

McCain library at ASU to blend history, civics in a living landmark

State leaders, friends and family gathered along Tempe Town Lake for groundbreaking event

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
January 30, 2026

On a sunny Thursday afternoon along Tempe Town Lake, with Papago Park rising in the distance and Arizona State University just across the water, the setting felt intentional.

Shovels were lined neatly in the earth. A towering excavator held a dancing U.S. flag across its frame. Civic leaders, family members and longtime friends gathered shoulder to shoulder on a dirt lot.

The focus was fixed not on nostalgia, but on what comes next.

The event marked the official groundbreaking for the John S. McCain III Library and Museum, a project years in the making and one rooted as much in purpose as in memory. Speaking to the crowd, ASU President Michael Crow reflected on the man at the center of it all.

“When John McCain walked into a room, you understood immediately that democracy was not an abstract idea to him,” Crow said to a crowd of approximately 150 people on Jan. 29. “It was a responsibility, and it was personal.”

That idea framed the afternoon and the institution now taking shape at 200 E. Curry Road in Tempe. Slated to open in 2028, the McCain Library and Museum will be an 80,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art facility situated on a 22-acre site, which was formerly a state tuberculosis sanitarium.

Designed by New York-based SHoP Architects with immersive exhibitions by Local Projects, the building is envisioned as far more than a museum. It is intended to be a tourist destination, gathering place, a teaching tool and a civic commons devoted to leadership, democracy and service.

“This is really more than a library or a museum,” Crow said. “It is about the man, the history and the future.”

Those themes echoed throughout the 90-minute ceremony, which drew a broad group of speakers. Ambassador and John McCain's widow, Cindy McCain, sat alongside Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs, Arizona Cardinals owner Michael Bidwill, philanthropist and former Cardinal Larry Fitzgerald and Rick Davis, a longtime McCain adviser and chairman of the McCain Institute board.

Each spoke about character, courage, humor and McCain's lifelong insistence on serving causes greater than himself.

For Davis, who has worked with the McCain family for nearly three decades, the moment marked both a culmination and a beginning. He described the library and museum as a place meant not only to honor the past but to orient the future.

"This is not just about what happened," Davis said. "It is about putting a north star in the sky for generations to come."

The symbol is deliberate. The north star appears in the museum's logo and reflects McCain's steady moral compass, as well as his life shaped by navigation and service as a naval aviator, prisoner of war, senator and global advocate for democracy.

Inside the building, Davis said visitors will encounter an experience designed to be immersive and deeply human. The lobby will feature a suspended Douglas A-4 Skyhawk aircraft, the same model McCain flew during the Vietnam War, setting the tone for a series of exhibition zones that trace his life and values.

One gallery, named "Courage Under Pressure," will place visitors in a flight simulator that recreates the challenge of landing on an aircraft carrier. Another confronts the brutal realities of being held in captivity at the Hanoi Prison during the Vietnam War, focusing not only on the experience McCain had there during his service in the war but on the collective resilience of his fellow prisoners of war. The tone shifts in later spaces, including an interactive "Straight Talk Express" that recreates McCain's famously candid exchanges with reporters and the public.

Technology plays a central role in how these stories are told. A digital hologram of McCain will guide visitors through key moments of his life, recounting experiences in his own voice and style.

(Video: <https://youtu.be/L0VMWlrJgfU>)

Yet the building is designed as much for conversation as for reflection. A Maverick Forum will host debates, lectures and international dialogues, while restaurants and gathering spaces are meant to make the museum an active destination rather than a one-time visit.

Hobbs emphasized that point in her remarks, calling the library and museum a living civic space.

"This will not be a quiet archive," she said. "It will be a place where people come together to discuss, debate and recommit themselves to democracy and public service."

Larry Fitzgerald offered a more personal view of McCain's legacy. He spoke about their friendship, their shared time after football practices and global leadership forums, and a visit to Washington, D.C., that revealed McCain's ability to connect with everyone he met.

“There was no hierarchy,” Fitzgerald said. “World leaders or strangers at the airport, he treated everyone the same.”

Fitzgerald also recalled sitting with McCain during his battle with cancer, watching him face the hardest fight of his life with grace and humor.

“He never asked ‘why me?’” Fitzgerald said. “That quiet strength is something I will always carry with me.”

