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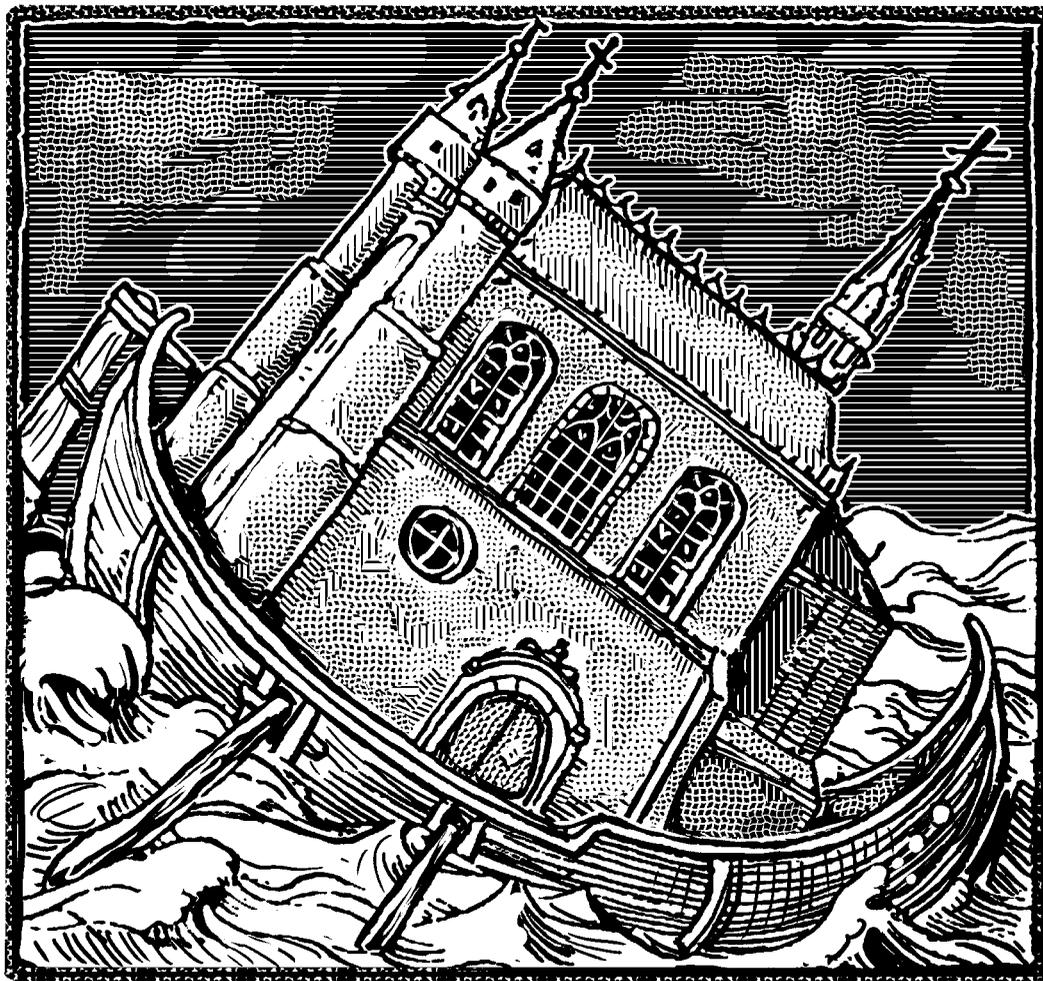
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GEORGE WASHINGTON SLEPT HERE



WHAT MIGHT BE CALLED “CREEDAL tourism” is an American specialty. Alexis de Tocqueville (unsurprisingly) was the first to note and interpret the phenomenon. Arguing in *Democracy in America* that the Puritan idea—that unique combination of the spirit of religion with the spirit of freedom—constituted the American “point of departure,” he marveled at how Plymouth Rock had become a venerated object:

Does this not show very clearly that the power and greatness of man is wholly in his soul? Here is a stone that the feet of some miserable persons touched for an instant, and this stone becomes celebrated; it attracts the regard of a great people.... What has become of the thresholds of so many palaces? Who cares about them?

