

## Harrisburg sheds its stodgy image

November 29, 2015 - By Mackenzie Carpenter / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette - [LINK](#)



The Daniel Finch mural "Lady Commonwealth" at the Susquehanna Art Museum.

HARRISBURG, Pa. — Splendor.

That's not a word usually associated with [Pennsylvania's State Capitol](#), which, for a few days a week, is crawling with legions of lobbyists, lawyers, legislators and a protest group or two.

But a recent tour of this massive, 1906 National Historic Landmark was a revelation: It's brimming with museum quality art, stained glass, mosaics, tilework and sculpture. State Capitol connoisseurs consider it one of the country's finest, and Thrillist.com ranked it among a dozen of the most beautiful, along with New York and Virginia.

Full disclosure: I covered the Legislature in the 1980s and as a young, ambitious reporter paid absolutely no attention to my workplace. So, on a recent trip as a guest of the Hershey Harrisburg Regional Visitors Bureau, I was stunned to see what I had missed, in plain sight, all those years ago.

By itself, a tour of the Capitol might be worth the 3½-hour trip from Pittsburgh, especially for fans of Gilded Age history and art, but this city has so much more to offer travelers these days — a thriving restaurant, food and art scene in the rejuvenated midtown section, along with lovely, leafy streets near the Susquehanna River, which itself is lined with charming 19th century houses and one of the most beautiful river walks anywhere.



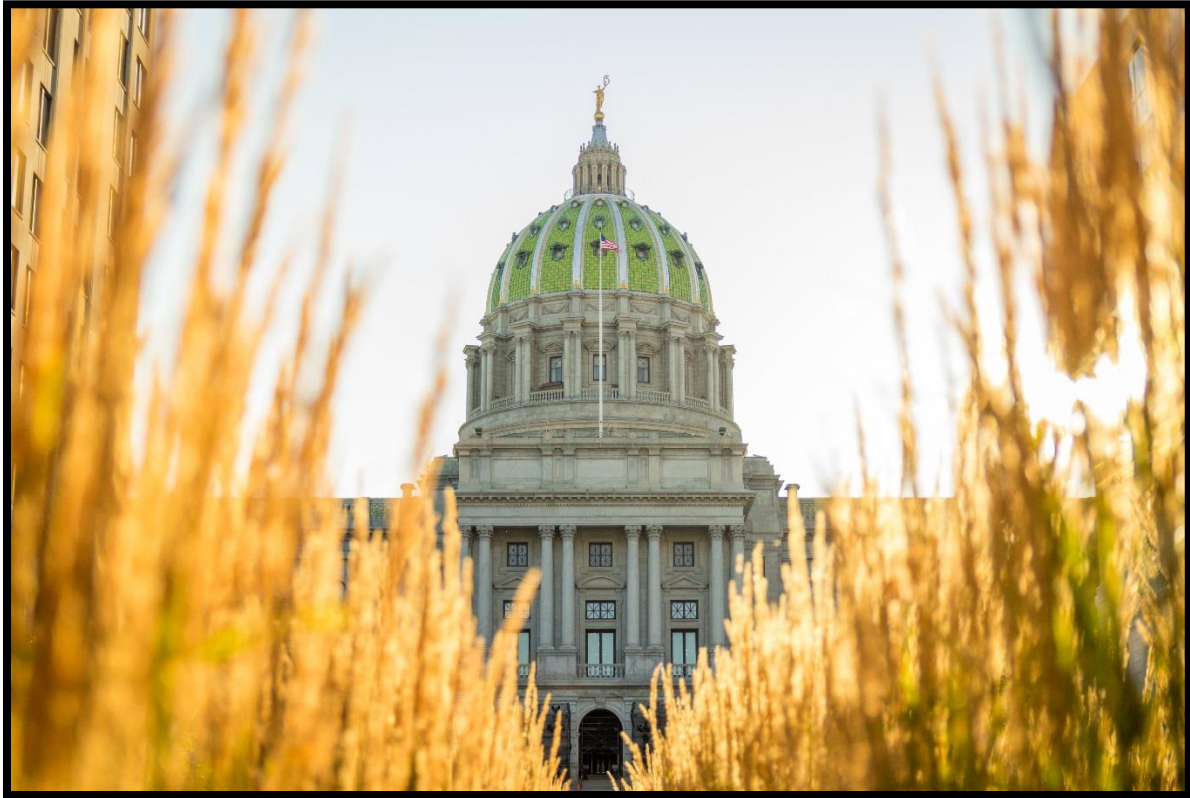
*A residential street in Harrisburg*

In fact, much of the action can be found in [Midtown](#), a few blocks north of the Capitol on North Third and North Fourth streets: There's a fire museum that will thrill young fans of firetrucks and a public market jammed with locally sourced products — freshly baked goods and produce, smoked meats, good coffee and the best handmade chocolate/caramel turtles you'll ever taste, constructed right on the premises by Amish women who shy from photographs but proudly hoist a tray of the gooey treats for a picture.

There's a vast used-and-rare book store complete with coffee bar, community space, young tattooed hipsters and older gentlemen playing chess. And an old mill has been restored as a great restaurant and studio space for artists.

