

GETAWAY *mavens*

Harrisburg PA:

Pennsylvania's Great, Too Long Ignored Capital City

OCTOBER 31, 2014 by MALERIE YOLEN-COHEN – [LINK](#)



Stone bridges cross Susquehanna River in Harrisburg PA

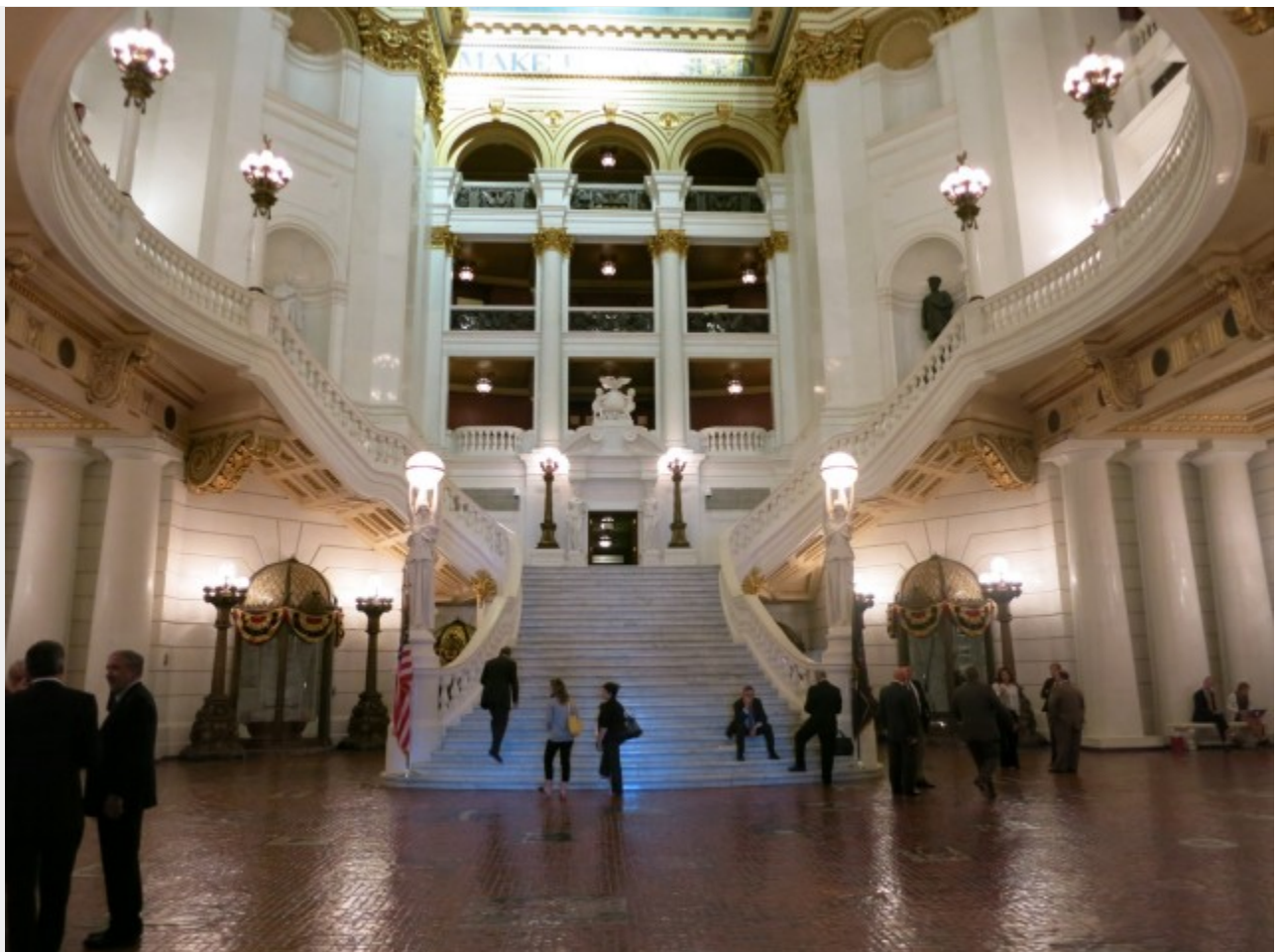
WHY GO: **Harrisburg** is a revelation in every sense of the word. The invisible, ignored mini-metropolis between Pennsylvania's "only" cities, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Harrisburg does not flaunt its natural and manmade beauty. But it should. Just visit the magnificent **Capitol Building**, and you'll wonder why it's not touted to the world. Ah, and there's so much more: river-views, in-your-face **Civil War** exhibits, **Victoriana** galore, and GM recommended spots to eat and bed down. Don't ignore Pennsylvania's Capital City – it's worth a few days to explore.

