



## Why Storytelling?

### THE BACKGROUND

In 2011, Philadelphia's historic district is alive with the sites and stories which are central to America's history. International icons like the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall combine with incredible heritage treasures such as Christ Church, Elfreth's Alley, the Betsy Ross House, and the African American Museum in Philadelphia. In 1994, Historic Philadelphia, Inc. began interacting with the public with costumed characters. But that was just the beginning. Then came Lights of Liberty, introducing a nighttime historical attraction. The Independence Visitor Center came next, followed by meaningful attractions like the Liberty Museum and family favorites like the Big Bus Company and Ride the Ducks. Next came the new Liberty Bell Center, the nationally-renowned National Constitution Center, and the revitalized landscaping of Independence Mall. **In 2005, Historic Philadelphia, Inc. (HPI) introduced the revolutionary Once Upon A Nation program to the historic district, giving visitors a way to navigate all the existing treasures in America's most historic square mile, and bringing all these stories to life.** And now with the further additions of the National Museum of American Jewish History and the President's House, more stories will continue to be told. **Between 2005 and 2010, over one million visitors have heard Once Upon A Nation stories in Philadelphia's Historic District and at Valley Forge.**

**Historic Philadelphia, Inc. President and CEO Amy Needle** said when Once Upon A Nation launched, "With all the wonderful attractions Philadelphia now has, we are pleased that we can bridge all of these relationships to enhance the tourist experience in Philadelphia. Once Upon A Nation's storytelling program will become the cherry on top of the delicious ice cream sundae that already exists. With the complete commitment of all our partners, what seemed impossible ten years ago, today is a reality."

### THE STORYTELLING CONCEPT

Exhibit designer Ralph Appelbaum, working with HPI leadership, introduced the idea of storytelling inspired by the National Storytelling Festival and the International Storytelling Center in Jonesboro, Tennessee. The concept was to take the oral tradition of storytelling as part of our American heritage and use it to share stories of our nation's history in a way that would engage visitors, tell under-told stories, broaden the visitorship to locations off the beaten path, and make history relevant to all.

Working in conjunction with a staff historian and the National Park Service, Historic Philadelphia, Inc. created a portfolio of true stories that bring depth and dimension to the public's understanding of the events and places that define our common American heritage. Authentic, little-known tidbits are carefully researched and vetted by historians. New and rarely heard voices – those of women, African Americans and other ethnic minorities, workers, slaves and servants – have been added to the historical discourse through the Once Upon A Nation storytelling program. The stories cover topics such as freedom, justice, equality, revolution, independence, integrity, risk taking, determination, diplomacy, tolerance, diversity, invention, creativity, resourcefulness, and relevance.

– more –



Once Upon A Nation has taught children and their families that history can be relevant to our lives today by complementing the interpretation provided by the National Park Service and other attractions in Philadelphia's Historic District. Once Upon A Nation weaves America's rich history into stories that speak to the intellect as well as the heart of each visitor. The stories cover a wealth of topics and span time from the seventeenth century through 2009 and share American history with 21st-century flair. The stories are brought to life in an engaging, fun, and educational way, targeting both residents and visitors who are young children, history PhDs, and everyone in between. From a library of more than 150 stories, each storyteller learns five and receives extensive training to assure a high level of performance and grounding in techniques that will captivate listeners.

Here are just a few:

- Captain Allen McLane, America's own version of James Bond, had super spy adventures and was George Washington's favorite secret agent.
- James Forten, educated at the school for black children run by Quaker Anthony Benezet, became a successful sail maker and leader among Philadelphia's vibrant community of free African Americans. Despite his wealth, education, family, and hard work, he faced discrimination and exclusion. Still, he worked to achieve the American dream for his children and all those who came after.
- Fanny Kemble, a beautiful British actress and abolitionist, married Philadelphian Pierce Butler in Christ Church in 1834. Only later did she discover that her husband owned over 400 slaves on his Georgia plantation. She exposed the horrors of slavery in a journal which she later published. Butler divorced her and she lost custody of their children – a personal civil war waged in the years just before America's own Civil War.
- Oney Judge, an enslaved woman, accompanied President and Mrs. Washington from Mount Vernon to Philadelphia. While there she met members of Philadelphia's large community of free black people. She yearns to be free. So, she plans and successfully executes a daring escape – and lives the rest of her life as a free woman. This story is linked with the extensive archaeology and research from the new President's House on Independence Mall.

