

IN SERVICE OF SOCIETY:
CONFLICTS OF CURATORSHIP IN 1976 BICENTENNIAL MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

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ABSTRACT

During the celebration of the American Revolution Bicentennial in 1976, museum curators developed patriotic exhibits that expressed similar forms of nationalism and promoted government-sponsored ideals of national unity. External political, economic, and social factors impacted the curators of three bicentennial exhibits, *The World of Franklin and Jefferson, USA '76: the First Two Hundred Years*, and *A Nation of Nations*, in ways that influenced the exhibits' content and focus. Shifts in the United States' social, economic, and political institutions resulted in reconstructions of the American past that accommodated the needs of a federal government struggling to regain public trust. Curators expertly manipulated national mythologies to reflect their patrons' desires. As a result, the three exhibits relied on themes of unity and progress to promote loyalty to the federal government. Such themes were often at odds with the realities of the 1970s, but they were repeatedly used in the exhibits to encourage visitors to reaffirm American ideals and loyalty to the nation-state. The museum field, which was in a period of transition as it slowly shifted to accommodate changes brought on by the protests of the 1960s, had not sufficiently responded to public and professional needs for guidance. Curators were forced to face new challenges of interpretation with little professional guidance. This analysis of three bicentennial exhibits reveals that due to political, economic, and social pressures, in 1976 museum professionals exercised their curatorial authority to create unifying narratives of nationalism.

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INTRODUCTION

During the 1976 American Revolution Bicentennial, museums developed exhibitions with common themes of patriotism that were designed to reach all Americans and renew their sense of pride in their country. The exhibitions celebrated the nation's founding moment, political values, progress, and diversity. The themes suggested that these were claims about national identity with which Americans could most easily connect. These themes held additional appeal for bicentennial organizers because they were easily manipulated to serve current interests. In the 1970s, increasing demands for public institutions to include the narratives of a variety of minority groups caused government officials and museum curators to seek forms of commemoration that would promote public trust. Eager to encourage images of national unity, museum curators focused on mythologies of the founding moment, political values, national progress, and diversity to produce patriotic exhibitions. Curators downplayed issues of dissent and division in these exhibits in order to maximize their potential for visitor consensus, which reflected positively on the museum and its sponsors. By doing so the curators failed to provide visitors with an objective, holistic view of American history. Three bicentennial exhibitions, *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, *USA '76: the First Two Hundred Years*, and *A Nation of Nations* revealed that social, economic, and political pressures in 1976 caused museum professionals to employ their curatorial authority to create unified narratives of nationalism.

Americans marked the 200th anniversary of the founding of their nation during a period of unrest as the country shifted along social, economic, and political lines. Organizers of the national bicentennial celebration feared that the anniversary would be a cause for conflict rather than consensus, because it occurred so soon after the activism of the previous decade.¹ Realizing

¹ Lynn Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration: Creating national identities in the United States and Australia*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 101.

this, bicentennial planners looked to the past for reaffirmation of the pride and prestige that had once marked the national character. In a time of social uncertainties, Americans sought understanding in the past. Robert G. Hartje, director of the Bicentennial Project of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) stated that, “Our celebration must somehow reflect the idea of what it means to be an American.” But defining universal American characteristics was difficult for bicentennial organizers. In the book *Bicentennial USA*, which was designed as a handbook for regional and state bicentennial organizers, Hartje used phrases such as “America is the right place,” and “the intangible spirit of the American people” to describe concepts of the United States and its people as inherently positive and enduring.² This enabled curators to draw connections between modern society and its revolutionary past that promoted centuries-old beliefs in national mythologies. Even as planners resuscitated old mythologies, such phrases struck chords within people whose faith in their nation had wavered.

Situated between a wary public and a federal government still reeling from the effects of Watergate, bicentennial planners in the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration (ARBA) sought a celebration that would invite little protest from the American people, and in which all Americans could participate. The ARBA therefore encouraged museums to produce images of nationalism with which they believed all Americans could identify. Representative Charles Mathias of Maryland, who introduced the legislation that created the ARBA, stated that, “We believe not only that the revolution was the most important event in our history but, even more, that the ideas and ideals of the revolution are as real and relevant today as they were two hundred years ago.”³ For organizers, the main symbolic grounds for claims about national identity were the founding moment, political values, progress, and diversity. The American

² Robert G. Hartje, *Bicentennial USA: Pathways to Celebration*, (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1973), 324.

³ Hartje, *Bicentennial USA*, 19.

Revolution's status in American culture, and its ability to resonate across social and political boundaries made it the natural choice for the focus of the celebration. Such repertoires of symbols provided fertile and robust grounds for imagined national community, despite difference and disinterest, in a wide variety of circumstances.⁴ As the great unifier, the ARBA thought, the American Revolution offered Americans an opportunity to reaffirm their loyalty to the nation.

In 1976, visitors came to museums to look at exhibits and learn.⁵ Exhibits used color, labeling, layout and design, and technology to provide visitors with a multi-sensory experience that appealed to multiple learning types. A range of aims and objectives were achieved in a single exhibition by the use of a variety of interpretive materials, and the exhibition was able to appeal to a wide visitor group made up of different ages, levels of knowledge, and intellect.⁶ The controlled environment of exhibits allowed curators to carefully construct historic narratives in ways that shaped Americans' collective memory during the bicentennial.

Realizing this, bicentennial planners acted to control museums' interpretation of the American Revolution. Hartje wrote in *Bicentennial USA* that museums celebrating the bicentennial were expected "to tell a story in literary form, to win an audience, and to point out moral lessons from the past."⁷ American history, specifically the Revolution, became a tool for transmitting powerful cultural messages to museum audiences. The unique ability of museums to act as a mediator between the past and present made it necessary to understand the ways in which they shaped national identity, especially during the bicentennial, when organizations such as the ARBA and the AASLH pressured museums to control exhibit content.

⁴ Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration*, 132 – 133.

⁵ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*, (New York: AltaMira Press, 2000), 3.

⁶ Michael Belcher, *Exhibitions in Museums*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 38 – 39.

⁷ Hartje, *Bicentennial USA*, 239.

The museum field underwent drastic shifts in the 1970s. No longer viewed by the public as untouchable centers of authority, museums struggled to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse society. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre said in 1966 that, “Social changes have not only made certain types of conduct, once socially accepted, problematic, but have also rendered problematic the concepts which have defined the moral framework of an earlier world.”⁸ Long-held assumptions of America’s social order and history, which lauded the efforts and achievements of white men, were questioned in the wave of social activism and protest of the 1960s and 1970s. Ethnic minorities and women, empowered by new recognition by the federal government, challenged museums’ traditional assumptions of history and demanded inclusion in these heritage centers.

However, change was slow in coming. Museum professionals were operating from an outdated code of ethics, instituted in 1925 that addressed individual conduct in operating museums. A new code, which gave greater attention to objects, was not passed until 1978.⁹ Although museum professionals were aware of the need for change within the field, especially with consideration to minority groups, substantial change was not made by the time of the bicentennial. Joseph Veach Noble, who later served as the president of the American Association of Museums (AAM), published his “Museum Manifesto” in 1970. In it he briefly described the five basic responsibilities of every museum: to collect, to conserve, to study, to interpret, and to exhibit.¹⁰ Museum exhibition interpretation and visitor analysis were developing fields in the 1970s, with no definite guidelines or evaluation methods secure by 1976. Museum professionals, and especially curators, were forced to make interpretive decisions in regard to bicentennial

⁸ Gary Edson, (ed.), *Museum Ethics*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 48.

⁹ “Code of Ethics for Museums,” American Association of Museums, <http://www.aamus.org/museumresources/ethics/coe.cfm>, (accessed February 27, 2010).

¹⁰ Stephen E. Weil, *Rethinking the Museum and other Meditations*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 57.

exhibits using professional standards that did not reflect contemporary needs. The lack of professional guidance, combined with pressures from the federal government to produce patriotic exhibits, caused curators to create bicentennial exhibits that dismissed the demands of minority groups and promoted traditional notions of nationalism.

As history always represents both past and present, changes in the ways history is staged must be understood as being about the present, and as embedded in continuing cultural practice, as much as about the past.¹¹ During the bicentennial, museum exhibitions across the country became shrines to the colonial past. Within their sacred halls American gazed upon relics of the founding generation. Images of men such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin dominated exhibits, their presence providing Americans with representations of the promises of American greatness. The founding fathers, along with documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, were more than relics of a bygone age. Visitor comments written in bicentennial exhibition books revealed that such objects were to them the physical embodiments of personal liberty and the promise of national power – both cornerstones of American identity that produced patriotic sentiments in audiences.

Furthermore, revolutionary figures and artifacts were representations of a constructed past. To select and put forward any item for display, as something worth looking at, as interesting, was a statement not only about the object, but about the culture it came from.¹² Museum curators deliberately selected objects and arranged them to produce positive feelings of nationalism that ultimately reflected well on the museum and its corporate and government patrons. *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* was sponsored by the IBM Corporation, which gave Charles Eames

¹¹ Rosmarie Beier-de Haan, “Re-staging Histories and Identities,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies* by Sharon Macdonald, ed. (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 186.

¹² Michael Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 34.

\$500,000 to design the exhibit.¹³ The overtly patriotic focus of the exhibit created narratives of consensus that minimized or eliminated historical dissent. This focus maximized the possibility of a positive response from audiences caught in a patriotic fever produced by the bicentennial, but ultimately did a disservice to audiences who deserved examinations that were more in-depth than those provided by a fife and drum narrative of American history.

Furthermore, bicentennial exhibits constructed narratives of the Revolution that resonated with a population that was keenly aware of its own precarious position in the world. The defeat in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, an economic recession, and continuing protests by minority groups caused many Americans to seek reassurance in positive images of the national story. The protests and ongoing social changes also caused museums and the federal government to find ways to reinvigorate public faith in their authority. Bicentennial exhibitions were carefully controlled environments in which selected national narratives encouraged Americans to affirm their loyalty to the nation-state and its guiding institutions.

Three bicentennial exhibits are the focus of this study. These exhibits are: *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, a traveling exhibit that was showcased internationally before coming to the United States for the bicentennial year; *USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years*, another traveling exhibit that remained within the United States; and *A Nation of Nations*, which was displayed at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. These three exhibits were chosen as the focus of this study because their content was national in scope, they were sponsored by nationally (and internationally) recognized museums, and they were made available to large audiences.

¹³ “The World of Franklin and Jefferson Press Release,” Document, 1975-1976, 1; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-5 The World of Franklin and Jefferson General (memos, letters, info); A1 Entry 30 Box 135; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

The three exhibits were centered on a single theme: the American Revolution. The *World of Franklin and Jefferson* used the lives of revolutionaries Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson as focal points for the rapidly evolving nation. Beginning with Franklin's birth in 1706 and ending with Jefferson's death in 1826, the exhibit covered 120 years of American history. The lives of these two men were used to reflect the progress of the American nation, from its establishment as several British colonies to independence and the growth of a democratic country. The American Revolution was presented as the pivotal moment in the history of the fledgling nation. The exhibit depicted historic events as things that happened either before or after the Revolution.

Sponsored by the ARBA and designed by George Nelson, *USA '76* interpreted the Revolution as having long-range effects on the development of the United States. This exhibit showcased American industrial and technological progress over 200 years, and emphasized the continued presence of revolutionary ideals in the development of the nation.

Curated by a team of museum professionals from the Smithsonian Institution, *A Nation of Nations* examined the cultural history of the United States through the experiences of the country's diverse population, and spanned in time from the pre-Columbian period to 1976. Despite differences in content and focus, all three bicentennial exhibits were centered on the American Revolution, and developed celebratory narratives that reflected positively on their designers.

The exhibits met the second criteria for inclusion in this study; they were shown at nationally recognized museums. The authority held by these museums added to the authenticity of the exhibits and their content. *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* was shown at seven locations: the Grand Palais in Paris, France; the National Museum in Warsaw, Poland; the British Museum

in London, England; the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City; the Art Institute of Chicago in Chicago, Illinois; the Los Angeles County Museum of the Arts in Los Angeles, California; and in Mexico City, Mexico.¹⁴ Paris and London were chosen as sites for the exhibit because of Jefferson and Franklin's close association with the cities as 18th century ambassadors. Warsaw was selected as a location for the exhibit in order to improve U.S. – Poland relations, as part of the Nixon administration's containment policy. In 1972, President Richard Nixon visited Polish President Gierek, a visit that Gierek returned when he came to the United States in 1974 as the two nations continued to improve their relationship.¹⁵ Warsaw's selection as a host city for *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* was done to please the Polish government. USA '76 was shown in ten cities, including Chicago, Seattle, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Boston; and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of History and Technology displayed *A Nation of Nations* in Washington, D.C.¹⁶ The museums were carefully selected by staff to enhance the authority, appeal, and presentation of the exhibits.

All three exhibits were viewed by extraordinary numbers of visitors. *The World of Franklin and Jefferson's* six locations all saw a minimum of 50,000 visitors during the exhibit's 60-day showings in Paris, Warsaw, London, New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Mexico City. During a period of three years, over 600,000 people viewed the exhibit.¹⁷ USA '76 traveled to ten

¹⁴ "The World of Franklin and Jefferson Press Release," D, 1975-1976, 2; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-5 The World of Franklin and Jefferson General (memos, letters, info); A1 Entry 30 Box 135; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁵ "USA and Poland," The Electronic Museum, http://www.electronicmuseum.ca/Poland-USA/usa_and_poland_2.htm, (accessed April 5, 2010).

¹⁶ Peter C. Marzio, (ed.), *A Nation of Nations: the People who came to American as seen through Objects, Prints, and Photographs at the Smithsonian Institution*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), i.

¹⁷ "The World of Franklin and Jefferson Attendance," Document, Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-14-1 The World of Franklin and Jefferson Mexico City; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

locations in the United States, and during its twenty-month tour had a total of 338,000 visitors.¹⁸ *A Nation of Nations* had an estimated 6 million to 10 million visitors in 1976.¹⁹ The large numbers of visitors to these exhibits indicated their popularity with viewing publics, which made them prime subjects for examining their content and interpretation of American history. Although not developed at the time of the bicentennial, current scholarship on visitor studies recognizes that the presence of people transforms a constructed exhibition setting into a dynamic public space. Kathleen McLean stated in *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions* that people are generally attracted to other people, and a crowd around one exhibit will draw more people.²⁰ The large and continuous attendance indicated that audiences eagerly absorbed the celebratory messages of national identity produced by exhibit curators.

In bicentennial exhibits, curators focused on shared experience over time as an important part of what it meant to be a nation. Symbols of history and claims about historical experience were frequently mentioned in talk about what members of a nation shared. For example, visitors to *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* during its showing at the Los Angeles County Museum of

¹⁸ Robert Dolehide, Scottsdale, Arizona, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "Final Report of 'USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years" Exhibition, Typewritten Letter, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Robert S. Byrnes, Los Angeles, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "Report for period July 30-August 13, 1975 on 'USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years," Typewritten Letter, 14 August 1975, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Byrnes to Jack Masey, "USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years, Seattle Exhibition Report for Period 10 – 15 June 1975," Typewritten Letter, 16 June 1975, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Byrnes to Jack Masey, "USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years, Chicago Exhibition Weekly Report #4, 12 – 18 March 1975," Typewritten Letter, 22 March 1975, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁹ Louis Harris and Associates, New York, to Dr. Daniel J. Boorstin, Washington, D.C. "Initial Thinking on Polling Visitors to the Bicentennial Exhibit," Typewritten Letter, 22 August 1973, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

²⁰ Kathleen McLean, *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Association of Science-Technology Centers, 2005), 21.

Art in Los Angeles, California expressed feelings of patriotism as they viewed the exhibit. A visitor wrote in the exhibit comment book that it was “a very rewarding exhibit – makes me proud of my heritage.” According to visitor Mrs. Wallace E. Ward, the exhibit was “an outstanding bringing together of the ‘essences’ of the beginnings of the American spirit – For me it was a refreshing breath from the past, and a continuing meld of insight into the hope of what we want to become.”²¹ Bicentennial exhibits did not simply commemorate the nation’s birth, they affirmed national purpose.²²

Visitor reaction to and interpretation of an exhibit is now understood as being more important than the exhibit itself. A well-designed exhibit means nothing if it is unsuccessful in attracting visitors. Harris Shettel argued in 1968 that, “exhibit effectiveness is demonstrated on the basis of measurable change in the behavior of the intended audience, produced by the exhibit, and consistent with the stated aims or objectives of the exhibit.”²³ At the time of the American Revolution Bicentennial, visitor studies was a new field. For several decades museum professionals realized that something was happening to their visitors, but they did not know exactly what. Without understanding the motivations and expectations of visitors, museum professionals were unable to effectively respond to the larger changes in society. By 1976, there was no set way to measure change in visitor behavior. Instead, museum staff largely relied on visitor comment books, often placed at the end of the exhibit, for visitors to write down their thoughts and opinions about the exhibit they recently viewed. As a result, the available

²¹ Stead, Rexford, Los Angeles, to Dolores Barchella, Washington, D.C., TL, 12 January 1977, Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-14 The World of Franklin and Jefferson, Los Angeles; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

²² Hartje, *Bicentennial USA*, 8.

²³ Harris Shettel, “Strategies for Determining Exhibit Effectiveness,” in *Exhibitions in Museums* by Michael Belcher, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 199.

information regarding the three bicentennial exhibits in this thesis has been largely drawn from visitor comments and newspaper reviews.

In the analysis of the exhibits, this thesis drew on scholarship concerning national identity and myth making, museum education, and visitor studies. Michael Kammen's work on the formation of American tradition in *Mystic Chords of Memory* and *A Season of Youth* stated that the United States uses times of commemoration to reaffirm the purposes of nationhood. Kammen examined the creation of American myths, such as the reverence of George Washington and the endurance of symbols like Lady Liberty and the eagle. His work was used to examine why certain symbols dominated bicentennial exhibits, and their purposes for inclusion in these four exhibits. Lynn Spillman's book, *Nation and Commemoration*, and Robert Hartje's *Bicentennial USA* are some of the few published works that discuss the American Revolution Bicentennial. As such, their insights into the ARBA's desires and influences on commemoration activities were used to explain the interpretations of the Revolution and American society in bicentennial exhibits.

Scholarship from the museum field described the transitions that occurred in the profession in the 1970s. Gary Edson's *Museum Ethics* was a reference for professional responsibility and duties, with the understanding that the book was based on a code of ethics amended twenty years after the bicentennial. Additional information about the Code used in the 1970s was located at the AAM's website. Reprinted in 1977, Freeman Tilden's book, *Interpreting Our Heritage* revealed the Seventies' slow shift in public history from object-oriented sites to interpretive-based sites. Tilden's "Six Principles of Interpretation" were used to understand professionals' changing approaches to museum education and exhibition design. As the bicentennial exhibits' curators dealt with shifting public, political, and professional needs, they clearly followed

Tilden's argument that interpretation is an interdisciplinary art aimed at provoking visitor thought.²⁴

Originally published in 1979, Edward P. Alexander's book, *Museums in Motion*, discussed the periods of transition that museums went through in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and explained museum professionals' parallel shifts in functions and responsibilities.²⁵ In 1990, the book *Rethinking the Museum* by Stephen E. Weil discussed issues of authority, curatorship, and collections management in 1970s museums. Weil revealed the impact of Joseph Veach Noble's "Museum Manifesto" on the field's duty to collect objects and interpret them.²⁶

Interpretation of objects, and understanding their impact on visitors were burgeoning areas of the museum field in the 1970s. *Rethinking the Museum* was used with *Interpreting Our Heritage* to understand curators' attempts at interpretation in three hugely object-filled bicentennial exhibits.

In *From Knowledge to Narrative*, Lisa C. Roberts explained how understanding the educational perspective of exhibitions influences visitors, and can shape their experience. This work was used to present exhibitions as dynamic spaces, with varied meanings and interpretations. In *Learning from Museums*, John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking discussed the role that visitors play in shaping the meanings in exhibitions. They argued that visitors bring with them a variety of experiences and expectations to exhibits, and therefore numerous interpretations of the information presented in exhibits were possible. Falk and Dierking also discussed the ways in which museums responded to their visitors' needs, which made the museum experience more accommodating and engaging. Their work assisted in clarifying how visitors understood and responded to the bicentennial exhibits. However, limitations in the

²⁴ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 18.

²⁵ Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: an Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, (London: AltaMira Press, 1996), 234.

²⁶ Weil, *Rethinking the Museum*, 57.

analysis exist. Demographic information on visitors that could assist in reaching conclusions about individual interpretations was not available, as no visitor surveys were conducted at any of the exhibits. The information was restricted to visitor comments, which may include the person's name and place of residence.