Although citizens and foreign tourists might today pay a visit to Versailles or the Tower of London, those historical sites are remnants of regimes long since past. By contrast, much of the tourism in the United States involves places, events, persons, and objects that evoke and confirm fundamental political beliefs. Think of the Liberty Bell, Independence Hall, and Boston’s Freedom Trail; think of Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Gettysburg.

Philadelphia, long a center of patriotic tourism, now has a new entry: the Museum of the American Revolution (styled a little too preciously “M*AR”). The museum traces its origins to one precious relic: George Washington’s war tent, which served as the general’s office and sleeping quarters for eight long years, as he remained in the field with his rag-tag, suffering army, declining to furlough himself. The tent is dramatic in its own right (and dramatically revealed on stage at the close of a short film), but the tale of its shifting and contested ownership for the past 240 years (elements of which are included in the museum’s account) makes it more remarkable still. It is a tale of veneration and filial piety all round, which links—whether by happenstance or providence—the Revolutionary War to the Civil War. Furthermore, the pivotal act of transmission was performed by a faithful slave.

Washington and Lee

THE STORY STARTS WHEN THE MARQUEE (along with other possessions of the great man) passed by Washington’s will to his wife’s grandson (Washington’s step-grandson and adopted son), George Washington Parke Custis, and then to Custis’s daughter, Mary Anna Randolph Custis,

who married Robert E. Lee. In his poem “Lee in the Capitol,” Herman Melville took note of the terrible irony of the Washington-Lee family connection:

The Chief who led invasion’s van—
Allied by family to one,
Founder of the Arch the Invader warred
upon:
Who looks at Lee must think of
Washington;
In pain must think, and hide the thought,
So deep with grievous meaning it is
fraught.

Early in the Civil War, while her husband led the forces of insurrection, Mrs. Lee fled Arlington House, their home on the Potomac, leaving many of the Washington family heirlooms locked in the cellar. The household keys were entrusted to her maid, a slave named Selina Norris Gray, who had been taught to read and write (against Virginia law) by Mrs. Lee and who remained behind. The alabaster mansion of the rebel general was soon seized, both for its symbolic value and its strategic position overlooking the District of Columbia. In 1864, the estate was repurposed as Arlington National Cemetery. In the meantime though, with 14,000 Union troops encamped on the surrounding heights, Selina Gray, who



stayed at her post for the duration of the war (even after the Emancipation Proclamation), witnessed the pilfering of household items and feared for the safety of what the family called “the Washington Relics.” After she alerted the troops’ commander to the danger, the Washington items were relocated to the U.S. Patent Office where they were put on public display—becoming something of a propaganda coup. They were, according to a newspaper account, “the only purely authentic souvenirs of the greatest man in modern times.”

The story is drenched in the ironies of American history. Gray was a piece of human property whose motives for acting showed an acute awareness of the sanctity of property. She acted, at least in part it would seem, out of domestic care for the things (one is tempted to say the “other” things) belonging to her mistress. But she also acted out of patriotism, ensuring the survival of objects sacred to the nation. These were the Washington Relics, and she was herself a descendant of the Custis slaves from Mount Vernon. (Her grandson, by the way, is buried at Arlington, a spot he earned by his service in World War I.)

After the war, Mrs. Lee petitioned the federal government for the return of all her property. An early decision by President Andrew Johnson to return the tent was countermanded as a result of a congressional inquiry, which determined that the artifacts were “the property of the Father of his country, and as such are the property of the whole people and should not be committed to the custody of any one person, much less a rebel like General Lee.” After Lee’s son sued the government, the Supreme Court ruled in 1882 in his favor. At that point, rather than disinter the 17,000 loyal dead buried on the grounds, the U.S. government purchased the Arlington estate from its reinstated owner. Secretary of War Robert Todd Lincoln, the oldest and only surviving son of Abraham Lincoln, closed the deal with George Washington Custis Lee, the oldest son of Robert E. Lee and the step-great-great-grandson of George Washington. In 1901, President William McKinley, the last veteran of the Civil War to serve as president, returned the personal property as well. Finally, in 1909, the tent was sold by Lee’s daughter (with proceeds to benefit the Home for Needy Confederate Women in Richmond) to W. Herbert Burk, an Episcopalian minister devoted to the preservation of Valley Forge. He assembled a large collection of Revolutionary era objects and documents that, through more twists and turns, became the core holdings of the Museum of the American Revolution.