And they all happened in and around America's most historic square mile, or at Valley Forge.

### **WHAT MAKES A GOOD ONCE UPON A NATION STORY?**

After six seasons and over 150 stories written and perfected, the staff of Historic Philadelphia, Inc. has created a formula for the best Once Upon A Nation stories.

- First, it is historically accurate.
- Second, the story has a strong beginning, an interesting middle, and a conclusion which ties up all those loose historical ends.
- Third, it has a "star" who is a real person from history facing a particular challenge or experiencing an event which had an impact on his or her life.
- Fourth, through a compelling performance, it touches the senses, stirs emotions, and makes the listener think.
- Most importantly, it is fun (and not boring)!

### **THE BENSTITUTE**

Storytellers (and period-dressed History Makers) are specially-trained at Historic Philadelphia, Inc.'s **Benstitute**, named in honor of eternal Philadelphia-favorite, Benjamin Franklin. The Benstitute's certification provides coaching in the art of storytelling, Philadelphia and American history, and in customer service, as well as extensive rehearsals. Acceptance into the Benstitute is by audition only, and those accepted undergo over 100 hours of studying, training, and rehearsing conducted by faculty and leaders from leading colleges and universities, historic sites, and theatrical venues. In addition to the provided curriculum, most storytellers and History Makers conduct significant additional research on their own time. The May graduation ceremony is a sight to behold with graduates wearing Colonial tri-corner hats decorated with red, white, and blue tassels.

One truly unique aspect of Once Upon A Nation storytelling is the importance of the performance that accompanies the story. Historic Philadelphia, Inc.'s Artistic Director, Geoffrey Berwind, combines creative vision and extensive individual storytelling rehearsals to make a compelling and engaging experience for visitors to see and hear. The stories become alive because of the training and the talent of the people who perform them. Part of that training teaches storytellers to invite listeners to become participants by playing characters or helping the storyteller act out parts of the tale. This combination of the historically accurate story with this very new kind of performance is what makes Once Upon A Nation storytelling genuinely unique.

### **ONCE UPON A NATION STORYTELLING BENCHES**



Since the summer of 2005, visitors to Philadelphia have been able to explore the city and discover the Once Upon A Nation Storytelling Benches, guided by a free and easy-to-read map. They find storytellers, at their distinctive 14-foot, 250-pound curved teak benches, who entertain free-of-charge from 11 am until 4 pm every day from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Each storyteller is dressed in modern-day attire, in lieu of period costumes, so they are able to entertain the visitor and also act as ambassador, providing directions, dining tips, and helpful suggestions to visitors without having to break out of an historical character to do so.

Each 5-7 minute story commences with the ringing of a special Once Upon A Nation crier bell at a bench location. The storyteller has 4 or 5 stories at his or her disposal, choosing one depending on the audience at that moment. After hearing a story, visitors may choose to explore one of the nearby attractions such as the Second Bank or the Betsy Ross House, or decide to go in search of the next bench to hear another story.

At the Storytelling Benches, children can pick up a Story Flag at any point, then collect a star from every storyteller on their journey. Flags with all 13 stars can be redeemed for a History Hero Certificate and special coupon book at the Historic Philadelphia Center, Betsy Ross House, or Franklin Square.

The free benches are open in Philadelphia's Historic District Memorial Day to Labor Day each year, with continuous stories told 11 am – 4 pm seven days a week.

