



Museums in Strange Places
“Time Machine: The Peale Center”
(S02/E04)

Episode Description:

There’s a time machine in downtown Baltimore on Holliday Street. A time machine that will take you back to the origin of public collections of art, history, and science and then zip you through the present and into the future of museums. The Peale Center, the oldest purpose-built museum space in the US, is starting its third century as a building and its third life as a museum after decades of sitting vacant. But history isn’t repeating itself here. Executive Director Nancy Proctor wants it to be a cultural commons, a storytelling platform, and an experimental lab for the art of the 21st Century museum.

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All the music in this episode is by [Outcalls](#).

Hannah (Scripted): *There’s a time machine in downtown Baltimore on Holliday Street. A time machine that will take you back to the origin of public collections of art, history, and science and then zip you through the present and into the future of museums. From the outside, the time machine looks like an elegant brick row-home. You have to walk inside to activate the time machine, and you’ll need the help of the visionaries giving one more life to this old building that’s taken on so many roles in throughout its history.*

Hannah (Scripted): *Welcome to Museums in Strange Places. I’m your host, Hannah Hethmon.*

Museums are the keepers of our history and culture, but they are also reflections of who we are now. In each season of this podcast, I explore a different country, state, or region through its museums. In Season 1, I traveled around Iceland, and now I’m visiting the museums of Maryland to discover how they reflect and shape this state’s unique identity.

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Nancy: I'm Nancy proctor. I'm the Executive Director of the Peel Center for Baltimore History and Architecture.

Hannah: And where in the world are we?

Nancy: We're in Baltimore, right downtown, caddy-corner to the City Hall and uh, in the heart of Baltimore's kind of government...and now a burgeoning kind of locally residential and creative community.

Hannah: And why is there a museum here?

Nancy: Ah, well this is the very first museum ever to have been purpose built in this country. And among the very first in the world, it was opened on August 15th of 1814 by Rembrandt Peale, who was inspired by his father's own museum in Philadelphia, Charles Wilson Peale. that was not in a purpose built building. So we get to claim the very first, uh, at least in the architecture point of view. And it is a really interesting point in the history of the building that Rembrandt Peale and his architect, Robert Carey Long Senior had to figure out, you know, what does a museum look like, what kind of spaces does it need, what dimensions, what facilities? And uh, so here we have a very early example of the thought process around that right at the beginning of professional museum practice in this country.

Hannah: So what did a museum at the time need? Tell me about the way they built their building.

Nancy: So, um, first of all, uh, this was kind of driven by Rembrandt peale's business model. He decided to try to run a museum like a business. So he borrowed money to be able to build the building. Commissioned Robert Carey long senior, the first native-born Maryland architect to design it. And they took as their premise, the, uh, Federal style townhouse in large, the sizes of the rooms and then added a picture gallery on the back with natural sunlight, a clerestory so that there could be natural light throughout the gallery even.. you know we are talking about before electricity. So they needed to take advantage of it, use the architecture to take advantage of natural resources wherever possible.

Hannah: What would the experience have been like as a visitor at that time?

Nancy: Well, first of all, um, I guess because this was a startup business, um, Rembrandt Peale did not have the means to buy property and build his museum and in the very elite section of Baltimore. So this was relatively inexpensive real estate because it was close to Jones Falls, which was at the time still an open kind of river going into the harbor. And it probably didn't smell great because it was used as, as a sewer as well. But, it was an area where there was a lot of new construction and kind of buzz happening sort of much as it is today, and they would have been attracted to come to Peale's Baltimore Museum, first because of the variety of the collection and exhibitions on display. It was called Peale's Baltimore Museum and Gallery of Fine Arts. So he had everything from natural history specimens, wildlife, animals usually stuffed but not always. And, also fine art painted by himself and his family, but also his opening exhibition featured work by European masters that were learned from private collections. One of the

key, uh, kind of draws that Rembrandt had thought to get people here paying tickets to come in—because remember he had to pay those investors back and, and run this thing like a business—Um, was gaslight. So gaslight was a brand new technology then and he demonstrated it really through installing gaslight chandelier's that allowed him to eliminate his galleries at night. And it said that people were so amazed by the brilliance of the light coming through the windows. They would stand out on Holliday Street, the street in front of the building and kind of gawk if they couldn't afford the ticket to come in. Um, so they were probably coming as much to see that new technology as they were to see the collections. Frankly.

