

# THE PROCESS OF CREATING AN HISTORICAL EXHIBIT

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As a precursor to a potential ongoing partnership between the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and the Northern Kentucky University Center for Public History, a group of students in the Master of Arts in Public History program was presented with the task to research and design an exhibit for the Freedom Center that would be part of its permanent exhibit display in the gallery known as “From Slavery to Freedom.”

The Freedom Center approached me about putting this project together after the opening of the “Beverly Hills Supper Club: Showplace of the Nation” exhibit at the Fort Thomas Military and Community Museum. I was tasked with the responsibility of determining the topic for the exhibit space as well as the responsibility of recruiting a team to undertake the research and design, and on May 4, 2011 I began the process.

The decision was made to focus on the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 as the primary topic of the exhibit space. This decision was based upon the location of the available space, which is situated between an interactive room with a timeline discussing the act as well as other historical compromises and a section of biographical panels of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown. With these three figures playing prominent roles in the abolitionist movement in the 1850’s, and citing the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 as major catalyst for their activities, the choice to address the act and its impact was an obvious one.

This met with the approval of Dina Bailey and Rich Cooper of the Freedom Center. The next step was to recruit some of the best and brightest of the NKU MAPH program for the purpose of research, text, and design.

**Justine Yohe** was chosen because of her ability to envision a fabulous exhibit design.

**Aleia Brown** was selected because of her skills in collections management.

**Mary Ladrick** brought to the table the uncanny ability to edit text and present objective solutions to text panel questions.

**Patia Tabar** provided great analytical insight as well as legal assistance as we began to place photographs and quotes into the panel designs.

**Luke Groeschen’s** military history background was essential in the research phase as we pursued some interesting avenues related to Federal Marshals and the military response.

**Cori Sisler’s** objective approach to research and text editing was invaluable to the overall success of the project.

**Cierra Earl** provided skill sets in computer technology and photography to assist us in the process as well as superior researching abilities.

**Maridith Yahl** proved to be a much needed asset, accomplishing any and all tasks in a timely fashion with the highest of quality whether it was research, text editing, or an objective approach to final design decisions.

An initial meeting was scheduled for Tuesday May 24 at the Freedom Center. At that meeting, the participants were provided with an overview of the project and the expectations of time commitment, content, and desired outcomes. Aleia Brown provided a general time table for deadlines and objectives for the project following the meeting, and Cierra Earl created a topical timeline for the team to use as it commenced its research. The original plan was for the team to meet twice a week to accommodate schedules. However, due to those same scheduling issues, the decision was made to move to a once a week format with an evening meeting time on Wednesdays that was more conducive to the majority of team members.

As the research progressed, the consensus of the team was to place the research findings into three key categories:

1. The legislation of the act itself
2. The impact of the act on the African American community, both slave and free
3. The development of organized resistance to the act (i.e. – communities, politicians, individuals, etc.).

This division allowed for greater continuity in the research process without creating a situation where researchers were looking for something to fill a category. In other words, instead of limiting the research by creating distinct categories this approach actually enhanced the breadth of research conducted on the part of the team.

Much of the research of course, was not used in the final design product proposed to the Freedom Center. However, the research gave the team a greater appreciation for what is available concerning the topic of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, as well as what is not available. For example, there is a great deal of information regarding stories of fugitive slaves and the communities who attempted to protect them, both successfully and unsuccessfully. However, there is not a lot of readily available research on the true economic impact of the act, nor is there much to be found regarding the reactions and responses of the Federal Marshals deputized for the cause of capturing and returning fugitive slaves. This obviously gave the team moments of great joy coupled with periods of frustration. All in all, enough quality information was delivered by the team to proceed with the next phase of the project.

Drafting the research into manageable text panels is a challenge faced by even the most gifted of veteran museum professionals. But thanks to the efforts of Mary Ladrack and Maridith Yahl, the transition was smooth and seamless. While other members of the team began drafting the panels, Mary and Maridith took the lead roles on the editing process. With their guidance a word limit was established, guidelines for target audience were put in place, and editing the text panels was done with complete objectivity. They also coordinated with Justine, who was beginning to create a design plan, what the number of panels should be and how the layout should look, including font type, size, and photo captions.

The opportunity to search the collection at the Freedom Center was an exciting prospect as the team began seeking artifacts as well as articles and images to incorporate into the exhibit design. Justine Yohe, Maridith Yahl, and Mary Ladrack were able to take some time to peruse some of the Freedom Center's collection of runaway slave ads and other items in an effort to find something to tie the text panels together in a cohesive design. While many great items were viewed and discussed, the three team members were unable to find anything that matched exactly what we were looking for with regards to the exhibit. Continued research into other sources bore fruit in the form of prints, photographs, and newspaper articles. Cierra Earl collected the source information for each image so that proper acknowledgments and permissions could be determined for the items that were not of public domain.

One other point of discussion came up with regards to the Satterwhite painting of Margaret Garner that the Freedom Center has on display near the gallery section the team was tasked to design. Margaret Garner's story is tied so closely to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, that the team felt it would be an integral part of the exhibit. Thus, dialogue commenced with the Freedom Center staff as to if and how the painting could or should be moved from its current location to the new exhibit space. While there are a number of logistical issues about moving the painting, such as the delicate nature of the work itself, the question of replacing the work with something else in the current location, and the numbering system for the audio tour, it was decided that the possibility of moving the painting would be entertained as a serious proposal. In fact, it was included in the final design proposal to the Freedom Center.

This team made great strides in accomplishing the tasks and goals set before us, and on June 28 we presented our final proposal to Dina Bailey. After much discussion and many questions about our choices and decisions, an approval was given. Dina Bailey then followed up with a teachable moment about the next steps in the process, as well as what we believed to be the good and the bad of our experiences as a working design team. From this point, the approved design is now in the hands of the Freedom Center Collections and Exhibitions staff. They will determine the next steps of the process to put the design into a tangible and functioning exhibition that will enhance the "From Slavery to Freedom" gallery in the Freedom Center's ongoing efforts to carry out their mission.