

*Brent Glass:* Hello. I'm Brent Glass. I'm Director of the National Museum of American History and I'm very grateful to have an opportunity to say hello to all the affiliates of the Smithsonian Institution and to give you an update on how we're doing in the renovation of the National Museum of American History.

*Jennifer:* Fantastic. Can you tell us a little bit about what's going to be on view when you reopen? How things might look different or feel different to visitors?

*Brent Glass:* There are going to be some dramatic changes at the museum and anyone who has been here over the last 40-45 years will immediately see that we are bringing more light into the museum. In fact one of our sub themes of this renovation is to shed more light on American History both literally and figuratively. And certainly the introduction of light through a new skylight, by opening up the interior architecture of the museum, is going to be very noticeable to people when they come in.

The architectural changes are going to be very significant. One of the elements of that architectural change that I'm very excited about are the artifact walls, the display cases that will be visible on the first and second floors of the museum. When you enter from the Constitution Avenue entrance or from the National Mall you will immediately see the great collections of the National Museum of American History. You will know you're in an American history museum.

*Jennifer:* Excellent. And can you tell us a little bit about how the gallery for the flag will change?

*Brent Glass:* One of the biggest changes and most dramatic changes and I think one of the most inspirational changes in the museum is the new gallery that we're building for the Star Spangled Banner, the flag that inspired the National Anthem. And that gallery will be located in the center of the museum on the second floor. But the flag will not be hanging as it had been displayed for many years just for the obvious reason that the preservation of the flag requires that it be displayed in a new environment in a position about at a 10 degree angle with a low light level.

Even with these preservation constraints that we have, we've turned those constraints into a very dramatic presentation of the flag and I think a much improved presentation of the flag. When visitors enter the flag gallery they will have an opportunity to learn more about the context, the historical context in which the flag

became the Star Spangled Banner. Through an exhibition, they'll learn about the Battle of Baltimore, of the capture of Washington just preceding that battle. Who was Frances Scott Key? What was this moment of inspiration that led him to write the poem that became the National Anthem?

Then they'll see the Star Spangled Banner in a very dramatic new presentation by the dawn's early light. Because we need to keep the light levels low we will be presenting the flag much in the way that Frances Scott Key saw it on the morning of September 14, 1814. When they leave the flag gallery they'll learn more about what happened to the flag after the Battle of Baltimore. How did it become the Star Spangled Banner? How was it saved by the family of commandant of Fort McHenry? How did it come to the Smithsonian in the early 20th Century? What have we done in the last decade to preserve the flag?

So they'll have a much greater understanding about why this flag is such an important symbol and why it's one of the icons of American History. And I predict that the Star Spangled Banner gallery will be one of those must see attractions in Washington, D.C.

*Jennifer:*

Do you have any new exhibitions planned for when you reopen? Any traveling shows that you are working on?

*Brent Glass:*

We have several new exhibitions and also new venues for old exhibitions. One of the changes that will be evident when people come into the museum is a new location for the First Lady's Exhibit, still one of the most popular exhibits in the museum and I envision it will continue to be very popular. The First Lady's Exhibit will be on the second floor but in the west wing, not the east wing of the museum.

We have new exhibitions planned on Abraham Lincoln, for example. We'll be opening a new exhibition in January of 2009 to observe the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth. We are planning a new exhibition on maritime history which will open in the spring of 2009. We're planning a new small gallery but a very important gallery that will showcase our coin and currency collection.

We will also open a document exhibition gallery and that is a new opportunity that we have to showcase some of the important documents in American History and that gallery will be located on the second floor of the museum.

So there are many new exhibitions or new locations for familiar exhibitions that will be available to the public when we reopen later this year.

*Jennifer:* At the last Affiliations conference, your staff spoke about the visitor surveys they've done, the kinds of interpretive strategies you might explore when you reopen, and changes you might make to the visitor experience. I wonder if you could speak to that ?

*Brent Glass:* We're interested in not only presenting our collection in a new way through the artifact walls and new exhibitions but also in serving the visitor in new ways. We have found that an emphasis on more personal contact with visitors is very important. We've learned this over the past two years at our treasures exhibition, The Treasures of American History, which is at the Air and Space Museum at least until the middle of April, April 13 to be precise. We've learned that visitors really appreciate the opportunity to ask docents questions rather than having a structured tour. They really enjoy having more interaction with the curators and with the education staff.

And so we're going to approach our educational mission a little differently when we reopen at the end of this year by providing more opportunities for visitors to engage with our docents and with our staff. We're also opening a new welcome center which will be available on the second floor. And at the welcome center there will be much more opportunity for visitors to learn what there is to see at the museum as well as what there is to see at other Smithsonian museums here in Washington, D.C.

*Jennifer:* Can you give Affiliates a preview of what they might see in their hard hat tour this summer?

*Brent Glass:* We're looking forward to giving the Affiliates a special sneak preview of what's going to happen at the American History Museum and we're going to offer a tour this summer. By the time the tour occurs this summer there will be a lot of evidence of a finished museum. They'll be seeing most of the galleries will be reoccupied by our staff and we'll be installing exhibitions this summer. We'll be starting to plan the welcome center and also plan some of our public programs and really planning our reopening which should be very exciting. So there'll be a great opportunity to have an advanced preview of the museum at a point when most of the construction work will be completed and the installation of exhibitions will be underway.

*Jennifer:* Excellent. And finally, we all watched your fabulous turn on Steven Colbert, the Colbert report. I wonder if you could talk about what it was like to be with him?

*Brent Glass:* I enjoyed the opportunity to work with Steven Colbert. It was very similar to bringing a 9 year old child with this irrepressible curiosity and the sort of off the wall questions that I had to answer. And I realized right from the beginning that he's the comic, I'm the straight man. I was not going to try to be funnier than he is and I don't think I could be funnier than he is. And so once we accepted our roles it was a delight to work with him. It was a challenge to talk about the collection in a serious way while he is trying to pull out any of the humorous incidents he could or any of the humorous qualities he could. But I think that in the versions of his tour that were on his show, I think it was a good opportunity for us to showcase the collection and the museum.

*Jennifer:* Would you like to say any parting words to Affiliates?

*Brent Glass:* I would like to say to the Affiliates how much I enjoy visiting the different museums around the country whether or not the American History Museum has something on loan there. In most cases that's the reason I'm invited. But I think it's just great that we have this Affiliation program not just for the loans of collections but for the professional interaction and collegiality that we have with the Affiliates all over the country.

*Jennifer:* Thank you.

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