

Whose history has been left out

Case study 1 George Washington and slavery

The President’s House Site in Philadelphia

Central issue: Can Washington be celebrated as a Founding Father without foregrounding his involvement in slavery?

ELEMENT	COMPLETED NOTES
THE OFFICIAL STORY	Washington’s leadership and the founding of the republic. The revised display places the house within a broader account of American independence and eventual emancipation.
THE MISSING HISTORY	The daily lives of nine enslaved people and the contradiction between the founders’ language of liberty and Washington’s own slaveholding.
THE CHANGE	The original exhibition was removed and later replaced. The revised panels retain slavery but omit some earlier material, including the slave-trade map and slavery timeline, and soften Washington’s responsibility.
THE JUSTIFICATION	The Interior Department says the new display offers fuller historical context and acknowledges slavery’s injustice. The wider review seeks to remove material considered unfairly disparaging.
THE CRITICISM	Historians and community advocates argue that the site’s purpose as a memorial to enslaved people is weakened when Washington’s reputation receives greater emphasis.
YOUR VERDICT	Sanitisation is the strongest description: slavery is still mentioned, but its violence and Washington’s agency receive less weight. This can produce a misleading interpretation without inventing facts.
NECESSARY NUANCE	Do not claim that slavery or all nine individuals have disappeared. The new display still names enslaved people and discusses escape and abolition. Compare emphasis as well as factual content.

Selection becomes historical rewriting when it removes a contradiction essential to understanding what is being celebrated. Washington can be recognised for helping establish the republic, but his achievements do not make his involvement in slavery irrelevant. At the President’s House, the presence of nine enslaved people makes the gap between liberty as an ideal and liberty as a lived experience central to the site. Replacing their story with a more reassuring account of national progress risks changing what visitors understand independence to mean. However, the revised exhibition still refers to slavery, so describing it as complete erasure would be inaccurate. The stronger criticism is that it sanitises Washington’s legacy by reducing the prominence of coercion and personal responsibility. A credible commemoration should therefore explain both his political achievements and the limits of the freedom he helped proclaim.

Sources: NPS historical context | The Philadelphia Inquirer 15 July 2026 | DW exhibit comparison

Case study 2 Trump’s place in presidential history

National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC

Central issue: Who should decide which failures belong in an official presidential biography?

ELEMENT	COMPLETED NOTES
THE OFFICIAL STORY	The presidency and Trump’s return to office are represented through his portrait and presidential identification.
THE MISSING HISTORY	His two impeachments and their significance for constitutional accountability.
THE CHANGE	The extended biographical label disappeared when the photograph was replaced. This removed achievements as well as the impeachment references from the physical display.
THE JUSTIFICATION	The gallery cited a planned refresh and experiments with shorter labels. The administration’s broader Smithsonian review promotes national achievement and rejects allegedly divisive narratives.

THE CRITICISM	An uneven standard may protect a sitting president's reputation: other presidents' labels still referred to impeachment or scandal at the time reported.
YOUR VERDICT	Possible sanitisation through selective omission. Calling it deliberate historical rewriting requires evidence beyond the missing label itself.
NECESSARY NUANCE	The earlier text remained online and impeachment history remained elsewhere in the Smithsonian. No direct White House instruction for this particular label change was established. Impeachment is not conviction: the Senate acquitted Trump twice.

Selection becomes historical rewriting when a museum applies different standards to comparable figures and thereby changes the public's understanding of their record. A presidential biography cannot include everything, yet constitutional controversies are relevant to assessing the exercise of power. Omitting Trump's impeachments may make his presidency appear less contested, especially if other presidents' failures remain visible. However, this case requires caution: the gallery removed the whole extended label, rather than only the impeachment sentence, and presented the change as part of a display update. The omission raises a question about unequal treatment, but it does not by itself prove direct political censorship. Curators should use transparent criteria developed through historical expertise, with consistent treatment of achievements and failures. A fair account would mention the impeachments alongside the Senate acquittals. Institutional independence matters because an official biography should inform visitors rather than protect the reputation of the person it depicts.

Sources: AP 11 January 2026

Case study 3 Broken treaties and Indigenous dispossession

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument

Central issue: Does presenting westward expansion as national progress conceal broken treaties and cultural destruction?

