

History, Commemoration, and an Interdisciplinary Approach to Interpreting the President's House Site

THE SITE OF THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH of the federal government from 1790 to 1800, the property that we call the President's House site, has never been actively interpreted. The site has had various historical markers over the years. At one point the National Park Service installed a wayside marker that included a conjectural illustration of the house during the Washington occupancy and a brief textual description. But none of this excited the populace. Today, however, Independence National Historical Park (INHP) is developing plans for interpreting the site. The challenge is not merely to go beyond the consensus approach to political history to the study of social history in the forms of slavery, household (family), vernacular architecture, and women, but to practice more inclusive interpretation. To meet this challenge, we must involve members of various constituencies in the planning process and incorporate cultural values into the interpretive design. Everyone who experiences this site participates in the multiple levels of its history and influence.¹

The original house was demolished in 1832, the very year of the Washington centennial. Eight years prior to the mansion's demolition, Lafayette's triumphal visit to the old Pennsylvania State House (Independence Hall) fixed everyone's attention on the preservation of that nearby historic structure. In 1828 the City of Philadelphia commissioned architect William Strickland to reconstruct the tower of

¹ At the outset, I should explain that I am not directly involved with public interpretation. My role at Independence National Historical Park is to manage an interdisciplinary professional division that includes building and landscape architects, historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists. The opinions offered here are my own and not necessarily those of the National Park Service.

Independence Hall in order to restore it to its appearance at the time of the writing of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. During the next century both Congress Hall and Old City Hall were restored because of their associations with the legislative and judicial branches of the federal government. But no one appreciated the obvious triangulation of the President's House on present-day Market Street with those two historic structures on Chestnut Street and the opportunity to preserve and interpret the early sites of all three branches of American government. The fact that the President's House was privately owned, while the other buildings were municipally held buildings, surely weighed against its preservation. Once the President's House was demolished, however, the absence of visible evidence contributed to its lack of public acknowledgement.²

National Park Service staff had already logged twenty-five years of study of the area in and around Independence National Historical Park by 1976 when the federal agency assumed custody of Independence Mall, over 140 years after the house's demolition. Park Service historians collected data about the President's House site, but lack of physical remains seemed always to postpone developing a more formal interpretive program. While the National Park Service works in an interdisciplinary manner, few members of its professional disciplines had reason to study the President's House site. There was no historic structure or cultural landscape for architects to document. There were no associated collections for curators to catalog and conserve. Until the construction of the Liberty Bell Center there were no occasions that warranted intensive below-ground archaeological investigation under the terms of the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act.³ Despite the site's important history,

² The recognition of residential sites of historic importance was not alien in Philadelphia in 1832. The Letitia Court house once owned by William Penn was formally acknowledged when The Historical Society of Pennsylvania held its inaugural meeting at the site in 1824. Roberts Vaux to John Fanning Watson, Nov. 2, 1824, describes that event. Letters and Communications to John F. Watson, 1823–1828, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

³ Some remnants of the main house and back-buildings did survive below ground. National Park Service policy prohibits archaeological investigation for data collection only because of the destructive nature of such projects. Site investigation customarily precedes construction. Edward Lawler Jr., "The President's House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 126 (2002): 5–96. Rebecca Yamin et al., "After the Revolution—Two Shops on South Sixth Street: Archeological Data Recovery on Block 1 of Independence Mall" (John Milner Associates for the National Park Service, 2004); and Rebecca Yamin and Tod L. Benedict, "Phase II Archeological Investigations, Liberty Bell complex, Block 1, Independence Mall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania" (John Milner Associates for the National Park Service, 2001).

no patriotic groups ever proposed holding ceremonies there such as those held annually in honor of our first president on Independence Square.

