

3. Narrative

The Story of North Carolina, North Carolina Museum of History

For years the North Carolina Museum of History sought **to produce** a permanent, comprehensive chronological exhibit ~~to that would~~ interpret the broad story of North Carolina's past. **At 20,000 square feet**, *The Story of North Carolina* is by far the largest, most innovative exhibit the museum has ever produced. Numerous staff members spent years developing the exhibit, and it represents the highest professional standards of scholarship, design, and production.

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1. Audience awareness

All North Carolinians, natives and newcomers, constitute the primary audience of the North Carolina Museum of History. Guests from out of state also form a significant portion of our overall visitation. Our visitors are diverse, not only in terms of age, race, or national origin, but in levels of education, learning styles, and life experiences. *The Story of North Carolina* ~~We was~~ designed ~~this exhibit~~ with the ~~hope and~~ expectation of engaging and educating the largest and broadest audience possible.

To ensure that exhibit content appropriately represented the perspectives of all visitors, museum staff partnered with two advisory boards—one from the African American community and one from the American Indian community. We wanted to make certain that visitors of various cultural backgrounds would see themselves and their stories reflected in the exhibit.

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The museum tracks visitor statistics on a monthly basis, employing staff observations, guest book data, and electronic counting systems. Traditionally, the **largest part** of our audience has been school groups, particularly fourth- and eighth-grade classes, ~~which that~~ study North Carolina history as part of the state-prescribed curriculum. ~~in fact, On a busy day~~ more than 1,000 children can tour the museum **on a busy day**. In 2012, more than 4,000 adults took scheduled tours, but the museum hosted thousands more **as** unscheduled walk-in visitors. Families, **general tourists**, and special interest groups, who come to see specific exhibits or programs, also factor in our visitation. With three major research universities and the world-renowned Research Triangle Park nearby, the museum ~~also~~ receives many well-educated, well-

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traveled visitors, including foreign exchange students, faculty members, and international businesspeople.

Because of this diverse audience, we designed *The Story of North Carolina* ~~the exhibit~~ to meet a variety of visitor expectations: ~~The~~ labels are engaging, ~~yet and written~~ at a moderate reading level; ~~the~~ interactives ~~are~~ appealing to ~~both~~ children and adults; ~~and the exhibit's~~ content and presentation draw in ~~both~~ those who are familiar with the state's history and those who are not.

~~Additionally, museum staff partnered with two advisory boards, one from the African American community and one from the American Indian community, to ensure that exhibit content appropriately represented the perspectives of all visitors. We wanted to make certain that visitors of various cultural backgrounds would see themselves and their stories reflected in the exhibit.~~

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2. Evaluation

Audience ~~evaluation and~~ feedback factored critically into the development of *The Story of North Carolina* and has continued to inform museum staff of the exhibit's impact ~~post-opening~~. To gather audience information, staff conducted front-end evaluations with three advisory boards. One board, composed of educators, students, and professionals from the African American community, advised ~~curators and staff~~ on content relevant to African American history. ~~Likewise,~~ ~~a~~ ~~second~~ group, ~~which~~ representing ~~ged~~ the state's American Indian tribes, made recommendations on the exhibit's inclusion and portrayals of American Indian history. ~~Finally,~~ ~~a~~ ~~final~~ ~~group~~ ~~panel,~~ ~~made~~ ~~up~~ of historians, archaeologists, and educators of multiple ethnicities, ~~advised~~ ~~on~~ ~~reviewed~~ ~~and~~ ~~evaluated~~ all exhibit content and presentation. Throughout the planning process, the North Carolina K–12 Standard Course of Study served as a guide for board and staff members involved in creating exhibit content.

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~~During~~ ~~As~~ the exhibit's construction phase ~~began~~, museum staff ~~again~~ met ~~again~~ with community advisory board members, ~~who~~ ~~seeking~~ ~~evaluated~~ ~~ions~~ of draft exhibit labels and ~~provided~~ constructive feedback on audiovisual presentation scripts, narrator selection, and cast-figure models. Museum staff ~~later~~ worked with fabricators to prototype exhibit interactives, and, when appropriate, communicated with personnel at other museums ~~about~~ ~~plans~~ ~~and~~ ~~options~~. ~~—~~ ~~In~~ one such instance, museum staff observed a “cow-milking” interactive at another institution

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~~similar to one planned for *The Story of North Carolina* and, a~~ After speaking with that museum's staff about its effectiveness, ~~educators and fabricators~~ decided to use sound effects in the interactive instead of liquid. ~~For this and other interactives, such as one depicting a World War I-era military recruitment office~~ At appropriate times, staff ~~even~~ brought in elementary-school-aged children to test functionality.

