

How the Smithsonian became the latest front in Trump's culture war

In November 2021, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History opened an exhibit called "The Electric Dr. Franklin," describing "Benjamin Franklin's pioneering contributions to electrical science." The exhibit explained that, prior to becoming an abolitionist, he had enslaved people in his household. "Benjamin Franklin's remarkable scientific accomplishments were, in part, enabled by slavery," it declared.

The exhibit speculated that Franklin may have used enslaved people in his electrical research. "Franklin wrote about experiments in which he took shocks and used family and friends in these ways, although he seldom identified who in particular assisted him," stated the exhibit, which closed in 2025 but can still be found online. "Indentured servants and enslaved people in his household could also have been used, although we may never know for certain."

It was an eye-catching conjecture: one of the most revered of the Founding Fathers subjecting people held against their will to possibly painful shocks. And it was one of many details singled out for criticism in a blistering 162-page White House report released in July that argued that the museum had fallen victim to an "ideological capture" that "moved the Museum's mission away from straightforward historical education and scholarship toward an extreme political activism that seeks to transform our country."

[Read full article](#)

[Comments](#)

<https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2026/09/how-the-smithsonian-became-the-latest-front-in-trumps-culture-war/>