“Every Story Told”: Centering Women’s History
A New Demonstration for a New Era: Collecting the 2017 Women’s March on Washington

LISA KATHLEEN GRADDY

On March 3, the day before the 1913 presidential inauguration, 5,000 women who had come from around the country marched up Pennsylvania Avenue in a “national procession.” Their point was simple, emblazoned on the foremost float: “We demand an amendment to the constitution of the United States enfranchising the women of this country.” They came in a show of strength and determination for a common cause. The extravagant parade and the near-riot that almost derailed it kept women’s suffrage in the newspapers for weeks and revitalized the voting rights movement with a new drama and militancy.

On January 21, the day after the 2017 presidential inauguration, approximately 750,000 women and girls—as well as men and boys—had once again come to Washington, D.C., from around the country and gathered on the National Mall for a rally and a march to the Ellipse across from the White House. Their points were many and complex. Marchers held signs proclaiming concern for the environment, reproductive rights, immigration rights, LGBTQ rights, racial and economic justice, and women’s empowerment—and expressing anger at the new administration. They came in a show of strength and determination to resist what they considered likely attempts to strip away hard-won rights and protections and impose new restrictions. The exuberant march, one of the largest ever in the nation’s capital, and its sister marches in 653 cities around the country generated widespread media coverage and encouraged women to embrace what their guiding vision document called a “bold message of resistance and self-determination.”

Separated by a century, organizers of both marches used the attention focused on Washington during the inaugurations to
revitalize their movements and send clear messages to the incoming presidents Woodrow Wilson and Donald Trump—as well as to both Congresses—that they must take American women and their concerns seriously.

For curators at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History (NMAH), the 2017 march provided an opportunity to add to the museum’s women’s history and protest collections and to evaluate our methods for collecting material related to marches on the National Mall.

COLLECTING THE MARCHES ON WASHINGTON

In the preface to the 2004 edition of her book, “Marching on Washington: The Forging of an American Political Tradition,” historian and archivist Lucy G. Barber concludes that “people who march on Washington believe that their opinion belongs in their capital, and they want to present it there themselves. They want to be with other people who share their opinion so that they can see each other and so that the rest of us can see them united.”

Since Coxey’s Army’s 1894 attempt to march on Washington, references Inez Milholland, who rode as the herald in the 1913 woman suffrage parade.

PHOTO BY RICH STRAUSS; COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY

This poster, collected at the 2017 Women’s March on Washington, references Inez Milholland, who rode as the herald in the 1913 woman suffrage parade.

PHOTO BY RICH STRAUSS; COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY
and rally at the United States Capitol building to demand jobs for unemployed men, groups of Americans have been taking their causes to the capital. Framing their protests as “petition in boots” (Coxey’s Army) or “a new type of lobbying” (the 1932 Veterans Bonus March), marchers have asserted their right to use the highly visible parts of the city to confer legitimacy, urgency, and visibility on their causes. Groups promoting economic relief and fairness, women’s suffrage, civil rights, pro-choice and anti-abortion positions, women’s rights, and anti-war stands have all used the capital as a platform. Barber argues that, whether or not marches achieve their political or reform goals, their cumulative effect has been to forge the National Mall, Pennsylvania Avenue, and the United States Capitol grounds into national public spaces and legitimize their use by citizens to air grievances, make demands, rally support, and draw strength and comradeship from fellow demonstrators as far-flung participants come together in the capital.¹

Some of these demonstrations have been captured by local and national media. Some, like the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, have been immortalized. And some have found their way into the NMAH. In the late 1960s, staff began shifting the museum’s political history collections away from a concentration on great men, great events, and governmental institutions to a focus on participatory American democracy. This shift included enlarging the collection of political campaign memorabilia and establishing a collection related to protest and reform movements.