While it's located in central Pennsylvania farmland, [Harrisburg](#) is an urban center, with all the challenges that come with that. There's been churn in the top levels of city government, there's unemployment, sprawl and traffic, all the ills that plague any city, so travelers need to keep their wits about them while exploring.

That said, the Capitol’s dome, a smaller version of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, stands like a beacon over the city skyline and an easy reference point for out-of-towners.



*Capitol Dome (photo by HHRVB)*

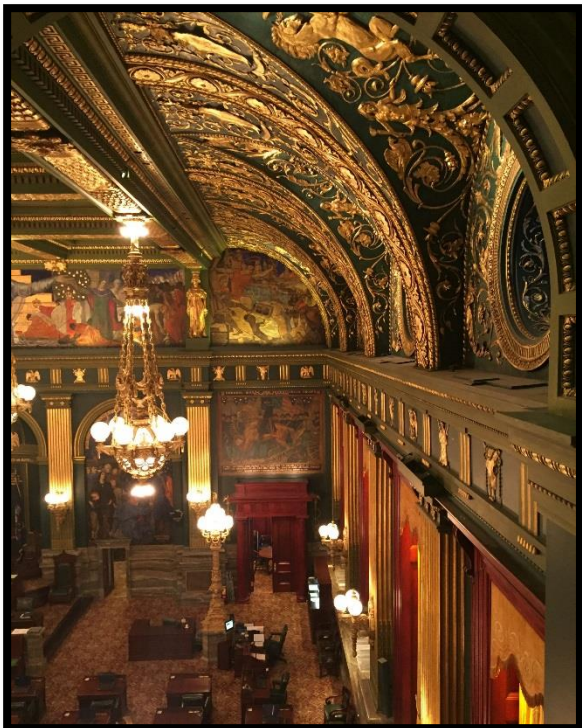
Designed as a “Palace of Art” in 1902 by Joseph Miller Huston, the Capitol’s rotunda is a bit of a Beaux Arts-Renaissance mashup — besides the Vatican-themed dome, there’s a sweeping white marble staircase modeled from the Paris Opera, gleaming Byzantine mosaic work and paintings by noted 19th-and 20th-century muralist Edward Austin Abbey, who is also famed for his work at the Boston Public Library.

Far above the visitors are painted murals reflecting idealized visions of the economic interests that made this state tick: oil, coal, steel — plus religious liberty, pictured as ships sailing across the Atlantic, presumably to the Keystone State. For what it’s worth, the oil industry “lunette” above the front entrance is my personal favorite; it’s mostly lovely goddess-like creatures floating on the night air, lit only by the flames of oil lamps.

Underfoot, embedded in the hand-fired Moravian tiles just a few steps from the front door, is a plaque noting the spot where President Theodore Roosevelt gave a speech at the Capitol’s dedication in 1906, declaring it “the handsomest building I ever saw.”

In the glittering, green and gold state Senate chamber, the murals and stained glass windows are by Violet Oakley, the first female artist in the country to receive such a prestigious public mural commission, which also included the state Supreme Court Chamber and the Governor's Grand

Reception Room (which is not open to the public). A strong supporter of women's rights, her sympathies can be glimpsed in one Senate mural celebrating freedom, where a man is seen on his knees unlocking the chains shackling a woman's ankles.



Construction ran over budget — at \$13 million, three times more than the original cost — and Mr. Huston and four others (not the artists) were convicted of graft. Not all that surprising, given the long tradition of chicanery in Pennsylvania politics, but the lavish end result seems worthy of this state's more exalted place in the nation's early history.

After the tour, walk down the front steps and straight ahead two blocks to [Little Amps Coffee Roasters](#), at 133 State St., for a restorative latte, cappuccino or a bracing “cold jar” — espresso shaken, not stirred, with plenty of ice, milk and

sugar. Then head north up historic Green Street, crossing over three blocks to the [Pennsylvania National Fire Museum](#) at 1820 N. Fourth St.

You can always drive — there's free parking — but it's a nice stroll through a neighborhood with carefully restored houses, tidy gardens and on one side street, a charming little pottery shop and art gallery dubbed “Vivi on Verbeke.”

If you have children who are crazy about firetrucks, the fire museum is the place for them — located in an 1899 Victorian fire house, it has all the bells and whistles that go along with the noisy business of putting out fires. (John Wagner, the museum’s directors and son of a firefighter, will gladly demonstrate.) Plus there are vehicles on display from the horse-drawn era up to an enormous mid-20th Century red monster that is still hauled out for parades.



*Pennsylvania National Fire Museum in Harrisburg*

Heading south again on N. Third Street, back toward the Capitol, stop at the Yellow Bird Cafe for lunch, then poke your head into the fledgling [Susquehanna Arts Museum](#), a stunning 20,000-square-foot space in what was once the Keystone Trust Building and which hopes to become, in a region full of historical museums, central Pennsylvania’s only dedicated art museum.