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~~Following~~ Once the exhibit opened, museum staff ~~has~~ continued to collaborate with the community advisory boards; ~~and in fact, the staff~~ is still working to implement some of those groups' suggestions. ~~In addition, c~~urators ~~also~~ solicited three scholarly reviews of the exhibit from a professional historian, ~~a~~ public history professor, and ~~a~~ K-12 education specialist. Their feedback helped staff assess ~~the~~ historical accuracy, curriculum compatibility, ~~and~~ effectiveness of exhibitry, and ~~the~~ visitor experience. ~~A few months after opening, t~~he museum partnered ~~a few months after opening,~~ with a group of approximately 100 Latino youth leaders to evaluate the exhibit's accessibility to Latino visitors. Their recommendations are currently being used to create a Spanish-language exhibit guide.

~~Other ongoing evaluation methods involve m~~Museum docents ~~who are~~ stationed in the exhibit ~~and~~ have been charged with observing visitor flow patterns and reporting visitors' comments and questions about the exhibit. ~~Their~~ feedback has ~~already~~ led to plans for improved directional signage. ~~Additionally, v~~isitors ~~also~~ have the option of ~~completing written cards to share~~ing their questions, concerns, and comments ~~on written feedback cards that. These~~ are examined and, ~~when appropriate, forwarded to staff for respon~~sed to where appropriate. Finally, the museum's ~~upcoming~~ five-year strategic plan includes an objective to conduct wider-ranging public surveys and analyze their results.

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Through the use of ~~all these multiple~~ evaluation strategies, the North Carolina Museum of History has gained a better understanding of this exhibit's audience, addressed the functionality of exhibit interactives, and learned about visitors' ~~responses-reaction~~ to the exhibit. Responses so far have been overwhelmingly positive. Still, museum staff ~~continue work~~ing to perfect the exhibit based on evaluation results; ~~these efforts-and~~ will continue ~~to do so into~~ the future.

3. Content

Museum staff, board members, and outside experts thoroughly researched and vetted the historical content presented in *The Story of North Carolina*. Staff from ~~multiple the museum's~~ seven departments—administration, collections management, curation, design, development & community relations, editorial & graphic design, and education—began the process ~~of by~~ brainstorming to determine key themes grounded in current historical scholarship and the North Carolina K–12 Standard Course of Study. Staff then met with African American and American Indian community groups, as well as academic advisors, ~~inviting to solicit~~ their ideas and feedback. Next, curators conducted extensive primary and secondary research on different subjects and time periods, crafting lengthy research reports with detailed bibliographies. They also began identifying potential artifacts, images, and interactive ideas to support each ~~of these~~ exhibit ~~topics~~subjects. ~~After Once~~ the museum hired an outside design firm, Christopher Chadbourne & Associates (CCA), and determined a preliminary spatial arrangement, curators started writing label copy. ~~Along the way, a separate~~ internal team of reviewers vetted all content, ~~where appropriate, the with~~ input ~~from of~~ experts and community/academic advisors ~~where appropriate~~was also sought out and taken into consideration.

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The Story of North Carolina uses a variety of media to convey historical content including artifacts, written text, short (between 2– and 7–minutes) audiovisual pieces, environments, cast figures, touchable interactives, and graphic imagery. This variety of formats ensures that visitors of all learning styles are able to connect with content. ~~Certain formats~~The variety also helps fit particular exhibit themes with the best possible method of presenting information and interpretation better than others. For example, ~~an original video communicates to interpret~~ the crisis that arose as a result of contact between American Indians and colonists, an original video communicates the message more effectively than the scant artifact record of the period could illustrate. Likewise, cast figures visually represent the social order of antebellum North Carolina society more powerfully and clearly than label copy alone could.

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Throughout the research and development process, curators employed current historical scholarship while maintaining the exhibit's accessibility to a general audience. As an example of this effort, ~~Instead of beginning~~ *The Story of North Carolina* ~~the exhibit~~ with North Carolina's first English colony , a traditional, if Euro-centric starting place, the first two galleries actually focus on the rich and complex societies that had thrived in the region for millennia before that European arrival. Later in the exhibit, Whereas the Confederate "master narrative" has long defined the story of North Carolina's Civil War experience, the Civil War gallery of this

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~~exhibit also focuses on~~includes southern unionism, life on the home front, and ~~the~~ African American experiences of slavery and freedom ~~along with the Confederate “master narrative” that has long defined the story of North Carolina’s Civil War experience. As a final example.~~ *The Story of North Carolina* addresses the 1898 Wilmington “Race Riot,” (the only successful overthrow of a legally elected local government in the nation’s history). ~~This area covers~~with a ~~larger-than-expected~~ footprint ~~and that~~ brings ~~to light~~ a shameful and long-hushed chapter of the state’s history ~~to light~~.