The interest of local historians and antiquarians in the President's House was similarly passive. Certainly, everyone who focused on eighteenth-century Philadelphia knew the location and commonly referred to it as "190 High Street," its eighteenth-century plot address. Harold Eberlein's article about the mansion seemed to be the standard reference and satisfied most curiosities. Not only did political historians ignore the site, no one suggested interpreting the President's House's significant social history, particularly as a site of slavery.⁴

African Americans have a long history of participation in First Amendment activities in Independence National Historical Park, but few organizations saw park sites as significant to their heritage for other purposes. The National Freedom Day Association's annual February 1 ceremony at the Liberty Bell in celebration of the signing of the Thirteenth Amendment predates the park's existence. Since 1986 the Martin Luther King Association for Non-Violence has held a ceremony at the Liberty Bell on Martin Luther King Jr. Day because of the Bell's significance to Dr. King. Both these groups have focused on significant milestones in the civil rights era of African American history. Neither ever expressed concern for the park's daily interpretative programs.⁵

Even the 1950s design of Independence Mall itself did not incorporate opportunities to suggest the site of the President's House. The design guidelines for Independence Mall employed a different rationale than those for the landscape in Independence Park's historic core. No footprints of historically significant former structures were marked on the mall in brick and ivy as they were in the blocks bounded by Second and Sixth, Chestnut and Walnut streets.

Between 1993 and 1997 INHP held sixteen public meetings and published five newsletters in preparation for its present General

⁴ Harold Donaldson Eberlein, "190, High Street (Market Street below Sixth): The Home of Washington and Adams," in "Historic Philadelphia: From the Founding until the Early Nineteenth Century, 1790-1800," special issue *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s., 43, part I (1953): 161-78.

⁵ For more information about the National Freedom Day Association see Charlene Mires, "The Difference This Day Makes," *Pennsylvania Heritage* 24 (winter 1998): 4-11; Mitch Kachun, "A beacon to oppressed peoples everywhere: Major Richard R. Wright Sr., National Freedom Day, and the Rhetoric of Freedom in the 1940s," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 128 (2004): 279-306.

Management Plan (GMP). The GMP focused on the redevelopment of Independence Mall. During the period of public comment, some interested parties proposed interpreting and even reconstructing the former mansion because of its significance as the residence of financier Robert Morris, as well as the first and second presidents of the United States. These motives followed the interests of consensus historians. No one ever mentioned slavery, family history, or women's history as reasons to support the reconstruction proposals. Following the GMP's approval, historians performed documentary research on a plot-by-plot basis to determine if there were sites of historical significance within the area affected by the construction. These studies noted the presence of free and enslaved African Americans and slave owners and traders in the area during the period of historical interest. But no one urged that this information be incorporated into a public interpretive program.⁶

I point out these facts not as shortcomings, but rather as indications of the myriad approaches to the past and the various ways in which a variety of disciplines viewed the park's resources. My own work in 1975 on the park's Deshler-Morris House, where the Washington family stayed in 1794, noted that the president brought some of his servants to the Germantown house. I employed the word used by members of the household—"servant"—to describe all categories of labor—free, indentured, and enslaved—and did not interpret the term more fully. By 1983, when I studied the living conditions of Thomas Jefferson during the Second Continental Congress in 1776, I felt it was important to explain Jefferson's relationship to his mulatto slave and brother-in-law, Bob Hemmings, and to expand upon the young man's critical role as an assistant to the Virginia delegate.⁷

If there was ever a conspiracy of silence about slavery in the executive mansion, it was an unspoken conspiracy shared by the Park Service, the academy, independent historians, and special interest organizations.

⁶ Edward Lawler to the National Park Service, Oct. 15, 1996, reprinted in Independence National Historical Park, "Abbreviated Final General Management Plan, Environmental Impact Statement" (National Park Service, 1997), 2–85; Sharon Ann Holt, "Occupation and Use of the 500 Block of Market Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1680–1850: A Historic Resource Study Conducted for Independence National Historical Park" (National Park Service, 1997); and Anna Cox Toogood, "Historic Resource Study, Independence Mall: The 18th Century Development, Block One, Chestnut to Market, Fifth to Sixth Streets" (National Park Service, 2001).