ELEMENT	COMPLETED NOTES
THE OFFICIAL STORY	A heroic national account may foreground settlement, military action and territorial expansion. The institutional site itself also commemorates Native resistance: these narratives must be distinguished.
THE MISSING HISTORY	The search for land and gold, broken commitments to Native nations, and the destruction of languages and cultural identities through boarding schools.
THE CHANGE	Interpretive material about broken promises and boarding-school violence was flagged for revision. Being flagged does not establish that every proposed change was implemented.
THE JUSTIFICATION	The Interior Department says the review aims at a fuller, accurate account informed by scholarship, rather than a narrow ideological interpretation.
THE CRITICISM	Critics argue that removing these explanations hides the causes and consequences of dispossession. CAP reports that the Northern Cheyenne had requested the boarding-school wording through tribal consultation.
YOUR VERDICT	Proposed sanitisation; potentially historical rewriting if revisions replace documented coercion with an uncomplicated story of progress.
NECESSARY NUANCE	The final replacement text must be checked before declaring a completed rewrite. An institutional overview and the political review are not identical. CAP is a progressive policy organisation with an explicit critical position.

Selection becomes historical rewriting when it conceals the processes that made national expansion possible. A short account of westward expansion may legitimately focus on one battle, but portraying territorial growth solely as progress leaves visitors unable to understand why Native peoples resisted. In this case, broken promises and boarding-school policies provide essential context: they connect expansion to dispossession and efforts to suppress Indigenous cultures. Removing that context would change the causal explanation of the past, not merely reduce its length. Nevertheless, material flagged for revision should not automatically be described as already erased. The final wording would need to show whether accurate information was corrected, condensed or

suppressed. A defensible commemoration should preserve the distinction between settlement as opportunity for newcomers and settlement as loss for existing communities. Including Indigenous perspectives helps visitors assess both experiences rather than treating the settlers’ interpretation as the only national story.

Sources: NPS history and culture | Daily Montanan 29 January 2026 | CAP 30 June 2026

Case study 4 The violence behind westward expansion

Grand Teton National Park

Central issue: How does removing the massacre from Doane’s biography change the meaning of exploration?

ELEMENT	COMPLETED NOTES
THE OFFICIAL STORY	Gustavus Cheyney Doane’s contribution to the exploration and surveying of the region.
THE MISSING HISTORY	His involvement in the 1870 Marias Massacre of Piegan Blackfeet people, including women, elders and children.
THE CHANGE	A panel that contextualised Doane’s legacy by mentioning the massacre was flagged and removed. The remaining representation no longer provided that counterweight.
THE JUSTIFICATION	The Interior Department initially referred to routine maintenance or updates and denied a connection to the review order. Later reporting quoted park staff linking the removal to compliance with that order.
THE CRITICISM	Blackfeet advocates object that a figure associated with violence is presented without the history of the people harmed by him.
YOUR VERDICT	Sanitisation, with a risk of historical rewriting: exploration takes on a more innocent meaning when the explorer’s violence is omitted.
NECESSARY NUANCE	CAP’s account has an advocacy perspective and should be corroborated. Removal is documented, but changing a panel is not the same as proving the massacre is absent from every park resource.

Selection becomes historical rewriting when the omitted information changes the moral and historical meaning of the figure being commemorated. Presenting Doane only as an explorer encourages visitors to associate westward expansion with discovery and achievement. His participation in the Marias Massacre complicates that interpretation by showing that exploration could coexist with violence against people already living in the region. Removing this fact therefore does more than shorten a biography: it separates an individual’s achievements from actions necessary to evaluate his legacy. Authorities may legitimately repair or update displays, but that explanation should be assessed against the replacement content and the reasons recorded for removal. Nor should one missing panel be treated as proof that every account has been erased. The appropriate response is to preserve a documented account of both exploration and violence, giving Blackfeet experiences a place in the story and allowing visitors to judge a complex legacy.

Sources: CAP investigation | Wyoming Public Media 15 June 2026 | Wyoming Public Media 23 July 2026

Case study 5 Who belongs in the story of Stonewall

Stonewall National Monument in New York

Central issue: Can Stonewall be commemorated accurately if some of the communities involved are no longer named?

