

‘History Has Changed’

Renovated museum digs deeper into civil rights movement

By Bill Dries

Tweet 3

Recommend Share 4

[Print](#) | [Front Page](#) | [Email this story](#) | [Email reporter](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

The headquarters for Freedom Summer is still being set up and nearby the stage is almost ready for the March on Washington.



Doug Zellman of 1220 Exhibits installs a bill of sale in the Slave Trade exhibit at the National Civil Rights Museum. The museum is preparing to open following a \$27 million renovation.

(Daily News/Andrew J. Breig)

The almost-finished exhibit on the black power movement includes an interactive media table that is as bold as the moments and cultural history it offers.

Enough of the \$27 million renovation of the National Civil Rights Museum is in place to see that it is not the museum that opened in 1991. It is more.

And the first major renovation of the institution built around the old Lorraine Motel where Dr. [Martin](#)

[Luther King](#) Jr. was assassinated in 1968 was more than adding new exhibits and sprucing up others.

[Earnestine Jenkins](#), one of the renovation scholars involved and a University of Memphis art history professor, said the exhibits reflect not only new technology but also new scholarship on the movement.

All of the exhibits should be completed by the opening to the public April 5.

What visitors will see is a museum chronicling not just the civil rights movement but a deep historical dive into the context of then and now as well as the people, known and unknown, who are part of a much larger story.

And the renovated museum does all of that with a broader recognition that not only do the 200,000 visitors a year come with different perspectives and levels of knowledge about the events and issues highlighted there.

“In 22 years, history has changed,” said museum executive director [Beverly Robertson](#), referring to civil rights era murders solved since 1991 as well as changes in habits. “People in a museum no longer read a book on the wall.”

“It’s not a museum that is limited to being a history museum,” said Daniel Kiel, a professor at the University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law, who worked on the exhibits on the 1954 *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision outlawing racial segregation in schools as well as the 1961 integration of public schools in Memphis, about which he made a documentary film.

'History Has Changed' - Memphis Daily News

There are more videos and recordings, particularly of recorded conversations President Lyndon B. Johnson had from his office, such as a phone call between Johnson and King. And in many more cases, the wealth of material is there for visitors to explore on their own as much or as little as they want.

The speeches before King's at the March on Washington are ready for selection on the new technology, including [John Lewis](#)' speech calling the movement "a revolution" at a time in 1963 when others in the movement and organizing the march counseled Lewis to stay away from such rhetoric. The inner workings of the controversy continued up to Lewis' walk to the podium.

Architect [Juan Self](#), who worked on the original layout as well as the annex, said the goal of his firm, Self-Tucker Architects, was to make the architecture disappear at most points so visitors could immerse themselves in the events and personalities.

One major set piece created in the original museum remains where it has been – the re-creation of the Edmund Petus Bridge in Selma, Ala.

"Everything was gutted out. We just started with a fresh box with the exception of the Petus Bridge," Self said, citing the expense of moving the bridge structure or replacing it and rebuilding somewhere else. "It's in the right place on the time line, so it fit very well. But everything else was completely redone. We also expanded into the old motel portion, which is now the black power exhibit."

The one area of the museum that remains essentially the same is the rooms where King and his aides stayed at the old Lorraine Motel in 1968.

The Albany, Ga., protest movement gets a more detailed treatment, including the police strategy of arrests without violence and few confrontations, at least in front of television cameras.

The exhibit points out that once the protestors were in jail, there was violence, although it was largely unseen. It also includes letters from jail from the protestors, similar to small pieces throughout the museum that go to the view that the movement included unknown figures as well as iconic figures.

The roots of slavery in Africa are explored extensively. The rotunda includes a round border at the top of the exhibit with the opening words of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

Jenkins said the placing of the section at the beginning of the museum experience gives a context to what follows.

"It starts where all human history starts – on the continent of Africa," she said.

One of the smallest artifacts in the area that includes replicas of slave ship conditions and traces Middle Passage slave trading routes is a certificate of sale for a 10-month old baby.