In 2011, the free storytelling benches will be at these 13 locations in the Historic District:

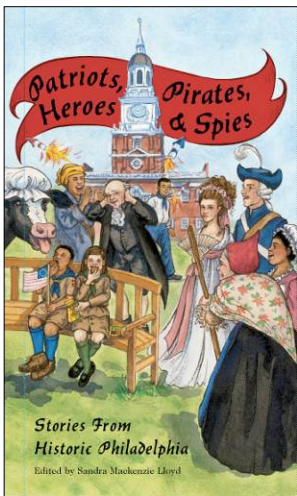
1. Independence Visitor Center
2. Independence Square, behind Independence Hall
3. Signers' Garden – presented by The Avery Foundation
4. Second Bank of the United States
5. The ACE INA Foundation Storytelling Bench at Carpenters' Hall
6. Harmony Lane
7. Franklin Court
8. Christ Church
9. Elfreth's Alley
10. Betsy Ross House
11. Arch Street Meeting House
12. The Lincoln Storytelling Bench at the National Constitution Center
13. Franklin Square

While always maintaining 13 benches (as a nod to the original 13 colonies) in Philadelphia, there have been other bench locations at various times including Washington Square, National Museum of American Jewish History, City Tavern, Free Quaker Meeting House, and the former Independence Living History Center.

In 2009 and 2010, Historic Philadelphia, Inc. created a special Underground Railroad storytelling “route,” with stories covering these topics at each of the thirteen benches. In 2011, to honor the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Civil War, HPI is offering a combined Underground Railroad and Civil War storytelling route.

Beginning in 2008, HPI created the **Once Upon A Nation Storytelling Benches at Valley Forge** in partnership with Valley Forge National Historical Park. Storytellers share riveting stories of the encampment, and how it became a turning point in the Revolutionary War. Unlike the storytelling benches in Philadelphia’s Historic District which close for the season on Labor Day, the benches at Valley Forge continue to operate on weekends into the fall, corresponding to a popular time of year for the Park. In 2011, the three storytelling locations in Valley Forge will be at the Welcome Center, Varnum’s Quarters, and the Train Station at Washington’s Headquarters.

**PATRIOTS, PIRATES, HEROES & SPIES: STORIES FROM HISTORIC PHILADELPHIA**



Since its inception, HPI has offered free interactive programming, including its signature Storytelling Benches, to educate young participants about American history and the important role Philadelphia played in the events that shaped our nation. This valuable segment of the audience, as well as teachers and families, repeatedly asked for a printed compilation of the stories told. In partnership with Penguin and under the leadership of Editor Sandy Mackenzie Lloyd, HPI created an anthology of stories: *Patriots, Pirates, Heroes, & Spies: Stories from Historic Philadelphia*.

Comprised of twenty favorite stories from the renowned Once Upon A Nation Storytelling Benches, this book enables visitors to take these unique stories of Philadelphia’s history home with them. The 190-page anthology, released in July 2008, has sold over 7,000 copies to date. Representing the 17th-20th centuries, each of the twenty stories is innovative and among the most popular offered at the Storytelling Benches. To engage children as readers, the book includes illustrations and an introduction on becoming a good Storyteller. Its subject matter is diverse, addressing a broad scope of engaging topics. It shares stories of people like Lydia Darragh, who risked her life to deliver important secrets to General Washington, and Peter Still, an enslaved man who bought his freedom and found his family. Stories about inventors and moms, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, and even a cow, are also included because history is made by everyone – young or old, rich or poor, male or female.

**THE RESULTS**

In the era of high-tech video games and on-demand television, the storytelling benches bring high-touch, interactive experiences to visitors with true-life tales filled with human drama, love, anguish, conflict, humor and joy. One example of Once Upon A Nation’s impact on the very first day of operation in May, 2005: after having been interrupted by sudden thunderstorms on the afternoon of the first day, storyteller Joe Nevin returned to his bench Sunday morning behind Independence Hall to find a visiting family from Denmark waiting to hear the end of the story from the previous afternoon. In town for only three days, they decided to forego their plans elsewhere that day to hear more of the Once Upon A Nation stories.