Best Things to Do in Harrisburg PA



Front of PA Capitol Building

TOUR: [Pennsylvania State Capitol](#). For many years, I believed that the Nebraska State Capitol building was the most beautiful in all the land, but then I visited Harrisburg. Architect Joseph Huston envisioned Pennsylvania's Capitol building as a "Palace of Art" and that's what he delivered.



PA Capitol Rotunda

When Teddy Roosevelt dedicated the Pennsylvania State House on October 4, 1906, he called it “The handsomest building I ever saw.” Costing \$13 million, it took four years to build and then another 21 years to complete the art and marble work. Overwhelming in the quantity of exquisite details and the in the quality of craftsmanship, the Capitol Building is an epiphany.

Take a **30 minute guided tour**, offered every half hour – so you don’t miss a thing. Among dozens of other factoids, you’ll learn:

The central Carrera Marble staircase is modeled after the Paris Opera House and the immense 52-million-pound dome replicates that of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome.



PA Capitol Dome Embellishments

Four murals around the base of the dome depict the “Four Forces of Civilization”: Art, Justice, Science and Religion.

The Italian Renaissance House of Representatives room is cloaked in irreplaceable stone from a closed quarry in the Pyrenees. Stunning stained glass windows weigh 200 lbs each, and four bronze-cast chandeliers are so large a man can stand inside of them (and must, to clean them).



Murals by Violet Oakley at PA Capitol

As incredible as the other rooms are, take time in the Supreme Court room. Four “Lawgivers Lamps” feature small bronzes of Moses, Solomon, Aristotle and Solon. But the *piece de resistance* is the set of incredible murals by Violet Oakley, the first woman to win such a large and prestigious commission. Her gilded oils on canvas, done in the first decade of the 1900’s, are a veritable word-search for the ages. She wove the words Love, Law, and Wisdom into her piece depicting Divine Law, and managed to include a portrait of her sister as well. Oakley’s work, 43 murals in total, can be found throughout the State Capitol building – she serves as a role model for all women in the arts.

Guided Tours Mon-Fri 8:30-4, Sat, Sun 9am, 11am, 1pm, 3pm. Free.



National Civil War Museum

VISIT: [National Civil War Museum](#). So many Civil War memorials revolve around a battle, but this Smithsonian Affiliate tells the story of our country's divisive war from both sides – Union and Confederate. “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” stated President Lincoln, and this museum does an excellent job depicting the human costs of the conflict. Located at the top of a hill, it affords an incredible view of the river valley.



View from property of National Civil War Museum

Plan to spend about two hours here, as you are introduced to several characters, who show up on videos throughout the well-designed exhibits.



Amputation diorama at National Civil War Museum

The Civil War was a “War of Firsts” – the first use of landmines, the first photos of the dead – and you can see evidence of these firsts represented in dioramas, artifacts and films. One multi-media diorama illustrates several men at camp, one reading a letter from his wife, another singing. There’s a life-size replica of the gory death of Lt. Cushing, the bible that General Lee took into battle, mourning badges from Lincoln’s funeral, and shackles and slave bracelets from the early 1800’s. The museum does not shy away from the most unpleasant aspects of history.



