

State Museum of Pennsylvania Mammal Hall gets makeover long overdue

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Editor's Note:

Portions of this story include adaptations from an article on Pennlive.com by Nick Malawskey on Aug. 30, 2016. Credit photos to VisitHersheyHarrisburg.org

- [VIEW VIDEO](#): Changes coming to the State Museum of Pennsylvania – Aug. 2016
- [READ](#): 10 Reasons to Visit the State Museum of Pennsylvania – Pennlive.com – June 2015

HARRISBURG, PA – The [State Museum of Pennsylvania](#) in Harrisburg began a long-overdue makeover that started in 2016 and will continue throughout 2017. The renovations to the original exhibits in [Mammal Hall](#) will cost approximately \$680,000 according to museum officials, but it's a wise investment in what is one of the most popular and enduring exhibits in the museum since it opened in 1968.

"Mammal Hall is truly our Hope Diamond, our Mona Lisa, our Crowned Jewels" said Howard Pollman, the museum's Marketing Director. "This is what everyone gravitates toward when they come to the State Museum. School groups especially love to get up close and personal with each scene, pressing against the glass to observe ever detail."

According to Pollman, after a school group visits the hall, museum staff can instantly gauge which displays received the most interest that day simply by observing the number of hand and nose prints on the glass.

The usual winners of the popularity contest are the two wolves fighting over a kill, a mother white-tailed deer and her fawns, and the brawny bison standing amid a snow-covered field (*pictured below*).



The museum isn't just for Pennsylvanians. It tells a much older story about North America and everything that inhabited this area since the days of the dinosaurs.

Many people remember visiting here as a child, and for families across Pennsylvania it has become a multigenerational reflection point. Parents who came here as a child are now returning with their own children. But the museum isn't just for Pennsylvanians, says Rick Dunlap, Public Relations Director for the Hershey Harrisburg Regional Visitors Bureau ([HHRVB](#)).

"It tells a much bigger story of North America and everything that inhabited the area long before its namesake William Penn arrive in 1682 to survey the land given to him by King Charles II," said Dunlap. "The story this museum tells is relevant to everyone alive today because it takes you from the beginning of time as we know it to modern day."

Mammal Hall, featuring dioramas depicting common and rare species of Pennsylvania in their natural habitats, was one of the original exhibits in The State Museum when it opened in 1968. Today, the circular hall is divided by a white barrier that hides a small team of experts who are hard at work carefully removing the taxidermy specimens in each exhibit.

Each specimen is being packaged and shipped to the studio of master taxidermist [George Dante of Wildlife Preservation](#) in West Patterson, New Jersey.

Once there, each preserved animal will be closely examined for damage and areas that need immediate repair. Most of the animals are original to the 50-year-old exhibit and over time they will develop cracks and splits among other natural deterioration, according to Dante. Once repaired, the animals will be repainted and groomed, before returning to Harrisburg.

These preserved animals are original to the exhibit hall and may have not been touched since 1968.

Meanwhile, [Stephen Quinn](#), a former artist with the American Museum of Natural History in New York, is leading a team that is refurbishing all the trees and bushes which compose the displays, as well as the many detailed murals which provide the background for each setting.

"As with any art form, the devil is in the details," said Quinn. "Everything has to be considered and work together, from the hue and saturation of the lighting to the airbrushed highlights of each animal's fur. The true art form in refurbishing these displays is in creating the authentic illusion of a natural scene."

It is the unique combination of art and science that makes this project so engaging for Quinn. He described the trick to creating a realistic wild encounter as a balance of "utilizing all the freedoms of expression allowed in art, while remaining highly disciplined to the rules of nature and science."

The scenes also must remain true to Pennsylvania, because they are all based on real places in Pennsylvania.

The vision for Mammal Hall when it was being planned in the 1960's was to display the native animals of Pennsylvania in authentic scenes that portrayed real settings from around the state.

