Those paying close attention might find context for the disparities of “Welcome Home” in the fourth gallery, “Home Economics.” It explores the relationship of government and banking to land, housing, and home ownership. Far more than a march toward the American dream, this is a recounting of Indian removal, homesteading, (discriminatory) home financing, health and safety, slum clearance, suburbanization, racially restrictive covenants, subsidized housing, homelessness, and the foreclosure crises of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Here, the racism that has never allowed a level playing field is most overtly described—but only to those who read about it. While this is true in any exhibition, regrettably this is the least visually enticing area of an exhibition filled with interesting things to see.

After alluding to the darker side of housing in the penultimate gallery, the docent transitioned my tour into the final room with the hopeful statement “But people try.” In this gallery the focus broadens from houses to communities. Case studies personalize and complicate stories of gentrification, affordable housing, cohousing, master-planned communities, adaptive reuse, and the rise and fall of high-density public housing. Told through the voices of individuals who have planned, resided in, and studied these places, the stories illuminate how, in the docent’s words, “people” (planners, policy makers, residents, philanthropists, developers, and preservationists) “try” to create communities that live up to ideals. Of course, goals vary considerably, from communal space and shared decision making to economic justice to manicured parks.

Visitors can also voice their perspectives and opinions. Notecards with a single question (there are four in all) prime visitors to record their thoughts about their own homes and housing policy. For now, the responses can only be seen online (at http://www.nbm.org/media/slideshows/house-home-visitor-feedback.html), but a system to exhibit them is being planned. This would be a welcome addition, providing another way for visitors to exchange ideas that are already circulating in “House and Home”: the many ways to build a house and make a home, and the forces within and beyond us that both restrict our choices and allow us to imagine the possibilities.

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Temporary Exhibition, June 15–Sept. 4, 2012. 2,500 sq. ft. Bruce Bustard, curator; Ray Ruskin, designer; James Zeender and Karen Hibbitt, exhibit registrars; Brian Barth, catalog design.

The National Archives and Records Administration exhibits in downtown Washington, D.C., offer the opportunity to see foundational national documents and learn about the function and breadth of the archives’ holdings. The temporary exhibit, “Attachments:
“Attachments” used the popular combination of photographs, individual stories, and family history to draw memorable narratives from essentially administrative documents held by the National Archives. These particular photographs and documents were used to identify, monitor, classify, and sometimes reject individuals wishing to enter, remain, or leave the United States. The exhibit provided basic information about immigration regulations on several small interpretive labels but relied on the individual stories to illustrate the contours, procedures, and effects of the laws. Enlarged photographic portraits accompanied by documents in glass cases dominated the simple gallery space. The striking images gave each individual a presence and reinforced the distinctiveness of each story.

The emphasis was on the faces and stories, but “Attachments” also provided visitors with a sense of the complications of federal bureaucracy and American immigration history. The point of entry for the exhibit was a large, eight-by-twenty-six-foot mural of the Angel Island Immigration Station and a “gate” of piled documents with photographed faces reproduced on frosted glass “bars.” Two interpretive labels introduced the race-based concept of desirable and undesirable immigrants that informed early immigration laws and the rise of photographic identification. Beyond the gate were the stories of the twenty-nine individuals grouped by action: “Entering,” “Leaving,” and “Staying.” An interpretive label introduced each section, and each section had stories of state approval and rejection. “Staying” also included the complicated combination of approval and rejection that was behind Japanese internment during World War II. A closing interpretive label gave an overview of the basic legal changes to immigration policy, concluding with the overhaul of the quota system in 1965. Finally, the section encouraged visitors to discover their own family’s immigration history in the archives’ records.

“Entering,” “Leaving,” and “Staying” included a range of immigrants and citizens of both genders from a range of places and across five decades. The stories represented a wide variety of complicating factors: the boundaries of Chinese exclusion; perceptions of ability, class, or politics; the necessity of proper documentation; and the plight of political and religious refugees. Because each individual was presented as a unique case it was difficult to determine whether they were typical and representative or simply the most captivating. An exhibit in a history museum might have emphasized the similarities and differences of experiences or offered more insight into the process of historical research and interpretation. But an exhibit in an archive is meant to highlight unique items and encourage more research. As a whole, “Attachments” conveyed that each immigrant experience was complicated in its own way, depending on national origin, resources, individual circumstances, and historical context.

Defining the groupings by the actions of the immigrant likely had more resonance with the public than the chronological or topical approach anticipated by historians.
This organization resulted in few opportunities to provide the broad historical context of the social, political, and legal development of immigration regulation. The official expectations, responsibilities, and discretion of federal officials who determined who was allowed to enter, who could stay, and who was deported were difficult to determine from the exhibit as a whole or in specific stories. The groupings also made it difficult to trace changes in policies and preferences, especially without a displayed list of the major laws. However, the exhibit was less about the history of immigration patterns or regulations than it was an introduction to the compelling and resonant stories that can be found in the archives.

A small number of enlarged photographic scenes—the largest elements in the exhibit—did provide an element of broad context. Unfortunately, their simple identification labels did not offer any interpretation. This was a missed opportunity to provide an explanation of the people, places, or events in the images, and to offer guidance on how to question or read the photographs. The image of uniformed officials questioning a young Asian boy could have explained processing protocols, a scene from an Americanization class in 1921 could have defined the term Americanization, and a photograph of European refugees registering in 1944 could have introduced refugee policies. Making scenic photographs such as these instructive rather than illustrative can be a useful tactic to increase interpretation or introduce how historians look at primary sources.

