

## *Questioning the Answers: Modernizing Public History to Serve the Citizens*

**T**HREE YEARS OF CONFLICT and public discussion about the President's House on Independence Mall has clarified the history of the house and handed an enormous challenge to public historians and scholars. People who have taken even a small part in the discussion agree that much happened at the house of great significance to the nation. However, we have also learned about how we and our predecessors worked to keep much of the house's important history silenced and sealed away from the public eye. We might even speculate on whether our predecessors were willing to accept the entire loss of the house itself to avoid facing the nested stories of American liberty and American slavery that unfolded within its walls and grounds. Though we too might prefer to turn away, at hand is our opportunity to use this history to change the future, for the sake of public history, scholarship, and indeed humanity.

This site asserts powerfully that slavery and freedom were two aspects of the same project, that the meanings of slavery, not to mention the lives, work, and ideas of enslaved people, were and are the warp of our national fabric. The site indicts our decisions not to tell the history this way, implicating us directly in the continuing failure of the nation's founding ideals. Consider a simple list of important dates related to the house's history.

**1790:** 215 years ago, George and Martha Washington arrived at the house, built by financier Robert Morris and loaned to the Congress for the president's use, bringing children, servants, and enslaved people.

**1793:** President Washington signed the first Fugitive Slave Act in his second-floor office.

- 1796: Oney Judge, personal maid to Martha Washington, escaped from the house to freedom.
- 1797: Hercules, cook to the household, escaped from the house to freedom.
- 1800: The national capital left Philadelphia for the District of Columbia.
- 1818: The City of Philadelphia bought Independence Hall from the state to save it from demolition.
- 1832: Nathaniel Burt gutted the President's House to create three narrow storefronts and thereby helped the house disappear from public memory.
- 1865: The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery in the United States.
- 1948: President Harry Truman signed the legislation creating Independence National Historical Park.
- 1951: The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania took down the (unidentified) last standing outer walls of the President's House to create Independence Mall.
- 1974: Staff researchers at Independence National Historical Park confirmed that the Washingtons had brought enslaved people to the house, people whose names and experiences it was possible to document and reconstruct.
- 2002: Edward Lawler's research definitively locating the President's House and identifying the inhabitants appeared in this journal.

This enumeration reminds us how nested freedom and slavery have been in our history. To fully interpret the American Revolution, in fact, we need to grasp that the Revolution, like the Civil War, was a conflict initiated by slave owners, defending liberties that included their right to deny liberty to Africans. The list reminds us that however much Philadelphia may have mourned the loss of the national capital, the city drowned its sorrows in the wealth of trade, including exporting wheat to feed enslaved workers in the southern states and the West Indies. The city's prosperity threatened or erased the architecture of its political ascendancy even as commercial dependence on southern and West Indian slavery muddled its moral path.

The list suggests the nature and dimension of the public history story that must unfold at this site, a story not just about the presidency or the

executive branch, nor even one that simply includes American liberty and its Faustian bargain with African slavery. The tale told here must also confess stories of hiding and revealing the realities that cloud our preferred image of national virtue. This tale will not necessarily make us or our forebears look good, nor will it necessarily make our visitors feel good, hence the interpretive, and indeed the political, challenge the President's House sets before us.

Because George Washington signed the Fugitive Slave Act (1793) on this site, within the hearing of two enslaved people soon to liberate themselves from his control, the President's House site is a mirror reflecting two faces, our faces, America's faces. In its simplest form, the struggle of the last three years has been about whether it is good news or bad news that we have the site and the information needed to look into this mirror and tell this kind of truth.

I believe it is good news. Historical truth, while far from wholly relative or personal, is still not as solid as it might seem. Since the days when ancient priests revised creation myths to assert the divinity of each royal usurper, the meaning of the past has been deeply political. Acknowledging the political importance of history can be disheartening, but in a democracy it can also be empowering. The political imperatives involved in talking about the past leave welcome room for us to put right the old regime's errors, make new uses of old facts, discover new power in buried sources, and infuse new meanings into old biographies. In other words, as long as American history responds both to facts and to the needs of the modern democracy, its racism, and any other faults, can be overthrown. Far from invalidating the practice of history, bringing history under the influence of politics permits history, I think, one of its most honorable civic functions.

Changing what we say about the past, though, routinely sets scholars and public historians at odds with each other, at the President's House and elsewhere. To take an example that is farther afield, Washington, DC, boasts two very different memorials to President Abraham Lincoln. One, standing in Lincoln Park on Capitol Hill, depicts Lincoln as a fatherly figure, the Great Emancipator. It was commissioned by freedpeople, created in 1876, and unveiled April 14 following a dedication speech by Frederick Douglass. By the 1920s, with Reconstruction a discredited memory (among white people) and judges winking at the crimes of lynch mobs, the "Preserver of the Union" had eclipsed the "Great Emancipator"

as the official signifier of Lincoln's life. From this new priority emerged the well-known columned monument that stands on the Mall in Washington, with one column for each state (circa 1860) and the names of all the states, loyal and secessionist, inscribed around the frieze. Rather than honoring Lincoln for taking the radical step of ending American slavery by executive order, this monument honors him for the precisely opposite qualities of forbearance, moderation, and, in his own famous words, "charity for all." Neither Lincoln is wholly true or wholly false. Historical research and the feelings of American citizens embrace both, contradictory as they are. Thus does public history struggle to represent "the truth."