The museum’s Division of Political History staff began the protest collection after realizing the opportunity they had missed in not collecting from the 1963 March on Washington. Curators then began paying attention to the activity happening just outside their new office in what is now the NMAH building. Eager to add material culture to the museum’s collection and include the untold stories of African Americans, women, and Native Americans and their struggles for equality, they began saving material from the marches and demonstrations on the Mall.
In a [2011 blog post](#), Smithsonian archivist Pam Henson shared curator Keith Melder’s recollections of salvaging pieces of the plywood shelters from Resurrection City, the makeshift village near the Lincoln Memorial that housed participants in the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign: “We simply went down and loaded the truck up with pieces of some of the shelters, and that was our collections [sic] for the Resurrection City. And those turned out to be valuable. … [T]hey’ve been on exhibition a number of times, and I don’t think anyone else preserved any residue of Resurrection City.”

Curator Larry Bird noted that members of the curatorial staff “placed under desks and behind doors all manner of objects for eventual accession.” Unofficial amassing eventually became sanctioned collecting, and the division’s catalog files record the expeditions that curators and specialists made to collect among the crowds on the Mall and nearby streets. The posters, buttons, sashes, t-shirts, and banners collected in the field are usually supplemented with material donated by marchers, which are often used for displays and research.

Although protests, rallies, demonstrations, and parades take place in all American cities, NMAH museum staff concentrate on collecting from those with a national focus; this usually means the ones that find their way to the National Mall. The museum’s new exhibition “American Democracy: A Great Leap of Faith” includes a show-stopping wall of protest posters mounted against a backdrop of the Capitol building. The interactive exhibit allows visitors to find out more about the demonstrations from which the posters were collected, which span from the 1963 March on Washington to the 2017 Women’s March.

**A NEW KIND OF MARCH**
The woman suffrage procession was the first civil rights parade to use the Capitol as a backdrop, thus underscoring the national importance of the cause and of women’s identity as American citizens. After 1913, Alice Paul and the National Woman’s Party (NWP) continued to hold demonstrations in the nation’s capital. Women’s rights activists of the 1970s also used the Mall as a stage
to focus the country's attention on their demands for national solutions to the issue of women's inequality.

There are only a few pieces in the museum's collection from the 1913 woman suffrage parade: a parade cloak; a fundraising card; and a letter from Florence Hedges, a participant in the parade, chronicling for her father the experience of being heckled and hemmed in by the crowds as she marched. Nor is there much from the “Silent Sentinels”—the NWP picketers who, under Alice Paul's direction, carried on a one-sided conversation with President Woodrow Wilson at his own front gates; the banners that still exist are in the collections of the NWP at the Belmont-Paul Women’s Equality National Monument. Like many other museums, the NMAH pieces together the material culture of those signature women’s rights demonstrations bit by bit, one donation and discovery at a time.
The modern collections are stronger. Led by curator Edith Mayo, NMAH collected sashes, buttons, banners, posters, and literature from marches and rallies supporting the 1972 Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and reproductive rights as well as the annual Right to Life marches that began in 1974. Collecting continued into the 2000s, as rallies in Washington began to center issues of immigration, war opposition, and economic justice. When the Women’s March on Washington was proposed the night of the 2016 presidential election, it was set to be the first major women’s rally on the Mall in more than 10 years.

But the 2017 march turned out to be neither simply the next in a series of modern women’s right demonstrations nor merely an homage to the 1913 suffrage parade. It was designed to be something quite different. In their Guiding Vision and Definition of Principles document, march organizers envisioned a movement conscious of the alienation that many women of color and working-class women had felt from both the suffrage movement and “second-wave” feminism. They aspired to “bring together peoples of all genders, ages, races, cultures, political affiliations, and backgrounds.” The march embraced a “de-centralized, leader-full structure” that would honor all movements that had come before—suffragist, abolitionist, feminist, Civil Rights, Occupy Wall Street, Native American, marriage equality, and Black Lives Matter. The sweeping agenda touched on reproductive rights, prison and judicial reform, violence against women, pay equity, immigration, environmentalism, racial equality, economic justice, LGBTQ rights, and ratification of the ERA. The march, as described, promised to be exciting, potentially overwhelming—and a challenge to collect.

