

Race in the Park



Between January 2002 and April 2003, the interpretation and future of the Liberty Bell and of the Philadelphia property occupied in turn by presidents George Washington and John Adams changed fundamentally and permanently. The official story of the Liberty Bell was newly imbued with social and political context. As a result, the site of Philadelphia's presidential mansion, which was rented for the purpose from financier Robert Morris, may become a fully interpreted landmark for the first time in its history. Visitors on their way to the new Liberty Bell Center would move across the footprint of the Presidents House, buried since the 1950s under the mall's public ladies room. What is more, the story told within the house would include not only Washington, Adams, and the development of the presidency, but also and especially the stories of eight enslaved Africans who lived there in bondage to Washington, including two who escaped, one with the help of Philadelphia's free black community. The real breakthrough is that these would not be told as separate stories but as one. On the very doorstep of the Liberty Bell, and within the Liberty Bell Center itself, visitors would see and experience the troubling interdependence of slavery and freedom in the lives of the founding generation, black and white, and in the nation that emerged from their work. This is all possible, but there is no guarantee at this moment that it will happen. People who have been deeply involved differ profoundly on how the changes came about, on whether the new plan can be considered a success, and on what the whole struggle will mean for this site and others in the future.

How did Independence National Historical Park become the location for what may become the most powerful commemoration of the impact, achievements, and aspirations of people held in slavery ever built in the United States? And what

remains to be done to ensure that the commemoration happens, that the content is accurate, and that this site does not become a solitary aberration on the margin of the "traditional" American story? These questions confront everyone involved in the process, and the answers depend upon what view one takes of what has happened so far.

From one perspective, an extraordinary David and Goliath drama unfolded in 2002, as a spontaneously organized group of historians and citizens, self-appointed to safeguard the integrity of this major historic site, took on the Park Service and changed its course. From another standpoint, the story concerns a team of hard-working, well-meaning public servants making practical decisions that made sense, only to be sideswiped by an eruption of public passion. From a third point of view, what happened is that African Americans suffered yet another enormous official betrayal, and can prevent a worse one only by organizing themselves and mobilizing both media and congressional attention. The affair makes fascinating public history because all these versions are true already, and the process is still unfolding. More important, had any element of the story been missing, the affair would have ended quickly in frustration and disappointment instead of enduring to produce a promising draft design and the possibility of a new relationship between the park and the city, as well as between the nation and its history.

The story began in 1790, when President Washington, preparing to move to Philadelphia from New York, corresponded extensively with his secretary, Tobias Lear, about modifications he wanted made to Robert Morris's house to accommodate his needs. Those letters, tucked away in the archives for two centuries, contain details of what the house looked like before and during the Washingtons' stay there and outline specific architectural changes made for the first president. They also refer to Washington's plans for housing the members of his "family," a term that in the eighteenth century meant his kin and dependents, including enslaved people whom he, following another eighteenth-century convention, routinely referred to as "servants." Washington and Lear discussed building a new servants' hall in the rear of the main house for four stable hands, three enslaved black men, and one free white man, and housing others, including Martha's enslaved maid, Oney Judge, within the main building.



Fig. 1. Conjectural elevation of Presidents House and photograph of present-day Market Street, © 2003 Edward Lawler Jr. Courtesy of ushistory.org.

In 1974, historians at Independence National Historical Park confirmed in an internal report that President Washington had held slaves while in Philadelphia, both at the presidential mansion on Market Street and at the Deshler-Morris House in Germantown. But the story did not reach the public. When the park began its efforts to redesign the mall in the early 1990s, park officials decided to move the Liberty Bell to a new location close to the site of the presidential mansion, but to do only minor interpretation of the mansion and none at all of its enslaved occupants. Park staff felt that visitors responded to the story of the Liberty Bell on its own, and that adding the presidential story or the history of slavery would just muddy the message.

