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Civil War and Reconstruction: The Battle for Freedom and Equality
Exhibit Walkthrough

The National Constitution Center’s new permanent exhibit, *Civil War and Reconstruction: The Battle for Freedom and Equality*, is the first gallery in America devoted to exploring the constitutional debates from the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The exhibit narrative explores how “We the People” came to write the Declaration of Independence’s promise of freedom and equality into the Constitution with the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. The Declaration recognized that “all men are created equal,” but the issue of slavery was left unaddressed in the 1787 Constitution. Slavery persisted, and by 1860, nearly four million enslaved people of color lived in America. The exhibit first spotlights the rising tensions over slavery, which brought about the bloodiest war in American history, and then explores the period after the Civil War when the nation attempted to rebuild after slavery’s destruction and passed the transformative Reconstruction Amendments.

The 3,000-square-foot exhibit features over 100 artifacts, including: original copies of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments; a military pass authorizing Frederick Douglass to freely pass throughout the country and recruit black troops; a pike purchased by John Brown for the armed raid at Harper’s Ferry to incite a revolt against slavery; and a fragment of the flag that Abraham Lincoln raised at Independence Hall in Philadelphia in 1861. These artifacts, as well as interactive technology, multimedia, and immersive graphics, will teach visitors about the key figures and events central to the era.

The first section of the exhibit, **Building to Crisis**, explores the time period of 1787-1860. As enslaved people of color pursued freedom, anti-slavery activists and abolitionists grew more vocal. They called upon the nation to live up to its founding promises and criticized white Southerners’ cruelty and abuses of fundamental rights. While the government tried to keep slavery off of the national agenda, the anti-slavery movement spread. Conflicts over slavery erupted and ultimately pushed the nation to the brink of war. Through multimedia, artifacts, and powerful quotes, visitors learn about the expansion of slavery, the American experience under slavery, and the growth of the anti-slavery movement.

The Civil War erupted in 1861. A four-year conflict that ended slavery and preserved the Union, the war affected the lives of all Americans. Enslaved people pursued freedom and sought protection behind Union lines even before President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared freedom for enslaved people within the rebellious states. Throughout the conflict, Americans divided over the future of slavery and the constitutionality of secession. The war eventually settled these questions, transforming the Constitution—and the nation—forever. This exhibit section describes how the war broke out after states seceded, the establishment of the U.S. Colored Troops, and the impact of the war on soldiers and civilians. This section also contains the largest artifact display of the exhibit, featuring items from the Civil War Museum of Philadelphia—one of the most significant Civil War collections in the country.

Reconstruction was America’s attempt to rebuild after the war, abolish slavery everywhere, protect freedom, and guarantee equality—efforts that culminated in the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th

Amendments. This final section, covering 1865-1877, focuses on the tumultuous presidency of Andrew Johnson after Lincoln's assassination, the continued fight of African Americans to be afforded the same freedoms as white Americans, and the passage and impact of the Reconstruction Amendments. Through an original gallery interactive created to teach the drafting process of each amendment's text, visitors can explore the key stories, figures, and ideas behind the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, examine the events that shaped each amendment, and compare the evolution of text within each amendment. These interactives are also designed to complement the Center's upgraded online *Interactive Constitution* and *Drafting Table* learning tools which will launch in the fall.

The Reconstruction section of the exhibit in particular will be the first of its kind to teach visitors about:

- The **13th Amendment**, which permanently outlawed slavery in the United States. Relevant artifacts include an 1866 poem by William Cullen Bryant titled "The Death of Slavery" and a letter written by Senator Lyman Trumbull, a key author of the amendment. Visitors can also engage with an iPad interactive to explore newspaper ads from formerly enslaved people as they searched for their loved ones after slavery was abolished. The newspaper ads have been gathered by Villanova University graduate students as part of the *Last Seen* digital history project.
- The **14th Amendment**, which defined citizenship and protected basic freedoms against state abuses, while expanding equal protection and due process of the law to all persons living in the United States. In this section, visitors can view an 1874 petition of black citizens praying for protection under the 14th Amendment and hear audio recordings of formerly enslaved individuals recalling what life was like during and after slavery, which have been preserved by the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center.
- The **15th Amendment**, which declared that states could not discriminate in voting based on race, color, or previous condition of servitude. Visitors can learn about Octavius V. Catto, a teacher and activist, who was fatally shot in Philadelphia while attempting to vote. An interactive map features the stories of influential African Americans who held political office during Reconstruction. Visitors can also see artifacts such as a "Colored" ballot box from Virginia's first statewide election that allowed black men to vote in 1867, and a "poll tax" receipt from 1910.

The decline of Reconstruction came in the mid-1870s, when federal troops left the South and Republican-led Reconstruction state governments were overthrown. White Southerners continued to violate the constitutional privileges and immunities promised to all by the Reconstruction Amendments. Although congressional Republicans pushed for enforcement legislation, most efforts failed to pass. Aided by the Supreme Court, white Southerners dismantled many of the accomplishments secured for and by African Americans during Reconstruction.

In the last exhibit area, visitors learn how the promises of freedom and equality lived on in the Constitution and the law as African Americans continued to fight for equality—culminating in landmark Supreme Court cases like *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of the 1960s.