

Museum of the American Revolution set to open in Philadelphia

By Natalie Pompilio
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A replica privateer ship is among the exhibits at the Museum of the American Revolution, which opens on the 242nd anniversary of the “shot heard round the world” in 1775. (Bluecadet)

PHILADELPHIA — As the nearly 12-minute film detailing its historical importance draws to a close, the tent that served as George Washington’s home and headquarters during the American Revolution appeared in silhouette behind the screen. As the music swelled, the linen structure present at the birth of the nation was revealed.

“Today, Washington’s tent is here, still bearing witness, reminding us of times when the nation’s future hung in the balance,” the narrator intoned. “The tent, like the republic, survives. It remains a symbol of the fragile American experiment, the power of the people to secure their own freedoms.”

It’s an engrossing, dramatic moment, this reveal of the crown jewel in the collection of Philadelphia’s new Museum of the American Revolution. The object of awe is a fragile, yellowing textile with scalloped trim, but oh, the stories it could tell.

“We had 50 Boston fourth-graders here in the tent theater for a test audience, and when the tent started to be revealed and you saw the scrim, they started grabbing each other and pointing. When the lights came up on the tent, they broke into applause and cheered,” said R. Scott Stephenson, the museum’s vice president of collections, exhibitions and programming. “I actually had tears in my eyes because I felt it rush through me.”

The first museum devoted to the country’s earliest years opens Wednesday, the anniversary of the opening battles of the American Revolution at Lexington and Concord and “the shot heard round the world” on April 19, 1775. It stands in “America’s most historic square mile,” a few blocks from the Liberty Bell, the first White House and Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence was signed and the U.S. Constitution ratified.

While there are dozens of museums and historical areas that touch on elements of the American Revolution, most focus on one battle or one person, Stephenson said. There's long been a need for a single museum that would offer a complete account of this crucial period, one that would not compete with the other sites but would fuel interest in the shared topic."



Exterior view of the Museum of the American Revolution. (Museum of the American Revolution)

"As Benjamin Franklin said in 1776, 'We must all hang together or we will surely hang separately,'" Stephenson said. "It's a big global story, but Philadelphia is a place where all those threads cross."

While some may think that the success of Broadway's "Hamilton" was the driving force behind the museum, the show had its stage debut in 2015 and Stephenson has been involved in this project for more than 10 years. In fact, many of the core exhibition items come from the collection of the Rev. W. Herbert Burk, who began advocating for a museum to honor Washington in the early 1900s.

Still, "Hamilton" has been a gift to the museum, Stephenson said, noting how the fourth-graders who applauded Washington's tent also ran through the exhibition singing the show's songs and pointing out familiar faces and scenes. The museum's location, on the site of a former National Park Service building, is also fortuitous: across the street from the First Bank of the United States, which Hamilton founded, and a restaurant called the Little Lion, which was one of Hamilton's nicknames.

"It's prepared this huge audience to receive this museum when they would have been arriving cold and without points of reference," Stephenson said. "It acknowledges that there's complexity, that it's messy, that these were not demigods the likes of which we'll never see again. When you know the real story, you realize there are Alexander Hamiltons among us today."

The entire project received \$30 million in state grants but the rest of its funding has come from corporate and private donors, including a \$50 million gift from founding chairman H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest and \$10 million from the Oneida Indian Nation. The \$120 million building includes 16 galleries and two theaters taking up 32,000 square feet, as well as a cafe and shop.

Exhibition items include a Revolutionary War cannon, a pair of booties made from the red jacket of a fallen British soldier for an American baby, and a mug from the 1770s that still smells of rum. After seeing a video re-creation of men pulling down a lead statue of King George III on horseback in New York in 1776, visitors can see large chunks of the statue that still exist and learn that the rest was transformed into 42,000 musket balls referred to as “melted majesty.”

The museum encourages visitors to approach its exhibits with four questions in mind: How did people become revolutionaries? How did the revolution survive its darkest hours? How revolutionary was the war? What kind of nation did the revolution create?



The “Posters of Protest” digital interactive display at the Museum of the American Revolution. (Bluecadet)

“We’re trying to emulate science museums. They’re a little bit better at asking questions, like ‘Are dinosaurs more like reptiles or like birds?’ They’ll involve you in the scientific process,” Stephenson said. “So often history museums in the past have been ‘fact, fact, fact, tea cup, fact, painting, fact, fact,’ as if history is something you just gather up and put on display.”

The museum takes a thoughtful, yet playful approach. “More Empire, More Problems” reads the wall of a gallery that breaks down the challenges Britain faced managing its global empire. Touch-screen displays throughout allow visitors to ponder what choice they would have made on the eve of war.

Engravings are animated, including one from 1775 that shows fighting at Concord Bridge. The addition of movement and sound presents the picture in an entirely different light. Nearby are items that “were witnesses to the fight,” Stephenson said, like a mirror from a farmhouse seen in the background and a piece of the bridge.

The museum wants to tell a deeper story, which means acknowledging that even heroes had flaws. Washington often shared his tent with an enslaved African who served as his valet. Native American tribes that chose to support Washington’s Army did so believing that they would be well-treated in victory. Free Africans did the same with the same misperception.

“People are hungry for more complicated stories about the past. The alternative has been that history is either a sermon or a bummer,” Stephenson said. “Here we ultimately hope we’re telling a story that will be uplifting.”

The final display features a wall of photographs of people who were alive during the Revolutionary War. As visitors walk along taking in the photos, they draw closer to a wall of mirrors bearing the words “Meet the future of the American Revolution.”

“As you march along, you see yourself reflected in the mirror and you see [these revolutionaries] looking over your shoulder,” Stephenson said. “Our hope is you feel you are part of the American Revolution now and have a responsibility to carry it to meet the future.”