

Letter to the Editor

TO THE EDITORS OF PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY:
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“WE MUST RESCUE FORT PITT MUSEUM”

In mid-March, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) released a report recommending that the Fort Pitt Museum in Pittsburgh be closed and its collections removed and dispersed. It is one of six sites in Pennsylvania on the list of closings. The museum’s companion site, Bushy Run Battlefield, would lose its visitor center. If all of these sites are closed, Pennsylvania will eliminate its recognition of the French and Indian War (and the War of 1812, incidentally). The report is fatally flawed by poor research, distortions, and faulty reasoning. (See www.savefortpittnow.com for a detailed critique.)

The Fort Pitt Museum tells a story that must be told

It is located on the very place that three peoples contested during the first true world war, a place whose ownership determined the destiny of much of North America. Key events continued here through the American Revolution and into the first years of the new nation. Pennsylvania has an international obligation to preserve and interpret the importance of this unique place, one of the handful of pivotal sites in North America: along with Independence Hall and Gettysburg, the site of Fort Pitt is a lynchpin of American history.

The Fort Pitt Museum tells a story that no one else can tell

Because of its site, the Fort Pitt Museum enables the visitor to grasp firsthand the strategic importance of the Forks of the Ohio and to learn about the chain of events that culminated with its capture in 1758 – then learn why this place remained vital to American expansion thereafter. Like no other museum or

organization, the Fort Pitt Museum concentrates on the military history of colonial and late 18th-century frontier America, but it also covers such other topics as boundary disputes, the Whiskey Rebellion, and the launch of the Lewis and Clark expedition. No other museum in the Pittsburgh area offers comprehensive exhibits of original materials, skilled staff and interpreters, research facilities, school programs, and one of the country's best bookstores on this topic. In fact, no other museum in the world covers this period so comprehensively and so well.

The Fort Pitt Museum is poised to tell that story even better than before

The museum was recently expanded and renovated, with the investment of millions of dollars. It now has a large and active friends organization and launched a multi-year program of seminars and intergenerational activities in 2008. There is also a major initiative to add additional historical documents and artifacts to the holdings of the museum. The 250th anniversary of the French and Indian War and the coming anniversary of the initial phases of the Revolutionary War mean that interest in the museum's topics is cresting. With completion of the major (\$35 million) overhaul of Point State Park this spring, there will be much greater awareness and visitation of the museum, as it is the jewel in what will become a major urban destination park. Indeed, the renovation of the park was intended to enable the two elements, park and museum, to provide a coordinated interpretive message. Closing the museum would destroy that concept.

The Friends of the Fort Pitt Museum are now crafting a plan to take the museum independent, after a transitional period during which a business plan will be created, new support will be obtained, and the museum will be intensively marketed. This plan will need interim funding from the state legislature, but the outcome will be a well-founded institution, a lower state budget, and better community support for the museum.

Thus the best years of the Fort Pitt Museum lie ahead, but first we must stop this recommendation from being implemented and ensure its future.

Donn Neal, President
Friends of the Fort Pitt Museum