



Reimagining Fraunces Tavern Museum *The Oldest Remaining Building in Manhattan*

by Craig Hamilton Weaver

FRAUNCES TAVERN holds the distinction of being the oldest remaining building in Manhattan. In a city in which many buildings barely survive for a generation, this is a remarkable accomplishment. Recognizing the tremendous importance of Fraunces Tavern to the history of New York City and the nation, Sons of the Revolution in the State of New York (SRNY) which owns the building and the Museum, as well as several contiguous structures, has undertaken an intense effort in the short period of only three years to reimagine and reinvigorate the entire Museum. The Museum has been transformed into a dynamic modern venue with cutting-edge exhibitions relevant to all visitors. While holding fast to its historic

mission of highlighting the Revolutionary War era and George Washington, SRNY's Museum and Art Committee has sought to expand the appeal of the Museum to a globally diverse audience having varying interests and ranging across all age groups, including thousands of school children.

The Building and Façade

A tour of Fraunces Tavern begins standing at the front steps on Pearl Street, gazing at the brick façade. The land on which the tavern was built was under water until the end of the 17th century, when lots were created using landfill. By 1719, Stephen De Lancey, a gentleman of Huguenot descent, purchased one of these lots for the purpose of building an

impressive brick residence. Prior to being purchased by Samuel Fraunces in 1762 for the purpose of establishing a tavern, the building served both commercial and residential functions, with the iconic Long Room becoming a recognized social hub for balls and other functions. A unique feature is the fact that the Pearl Street façade was constructed of brown brick, which was just beginning to be used in New York City, whereas the Broad Street façade is constructed of traditional yellow bricks imported from the Netherlands. The Broad Street façade is most likely the only remaining yellow brick structure remaining in a city where, under Dutch rule and for many years thereafter, many buildings were constructed of this material. Recently, SRNY retained the services

of a prominent architectural preservation firm to examine the building in detail. The firm has verified the authenticity of the brown and yellow brickwork and ascertained the fact that the Long Room remains in its original location and contains a considerable amount of original materials. Other areas of the building, including the basement, are equally well preserved.

The George Washington Portrait Gallery

Entering the front door on Pearl Street, visitors immediately see a vibrant restaurant and bar operated by a tenant of SRNY, whose Tallmadge Room at the corner of Pearl Street and Broad Street is reminiscent of the original tavern operation. The establishment is well respected in New York City for its diverse menu offerings and the broad spectrum of alcoholic beverages served, including Samuel Fraunces Ale. Walking up the stairs to the second floor, the visitor enters Fraunces Tavern Museum, where they will find the George Washington Portrait Gallery. This space and collection were the gifts of the late Stanley DeForest Scott, honorary president of SRNY, and his wife Elizabeth, and contain one of the finest collections of George Washington prints on display by a museum.

The Government Offices

To the right of the Washington Portrait Gallery is the permanent exhibition, *Governing the Nation from Fraunces Tavern*, which opened in June of 2022 and recreates the Department of Foreign Affairs under Secretary John Jay. As the Revolutionary War came to a close and a fledgling government was being established in New York City, office space was leased in the tavern for the Departments of Foreign Affairs and War and Board of Treasury, making Fraunces Tavern the first executive government office building in America. The Museum chose to

illustrate the Department of Foreign Affairs because of the existence of an original account book in the National Archives detailing its furnishings. A theme running through the exhibit is the hierarchy of an office of this period—the elegant New York Chippendale table where Jay and his visitors would sit, containing a Sheffield plate inkstand and impressive book press, is contrasted with the desk of the Under Secretary Henry Remsen Jr. and the clerk’s desk containing much simpler objects. Recently the Museum was loaned the original traveling desk of Under Secretary Henry Remsen Jr. by Holland Lodge No. 8 of New York, which is on display. Hanging on the wall is an original Ratzler map of New York City; the walls themselves are covered with extraordinary Zuber wallpaper, a gift to the Museum in 1968 by Dr. George Clinton Andrews. The vibrant wallpaper is appropriate to the room as it depicts the surrender of General Cornwallis at Yorktown, among other historic scenes.

