

**MUSEUM REVIEW**

**A SHAMBLES FOR  
THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE**

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“The President’s House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation.” Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, PA. <http://www.nps.gov/inde/historyculture/the-presidents-house.htm>. Permanent exhibition, opened December 15, 2010. Kelly/Maiello, Architects & Planners, designers.

*T*he open-air President’s House site that opened in December 2010 at Independence National Historic Park (INHP) in Philadelphia is situated in some of the country’s most hallowed public space. Immediately adjacent to the Liberty Bell Center and just a long block from Independence Hall and, in the other direction, from the National Constitution Center, the sparsely defined footprint and frame of the house at the corner of Sixth and Market streets commands attention, in part because it is architecturally such a contrast to the solid settlement of all the other buildings around it. This stark difference announces before one even enters the space that the President’s House is a public history site different from any others in the large compound that is INHP. Joined with its central location, that contrast draws many curious visitors into its interior.

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Core themes and narratives were defined for the site by 2005. Official planning for it was launched in 2002 and was initially focused on chronicling the households of Washington and Adams and their centrality in forging the new federal government. Yet, in the same year, an essay by architectural historian Edward Lawler had established in detail the presence of nine slaves in the Washington household. By 2005, spurred by the activism of a local African American organization, Avenging the Ancestors Coalition, and a growing cadre of historians and public advocates, slavery—in the household and in the nation—and the dynamically expanding body of free blacks in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia became fortunately mandated as core axes of interpretation at the site along with the house itself, its occupants both notable and humble, and the development of the executive. A studding of slavery and freedom was now in place on which the designers might show how the house hung here invariably creaked and contracted from its frame.<sup>1</sup> Now that the dust has settled from the site's completion and opening, taking some time to ascertain how well they collapsed the house is worthwhile.

Unfortunately, the design and curating of this singular house in INHP is deeply flawed. Once within its perimeter, any inquisitive visitor might reasonably wonder what exactly they had entered. As currently executed, the President's House is an undisciplined jumble of multiple undesignated entry points, any one of which thrusts the visitor into a sparsely contextualized story recounted on a scattered cluster of walls that barely suggests a domestic space. Unconventional exhibitions in public space are to be applauded, especially if they effectively challenge the obscurantism and mendacity of received national knowledge in novel ways architecturally and curatorially. If some pedantic curatorial hierarchy is being eschewed here and visitors encouraged to build their own story by entering the space and narrative wherever they might choose, fine. But there are limits—if people do not know where they are, what they are confronting, but instead are thrown helter-skelter into some narrative maelstrom, then in fact no socially useful challenge and revisioning can occur. You have to know where you are before you can evaluate it. Perhaps the designers were not concerned to challenge any of these hierarchies. In that case, their curatorial negligence has to be fingered. Nowhere on the perimeter of the house's footprint is there any signage welcoming and introducing the visitor to what is before her. Even at the nominal front door to the house, *nothing at all* tells you where you are. This is inexcusable. The designers have abdicated near totally their reasonable responsibility to orient and gently guide the visitors through a story that they have defined and deployed.

Perhaps their problems with guiding the visitors are because they are not sure what their story is. The site is cacophonous—not only because of its lack of a narrative center, but also because poorly planned points of ambient sound within the space battle to be heard among themselves as well as with the voluble street sounds outside it. In the niche in the site's nominal front, densely inscribed panels briefly recount the first laying of the federal government. Off to the right on a wall are two looping videos, one about black Philadelphians and black St. Domingans in 1793 and another about Martha Washington's slave, Oney Judge, who would successfully run away in 1796. No effort is made, however, to articulate their relationship to the nearby information on the federal government. The federal information seems almost grudgingly advanced; it never is really engaged again. Indeed no context is provided for the videos themselves. Little is said about the Adams administration and household, which among many relevant features briefly included a young free black male named James Prince, whom Abigail Adams met in Philadelphia, championed, and brought back to Braintree where she pushed aside local opposition to have him receive some schooling. John, however, refused to have the "turbulent" black return to the President's House, despite Abigail's continuing endorsement.

The problem at the President's House is not so much that the curators do not know what their story is as much as it is that they really only want to tell a portion of this officially defined story: that the President's House stood at this corner of Sixth and Market streets in the 1790s and that its first white occupants enslaved nine individuals who lived there. The preponderance of curated space at the site is dedicated first of all to characterizing the lives of the nine and second to conventional recapitulations of slavery in the Atlantic world, the American colonies, and the United States—the latter presented unimaginatively in text-driven panels otherwise dense with images hung on the available wall space. Considering as well the significant space assigned a large wall on the site's perimeter containing the names of the nine enslaved and an adjacent, cylindrical cloister of sorts intended for meditating on them and their African heritage, the site strives frankly to be more commemorative than a public history site *per se*—it is finally a memorial to the nine individuals enslaved by a mendacious white democracy and to the hundreds of thousands of other slaves in the United States they then represented. The acknowledgment of their memory is appropriately integral to this site, although currently not furthered by the anemic memory cell squirreled away in a corner at the rear.