Curators designed bicentennial exhibits that overwhelmingly placed emphasis on commonalities between Americans that renewed their faith in their country and its political institutions. The myths of the American narrative were rarely questioned in bicentennial exhibits, and encouraging symbols of national identity overshadowed conflicting evidence of American dedication to ideals of liberty and equality. Michael Kammen argued in *Mystic Chords of Memory* that in such a diverse society, Americans tend to honor their commonalities. As a result, commemoration practices in the United States celebrated narratives that emphasized consensus rather than change. During the bicentennial, museum curators actively sought consensus over conflict in the development of exhibition design and interpretation. Maintenance of American nationalism required a powerful application of faith in a mystic homogeneity that embraced but superseded a broad range of backgrounds, beliefs, and regional loyalties.²⁷ In order to accomplish this, curators of these three bicentennial exhibits responded to government pressure to create exhibits that emphasized consensus and patriotism. So central constructions of national identity in bicentennial exhibitions promoted national mythologies and ignored the contradictions, dissent, and violence in the American past. Overwhelmingly, visitors responded positively to the exhibits' messages, which confirmed that like the federal government, they sought reassurance in a mythic past. The three bicentennial exhibitions revealed that museum professionals involved with *The World of Franklin and Jefferson, USA '76*, and *A Nation of*

²⁷ Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic*, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 226.

Nations responded to social, economic, and political pressures and employed their curatorial authority to create unified narratives of nationalism.

CHAPTER 1. FAILED INDEPENDENCE:
THE WORLD OF FRANKLIN AND JEFFERSON VS. THE GOVERNMENT

Charles and Ray Eames created *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* exhibit for the celebration of the American Revolution Bicentennial in 1976. In addition, the exhibit was sponsored by the ARBA in collaboration with a grant from the IBM Corporation. The political and financial sponsorship of the exhibit impacted its content. The Eameses created an overtly patriotic design that highlighted the lives of two famous American revolutionaries: Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, who in ideas and spirit reflected the essence of the Revolution.¹ However, the exhibit was more than biographic; it was also a reconstructed history of the early United States. The Eameses presented Franklin and Jefferson as symbols of America's great transformation over 120 years, from Franklin's birth in 1706 to Jefferson's death in 1826. Franklin represented America's inventiveness and colonial past, while Jefferson represented the triumph of the Enlightenment and the future of a new nation.

Using the 120 years that spanned the lives of these two men as a backdrop, the Eameses created a narrative of the United States in *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* that enforced traditional notions of American identity: the importance of the founding moment, the worship of founding fathers and political values, and the manifest destiny of the American people. These themes reflected positively on the American people and the exhibit's government and corporate sponsors. As a result, the patriotic themes of the exhibit ignored divisions in American history, especially regarding debates about the formation of the republic. Curators, lead by the ARBA employed Jack Masey, used their authority to create an exhibit that commemorated the nation's birth and affirmed national purpose.²

¹ Esmond Wright, "1776: Two sides of a story: Esmond Wright on current exhibit to mark the bicentenary of American Independence," *Times Educational Supplement (London, England)*, 26 September 1975.

² Hartje, *Bicentennial USA*, 8.

Charles and Ray Eames designed *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* through a \$500,000 grant by the IBM Corporation.³ The Eameses were well-known designers who started in furniture, and gradually expanded to include film and exhibition production. The Eameses embraced the visionary concept of modern design as an agent of social change, and they partnered with the federal government and the country's top businesses to lead the charge to modernize postwar America.⁴

In designing *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, the Eameses partnered with two powerhouses: IBM and the ARBA. In the 1970s, the IBM Corporation was rapidly expanding. Its products and influence stretched across the globe; its technology was used in supermarkets, banks, the computer industry, and by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). In 1976 the company had over 577,000 stockholders and earned over \$16 billion.⁵ The ARBA was an extension of the federal government, created by Congress in 1966 to plan the national celebration of the bicentennial. The director of the ARBA's Design and Exhibitions, Jack Masey, had direct control over *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*. He managed the exhibit's scheduling, travel, and approved its design. The Eameses, IBM, and the ARBA were eager to be associated with a widely successful exhibit that would enhance their reputations and public images. As a result, the ARBA selected and IBM generously supported the overtly patriotic and streamlined version of history designed by Charles and Ray Eames. Every section of *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* supported a traditional narrative of the United States as unified through the founding moment, political values, progress, and diversity.

³ "The World of Franklin and Jefferson Press Release," Document, 1975-1976, 1; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-5 The World of Franklin and Jefferson General (memos, letters, info); A1 Entry 30 Box 135; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴ "The Work of Charles and Ray Eames," Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/eames/bio.html>, (accessed February 28, 2010).

⁵ "1976," IBM Archives, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/eames/bio.html>, (accessed February 28, 2010).

Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were chosen by the Eames as the focus of the exhibit because of their importance to the development of the United States. Franklin worked as ambassador to Great Britain to close the rift between the American colonies and Parliament, and when that was no longer an option, was an avid advocate for independence. Jefferson wrote tirelessly of a government's responsibility to its people, and applied his ideas in the Declaration of Independence. In addition to praising their ideas and actions, the exhibit drew connections between the past and present, implying that the greatness of principle and deed that graced the Revolution still existed in 1976. A newspaper report from London stated that, "Franklin and Jefferson were prototype Americans, and their extraordinary philosophy about the equality of all men, the supreme importance of the individual, and the responsibility of governors to the governed still marches on, a continuing and noble experiment."⁶

The Eameses claim about a government's responsibility to its people was at odds with recent events in American history in 1976. The Watergate trials and President Richard Nixon's resignation were very much in the forefront of Americans' minds as they celebrated the bicentennial. Even the new President Gerald Ford called the state of America "not good."⁷ Many Americans felt disgusted with the failure of their government officials to follow the laws of the nation they had sworn to uphold. Wilbur Zelinsky wrote in 1973 that, "if Americans by the millions were prepared to lay down their lives for the abstract idea of Union, few would lift a finger to strengthen the national government."⁸ In an article titled "B.S. Bicentennial," newspaper columnist L.E. Sissman expressed his disgust with the Pittsburgh Committee of '76's

⁶ "Salute to a noble experiment," *Times (London)*, September 12, 1975; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; Design and Exhibit press clips "The World of Franklin and Jefferson" 1976-1977; A1 Entry 29 Box 133; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁷ Robert Penn Warren, "The Use of the Past," in *A Time to Hear and Answer: Essays for the Bicentennial Season*, Robert Penn Warren, et al., (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 20.

⁸ Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 50.

Bicentennial Salute program, which just as Nixon's involvement in Watergate was being exposed, cited the President "for his devotion to the ideals of freedom."⁹ For many Americans, events such as this only reinforced their belief that government officials were removed from reality, out of touch with their constituents, and not to be trusted.

These realities were completely ignored by the Eameses and Masey. The Eameses, who were receiving sponsorship from the federal government, removed all doubt in the government's ability to provide for its citizens from the exhibit. They were unwilling to anger a powerful sponsor that was promoting their work to national and international audiences. Although Masey was the head director of *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, he was also an ARBA employee. His endorsement of the exhibit's content revealed that he was more concerned with promoting the federal agenda than he was with adhering to professional standards. An interpretation that included the colonists' mistrust of a strong central government, and the debates and compromises that led to the creation of the current federal system may have comforted visitors, and could have taught them that governments are flawed and evolving structures. Instead, the Eameses and Masey ignored that possibility and produced an exhibit that lauded the ideologies of the American Revolution.

Even as they lamented the state of their government, Americans were desperate for reliable leadership. 1976 was an election year, when Americans had the chance to wipe away the corruption of the Nixon administration, and start over with a new President. In this context, *The World of Franklin and Jefferson's* lofty claims about the nation's former politicians Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were made to remind disgruntled Americans that honest, selfless leaders had been produced before, and that they could be found again. James Reston, who was

⁹ L.E. Sissman, "B.S. Bicentennial," *The Atlantic Monthly* (1971) 232 (September 1973): 28.

the associate editor of the *New York Times*, said at a conference in 1975 that discussed the past and present state of the country,

Our illusions about political leadership have been sadly shaken by Watergate, and when we look over the list of candidates for 1976, searching for some unsuspected savior, the draft picks seem a little thin. This has shaken the spirit of many people ... but if we celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and concentrate on the strengths and ideals of this great country, we will have a reliable guide for our conduct as individuals and a nation.¹⁰

Despite the failure of one man, the President, the legal institutions of the United States remained strong. It was Franklin and Jefferson who drafted those strengths in the Declaration of Independence, and through this exhibit, it was to these two men that Americans were expected to look to find guidance for the future of the nation.

The World of Franklin and Jefferson was the first major bicentennial-themed exhibit to be shown to audiences outside of the United States. The exhibit debuted in Paris, France at the Grand Palais in 1975, and traveled to Poland and England that same year before coming to the United States for the 1976 bicentennial celebrations. The exhibit showed for three months at each of its six locations, and was viewed by more than 600,000 people.¹¹

The World of Franklin and Jefferson was a large exhibit; it covered 7,500 square feet and included over 40,000 words of text.¹² Charles Eames, commenting on the enormity of the

¹⁰ James Reston, "America in a Changing World," in *A Time to Hear and Answer: Essays for the Bicentennial Season*, by Robert Penn Warren, et al., (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 145-146, 151.

¹¹ "The World of Franklin and Jefferson Attendance," Document, Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-14-1 The World of Franklin and Jefferson Mexico City; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹² "The World of Franklin and Jefferson Press Release," Document, 1975-1976, 1; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-5 The World of Franklin and Jefferson General (memos, letters, info); A1 Entry 30 Box 135; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

exhibit's size and content, called it "the largest living tabloid in the world."¹³ Hundreds of artifacts were included in the exhibit, such as Franklin's printing press, correspondence between Jefferson and John Adams, and a large stuffed bison belonging to Jefferson. Large red, white, and blue banners with quotes from Franklin and Jefferson hung from the ceiling, and a timeline depicting events in the lives of Franklin and Jefferson, as well as the United States and the rest of the world was mounted on a wall. These materials were designed not only to illustrate the lives of Franklin and Jefferson, but also to depict the steady progression of the United States from colony to independent nation. At every moment, visitors were presented with images of patriotism and progress. Charles Eames said, "there is a kind of patriotism, healthy, direct" in the exhibit's message.¹⁴ A patriotic approach was designed to remind visitors of the many positives of the United States and its cultural and political institutions. The horrors of the American past, such as slavery, segregation, and the recent break with the national government were ignored in order to promote consensus and loyalty to the nation-state.

The exhibition had four parts: "Friends and Acquaintances," which focused on the formation of the ideas and ideals of Franklin and Jefferson through contact with the thinkers of the 18th Century; "The Two Men," which contrasted the lives of Franklin and Jefferson; "Founding Documents," which emphasized Franklin and Jefferson's involvement in the creation of Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights; and "Epilogue," which featured Jefferson's

¹³ "Exhibitions: the World of Franklin and Jefferson at British Museum, London, until 16 November," *New Scientist (London)*, September 25, 1975; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; Design and Exhibit press clips "The World of Franklin and Jefferson" 1976-1977; A1 Entry 29 Box 133; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁴ Takashi Oka, "America takes the bicentennial to Europe," *Christian Science Monitor (London)*, October 15, 1975; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; Design and Exhibit press clips "The World of Franklin and Jefferson" 1976-1977; A1 Entry 29 Box 133; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

involvement in the westward expansion of the United States.¹⁵ All four sections of the exhibit used Franklin and Jefferson as symbols that reinforced traditional notions of national identity that ultimately reflected positively on the Eameses, IBM, and the ARBA.

The first section of the exhibit, “Friends and Acquaintances” examined the development of Franklin and Jefferson’s revolutionary ideas through the lives of their contemporaries. Several large, box-like structures were placed at the entrance to the exhibit as representations of acquaintances of Franklin and Jefferson. These structures were over six feet tall, and contained portraits of the individual they represented, as well as quotes by the showcased individual, and images of materials relevant to the person’s life (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1. *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* at its opening at the Grande Palais in Paris, France in 1975. The large, box structures depicting Franklin and Jefferson’s acquaintances are visible in the foreground. (1976 *Bicentennial: the American Experience*, Smithsonian Institution Scholastic Magazine, Inc.)

¹⁵ “The World of Franklin and Jefferson Press Release,” Document, 1975-1976, 3-5; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, ’73-’75; EXH 5-5 The World of Franklin and Jefferson General (memos, letters, info); A1 Entry 30 Box 135; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

Charles Eames said that the structures “carry a collection of imagery and information about these people who influenced each other and their time.”¹⁶ The Revolutionary individuals that the Eameses and Masey considered to be contemporaries of Franklin and Jefferson included John Adams, Patrick Henry, George Washington, Dr. Benjamin Rush, Charles Wilson Peale, and James Madison.¹⁷ All of these men were prominent figures during the eighteenth century, and many of them helped to design the newly formed United States’ political, educational, and cultural frameworks. Giant structures told the story of these men’s lives, and attempted to connect their experiences to Franklin and Jefferson’s. For example, John Adams was an early and strong advocate for American independence, worked with the two men on drafting the Declaration of Independence, and maintained a long correspondence with Jefferson throughout their lives. These men were powerful, and so too were Franklin and Jefferson. The familiarity to Americans of the names of these men, as well as the imposing height of the structures, clearly indicated their importance to the Revolution and the development of the United States.

The chosen acquaintances of Franklin and Jefferson were also representations of enduring American beliefs. The Eameses and Masey took advantage of nearly two centuries of myth making, removed these men from their physical existences, and turned them into revered symbols. A public relations statement released by the Office of Charles and Ray Eames stated that “the persons selected for inclusion in the Franklin/Jefferson exhibition, in effect, were those in the circle of friends and acquaintances of Franklin and Jefferson and/or who were

¹⁶ “The World of Franklin and Jefferson Press Release,” Document, 1975-1976, 3-5; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, ’73-’75; EXH 5-5 The World of Franklin and Jefferson General (memos, letters, info); A1 Entry 30 Box 135; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁷ Office of Charles and Ray Eames, “The Films of Charles and Ray Eames. Volume Three: The World of Franklin and Jefferson,” DVD recording, Image Entertainment, 1992.

representative examples of a set of ideas and attitudes bearing on the American adaptation of the Enlightenment.”¹⁸ These Revolutionaries were deliberately selected by the Eameses, and approved by Masey to remind audiences of the basic tenets of American identity: freedom, equality, and democratic political values. Patrick Henry, well known by Americans for his “give me liberty or give me death” speech, was a symbol of freedom; and John Adams, James Madison, and George Washington were easily associated with the founding of the nation and the documents that came from this period. For Americans, political values were associated with the founding moment in revolution, and so expressing nationalism in terms of political values served to represent their unique place in world history.¹⁹ This created a “feel good” attitude about the exhibit that reflected positively on its designers, curators, and sponsors, despite real-world circumstances that contradicted their arguments.

In 1976, many Americans doubted the security of their place in the world. Since the end of World War II, the United States was the world’s superpower, contested only by the Soviet Union. Americans who had grown up in a postwar world were accustomed to thinking of the United States as a nation in which its citizens were guaranteed the best form of life in the world; a life free from want and fear, and a place where individual rights were protected by the world’s longest-lasting written constitution. After the loss in Vietnam, and Japan’s phoenix-like rise from the ashes of World War II to become an international economic and technological power, Americans’ confidence in their superiority was shaken. James Reston said in 1975 that, “It was never really reasonable for us to suppose that we could play forever as dominant a role as we did

¹⁸ “The World of Franklin and Jefferson Press Release,” Document, 1975-1976, 16; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, ’73-’75; EXH 5-5 The World of Franklin and Jefferson General (memos, letters, info); A1 Entry 30 Box 135; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁹ Lynn Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration: Creating national identities in the United States and Australia*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 145.

in the immediate postwar generation, or that we could retain a monopoly on the advances of science and technology in the world.”²⁰ No longer able to rely on their nation’s military, economic, or technological superiority, Americans turned to their political values to convince themselves of their country’s moral greatness. Reston said, “Our political institutions are reliable. They will see us through.”²¹ The Eameses and Masey encouraged visitors to believe in the uniqueness of American political values in *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*’s section, “Friends and Acquaintances.” Other segments of American society might wane, but the nation’s political foundations remained strong, unique, and a lasting example to the rest of the world. The use of recognized Revolutionary figures allowed the exhibit’s designers and curators to make claims about American national identity that emphasized the importance of the founding moment and reinforced the significance of the nation’s democratic political values.

“Friends and Acquaintances” continued to place emphasis on democratic traditions by reserving a wall for portraits of anonymous Americans from the Revolutionary period. At the time of the American Revolution, a democracy was considered a dangerous form of government, since it relied upon the direct participation of the people to succeed. Even proponents of democratic government urged caution in its execution, because they doubted the public’s capacity to intelligently and effectively maintain the government. Despite these concerns, the United States was founded as a democratic republic, and its citizens proudly exercised rights that were limited elsewhere in the world at the time. Eighteenth-century Americans claimed that their country was a land of freedom because of its government’s consideration and protection of all citizens. The portraits of anonymous Americans reminded visitors of the significance of every person in the United States, subtly claiming that without their support and participation the

²⁰ James Reston, “America in a Changing World,” in *A Time to Hear and Answer*, 145-146.

²¹ James Reston, “America in a Changing World,” in *A Time to Hear and Answer*, 151.

country would fail. The portraits also served to connect to visitors on a personal level, since visitors were likely to have more in common with anonymous eighteenth-century Americans than revered elites like George Washington or Thomas Jefferson. The stark contrast between the elites plastered on towering columns, and portraits of unknown Americans reinforced the belief in the continued strength of the American democracy. Edith W. Haught, a visitor to the exhibition when it showed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, said that the paintings were “stunning compositions evoking all sorts of ‘noble nostalgia’ preparing the viewer for his journey through a dramatic time in history. I, for one, am not forgetting about our heritage at the end of 1976!”²²

This was just the type of reaction that the Eameses, IBM, and the ARBA sought when they created the exhibit. Haught’s comment indicated that she accepted the designers’ patriotic productions; she claimed the exhibit’s representation of American history as her own, despite its obvious disregard for public trust. In a period of social, economic, and political flux, the exhibit’s designers and curators ignored increasing public desires for a re-examination of the American past, as well as the profession’s call to evaluate museums’ public responsibilities. They allowed pressures from the exhibit’s sponsors to guide their curatorial authority, and the result was an exhibit that interpreted American history as existing free from internal dissent as citizens placed their trust in an omnipotent government.

The second section of *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, called “The Two Men,” relied heavily on artifacts that represented the roots and ideas of the two architects of American Independence. According to a newspaper report from London, the artifacts were used “to

²² Edith W. Haught, Washington, D.C., to Los Angeles County Museum of Art Special Exhibitions, Los Angeles, California, Typewritten Letter, 15 November 1976, Design and Exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, ’73-’75; EXH 5-14 The World of Franklin and Jefferson, Los Angeles; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 456; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

illustrate the relevance to society today of the continuing significance of the concepts of America's founding fathers."²³ Featured artifacts included Franklin's air pump and printing press, and Jefferson's writings on Virginia and his *Summary View of the Rights of British America*. These objects were selected by curators for inclusion in the exhibit as examples of the men's interests and accomplishments, and also as evidence of America's roots.

These objects were relics of a revolutionary past, and their presence and presentation encouraged long-conceived beliefs of the Revolution as unique and progressive. Bob Hunter, a columnist, stated that, "Perhaps the greatest impact of the show was made by indicating how the writings of Franklin, Jefferson, and their associates in the forming of our nation were well-springs not only of our new form of government, but also of the inventions and developments important to manufacturing and agriculture."²⁴ The Eameses and Masey recognized that the objects were intimately connected with the founding moment and American progress. Franklin's printing press had removable letters, which made it easier and more efficient to print. The printing press's ability to quickly produce and spread information caused it to become a symbol of liberty during the Revolution, as well as in the early United States. The printing press represented the freedom of knowledge against tyranny, a right that was protected from infringement by the government in the First Amendment to the Constitution. In 1976, two years after the Watergate trials and President Nixon's resignation, the printing press held an additional

²³ "Star Spangled," *Tourist's London (London)*, September 11, 1975; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; Design and Exhibit press clips "The World of Franklin and Jefferson" 1976-1977; A1 Entry 29 Box 133; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

²⁴ "The World of Franklin and Jefferson, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Seventh Report, December 20 – December 26, 1976," Typewritten Letter, 3 January 1977, Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-28 Franklin/Jefferson Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Bob Hunter, "World of Franklin," Typewritten Letter, 17 November 1976, Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-28 Franklin/Jefferson Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

meaning for Americans. The exposure of the federal government's involvement in the break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at their Watergate office in Washington, D.C. in 1972 was due largely to the work of two Washington Post reporters: Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Their investigative reporting into the Watergate break-in eventually led to the conviction of several government officials, and Nixon's resignation as President.²⁵ To American audiences viewing Franklin's printing press, the power of the press would have seemed strong indeed.

