

Constitution Center's bold new exhibit takes on the Civil War and Reconstruction

by [Stephan Salisbury](#), Updated: May 7, 2019- 3:56 PM



CIVIL WAR MUSEUM OF PHILADELPHIA, COURTESY OF NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER

It seems remarkable, but apparently it is true: There is not a single exhibition in the United States that explores the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the radical transformation they wrought on the nation's governing framework and its daily life.

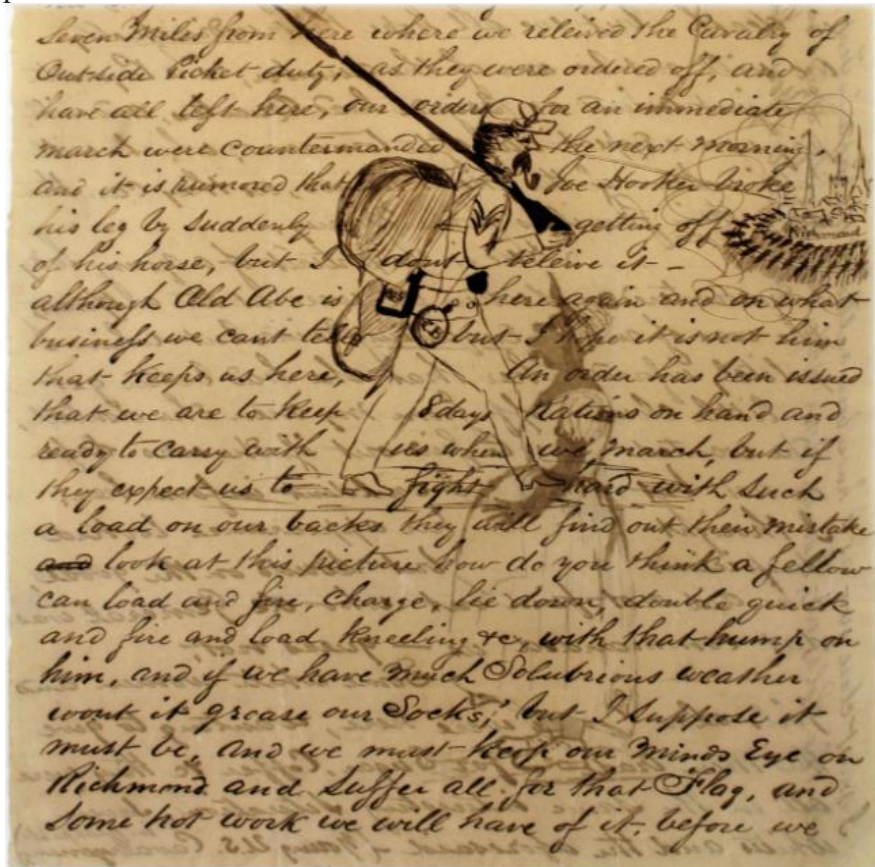
Nothing covering the whole story — from enslavement through resistance and on into brutal war, legal jockeying, constitutional amendments, and the rise of the violent and repressive backlash — can be found anywhere. It's an epic of frustration and achievement brimming with heroes and unconscionable villains, a period so charged with significance it is often called the “second founding.”

But the [National Constitution Center](#) on Independence Mall is about to end the institutional silence. On Thursday, the center opens its first new permanent exhibit in years, “Civil War and Reconstruction: The Battle for Freedom and Equality.”

The exhibit, which contains more than 100 artifacts and interactive displays that invite deep, clarifying exploration of what might otherwise seem arcane documents, is built around many materials that once reposed in the old Philadelphia Civil War Library and Museum, a now-shuttered but storied institution founded by former Union officers in Philadelphia after the Civil War.

From Dred Scott’s 1846 petition for freedom, signed with his mark, an X, to a paper receipt for “Lucy Ann,” who was sold for \$775 in 1862, to original copies of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution and the ominous rise of the Klan, the exhibit vividly illustrates the intractable problems clustered around brutal warfare and its aftermath.

Those problems, of course, are still with us today. Racial injustice, birthright citizenship, voter exclusion and suppression, the authority of the Constitution itself, all are very much part of contemporary politics and civic life.