⁷ Doris Devine Fanelli, "Furnishings Plan: Deshler-Morris House, 5442 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19144" (National Park Service, 1976); and Fanelli, "Furnishings Plan for the Graff House, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania" (National Park Service, 1988).

When the GMP was underway, no one called for interpreting slavery at the site. Yet the public meetings failed to bring members of the African American community to the conversation. To mitigate this loss, the park began an ethnography project that employed a variety of qualitative field-work techniques to capture the ideas of underrepresented groups.

INHP conducted a Rapid Ethnographic Assessment Procedure (REAP), a process designed to quickly gather information from residents of the surrounding area. A skilled ethnographer, Setha Low, was the principal investigator for this study and she was able to bring the concerns of the local African American community to the forefront. Respondents indicated that the park held no cultural representation for them. They could not make cultural connections to the park because they were unaware of their own local history and most of the park's interpretative programs only stressed political history at the national level. Shortly after the REAP, INHP worked with ethnographer Tony Whitehead to produce a deeper and broader study, an ethnographic overview and assessment. The primary purpose of that study was to identify groups with traditional associations with INHP. In addition, Whitehead built upon Low's work and interviewed park visitors. His findings independently confirmed Low's. Not only African American neighbors, but also African American visitors felt that the park's stories held no relevance for them. One respondent stated, "it is hard to understand where African Americans fit in the colonial setting. We need to point out the links and tell a more complete story."⁸

The historians at INHP had already begun a research program that would lead to more inclusive interpretation. In response to the National Park Service's Underground Railroad Initiative, INHP amended its National Register nomination to point out sites related to slavery and the abolition movement. The exercise of creating this document demonstrated the relevance of many sites and collections in the park to the stories of slavery and abolition. The park became a member of the Underground

⁸ Setha M. Low et al., "Rapid Ethnographic Assessment Procedures Report" for "General Management Plan, Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania" (National Park Service, 1995). This study also investigated Vietnamese, Chinese, Hispanic, Italian, and Jewish communities. Responses of all groups about the park's relevance ranged from high to low. Dana T. Taplin, Suzanne Scheld, and Setha M. Low, "Rapid Ethnographic Assessment in Urban Parks: A Case Study of Independence National Historical Park," *Human Organization* 61 (2002): 80-93; Tony Whitehead et al., "Ethnographic Overview and Assessment, Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania" (National Park Service, 2002), 105.

Railroad Network and now offers walking tours on the subject of slavery and freedom.⁹ The overwhelming attendance at these tours demonstrated the interest that African American history held for a diverse audience.

Undaunted by the park's inability to reconstruct the President's House as he had urged during the GMP meetings, Edward Lawler Jr. continued his researches and published an expanded article about the site in this journal. In a paragraph describing household composition, Lawler noted that the Washingtons brought some of their slaves to Philadelphia during the presidential years. Gary Nash, long a historian of African American Philadelphia, astutely noted this information and reawakened the history community's awareness that Washington, who kept hundreds of slaves at his Virginia plantations, felt sufficiently secure as a slave owner to bring some of his house slaves to his presidential home in the nation's capital. This reminder caused a demand that no filiopietistic society had ever made—the public insisted that INHP interpret the President's House site through the lens of Washington's slaves. Congress responded with an order for the park to commemorate the slaves who lived at the site. What has transpired since then has, in effect, been the development of an interpretive plan through a very public and inclusive process. Suddenly, many of the cultural resource management disciplines were drawn to the President's House site. The experience has given the park the opportunity of "re-viewing and re-imagining the historic landscape."¹⁰

The park's first venture into the community-based interpretation process began with the creation of a team to rewrite five central panels of the new exhibit for the Liberty Bell Center. Working intensely for several days, members of the park staff joined their colleagues from the National Park Service's Northeast Regional and Washington offices, historian Ed Linenthal, and an appointed member of the Ad Hoc Historians in designing exhibit panels that examined the transformation of the Liberty Bell from functional to symbolic object through its adoption as a symbol of freedom by the abolitionists. Included in the exhibit, which opened to the public on October 9, 2003, is a panel about the President's House

⁹ Anna Cox Toogood, "National Register Amendment, Independence National Historical Park, Underground Railroad and Anti-Slavery Movement" (National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, 2000). This network was created in 1997 by the *National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act of 1997*, 105th Cong., 1st sess., 1997, HR 1635.

