



FIRST STOP: The Magic of the Lantern Tells the Tale

Stop #1 is the Magic Lantern Theater, where our Showman brings to life the horrors of the slave trade, from its beginnings in Colonial America to the Civil War. Students see, hear, and learn about this dark chapter in American history as Magic Lantern audiences would have in the late 1800s. The story unfolds with the deft manipulation of a rare triennial Magic Lantern projecting spectacular 150-year-old glass slides, original commissioned art and historic period photographs. Victorian “special effects,” music, and sounds all deepen the experience. The story of this inhumanity along with the courageous acts of freedom that led ultimately to emancipation, portray the re-defining of the self-evident truth that “all men are created equal.”



More on the Lantern Shows

Magic Lantern performances, although foreign to modern day audiences, were the most popular form of entertainment in America in the late 19th Century, before there were movies. Using a gorgeous exotic wood and brass antique lantern, the performers or “Showmen” would take their audiences on a journey unlike anything they had experienced before. With original antique pictures, hand-painted on glass, combined with widely-recognized stories, the Showman interacted with his audience, bringing

multiple characters and voices to life, magically manipulating artistic images against a backdrop of music, sound effects, and sing-alongs. In 1895, there were over 30,000 lantern showmen in the United States alone, giving well over 75,000 performances a year. Magic lanterns were also widely used in schools, universities, churches, fraternal lodges, and homes.



Then as now, spectators loved special effects. Stunning images using water-tank slides, dissolves, chromatropes, “snow curtains,” and other unexpected mechanical “tricks” surprised and delighted audiences over 100 years ago. You will see many of these used in our show for dramatic effect.

Our triennial is a magnificent three-lensed brass and mahogany projection “lantern” that was used to captivate audiences across America in the mid to late 19th century. It has been electrified from its original gas delivery system and is just one of fewer than 100 such lanterns in existence worldwide. Ours is the only permanent magic lantern theater in the world in the last 130 years and each performance is a bit of “living history.”

