

# Unflinching and Unvarnished: Curating “Hard” History

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hard

undiscovered

tough

sensitive past

marginalized

# HISTORY

woke

difficult

traumatic past

difficult knowledge

# “Hard history”: challenging and uncomfortable aspects of the past that also make implications on the present

- What topics are classified as “hard”?
- Who classifies them?
- For whom are they hard?
- Why are they hard?

# A history of “hard” history

## Education

- Late 19<sup>th</sup> century: “modern history” becomes school subject
  - Connected to nation-building and patriotic efforts
  - Shared vision of cohesive national past
- 20<sup>th</sup> century events (world wars, genocide, and other mass violence, imperialism, and the lingering effects of colonialism) and empowerment of women, as well as ethnic, religious, and other minorities
  - Expand narratives and challenge national histories
- “History Wars”

## Museum

- Pre-Hellenic roots
- Europe’s *Kunstkammern*, or cabinets of curiosities
  - Encyclopedic collections, wide in scope
- 18<sup>th</sup> century: move into North America
  - Bring objects and learning together in a space
- 19<sup>th</sup> century: attempts at democratic spaces connected to nation-state building
  - Society is not democratic at this time (e.g., segregation)

Museums are considered “significantly more trustworthy than researchers and scientists, NGOs generally, various news organizations, the government, corporations and business, and social media.”

“Museum Facts and Data,” American Alliance of Museums, accessed 2023

**THE ANNUAL SURVEY  
OF MUSEUM-GOERS**

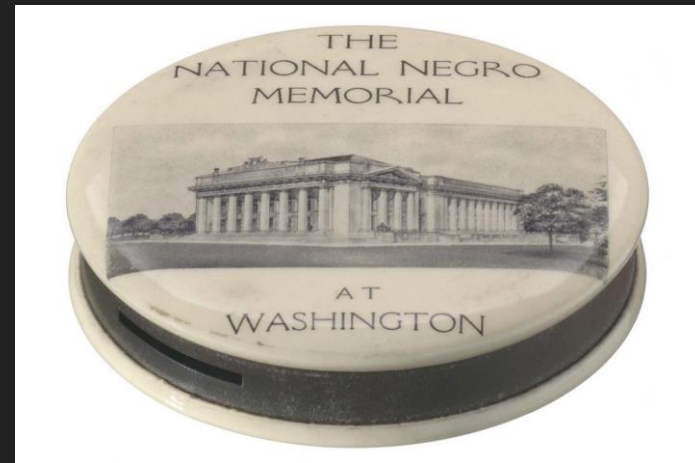
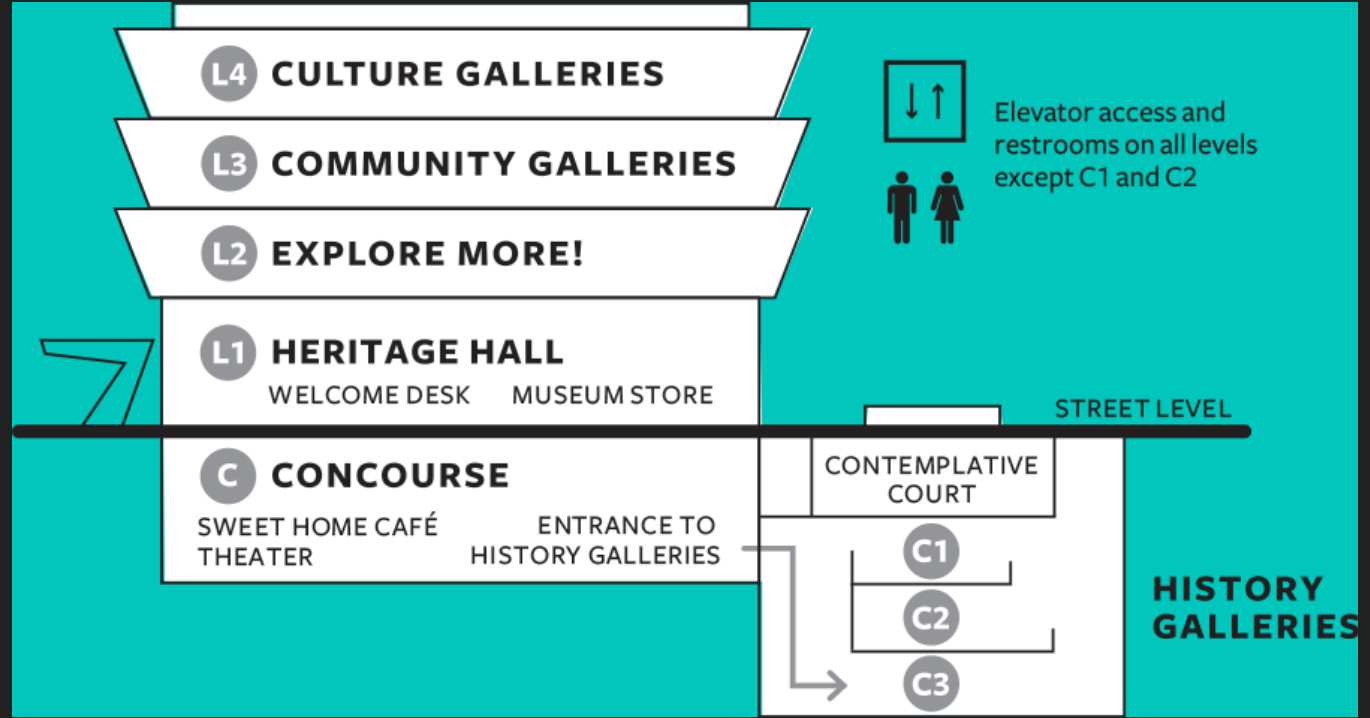
2024 Enrollment  
is now open!