¹⁰ House Report, 107-564, *Department of the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2003*, 107th Cong., 2d sess., 2002, HR 5093; Dell Upton, "Introduction," in *Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race*, ed. Craig E. Barton (New York, 2001), viii.

intended to raise visitors' awareness of the site's proximity to the Liberty Bell Center and of its significance as a site of slavery during the Washington presidency. The revised exhibit was a beginning; however, commemoration of the site of the President's House was moving on a parallel track.

INHP invited representatives of community groups and individuals with a special interest in the President's House site to participate in creating a schematic design for the congressionally mandated commemoration. These representatives joined park staff, landscape architect Laurie Olin, and exhibit designer Vincent Ciulla to consider the site's interpretive themes as well as to develop a concept design for the landscape. The resulting plan identified five themes that provide the structural organization of the physical design: (1) the house and the people who lived and worked there; (2) the executive branch of the United States government; (3) the system and methods of slavery; (4) African American Philadelphia; and (5) the move to freedom. In January 2003, the park and the designers presented the plan at a public meeting hosted by the African American Museum. While there were no dissenting comments about the plan or the themes, during discussion of Washington as a slaveholder, the meeting became very acrimonious, making agreement impossible. The audience proclaimed loudly that more voices must be heard.¹¹

Park staff continued working behind the scenes, meeting with community group representatives and scholars individually and collectively in order to capture their thoughts on the content of the commemoration. In November 2003, for example, INHP held a one-day meeting of social historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists who would bring varying perspectives to the project. This group focused on what we can and cannot know from the documentary record about the site. Conclusions of that meeting are published on INHP's Web site.¹²

¹¹ Community participants in schematic development included Michael Coard of Avenging The Ancestors Coalition (ATAC); Joel Avery and Tanya Hall of the Multicultural Affairs Congress, Pennsylvania Convention and Visitors Bureau; Karen Warrington, director of communication for Congressman Robert A. Brady; Edward Lawler Jr. representing the Independence Hall Association; Harry Harrison, president of the African American Museum in Philadelphia; and Stephanie G. Wolf representing the Ad Hoc Historians. Vincent Ciulla Design, Olin Partnership, "Presidents' House: Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Final Concept Design, March, 2003."

¹² Representatives of the Ad Hoc Historians, the Independence Hall Association, and INHP expanded the table to include Charles Blockson of the Blockson Collection of Temple University; Sheryll Wilson of the African Burial Ground in New York City; Dennis Pogue of Mount Vernon;

As the roundtable members considered the physical appearance of the house site, they began to acknowledge the tension between our scholarly understanding and the public's expectations of the past. The documentation for completion of some of the improvements that Washington ordered for the site understandably weakens after the president and his entourage arrived in Philadelphia, obviating the necessity of written communication. The directives included provision of dormitory areas for enslaved and free servants. The group acknowledged the Washingtons' practice of quartering their slaves and servants by job function throughout their house site; but the roundtable felt it is, nonetheless, essential to mark one specific location as slave quarters in order for the visitor to forge an emotional connection with the site.

