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Discoveries in the National Archives

“Okay, everyone, remember to stay close!” Mrs. Smith called over the herd of students swarming through the National Archives. I nodded without thinking about it, my eyes traveling over the stately oil paintings that hung around the room. Our guidebook had called them the Faulkner murals. They depicted scenes of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution being presented, with a large group of representatives present.

The murals were painted in beautiful, vibrant colors, dusky reds, earthy greens, and creamy whites. Logically, I knew it must have been restored, but it felt like I had traveled back in time to just minutes after the final stroke had been put on the canvas.

“Now, you all can go look at the Declaration and Constitution...”

The rest of Mrs. Smith’s words faded below a hurry of footsteps as my class swarmed towards the documents. I stumbled out of the way. They clustered around the glass cases, to the slight disapproval of the security guards that stood by. Standing on my tiptoes, I searched for a glimpse of the old documents.

It was no use. I could barely see the glass case over my classmate’s heads. I began to skirt the perimeter of the herd, seeing if I could squeeze in somewhere. A black splotch against the side of a column caught my eye as I scanned the room.

I wandered over to the dark thing that had caught my eye. Nobody was looking at it, instead absorbed in the views of the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and Bill of Rights. I’d just wait until they filtered out. In the meantime, this might be interesting.

I neared the dark splotch, which turned out to be a small touchscreen. It was tucked somewhat behind a column. Is it meant to be hidden?

I darted a quick glance at the security guards. They weren’t paying any attention to me. Furtive, I glanced back at the tablet. The screen had flickered on, cycling through screensavers of the huge Faulkner murals. I tapped it, and it flashed to a background of the American flag. Text began to scroll across the webpage.

Welcome to the National Archives. You are currently standing in the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom. The documents contained within this room have shaped our nation’s history.

Thank goodness, I thought. This looked official enough. I couldn’t get in trouble for learning.

Below the words, an option for choices appeared. However, I didn't see any place to click. Three words, set in bold, winked at me from the bottom of the screen.

The Constitution. The Declaration of Independence. The Bill of Rights.

How do I select one? I wondered, staring at the three choices. I guess the Bill of Rights. Do I click on it?

To my surprise, the other two choices flickered out, leaving just the Bill of Rights on the screen. The page automatically scrolled down, showcasing a few paragraphs of text on the document I'd thought of.

How did it do that?

Unsettled, I glanced back at my classmates. They remained clustered around the containers that held the documents. I looked back at the touchscreen.

Maybe that's just the order it goes in, and I'm being silly. With this reassuring solution in mind, I continued scrolling down the webpage. It displayed a picture of a drawing, weathered paper and faded ink. The words "No Taxation Without Representation" were blocked in on a sign in the foreground of a crowd of protesters. I vaguely remembered Mrs. Smith telling us about that. What was so important about tax representation anyway? I'd rather have no taxes.

I scrolled to the next picture. It was dated 1913. The black-and-white photograph depicted women in flowing skirts and fashionable hats, marching down a street with signs in hand. The women's suffrage movement, I thought, seeing a sign that read "Votes for Women".

Next, a protest from the Civil Rights movement popped up on the screen. Messages of equal rights and respect dominated the signs of the protestors. The next slide showed a protest influenced by Cesar Chavez's protests in California, yet another thing I remembered learning about in class. Most recently, protestors flooded the streets in support of Black Lives Matter, climate change protests, and Roe v. Wade.

I paused for a second, then scrolled back through the entire slide. Each of the photos seemed to have been taken on the same street corner. From this one slideshow of photos, you could watch the world change—lampposts sprung up and became more modernized, businesses changed hands, streets were repaved from cobblestone to asphalt. The only constant in the photos was the layout of the street corner and the people occupying it.

I stared at the photographs with reverence, taking in the faces of the protestors. These were the people who had changed our nation. They were all genders, races, ages, and classes, from every time period in United States history. Yet one thing united them— their shared beliefs.

Every sign was raised and fist held aloft, every message shouted proudly. Each protester was standing up for what they believed in, fiercely and unapologetically. The messages varied from era to era, but the core belief stayed the same. Freedom from wrongful laws. The same privileges for everyone. Better living and working conditions. Above all, human rights.

Even though the slideshow ended there, with merely an arrow pointing to the next amendment, I instantly realized the message. The first amendment, the right to free speech, protects our democracy. Americans use it to speak out. They use it to protest unfairness and show how our country could be better. This right is what distinguishes us from less fortunate places in the world, where the government controls and obliterates opposition. With this Constitutional right, Americans continue to be able to make change everywhere.

Democracy is like a beautiful painting. You might not always see all the work that goes into it. But someone, a living human being, sat for long hours and breathed life into their work of art. They laid out a blank canvas and covered it in broad swathes of color. They took time on every little detail, making sure that it was as close to perfect as possible. The canvas is America. The overall painting is democracy. And every single little stroke, the individual eyelashes or the pale blue highlight in the heart of a candle, those are change.

What's so special about this painting is that the artist is the people of America. Everyone who makes a change, no matter how small, has touched the canvas of our country. Whether it's starting a petition, getting a book unbanned, or even running for class president, every small act of free speech helps our democracy blossom. Because at the heart of a democracy is change, and at the heart of change is people.

The original thirteen colonies wanted taxation with representation, and they didn't stop until they were free from Great Britain and could represent themselves. The women of America wanted voting rights, and they didn't stop until they got them. Abolitionists wanted slavery gone, and they didn't stop until every last trace had vanished. Our country, our modern day, is built on the accomplishments of people who didn't stop fighting.

Our constitution promises equality for everyone. We still have a ways to go on that front. But I am convinced that, as long as we keep fighting for change, we can achieve anything. We can paint over the ugly or unfair parts of our artwork. We can fix the mistakes of our ancestors.

The touchscreen pulsed, welcoming me to continue to the next amendment. I looked at it, then glanced around. There was a gap in the crowd clustered around the documents on display. Maybe once, I would've stayed with the tablet. I might've thought something like, what's so special about these pieces of paper? Our country can run without them. However, I now knew that wasn't even close to the truth. These documents had built the foundation of our democracy today. They offered us freedoms that many people alive today could only dream of. They weren't perfect, and never would be, but we could help them become as close as possible to it.

I stepped away from the tablet. Unbeknownst to me, the touchscreen wouldn't be there when I looked back a minute later.

But all in due time; right now, I'm approaching the cornerstones of our country.

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