100 YEARS OF LITHUANIAN STATEHOOD
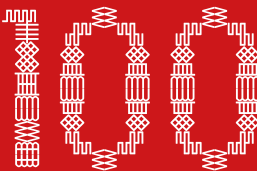
KEY HISTORIC SITES IN VILNIUS

VILNIUS

Restored Lithuania 100

On 16 February 1918, the Act of Independence of Lithuania was signed, effectively creating the modern Lithuanian state, with Vilnius as its capital. It is one of the most important dates in the nation's history - the birth of a new democratically-run country.

The Act laid the foundation for the creation of a state based on the principles of equality, freedom and prosperity, where different nationalities and social groups could co-exist. Its signatories were twenty Lithuanians elected to the Council of Lithuania and entrusted with the task of creating an independent Lithuanian state. The signatories' backgrounds and subsequent fates were very diverse.

As part of the Centennial celebration, this guide aims to shed light on the most important sites of the events leading up to the signing of the Act of Independence of Lithuania, as well as the places central to Lithuanian cultural life in the early 20th century.

Museums   Houses of Worship   Theatre / Concert Hall   Plaque

1. THE GREAT SEIMAS OF VILNIUS

The Lithuanian National Philharmonic Society
Aušros Vartų g. 5, www.filharmonija.lt

+370 526 65233, +370 526 65216
Ticket Office: Tue-Sat 10:00 - 13:30,
14:00 - 19:00, Sun 10:00 - 12:00

The building of the current Philharmonic dates back to the beginning of 20th century, when the city's Duma assembly and Theatre Construction Committee decided to house a theatre and concert hall in the reconstructed building of the Russian Merchants' House that stood there.

The remodeled building hosted many historically significant events. When the ban on Lithuanian press was lifted in 1904, Petras Vileišis opened the town's first Lithuanian bookstore there. It is also where the Great Seimas of Vilnius assembled on 4-5 December 1905. On 6 December 1906, the first Lithuanian opera *Birutė* premiered there.

Around 2,000 Lithuanian representatives convened at the Great Seimas from modern day Lithuania, Ukraine, Latvia and Poland - all following just one invitation that was printed in the newspaper *Vilniaus Žinios*. The hall was overflowing with people. This is where the demand for Lithuanian political autonomy was first voiced. The resolutions adopted by the Great Seimas stated that the affairs of the people who inhabited Lithuania could only be run within an autonomous country. So that all nationalities residing in Lithuania could take full advantage of freedom, this assembly of Lithuanians decided to demand autonomy with a fairly elected Seimas in Vilnius. The resolution stated that the autonomous Lithuanian state should be made up of the current ethnographical Lithuania at its core and the peripheries that wanted to be part of this core because of economic, cultural, national or other reasons.

2. THE FIRST LITHUANIAN MASS

The Church of St. Nicholas
Šv. Mikalojaus g. 4, www.mikalojus.lt

Open: Mon-Sat 15:30 – 18:30, Sun 7:15 – 15:00

The secret cultural society of Lithuanian intellectuals – the Twelve Vilnius Apostles – was created during the strictest years of the Lithuanian press ban by future signatory Donatas Malinauskas, Juozapas Ambraziejus and Povilas Matulionis. The society gathered twelve active litvomaniacs of varying views who didn't necessarily all speak Lithuanian - among them, the three Vileišiai brothers, as well as Andrius Domaševičius and Gabrielius Landsbergis-Žemkalnis. The Twelve Vilnius Apostles also included two prominent women - Felicija Bortkevičienė, a member of the Great Seimas and the Constituent Assembly of Lithuania (Lithuanian: Steigiamasis Seimas), and a founder of various women's organisations; and Filomena Malinauskaitė, an active assistant to the Lithuanian book smugglers and member of the Lithuanian educational and cultural organisations that brought Lithuanians together at the St. Nicholas Parish.

