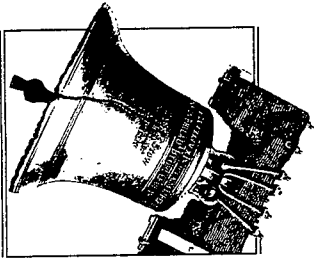


Shrines



MANY OF AMERICA'S MOST FAMOUS shrines and landmarks are phony. Yet such is the average person's confidence in physical objects that few shrines ever fall under suspicion.

Of all American shrines, perhaps none is more sacred than the Liberty Bell, which, as everyone knows, was rung when independence was declared on July 4, 1776. The only question, when questions are raised, is about the details. One author wrote that the bell was rung by an "old man" with white hair at the signal of a boy with "blue eyes," who had just received word that the delegates had voted for liberty. More colorful narrators recalled that the old man rang the bell a hundred times while crying loudly, "Liberty throughout the land, unto the inhabitants thereof." B. W. Belisle in his *History of Independence Hall*, published in 1859, added the interesting detail that the "gray headed patriot" rang the bell to the cheer of a crowd below, which had "anxiously awaited" the signing of the declaration "with trembling hope."

Such is the popular fascination with the Liberty Bell that a few years ago a group of industrious citizens had full-size replicas of the shrine made up for every state in the Union, so that people who couldn't travel to Philadelphia could benefit from the uplifting sight. In Utah the replica stands just outside the state's House of Representatives. Tour guides point to the bell with reverence, and it's only a duplicate.

Yet the Liberty Bell is a fraud. The story told to millions

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is twaddle. Experts say the tale is the fabrication of a young nineteenth-century Philadelphian, George Lippard.* Lippard published the story in the aptly titled *Legends of the American Revolution* (1847), a book which catapulted him immediately to the front rank of historical mythmakers.

Of the true story of the Liberty Bell, little is known. It was installed in Independence Hall in 1753. But there is no evidence the bell was rung when independence was declared. In any case, it wouldn't have been rung on the fourth to celebrate the event. Independence was declared on July 2, not July 4. It might have been rung on July 8, when Congress publicly celebrated independence for the first time, but there's no evidence of it.

It is a good-looking bell, but it wasn't a shrine until Lippard. In 1828 the city of Philadelphia even tried to sell it for scrap. There were no takers, however.

The bell contains the inscription "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the Land unto the Inhabitants Thereof." But the inscription, cast when the bell was produced in 1753, had nothing to do with the Revolution.

It is called the Liberty Bell but wasn't named until long after the Revolution—and not in honor of the Revolution. The "liberty" referred to in the title was intended to mean the liberty of blacks, not whites. The name was coined in 1839 by antislavery activists.¹

Of other shrines associated with historical milestones, Bunker Hill and Plymouth Rock are perhaps subject to the most confusion and error. Bunker Hill owes its famous reputation to a case of mistaken identity. The famous battle actually took place on Breed's Hill, a smaller mound nearby. The patriots had been under orders to secure Bunker Hill but decided for unknown reasons to throw up

*Lippard's only other major claim is that he wrote a play considered so racy it was banned in Philadelphia.

their redoubts on Breed's, which, unfortunately, was much more vulnerable to attack. Like those patriots, Americans since have been confused over where the battle took place. So have the British. A British map of Boston made after the battle shows the American forces clearly camped on "Bunkers [sic] Hill."

The Americans, incidentally, lost the Battle of Bunker Hill. After fighting off the more highly trained enemy, the patriots at last gave up and fled, allowing the British to take the hill. British victory, however, came at a frightening cost: more than a thousand royal troops killed and wounded. The Americans suffered five hundred casualties.²

The belief that the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock rests solely on dubious secondhand testimony given by a ninety-five-year-old man more than a century after the *Mayflower* arrived. The statement was made in 1741 by Elder Thomas Faunce, who based his claims on a story he had supposedly been told as a boy by his father, who himself arrived in America three years *after* the *Mayflower*.

At any rate, the Pilgrims didn't first land at Plymouth. They landed at Provincetown. To the considerable dismay of the residents of Provincetown, however, nobody remembers that.³

Plymouth was not, by the way, the first English settlement in North America, or even the first permanent settlement. Jamestown, planted in 1607, was first. The Pilgrims have won the reputation that they were first only because New England historians made such a fuss about them. And until the nineteenth century American history was largely written of, by, and for New Englanders. Their original bias endures.

Also subject to myth and error are famous homes associated with Lincoln, Betsy Ross, and Stephen Foster. So established is the reputation of the little log cabin on display near Hodgenville, Kentucky, in which Lincoln is said to have been born that it has

become a major tourist attraction. It is guarded by the Interior Department and is officially registered as the "Abraham Lincoln Birthplace Historical Site."

It is a fraud, however, as Lincoln's own son Robert attested. Records indicate the original log cabin where Lincoln was born was actually destroyed by fire before 1840. Further, not even the burned logs were saved. According to the reminiscences of an eighty-four-year-old Kentuckian whose family lived in the original cabin, "the logs were burned for firewood." In 1865, the year of Lincoln's death, eyewitnesses reported that there were no signs of a log cabin at the site of the old Lincoln farm where the President had been born.

