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Walmart

MUSEUM

By Lawrence Elizabeth Knox | Photos courtesy of Walmart



An illustration of the American Dream returns to the heart of Bentonville

Walmart has much to celebrate this year. In January, the global retail giant began the gradual unveiling of its new 350-acre home office campus, a workplace that reflects a sustainable future while paying homage to the company's roots.

Additionally, Walmart's proud past and the legacy of its founder, Sam Walton, has been preserved less than a mile away at the Walmart Museum, which reopened March 14 in its original home on the Bentonville Square following a major renovation.

Over the last two-plus years, the museum, which encompasses Walton's 5 & 10 and the Spark Café, was like the city's own "man behind the curtain." The exterior scaffolding remained draped with a cover that showcased an image of the building on the corner of Main Street and Central Avenue. When the curtain was finally pulled back, however, there was no smoke and mirrors — and certainly no wizard. Instead, it was a reimagined museum with double the exhibit space, including a new education center, a hologram theater that brings Walton's words to life, other interactive digital experiences, and a third-floor event venue with a rooftop patio.



Ginger Spiller

APRN, FNP-C, founder of Our Functional Wellness Clinic

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One of the new displays highlights an especially important day in Walmart's history — March 17, 1992, when President George H.W. Bush traveled to Bentonville to present the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Walton, who died less than three weeks later. Remarks from the ceremony decorate the wall.

“Mr. Sam says two things at the end of that,” said Kurt Templeton, senior director of the Walmart Museum and Heritage Group. “He talks about how our purpose is to help people save money so they can live a better life... but the quote I love is when he says, ‘I thought we were quietly living our lives down here in Arkansas.’ He was so humble and also so tenacious. I think Mr. Sam almost took for granted the impact he had.”

Stepping into Walton's 5 & 10 is to be hit by a wave of nostalgia. The dime store, where it all began, is brimming with a colorful collection of vintage toys and candies, but the trip down memory lane doesn't end there. The museum invites visitors to explore the company's rich history, from the 1950s to today, through memorabilia such as the bill of sale from Walton's purchase of the Ben Franklin franchise in Newport, Arkansas, and a marked-up draft of his autobiography, *Sam Walton: Made in America*.

The replica of Walton's office as it appeared when he passed away — featuring 788 artifacts, all carefully returned to the exact same spot — is now shown from a new perspective, as is his red and white 1979 Ford F-150. While the pickup truck is on display in the museum, its new positioning, set against a glass wall of the attached Spark Café, gives customers a special viewing as well, as they eagerly await a scoop of Yarnell's ice cream. The retro spot offers classic flavors, such as Walton's favorite butter pecan, as well as specialties such as Spark Cream, starring Walmart's blue and yellow color palette.

The museum has expanded up, and the second floor evokes a more modern vibe with freestanding digital exhibits that sing of the company's more recent contributions, from serving those



impacted by Hurricane Katrina to driving positive impact across its global supply chain to collaborating with celebrities such as Dolly Parton for good causes. The education center provides a space to build community programming and partnerships while a nearby activity allows children to design a Walmart spark in the form of a sticker. In the first week after reopening, they printed 5,000 stickers, Templeton explained.

“With the open-endedness of how we can evolve the exhibits, I really want to have, every six to 12 months, new reasons for people to come visit the museum,” he said. “It shouldn't be, ‘I've been there once; I don't need to go again.’ It should be, ‘Oh, I want to go see what's new or different,’ and I think we've really designed a building that allows our programs to evolve with whatever the technology allows us to do.”

With the building's rebirth also came a new elevator and a wide staircase, the walls of which are adorned with vintage magazine clippings. Every update was made with impeccable attention to detail, all while preserving the charm of the three-story Terry Block building with the help of Crossland Construction.

Early in the project, which began in November 2022, the crew moved 96 dump truck loads of dirt from the

property, working at night so as not to interfere with the community's daily traffic flow. The Carthage stone was located and hand-tooled by masons locally, while the bricks were fabricated to the original specs and placed with matching grout lines, thanks to scans of the building's exterior.

“They're not perfect, if you were building with today's lasers and levels and all that,” Templeton said, “but they're perfect to what the grout looked like in 1888.”

During the renovation, the museum opened a temporary exhibit on the first floor of the Ledger building, which functioned as a test lab to experiment with improvements, specifically regarding its use of digital storytelling in creating an inclusive and accessible visitor experience.

“We always talk about Walmart's proud past and bright future,” Templeton said. “You can come to the museum, and you can see our proud past, starting with the five-and-dime variety store, but then you can truly appreciate the bright future when you see our supply chain exhibits, and you see the new technology, and you see where we're highlighting the accomplishments of our associates. It's a really nice pair of bookends, honestly.” ■

► For more information, visit corporate.walmart.com/about/walmart-museum.