

David C. Murray

Exploring Philadelphia

Walking tours and libraries in the Center City

Jessica Pressler once quipped, “Philadelphians occasionally refer to their city—somewhat deprecatingly—as the ‘sixth borough’ of New York.”¹ From an outsider’s perspective, this witticism might appear to hold some truth. After all, the two cities’ downtowns are a relatively “short” 100-minute commute from one another. New Yorkers flocked to Philadelphia in the early-to-mid 2000s to take advantage of a downtown condo boom. And anyone who has ever visited Philadelphia knows that its older neighborhoods—

to south between Vine and South streets for about 11 equally reasonably sized city blocks. Exploring this area by foot is one of the city’s great joys.

Divided by tradition into about a dozen neighborhoods, visitors to Center City can witness the best of the history of American urban architecture in one afternoon. My recommendation is to move slowly east to west beginning with Elfreth’s Alley in Old City (www.elfrethsalley.org/), making sure not to miss Independence Mall



Center City, Philadelphia. Photo credit: Paul D. Toth.

Rittenhouse Square, Queen Village, and Northern Liberties among them—manifest a rather New York kind of vibe.

In my experience Philadelphians mostly dismiss such comparisons, preferring instead to take a longer view. Philadelphia is the keystone of the Keystone State. Its historic downtown area, referred to locally as Center City, runs east to west between the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers for 27 blocks, and north

State Park, including Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, and the new National Constitution Center before moving on to the antique shops and restaurants on Pine Street east of Broad.

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Elfreth's Alley, Center City Philadelphia. Photo credit: Paul D. Toth.

Cross over Broad and continue west on Pine Street until reaching South Smedley Street, a picture postcard opportunity if ever there was one. Smedley emerges onto Spruce Street about a block and a half from Rittenhouse Square, the most expensive neighborhood in the city. Rittenhouse Square is not to be missed for its liveliness and high people-watching quotient, particularly in spring.

If you are still up for more walking, continue west on Spruce to the finest block of brownstones in Center City located between 20th and 21st streets.

End your walking tour on Waverly or one of the other side streets near Fittler Square, where the Philadelphia trinity and other restored 19th-century row houses are on full display. There are only three rooms in a trinity-style row house—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—each of which is stacked directly on top of the other. Some of the smaller Philadelphia row houses contain a “complete home” in as little as 450 square feet!



Independence Hall, South Façade. Photo credit: Paul D. Toth.

A librarian's paradise

Philadelphia plays second fiddle to no other city in the relatively brief but tumultuous sweep of U.S. History. While every American school child has heard about the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, and Ben Franklin (generally in that order), few Americans appreciate the city's impact on the economic and cultural life of the nation *after* 1800. For many years during the colonial era, Philadelphia held the distinction of being the second largest city in the British Empire (second to London, naturally).² Not until

1830 did the metropolitan population of New York (223,124) finally surpass that of Philadelphia (188,797).³

With the completion in 1825 of the Erie Canal, which connected the Hudson River with the Great Lakes, New York finally gained a firm economic advantage. Philadelphia, of course, did not go away. The city instead turned to manufacturing and industry of all kinds, focusing especially on textiles and shipbuilding.

From Louisa May Alcott to Marian Anderson, Samuel Barber to Jim Croce, long indeed is the list of prominent Americans born in or near Philadelphia, or who moved to the city and were significantly

shaped by it. Today this rich, pre- and post-Revolutionary War history is well reflected in the abundance and diversity of cultural institutions located throughout the city. By way of example, area libraries and archives together constitute one of the richest repositories of primary-source documents in the United States. Philadelphia is truly a librarian's paradise. ACRL



Architectural Sculpture on the Façade of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo credit: Paul D. Toth.

2011 participants will no doubt enjoy taking the time to visit at least one or two of these special library collections. Many of the most interesting venues are within easy walking distance of the conference hotels, while others are only a short bus or subway ride away. Here are a few of my favorite librarian haunts.