The Long Room

On the other side of the Washington Portrait Gallery is the iconic Long Room. As previously mentioned, this room remains in its original location. Commencing in the 1730s, the room served as a prestigious location for social events and a gentleman named Henry Hall used the facility to offer dance instruction. While Samuel Fraunces operated Fraunces Tavern, the room was used as a venue for both dining and functions. The



furnishings in the room were restored in 2022; New England chairs were replaced with New York fiddle back and bannister back chairs. Smaller Chippendale Pembroke tables were added alongside the grand long table. Hanging over one of the fireplaces is an important painting of Washington at Valley Forge from the Fraunces Tavern Museum’s collection. This painting was begun by Thomas Hicks and finished by Emanuel Leutze, and depicts one of George Washington’s most trying times during the war. Conversely, the Long Room was the site of the culminating event in Washington’s

Top: The Government Offices exhibition. Opened in June of 2022, it recreates the Department of Foreign Affairs under Secretary John Jay.

Above: The space and collection in the George Washington Portrait Gallery were the gifts of the late Stanley DeForest Scott, honorary president of SRNY, and his wife Elizabeth.



ultimate triumph, namely Washington’s emotional farewell to his officers at Fraunces Tavern on December 4, 1783. The contrast could not be more poignant.

The Dunsmore and McEntee Galleries

Walking up the stairs to the third floor of the Museum, visitors enter the Museum’s Dunsmore Gallery, which contains an exhibition depicting the over 300-year history of Fraunces Tavern using photographs, articles, and period illustrations. The room contains examples of the original yellow bricks as well as a three-dimensional model of Fraunces Tavern and its surrounding buildings.

Across from the Dunsmore Gallery, visitors enter the majestic McEntee Gallery lined with original Tiffany display cases. This room has been completely updated and out of storage has come Martha Washington’s slipper to sit alongside a locket containing George Washington’s hair.

Numerous historical artifacts are on display to capture the attention of any visitor.

Contained within the McEntee Gallery is the newly created *Private Dining at Fraunces Tavern* permanent exhibition, opened in January 2023. This room represents a private dining venue within the Tavern. It is known through written accounts that many famous people—including Washington,

Alexander Hamilton, Paul Revere, and John Adams—dined in the Tavern and enjoyed the sumptuous cuisine of Samuel Fraunces. Clubs, political groups, and small parties gathered and dined in private dining venues such as those depicted in this exhibit. The theme throughout the room is the impact of global commerce and diversity on all aspects of the Tavern’s operations: diversity of dining patrons in the growing metropolis, of cuisine offered, and of furnishings contained in the room that illustrate the point. Fraunces Tavern was known for the breadth of its cuisine, ranging from dishes introduced by African Americans to delicious pastries influenced by the Huguenot population of the city, while hearty main dishes evidencing the Dutch and English background of many of its patrons were predominant. The dining room was frequented by individuals of many backgrounds in this cosmopolitan venue, and the furnishings reflect the impact of extensive global trade. The Canton porcelain is from China, a magnificent chest on chest is from coastal Massachusetts, a set of ornate Chippendale chairs are from England, and a Philadelphia Chippendale table reflects the fact that much of New York’s furniture originated in there. The Dutch marquetry clock from an early New York family highlights the residual Dutch influence in the colonial city, and the sideboard made a few blocks away evidences the capability of local cabinetmakers.

Cloaked Crusader: George Washington in Comics and Pop Culture

Climbing a couple of steps into the Messick Galley, one enters the magnificent special exhibition opened in October 2022 highlighting the depiction of Washington from the early 20th century up to the present in pop culture. Curated by Renée Witterstaetter, a comic book colorist, editor, producer, and writer, the exhibit makes use of state-of-the-art technology



Top: The Long Room served as a prestigious location for social events and a gentleman named Henry Hall used the facility to offer dance instruction.