At about the same time, however, a history buff named Edward Lawler, taking some relatives on a tour of Independence Park, informed his guests that Philadelphia had been the nation's capital during the 1790s. Pointing out the locations where Congress and the Supreme Court had done their work, Lawler was frustrated and embarrassed not to be able to locate the "White House." That frustration started Lawler on a painstaking search that eventually led to the rediscovery of Tobias Lear's letters, the reconstruction of the probable footprint of the Presidents House, and the realization that the front door of the planned new Liberty Bell Center would stand upon the site of the Washington slave quarters. Lawler's work on the Philadelphia mansion has since won the endorsement of scholars at Mount Vernon, the White House Historical Association, and elsewhere. He shared his research on the house and the presence of enslaved people within it with Independence Park historians, and then in January 2002 published key portions of his analysis in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, the flagship journal of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

These things might have stayed, except for a rapid and fortuitous concatenation of circumstance and opportunity. Dr. Gary B. Nash of UCLA, who had read Lawler's article and then come through Philadelphia on a book tour, spurred

interested local scholars and institutional leaders to join an *ad hoc* advisory group that he and Professor Randall Miller of St. Joseph's University formed. While a citizen's advisory group, the Independence Hall Association, developed a Website to spread the word about Lawler's research and sponsored an Internet petition asking the park to rethink its approach to the site, the *ad hoc* group of scholars offered to assist the park in developing the content for a new interpretation. Nash mentioned Lawler's research and criticized the park in public appearances and on the radio, creating at once a widening circle of public awareness and considerable resentment among park staff. Stephan Salisbury, a reporter on the city desk at the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, heard about the issue, decided to read Lawler's article, and with Inga Saffron, *Inquirer* architecture writer, wrote a story for the front page of the Sunday paper about Washington's slaves, the Liberty Bell Center, and the opportunity that was at hand to blend the stories of slavery and freedom right on Independence Mall.

That article, two successive pieces on the Sunday front page, and two op-ed pieces by Dr. Charlene Mires, historian at Villanova University, and Nash and Miller, definitively made the story a public matter. African Americans in Philadelphia and around the country responded with frank outrage. Active work by community leaders, including lawyer Michael Coard, historians Dr. Charles Blockson and Dr. Shirley Parham, activist Sukarnee Rhodes, and others led in the spring of 2002 to the creation of the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition (ATAC). ATAC sponsored an extensive letter-writing campaign, prepared for a demonstration at the Market Street site, and contacted Philadelphia's congressional delegation, demanding that the story of enslaved people in the Presidents House get the attention it deserved.

In response to the public and scholarly outcry, National Park Service officials asked Independence Park to address the weaknesses of its approach to both the bell and the Presidents House. Beginning in the early 1990s, Park Service policy had explicitly embraced the interpretation of controversial historical subjects, including Native American history and the history of slavery. Under the leadership of Dwight Pitcaithley, chief historian for the Park Service, and supported by a collaborative agreement with the Organization of American Historians, individual sites were encouraged to reach out to scholars and communities in order to enrich or correct their interpretations. These resources were now put at the disposal of Independence Park.

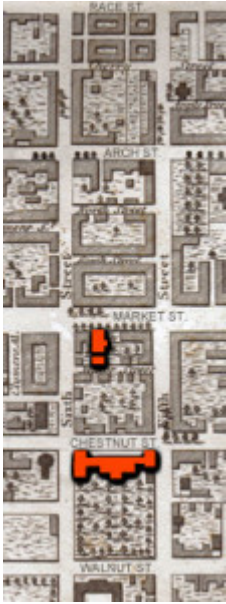


Fig. 2. Detail from the John Hills Map of Philadelphia, 1796. Highlighted in red are the Presidents House (on Market St.) and the Independence Hall group of historic buildings. Courtesy of ushistory.org.

Meetings of park staff with the *ad hoc* historians and other scholars invited in through the OAH connection secured a revision of interpretation for the Liberty Bell site, moving away from an exhibit that featured the bell as a self-evidently significant artifact and implied that liberty in the United States was an accomplished fact. The revised approach came to include the social and cultural meanings given to the bell by abolitionists, suffragists, and others—then and now—as they struggled, in the words of the Preamble of the Constitution, to “secure the blessings of liberty to [them]selves and [their] posterity.” But interpretation at the Presidents House site remained in limbo through the early summer of 2002, even as construction on and near the site went forward.