The President's House site offers the challenge of reconciling traditional beliefs and historical interpretation. While historians know that a place approximating the popular notion of "slave quarters" didn't exist at 190 High Street, this knowledge won't dissuade visitors from bringing expectations and an emotional need to find such a location. The contributions of community consultants as well as the demands of the audience at the January 2003 public meeting demonstrated that the President's House site had acquired its own *genius loci*, its spirit or power of place that exceeds the documentable. A similar situation exists at the National Civil Rights Museum, located at the site of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. Dr. King's occupancy of Room 307 during his fateful stay there is indisputably documented. Today, however, there are two Room 307s: one in the newly constructed museum and one in the restored motel. In fact, neither room is accurate in terms of authenticity. The actual Room 307 that Dr. King occupied is now a vestibule.¹³ The documented location of the motel room is subordinate to the idea of the historic events commemorated. This tension between history and belief is evident in comments at a recent civic engagement forum on the President's House.

In April 2004, Independence National Historical Park partnered with the Ad Hoc Historians and The Historical Society of Pennsylvania to

Bernard Herman, University of Delaware; and independent historian William Seale. Doris Devine Fanelli, "Consensus Document from the President's House Roundtable" (Independence National Historical Park, 2004). The document is available on <http://www.nps.gov/inde/NPS/docs.htm>.

¹³ Mabel O. Wilson, "Between Rooms 307: Spaces of Memory at the National Civil Rights Museum," in *Sites of Memory*, ed. Barton, 13–26.

plan a public forum that would continue the dialogue about the President's House by examining the themes proposed in the Olin/Ciulla plan. The forum, held on October 30, 2004, had an estimated 248 attendees representing twenty-seven public organizations. Analysis of the comments demonstrated that the audience considered the most important themes to be those that described the slaves who lived at the site, slavery, and abolitionism. No one in the audience called for explication of the executive branch of government or for discussions of Washington's and Adams's presidencies.¹⁴

Interestingly, though, several people who subsequently submitted written comments which conveyed dissenting opinions about the commemoration. One writer reminded the park to have a balanced interpretation that included the executive branch. Another pleaded for a consensus history and saw the government story in opposition to the slavery story. "Which person exemplifies the ideas and ideals that led to the American Revolution and the founding and growth of the United States?" he wrote, "a man who groomed a horse [or] the men who signed the US Constitution?" Another writer supported a monument to slavery but not in Independence National Historical Park, where the interpretive theme should be the formation of our national government. A writer asked why the topic of slavery is important. "The past is over. How does this advance a cause?" Why, asked a commenter, are federal funds being used to construct a memorial for oppressed people? He suggested that private funds support the commemoration. Two writers noted the "anger and despair" in the audience.

While the forum confirmed the appropriateness of the selected interpretive themes, the more interesting ideas to emerge were the cultural values expressed. The audience directly and indirectly expressed several values

¹⁴ The program was funded through the National Park Service Northeast Region's Civic Engagement Program. Public support for the project was demonstrated through matching in-kind donations, most notably the contribution of the time of community members who helped to plan and publicize the event and who provided thoughtful comments about their hopes for the site's interpretation. These included Morris Vogel of the Rockefeller Foundation; Charles Blockson; Mary A. Bomar, superintendent, Independence National Historical Park; Michael Coard; Edward Lawler Jr.; Charlene Mires, the Ad Hoc Historians; and Sucaree Rhodes, Generations Unlimited. Invited speakers also included Kris Kepford Walker, Cliveden; Patricia Washington, Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation; Rev. Jeffrey Leath, Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church; and Arthur Sudler, African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. Documentation for the session includes my personal field notes, those of Shaun Eyring, Northeast Region, National Park Service, still photography, and videography.

that should guide the planning, design, and interpretive programs at this site. These values permeated the comments regardless of the speaker's group affiliation.

Identity: The President's House site offers an opportunity for the biographical interpretation of a fraction of the many enslaved Africans who played important roles in American history. Symbol and metaphor are powerful narrative features and many who attended the forum see each documented enslaved African as a symbol of thousands whose identities will never be known. Therefore, each identifiable slave who lived at 190 High Street must be fully described in the site's interpretation. Charles Blockson, curator of the Blockson Afro-American Collection at Temple University, stressed the importance of interpreting the lives of all enslaved people, including not only the Washingtons' slaves but also those of the property's previous owners. He also called for the portrayal of Samuel Fraunces, the New York tavern owner brought to Philadelphia by Washington to serve as his steward. Fraunces is a legend in the African American community and his story is important to the President's House site.