Yet the site is after all entitled “The President’s House: Freedom and Slavery in Making a New Nation,” not the President’s Prison House. It was not supposed to be only a site of slavery and commemoration, but one of public history explicating this house, the executive, and their relationship to the broader federal government in the 1790s. The curators thus make nods to telling a more inclusive historical story. Yet when they do, this additional information appears sequestered and incidental. When combined with egregious execution, this frankly narrative sleight-of-hand leads the visitors to have to play a sort of hide-and-seek with the argumentative intent of the site. Confusion abounds, clarity suffers, rich opportunities are missed.

Actually, making slavery the story of the President’s House is fine. The curatorial challenge is in being sure that story is well focused and refined in terms of the unique opportunities and resources the house affords. Currently it is not. The house can be both commemorative—functioning as a site that through the nine memorializes the boundless victims of the nation’s embrace of slavery—and illustrative of how, through the nine and the house, that embrace came to be settled. Indeed the commemoration of the nine can only be enhanced by a resourceful characterizing of the specific political milieu in which they lived in Philadelphia.

While slavery is certainly broached elsewhere within INHP, it is nevertheless fitting to have one key component at the heart of INHP dedicated principally to telling the story of slavery’s relationship to the more centralized nation state forged there in the years immediately after 1787. Indeed no site there can tell the story with the personal poignancy of the President’s House because of the intimacy with which the most powerful implementer of this state lived in that house with his slaves and used that state to secure his tyranny over them. No other site in INHP affords this specific opportunity to explore the uncomfortable intimacy of slavery with the forging of the new nation, how slavery from the very onset of the new federal government not only corrupted it, but was in fact that new federal government. The two were inseparable—not necessarily, but circumstantially. In 1787 the foundation for the Constitution was laid in Philadelphia just around the corner from the President’s House. It schematized a nation fundamentally divided and one of the most important frames first emerging from those blueprints was the President’s House. From 1790 through 1800, not only was it a center for cobbling a weird planking of slavery and freedom into the executive, judiciary, and the legislature; it indeed sheltered and rehearsed within its very walls the daily routines and intimacies of lived freedom and tyranny.

No comparable space for telling this specific story of the early national era exists in Philadelphia, or probably in the nation as a whole.

In this revised larger story, George Washington, as the first executive and as the overarching figure in the new federal government, must be front and center. Through him exclusively are the stories of both that government and slavery simultaneously compressed. Without him as a prominent actor in this site—which he currently is not—the most effective vehicle for grounding slavery in both the President's House and that new government is lost. John Adams needs to be woven into the narrative as well. Perhaps he can pose some alternatives to Washington—his personal opposition to slavery, his administration's complicated relations with Toussaint Louverture and St-Domingue—while finally upholding his policies that reinforced slavery. But he cannot have the prominence of Washington given the centrality of slavery to the story.

In telling this larger story, Washington does not fare well. In 1790 he signed the Naturalization Act, which limited naturalized citizenship to free white persons. In 1791—soon after Washington first installed an advisory cabinet—Attorney General Edmund Randolph advised him on the need to regularly rotate his slaves out of Pennsylvania so that they would never in one single residency overstep the six-month sojourning limit for transient slaves imposed by the state's Gradual Abolition Act of 1780. One day after six months, they could sue for their freedom.<sup>2</sup> In 1793 he signed the Fugitive Slave Act. Aided by its greater capacity to make treaties with nations both foreign and aboriginal, the federal government, with Washington at its head, could organize and settle territories more effectively, a power critical to the expansion of slavery. It also made possible a policing and securing of slavery that simply did not exist under the Confederation. And, of course, all of this was occurring as he participated more broadly in launching a national government under which the free movement of white men and the security of their property was paramount.