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The text presented to visitors is accessibly written and ~~clearly~~ delineates fact from opinion. ~~Q—~~ quotations ~~are~~ always ~~have attributed to~~ speakers, and the opinions of various historical ~~actors~~ ~~figures~~ are presented clearly as such. The exhibit text frequently encourages visitors to question assumptions, ~~to~~ make comparisons with their own experiences, and ~~to~~ look at the past from different perspectives. For example, labels ask visitors to consider what it would ~~have been~~ like to haul all the water they need~~ed~~ each day ~~from a source to the place of use,~~ ~~or~~ and to think about how indigenous people may have depicted themselves differently than John White did in his famous 16th-century watercolors.

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4. Collections

North Carolina Museum of History staff and advisors developed ~~the content of~~ *The Story of North Carolina’s* ~~content~~ with the goal of drawing heavily from the museum’s rich ~~collection of~~ artifact ~~collections~~. Curators chose potential artifacts in tandem with storyline research, and, in some cases, ~~permitted~~ artifact availability ~~to drive~~ the narrative. For example, the museum possesses an outstanding collection of objects related to Civil War-era North Carolinians. ~~To showcase this collection’s depth and because the Civil War was a significant turning point in North Carolina history,~~ staff and designers chose to give the *North Carolina in Crisis* gallery a sizeable footprint ~~that would accentuate the Civil War and its significance as a turning point in North Carolina history.~~ In ~~other cases instances~~ where the museum’s permanent collection lacked depth, curators sought out loans from other institutions—~~as an illustration,~~ ~~to~~ present a more complete understanding of North Carolina’s earliest inhabitants, curators and registrars secured loans of appropriate objects from two nearby archaeology research centers.

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Standardized ~~exhibit~~ labels ~~were designed to~~ provide visitors with clear ~~artifact~~ information ~~about the collection items that are on exhibit.~~ Artifact labels include ~~the~~ ~~artifact’s~~ description

and date ~~and~~. Many ~~also~~ include an additional sentence of historical background, ~~and~~ for artifacts of particular interest, artifact story labels offer even greater context. In rare situations where reproduction artifacts are used, labels ~~clearly~~ alert visitors to the modern stand-ins. ~~Label and~~ In addition, objects are ~~object-positioned within the exhibit also permit~~so visitors ~~to can~~ make clear distinctions between artifacts, which are always behind glass or rail ~~barriers~~, and more reachable elements such as touch objects and cast figures. All artifact cases in the exhibit are ~~locked~~, and artifacts not displayed in cases are situated several feet behind guardrails. Alarm systems and additional ~~p~~Plexiglass barriers keep wandering hands and feet safely behind the rails.

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The *Story of North Carolina* makes use of two particularly large artifacts ~~from the collection to~~ illustrate and amplify exhibit content: ~~a 1742 Pitt County farmhouse and an 1860 Martin County slave cabin~~. The two full-size homes, which had languished in storage for decades after curators rescued them from demolition in the 1980s and 1990s, ~~were reconstructed by museum staff and a restoration specialist to make~~ their debuts in ~~two galleries of this exhibit~~. ~~Working with museum staff, a restoration specialist reconstructed a 1742 Pitt County farm house and an 1860 Martin County slave cabin within the exhibit galleries~~. Visitors can walk ~~into and~~ through the farm-house, which is furnished with ~~museum~~-artifacts ~~from the museum collection to~~ represent a typical yeoman dwelling of the early antebellum period. ~~When working with~~ ~~Designers purposely left exterior siding off one wall of~~ the slave cabin, ~~designers purposely left the exterior siding off one wall~~ so that visitors can peer into the furnished interior to learn more about the lives and material culture of enslaved North Carolinians. This unique use of two large artifacts affords visitors an experience similar to that of exploring a historic house museum, but within a gallery setting.