The Twelve Vilnius Apostles established a fund to support Lithuanian literature, science and art, and also helped the first Lithuanian daily newspaper *Vilniaus Žinios* see the light of day thanks to its funding initiatives. By sending numerous letters to Vilnius' Bishop, the society made sure that masses were also held in Lithuanian. The first mass held in Lithuanian took place in 1901 at the Church of St. Nicholas, and continued to be the only mass held regularly in Lithuanian in Vilnius until 1939.

To mark the significant contribution the cultural society made to the country's history, the memory of the Twelve Vilnius Apostles is preserved in a medal of red granite right beside the bust of Vytautas the Great, which was erected to mark the 500th anniversary of his death and was preserved by the church throughout Soviet rule.

3. THE LITHUANIAN CONFERENCE AND THE FIRST LITHUANIAN GYMNASIUM

The Russian Drama Theatre of Lithuania
Jono Basanavičiaus g. 13, 14
www.rusudrama.lt

+370 526 20552
Ticket Office: Tue-Sat 10:45 - 14:45, 16:30 - 18:30,
Sun 11:00 - 16:00

In 1915, public figures working to unite Lithuanians since the Great Seimas of Vilnius established the Lithuanian Society to Aid Victims of the War. As the war was ending, the Society's Committee, members of which included four future Independence Act signatories - Antanas Smetona, Jurgis Šaulys, Steponas Kairys, and Petras Klimas - began planning for the restoration of Lithuanian statehood and independence. They obtained the German government's approval to hold a Lithuanian Conference in Vilnius, which took place on 21 September 1917 in the Pohulianka Theatre, a building that was funded by the city's Polish community. It is there that the Council of Lithuania was elected, which was unanimously commissioned with the task of creating an independent Lithuanian state.

The Society to Aid Victims of the War also took care of establishing a Lithuanian gymnasium in 1915. The Lithuanian Scientific Society, chaired by Jonas Basanavičius, approved the gymnasium's staff and provided funding. Mykolas Biržiška was named headmaster. 25 students attended the first lessons on 18 October 1915, and their number grew to 75 by December of the same year. Tuition wasn't free, but students from low-income families could apply for scholarships and those who had no place to live in Vilnius could stay in the dormitory. The gymnasium was named after Vytautas Didysis in August 1921 - through the efforts of Lithuanian societies the gymnasium stayed open throughout the period of Polish occupation.

4. THE LITHUANIAN COAT OF ARMS

The Lithuanian Theatre, Music and Cinema Museum
Vilniaus g. 41, www.ltmkm.lt

+370 526 22406
Working hours: Tue, Thu, Fri 11:00 - 18:00,
Wed 11:00 - 19:00, Sat 11:00 - 16:00

This museum houses a collection of scenography work by artist Mstislavas Dobužinskis, which is now part of UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. The artist was born in Novgorod, Russia in 1875 and holds a special place in Lithuanian history. Dobužinskis studied in Saint Petersburg's School of Painting, the Vilnius Gymnasium, Saint Petersburg University, and was a contemporary of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis. His paintings from 1906-1907 that depict Vilnius are very well known. After Lithuanian independence was proclaimed, the artist helped create Lithuanian medals and postmarks. In 1925, Dobužinskis was given Lithuanian citizenship and in 1929 he entered the call to create a Lithuanian coat of arms – the Vytis – where his version, along with those submitted by Tadas Daugirdas, Antanas Žmuidzinavičius, Juozas Zikaras, and Adomas Galdikas, was recognised as being the most historically reasonable; however, it wasn't adopted. An easel sculpture by Kęstutis Musteikis and Algirdas Umbrasas that stands right by the Vilnius Cathedral serves to commemorate Dobužinskis.