American Alliance of Museums  
Wilkening Consulting

- The Neutrality Principle (National Museum of African American History and Culture)
- The Both Sides Now Doctrine (North Carolina Museum of History)
- The Erasure Maxim (Greensboro History Museum)

# The Neutrality Principle

Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture





# Slavery and Freedom

“We’ve got to tell the unvarnished truth” –  
Historian John Hope Franklin, 2005

“We set out to be an **activist** museum. [...] Our job is to illuminate all the dark corners—doing things that are controversial not for controversy’s sake, but doing things that matter, that give people help, that give people knowledge as they **grapple and debate these things.**” – Founding Director Lonnie Bunch, 2017



## Slavery & Freedom 1400-1877

Five hundred years ago, a new form of slavery transformed Africa, Europe, and the Americas. For the first time, people saw other human beings as commodities—things to be bought, sold, and exploited to make enormous profits. This system changed the world.

The United States was created in this context, forged by slavery as well as a radical new concept, freedom. This is a shared story, a shared past, told through the lives of African Americans who helped form the nation.

*We've got to tell  
the unvarnished truth*

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN

“At a certain moment, you’re likely to come across this jarring conflict between the claims of universality and the reality of this display of white supremacist, European power, Euro-American power that’s being enacted there in the name of the universal. The universal falls apart.”

- Charles Esche, Director of the Van Abbe Museum in the Netherlands

Slavery and Freedom “explores the complex story of slavery and freedom, which rests at the core of our nation’s shared history. The exhibition begins in 15th-century Africa and Europe, extends up through the founding of the United States, and concludes with the nation’s transformation during the Civil War and Reconstruction.”