Washington's administration was integral to embedding slavery in the new federal government and reinforcing the infrastructure upholding it. Indeed, no household better modeled the new nation's settlement with slavery than did the First Family at the President's House. Moll dusted and painted and minded Martha's two grandchildren while the younger Austin, Giles, and Paris worked in the stable, drove carts, and served as footmen on Washington's carriage. The young Richmond helped Hercules, his father and the Washingtons' highly skilled chef who would escape in 1797, in the

kitchen and with errands. Christopher Sheels helped attend Washington while Oney Judge waited upon Martha and helped to fabricate her clothes. Their situation in the President's House was not separate from the forging of the new national government. They were the testament that slavery was not actually contrary at all to the new government; rather it was something embedded and arrayed within it with surprising ease alongside its promulgation and protection of white freedoms. Slavery was nothing to be hidden; it was something familiar, domestic, even positive. Evidently, it was not incompatible with the new nation. These arguments that no other site at INHP can make about the young nation with a similar vivacity are core to the public value of the house. The current exhibition does not know how to make them effectively. Over time, this failure must be righted.

Nowhere is the easy tyranny of Washington with his slaves revealed as vividly as it is with his response to the flight of Oney Judge. Yet the story, as currently told at the site, is arrayed sloppily at the same time the curators fail to recognize it must be a—if not *the*—central narrative axis at the site. This story is a resource uniquely residing with the President's House. Oney, born about 1776, was a dower slave to Martha Washington. She had served Martha since age ten and was with her since the Washingtons moved to the house in late 1790. Over the following years, she became Martha's body servant and an expert seamstress. The Washingtons indulged her with small gifts of cash and tickets to the circus and allowed her some freedom to move about the city, which enabled her to become acquainted with local free blacks. In May 1796 Oney executed a carefully planned escape from the Washingtons, fleeing on a ship first to New York City and then to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The Washingtons, particularly Martha, were devastated by her flight; George condemned "the ingratitude of the girl, who was brought up and treated more like a child than a Servant." They did not consider the fact that Oney had recently learned she was to be a wedding gift to Martha's granddaughter, Elizabeth Custis. Once George learned by August that she was in Portsmouth, he personally pursued her with whatever resources of the federal government he could muster: the Fugitive Slave Act; pressuring the secretary of the Treasury, Oliver Wolcott, to enlist support of the collector of the Port of Portsmouth "to seize and put her on board a Vessel" for Philadelphia or Virginia. Although vigorous as he could be behind the scenes in hounding Oney, the Founding Father became quite sheepish at the prospect of exciting "a mob or riot . . . [from her]

adherents” in Portsmouth. Rather than have that happen and the public be informed of his cowardly pursuit of a vulnerable twenty-year-old girl, he advised the port collector in December that he nobly deferred to “forego her Services altogether.”

These events do not honor George. The most powerful man in the nation stalked a lone girl of twenty with the force of his minions in the federal government. That’s what the new order under the Constitution made possible. That was slavery both lived in the President’s House and promulgated from it. Recent historiography’s just noting of Washington’s doubts about slavery in his later years are uncomfortably challenged here by this evidence of his petulant slave chasing identical to that of any small-time trader or farmer. Indeed it was worse because the enormously influential Washington could pressure his appointed cabinet officers to serve his self-interest. Without the Constitution and the federal government, the President’s House was unnecessary. We cannot understand the meaning of the President’s House and the slavery it upheld without connecting it intelligently to the federal government that made it necessary.

George Washington and Oney Judge must be two of the most important faces at this ground. It is from the curators’ clear understanding of what the site’s core stories and themes are that a well-executed exhibition might emanate. This site currently lacks such a rich and well-defined center. The crucial advertisement from Washington’s steward seeking Oney’s return is all but hidden on the back of a panel at the rear of the site while a video about her without any contextualization loops quizzically in the nominal front of the house! Disconnected and nonsensical bronzed footprints identifying Oney’s flight are tossed off along another side. They have failed to use the unique resources they have here to elevate this site to the singular significance it merits as perhaps our key public history site for explaining the what, how, and why of the interlocking of slavery and freedom at the federal nation’s raising.

Moreover, both interpenetrating the house and surrounding it were the free blacks of Philadelphia. It was also a site curiously affording opportunities for them. The Reverend Richard Allen, a leader of the black community and the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, cleaned the chimneys in the house with his young assistants. The black St. Thomas Episcopal Church, led by the Reverend Absalom Jones, was just down Fifth Street from the house. Small black businesses were on nearby streets. The city was

filling with several thousand blacks who had successfully fled slavery. Free blacks helped Oney escape; Oney and other black members of the household probably knew Allen and Jones and other free blacks. Unlike the master of the President's House, they modeled freedom for the household's slaves both within and outside the house.

