I am one of those fortunate people who love their jobs. Each day I have the opportunity to handle the objects, documents, and photographs commemorating New Mexico’s long and dramatic history. As Director of the Palace of the Governors and the New Mexico History Museum (NMHM), I have extraordinary exposure to these stories and objects.

The Palace collections contain nearly 20,000 objects, 750,000 historic photographs, and thousands of manuscript pages, all housed in the oldest public building in the United States. The Palace is nearly 400 years old and is the most important artifact of our state’s patrimony; preserving it has been one of the central missions of the Museum of New Mexico since its beginnings in 1909. Countless people, important and ordinary, have lived, worked, and convened business and government affairs within the Palace’s thick adobe walls. The Palace has doubled as a historic structure as well as the state’s history museum, a task too great, even for this venerable building.

A new chapter in New Mexico history begins in summer 2008, when NMHM opens adjacent to the Palace of the Governors. As a major cultural attraction, NMHM, the Palace of the Governors, the Fray Angélico Chávez History Library and Photo Archives, and the Palace Press will offer New Mexicans and visitors a comprehensive state history museum. I have the privilege of working with the professionals and volunteers dedicated to developing NMHM.

Navajo blanket weaver.
Detroit Publishing Company, photographer unknown.
Courtesy Palace of the Governors, Neg. #40811.
THE HISTORY MUSEUM HAD ITS BEGINNINGS more than twenty years ago. In the late 1970s, then Palace Director Dr. Tom Chávez and his staff began the programming studies that were the first steps in planning an addition to the Palace. Dr. Chávez, staff, project architects, and Friends of the Palace, a support group of dedicated volunteers, began planning a facility—referred to as the “Palace Annex”—to provide proper storage and exhibition space for the priceless artifacts in the collections.

Dr. Chávez, an effective advocate at state and federal levels, raised the initial funds for the building. By late summer 2002, when I joined the Palace staff, archaeological excavations were nearly underway at the site of the new facility, which ultimately yielded more than 900,000 artifacts and a great deal of information about the architectural history of the Palace.

A team comprising museum staff, project architects Roy Woods and Peter Saylor, the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of the Department of Cultural Affairs, and representatives from the Board of Regents and the Museum of New Mexico Foundation (MNMF) began planning the new museum’s visitor experiences.

With a grant provided by the Thaw Charitable Trust, and encouraged by the organization’s high museum standards, the team hired internationally known museum consultants Harold and Susan Skramstad to lead the development of the project’s institutional values and interpretive goals. The Skramstads persuaded the team to think of the new facility as a statewide museum rather than a Palace “annex,” and to join a growing number of museum professionals in other states engaged in rethinking the role of history museums.

HISTORY MUSEUMS ARE EVOLVING. No longer simply community or state attics filled with long-forgotten objects and yellowing letters, they are becoming places that honor the past while serving as partners in education, civic engagement, and social change. The best history museums play a strong role in framing social policy, and provide a long-term perspective on what makes communities and states unique.

The history museum will tell New Mexico’s story from its prehistoric sequences to the present. Few states have the time depth and cultural breadth of New Mexico. Most people are taught that America’s colonial history began with the settlement of Jamestown or stories of the Pilgrims. NMHM will be an opportunity to change the way that most Americans think about their national history by framing it within a broader cultural perspective that recognizes contributions by Spanish, Mexican, Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache peoples.

The project also means that, for the first time, the Palace can tell its important story as witness to four centuries of contact between peoples of many cultures. In the planning process, the team assembled long lists of dramatic historical events and inspirational life stories of real people, some well-known and others not as famous. Artifacts were inventoried and others—which need to be borrowed or acquired to tell the history of this state—were identified.

The team believes that all programs and experiences must be based on well-researched history and contain authentic artifacts, and it will respect the diverse points of view that guide how stories are told, and whose stories are told, in the history museum’s exhibits.
The Making of a Modern History Museum

By Patrick Gallagher
President, Gallagher & Associates

TRADITIONAL HISTORY MUSEUMS functioned as illustrated timelines. Galleries were boxes filled with artifacts and collections, documenting events and presenting chronologies of places and cultures. These quiet, somber displays reflected an academic perspective of how societies should record their history. The silence often spoke eloquently about what was missing. Where were the stories of the people—the individuals who made history, who experienced events, and whose lives were forever altered by them?

For modern history museums, these personal accounts often are the most significant artifacts in the collection. Rich, textured narratives define the relevance and meaning of past events. They tell us how we became who we are. Equally important is their ability to create context, helping us to interpret the past by understanding the circumstances in which it unfolded.