CWMP

Illustrated letter from a Civil War soldier complaining of the heavy loads they are required to carry, 1863. Courtesy of The Civil War Museum of Philadelphia and The Abraham Lincoln Foundation of The Union League of Philadelphia

“How can anyone who learns about these struggles not be inspired?” asked Jeffrey Rosen, president and chief executive of the Constitution Center. “It’s so unifying. If there’s any hope in this country today, it is the significance of this text, which binds us. People are still fighting for it. They’re debating what it means. But it has touched many and it is incredibly meaningful to bring it to people and inspire them to learn more about it.”

Even though politics seemingly engulfs the Constitution today? he was asked.

“The Constitution exists above politics to say not what the government should do, but what the government may or may not do,” Rosen said.

“It is what is removed from politics. Politics may want to ban hate speech or flag burning, but the Constitution says you can’t do that because there are certain rights that are so fundamental they are above politics. Now, what the Constitution means is settled by politics. That’s the whole point of the Civil War. It took the heroic sacrifices of those abolitionists and other citizens to transform the Constitution and to express that transformation in the form of constitutional amendments.”



NCC
Dress spurs worn by Major General George Meade. From the Collection of the Civil War Museum of Philadelphia on loan from Gettysburg Foundation

Scholar and filmmaker Henry Louis Gates Jr., who just took a turn as executive producer and host of the PBS series *Reconstruction: America After the Civil War*, said the exhibition is a "compelling example of how our great cultural institutions can help us learn from —and reconcile with — our troubled past.”

Gates called Reconstruction a “defining and dark era in our nation’s history” that has been “undertought in our schools and misunderstood in our society for more than a century.”

The exhibition, which fills a 3,000-square-foot gallery, is divided into several parts. In the Constitution Center account, the Supreme Court's infamous 1857 Dred Scott decision crystallizes the whole conflict and its aftermath.

Scott was an enslaved man from Missouri who lived for a time on free soil and then sued for his freedom. In similar cases, many courts freed the enslaved. But not this time.

Scott's case reached the Supreme Court, where [Chief Justice Roger B. Taney](#) wrote a sweeping denial of Scott's claims. No, Dred Scott was not a free man simply because he lived in a free state. Moreover, Scott was not a citizen. Nor could any black man, woman, or child, enslaved or free, ever be a citizen of the United States. Nor did Congress have the authority to ban slavery from the nation's territories.



CIVIL WAR MUSEUM OF PHILADELPHIA ON LOAN FROM GETTYSBURG FOUNDATION
Fragment of the flag that Abraham Lincoln raised at Independence Hall, 1861

From a constitutional perspective, the Civil War was fought to overturn the Dred Scott decision, and “Civil War and Reconstruction” reaches deep into the historical narrative to show why, presenting important but often-overlooked figures as actors in the national drama.



GETTYSBURG FOUNDATION

Tin dressing kit used by a female volunteer at the Union Volunteer Refreshment Saloon and Hospital, ca. 1860s. From the Collection of the Civil War Museum of Philadelphia on loan from Gettysburg Foundation.

The displays used to illuminate the Civil War amendments are distinctly interactive. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery. The 14th Amendment established citizenship status and guaranteed equal protection under the law. The 15th Amendment guaranteed the right to vote for all men, regardless of color. Visitors can follow the evolution of the language from draft to draft.

The withdrawal of federal troops in 1876 thwarted “the promise of Reconstruction,” said Rosen. After that withdrawal, black people in the South faced the horrors of the mob and the terrorism of the Klan, he added.

“Not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 did Martin Luther King begin to make the promise of the [Civil War] amendments a reality,” he said.

In addition to the exhibition, the Constitution Center will feature daily performances in the exhibit highlighting Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a key African American activist, poet, speaker, and writer during Reconstruction.

ON EXHIBIT

Civil War and Reconstruction: The Battle for Freedom and Equality

New permanent exhibit opening Thursday at the National Constitution Center, 525 Arch St.

Hours: 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday.

Admission: Adults: \$14.50, seniors and college students (with ID) \$13; veterans, \$11; ages 6-18, \$11; free for children under 6 and active military.

Information: 215-409-6600, constitutioncenter.org.



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