Hannah: I think that's still a museum strategy sometimes.

Nancy: Yes. And sometimes it works. But, uh, ultimately for Rembrandt Peale, it didn't work well enough. So, um, by 1829, he and his brother Rubens, who had been helping him run the museum, decided to sell the building to get out from underneath that initial debt. They sold it to the city. It became Baltimore's first City Hall and they moved the collection to a different location, perhaps a more salubrious location on East Baltimore Street, but it only was there for a couple more years. And then, uh, they sold the collection to PT Barnum who took it to New York to open his New York American Museum.

Hannah (Scripted): *So ended the first of the Peale's three museum lives. But obviously the building outlasted its original purpose, and it would go on to house three very different enterprises before its second life as a museum could begin.*

Nancy: When the city bought the building in 1829, they turned it into the first City Hall which opened in 1830, and it was City Hall until the new City Hall was built in the 1870s, just kind of catty corner to cross the street. At that point, the building became Male and Female Colored School Number One, uh, one of the very first public schools for people of color in Reconstruction era Baltimore. And actually the first of the schools, the public schools in Maryland to offer a secondary school education to African Americans. That was from about 1878 to 1887. The school quickly outgrew the capacity of the building. In fact, uh, when you walk around the building, the footprint of the rooms is pretty much the same now as it was then. You can imagine up to 600 students and teachers operating just in the first two floors of this building.

Hannah: If you're hearing that you're gonna think it must be bigger than it is, but this is just a very large home essentially. Exactly. I mean, we're talking about talking about a townhouse with supersize rooms and a picture gallery on the back.

Nancy: it's about 10,000 square feet. All in, all over four floors. There is also an extensive basement. Yeah, so it was a actually also not a great place for a school. This was a manufacturing area. So the air was not good. It was noisy. There was not good light, there was not good fire safety and exit in the building, so a lot of African American leaders, advocated to get the, uh, the school, a new building, which they did eventually secure a new building on East Saratoga Street and the school, move there. It moved a couple more times, but basically the school that was founded here is now known as Frederick Douglass High School, which is of the most historic high schools in the United States. After the school

left, however, the building started being used for manufacturing and that almost destroyed it. The interior was pretty much gutted. And in fact the city was gonna tear it down, uh, in the 1920s when some journalists and citizens came together and convince the city to restore it instead. So it was reopened in 1930 as Baltimore's first municipal museum.

Nancy: So what we're seeing here today, again, the footprint is this more or less the same as in Rembrandt Peale's day, but the interior design, I'm really is more a 1930s view of what Rembrandt should've had in his museum. Not necessarily what was here. The elements, like the floors were brought from other buildings of that same period that were being torn down at the time around Baltimore. And one of the many things that, uh, Sharf managed to preserve here were architectural sculptures from Union Bank, another Robert Carey Long Sr. building that was being torn down at the time and they're actually the oldest architectural sculptures in America and they're in our back garden wall.

Nancy: Well, the first impulse was to save this building because of its a unique place in American history, but then it was used as a museum. So it was Baltimore's first city museum. Um, and it told the history of the city, and really, you know, had many different directors in its sort of 67 years, but lots of pioneering exhibitions, um, a lot of social history driven, uh, approaches to exhibits and collections and some really important works were housed here. For example, Charles Wilson Peale's exhumation of the Mastodon. That collection was transferred to the Maryland Historical Society in 1997 when the building was shut down along with a number of other museums that were in the same City Life Museums network. That was basically because the city got onto hard financial times and so it decided to shut down a number of museums and the building was really abandoned then and has remained vacant until last year when we started really actively programming it again and starting to try to restore the building. In those 20 years, the roof started leaking. So there's a lot of water damage throughout the building. We don't even have an elevator. Um, so there are a lot of kind of basic property and human safety elements that we need to add in...accessible restrooms, et cetera. So that's what we're fundraising to do right now.