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Two full-time conservators ~~on from~~ the museum's staff served on the exhibit planning team ~~and advised on conservation concerns~~ throughout the development process and post-opening ~~evaluations to advise the team about conservation concerns~~. They also ~~Under their supervision,~~ trained ~~and supervised~~ mountmakers ~~who~~ constructed sturdy, customized mounts for each object. The museum's textile conservator individually padded, fitted, and dressed mannequins to ensure that all textile items were supported appropriately. Additionally, curators planned several rotations for all textiles to ensure that these light-sensitive objects could be taken off display every six months for needed rest. ~~All artifact cases in the exhibit are locked, and artifacts~~

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~~not displayed in cases are situated several feet behind guardrails. Alarm systems and additional Plexiglas barriers keep wandering hands and feet safely behind the rails.~~

5. Interpretation / Communication

The Story of North Carolina provides the museum with a centerpiece exhibit ~~where-in which~~ visitors of all ages can learn how the lives of North Carolinians in the past ~~were different~~ from their own, yet also ~~how, in many ways, they~~ were similar ~~in many ways~~. The exhibit encourages museumgoers to think about how objects, ideas, lifestyles, and landscapes have changed, as well as how the concept of being a North Carolinian has evolved over time.

The title alone alerts visitors that they are about to encounter a chronological history of a place and its people. Within that broad framework, gallery divisions and an easily-identifiable label hierarchy present North Carolina's story by time period and theme. ~~Each gallery~~ begins with an advanced organizer—an eight-foot-tall angled label that names the upcoming gallery and offers a one-line synopsis: "Building Community: Many different people call North Carolina home," for instance. From there, seven-foot-tall freestanding primary panels introduce the ~~big-major~~ ideas ~~that are to be~~ covered in ~~each-that~~ gallery. Secondary labels (either vertical wall panels or horizontal rails) explore aspects within each ~~major big~~-idea. At a lower level, ~~biographical labels~~, tertiary ~~labelies~~, and artifact story labels highlight people, places, institutions, and objects to further flesh out the story.

The hierarchy, expressed through label size, shape, and color palette, is intuitive. Visitors can quickly identify which labels are giving them overarching points and which are conveying interesting details. In addition, all the labels are short—between 60 and 85 words—allowing visitors to take in information in manageable, layered chunks without being intimidated or bored by massive blocks of text. The labels are direct and concise, with no confusion over attributions, authorship, or unsupported supposition.

In addition to label copy, visitors obtain content through audiovisual pieces and various interactives. They also glean information from varied display techniques such as environments, cast figures, and dioramas. This combination of formats allows the exhibit to cater to a mix of different learning styles. Visual learners can take in the short, layered labels and images.

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Auditory learners can experience audiovisual elements. Tactile learners can manipulate ~~the~~-lift-and-drop labels and touchables.

~~The a~~Numerous interactive elements also offer the opportunity for visitors to relate to one another. Children enjoy working together on our large state map, pressing buttons to activate lights, sounds, and moveable figures. Young and old alike experience 19th-century farm chores ~~together~~—laughing ~~and exclaiming together~~ as they discover the weight of a ~~full~~-wooden bucket ~~full~~ of water or ~~exclaiming surprise when are surprised by a loud moo from~~ Buttercup, ~~our~~ ~~milkable-the~~ cow, ~~elicits a loud “moo!”~~. And visitors love posing as a newly recruited World War I soldier, sticking their head through a three-dimensional “cut-out” ~~while-as~~ a member of their party snaps a photo.

The exhibit provides a comfortable learning environment, and visitors appear to be at ease interacting with exhibit elements and one another. We often observe museum-goers lingering in particular areas or pointing out objects of interest to their companions.

6. Design and Production

Staff from the North Carolina Museum of History and ~~outside design firm~~ CCA kept ~~the~~ final visitor experience in mind ~~as-we~~~~while~~ ~~work~~~~ed~~~~ing~~ together ~~planning-during~~ the exhibit’s design. We consciously looked for ways to spread innovative interpretive techniques—such as cast figures, environments, dioramas, audiovisual pieces, and interactives—across the entire exhibit, ~~and~~ particularly in areas where ~~our-the museum’s~~ artifacts ~~alone~~ could not carry the storyline ~~alone~~. We also ~~configured-designed~~ the exhibit to meet ADA standards and to provide room for school and tour groups without impeding the flow of other visitors.

This high standard of design remains constant throughout *The Story of North Carolina*.

~~As mentioned,~~ a prominent advanced organizer label introduces each new gallery and orients visitors to upcoming content. A graphic color palette, subtly coded to each gallery, reinforces content structure, and a strong label hierarchy conveys differing layers of information in a consistent fashion.

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Museum-goers remain visually stimulated ~~by~~ through an interesting mix of conventional exhibit design (artifacts displayed in cases) and more contemporary experiential settings, such as a traditional Piedmont Siouan bark house that is surrounded by life-sized trees, the brick-~~and-~~ mortar facades of tobacco and textile mills, and a World War I recruitment office. Visitors are also drawn to the minute details that are expressed in dioramas about 19th-century life and the Civil War, and ~~they~~ are awed by the scale of two reconstructed artifact buildings.