American progress and prosperity had its own images as well. The Eameses presented Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, as well as his own experiments in agriculture at his home at Monticello as evidence of early nineteenth century Americans' awareness of the vast, fertile land available to them. These items evoked Jefferson's vision of a country dominated by yeoman farmers. However, the images presented by these artifacts were overtly idyllic. A dominant motif in American historical fiction has been a defensive nostalgia of the past, which has managed to preserve the West in national collective memory as perpetually vast, untamed, ripe, and filled with peace and plenty.²⁶ However, this notion of the West was false. Jefferson's vision of a nation that rewarded yeoman farmers was being undermined even before the image had achieved its full iconographic impact. Land may well have been Americans' greatest resource during the first half of the nineteenth century, but the yeoman farmer, his wife, and their hired hand did not prosper nearly so much as the land speculator and his agents.²⁷ The curators did not discuss the inequitable distribution of wealth that the opening of the West caused because it would have showed the limitations in the government's ability to provide for its citizens. In

²⁵ "The Government Acts," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/watergate/part2.html>, (accessed February 12, 2010).

²⁶ Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: the American Revolution and the Historical Imagination*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 102, 219.

²⁷ Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 101-102.

addition, the similarities between nineteenth century land speculators and twentieth century corporations would not have been lost on audiences in 1976, who were wary of self-serving big businesses. IBM, which was in the process of expanding its markets in the 1970s, did not want any negative attention. The purpose of Jefferson's notes and agricultural instruments in the exhibit was not to examine the contradictions of the past, but to reinforce Americans' belief that their nation was unique and prosperous. The artifacts in this section therefore invoked feelings of pride and patriotism in its American viewers, which pleased the exhibit's sponsors. According to Charles Eames, "Celebration is the duty of the citizen."²⁸

The Eameses took celebration to a new height in the third section of the exhibit, where the nation's founding documents were treated with a reverence usually reserved for holy relics. "Founding Documents," featured three documents that affirmed the existence of the United States: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Each document was mounted separately on a wall in an area that was designed to recall the meeting halls of the Revolution. In addition to the documents, this section included trophies and paintings similar to those placed in eighteenth-century public buildings.²⁹ In 1976, just two years after the Watergate scandal and the unprecedented resignation of Richard Nixon, Americans were acutely aware of the rights and responsibilities of their government. Viewing replicas of the nation's founding documents reminded visitors of Franklin and Jefferson's prescience, and the power of the documents that had so recently been invoked to remove a president from office. Aside from the meetinghouse design, the documents were removed from any historical context. No discussion of

²⁸ Eleanor Page, "Art Institute invites us on a stroll through history," (*Chicago*) *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 1976; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; Design and Exhibit press clips "The World of Franklin and Jefferson" 1976-1977; A1 Entry 29 Box 133; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

²⁹ "The World of Franklin and Jefferson Press Release," Document, 1975-1976, 4-5; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-5 The World of Franklin and Jefferson General (memos, letters, info); A1 Entry 30 Box 135; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

the events, debates, or reasons for drafting the documents were included; they were simply placed on the wall by themselves. This presentation was constructed so that audiences would view the replicated documents as powerful symbols of the United States and its government. The placement of the documents on the wall ensured that visitors would have to look up at them, similar to the position of sacred items. London columnist Michael Ford expressed his awe when he stated that the “three spectacular documents still stand as touchstones for the definition of America.”³⁰

Such statements indicated the massive symbolic weight that Americans attached to their democracy as it was embodied in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. These three documents were drafted as statements to the world of their creators’ intent. The new nation from the beginning set itself the task of continuing to show that it had a global mission, and to justify its mission to the world. Thus the inclusion of the documents in the exhibit served not simply to commemorate the nation’s birth; it was to celebrate the reasons for the nation’s birth, to announce and reaffirm the arguments and purposes of national existence.³¹

By stating the reasons for their separation, eighteenth-century Americans had already begun to enunciate their national purpose. The new nation preferred to canonize not an event or an act, but a statement: a public declaration of legal rights and general principles.³² It was their political values that legitimized their claims for separation from Great Britain, and gave America its unique place in the world. Over the centuries, the documents were recognized and revered by Americans as cornerstones of the nation, as the penultimate embodiments of liberty, equality, and freedom. The language that Americans have used to describe the documents revealed their importance to the nation. Kenneth Rush, speaking at the opening of *The World of Franklin and*

³⁰ Michael Ford, “The World of Franklin and Jefferson,” *Durrant’s Art Review (London)*, September 19, 1975.

³¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: the national experience*, (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 390.

³² Boorstin, *The Americans*, 377.

Jefferson exhibit in Paris in 1975 said, “Out of the Constitution came a new nation, out of the nation self-rule came to span a continent.”³³ Cecelia M. Kenyon wrote in 1976 that, “If we look at the precise language of the Declaration . . . it is the collective safety and security of the people that is meant, and these are inextricably linked with the individual rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”³⁴ Robert G. Hartje wrote in *Bicentennial USA* that, “the Declaration of Independence still stands as a model of hope for better things. The achievements of the American people through two hundred years of nationhood include important successes in fulfilling its expectations.”³⁵ To Americans in 1976, these documents represented the creation of a new government, founded on the principles of liberty, equality, and the protection of individual rights. The documents were the foundation of the United States, and as such were revered by Americans. An exhibit review called them “the climax of the exhibition,” which demonstrated the high regard in which Americans held the documents.³⁶

Especially during the bicentennial, which occurred so soon after the protests movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, the founding documents took on new meaning. With the extension of the rights of citizenship, and the guarantee of equal protection to ethnic minorities, the promises of the founding documents seemed closer than before. Esmond Wright, an immigrant to America, said, “The civil rights legislation passed by Congress has gone far beyond anything previously enacted in American history. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of black militants, the

³³ Prologue statement of “The World of Franklin and Jefferson” Paris showing, by Kenneth Ash, Document, Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, ’73-’75; EXH 5-9 The World of Franklin and Jefferson – Paris; A1 Entry 30 Box 135; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³⁴ Cecelia M. Kenyon, “The Declaration of Independence: Philosophy of Government in a Free Society,” in *Aspects of American Liberty, Philosophical, Historical, and Political: Addresses Presented at an Observance of the Bicentennial Year of American Independence by the American Philosophical Society, April 22 – 24, 1976*, by George W. Corner (ed.), (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The American Philosophical Society, 1977), 120.

³⁵ Hartje, *Bicentennial USA*, 6-7.

³⁶ Michael Ford, “The World of Franklin and Jefferson,” *Durrant’s Art Review (London)*, September 19, 1975; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, ’73-’75; Design and Exhibit press clips “The World of Franklin and Jefferson” 1976-1977; A1 Entry 29 Box 133; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

majority of blacks are proud, and have increasing incentive to be proud, of their American citizenship.”³⁷ The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights referred to both the founding moment and political values, and found expression in the exhibit as icons of nationalism.

The Eameses constructed false impressions of progress in the exhibit’s fourth section in order to support its patriotic themes. According to Michael Kammen, Americans have long been obsessed with individual and national progress, even before the founding of the United States.³⁸ Prior to the Revolution, a steady commitment to conquering land, and the growth and expansion of resources and population marked the national landscape. Although confined to the area east of the Appalachian Mountains by the time of the Revolution, Americans were eager to explore and expand into western North America. The fourth and final section of the exhibit, called “Epilogue,” presented the expansion of the new nation under President Jefferson. Focusing on the Louisiana Purchase, the end of *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* explored the ways in which progress became the dominant watchword of American national culture.³⁹

The exhibit, which spanned the lifetimes of Franklin and Jefferson, ended by highlighting the Louisiana Purchase, one of Jefferson’s greatest accomplishments as President. A large map of the United States hung on a rear wall, and depicted the vast amount of land acquired through the purchase. This enabled visitors to grasp fully the extent to which the United States expanded – it more than doubled the size of the country in 1803. By purchasing the Louisiana Territory, Jefferson believed that he could increase Americans’ security as well as their prosperity. But when obliged to defend his decision, an act that was not clearly articulated in the Constitution,

³⁷ Esmond Wright, “American: the End of the Dream?” in *Lessons from America: an Exploration* by Richard Rose (ed.), (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), 293-294.

³⁸ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: the Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 6.

³⁹ Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 102.

Jefferson spoke less of security and prosperity than of extending “an Empire for Liberty.”⁴⁰ To him, the purchase gave the country and its citizens valuable land that could be used to extract resources, which the nation needed to pay off its war debts to France. Jefferson also saw the possibility of expanding the rule of the United States into this new land. He used phrases that evoked images of the Revolution to remind Americans of their unique purpose, and to justify an action that potentially ignored presidential restraints set forth in the Constitution. Liberty for all Americans, argued Jefferson, was made manifest in the Louisiana Purchase. Thus, from its purchase the territory became synonymous with liberty and prosperity.

The Louisiana Purchase added a western dimension to American iconography, which was reproduced in the exhibit to give visitors impressions of national prosperity. Numerous paintings by artists such as George Catlin and Seth Eastman depicted the west as a vast, bounteous, and uncivilized territory.⁴¹ These idyllic images preserved the west as it appeared at the time of the purchase, before settlers migrated and altered the landscape. Such images held within them the promise of prosperity and individual independence as a landowner. Although the west did not remain unchanged, the paintings created feelings of nostalgia in visitors for a past that they had never witnessed, but were familiar with as meaningful symbols of national identity. According to Richard Slotkin, “the ideal of innocence remains part of our realities.”⁴²

The images also gave the impression of the United States as a land of plenty, a phrase that had often been used to distinguish the United States from other nations. Notes and sketches that detailed the discovery of numerous plants and animals from the Lewis and Clark expedition into the Louisiana Territory were used to reinforce visitor beliefs of the United States as a prosperous nation. Envisioning the United States as an “Empire of Liberty” filled with “peace and plenty”

⁴⁰ Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 102.

⁴¹ Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 102.

⁴² James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 20.

affirmed Americans' belief in the uniqueness of their culture, and strengthened their loyalty to the federal government.⁴³ In addition, viewing the prosperity of the past inevitably linked Americans to the present, and reinforced the myths of their culture: America is a vast and productive land; it is the most powerful nation on earth; it is a great breadbasket of the world; it is resourceful and wealthy.⁴⁴ These were myths that the Eameses, IBM, and the ARBA wanted to project to audiences because of their powerful impact on visitors. By viewing the expansion of the United States through the Louisiana Purchase, Americans were reminded of the greatness of their nation, and the steady progression of their national power and prosperity.

The exhibit's images of prosperity contrasted starkly with the economic realities of the 1970s. A recession marked the start of the decade, and throughout the 1970s Americans struggled to cope as businesses stalled and unemployment rates increased. They were confronted with an unimaginable rise in inflation while the national economy failed to grow. In 1976, oil and gas shortages shut down assembly lines and closed schools. In Detroit, the once-proud symbol of American industrial might, the electric company reduced voltage, dimming lights and darkening moods across the state of Michigan.⁴⁵ The outlook of the American economy in 1976 was gloomy, nothing at all like the exhibit's innocently cheerful presentation of the country. The Eameses crafted an image of the early nineteenth-century United States that was joyful and thriving in order to influence visitors' own perceptions of the country in the twentieth century. Kammen argued that what people believe about the past is more important in determining their behavior and responses than truth itself.⁴⁶ An honest presentation of the precarious position the new nation held in the years immediately following America's founding, as well as its current

⁴³ Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 102.

⁴⁴ Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, 3.

⁴⁵ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: the Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2001), 121.

⁴⁶ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 38-39.

economic crisis, would have been counterproductive to the exhibit's promotion of nationalism. So, the Eameses turned to old mythologies of progress and prosperity that allowed visitors to escape the depressing realities of the present and find reassurance in a reconstructed past that depicted a strong and prosperous nation. By presenting myths as truth, the Eameses and Masey did a disservice to the segment of their audience who were willing to examine traditional assumptions of the American past. A newspaper report on the bicentennial said, "There was an exciting mix of pride and sarcasm in the Bicentennial prelude. Pride in remembering how it all began, this young-old country. Sarcasm in the persistent reminders that we celebrate so enthusiastically when the country has not done all it could and should do for many of its people."⁴⁷ For Masey especially, as director of Design and Exhibitions it was his responsibility to provide audiences with an interpretation of the past that went beyond restating traditional mythologies and nationalistic propaganda. Instead, pressures from the federal government caused Masey to use his curatorial authority to produce an exhibit that was celebratory of America's founding and its leaders.

During *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*'s three year showing, over 600,000 people viewed the exhibit.⁴⁸ Studies of visitors, which could have revealed information about audiences such as why they came to view the exhibit, how they interacted with the exhibit and with each other, and how they viewed the exhibit, were not conducted for *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*. Visitor studies was a developing field in 1976, and with no standardized forms of

⁴⁷ "The Morning After," (*Atlanta, Georgia*) *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 6, 1976; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; Design and Exhibit press clips "The World of Franklin and Jefferson" 1976-1977; A1 Entry 29 Box 133; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴⁸ "The World of Franklin and Jefferson Attendance," Document, Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-14-1 The World of Franklin and Jefferson Mexico City; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

evaluation, museum staff relied on other methods to gather information from their audiences. For *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, newspaper reports and visitor responses in a message book provided at the end of the exhibit revealed that audiences largely agreed with the Eameses constructions of nationalism. Mrs. Wallace E. Ward, visiting the exhibit in Los Angeles, said that it was “an outstanding bringing together of the ‘essences’ of the beginnings of the American spirit – For me it was a refreshing breath from the past, and a continuing meld of insight into the hope of what we want to become.”⁴⁹

Visitors often spoke of their heritage when commenting on the exhibit. Surrounded by icons from the American past, visitors felt a reaffirmation of the American experience. An English immigrant, Leonard Wold said, “I can now say, that having seen this beautifully organized exhibition – that I am proud to be American. Would that we had some of TJ’s and BF’s commonsense today!”⁵⁰ Lois Smith wrote that it was “a very rewarding exhibit – makes me proud of my heritage.”⁵¹ When these visitors spoke of their heritage, they were referring to the people and times of the Revolution. During the bicentennial, Americans marked the beginning of American history at the birth of the nation; it was considered to be the seminal event in their past, and the exhibit blatantly encouraged the exaltation of the people, ideas, and events of the Revolution through its interpretation of artifacts belonging to Franklin and Jefferson.⁵² By almost

⁴⁹ Rexford Stead, Los Angeles, to Dolores Barchella, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, 12 January 1977, Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, ’73-’75; EXH 5-14 The World of Franklin and Jefferson, Los Angeles; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵⁰ “The World of Franklin and Jefferson visitor comments,” Typewritten Letter, 1976, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, ’73-’75; EXH 5-28 Franklin/Jefferson Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵¹ Rexford Stead, Los Angeles, to Dolores Barchella, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, 12 January 1977, Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, ’73-’75; EXH 5-14 The World of Franklin and Jefferson, Los Angeles; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵² Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, 54.

worshipping these men and the Revolutionary past, American visitors unconsciously supported the Eameses' efforts to mold history to fit the needs of the federal government and IBM.

The optimistic presentation of the Revolution affected the tone of the entire exhibit. Visitors frequently commented on the positive energy they felt as they went through the exhibit. Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Kaplan called it the "most inspiring exhibit yet!" Norton Stevens mentioned its "great graphics and spirit!" and Eileen Eisenbark said the exhibit was "energetic and feels good."⁵³ These comments were the result of the exhibit's reaffirmation of long held American beliefs of their country as inherently great and benevolent as the world champion of liberty, equality, and freedom. From the first section to the last, the exhibit continuously reinforced traditional notions of the Revolution, and by extension the United States as fulfilling its responsibilities to all mankind in another revolutionary age.⁵⁴ Franklin and Jefferson were interpreted by the designers and curators as visionary proto-Americans, who helped shape the foundations of the new nation, which found their expression in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; and westward expansion was portrayed as Americans' noble duty to bring liberty and prosperity to all peoples. Together, the exhibit sections projected traditional mythologies as real, and focused on a celebratory spirit to wipe out any dissent or doubt in visitors' minds. The result was an exhibit that failed to question the assumptions of American history, and ignored the fluctuating social and professional realities that demanded such introspection. The exhibit's designers and curators were at fault for allowing external political and financial pressures to influence *The World of Franklin and Jefferson's* content. This resulted in a false narrative of unified nationalism that promoted the interests of the exhibit's sponsors.

⁵³ "Some Comments on 'The World of Franklin and Jefferson'," Typewritten Letter, 28 March 1976, New York; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-28 Franklin/Jefferson Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵⁴ Hartje, *Bicentennial USA*, 325.

Visitors rarely questioned the story that was visible in the exhibit, despite its lack of depth in examining the disagreements, forgotten possibilities, and contradictions in the formation and execution of the new American republic, as well as the exhibit's disregard for past and present realities. Of 417 visitor comments from the exhibit's showing in New York, only 15 were negative in tone and criticism.⁵⁵ One of these stated, "I find an inadequate representation of the role of slavery in this time period for the basic establishment of the economic system."⁵⁶ Indeed, the exhibit did not include slavery in its discussion of Jefferson, or in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. A total of four African Americans were included in the exhibit; Benjamin Banneker, Phyllis Wheatley, Absalom Jones, and Toussaint Lowateur. The Office of Charles and Ray Eames stated that certain individuals were excluded from the exhibit because they were "not representative examples of a set of ideas and attitudes bearing on the American adaptation of the Enlightenment."⁵⁷ Other significant African Americans, women, and American Indians were excluded from the exhibit because their presence would have served to remind visitors of the inequalities that persisted in the United States ever since the nation's founding. Despite the emergence in the 1970s of a new social history that included minorities in the national story, the Eameses and Masey deliberately ignored minorities in their pursuit of a celebratory national narrative. Their selective criteria for

⁵⁵ Joe Enright to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "Visitors' comments on 'The World of Franklin and Jefferson,'" Typewritten Letter, 17 March 1976, Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-9 The World of Franklin and Jefferson – Paris; A1 Entry 30 Box 135; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵⁶ "Some Comments on 'The World of Franklin and Jefferson,'" Typewritten Letter, 28 March 1976, New York; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-28 Franklin/Jefferson Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵⁷ "The World of Franklin and Jefferson Press Release," Document, 1975-1976, 16; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, '73-'75; EXH 5-5 The World of Franklin and Jefferson General (memos, letters, info); A1 Entry 30 Box 135; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

inclusion created an exhibit that reinforced traditional views of American history by focusing on the ideas and deeds of elite white males.

The emphasis of a traditional approach to American history had several advantages. First, it allowed the exhibit to make generalized claims about the American past with minimal dissent. Claims that the United States was born in revolution, founded on unique political ideals, and had access to vast resources that made the country prosperous were made to appeal to a large and diverse audience. General claims such as these were difficult to disagree with, and allowed the exhibit designers and curators to capitalize on the public's selective memory of the past to maximize visitor consensus. The visitor comments showed that although several people were upset that specific individuals or events were not included in the exhibit, very few disagreed with the exhibit's traditional claims about American history. Visitors' overwhelming agreement with the claims made by *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* revealed that at a time when ethnic and gender protests were still ongoing, many Americans, despite their interest in ethnic history, sought reassurance of their unique place in the world by clinging to a celebratory, white-dominated narrative of their past.

Despite visitors' overwhelming support for the final narrative that the Eameses produced, Masey had a professional responsibility to consider the impact of a greater minority presence in the exhibit. After the social protests of the 1960s and the ethnic demonstrations of the early 1970s, which were still ongoing by 1976, citizens and public institutions in the United States were rapidly reassessing the nation's social structure. This raised questions of the nation's history with which museum professionals were grappling with. Although few answers were clear by 1976, museum professionals recognized that the traditional approach to history, which celebrated the achievements of white men, was no longer sufficient. However, Masey's

association with the ARBA, and overwhelming desires by the American people for a patriotic celebration of the bicentennial caused Masey to endorse an overtly nationalistic exhibit that revived citizen devotion to the United States, despite its lack of consideration for historic ethnic narratives.