Scholarly history has it a bit easier, perhaps because fewer people read scholarly books than travel to see monuments and historic sites. But the relative permissiveness of scholarly work really derives from the different rules under which scholarship operates. Scholars are trained to query while monuments are expected to declaim. The scholar's natural outlet is not a plaque with a few choice phrases graven in stone, but a book whose many words, however finely inked and bound, are always open to revision in future editions. Though scholars make claims for the authoritativeness of their renderings of the past, most would confess if pressed that what they offer are at best highly plausible reconstructions, compounded of asking questions, pursuing clues, and balancing cleverness with uncertainty.

Not so for the monument or for the public historian who serves it. However sensitive to ambiguity any individual public historian might be, as matters currently stand the public turns to historic sites and their keepers for "the truth" about how things worked, who people were, or why things happened. Public historians, therefore, are expected to minimize if not wholly eradicate ambiguity so that people will go away confident, for instance, that one Lincoln was more real and the other, less so. To reduce the matter to a simple schematic, scholars serve an audience eager to examine the past in search of interesting questions, while public historians serve the people looking for convincing answers.

Scholars are, to a real extent, inoculated against certain kinds of "truth." To be sure, scholars hold themselves to standards of honest endeavor that preclude making things up from whole cloth, fabricating fake research materials, stealing from others, and falsifying, ignoring or destroying inconvenient data. Public historians likewise operate with standards that both discipline and inspire interpretation. Facts about

specific places, people, events, and artifacts must be researched thoroughly and reported accurately. A silver pot cannot be attributed to Paul Revere unless the documents prove that he made it. Whole committees labor to ensure that every historic marker is located on the spot that really hosted the relevant memorable events.

In short, scholars and public historians handle what is *known* with equivalent seriousness and rigor. The divergence comes, and the conflict between them, in handling what is *not* known, what cannot fully be known, or what can indeed only be suspected from tantalizingly incomplete bits of surviving evidence. What is not known, and even more what others confidently declare can never *be* known, can lure eager scholars like an unconquered mountain. A public historian confronted with the unknown or unknowable past, however, is likelier to feel like a bull facing a red flag than like Edmund Hillary contemplating Everest. Caution is the only sensible response, since a public historian who goes charging after what is not certain can realistically expect a blow, perhaps a fatal one, from the cunningly concealed sword of history's matador.

Each camp will argue passionately for the superiority of its response, but in fact neither approach guarantees that the historical past is well served. "The truth" can suffer equal damage whether trod on by an eager scholar charging toward the summit or left hidden by a public historian unwilling to risk investigating. Since changing a major historical interpretation can introduce all kinds of uncertainty, the process inevitably opens up a chasm between the two kinds of history practitioners.

Coupling this template of professional behaviors with the undeniable existence of American racism suggests a way to understand why building the African American and Native American histories of places and events into public interpretation and programming has been such an uphill struggle, and not just at Independence National Historical Park. Euro-Americans have maintained a high degree of control over literacy and public records in the United States, which means that the surviving archival materials reflect a strong Euro-American bias. Surviving materials also reflect a consistent Euro-American policy of muting, distorting, or disregarding the ideas, achievements, and voices of African- and Native Americans. Even assuming a contemporary increase in good will toward restoring the full panoply of historical experience to public interpretation, the poor and incomplete record that resulted from persistent inattention to Black and Native experience reflexively triggers caution on the part of

public historians.

Scholarly research by itself cannot necessarily overcome the cautious reflex, since scholars are comfortable with a higher level of uncertainty than their public history counterparts. So even when, as at the President's House, a satisfactory scholarly reconstruction of the past became available, sufficient uncertainty remained to endanger the new ideas as they passed from scholarship to public interpretation. Habitual caution certainly does not excuse retaining biased interpretation, but understanding the structures of caution and the disconnect between scholarly knowledge and public presentation offers the most promising path to improvement.

The many people interested in the history of enslaved Africans at the President's House site, therefore, began their work talking past each other. Faced with an impasse over marking the Washington slave quarters, the President's House team worked collaboratively through demanding and sometimes painful encounters to a resolution. The three years spent in discussion, organization, debate, and delay since Edward Lawler Jr.'s research first broke in these pages have been spent in the important job of learning to speak about ambiguity and uncertainty, learning to define standards of certainty, and learning to blend scholarship and public history in a new way, so that historical interpretation can satisfy the ethical demand for full representation of slavery and liberty on Independence Mall. The President's House experience therefore offers one model of how to overcome the dangers to "truth" built into both the scholarly and the public history approach.

