

# Foundation Secures Republican Archives for Museum



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**April 14, 2016:** Creators of the National Republican History Museum know what likely will be in the museum. The first shipment of historical documents from the Republican National Committee (RNC) should be arriving by the end of the month, for instance.

But what the outside of that museum will be? That's still on the drawing boards. Nevertheless, details of many of the behind-the-scenes projects continue to move forward.

The goal: a 2017 groundbreaking, followed by a mid-2018 opening.

"We're moving [forward] on several fronts," said Dan Zimmerman of the National Republican History Museum Foundation. "[Fundraising] is going to accelerate now that the primary here in the state is over."

"... We've got the different exhibits outlined, but now we need to put some meat on the bones ... both with story and with material. What we are going to get from the RNC is not going to be enough to portray the story we want to portray. So we have to go out and get donations for the different material to tell the story."

## **ARCHIVES ARE ON THEIR WAY**

The most important development may be what the museum foundation knows it has in hand: original, historical documents from the RNC.

Zimmerman has explained all along that these archives of the Republican Party are vital to the museum foundation's efforts.

The best part? The first shipment "should be here by the end of the month," he said. "... the initial shipment is not going to be very large; it's going to be about five pallets that are four by four by four, so it's not a significant amount. The more significant amount is going to come over time."

What the foundation will find in those boxes is anyone's guess.

Previously, Zimmerman has described the Republican archives as "a historian's gold mine," noting the RNC currently houses the documents in a 15,000-squarefoot warehouse. It's unclear where it will go once it reaches Ripon.

"We have not decided on the [storage location] ... We've got a couple places we're looking at right now that have temperature controlled storage that have enough room to store them and work on it all," Zimmerman said. "Ripon doesn't have a shortage of empty buildings right now, so there are a lot of different options."

Then the hard part begins: sifting through the myriad documents.

"They haven't gone through any kind of organizing or archiving process, so we need to take the material, inventory the material, figure out the historical significance of the material, then catalog and store it properly," Zimmerman said. "... It's a surgical-type process; you get a lot of things you don't need ... Some people have termed it as 'Aunt Mabel's garage' ... Some of it's usable; some of [is not]."

## **RIPON'S STORY WILL PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE**

Simply having the archives isn't enough. Choosing how to feature Republican history may be even more important.

That's why the organization is focusing — at least, for now — on designing both permanent and rotating exhibits.

"We're essentially designing the museum from the inside-out. We have an idea of what we want the outside to look like, but the exact footprint of the building, how it's going to flow inside the building are really going to be more driven by the

different permanent exhibits we have inside the building and how much space those exhibits are going to need,” Zimmerman said.

Several exhibits are projected to be included:

- Founders Exhibit, which will celebrate citizens past and present who have “fostered the Republican Ideal”
- Call for Freedom, 1776-1860: This is envisioned as a holographic, interactive re-enactment
- Civil War and Reconstruction, 1860-1876
- Doldrums, 1876-1896
- Golden Age, 1896-1932
- Wilderness, 1932-1980
- Conservative Resurgence, 1980-Present

These permanent exhibits will be designed to appeal to adults and older students. Younger patrons of the museum may be more interested in a planned children’s area that is expected to feature “Ella the Elephant” and “Honest Abe.”

“We’ve got an elementary educator that is working with us to make this history appealing to both elementary school kids and adolescents,” Zimmerman said.

The signature display at the museum will be a familiar sight.

“Once you get deeper inside the museum, we’ll have a mock-up of the Little White Schoolhouse, a re-enactment of the actual meeting that took place inside the schoolhouse ...,” Zimmerman said. “[This will be] a very technological, holographic-type interaction that the visitors of the museum can actually participate in the discussion that went on in the school house at that time.”

Those are the broad strokes of the planned displays. Getting the details right, though, won’t be easy.

“The hardest thing we’re dealing with right now is getting the story correct,” Zimmerman said. “As you can imagine, over 160 years of history and especially since World War II, there’s been significant politicizing of the history ... So trying to find accurate, unbiased information has been a challenge. We don’t want bad information or misinformation to creep into the history.”

### **STILL IN DESIGN PHASE**

The displays will represent the core of the museum. What it’s wrapped in, though, remains undecided.

“We’re going to design the actual building footprint around the space we need to accommodate those exhibits,” Zimmerman said. “And then we’ll have the extra space for our rotating exhibits, gathering space, museum store, [etc].”

Will the final product retain the historic Republican House building, most recently used as a Chinese restaurant?

“We’ve got plans to incorporate it and plans not to incorporate it,” Zimmerman said, noting no decision has been made. “... Right now, it’s there; we have no plans to take it down right now. But we still have the challenges [with the building]. Structurally, there are problems.”

As such, plans for the structure itself remain fluid.

“There’s a significant amount of work going on right now to nail down the exact footprint of where we want to position the [new] building on the property, and we just don’t know yet because we need to get a better idea of the kind of square footage we need,” Zimmerman said. “Do we go two stories? Do we go more than two stories? We just don’t know yet.”

He added it’s important any new construction not “encroach on the Little White Schoolhouse ... We don’t want to disturb that setting and that look. We’re trying to work through that right now.”

### **REPUBLICAN PARTY REMAINS RELEVANT**

All this work, meanwhile, has gone on against a highly unusual backdrop: the most contested Republican field for president in many years.

“[The election] really has not been any kind of impediment,” Zimmerman said, noting the unusual race “could make for a really interesting display inside the museum” one day. “The other part of it is, people are saying this is the demise of the Republican Party. I would offer to look back to the Teddy Roosevelt days and the split of the Bull-Moose — and that was 100 years ago, and today we’re still talking about the Republican Party. So there was discussion of the demise of the Republican Party back then, and in reality it probably made it stronger.”

Does a divided Republican Party lessen the relevance of a Republican history museum?

“I think if anything it increases the relevance of [the museum], because folks need to fully understand what the whole party is all about, what our political history is, not just the Republican Party but the whole United States,” Zimmerman said. “I think the current election cycle has woken some people up and stirred some interest in it, so I think it’s been a positive thing.”

## FUNDRAISING CONTINUES

The election has had at least one impact on planning for the museum: fundraising has been somewhat on hold, until now.

“There is a competition for dollars right now with the campaigns going on; we’ve specifically held back until our primary was done,” Zimmerman said. “[Now] we’ve started moving out with our fundraising campaign ... [But] there is a degree of ... fundraising fatigue.

“But we’re doing OK ... I think we’re on track to succeed.”

Zimmerman’s excited about the project, and he believes others are becoming enthused about the future museum as well.

“The chairman [of the RNC, Reince Priebus], personally has expressed his interest in making sure that this comes to fruition, but I think that has more to do with his love of history and the fact that he’s from Wisconsin,” Zimmerman said. “It’s not just Republicans that are interested in it ... There’s interest across the board, all across the entire political spectrum.”

This is one vision of what the National Republican History Museum could look like, though its design remains in flux.