[SPONSOR BREAK]

Hannah (Scripted): *I want to take a quick break to talk out about this episode's sponsor--the Lyndhurst Group. Are you trying to build stronger communities through your history organization or museum? Do you wonder if your organization is working as efficiently as possible? Bob Beatty and the Lyndhurst Group can help with organizational assessments and in-depth strategic planning. I've known Bob for a few years now, and I've long been impressed by his passion for our field and commitment to making it stronger. If you need help at your history organization, I highly recommend giving visiting lyndhurstgroup.org to learn more about how the Bob Beatty and the Lyndhurst Group can help make your institution the asset your community wants and needs.*

Hannah: And how did the project gets started to reopen the building and to give it its third life as a museum.

Nancy: that actually started a long time before my time, by a group of citizens who again, just felt like this was a really important organization. They started off as the friends of The Peale, later on became known as The Peale Center for Baltimore History and Architecture. And I'll have to say it was one of the things that really inspired me to work with this organization was there was this board of people who for more than a decade had just been working, you know, completely for free to try to save this building and reopen it as a cultural center again. Um, so I've got the great privilege of working with a board who were very drawn by their passion for the project, um, rather than any personal prestige or you know, kind of wanting to do social networking of their own.

Hannah (Scripted): *The Peale began life as a public version of the cabinet of curiosity, a public, educational variation on the traditionally-private gentleman's collection. Then it lived through the golden age of traditional museums, where authoritative exhibits, curated artifact collections, and authentic furnishings were the name of the game. But what kind of institution will the Peale be in its third museum life?*

Nancy: Well, we could say in the spirit of Rembrandt Peale, we're kind of faced with a similar dilemma now, which is what is a museum for the 21st Century? He had to figure out what was a museum in 1814. We have the same question today. And so one thing that I think we do know is that we don't want to just reinstate the 20th Century museum. One of the things that I've been very interested is in business models around how you make museums and cultural institutions sustainable. And we've got a real opportunity here because this is a startup museum to try a lot of new things. And so that's a big part of what we are, is a lab for experimenting with new ways of being relevant and sustainable as a cultural center for the 21st Century.

Nancy: I like to think of the appeal as a cultural commons, as a platform for the communities and the, particularly the cultural storytellers of Baltimore to have their stories preserved and heard. Um, we help local cultural storytellers record and publish their stories on a wide range of free and open platforms. We've helped publish more than 1,250 stories of Baltimore so far alone. Um, and we also host exhibitions, performances and events, um, where the programming really is coming, grassroots up from the community. We're particularly interested in programming that, um, first of all helps us diversify the cultural record of the city, is inclusive of the wide range of voices around Baltimore, and our ultimate aim with that is, as we say in our kind of our strapline, to help people see Baltimore in a new light. Baltimore's one of the oldest cities in America and yet it's known worldwide for a very limited range of narratives. They get kind of recycled on the evening news, ad Nauseam I would say,

Hannah: And which are?

Nancy: Well stories about crime, about corruption, about drugs, all of which is also part of Baltimore, but to only hear that side of it is just such a tiny part of the story. And so we want to make sure that Baltimore is really understood and known and appreciated worldwide for the full diversity of its

communities and its cultures and its history. We also are looking for programs that are very immersive and very participatory. We think that really helps this historical building be more relevant and more present for people today. Sort of hand in hand with the development of the Internet and networked technologies, it seems that culture has shifted. People aren't so much looking to consume things, to come in and be passive audiences looking at stuff in glass cases in a museum. They want to be part of something. So we're trying to create programming and opportunities for people to really participate where the story's not complete until the audience, as you were, is part of the telling of it.

Nancy: So you'll notice going around, first of all, this building is not in a condition to look after original objects. We don't have fire suppression systems, you know, we don't have conservation-level climate control. So we use replicas and we also use digital originals. So, at least for the moment, we're adopting what I call a digital-first approach to collections, partly out of necessity, but also partly out of this, in the spirit of this being a lab for trying new ways of doing things. As you know, looking after our original objects is very expensive and money is of course a shortage here as in all museums, but particularly so because we've got to renovate the building. So what we're doing is exhibiting copies, be they analog copies or digital copies of original artifacts and looking really for the things that help us tell the stories of the building. Um, and one of the advantages of this approach, this kind of digital first approach, is that we're actually able to reach people with those stories who can't necessarily physically come to Baltimore to see physical objects in person.

