

Pittsburgh's Story Is America's Story



photo: Courtesy of National Flag Foundation and National Football League

BY LAND AND BY AIR

One stop on the National Flag Foundation's Flag Sojourn: 250 was the 2026 Super Bowl LX in Santa Clara, California, where the flag flew in the cockpit of a military fighter jet that participated in a historic eight-aircraft joint Air Force/Navy flyover during the national anthem.

FLAG SOJOURN: AMERICA 250 WILL COMMEMORATE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA'S ROLE IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND TECHNOLOGY REVOLUTION, MARKING THE NATION'S 250TH BIRTHDAY

written by **BETH MARCELLO**

HERE'S A BOLD STATEMENT TO PONDER AS Americans prepare to celebrate the 250th birthday of the country's declaration of independence from the British on July 4, 2026:

Without Pittsburgh, maybe there's no American independence.

THIS ISN'T HYPERBOLE

The fight with the French for control of the invaluable land at the confluence of our three rivers was won for the British by John Forbes, George Washington and the colonists under their commands. Emboldened by

this victory, these same colonists stood up against the crown when King George not only turned around and taxed them to pay for the war they had won for the British but also forbade them from staking claim to land west of the rivers that the soldiers thought that they had earned with their military service.

This fiery tension ignited the Revolutionary War, and on July 4, 1776 — some 20 years after Britain's Fort Pitt replaced France's Fort Duquesne at what is now Point State Park — the colonists declared themselves an independent nation.

Now this July Fourth, Pittsburgh will celebrate our

pivotal role in the American Revolution when a U.S. flag that has been flown around the world to commemorate the founding of the country makes its second-to-last stop in our region.

By the time the flag arrives in Pittsburgh on July 1, it will have been flown in every state, U.S. territory and cemetery around the globe where fallen American veterans are buried. Its year-long trek, Flag Sojourn: America 250, was the brainchild of the National Flag Foundation, a Pittsburgh-based organization with a mission to educate the public about the American flag and honor those who served to protect it.

"The sojourn is a quiet tribute to the relevance of the flag," said Romel Nicholas, a principal attorney with the firm Gaitens, Tucceri & Nicholas, and the volunteer chairman of the nonprofit, apolitical National Flag Foundation.

AN ORDINARY FLAG

What's significant about this flag is its insignificance, Nicholas noted. It hadn't draped a soldier's coffin. It wasn't blessed by the pope. There's not a celebrity involved. It's just an ordinary, five-by-eight-foot cotton flag, one like anyone can buy and fly on their porch at home. Without much fanfare or widespread publicity, the flag has been safely, reverently shepherded from place to place by UPS in the air and by members of the National Sheriffs' Association on the ground in the states.

"The flag is its own celebrity," Nicholas said.

"It's not just a symbol," said Emily Balawejder, director of marketing and communications for Rivers of Steel. "It's a symbol."

That's how Balawejder remembers a nun describing the flag in a grade-school history class. It's a memory that stuck with her and guides her involvement in the flag's three-day regional sojourn on behalf of Rivers of Steel, the nonprofit that celebrates Pittsburgh's steel legacy.

While in western Pennsylvania, the sojourn flag will symbolize Pittsburgh's impact throughout American history — from the origins of the American Revolution at Point State Park, to the forging of the Industrial Revolution in our factories and steel mills, to the startups that seeded our digital revolution.

"All the vibrancy that exists here today is a result of this being a place where people flocked to and brought their values, traditions and beliefs three centuries ago," Balawejder said. "This same spirit that brought families and individuals across an ocean to do unbelievably dangerous work back then still exists in our economy and our pride."

THAT'S NOT JUST PITTSBURGHERS TALKING

When the U.S. Sen. Elissa Slotkin (D-Mich.) recently toured the Carrie Blast Furnaces, the historic landmark on the site of the former U.S. Steel Homestead Works, she told Rivers of Steel CEO Mary Murrin that the reason she wanted to visit was that "Detroit wouldn't be Detroit without Pittsburgh."

FROM LIGONIER TO THE THREE RIVERS

Once the flag arrives at the UPS Cargo Bay at Pittsburgh International Airport on the afternoon of July 1, it will make its way to Fort Ligonier, which is opening a new exhibition on the Fourth of July weekend, Road to Revolution, to commemorate the country's Semiquincentennial.



