

Nora Whelan's Presentation to DC Classmates on May 5th 2011

I've been invited to come and talk to you about the Smithsonian – a very dangerous thing for Nick to do – Don lives in fear that someday I'll start and then be unable to stop as the Smithsonian is one of my very favorite subjects. So I wrote it all out with a beginning and an end.

I'm sure you know the story of Mr. Smithson, the Englishman who left his entire estate to the U.S. Government to build an institution in Washington, nowhere else, named after him and asking that it would “diffuse knowledge among men” whatever that meant in 1835. And I am here to tell you what it means today and how it has evolved over the years.

The Castle building in the center of the mall was the first Smithsonian and even today is a good place to begin a tour. First of all it opens at 8:30 when nothing else opens until 10. It has good coffee, pastries and sandwiches in the main hall and videos showing collection highlights of each of the buildings on the mall. There is always an interesting, changing exhibition in the west wing of the building.

It all began here at the Castle in 1846. This was a research center and home for Dr. Henry the first Secretary and his family. The Smithsonian has evolved over the years from this one building to 19 separate museums on the mall, in downtown Washington and outside the city.

The second Smithsonian, Arts and Industries, built next to the Castle, is now closed for renovation. This building was originally planned for purely exhibition purposes after the arrival of 44 railroad cars filled with material from the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia . And it became the first museum.

In 1910,, the third Smithsonian, Natural History, opened directly across the mall. At that time it not only housed birds, beasts and dinosaurs, but also art objects and paintings. Today it is celebrating that 100th anniversary with a new exhibit, Human Origins. This is an extensive exhibit tracing the beginnings of humanity from 6 million years ago to the present day and discusses and how we turned out so well and with DNA that is 99.9% identical for all of us. This is a field of study in which new information appears almost daily, and can be incorporated into the What's New space in the hall. So the exhibit is always current.

Here at Natural History you see the scientific view of our world and beyond. The Ocean Hall, in one of three original halls off the rotunda, introduces you to the concept of one ocean, made from what we used to regard as five, important to all life, especially ours. This covers 70% of the planet and provides 50% of our oxygen. This fascinating exhibit includes a 24 foot long giant squid, and a full-sized model of Phoenix, a 45 foot long Right Whale, who is swimming in North Atlantic waters as I speak. Sea life, from enormous to minuscule, telling the story of life from its beginnings in the sea millions of years ago to today.

In the other main halls, you'll find lions and tigers and bears and a video on who is a mammal, - and dinosaurs, the largest creatures that ever walked the earth from 150 million years ago. These dinosaurs make up the museum's most popular collection, with millions of school children who come every year ,and sometime it seems all on the same day.

Upstairs is the Gem, Geology and Mineral hall where, you will find diamond dust far older than our solar system. It's from a meteorite that fell in New Mexico in 1969. Here you can touch meteorites and rocks from the Moon and Mars, make your own earthquake and see beautiful minerals and gems. And, of course, in the Winston Gallery, the Hope Diamond. For this year only, it's displayed in

a new setting, celebrating its 50 years at Natural History. This setting, called "Embracing the Hope", is a ribbon of white diamonds wrapping around the beautiful blue stone. At year's end, this setting will go back to the Winston Company, and you may want to save up between now and then to buy it as a Christmas gift for someone special. Of course you'll have to buy a gem to put in it.

Down long halls and past the butterflies and Insect Zoo, is an exhibit about bones and what you can learn about people and places from bones hundreds of years after burial. Some of these are more than 400 years old and came from the first settlement at James Fort, Virginia while others come from St. Marys City when it was the first capital of Maryland in the 1600's. Scientists are drawing all kinds of conclusions from these bones about the Chesapeake Bay area and the people who lived and died there.

This is a CSI type of exhibit where you learn how a forensic sculptor can reproduce a face on a skull, and also learn the most amazing things about really repulsive teeth. One set of bones is of a 16 year old boy, with an arrowhead still in his leg bone. who died in the first Indian attack on James Fort. He was already badly weakened by an uncontrolled infection from a broken, abscessed tooth. Fascinating as it is, it makes a person think about getting home and brushing and flossing.

Natural History is not just exhibit halls, it is also an extensive research center. It houses the National Herbarium, a collection of over 4 million plant specimens,, This collection was most helpful in finding additional sources of toxol, when the medicine Tomoxafin was found to be so effective in cancer treatment and so scarce.

Across the mall, next to the Castle, is the 4th Smithsonian. The Freer Gallery of Oriental Art, opened in 1923, dedicated to the fine arts, a first for the Smithsonian. In addition to the oriental collection, there are 1300 paintings by James Whistler and his famous Peacock Room. This is the dining room that Whistler was asked to decorate to show off a collection of blue and white Chinese porcelains. This beautiful room of brilliant blues and greens and coppery gold, with a Whistler painting as a centerpiece, was dismantled and reinstalled several times before arriving at the Freer. Do go see this beautiful work of art and hear its most unusual and intriguing history.

Back across the mall to American History, now brighter and lighter with new glass entrances and skylight after a two-year renovation. The highlight of the museum is still the Star Spangled Banner, now beautifully displayed in a new home with its epic story told as you enter and leave the exhibit. You all know the story of the British burning Washington and their determination to do the same for Baltimore, but Ft. McHenry stood in their way. Francis Scott Key had watched the shelling of Fort McHenry all night from a ship farther out in the bay, and he was anxious to see if an American flag still flew over the fort. This is the flag he saw that September morning in 1814. It's now rather worn, missing one of its 15 stars and about 8 feet of its 42 foot length, but still a magnificent sight. Don't miss it.

