

Pennsylvania

Savor the heritage here that others travel the world to find.

At home, living with history

By Myra Bellin

Those of us who live in Society Hill are constantly reminded that Philadelphia is continuing to morph into a popular tourist destination. Visitors wander the streets, maps in hand, cameras slung around their necks, searching for the nearest cheesesteak or the Betsy Ross House. They frequently stop me to ask directions. As a longtime resident, I can easily point them toward Chinatown or the upscale shops of Walnut Street.

I know the local geography even though I feel like I inhabit a different universe, parallel to theirs. They are on vacation. I'm not. They are actually spending their free time (not to mention their

money) to visit places I pass every day. This makes me stop and wonder about exactly what they see.

Visitors are primed to notice the blue-gray cobblestones, the painted shutters of homes dating to the 18th and 19th centuries, the wrought-iron streetlamps, and the neatly pointed bricks. I'm primed to notice red traffic lights as I race from drugstore to dry cleaner to supermarket. Tourists really look at Independence Hall, taking a moment to appreciate its pleasing proportions, leaning their heads back to see its elegant white spire. I rush past this famous building after a hard workout at the gym,



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eager to reach home and shower and get to work.

Tourists travel with guides pointing out areas of historical significance. Sometimes a huge land-water vehicle converted to a tour bus passes me when I am walking the dog on Pine Street. Its passengers all have kazooos; the small instrument must be a souvenir of the tour. They hang out the sides of the bright bus-boat, waving and playing their kazooos as I stoop to clean up the dog's mess. I wave back, straining to hear the words of the guide poised at the front with a megaphone, vowing to take the tour myself someday to see the streets as they do, and to get my own kazoo.

Tourists infiltrate my neighborhood to connect with the history reflected in

its buildings and collected in its museums. Its very walkability is historical. William Penn's grid plan for the city covered an area two miles by one mile, nestled between the Delaware and the Schuylkill. This area is still the nucleus of Philadelphia, and Society Hill is part of it.

My husband and I can easily stroll from our house to the movies, threading our way through cobblestone alleys and ribbons of pavement surrounded by the green of spring and patches of fresh flowers this time of year. Crossing Fourth Street, carriage drivers call out to us, inquiring if we want a horse and buggy tour of the area. We must have the relaxed mien of tourists on such outings, leisurely pacing the histori-

cal byways, chatting and holding hands. It's a good way to spend time.

But it's not just the streets and buildings and museums that assume an active presence because of tourists — it's what these structures commemorate and symbolize. The visitors' interest in coming here reminds me that after a long day of debate, men like Jefferson and Washington and Franklin sat down in local, candlelit taverns for a glass of Madeira and good conversation. The Founding Fathers debated and disagreed and probably needed a good drink after days spent hammering out compromises. The tourist traffic reminds me that the spirit giving rise to our democracy is still valued.

There are, of course, inconveniences posed by living among historical landmarks. Horses and buggies slow lanes of automobiles, parking on weekends is really tough, and sight-seeing trolleys use a lane and a half of the two lanes squeezed into narrow city streets. These situations become annoyances when I'm in a hurry. But they are also the trappings of tourism, the evidence of tourism.

They remind me that there are reasons beyond the commercial that lie at the heart of the tourist traffic. They remind me that my neighborhood birthed a country. They remind me that the seeds of a politically energized and philosophically different, more tolerant, nation were sown right here. In days filled with work and chores, against a global environment of terror and threats, such things are worth remembering.

Myra Bellin lives and writes in Philadelphia.