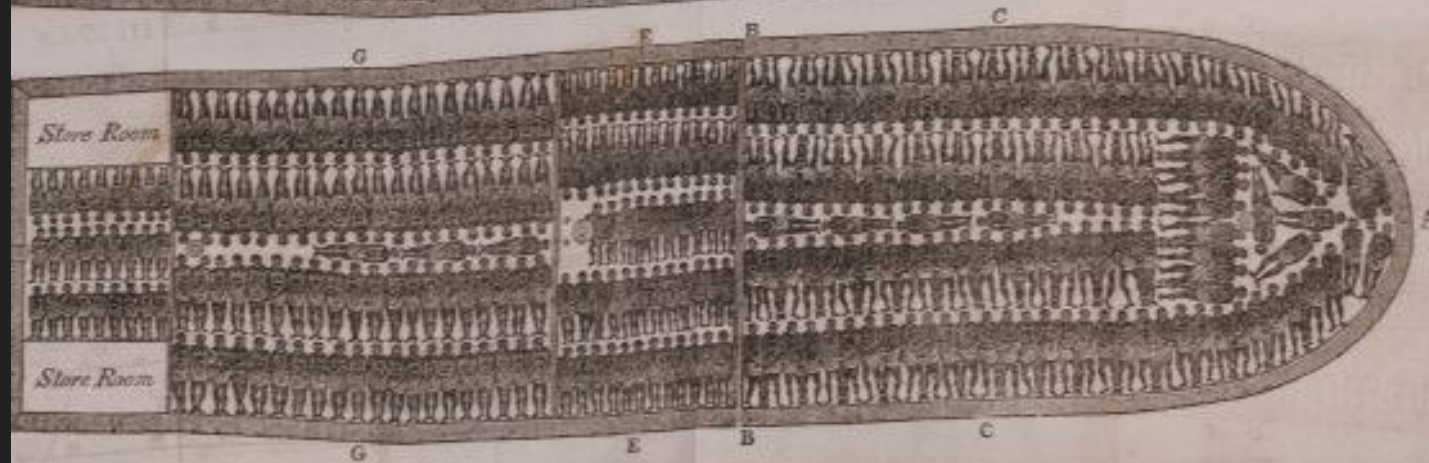
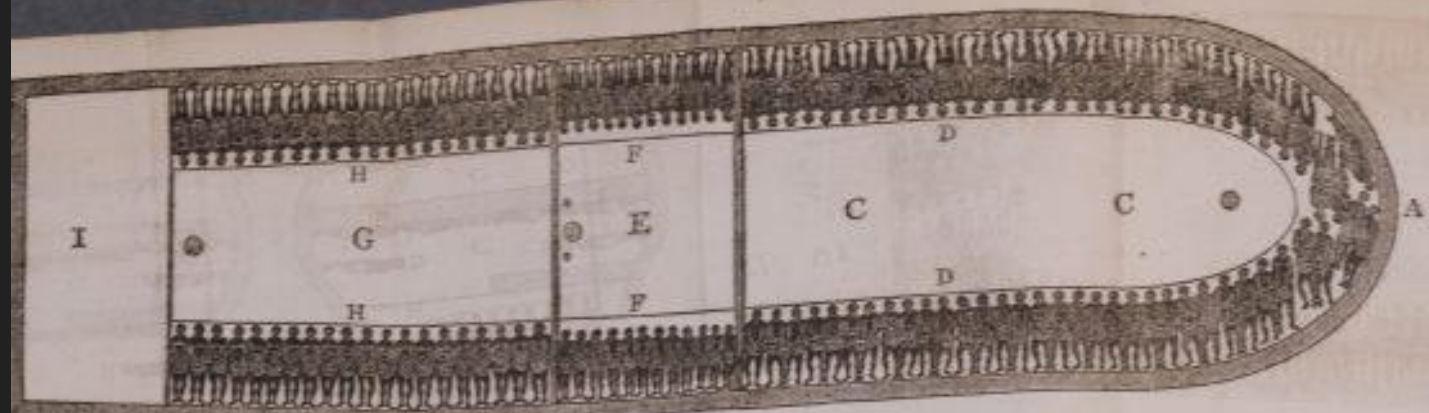


William Hodges, *A view of the Cape of Good Hope, taken on the Spot, from on board the Resolution, Capt. Cook*, Oil on canvas, 1772. Near here, in 1794, the slaver *São José Paquete Africa* sank with her human cargo.

## Iron Ballast

Ballast was used to offset the lighter weight of the human cargo. The inventory for the *São José* indicates that 1,400 iron ballast bars were ordered for the voyage.





