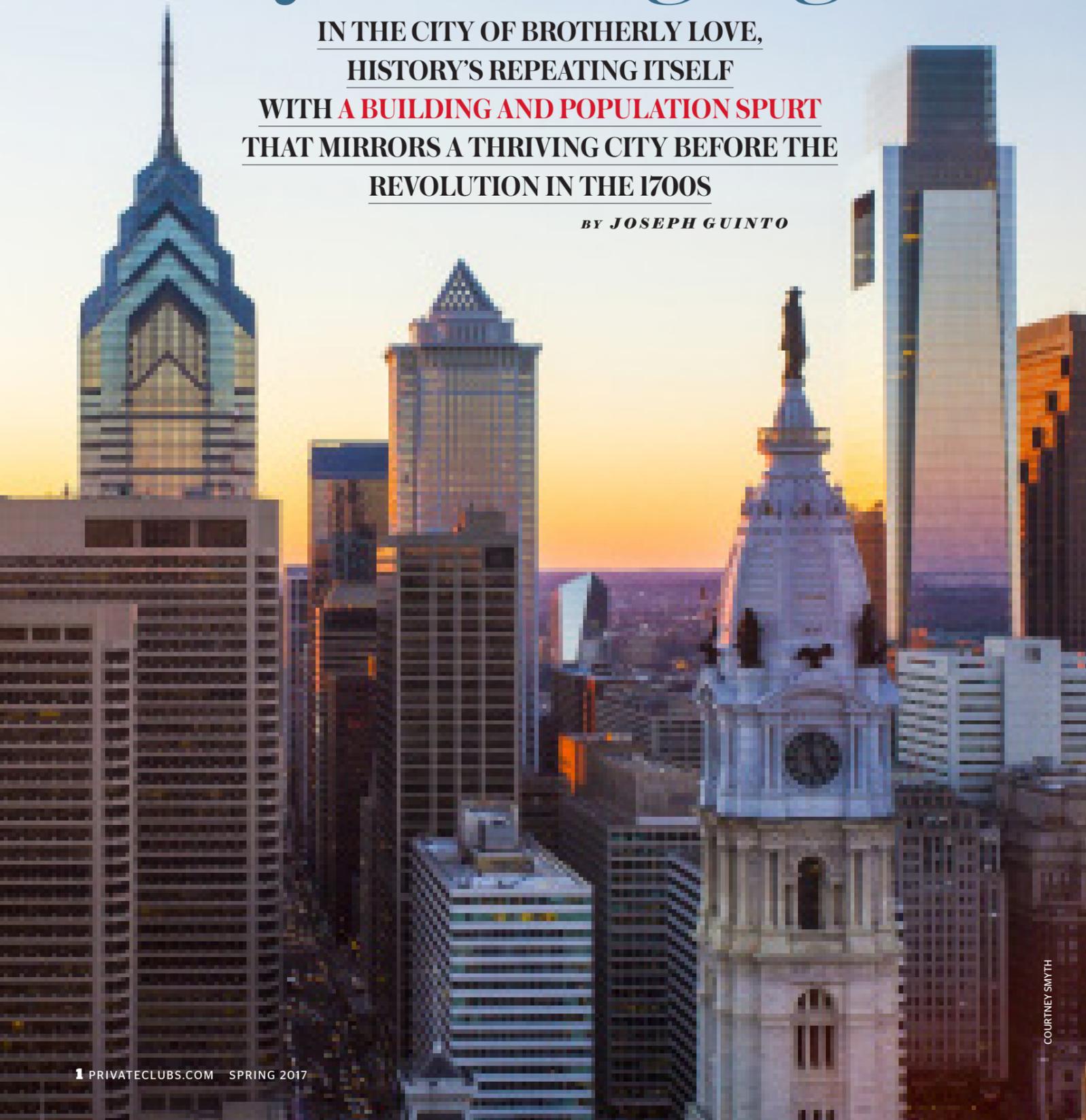


Philly's Rising Again

IN THE CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE,
HISTORY'S REPEATING ITSELF
WITH A BUILDING AND POPULATION SPURT
THAT MIRRORS A THRIVING CITY BEFORE THE
REVOLUTION IN THE 1700S

BY JOSEPH GUINTO



COURTNEY SMYTH



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I'M ABOUT TO CRY. In a public park. In the center of Philadelphia. It's just after sunset and I'm alone at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the American Revolution, which stands off to one side of Washington Square. The memorial honors thousands of soldiers buried beneath this 7-acre park during the Revolutionary War.

