



First Amendment Museum Names

Christian Cotz New CEO

The First Amendment Museum in Augusta, Maine announced the appointment of Christian J. Cotz as Chief Executive Officer. Cotz brings 25 years of museum experience and a deep knowledge of the First Amendment to Maine, having worked in leadership positions at James Madison’s Montpelier in central Virginia for the last two decades. Cotz will guide the First Amendment Museum through the next stages of its development – building staff, completing the restoration of the historic structure, construction of the museum addition, and developing and installing exciting and relevant exhibitions in the space. “We are confident Christian’s experience in the museum field will allow us to speed up the pace of the project and bring new energy and ideas and partners to the table,” said Genie Gannett, Board Chair of the museum.

The First Amendment Museum is located in the historic home of publisher Guy Gannett on State Street in Augusta, next to the Governor’s mansion, Blaine House, and the Capital. Gannett founded Guy Gannett Publishing Company in 1921. Throughout the 1920s, the company acquired Portland’s *Press Herald*, *Evening Express*, *Daily Advertiser*, and *Sunday Telegram*, as well as Augusta’s *Kennebec Journal*, and the *Waterville Morning Sentinel*. In the 1930s, the company expanded into broadcast radio, and by the 1950s the reach extended into television. A champion of the free press, Gannett once wrote, “I have never regarded the newspaper as a piece of private property to be managed for mercenary ends; but rather as an institution to be managed for the public good, and to be made a force in the community for the promotion of the welfare of our city, state, section, and nation.”

The home changed hands in the early 1970s to house the State Planning Office. The State vacated the building in 2010, and the museum purchased the home in 2016 and has made steady progress on the architectural restoration of the historic building, on designs for an addition, and on the concept design for the exhibition. “My sister, Terry Hopkins, and I can’t think of a more fitting way to honor grandfather’s memory than by turning his home into a museum that promotes First Amendment freedoms. He would have liked that,” said Genie Gannett, Guy’s granddaughter, and, with her sister, co-founder of the museum.

At Montpelier from 2000-2019, Cotz took part in the transformation and restoration of the home of America’s 4th President and Father of the Constitution, James Madison. “There are a lot of parallels between the two places,” said Cotz. “When I started at Montpelier, we had a house that needed to be restored, both Madison and Montpelier were largely unheard of, we had very few visitors, and no money. But we had incredible aspirations. This project will be another exciting challenge. And, of course, Madison penned the First Amendment, and was a champion of the rights it protects.” During his tenure as Montpelier’s Director of Education, Cotz developed exhibits and interpretive programs about the Madisons, the enslaved community, the Constitution and Bill of Rights, the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras, as well as architecture and natural history. He was at the forefront of the effort to engage the descendants of enslaved families as stakeholders in Montpelier, and was project director for the ground-breaking exhibition, *The Mere Distinction of Colour*, which won six national museum awards. Cotz coordinated the National Summit on Teaching Slavery and was a co-author and editor of the resulting rubric: *Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Historic Sites and Museums*. According to Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, Associate Professor of History at the Ohio State University, who was an advisor on the exhibit and a participant in the Summit, “working with Christian was one of the highlights of my career. His ability to see what does not yet exist is matched only by his skill at bringing together the right people to make what he has conceived a reality. He is a visionary who is redefining what is possible and what is necessary in museums and at historic sites.”

So, why will people want to come to the First Amendment Museum? According to Cotz, “This will be a conceptual museum about how the First Amendment affects our lives and how we utilize the rights it protects. It will be current and relevant. We will address subjects that are on people’s minds and be part of the national dialogue.” John Dichtl, President and CEO of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), noted that “visitation is growing at museums and historic sites like the First Amendment Museum that can demonstrate the relevance of history. The whole field is heading in that direction, from large, long-established institutions to smaller, bright, new additions.”

Ed Ayers, a frequent advisor to Montpelier, and president emeritus of the University of Richmond, has found that students and the public in general are sadly unaware of how current events are informed by history. “History is often invisible, apparently weightless” said Ayers.

“Yet, like the invisible air we breathe, history is everywhere around us and necessary for our very lives. The First Amendment Museum will make an essential element of that history tangible to visitors. Christian has done that work with race and he can do it with freedom.”

According to a survey conducted by the Newseum in 2016, 40% of Americans can't name any of the First Amendment freedoms. “That’s frightening,” said Cotz. “Justice Brandeis said, ‘the greatest menace to freedom is an inert people.’ To understand and utilize our First Amendment rights is essential to what it means to be American. Madison was an intentional political theorist. He put the First Amendment first on purpose because he saw it as paramount. The Constitution lays out the way the government functions, it even tells us how we can change its functions, but it doesn’t tell us how we instigate that change. That’s what the First Amendment does. It tells us how to go about creating change. It tells us we can believe or imagine anything we want. That we can talk about whatever we imagine. That any idea we can conceive can be printed. That we can peacefully assemble in support of that idea. And that we can petition the government to legislate in favor of that idea. The First Amendment protects our ability to make a better society. It tells us how we create the ‘more perfect union’ the founders hoped future generations would develop. And that’s what we intend to convey here. We want to inspire people to live their freedoms.”

Cotz’s wife, Amy Larrabee Cotz, was born and raised in Belfast, Maine and is a historian in her own right, being the Associate Editor of the *Dolley Madison Digital Edition* at the University of Virginia. Her family has deep roots in Maine - she is descended from steamship captains on Penobscot Bay, guides on Moosehead, factory workers, federal executives, timber cruisers, teachers, and farmers. She and their two daughters, Ava and Aria, will join Cotz in Maine in June. They are looking forward to spending the summer at the family’s camp on a lake not far from the museum. “I’ve been coming to Maine with Amy every summer for almost twenty years,” said Cotz. “Moving here permanently feels like coming home.”