



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**America's Capital
The National Archives**

The National Archives

September 3, 2005

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. This week, Reporterette and I paid a visit to the National Archives in Washington, DC, located on Constitution Avenue. If you have not visited the National Archives lately, don't pass it up.

The main exhibit hall (the Rotunda) has been redesigned. It features the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Unlike the old exhibit, you can spend as much time as you wish viewing these documents.

The Archives building itself is worth a visit. It is similar to the architecture of many of the buildings along Constitution and Pennsylvania Avenues. Figure 1 shows the entire building.¹ Figure 2 shows the front of the building. Its interior is also beautiful. Stone floors, massive metal doors, and high vaulted sculptured ceilings are a few examples of the impressive décor.



Figure 1. The National Archives



Figure 2. Front view.

I suggest you take-in the Archives introduction movie before you begin your tour. The 2003 renovation of the Archives also resulted in a fine theater---one I envied...wishing I had had a chance to use it for a lecture. Take a look at Figure 3. Your tax dollars at work.

¹ <http://www.archives.gov/dc-metro/washington/>



Figure 3. The Archives Theater.

The movie began with a statement from the narrator: *America is a country that was made successful by waves and waves of immigrants. It's a country you want to come to.* It is a fine idea to keep in mind as we deal with the huge influx of immigrants at the present time and the increasing antipathy toward the influx of Muslim immigrants.

You will find many exhibits throughout the building, including examples of documents and other artifacts stored at the Archives. Several of the exhibits show video clips of Presidents and their families. Others are audio presentations.

The Rotunda

The highlight of your visit might be the Rotunda, shown in Figure 4. The picture does not do justice to this room. For lack of a better term, it is breathtaking. Reporters are supposed to have an anti-sentimental shield around them---perhaps their ever-present trench coat hides their emotional armament. It did not work for me (but then, I'm not really a reporter). I was awed during my stay in the Rotunda---perhaps because recently, I had been reading books about America's revolutionary years. I've come to know more about our founding fathers' warts, but I've come to marvel even more at their bravery and sagacity.

I inserted three check marks into the figure to show the location of The Declaration of Independence (red check), The Constitution (blue check), and The Bill of Rights (purple check).

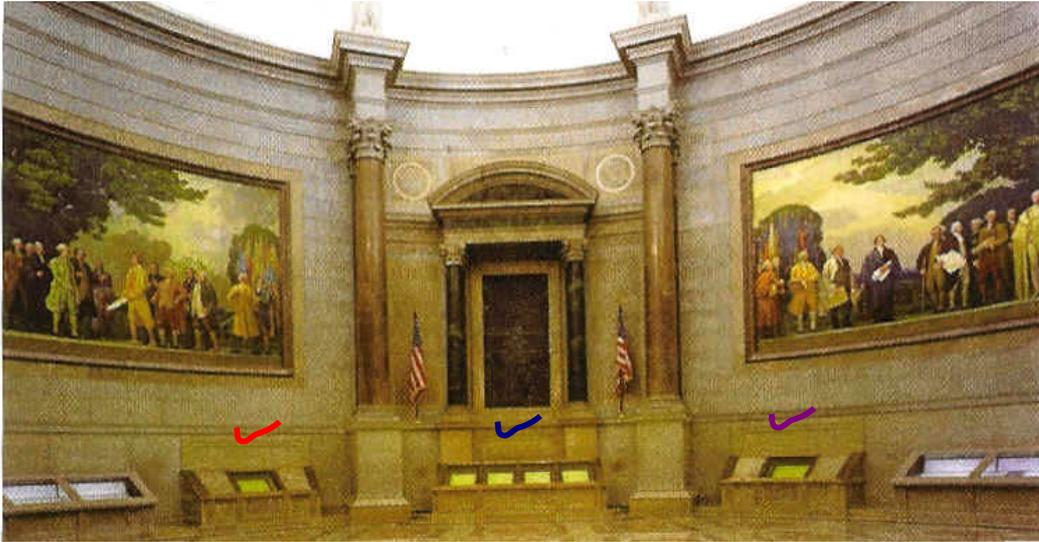


Figure 3. The Main Hall.

Other documents are displayed in the Rotunda. To the right of the Bill of Rights are manuscripts about the Louisiana Purchase. President Jefferson was anxious to obtain control and ownership of New Orleans, and was surprised to discover France was willing to sell more than this port city. The display proclaimed the purchase encompassed 828,000 square miles. The United States paid \$15,000,000 to France for this land, or 2.8 cents an acre. I write this report just after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast; I wonder what the current real estate values are in and around New Orleans. (Hang onto your sea-filled quarter-acre! Uncle Sam will fix the levees and continue subsidizing your life-style.)

The guards informed me these documents are the originals, and the technologies that encase them ensure they will not deteriorate further. Good, because the Declaration of Independence has faded to be almost illegible. The only signature I could make out was John Hancock's because of his large hand writing. The Bill of Rights was not in very good shape either. But the Constitution could be read.

Shortly after my retirement in 2002, I read copies of these documents. I was having trouble sleeping, so I placed them on my nightstand and made it a point to read a few passages before turning to easier fare. I was amazed about how little the Constitution actually says. Four pages of words jump-started our Republic.

Four pages that say as much for what they do not say, than for what they do. This approach by the creators of the Constitution was brilliant. It was sufficiently brief and uncontroversial to be ratified. Yet, it was indeed ratified, and therefore bound the colonies, however tenuously, together as a union. The details could be---and would be---worked out later. (Shia Iraqis, can you hear me? Make you new constitution general. ...And don't forget to include a "freedom to practice religion clause," even for the Sunnis.)

The two large murals shown in Figure 4 were painted by Barry Faulkner in 1935-1936. The mural on the left shows Thomas Jefferson presenting a draft of the Constitution to John Hancock, who was President of the Continental Congress. The mural on the right shows James Madison

offering the final draft of the Constitution to George Washington, President of the Constitutional Convention.

The Archives Shop

Toward the end of our tour, we paid a visit to the National Archives Shop. On sale were reproductions of the three historic documents on display in the Rotunda. Even more, for \$140.00 a-piece, they could be purchased in gold frames. I was impressed, "Say Holly, those framed Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights would look pretty good on a wall in a home. Especially in a study."

...Which was another way to say, "Our home."

Holly, "Hm."

....Which was another way to say, "Get real."

A Surprise

After staying longer than planned at the National Archives, we stopped at the Archives Café for a late lunch. The eatery was not exactly the Bellagio, and I did not expect to have access to an after-lunch XO, but the pleasure of eating in unknown places is a source of pleasure.

Of course, this pleasure might not occur on every occasion. Montezuma and his vengeful tribe have visited my lower colon on more than one occasion. But not this time. Holly ordered a hamburger. I ordered the barbecue chicken sandwich. I testify it is one of the best recipes ever for barbecue chicken.

Imagine. Sitting in the basement of the National Archives, just below three of the most important documents in America's history...eating fine barbecue and sipping a Diet Coke...talking history and talking trash....Life is good.

Your on the Street Reporter