In July, riding the strength of its successful letter-writing campaign, ATAC staged a public demonstration at the Presidents House site. Congressman Chaka Fattah from Philadelphia responded by introducing an amendment to the Department of the Interior’s budget resolution calling for the Park Service to address the Presidents House, and requiring that Independence Park submit a design for interpretation of the site by March 2003. INHP commissioned designers Laurie Olin and Vince Ciulla, then invited several of the outside groups to send one representative each to advise the designers on the history of the Presidents House site. That group worked diligently over several months discussing the site and rethinking designs and, in January 2003, unveiled a draft design to the public at the African American Museum of Philadelphia.

The draft design, which can be viewed online at the Website of the [Independence Hall Association](#), has a number of path-breaking features, including monumental statuary evoking enslavement and emancipation, stories of the eight people enslaved there by the Washingtons, structural and textual evocations of the role and importance of Philadelphia’s free black community, and clever spatial

and narrative integration of those stories with the diplomatic and political histories of the two presidencies. The centerpiece of the design is a long wall snaking through the site, representing the uncertain boundary between enslavement and freedom and telling the stories of both on panels along its length.

But the design quickly became embroiled in a conflict that has powerful implications for the practice of inclusive public history. Any official version of the history of an injustice becomes a ready target for accumulated anger and grief, while the process of developing historical interpretation offers few openings for usefully addressing those powerful emotions. At the January presentation, the Park Service team blundered into this maelstrom. Their clumsy attempts to control the tenor of the debate were met with direct, even loud, personal abuse. In heated language, people assailed the process by which the draft design had come into being. Despite the considerable involvement of African American historian Dr. Clement Price and Michael Coard of ATAC, other African Americans in the audience had felt excluded and argued for restarting the whole design process. Impassioned voices demanded assurance that African Americans would not have to fight so hard for their history the next time, and that the African American community would not be required to fund the installation. A final group of speakers demanded that a far larger share of the park's building contracts be awarded to African American contractors.

While these demands sounded like distractions to many members of the audience, to those who espoused them they represented essential signs of good faith, without which it would be irrelevant to examine details of the draft design. People expressed profound unease over all that the imperfect process confirmed about the past and portended for the future. To those with such concerns, the specific merits of the draft design and the park's timetable for getting the work done were the distractions.

At the time of this writing, the future of the draft design and indeed of interpretation of the Presidents House remains in limbo, suspended by internal divisions in both the activist and scholarly communities. Those who generally support the design are divided over specific content, aspects of fencing and traffic through the site, and how best to mark the location of the slave quarters. And the crucial division remains, growing wider and more personal, between those willing to respect the park's timetable and make sure that a groundbreaking installation gets built, even if it is imperfect, and those who feel that the betrayals built into the design process are too deep to ignore, even at the risk of indefinitely delaying, or losing the installation itself. Meanwhile, Congress has begun its annual appropriations discussions and the Park continues to build, planning to open the new Liberty Bell Center as close to schedule as possible. For Philadelphia, for the participants, for history, and for justice, much hangs upon the outcome—not least the question of whether failure to find an answer will plant deeper seeds of bitterness between blacks and whites, between scholars and public historians, and between those who have given so much time and energy to the process and the constituencies they tried

to represent.

But even without knowing the outcome, there are lessons here of the first importance for the practice of public history. One is Marshall McLuhan's long-ago assertion that the medium is the message, or the much older wisdom that the ends cannot justify the means. With stories as charged as American slavery, where emotion is as real as reason, there are no shortcuts to good public history. Those involved in revising interpretation at the park tried hard to work within a very tight timetable because the construction was so far along before the controversies emerged into the public eye. As a result, the process became crucially constructed by and for people empowered to speak for others by racial, class, or educational privilege. Independence Park itself bears significant responsibility for the initial delays and subsequent urgency. But it hardly matters for public historians where the responsibility lies in this specific case. Every museum, every historic site, every interpretive process has faced or will face its own version of the same situation. When something of desperate importance erupts upon a process already well underway and accountable to a deadline, what is a public historian to do?

