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Radio and TV personality Tavis Smiley joins Mayor Nutter in viewing some of the featured artifacts in a traveling exhibition of the black experience in America. It will debut in January.

Exhibit views black experience

The Constitution Center will host the study of four centuries of African American life in the U.S.

By Stephan Salisbury Inquirer Culture Writer

The National Constitution Center will host the debut of a major traveling exhibition exploring the four-century sweep of the black American experience, from slavery to the cusp of the presidency, officials announced yesterday.

America I AM: The African American Imprint was conceived by talk-show host and author Tavis Smiley, and organized by the Cincinnati Museum Center and Arts and Exhibition International, the private entity best known in Philadelphia for the blockbuster King Tut exhibit at the Franklin Institute last year.

America I AM, scheduled to open at the Constitution Center Jan. 15 for a run through May 3, will feature interactive and video exhibits and more than 150 resonant artifacts, including one that was unveiled yesterday: a simple five-inch brass key to the jail cell where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was imprisoned in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963 and where he wrote *Letter From Birmingham Jail*.

The show opens on King's birthday.

Smiley, on hand for yesterday's news conference, said the exhibit - the result of two years of planning - would seek to answer a question posed by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903: "Would America have been America without her Negro people?"

"This will be the biggest, baddest, boldest exhibition ever that tells the story of African Americans," Smiley said. "Think for a minute. . . . There would be no America without the contributions of black folk.

"From the arrival of the first slaves in Jamestown 400 years ago all the way up to the time of Barack Obama - we're going to tell that story."

Joseph M. Torsella, the Constitution Center's head, said the center had wanted the exhibition since hearing about it a year ago. "We want to use temporary exhibitions to explore all aspects of American history and the Constitution. African Americans from the beginning . . . have been central to telling that story."

Torsella added that artifacts recovered from the historic archaeological excavation that preceded construction of the center would be included in the exhibit. And the story of the President's House at Sixth and Market Streets, where George Washington lived during his presidency, attended by a number of black slaves, would also be woven into the exhibition.

The doors to the dungeon from Cape Coast Castle off the coast of Ghana, where captive Africans were warehoused before being shipped into slavery across the Atlantic, will be exhibited. The doors are from the collection of the African American Museum in Philadelphia, a block away from the center at Seventh and Arch Streets. The museum is itself pulling together a new permanent exhibition on early black Philadelphia, to be installed next year.

America I AM will involve more than weighty historical objects, organizers said. Drawn from dozens of black-history museums and individuals, the show will also feature everything from Muhammad Ali's boxing gloves to materials associated with Motown to the writing table of 18th-century African American poet Phillis Wheatley.

Mayor Nutter, also on hand for the news conference, noted that "creative culture is the business of this city" and expressed confidence the exhibition would attract visitors from around the country.

America I AM is being underwritten by Wal-Mart, while Exxon Mobil is subsidizing the fuel costs for a kind of museo-mobile - a mini-exhibit in a tractor-trailer truck that will travel nationwide as the exhibit wends its way from city to city for the next four years. Mark Lach, senior vice president of Arts and Exhibitions International, estimated the exhibit's cost at \$5 million.

He said other stops would include Chicago, Los Angeles, Fort Lauderdale, Fla., St. Louis, Denver and New York, among others. He declined to name venues but said they would be announced shortly.

Center officials said tickets for *America I AM* must be purchased separately and would range in price from \$17.50 for adults to \$9 for children. Access to the rest of the center will be included.

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