Memory and sense of influence of the past on the present: The President's House site holds great symbolic significance as a representation of the conditions of slavery under which many of the attendees' ancestors suffered. Many African Americans feel a sense of connection to the site through the oral traditions they inherited from their families' personal experiences. They feel an intense responsibility to their ancestors to partially correct the indignities they suffered by interpreting slavery at this site. It is worth noting that to date, no one has come forward as a direct descendant of any slave who resided at this site. This is why I stress the symbolic function that the site performs. One participant at the forum very movingly declared, "people are calling out to us from that site."

Agency: Successful design and interpretation at this site demands that the enslaved Africans not be portrayed as victims but as agents. The conditions of slavery must be directly addressed in an unvarnished manner; but emphasis should be on the triumph of individuals over those conditions. Slaves' acts of resistance, from small actions that may have gone unnoticed

by their owners to great feats of escape, charge the story with excitement and shift the focus from master to slave. There is documentation of such resistance in slaves' conduct at Mount Vernon; there is no reason to believe that these actions ceased when the household was in Philadelphia. Power and self-determination are essential ingredients to this commemoration.¹⁵

Dignity. The enslaved people retained their dignity. While they performed the roles assigned by their owners, they did not capitulate to them. The site must portray the culture of slavery from the enslaved persons' point of view. Explaining the behaviors, customs, practices, and strategies of the enslaved will improve visitors' appreciation for the complexities of slaves' lives. The Washingtons' slaves adhered to an unwritten code of conduct that was as nuanced and demanding as the first president's well-known code of civility.

Truth: Participants at the forum frequently called upon the Park Service to "tell the truth." Community groups do not want the story of slavery at this site to be ignored or devalued. They do not want excuses made for the Washingtons as slaveholders. The interpretation should, for example, explain the Washingtons' efforts to keep their slaves in bondage while they lived in Philadelphia. There should be full disclosure of presidential collusion with members of the household to prevent the slaves from achieving their freedom through Pennsylvania's 1780 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery. Washington's expectation that his slaves accept his paternalistic authority explains his reaction to Oney Judge's escape, for example. The president was at a loss to understand the "ingratitude of a girl, who was brought up and treated more like a child than a Servant." He wanted Oney brought back forcibly, if necessary, because he could not afford—literally and figuratively—to permit a dower slave to escape.¹⁶

¹⁵ Mary V. Thompson, "'They Appear to Live Comfortable Together': Private Lives of the Mount Vernon Slaves," and Jean B. Lee, "Mount Vernon Plantation: A Model for the Republic," in *Slavery at the Home of George Washington*, ed. Philip J. Schwarz (Mount Vernon, VA, 2001), 95, 2–45 note examples of resistance. This concept is also discussed in Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (New York, 2003).

¹⁶ George Washington to the Secretary of the Treasury, Sept. 1, 1796, in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, 39 vols. (Washington, DC, 1931–44), 35:201–2.

In order to appreciate how this site must be interpreted, it is necessary to distinguish between history and commemoration. The story of the President's House site is built upon documentary evidence—evidence that, through the evaluation and analysis of data and the drawing of conclusions, provides the historical context. There are many points of view and analytical approaches that may be taken to illuminate the events that occurred here. Political historians, antiquarians, social historians, archaeologists, and historians of material culture have studied this site, all to good advantage. These approaches complement—not compete with—one another. There is no single story about the President's House. To insist that only the lives of the rich and famous merit discussion is to continue their hegemony into the present and to perpetuate the exclusions they practiced. Such sophistry produces a misleading view of the past. As historian Alfred F. Young has stated in his analysis of Boston's Freedom Trail, "the issue is no longer whether to include ordinary people in public presentations of history, but how to include them. We are past the point where all we want to say is 'they too were there.'" As a national park, INHP must tell the story of the executive branch of government because of its national importance; but that story includes exploring the context of executive actions. What was Washington thinking, for example, when he signed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793? Surely he appreciated its application to his personal circumstances. Will it better engage the visitor and demonstrate the nexus of the national and the personal by telling the ironic tale of the president's being hoisted by his own petard when his slaves circumvented federal law and successfully escaped?¹⁷