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Numerous easy-to-use interactive elements, including touchables, lift-and-drop labels, and push-button interactives promote hands-on learning. ~~Over~~ More than a dozen cast figures, dressed in historically-accurate clothing, elicit an understanding of the role everyday people played in our state's history. Gobo lights projected on the floor lend atmosphere, as leafy shadows evoking the natural world of North Carolina's first inhabitants ~~or~~ and stars and stripes hinting at the coming of conflict near the entry to the Civil War gallery. Ambient sounds, such as lapping waves in the pirate ship and the calls of farm animals in the barnyard area, help set ~~the~~ some scenes.

Seven original short videos use modern technology to convey additional information about subjects with that have particularly complicated content, such as Secession, Reconstruction, or a white supremacist coup. They videos also allow express multiple viewpoints to be expressed and enable, using modern technology to engage visitors to become engaged in the past events, such as Secession, Reconstruction, and a white supremacist coup. Videos longer than 3 or 4 minutes play in theater settings or in areas with seating, ensuring comfort and providing opportunities for visitors to take a break as ~~visitors they~~ move through 20,000 square feet of exhibit space.

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Due to the lengthy anticipated run of this exhibit and ~~its high~~ the number of visitations by school groups ~~visitation~~, museum staff insisted that exhibit elements have a timeless feel and be extremely durable. We did not want showy technological elements that would become outdated, or begin breaking down quickly. The exhibit has just one computer interactive—the rest are simple manipulatives, ~~which that~~ engage visitors visually and physically, while also holding up to repeated use.

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7. Human Comfort, Safety, and Accessibility

Museum staff worked closely with CCA ~~an outside design firm~~ to configure *The Story of North Carolina* so it not only meets ADA standards, but is safe, comfortable, and accessible to visitors of all ages. physical constraints, and cultural backgrounds.

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Both the Office of State Construction and the Department of Insurance reviewed, and approved, plans for the exhibit. Early on, those plans called for it to be housed on two different levels with escalators ~~to that would~~ move visitors between floors. Later, administrators decided to house the exhibit entirely on the museum's first floor.

The revised floor plan not only made the exhibit easier for visitors to access but provided more room for the fluid movement of school groups, while offering gathering points for docent-led tours and gallery carts. Having the exhibit all on one level also ~~made it more~~ improved the experience convenient for visitors in wheelchairs ~~or and those~~ with limited mobility. ~~Carpeting throughout most of the exhibit helps cushion visitors' feet while also dampening noise.~~

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Multiple agency reviews and years of planning ensured that the exhibit ~~meets~~ all code requirements, from fire alarms and emergency lighting to sprinkler systems and exit signage. In addition, surveillance cameras were placed throughout the exhibit to help protect ~~both~~ valued artifacts ~~and as well as~~ visitors. Security guards, many of whom are trained in first-aid and AED response, also routinely patrol the exhibit galleries to offer assistance in case ~~of~~ accidents or health-related emergencies occur.

To help prevent accidents during activities, museum staff and designers adapted touchable interactives. Spear points, pottery shards, and other sharp objects were dulled. A stone adze was tethered to a short rope to allow only soft, glancing blows. And the lid on a pirate chest was made especially lightweight and flexible to protect young hands and fingers.

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All exhibit graphics meet the museum's in-house standards for color contrast, legible font styles, and minimum point size. While lighting is set at a low level to protect fragile artifacts and create ambience, it is sufficient to ensure visitors can easily read labels and see inside object cases. In theater settings, computers control the lighting—~~V~~—visitors push a button when they are ready to activate the media piece, and ~~the a~~ computer gives them allows enough time for viewers to be seated before dimming the lights and starting the program. After the program ends, the

computer brings the lighting back up to help visitors find their way ~~to an exit~~ out of the area. Each of the seven media pieces also features ~~open~~ captioning for the hearing impaired.

~~In such a large~~ Since the exhibition ~~space is so large~~, particular attention was given to visitor comfort. ~~Carpeting was used~~ throughout most of the exhibit ~~to help~~ cushion visitors' feet ~~while and to~~ dampening noise. ~~In addition, benches~~ ~~are~~ scattered strategically throughout the exhibit to ~~give provide occasional guests~~ places to rest, ~~and~~ ~~Five~~ of the exhibit's seven media-viewing areas ~~also~~ offer seating. A second exit, placed about halfway through the exhibit, ~~accommodates~~ ~~allows~~ visitors who have limited time, energy, or attention span ~~to leave the exhibit area~~. ~~The space was also planned so that~~ ~~Restrooms~~ and water fountains are conveniently located near both exhibit exits.

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