The visitors who left negative comments about the exhibit more often were disgusted with its financial support rather than its historical accuracy. An anonymous visitor wrote that the exhibit was “too commercial – a disappointment.” N. M. Graham called it “a little bit of everything with advertising technique treatment.” Another unsigned comment said, “This IBM view of American history has been more than confirmed by an attentive visit. It should have been shown elsewhere, not at the Metropolitan Museum, not within a great institution that should remain above such a narrow outlook.”⁵⁸ Designer Charles Eames was shocked at visitors’ impressions that the \$500,000 grant from IBM influenced the nature of the exhibition. He said, “I believe that it was seen as an intrusion on the museum by the sponsor. Maybe they felt that because there was a story, and IBM had paid for it, it must somehow be IBM talking – which was not at all the case.”⁵⁹ The visitors who left these comments were upset with the enormity of corporate promotion and marketing of the bicentennial, and that anger extended to the exhibit. The commercialism surrounding the bicentennial was so visible on the American landscape by 1976 that opponents called it the American Revolution ‘Buy-centennial.’ Columnist William Randel wrote that the celebrations would be better if placed in the hands of the American people, rather than corporations. He wrote, “the American people would probably not all agree on what the Revolution meant and still means, but disagreement for so diverse a people, would be more

⁵⁸ Visitor comments on “The World of Franklin and Jefferson,” Typewritten Letter, April 1976, New York; Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, ’73-’75; EXH 5-28 Franklin/Jefferson Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 30 Box 136; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵⁹ Charles Eames, “Conversation with Charles Eames,” *The American Scholar* 46 (Summer 1977): 335.

genuine than anything foisted upon them by a commission motivated by profits and partisan advantage.”⁶⁰

One comment, however, revealed that a visitor recognized the curators’ inclusion of patriotic propaganda. Burnett Anderson, the Minister Counselor of Public Affairs in Paris, France, wrote to Jack Masey,

What I can’t understand is how you can be party to putting a glossy piece of big business propaganda in the Metropolitan Museum ... this notion of a bunch of glossy color photographs in boxes idealizing slaveholders and elitists is abhorrent to all of us who are devoted to true art and genuine democracy. John Hansen was the first President of the United States and is never mentioned. You are discriminating against every minority, in addition to corrupting American museums.⁶¹

Anderson was outraged that Masey would allow the federal government and IBM to manipulate American history to such an extent that it no longer resembled the truth, in any context. He understood the true intent behind the exhibit’s design, and was disgusted that a curator – and those at the exhibit’s traveling locations – would endorse such blatant professional interference.

Despite these few comments, the response to the exhibit was overwhelmingly positive. Visitor comments consistently revealed that despite its dubious authenticity, Americans overwhelmingly supported the exhibit’s patriotic endorsement of national mythologies and leading institutions.

Charles and Ray Eames designed *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* exhibit as a celebration of American nationhood and governmental strength. The exhibit was filled with artifacts and information that presented Franklin, Jefferson, and their contemporaries as crucial to the founding of the nation. Without them, the exhibit claimed, the United States would never

⁶⁰ William Randel, “Why a bicentennial? The fife and drum of big business,” *The Nation* 216 (January 1973): 108.

⁶¹ Burnett R. Anderson, Paris, France, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, 5 May 1976, Design and exhibit Program Records of the World of Franklin and Jefferson Exhibit, ’73-’75; EXH 5-5 The World of Franklin and Jefferson General (memos, letters, info); A1 Entry 30 Box 135; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

have become the great nation that it was in 1976. However, Franklin and Jefferson were not the only focus of the exhibit. Using the two men as starting points, the Eameses designed an exhibit that at every moment inundated visitors with optimistic images of nationhood. The exhibit celebrated the commemoration of the American bicentennial by resubmitting the images and arguments that have become intimately connected with its founding. Franklin, Jefferson, and their contemporaries were men of vision, and yet it was the common people who truly created the nation by faithfully following its mandates of liberty, equality, and prosperity. These arguments were supported by the presence of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, and were carried out through the development of the west.

These arguments were constructed by the Eameses to ignore past and present examples of dissent. In order to appease the exhibit's powerful patrons, the Eameses created and Masey approved an exhibit that emphasized consensus, unity, and loyalty to the federal government. As a result, visitors eagerly responded to the exhibit's central messages of American greatness, born out of revolution, and the uniqueness of their political values and national prosperity. Masey, who had the authority and the responsibility to refuse such blatant political propaganda, instead bowed to external pressures. His employment by the ARBA, and the temptation of generous financial support from IBM caused Masey to employ his curatorial authority to create an historic narrative that promoted these institutions. Due to political and financial pressures, the curators of *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* exercised their curatorial authority to produce an exhibit that promoted fabricated narratives of unified nationalism.

CHAPTER 2. *USA '76*: PROGRESS OR PROPAGANDA?

The American Revolution Bicentennial Administration (ARBA) developed *USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years* as a celebration of America's unique history. John W. Warner, Administrator for the ARBA, called the exhibit "a reminder that the United States has, even at so young an age, a proud record of surmounting obstacles ... and a future full of new challenges."¹ The exhibit was designed to stress the achievements of the ARBA through a celebration of the development of the nation and the American people. Like *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, the artifacts selected for inclusion in the exhibit by the ARBA attempted to invoke feelings of patriotism and pride for the American Republic, and by extension, its federal government. Images of settlement and industrialization retold the story of national progress, with 1776 depicted as the pivotal year. In ARBA's presentation of artifacts, images, and sound *USA '76* created a narrative of American history that celebrated the nation's political, economic, and technological progress over two hundred years. Influenced by the ARBA, the curators of *USA '76* arranged the exhibit as a celebration of American nationalism, and presented traditional ideas about the United States' history that called for public support of the federal government.

The ARBA's director of Design and Exhibitions, Jack Masey, chose to focus on America's progress as the subject of *USA '76* because the topic garnered little opposition and promoted positive images of both the country and the Administration. Since the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission's founding in 1966 (which became the ARBA in 1973), the organization was the center of controversy in the wake of claims of internal corruption and a succession of administrative resignations and reappointments. The American public, failing to see substantial progress from the ARBA, lost trust in the organization and openly criticized its

¹ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, "USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years," Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 1.

plans for the bicentennial. William Randel, writing for *The Nation* magazine in 1973, said, “No less disturbing than the commercialism is the apparent inability of the commission leadership to understand the Revolution. Left to their own resources, the American people could be depended on to develop their own means of celebrating.”² The ARBA clung to a founding moment vision as they faced their critics. When anti-war and racial conflicts were at their height, youth activists meeting with worried bicentennial organizers in 1971 charged that the organization “was not representative of the American people,” and that it “should disband.”³ In the face of such blatant opposition, the ARBA sought consensus through an emphasis on founding moment history. The founding years of the United States, from 1776 to 1789, generated wide sweeping claims about national identity in the form of phrases such as “our Founding Fathers,” and “our form of government” with which the majority of Americans could readily connect.⁴ Therefore, Masey used *USA '76* to promote a narrative of United States’ history that emphasized shared experience over time that, in turn, reflected positively on ARBA as an organization.

George Nelson, who was a contemporary of Charles and Ray Eames and was known for his modern furniture conceptions, designed *USA '76*.⁵ The exhibit was shown exclusively in the United States, and it traveled to Chicago, Seattle, Los Angeles, and Scottsdale, Arizona. The exhibit showed at each location for one month, and was viewed by 338,000 people.⁶ The

² William Randel, “Why a bicentennial? The fife and drum of big business,” *The Nation* 216 (January 1973): 108.

³ Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration*, 115.

⁴ Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration*, 100 – 101.

⁵ Suzanne Slesin, “George H. Nelson, Designer of Modernist Furniture, Dies,” *New York Times* (March 6, 1986).

⁶ Robert Dolehide, Scottsdale, Arizona, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. “Final Report of ‘USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years,” Typewritten Letter, 10 March 1976; Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit “USA '76: the First 200 Years” ’73-’76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Robert S. Byrnes, Los Angeles, California, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. “Report for period July 30-August 13, 1975 on ‘USA '76: the First Two Hundred Years,” Typewritten Letter, 14 August 1975, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit “USA '76: the First 200 Years” ’73-’76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Robert S., Byrnes Los Angeles, California, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. “USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years, Seattle Exhibition” Report for Period 10 –

exhibition was originally scheduled to show at seven locations across the United States, but its size of 9,000 square feet prevented several museums from hosting the exhibit.⁷ As a result, the exhibit showed primarily in the Western United States.

USA '76 included six major sections that spanned the development of the United States since 1776. These sections were: “Celebration,” which focused on the Declaration of Independence as the foundation for the new nation’s liberty; “Wilderness,” which depicted the natural beauty of the United States before European settlement; “The Making of a Nation” focused on the ways in which people adapted to their environment as the landscape changed; “Changing Times” presented the nation’s industrial and technological progress; the film “People, People, People” showed in cartoon form the steady progression of the nation, from 17760 B.C. to the landing on the moon in 1969; “Portraits of Americans” showed one hundred photographs of modern Americans to illustrate the diversity of the people that made up the United States; and the final section, “The Bicentennial and You,” showed visitors diverse ways in which they could participate in the bicentennial.⁸

The overarching theme of the exhibit was national progress. All six of its sections depicted in some form the steadfast advancement of the United States since the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Progress, the ARBA argued, was a two-century old American tradition,

15 June 1975, Typewritten Letter, 16 June 1975, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit “USA ’76: the First 200 Years” ’73-’76; EXH 2-19 USA ’76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; George Nelson to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, 20 August 1973, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit “USA ’76: the First 200 Years” ’73-’76; ADM 2-7 1973/1976 Contracts; George Nelson and Company USA ’76 exhibit; A1 Entry 28 Box 128; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁷ George Nelson to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, 20 August 1973, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit “USA ’76: the First 200 Years” ’73-’76; ADM 2-7 1973/1976 Contracts; George Nelson and Company USA ’76 exhibit; A1 Entry 28 Box 128; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; “Center for the Arts opens ‘birthday’ exhibit,” *Scottsdale Today*, January 12, 1976.

⁸ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, “USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years,” exhibition booklet, 1976, 1 – 31.

and something worth celebrating in 1976. According to Michael Kammen, the celebration of tradition, and especially the Revolution, in American culture was ironic when placed within the liberated attitude after the Revolution, which expressed that Americans were released from the burden of the past.⁹ Finally freed from their ties to the Old World, Americans in the newly formed United States created their own past. Two hundred years later, the celebration of a revolutionary past countered the spirit of independence, which encouraged individual and national separation from the past.

In addition, the ARBA's presentation of change as a tradition in American culture undermined its own message. Change, by its very nature, is the opposite of tradition, which at its heart is stable and constant, despite its many variations over time. The ARBA used change as a mark of advancement. Americans have viewed change as an overwhelmingly positive characteristic of their culture. The country's reverence for change was used as a mark of its distinction, beginning with the Puritans' self-declaration to belonging to "a city upon a hill" to the country's claim of its "destiny to be the great nation of futurity."¹⁰ In this view, change is part of the American tradition. As the focal point and symbol of the social, political, and cultural orders, the Revolution became an agent of change. The Revolution's status, as well as Americans' belief in the steady progression of their nation, revealed the acceptance of these cultural definitions of tradition as a basic criterion of social activity, and as the basic referent of collective identity.¹¹

⁹ Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 7.

¹⁰ Review of *The Politics of History: Writing the History of the American Revolution, 1783-1815*, by Arthur H. Shaffer, *The American Historical Review* 81, no. 5 (December 1976): 1222, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/185312> (accessed January 12, 2010); John O'Sullivan, "The Great Nation of Futurity," *The United States Democratic Review* 6, no. 23 (November 1839): 426 – 430, <http://digital.library.cornell.edu> (accessed January 12, 2010).

¹¹ Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 16.

Masey constructed the belief that national character could best be discovered in the country's history – most particularly in the story of the American Revolution – in the exhibit's first section, "Celebration."¹² This section highlighted the nation's commemoration of the Declaration of Independence in Fourth of July activities. The signing of the Declaration of Independence marked July 4, 1776 as the starting point in American history. It was the day that "celebrated an ideal of liberty" that was expressed in the document.¹³ By assigning July 4 as the date of their nation's birth, Americans became intimately connected to the political motivations for the country's founding. Masey deliberately began the exhibit with an introduction to the Revolution to remind visitors of their deep cultural ties to the federal government. Expressions of patriotism were encouraged by the ARBA and Masey to enhance visitor loyalty to the Administration and the government that created it.

"Celebration" served to orient visitors by introducing them to the festive nature of the exhibit. Images of Independence Day activities created an atmosphere of jubilation as visitors were confronted with text and images that reflected modern forms of commemoration. For example, a painting depicting an 1850 Independence Day parade in a small town in New Hampshire hung near the entryway to the exhibit. The painting showed men banging drums, and a military company followed by an American Indian as crowds of townspeople watched the procession. An Independence Day scene in 1850 was recognizable to Americans in 1976, who engaged in similar festivities to honor the Fourth of July. The exhibit text stated that in 1976, "the celebration has come to mean parades on village greens and marching bands and annual neighborhood softball games and hot dogs eaten under a flag on the front porch. It has grown so familiar to us that we have trouble grasping the fact that the Declaration is two hundred years

¹² Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 255.

¹³ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, "USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years," Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 2.

old.”¹⁴ Such personal connections, reinforced by images of mid-nineteenth century parades, legitimized American commemoration practices. The myths of the Revolution presented by the ARBA, and of the Declaration of Independence, were constructed as fundamental to the beliefs, ideals, and practices of the American people in 1976. Freedom, independence, equality, and a political life based upon the sovereignty of the people were conscious goals of Americans, and they were carefully nurtured by the ARBA through images and deeds of the Founding Fathers.¹⁵ Reminders of the reasons for commemorating the Declaration of Independence and the Fourth of July carefully placed visitors within a framework of nationalism that was encouraged and celebrated throughout the remainder of the exhibit.

The ARBA used photographs, paintings, and artifacts from the eighteenth through twentieth centuries to create an exhibit that was a visual explosion of American progress. An invitation to the exhibit produced by the California Museum of Science and Industry in Los Angeles, where it made its only appearance in California, celebrated it as “an eye-popping exhibit honoring the vast journey our United States has made since 1776.”¹⁶ The second section of the exhibit, “Wilderness,” marked the beginning of the American journey by portraying the natural beauty that once existed west of the Appalachian Mountains. Spectacular landscape paintings by artists such as Thomas Cole, George Kensett, and Thomas Moran depicted the magnificence of the American continent. The paintings showed lush forests, crystalline waterways, snow-capped mountains, and the golden fields of the prairie. Although intended to represent the United States

¹⁴ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, “USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years,” exhibition booklet, 1976, 2.

¹⁵ Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, 71.

¹⁶ “USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years,” California Museum of Science and Industry, July 15 – August 13, 1975, Exhibit Invitation, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit “USA ’76: the First 200 Years” ’73-’76; EXH 2-19 USA ’76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

as it once was, these paintings were created as much as 80 years after the Revolution. As such, they were merely idealized visions of the United States, not accurate representations of reality. Despite their age and dubious authenticity, the myths of a vast and rich nation were maintained by the ARBA in order to enhance the administration's public image. These myths functioned to preserve and to inculcate visitor belief in innocence, in freedom, in the use of wilderness, and in adaptability by their continued existence in American minds.¹⁷ The landscapes reinforced the myth of the American wilderness, a vast resource that served as evidence for the country's present and future greatness. Echoes of such beliefs were evident in the exhibit, which proclaimed ownership to an idealized vision of the past. The exhibit text read,

The paintings shown in this part of the exhibit portray the beautiful, awesomely empty, and unnervingly quiet landscape that confronted the first explorers and settlers ... Beyond the Mississippi lay the unchartered prairies, the mountains, and the arid wastes that seemed to deserve the name which the 19th Century pioneers gave it – “the Great American Desert.”¹⁸

The text, combined with the paintings, was designed by the ARBA to reinforce Americans' belief that their country was unique and prosperous. The West was the American dream incarnate: it was the way to happiness, liberty, and independence, and protected by a government founded on the same principles.¹⁹

Missing from the landscapes were people. Nelson and Masey deliberately chose landscapes that depicted an uninhabited land waiting to be settled. Such representations spoke to the descendents of Europeans, whose cultural beliefs understood wilderness to be a temporary state that would be ended with the advancement of civilization. However, the ARBA curators knew that the American continent was far from uninhabited. American Indians, Spaniards, Britons, and

¹⁷ Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, 17.

¹⁸ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, “USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years,” Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 4.

¹⁹ Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, 75.

Frenchmen lived on the land claimed by the Americans. A few of the landscapes included American Indians, such as Sanford R. Gifford's "In the Wilderness" and Albert Bierstadt's "View of Wind River," but they were always in the periphery, tiny images dwarfed by the surrounding land.²⁰ The Indians were all but ignored; their history was almost never considered as American history.²¹

Masey, who had the ultimate authority over the content in *USA '76*, allowed designer Nelson to disregard American Indians in this section of the exhibit because the ARBA wanted a narrative that emphasized national consensus. Ignoring the presence of American Indians on the national landscape, in both the past and a present that was familiar with native protests, allowed Masey and Nelson to capitalize on mythologies of a unified West. Removing the American Indians also removed the presence of ongoing protests by the American Indian Movement (AIM) from the minds of visitors. In this manner, Nelson and Masey eliminated AIM's potential to threaten the exhibit's unified, patriotic narrative, an act that was supported by the ARBA. The exhibition booklet, which was printed by the ARBA, said, "Americans are united by their history, their beliefs, their traditions – and by the physical fact of a great continent."²²

In the next section, "The Making of a Nation," curators manipulated American Indian contributions to the development of the United States in ways that supported white American progress. Masey approved the use of native buckskins, and descriptions of agricultural and warfare techniques to show that, "American Indian knowledge became an important part of our heritage."²³ Nearby European-influenced items, such as the Kentucky long rifle and a bowie

²⁰ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, "USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years," Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 6-7.

²¹ Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, 54.

²² American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, "USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years," Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 24.

²³ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, "USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years," Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 8.

knife, in contrast, were described as purely American inventions. The exhibit openly claimed that Anglo-Americans learned from the American Indians, but then they grew and developed their own tools. The juxtaposition of American Indian and Anglo-American artifacts created a visual narrative of American progress. From skulking war tactics borrowed from the American Indians to the development of the log fort, the exhibit showed that Anglo-Americans improved upon the past, steadily making advancements in agriculture, technology, and war. While American Indian cultures were briefly displayed and acknowledged as a part of the American narrative, their cultural implements were made to look primitive and insignificant by the section's message that they were ultimately improved upon as Anglo-Americans proceeded to mold the nation in their own image.

Masey and Nelson ignored protests by the AIM for greater recognition of their cultural significance in the United States, and turned this section into a proclamation of cultural victory. It was a display of defiance against public pressures to re-evaluate traditional assumptions of American history. Ironically, this display only served to support the ARBA's desire for patriotic propaganda. Masey and Nelson, who were both employed by the ARBA, satisfied their patrons at the expense of historical redress.

In contrast to the happy images that the exhibit produced, the ARBA and other bicentennial planners experienced difficulties in getting people, especially minorities, to participate in the celebrations. Remembering a common past in which minorities were second-class citizens, African Americans in the 1970s were reluctant to place their trust in the federal government and government officials. Washington, D.C.'s Director of the Office of Bicentennial Programs Knighton Stanley said that a large part of his job was "justifying the Bicentennial to a city whose residents are largely black." He said that "there were a lot of reservations – with justification –

that the flag waving and the hoopla were just for the tourists, and there were questions concerning what do we have to celebrate.”²⁴ By the time of the bicentennial, African Americans and other minority groups had only recently been granted full citizenship, with those rights protected by the federal government. Many ethnic groups, such as American Indians and African Americans, were still protesting the government’s policies and approaches to minorities as the bicentennial celebrations were being planned and carried out. The ARBA’s construction of images of the United States as a country where an individual’s freedom to succeed and prosper was protected by the government appeared hollow to minorities. Virginia Evans, a 40-year-old African American woman from Washington, D.C. said, “Black people are still treated as niggers. They think we know nothing. As long as they give us a dollar, we’re supposed to be satisfied. And no – I am not satisfied.”²⁵ USA ’76’s designers, curators, and patrons did not seem to mind that the exhibit was at odds with the social realities of 1976. Their promotion of a celebration of American nationhood was designed to minimize conflict as the exhibit repeatedly emphasized the triumphs of the federal government. As James Reston said at a bicentennial conference, “Much remains to be done, but the old story has been repeated: we have made progress through adversity.”²⁶

Despite pressures from the federal government, the exhibit’s curators had a professional responsibility to consider the impact of their interpretation on the public, and especially minorities. By the time of the bicentennial, the museum profession itself was beginning to change the ways in which staff approached interpretation, especially with regards to minorities, but the full effects of these changes would not be visible until the 1980s. For example, the AAM

²⁴ Lynn Darling, “Bicentennial wins plaudits for legacies to the nation,” *Washington Post*, January 1, 1977, LexusNexus, (accessed January 19, 2010).

²⁵ “Our America,” *Newsweek* 88 (July 4, 1976): 67.

²⁶ James Reston, “America in a Changing World,” in *A Time to Hear and Answer: Essays for the Bicentennial Season*, Robert Penn Warren, et al., (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 152.

amended its code of ethics to include new concepts of interpretation that were based on Freeman Tilden's "Six Principles," but this was not done until 1978. At the time of the bicentennial, museum professionals were operating with a code of ethics from 1925 that emphasized an individual's responsibility to the profession, not the public. Despite the lack of formal guidelines that dealt with issues of cultural sensitivity, museum professionals were well aware of the public's mood. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in 1968,

Through scientific and technological advances we have made of the world and our nation a neighborhood. Through our ethical commitments we have failed to make of it a brotherhood.²⁷

Author Joseph Tilden Rhea called this thrust by minorities for national recognition of their culture the Race Pride Movement. According to Rhea, in the 1960s and 1970s, Americans engaged in a cultural revolution that changed collective memory all across the country.²⁸

For example, in the 1970s, over 50 African American museums were established. These ranged from modest affairs with associations with a particular building, such as the African American Meeting House in Boston (1974) or the Herndon Home in Atlanta (1971), to others such as the Wilberforce Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Ohio (1971), which is a multi-million dollar institution with the space to represent the larger history of Black America.²⁹ The 1970s also saw the rise of American Indian cultural centers, many of which were funded by the federal government in recognition of the group's cultural significance. The ARBA itself created a bi-ethnic committee in 1974, called the Bi-Ethnic and Racial Committee (BERC), which apportioned funds to ethnic groups seeking support for cultural projects. The National Park Service funded an exhibit in 1975 called *Indian Pride on the Move*, and by September 1975

²⁷ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Racial Injustice," in *Voices of Dissent: Positive Good or Disruptive Evil?* By Frank Kane, (ed.), (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 30.