*We had about 12 negroes did wilfully drown themselves,  
and others starv'd themselves to death;  
for 'tis their belief that when they die  
they return home to their own country and friends.*

**CAPTAIN THOMAS PHILLIPS  
OF THE HANOVER CA. 1694**

*The voyage of the  
ship of the name  
of the name of the  
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**Holding on  
to Humanity**

*Left Lisbon on 27 April 1794,  
destined for Mozambique to fetch a cargo of slaves  
and then set sail for Maranhão in Brazil.*

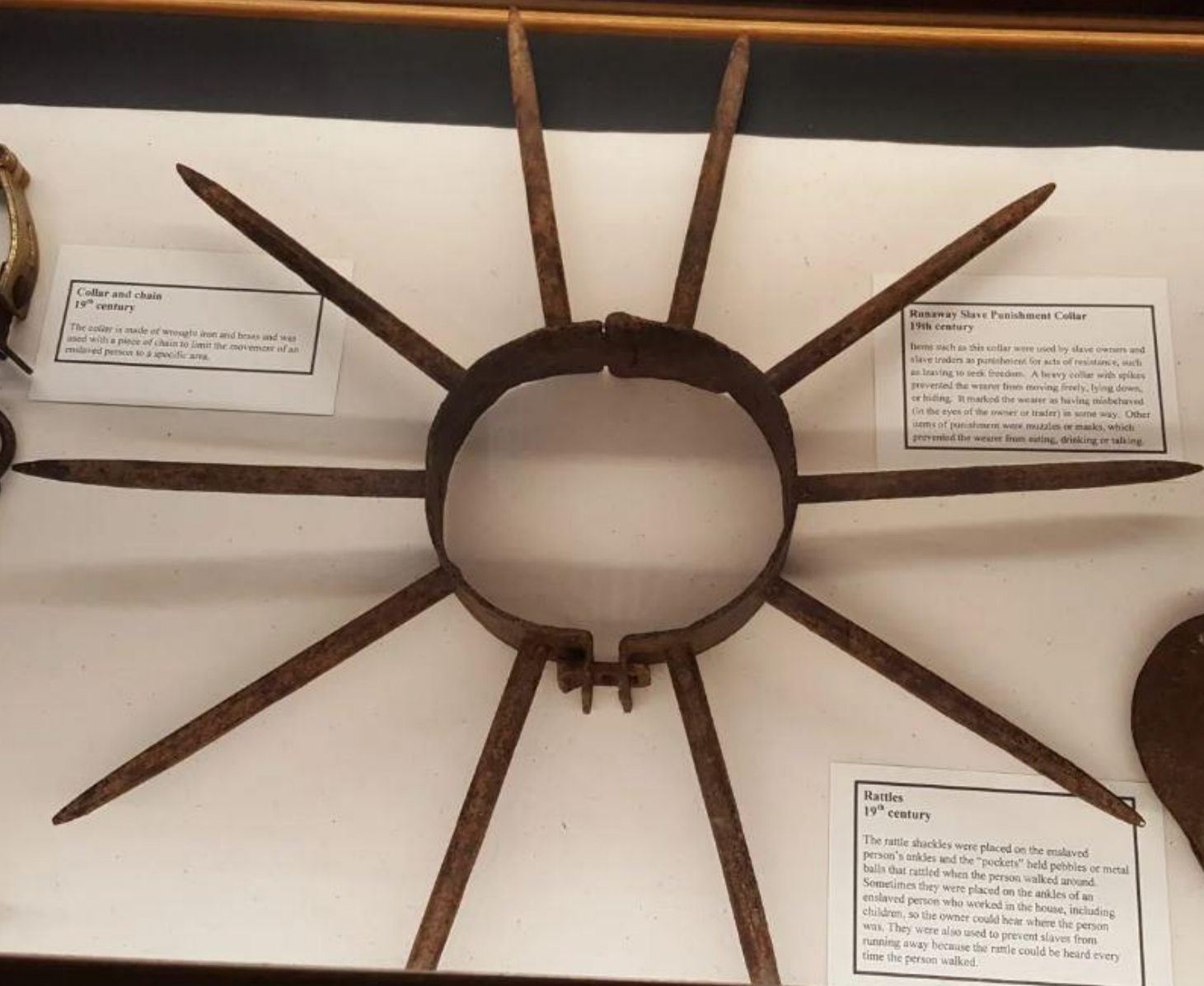
**WESTERN CAPE ARCHIVES, SOUTH AFRICA  
MSO 1/19 REFERENCE 199-11**





**Collar and chain**  
19<sup>th</sup> century

The collar is made of wrought iron and brass and was used with a piece of chain to limit the movement of an enslaved person to a specific area.



**Runaway Slave Punishment Collar**  
19<sup>th</sup> century

Items such as this collar were used by slave owners and slave traders as punishment for acts of resistance, such as leaving to seek freedom. A heavy collar with spikes prevented the wearer from moving freely, lying down, or hiding. It marked the wearer as having misbehaved (in the eyes of the owner or trader) in some way. Other items of punishment were muzzles or masks, which prevented the wearer from eating, drinking or talking.



**SLAVE SHACKLES**  
FROM THE DAVID MACKRAE  
COLLECTION ACQUIRED BY THE  
MUSEUM IN 1964. THEY WERE  
WORN BY DOUGLAS BRACKER.



**Rattles**  
19<sup>th</sup> century

The rattle shackles were placed on the enslaved person's ankles and the "pockets" held pebbles or metal balls that rattled when the person walked around. Sometimes they were placed on the ankles of an enslaved person who worked in the house, including children, so the owner could hear where the person was. They were also used to prevent slaves from running away because the rattle could be heard every time the person walked.



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# Neutrality in language

## Holding onto Humanity

The weeks aboard ship tested the humanity of everyone held captive. Men shackled two-by-two, on many mornings found their selves bound to a corpse. Stored in separate quarters and free to move about, **women were constantly subject to rape and other physical violence.** High child mortality rates were attributed to deadly disease and starvation. While many souls were lost during the Middle Passage, those who survived did so through courage, strength, and the will of the human spirit. (coloration, mine)

