

Bringing the city's history back to life

In its recent report, "Destination Philadelphia," the City Planning Commission concluded that the historic district needed to be revitalized in order to rekindle visitor interest. While private and government organizations have been quick to respond to this need with plans to preserve or restore the historic structures within Independence National Historical Park, they have been less willing to address a more pressing need: inspiring the general public through new ways of interpreting Philadelphia's history.

Under federal law, the National Park Service is charged with the responsibility of interpreting many of the most historic sites within the jurisdiction of Independence Park. Their efforts have been commendable, particularly in the decade leading to the 1976 Bicentennial. Over the last 20 years, however, there has been increasing reluctance to deviate from a standard narrative presentation of the events which preceded the American Revolution and the subsequent Constitution and early republic periods.

Often these presentations fail to recreate for the visitor the prevailing mood of our country as it existed in the late 18th century. Inspiration is sacrificed for content, entertainment for the dry facts and monotonous themes that become confused with good, sound history. Those attempts that have been made to recapture visitor interest have taken the form of a computerized exhibit on the Constitution or special effects displays, most notably at Franklin Court. But rarely is there a genuine opportunity for the visitor to become engaged in the events that shaped our nation's history.



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What the historic district needs are more living historians like Ralph Archibold, who has so completely embraced the personality and idiosyncrasies of Benjamin Franklin that he has become indistinguishable from the founding father. Archibold not only tells the history of our city, but he does it so convincingly that he engages those who cross his cobblestoned path. Just imagine how inspirational it would be to meet others like him; a town crier who stirs visitor interest by distributing copies of Tom Paine's "Common Sense," the pamphlet that mobilized public support for the American Revolution; or an Elizabeth Drinker, the Quaker homemaker who had some very progressive opinions about the role of women in Philadelphia society.

Park Superintendent Martha Aikens and her administrative staff would do well to consider a more serious commitment to living history than it has displayed in the past. Let's not forget that history can be inspirational as well as factual and the visitors who come to our city want — and deserve to have — both. ■

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