5. LIETUVOS AIDAS PRINTING HOUSE
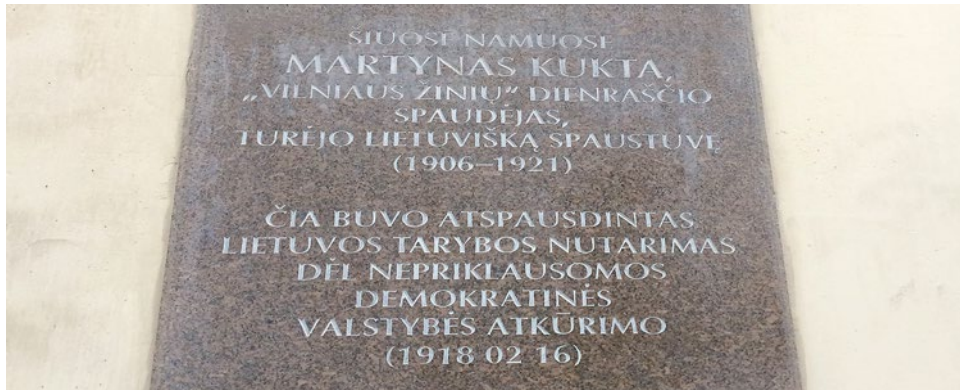
Totorių g. 20

To spread the news about the Act of Independence of Lithuania to all Lithuanians, Petras Klimas took the initiative of having it published in the *Lietuvos Aidas* newspaper, which was printed in Martynas Kukta's printing house on the eve of the Act's signing. Around 200 copies dating back to that day still remain. On the day independence was declared, the representatives of the occupational German government raided the printing house and Martynas Kukta spent a few days in custody.

M. Kukta returned to Vilnius from Saint Petersburg in 1904. Encouraged by Petras Vileišis and with support of his brother, he opened a printing house, which operated on Totorių Street from 1911. A memorial board marks the site today.

6. ORIGINS OF THE NATIONAL FLAG DAY

Gediminas Castle Tower
Arsenalo g. 5, www.lnm.lt

+370 526 17453
Temporarily closed for visitors

In December 1918 the Red Army entered Lithuania. It took control of Vilnius in early January 1919 and began making its way to Kaunas where the State Council of Lithuania and government had moved.

On 1 January 1919, volunteers hoisted the Lithuanian flag atop Gediminas' Tower - Vilnius Commandant Kazimieras Škirpa was in charge of the operation, which involved volunteers from all over Lithuania. The first Lithuanian flag didn't fly for long - the Bolsheviks took control of Vilnius on 6 January 1919 and removed the yellow and green from the tricolor, leaving only the red.

The second time the Lithuanian flag was raised was when the Lithuanian Army returned to Vilnius on 26 August 1920. However, the Polish Army seized Vilnius in October of the same year and the flag was removed.

It was flown over Gediminas' Tower for the third time on 29 October 1939, when Vilnius was returned to Lithuania. When the country was occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union, the flag was once again taken down.

Members of the Lithuanian Battle Unit raised it again on 5 April 1944, but it was removed for a long time by the Soviet "liberators".

The flag has now been flying ever since it was raised on Gediminas' Tower for the fifth time on 7 October 1988.

7. SIGNING THE ACT OF INDEPENDENCE OF LITHUANIA

The House of Signatories
Pilies g. 26, www.lnm.lt

+370 523 14437
Working hours: Tue-Sat 10:00 - 17:00

In the early 20th century, this building belonged to Kazimieras Štralis. A confectioner's shop occupied the ground floor and the upper floors were made up of rentable apartments. The Central Committee of the Lithuanian Society to Aid Victims of the War rented apartment 2. The room on the right of the balcony housed the Committee's office, on the left - the office of the Committee's Chairman Antanas Smetona.