## Slave Shackles

Jefferson understood that his African American slaves produced his wealth and provided him the leisure to read, write, and govern. Slavery was woven into his daily life, as were its contradictions. Most notably, Jefferson had **enslaved children, the product of a long relationship with Sally Hemings,** a woman he enslaved. (coloration, mine)

## Enslaved at Monticello

The names on this wall identify many of the 609 people held in bondage by Thomas Jefferson over his lifetime. The people remembered here include six of **Jefferson's children whom he fathered with Sally Hemings,** an enslaved woman. Children inherited the status of their mother, so Jefferson's children were born and kept enslaved. (coloration, mine)

# Color-coding





“The problem with neutrality as a claim for a museum is that it fundamentally neutralizes any criticism, dissent, or alternate history that it might present, which contradicts its very claims to education and free and open exchange of ideas [...] because the institutions’ very power structures, historically and operationally, nullify concepts of civics to maintain a neutral position.”

- Laura Raicovich, *Culture Strike*, 2021

# The Both Sides Now Doctrine

North Carolina Museum of History



**How it started vs. How it's going**



**1902**

**2023**



“The Division of State History Museums collects and preserves artifacts and other historical materials relating to the history and heritage of North Carolina in a local, regional, national, and international context to assist people in understanding how the past influences the present.”

North Carolina Museum of History, Mission Statement, 2023





“His methods were sometimes regarded as unorthodox, but his overall purpose was to entertain as well as to instruct. His greatest delight was ‘to weave around each object displayed a romantic halo’ that pleased those who heard him, even if it became necessary, as at least one newspaper suggested, **for teachers to clarify historical discrepancies**” (coloration, mine).