²⁸ Joseph Tilden Rhea, *Race Pride and the American Identity*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 4.

²⁹ Rhea, *Race Pride and the American Identity*, 112.

25 American Indian tribes were designated Bicentennial communities by the ARBA, and 160 projects totaling over \$8,130,000 were approved and funded by the Administration.³⁰ Speaking at one of the first meetings of the BERC at a conference in Washington, D.C. on October 8, 1974, James Gibson, who presided over the meeting, clearly understood the importance of recognizing and celebrating ethnic heritage in the United States:

“I think the meeting proved something, that racial and ethnic groups are interested in the Bicentennial and they are concerned about participation. They are concerned about the kinds of things that we’re all interested in and that is to celebrate the greatness of our nation, to celebrate the country’s renewal, to celebrate the country’s rededication, to celebrate the history and the rewriting of that history. One of the things that I think is crucial is that we want to really help define American as it is. And America is made up of a variety of religious, ethnic, cultural, racial groups and we want to legitimize that pluralism and that diversity and still show that we can work together and be inspired by the challenge of the next century.”³¹

Museum professionals, such as Masey, needed to respond to the shifting social conditions in the country. Masey was caught between public desires for change and the ARBA’s need for a traditional retelling of national mythologies. However, Masey had a curatorial responsibility to formulate an exhibit that was representative of the country. He could have supported an exhibit design that was patriotic and reflected an honest inclusion of ethnic narratives. Instead, Masey’s

³⁰ Letter from Paul Swearingen to Wayne Chattin, Typed Letter, 2 July 1975; Programs, States and Communities Division; Native American Programs, Program Records ’75 – ’76; NPS – Indian Pride on the Move Exhibit; A1 Entry 82 Box 289; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Annual Report Prepared by the ARBA Office of N.A. Programs, Denver Federal Center, Denver, Colorado September 1975, 10-12, 21-23, 27; Programs, States and Communities Division; Native American Programs, General Correspondence ’74 – ’76, A; Native American Programs; A1 Entry 81 Box 280; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³¹ Transcript of Proceedings, District of Columbia Bicentennial Committee, Racial/Ethnic Bicentennial Meeting, Washington D.C. 8 October 1974, ACE – Federal Reporters, Inc. Washington, D.C., 6; Programs, States, and Communities Division. Ethnic Racial Program; Program Records of the National Bicentennial Ethnic Racial Coalition ’74 – ’76; A1 Entry 77 Box 273; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

position as an ARBA employee created a massive conflict of interest that resulted in an exhibit that was loyal to the exclusive wishes of the federal government.

“The Making of a Nation” largely lauded American technological progress. Building on the contribution of American Indians, Nelson was quick to highlight the purely American inventions of the steamboat, flatboat, and the telegraph. These inventions enabled the transportation of people and goods across the nation, and encouraged development and growth. Furthermore, they reminded visitors of America’s own inventive genius by claiming the credit through citizens’ intelligence, vision, and determination. Neil Armstrong, commenting on the bicentennial in *Reader’s Digest*, said,

America means opportunity. It started out that way. It was new and bountiful – and seemingly unlimited. Over the decades, the immigrants poured in, bringing their talents as gifts to this country. They discovered a new life with freedom to achieve their individual goals.³²

America was presented as a land full of opportunity and talent, a nation that was quickly surpassing the Old World in talent, technology, and progress. Images of railroads, steam engines, and cities dense with people gave the impression of nineteenth-century America as a busy and bustling place, with Americans focused on producing increasingly efficient ways to manage their lives. Americans’ need to bring about change and their insistence that change is desirable, inevitable, and necessary were modern manifestations of the long-established American mythology of revolution, reform, and progress.³³ These images subtly included the ARBA in their claims of national progress.

Americans gazing at century-old relics from an earlier age of industrial revolution were keenly aware of the familiarity of such images. Although the objects and images were 100 years old or older, visitors recognized the forms of transportation and living upon which their own

³² Neil A. Armstrong, “What America Means to Me,” *Reader’s Digest* 108 (June 1976): 75-77.

³³ Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, 348.

society was based. A painting of New York City in 1859 was recognizable to audiences in 1976, and the similarities were noticed between an engraving of an Ohio River flatboat and modern ferries. Tom Hou, a visitor to the exhibit, said, “Your exhibit covered more of the American way of life than a lot of others I had seen.”³⁴ Progress was recognized and accepted by viewers as central to the American character. Elsa Bocus, a foreign-born American citizen, said that, “America stands for Western civilization. The United States is holding the fort.”³⁵

Such statements contrasted with popular thought of the time. While celebrating the bicentennial, the United States was in a crippling recession that had seen unemployment rates skyrocket as the economy stagnated. Jobs began to move overseas, and an oil crisis at home forced Americans to realize their dependency on other nations. Statements about America as the last best hope for Western civilization indicated that despite the misgivings of its citizens, the United States was still recognized by the rest of the world as a respected and formidable power. Unlike the pessimistic reports of the President or media, American economic and technological prowess was still recognized by the world. This was the kind of response that the ARBA craved, because it translated into a positive reflection of the federal government.

“Changing Times” echoed similar themes of progress, and celebrated the modern American state. This section continued to laud American growth over 200 years; images of massive cities, called megalopolises, were mounted on walls to show visitors the scale on which the United States had progressed in the twentieth century. Other images, such as photographs of an automobile assembly line, hundreds of recreational vehicles parked side by side on a beach, and

³⁴ Robert Dolehide, Scottsdale, Arizona, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. “The Opening of ‘USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years Exhibition”, Typewritten Letter, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit “USA ’76: the First 200 Years” ’73-’76; EXH 2-19 USA ’76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

³⁵ Tina Gindick, “Bicentennial Fever – Everybody Else Has It,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 1976.

dozens of airplanes waiting at airport gates were selected by Nelson to present Americans as a people on the move. The exhibit text stated that, “In two hundred years, we have become the most mobile society in the world.”³⁶ For two centuries, Americans had been exploring, settling, inventing, and moving. Nelson and Masey interpreted this restlessness as an integral part of American identity. The desire for change was a trait that dated back to the Revolution: dissatisfied with their colonial status, Americans broke with their British past and created a new government, and a new way of life. That desire for change, and the search for something better, were parts of the American psyche, and were utilized by the exhibit’s curators to transform the recent divisions in American society into a unified desire for social advancement.

Masey and Nelson were aware of the country’s recent and continuing transformations, and so “Changing Times” emphasized many of Americans’ commonalities. The exhibition designers knew that the modern focus of this section would cause visitors to think of the differences and divisions that still existed at the time of the bicentennial. Eager to maintain *USA 76*’s celebratory theme, Masey and Nelson brought visitors’ attention to aspects of American life in which they could share. To this end, “Changing Times” emphasized the country’s physical growth and expansion of its population. Mobility and leisure were lauded as progressive, and reminded visitors of common activities. Photographs of hundreds of tourists at Disney World, mass housing complexes, and the gathering at Woodstock presented a homogenous, almost faceless mass of people with the same values and the same standards of behavior. The section’s claims of national unity served to foster visitor belief in belonging, and loyalty to the nation and its government. The images of homogeneity also served as a constant demonstration of the democratic nature of American society. Society, as more or less the collective will of the people,

³⁶ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, “USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years,” Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 18.

represented the will of its sovereign citizens.³⁷ In this way, photographs of masses of people engaging in ‘American’ activities of work, travel, and leisure upheld, however abstractly, American ideals of democracy and unity functioning within a diverse society.

The fifth section of the exhibit was a film, called “People, People, People.” Beginning in 1776 B.C., a date chosen by Masey and Nelson to orient the audience’s attention to the Revolution, the film produced in visual form a narrative of the nation’s steady progress throughout history. “There has never been anything to match the growth of this country,” the film proclaimed.³⁸ Cartoon images of the variety of people who stepped foot on the American continent marched across the screen, and showed audiences the diversity in U.S. history. Asians, Vikings, Spaniards, Britons, and immigrants from other nations were shown, each with their own place in American history. The film focused on the development of the population in North America. It was the only time in the exhibit that the presence of other peoples, especially American Indians, were acknowledged by curators as living and interacting on the continent prior to the arrival of the British. By doing so, Masey unconsciously contradicted earlier statements in the “Wilderness” section, where the use of landscapes indicated that America was an empty land.

However, Masey ignored these discrepancies by developing within the film images that reinforced the traditional American historical narrative. Although the film included images of minority ethnic groups, the storyline focused solely on European advancement on the North American continent. Native groups were depicted as helpmeets to the early European explorers, and they were dropped from the film when it approached the American Revolution. From that point on, the film reiterated the western historical tradition and told of the conquering of the

³⁷ Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, 219.

³⁸ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, “USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years,” Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 16.

continent by European settlers, and the development of the nation as an economic and industrial center. A section from the film text said, “1776: our last king is overthrown ... a new nation lures new people, who dash across the continent ... and a country bursts with industry.”³⁹ The film portrayed what took centuries to accomplish in four minutes.⁴⁰ The rapidity with which the story was delivered created the impression that the United States was unique because of its ability to industrialize so soon after its founding. This notion was encouraged in the exhibition booklet, which stated, “One moment, it seems, the continent was empty ... and the next, it was filled with people.”⁴¹ The film culminated with the American landing on the moon in 1969, which sent a clear message to audiences of the United States’ greatness as the world’s most powerful nation.

Despite its clear reaffirmation of the traditional narrative of American history, “People, People, People” attempted to focus its viewers on the section’s inclusion of diverse groups of people. In this manner, Masey attempted to ameliorate public demands for a consideration of the ethnic presence in American history. However, Masey approved a design of the section that streamlined America’s ethnic diversity into immigration figures that supported the ARBA’s story of national progress. Opportunities for discussions of the contributions of ethnic groups to national development, or the effects of changing social attitudes toward immigrants was denied by a curator who was eager to produce ARBA-influenced propaganda.

The exhibition booklet described the explosion of growth experienced by the nation due to immigration. It gave an example from Poland, stating that “in 1821, one solitary Polish national came here; in 1921, 95,000.”⁴² Immigration was the key to the nation’s successful growth, a trait

³⁹ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, “USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years,” Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 16-17.

⁴⁰ Hardy Price, “History Show to Open,” *Arizona Republic*, 17 January 1976.

⁴¹ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, “USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years,” Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 16.

⁴² American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, “USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years,” Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 16.

that made the United States unique. The film's inclusion of minority groups, however little, in American history indicated Masey's awareness of the nation's diversity. However, the film failed to go beyond generalizing claims (which made it easier for a variety of people to accept) and explore the contributions of minorities and immigrants to the development of the United States. The ARBA was aware that the twenty years leading up to the bicentennial changed the ways in which people viewed the actions of the past. American audiences were interested in, and demanded to see an ethnic presence in the exhibit. Visitor Tom Davis wrote in the exhibit comment book, "It is a time for reflection and reassessment, and this exhibit is a gentle way to remind all Americans that we have potential and we must fulfill it."⁴³ At the same time, the ARBA was anxious to minimize any conflict in the celebrations of the American Revolution. As a result, *USA '76* used symbols of history and claims about historical experience that exulted a shared national identity. In "People, People, People," it was enough, it seemed, that minorities were included at all.

On a cultural level the film ignored past conflicts between ethnic groups and attempted to transform them into symbolic struggles for unity.⁴⁴ Clearly reminding visitors that they were celebrating the birth of the nation, Masey selected immigration statistics that began in 1776. "People, People, People" could have included estimates on the number of people living on the American continent prior to the European's arrival, which would have complimented the film's content. Instead, Masey chose to start with Americans' declaration of independence from Great Britain, which was indicated by the film's starting date of 1776 B.C. Even as the section strove

⁴³ Robert Dolehide to Jack Masey, "Final Report of 'USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years" exhibition in Scottsdale, Arizona, Typewritten Letter, 10 March 1976, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴⁴ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 206.

to highlight the country's vast and diverse population growth, it reaffirmed the status quo, the authority of existing institutions, and the need for loyalty to the nation-state itself.⁴⁵ This was done by curators to downplay the divisions in the American past and present. Instead, the film urged the celebration of a common heritage, that despite differences in origin, all Americans could claim as their own.

The theme of diversity continued in "Portraits of Americans." This section displayed one hundred photographs of people to depict a cross-section of American society as it existed in 1976. They included children, a centenarian, farm workers, an astronaut, and people from all races. In this section Americans viewed the variety of faces that made up the United States. The inclusion of blacks, American Indians, Asians, and Latinos was a direct acknowledgement of the diversity of Americans, and revealed that these ethnic groups had made significant enough contributions to be part of the national narrative. It was a steady reversal of social relationships that had previously dictated that white Americans appear as superior to other ethnicities.

Prior to the Revolution and surviving into later centuries, differences based on birth and inheritance were difficult to sustain, and so individuals identified by Europeans by their peculiarities of dress, speech, hairstyle, and behavior, were perceived as ignorant and inferior.⁴⁶ For several centuries, the perceived inferiors included African Americans, American Indians, and Latinos. The social and political changes brought on by the civil rights movement, and the continuing protests by the AIM and African Americans in the 1970s caused *USA '76*'s designers to acknowledge the power of the minority presence in the United States. The bicentennial of the American Revolution was separated by a decade of disunity and dissention but was still

⁴⁵ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 229.

⁴⁶ Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, 93.

connected by an acute concern for citizen loyalty to the state and national cohesion.⁴⁷ The minority presence in “Portraits of Americans” was therefore crafted by curators in such a way that the individual photographs melded with the larger collage (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. The “Portraits of Americans” in *USA '76* showed a cross-section of American life. Curators deliberately constructed consensus-oriented sections in the exhibit to please its government sponsor, the ARBA. (Photograph courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration).

The portraits gave the impression that American minorities were not only full citizens, but also that they supported the nation despite their protests. Visitors to this section recognized the attempt that was being made to include a variety of Americans, and celebrate the diversity of their occupations, age, and lives. Barbara Turkian wrote in the exhibition comment book, “I

⁴⁷ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 226.

thoroughly enjoyed the photographs of the ‘People’ in this great country – that’s what America is all about!”⁴⁸ An anonymous visitor wrote, “Each of your photos of Americans held a story of a life within its boundaries. I spent much time in front of each.”⁴⁹ These reactions revealed that at the time of the bicentennial, Americans were interested in a rising social history that recognized the presence and contributions of minorities in U.S. history. Visitors wanted to see ethnic diversity in a cross-section of their country.

Despite the limited presence of minorities in the exhibit, “Portraits of Americans” failed to include any analysis with the photographs. The photographs were simply placed on a wall free from labels or other identifying material, which forced visitors to draw their own conclusions. This approach allowed Masey and the other curators to refrain from making a public statement on diversity. With visitors free to interpret the photographs at will, people were more likely to arrive at conclusions that agreed with their personal opinions. This minimized dissent over the exhibit’s content, and distanced the ARBA from any direct involvement with the troubling issue of American diversity.

However, some visitors were not satisfied with the images in “Portraits of Americans.” These visitors appeared to be more aware of the divisions that still existed in the United States than other visitors. Sylvia Zell wrote, “There is no real mention of the great women of our country’s history, people like Susan B. Anthony and Harriet Tubman,” and Margaret Kerry wrote, “God

⁴⁸ Robert Dolehide to Jack Masey, “Final Report of ‘USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years” exhibition in Scottsdale, Arizona, Typewritten Letter, 10 March 1976, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit “USA ’76: the First 200 Years” ’73-’76; EXH 2-19 USA ’76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴⁹ Robert S. Byrnes, Los Angeles, California, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. “USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years, Seattle Exhibition” Report for Period 10 – 15 June 1975, Typewritten Letter, 16 June 1975, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit “USA ’76: the First 200 Years” ’73-’76; EXH 2-19 USA ’76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

we are horrible people. Didn't we do anything right?"⁵⁰ For its bicentennial edition, *Newsweek* published 50 views on the current state of America, written by ordinary citizens from different backgrounds. Ferman Moore, a 27-year-old black male from a Los Angeles ghetto, said, "For America to celebrate now is something for us to question. What are we celebrating? If we're celebrating fairness and genuine care for each and every man, we are wrong. We should not be celebrating when things are as they are." Sam Moore, a 33-year-old third generation coal miner wrote of his concerns for his children. He said, "I would most like to give all my sons a college education. I just believe in people's constitutional rights and freedoms. I'd like to see all three of my sons grow up to be lawyers and charge fair prices and fight for the people."⁵¹ Their voices confirmed that the American experiment was incomplete in 1976, and painfully so for the poor, for minorities, and for women. They reflected a concern for a loss of trust in everything from family life to politics. Americans were, the novelist John Cheever wrote, a nation "haunted by a dream of excellence."⁵² Such depressing realities were ignored in *USA '76*, because an examination of the divisions and discontent in American society would undermine the exhibit's celebratory salute to the federal government. The ARBA was not interested in highlighting areas of society that were neglected by the government, and as ARBA employees, neither were Masey, Nelson, and the other curators.

⁵⁰Robert S. Byrnes, Los Angeles, California, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "Report for period July 30-August 13, 1975 on 'USA '76: the First Two Hundred Years," Typewritten Letter, 14 August 1975, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Robert S. Byrnes, Los Angeles, California, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "Visit to "USA '76" by the Australian Consul General," Typewritten Letter, 3 August 1975, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵¹ "Our America," *Newsweek* 88 (July 4, 1976):16, 42.

⁵² "Our America," *Newsweek* 88 (July 4, 1976):16.

Taking into consideration that many visitors might question the exhibition's celebratory message, the curators of *USA '76* focused largely on the nation's commonalities. An internal ARBA memo concerning the exhibit said about Americans:

They live, work, study, vote, play, and in general interact in an infinite variety of ways. But within this diversity they are united by their history, their beliefs, their traditions – and by the physical fact of a great continent. This common experience has left its mark on their faces, and there is something specially American about them.

Whenever confronted with issues of national divisions, Masey and Nelson repeatedly relied on common characteristics to define nationhood. These were usually expressed in abstract concepts of the 'nation,' such as the United States' dedication to freedom, equality, and progress. In *USA '76*, the main focus was on the creation of a living vision of a diverse people working in tandem to further their national purpose. Characterizing the nation as diverse was a central strategy employed by Masey for representing unity across difference. Talk of diversity coded in the recognition of women, youth, the aged, and the disabled, and regional groups, as well as ethnic and racial groups. The symbols used to represent national unity were abstract yet emotional: they involved the bare assertion of the existence of celebration, references to abstract symbols like the flag, and the ritual use of spectacle as expression of social bonds. Two ways of symbolizing what Americans shared entered the vocabulary of celebration organizers; they appealed to symbols of diversity, and to the experience of the celebration itself.⁵³

The final section of *USA '76* was "The Bicentennial and You." It showcased the three ARBA-sanctioned themes of the national celebration: Heritage '76, Festival USA, and Horizons '76. These three themes were designed by curators to "review and reaffirm the basic principles on

⁵³ Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration*, 119, 126-130.

which the nation was founded.”⁵⁴ Heritage ’76 urged Americans to re-examine and take pride in their nation’s history; Festival USA encouraged individual expression and celebrated American folk art; and Horizon ’76 challenged people to get involved in community projects that would benefit the future of America. It was blatant promotion of the ARBA; Masey did not bother to coat this section with coded appeals to unity and nationalism. Instead, he embraced them.

Projects that were displayed in this section included historic reenactments, photographs from a folk festival in Washington, D.C., and park conservation.⁵⁵ Curators connected community involvement with the Revolution by reminding visitors that the spirit of individual sacrifice for the betterment of others was the same spirit that led to the founding of the nation.

In the exhibit, the ARBA acknowledged that its goals were “to forge a new national commitment, a new Spirit of ’76.”⁵⁶ The “Spirit of ’76” was a vague term that was used by the ARBA and other bicentennial planners to describe the passion of the people for their revolutionary past, and their continuing loyalty to the nation. Heritage ’76, Festival USA, and Horizons ’76 were methods through which people could express their allegiance. The projects highlighted in this section revealed consistent themes: a preoccupation with a revolutionary past, acknowledgment and celebration of individual and community diversity, and concern for creating a better future. By the end of 1976, over 12,566 communities across the country participated in the programs, which demonstrated that people were aware of and actively engaged in expressing devotion to the nation.⁵⁷ By recreating an early nineteenth century Shaker room, planning cultural centers, or examining ways to improve urban planning, people

⁵⁴ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, “USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years,” Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 30.

