

CALVIN COOLIDGE PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM SCHEMATIC EXHIBIT DESIGN



DESIGN DIVISION, INC. JULY 4, 2025

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“We draw our Presidents from the people. It is a wholesome thing for them to return to the people. I came from them. I wish to be one of them again.”

—Coolidge Autobiography, 1929



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Introduction

The Calvin Coolidge Presidential Library and Museum (CCPLM) was established in 1956. Housed within the Forbes Library in Northampton, what was initially known as the Coolidge Memorial Room underwent several partial renovations and case additions, as well as several infrastructure updates between 2000 and 2020. Except for minor content updates, however, the core permanent exhibition has been largely unchanged since the CCPLM's founding. The lackluster, dated presentation of historical content—with its uncomplicated narratives concerning class, race, gender, Indigenous peoples, and foreign and economic policy—does not do justice to the significant educational potential of the museum. Therefore, the Coolidge Standing Committee of the Forbes Library Board of Trustees is embarking on a project to renovate and revive the content of the museum space.

The Coolidge Presidential Library and Museum is seeking to update the content of the permanent exhibit that will offer a thoughtful portrayal of Calvin and Grace Coolidge, balancing their personal lives, their record of public service, and early 20th century history. To achieve the goal stated above, the museum exhibits committee selected Design Division, Inc. (DDI), an interpretive exhibition design firm, to reimagine and update the museum.

Kick Off Meeting

DDI began the process by organizing a kick-off meeting with the museum curator, the library director, and the museum board of directors to gather additional insight into their goals for the redesigned exhibits.

Research

The design process began in earnest with a research effort focusing on the lives of Calvin and Grace Coolidge in Vermont, Massachusetts, and Washington D.C. Based on that initial research, and working with both the curator and exhibit board, DDI developed a unifying theme statement (opposite page) for the interpretive exhibits.

Content Outline

The next step included the creation of a preliminary interpretive content outline, which was presented to the board, revised, and approved. Although not comprehensive, the outline aided in the conceptual design process.

Exhibit Space Analysis

DDI studied, measured, and documented the existing exhibit space in CAD drawings. Two of the biggest challenges are that the single room has multiple windows and doors, which reduce exhibit space, and that the space is also used for meetings and assemblies. When used for those meetings it must include seating for as many as 75 people.

Organization

The result of the space analysis together with the content outline and established interpretive goals has led us to propose organizing the interpretive content around geographic locations rather than in a strict chronology. The following pages will explain the rationale behind this conclusion and illustrate the approach.

Unifying Theme

Calvin Coolidge was a product of and inspired by his small-town New England upbringing who ended up playing a major role in the centuries-old American argument about the role of government in our lives.



Exhibit Organization

Multituse Space

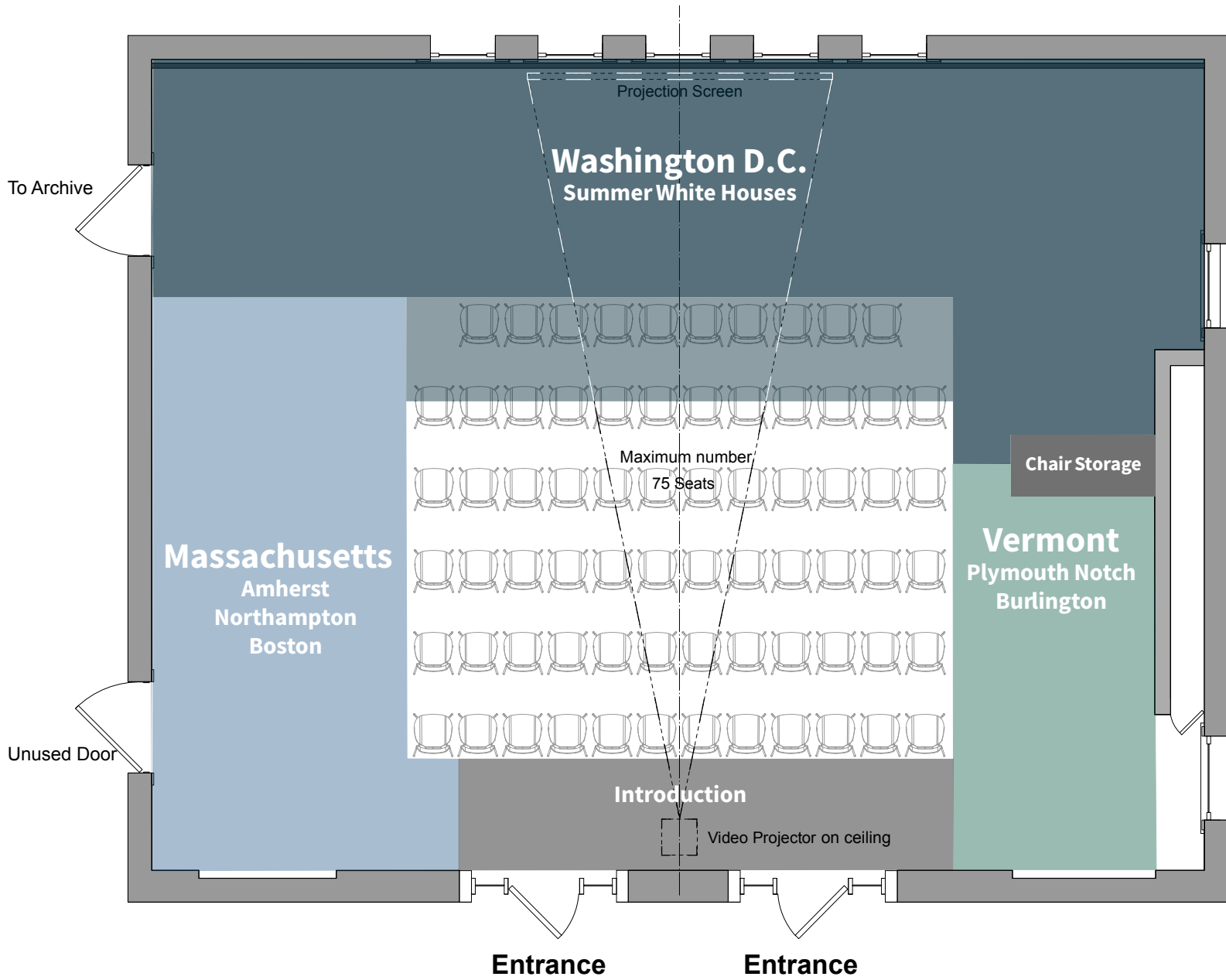
Because the museum space is used for presentations and gatherings for as many as 75 people, the space must be able to transform easily from a museum to an assembly hall with seating for meeting participants. Since the room will be used primarily as a museum, it is best if it does not look like a meeting area while open to the public as a museum. To this end, we are proposing that the exhibits be divided into two groups: one group located in fixed places on the perimeter of the space, the second group in movable cases located within the seating area. A small grouping of seats would always remain in place to accommodate both visitors watching the orientation video and small group assembly. Since the space is multi-use, the museum cannot create a set path with permanent walls for visitors to follow through the space. If this had been possible, we might have opted to organize the interpretive content differently.

