



# GILCREASE MUSEUM

Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art

## ***Enslavement to Emancipation: Toward a More Perfect Union*** **Explores North American Slavery from 1520 to Emancipation** **Through the Lens of Three Rare Documents**

**On View at Gilcrease Museum June 17 through July 4**



Images [left to right]: 1520 letter from Diego Columbus to King Charles V of Spain; Gilcrease Curator of History Mark Dolph and Historian and Attorney Hannibal Johnson; authorized copy of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Tulsa, OK, June 10, 2021— Growing out of its commitment to illuminating how historic events continue to impact and influence our lives today, Gilcrease Museum will present *Enslavement to Emancipation: Toward a More Perfect Union*. The exhibition traces the arc of African slavery in the Western Hemisphere and United States, and its legacy today, by bringing together for the first time three foundational documents from the museum’s archival collection—a letter sent by Christopher Columbus’ son to the King of Spain requesting permission to begin bringing enslaved Africans to the Western Hemisphere; a rare, certified, handwritten copy of the Declaration of Independence; and an authorized copy of the Emancipation Proclamation. The exhibition will be on view Thursday, June 17 through Sunday, July 4, 2021.

“*Enslavement to Emancipation* exemplifies the mission of Gilcrease Museum by bringing together works from our collections that illustrate how long-past events continue to shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” said Susan Neal, Executive Director, Gilcrease Museum. “The three archival documents trace the span of more than 300 years of slavery in the Western Hemisphere, and reflect our belief that the history of America is not confined within the boundaries of the continental United States. By showing these documents together for the first time, we invite visitors to view these important pieces of our history through the lens of issues facing us today.”

*Enslavement to Emancipation* opens with what is believed to be the first written account of the enslavement of Africans in the Americas. In this letter to King Charles V of Spain in 1520, Christopher Columbus’ eldest son, Diego Columbus, requests license as Governor General of Spain’s American empire to begin the importation of Africans into the Western Hemisphere to replace the labor of enslaved Indigenous people. The document reveals the beginnings of slavery in North America, nearly a century before the first enslaved Africans were brought to the Jamestown colony in 1619.

The exhibition presents a second inflection point for American slavery with a certified, handwritten copy of the Declaration of Independence. The ideal of that document, that all people are created equal, was literally and figuratively revolutionary, but belied by the actions of the nascent United States where thousands of people were held in chattel slavery—a number that would grow into the millions by the time of the Civil War.

The third document in the exhibition is an authorized copy of the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed enslaved laborers in the Confederate States and made ending slavery an essential objective of the Civil War. The Proclamation represents both the beginning of the process of abolishing slavery as a legal institution, and the continuing struggle to realize the promise of 1776 for all Americans.

The exhibition culminates in a video discussion between Tulsa historian, writer, and attorney Hannibal Johnson, and Gilcrease Museum Curator of History Mark Dolph, that places the three historic documents in a contemporary context. *Enslavement to Emancipation* calls on visitors to recognize their personal agency in building a more perfect union and ensuring liberty, equality, and justice for all.

*Enslavement to Emancipation* is curated by Gilcrease Museum Curator of History Mark Dolph and is made possible by a generous sponsorship from Bank of Oklahoma.

“Bank of Oklahoma is proud to sponsor an exhibition providing insight into the foundation and evolution of critical issues still relevant today,” said Marc Maun, Executive Vice President and Chief Credit Officer, Bank of Oklahoma, and Chair, Gilcrease National Advisory Board. “We encourage everyone to take this unique opportunity to learn about how these rare documents have influenced American history.”

### **About Gilcrease Museum**

The Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, known as Gilcrease Museum, houses a comprehensive and interdisciplinary collection of more than 350,000 items reflecting the art, culture, and history of North America. The museum represents hundreds of Indigenous cultures from across North and South America, with works of art and material culture from 12,000 BCE to the 21st century. The collection includes more than 350 years of American paintings, sculptures, and works on paper, including the largest public holdings of art of the American West. The museum is owned by the City of Tulsa, which has partnered with The University of Tulsa to steward the museum. To learn more about Gilcrease Museum, please visit [gilcrease.org](http://gilcrease.org).

### **About the Helmerich Center for American Research**

The Helmerich Center for American Research at Gilcrease Museum houses the Gilcrease Library and Archive, a collection of more than 100,000 manuscripts, photographs, maps, rare books, print portfolios and broadsides related to the history of America from the 15<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries, from the Spanish arrival in the Americas, to the New England colonies and Westward settler expansion, to the experiences of America’s native peoples.

Through innovative research, institutional collaborations, publications, educational programming, digital services, visiting scholars programs, and research fellowships, the Helmerich Center for American Research is dedicated to enhancing our understanding of human society and culture. As an institute for collections-based research, the center supports and creates opportunities for research and scholarship in the humanities, and hosts visiting faculty, students, and scholars from around the world at its 25,000 square-foot-facility.

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