

New 'Discover History' center at Washington's HQ is truly touching



YOU ARE HERE! Tom Ross, superintendent of the Morristown National Historical Park, with interactive map in new Discovery History Center. Photo by Kevin Coughlin

By Kevin Coughlin - January 31, 2018  1

The new \$2.25 million **Discover History Center** that opens on Presidents Day weekend at the **Washington's Headquarters Museum** in Morristown is full of signs and placards and message boards.

One sign, however, is conspicuously absent:

DON'T TOUCH!

"This is highly interactive... we want people to touch things," said **Tom Ross**, superintendent of the **Morristown National Historical Park**.



Tom Ross, superintendent of the Morristown National Historical Park, tries an interactive map at the new Discover History Center. Photo by Kevin Coughlin

The lower level of the museum now abounds with touch screens, motion-activated overhead speakers, push-button maps, and mini-doors that open to reveal historical tidbits about Gen. George Washington and the hard winter of 1779-80 endured by his ragtag Continental troops in Morristown. (Did you know the General's valet was a slave he bought for the purpose?)

You can crawl onto a wooden bunk in a recreated hut, try a uniform on for size, and lift faux logs that approximate the weight of a soldier's gear. Pull a handle, and a slot-machine-type contraption serves up your Revolutionary fate. (It kept landing on "Scarred for Life" during a press tour this week.)

Another interactive display resembles a vertical roulette wheel. Press a button and it spins, showing you how long it took to deliver messages to various outposts from the adjacent Ford Mansion, where Washington made his headquarters. (Figure about a day for the General to communicate with his men, shivering five miles down the road at Jockey Hollow.)



WHERE DID I LEAVE THAT KEY? The new Discover History Center includes this door, circa 1760, from the jail that once stood on the Morristown Green.

There are unappetizing re-creations of soldiers' meals, depictions of latrine duty (hygiene was emphasized in Morristown; disease caused more casualties than musket balls during the war), and representations of just how high the snow piled during that winter of 24 storms.

"It's a wonderful exhibit, fun and entertaining for children, and also educational. We think people are really going to enjoy it," said **Eileen Cameron**, president of the **Washington Association of New Jersey**.



A new state-of-the-art screening room shows the documentary, 'Morristown: Where America Survived.' Photo by Kevin Coughlin

The volunteer organization raised \$1.7 million for the project, which was put together by Steve Feldman Design of Maryland.



BY GEORGE, WHAT'S THIS? The Washington's Headquarters Museum now has a more user-friendly feel—it even has cutouts of Washington and Hamilton for selfies. Photo by Kevin Coughlin

Established 144 years ago, the Washington Association helped create the Morristown historical park by donating the Ford Mansion to the National Park Service in 1933.

When plans for the Discover History Center were announced **back in 2013**, the goal was to complete the work within two years. But fundraising, contracting and historical accuracy all took time, Ross and Cameron acknowledged.

Cameron can hardly wait for the center's grand opening, on Saturday, Feb. 17, 2018, at 10 am.

Re-enactors from the **2nd New Jersey Regiment, Helms' Company**, will be there, too. **Linda Russell** will perform 18th century hits on her hammered dulcimer. Historical photos by artist Xiomaro will be displayed, the Ford Mansion will be open for tours, and the **Morris Tourism Bureau** and other agencies will make special presentations.



Bert Dunkerly, acting chief of interpretation and education, with musket display at the new Discover History Center at the Washington's Headquarters Museum. Photo by Kevin Coughlin

And it's all free to the public. The National Park Service eliminated fees at its Morristown sites this year because it's too costly to collect them. (Donations are gladly accepted, though.)

The center will remain open on Sunday, Feb. 18, and on Presidents Day, Feb. 19, and also on Tuesday, Feb. 20, because some schools are closed that day. Then the museum will resume its regular Wednesday-Sunday schedule, as Park Rangers return from a start-of-the-year

furlough.

Officials at the center have been reaching out to area teachers, hoping they will incorporate it into their history lessons.

Exhibits, including a new timeline upstairs with short videos, are designed to give an overview of events surrounding the Revolutionary War.

“We try to find the middle ground, because we don’t want to be seen as being too out of touch with the larger historical community,” explained **Jude Pfister**, chief of cultural resources for the museum.

“But at the same time we don’t want it to be a dissertation, either, that’s going to be too overwhelming for people. It can be a juggling act. I would say at the end of the day, I think we did a pretty good job.”



HOW DEEP? Depiction of the snow at Jockey Hollow during the Revolutionary War, at the new Discover History Center. Photo by Kevin Coughlin



The museum’s first-floor exhibition space also has been expanded, to better display items such as these Revolutionary War surgeon’s tools. Recent improvements also include a redesigned gift shop. Photo by Kevin Coughlin