Exhibit Organization Strategy

Based on the exhibit content outline and the space limitations, we have refined and organized the content geographically rather than chronologically. Three distinct geographic locations are paramount in Calvin and Grace Coolidge's lives: Vermont, Massachusetts, and Washington D.C. Each geographic location can be broken down into secondary locations. For example, Massachusetts can be broken down into Amherst, where he attended college, Northampton, where he practiced law and was elected mayor, and Boston, where he served as a legislator and governor.

One of the strengths of a geographically organized exhibit is that it more readily allows for the discussion of topical subjects than a strictly chronological presentation. Each of the three sections will be organized in rough chronological order, and visitors can explore each section in any sequence they wish and still enjoy the same overall interpretive experience. (See plan on next page.)





Plan: Interpretive Content Space Organization



Museum Exhibit Floor Plan

This plan illustrates the geographic approach to content organization within the museum space with Vermont on the right, Massachusetts on the left, and Washington D.C. at top.



Multiuse Floor Plan

This plan illustrates the transformation from museum to meeting room. Exhibits within the enlarged seating area have been moved to the periphery of the space, which has been designed to accommodate them.

Museum Walk Through

The following is a description of your experience as a visitor walking through the new interpretive exhibits at Calvin Coolidge Presidential Library and Museum.

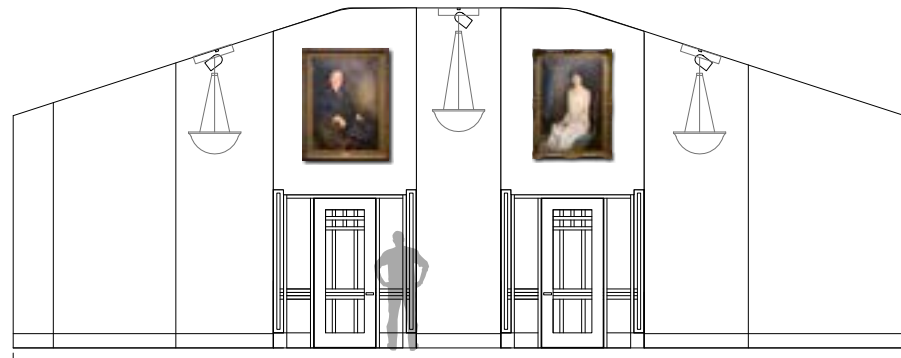


Enter Through the Library!

You must enter the museum through the front door of the Forbes Library (as Calvin Coolidge did in the early 20th century to study the law books located within) and traverse the elaborate, oak-panelled staircase that leads to the gallery space on the second floor that in turn brings visitors to the museum entrance. An impressive sign located on the wall near the double doors leading to the museum directs visitors inside.