Center: The majestic McEntee Gallery is lined with original Tiffany display cases. Martha Washington’s slipper sits alongside a locket containing George Washington’s hair.

Above: The Messick Galley houses a special exhibition depicting Washington from the early 20th century up to the present in pop culture.

and broadens the appeal of George Washington and the entire museum to a newer, younger audience. The walls are hung with numerous original comic book depictions and oil paintings of the founding father. This exhibit is the first of its kind ever presented and includes many innovative artistic mediums in covering the subject.

To the Beat of Their Own Drums

The Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Educational Center for American History features an exhibit showcasing the SRNY's extensive collection of colonial flags that informs visitors of the history and iconography behind the regimental flags of the diverse groups who fought for American independence. Also on display are a rotating selection of paintings by the artist John Ward Dunsmore depicting various Revolutionary War era scenes. The Davis Educational Center is also used for the Museum's many author lectures and other special programs.

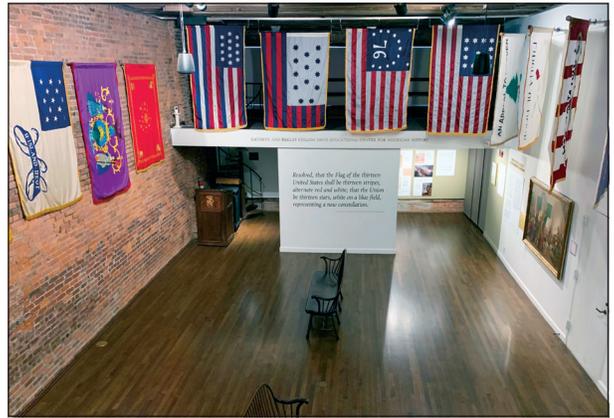
The Birch Trials at Fraunces Tavern

At the Pearl Street side of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Educational Center, one sees the latest permanent exhibition opened by the Museum in June of 2023, *The Birch Trials at Fraunces Tavern*. In 1783, as the Revolutionary War was drawing to a close, a joint British and American commission was established and met at Fraunces Tavern weekly to review and deliberate upon the eligibility of some Black Loyalists to leave New York. Evidence was reviewed by the lead magistrate and three American and three British commissioners. These proceedings are referred to as the Birch Trials, named after British General Samuel Birch, who was appointed by Sir Guy Carlton to oversee the proceedings. These hearings were an integral component of a process whereby 3,000 Black Loyalists were permitted to leave New York, resulting in their eventual freedom and constituting

the largest emancipation effort prior to the American Civil War. Visitors see a table and chairs organized as if waiting for the commissioners to arrive, and hanging on the walls are copies of original documents, including Birch Trial certificates and newspaper articles referencing Fraunces Tavern. Also included in the exhibition is a comprehensive overview of Black participation on both sides of the Revolutionary War. This exhibit reflects two years of exhaustive research on both sides of the Atlantic into thousands of original documents and provides the most comprehensive insight to date into this event in the history of Black emancipation in America.

Adeline Moses Loeb Gallery and Upcoming Exhibits

In 2024, the Museum will commemorate the return visit of Lafayette to America, with an emphasis on activities occurring in New York and a new special exhibit in the Adeline Moses Loeb Gallery, established through the generosity of Honorary President, Ambassador John L. Loeb Jr. Beginning in 2025, the Museum also intends to present a comprehensive set of exhibits telling the history of the Revolutionary War as we honor America's 250th anniversary in 2026. The Fraunces Tavern Museum truly is a monument to memory, presenting over 300 years of living history to visitors from around the world. 



Top: An exhibit showcasing the SRNY's extensive collection of colonial flags.

Center: The Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Educational Center has the latest permanent exhibition opened by the Museum in June of 2023, *The Birch Trials at Fraunces Tavern*.

Above: The Fraunces Tavern Museum private dining exhibition preview group.

Mr. Weaver is co-chairman of the Museum and Art Committee, Fraunces Tavern Museum.