Material Culture**

Material culture is a phrase for the objects made and used by people. In its literal sense, it means physical forms and products of culture. Sometimes this also includes surprising things like landscapes, music, and language. Considering and examining objects allows us to reflect on human experiences across time (many objects outlive their original makers and users) and how people attach meaning, symbolism, and importance to the things in their world. As a museum, our primary reason for existing is to collect, care for, and allow people to engage with actual pieces of historical material culture.

The Museum refers to a variety of forms of material culture using specific words:

- An object is any thing. Among these things are paintings, documents, artifacts, furniture, sculptures, powder horns, and an array of other types.
- An artifact is something that was excavated by archaeologists or amateur diggers after a period of being buried.
- A relic is something preserved with a specific story because of its history of use and ownership (its provenance)
- The collection is the Museum’s whole assemblage of objects.
- Authentic, original, real, and witness objects are things that existed in our historical period and survive today.
- Replica and reproduction objects are things created by contemporary people based on original things.

### **Monarchy**

Monarchy is a form of government based on the relatively absolute rule of a single person in authority. The American Revolution and the other global revolutions that followed replaced many monarchies and monarchical colonies with republics and other new forms of government.

### **Museum**

A museum is a place where objects are preserved, studied, and displayed. Increasingly creative adaptations of this term mean some people now use it to refer to physical spaces without objects or digital spaces that feature stories about objects. While these can be exciting venues for exploration and learning, our Museum’s core experience includes both a physical place and original objects.

### **Nation**

A nation is a group of people who share certain cultural aspects and/or values (such as a shared geographic space, common descent, history, law, language, foodways, and/or religion). Most often, a nation is rooted in a specific geographic space and conducts itself as an organized political state. Nationalism can have good and bad results, both often rooted in a people’s pride in their identity, nationhood, and role in the world.

### **Native American/American Indian/ Indigenous Peoples**

The Museum uses Native American, American Indian, and indigenous as synonymous adjectives to refer to the native inhabitants of the Americas at the time of European colonization and their descendants. Europeans initially called these people Indians, and it was only much later that different nations and individuals decided to call themselves Native Americans, American Indians, indigenous peoples, first nations, and other terms. Because native identity and labelling is a matter of self-determination (different people prefer to be called different things), there is no universal term that everyone accepts. We use Native nation names and personal names as often as possible rather than generic terms.

These are living cultures, and there are both commonalities and differences among native nations. Just like today, Native Americans in the 1700s shared some cultural

experiences across vastly different groups while also having distinctive beliefs, practices, and experiences that distinguished each.

### **Republic**

The people who advocated for independence and wrote the founding documents of the United States constructed new systems of government to replace the British monarchy and its colonial extensions. A republic is a political body (a state) in which power rests in the hands of many representatives of the public. Some republics have broad representation in which most adults are citizens and can vote. Others feature more exclusive citizenship and systems of representation. This way of constructing government was created in the late eighteenth century based on old inspirations (especially memories of the “classical” civilizations of Greece and Rome) as well as new ideas that sprang from the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment. The United States is a republic (made up of many state republics) in which citizens vote for representatives who create laws. In practice, many people refer to the U.S. system of government as a democracy, in which power rests in the hands of the people and all citizens have equal rights.

### **Self-government**

Much of the debate involved in the early days of the American Revolution revolved around the proper place of authority in civil society. Eventually, Americans came

to advocate for local and national self-government, which meant their independence from foreign or distant rulers, and republicanism over monarchism.

### **Slavery/Enslaved People**

Slavery is a condition of lifetime servitude, sometimes inherited through descent and often connected to race or ethnicity. In early America, many Native Americans were enslaved by Europeans. By the eighteenth century, most enslaved people in North America were of African and mixed descent. Following recent scholarship, the museum refers to enslaved people rather than slaves to imply personhood and agency. We use slave as an adjective to refer to things like slave ships.

### **Story**

The Museum is a place where we tell stories, which are at the heart of all of our interpretation. Stories are the creation of people who gather information and tell narratives that may or may not be rooted in historical facts. The stories we tell at the Museum presume that there was a reality to the past but also that we must translate that into new media in the form of history. How we balance what we know to be true and how we fill in the gaps of our knowledge is the delicate balance between nonfiction and fictional storytelling. We make the process of our storytelling transparent and encourage guests to participate in considering this process by presenting them with questions and substantial primary sources.





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