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National Museum of African American History and Culture Welcomes Generations of Visitors on a Journey Through History

Washington, D.C. – Peri Dickerson, a retired African American woman, was standing in line at 9:15 a.m. on Saturday wearing her special occasion outfit—a blue, orange and brown printed headscarf and matching ankle-length dress.

She gripped the 10:00 a.m. ticket that she got from a cousin and smiled as she motioned toward three generations of her family by her side.

Just over her shoulder, engulfed by a translucent fog, the bronze, sharp angles of the National Museum of African American History and Culture peeked out like shards of glass, teasing the throngs of visitors patiently waiting to reach the museum entrance visible in the distance.

Even as rain, clouds and wind battered the museum, spirits remained high. A rainbow of umbrellas snaked around the exterior of the museum as groups of visitors approached from all directions.

Exactly one week after the opening of the most anticipated new Smithsonian museum in years, crowds continued to flock to the museum.

From slavery to segregation, education to music, the museum's collections chronicle more than 175 years of African American history and culture in the United States.

Tour buses rolled up, one after another, emptying a steady stream of old and young alike rushing to secure a spot in line.

A culmination of 13 years of planning, construction, and development, the museum finally opened to the public on Sept. 24, 2016.

In 2003, President George W. Bush signed legislation that officially created the National Museum of African American History and Culture, but the groundbreaking didn't materialize until 2012.

On Saturday, vocal sidewalk vendors promoted t-shirts and souvenirs while food trucks lined up bumper to bumper along Constitution Avenue.

Mesmerized by the building's silhouette flanking the Washington Monument, visitors took photos and gazed at the structure with wide eyes as they slowly moved closer and closer to the entrance.

"This is the most exciting thing that could happen in our lives right now," said Dickerson, who was raised during the era of segregation in the suburbs of Baltimore. "We have 3

generations here right now, and if my great-grandson wasn't in swim lessons, it would be four generations."

Dickerson and her family planned to start at the bottom of the museum, located underground, with the "Slavery and Freedom" gallery and work their way up chronologically to explore the "Era of Segregation" and "1968 and Beyond" galleries, before moving aboveground.

The 400,000-square-foot building houses 10 installed collection items, including a slave cabin, segregation-era railway car, and Chuck Berry's Cadillac.

As the eldest member of the family, Dickerson hoped the exhibits would give her family a closer look at what she experienced as a child in a segregated city.

"You know, you talk through things with your family and you try to get them to see and understand some of the things you've experienced," said Dickerson. "See, I understood segregation and even though I'm telling them about it, I don't know that they can fully understand it. So it's important for them to experience that history here at the museum."

All told, the museum distributed 705,809 passes for the remainder of 2016 after the opening. But many people who showed up on Saturday were still on the hunt for tickets.

Leona Wilson and her husband arrived at the museum Saturday morning at 7:15 a.m. hoping to get one of the limited number of same-day passes.

The Wilsons came to the District from New York knowing that they would have to wait in line with no guarantee of getting tickets. They were willing to take the risk to see history on display.

“We’ve been here since the beginning and we’ve contributed so much,” said Wilson, who studies genealogy and wanted to see a chronological approach to the African American experience. “And we are continuing to contribute. That’s why it’s essential, for all Americans, to have this museum.”

On Saturday, the box office issued 950 same-day passes, according to a museum official, compared to 800 on Friday. The number of available same-day passes fluctuates based on the number of tickets already reserved for the day and the number of visitors authorized for entrance by the fire marshal.

The Wilsons got lucky.

“We are a very important part of the American history,” said Wilson. “This is the only country that I know. This is my country.”

Hundreds of people filed into line before the museum opened at 10 a.m., packing into the space between the metal pedestrian guardrails, as non-ticket holders stood outside the guardrails begging for extra tickets. From the back of the line, it took approximately one hour to reach the entrance, but eager visitors with tickets in hand were unfazed.

Barbara Richardson, who traveled from Greenwich, Conn., hoped to find a ticket after she was unable to get one ahead of time.

“I let my phone ring for an hour and a half, but it was the same message over and over, which was very frustrating,” said Richardson, who attended an all-black school in North Carolina as a child where black history was heavily taught. “I did some housework and some reading, and it was still ringing. So I finally hung up.”

Richardson found a parking spot on Constitution Avenue Saturday morning, and got in line at 8:30 a.m. outside the museum to try to get a same-day pass.

“I read everything I can on black history,” said Richardson. “I’m going to stay in there as long as I can. I know I won’t be able to see everything, but I will come back some other time.”

But 8:30 a.m. was too late. An hour later, as Richardson was circling the museum, a museum representative handed her a spare ticket, and Richardson quickly grabbed a spot in line.

The museum's collections illustrate the chronology of African American history, beginning with the origins in Africa and progressing through centuries to the present day.

The cost of construction and installations of exhibitions at the museum totaled \$540 million, half of which was funded by federal funds and the remainder by the Smithsonian, according to documents released by the museum.

"African Americans have played an integral part in the development of this country, and specifically in D.C.," said Dickerson. "This was a predominantly black city until gentrification, and now it's the epicenter of all tourism in the United States. This is where you want to come to see what black folk did."