The interpretation of history carries the burden of honesty. The standards of the history profession are high. Historians don't write fiction; the documentable past is sufficiently fantastic. Yet some of the demands for the National Park Service to "tell the truth" are unfulfillable. Quite a few statements made at the forum about Washington's treatment of his slaves are not documented. There is a great deal we can say about Washington's actions as a slave owner that are shocking to modern sensibilities; however,

¹⁷ Alfred F. Young, "Revolution in Boston? Eight Propositions for Public History on the Freedom Trail," *Public Historian* 25 (spring 2003): 28. Bernard Herman offers another excellent example of incorporating the national with the local story in "Spaces in the Early American City," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24 (2004): 319–26. Evelyn B. Gerson, "A Thirst for Complete Freedom: Why Fugitive Slave Ona Judge Staines Never Returned to Her Master, President George Washington" (MA thesis, Harvard University, 2000).

we must differentiate between the documented truth, anecdotal information, and the beliefs ascribed to Washington by individuals who strongly identify with the conditions and suffering of slavery.¹⁸

Just as historian Ira Berlin has stated that the discussion of slavery is a metaphor for a discussion about race, for many members of the African American community, slavery in the Washington household is a metaphor for all slavery in America, for its oppression and for many of its still-visible consequences. Here is the point where history ends and commemoration begins. To practice good history and good civic engagement, we must move towards an interdisciplinary understanding of the subject.¹⁹

In his examination of the controversy about the Enola Gay exhibition at the Smithsonian Museum of American History, Edward T. Linenthal identified two distinct voices. The historical voice speaks of complicated motives, actions, and consequences "often hardly considered at the moment of the event itself." The commemorative voice is that which asserts primacy because of first-hand experience with the subject. In the case of the President's House temporal distance prevents anyone from asserting true primacy with the federal decade. No one has come forward claiming to be a descendant of the slaves who lived there. But viewing the President's House as a metaphor for slavery, members of the African American community feel a strong responsibility to share their ancestors' stories. To this group, the documented events at the President's House are of less importance than the opportunity to share their oral traditions and collective heritage. Jack Santino, discussing spontaneous shrines, notes that the relationship of the visitor leaving *memoria* to the individual memorialized may be imagined—but it is no less felt. This is important to remember when we consider the reactions and expectations of community groups to the President's House site. The vocal people that see such significance here are exhibiting strong place attachment. They are responding more to the politics of contemporary interpretive opportunities

¹⁸ There are documented instances of Washington ordering his slaves beaten, or sold to the islands—which was tantamount to a death sentence and he knew it. He did not always provide well for his slaves' basic needs and sometimes seemed more concerned for the comfort of his livestock. Wiencek, *Imperfect God*, 124, 125, 131. Wiencek cites *The George Washington Papers*, ed. W. W. Abbott, Dorothy Twohig, Philander D. Chase et al. (Charlottesville, VA, 1983–) as his source.

¹⁹ Ira Berlin, "Slavery in American Life: Past, Present, and Future," in *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War*, ed. Robert K. Sutton ([Fort Washington, PA], 2001), 18.

than to scholarly debate.²⁰

Elaborating upon Linenthal's very apt distinctions, individuals often carry both voices, the historical and the commemorative. These voices don't always conflict; in fact, at the level of public interpretation, the cultural values inherent in the commemorative voice can elucidate the interpretive values of the historical voice. The former establishes the standards for expressing the latter. The physical commemoration, the designed landscape will follow from the existing resonance that the site already carries for many.