The Introductory Exhibit

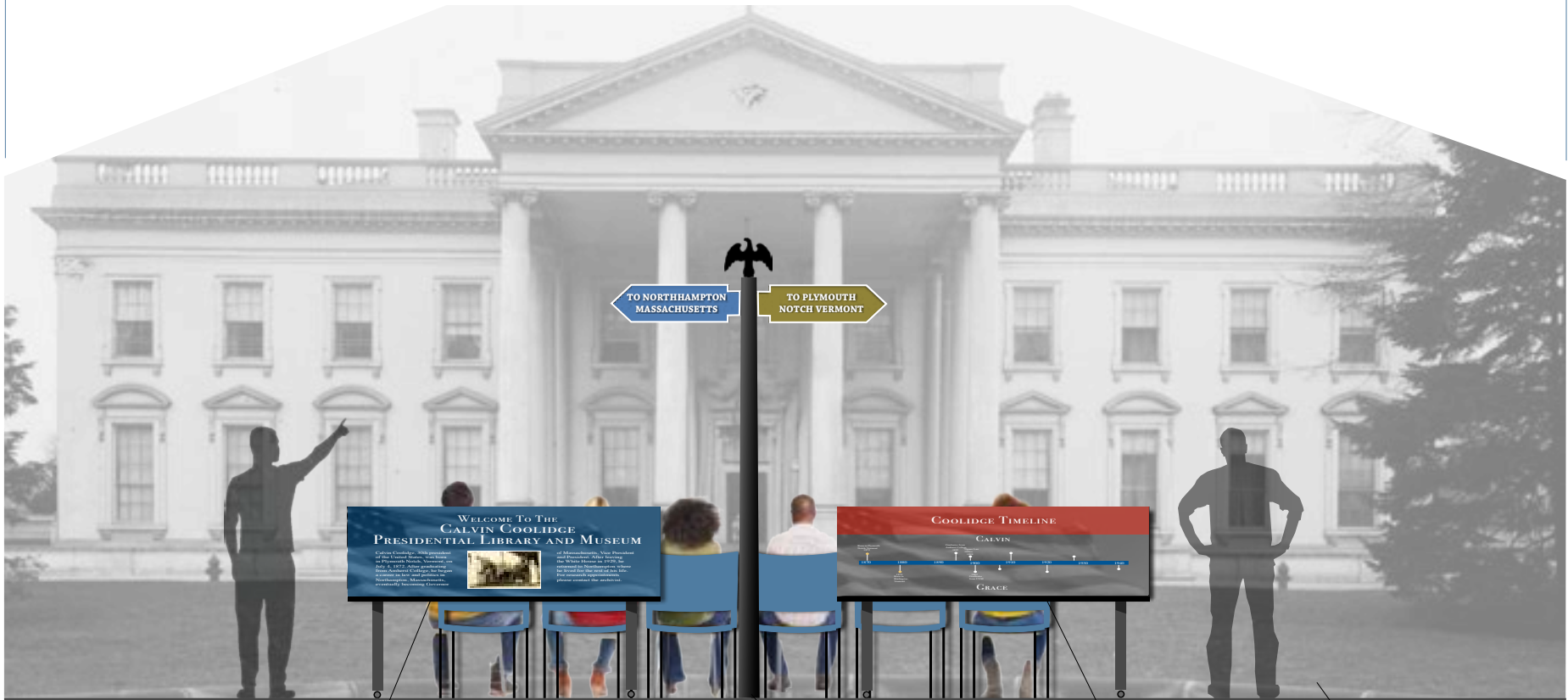
Immediately upon entering the museum you encounter an impressive panoramic photo mural of the 1920s-era White House located on the expansive wall on the far side of the space. To your right, a docent is seated at an information desk, ensconced above the docent desk high on the entry wall are the portraits of both Grace and Calvin, and directly in front of you is a welcome/overview panel. To the right of the welcome panel is a concise timeline of Grace and Calvin's lives. A classic "street style" directional sign located between the two panels points to each area in the exhibit—Vermont on one arrow shaped sign, Massachusetts on another, and Washington D.C. on a third. You can choose to explore the exhibits in any order that you wish, or you can take a seat and view the orientation video.



Howard Chandler Christy's magnificent portraits of both Grace and Calvin are ensconced above the entry doors on the west wall.

44'-0"

17'-0"

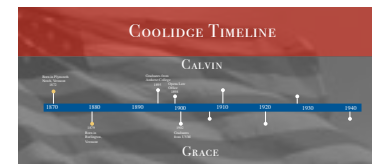
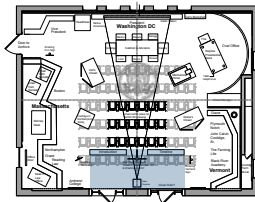


Introductory Panel
Contains text and images

Sign Post
Not visible is a directional sign for Washington, D.C.

Timeline Panel
Contains text and images for both Calvin's and Grace's lives

Photo Mural
41'-0" wide by 15'-0" tall with acoustical material located behind that covers almost the entire wall



Introductory Exhibit

44'-0"

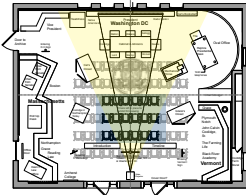
17'-0"



Still and Video Images

Projected Flag Image
Multiple layered images can be projected onto the screen

White House Mural
Serves as a projection screen for the orientation film



Orientation Video

Introducing visitors to both Calvin's and Grace's lives, the orientation video is projected onto an expansive photo mural of the White House as it appeared in the 1920s.