Most striking in the exhibit were the beautiful and sharply focused photographic portraits of the featured individuals. The enlarged and unframed canvas photographs reproduced larger-than-life-sized faces that encouraged visitors to connect personally with the stories. Introductory text suggested “looking into the eyes of the immigrant” to discover “tales of joy and disappointment, opportunity and discrimination, deceit and honesty.” A brief quotation reproduced on the wall next to each image hinted at the drama to be found in the records in the accompanying glass case, and this setup seemed successful at directing visitors to the documents.

While the photographs were evocative, the documents were explicit. Most sources were paper, including many facsimiles of handwritten and typed forms. There also were more unique items, including an elaborate Chinese merchant’s certificate from 1883, personal letters, postcards, and a few cigarette packs with handwritten notes (known as coaching papers) that served as evidence of a fictitious claim of relationship to a Chinese American citizen. Visitors in the gallery spoke about their personal experience with similar documents: one man told his son how “this form is now twenty-five pages long” and “this fee is now $200.” Overall, the documents within the glass case represented the regulatory bureaucracy and all the forms it required.

The physical setup required leaning over the cases to see the majority of the exhibit text; it also resulted in visitors resting on the glass case as they read the story. Detecting the fascinating elements within the documents required close reading that could have been aided with some physical modifications. The beautiful young woman from Armenia may have been smiling in her portrait, but in her 1934 application form she detailed the reasons why she was a “bona fide political or religious refugee” by describing the destruction of her family by Turkish forces. When documents are used to represent a person’s life, it helps to enlarge facsimiles, transcribe handwriting, or highlight the most important lines to help the visitor see how the lines within a document provide a story.
“Attachments: Faces and Stories from America’s Gates” encouraged visitors to connect to the topic by explicitly linking exhibit content to family history. For example, the American historian Erika Lee’s discovery of her grandparents’ wedding portrait within the immigration files was included as part of the story of her grandmother Wong Lan Fong. The label for the last person featured in the exhibit, the teenage Polish refugee applicant Michael Pupa, who applied for entry in 1951 and is still living, explained that the exhibition inspired him to begin to share this part of his past with his family. The content clearly resonated with visitors, prompting some to discuss family immigration experiences related to the era or specifics of a featured story.

The exhibit emphasized finding the individual within the institutional and encouraged visitors to search for their own family stories within the archives. The exhibit book (also called Attachments: Faces and Stories from America’s Gates) and a guide to researching family history were in a glass case at the gallery exit and prominently displayed in the gift shop. Incorporating more information about how to begin to research family history throughout the installation would have strengthened this message. Likewise, providing further reading and resources on a label, in a pamphlet, online, or through a cell phone readable Quick Response Code could direct visitors who did not buy the book to additional historical or instructional information.

Finding the right balance between context and detail is especially challenging for exhibits that feature individuals and that rely heavily on photographic visuals. Here, the
seven labels of interpretation were smaller than almost all of the photographs, making it difficult to offer a coherent historical narrative more nuanced than “immigration is complicated.” Yet that is a significant point in itself, and one that may be new to many visitors. Perhaps more importantly, “Attachments” successfully conveyed the powerful message that real peoples’ stories do exist in the National Archives.

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Permanent exhibition, opened July 2008. 50,000 sq. ft. Jim Fricke, curatorial director; Kristen Jones, senior curator; Pentagram, exhibit designers.

In recent decades museums owned and operated by corporations to narrate their company history have popped up all over the nation’s cultural landscape. Wells Fargo and the Hershey Company were among the pioneers of the practice, and over the past two decades the Coca-Cola Company, Union Pacific Railroad, and Intel have joined the growing list of companies that have followed suit. One of the most recent additions is the Harley-Davidson Motor Company, which opened the Harley-Davidson Museum in Milwaukee in 2008. The museum is fun and engaging, and it succeeds in telling the Harley-Davidson story from the company’s point of view. However, the constraints of corporate ownership seem—perhaps unsurprisingly—to have prevented the institution from exploring the full richness of the company’s history and the role of motorcycles in American life.

The museum’s developers utilized corporate affiliation and seemingly unlimited access to the immense collection of documents and items in the corporate archives and warehouses to create captivating, high-quality exhibits filled with 150 motorcycles, hundreds of pieces of advertising, endless racks of leather jackets and clothing, and a wide range of other memorabilia. Artifacts are the driving force in the displays, and the company invested a significant amount of money in mounting them. Video and computer touch screens are scattered throughout the museum, allowing visitors to go into greater depth on numerous topics. In a display on the motors used in Harley-Davidson products patrons can rev the engines and hear the piped-in, classic Harley engine sound, making the motorcycles and the museum come alive.

The museum’s main exhibition, “The Harley-Davidson Journey,” spans two floors and is an interesting but flawed company history. The visitor enters the exhibit on its second floor, which covers the company from its founding in 1903 to World War II. The first gallery seems more interested in perpetuating the Harley-Davidson origin myth than in answering fundamentally important questions. It asserts that William Harley, Arthur Davidson, Walter Davidson, and William Davidson built the first motorcycles in a small shed on Milwaukee’s west side, without outside help. Herbert Wagner and other scholars have argued, however, that many outside influences helped the company