



Preserving Our Nation’s Cultural Resources

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“You don’t know what you’ve got till its gone” – these words from a popular song convey the need for historic preservation. The preservation of the nation’s past – historic properties, material culture, public and private records, historic photographs, oral history, and recordings – allows each generation to pass on tangible evidence of another era to the next generation. Through these materials, Americans can explore the choices and decisions made by famous and ordinary people, individually and in groups, that shaped the nation. They provide a window into a world that no longer exists. Connecting to the past helps to ground us during times of change and turmoil. Connecting to the nation’s past helps us to understand the American character.

The Smithsonian’s Role as Custodian of Our National Culture, Heritage, and History

Chartered in 1846, the Smithsonian is uniquely situated to care for the nation’s culture, heritage, and history. Tradition and public confidence make the Smithsonian the nation’s premier repository. Americans rely on us to save our history, to care for the material evidence of the past, and to tell our national story to millions of visitors each year. The Institution’s broad collecting mandate brings thousands of artifacts and documents into the national collections each year. Despite federal appropriations and increased private donations, we face challenges in caring for the materials collected over the centuries. Nonetheless, the staff employs the highest preservation standards to fulfill our responsibilities to the American people.



Muhammad Ali’s Boxing Gloves. (Courtesy of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History)

The Smithsonian’s collections are vast and diverse. Preservation is an essential part of professional collections management. Once materials are accessioned into the collections, specialized conservators (for example, paper, textiles, paintings, metals, etc) survey and treat them before they are exhibited. Objects on exhibition are monitored so that environmental conditions are maintained – low light levels and consistent temperature and humidity levels. Exhibited objects are rotated off view after a specified amount of time. When not on exhibition, objects are stored in secured facilities, protected with archival materials, and monitored for stable environmental conditions. Because of the high cost of conservation, historical importance and exhibition relevance determine treatment priorities.

What Makes a Cultural or Historical Artifact Worthy of Preservation by the Smithsonian?

Each museum of the Smithsonian collects different objects consistent

with their different missions or purposes. As the nation’s history museum, the National Museum of American History collects broadly across the American experience. The museum seeks objects, ordinary and extraordinary, whose stories and meanings are rich and complex, that have inherent worth, that both reflect and challenge the conventional wisdom, and that invite us to look deeper or broader. These objects and their documented contexts are critical to our responsibility to illuminate and interpret the larger themes of American history and form the foundation for research, scholarship, exhibition, public programs, and outreach.



Howdy Doody. (Courtesy of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History)

Thus the collections at NMAH range from the simplest hand tools to the ENIAC computer; from the desk on which Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence to a Votomatic from the 2000 Presidential election; from Judy Garland's Ruby slippers to the hat Abraham Lincoln wore to Ford's Theater the night he was assassinated; from John L. Sullivan's bare-knuckle championship prize fighting belt to Muhammad Ali's boxing gloves; from fragile ceramics to a two-and-a-half ton Mormon sunstone; from unrivaled collections of scientific and medical instruments to the wooden puppet, Howdy Doody; from early locomotives and streetcars to Richard Petty's stock car and Lance Armstrong's bicycle; from the Woolworth's lunch counter at which protesters sat in the Greensboro sit-in of 1960 to the chairs that Archie and Edith Bunker filled in *All in the Family*. Numbering over 3 million objects, the museum's collections constitute a unique and irreplaceable representation of America's social, cultural, scientific and technological history.

A Preservation Case Study

The Star-Spangled Banner, the flag that inspired the national anthem, is among our most esteemed and valuable cultural artifacts. As such, it has received special preservation attention since it was donated to the Smithsonian in 1912. The flag's iconic status and its fragile condition require attentive monitoring. Treated at various times in the past 100 years, with the most extensive treatment from 1999 to 2005, the Star-Spangled Banner has benefited from the highest level of professional conservation science and practice.

The Star-Spangled Banner came into prominence on September 14, 1814. That morning, Major George

Armistead hoisted a magnificent American flag above Fort McHenry to signal the American victory over British forces in the Battle of Baltimore during the War of 1812. Francis Scott Key, an amateur poet, had witnessed the 25-hour bombardment from aboard a ship in the harbor. As he saw the flag unfurled "by the dawn's early light," he was so moved by its sight that he penned a poem in tribute. Key set the words to music, and the song became the National Anthem. He named the flag he saw that morning the "Star-Spangled Banner."



Sponge Cleaning the Star-Spangled Banner. (Courtesy of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History)

The Smithsonian's goal for the Star-Spangled Banner has always remained the same: to ensure the treasured flag's survival. Thanks to the dedicated work of the conservation team, the Star-Spangled Banner is now expected to survive for generations to come. But the Smithsonian must find a new way to display the historic flag. It is too fragile to hang vertically, as it once did. The staff is working with architects, engineers, and other experts to create a permanent display room for the Star-Spangled Banner that is environmentally sound. Visitors will be able to see the flag in its true condition, as a tattered but treasured piece of our nation's history.

How You and Your Students Can Help Preserve the Culture and Heritage of Your Local Community

Few of our nation's historic materials receive the same attention as the Star-Spangled Banner. Much of our history is being lost. Preserving history at the national and local level offers us different ways to approach the past. Local context provides intimacy and a sense of entitlement that can excite and broaden the appeal of historic preservation. We learn about the fragility of the past by working on projects close to home. For example, students can catalog old family photographs by identifying people and noting the date and the event the photo chronicles. Compiling this information also encourages students to learn more about their family history. Teachers and students can contact their local historical society and inquire about projects where they can help.

Educational Resources from the Smithsonian Featuring Local History and Historic Preservation

The National Museum of American History's webpage includes many educational resources that focus upon American History and culture, including:

- **History in Your Home** - Everyday objects are part of American history and culture. They provide important clues about how people in the past lived, worked, and played. This engaging resource helps students discover the history that exists around them.

To access "History in Your Home," please visit americanhistory.si.edu/collections/homehistory.cfm. Images and information about objects and documents can be found at: americanhistory.si.edu/collections/index.cfm. To learn more about the Smithsonian Institutions please visit si.edu.