⁵⁵ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, “USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years,” Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 30.

⁵⁶ American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, “USA ’76: The First Two Hundred Years,” Exhibition Booklet, 1976, 30.

⁵⁷ Lynn Darling, “Bicentennial wins plaudits for legacies to the nation,” *Washington Post*, January 1, 1977, LexusNexus, (accessed January 19, 2010).

participated in forms of expression that openly showed their dedication to the federal government. Whether they were aware of it or not, this was exactly what the ARBA wanted Americans to do.

Despite his close association with the ARBA, Masey had a responsibility as the director of *USA '76* to manage an exhibit that would propel visitor thinking. A restatement of national mythologies appeared to be a natural choice for a commemoration as massive as the bicentennial, but in 1976 such arguments were becoming increasingly transparent. A rising expectation from the public to include minority narratives demanded reconsiderations by museums of the traditional assumptions of American history, especially in 1976 of those surrounding the Revolution. The possibility of teaching visitors, and of having a powerful and lasting effect on them would have been more beneficial and influential than providing short-lived amusement and diversion for many.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, the ARBA's control over Masey's job was too strong to break the Administration's hold on *USA '76*, its chief mechanism of support.

During its four-month tour in the United States, 338,000 people viewed *USA '76*.⁵⁹ Like *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, the exhibit staff conducted no visitor studies. This was partially

⁵⁸ Kenneth L. Ames, Barbara Franco, and L. Thomas Frye, *Ideas and Images: Developing Interpretive History Exhibits*, (Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1992), 323.

⁵⁹ Robert Dolehide, Scottsdale, Arizona, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "Final Report of 'USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years," Typewritten Letter, 10 March 1976, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Robert S. Byrnes, Los Angeles, California, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "Report for period July 30-August 13, 1975 on 'USA '76: the First Two Hundred Years," Typewritten Letter, 14 August 1975, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Robert S., Byrnes Los Angeles, California, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years, Seattle Exhibition" Report for Period 10 – 15 June 1975, Typewritten Letter, 16 June 1975, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; George Nelson to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, 20 August 1973, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; ADM 2-7 1973/1976 Contracts: George Nelson and Company USA '76 exhibit; A1 Entry 28 Box 128; Records of the

because visitor studies were not a formal part of the museum exhibition process. The field of museum education, of which visitor analysis would become a part, did not exist at the time of the bicentennial. As late as 1974, museum staff members were aware that something was happening to their visitors as they viewed exhibits, but they had no definite ways to measure and analyze these changes.⁶⁰ As a result, staff relied on visitor comments, written in a book placed at the end of the exhibit, as indicators of visitor satisfaction and learning.

The comments from *USA '76* revealed that despite its obvious bias, visitors enjoyed the exhibit and its exploration of the nation's history. Mr. and Mrs. J.L. Jones called the exhibit "a terrific display, beautifully presented, at times depressing, mostly exhilarating."⁶¹ Other visitors echoed similar sentiments. Deborah A. Harper said, "All of the exhibit showed the good and bad of American history and the present." Gina E. Manoli wrote, "Beauty, joy, fear, hope ... and love have been displayed in this exhibit. A realistic, true and touching view of America. It sparked a flame in my heart."⁶² These comments showed that visitors connected with the exhibit on emotional levels, which was a victory for Masey and the ARBA. What they did not anticipate was that visitors recognized the complexities of the nation's past and present. Visitors who remembered the civil rights protests and who still had to contend with demands from the AIM,

American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁶⁰ Belcher, *Exhibitions in Museums*, 200.

⁶¹ Dolehide, Robert, Scottsdale, Arizona, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "The Opening of 'USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years' Exhibition, Typewritten Letter, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁶² Robert S. Byrnes, Los Angeles, California, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years, Chicago Exhibition" Weekly Report #4, 12 – 18 March 1975, Typewritten Letter, 22 March 1975, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD; Robert Dolehide, Scottsdale, Arizona, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "The Opening of 'USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years' Exhibition, Typewritten Letter, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

black militants, and even the Women's Liberation Movement recognized the present divisions and inequalities in American society, despite the ARBA's best efforts to minimize them.

USA '76 presented an ARBA-sanctioned view of the United States that was celebratory, linear, and progressive. By doing so, the ARBA unconsciously compared the past with the present, and when thusly judged, the present did not always come out on top. Visitors became nostalgic as they viewed the promises embodied by the United States – freedom, equality, and progress – that were not all fulfilled by 1976. The result was a powerful range of emotional response, from fear to hope, but the lasting impression by visitors was of a reaffirmation of American pride and the promise of the future. Visitor Stephen de Ga'al wrote, "The exhibition very well captures the nostalgia of the past, present, and future of America."⁶³

Visitors frequently mentioned their national pride in the comment book. Lynn McBroom wrote, "Wonderful exhibit; it reinforces my feeling of pride in being American." An unsigned comment read, "It (the exhibit) was very impressive and inspired one to great respect for this great country and love for it, and what it stands for." These comments reflected the exhibit's theme of celebration, which reinforced and reinvigorated American myths of their country as inherently great and tolerant of social change. From the first section to the last, Nelson and Masey continuously encouraged in the exhibit a celebratory spirit. The United States was birthed in revolution, and had been steadily changing and making progress ever since. The slow inclusion of all people in the grants of the Declaration of Independence and protection of the Constitution was just a part of the nation's realization of its full promise, and reminded visitors of the country's recent social revolutions. Downplaying the nation's past and present

⁶³ Robert Dolehide, Scottsdale, Arizona, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "The Opening of 'USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years" Exhibition, Typewritten Letter, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

disagreements, divisions, and civil disobedience, *USA '76* lauded the country's commonalities, even if they existed only on intangible, abstract levels. This sentiment was confirmed by author Richard Krikus when he wrote in 1976 that,

One of the greatest achievements of the United States has been its capacity to accommodate conflicting group demands in a relatively peaceful and equitable fashion. Group differences are ameliorated because Americans belong to more than one of them. Perhaps of larger importance, Americans share a common political culture and have faith in the system's fairness.⁶⁴

Americans could not escape their past, and it was this past that Masey and Nelson molded to fit the ARBA's narratives of unified nationalism. Claims of national greatness functioned as myths, and enforced visitor beliefs of the United States as a country born fully formed with a great destiny on its shoulders. In the exhibit, progress took many forms, including technological advancement, population growth, acceptance of ethnic diversity, and the continuation of the nation's political ideologies. By expressing their pride, visitors showed that they accepted the ARBA's celebratory claims. After visiting the exhibit, Tom David Tempe wrote, "It is refreshing to see an exhibit that is willing to look at both the good and the bad that is, and has been America. It is a time for reflection and re-assessment and this exhibit is a gentle way to remind all Americans that we have potential and we must fulfill it."⁶⁵

There was very little written disagreement over the exhibit. In six correspondences between Jack Masey, the ARBA exhibition director, and the exhibition managers at the *USA '76* show locations, only two memos recorded comments that were negative. However, the exhibition managers selected the comments that were sent to Masey because they were either representative

⁶⁴ Richard Krikus, *Pursuing the American Dream: White Ethnics and the New Populism*, (London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 343.

⁶⁵ Robert Dolehide, Scottsdale, Arizona, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "Final Report of 'USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years," Typewritten Letter, 10 March 1976, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

of the received comments or unique. The selection may have been deliberate to make the comments appear more constructive. The ARBA was eager to appear in tune with the American people and their desires, and a positive reaction to *USA '76* translated into a positive review of the Administration. Of the recorded negative comments, an anonymous woman complained that an inclusion of modern women was lacking in the exhibit. She wrote, "I greatly respect homemakers (I'm a mom and grandma myself) but would have liked to see more pictures of women achieving today."⁶⁶ The exhibit did include a section on nineteenth century America, called "The Making of a Nation," where discussion about the economic impact that industrialization had on women would have been appropriate. In addition, the "Changing Times" section could have included discussion about post-World War II economic demands and its impact on traditional gender roles. Instead, these sections focused largely on the technological developments that led to America's greater economic power, thereby excluding women like Tubman, Anthony, and Jeannette Rankin, who was the first woman elected to Congress. Like the film, "People, People, People, or Portraits of Americans," Masey dismissed any discussion of social division because the topic was in direct opposition to positive images of nationalism. Anything that was potentially detrimental to the ARBA's image was ignored or expertly manipulated to appear to support the government.

The exhibit's designers did not want to focus on the divisions that existed in American society, both in the past and the present. They feared that acknowledgement of the country's less than perfect dedication to the lofty ideals in the Declaration, and its occasional blatant disregard

⁶⁶ Robert S. Brynes, Los Angeles, California, to Jack Masey, Washington, D.C. "USA '76: The First Two Hundred Years, Seattle Exhibition" Report for Period 10 – 15 June 1975, Typewritten Letter, 6 June 1975, Design and Exhibits – Correspondence relating to the Exhibit "USA '76: the First 200 Years" '73-'76; EXH 2-19 USA '76 Weekly Reports; A1 Entry 28 Box 131; Records of the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration; Record Group 452; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

for the laws set forth in the Constitution would remove visitors' focus from the celebration of two hundred years of continuous nationhood. As a result, *USA '76* emphasized Americans' commonalities, and curators relied on appeals to abstract concepts of wholeness, as exemplified in "People, People, People" and "Portraits of Americans." Exhibit curators were aware of the demand by the public to include minorities, and they did so, but solely within the context of the traditional narrative of the United States. Americans saw minorities in *USA '76*, but only so much as they supported a celebratory narrative that reaffirmed citizen loyalty to the federal government.

USA '76 was designed by George Nelson and the ARBA to celebrate American nationhood and progress over two centuries. Every section in the exhibit reinforced its celebratory theme. It showed images of the country's steady growth and saluted the people whose commitment to the nation resulted in the United States becoming the most powerful country in the world. Beginning with the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the exhibit showed the ways in which the nation and its people had improved. The exhibit retold the myths of national progress, which said that through technology and industrialization the people of the United States conquered the West and became an economic power. Visitors, who found in the exhibit a reflection of themselves, accepted these messages. Feelings of pride revealed an emotional resonance with the exhibit's messages of identity that impacted visitors searching for an affirmation of their place within a changing American society.

The search for a common identity, combined with the ARBA's desperate efforts to be viewed positively, resulted in an exhibit that was largely celebratory of the American past, and encouraged loyalty to the present nation. Nelson created a narrative, which Masey approved that focused on reconstructing national progress into a seamless, opposition-free event. The struggles

faced by minorities, immigrants, and activists were removed from the national narrative in Masey's desperate bid to please his government sponsor. In endorsing such an obvious advertisement for the ARBA, Masey failed in his responsibilities as a museum professional. He failed to recognize the public's pleas for changes in the national narrative as legitimate concerns, and missed opportunities to educate visitors beyond a simple retelling of 200-year-old mythologies. Political pressures caused Masey to use his ARBA-endorsed curatorial authority to construct a self-serving narrative of unified nationalism.

CHAPTER 3. OUT OF MANY: *A NATION OF NATIONS* AND THE DILEMMA OF DIVERSITY

A Nation of Nations was designed by the Smithsonian Institution as a bicentennial exhibition to celebrate the diversity of the American people in 1976. The exhibit was displayed in the National Museum of History and Technology (NMHT), and used objects gathered from across the nation to illustrate the many contributions of immigrants to the development of the United States. The main argument made by the exhibit's curators was that the United States was "not merely a nation but a teeming nation of many nations," a phrase that was taken from a poem by Walt Whitman and used as the exhibit's title.¹ *A Nation of Nations* narrated the American search for authenticity and identity in a nation that was geographically, culturally, and ethnically diverse. Hundreds of artifacts covering nearly an acre of space depicted the complex changes, from immigration to the process of naturalization, which rendered a nation based on the tensions of pluralism. Unlike *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* and *USA '76*, *A Nation of Nations* showed both the country's racist past and the hope for a future based on an acceptance of diversity.

The curators of *A Nation of Nations* took a more progressive approach to their interpretation of American history. However, their inclusion of ethnic diversity was based on the assumption that all American citizens had the ability to become economically independent and successful, an ideal that was increasingly difficult to reach in the 1970s. Like Jack Masey, the curators of *A Nation of Nations* found it difficult to reconcile federal urges for unity with the nation's abundant diversity. As a result, *A Nation of Nations* was a confusing attempt to include both traditional national history and the emerging social history that emphasized minority voices. In this manner, *A Nation of Nations* simultaneously celebrated the diversity of the United States and reaffirmed

¹ Donald Sanders, "The diversity of American life is evident at the Smithsonian," *Miami News (Miami, Florida)*, July 20, 1976, Google News Archives, (accessed 22 January 2010).

the common tenets of citizenship and nationhood. Although the curators used their authority to please the government and public, they took professional risks that ultimately strengthened the museum profession.

A team of curators from the Smithsonian Institution developed *A Nation of Nations*. They included Carl Scheele, who was the lead curator of the exhibit; Peter C. Marzio, who was the chairman of the Department of Cultural History; S. Dillon Ripley, who was the secretary and chief executive; and Brooke Hindle, who was the director of the NMHT.² The curators accepted a design plan created by Ivan Chermayeff and John P. Grady, of Chermayeff and Geismer Associates.³ The curators were experienced in exhibition design and development, and led by Scheele, they decided to focus on the cultural diversity that existed in the United States for thousands of years. Covering events as far back as 22,000 years before 1976 in the exhibit, the curators were especially sensitive to the growing recognition of diversity in the country.⁴

The curators deliberately chose this range of time because it allowed them to include the various American Indian groups that occupied the land that would become the United States within the historic narrative of the country. After the Wounded Knee trials of 1974, which found the federal government guilty of misconduct against the AIM, the Movement increased in power and felt more confident in attacking the federal government and public museums.⁵ In 1972, a caravan of demonstrators destroyed property and stole artifacts from the Wounded Knee Trading

² “Smithsonian readies ‘testament to human curiosity,’” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* (*Sarasota, Florida*), February 23, 1975, Google News Archives, (accessed January 22, 2010).

³ Chermayeff and Geismer Associates, “Nation of Nations: An exhibition on the American people at the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of History and Technology for the Bicentennial year,” January 1973, interpretive plan; A Nation of Nations: Chermayeff & Geismer Contracts, 1972-1976; Exhibition notes, 1973; Box 2; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibit Records, 1971-1989; Record Group 06-163; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁴ “A Nation of Nations,” *Kentucky New Era* (*Hopkinsville, Kentucky*), February 12, 1977, Google News Archive, (accessed January 22, 2010).

⁵ Laura Waterman Wittstock and Elaine J. Salinas, “A Brief History of the American Indian Movement,” American Indian Movement Gran Governing Council, <http://www.aimovement.org/ggc/history.html> (accessed March 2, 2010).

Post and Museum. A year later, during the occupation of Wounded Knee, the trading post and museum were thoroughly destroyed, all objects were stolen or broken, and the owners became hostages for a time during the siege.⁶ In 1974, the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society established an Iroquois Advisory Committee and in 1975, the museum agreed to remove all medicine masks from exhibition.⁷ And after formal Iroquois protests in 1971, the New York State Museum in Albany agreed to remove all displays involving American Indian skeletons and to replace them with drafted renditions.⁸ The American Indian protests directed at museums occurred just as many museums, becoming aware of their own shortcomings during the civil rights movement, tried to head off controversy by creating American Indian advisory committees, using American Indian consultants, and hiring American Indians as staff members.⁹ Scheele and the other curators included American Indians in the exhibit as a preemptive strike against criticism from the AIM.

Covering 35,000 square feet, *A Nation of Nations* celebrated the country's cultural and ethnic pluralism, and challenged visitors to what President Nixon called a "dedicated effort for the fulfillment of national goals yet to be achieved."¹⁰ Nixon was referring to the promises of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution: the guarantee of individual freedom, equality, and equal protection under the law for all American citizens. The protests of the 1960s and early 1970s, along with a loss of faith in the government after the failure of Vietnam and the Watergate scandal, left many Americans doubtful of their country's ability to serve its people. In

⁶ Karen Coody Cooper, *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices*, (New York, New York: AltaMira Press, 2008), 9 – 10.

⁷ Cooper, *Spirited Encounters*, 33.

⁸ Cooper, *Spirited Encounters*, 40.

⁹ Cooper, *Spirited Encounters*, 11.

¹⁰ Douglas David, "Sweeping up America," *Newsweek* 88 (July 12, 1976): 67, LexusNexus Academic Search Premier, (accessed January 19, 2010); Robert Betts, "The Nation's Birthday: past, present, and future of U.S. will be saluted," *The Argus-Press (Owosso, Michigan)*, March 12, 1973, Google News Archives, (accessed January 22, 2010).

efforts to remove such mistrust, government officials lauded the regenerative powers of the American people. Speaking on July 4, 1976, President Ford declared, “Our country must never cease to be a place where men and women try the untried, test the impossible, and take uncertain paths into the unknown.”¹¹ The exhibit staff at the Smithsonian heeded Ford’s words in the development of *A Nation of Nations*. Unlike *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* or *USA ’76*, this exhibit boldly examined the country’s cultural past, and questioned assumptions of ethnicity and difference.

The exhibit was shown in the NMHT for five years, and an estimated 10 million people viewed it in 1976.¹² Although early plans for the exhibit included discussion about preparations for a survey to hand out to visitors waiting to enter the exhibit, no formal surveys were conducted for the duration of *A Nation of Nation*’s tenure at the NHMT. According to an internal memo, the survey was intended to “give visitors during the bicentennial year an opportunity to demonstrate their faith in their country as well as voice their hopes and fears for its future.”¹³ It was an obvious appeal to the nation’s democratic principles, which the visitors examined as they walked through the exhibit. It was intended that a rotating electronic device, similar to the news feed in Times Square in New York City, would play a continuous stream of information to visitors as they waited to enter the exhibit. The information was to prepare visitors for what they would see in the exhibit, tell them about the demographic characteristics of the people who had already entered the exhibit, and give them an up to the minute count of the number of people

¹¹ David M. Alpern, Thomas M. DeFrank, and Jane Whitmore, “Happy Birthday,” *Newsweek* 88 (July 12, 1976). LexusNexus, Academic Search Premier, (accessed January 19, 2010).

¹² Louis Harris and Associates, New York, to Dr. Daniel J. Boorstin, Washington, D.C. “Initial Thinking on Polling Visitors to the Bicentennial Exhibit,” Typewritten Letter, 22 August 1973; *A Nation of Nations: Contracts, 1973-1977*; Curatorial Records, 1968-1991; Box 4; Record Group 06-164; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Curatorial Records, 1968-1991; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹³ Louis Harris and Associates, New York, to Dr. Daniel J. Boorstin, Washington, D.C. “Outline of Substance and Costs for Bicentennial Exhibit Polling,” Typewritten Letter, 13 September 1973, *A Nation of Nations: Contracts, 1973-1977*; Curatorial Records, 1968-1991; Box 4; Record Group 06-164; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Curatorial Records, 1968-1991; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

who had gone through the exhibit. A survey was proposed for visitors to respond to questions regarding the quality of American life and listed characteristics of American life and its development.¹⁴ The estimated cost of creating the electronic news feed and survey was \$464,000.¹⁵ The high cost prevented the exhibit survey from being carried out. Instead, staff and tour guides collected visitor comments that were written down in books placed throughout the exhibit. These comments revealed that the majority of visitors were impressed with the exhibit and took delight in examining the good and bad of American history. According to one anonymous comment, the exhibit “has the effect of making us think – about what went into the making of our country – not just the things we’ve done right – but some things we’ve done wrong.”¹⁶ Close examinations of the cultural, social, and political development of the United States were major themes of the exhibit.

A Nation of Nations had four sections: “People for a New Nation,” which examined American Indian cultures prior to European contact, and the development of eastern America through the Revolution; “Old Ways, New World,” which examined the ways in which European cultures were transplanted and adapted in America; “Shared Experiences” defined what it meant to be an American, and showed the ways in which this identity was fostered and expressed; and “A Nation of Nations” celebrated the diverse influences on past and present American culture.

