

Exhibiting A New Icon

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The Woolworth lunch counter where the 1960 Greensboro civil rights sit-ins took place recently became part of the National Museum of American History's collections. You can read about how the counter came to the Museum in Part I of this series. Below is Part II, which examines issues curators confronted while planning to exhibit the counter.



The exhibition "Sitting for Justice: The Greensboro Sit-in of 1960" at the National Museum of American History



Posters, buttons, and newspaper articles from the Civil Rights Movement



A portion of the Woolworth lunch counter

Almost immediately after the Woolworth lunch counter became part of the National Museum of American History's collections, there were discussions about how, when, where, and if to exhibit it. However, there were no major exhibitions close to fruition that could make use of the new artifacts. Nor were there pots of money available to dramatically redo existing exhibitions, such as the Political History Hall, where the struggle over voting rights is discussed. There seemed only two choices: keep the lunch counter in storage indefinitely, or exhibit it in a very modest manner that would allow only a limited discussion of historical context. It didn't take long to make the decision: These artifacts deserved immediate exposure, even in a temporary and limited setting.

The only available site in the museum large enough for the lunch counter was the building's main hallway, which connected displays of the Star Spangled Banner and a monumental sculpture of George Washington - two of the museum's most prominent icons. Although it was better suited for displaying icons, not artifacts requiring extensive historical context, the hall was our best option.



Photographs of the sit-in movement and the front page of the North Carolina A&T student newspaper with the headline "Students Stage Sit Down Demand"

How could a hallway exhibit convey the drama and excitement of the sit-ins, part of a centuries-old struggle for equal rights in America and part of a more recent struggle in which conflicts from Montgomery to Selma to Chicago received extensive television and media coverage? Clearly the lunch counter was well suited to be the centerpiece, or at least an essential artifact, in an extensive exhibition.

The size of the hall limited what could be accomplished. There was room for the modest use of large photomurals but despite one's best efforts, a hallway could not become an exhibition space. The hallway exhibition also suffered from the lack of a major visual presence of the people who used the counter. In a larger exhibition space, this could be remedied through the use of mannequins, an array of photomurals, or by peopling the exhibition through video or musical presentations.

Yet, for several reasons, the hallway exhibition works. First, while NMAH has, in the last 15 years, worked to re-invent itself as a museum of American social history, there are still many objects displayed for their iconic or patriotic value. We were struck by how few of these icons reflected the diversity of America's populace. We felt that it was important to have an icon of race that cried, in the words of poet Langston Hughes, "I, too, am America." We hoped visitors would come to realize that while it is important to revel in museum icons like the Washington statue, First Ladies' gowns, or Archie Bunker's Chair, their museum visit and the history they explore are incomplete without icons such as the Greensboro lunch counter.

Using written words, images and objects, "Sitting for Justice: The Greensboro Sit-in of 1960," explores the sit-in through the eyes of its participants. The exhibition places the sit-ins within the context of the African American Civil Rights Movement, and places that movement within the context of racial struggle throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries. In essence, it tells an abbreviated, but cohesive story.

But the exhibition is not meant to be a permanent fixture within the shadow of the Star Spangled Banner. Eventually the lunch counter will become part of a major interpretive exhibition that chronicles aspects of 20th-century history. Until then, it will remind visitors of the recent struggle for racial equality in this country and the importance of individual participation in the political process.

Respect has come slowly and grudgingly for the action taken by the four students and their supporters who sat down so long ago and refused to leave until they were served. We have received mail from people opposing the acquisition and exhibition of the lunch counter. But seeing the lunch counter on display in the museum reminds most visitors

that the Civil Rights Movement is not just a part of African American history. It is a story that should have meaning for all Americans.

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