Bringing the Past Alive

IN A CERTAIN SENSE, THE ARRIVAL OF A museum, specifically a history museum, is bad tidings. Living history requires no museum. When the mausoleums take the bodies, the museums try to keep the spirit, but it’s not easy. Already in 1838, Abraham Lincoln warned that “the scenes of the revolution...must fade upon the memory of the world.” Later generations could read about those scenes, but they could no longer be “so vividly felt.” In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, the surviving “participants”—who were “found in every family,” Lincoln said—had constituted “a *living history*.” That history bore “the indubitable testimonies of its own authenticity, in the limbs mangled, in the scars of wounds received.” Such living history had the distinct advantage of being “understood alike by all, the wise and the ignorant, the learned and the unlearned.”

The Museum of the American Revolution does what it can to defeat “the silent artillery of time,” to reanimate those lost scenes.

Ideological bias leads to forgetfulness about the link between liberty and limited government.

Thus, the actual objects from the past—the uniforms, flags, muskets, and powder horns; the broadsides, letters, maps, and books; the porcelain, paintings, and busts—are supplemented with all manner of “digital interactives,” “immersive experiences,” and even old-fashioned tableaux. Lincoln said that the revolutionaries “were a forest of giant oaks; but the all resistless hurricane has swept over them.” At the M^{AR} though, one can stand beneath a life-size replica of Boston’s Liberty Tree (a great Elm chopped down by Tories in 1775); on the fake trunk, there is an inset panel of real wood from the very last of the Liberty Trees (Maryland’s 400-year-old Tulip Poplar destroyed by Hurricane Floyd in 1999). Invited to touch, we all did.

Then there is the tableau of a scene described by Israel Trask, one of the youngest patriots to serve in the Revolution (a real-life Johnny Tremain). It recreates the 1775 snowball fight-turned-brawl between the Virginian and New England regiments of Washington’s army, at the moment when the general intervened to establish order and unity. The scene

is well chosen for it illustrates both the fractiousness of the colonies and Washington’s ability to calm and inspire democracy (an explicit theme in other gallery displays), all as seen through the eyes of a 10-year-old.

There have been criticisms bemoaning the dumbing-down and desacralization of the Revolution (by Andrew Ferguson in *The Weekly Standard* and Edward Rothstein in the *Wall Street Journal*). There has also been tempered praise (Michael Lewis in *Commentary*). I’m inclined to second the praise. The museum is pitched to those at the mid-point between Lincoln’s “learned and the unlearned,” which is to say middle-school kids vacationing with pedagogically-inclined parents. That might be called dumbing-down, or it might be called education: there is no leading higher without first somehow making contact with students where they are. On the day I visited, the signs were encouraging: a family at the entrance to the museum conversing with a costumed Ben Franklin about his diplomatic service; a father and son discussing the Stamp Act in the pub across the street after their visit; a group of youngsters aboard the privateer ship engaging hands-on in the teamwork (and command) required for firing a 12-pounder; my 21-year-old son remarking “so really the seeds of the Revolution were planted much earlier in the 1750s”; and I myself learning plenty I didn’t know before.

Politically Correct?

PARTICULARLY WELCOME WAS THE ATTENTION given to the writing of the state constitutions during the late 1770s. There were helpful timelines and maps, and overall a decent balance of political and military history with social history. And the featured quotations, in large font, from John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Rush were excellent. Also successful was the museum’s focus on symbols, especially flags (like the 13-star “new constellation” flag that flew over Washington’s headquarters and two centuries later was carried into space by John Glenn), but other devices as well, like the Great Seal of the United States, the Join-or-Die snake cartoon, the interlocking American Congress circle-of-states image, and numismatic emblems. Ben Franklin, who had a knack for graphic design, was involved in almost all of these unifying endeavors.