A core component of Historic Philadelphia, Inc., storytelling is recognized by partners in the area as an integral part of the region’s tourism community and for its vital service in both Independence and Valley Forge National Historical Parks. Partners in the Park Service are vocal in their support of this programming, considering it an asset and a complement to the work they strive to accomplish at their historical sites. An excerpt from a 2009 National Park Service Storytelling evaluation reads as follows: “...the program allowed the visitors to get a fuller context of the park story as it affected all people, as well as allowing them to experience the park with as much choice as possible...”

In 2009, the American Association for State and Local History presented a prestigious Leadership in History Award of Merit, the only award granted to a Pennsylvania organization, for the Once Upon A Nation storytelling

program. Also in 2009, *Patriots, Pirates, Heroes & Spies* was named as a Notable Book by the TriState Review Committee of Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware.

Testimonials have come from as close as South Philadelphia and as far away as England, declaring that children have enjoyed “this history stuff” and adults are having fun, being entertained, and saying “Thank you for a fantastic look at American history!”

A family from Unionville, Connecticut declared, “It was a wonderful day - by far the best day in a city that my family has ever had. I congratulate you and your team for a terrific project that is bringing not only history but Philadelphia to life for us. We cannot wait to come back and try it again!”

A teacher from South Carolina said, “Once Upon A Nation was the most delightful experience in our trip to historic Philadelphia. My daughter said she didn't even feel like she was learning. You have created a beautiful way to share history with children and adults alike. You made our trip to Philadelphia a delightful and unforgettable experience. This is a program that should be celebrated. More historic sites should follow your model.”

Media outlets and bloggers have made glowing recommendations for Once Upon A Nation as well:

- *Philadelphia Daily News* Editorial, “It's about time the city got a story with a fairy tale ending.”
- From *My Own Time Machine* Blog, “The experience is interactive, it fires the imagination, it challenges young minds to put a historical event in the context of how they live today. I know it's a successful program because my own children clamor each summer to make sure I take them!”
- *Philadelphia Inquirer* Editorial, “Gather 'round and listen to a story about a city whose historic district offers one-of-a-kind visitor attractions like the Liberty Bell and National Constitution Center, yet still lacks that extra dash of excitement. And hear how city leaders led by Gov. Rendell are preparing a surprise ending for their tale - a bold plan to put zip in visitors' steps.”
- John Fea, an historian who writes *The Way of Improvement Leads Home* Blog, wrote, “As an early American historian the day gave me a lot to think about and ponder, especially in relation to issues like public history, memory, historical tourism, religion, and public history. We concluded that we like colonial/revolutionary Philadelphia better than Colonial Williamsburg.”

### **THE BIG PICTURE**

Since the implementation of the Once Upon A Nation concept, the theory of storytelling has infused all aspects of Historic Philadelphia, Inc.'s programming. For example, when the organization redeveloped Franklin Square in 2006, it took the opportunity to bring a carousel to Philadelphia for the first time in many, many years. Philadelphia had once been the American capital of carousel-making, and by bringing one to Franklin Square, it was another engaging way to tell a piece of Philadelphia's past. The idea of engaging programs that bring history to life has infused the other entities of Historic Philadelphia, Inc. at Franklin Square, the Betsy Ross House, and the re-imagined indoor and outdoor shows of Lights of Liberty.

**Historic Philadelphia, Inc. (HPI)** was founded in 1994 by former Pennsylvania Governor Edward G. Rendell, then Philadelphia's mayor, and charged with marketing, promoting, and providing programming for Philadelphia's Historic District, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the experience of both area residents and out-of-town visitors. A nonprofit organization, HPI enhances the visitor experience and helps strengthen Philadelphia's tourism industry through interpretation and interaction, making our nation's history relevant and real. Historic Philadelphia, Inc.'s programs include the Betsy Ross House, Once Upon A Nation storytelling and Adventure Tours, Franklin Square, and the Lights of Liberty.

For further information, visit [www.historicphiladelphia.org](http://www.historicphiladelphia.org) or call 215-629-4026. Follow HPI at [twitter.com/HistoricPhilly](https://twitter.com/HistoricPhilly) or <http://tinyurl.com/facebkHPI>.

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