American History tries to offer exhibits that will be interesting, educational and provide the best learning experience, but many of them come and go. One of these is a small but outstanding exhibit of the Life of Abraham Lincoln, appropriate today as we begin the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. Unfortunately, it will be closing at the end of this month, but is well worth a visit before then. Especially since it is almost directly across the hall from The Price of Freedom an ongoing exhibit that no one should miss.

It covers more than 250 years of Americans at War and examines how wars have shaped the nation's history and transformed American society. It highlights the dedicated service and sacrifice of generations of men and women who have protected our country's interests and defended our

freedoms. It tells the story from the French and Indian Wars to today in Iraq and Afghanistan. It includes four main centerpieces.

First, the Revolutionary War with its Minutemen, the shot heard round the world, forming and training the Continental Army, Yorktown and other battles concluding with George Washington's resignation and the surrender of his sword to Congress after final victory. Second, the Civil War from Bull Run, -or First Manassas, - to Petersburg, Sheridan's Horse Winchester and Grant and Lee at Appomattox, Third, WWII in Africa, Europe and the Pacific – Don will be glad to provide his rant on Midway, and last the many years of the War in Vietnam and the Huey helicopter that was arranged and delivered to the museum in part by your classmates.

To the first floor for our next exhibit “On the Move”. This covers the advances and multiple changes in transportation and their impacts on the growing nation. It is full of ships, trains, trolleys, buses and cars, but also contains an exhibit of a truly tiny flake of gold. This is the nugget discovered at Sutters Creek in 1848 that began the California Gold Rush. This was as big a disappointment to me as my first sight of Plymouth Rock.

Exhibits in the West Wing will be closing at the end of the year as the area begins a two year renovation. These include Science in American Life with its Julia Childs' kitchen, the First Ladies Exhibit and Inaugural Ball Gowns, and Contemporary Culture , but,[never fear] Dorothy's Ruby Slippers will continue on display in the small exhibit titled “The Year 1939.” - a time which some or most of us can remember. The first colored movie – The Wizard of Oz, Radios in almost every home, Big Band music, and Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. In retrospect it seems really silly to have been enraptured every week listening to a ventriloquist on a radio. Although maybe that's where Mr Bergen belonged – people said his lips moved as Charlie spoke.

You will find a whole different world at American Art and the National Portrait Gallery located on 7th and G Street [NW] where six and one-half years of renovation have produced beautiful buildings, a glass ceiled courtyard with a most wonderful water feature and the Lunder Conservation Center where you can watch paintings being restored. The new Luce Center , a visible storage facility, has pullout cases displaying crafts, miniature, jewelry and many fascinating things not displayed in the galleries. This is also where you will find the famous Landsdowne portrait painting of George Washington which the U.S. recently bought for \$20M after having it on loan for 22 years.

In the 1970s, three more museums opened, the Renwick, the Hirschhorn and Air and Space. I'll just talk about Air and Space.

You walk into Air and Space among the space capsules and with several famous and historic aircraft overhead - The Spirit of St. Louis, the North American X-15 - the fastest aircraft that ever flew, Glamorous Glennis – the first aircraft to break the sound barrier and others.

Back in January, Air and Space reopened its Pioneers in Flight exhibit with the airplane the Lindberghs flew on two flights over the Arctic looking for new routes to Asia. It was surely a courageous thing to fly in such a tiny, delicate craft. The museum has exhibits from the Wrights First Plane to the latest in space flight and a marvelous, fairly new, exhibit on exploring the universe. This begins with the mapping of the stars and planets with instruments, expands to Galileo's telescope in 1609 and its first look at the heavens, and ends with a replacement lens for the Hubble. We are able to see deeper and deeper into space, and you really must see these spectacular pictures of deep space and touch the three dimensional exhibit of The Big Bang.

The exhibit How Things Fly covers lift, thrust and drag, but I'm not sure I'm convinced about any of

them, and still wonder about the vacuum above the wings that Don assures me is holding up our airplane.

Though no one could fail to be thrilled just walking through the museum among the rockets, missiles, the space lab, the moon lander and exhibits of airplanes through the ages. But here I do suggest you stop and see the movie "To Fly" and always suggest your guests see it.

This leaves us with the newest museum on the Mall, the Museum of the American Indian, opened in 2003. By the time you've arrived here, you most likely are ready for lunch, and this is the place to have it. Or maybe even make a special trip to have lunch here. The cafe features a native inspired menu representing five regions in the Western Hemisphere – unusual but delicious. Just as the museum itself is unusual and Yes, even delicious. Here you'll find architecture, landscaping and exhibits, all designed by a collaborations of tribes and communities, telling the story of Native Americans, by Native Americans.

I haven't mentioned all the Smithsonian, not even the wonderful Udvar Hazy or the National Zoo, and for that you can be eternally thankful, but it has evolved over the years into more than a pretty face of wonderful exhibits ...it houses renowned research collections available to scientists and scholars - a library in each museum is available to the public. These contain first editions of books by Copernicus, Galileo and many others, original botanical drawings by world famous artists, fashion, architectural and aeronautical designs – representations of everything ever printed.

The Smithsonian is always changing, never the same. Do come and bring the grandchildren or be first in the class to bring in a great-grandchild. Tell them Nora sent you.