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Comments 'Records of Rights' at the National Archives traces the unfinished journey to liberty and justice for all

BY KRISTEN PAGE-KURBY January 2 at 8:04 am

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(National Archives)

We (a bunch of rich white guys) **hold these truths to be self-evident** (assuming you're white and male), **that all men are created equal** (well, white ones), **that they are endowed by their Creator** (who's probably a white guy, frankly) **with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty** (unless you're a slave, or a woman who'd like to own property or get divorced or have any claim to her children) **and the pursuit of Happiness** (unless voting and not being property make you happy. Then tough luck.).

These are not, obviously, the words to the Declaration of the Independence, but they might as well be. With the new permanent exhibit "Records of Rights," the National Archives showcases how those excluded by our Founding Fathers got themselves what the Declaration promised.

The show has three main areas: "Bending Towards Justice," which focuses on African-Americans; "Remembering the Ladies," about women's rights; and "Yearning to Breathe Free," about immigrants. The three don't have clear physical boundaries,

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however. That's deliberate, says Jennifer Johnson, one of the curators.

"There's a lot of overlap, and we tried really hard to illustrate that for viewers," she says. "For example, for a period of time women, if they married a foreigner, they lost their U.S. citizenship. Many women were very involved in the abolitionist movement, which let them get their feet wet before the suffrage movement really took off."

As you move forward in time, original documents and reproductions (some pieces are too fragile for permanent display) detail not only the struggles of the various groups, but how individuals contributed to the fight.

"One of my favorite cases is letters from children writing to President Truman about segregation," Johnson says. "One was from a little boy who lived right next to a [whites-only] park, but he wasn't allowed to play at it. Those are little-known personalities, those aren't big markers ... but they're still important."

Some of the papers on view aren't as polite as letters from kids. The immigration section includes some particularly virulent petitions demanding that the country's borders be closed to [insert group of your choice here] to preserve America's [jobs/culture/"purity"].

Other documents are charmingly (in retrospect) anachronistic: A World War II-era pamphlet called "You Are Going to Employ Women" explains to male supervisors how to handle ladies. It offers such advice as "a woman is not a man; in many jobs she is a substitute — like plastic instead of metal — she has special characteristics that lend themselves to new and sometimes much superior uses" and points out that women are "particularly good at repetitive tasks."



The exhibit's 17-foot-long interactive touchscreen lets viewers delve into multiple flavors of rights: workplace, Native American, First Amendment and many others. (National Archives)

One innovative part of the exhibit is "A Place at the Table," a 17-foot-long interactive touchscreen that's essentially a giant iPad. Using it, visitors can examine the changing rights of groups not represented in the exhibit's three main categories, such as the rights of schoolchildren and of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. The technology, in addition to allowing people to share their reactions, also enables the Archives to keep up with

what's going on outside its walls.

"After all," Johnson says, "we don't know which rights might surface later."

"Records of Rights" is different than most exhibits (at the Archives and elsewhere), which almost exclusively focus on the past. It also looks toward the future — and makes you wonder what sort of horrified gasps (and occasional giggles) our laws will get 100 years from now.

People's Choice

While "Records of Rights" is a permanent exhibit, certain documents will rotate in and out. A public vote determined that the first such document to be on display would be

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the joint congressional resolution proposing the 14th Amendment ("equal protection of the laws") to the states in 1868. It beat, among others, the Americans with Disabilities Act and Executive Order 9981, which desegregated the Armed Forces.

[National Archives](#), 700 Pennsylvania Ave. NW; free; 202-357-5271. (Archives)

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