To insure each diorama in the hall included the appropriate plant type, placement of trees and shrubs, and landscape for a real place in Pennsylvania, [museum workers formed field parties](#) that traveled around Pennsylvania collecting natural samples, photographs and sketches of each area where these animals would have lived or existed in the past.

Every detail was then meticulously re-created so that when a visitor of any age pushed their noses against the glass to get a closer look at the detail of a display, they can imagine being face to face with a real elk, bear, or white tail deer in a real place in Pennsylvania.

The animals themselves were donated by the Pennsylvania Game Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service after state museum curators at the time decided it was unethical to hunt living creatures for the museum.

The Red Fox habitat is one example of how specific the dioramas are to real places in Pennsylvania. The scene depicts a family of red foxes on a hillside in nearby Newberrytown. Museum staff who recently visited the location conducting research for the 2016 restoration project, reported the hilltop depicted in the mural was completely recognizable, with only a minor addition of a modern housing development rising up in the distance.



The importance of that extensive attention to detail in the research completed by the original field teams cannot be overlooked,” said Dunlap. “The authenticity of these exhibits in Mammal Hall was instrumental in its initial success when it opened, and has remained the key to its longevity for the past 50 years.

Each display is a snapshot of a moment of natural life, inviting the question: "What happens next?"

As someone close to the renovation project, Quinn explains the emotional response we feel when looking at the displays is likely one reason the Mammal Hall has remained one of the fondest memories for generations.

“The scenes were created to look and feel so real, they tend to evoke the same emotions we would have if we witnessed these scenes happening in real-time out in nature,” said Quinn.

Different scenes create any array of feelings from fear, empathy, sadness, wonder, and excitement, to curiosity, exhilaration, and joy.

“The scenes portrayed in Mammal Hall are moving and emotional, which makes them memorable,” said Dunlap. “When I take travel writers through the museum, Mammal Hall is always where they take the most pictures; and once a writer has experienced the entire museum it always ends up in their story as a top recommendation when visiting the Hershey Harrisburg Region.”

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MEDIA INTERVIEWS

Mary Smith, President & CEO of the Hershey Harrisburg Regional Visitors Bureau is available for media interviews regarding the contents of this news release. Please try to make interview requests at least 12-hours in advance. The bureau will make every effort to accommodate all interview requests. Contact Rick@HersheyHarrisburg.org or call 717.884.3328.

ABOUT THE HERSHEY HARRISBURG REGIONAL VISITORS BUREAU

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The HHRVB is the official non-profit partnership-based Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) leading economic growth for Pennsylvania’s Hershey & Harrisburg Region through destination marketing and tourism development. The organization, accredited by Destination Marketing Association International ([DMAI](#)) since 2010, is committed to actively marketing the tourism assets in Dauphin & Perry County to business and leisure travelers both domestic & international. The bureau also leads regional sales efforts to attract meeting & event organizers, sporting event producers, and group tour leaders. For more information go to VisitHersheyHarrisburg.org or call 877-727-8573. Media can use #HHRVB and #HHRVB4Media when tagging stories and social media posts related to the region.

ABOUT THE STATE MUSEUM OF PENNSYLVANIA & PA HISTORIC & MUSEUM COMMISSION

Since its creation in 1905, The State Museum of Pennsylvania has collected, preserved, researched, and interpreted the cultural and natural history of the state. Over the years, the museum has greatly expanded its collections and modernized its public offerings to serve the needs of succeeding generations of Pennsylvanians. Originally located next to the Capitol, the museum moved to its current location in 1964. It became a bureau of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission in 1945.

The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) is the official history agency of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Created in 1945, we are responsible for the collection, conservation, and interpretation of Pennsylvania’s historic heritage, which we accomplish through the Pennsylvania State Archives, The State Museum of Pennsylvania, the Bureau of Historic Sites and Museums, the Pennsylvania Trails of History, the Bureau for Historic Preservation, and the Bureau of Management Services.