

The Smithsonian Is Collecting Objects From the Capitol Siege

Curators are gathering posters and banners from the riot and the protests that preceded it to “help future generations remember” Jan. 6, a museum director says.

By Zachary Small

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A sign that reads, “Off with their heads — stop the steal” and a small handwritten poster with the words “Trump won, swamp stole” are among dozens of objects and ephemera from pro-Trump rallies and the Capitol takeover Wednesday that are heading to the National Museum of American History, collected by curators from the division of political and military history.

The museum, a branch of the Smithsonian Institution, announced Friday that it has begun archiving protest signs, posters and banners from protests on the National Mall and from the violent mob that stormed through the Capitol on Wednesday. Only a day after Trump supporters invaded the halls of Congress, Frank Blazich, a curator with the museum, was on the National Mall collecting ephemera from the demonstrations before the winds swept them away.

“As an institution, we are committed to understanding how Americans make change,” the museum’s director, Anthea M. Hartig, said in a statement, explaining that “this election season has offered remarkable instances of the pain and possibility involved in that process of reckoning with the past and shaping the future.”

Dr. Hartig added that the objects and stories collected will “help future generations remember and contextualize Jan. 6 and its aftermath.”

In an earlier statement, the Smithsonian’s leader, Lonnie G. Bunch III, said, “As a historian, I have always believed in the power of peaceful protest.” He added, “Demonstrations give us a glimpse of the fragility of our democracy and why the work we do and the stories we tell are so important.”

Efforts to acquire materials from the unrest are restricted to the National Mall, while authorities in the Capitol Building are leading their own cleanup efforts and aiding a federal investigation into the violence that took place. However, curators expect that in the near future they will be able to work with

government agencies, congressional offices and the curator for the Architect of the Capitol to make acquisitions from inside the building.

Announcing the effort, Dr. Hartig recalled one of the museum's most treasured artifacts, the Jefferson Banner, which symbolizes Thomas Jefferson's presidential victory and the peaceful transfer of power that followed the bitter election of 1800.

"Two hundred and twenty years after Jefferson was sworn in as president, the vulnerability of this legal and historic handover was revealed," she said. "While shaken, we remain confident that a peaceful transfer of power shall yet again occur Jan. 20."

Curators at the museum had embarked on a similar collecting expedition over the summer, acquiring signs and banners from Black Lives Matter protests to document the moment in history. At that time, museum officials asked the public to submit any material that could be considered as a future acquisition; on Friday, they repeated the request for contributions, asking that photos and brief descriptions of objects be sent to 2020ElectionCollection@si.edu.