

# Reviving America's Freedoms

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## **Issue: Poor Understanding of Basic Liberties**

Many Americans, it seems, lack in-depth knowledge about the origins of their basic liberties. Numerous surveys and reports reveal that few Americans can name the five freedoms protected by the First Amendment, and fewer still understand what they mean. A January 2006 survey of adults by the McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum found that, while 22 percent of Americans could identify all five members of TV's Simpson family, only 1 in 1,000 could name the five First Amendment freedoms. A 2007 survey by the First Amendment Center found that, while most Americans—64 percent—could name freedom of speech as one of the five, many fewer could come up with even one of the other four. In recent surveys by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, it was found that only 29 percent of high school students personally think about the First Amendment, while 38 percent take it for granted (2011).

The current meaning of our freedom is something that has

been established over time, through both the exercise and the denial of these rights. These freedoms are not static; they are part of a process of defining what it means to be American. From the freedom of religion ensconced in Penn's Charter of Liberties to rights ensured under our Constitution to the promise of the Statue of Liberty, America's history has been filled with the struggle to define, allow, enforce, and balance the freedoms of different peoples. American freedom as we know it is at risk because few Americans know and understand the five freedoms on which this country was formed.

## **Innovation: Digitally Archiving the Heritage of our Liberties**

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With the goal of re-establishing our American freedom, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP) and the Bank of America have partnered to make accessible a collection of our nation's most significant historical documents that trace the stories of American freedoms and the struggles that made our democracy what it is today. This digital history project, *Preserving Freedom*, will physically conserve, digitally preserve, interpret and give historical context to a collection of 50 landmark documents from HSP's one-of-a-kind archival collection. The final product will be an online portal that offers a fresh approach to

historical interpretation in the form of an annotated "document timeline."

In this digital history project, the Historical Society will select 50 documents from key moments in the struggle to define the meaning of freedom in this republic and will make them available to a wide public by digitizing, transcribing and setting them within this larger contextual framework.

This project will illustrate how Americans have interpreted and fought for their freedoms, and how these freedoms have shaped our history.

## **Background: Capturing History**

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As one of the nation's oldest historical societies, HSP cares for a collection of more than 21 million documents and graphic items that span over 350 years of history. *Preserving Freedom* directly reflects the goals of both HSP and Bank of America by preserving, safeguarding and making accessible a valuable piece of our nation's heritage. The Historical Society, by using technology, will make accessible a digital archival collection to illustrate the fight for American freedoms.

This digital project will feature documents from the full span of American history. For example, William Penn's

1682 deed with the Delaware Indians, a founding document of Pennsylvania history, speaks to the broader story of European settlement and the tensions between Native American and European American freedoms and rights. Penn intended to establish a "Holy Experiment" that would respect Indian rights while also attracting European settlers with new freedoms that many had not enjoyed in the Old World. In the end, however, Native Americans were dispossessed of their lands. Balancing freedoms was more difficult than Penn had imagined.

By 1787, when the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation, Euro-Americans were anxious to protect their own freedoms. They had recently secured their independence from Great Britain and were concerned to establish a new government that would be strong enough to protect their liberties but not so strong as to threaten them. The Historical Society's handwritten drafts of the U.S. Constitution, in the hand of James Wilson, allow readers to glimpse the process whereby America's founding fathers grappled with devising a frame of government that would preserve their freedoms while effectively governing a diverse nation. Among the compromises the founders made was an acceptance of chattel slavery, the perpetual denial of freedom to thousands of human beings. By the mid-19th century, growing numbers of Americans had come to the realization that their own freedom could not be built upon the unfreedom of others.

Another example of documents that help tell the story of our collective freedom is the journal of William Still, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, which documents the extraordinary history of the flight to freedom by hundreds of African Americans, including Harriet Tubman. Finally, letters and the will and testament of John Brown reveal the lengths to which some abolitionists were willing to go to fight for the freedom of African Americans held in bondage.

## **Impact: Preserving the Past to Benefit the Future**

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Much more than just an online history exhibit, the *Preserving Freedom* project will combine digital access with transcription, historical context and K-12 curricular support. Further, TEI markup (Text Encoding Initiative)—the latest practice in digital humanities—will allow for sophisticated searching, analysis and online presentation of both the text on the page and the meaning behind the text. This markup practice will also dramatically increase the discoverability of the content to online users and researchers with an interest in the topic.

*Preserving Freedom's* immediate impact will be in the physical preservation of these 50 landmark documents of our nation's past and their immediate accessibility in

digital format. In the long-term, what HSP and Bank of America aim to achieve is an innovative educational resource for scholars, educators, students and history enthusiasts. Barriers of physical access will be removed for researchers everywhere and K-12 educators will be provided with nationally significant primary documents to support their classroom curriculum. It is critical for our nation's students to investigate the story of American freedom with an open mind in order to develop future generations of informed citizens that understand their civic responsibility.

Users of the online portal will gain an unparalleled learning experience of American freedoms through unique, original historical content. Beyond the popular image of Americans fighting for and gaining their freedom from Great Britain, *Preserving Freedom* will also explore "messier" issues such as attitudes toward Native Americans and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Americans continue to grapple with the extent and the limits of our freedoms, and with the relationship between liberty and security. As the documents presented in this project will attest, these rights cannot be taken for granted. They have real meaning in our history and in our present lives. We must preserve and understand them for the republican experiment begun over two centuries ago to continue to succeed.

In conclusion, this collection of landmark documents

provides historical context for the struggle to achieve American independence, personal liberty and the framework for democratic government. The interpretive digital resource will provide a comprehensive view of the story of freedom in order to inspire critical thinking and new historical research on people and events that have shaped our everyday lives. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, in partnership with Bank of America, believes strongly that through excellence and innovation we can accomplish our mission to inspire individuals and organizations to create a better future through historical understanding.

**Founded in 1824 in Philadelphia, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP) inspires people to create a better future through historical understanding. One of the oldest historical societies in the United States, it is home to some 600,000 printed items and more than 21 million manuscript and graphic items. Its unparalleled collections encompass more than 350 years of America's history—from its 17th-century origins to the contributions of its most recent immigrants. The Society's remarkable holdings together with its educational programming make it one of the nation's most important special collections libraries: a center of historical documentation and study, education, and engagement. For more information about HSP, visit [hsp.org](http://hsp.org).**

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