ELEMENT	COMPLETED NOTES
THE OFFICIAL STORY	The 1969 uprising and the struggle for lesbian, gay and bisexual rights remain commemorated, but the vocabulary describing the wider movement was narrowed.
THE MISSING HISTORY	Transgender and queer people’s presence and contribution to the broader struggle connected with Stonewall.
THE CHANGE	References to transgender and queer people were removed from NPS material. A separate change in February 2026 removed the Pride flag from a federally managed flagpole.

THE JUSTIFICATION	The vocabulary changes occurred amid federal policy rejecting recognition of gender identity beyond sex categories. NPS defended the flag removal as compliance with flag-display guidance, while saying interpretation would continue.
THE CRITICISM	Campaigners and elected officials argued that narrowing the community named at the site excludes people whose history the monument should recognise.
YOUR VERDICT	Historical rewriting through exclusion is a defensible interpretation of the wording changes. The flag removal concerns symbolic recognition and must be analysed separately.
NECESSARY NUANCE	Do not claim that all Stonewall interpretation ceased or that the Pride flag disappeared everywhere nearby. Avoid attributing the uprising to one group alone or applying today’s identity labels mechanically to every participant.

Selection becomes historical rewriting when it changes who is recognised as having participated in a historical struggle. Stonewall can be explained briefly without naming every individual, but systematically removing transgender and queer people narrows the community whose experiences are being commemorated. This changes visitors’ understanding of who resisted discrimination and who belongs in the resulting rights movement. The strongest argument concerns the altered description of the people involved, rather than the disappearance of a symbol alone. The flag decision was defended through administrative guidance and should be examined separately from the website changes. Moreover, acknowledging excluded groups does not require claiming that one group alone led the uprising or that all participants used today’s terminology. Accurate commemoration should reflect the movement’s diversity and explain uncertainty where necessary. Selection is legitimate when it makes a complex history accessible; it becomes misleading when present political categories determine which historical participants remain visible.

Sources: Congressional letter 11 February 2026 | ABC News flag policy and removal

Case study 6 Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills

Anniversary celebrations at Mount Rushmore

Central issue: Can Mount Rushmore embody a shared national story when the history of the land remains contested?

ELEMENT	COMPLETED NOTES
THE OFFICIAL STORY	Presidential leadership, American achievement and national greatness, expressed through the monument’s four carved presidents and its use for anniversary celebrations.
THE MISSING HISTORY	The Black Hills’ sacred significance to the Lakota and the taking of land after the United States violated the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie.
THE CHANGE	The concern is selective framing in a commemorative narrative: celebrating the monument without foregrounding the contested land history. The worksheet does not establish that a specific panel was removed here.
THE JUSTIFICATION	Celebratory framing treats the monument as a symbol of shared national pride. This is the rationale of the narrative, not evidence of a specific official explanation for a display alteration.
THE CRITICISM	From a Lakota perspective, the site cannot simply represent shared freedom when it also embodies dispossession and an unfulfilled treaty commitment.
YOUR VERDICT	Selection becomes sanitisation if the land dispute is left out of an account presented as the common national story. Rewriting would require evidence that this history is denied or misrepresented.
NECESSARY NUANCE	A celebratory speech is not an exhaustive museum account. Omission alone does not prove denial, and the existence of institutional information about Native history complicates a claim of total erasure.

Selection becomes historical rewriting when a partial perspective is presented as the uncontested experience of the whole nation. Mount Rushmore may symbolise presidential leadership for many Americans, yet its location in the Black Hills gives it a different meaning for the Lakota. The treaty violation and dispossession are relevant

because they challenge the assumption that the monument represents freedom shared equally by everyone. An anniversary celebration need not recount every historical event, but claiming a common national story while excluding this conflict risks turning one community’s memory into an apparently universal truth. Still, a celebratory omission is not automatically equivalent to denying the treaty or removing historical evidence. The judgement depends on the claims made and the information available alongside them. Mount Rushmore could contribute to a more inclusive commemoration if presidential achievements were discussed together with the history of the land and the continuing disagreement over what the monument represents.

Sources: [Worksheet historical context](#) | [The Guardian anniversary report](#)