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Sense the energy of 21st century Harrisburg

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Marc d'Entremont

In the early years of the 20th century Philadelphia artist Edwin Austin Abbey created the monumental murals that decorate the vast rotunda of the [State Capital](#) building in [Harrisburg](#). They illustrate [Pennsylvania](#)'s top three 19th/20th century industries: oil, coal and steel. Although agriculture was always important, these three industries were the engine that was propelling the United States into world power status and Harrisburg was a major player. [In 21st century Pennsylvania, and Harrisburg, the engine is fueled by tourism, specialized manufacturing and still, agriculture.](#)

Traveling on the [Pennsylvania Turnpike](#) one drives through lush farmlands of [Dutch country](#) and usually skirts the city of Harrisburg. After all, most people know the city as part of the modern "rust belt." The great steel mills are gone and suburban flight halved the city's population by the end of the 20th century. [Yet it would be a mistake to ignore Harrisburg.](#) Sure there are neighborhoods of deteriorating housing, but there are even more areas that never declined, others that are on the rise and dozens of well-maintained parks. And it's a new generation of [young professionals](#) that have reversed the population decline, want an urban experience and are revitalizing [Harrisburg](#).

It's easy to explain away revitalization of a state capital by simply assuming it's all money from the political machine. But Harrisburg is still one of the major railroad transportation hubs of the Northeast connecting to the west and the south. Old steel mill buildings and warehouses have been repurposed for [new specialized industries and institutes of higher education](#). Spend some time in Harrisburg and sense the energy of the present.

(Disclaimer: the author was a guest of the [Hershey Harrisburg Regional Visitors Bureau](#))



Sheldon Munn Guided Motor and Walking Tours Marc d'Entremont

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Sheldon Munn, historian and author, is a virtual encyclopedia of all things Harrisburg. Over his long lifetime he has experienced many transformations that the city has undergone. His [tours](#) reflect this first-hand knowledge; they're not from a memorized script. Ranging from two to six hours, Sheldon can cover all Harrisburg sites from the Capitol Building to the [Benjamin Olewine Nature Center](#) and the [National Civil War Museum](#).

His knowledge of Harrisburg's neighborhoods is peppered with stories of the rebirth of colonial [Shipoke](#) (1710) into a picturesque and affluent enclave on the [Susquehanna River](#), [Bellevue Park](#) with its gracious 1920/1930s homes as one of America's original "[City Beautiful](#)" [planned communities](#), to the [Italian Lake](#) neighborhood surrounding its [Italian Renaissance park](#) and [Allison Hill](#) overseeing downtown and undergoing revitalization of its once grand Victorian townhouse architecture.

[City Island](#), in the middle of the Susquehanna, once farmland, is now a sizable recreation park with [Riverside Stadium](#) home to the [AA League Harrisburg Senators](#). And there's [Fort Hunter Plantation](#) (1725) a well-preserved example of early Pennsylvania frontier life with many original 18th and 19th century buildings documenting the life of this extensive farm operation through the middle of the 20th century. You'll learn more about Harrisburg from Sheldon than you ever thought existed.



Pennsylvania National Fire Museum Marc d'Entremont

Pennsylvania National Fire Museum

Dave Houseal is a 3rd generation Harrisburg fireman, now retired after nearly 40 years. The [Pennsylvania National Fire Museum](#) owes its existence to men like Dave and the state is fortunate to have this all-volunteer educational center. As director of the museum, Dave's enthusiasm is infectious as he illuminates Benjamin Franklin's legacy, the romance and the danger of firefighting through the sights and sounds of professionally designed exhibits.

Housed in the 1899 Victorian firehouse, Reily Hose Company No. 10, the museum features an outstanding collection of artifacts from the hand-drawn equipment of yesterday to the modern tools of today.



Brown Bag Atrium Series Marc d'Entremont

Brown Bag Atrium Series

Not many think of a city hall as a bastion of culture or even frivolity. Faceless cubicles come to mind more often than not. Yet [Harrisburg's Department of Arts, Culture and Tourism](#) has changed that perception with the Brown Bag Atrium Series. [Mr. Lenwood Sloan, Director of ACT](#), said Mayor and Mrs. Eric Papenfuse believe "City Hall is the front porch of Harrisburg." On the first and third Fridays at noon, city hall employees and the general public are invited to enjoy light refreshments and cultural entertainment in the Atrium Lobby.