Hannah (Scripted): *This building is unique as a historic space that was designed for large exhibitions. The new Peale Center won't be showing it off like a traditional historic house or a traditional museum, but that doesn't mean the space won't be put to good use. Nancy takes me on a tour of the three floors, stopping in each room to explain what programs and events will be activating these spaces.*

[Noises of walking on creaky old floors]

Nancy: Ok, so this is one of our front rooms on the ground floor. So just when you come in the front door, it's immediately to your left. And uh, this room is our, what we call our storytelling studio. At the moment we have Mama Linda Goss in residence here. She is one of the co-founders of the National Association of Black Storytellers, and is running workshops. She's also spearheading a program called "How We Got Over." She herself is a graduate of a segregated school, actually from Tennessee and a lot of the Griots and elders that she knows through the Griot's circle and the National Association of Black Storytellers are also graduates from colored schools or segregated schools and um, so sort of to help us understand the 19th Century history of this building as Male and Female Colored School Number One, um, we're working with her and um, the storytellers that she's connected with to record their stories of race and segregation in education in this country. Um, and we're also working with 19 oh, sorry. With 21st century, um, high school students in Baltimore, um, who were talking about their experiences of race and segregation in the public school system. And so we want to kind of connect those historical moments from 19th through 20th and 21st centuries again, to ensure that we've got some historical context and perspective on where Baltimore's contemporary issues around race and segregation in schools come from and how that history is really relevant to finding solutions for today.

[Noises of walking on creaky old floors]

In here, as you'll see in installation at the moment, is our time travel agency. Um, so this is a project being developed by David London. He is a local magician and performer who, uh, also did a wonderful exhibition and experience I should say here on PT Barnum recently. So the time travel experience, you'll be able to come in here and book your tickets to travel back in time. First though you have to get, you have to turn on the time travel machine. The portal will be based here and it's sort of like an escape room in reverse. Instead of getting out of the room, you're trying to solve the riddles to get into the room and to trigger the time machine to transport you back into Rembrandt Peale's studio in 1818. Um, so that'll be housed in this room here. And um, we're developing a lot of, a lot of elements that, again, interactive, participatory, immersive, and one of them includes actually an AR app through which you'll be able to see some things that you wouldn't otherwise be able to see because of course you're time traveling.

Hannah: That's awesome.

Nancy: The aim of this experience is to enable people to collect objects and artifacts from the past to bring back to the present to solve present day problems.

[Noises of walking on creaky old stairs]

Nancy: Yeah. And then, yeah, one of the principles of Submersive Productions came in while we were standing down there. This is Ursula Marcum. Are you interruptible, Ursula? So Ursula Marcum is one of the principles of submersive productions there, the immersive theater company that was running the HT Darling show I mentioned when I started working here and uh, they've just been great partners and inspirations for what we're doing here now. So I asked them if, uh, when that show ended, if they'd like to stay on and have a bit of a lab space to continue developing new programs both for the Peale and for other places they work into.

Hannah: Uh, uh, so would you tell me what you're doing in this space, um, and, and what you're working on?

Ursula Marcum: Absolutely. So I work with Submersive Productions, as Nancy said, my husband and I do immersive theatrical experiences. So this piece is called the Institute of Visionary History and the Archives of the Deep Now, and it will be a fully explorable space in August. So audience members will be able to come in and pick an archive box to explore and by picking something from the archive, things happen in the room for that person to experience. And then in September, October, November, there will be three different performances all based on stories that you can find here in the archives that, so performances will be happening in the space as well as the explorable space.

Hannah: Wow that of sounds like a choose your own adventure.

Ursula: We, we like to think of it as a choose your own adventure kind of a game. And what's, um, I don't know what's the inspiration and having this building as opposed to another place to work? Well, the Peale was a huge inspiration for us for HT Darling for obvious reasons, but we were really inspired by Nancy's desire to broaden the story narrative that's about Baltimore and the region. And so while everyone will be fictional in this place, they're based on real historical figures, but ones that you don't often hear about

[Noises of walking on creaky old floors]

Nancy: Okay, so this room's very echoey, as you might recall that I just love the acoustic in here. And uh, one of the programs that, uh, I want to develop is actually acapella singing, um, for our last show called *Boot Prints*, um, which was a play at Baltimore written play that's being turned into a movie filmed here at the Peale and we had a staged reading of it, um, and it's a really classically inspired play in terms of structure and that there's kind of a chorus like a Greek chorus, um, but it's an African American family story. And so our Greek chorus was singing African-American hymnals and Gospel songs, um...

