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## **New Orleans history goes high tech as part of major museum expansion**

### ***New exhibition center to employ state-of-the-art digital interactives to engage all ages and interests***

*March 27, 2019 | New Orleans, Louisiana* — On April 6, 2019, The Historic New Orleans Collection—a museum, research center and publisher in the French Quarter—will throw open the doors to a **\$38 million expansion of its museum facilities**. Located at 520 Royal St., the exhibition center will not only double the museum’s public gallery space for original artifacts, but it will also utilize state-of-the-art technology to tell the stories of New Orleans.

Made possible in part through generous donations from THNOC’s local, national and international supporters, the center—totaling more than 36,000 square feet—comprises a meticulous restoration of the historic 1816 Seignouret-Brulatour Building and courtyard, as well as a brand new rear building. The facility will house changing exhibitions, the first continuing exhibition on the history of the French Quarter in the historic neighborhood, a [hands-on educational space for children and families](#), an expanded museum shop and a café.

Digital interactives throughout the campus complement and enhance THNOC’s vast holdings of original artifacts. In addition to video and audio content developed by THNOC staff members, artists and developers were hired to bring the newest ideas in museum engagement to the site.

“Connecting with an original artifact is a powerful experience, and that’s been our primary focus for so long, and in many ways it still is,” said John H. Lawrence, director of museum programs at THNOC. “But these interactive experiences provide other ways for people to understand the objects they were looking at and see them in a whole new way.”

As visitors enter the new Welcome Center at 520 Royal St., a **large touchscreen smart table** connects THNOC’s past and future. “**French Quarter at Your Fingertips**” features an interactive map of the French Quarter with information on the hundreds of different properties in the French Quarter, from famous structures to Creole cottages. Developed with [Ideum Inc.](#) and made possible by Ann M. Masson, in memory of her husband, Frank W. Masson, the table incorporates some of the data found in THNOC’s Collins C. Diboll Vieux Carré Digital Survey.

The original Vieux Carré Survey, an extensive study of the properties within the neighborhood, was created to bolster local historic preservation efforts of the French Quarter in the mid-20th century. The materials cited are housed in a number of different repositories in the United States and abroad, including THNOC, but the survey itself has been housed at THNOC since 1966, the year of the museum’s founding.

**New media artist and New Orleanian [Xiao Xiao](#)**, along with colleagues and fellow alumni from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Alan Kwan, Don Derek Haddad and Bjorn Sparrman, developed three interactive projects that are located throughout the historic structures on the site.

**Virtual reality binoculars** will be placed on the third and second floors surrounding the interior courtyard and will allow visitors to see virtually reconstructed versions of the courtyard from the 19th and 20th centuries. An **elevator with a virtual window** will showcase the everyday life of people who worked and lived in the buildings, with each floor highlighting a different era. In the French Quarter Galleries, visitors will get an at-a-glance overview of topics covered by the display through an **ever-changing animated and graphic word cloud**. In addition, a network of sensors deployed around the galleries will detect visitor activity and update the display with words associated with that area.

“These pieces provide visitors with instant immersion into scenes from the past,” said Xiao Xiao. “In addition to reading about events or looking at isolated objects, they are able to explore richly detailed worlds. All of these technologies also play off the physical space in unexpected ways and in doing so give people experiences that they can have nowhere else.”

“These are pretty cinematic experiences, in the sense that there are immersive visuals, sound and some micro-narratives,” said Kwan. “Except these technologies allow the visitors to take control of the ‘camera’ and to more actively explore the scenes.”

In one room of the French Quarter Galleries, an immersive film showcases more than 300 years of the French Quarter after nightfall, developed by writers and producers Michelle Benoit and Glen Pitre of **local production company Côte Blanche**.

Projected on all four walls, the film fills the space with imagery and sound. Over the course of a 17.5-minute journey, viewers are transported from a mosquito-infested Mississippi River bank prior to Native American settlement, to a modern night in the midst of the Krewe de Vieux parade.

The film’s production employed hundreds of actors, musicians and film technicians, and some scenes, such as a Choctaw encounter with Europeans or a visit to the famed French Opera House, were produced in cooperation with Louisiana State University’s Screen Arts program. Animator Charlie Lavoy added movement and life to paintings, photographs and more from THNOC’s holdings.

“Giving this project both the historical accuracy and the dramatic punch that THNOC wanted took every trick we knew and, frankly, quite a few new ones we had to figure out,” said Pitre. “It’s definitely one of the high points of my 40-year career.”

The Historic New Orleans Collection’s new exhibition center will open to the public Saturday, April 6, 2019, and regular hours will be 9:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m., Tuesday–Saturday, and 10:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m. on Sunday. More information is available online at [www.hnoc.org](http://www.hnoc.org).

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#### **About The Historic New Orleans Collection**

Founded in 1966, The Historic New Orleans Collection is a museum, research center and publisher dedicated to the study and preservation of the history and culture of New Orleans and the Gulf South region. For more information, visit [www.hnoc.org](http://www.hnoc.org), call (504) 523-4662, or follow THNOC on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).