

Shouldering Independence



As the day begins at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, I join Laura, one of our most experienced interpreters, as she organizes the first tour of the day. Moving along the line of waiting visitors, sharing information, talking to our guests, passing out maps, Laura and I overhear snippets of conversation. The startlingly bright orange tee shirts in line this morning belong to students from Middleburg Middle School. Their teachers undoubtedly brought a carefully prepared lesson plan for the day. The students, on the other hand, worry about food. "I'm hungry, why can't we get ice cream? Why do we have to stand here?" Cheerfully, Laura engages the teenagers in a discussion of ice cream flavors and manages to weave in the fact that Thomas Jefferson brought the recipe for ice cream to the United States.



Fig 1. Independence Hall. Courtesy of Independence National Historical Park.

Farther down the line, we find a small group of men and women in business suits. A closer look reveals that they all wear nametags from a convention of lawyers that is in town this week. This group is apparently on a subcommittee on "Constitutional Rights v. the Fight against Terrorism." As they wait, they debate the constitutional issues involved in criminal profiling. Obviously, they have more serious matters on their minds than ice cream flavors.



Fig 2. Visitors begin the tour. Courtesy of Independence National Historical Park.

The first tour of the day will be completed by a group of senior citizens from Kansas. As the National Park Service District Ranger, I explain to this and every other group visiting Independence Hall that because of antiterrorism measures the visitors will pass through a metal detector before entering the building. One of the women expresses concern: "Is this a target?" As Laura tries to reassure her, one elderly visitor proclaims "We lived through Pearl Harbor and D-Day, they can't scare us away now." The nervous woman doesn't look convinced.

Quickly assessing her group, Laura leads the senior citizens, the lawyers, and the middle schoolers into the Assembly Room, where tables covered in green baize, soft gray walls, and authentic furnishings wait quietly for our visitors. Once this room rang with raised voices, the sound of walking sticks pounding on the floor, and maybe even doors slamming as irate delegates stormed out. The United States was not born in silence.



Fig 3. Independence Hall Assembly Room. Courtesy of Independence National

Historical Park.

Here, in the Assembly Room, Laura begins her narrative. Using the individuals who participated in the tumult of the Second Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention she weaves a story of human emotion, conflict, compromise, and achievement. She's careful to reach out to all visitors: for her hungry students, she points out that much of the business of the Convention occurred during meals; for the lawyers, she shares the legal backgrounds of many of the delegates. James Madison and George Mason also worried about individual rights. For everyone, she points out that the delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 knew fear and uncertainty. In some cases, they fretted about personal safety; but, more frequently, they worried about the possibility that their country would not live up to its potential.

The success of this tour is made obvious by the questions visitors raise at the end. "If George Washington was the peace maker of the convention, who was the trouble maker?" "What happened to George Mason after he refused to sign the Constitution?" "What do you think these men would feel if they came back and learned about September 11?" Laura solemnly replies, "The technology to build and destroy the World Trade Center would amaze them; the evil in human hearts would not." She points out that many of the provisions in the Constitution, such as the balance of power, come from an understanding of human fallibility. On the way out the door, the middle-school students debate whether ice cream or the Declaration of Independence represents Thomas Jefferson's greatest achievement.

Unfortunately, not every tour goes this smoothly. Those occasions when visitors proclaim historical "truths" that we can not document as accurate sometimes present insurmountable challenges. Recently, a group of visitors insisted that the National Park Service ignores the influence of Christianity on United States history. As soon as their tour entered the Assembly Room, this group began bombarding the ranger with questions. "Originally each table held a Bible. Why did you remove them?" "The members of both the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention began each day's session on their knees in prayer. Why don't you mention that?" At first, the ranger attempted to answer their questions. He explained that the furnishings in the room reflect the research done by our curators. The curators labor over diaries and letters and contemporary recollections to identify furnishings and books that were in the room. In answer to the second question, he acknowledged the possibility that the visitor has information that we don't have. "We are always interested in learning more about what happened here. Our records don't show that the delegates prayed. If you can tell me where you learned about the delegates praying, I would like to consult that source."

Unfortunately, in this case the ranger's approach failed. These particular visitors appeared unwilling to enter into a dialogue; they seemed only interested in sharing their particular point of view.

Eventually, the ranger asked them to hold their questions to the end of the tour and tried to finish his presentation for the rest of the tour. At this point, the group began singing "God Bless America" making further interpretation impossible. Sadly, this tour ended with this group being escorted from the building.



Fig 4. A ranger answers questions. Courtesy of Independence National Historical Park.

Fortunately, confrontations at this level rarely occur. But interpreters trained to use their skills to connect the visitors, the resource, and the story of American Independence occasionally have difficulty realizing that not all visitors need their matchmaking skills. Many individuals arriving from former Soviet-block nations and from underdeveloped nations come with a powerful understanding of Independence Hall. We frequently hear from visitors who tell us about unofficial, or in some cases, illegal schools where they learned as children about America's quest for freedom. As adults, they relate our eighteenth-century story to their nation's twentieth- or twenty-first century struggles. I tell my staff that we have nothing to teach a survivor of the Soviet gulag about freedom.

The challenging, yet glorious, differences among visitors' expectations when they come to Independence Hall constitute a unique opportunity for learning. In the months since September 11, it has become clear that our visitors reflect the world situation. When things seem relatively calm, we experience routine visits. When the situation in the Middle East gets worse, we greet visitors who come seeking tranquillity and a reconnection to this country's founding as a measure of solace and comfort in a disturbing new world. For some of these visitors, it is troubling to encounter protesters—massing in front of the Liberty Bell Pavilion—complaining about the United States' military actions in Afghanistan. One gentleman who lost a relative in the World Trade Center broke down in tears at the sound of a small group chanting antiwar slogans directly outside the Liberty Bell. The sensitive ranger on duty engaged this gentleman in conversation and helped him to understand that the freedoms given by the Constitution, the symbol of the Liberty Bell, and the unpleasant protest all join together to protect this nation from suffering the fate of Afghanistan. As long as this freedom prevailed, as long as Americans understand the reality of the Constitution, his daughter did not die in vain.

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