

State Museum of Pennsylvania opens retrospective exhibit of Nick Ruggieri's Bicentennial Series

The State Museum of Pennsylvania opened its new retrospective exhibit "Pennsylvania in Watercolor: Revisiting Nick Ruggieri's Bicentennial Series" on March 9 to kick off several years of programs celebrating the United States' 250th birthday in 2026.

The paintings function as "a visual time capsule of Pennsylvania," according to Curt Miner, chief of interpretation at The State Museum. "It's a deceptively simple exhibit, but it can prompt deep conversations...and it helps us consider how Pennsylvania has changed in 50 years."

Nick Ruggieri's Bicentennial Series came from a commission by Harrisburg's *Patriot-News*, where Ruggieri served as art director, to paint a representation of each Pennsylvania county. The original exhibit opened in 1975 at The State Museum, then called the William Penn Memorial Museum, to recognize the 1976 Bicentennial.

Even though the Semiquincentennial (250th) is more than two years away, remembrances have already begun around the country. "We might be late," Miner said with a laugh. He noted that because several years of events led to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it is natural that remembrances of it also span several years. Staff at The State Museum restored Nick Ruggieri's Bicentennial series to kindle the reminiscences, reflections, and predictions that characterize anniversary celebrations.

"It's been a great way to make connections with almost everyone who walks in," Amy Hammond, curator and Art of the State project director at The State Museum, said about the Ruggieri exhibit.

Miner also noticed the exhibit's popularity among guests and employees from across Pennsylvania. "They went to their county and they were pointing out places, which is exactly what it was designed to do originally, to celebrate...the *entire* commonwealth."

Hammond spoke of a visitor who commented on the painting for Lackawanna County; according to the visitor, the site depicted in the painting no longer exists. "[The exhibit] also serves to capture history. The way that that looked in 1975 is not the way that that space looks now."

The current exhibit features 53 paintings, most of which are watercolors, that represent 48 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. They are organized thematically under categories such as Industry and Architecture rather than by geography. The paintings of the missing counties are undergoing preservation work.

The Ruggieri exhibit opened the same weekend that the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) recognized the 343rd anniversary of William Penn's 1681 Charter. All PHMC sites, including The State Museum, offered free admission to visitors on March 10 under the title of "Celebrate Pennsylvania's Birthday." Approximately 800 people visited The State Museum that day.

The State Museum did not display the original Charter at this event as it had previously– the State Archives displayed it in their new building instead– but it still assigned docents to talk about the replica on permanent display.

Longtime docent Pauline Wagner connected the Ruggieri exhibit’s premiere to this annual commemoration of the 1681 Charter. “Here you have William Penn’s vision of Pennsylvania,” she said, gesturing at the replica, “and over there, you have Nick Ruggieri’s vision.”

“Pennsylvania in Watercolor: Revisiting Nick Ruggieri’s Bicentennial Series” will be on display at The State Museum through June 16, 2024.

Works cited

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