Gory death of Lt. Cushing at National Civil War Museum, Harrisburg PA

Perhaps most engaging is “Meet Mr. Lincoln” – an interactive video Q&A where you can ask Honest Abe questions about his opinions and feelings. My favorite film, though, shows President Franklin D. Roosevelt addressing elderly Civil War vets at the 75th Anniversary of the War in 1938. These now-frail men entranced me – they were the very last of those who witnessed firsthand brother taking up sword against brother. *Mon/Tues, Thurs-Sat 10-5, Wed 10-8, Sun noon-5.*



Victorian Parlor at Fort Hunter Mansion, Harrisburg PA

TOUR: **Fort Hunter Mansion**. I don't usually go gaga about period home tours, but include this one on your itinerary for sure if you want to be schooled in quirky Victorian rituals. In the modern world, we like sleek, uncluttered spaces, but in the Victorian era, extreme frippery was the order of the day.

A 45 minute traipse through this "Museum of the Victorian Age" introduces you, in the most engaging way, to the world of Helen Reily, the childless last owner of the Fort Hunter Mansion, who moved in with her husband, John, in 1886 and ran a prosperous dairy farm on the property.



Victorian Copper Disc Style Music Box at Fort Hunter Mansion, Harrisburg PA

My guide was **Julia Chain**, a funny, folksy, entertaining MA level historian who began by stating, "One of the failings of house tours is that they focus on dead white guys." So Chain's tour does nothing of the sort. After being introduced to the owners of the home through their portraits by the front door, the house-tour focuses on Helen, an avid collector of pitchers who was also an active, local philanthropist. "Helen had so many pitchers, she gave them as gifts to friends who brought them back. We used to sell them in the gift shop."



Victorian Meds

Step into the parlor, gussied up with a \$500 marble fireplace (expensive for the time), a horsehair settee and a portrait of a three-year-old girl in a dress – actually Uncle Henry – wearing what was typical for young boys at the time. You’ll hear the full sound of a rare copper disc music box, and sit on a couch in the hall to look up at the first “floating staircase” ever built in the region.

Upstairs, the Master bedroom features the best Susquehanna River views, a family Medicine Kit, dowels to push out the inverted fingers of gloves (yes that was a thing), and a stand-alone tub for bathing. “By now, people would bathe once a week rather than once a year.”

A quilting frame stands in the center of the Ladies Sitting Room. “Idle gossip was looked down upon, so women would get together to sew and gossip – no longer idle.”



Creepy dolls at Fort Hunter Mansion, Harrisburg PA

The creepiest exhibit is a collection of porcelain dolls and an Ouiji board in a hallway closet. The dolls' complexions are pitted, and their eyes witchy-black: a result of finishing wax that has melted off over the years. But disturbing nonetheless.

You'll see guest rooms, the old kitchen house and grounds, too, and leave with a greater appreciation for that era in history. *Open May-Mid-December, Mansion Tours Tues-Sat 10-4:30, Sun noon-4:30.*



“To the Fire” at PA National Fire Museum, Harrisburg PA

TOUR: **Pennsylvania National Fire Museum**. The museum’s motto is, “Give us 90 minutes and we will give you the history of the fire service from 1790 to the present.” And what a fun 90 minutes it is. The station was in operation from 1899 until 1980 and repurposed in 1995 as this terrific museum, reborn to appear like it did in the Victorian age.



Fire-Engine horsepower at PA National Fire Museum, Harrisburg PA

Walk in to the old **Reily Hose Co. Hook and Ladder #10** and say hello to Bert and Charlie, fabrications (complete with sound effects) of the real horses that used to pull the fire wagon. Back in the early 1800’s, Firehouses were essentially privately run and in competition with each other. Whoever got to the fire first got paid. You’ll learn about this and other little known facts about the early fire service and its equipment.

