

Smithsonian

MAGAZINE

250 Places to Visit to Celebrate America

Journey around the nation with this interactive map, divided by region or category, and discover American history in a way you've never seen before

From the editors of *Smithsonian* magazine

“America is a land of wonders,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville nearly 200 years ago. For ten months, beginning in May 1831, the French aristocrat explored the nation, touring the cities of Boston, New York and Philadelphia before traveling as far into the frontier as Michigan and as far south as New Orleans. He met with powerful leaders, including Andrew Jackson and Sam Houston, but also everyday citizens, more than 200 Americans in all. Upon his return to France, he recounted his travels in his classic two-volume *Democracy in America*, which became a sensation in Europe and the United States. De Tocqueville wrote with such incisive clarity about American politics and society that his words are still studied generations later.

In thinking about the 250th anniversary of our nation's founding, *Smithsonian* magazine looked to de Tocqueville for inspiration. The “wonders” he observed, from the mighty Mississippi River to the New England towns he praised as the birthplace of American liberty, represent integral elements of our national character. They are part of what makes the United States worth celebrating, worth arguing about and worth defending. They represent our national project and our best selves.

We had the idea to identify 250 sites across the country, each a wonder in its own way, and nearly two years ago, we began brainstorming. Our criteria were straightforward: Does this site capture something about the United States or its people worth celebrating?

In building out the map, we also strove to ensure that the “wonders” we identified were as geographically diverse as possible. Though the events of the Revolution occurred largely within the bounds of the original 13 colonies, this anniversary represents a chance where all Americans, wherever they live, can commemorate together.

Behind the Scenes: How the map came together

- Brainstorming began in February 2024 with suggestions from *Smithsonian* editorial staff
- More than 500 sites were initially considered for inclusion
- Additional feedback came from museum staff and contributing editors
- Map text written by magazine editors Megan Gambino, Ellen Wexler and Brian Wolly

We divided the list into ten categories, 25 sites in each, and hope that all Americans see themselves, their interests and their perspectives represented on the map.

In “Witness to History,” we ventured to sites of momentous events, from Philadelphia’s Independence Hall to the Greensboro lunch

counter to NASA's Mission Control Center in Houston. For "Natural World," we explored America's uniquely great outdoors, arching our necks to glimpse the top of California's great sequoias and squatting along the Platte River in Nebraska to witness the astonishing sight of migrating sandhill cranes. In what may have been the trickiest category to narrow down, we took to the road for "Oddball Americana," identifying quirky attractions like the International Cryptozoology Museum in Maine and Connecticut's must-visit Pez Visitor Center.

We sated our appetite in the "Food" category with stops at the first Sonic drive-in in Stillwater, Oklahoma; at the birthplace of the Buffalo wing in, surprisingly enough, Buffalo; and at Pequod's Pizza for some classic Chicago deep dish. Our brains went into overdrive in "Science and Ingenuity," considering legendary landmarks of America's innovative spirit like Walden Pond and the Erie Canal. We located our inner cultural omnivore through "Sounds of America," "On the Screen" and "Architecture and Arts" at sites that marked revolutionary moments in music history (Nashville's Grand Ole Opry), in television and film (Iowa's *Field of Dreams*) and in the arts (Pennsylvania's Fallingwater).

In "Museums and Historic Homes," we sought destinations that recognize inspiring figures such as Harriet Tubman, Ronald Reagan and César Chavez, and in "Culture and Community," we recognize places of convergence, whether religious, such as Newport, Rhode Island's 18th century Touro Synagogue; or athletic, as in the Williamsport, Pennsylvania, home of the Little League World Series; or in ethnic heritage, such as Miami's Little Havana, plus much more.

Not all the places on the map inspire purely positive feelings. Some are even mournful, or lean on the bitter side of bittersweet, such as Pearl Harbor. But each of these particular sites, we believe, presents a space for admiring the American fortitude exhibited there.

Every state in the union is represented with at least two spots. Puerto Rico has a spot as well. This means that evidently worthy sites, such as Boston's Old North Church, where lanterns were hung for Paul Revere's Ride, or San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, weren't included, as well as others such as Ground Zero in Manhattan, Antietam in Maryland, the Manzanar internment camp in California or Wounded Knee in South Dakota, whose historical significance is beyond dispute.

We included just one Smithsonian museum—though, of course, we encourage readers to visit them all!

Enjoy browsing through this map of wonders. How many have you been to? De Toqueville, I'm sure, would be astounded by each and every one of them, that is, if he ever tore himself away from Café Du Monde's beignets.



The image shows a screenshot of a map application interface. The background is a dark blue color. In the top left corner, there is a circular icon with a white outline and a blue fill, containing a white silhouette of a beignet. In the top right corner, there is a small white 'X' icon. The main content is a white rectangular box with a slightly distressed, torn-edge bottom. Inside this box, the word "FOOD" is written in a small, bold, blue, sans-serif font. Below that, the name "White Horse Tavern" is written in a large, blue, serif font. Underneath the name, the text "NORTHEAST | Newport, Rhode Island" is written in a smaller, blue, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the white box, there is a paragraph of text in a small, grey, sans-serif font: "Founded in 1673, America's oldest operating restaurant serves seafood fresh from Narragansett Bay, as well as meat and produce from local farms. The clapboard colonial is said to be haunted by a few ghosts."



CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

Touro Synagogue

NORTHEAST | Newport, Rhode Island

In 1790, newly elected President George Washington visited Newport to gin up support for the Bill of Rights and to meet with local religious leaders. While the Constitution had been ratified in 1788, the First Amendment, which would protect the free exercise of religion, had not yet been enshrined—even as Rhode Island itself was founded, in part, on the principle of religious liberty.

In a subsequent letter addressed to the congregants of Touro Synagogue, Washington unequivocally laid out the new nation's commitment to preserving the rights of Jewish Americans and other religious minorities. The Rhode Island institution was dedicated in 1763, making it the oldest synagogue in the nation. Like many civic buildings in Newport, the synagogue was built in part by enslaved labor. Today, a visitors center recognizes the architectural importance of the building and the synagogue's status as a symbol of religious liberty.



SOUNDS OF AMERICA

Newport Folk Festival

NORTHEAST | Newport, Rhode Island

When the festival debuted in 1959, 13,000 music lovers turned out to see the likes of Pete Seeger, Odetta and Bo Diddley. The inaugural event also introduced audiences to a little-known talent: an 18-year-old soprano named Joan Baez.

In the years that followed, the festival became a vital component of the folk revival movement—and the site of several key turning points in music history. At the 1963 festival, a group of 11 famous folk artists sang the protest song “We Shall Overcome,” which Baez performed at the March on Washington the following month. Bob Dylan went electric two years later, performing “Like a Rolling Stone” on his electric guitar before unsuspecting—and, in some cases, horrified—festival attendees, a decision that would shape the folk music scene for decades to come.

While the festival has evolved since then, it still welcomes thousands of fans every summer. In recent decades, performers have included John Prine, Patti Smith, Brandi Carlile, Lucinda Williams, Emmylou Harris, Sufjan Stevens and Phoebe Bridgers.

Z Resources

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