

Salute Independence

What Better Place To Do It? Philadelphia, Of Course!

By Eric Karlan

Residents in big cities often overlook local tourist sights. For New Yorkers, it may mean shunning the Statue of Liberty. Or in Washington, D.C., it might be a matter of driving past the Jefferson Memorial and ignoring Thomas Jefferson inside.

In Philadelphia recently, Independence Hall was something of a mystery for college student Eric Karlan. That was until *Frederick Magazine* invited Karlan to write a travel piece tied, in part, to *FM*'s History Sleuth Challenge (a summer collaboration with Frederick County Public Libraries, embracing the era of Abigail Adams and Dolley Madison).

Karlan, a soon-to-be senior at the University of Pennsylvania, is one of many college journalism students who queried the magazine about an assignment this summer. Karlan's ingenuity and writing talents precipitated a special invitation. He agreed to visit Independence Hall, along with the Independence Living History Center, and write about his experience for *FM*'s July issue—a fitting time given celebration of the Fourth of July.

We asked Karlan to take us from the 30th Street Station in downtown Philly to the historic stops. (The station offers a natural starting point for any Marylanders hopping an Amtrak train to the City of Brotherly Love.) Let Karlan tell you the rest. —*Frederick Magazine*



Independence Hall, Philadelphia. Right: The Liberty Bell, located on Market Street, between 5th and 6th streets.



Books, quills and candles recreate the 18th century interior of the Assembly Room at Independence Hall. In this room, the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution were signed. Open year-round (except Christmas Day) the site is operated by the National Park Service.

The Market-Frankford subway heads east out of 30th Street Station, bounding underneath turquoise-glass skyscrapers that tower over the William Penn statue perched on City Hall. The train slows at the Fifth Street stop, and a recorded voice invites travelers to step off, walk up and explore historic Philadelphia.

I surface at the intersection of Fifth and Market streets, and see Independence Square—an oasis of early American charm and history. I cross the stone-paved street and walk one block west to the Independence Visitor Center, where visitors pick up tickets for the tour of Independence Hall: “the birthplace of America.”

Nine gongs from the bell tower atop Independence Hall tell the time. Even at the early Wednesday morning hour, with a steady drizzle falling, the long hall at the Visitor Center is packed. School groups and tourists await, eager to retrace the steps of our Founding Fathers.

I have come at a good time. On warm, sunny days, tickets usually run out by mid-morning. Tickets are always free—except for the \$1.50 online reservation fee per ticket.

I grab my ticket, walk one block south past the Liberty Bell, and head into the east wing of Independence Hall. Since Independence Hall is a national historical park, a park ranger serves as our tour guide. The ranger leads my tour group

into the 1732 Georgian-style brick building—the most historic building in American history. I am awed at the sense of going back in time.

To the right of the entrance is a courtroom, set up like it was in the 18th century. There is a round table in front of the judge’s bench where the prosecution and the defense lawyers both sat. And there is the prisoner’s dock toward the back of the room, where the defendant literally “stood trial.” On the opposite side of the hall is the Assembly Room.

THE ROOM WITH THE VIEW

Standing in the Assembly Room, I feel overwhelmed with patriotism. I am now



Atop Philadelphia City Hall, city founder William Penn overlooks Philly. The 37-foot, 27-ton bronze statue is one of 250 sculptures in and around the building (constructed 1871–1901, \$24 million) created by Alexander Milne Calder (grandfather to mobile sculptor Alexander Calder).

standing in a room once occupied by the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, the 39 signers of the Constitution and every United States president. Books, quills and candles are spread across tables covered in green cloths to recreate the atmosphere. The original wooden “Chair of the Rising Sun” that George Washington used during the 1787 Constitutional Convention sits in the front of the room. During the proceedings, Philadelphian Benjamin Franklin stared at the chair’s carving of a half-sun on the horizon, wondering if it was rising or setting. After the Constitution was signed, Franklin said, “Now I know that it is a rising sun.”

ARCHAEOLOGY HEADQUARTERS

After the 30-minute tour is over, I am on to my next location: the Independence Living History Center, an archaeology laboratory examining artifacts uncovered from the grounds beneath the historical district. The Living History Center is just two blocks east, on the corner of Third and Chestnut streets. Walking along Chestnut, I pass many historical landmarks: a statue titled The Signer commemorating the Declaration’s signing, the Second National Bank and Carpenter’s Hall, where the First Continental Congress convened in 1774. Turning right there is the First National Bank, and across the street, my destination.

Unlike Independence Hall’s historical presence, my second stop houses a modern laboratory. Here, archaeologists examine the everyday minutiae of early Philadelphia life: chipped pieces of china dishes and bowls, animal bones leftover from dinners, remnants of smoking pipes. Most of these artifacts, however, are not for public display—so I head to the site of the latest excavation.

BEFORE THE WHITE HOUSE

I walk back to an inconspicuous wooden platform, just across the street from the Visitors Center where my morning began. The site is a hidden treasure in Independence Park, easily missed by most tourists. Stand on that wooden platform and you stand on the very spot George Washington and John Adams served their terms as president: the President’s House.

Before its demolition, Washington once called the three-story brick mansion the “best single house in the city.” From 1790 through 1800, the President’s House served as the headquarters of the executive branch. Essentially, it was the predecessor to today’s White House. In May 1800, Adams and the federal government left Philadelphia for the newly built capital: Washington, D.C.

Despite the Philadelphia site being

abandoned, I find it hard to believe anyone could have allowed the President’s House to be destroyed. It fell victim to a fire in 1832. I knew Philadelphia was once our nation’s capital, but I never realized the President’s House once stood at Sixth and Chestnut streets.

Thanks to the work of archaeologists, generations to come will know better. It started with an excavation in 2007 and search for clues to the lives of America’s first two presidents. During the dig, archaeologists uncovered a basement underneath the spot that was the kitchen, a foundation wall once under the President’s second-floor office, and underground passages from the kitchen to the main house once used by residents—and slaves.

Ironically, despite being the “father” of the Free World, Washington owned nine slaves during his two-term tenure as president. (Adams, a Massachusetts man, never owned slaves.) Nevertheless, plans are already underway to commemorate not merely the site of the President’s House, but to memorialize Washington’s nine slaves. The memorial will be erected in the near future—a fitting addition to the United States of America’s most historical three blocks. ✦

Information

www.nps.gov/inde

History Sleuth Challenge

Philadelphia makes a perfect destination for enterprising detective teams embarking on the History Sleuth Challenge, sponsored by Frederick County Public Libraries and *Frederick Magazine*.