Thank you, Fleur.

It is a pleasure to welcome so many journalists, writers, producers and photographers today.

Ten days from now, when this extraordinary museum is dedicated by President Obama, our country will have the opportunity to gain a fuller understanding of what it means to be an American. This museum explores our national identity through a particular lens, reflecting the life experiences, over time, of African American people. Their stories, illustrated through artifacts and works of art, through voices and writings, through courage and determination, through innovation and leadership, comprise an eloquent and powerful narrative central to our national identity.

The idea to establish an institution devoted to African American history was first suggested by black Civil War veterans a century ago. Later, Herbert Hoover proposed a building memorializing African-American contributions to history and science. But it was the 21st century before plans started to take shape and, in 2003, Congress passed legislation to make the museum a reality, as a part of the Smithsonian Institution. We are grateful to President Obama and to Congress for providing ongoing support and for establishing the Museum’s Council, which has offered guidance and encouragement over the months and years it took to get to this point.

This landmark comes at a significant time in history, for the Smithsonian and for our country. It will enable us to advance James Smithson’s democratic mandate—“the increase and diffusion of knowledge”—in more eloquent and far-reaching ways than our founding benefactor could have imagined. The Smithsonian is a uniquely American institution with 19 museums, established at key points in its 170-year history. The inauguration of our newest one occurs as race and cultural differences dominate the national discourse. This museum is an ideal gathering place, to learn, to hold conversations, to be inspired and uplifted. The Smithsonian can and should provide a forum for discussions relevant to our mission, especially when these can shine a light on the history and culture of the public we serve. This is true of the National Museum of African American History and Culture and it is true of all of our other museums, research centers and educational initiatives.

Museums in the 21st century are dynamic learning institutions that use the exceptional power of art and artifacts to evoke feelings, teach and energize people. At a time of cynicism and distrust of so many establishments, of the press and even of government, libraries and museums remain among the most trusted sources of information in our
country. Frequently I visit our museums on my own, without my I.D. badge, to view exhibits along with other visitors. You can actually see people appear to change, especially young people, as they explore an exhibition and light up with a spark of recognition. Museums have the capacity to touch lives, and transform the way people see the world and interact with others.

The museums of the Smithsonian are all working to share the treasures we care for in thought-provoking and engaging ways. The newest member of our family will set the bar even higher for the visitor experience. Opening now, at a time when social and political discord remind us that racism is not a thing of the past, this museum will help advance public conversation. It was 1863 when Frederick Douglass said “The relation between the white and colored people of this country is the great, paramount, imperative, and all-commanding question for this age and nation to solve.” A century and a half later, it is high time to honor the words of the brilliant statesman who began life as a slave.

As its mission states, our nation’s newest landmark was created to “be a beacon that reminds us of what we were; what challenges we still face; and point us towards what we can become.” From its extraordinary design, representing openness, strength and hope, to its collection, the building stands at the crossroads of past and future. Virtually all of the objects housed within it were donated by people eager to share parts of their own histories with the public. It is the only one of our buildings, including the Castle, constructed without a pre-existing collection. As you will soon see, the objects contained within these walls are as diverse as the people associated with them. Some, like the glass-topped coffin of Emmett Till, may make you angry, or move you to tears. Others, like Chuck Berry’s Cadillac, may lift your spirits. Individually and together, these artifacts and documents represent a country that is complicated and evolving. The many people who owned, used, saved, and gave us these objects emerge through them, as do the artists, who created the paintings, sculpture and other works on display. It is they who made this museum a reality, and, on behalf of the Smithsonian and the public we serve, we are deeply honored by, and grateful to, them.

As soon as the vision for it started to take shape, the enormous cost of this project became apparent. Half of the funding required to construct the building was provided through federal appropriation; the remainder needed to be raised from private sources. From the outset, the outpouring of financial support has been generous and heart-warming. Organizations of all kinds have joined in the effort, from major corporations and foundations to church groups and scout troops. The number of individual supporters is especially gratifying: there are people who wrote checks for a million dollars or more and those who contributed whatever they could, from one dollar to thousands. To date, more than 100,000 people have come aboard as members, a record for the Smithsonian. We are deeply grateful to all of those who recognized the importance of this museum and its role in the life of our country. Thank you.

In 2005, work on the project seriously got underway with the appointment of a director, Lonnie Bunch. As an esteemed educator and scholar, Lonnie must have known the challenges ahead, of creating a museum from stem to stern, but he didn’t flinch. In just 11 years, he led efforts to imagine, design and construct this awe-inspiring building,
envision and develop the interpretive plan for the museum, and lead the campaign to fund it. Perhaps the most challenging task that Lonnie oversaw was creating the collection itself, an initiative that required a national awareness effort, considerable travel and research. Along the way, he put together his extraordinary staff—a group of talented, bold and smart museum professionals whom you’ll meet later.

It is my honor to introduce the person who did more than any other to make the National Museum of African American History and Culture possible, its founding director, Lonnie Bunch.

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