Hannah: In here?

Nancy: Well in the picture gallery, but I got the singers come up here to sing and oh my God, it's just, [gasps] you know, it just goes right to your core because of the way the sound just reverberates in this space. And you can see why, you know, the, again, pre-electricity, when they built the building, they had to build it not just for great light but also for great acoustics because there was no amplification then.

Hannah: It makes for such an interesting space to play with in terms of a lab. All these different rooms designed for different things. Purpose made for "cutting-edge" technology in quotes at the time. So hopefully now too.

Because it's a Tardis, we have room for artifacts from old shows to be leftover. So for example, in the corner here we have, Sassy Toes as she's known, um, she is a, a puppet of a mastodon which does dance. It takes six people to do so. But she's inspired by the history of Charles Wilson Peale and his sons excavating mastodons in upstate New York. And then bringing them both to Baltimore and the Philadelphia Museum to exhibit.

Hannah (Scripted): *At the end of my tour of the building, Nancy stop at the top of the second floor landing to point out a mural that covers the wall. It depicts a long room with shelves full of natural history specimens lining the walls, above which are hung many fine art paintings.*

Nancy: So we're standing in front of a mural that is a very large, a blow up of a detail of a watercolor by Titian Peale, Rembrandt's, brother and another one of Charles Wilson Peale's sons. He was a naturalist and an illustrator of natural history. But in this case he was painting the interior of his father's museum in Philadelphia. And um, this mural is here because of an exhibition that was here at the Peale when it was last a museum in the early 1990's called Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastodons all about the history of American museums and the role of the appeal in that history. And, uh, what I love about being here is it helps us look at this very early moment in which museums were shifting from being cabinets of

curiosity, i.e. private collections that were curated by the collector according to their personal aesthetics or whims or interests, and really only available to that collector's friends to the idea of a museum as a public and educational institution. This was something that Charles Wilson Peale really championed. And he lobbied the founding fathers who were his peers and his friends, um, to fund museums, saying a great country needs great museums. He never got a penny out of them. And I suspect that might be part of what inspired Rembrandt to choose this "let's run a museum like a business" model, uh, when he came and built his Baltimore Museum.

Nancy: But what we see in this mural enlarged from Titian Peale's watercolor is this categorization of objects in the museum. We're not yet at the point where there's a distinction between an art museum and a science museum and a history museum. We have all sorts of collection objects from different disciplines in the same space, but they are starting to be separated in space by type. Charles Wilson Peale was largely inspired by Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish taxonomist, who is introducing ideas of, of organizing species into families and groups. And Charles Wilson Peale implemented this in his museum. So all of the, uh, natural history specimens, the birds are in their own little cubbies and one wall above that you've got, um, portraits of America, famous Americans in rows. You've got shells and busts in each, in their own area. So we're starting to develop this concept that emerged in museums in the 19th Century that objects tell a story on their own, that if you just display them in space in the right way and the right configuration, they will speak. And I find that fascinating because of course, that's an idea that culminated in the white cube art gallery. This idea that you can put contemporary work in a space with no interpretation and the art will just speak and people will figure it out. Well, we realized that doesn't actually always work. The interpretation might be a good idea sometimes, and so we're kind of coming full circle and an undoing of this idea of, of objects speaking on their own, but you kind of see that crystallized in this image of Charles Wilson Peale's museum and uh, it's really this moment of professionalization of museum practice, of starting to think of museums as public institutions with an educational responsibility to a very broad public. Um, so I love that that history has such deep roots in this building because that makes this a great place to kind of rethink what museums should be for the 21st Century.

Nancy: So we hope that people will think of the Peale as a safe place, not only to tell and share their stories but also to write new parts of the cultural record of the city. Um, so that's where we were going, but, you know, frankly the community will drive us, um, if they need us to go in a different direction, that's what we'll do.

Hannah (Scripted): *Thanks for joining me on this adventure as I explore Maryland's museums. Today's episode was sponsored by The Lyndhurst Group. If you enjoy Museums in Strange Places, please help me keep it going by leaving a review on iTunes or sharing this episode with a friend.*

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