That humanity is central to the mission of the McCain Library and Museum. Alongside the exhibits on national security and global affairs, visitors will find galleries devoted to McCain’s connection to Arizona, his relationships with staff and colleagues, and his belief that disagreement — when grounded in respect — strengthens democracy.

For Crow, the decision to locate the institution at ASU was rooted in the university’s public mission. He recalled how the project began with a simple phone call offering land for an idea that, at the time, had no formal plan and no funding.

“Universities exist to serve the public good,” Crow said. “This institution aligns perfectly with that purpose.”

“This is not just a building,” Cindy McCain said. “It is a reminder to the next generation to get back up when you fall, to care passionately about what you believe in, and to always serve something greater than yourself.”

What others had to say:

Michael Bidwill, principal owner, Arizona Cardinals

“(The library) is going to be an amazing thing for Arizona. It’s going to benefit us so much ... it’s going to be a place where young people get educated, get that idea of service beyond self. The idea that freedom matters, leadership, courage, all those things that John McCain stood for.”

Corey Woods, Tempe mayor

“John McCain was a fearless hero. His service to our country started practically at his birth and lasted his entire life. With the establishment of the McCain Library and Museum, his legacy of selflessness, liberty and respect for the dignity of all people will live on for decades to come.”

Doug Ducey, former Arizona governor

“As governor, I reflected on how much John McCain shaped Arizona’s role on the national stage. He understood our state could be both fiercely independent and deeply patriotic, that we could be pragmatic without losing our principles. And that public service is about solving problems, not scoring points. That’s why this library matters.”

Jack McCain, U.S. Naval Reserve aviator and son of John McCain

“We are here today, much like the institution that will soon stand in this place, not to memorialize John McCain the man, but to enshrine the ideals for which he stood. Democracy, national security, character, courage, leadership, human dignity and the prosperity of the state of Arizona and the United States.”

Jimmy McCain, regent, Arizona Board of Regents, and son of John McCain

“This building is more than about honoring my father’s legacy. It’s about investing in Arizona’s future institutions because they drive real economic growth. The library will create jobs during construction and permanent jobs once it is open. It will draw scholars, students, policymakers and visitors from across the country and around the world. Those visitors will support local businesses, fill our hotels, eat in our restaurants and contribute to the long-term vitality of the city of Tempe.”

Judge Diane Humetewa, United States District Court for the District of Arizona

“Throughout his life, John McCain’s public service always began and ended with his love for Arizona, all its people and all its places. ... It is important that the McCain Library and Museum preserve his legacy of service to Arizona. It must reflect his method of give and take in establishing public policy. His approach to nonpartisan or bipartisan compromise always focused on doing what is right for Arizona.”

Dana Getman, principal, SHoP Architects

“We are honored to partner with the McCain family and Arizona State University on this pivotal project. As a place for exchange and engagement, our focus is on what the building does — how it fosters connection and serves as a catalyst for advancing the combined missions of the McCain legacy and ASU. John McCain’s commitment to protecting Arizona’s wilderness and public landmarks reflects a fundamental respect for the land’s integrity. Our building embodies that same philosophy of land stewardship: rather than dominating or disrupting the natural environment, it maintains a symbiotic relationship with it, becoming part of the ecosystem.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



From left: Former Cardinals football player Larry Fitzgerald, Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs, Ambassador Cindy McCain, ASU President Michael Crow and principal owner of the Arizona Cardinals Michael Bidwill break ground on the McCain Library and Museum in Tempe on Jan. 29. Photo by Samantha Chow/Arizona State University

Gallery



ASU President Michael Crow speaks during the groundbreaking ceremony for the McCain Library and Museum in Tempe on Jan. 29.



Grandchildren of the late U.S. Sen. John McCain shovel dirt during the groundbreaking for the McCain Library and Museum in Tempe on Jan. 29.



An artist's rendering shows the John S. McCain III Library and Museum at Arizona State University as seen from Papago Park. The 80,000-square-foot facility will be on a 22-acre site overlooking Tempe Town Lake, across from ASU's Tempe campus.



The John S. McCain III Library and Museum — shown here in an artist's rendering of the lobby — will host programs that foster civic dialogue and will serve as a research opportunity to explore the late senator and naval officer's collection of papers and other items from his career in public service.



An artist's rendering shows the main entrance from the promenade. The McCain Library and Museum aims to be a vibrant hub for civic engagement with immersive, interactive experiences to inspire future leaders committed to the public good.