On 16 February, 1918, the Council of Lithuania assembled in the chairman's office at a leather padded table that is still there today. The council was made up of 20 people elected in September 1917 at the Vilnius Conference. Everyone was given feather pens and inkpots. Jonas Basanavičius read the Act of Independence of Lithuania aloud and signed it first; other members of the council were invited to sign in alphabetical order. Jonas Vileišis wanted to keep his pen as a historical relic, but was asked to return it, as it was the committee's property. After signing the Act the signatories most likely went to have lunch in the cafe downstairs and spent the rest of the day planning future actions - the new state had yet to be created.

Before 16 February, the Council of Lithuania met at the Lithuanian Scientific Society on Aušros Vartų Street, in the office of its chairman Jonas Basanavičius. Firewood was very expensive at the time and J. Basanavičius often sat in his office in a fur coat. Having had enough of the cold, the Council decided to meet at Kazimieras Štralis' house, where its most important meeting took place on 16 February 1918.

8. THE LITHUANIAN BOOKSTORE

The House – Museum of Marija and Jurgis Šlapelis
Pilies g. 40, www.slapeliumuziejus.lt

+370 526 10771
Working hours: Wed-Sat 11:00 - 17:00,
Sun 11:00 - 16:00

Jurgis Šlapelis become part of the Lithuanian movement early, while still studying at Mintauja's Gymnasium in modern day Jelgava, Latvia. Jonas Jablonskis was his teacher there. It was in his house that J. Šlapelis met Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas, Gabrielius Landsbergis-Žemkalnis, Pranas Maišotas and Liudvika Didžiulienė, who established a dormitory for Lithuanian students in Mintauja. J. Šlapelis and Antanas Smetona proved to be real rebels, and ended up being expelled from the gymnasium. J. Šlapelis was awarded a scholarship to study in Moscow and chose medicine only to have the chance to return to Lithuania as a young doctor. Upon coming back to Vilnius he published articles in Lithuanian newspapers and established Lithuanian language improvement courses, where he met his future wife - the performer of the main role in the opera Birutė, book smuggler Marija Piaseckaitė.

The two opened a bookstore on Dominikonų Street in 1906 that operated for 40 years and survived all five Lithuanian occupations. It became a Lithuanian beacon in Polish-occupied Vilnius. Marija Šlapelienė kept it going throughout the years. Even though Marija and Jurgis were constantly persecuted and accused of disseminating illegal literature, they felt it their duty to stay in multicultural Vilnius and keep the Lithuanian spirit alive. They never stopped believing that Vilnius would be returned to Lithuania, though they probably did not think this would coincide with an occupation of the entire country.

9. ORIGINS OF LITHUANIAN ART AND MUSIC

The House of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis
Savičiaus g. 11, www.mkcnamai.lt

+370 526 22451
Working hours: Mon-Fri 10:00 - 16:00

Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis is rightfully thought to be Lithuania's most significant artist and composer to date. He started studying music at the estate of Mykolas Oginskis (Polish: Michał Ogiński) in the Lithuanian town of Plungė, Oginskis supported him during his studies in Warsaw's Music Institute and the Royal Conservatory of Leipzig. Upon his return to Vilnius, he became friends with Lithuanian intellectuals including Sofija Kymantaitė, who inspired him to join the Lithuanian societies. The short but very tender and enriching love story that unfolded between the two took place in Vilnius.

The city also hosted the first exhibitions of his paintings and was where he led choirs singing Lithuanian songs harmonised by M. K. Čiurlionis himself. In Vilnius, M. K. Čiurlionis held concerts where he played piano or conducted. The General Meeting of the Lithuanian Scientific Society elected him into the Committee of Collecting Songs and Melodies. Later in life, M. K. Čiurlionis often visited Saint Petersburg to exhibit his paintings and establish connections with Russian artists. That was where he met M. Dobužinskis, who was inspired by Vilnius' beauty. Constant stress and poverty wrecked the artist's health; he was treating psychological and emotional exhaustion in a sanatorium in Pustelnik when he caught a cold and died of pneumonia.

MAP

Go Vilnius, Lina Dusevičienė

WWW.VILNIUS-TOURISM.LT