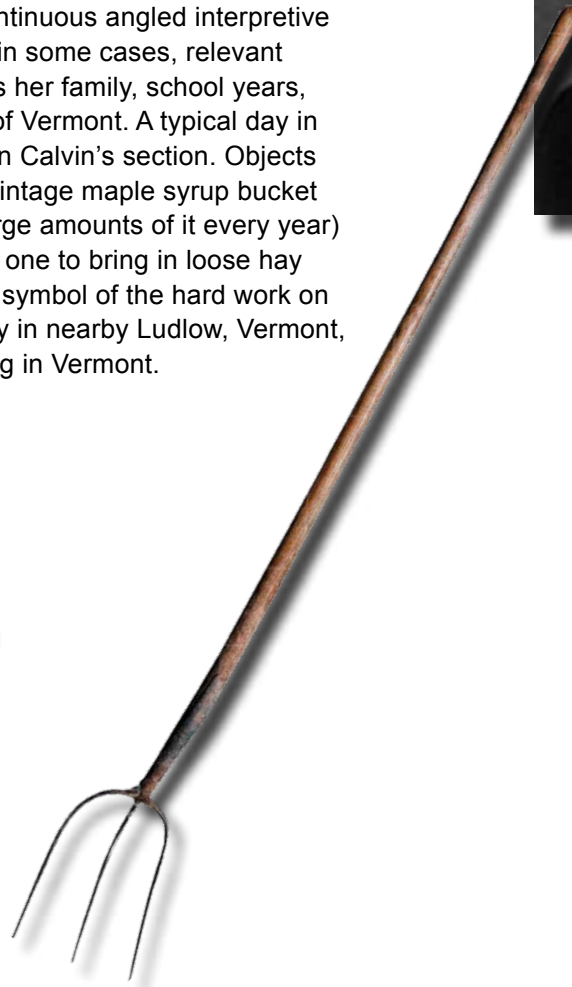
Orientation Video

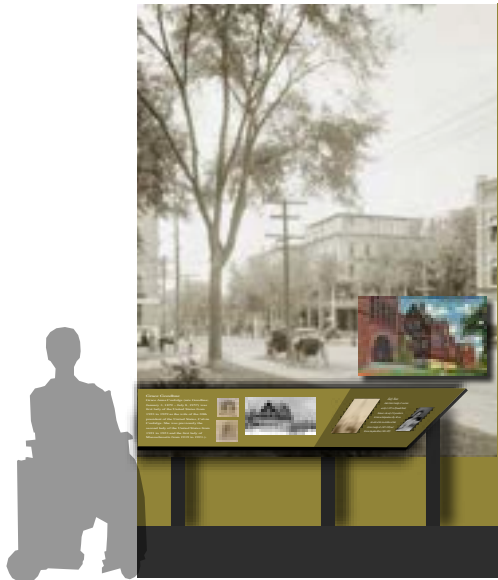
You take a seat in the center of the museum space as the orientation countdown clock moves down to zero. Projected onto the expansive photo mural in front of you, the video presentation presents images from Calvin's and Grace's lives, following their journey from their humble beginnings in Vermont to the mayoralty of Northampton, the governorship of Massachusetts, and then ascending to the presidency of the United States. As the visual collage moves forward in time it might expand to cover more than 80% of the mural surface. Utilizing photographs, film footage, audio recordings, interviews, and contemporary images of Northampton and other areas, the film, dramatically weaves an introduction to the Coolidge's and their extraordinary lives. Once the video is finished you decide to explore the Vermont section of the exhibit.



Vermont

As you approach this section of the exhibit, a traditional-style road sign states "Welcome to Vermont". Directly ahead, a 15'-0" wide mural of the Coolidge family farm in Plymouth Notch serves as the backdrop for this section. A second mural to the left that depicts Burlington, Vermont, is the backdrop for exhibits about Grace Goodhue, his future wife, and her upbringing in that city. At the base of each mural and at table height, a continuous angled interpretive rail contains images, text, and in some cases, relevant artifacts. Grace's exhibit covers her family, school years, and her time at the University of Vermont. A typical day in the life of a farmer is featured in Calvin's section. Objects in the display might include a vintage maple syrup bucket (Coolidge's family produced large amounts of it every year) and a pitchfork (Coolidge used one to bring in loose hay from the field, an example and symbol of the hard work on the farm). Black River Academy in nearby Ludlow, Vermont, is featured as his final schooling in Vermont.

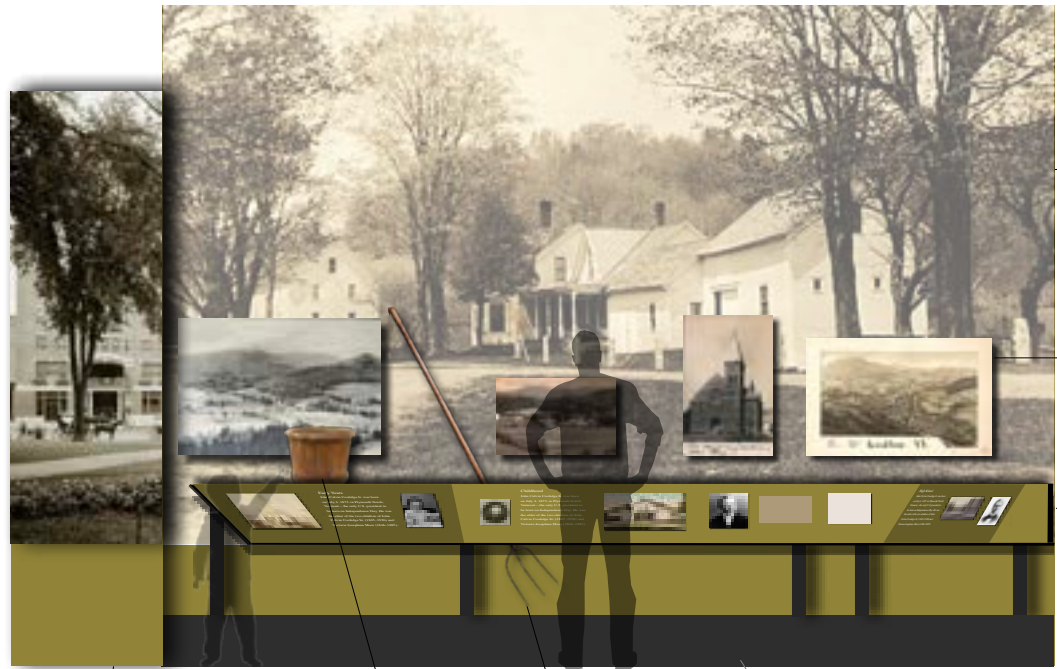
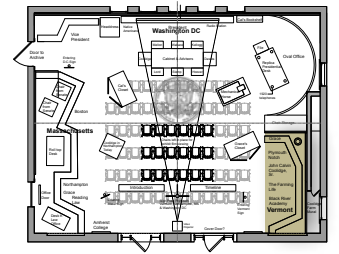




Grace Section

Elevation: Vermont Section

Scale: 3/8" = 1'-0"



Calvin Section

Chair Storage
Grace mural wraps around corner and covers door to chair storage area.