Thousands. Under my feet. Unnerving, especially because the life of the modern city continues to go on above the graves. Streetlights begin fighting the twilight. Joggers lope past. A half-dozen dogs pull their people across the diagonal walking paths that bisect the square.

Darkness sets in. An eternal flame flickers against the side of the tomb. *Thousands.* Nameless. Unknown. Forgotten? I get closer so I can see the fading epitaph on the tomb: "Beneath this stone rests a soldier of Washington's army who died to give you liberty."

Tears well in my eyes and a lump forms in my throat before I manage to halt the advancing emotions. I have been a Revolutionary War buff (read: geek) since childhood, but I've never cried at a historic marker before. In fact, I haven't cried since the movie *Up* came out eight years ago. (Yes, I admit it. I cried during a cartoon.) Stranger still, I'm not really sad. Instead, I'm simultaneously awed by the

PAST AND PRESENT:

This page, visit the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington Square, below, and the soon-to-open Museum of the American Revolution, above right. Facing page, bottom right, sample the changing menu at the Wister BYOB restaurant and take in the modern food and ambiance at the Double Knot. Far right, see a pre-Revolutionary War drum at the Museum.



enormous sacrifice represented here, and I'm happily optimistic that I'm not alone in taking notice of it.

Regardless of the nonchalance of the dog walkers going by this tomb, the Revolution is having a moment. HBO's hit miniseries *John Adams* got that moment started in 2008, and the current Broadway sensation *Hamilton* has whipped it into a pop culture frenzy. Now, right here in the city where our forefathers declared the country's independence and ratified the Constitution — bookends to the bloody battles of the war between — the Museum of the American Revolution will open its doors in April, just off Independence Mall. The \$150 million attraction contains the most comprehensive collection of Revolutionary War artifacts ever collected and will tell the war's story in a way never before attempted.

With its opening, the museum will join dozens of other new buildings that have sprung up across this city — because Philadelphia, it turns out, is also having a moment. An influx of young people and immigrants has helped reverse decades of population decline. A wave of new development has reached from the spiffed-up banks of the Delaware River in the east to the Schuylkill River in the west, lifting glitzy Center City to new heights and transforming *Rocky*-esque

working-class neighborhoods into trendy dining, drinking, and shopping destinations.

Young people, immigrants, new taverns, expanding commerce, a bustling waterfront, and the hammering of home construction. That's Philadelphia today. But it could just as well have described the city on the brink of the war for independence. In my four days here, I'll get a preview of the Museum of the American Revolution's take on that history and try to discover how the past is meeting Philadelphia's present.

NOWHERE is past meeting present more than in Philadelphia's Old City, a small, historic 300-acre neighborhood that lies between Center City to the west and the Delaware River to the east. Here, you'll find most of the city's Revolution-related sites.

Ninety minutes after I drop my bags at the newly refurbished Ritz-Carlton, Philadelphia in Center City, I have wandered past Independence Hall, the Benjamin Franklin Museum, Alexander Hamilton's First Bank of the United States, the Liberty Bell, Betsy Ross' house, and

Elfreth's Alley, the country's oldest continually occupied street.

I've also seen The Ross, 401 Race St., and the site of the old National Products building. The Ross — a trio of new, \$2.2 million (and up) townhomes — sits right across the street from where Betsy Ross either did or did not sew the first 15-star flag at George Washington's request. (History is a messy subject.) At 401 Race St., construction crews are building 216 apartments one block from where Ben Franklin's gravestone in Christ Church Burial Ground has begun to split apart, prompting a GoFundMe repair campaign. At the site of the National Products building, a once-grand midcentury restaurant supply store, a 192-unit luxury apartment complex is now being built. When completed, the complex will tower over the tiny two-story historic homes on Elfreth's Alley.

When developers complete these projects and a 17-story building also



now underway on Race Street, Old City will boast about 3,600 housing units. In this area known primarily for tourist sites and raucous bars (many now closed), only 1,900 housing units existed in 2000.

Given the residential boom, Benjamin Moore, the chef-owner at Wister, a sleek BYOB restaurant that opened in Old City last October, tries to change his menu every couple of weeks. "We're getting a lot of people from the neighborhood in here," the chef tells me when I drop in for dinner on a Friday night and, as with Philly's other BYOB's, pay no corkage fee for the wine I've brought. "This area is growing fast. We get a lot of regulars. So we want to give them something different each time."

