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National Museums: In Brief

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Introduction

The Institute of Museum and Library Services estimates there are more than 35,000 museums in the United States.¹ The many types of museums include arboretums, botanical gardens, nature centers, historical societies, historic preservation organizations, history museums, science and technology centers, planetariums, children’s museums, art museums, general museums, natural history and natural science museums, zoos, aquariums, and wildlife conservation centers. Some of these museums are termed “national” museums.

There is no definition of a national museum. Some national museums are authorized by Congress and operated by the federal government (such as the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture).² However, most national museums are private museums, funded and operated without government involvement.

At times, Congress has acted to designate certain private museums as national museums. Such congressional designation of private museums is honorific and recognizes a museum as being of national importance. In general, this designation is not accompanied by federal funding, although these museums may apply for competitive grants from federal sources, just as museums without congressional designation may apply.³ A few congressionally designated private museums have received funding through appropriations, but that is the exception rather than the rule.

Museums may receive a congressional designation of national in several ways. Congress has recognized museums through bills and joint resolutions (both of which become laws if passed by both chambers and signed by the President) and through simple and concurrent resolutions (which are adopted by one or both chambers but do not carry the force of law).

Notably, not all museums designated “national” have received this designation through congressional action. Some museums have designated themselves as national (e.g., the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, the National Western Art Museum, and the National Museum of Wildlife Art). This report does not include federal museums nor museums self-designated as national museums. Instead, it discusses the various ways in which Congress has designated private museums as national museums.

Examples of Congressionally Designated National Museums

This section presents selected examples of the various ways in which a private museum has been congressionally designated a national museum. The examples are listed in alphabetical order by name of the museum and each example includes the name used on the museum’s website, which may differ from the name in the legislation;⁴ the museum’s location; legislation related to naming the museum; and a brief overview of the language and process or history of its designation as a national museum.

America’s National Maritime Museum, Newport News, VA; Front Street, NY

¹ Institute of Museum and Library Services, “Government Doubles Official Estimate: There Are 35,000 Active Museums in the U.S.” press release, May 19, 2014, at <https://www.imls.gov/news-events/news-releases/government-doubles-official-estimate-there-are-35000-active-museums-us>.

² For more information, see CRS Report R43856, *Contemporary Federal Museum Authorizations in the District of Columbia: Past Practices and Options for Congress*.

³ Major sources of federal funding for museums include the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

⁴ For example, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum was recognized as “America’s National Negro Leagues Baseball Museum.”

P.L. 105-261, Strom Thurmond National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1999.

Section 1068, added by Senate amendment, stated that “America’s National Maritime Museum is comprised of those museums designated by law to be museums of America’s National Maritime Museum on the basis that they—(1) house a collection of maritime artifacts clearly representing the Nation’s maritime heritage; and (2) provide outreach programs to educate the public about the Nation’s maritime heritage.”

In the 108th Congress, S. 674, America’s National Maritime Museum Designation Act, proposed including additional existing museums in the designation, but it did not pass.

Dr. Samuel D. Harris National Museum of Dentistry, Baltimore, MD

P.L. 108-122, Recognizing the Dr. Samuel D. Harris National Museum of Dentistry, an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution in Baltimore, Maryland, as the official national museum of dentistry in the United States.

The act started as a joint resolution that began “Whereas the Dr. Samuel D. Harris National Museum of Dentistry, an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, is an international resource with the primary mission of educating people, especially children, about the history of dentistry and the importance of good oral care.... [T]he museum, known as the Dr. Samuel D. Harris National Museum of Dentistry ... is recognized as the official national museum of dentistry in the United States.”

National Aquarium, Baltimore, MD

P.L. 96-118, To authorize appropriations for fiscal years, 1980, 1981, and 1982 to carry out cooperative programs with the States for the conservation of anadromous fish, and for other purposes.

Section 7 of the act, added by an amendment to the bill, stated “The aquarium to be built by the City of Baltimore, Maryland, on the site on Pratt Street, Pier 3, of the Baltimore Inner Harbor, shall, on and after the date of the completion of its construction, be known and designated as the ‘National Aquarium in Baltimore.’ Any reference in any law, map, regulation, document, record, or other paper of the United States to that aquarium shall be held to be a reference to the National Aquarium in Baltimore.”

Later that year “a bill to repeal a provision of law relating to the naming of a certain public facility in Baltimore” was introduced but did not pass.

National Atomic Testing Museum, Las Vegas, NV

P.L. 112-81, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012

Section 3114 stated that “The museum operated by the Nevada Test Site Historical Foundation and located in Las Vegas, Nevada – (1) is recognized as the official testing museum of the United States; and (2) shall be known as the ‘National Atomic Testing Museum’.”

National Building Museum, Washington, DC

P.L. 96-515, National Historic Preservation Act Amendments of 1980

In the 95th Congress, a joint resolution (P.L. 95-596) “to initiate preliminary studies for the restoration and renovation of the Pension Building in Washington, District of Columbia, to house a Museum of the Building Arts, and for other purposes,” stated that “the Pension Building is a unique, historic, constitutes an architectural treasure belonging to the people of the United States, and must be restored and properly utilized ... [and] would most appropriately be dedicated to the public use as the Nation’s Museum of the Building Arts, benefiting this and future generations.”

Section 306 of P.L. 96-515 stated “in order to provide a national center to commemorate and encourage the building arts and to preserve and maintain a nationally significant building which exemplifies the great achievements of the building arts in the United States, the Secretary and the Administrator of the General Services Administration are authorized and directed to enter into a cooperative agreement with the Committee for a National Museum of the Building Arts, Incorporated ... for the operation of a National Museum for the Building Arts....”

