Tracy Baetz joined the staff of the U.S. Department of the Interior Museum in 2013 as Chief Curator. In this role she has curated several gallery and online exhibitions, the most recent of which opened at the Department of the Interior last summer. Baetz earned a Master’s degree in American Studies from Florida State University and Bachelor’s degrees in History and in Government from the College of William and Mary. Her museum career has spanned 25 years at a variety of institutions—including a decade with national outreach initiatives at the Smithsonian Institution and seven years as the executive director of the accredited Brick Store Museum in Maine.

Interview by Thomas Faith

How did the Department of the Interior’s museum originate?

Under 32nd Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, construction began in 1935 on the Department of the Interior’s third and current headquarters. As Federal Public Works Project No. 4, it’s the first federal building to be authorized and built in the nation’s capital during President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration. Ickes specifically secured $100,000 in PWA funding to include a museum that would occupy an entire wing. While it was a novel concept for a Cabinet-level federal agency, the museum was just one of many tools Ickes employed to better explain and more broadly share the missions of the Department. The museum’s original displays were planned and fabricated over a three-year period by the National Park Service’s Eastern Museum Laboratory (no longer in existence). The Interior Museum opened to the public on March 8, 1938, so we’re celebrating our 80th anniversary this year.

Why did you decide to become the chief curator of the Interior Museum?

The job posting came at a time when the Interior Museum was going through a major transition. Much of my career has been with projects or institutions doing something unprecedented and requiring a lot of flexibility and innovation. I’d had 20 years of museum experience at local, state and national museums but was never federal, so that was intriguing, too. The Department of the Interior dates to 1849, and its history is intertwined with that of the nation—all of which offers a lot of potential from a museum standpoint. I hoped they’d think I’d be a good fit.

What was the first order of business for you as chief curator in 2013?

Reopening the gallery. Wing-by-wing facilities modernization projects in our headquarters necessitated what was slated to be a temporary closure of our public exhibition space in 2009. When I came on board in spring 2013, however, the construction crews were only just getting ready to turn back over to the museum approximately 600 s.f. of its original 8,000 s.f. This significantly-reduced footprint provided our four-person museum staff the unique yet unanticipated opportunity to completely reimagine the space. The immediate focus was on developing exhibitions, the first of which debuted in April 2014.

What are some strengths of the museum’s collection related to the history of the Department of the Interior?

The Interior Museum’s collection contains over 8,000 objects. That’s just a fraction of the more than 205 million museum objects cared for by nine other Department of the Interior bureaus and offices nationwide. The Interior Museum’s historical artifacts consist of “tools of the trade” for scientific discovery, stewardship, and protection—from land management to law enforcement. Others chronicle policy priorities and major initiatives or commemorate milestones. Many more are items gifted to secretaries of the Interior, conveying both the honor and complexities of the position. We also have more than 1,200 works of art, including two Thomas Moran masterpieces of the American West and the official portraits of all 51 past secretaries. Approximately 2,100 objects—most of which date from the late 1800s to mid 1900s—reflect the culture, history, and geographic diversity of American Indian tribes and Alaska Native Villages, as well as represent the Department’s federal oversight of U.S. territories and insular areas.

How do you tell the story of the past, present, and future of the Department of the Interior in 600 square feet, as you did in your recent exhibit People, Land & Water?

We spent a lot of time with our stakeholders to develop a contemporary overview of the Department with this exhibition. A key takeaway from that process was to emphasize Interior’s scope and influence. People, land, and water were common refrains reinforced throughout the exhibit against a backdrop of “West to East and Sea to Sky.” The small space meant that words and artifacts were at a premium and therefore had to be selected for the greatest impact. Rather than silo out each of Interior’s bureaus, we concentrated on their synergies. A timeline and broad interpretive themes of discovering, protecting, contemporary cultures, and powering our future ultimately provided the framework for illustrating that interconnectivity, as well as the projects in which our employees are engaged nationally and internationally.

You have said with People, Land & Water that you tried to accommodate “striders, strollers, and studiers.” How did you accomplish that?

I can’t take credit for that terminology, but it’s an information hierarchy and layered approach to exhibition design that
Newly Declassified Records

This issue’s featured declassified series is a sizeable U.S. Air Force series entitled “Classified Research and Development Case Files.” Totaling 100 Federal Record Center boxes, this Record Group 342 entry UD–16D 8 series contains records that date from the late 1940s to the early 1970s from a number of Air Force commands that originated with Air Research and Development Command (ARDC), created shortly after the founding of the U.S. Air Force in 1947. Over the span of the records in this series, the research and development aspect of ARDC was subsumed into the Air Force Systems Command (AFSC). The records in this series are delineated by the research contract number; unfortunately, the records are not arranged, so earlier dates will be found in higher-numbered boxes. The record types represented in the series run the gamut of what can be found in R&D files: reports, blueprints, photographs, charts, project folders and management files, and computer outputs. The subjects of these R&D efforts vary like the records types—jet, rocket, and ramjet engines, advanced avionics, lasers, radio antennae, and so on. There are several boxes of records devoted solely to the abortive XJ99 lift engine that was slated to equip a joint U.S.–UK vertical take-off (VTOL) fighter. Another box is devoted to the Laser Target Recognition System (LTRS), an early, if not the first, LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) system which has found use today in a wide range of fields such as archeology, geology, biology, mining, surveying, space-flight, as well as for the military services. Like most previous series described in this column, documents have been withdrawn from these records. For the withdrawn documents, standard National Declassification Center withdrawn item notices have been inserted, each bearing enough information for the researcher to make a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) request. To discover more record series declassified by the NDC, please visit the NDC Blog at http://blogs.archives.gov/ndc/ for complete lists of declassified record series made available as soon as declassification processing is complete. Visitors to the blog also have an opportunity to set processing priorities on a number of record series awaiting indexing.

—A. J. Daverede, NARA, NDC