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NEWS

'We're going to build something': Former Truman library director starts work in Quincy, MA



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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

The Adams Presidential Center has appointed Dr. Kurt Graham, former director of the Harry Truman Presidential Library and Museum, as its first president.

The center will host the first installment of its Adams Speaker Series on Oct. 30, featuring a panel of distinguished historians and authors.

The center will focus on educational programming and research while working towards establishing a physical location.

QUINCY – The Adams Presidential Center may be years away from building a physical location, but it's already working to fulfill its mission: Sharing the history of John, Abigail, John Quincy and Catherine Louisa Adams, members of Quincy's great political family who represent to many the country's founding ideals and principals.

This month, the organization introduced its first president, Dr. Kurt Graham, who previously directed the Harry Truman Presidential Library and Museum in Missouri for nine years.

It also announced its first free public event. The Adams Speaker Series will begin Oct. 30 – John Adams' 289th birthday – with a panel of three distinguished historians and authors.

Dr. Kurt Graham – inaugural president of the Adams Presidential Center

"Similar aspirations" will guide Graham's work in Quincy as in Independence, Missouri, where he oversaw a massive, \$30 million renovation to the Truman Presidential Library's

museum's exhibits, he told The Ledger in a phone interview.

In his previous job, Graham took Truman's legacy on the road, extending the library's national and international profile with programming and talks from Washington, D.C., to Brussels to Jerusalem.

Likewise, he said he plans to share the Adamses with the world, while also engaging local residents with the legacies of the two homegrown presidents, legacies he said have a burning relevance for the present moment.

"There are very few issues, very few values we have that we can't trace back to that founding era and this founding family," Graham said.

"Civil rights, women's rights, international relations, freedom, liberty and equality, pluralism – anything we would consider to be interesting and important today, the Adams (administrations) grappled with those things first."

While Graham said the Adamses are for everyone, he emphasized reaching the "rising generation" coming of age in a world increasingly remote from some of the principles embodied by the founders.

"(It's important for) young people to understand a participatory republic is not a foregone conclusion," he said. "There are no guarantees. The fate of the nation is in our hands. That's how it was set up."

Education news: Some of Quincy's special ed students have a new school. Take a look inside

Housing in Quincy: How much does it cost to live in North Quincy's newest apartment building?

Asked to compare Truman and John Adams, Graham said both are the subjects of great biographies by the late author David McCullough. Beyond that, he said both were men of moral character who compare favorably to today's political leaders.

"Today, we don't really expect anyone to put the good of the nation ahead of their own personal self-interest," he said. "When we expect more of elected leaders, then we might have a chance of getting another Adams or another Truman."

Asked to describe the challenge of directing an organization that has yet to be built, Graham spoke optimistically.

"I see my work as a tremendous opportunity," he said. "Nothing is here yet, and we're going to build something from the ground up.

"We don't exist yet as a physical space. But there are all types of programming and educational work we can do while we're building a research and educational facility."

Who was John Adams? A man passionate about the public good and civic education

Titled "John Adams: Passion for the Public Good & Civic Education," the free event begins at 5:30 p.m. at Quincy High School. Participants are asked to register, and check-in begins at 5 p.m. The series will present similar events quarterly to live and virtual audiences.

Three speakers will join Graham for Wednesday's panel. Harvard professor of political philosophy, ethics and public policy Danielle Allen founded the nonprofit Partners in Democracy, which works to strengthen democratic culture in Massachusetts. She is a member of the Adams Presidential Center's board of directors.

Allen's academic work includes many books, including her award-winning "Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality."

Joining Allen on the panel is Jane Kamensky, a former history professor at Harvard and current president and CEO of Monticello, home of Thomas Jefferson, in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Kamensky authored the award-winning "A Revolution in Color: The World of John Singleton Copley." This year, her book about feminist pornographer Candice Vadala, titled "Candida Royale and the Sexual Revolution," was published by W.W. Norton.

Rounding out the panel is Jeffrey Rosen, president of the National Constitution Center and host of the weekly podcast, "We the People."

A law professor at George Washington University and contributing editor of The Atlantic magazine, Rosen has written books on the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg as well as Louis Brandeis and William Taft.

His latest book, “The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America,” was published by Simon and Shuster in February.

What's the difference between a presidential library and a presidential center

Presidential libraries, like the Truman library, operate under the auspices of the National Archives, a government agency. All U.S. presidents since Herbert Hoover have presidential libraries, though Donald Trump's exists only as a website and Barack Obama's is available online while its Illinois premises are not open to the public.

Official presidential libraries are largely limited in what they can do beyond preserving and making available a president's papers, records, collections and other historical materials.

Franklin Roosevelt was the first president to plan a facility to house his papers, books and memorabilia, according to the National Archives. In 1955, Congress passed a law establishing a federally maintained system to preserve presidential records.

The Adams Presidential Center, on the other hand, is a nonprofit overseen by a board of directors without direct government oversight or restrictions. In this respect, it follows the pattern of such institutions as Jefferson's Monticello and George Washington's Mount Vernon.

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