National Children’s Museum, Washington, DC

P.L. 108-81, Museum and Library Services Act of 2003

Section 502 stated that “The Capital Children’s Museum, located at 800 Third Street, NE, Washington, DC (or any successor location), organized under the laws of the District of Columbia, is designated as the ‘National Children’s Museum’.” The museum has relocated several times and currently plans to reopen in a new location in Washington, DC, in 2019.

National Law Enforcement Museum, Washington, DC

P.L. 106-492, National Law Enforcement Museum Act

In this legislation, “Congress finds that there should be established a National Law Enforcement Museum to honor and commemorate the service and sacrifice of law enforcement officers in the United States.... The Memorial Fund may construct a National Law Enforcement Museum on Federal land.”

P.L. 115-321, the National Law Enforcement Museum Exhibits Act, amends the establishing legislation to allow the museum to acquire, receive, possess, collect, ship, transport, import, and display firearms.

National Mining Hall of Fame and Museum, Leadville, CO

P.L. 100-655, a Joint Resolution to designate the month of October 1988, as “National AIDS Awareness and Prevention Month.”

Starting in the 96th Congress, several bills were introduced to recognize the museum. In the 100th Congress, the language was added as an amendment to the joint resolution on National AIDS Awareness Month, which became law.

Title I stated that “The National Mining Hall of Fame and Museum, organized and incorporated under the laws of Colorado, is hereby recognized as such and is granted a charter.”

National Museum of American Jewish Military History, Washington, DC

P.L. 85-903, An Act to incorporate the Jewish War Veterans, U.S.A., National Memorial, Inc.

Created and “declared to be a nonprofit body corporate of the District of Columbia, where its legal domicile shall be, by the name of the Jewish War Veterans, U.S.A., National Memorial, Incorporated.” The group was directed “to maintain and conduct a national memorial and museum dedicated to and commemorating the service and sacrifice in the Armed Forces of the United States during the period of war by Americans of the Jewish faith....”

National Museum of Nuclear Science & History, Albuquerque, NM

P.L. 102-190, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993

Bills to authorize the establishment of a National Atomic Museum were introduced starting in the 94th Congress, but none passed.

Section 3137 of P.L. 102-190, added by a Senate amendment, recognized the museum operated by the Department of Energy as “the official atomic museum of the United States” and stated that it “shall be known as the ‘National Atomic Museum.’”

Section 3143 of P.L. 105-261, the Strom Thurmond National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1999, called on the Secretary of Energy to submit a plan to relocate the museum. The museum reopened in 2009 in its new location, and it was renamed the National Museum of Nuclear Science & History.

National Museum of World War II Aviation, Colorado Springs, CO

P.L. 115-91, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018

Legislation to recognize the museum as the National World War II Aviation Museum was introduced beginning in the 111th Congress, but did not pass.

Section 2861 of P.L. 115-91, added in the Senate by amendment, recognized the museum as America’s National World War II Aviation Museum. The provision stated that “The National Museum recognized by this section is not a unit of the National Park System, and the recognition of the National Museum shall not be construed to require or permit Federal funds to be expended for any purpose related to the National Museum.”

National Navy Seal Museum, Fort Pierce, FL

P.L. 110-115, An act to recognize the navy UDT-SEAL Museum in Fort Pierce, Florida, as the official national museum of NAVY Seals and their predecessors.

The legislation states “The Navy UDT-SEAL Museum is the only museum dedicated solely to preserving the history of the Navy SEALs and their predecessors.... Since 1985, when the Navy UDT-SEAL Museum first opened, it has become home to artifacts and photos....”

In the 112th Congress, House and Senate bills to recognize the memorial at the museum as the official national memorial of Navy SEALs and their predecessors were introduced, but did not pass.

National World War I Museum and Memorial, Kansas City, MO

P.L. 108-375, Ronald W. Reagan National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005

Section 1031 of P.L. 108-375, added by a Senate Amendment, recognized the Liberty Memorial Museum as “America’s National World War I Museum” and noted that the Liberty Memorial Museum “is the only public museum in the United States that exists for the exclusive purpose of interpreting the experiences of the United States and its allies in the World War I years (1914-1918), both on the battlefield and on the home front.”

After that, there were attempts to designate the Liberty Memorial at the museum as the National World War I Memorial, with P.L. 113-291, Section 3091, designating it as a “World War I Museum and Memorial.”

National WWII Museum, New Orleans, LA

P.L. 108-87, Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2004

Section 8134, initially introduced as H.R. 2109 (108th Congress) and later added by amendment, noted that “The National D-Day Museum is the only museum in the United States that exists for the exclusive purpose of interpreting the American experience during the World War II years (1939-1945) on both the battlefield and the home front and, in doing so, covers all of the

branches of the Armed Forces and the Merchant Marine.” For this and other reasons, Congress designated the National D-Day Museum as America’s National World War II Museum.

Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, Kansas City, MO

S.Con.Res. 60 (109th Congress), A concurrent resolution designating the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, as America’s National Negro Leagues Baseball Museum.

In the 109th Congress, concurrent resolutions were introduced in both the Senate (S.Con.Res. 60) and the House (H.Con.Res. 277) to designate the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum as “America’s National Negro Leagues Baseball Museum.” The Senate resolution passed both the Senate and the House.

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