

## True or False? Tour Guides In Philadelphia Face Testing

PHILADELPHIA, May 27 (AP) — Tour guides will show you this city on foot, trolley, double-decker bus or horse-drawn carriage. But can you believe what they say?

That is a concern of some Philadelphia hospitality officials, who worry that the city's most valuable asset — its history — is being tarnished by unreliable tour guides who mix up dates and spice up the biographies of famous founders like Benjamin Franklin and George Washington.

The issue has sparked debate and a led to a proposed ordinance to test and license guides.

It is important to have guides people can trust, said Meryl Levitz, president of the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation.

The Liberty Bell alone had 1.8 million visitors last year, and tourism in the region generated \$10 billion, Ms. Levitz said.

"What people value most about their Philadelphia experience is authenticity," Ms. Levitz said, and that should not be ruined by "well-meaning people who are looking to invigorate their stories."

If the ordinance is approved, Philadelphia would join a number of cities with similar regulations, including Washington, New Orleans and Charleston, S.C.

Guides in Williamsburg, Va., must pass a multiple-choice test that includes general Colonial and Williamsburg history. Licenses cost \$100 and are good for three years.

In Savannah, Ga., prospective guides are given a 91-page manual to study before taking a \$100 test.

"The people of Savannah featured in this manual have lived tales of courage, resolution, charm and, at times, quite idiosyncratic behavior," it states. "They deserve to be represented as they lived."

The tour guide bill in Philadelphia was introduced this spring by City Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds Brown. She had been contacted by Ron Avery, a former reporter and

part-time guide who had compiled a list of what he said were myths and half-truths uttered on local tours.

Among the mistakes: Benjamin Franklin had 69 illegitimate children and homes were taxed based on how wide they were.

"Once it gets started, it just takes on a life of its own," Mr. Avery said.

Those who oppose Ms. Brown's bill say any errors people hear are most likely the result of guides misspeaking during long days of multiple tours. Licensing would simply be a financial burden and bureaucratic waste of time, they say.

Jonathan Bari, whose company offers a walking tour of Philadelphia, said licensing fees would most likely be passed on to visitors — and would not guarantee error-free tours.

Mr. Bari told the City Council at a hearing this month that "the only way to really avoid this would be to have every tour scripted, vetted and recorded verbatim and then played back verbatim to ensure absolute accuracy each and every time."

Other tour operators say Ms. Brown's bill has merit.

"Bring it on," said Jill Lawrence, a Colonial re-enactor. She said she often corrects tourists' misinformation — like whether Betsy Ross, the flag-maker who was a three-time widow, killed her husbands. Not true.

"These are things we hear over and over," she said. "It would be terrific if we didn't have to correct these rumors all day long."

A program in Philadelphia, Once Upon a Nation, employs about 80 storytellers and Colonial re-enactors, including Ms. Lawrence, to entertain tourists each summer. But the re-enactors must hit the books — 100 hours of training and a final exam.

As Amy Needle, president and chief executive of Historic Philadelphia Inc., which runs Once Upon a Nation, put it, Why would anyone need to embellish? "The real history is better than anything you can make up," Ms. Needle said.



Matt Rourke/Associated Press

Jill Lawrence, a Colonial re-enactor, graduating from a training program for guides last week.

