

2018 VAM PRESENTATION

March 12, 2018

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon. My name is Mary Helen Dellinger and I am the Curator of the Manassas Museum System. My part of this talk is to discuss how to manage a large scale renovation project that takes place inside an exhibition gallery and is added on top of your normal work load.

THE PROJECT

Main gallery – views one and two

In the summer of 2015 my Director met with me to discuss her idea to enliven our so-called permanent gallery space. This space had been designed and installed in 1991 and since that time had seen very little change. The exhibit itself is very good – excellent scholarship, featuring lots of objects and supporting images, all displayed very well. But the displays were not flexible and required lots of manpower to even get inside the cases. There was also the factor of not enough funding to make any wholesale changes – we had some money but not enough. Based on the last factor, my boss wanted to look at upgrading a *portion* of the gallery. And what she wanted was something that was technology based.

Over the course of the next year we discussed various options and settled on the idea to create a space where visitors could hear oral histories about Manassas. The space was supposed to be flexible in that the stories could be easily changed out. An opportunity for funding arose when a long-time Museum supporter passed away unexpectedly. She had been a life-long resident of Manassas and loved to tell stories: the perfect match for what we were trying to do. We approached her family and pitched the idea of this new space, named in their mother's memory, and they loved it. Memorial donations were directed to the project and it was given a name: "Annie's Porch: This Was Manassas." I was directed to proceed.

I SMELL TROUBLE COMING

Steve Carrell

Now, to be perfectly honest, I had misgivings about this entire idea. The exhibit space we were getting ready to renovate had been created in a timeline fashion. The section of the gallery we were going to work in was near the end of the timeline, but this new “Annie’s Porch” would disrupt the flow of the story. There was also the fact that the gallery is one large space with no way to close off the part where we would be working. So I was also concerned about how to protect the other exhibits while doing this work.

THE BEST LAID PLANS...

Back of gallery

In the fall of 2016 we put a bid out on the street for an exhibit design firm and a contract was granted in early 2017. Concept meetings took place during the first half of the year and then final design was completed just before Christmas last year. Our design called for a large structure – basically a box that housed two exhibits in the back of the main gallery – to be upgraded to take on the new exhibit. This would mean removing the contents of the interior two exhibits (no problem) but we were able to keep the displays that were on the outside walls. This was key for me trying to preserve the timeline story that was in the rest of the gallery.

THE PIANO DRIVES THE CONVERSATION

Piano

Platform exhibit

We immediately identified one problem: where to place a very large piano that had once belonged to one of Mosby’s Rangers that was on exhibit inside this box. The piano was too large to fit in our off-site storage facility and had to remain at the Museum. Basically this one object was driving the entire conversation about the exhibit. We decided after some meetings with staff that the very last part of the timeline exhibit was a weak link that we could get rid of and not corrupt the rest of the displays. We would remove all the objects from this section so we could re-display the piano on the platform there. This new space would now be called “Manassas At Play” and would feature objects from our collection like sporting equipment, theater playbills, marching band uniforms, etc. Of course,

that meant that new graphics would be also required. We are able to handle this change in-house though so I was not too concerned.

WE CAN'T SAVE THE BOX

So, what was removed

Drum

Timeline

Peace Jubilee

Public Schools

In early January 2018 we had our first meeting with the general contractor who was going to renovating the box to house the new exhibit, and the City building inspector. Based on those discussions, we discovered that we could not save the box at all – the entire thing was going to have to come down and a new one built. This also meant the loss of all the exhibits on the outside of the structure. We also decided that as long as we were at it, we would also upgrade the wall display in this area as well.

Jim Carrey

Remember here my earlier misgivings about how this project would affect the existing displays.....

I am now faced with the task of removing all the objects from these spaces, taking down the graphics and saving as much of the casework and mounts as I can.