Horses were well trained to be ready when an alarm came into the firehouse: chains across each stall would release so that the firemen could hitch them up as quickly as possible. See how a Hand-Pumper crew worked and how Steam Engines pressurized water, along with a slew of antique trucks and wagons.



Johnstown Gamewell Call System at PA National Fire Museum, Harrisburg PA

The Museum also contains the complete **Johnstown Gamewell Call System** – a communications marvel in the pre-computer era.

Though this place is kid-heaven, even adults like to see what the inside and underground portion of a fire hydrant looks like and push buttons to “Sound the Alarm.” You’ll hear expressions of fire “alarms”, from a 1873 firebox to, humorously, a gossiping woman on a Party Line. \$5, Open Tues-Sat 10-4, Sun 1-4.



Market Street Pedestrian Bridge, Harrisburg PA

WALK: Market Street Bridge. This old railroad bridge over the Susquehanna River is a favorite of pedestrians. Pretty and subtly lit at night, I'd recommend it for the view it affords of the series of extremely photogenic stone bridges that cross the river nearby.



Midtown Scholar Bookstore

VISIT/SHOP: [Midtown Scholar Bookstore](#). What was once the first non-segregated movie house in PA (and then a succession of clothing and antique stores) is now one of America's largest used academic bookstores. The New York Times called visiting here "nearly a religious experience," and you'll see why as you wander through 15,000 sq feet of mazelike stacks containing over 100,000 books on several floors.



Robnison's Rare Books and Fine Prints

The maze of a basement goes on and on, extending right beneath the street. It's where one of the building's several businesses, **Robinson's Rare Books and Fine Prints**, is located.



Midtown Scholar Bookstore, Harrisburg PA

Owners **Eric Papenfuse (Mayor of Harrisburg)** and his wife, **Kathy** wanted to bring vitality back to this depressed area of town by anchoring this bookstore/coffee bar/café for book clubs, concert-goers, performing artists and discussion groups. They have succeeded – attracting an influx of young families and artists, an indie movie theater (**Midtown Theater**), **Urban Churn** (a hip old fashioned ice-cream shop), **the Millworks** (hyper-local restaurant and artist collective), and other restaurants, cafes and museums.

Where to Eat in Harrisburg PA



Signature Scallops, Hilton Harrisburg Downtown

EAT: [Golden Sheaf at Downtown Hilton](#). By the time you read this, the Golden Sheaf will have been moved to street level, modernized and renamed. But the caliber of food and service will remain the same. Try the signature Crab Stuffed Scallops (\$36) or “Deconstructed Bloody Mary” Salmon, Beet Ravioli (\$10) or Honey Lacquered Halibut (\$34). For a brand-name hotel restaurant, it’s got some innovative cuisine.



Smoked Salmon Salad at Home 231, Harrisburg PA

EAT: [Home 231](#). Cute and homespun, this little neighborhood spot is famous for its unique homemade ice cream, house-made Lemonade and farm-raised meats and produce. Go for the terrific salads, like Asparagus Tomato Salad with Chickpeas and Artichokes (\$10), sandwiches (Smoked Salmon – \$12) and House Veggie Burger (\$14).

EAT: Locals also recommend [Rubicon](#), [Bricco](#) and [Café Fresco](#).

Where to Stay in Harrisburg PA

STAY: [Harrisburg Downtown Hilton Hotel](#). After a major renovation, bathrooms, stocked with luxurious Peter Thomas Roth products, rival those of trendy boutique hotels. Floors and walls of sand-colored travertine marble, rain showerhead (in traditional tub) and contemporary style raised sink bowl, it's not your typical corporate granite counter bathroom. Bedding is pillow-top comfy. *Room rates \$159-\$400 per night.*

STAY: [City House B&B](#). For a more intimate stay, this four-guestroom townhouse overlooking the Susquehanna River has won raves from visitors. Modernized in 2010, it offers "20's charm" with 21st century amenities. *Rooms include breakfast \$125-\$165.*