Probably the single best device currently at the site—a video on Richard Allen—connects this world of free blacks with the black and white residents of the house. It recounts his work there, his labors with black Philadelphia, and his understanding of Washington. On December 30, 1799, Allen, Jones, and seventy-two other local blacks petitioned the federal government to end the foreign slave trade and the Fugitive Slave Law and its “barbarities” while requesting that African Americans “be admitted to partake of the liberties and unalienable rights” of the nation. Just a day earlier, Allen had given a eulogy at his church upon Washington's recent death. Of the legions of eulogists nationally, Allen alone lauded him for his manumission of all his slaves by will. “He dared to do his duty, and wipe off the only stain with which man could ever reproach him.” This video captures these important dramas within free black Philadelphia through Allen, but the curators largely fail to continue to explore their important relationship to the house and its inhabitants beyond the video.

Moreover the video and the site in general fail to interpret the abundant paradoxes of slavery and freedom inhabiting the President's House that free blacks perceived with a singular clarity. Allen recognized Washington's death as an opportunity—one synchronized with the submission of the petition—to transform an iconic slaveholder into an abolitionist in the hopes of ultimately so transforming the nation. In Allen's skilled hands, Washington became one who “thought we had a right to liberty.” Yet, apparently an oration of gratitude, the eulogy was in fact a muted jeremiad: equating “the American people” with “the chariots of Israel,” he cautioned that “all the officers of the government in the United States, and all the people that say my Father, my Father” must infuse themselves “with a double portion of his [i.e., Washington's] spirit.” Summoning Scripture, he proclaimed the end of those who fail “the cause of the oppressed”: “the righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance, but the memorial of the wicked shall rot.” Richard Allen was not mired in self-deception: he knew Washington's “only stain” in fact to be indelible and deep. Yet, seizing the moment with a brilliant rhetoric of politics and faith, Allen transfigured him into an



undoubting champion of national abolition, quietly upending mourning into celebration for a man who apparently embodied American freedom but had to die to advance it. Allen and many African Americans around him saw the perilous paradoxes in a national settlement uniting slavery and freedom that leading white men thought viable and constructive. Somehow, he recognized that death and destruction would need to play a role in shivering these fused contradictions.

Of course, “the officers” betrayed this rhetorical dedication to “the cause of the oppressed.” Thus the memorial aptly rots. At the same time it bounds an exhibition asserting the confidence of the new nation with slavery, the site’s architecture argues for the ruins of that settlement— especially when compared necessarily with the buildings surrounding it. If one steps away from the house to the other side of the large lawn bordering it and views it as part of a long sight line running from the beginning of the Liberty Bell Center across Market Street over the Visitors’ Center through to the National Constitution Center, its character as collapse is glaring. Compared with the otherwise smug stolidity of all these other buildings and the sweeping line they create, the site can be recognized not as a house at all, but a shambles that raises doubts about the probity of all the other structures in the chain. The President’s House was intended to be in conversation with the Liberty Bell Center and its attestations to birthing freedom. The tumbled structure is the most honest representation in that whole line of a history built on moral paradox and the terrible suffering of millions. Perhaps the architects intended this sort of comparison; regardless, the curators failed to work with this extraordinary interpretive opportunity to infuse the site with paradox. Looked at with a certain eye, one can see Brady’s photographs of a ruined Richmond and its lone standing chimneys and shattered frames in April 1865. The President’s House—constituting finally a fractured, fundamentally divided frame that its white occupants never recognized—laid the sight line to a ruined Richmond. Thus it is fitting at INHP that we now have this tumbled gap to remind us, on the one hand, where all of the line it shares was heading.

Looked at with fresh eyes, the built structure affords opportunities that can only enhance the site. I look forward to those fresh eyes being applied over the coming many years to a thorough-going reorientation of the interpretation of the President’s House, one of the most important sites for national history and commemoration in the United States.

## NOTES

1. Edward Lawler Jr., "The President's House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 126 (January 2002): 5–95; Lawler, "The President's House Revisited," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 129 (October 2005): 371–409.
2. In a 1786 correspondence with Robert Morris, the wealthy Philadelphia financier, Washington, while professing that "there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do" for abolition, frankly concluded that Pennsylvania's 1780 abolition act and the PAS that sought to safeguard its provisions "introduces more evils than it can cure," despite the fact that they were emblematic of precisely the "Legislative authority" he claimed to seek for a gradual implementation of abolition. GW to Robert Morris, April 12, 1786, in W. W. Abbot, ed., *The Papers of George Washington: Confederation Series*, vol. 4, *April 1786-January 1787* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 16. Rotation was not simply a routine safe circuit: Austin, one of Washington's most trusted slaves, drowned after falling from his horse while fording a cold stream in Harford, Maryland, in December 1794. While Washington assigned Austin duties on these trips to Mount Vernon, rotation also necessitated them and bore direct responsibility for the untimely death of a man with a wife and five children.