The June 20th event was themed to coincide with the continuing remembrance of the centenary of the Civil War and [Juneteenth](#). The Victorian Dance Ensemble demonstrated parlor dances popular in both the north and south. A formal version of square dancing, the group engaged the audience by inviting participation.

The four superb voices of Harrisburg's African-American a cappella Lark Quartet, in uniforms of Civil War U.S. Colored Troops, performed songs of the Underground Railroad. You can watch the entire [June 20th Brown Bag event](#) on You Tube.



"Stories from Home" at the Open Stage of Harrisburg Marc d'Entremont

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Open Stage of Harrisburg, the nearly three-decade-old regional theater of Harrisburg was founded in 1983. Located in an intimate black box space within the Walnut Street Parking Garage building, Open Stage is in the heart of downtown Harrisburg. Their mission is to "present plays that appeal to audiences who enjoy challenges beyond mainstream theatre offerings." [Open Stage](#) of Harrisburg is a partner with the Capital Area Intermediate Unit in the Capital Area School for the Arts (CASA), the Capital Region's arts magnet school.

[Stories from Home](#), performed by an ensemble cast with multimedia projections, brought to life three neighborhoods in the county: Harrisburg's Old Eighth Ward, Paxtang, and Steelton. The now vanished Eighth Ward (cleared to make room for the vast capital complex) was Harrisburg's Lower East Side – a polyglot mix of immigrants that thrived in the 19th century. Like industrial cities throughout the US in that time, it was residents of neighborhoods like the Eighth Ward that built America. And it was their struggles and triumphs that are the legacy of our current cultural issues.

Paxtang was the home of the infamous [Paxton Boys](#), a murderous 18th century gang of racists that vowed and succeeded in clearing the land of all vestiges of Native Americans in both body and soul.

Steelton, once a center of steel manufacturing might, was both an economic engine of the region and the path for destitute immigrants to get a glimpse of what the American dream could have in store for them or at least their children.

Performed with both humor and pathos, [Stories from Home](#) is entertaining, thoughtful and will introduce a visitor to Harrisburg's past while shedding light on its current revitalization.



Midtown Scholar Bookstore Marc d'Entremont

Midtown Scholar Bookstore

Located in a renovated 1920s theater next to Harrisburg's historic [Broad Street Market](#), in midtown Harrisburg, is the mother of bookstores. With nearly 200,000 new, second-hand, out-of-print and scholarly books in stock, Midtown Scholar Bookstore sprawls through two contiguous buildings as well. It has been named one of "America's Great Independent Bookstores" and voted "Simply the Best" Independent Bookstore in the region every year for the past decade.

Their cafe serves premium fair trade coffees, tea and baked goods and the bookstore contains two art galleries, a stage for author talks and acoustic music and several community meeting rooms. On the second floor gallery there are deep, comfortable leather armchairs creating an inviting club-like library atmosphere. The store is superbly organized and spacious with original artwork and wall murals and a friendly, helpful staff. If a book isn't in the store, it is most likely available from their warehouse, which stocks an additional two million academic and general-interest books.

To say the [Midtown Scholar Bookstore](#) is popular among Harrisburg residents is an understatement. In November 2013, the populace voted founder and owner **Eric Papenfuse** as the city's 38th mayor.



The Pennsylvania State Capital Building Marc d'Entremont

The Pennsylvania State Capital Building

Completed in 1906 at the staggering cost of \$13,000,000 (over \$340,000,000 in 2014 dollars) [Pennsylvania's State Capital Building](#) was considered, and designed by architect Joseph Huston, to be "a palace of art." Touring the vast building it's easy to imagine you're in a palace of the gilded age rather than a structure for the gritty pursuit of politics. **The professional guides of the Capitol Visitors Services provide not only information but understand the personalities that created the stunning art that tell the stories of a country on the cusp of greatness.**

Huston insisted that Pennsylvania artists be commissioned for everything from stained glass domes to monumental murals and the unique 377 tile "carpet of history" created by the Mercer Tileworks. Young talent that would become celebrated 20th century artists, including William Brantly Van Ingen, Violet Oakley and Edwin Austin Abbey, devoted years on their works.

85,000 visitors tour the capital building annually, but you can take a [virtual tour](#) on the web as well as read everything you would ever want to know about Pennsylvania's showplace.