A DAY ON THE MALL
Several colleagues and I headed out to the National Mall early on Saturday, January 21. While a large crowd was expected—and the morning ride on the D.C. Metro indicated that people were already heading downtown—not many people were out when we arrived. We began to wonder whether turnout would be less than anticipated. But by noon marchers filled the Mall, Constitution
Avenue, and Pennsylvania Avenue. Over the course of four hours we moved between Constitution and Independence avenues, up to the Capitol, and back down to NMAH in search of material culture, working our way through crowds so dense in places that they sometimes came to a complete standstill.

Just as collecting at a political convention is about more than funny hats, collecting at a rally is about more than funny signs. Through demonstrations, Americans publicly communicate their grievances and attempt to influence the actions of their elected representatives and fellow citizens. We seek out the objects that demonstrators create to convey their messages. These include the official posters and leaflets that the organizers of a march produce, as well as the signs that advocacy groups and organizations—in this case, groups such as Emily’s List, the National Organization for Women, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and Planned Parenthood—produce to highlight priority issues. Such mass-produced placards usually become a solid sea of similar messaging, as seen in photographs of rallies. This time, however, they were overwhelmed by a variety of homemade signs. Uplifting, confrontational, funny,
and poignant, the signs were unquestionably the stars of the media coverage and the collecting. Marchers could not part with them during the march, so we distributed business cards inviting them to donate their signs afterward. We foraged through the bins set out in front of the NMAH, where participants who visited the museum post-march were invited to dispose of the signs, which were not allowed inside.

We tried to build a collection of signs that, exhibited or researched a hundred years from now, would convey the primary themes of the demonstration. We looked for material that would document the diversity of the march, show its connections to earlier women’s marches, and hold up for decades of museum use. We augmented these with pussy hats in various designs and shades of pink and with official Women’s March buttons and t-shirts, as well as the ones hawked by street vendors.

Even in the midst of a demonstration, field collecting is more about curating than documenting. It required us to constantly compare the signs that we were seeing to determine which ones would best convey the themes of the day and illustrate public engagement. It also necessitated checking them against a mental inventory of the material from past protests that was already in our collection to see what connections we can draw between causes, slogans, and symbolism. And, indeed, we did find a sign or two that referenced the suffragists and their inaugural parade 104 years earlier.

**PROCESSING THE WOMEN’S MARCH**

After our day on the Mall, we turned to processing the material that we had collected, following up with donors, and sifting through unsolicited offers from people who had read about our work documenting the march. One poster from the march, a Black Lives Matter sign, is already on display as part of the “American Democracy” exhibition’s protest wall. Meanwhile, we are still searching for some objects, including a set of Shepard Fairey’s “We the People” posters that were used at the march.

We have begun answering requests from researchers who are writing about the march and would like to see the material we’ve
added to the collection. We have also begun to contemplate the
questions that the march raised about collecting items from
contemporary demonstrations. How can we be sure that we reflect
the diversity of the march? We do not know who used many of the
signs that we collected that day, and although the demonstration was
intended to be diverse—and a number of its organizers were women
of color—many of the participants were white. How do we
incorporate the sister marches and anniversary marches into our
collection? Do we treat them as supplements or as completely
separate events? In a world of downloadable posters and websites
that feature photos of the march’s “best signs,” which posters should
the NMAH save? Should we concentrate on the signs that will survive
the longest and work best as part of an exhibition? Should we look
for slogans that will not need lengthy explanation 50 years from now?
Should we save the most typical signs—or the most extreme ones?
Should we prioritize current or long-standing issues? Should we look
for the most visual signs or those carrying the strongest messages?
We are always drawn to issues and slogans that tie to the past and
will still resonate in the future. A curator’s mental checklist is never-
ending, and we try to strike a balance between the possibilities.

The solution may be to plan collecting materials from large
demonstrations as multistep projects, with different stages of
evaluation and targeted follow-up collecting. This would allow us to
build more comprehensive collections for each march, ones that could
balance the sweeping overview of an event with specific stories of
individual participants. One nice thing about contemporary collecting
is that it quickly becomes historical collecting—time is on our side. FJ

LISA KATHLEEN GRADDY is a curator of political history at the Smithsonian Institution’s National
Museum of American History.

1 Lucy G. Barber, *Marching on Washington: The Forging of an American Political Tradition* (University

TAKEAWAY
Read a National Museum of American History blog post about
collecting political history.