Today, both the human perspective and a sense of time and place guide exhibition development, shaping the dramatic arc of the exhibition experience and defining how it will capture and engage its audience. Visitors to history museums come with high expectations mingled, often, with great skepticism about what they are about to experience. The ultimate goal of the exhibition is to kindle a dialogue, drawing people in to explore issues and participate in the story rather than standing on the sidelines as passive observers.

Museums play a vital role not just in helping us to understand our past, but also in understanding our lives today. When headlines grab our attention, we often turn to history museums for perspective. The past becomes a lens for viewing the present. Equally significant is the museum’s ability to create a cultural context for its audience. It is no secret that history scores in schools are at an all-time low, raising the bar and the stakes even higher for the modern museum. For young people in particular, understanding those who came before them is a powerful tool in nurturing a sense of community and identity.

At the New Mexico History Museum, this goal of forging identity and community through an understanding of history is especially important. The confluence of cultures and individuals that settled New Mexico over the centuries has molded the social, political, economic, and spiritual nature of its communities. Through dynamic multimedia, this new history museum will give voice to these generations of New Mexicans. It will allow visitors to forge personal bonds, engaging them in the museum’s interwoven storylines.

There certainly will be collections in the galleries. But in this museum, visitors will become performers in a “theater” of understanding—giving the exhibition new layers of meaning, and giving visitors an enhanced connection to stories that resonate with humanity, passion, and relevance.

No longer will the museum focus only on permanent collections; it will think as well about core concepts and ideas that can engage visitors in its various storylines. By weaving together images and artifacts, theatrical environments and media, as well as opportunities for special programming and activities that reach beyond its halls, the museum can help to redefine the essence of a modern history museum. New Mexico is a place of continual change, shaped and defined by people whose proud heritage is unique. Let us engage those people and celebrate their extraordinary history.
THE SKRAMSTADS ENCOURAGED Palace staff, Friends of the Palace, and me to travel widely around New Mexico and listen to citizens, historians, educators, and civic leaders share what they expect from NMHM exhibits and outreach programs. Public meetings were held in more than a dozen communities, including Alamogordo, Silver City, Monticello, Roswell, Clayton, Carlsbad, Gallup, Raton, Springer, Farmington, Los Alamos, Zuni Pueblo, Ohkay Owingee, and Santa Fe. E-mail and survey forms from meeting participants let us know that they expect to see exhibits ranging from the earliest Clovis site to the Spaceport of the future. They want us to honor the struggles and triumphs of their ancestors: artists, athletes, scholars, Native leaders and immigrants, soldiers and settlers, ciboleros (buffalo hunters) and comancheros (traders with the Comanche), cowboys and homesteaders, miners and railroaders, merchants and lawyers, and politicians and scientists.

The “listening sessions” caused a rethinking of the relationship between NMHM and the Palace, resulting in a redesign of the building that will include expanded public programs. The building will be three stories high and contain 96,000 square feet, including an education center, a 200-seat auditorium, more than 26,000 square feet of exhibition space, about 12,000 square feet for collections storage, an enlarged museum shop, and modern offices for staff and volunteers. The Palace will be renovated to contain galleries and restored period rooms.

“This museum will change the way that Americans think about their national history.”

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EACH MONTH FOR THE PAST YEAR, Palace staff, the Museum Services Division exhibition team, and the conceptual development team under the direction of international museum designer Patrick Gallagher, have gathered to lay out the exhibitions and experiences that visitors will see in the history museum. The team divided New Mexico history into five broad thematic and temporally-based exhibition areas, with exhibits based on personal narratives and dramatic events, using the latest media technology, authentic artifacts, photographs, letters, diaries, and film in vivid presentations.

When NMHM opens in 2008, it must inspire us with the stories of those who came before, as well as those who are making our history today, in large and small ways. Learning in museums is different than classroom learning. Museums must offer opportunities to see and handle real artifacts, to connect with different times and places through the magic of historic photos and film, and to immerse visitors in environments that transform period rooms into the stages of history.

The history museum must honor our ancestors and inspire our descendants. It must be a partner in the education of our children and the generations to come. It must be a pillar of our civic life, showing New Mexicans and visitors how we have built on the foundations of our long prehistory and nearly 400 years of European history.

When families enter the museum, we want them to enjoy each visit and take pride in their history. We want them to find the stories of their communities and families and to seek out the museum as a partner in their journey of lifelong learning. When visitors search the Internet for homework assignments or to satisfy their curiosity, we want them to find their answers in our online resources. The New Mexico History Museum must be a place that not only houses New Mexico’s past, but initiates its future. Each day brings us closer to our goals.