GETTING STARTED

Stanchioned off area

Back of gallery – views one and two

Staging area – views one and two

Protect exhibits – views one and two

Moving mirror

Moving piano

To try and keep as much order and security as possible I did the following:

- Roped off the front of the gallery from the back
- Set up tables in the back of the gallery and covered them with packing blankets
- Printed off the spreadsheet listing all objects on exhibit and where they are in the gallery
- Working display by display, removed all the objects, tagged them, hand corrected the spreadsheet and boxed everything up
- Corrected the computer records with the new location of each object
- Created spaces in the gallery labeled with the new location for the pieces that had just come off exhibit
- Worked out a schedule with the Public Works guys to provide trucks and manpower for the half dozen heavy pieces that I could not manage alone
- Used plastic sheeting/blankets to cover all adjacent platforms and cases for protection

DEMOLITION!

Taking down the structure – views one and two

Partially demolished structure

Almost done and painting – views one and two

Damaged walls – views one and two

Finished gallery waiting for new construction

Once all of this was done we were ready to proceed with the demolition of the box. Again, this was taking place inside the main gallery with exhibits all around it that needed to be protected. The demo work went quickly and the guys were very sensitive to the area where they were working. Unfortunately, when some of the large graphic panels were removed from the walls, they underlying drywall

was seriously damaged (unavoidable). So this now added repair and painting of two walls to the list of things to do.

Construction on box – views one and two

Graffiti – views one and two

We now have seriously disrupted the timeline sequence in the back of the gallery by removing four parts of the old exhibit and I am tasked with trying to figure out how to “fix it.” In meetings with the staff, I was asked if it would be possible to expand the story of Jennie Dean/public schools. I said yes, but that would mean having two different displays about her in two different parts of the gallery. The solution we agreed upon was to take down an exhibit we had on the early town of Manassas (not effected by the renovation project) and expand the school story into this section. This means tearing out yet another part of our exhibit.

THE NEW PLAN

- Install the media room as planned *Annie’s Porch*
- Install a new television on the front wall – we are not replacing the exhibit that was there *Television wall*
- Leave the side wall blank for now – this was our timeline of the Civil War *Timeline*
- Install a brand new “Peace Jubilee” exhibit on the back wall
- Remove the map and expand the public school story into this space *Public Schools*
- Install a brand new “This is Manassas” exhibit on the wall opposite the new media room *This is Manassas*
- Install a brand new “Manassas At Play exhibit on the last platform in the gallery

What started out as one small media room and is now affecting almost half of the gallery space. An unintended consequence but one that I was worried would happen from the start.

ONE LAST PROBLEM

Video wall

Just as production of all these exhibits was coming to a close – two weeks before installation was to begin – the video in the back of the gallery adjacent to the space we were working in completely broken down. We were told it could not be fixed.

This was really the last the straw for me. I instructed the contractor to just remove everything from the wall – old tv, speakers, video equipment, etc. and patch it up and paint it. We are leaving that blank for now.

WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING AT THE SAME TIME?

During this entire project, I am expected to:

- Install an art exhibit by March 1 in our temporary gallery *Art exhibit*
- Close art exhibit on April 1, reset gallery and open a new exhibit on the Boys and Girls Club on April 13 *Boys and Girls exhibit*
- Install a new exhibit on local beer baron Robert Portner in the middle of our main gallery on April 13 (guest Curator) *Robert Portner*
- Keep up with all other speaking engagements, collections issues, tours and committee work as normal

LESSONS LEARNED

Lessons learned

- Take your time when dismantling exhibits – rushing to meet a deadline is not worth it
- Keep impeccable records about where things are moving to
- Make sure your helpers understand the seriousness of what they are working on and how important the objects are that they are handling – bribing them with donuts and coffee is a good thing (just not in the gallery!)
- Be prepared to work long hours
- Delegate anything you can from your normal responsibilities but remember that in the end you are the one responsible for getting it done – chose your help wisely
- Protect the spaces around the work area as best you can. Realize that cases may get dirty on the outside – that's okay you can clean them later
- Keep your sense of humor – laughter helps