Reflecting, as the articles in this issue do, on how public historians and scholars lurched toward collaborative ways of handling various degrees of historical truth can make the process visible and allow others to build upon it. But the collaborating team is still faced with the challenges of politics and the visitor audience. Scholars would err greatly if they retreated to their classrooms and archives and left the public historians to take the heat for the new ideas. Public historians likewise would be mistaken to jump the queue, elbowing the scholars aside in an effort to submerge the new questions under a peremptory new layer of answers. Successfully telling something this complicated and charged with politics and emotion will not produce a product that looks familiar. But both history and the audience can be well served if scholars and public historians jointly offer visitors a new set of expectations for their experience at the President's House site.

Visitors should be alerted to expect to find two different kinds of history at the President's House. One aspect of interpretation at the site will tell them what we know, all of it, about two presidents and their policies, families, and relationships with slavery and enslaved people. Visitors will learn how both servants and free and enslaved African Americans understood and acted on the ideas of equality shaped and articulated on this site. We know, and we can unfold for visitors, how Euro- and African American perceptions of slavery and hopes for liberty shaped both the founding documents and unfolding national story.

The second, newer, aspect of interpretation will openly acknowledge what we do not or can not know, guiding visitors toward questions about why the information gaps exist and what those silences mean. Instead of presenting history as if there were no silences, no gaps, nothing forgotten, the President's House site would entice visitors to wonder what is missing, and why, and what the missing pieces might mean. For instance, until now, interpretation on the Mall has ignored the story of Oney Judge's escape from Sixth and Market. A new exhibit would improve on that legacy only a little by acknowledging her escape as a good thing for her and a blow to the Washingtons. The real payoff would come by interrogating the silence surrounding how she escaped. By marshalling records of Philadelphia's free African American community, the city's maritime history, and the surviving documents that give details about her refusal to return, the exhibit could explore the escape as it may have presented itself to her—the tactical challenges to be met, opportunities to be scouted, allies to be trusted, moments of risk, resolution, terror, and joy. Asking questions about Oney Judge's secrets, the crucial things the Washingtons never knew, would give Judge her due, reveal the limits under which the Washingtons operated, and dramatize vividly the complex overlays of liberty and slavery in eighteenth-century Philadelphia.

Significant portions of the museum audience, especially those seeking confirmation of rather than challenges to what they believe about George Washington, might reject this kind of exhibit as overtly "political." It is essential, in that case, to openly avow that while political influence on history operates both to reveal and to conceal, it cannot make true what is false or false what is true. No extent of exploring Washington's investment in, defense of, and support for American slavery will make his military and political legacy a lie, any more than centuries of honoring him as the Father of Our Country erased slaveholding from his record.

Meeting the challenge of satisfying audiences involves less the content of our presentations than modernization of our mission and methods. To a very large degree, public history still clings to a mission articulated in the late nineteenth century, when the gatekeepers of public culture in America generally perceived the mass audience as ignorant, backward, even dangerous. The elemental elitism of this vision of our work and its purpose is built into our structures, habits, and fears. Even the established ritual of marching silently through museum galleries itself testifies to the expectation that visitors should passively, even reverently, absorb what curators and collectors determine is important for them to know. Small wonder that so large a proportion of museum audiences are school kids who scarcely have a choice.

Contemporary research tells us that people turn to history not to be lectured at but to be touched emotionally, to encounter something "real," and to acquire a sense of their own importance in the historical story.<sup>1</sup> The passive consumption of curatorial ideas constrains the visitor experience, sharply narrowing the available range of emotional and intellectual engagement. The record and the questions surrounding Oney Judge's escape and the Washingtons' responses could be presented to visitors conventionally as a narrative built overtly around the themes that we insiders decide matter and the truths that we acknowledge as proven. Alternatively, the same stories could appear to visitors as an assemblage of our knowledge and materials put at their service in creating a relationship with history that moves them. Some visitors in such a setting might feel most deeply engaged by the written and visual record and others by the gaps and silences. Visitors might identify with the frustrated and embarrassed master and mistress, with the brave and successful fugitive, with her helpers, or with the symbolic process they all shared of shaping executive power in a new republic. All would be relevant and meaningful. The question for us who create the exhibit is only—and hugely—whether we genuinely think that offering visitors experiences of intellectual ownership is more important than demonstrating our mastery. The pun is intentional; it may be our own investment in seeming authoritative, rather than our audiences' demands, that holds us back.

At the end of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Ben Franklin

<sup>1</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York, 1998), app. 2: Tables.



expressed to the other delegates his faith that the sun was rising on America, not setting. The struggle over the President's House offers a similarly bright glimpse into a better future for history and, I think, for civic life. Interpreting the known and the unknown together is a modern way of doing the business of public history that need not exclude anyone. It invites the public back into its own history, back into citizenship. It acknowledges that politics is nothing more or less than the door through which citizens pass to encounter historians at work. Nineteenth-century leaders wanted people to learn about Washington and use him as a role model. Modern interpretation at the President's House should be written for a modern audience, for people seeking answers not about George Washington or Oney Judge, but about themselves and their own role as stewards of the republic. These citizens are the ones public history must speak to because, fundamentally, it is their past and future (and ours), not George's or Oney's, that is in play.

*Mid-Atlantic Regional Center  
for the Humanities*

SHARON ANN HOLT