- Beth Crabtree, 1991



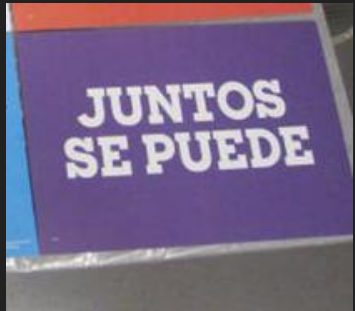


10 Things to See NC Museum of History - The GloveTrotters!

[Visit >](#)



*“Signs of the Times* is an exhibit that showcases signs and objects (political, protest, and social) from various time periods, including 2020. Connecting signs and objects relating to 2020 issues (Black Lives Matter, Covid-19, the election) to signs and objects from past, often similar, issues will show that history is happening now.”





Katherine Johnson of Durham was one of hundreds who rallied and marched in downtown Raleigh Friday, June, 24, 2022 in opposition to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn its landmark Roe v. Wade ruling.



# Signs of the Times

- How do Protests Happen over Time?
- In What Forms Do Protests Occur?
- How Do People Capture the Spirit of Protest?
- How Are Protests Part of Everyday Life?
- What Do Protests Sound Like?
- Where Do We Go from Here?



**“There is a level of advocacy that we can accept in our role as a state institution [...] [this] material is inherently provocative, we have always owned that that was part of it.”**

# Censored topics

- Confederate and other monument removal or destruction
- No profanity, even in abbreviation (e.g., "F12")
- No materials that name sitting politicians in NC at any level

## N.R.A. POSTER BOYS



TILLIS  
NRA RATING  
A+

CONTRIBUTIONS  
FROM NRA  
\$44 MILL.



BURR  
NRA RATING  
A+

CONTRIBUTIONS  
FROM NRA  
\$7 MILL.

## TYPICAL REVOLUTIONARY-ERA MUSKET



- 1** round magazine capacity
- 3** rounds per minute
- 1,000** feet per sec. muzzle velocity
- 50** meters max. accurate range

## TYPICAL MODERN-DAY AR-15



- 30** round magazine capacity
- 45** rounds per minute
- 3,260** feet per sec muzzle velocity
- 550** meters max. accurate range



## “Gay Rights Are Human Rights”

For most of North Carolina’s history, it was illegal and dangerous to be part of the LGBTQIA+ community, and laws criminalized members of the community. The 1969 Stonewall riots in New York set into motion the modern gay rights movement.

Since the mid-1970s, the North Carolina LGBTQIA+ community has become more visible. Pride marches, protests, and community organizing have helped raise awareness of social issues, laws, and legislation that **infringe on basic human rights. LGBTQIA+ groups continue to pursue equal rights for all community members.** (coloration, mine)

## **Passive Action Protest**

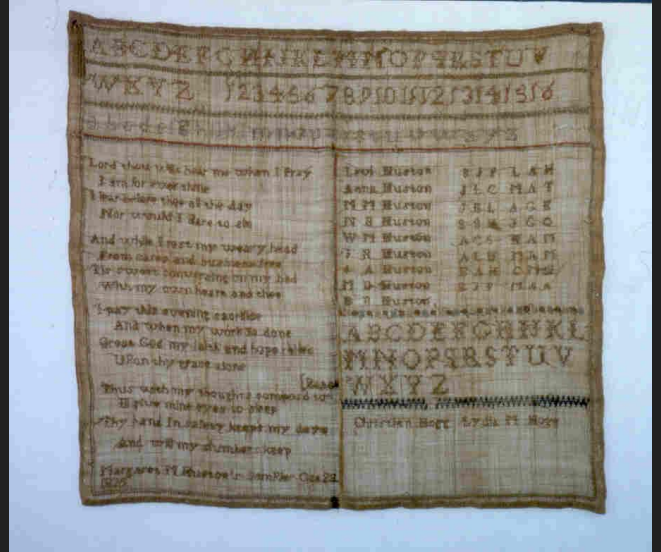
Passive action protests serve as a way of seeking change through smaller, often daily, actions. They can be individual: one person passing out flyers, circulating petitions, displaying yard signs, or wearing stickers. Or they can be larger, with groups participating in silent vigils and sit-ins that don't disturb the environment around them.