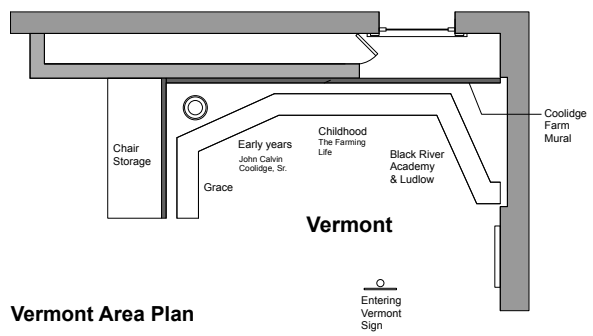
Maple syrup bucket **Pitchfork**

Base for object display
12" high base

Mural
Acoustically transparent mural with acoustic material behind

Items mounted on mural

Interpretive Reader Rail
Contains text, images, and possible objects.



Vermont Area Plan

Vermont



Massasoit Street marker for Coolidge house

Existing Exit
If allowable we would abandon this as an exit

Mural
Acoustically transparent mural with acoustic material behind

Items mounted on mural

Door to archive

Elevation: Massachusetts Section
Scale: 3/8" = 1'-0"

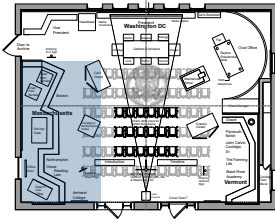
Office door for Calvin's law practice

Rolltop desk in Calvin's law office

Base for object display
12' high base

Chair used by Calvin as state senate president

Interpretive Reader Rail
Contains text, images, and possible objects.



Massachusetts

Covering Calvin's life from his education at Amherst College to his term as governor of Massachusetts, and Grace's life from her time at the Clarke School, her marriage to Calvin, and her years the first lady of Massachusetts, this section explores the some of the most formative years in their lives.

Massachusetts

A road sign that states “Welcome to Massachusetts” welcomes visitors to this section of the exhibit. The historic Masonic building, located in downtown Northampton and former site of Coolidge’s law practice stretches across the backdrop mural that anchors this section. Located immediately to your left is an interpretive panel dedicated to Coolidge and his time at Amherst College, his first introduction to Massachusetts.

You notice the larger artifacts located in front of the mural, including the desk he used in the law office where he read law, his rolltop desk from his law practice, the desk he used as a city councilman, and the chair he used as the senate president, all of which give some physical sense of his life in local and state politics. His former law office door, remarkably intact, might be displayed adjacent to his rolltop desk. A flowerpot with flowers might be a focal point for his budding relationship with Grace.

Located in front of the artifacts is an interpretive rail that displays images, documents, and artifacts that relate to the Coolidges.

Behind you a separate kiosk connects the events of Coolidge’s life to today’s Northampton. Strikingly, many of the places where Calvin and Grace lived and worked remain intact, including both of his long-time homes, the town hall, the Masonic building, Forbes Library, and the Clarke School.



Flower pot similar to what Grace gifted Calvin in 1904



Coolidge and his sons



Rolltop desk from Coolidge’s law office



State senate president’s chair

Washington D.C.

After leaving Massachusetts, you enter the Washington D.C. section, with its stunning backdrop of the 1920s White House—a photomural that covers the entire east wall of the museum. Catching your eye immediately is an exhibit highlighting Coolidge's first years in Washington DC, when he served as Vice President to Warren G. Harding.

Native America

Adjacent to the vice-presidential section, you are attracted to a large opaque box with an image of a fantastic Sioux War bonnet on its front and on its sides. You realize that the front of the box is an operable door. Inside the war bonnet depicted in the images is on full display. The bonnet was a gift from the Lakota—a gesture of thanks after Coolidge signed the Indian Citizenship Act, which granted citizenship and the right to vote to all Native Americans on reservations. A section about Coolidge's Native American policies is part of the display and you might hear Native American music playing when the case was opened. In front of the mural is an interpretive rail in which small objects are mounted that evoke the joint Washington tenures of the president and First Lady. One section includes a replica 1920s-era radio with handsets so that visitors can listen to a typical Coolidge radio address.

The Coolidge Cabinet & Advisors

As you move along the rail, you notice that in the center of the space, near a substantial Presidential seal on the floor, is a big conference table surrounded by eight chairs. Representing the President's cabinet and his closest advisors, each chair has a portrait of one of his advisors mounted on the back. The chairs act as interpretation stations for those advisors. You decide to sit in the chair belonging to Herbert Hoover, Coolidge's Secretary of Commerce, and examine documents pertaining to him

scattered on the desktop. An abbreviated dossier about Hoover is located on a plinth of the desktop, and a flip book traces his tenure with Coolidge and examines their relationship. You ultimately feel like you are sitting in on one of Coolidge's cabinet meetings.

Oval Office

After exploring several seats around the table, you observe to the right a replica of the Oval Office, complete with Coolidge's presidential desk. A partial physical reconstruction of the inside of the Oval Office from 1923 encircles half of the space allowing you to look out the windows to the grounds of the White House. You walk to the desk and realize that you can sit in a replica of Coolidge's chair and look over the desktop, which is covered with items matching those worked with by Coolidge when he was in office. The desk drawers can be opened; inside, displayed behind acrylic, are personal objects that belonged to Coolidge during his presidency. Some drawers feature interpretive information as well. You can pick up one of several 1920s-era telephone handsets located on the desk and listen to a selection of Coolidge speeches. Next to the desk are a replica of his personal bookcase, with a selection of the books that would have been found there when Coolidge was in the White House, and a replica of one of his original filing cabinets, which you can explore as well.

In front of the desk is Coolidge's famous mechanical horse.