As I leave Wister and walk down Market Street toward Center City, the Revolutionary War geek in me ponders what it would be like to live in Old City or nearby Society Hill, where your neighbor's red-brick home might have housed some unknown war hero. Settling in for a smoke-infused cocktail at Double Knot, a sultry new Midtown Village subterranean speakeasy, I decide that living next to the Society Hill house where Tadeusz Kosciuszko lived, which I walked by earlier in the day, would be a good

spot. Kosciuszko, a Polish engineer, helped Nathanael Greene's forces outrun those of British general Charles Cornwallis for weeks. But everyone knows that, right?

WHEN I arrive at the Museum of the American Revolution the next afternoon, I'm thinking not of Kosciuszko but of Paul Giamatti's grumpy John Adams and Lin-Manuel Miranda's hip-hop Hamilton. Those portrayals have helped break some of the revolutionaries out of the bronze-and-marble casings that have entrapped them and separated them from the rest of us for the past couple of hundred years. Now, this new museum wants to do the same thing for those involved in and affected by the war, albeit it without the rap battles.

So says R. Scott Stephenson, who heads the museum's collections, exhibitions, and programming, as we walk through all 16,000 square feet of the exhibition space. The museum aims to immerse visitors in the Revolution's full history, from the French and Indian War (1754-1763) through to the U.S. Constitution's ratification in 1788. "You enter a subject of the Crown," Stephenson says. "You leave a citizen. That's the big arc of our story."

Along the way you'll see artifacts such as powder horns and teapots and Washington's actual Valley Forge field tent (a show-stopping centerpiece of the collection). Touch screens and video galleries abound, too. Stephenson excitedly shows me one "immersive theater" where 20 visitors at a time will join a Continental regiment facing off against a digitally re-created line of British soldiers at the Battle of Brandywine. That battle took place



M. KENNEDY (WASHINGTON SQUARE)



on Sept. 11, 1777, just 25 miles from Philadelphia. Life-size British troops depicted on a video screen open fire. Muskets roar. Actual smoke fills the room, as does the artificially re-created smell of gunpowder.

Pardon the spoiler alert, but the British rout the Continentals in the fight. Congress will then scurry to York, Pa., and, on Sept. 26 Philadelphia will fall to the British. So why choose Brandywine Creek as the place to take virtual shots at visitors? To prove that this war, like all others, was hell.

“There is a real contrast between the kind of triumphant imagery we usually associate with the Revolution and the gritty reality that played out on the ground,” Stephenson says as we walk through a room displaying 50 different weapons used in the Revolution. A contrast also exists between what we know about the founders and what we know about everyone else involved in the war, including people at its fringes. The museum tells their stories, too. Like the tale of a teenage slave from Virginia named London who escaped his American captors and joined Benedict Arnold’s British regiment — heartbreaking proof the American Revolution took too long to deliver on its promises of

HISTORY LESSON: At the Museum of the American Revolution, see artifacts such as a powder horn, above, and George Washington’s Valley Forge field tent, below.

liberty for all men. “The Founding Fathers are obviously important,” Stephenson says. “But here, we’re really trying to give you a much broader picture of who the founding generation is.”

THE NEXT DAY I head out to Fishtown, on the banks of the Delaware River, well north of the original street grid William Penn laid out in 1682. The founding generation would have known this area only as farmland, and just a decade ago it was a quiet, working-class enclave with a nice waterfront park. Today, foodies laud it as one of the East Coast’s best dining neighborhoods and it has emerged as one of the city’s hippest areas.

I stroll down Frankford Avenue, a strip of mostly low-slung former manufacturing facilities newly populated with shops such as Toile, which bills itself as a “custom atelier.” At the flagship location of a burgeoning coffee chain called La Colombe, they distill a java-infused rum on site. Kensington Quarters specializes in “whole animal dining,” and Wm. Mulherin’s Sons, around the corner on Front Street, serves a modern take on pasta and pizzas within a former whiskey bottling factory.

Just off Frankford, close to the Delaware River, the booze theme

continues. Philadelphia Distilling has just opened a 15,000-square-foot distillery and tasting room in an old metal-works factory. The company makes my favorite gin: Bluecoat, a homage to the Continental Army’s soldiers (yes, I really am a Revolution geek). Looking at its new operations, I’m reminded of a line in David McCullough’s *John Adams* that says during the time of the First Continental Congress in 1774, distilleries and breweries thrived in this town. That’s true again today. Not only are there new craft distilleries in Philly, but so many breweries have opened recently that Visit Philadelphia, the tourism bureau, has established a craft beer trail map to help you swill your way through town.

