

The Philadelphia Inquirer's Walking Tours of Historic Philadelphia

Fourth Edition

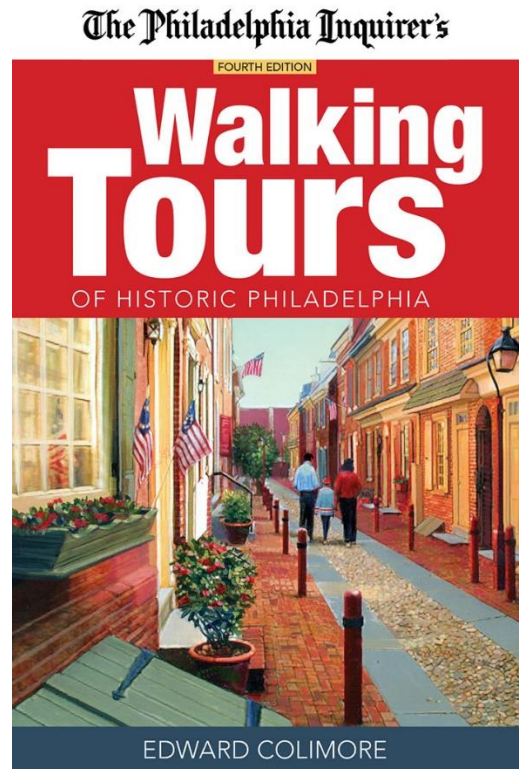
Edward Colimore

Introduction

More than three centuries ago, William Penn set out to create a “Greene Country Towne,” which would “never be burnt, and allways be wholesome.” The new town would be a very different place from the congested, disease-plagued London of his time. Penn called his city a “Holy Experiment,” a place of refuge for people longing to live in peace and worship freely. He envisioned thriving markets, handsome houses, orchards, gardens and fields—a veritable paradise. Philadelphia, he named it, the “City of Brotherly Love.”

“And thou Philadelphia, the virgin settlement of this Province named before thou were born,” wrote Penn in a prayer two years after the city’s founding in 1682. “What love, What care, What service and What travail has there been to bring thee forth and preserve thee from such as would abuse and defile thee.”

The love and travail are still very much present, as Philadelphians of the 21st century struggle to preserve the unique character of Penn’s city. In the years between his time and ours, Philadelphia has become more like London in its crowding and griminess. Yet glimpses of the “greene country towne” remain in the proprietor’s four lovely public squares and in the ribbons of greenery that roll back from the Schuylkill River in Fairmount Park, the nation’s largest landscaped urban park.



Penn had set a tone for Philadelphia, imparting a certain tolerance and hospitality that drew people from many nations and creeds. In the 18th century, the city became the perfect backdrop for a heroic era of ideas that changed the world. This is the birthplace of the United States, where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were written and argued about. Some of the most treasured icons of American democracy are here—Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, and the places where Benjamin Franklin and Betsy Ross lived and worked.

From the gathering of the first Continental Congress here in 1774 until President John Adams left 26 years later for the new capital in Washington, the greatest leaders of the emerging nation walked these streets, worshipped in these churches and lived out the most dramatic period of their lives.

This book walks you through Philadelphia's—and the nation's—early history. You'll see it unfold down quaint, cobblestoned alleys and busy, broad streets, in simple brick rowhouses and venerable mansions, in tiny courtyard gardens and magnificent parks. In these pages, you'll find the historical context of the buildings before you as well as guides to scores of out-of-the-way places. Along with the walks are tips on the modern city's amenities, including nearby restaurants, cafes, parking and public transportation.

Philadelphia is not one but several cities—and you can experience all of them if you know where to look. Tucked amid the glass-and-steel skyscrapers are not only the brick-and-mortar buildings of the colonial and Federal periods, but also blocks of homes from the Civil War era and the Age of Victoria.

What sets Philadelphia apart from many other cities is that it preserved, rather than bulldozed, much of its past. There are more historic structures here than in any other comparable American city, architecture critic Lewis Mumford once observed, primarily because so much history was made here. And there are abundant records and drawings of old Philadelphia buildings, making the restorer's job easier, because of the early presence of fire insurance companies, dating from the founding in 1752 of the Philadelphia Contributionship for Insurance of Houses from Loss by Fire. All of these things have combined to make Philadelphia an American time capsule, a unique museum of the nation's political, social, military and architectural history.

The neighborhoods that gave the city a comfortable human scale in times past are still here—along with the massive office towers. Society Hill, for example, stands today as a symbol of colonial Philadelphia—a part of the city that had fallen into slums by the turn of the 20th century but was restored in the late 1950s and '60s through an innovative plan of public-private development. Yet even on these quiet residential blocks of three- and four-story brick townhouses, the walker looks up to find modern apartment towers looming overhead. These collisions of past and present, mixed with discoveries along the way, make walking historic Philadelphia an experience of constant surprise and delight.

After a section of Useful Information, each tour begins with a brief overview and history of the area. The full walking tours, with an average of 20 stops, will occupy the better part of a day. Some tours—such as those taking in Fairmount Park, Germantown and Chestnut Hill—require driving as well as walking because of the distances involved.

Independence National Historical Park—site of Independence Hall, Congress Hall, Old City Hall, Carpenter's Hall and dozens of other historic places—has undergone major enhancements in recent years. The Independence Visitor Center (Sixth Street between Market and Arch Streets) opened in 2001 and has undergone a \$15 million renovation wrapping up in 2019. The National Constitution Center (Sixth and Arch Streets), a national museum offering an interactive tour of American democracy, opened in 2003 and has also seen upgrades. A new Liberty Bell Center (Sixth and Chestnut Streets) opened in 2003, and underwent extensive landscape renovations in 2019. The building and grounds offer improved interpretation and surroundings for one of the nation's most revered icons. The changes have made better use of the sprawling 15-acre Independence Mall stretching from Race to Chestnut Streets.

As you walk back in time, take a moment to reflect on the great men and women of the Revolution, going through their daily lives. Benjamin Franklin wrote about the pleasures of Philadelphia in a letter to a friend in 1786. He mentioned his family, friends, books and gardens. He wrote about balls, concerts, parties and card games. "I have indeed now and then a little compunction in reflecting that I spend time so idly; but another reflection comes to relieve me, whispering, 'You know that the soul is immortal; why

then should you be such a niggard of a little time, when you have a whole eternity before you?"

Indeed. Welcome to Philadelphia. Enjoy.

Edward Colimore