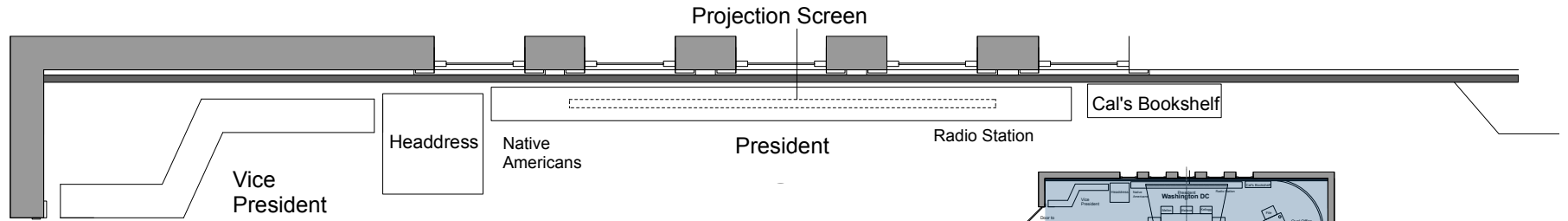
Reader Rail
Content TBD
Elevation: Washington, DC

Headdress
Case work to be determined

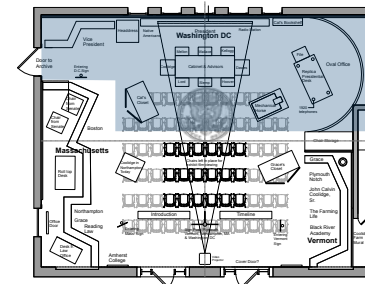
Advisors and Cabinet Members Exhibit

1920s Radio Program

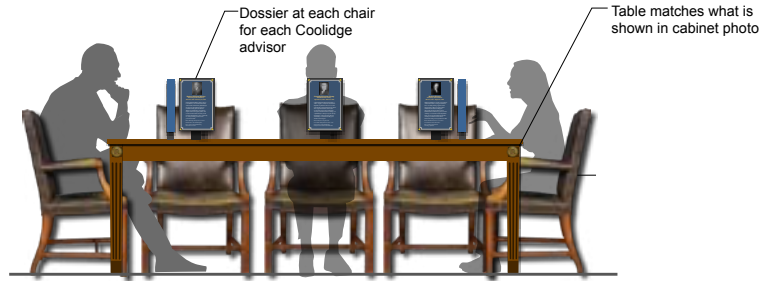
Calvin's Bookcase
Includes a selection of books that Coolidge brought with him



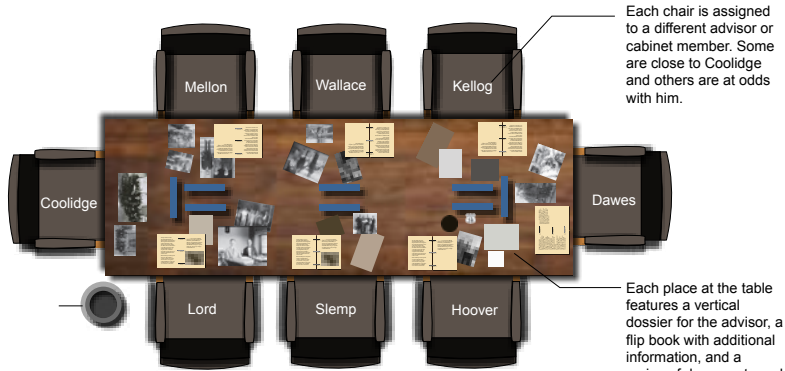
Partial Plan: Washington, DC



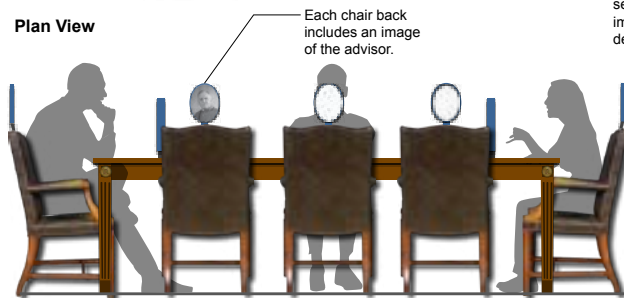
Washington D.C. Section



Side View with One Side's Chairs Removed

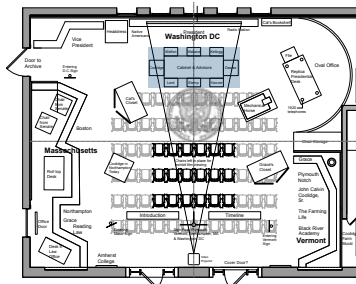
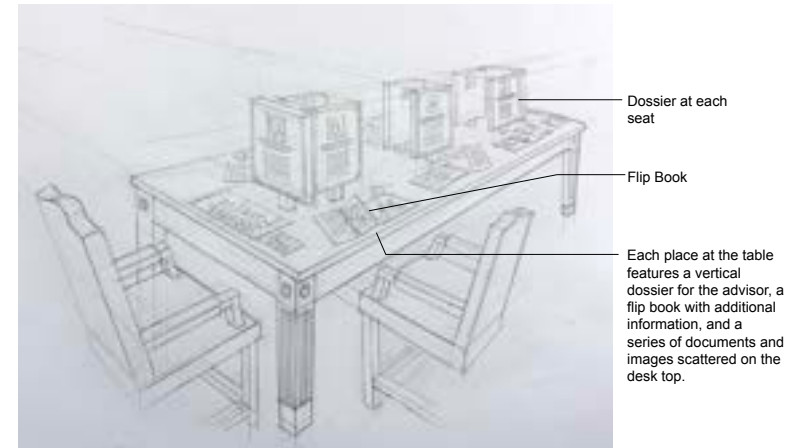



Plan View



Side View

Each place at the table features a vertical dossier for the advisor, a flip book with additional information, and a series of documents and images scattered on the desk top.