¹⁴ Louis Harris and Associates, New York, to Dr. Daniel J. Boorstin, Washington, D.C. “Initial Thinking on Polling Visitors to the Bicentennial Exhibit,” Typewritten Letter, 22 August 1973, *A Nation of Nations: Contracts, 1973-1977*; Curatorial Records, 1968-1991; Box 4; Record Group 06-164; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Curatorial Records, 1968-1991; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C. “Outline of Substance and Costs for Bicentennial Exhibit Polling,” Typewritten Letter, 13 September 1973, *A Nation of Nations: Contracts, 1973-1977*; Curatorial Records, 1968-1991; Box 4; Record Group 06-164; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Curatorial Records, 1968-1991; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ Louis Harris and Associates, New York, to Dr. Daniel J. Boorstin, Washington, D.C. “Outline of Substance and Costs for Bicentennial Exhibit Polling,” Typewritten Letter, 13 September 1973, *A Nation of Nations: Contracts, 1973-1977*; Curatorial Records, 1968-1991; Box 4; Record Group 06-164; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Curatorial Records, 1968-1991; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶ Carl Scheele, Washington, D.C., Autographed Document Signed, 13 June 1976; Public Comments, 1976-1977; Box 4; Record Group 06-163, National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

Together, all four sections promoted an image of a United States that was teeming with diversity, and yet found strength in its common past: the American Revolution.

Brooke Hindle, the director of the NMHT, referred to the Revolution as “uniting many of the divergent and conflicting groups in a common cause which they called ‘The American Cause.’”¹⁷ From that point on, the exhibit staff claimed, all Americans had pursued the American cause – a dedication to freedom, liberty, and equality that existed throughout the centuries. Not all Americans agreed on what the ‘Cause’ meant, and even less agreed on the means to promote it. The curators showed these debates and setbacks in *A Nation of Nations* in a display called “Prejudice,” which included ‘White Only’ signs and Klu Klux Klan paraphernalia. Despite these painful reminders of what to bicentennial audiences was a recent past, the exhibit’s secondary theme of nationalism tied images of differences together, and reinforced visitors’ beliefs in a shared identity as Americans. According to Senator Charles Mathias, it was, “A celebration ... to discover and develop a greater sense of common purpose, of sharing common aims and ideals, of belonging to the same country.”¹⁸ In that way, curators maintained forms of nationalism within a discussion of cultural diversity.

All societies depend for their continuation on common assumptions, common forms of communication, common referents for thoughts and ideas, common patterns of behavior and ritual, and a common inheritance.¹⁹ At first glance, *A Nations of Nations*, with its discussion of diversity within the American past and present, appeared to contradict other exhibits, such as *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* and *USA '76*, which emphasized the country’s shared experiences and promoted loyalty to the nation. Indeed, *A Nation of Nations* did not shy away

¹⁷ Brooke Hindle, “Introduction,” *A Nation of Nations: the People who came to American as seen through Objects, Prints, and Photographs at the Smithsonian Institution*, ed. by Peter C. Marzio (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), xv.

¹⁸ Hartje, *Bicentennial USA*, 323-324.

¹⁹ Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality*, 17.

from ethnic or cultural diversity throughout the history of the United States, nor did the curators downplay the divisions that still existed in the country in 1976. It openly discussed the main dilemma of diversity within the United States: how to support various cultures while maintaining one central American identity. The curators presented the story of this struggle through the emergence from many diverse cultures and peoples of ‘one’ nation. The exhibit’s focus on patterns of migration to the United States allowed exhibition curators to place its discussion of diversity within a carefully planned narrative of a shared past that promoted belief in a common heritage as Americans. S. Dillon Ripley said that, “the 100 percent American is 100 percent something else.”²⁰

Ironically, the exhibit presented American ethnic and cultural diversity as a unifying national experience. This was done to please the curators’ government sponsors. In the 1970s, the Smithsonian Institution’s budget was \$300 million dollars, with half coming from the Congress.²¹ As the country’s national museum, the curators had responsibilities to both its political and public constituents. The government’s hefty financial support was a factor for curators when developing *A Nation of Nations*’s content.

The first section of the exhibit, “People for a New Nation,” concentrated on the early phases of immigration, and emphasized that the United States had never produced any native peoples. Curators immediately stripped visitors of any preconceived notions of uniqueness by arguing that the United States was a nation of immigrants. The section began with the discovery of America by Siberian hunters in 22000 B.C., and led up to the American Revolution in 1776. Artifacts and paintings depicted the vast cultural diversity in the land that would become the United States (see Figure 3).

²⁰ S. Dillon Ripley, “Foreward,” in *A Nation of Nations*, xiii.

²¹ Edward Parks, “Secretary S. Dillon Ripley Retires After Twenty Years of Innovation,” *Smithsonian*, September 1984.



Figure 3. The display of American Indian artifacts in *A Nation of Nations* was a direct response to public demands that museums give greater consideration to ethnic voices in the national narrative. (Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Archives).

The curators included objects from pre-contact American Indian nations and seventeenth and eighteenth-century English, Dutch, Spanish, French, and German immigrants to demonstrate to visitors that no one was a native or a descendent of natives. Since Americans could not claim to be a native American, the curators argued that their common identifying factor was their immigrant heritage.

Scheele and the other curators depicted the American Revolution as the unifying event that created a common American culture. The Revolution transformed the nation of immigrants by

channeling their diverse backgrounds and cultures into a common cause: that of independence.

An exhibit label stated:

The American Revolution succeeded because so many different kinds of people were committed to it. Most of the signers of the Declaration of Independence had English names, but French, Spanish, Dutch, Germans, Indians, Africans and others fought as well. Many took part who couldn't yet be citizens – but what joined them now was the passion for liberty and the need to be something altogether new, American.²²

The curators openly claimed that what drove the settlers to rebellion was a deep desire to belong to a group, and to be tied together by something stronger than their different cultures possessed.

Guided by the spirit of independence, they created new identities for themselves. No longer identifying themselves by their country of origin, but instead as citizens of the United States, they ceased to be immigrants, and became Americans.

From the start, curators oriented visitors to think of themselves as one people. This contradicted the exhibit's main claim: that the United States was a nation made of many cultures. The curators' unique crafting of a unified Revolution, which was also incorrect historically, allowed both the curators and visitors to safely commit to a unified narrative that was free from troubling thoughts of cultural division. It was the type of narrative that a federal government struggling to regain public trust desired, because it placed national loyalty within a secure, traditional narrative of the Revolution.

The presentation of the Revolution as a unifying event served to further national mythologies that placed the birth of the country in 1776. *A Nation of Nations* claimed that from the birth of the United States, Americans were a people with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds that were connected by their revolutionary origins. A label describing the Constitution said, "You

²² "A Nation of Nations," Exhibit Labels, Exhibition Script Development (Section 1), 1972-1976; Box 1; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 4.

could say that the spirit of Revolution was our first national export.”²³ By declaring their independence from Great Britain, the new Americans departed from a past in which their origins began in a multitude of places with different, and often competing agendas, and embraced a new origin wholly of their own creation. The ideas of the American Revolution guaranteed the equality of all men, despite their background or status in life. It had a perceived leveling effect that allowed diverse peoples to unify under a common cause, and a common heritage that rested in individual freedom and equality. An early draft of the exhibit script stated that immigrants “called themselves Americans and they wanted to be free.”²⁴ Thus the curators identified the birth of an American people with the birth of the nation.

The curators’ interest in promoting a pro-government narrative of the Revolution prevented them from seriously examining the claims that they made. Despite the lofty phrases of the Declaration of Independence, the document and the new government did not guarantee the equality of all men, which was most ardently supported by the presence of slavery across the American landscape. Slavery, a dominant part of American life and development for over two centuries, was not mentioned anywhere in the exhibit. The treatment of American Indians by the early Republic’s federal government was also ignored, although the curators attempted to combat this with inclusion of American Indian groups as they existed prior to the Revolution. Scheele ignored these discrepancies in order to focus on the constructive parts of American history that reflected well on the federal government and its efforts to provide for its citizens.

²³ “A Nation of Nations,” Exhibit Labels, Exhibition Script Development (Section 1), 1972-1976; Box 1; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 4.

²⁴ “A Nation of Nations,” draft of exhibition script, 1973; “A Nation of Nations,” Exhibit Labels, Exhibition Script Development (Section 1), 1972-1976; Box 1; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 3.

The Revolution may have united the people in the United States under one country, but it did not completely eradicate existing traditions. The second section, “Old Ways in a New Nation,” explored the ways in which eighteenth and nineteenth-century Americans struggled to reconcile older traditions with an emerging American culture. The decades immediately following the Revolution were a period of exploration and adjustment as people tentatively began to define their place in the new country. A title on the exhibit wall acknowledged “The Diverse Majority” of ethnicities and cultures in the early United States. Underneath it a printed quote by Saint John de Crevecoeur in 1782 asked, “What then is the American, this new man?”²⁵ This question of identity was evident in a nation filled with people whose roots reached to Asia, Europe, and Africa. The attempt to reconcile these different cultures was often unsuccessful, with the result of exacerbating existing conflicts or the eradication of some cultures by more aggressive ones. S. Dillon Ripley said,

The nation of nations has been a place of turmoil among red men, white men, black men, and yellow men; it has been a cauldron which has refused to melt the antagonistic elements into a new, single race of composite men. Rather, the American has come to be a multiple man, with allegiances here and sympathies to a past which somehow seems essential to his quest for personal identity.²⁶

Living within a nation that was founded on the tensions of pluralism, Americans with strong ties to their ethnic or cultural traditions struggled to identify themselves. The exhibit text stated that, “Non-English artisans such as Dutch, Swedes, Germans, Africans, Jews, Scots and others had their own ways of doing things, and even when they adapted English models kept their own styles.”²⁷ Immigrants to the United States therefore adopted dual identities, one that was from

²⁵ “A Nation of Nations,” Exhibit Labels, Exhibition Script Development (Section 1), 1972-1976; Box 1; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 7.

²⁶ S. Dillon Ripley, “Foreward,” in *A Nation of Nations*, xiii.

²⁷ “A Nation of Nations,” Exhibit Labels, Exhibition Script Development (Section 1), 1972-1976; Box 1; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 7.

their old life, and another that was American. This was most obvious in the curators' focus on immigrants' forms of transportation and living as they transitioned to their new lives in the United States.

Scheele deliberately selected modes of transportation and living as examples of ethnic expression because they provided the greatest similarities between cultures. Although exact methods of transportation or expression in work were different, their forms were easily identifiable to members of separate cultures. This way, Scheele could relate cultural differences without jeopardizing his claims of national commonalities. This part of "Old Ways in a New Nation" placed visitors in a narrow corridor that contained scaled models of the types of ships immigrants traveled on to the United States. Surrounding the ships were posters advertising steerage to the United States, as well as tickets and lists that illustrated the mortality rates for passengers crossing the Atlantic. Curators designed the confined space to impart on visitors the terror of trans-Atlantic travel as they passed from one section of the exhibit to another. This emphasized the curators' theme of commonalities, because every visitor had the same experience as they went through the exhibit. In addition, the design symbolized the transition for immigrants to a new culture and a new identity.

Greeting visitors at the other end of the corridor was the entry hall from Ellis Island. Still in lines, visitors heard voices in dozens of languages. Signs written in foreign languages were on the walls, and against the background of the Ellis Island interior were photomontages of the immigrants and the officials who checked on their health. Family portraits from the nineteenth century were blown up to full size and presented as rear illuminated transparencies.²⁸ The

²⁸ Chermayeff and Geismer Associates, "Nation of Nations: An exhibition on the American people at the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of History and Technology for the Bicentennial year," January 1973, interpretive plan; A Nation of Nations: Chermayeff & Geismar Contracts, 1972-1976; Exhibition notes, 1973; Box

constant images, sounds, and signs were meant to overwhelm visitors so that they could understand the chaos and confusion that greeted immigrants as they entered the United States for the first time. At the same time, the images of immigrant families served to remind visitors of their own heritage; that no matter how long they and their family had been in the United States, they were still immigrants to the country. Despite their past and present differences, the curators argued, all Americans had a shared heritage as immigrants. Although their ancestors arrived in the country in various ways, they had similar experiences as they crossed the Atlantic and went through immigration once they disembarked. Americans were united, however briefly and abstractly, through a constructed past that emphasized shared experiences despite their diversity.

The curators recognized that immigrants' diverse heritages contradicted their efforts to maintain a narrative of homogeneity. Again, they were confronted with a dilemma to include cultural diversity within a framework of unified nationalism. The result was a series of opposing sections whose contents attempted to appease both public demands for a minority presence and the government's desire for images of unity.

A continuing tension arose between the demands of American nationality for conformity and the desire of the immigrant and his descendants to preserve something of their old world.²⁹ People who viewed themselves as true Americans did not always readily accept immigrants' expressions of their cultural heritage at work and at home. The drastic and occasionally violent pressures placed on immigrants to conform were highlighted in a small exhibit called "Prejudice." "Prejudice" included signs that said 'Whites Only,' 'No beer sold to Indians,' 'JapsKeep Out, You Rats,' and a Ku Klux Klan uniform (see Figure 4).

2; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibit Records, 1971-1989; Record Group 06-163; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 9.

²⁹ Brooke Hindle, "Introduction," *A Nation of Nations*, xvii.



Figure 4. The “Prejudice” display in *A Nation of Nations* openly examined the methods of social terrorism employed in the United States. Items such as “White Only” signs and a Ku Klux Klan uniform (*center*), demonstrated curator Carl Scheele’s attempts to explain Americans’ often violent struggle to force conformity on a diverse society. (Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Archives).

The artifacts showed the methods that naturalized Americans or radical groups used to target people who operated outside accepted forms of society. These were individuals who expressed more of their ethnic cultures than their adopted American identity. A label read, “If ethnic identity is a unique strength, it also lays us open to prejudice. Racism, anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, anti-radicalism, distrust of foreigners: America has known them all.”³⁰ These expressions of cultural conflicts revealed the American struggle to exist as one people within a

³⁰ “A Nation of Nations,” Exhibit Labels, Exhibition Script Development (Section 1), 1972-1976; Box 1; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 21.

pluralistic nation. Although it blatantly contradicted earlier statements of unity in “People for a New Nation” and “Old Ways in a New Nation,” curators included the section to appease the public and museum profession. Both groups were increasingly aware of the need to reassess American history, especially in the wake of the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Although the museum profession was slow to incorporate social history in exhibits, the curators’ sensitivity to cultural change in *A Nation of Nations* revealed that in some cases, professionals acted independently.

Visitors viewing the implements of ethnic hatred in 1976 were intimately familiar with the nation’s struggle to define itself. The violence of the recent civil rights movement and minorities’ subsequent demands to be recognized as distinct groups left lingering uncertainties regarding America’s changing social structure. Ted Morgan, an immigrant to the United States in the 1960s, said, “When I look at this country, I see a society so vast and complex that it defies explanation.”³¹ Even the exhibition planners recognized that the old and familiar structures of the United States were changing. Brooke Hindle said, “Today the picture is less clear and progress less certain. We recognize that the melting pot did not really melt, and it has taken some time to discover that the balance of diversity and conformity that has resulted may be vastly more desirable.”³² Like the Americans viewing the section, “Prejudice” recognized that the country’s struggle to balance individual diversity with a national desire for conformity had not ended with the civil rights movement. The interpretive plan for *A Nation of Nations* said, “The vivid realities of present-day prejudice must not be ignored, so that the visitor does not get the idea this is only history.”³³ Unlike *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* and *USA '76*, the curators of *A Nation of*

³¹ Ted Morgan, *On Becoming American*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 331.

³² Brooke Hindle, “Introduction,” *A Nation of Nations*, xviii.

³³ Chermayeff and Geismer Associates, “Nation of Nations: An exhibition on the American people at the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of History and Technology for the Bicentennial year,” January 1973,

Nations openly confronted racial hatred and prejudice in American history. They presented prejudice as a characteristic of the national struggle to reconcile the tensions between the country's unity and diversity.

The third section of the exhibit, "Shared Experiences," focused on the naturalization process in the United States. Again, this section contradicted the statements of division that were articulated in "Prejudice." Naturalization was shown through the reconstruction of a nineteenth-century classroom, which curators consciously selected as a familiar institution to audiences. The schoolroom also represented the inculcation of American values in succeeding generations. The room was of a late nineteenth-century classroom, with metal desks, a blackboard with a painting of George Washington hanging above it, and an American flag on the wall. The classroom showed visitors how children of immigrants had common experiences in becoming Americans. The overarching American community was emphasized by the flag, the prime symbol of the American nation, and by the pledge of allegiance.³⁴ The main label for this section said, "A good dose of patriotism and Yankee social values was generally administered along with the three R's. For how else were all those new citizens going to learn what it means to be an American?"³⁵ Children from a multitude of ethnic backgrounds were taught about United States history and its leaders, with the painting of George Washington as an ever-present reminder of the American heroes and qualities they were expected to emulate. Students were to cultivate character in order to be successful, in order to help in maintaining social stability, and in order to be vocationally

interpretive plan; *A Nation of Nations: Chermayeff & Geismar Contracts, 1972-1976*; Exhibition notes, 1973; Box 2; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibit Records, 1971-1989; Record Group 06-163; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 18.

³⁴ Brooke Hindle, "Introduction," in *A Nation of Nations*, xvii.

³⁵ "A Nation of Nations," Exhibit Labels, Exhibition Script Development (Section 1), 1972-1976; Box 1; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 26.

reliable. Above all others, it was the reputation and character of George Washington that dominated the historical imagination in America.³⁶

Emulated and nearly deified for two centuries, George Washington symbolized dignity, sober judgment, self-sacrifice, and the possibility of greatness within all Americans. His was an example for all Americans to follow, and a reminder of the nation's past and future achievements. The image of Washington as a universally loved figure was developed to enhance future generations' reverence for him and the nation that he produced. Parson Weems, whose tales aided in the mythologizing of the founding fathers, said, "Where shall we look for Washington, the greatest among men, but in America? That greatest continent is so far superior to any thing of the kind in other continents, that we may fairly conclude that great men and great deeds are designed for America."³⁷ Washington was America incarnate, and immigrant schoolchildren, through their imitation of him, were expected to become loyal citizens of the United States. The presence of Washington in the classroom tied reverence for the man to respect and loyalty to the federal government as well; as the first President of the United States, it was impossible to separate the man from his associations with the government. Although not nearly as blatant as *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* and *USA '76*, the curators used the exhibit's content to subtly promote loyalty to the federal government. The Smithsonian Institution's reliance on the government for funding ensured a degree of patriotism in the exhibit.

The uniformity of the classroom, which was indicated by identical desks, subtly gave visitors impressions that public schools were great equalizers. In the public school immigrant children used the same educational tools, and had equal opportunities to succeed. Differences in backgrounds were forgotten and hard work and dedication to self-improvement were rewarded.

³⁶ Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 250-252.

³⁷ Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 344.

Of course, this was true only as long as students left their ethnic identities behind and embraced their identities as Americans. Expressions of ethnic pride were not well received in America until relatively recently by the time of the bicentennial. The pressures to conform to an American standard of behavior were well known by naturalized citizens. The exhibit displayed quotes from immigrants who remembered giving up some of their ethnic heritage in order to fit in to American society. Mario Puzo, an Italian immigrant from New York City, spoke of the tragic benefits of American citizenship in 1930. He said, “What has happened here has never happened in any other country in any other time. The poor who had been poor for centuries achieved some economic dignity and freedom. You didn’t get it for nothing, you had to pay a price in tears, in suffering, but why not?”³⁸

Becoming an American, a person whose rights were guaranteed by the nation’s founding documents, and a person who had the possibility to achieve independence and success, came with a price. In return for freedom, immigrants were expected to renounce their cultural identities. Not all of them did so. By the time of the bicentennial, immigrants and minorities were actively regaining their forgotten heritage. Groups such as the AIM, the Chicano movement, and black nationalists protested exclusive federal policies, and challenged the assumption that to become American meant a refusal of your ethnic past. Author Richard Krikus said of the American government in 1976, “We have made progress to be sure, but we have not taken sufficient measures to meet rising demands on the part of our people for a greater voice in decisions which shape their lives.”³⁹ The presence of the classroom in *A Nation of Nations* vividly showed people how the common experience of acculturation produced similar attitudes

³⁸ “A Nation of Nations,” Exhibit Labels, Exhibition Script Development (Section 1), 1972-1976; Box 1; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 27.

³⁹ Krikus, *Pursuing the American Dream*, 347.

and made Americans more alike than their ancestors abroad. In this manner, “Shared Experiences” simultaneously lauded the diversity of immigrants and reaffirmed the common tenets of American nationhood.

The final section of the exhibit demonstrated the ways in which purely American ideas reshaped the Old World. “A Nation Among Nations” displayed the life-sized golden arches of McDonald’s, Pepsi-Cola signs, and products by Levis, Marlboro, and KFC. Curators selected these as examples of American mass production and mass consumption. The exhibit claimed that,

Americans organized old and new technologies into a system for making products in vast quantities to sell at low prices. This method of production was copied and often improved upon by nations everywhere, resulting in today’s wide proliferation of sister products from Volkswagons and Rolleiflexes to foreign-made “Saturday night specials.”⁴⁰

Mass production and mass consumption were two American inventions that impacted the world. They created changes in world trade and individual spending habits and lifestyles. Immigrants were not immune to these changes, and many utilized American forms of mass production and mass consumption to promote their ethnic heritage. Curators chose neon signs with the words “Warsaw sausage,” “pizza,” “Asia Pearl Restaurant,” “Old Mexico Restaurant,” and “Irish Rose Bar and Grill” as visual endorsements of ethnic foods in the United States (see Figure 5).