Two other main criticisms have been lodged: the outsized presence of the Oneida Nation (major benefactors to the museum) and, more seriously, political correctness—that constant drumbeat of race, class, and gender. As to the Oneida Indians, we would be well-advised to



follow the lead of General Washington who, in a speech to the tribe in the summer of 1778, declared: "I would confirm to you the good will of my heart towards all of your nation, the good Oneidas...who are a brave and wise people.... Brothers—you have fought along with our warriors—you have helped them to take one large army and to recover two of our great Towns, Boston and Philadelphia." The Oneida were, in fact, our first allies in the conflict. That they remain proud of their commitment to the new nation and seek to remind their now-fellow-citizens of their services (as scouts, spies, warriors, and maybe most crucially, emergency provisioners at Valley Forge) makes them still a wise people.

More broadly, the museum's treatment of the Iroquois Confederacy offers lessons in foreign policy. Although the central conflict was certainly between the colonies and the mother country, other parties in America and Europe were drawn in and had their own complex calculations of self-interest and justice. Remember the culminating charge against King George in the Declaration of Independence, that he was turning the Native Americans against the colonists. Our separation from Great Britain led to the dissolution of the political bands among the Six Nations, as the Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca tribes (the Declaration's "merciless Indian savages") sided with the British, while the "good" Oneida and Tuscarora sided with us. Remember, too, that in Jefferson's draft of the Declaration, the final charge against the king included another element as well: George III's role in first establishing and maintaining slavery in the colonies (in violation of the Africans' "most sacred rights of life and liberty"), followed by the king's role in fomenting slave insurrections against the colonists (thus setting "the Liberties of one people...against the lives of another").

Recollecting these words brings some needed perspective to the political correct-

ness charge. It is actually not a distortion of the past to note the presence of three races in early America or to be aware of why blacks and reds might have been less inclined to support the initial experiment in self-government, racially restricted as it was in practice (though not in principle). Insightful later observers adopted a similar lens. Far and away the longest chapter of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is entitled "Some Considerations on the Present State and the Probable Future of the Three Races That Inhabit the Territory of the United States."

Back to the Future

THIS IS NOT TO DENY THE LEFTWARD slant of the museum's interpretive frame. This was most evident in the final movie, "The Ongoing Revolution," which closed with contemporary clips that went by fast but seemed to be from the "marriage equality," Occupy, and Black Lives Matter movements. Why not the Tea Party or pro-life movements? Among other things, such persistent ideological bias leads to forgetfulness about the link between liberty and limited government. Nonetheless, the M*AR is right to present the Revolution as involving an idea whose fate is still at stake. Each generation does indeed have a mission of transmission. In his Lyceum Address, Lincoln described the post-founding generation as the inheritor of two things that had again and always to be transmitted: "this goodly land" and "a political edifice of liberty and equal rights." In his most extensive gloss on the meaning of the Declaration—his 1857 *Dred Scott* speech—Lincoln argued that the "standard maxim of free society," set forth in the Declaration, was meant to have a "constantly spreading and deepening" influence.

The new Museum of the American Revolution certainly emphasizes the spreading influence of revolutionary truths: the abolition

of slavery, the vote for women, Native American citizenship, and expanded protection for civil rights. And it doesn't entirely neglect the more difficult matter of deepening the Declaration's influence. Mostly by example (which is perhaps fitting), the point emerges that the collective project of self-government requires individuals who are themselves self-governing, and even self-sacrificing. More than any other object, Washington's battle tent drives home the message about the inseparability of liberty and virtue.

The museum did a much better job of conveying the soul-based requirements of transmission when it designed the exit from the exhibit. One walks past a wall of photos of old men and women, of grave mien, born before the Revolution, who lived into the age of photography. (Michael Lewis perceptively remarks in his review for *Commentary* that "up until now we have known the faces of the American Revolution only as periwigged platitudes.") That wall of photos angles in to another short wall, covered in a variety of mirrors, bearing the logo "Meet the Future of the American Revolution." Your face and the faces of your fellow museum-goers—"the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions," whom Lincoln spoke of in the Lyceum Address—are the last images you see. Corny? Yes it is. But also effective in prompting reflection on one's own patriotism and awakening a sense of large responsibilities. By ingeniously yoking together reverence and resolve, the exit becomes a threshold to the future. To quote Lincoln on the task of transmission one final time: "this task of gratitude to our fathers, justice to ourselves, duty to posterity, and love for our species in general, all imperatively require us faithfully to perform."

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