

The Rhode Island State House: Moon Flecks and History Under a Dome

Perhaps to compensate for its small size, Rhode Island didn't skimp when it built its State House. Completed in 1904, the building is the fourth largest self-supporting marble dome in the world, trailing only the Minnesota State Capitol, the Taj Mahal and St. Peter's Basilica.

The State House is grand and imposing, yet also light and airy, thanks to the white Georgia marble used in its construction. Cynics contend that Rhode Island's legislature is for sale, but it wouldn't come cheap if the building were included. It's estimated that it would cost 1.1 billion dollars to construct the State House today.

Built in the Classically inspired American Renaissance style, the State House was one of the first public buildings to be completely electrified. To show off the new technology, interior light bulbs were left uncovered. Still, the architects didn't have complete faith in the new technology, and also included several expansive skylights.

The State House's natural light and white stone mesh perfectly with its soaring dome. As you ascend the steps to the Rotunda, your gaze is drawn upward to the ceiling, 149 feet above. Painted on the interior of the dome is an elaborate mural depicting Rhode Island's origins, including founder Roger Williams meeting with Narragansett Indian chiefs.

The galleries of the Senate and House are open to visitors, as are the floors, provided the chambers are not in session. A must-see is the State House Library, which is heavy on dark wood and resembles a private gentleman's club. This is not surprising as the State House architects, who were also responsible for the original Penn Station, designed a number of such exclusive lodges. The library's intricately designed ceiling is a marvel - it features the seals of Renaissance era book printers sculpted in stucco and gold leaf.

In addition to its law making function, the State House is a repository for all manner of artifacts, including a Gettysburg Gun and battle flags carried by Rhode Island troops during the American Revolution. The Gettysburg cannon was never fired - it was struck by a Confederate cannon ball and rendered useless. The inoperable cannon was displayed for decades before it occurred to someone that it was still loaded with gun powder. In 1962, the gun was removed and the charge emptied; the Civil War relic was then returned to the State House.

The most significant piece of Rhode Island history on display, however, isn't a weapon, it's a piece of paper. Just outside the Senate chamber is the original 1663 Royal Charter issued by King Charles II granting Rhode Island colony status. The document is housed in a vaulted glass case which also contains one of the original copies of the Declaration of Independence.

The ornate State Reception Room, whose azure ceiling resembles the sky, features several massive portraits including a full length 1802 rendering of George Washington by Rhode Island native Gilbert Stuart. No matter where you move about the room, Washington appears to be facing you. Two other items displayed in the State Room are more curious than visually impressive: a few flecks of the moon (along with a small Rhode Island flag carried there and back), and some grains of sand from the battle of Iwo Jima.

If all this Rhode Island history and politics tires you, not to worry. The south lawn of the State House is only steps away from the Providence Place Mall, seat of Nordstrom's, an IMAX and a food court. The south lawn is also a good place to survey the "Independent Man" who tops the State House. Viewed from a passing vehicle on nearby I-95, he resembles a cereal box prize, but is actually eleven-feet tall and weighs five-hundred-pounds. The bronze statue was inspired by Roger Williams and Rhode Island's early reputation for liberty, tolerance and free thinking. But the Independent Man also has an edge: he clutches a 14-foot spear and has been hit by lightning 27 times.

IF YOU GO ...

Rhode Island State House

82 Smith Street

Providence, RI 02903

www.sec.state.ri.us/pubinfo/Tours/tours.html (Information and self-guided tour)

www.rilin.state.ri.us/statehousetour (Detailed virtual tour)

Open weekdays 9AM to 3:30 PM. Closed weekends and holidays.

Free guided tours available Monday-Friday at 9, 10, 11 AM. Call (401) 222-3983 for reservations. Brochures for self guided tours are located in the Public Information Office, Room 38 on the basement level, or at the Capitol Police Desk on the first floor.

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