The story of Independence Park suggests two answers, one reactive and one preventative. We can learn from Independence Park's struggle that, once caught between the irresistible force and the immovable object, public historians should take no half measures. With an issue of such importance, the smartest response is to swallow hard, give in, stop the presses, and roll up our sleeves. In part this is simply tactical wisdom. But a willingness to stop has a deeper philosophical legitimacy as well. History is a living process because human knowledge of the past is always contingent and the timetables of its recovery remain random. If contingency is built into the nature of the material we interpret, then we need to be willing to let the past surprise, unsettle, and delay us. When some neglected piece of the story turns up bleeding upon our doorstep, we do not have the right to tell it to come back during business hours. The people we serve—past, present, and future—deserve our commitment to offer up our timetables to the changing story of the past.

The second lesson from the Philadelphia story, however, suggests that we could prevent this dilemma from arising in the first place by shouldering an even bigger task on our own initiative. Public historians should assume without being told that *any* history over which we have stewardship anywhere in this country will carry within it charged stories of human experience shaped by race, class, sex, creed, age, or all of the above and more. Prejudice and discrimination in the United States have not been occasional accidents of personal temperament or regional predilection or bad timing. Scholars have shown us again and again that prejudice in all its forms was built into the bone, blood, and sinew of our colonial and national life, of our political and religious beliefs, and of our social and economic systems. Therefore, nothing depends upon the presence of so-called minorities at a site. Whiteness is as much a racial experience as blackness; masculinity just as much a gender identity as femininity, and so forth. We could be interpreting the force and

implications of those identities everywhere.

Other passions, notably a thirst for justice, equality, and freedom, coexist with prejudice in our national anatomy, and for that we may be thankful. But being thankful should not make us blind or afraid. It should make us eager: eager to find the stories of injustice that lie all around us and to tell them, share them, unpack them, understand them so that our sites become part of the work of overcoming them. Public history, thus engaged, would be doing work that will help us bequeath to our successors a nation with less pain, less rage, less betrayal, less dishonesty than the one we inherited.

The struggles at Independence Park also suggest something of how historical interpretation might look if public historians acted eagerly to interpret the history of injustice. If, as I very much hope, interpretation at the Presidents House moves to a successful conclusion, then the site will present the stories of enslaved blacks, free blacks, free whites, and less free whites as distinct threads of a single tapestry. The stories of George and Martha Washington conspiring to circumvent Pennsylvania's gradual emancipation law will be echoed and amplified by the stories of Hercules and Oney Judge conspiring to circumvent Virginia's laws on slavery. Washington's careful efforts to create a public presence appropriate to the head of a republic will include his early decision not to display the African Americans he held in slavery at state dinners and other occasions. Regional cultural distinctions and debates over slavery in the early republic can be illuminated by the differences between the Philadelphia households of Adams and Washington.

In other words, if we as public historians choose to look for trouble actively and eagerly, and set aside the time needed to plumb the charged and ubiquitous stories of injustice and braid them into our interpretations, our reward will be to find vivid and entrancing stuff capable of electrifying many audiences. We would become custodians not of the private passions of particular collectors, nor of sanitized hagiography, nor of dully "objective" facts, nor of accumulating masses of stories of "special" groups. We would have pulsing in our hands the ongoing history of one of the grandest of human experiments, the living, breathing, active, fascinating, painful, powerful plenty that is the story of the United States.

Further Reading:

For further information on Philadelphia history, Independence National Park, and the Presidents House controversy, see Charlene Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory* (Philadelphia, 2002); Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), and *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early North America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974); Gary B. Nash and Jean Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath* (New York, 1991). To order a printed copy of the original study by Edward Lawler, [click here](#). See www.ushistory.org for a summary of the Lawler article, information about

the eight enslaved people, a copy of the Olin and Ciulla designs, and up-to-date links to ongoing Philadelphia *Inquirer* coverage of the controversy.

Michael Coard, David Hollenberg, Edward Lawler, and Stephanie G. Wolf kindly consented to be interviewed for this article, and Gary Nash generously shared his written reflections. Additional insights were developed at the 2002 Cliveden Institute in Philadelphia, for which the author thanks Dwight Pitcaithley and Dr. Shirley Parham.

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