Fishtown isn’t the only formerly working-class neighborhood welcoming new hot spots to eat, drink, and shop. Similar developments in East Passyunk (say: Pash-UNK), Kensington, and Northern Liberties have increased the appeal of these areas, as well. I head back to Center City to talk about their rising tide with Ariella Cohen, editor-in-chief of Next City, a nonprofit organization that explores urban policy reform issues both through events and in an online news outlet. “There’s a real energy in these neighborhoods now,” says Cohen, who offices just a couple of

blocks from the rising \$1.5 billion Comcast Technology Center, which will house a Four Seasons hotel when finished next year. At 1,121 feet and 60 stories, the center will be the country’s tallest building not located in Chicago or New York. “A lot of people, and a lot of families, are putting down roots in neighborhoods where there had been vacant homes. I mean, just in the past few weeks, I’ve been to three different meetings about playground development.”

NOT EVERYONE IS benefitting from the city’s recent uptick. Cohen points out that many bill Philadelphia as the country’s poorest big city, and some neighborhoods continue in marked decline.

Yet I understand why her schedule has included so many playground meetings when I spend Saturday afternoon wandering for blocks on East Passyunk Avenue — a long commercial artery — dodging baby strollers all along the way. I also see plenty of young people without any offspring, including a raucous crowd of 20-somethings I sit near at the bar at Le Virtù, which offers refined takes on the food of Italy’s Abruzzo region. One guy in the group, named Andrew, hails from Delaware. “I’m a hick from the sticks,” he tells Ann Marie, the bartender, while donning an outrageous, Truman Capote-ish Southern accent. “Well, Andrew, welcome to the Avenue,” Ann Marie replies.



MODERN TASTES: Facing page, below left, sip a cup of coffee at La Colombe. This page, above, savor a cool cocktail at Wm. Mulherin’s Sons.

Andrew might consider relocating from “the sticks.” He’d certainly fit in. Of the top 10 largest U.S. cities, none have added more people percentage-wise between ages 20 and 34 than Philadelphia in the last decade. Millennials now comprise one-quarter of the city’s population.

New immigrants are arriving at a rapid clip, too. Some 50,000, many from Latin America and South Asia, moved to Philadelphia between 2010 and 2015. “There’s a Cambodian pharmacy near my house now,” Cohen tells me. “The neighborhood is changing quickly.”

All these millennials and immigrants have helped Philadelphia start growing again after six decades of decline. Its population has increased 1.6 percent

since 2010, reaching 1.5 million.

That makes me think of the Revolutionary War. Possibly — no, definitely — because I’ve been obsessed with it while I’ve been in town. But a historic parallel pops into my head while I’m having a rum-based nightcap at Townsend, an amber-hued restaurant and lounge tucked into an old rowhouse on East Passyunk Avenue. My thinking: Ben Franklin moved here at a young age. Robert Morris, who became the richest man in the colonies and personally funded or backed loans that funded Washington’s army, did

the same. Immigrants. Young people. A newly thriving city with a very long history — that described Philadelphia before the Revolution, and today.

But you can’t get from pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia to the modern, ascending, hip Philly of today without going through that war first, without those bodies ending up in the ground under Washington Square, without someone having to pay the ultimate price for liberty. Why would some everyday person risk that? Even a Revolutionary War geek like me struggles to understand it all. But, luckily, we can all start figuring it out at a new museum in Philadelphia, just down the street from Independence Hall. ■



M. FISCHETTI (LA COLOMBE)

MATTHEW WILLIAMS (WM. MULHERIN’S SONS); DON RIDDLE (RITZ-CARLTON)

Multimillion-Dollar Update for a Storied Hotel

With good reason, designers chose a palette of metallic colors such as bronze and nickel along with soft greens for a \$25 million renovation of the **Ritz-Carlton, Philadelphia**, a project completed last summer. They opted for the colors of money because the historic property occupies a building built in 1908 to house one of the grandest banks in the City of Brotherly Love. Architects of the former Girard Trust Company building, modeled after the Pantheon in Rome, designed it in neoclassical style with a massive dome supported by a colonnade of Georgia marble.

The building was converted into the Ritz-Carlton 15 years ago. The recent upgrade touched all 301 guest rooms, the Ritz-Carlton Club Lounge, and some 26,000 square feet of event space, as well as the lobby. That grand space now dramatically showcases the 9,000 tons of marble in the original building, with its centerpiece being Agimero, a new restaurant from chef Richard Sandoval, which sits 142 feet under the dome’s central skylight. Sandoval’s menu focuses on sustainable seafood, steaks, ribs, and poultry. From \$299. 800-523-8000; ritzcarlton.com — J.G.