- **Free Library of Philadelphia (www.freelibrary.org).** One of the country's great public library systems with 7 million unique items, the Central Library of the Free Library of Philadelphia is located at the corner of Vine and 20th Streets. Those of us affiliated with university research collections sometimes forget that public libraries, large and small, house treasures beyond compare. I recommend visiting the Free Library as much for its unique collections, which include Early American Children's Books, a historical Map Collection 130,000 items strong, and a collection of more than 500 Incunabula, as for the 1927 Central Library's impressive architecture (particularly the interior spaces).

- **Philadelphia Museum of Art—Museum Library (www.philamuseum.org/library/).**

Located within the confines of one of the world's great art museums (follow the Benjamin Franklin Parkway to its terminus), the Museum Library is open to the public Tuesday through Saturday, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The facility brags of a collection of more than 200,000 items, many of which are rare, and the librarians there are happy to help patrons research their personal art objects. Currently on offer is "Revisiting the Centennial: Resources from the Library and Archives," an exhibition of objects from the 1876 Philadelphia world's fair, the first ever held in the United States.

- **Historical Society of Pennsylvania (www.hsp.org/).** Rightly or wrongly, the collections of some local historical societies are viewed as ancillary to the study of national U.S. history. Not so for the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, located at 1300 Locust Street. Renowned for its 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century manuscript collections, i.e., primary-source ephemera, this institution owns more than 600,000 books and serials. Those interested in genealogy, ethnic, or immigrant studies will wish to have a look. Hours are limited, so call ahead: (215) 732-6200. Daily admission costs \$8 for visitors.



Book Stacks, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia. Photo credit: Paul D. Toth.

- **The Library Company of Philadelphia (www.librarycompany.org).** Founded in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin as a subscription library for shareholders, The Library Company focuses on American history and culture from the 17th through 19th centuries. Highlights of the collection include rare books and manuscripts, broadsides, prints, photographs, works of art, and all manner of ephemera. The Library Company houses the second-largest collection of books and other items printed in the British Colonies. If you are familiar with and impressed by Readex's

Early American Imprints, you will savor a visit to the Library Company. The building is located across the street from the Historical Society on Locust Street about halfway between 13th and Broad. Open and free to the public, hours are between 9:00 a.m. and 4:45 p.m., Monday through Friday.

University archives

Conference attendees interested in special libraries and archives might wish to visit the special collections of two local ARL Libraries: Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania. Temple is home to the nationally prominent Urban Archives and Blockson collections. The Urban Archives (library.temple.edu/collections/urbana) houses the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* clippings collection and other archival materials relating to the history of the Delaware Valley from the late 19th to the late 20th centuries. The Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection (library.temple.edu/collections/Blockson) serves both a local and national audience of researchers interested in the study of the history of people of African descent. Both collections are located on Temple's Main Campus in North Philadelphia. Due to renovations, the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of the University of Pennsylvania is temporarily located on the 5th rather than the 6th floor of the Van Pelt–Dietrich Library Center in West Philadelphia (www.library.upenn.edu/rbm/).

Other possibilities

- **The Athenaeum of Philadelphia.**

Founded in 1814, the collection of the Athenaeum focuses on American architecture and interior design history for the period 1800 to 1945. Admittance is by appointment only, so call ahead: (215) 925-2688.

- **The National Archives.** The archival facility for the National Archives and Records Administration's Mid-Atlantic Region is located at 900 Market Street in Center City (www.archives.gov/midatlantic/). The building serves as the depository for federal documents generated in the Mid-Atlantic region, and includes more than 65,000 cubic feet of archival materials dating

from 1789. Call ahead if planning a visit: (215) 606-0100.

ACRL 2011 and Philadelphia

For repeat and new visitors alike, the ACRL 2011 conference in Philadelphia should prove both stimulating and enjoyable. Please do take just a little bit of time beyond the confines of the Pennsylvania Convention Center to enjoy all that our amazing city has to offer.

Notes

1. *New York Times*, August 14, 2005.
2. Robyn McMillan, "An 'Epidemical Fury of Emigration': The Flight of the Non-English into the Colonies on the Eve of the American Revolutionary War," in *American Revolution: People and Perspectives*, ed. Andrew K. Frank. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 24.
3. Todd K. Gardner and Michael R. Haines, "Metropolitan Areas—Population: 1800–1990 [Part 1]," Table Aa1034-1178 in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, ed. Susan B. Carter et. al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). ¶¶

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