CONCORD — For decades, visitors have flocked to the Concord Museum to learn about the town’s fabled heritage: the early Colonial settlers, the Minutemen, the Transcendentalists.

But there was something missing from that venerable narrative. The stories of the Native Americans, African-Americans, and women who were also critical to the formation of Concord’s history had been overlooked for far too long, according to the museum’s executive director, Tom Putnam.
With a $13 million upgrade now underway, the Concord Museum intends to address those omissions.

Devised by Amaze Design of Boston, the first three galleries to be completed were opened to visitors last month. They include an entrance gallery called “Gateway to Concord,” a gallery of carefully curated artifacts called “Concord: At the Center of Revolution,” and the “People of Musketaquid” gallery, which Putnam points out is the only public space in Concord fully dedicated to the region’s earliest human inhabitants, the indigenous Wampanoag.

The focal point of that gallery is Turtle Island, a 600-piece ancient stone tool display created as a collaboration between Aquinnah Wampanoag artist Elizabeth James-Perry and archeologist Shirley Blancke.

“I was honored to help provide perspective on our history and artifacts,” said James-Perry, one of three tribal consultants who advised the museum on the design of the Musketaquid gallery. “The excellent stonework, basketry, pottery, porcupine quillwork, and writing are authentic and special and come from contemporary [Wampanoag] artists.”

“The Concord Museum is not just about Colonial antiquities and [Ralph Waldo] Emerson and Thoreau,” Putnam said. “We don’t want to sugarcoat history. What happened in Concord in 1775, the start of the American Revolution, was not complete until the African-Americans who were enslaved at that time and the women who lived here had the same rights the Minutemen fought for.”

The three galleries that have opened are the first stage of a planned two-year renovation that will ultimately create 13 new gallery spaces while also making some significant infrastructural upgrades to the 130-year-old institution. A new education center at the museum opened in 2018.
“These galleries should set the standard for the rest of the renovation,” said David Wood, the museum’s curator. “We plan to carry this attitude and aesthetic throughout the museum. The prospect, as Henry David Thoreau said, is infinite.”

When Putnam and his staff introduce the new galleries to the student groups who visit the museum each year — many of them as part of the Paul Revere’s Ride Fund, which brings children from Lowell and Lawrence to the Concord Museum for free — they emphasize the connections between history and the present.

“Thoreau’s writings almost anticipated today’s climate change issues,” Putnam said. “And Native Americans have believed in living in harmony with the land for centuries — something else we talk about now.”

Tiffany Barlow, who teaches fifth-grade social studies at the Butler Middle School in Lowell, visited the museum last month with her students. “They enjoyed discovering the ways both the Native Americans and the English settlers used the land, and how our own daily activities and items are influenced by both of the cultures,” she said.

Newly designed exhibitions reflect the fusion of past and present. A 12,000-year-old Native American spear point is juxtaposed with an ax made by Wampanoag Jonathan James-Perry, who explains in a video the process of creating the ax.
Students from the Butler Middle School in Lowell, including Khamyah Phal (center left) and Hanstorry Desire (center), listen during a tour of a new gallery at the Concord Museum.

“In honoring the Native American experience, we want to ensure that visitors don’t think of them as prehistoric people,” Putnam said. “These are people who are still living and thriving in the Commonwealth.”

Conversely, he said, “Concord’s history didn’t begin in Colonial times; it began, like the spear point, 12,000 years ago.”

Reflecting the experience of African-Americans in Concord was part of the revitalized museum’s mission as well. Historians believe there were around two dozen slaves living in Concord on the eve of the American Revolution.

One artifact representing their story is a mirror that belonged to Case Whitney, a slave who emancipated himself by volunteering to fight for the Continental Army. Not far from the mirror is a copper teakettle that belonged to Concord’s most famous female historical figure, Louisa May Alcott. Working as a nurse in the Civil War, she drew upon that teakettle for comfort when she was far from home.

As the lead architect designing the new wing, Andrew Anway said his primary charge was to “have the artifacts do the talking.” Here, as in any museum, Anway said, “The goal is to create personal connection and imagine your own self as part of that history.”

In the case of the Minutemen, for example, “See yourself standing in your living room, waiting for the signal to go march with your neighbors.”
“I want everyone of all ages who visits us to see themselves in the galleries,” Putnam said. “That means we need to reflect not just Emerson and Thoreau, but Native Americans, African-Americans, and immigrants of all kinds.”

A school group passes through a new enclosed exhibit space, which used to be an outside walkway exposed to the elements.
The desk at which Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote “Nature” is on display.

Tom Putnam, executive director of the Concord Museum, leads fifth graders from the Butler Middle School in Lowell on a tour of the museum’s new galleries.