In North Carolina, members of the LGBTQIA+ community have distributed flyers and circulated petitions to raise awareness of social issues, laws, and legislation that impact their lives. Groups pursuing their civil rights created and circulated newsletters highlighting issues but also telling the story of the movement through the voices of those who participated. (coloration, mine)

# The Erasure Maxim

Greensboro History Museum





A collection of 174  
Confederate longarms that  
represent “the largest  
collection of this type  
anywhere in the world.”

- Former Director William Moore, 1998





“The overall thrust of the exhibit is about the increasing importance of Greensboro during the Civil War. The reasons why this was so are examined and interpreted through text and material culture. [...] Dr. Murphy’s collection helps to illustrate and inform the individual parts of the story.”



Through Collector's  
Eyes: the Murphy  
Collection



Nov 7, 1999 - June 4, 2017





The Virginia Historical Society “used to have [their] collection [of weapons] beautifully exhibited in cases where you could see both sides of the gun. All of a sudden, they had a change of administration, and the whole business went into the basement. I sure hated to see that.”

- Dr. John Murphy, 1998

“I was reminded of my own reaction to the Virginia Historical Society’s ‘political correctness’ in consigning the Fuller and Stewart Collection to the basement. In the late 80’s [sic], I underwent their procedure of filling out a request form and waited for thirty minutes to be led down to see one piece, especially when I remembered the previous lovely display on the first floor!”

- Ralph MacDonald, 1998.



G. W. MORSE

2 Sheets—Sheet 1.

Breech-Loading Fire-Arm.

Patented Oct. 28, 1856.

Oct. 28, 1856.



**William Falley (1844-1912)**  
 Major American Inventor and Entrepreneur  
 Falley's 1870 rifle was an early derivative from Remington's design, which was used in the American Civil War. It was a breech-loading rifle with a sliding block action. Falley's design was a significant improvement over the muzzle-loading rifle of the time. It was used by the Union Army during the war.

**George W. Morse (1813-1888)**  
 Engineer, Inventor and Civil War Arms Designer  
 George Morse's 1856 rifle was a significant improvement over the muzzle-loading rifle of the time. It was a breech-loading rifle with a sliding block action. Morse's design was used by the Union Army during the war.



**Charles Cornish (1841-1913)**  
 American Inventor and Arms Designer  
 Charles Cornish's 1870 rifle was a significant improvement over the muzzle-loading rifle of the time. It was a breech-loading rifle with a sliding block action. Cornish's design was used by the Union Army during the war.

**Frederick Cleaveland Thompson, Sr. (1827-1895)**  
 Federal Rifle Designer  
 Thompson's 1856 rifle was a significant improvement over the muzzle-loading rifle of the time. It was a breech-loading rifle with a sliding block action. Thompson's design was used by the Union Army during the war.

**Field Armsworks (1828-1912)**  
 American Arms Manufacturer  
 Field Armsworks' 1856 rifle was a significant improvement over the muzzle-loading rifle of the time. It was a breech-loading rifle with a sliding block action. Field Armsworks' design was used by the Union Army during the war.

**Charles C. Chapman (1819-1912)**  
 American Arms Designer  
 Chapman's 1856 rifle was a significant improvement over the muzzle-loading rifle of the time. It was a breech-loading rifle with a sliding block action. Chapman's design was used by the Union Army during the war.





Green Hill  
Cemetery,  
Greensboro

July 4, 2020



**“Exhibitions perform in the ‘present time.’ Meanwhile the institution is a heritage machine bearing and asking questions around unresolved, ignored, absented, and obscured stories from the past, and also negotiating, fermenting, testing out, in the best case, possible futures.”**

Vasif Kortun, 2018

The John M. and Isabelle Murphy  
Confederate Long Arms Collection



Over 150 years ago there was a...  
man. place



These are the stories.

“One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over. The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive, an example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but **it does not tell the truth.**”

- W.E.B. Du Bois, 1935





**Thank you!**

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