Andrew William Mellon
Secretary of the Treasury
March 9, 1921 – February 12, 1932

Andrew William Mellon, known also as A. W. Mellon, was an American banker, businessman, industrialist, philanthropist, art collector, and politician. The son of Mellon family patriarch Thomas Mellon, he established a vast business empire before moving into politics. He served as United States Secretary of the Treasury from March 9, 1921, to February 12, 1932, presiding over the boom years of the 1920s.

- Born: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1855
- Ambassador to the United Kingdom
- Close advisor to President Harding
- Revenue Act of 1921




Herbert Hoover
Secretary of Commerce
March 5, 1921 – August 21, 1928

Herbert Clark Hoover was the 31st president of the United States, serving from 1929 to 1933. A wealthy mining engineer before his presidency, Hoover led the wartime Commission for Relief in Belgium and was the director of the U.S. Food Administration, followed by post-war relief of Europe. As a member of the Republican Party, he served as the third United States secretary of commerce from 1921 to 1928 before being elected president in 1928.

- Born: West Branch, Iowa, 1874
- 31st President of the United States
- Was a mining engineer before becoming a politician

Dossier Panel: Examples of Other Advisors



Campbell Bascom Slem
Presidential Secretary
September 4, 1923 – March 4, 1925

Campbell Bascom Slem (September 4, 1870 – August 7, 1943) was an American Republican politician. He was a six-time United States congressman from Virginia's 9th congressional district from 1907 to 1923 and served as the presidential secretary to President Calvin Coolidge. As a philanthropist, Slem set up the "Slem Foundation", which provides gifts and scholarships to schools and colleges in Southwestern Virginia.

- Born: Turkey Cove, Virginia 1870
- U.S. House of Representatives, 1907 - 1923
- Close advisor to President Harding
- Suspected to be member of Ku Klux Klan

Dossier

Relevant Items
Various materials related to Slem embedded in desk top or loose to handle

Typical Dossier Panel



The desk setup includes a flip book with text on both sides, a photograph of four men in suits, a document with text, and a yellow sign with text in English and Dutch. The sign reads: "DO NOT USE BY WHITE PERSONS" and "VOOR GEBRUIK DOOR BLANKEN".

Flip Book
Flip book with additional material for visitors to explore

Plan: Items on Desk for Slem

The Cabinet: Typical Advisor



Coolidge in the oval office with staff

Desktop
The desktop is populated with replica desk accessories, lamp, ashtray, pens, documents, and photos.



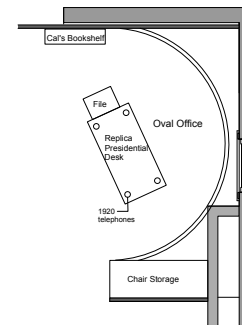
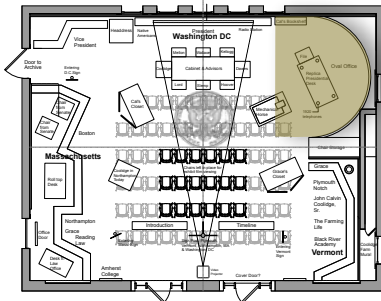
Windows
Replica windows with mural behind that shows actual view out of Oval Office windows in the 1920s.

Interactive Period Telephones
Visitors can choose which Coolidge speech they want to listen to.



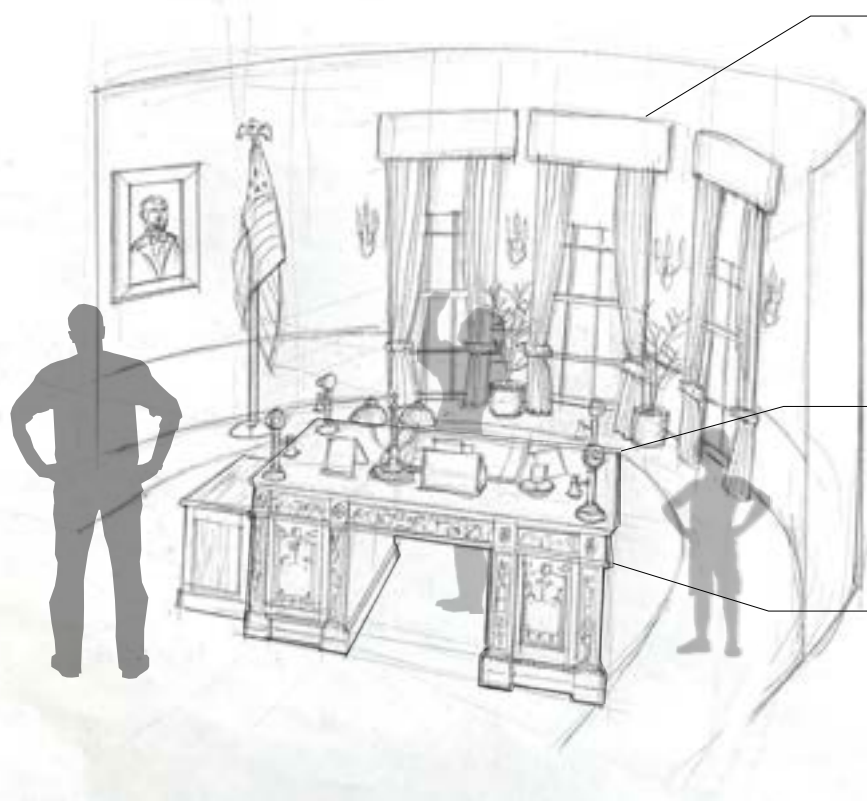
Elevation: Oval Office Elevation

Desk
Replica Coolidge-era desk with operable drawers holding objects and additional documents.



