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I used the travel bursary to first visit Philadelphia. I stayed in the Old City neighbourhood, where practically every building was red-bricked, with white framing, and a plaque detailing its historical relevance to the American Revolution, the Civil War, or an American president. Every street corner had a park, with stone walls around its edging, neatly cut grass, black iron benches and an abundance of grey squirrels. It was the first American city I'd visited that wasn't designed with international tourists in mind. Walnut street, one of the main roads through the city centre and the one I used to navigate my way from Penn's landing into the Centre City neighbourhood, had a plaque detailing Alexander Hamilton's old home. A few street's over and you can find where Thomas Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence, Independence Hall (where the American government was first held), and Betsy Ross's house.



The American government at the time of the American Revolution, I found, had a far greater tie to Welsh history than I expected. At least eight US presidents had welsh ancestry, including Jefferson, Lincoln and John Adams. Even the steel roof of the White House in Washington DC was made in Pontardawe, South Wales, in the late 19th century. Beyond the presidents, other Welsh-American politicians held residence in Pennsylvania. Samuel Powel, last colonial mayor of Philadelphia, and first mayor after the American Revolution, lived in the Old City. Much of the constitution was discussed after hours within Powel's house, which is now a museum, throughout 1787.

Beyond its history though, Philly's Welsh ties are still evident today. The state of Pennsylvania was founded by William Penn, an English Quaker who intended to create Pennsylvania as a safe haven for Welsh Quakers who faced religious persecution. He intended to call it New Wales, but was overruled by the King. A plaque on city hall details this history, and depicts the Welsh dragon.

The Dandelion, a British-inspired pub, even offers a Welsh Rarebit on its lunch menu. Made of a cheddar and mustard cheese sauce, grilled over a giant slab of fresh white bread, it resembled a similar, if-not-exact, taste of home.

Travelling to Philly before going to the North American Festival of Wales in Pittsburgh was an act of strategy. It meant that I could catch the Amtrak train from Philadelphia's William H Gray station, and travel through the Welsh Tract (now known as the Main Line) towards Pittsburgh in the West of Pennsylvania. The Welsh Tract was formed by the Welsh Quakers mentioned above, who purchased the land from Penn and formed Welsh communities. Many of these Welsh place names still exist today, and include towns such as Merion, Bala Cynwyd, Gladwyne, Bryn Mawr, Radnor and St Davids. I learnt at the festival that Scranton, Pennsylvania, was the largest concentration of Welsh people outside of Wales in the 19th and 20th centuries, thanks to the coal boom.

Pittsburgh's Welsh history felt less evident in the city itself, but was concentrated greatly in the festival. Here, there was Welsh tea, Welsh cakes, and Welsh corgis. I learnt Corgis are from Pembrokeshire, and Americans call Welsh cakes 'Welsh cookies,' which were true to form (more so than the Welsh Rarebit, I'd argue). Many of the visitors to the event had been attending for years, and were hugely enthusiastic to meet and talk to people who share their interest in Welsh culture and history. Some of them have distant Welsh ancestry, others have married Welsh, have Welsh parents, or were born in Wales and have since moved to the US.

With singing, poetry recitals, history lectures, and a market full of Welsh items, the North American Festival of Wales (NAFOW) brings Welsh and American history together while encouraging the continued harmony between these cultures in contemporary life. To paraphrase Mal Pope (Welsh singer and songwriter) in his keynote speech at this event: "I'm surrounded by people who love Wales. Most of whom have never been... but people who feel connected to Wales. I'm at the North American Festival of Wales. And I love it."

It's a trip I'd have never gone on without the funding from the WLCOW, so thank you again for the opportunity.