The fake cabin was built out of logs salvaged from a two-story home near Lincoln's. In an obvious attempt to cash in on the legendary President, the builder, one John Davenport, first advertised it as Lincoln's birthplace, then sold it to Alfred W. Dennett, a promoter. Dennett removed the cabin to Nashville, where he put it on display at the Tennessee Exposition of 1897—right alongside another cabin said to be the original home of Lincoln's Confederate counterpart, Jefferson Davis. When questioned about the origins of the Lincoln cabin, Dennett's partner, evangelist James W. Bigham, explained (according to a reporter who was covering the exposition), "Lincoln was born in a log cabin, weren't he? Well, one cabin is as good as another."

After the exposition closed, Dennett disassembled the cabin and packed it away until 1901, when he again put it on display, this time at an exposition in Buffalo, New York. Eventually it wound up in the basement of a Long Island mansion. It was finally sold to a group of civic-minded preservationists, who turned it over to the federal government. Safely in the hands of the Interior Department, it was returned to Hodgenville, reassembled for the last time, and suitably installed in an elaborate memorial building.

In anticipation of questions about the cabin, the preservation-

ists who donated it to the government undertook a major effort to dispel all doubts about it. They claimed to have collected "affidavits" from old settlers in the region who vouched for the cabin's authenticity. And they said the affidavits were "carefully reviewed" by a number of academic experts, including "Professors Hart of Harvard, Adams of Yale, and Turner of Wisconsin—officers of the American Historical Association—and Ida M. Tarbell, Lincoln's biographer." The experts, it was claimed, "agreed that the logs were genuine beyond a reasonable doubt."

Unfortunately none of the affidavits seem to have survived. Neither have the supporting statements made by the historians who had supposedly been consulted. Charles Hosmer, who has studied the controversy in depth, says there's no "conclusive proof that any of the distinguished professors ever declared the cabin authentic." It is hard to believe they ever would. All the contradictory evidence set aside, even partisans admitted the cabin had been moved, taken apart, and assembled half a dozen times or so. It is a little difficult to believe, therefore, that anyone could say with certainty that this cabin was the cabin.⁴

Another popular shrine is the home of Betsy Ross, located in Philadelphia. Yet there's no evidence she ever lived there. Both the U.S. Congress and the city of Philadelphia refused to accept the home as a gift because the claims of authenticity couldn't be verified. In 1949 the Joint State Government Commission of Pennsylvania concluded that "there is no proof that Betsy Ross lived here," although the commission acknowledged that "the house is an interesting example of the homes of the period."

The claim that Ross lived there was apparently advanced by the late-nineteenth-century owner of the house, perhaps in an attempt to increase its value. The house was scheduled to be destroyed in 1892, but at the last moment it was saved by preservationists, who had been encouraged in their efforts by a small-time painter who

made money showing a picture of the building entitled "Birth of Our Nation's Flag."

Whether Ross ever lived in the house is a side issue at any rate. Her chief claim to fame is that she invented the first American flag. Unfortunately, while it's possible she sewed the first flag, there's no evidence she designed it. What evidence there is concerning the origins of the flag suggests that one Francis Hopkinson deserves the credit. Records show that in May 1780 Hopkinson sent a bill to the Board of Admiralty for designing the "Flag of the United States." Presumably Hopkinson could not have claimed credit for the flag if he hadn't been responsible for it since the people who knew the truth were still alive and could say otherwise.⁵

Claims that Stephen Foster wrote "My Old Kentucky Home" at Rowan Manor House near Bardstown, Kentucky, are as unfounded as the assertions made on behalf of the Betsy Ross home. Originally people were misled by a newspaper story published in the *Louisville Journal* in 1893. Later the myth was spread by promoters who bought the house with a public subscription and in 1922 donated the building to the state. Historians say that Foster composed the song in Pennsylvania, where he lived at the time.⁶

It may be that the average American doesn't care that the Lincoln, Ross, and Foster homes are fakes. Over the years Americans have shown an astonishing indifference to the relics of the past, fake or real. During the War of 1812 the room in which the Declaration of Independence was signed was slated for demolition and partly torn down. Preservationists managed to save the edifice, but only after two great wings of Independence Hall had already been destroyed. In 1853 a syndicate of enterprising Virginia businessmen attempted to turn Mount Vernon into a hotel. Appalled, the governor of Virginia sought to buy Washington's home, but when the

owner demanded to be paid the going market rate of two hundred thousand dollars, the legislature refused to go along. Only the concentrated efforts of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association saved the building from commercial exploitation.

The homes of less famous patriots were not similarly spared. During the Civil War the John Hancock mansion was demolished so a developer could put to more profitable purposes the land underneath, which had grown in value to more than a hundred thousand dollars.⁷

Other shrines that have come under critical scrutiny are Henry Ford's Greenfield Village and John D. Rockefeller's better-known Colonial Williamsburg. Ford's paean to the "Early American Village" suffers from the sin of omission. Ford hated bankers, lawyers, socialites, and patricians, so in his ideal little town there aren't any. There are no banks, law offices, or mansions. Only comforting symbols of the past are allowed: an old windmill from Cape Cod; a New Hampshire farmhouse; Thomas Edison's Menlo Park laboratory.

Williamsburg, in its original form, was also incomplete. Although Rockefeller indicated he wanted everything to be accurate—"no scholar must ever be able to come to us and say we have made a mistake"—he left out any evidence that real people had ever lived there. His was a tidy world where mothers wore beautiful dresses and every family had a nice little home. To compound the inaccuracy, there were no slaves: in his re-creation, not one, although more than 50 percent of the people in the real Williamsburg had been slaves. In the 1970's slaves were added. As one historian remarked, Williamsburg finally discovered slavery.⁸

Richard Shenkman



**LEGENDS,
MYTHS,
&
Cherished Myths
OF
AMERICAN HISTORY**



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