Partial Floor Plan

The Oval Office



Coolidge Oval Office Replica

Windows

Replica windows with mural behind that shows actual view out of Oval Office windows (note caps on Oval Office)

Interactive Period Telephones

Visitors can choose which Coolidge speech they want to listen to.

Desktop

The desktop is populated with replica desk accessories, lamp, ashtray, pens, documents, and photos.

Desk

Replica Coolidge-era desk with operable drawers holding objects and additional documents.

Pull up Files

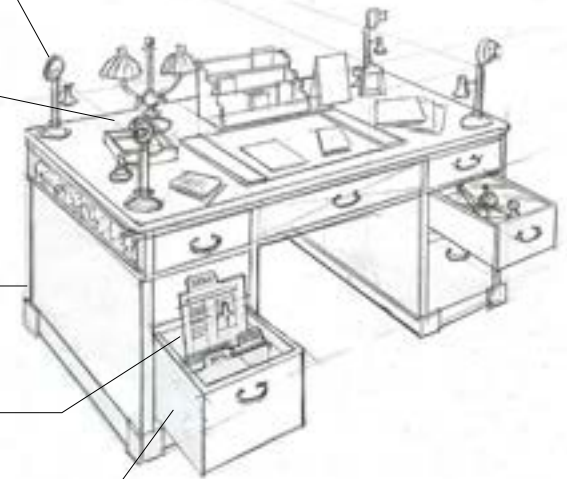
Visitors can pull up "files" that feature relevant interpretation and photos.

Drawers

All drawers can be opened and contain original or replica objects, documents, and photos from Coolidge's time in office.



Coolidge working at his well-used desk



Coolidge-era Oval Office Replica Desk

Grace and Calvin's Closets

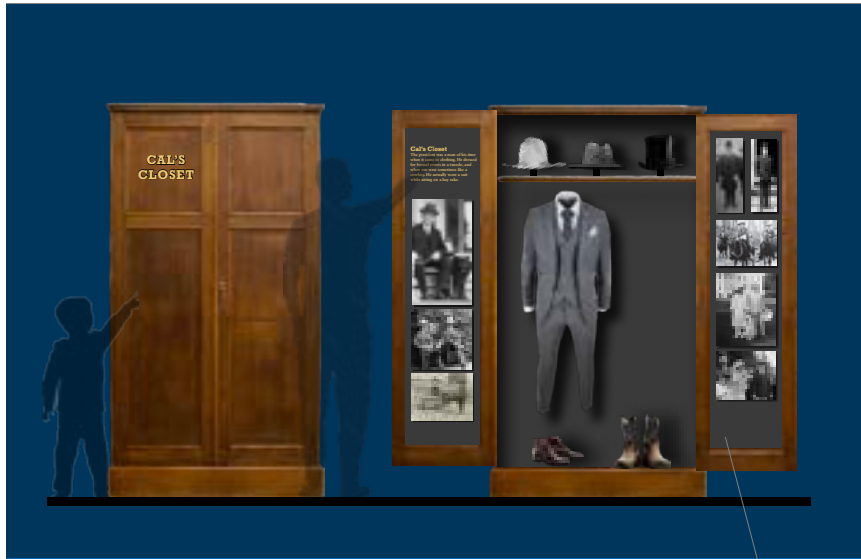
After spending time exploring the Oval Office, you notice a strange mechanical device in front of the presidential desk. You approach and realize that it is a mechanical horse, like the mechanical bull popularized in movies like *Urban Cowboy* and *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*. The horse was given to the president, who enjoyed horseback riding.

Nearby are two 1920's-era closets or armoires. You approach the one labeled "Cal's Closet" and open it. Inside are the president's actual clothes—his suit, his tux, top hat, cowboy hat, cowboy boots, and regular shoes—and other personal possessions like his watches and cufflinks. In the closet labeled "Grace's Closet" are her hats, gowns, dresses, shoes, and jewelry. On the inside surfaces of the opened doors of both closets are photographs of the Coolidges in formal and informal attire. You see the president wearing his cowboy hat as he rides a horse or in his tuxedo as he attends a formal dinner. Images for the first lady depict her walking her dog and standing on the steps of the White House with the president. The images are accompanied by quotes from Calvin and Grace about how they felt about attending various functions in the public eye.



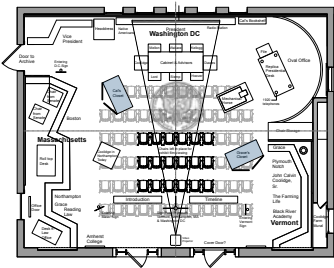
Mechanical horse belonging to Cololidge.





Elevation: Grace's & Calvin's Closets

Scale: 3/8" = 1'-0"



Interpretive text and Images
 Images and text feature the fashions of the 1920s and Grace and Calvin wearing them. Calvin's chaps may be displayed here as well.



Closet Casework
 Although it looks like a real closet or wardrobe it is actually a display case designed to mimic a closet. Visitors can open the doors to explore the garments, shoes and hats.

Grace's and Calvin's Closets

Budget

The preliminary budget for exhibit design, exhibit fabrication, lighting design, and architectural improvements to the museum space is \$400,000.00.



The desk Coolidge used as a law student in the office of Hammond and Field at 25 Main Street, Northampton, MA.

“I favor the policy of economy, not because I wish to save money, but because I wish to save people. The men and women of this country who toil are the ones who bear the cost of government. Every dollar that we carelessly waste means that their life will be so much the more meager. Every dollar that we prudently save means that their life will be so much the more abundant. Economy is idealism in its most practical form.”

—Presidential inaugural address, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1925