⁴⁰ “A Nation of Nations,” draft of exhibition script, 1973; “A Nation of Nations,” Exhibit Labels, Exhibition Script Development (Section 1), 1972-1976; Box 1; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 8-9.

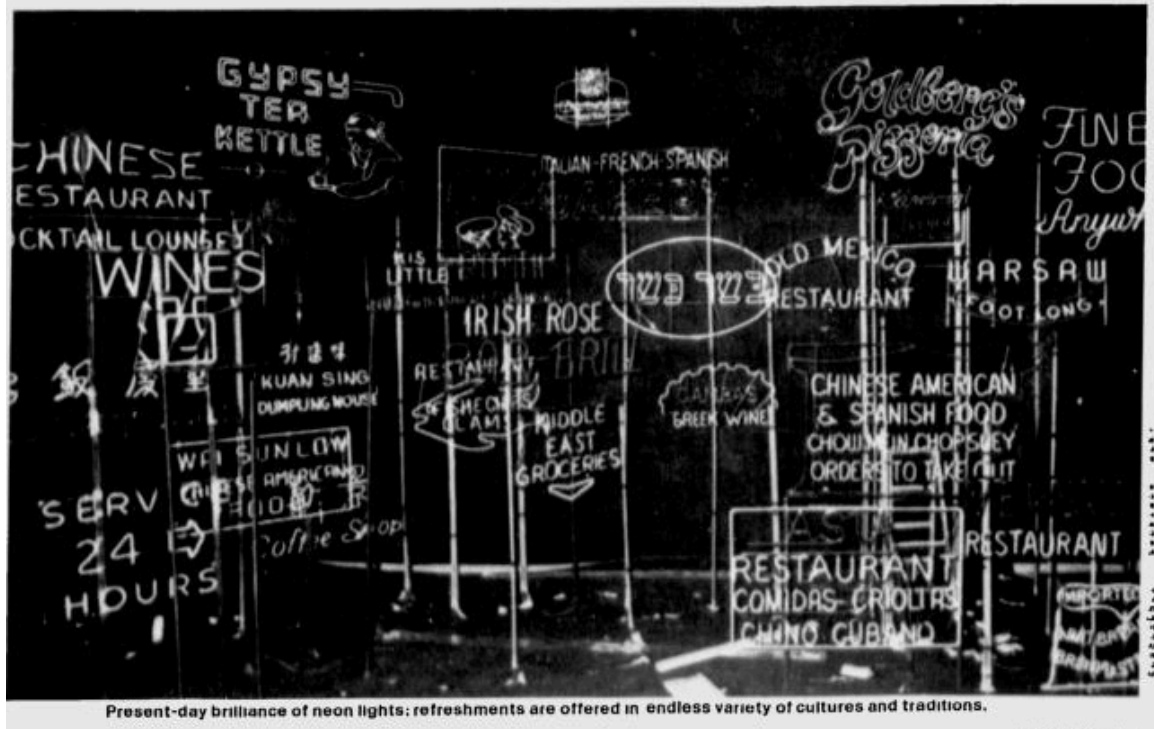


Figure 5. Neon signs in English, Chinese, and Hebrew advertise a blend of ethnic foods, depicting the variety of American culture in 1976. Curators used forms of mass communication and mass consumption to depict the United States as a nation united in its diversity. (“A Nation of Nations,” *Kentucky New Era*, April 12, 1977).

The variety of the signs revealed the large multi-cultural presence in America. This presentation emphasized the diversity in the United States, which opposed curators’ claims of commonalities in “Shared Experience.” Their desire to appeal to minorities and Americans demanding to see a greater ethnic presence in exhibits was evident in the section’s praises of ethnic foods. At the same time, the curators attempted to ameliorate the federal government, which frowned upon any discussion of divisions, by placing ethnic contributions within a narrative of conformity. In this sense, the ethnic signs revealed that immigrants used American technologies of mass production, mass consumption, and mass marketing to emerge as an accepted presence on the cultural landscape. Mass production and mass communication allowed minorities to conform to American ways of life.

“A Nation Among Nations” also displayed recipes and advertisements dating to the late eighteenth century for American foods that revealed their mixed ethnic ancestry. A 1742 recipe for English cakes included the use of Indian corn; a 1824 recipe for “Gumbo – A West Indian Dish” called for okra; a label for macaroni from the 1930s was written in Italian and English, and depicted two Greek gods with the American eagle gripping a shield bearing the U.S. flag flying overhead; and a 1974 ad for McCormick Spice’s “French Dressing” appeared in Japanese, which showed its French, Japanese, and American influences.⁴¹ Over the centuries, what was once a confusing mess of different cultures transformed into a distinct American cuisine. America was depicted as a country where ethnic diversity blended, with the result of a boggling variety of foods and traditions. Through mass production and food, Americans found ways to embrace different ethnic and cultural traditions as part of their national identity.

Scheele and the other curators chose frail examples of nationalism in their pursuit of a unified American narrative. Food and advertisements were not sufficient commonalities to overcome the divisions in American society. If deep reverence for the American Revolution was not enough to unite Americans, then discussions of Chinese food or advertisements written in Japanese certainly failed to do so. Instead, “A Nation Among Nations” emphasized the nation’s diversity by exposing the transparency of its commonalities. An immigrant heritage, blended foods, and bi-lingual advertisements were weak arguments for unity, especially when presented to audiences whose identities were increasingly tied to their ethnic heritages. The 1980 census revealed an enormous increase in the number of Americans identifying themselves according to an ethnic identity. In 1970, 2,557,000 people identified their race as ‘other;’ in 1980 the number

⁴¹ Peter Marzio, (ed), *A Nation of Nations*, 580 - 592.

was 11,676,000.⁴² These figures indicate that in ten years, the number of Americans identifying themselves by an ethnicity that was not white or black rose by over 9 million. In the 1970s, ethnic identity became increasingly important to Americans' sense of self. The ethnic protest movements of the 1960s gave birth to new ethnic identities, and a revival of cultural traditions that revealed Americans' multi-national origins. The curators' attempts to preserve forms of national unity based on the Revolution and multi-cultural cuisine demonstrated the dilemma faced by museum specialists as they struggled to reconcile two opposing forms of history with little professional guidance.

Although no formal surveys were conducted for *A Nation of Nations*, the comments left in exhibition booklets and letters sent to Scheele revealed that the majority of visitors supported his claims about American diversity. Despite the exhibit's opposing sections, visitors appreciated what they viewed as an open discussion of the tensions of pluralism. Robert L. Tripp said that he and his family, which included three children, ages 9, 13, and 15, found the exhibit

Absorbing and enlightening. We especially appreciate that the exhibit really does demonstrate that this is indeed a multi-ethnic, multi-racial society, and it demonstrates it in a forthright, open, honest way – showing positive as well as negative aspects of our past and present.⁴³

In 1976, American visitors were more aware than ever of the minority presence in the country. A decade earlier the civil rights movement was in full swing, and the vast social changes wrought by that and subsequent ethnic movements were still being felt by bicentennial audiences. Visitors expected that national institutions, such as the Smithsonian, would include the range of American experiences in its exhibitions. They were glad to see that the curators of *A Nation of*

⁴² "1980 Census," United States Bureau of the Census, <http://www.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1981-02.pdf>, (accessed April 2, 2010), 25.

⁴³ Robert L. Tripp, Reston, Virginia, to Brooke Hindle, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, 7 January 1977; Public Comments, 1976-1977; Box 4; Record Group 06-163, National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibit Records, 1971-1989, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

Nations not only embraced the country's ethnic and cultural diversity, but that they also confronted the terrors of the past in the exhibit's section on prejudice. An anonymous visitor wrote in a comment book that, "the exhibit stands out as a way of stressing the importance of ethnic groups taking pride in their differences and preserving them."⁴⁴

The curators' presentation of Americans' search for identity caused visitors to recall their own heritage. Visitors connected with specific objects in the exhibit that reminded them of their ancestors. An anonymous visitor wrote, "The Nation of Nations exhibit brought back many memories of objects I had heard about from my parents and actually seen myself as a youngster."⁴⁵ Another visitor wrote, "I was enthralled by the classroom – a reminder of the good old days."⁴⁶ These emotional responses from visitors indicated that the exhibit did more than simply teach people about the diversity of groups in the United States. Through the use of tangible objects, curators made the past real and alive. These were objects that visitors' ancestors had used, and these were trials that their ancestors had experienced. The immigrants ceased to be anonymous faces and became recognizable to visitors who saw something of themselves in the exhibit. As one visitor wrote, "one's roots come to mind, the best I've seen anywhere in the world."⁴⁷

Visitors also spoke of national pride as they reflected on the exhibit. Instead of commenting on the nation's differences and struggles in overcoming social and cultural hurdles, especially in

⁴⁴ Laila S. Jarvela, to Brooke Hindle, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, March 21, 1977; Public Comments, 1976-1977; Box 4; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibit Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 5.

⁴⁵ Laila S. Jarvela, to Brooke Hindle, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, March 21, 1977; Public Comments, 1976-1977; Box 4; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibit Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 5.

⁴⁶ Laila S. Jarvela, to Brooke Hindle, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, March 21, 1977; Public Comments, 1976-1977; Box 4; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibit Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 4.

⁴⁷ Laila S. Jarvela, to Brooke Hindle, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, March 21, 1977; Public Comments, 1976-1977; Box 4; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibit Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 2.

recent years, visitors recognized that the country's strength came from its great diversity. One visitor wrote, "I found the Nation of Nations exhibit very well done and creative of national pride."⁴⁸ Another said, "It should inspire all who see it to continue the 'building of our country' and to strive to correct our mistakes of the past."⁴⁹ The exhibit's images of shared cultural experiences reaffirmed existing feelings of pride as Americans reflected on their past, and garnered hope for the creation of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic future.

The negative comments regarding *A Nation of Nations* were largely critical of the exhibit's exclusion or misrepresentation of a specific ethnic group. Boris Cesen, the Consul of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in New York City, complained that a sign in the political section of the exhibit was inaccurate. The sign, which read, 'Croations for Nixon,' had singled out one of six ethnic regions of Yugoslavia, and Cesen said that the mention of Croatia alone on the sign insulted the other five regions. He demanded that the sign either be removed or replaced with the slogan, 'Yugoslavians for Nixon.'⁵⁰ Another letter criticized the exhibit's curators for excluding the Portuguese, and detailed that group's extensive contributions to American independence and national development.⁵¹ Gail O'Gorman lambasted the exhibit's representation of Brazilian athlete Pelé. O'Gorman wrote that the exhibit was in

very bad taste and misleading to include Pelé, due to the implication he left his native Brazil and became an American immigrant. The millions of children who see that, and know his name now, will be further deluded and think he became an

⁴⁸ Laila S. Jarvela, to Brooke Hindle, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, March 21, 1977; Public Comments, 1976-1977; Box 4; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., 5.

⁴⁹ Carl Scheele, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, 13 June 1976; Public Comments, 1976-1977; Box 4; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁰ Jon Eklund, Washington, D.C. to Carl Scheele, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, June 10, 1976; Public Comments, 1976-1977; Box 4; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁵¹ Christian F. Rendeiro, Hamden, Connecticut, to S. Dillon Ripley, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, September 15, 1976; Public Comments, 1976-1977; Box 4; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

American – another subtle dig at Latin America, as if it's a place one has to leave to have opportunity and recognition. I'm disgusted.⁵²

These complaints indicated that by the time of the bicentennial, a person's ethnic heritage was a powerful part of his or her identity. A surge of interest in individual heritage followed the civil rights movement, which in turn resulted in widespread ethnic self-expression. Fueled by increased recognition by state and federal governments, ethnic groups held power and the expectation that public institutions, such as museums, had a responsibility to accurately represent heritage and ethnic groups. Now that they finally had a degree of power and influence over the representation of their cultural traditions, members of ethnic groups vehemently protested any slight, whether it was intentional on the part of the museum or not. These complaints reveal that people were increasingly identifying themselves according to their ethnicities, and that they believed that they held authority over public displays of their heritage.

Aware of public expectations, *A Nation of Nations*'s curators discussed the ethnic and cultural diversity that existed in the United States throughout the nation's history. At the same time, they attempted to find commonalities in the nation's diverse cultural heritage that upheld the government's belief as existing as one unified people. The American Revolution was presented as the central event that forged a new nation, with its people bound together by common political values and traditions. Ironically, the Declaration of Independence, which guaranteed freedom and equality to all Americans, could not overcome the inequities experienced by immigrants as they made their transition from newcomer to citizen. Methods of terror and harassment were employed by native-born Americans in order to force immigrants to conform to accepted standards of behavior. Public schools were used to acculturate the children of immigrants, who

⁵² Gail O'Gorman, Washington, D.C. to Brooke Hindle, Washington, D.C., Typewritten Letter, June 9, 1976; Public Comments, 1976-1977; Box 4; Record Group 06-163; National Museum of American History, Division of Community Life, Exhibition Records, 1971-1989; Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.

were taught to be loyal American citizens by emulating American heroes, practicing American traditions, and speaking the American language. However, ethnic traditions remained. They blended with other traditions and formed entirely new traditions that were recognized as being distinctly American. Visitors identified with the exhibit's presentation of immigrants, and recognized themselves as part of America's heritage.

The format of the exhibit revealed that curators experienced difficulties in producing a single, unified message. Pressures from the federal government, which funded half of the Smithsonian's annual finances, demanded that Scheele focus on narratives of unity. However, a growing demand from the public to reassess traditional approaches to American history, as well as shifts within the museum professional toward greater social responsibility, placed additional pressures on the exhibit's curators. Scheele and the other curators with *A Nation of Nations* were unique in that they made a genuine attempt to include in-depth discussions of diversity in the exhibit. Whereas curators of *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* and *USA '76* used their authority to please the ARBA and their corporate patrons, Scheele balanced the government's expectations with a vivid ethnic presence. Although this expressed itself in opposing exhibit sections, it was appropriate that the nation's premiere institution made the first move towards re-examining assumptions embedded in U.S. history.

CONCLUSION

During the celebration of the American Revolution Bicentennial, museum curators across the United States created patriotic exhibitions that emphasized narratives of unified nationalism. Three exhibitions, *The World of Franklin and Jefferson, USA '76: the First Two Hundred Years*, and *A Nation of Nations*, were influenced by external political, economic, and social factors that affected their content and focus. Curators often sacrificed opportunities to reexamine assumptions of American history in order to satisfy desires from the federal government and corporate sponsors for narratives of national consensus. This resulted in a retelling of mythologies that surrounded the American Revolution and the development of the nation. Curators easily crafted such mythologies to fit the contemporary needs of the government, the museum field, and the public. After the traumas of Vietnam and Watergate, many Americans welcomed a dash of patriotism.¹ For bicentennial organizers and museum curators, the anniversary was an opportunity to move on from the divisions that the civil rights and ethnic movements had created in American society. In such a diverse society, commemoration practices sought shared experiences as the focus of the bicentennial. As a result, the three bicentennial exhibitions emphasized consensus over conflict in their representations of United States history.

However, there was an expanding population who no longer accepted the traditional consensus-oriented history that Masey and Scheele produced. The conflicts of the 1960s and continued protests by the AIM and other ethnic groups prompted them to call for a reexamination of American history to include minority voices. As the power and presence of minorities became increasingly visible in the United States, these groups sought greater representation in the country's heritage centers. Museums were frequently the targets of minority

¹ David M. Alpern, Thomas M. DeFrank, and Jane Whitmore, "Happy Birthday," *Newsweek*, (July 12, 1976), LexusNexus (accessed January 19, 2010).

groups, especially by American Indians, who wanted exhibits that perpetuated racial stereotypes taken down. As curators of bicentennial exhibits that represented the nation and its people, Jack Masey and Carl Scheele had a responsibility to consider and respond to the requests of minority groups. As national exhibits viewed by thousands of people, the exhibits shaped visitors' perspectives on the country, its leading institutions, and its people. A reassessment of the traditional narrative had the potential to reshape visitors' views on race, diversity, the state of the nation, and the government's response to the concerns of its citizens.

Instead, Masey's association with the ARBA as an employee overrode his professional considerations. As a result, *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* and *USA '76* were blatant pieces of governmental propaganda. In these two exhibits, all conflict in the country's past was eliminated and replaced with a narrative that focused on national loyalty and progress. *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, which focused on the formative years of the Republic, from 1706 to 1826, ignored any discussion of slavery, although it was a primary bargaining factor in persuading the Southern colonies to agree to nationhood, and shaped the development of the nation for the next 90 years. Instead, Masey chose a design that removed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution from all historical context, and treated them as sacred objects. This was the result of several factors: Charles and Ray Eames created a design to please the federal government and the IBM Corporation, the exhibit's chief patrons; the government was also one of IBM's clients, and the corporation was eager to maintain a friendly relationship through its generous \$500,000 sponsorship; Masey's position as an ARBA employee created vast conflicts of interest that he was unable to combat; and professional awareness of museum interpretation and its impact on visitors were burgeoning fields. These factors created a situation in which Masey was relatively powerless as curator, and his authority was employed in *The*

World of Franklin and Jefferson to produce a self-serving governmental narrative of unified nationalism.

USA '76 followed a similar pattern. Masey was also in charge of this exhibit, but unlike *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, the ARBA was open in its sponsorship. Eager to please the government in this exhibit as well, Masey approved an interpretive plan that ignored divisions in American society and lauded the nation's technological and economic progress. Like *The World of Franklin and Jefferson*, *USA '76* focused on shared experiences that dismissed past and present conflicts. Masey supported a narrative that depicted the country as endlessly prosperous, despite overwhelming historical evidence that said otherwise. The United States had gone through several recessions and depressions by 1976, and in fact was in the middle of a decade-long recession during the bicentennial celebrations. Images of the West as a land of plenty, or claims that every citizen had the opportunity to succeed were hollow to Americans intimately familiar with unemployment and rising economic costs. Once again, Masey's association with the ARBA, and the lack of professional guidance, caused the Director of Design and Exhibition to succumb to political pressures. The result was an exhibit that sacrificed historical perspective and contemporary realities in order to create patriotic political propaganda.

Carl Scheele attempted to reconcile both traditional history and the emerging social history in *A Nation of Nations*. Although Scheele, like Masey, was an employee of the federal government, he did not let his position interfere with his interpretation of American nationalism. Aware of the public's increased demands for a consideration of minority voices, Scheele approved an interpretive plan that openly discussed the nation's ethnic and cultural diversity. By the time of the bicentennial, the museum field was aware of the profession's responsibility to not simply present history, but to interpret it as well. However, exact methods for interpretation and their

impact on audiences were not yet fully developed or understood by museum professionals. The American Association of Museums, for example, did not amend its code of ethics to include object interpretation until 1978. Scheele took professional risks when he developed *A Nation of Nations*. That the profession was experiencing a transition in its approach to exhibition development was apparent in *A Nation of Nation's* competing, and sometimes confusing, themes. Scheele curated an exhibit that argued that the United States was a nation united through its diversity. The contradictory themes of unity and diversity were prevalent throughout the exhibit, which demonstrated Scheele's attempt to address two conflicting historical analyses. One, supported by the federal government, encouraged a traditional retelling of national myths; the other, supported by a more ethnically conscious public, promoted the inclusion of minority voices in the national narrative. The result was an exhibit that revealed its curator's struggle to navigate the country's tides of change. Instead of using his curatorial authority to simply please powerful sponsors, like Masey did, Scheele exercised his authority towards active experimentation and risk taking.

As centers of heritage and the public trust, museums were monuments to the American Revolution Bicentennial. The exhibitions that curators produced on American history were viewed by millions of people; from 1975 to 1977, *The World of Franklin and Jefferson, USA '76*, and *A Nation of Nations* were viewed by an estimated seven million people in the United States and abroad.² These figures indicate not only the exhibits' popularity, but that audiences were actively engaged in determining the meaning of their national history. Visitors were vocal regarding Masey and Scheele's handling of the exhibits, which revealed their perceived

² The final attendance figures for the three exhibits are: 600,000 (*The World of Franklin and Jefferson*); 338,000 (*USA '76*). The Smithsonian Institute's Museum of History and Technology had an average annual attendance of 6 million in 1973. Although the NMHT expected 10 million visitors in 1976, the final total for all three exhibits reflects the museum's average attendance figures.

ownership over “their” history. As curators of national heritage centers, Masey and Scheele had a professional responsibility to listen to and address visitors’ concerns. However, *The World of Franklin and Jefferson* and *USA '76* ignored the public in favor of eliminating political and economic pressures. Although confusing, *A Nation of Nations* demonstrated an effort by curators to respond to the competing political and social demands of the 1970s. Although different in focus, all three exhibits demonstrated that political, economic, and social pressures in 1976 caused curators to exercise their authority in pursuit of unified national narratives.

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