Just down the street is the remarkable [Midtown Scholar Bookstore](#), located in a renovated 1920s theater, named one of “America’s Great Independent Bookstores” and voted “Simply the Best” Independent Bookstore in the region for nine years running. It’s huge — with more than 100,000 used, rare and sale-priced books at the store, which also houses a cafe, on six floors in two connected buildings. Tucked away in one nook is Robinson’s Rare Books and Art Prints, and there’s a thriving Internet business too, with more than 1 million academic and general use books in other warehouses. The main hall, with a vast mural on one wall and a giant reclaimed firehouse bell hanging overhead, is used as a space for community meetings and in one sunny room around a corner I stumbled upon four older gentlemen playing chess.

There are a number of good restaurants in Harrisburg — lobbyists aren't called fat cats for nothing — but [The Millworks & Artists Studios](#), which opened in March, is a standout. It delivers not only good food, much of it procured from the Broad Street Market's local vendors next door, but 35 regional artists have studios inside the building, and on weekends there are open houses allowing visitors to watch the artists at work. There's also a wonderful gift shop with locally made jewelry, clothing, arts and crafts.



While the town of Hershey, some 15 miles east, is another trip entirely, this is [craft beer country](#), and almost a dozen breweries can be found in the region. Harrisburg has its share, including the recently opened [Zeroday Brewery Co.](#) in Midtown, but a side visit to the fabled [Troegs Brewery](#), just down the road from the fabled [Hotel Hershey](#), is a must. Take the tour and watch how your beer is made, then have dinner in the 5,000-square-foot tasting room, where on a recent fall night they were serving a beer flight of wheat, bock and a third made with a fermented essence of local pumpkin. Delicious. And don't be put off by the words "Snack Bar" — dinner, accessed cafeteria style, is high-end comfort food, including mashed potatoes made with duck fat.

There's more good food to be had back in Harrisburg for early birds on Thursday, Friday and Saturday mornings, when the [Broad Street Market](#) opens at 7. It's on the National Register of Historic Places and bills itself as one of the oldest continuously operated market houses in the country. Founded in 1860 and used to feed the Civil War troops training at nearby Camp Curtin, the market is home today to 40 vendors — including Amish farmers — offering everything you'll need for breakfast or lunch. Bring a cooler and load up on pies, smoked ham, and handmade pretzels to take back to Pittsburgh.



*A café in Harrisburg*

But before you do, there's one more place that's worth a visit, at least for history buffs:

[The National Civil War Museum](#), located in the city's Reservoir Park, a few miles north of the Capitol. It's controversial, currently the subject of a local political turf battle too complicated to go into here, but the displays and dioramas are well thought out and affecting. While Gettysburg remains the obvious go-to place for Civil War aficionados, this is worth a visit, especially for students looking to get a sense of the war's impact on families, slaves and soldiers north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

A word about lodging: Harrisburg has plenty of it, given the legislative tide of visitors washing in and out each week, and even the [Best Western "Premier"](#) on the outskirts of town — on the way to Hershey — was quite comfortable. The [Hilton Harrisburg](#) is steps from the Capitol, but a word of warning — it's booked solid when the legislators are in town.

## **IF YOU GO**

To help plan a trip to Harrisburg and Hershey, go to [VisitHersheyHarrisburg.org](#) or call 1-877-727-8573.

### **PENNSYLVANIA STATE CAPITOL**

[www.pacapitol.com](#)  
North Third Street, Harrisburg, PA 17120  
Guided 30-minute tours are free, offered every half-hour from Mon-Fri between 8:30am-4pm; Sat-Sun & most holidays tours are offered at 9 a.m., 11 a.m., 1 p.m., 3 p.m. Always recommended to call ahead to check tour availability.  
Reservations Line: 1-800-868-7672

### **MUSEUMS, BOOKSTORES**

#### **Pennsylvania National Fire Museum**

1820 N. Fourth St., Harrisburg, PA 17102-1501  
1-717-232-8915; [www.pnfm.org](#)

#### **Susquehanna Art Museum**

1401 N. Third St., Harrisburg, PA  
1-717-233-8668; [www.sqart.org](#)

#### **Midtown Scholar Bookstore**

1302 N. Third St., Harrisburg, PA 17102  
1-717-236-1680; [www.MidtownScholar.com](#)

#### **National Civil War Museum**

1 Lincoln Circle at Reservoir Park, Harrisburg, PA 17103  
1-866-258-4729; [www.nationalcivilwarmuseum.org](#)

### **FOOD & DRINK**

#### **The Millworks & Artist Studios**

340 Verbeke St., Harrisburg, PA  
17102  
1-717-695-4888; [www.MillworksHarrisburg.com](#)

#### **Broad Street Market**

1233 N. Third St., Harrisburg, PA  
17102  
1-717-236-7923; [www.BroadStreetMarket.org](#)

#### **Troeg's Brewery**

200 East Hersheypark Drive,  
Hershey, PA 17033  
1-717-534-1297; [www.Troegs.com](#)  
For more information on the region's breweries, go to [www.HersheyHarrisburgBeer.com](#).

#### **Little Amps Coffee Shop**

133 State Street, Harrisburg, PA  
17101  
1-717-635-9870