Because of Independence National Historical Park's high visitation, the teaching potential of the President's House site is vast. Effective public commemorations elicit reactions of proximity and participation from the audience. They "invite us to confront our own values . . . [and] to commit to the values we understand as marked by this discourse." The President's House offers an opportunity to bring the discussion of slavery in America to a site of acknowledged national significance, to demonstrate how issues of slavery and race were interwoven with the founding of modern democracy. The visitor, whether local or international, will gain a greater comprehension of race in America by encountering the multiple views of the past than by only viewing the past from the perspective of the householder. For the interpretive opportunity to be effective, we must consider the cultural implications that the commemoration carries.²¹

Mary Louise Pratt coined the term "contact zone" to describe "the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish on-going relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict." James Clifford has applied Pratt's idea of contact zone to controversial museum exhibits and programs, those that involve competing voices. Such museums have to navigate a difficult course that requires placating their usually conservative sources of financial support as well as developing an accurate interpretive program. The President's House site can be understood as a

²⁰ Edward T. Linenthal, "Anatomy of a Controversy," in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Englehardt (New York, 1996), 9–10; Jack Santino, "Performative Commemoratives, the Personal, and the Public: Spontaneous Shrines, Emergent Ritual, and the Field of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* 117 (2004): 370; Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low, *Place Attachment* (New York, 1992).

²¹ Carole Blair and Neil Michel, "Designing Memories . . . of What? Reading the Landscape of the Astronauts Memorial," in *Places of Commemoration: Search for Identity and Landscape Design*, ed. Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington, DC, 2001), 188.

contact zone where the voices of history and commemoration compete and where visitors who carry conflicting views of the past will meet. To reconcile these voices, we need to bring the National Park Service's interdisciplinary approach to our understanding of the site and incorporate the theory and methods of applied anthropology into our historical interpretation. This approach is widely used at other National Park Service sites.²²

Considered as a contact zone, the site will promote a degree of interactivity among groups that don't interact on a daily basis. At the site, these groups may contest for power, asserting their rights and connections to the stories. Visitors will carry personal understandings of the past. Skillful, community-based interpretation will explain the history of the site and it will also ask visitors to confront their preconceptions about the early presidencies, the executive branch, and slavery.

Although the presence of slavery at this site was rediscovered nearly three years ago, the idea remains so consuming that little energy is left for incorporating the national history of the presidencies. John Adams, whose household forms an interesting contrast to Washington's, is barely mentioned during community meetings. In time, however, the other significant features of this site's history and a more balanced portrayal of all the stories will emerge. It was never the National Park Service's intention to dismiss the proponents of the other themes; rather, we want to hold their interests while incorporating equally powerful stories into the interpretive program so that the site holds relevance for everyone. Successful interpretation, however, doesn't imply that all of the strident voices are quieted. Inclusive interpretive planning at a contested site will promote the presentation of difficult issues, but it cannot resolve them.

The President's House project marks a rare intersection of public and scholarly interest. What could be more gratifying for any conserving institution than to have the public demanding representation? If this site

²² Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York, 1992), 6-7, as quoted in James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 192. There are numerous examples of applying anthropological theory and methodology to reconcile cultural considerations with other scholarly disciplines in established programs. See, for example, the special issue, "Traditional Environmental Knowledge in Federal Natural Resource Management Agencies," *Practicing Anthropology* 27 (winter 2005). Examples of National Park Service sites with competing voices include many Civil War sites, where slavery, the cause of the war, competes with the Lost Cause Theory; Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument; and Devil's Tower National Monument, where recreational organizations of rock climbers compete with Native Americans who use the site for ceremonial purposes.

inspires even 1 percent of its visitors to learn more about the past, to consider a broader perspective, and to appreciate the value of our national parks, we will accomplish a lot. It is only by expanding our audience and making national parks relevant to them that the National Park Service will ensure their preservation into the next century.

*Independence National
Historical Park*

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