AN HISTORIC LANDMARK

When the U.S. Senator from Michigan Elissa Slotkin (center) toured the Carrie Blast Furnaces, the historic landmark on the site of the former U.S. Steel Homestead Works, she told Rivers of Steel CEO Mary Murrin (left) that she wanted to visit because "Detroit wouldn't be Detroit without Pittsburgh." Also pictured: Rivers of Steel Vice President of Archives and Facilities Ron Baraff.

Fort Ligonier in Westmoreland County is key to Pittsburgh's role in the American Revolution. On separate occasions, both Washington and General Forbes launched from Fort Ligonier via different routes to confront the French for control of what was then known as the Forks of the Ohio. The confluence of the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers was the most valuable real estate in the interior of North America in the mid-1700s. Whoever controlled the Point controlled trade and military movement via the rivers' access to the west and south.

Fort Ligonier was also the site of a devastating friendly-fire skirmish, in which George Washington lost more than a dozen men on a foggy November night when two British regiments converged, each thinking the other was the French. This and another unsuccessful battle at Fort Necessity in Fayette County sharpened Washington's military prowess and ultimately steeled his confidence to lead the new nation.

That's why Pittsburgh's story is America's story.

So, the next time you're barreling through the Fort Pitt Tunnel to Downtown, criss-crossing the Fort Duquesne Bridge to a ball game, or traversing Route 30 toward Fort Ligonier to leaf-peep in the fall, remember those who came before us and blazed the trail to the independence we enjoy as Americans today. Happy birthday, America. Land of the free, and home of the brave.

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JOIN THE SOJOURN

When the National Flag Foundation's Flag Sojourn: 250 arrives in Pittsburgh, many events that honor the flag and Pittsburgh's connection to American history will be open to the public. For the current event schedule, visit www.nationalflagfoundation.org.

Wednesday, July 1

STEWARDSHIP & HONOR | Pittsburgh International Airport

The flag arrives at the UPS Cargo Terminal, where the Allegheny County Sheriff will accept it for the regional sojourn and a first stop for military honors at PIT (closed to the public).

Thursday, July 2

AMERICA BEGINS HERE | Fort Ligonier, Westmoreland County

A ceremony will commemorate Fort Ligonier's role in the leadup to the American Revolution before the flag travels to Pittsburgh along the route that George Washington took to what later established Pittsburgh at the Point.

POINT OF CONFLUENCE, CONFLICT, RENEWAL | Point State Park
Dignitaries and leadership of the Heinz History Center and Daughters of the American Revolution welcome the flag with a reenactment at the Fort

Pitt Museum.

MEMORY IN MOTION | North Shore Memorial Walk

Beginning at the Fred Rogers Memorial, a multigenerational Won't You Be My Neighbor jazz jam honors the sacrifices that made freedom and independence possible.

IN EVERY GENERATION | Soldiers & Sailors Hall

A free Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Americana Concert.

REFLECTION & RESOLVE | Mount

Washington

Veterans from three wars and public officials salute the flag at sunset at the Fort Duquesne Incline.

Friday, July 3

IN SACRED TRUST | National Cemetery of the Alleghenies, Washington County

A solemn ceremony honoring the fallen heroes who gave their lives for the values the flag represents.

BIRTHPLACE OF FLAG DAY | Flag

Plaza

Scouting America and the American Legion honor the role our region played in the creation of

Flag Day.

STILL WE STRIVE | Freedom Corner
Diverse veterans organizations celebrate the progress made and the work left to be done in the search for a more perfect union.

THE INNOVATION REVOLUTION | Bakery Square

A celebration of Pittsburgh's transformation from industrial powerhouse to innovation leader in AI, robotics, healthcare and the life sciences.

FORGED IN FIRE: INDUSTRY, LABOR AND THE NATION | Carrie Blast Furnaces

A community picnic honors the workers, ingenuity and grit that powered America, and the reinvention that continues.

Saturday, July 4

CARRYING THE SPIRIT FORWARD | American Legion Convoy

A motorcade organized by the American Legion will accept the flag from the Allegheny County Sheriff for transport to Washington, DC and its final stop over the U.S. Capitol. [Go](#)

Beth Marcello, based in the South Side Slopes, is a writer, consultant and advocate for women.



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