

For tourists, Hub is special on the 4th

City's landmarks tell visitors tales of period history

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In front of Boston's Old City Hall, tour guide Margaret Ann Brady kept cool on a hot day while talking to city visitors. (Photos by David L. Ryan/Globe Staff)

By Thomas Oide | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Doyle and Mary Garrett, tourists from Lancaster, Pa., wish they had a time machine to see Boston's historic landmarks when they were first built. Since they don't have one, they said, seeing them Tuesday was "about as close as you can get."

The Garretts were just some of the tourists who were out on the Freedom Trail on the day before Independence Day, soaking in the city's rich history despite the 97-degree heat and stifling humidity.

"We like the history, in general, and take in as much as we can," Doyle Garrett said, while taking a break from walking in the courtyard of Old North Church, where the church sexton and a vestryman hung lanterns to signal to Paul Revere.

Melissa Baron, a high school American literature teacher from Seattle, made her first stop at the Granary Burial Ground, final resting place of Revere, John Hancock and Samuel Adams. Baron planned the trip to visit family, not realizing that she'd also be spending the Fourth of July in Boston.

As someone who teaches books like "The Crucible" every year, she was excited to see historic sites and relate them to her work in the classroom.

"To be out here now and as an American lit and American history teacher, it feels much cooler to be here," Baron said. "It's more meaningful to tie all of the abstract things we talk about to actual, tangible things."

Margaret Ann Brady, a Freedom Trail tour guide who dresses in Colonial garb, said Boston's history makes it one of the best places to visit around the Fourth.

"This is the foundation of the Revolution and it's all right here," Brady said as she left Old City Hall on her way to the city's one-time Newspaper Row on Washington Street. "You can feel it, you can smell it, you can taste it. There's nothing that gives you that spirit more than being here in Boston."

Joaquin Rodriguez, a tourist who brought his family from Miami, said he was glad to visit on such a significant holiday. Rodriguez, originally from Spain, wanted to see and learn more about American history and culture.

“Around this time, especially for Americans and Bostonians in particular, it remind you of the great moments in history and we wanted to share that,” Rodriguez said in front of the golden-domed State House. “People here in Boston are very proud of their heritage and what they have achieved.”

The Fourth may be a big holiday in Boston now, but in 1776, on the day the Declaration of Independence was first signed, it was no big deal. According to Bostonian Society executive director Nathaniel Sheidley, Boston residents had no idea what had happened in Philadelphia until two weeks later.

“The pace of communication during the 18th century was such that people didn’t know on the Fourth in Boston,” Sheidley said. “People had a sense that it was being debated by the Congress, but there wasn’t any knowledge that it was signed until July 18.”

Sheidley said the sheriff usually read proclamations to the town back then. But since his voice was so quiet, Thomas Crafts, was picked. A colonel in an artillery unit, Crafts shouted the declaration, line-by-line, to the town because his voice “could carry over the booming of cannons,” Sheidley said.

When he finished, people fired cannons and rang all the bells throughout the city. Citizens also scoured the city and removed any symbols of the crown or royalty.

Sheidley said the Fourth is much more than just a celebration of a historic event.

“The Fourth of July is bound up with the experiment of self-government that started on July 4, 1776,” Sheidley said. “Each generation is invited to carry it forward. It’s a opportunity to celebrate what that generation gave us, but it’s also a reminder that we have a responsibility to carry it forward in our own time.”

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