

**President's House Civic Engagement Forum  
October 30, 2004  
Report**

General Description

In April, 2004, Independence National Historical Park [INDE] partnered with the Ad Hoc Historians and The Historical Society of Pennsylvania to apply for partial support of a public forum on the President's House. Mary M. Bomar, Superintendent of Independence National Historical Park, encouraged this collaborative project in furtherance of the park's civic engagement program. The President's House site, located at Sixth and Market Streets served as the residence of George Washington and John Adams as well as the location of the Executive Branch of government during most of their respective presidencies. The structure and its outbuildings were demolished in 1832, and over time, public memory forgot its existence. It recently became the focus of popular and scholarly attention because some of the Washingtons' slaves lived in his presidential household. With Superintendent Bomar's support, the partner organizations responded to a grant solicitation by the National Park Service Northeast Region's Civic Engagement Initiative. The application requested partial support for the expenses of holding a public forum on the President's House.

The purpose of the proposed project was the continuation of an on-going dialogue about the presence of slavery at the President's House Site through an exploration of potential interpretive themes for use in both a permanent commemoration as well as in all interpretive media. Through discussion, the forum's audience would examine the interpretive themes for the site, which were outlined in the Olin/Ciulla "Final Concept Design" (March, 2003) to determine their continued relevancy to the project. The intended forum audience was interested community groups, the press, the National Park Service, academic and applied historians, site managers and educators. In addition to the one-day forum, features of the project included a special website on this topic that is linked to INDE's website, and a documentary videotape of the event.

The Northeast Region of the National Park Service granted the park \$5,000 for the forum, to be matched--dollar for dollar-- by cash or in-kind donation.

Planning Process

Beginning in June, 2004, we formed a planning group that included representatives from the park, the Ad Hoc Historians, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Charles Blockson of Temple University, Avenging the Ancestors Coalition (A.T.A.C!), the Mid-Atlantic

Center for the Humanities [MARCH], the Independence Hall Association, and WHYY television. This group determined the structure of the forum, the invited participants, and the local arrangements. They met in person and communicated by e-mail.

### Advertisement

We advertised the event directly to local organizations with demonstrated interest in the topic. We placed a notice on INDE's website that included a reply card for registration, mailed announcements to over 300 organizations and individuals, and sent two media advisories. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania placed a notice in its newsletter. The Friends of Independence National Historical Park also publicized the event to their membership.

### Event

The park hosted the forum in the Independence Visitor Center, Sixth and Market Streets, Philadelphia. The main meeting room and one theater were used. Each registrant and members of the press received an information packet. The packet included a copy of the day's agenda; biographical information about the participants; position papers of major participating groups; the themes under inquiry; a copy of a case study on the James Dexter site, another successful civic engagement project at INDE; a brief bibliography for further reading; copies of an historical plan of the house site and a drawing of the present Liberty Bell Center superimposed on that historic plan; and a response form for attendees' comments.

Dr. Morris Vogel of the Rockefeller Foundation served as moderator for the event. The afternoon began with a Power Point presentation about the President's House by NPS Interpretive Ranger Joseph Becton. Following Mr. Becton's presentation, panelists representing key stakeholders briefly stated their interest in this project. Speakers included Mary Bomar, Superintendent, INDE; Charles Blockson, Curator, the Blockson Collection, Temple University; Michael Coard, Esq., ATAC; Edward Lawler, Independence Hall Association; Charlene Mires, Ad Hoc Historians; Sacaree Rhodes, Generations Unlimited.

In addition to the panelists, special invitations had been extended to representatives of organizations with a demonstrated interest in the site and the topic. Those representatives made brief statements regarding their hopes for the site. Speakers included Patricia Washington, Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation [GPTMC]; Kris Kepford Walker, Cliveden; the Reverend Jeffrey Leath, Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church; and Arthur Sudler, St. Thomas African Episcopal Church. Of two additional invited representatives, Barbara

Silberman, Heritage Philadelphia Programs was unable to attend and the Pennsylvania Sons of the American Revolution did not send an official spokesman. The panelists, the special invitees and the planning committee met on the morning of October 30 to review their roles in the project and plan their afternoon session. Dr. Randall Miller, St. Joseph's University and Ad Hoc Historians, served as moderator for the morning planning session.

In the public, afternoon session, following the planned discussants, Dr. Vogel opened the floor to comments. Comments were taken from the floor and recorded on newsprint by Shaun Eyring, Cultural Resources Manager of the Northeast Regional Office. The conclusions below are taken from this raw data and are expressed as written. To these comments I have added information from my field notes prior to analyzing the comments by themes.

The dialogue was lively, passionate and contested, as Dr. Vogel announced it should be. It is estimated that over 248 people attended. These attendees represented 27 organizations (see attached list).

### Themes

In the Olin/Ciulla "Final Concept Plan" (2003), National Park Service staff and members of community groups identified five themes that should be developed in the commemoration. They are: 1. The house and the people who lived and worked there; 2. The Executive Branch of the U.S. Government; 3. The system and methods of slavery; 4. African-American Philadelphia; and 5. The move to freedom. The most-referenced themes during the forum discussion were themes 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the Olin/Ciulla plan.<sup>1</sup> Following is a brief synopsis of ideas expressed that supported those themes.

#### 1. The house and the people who existed and toiled there.

The physical house site received some attention in terms of marking the site on the ground and noting one spot on the plan near the entrance to the Liberty Bell Center [LBC] as "slave quarters." The day before the forum, Ed Lawler of the IHA and Jed Levin of NPS marked the entire footprint of the buildings on the property on the ground using blue tape. Following the discussion, Joseph Becton offered a tour of the site.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Information is derived from the author's personal field notes, notes made by Shaun Eyring of the National Park Service, documentary video, written and electronic communications.

<sup>2</sup> On Monday, November 1, Ed Lawler provided a similar tour to Superintendent Mary Bomar, Dennis Reidenbach, Steve Sitarski, Doris Fanelli and Patricia Schaffenberg. Mr. Lawler and the Superintendent agreed to place a sign on the brick pier at the site of the

The audience comments showed great interest in the Washington occupancy; there was little interest in the Adams household. Mr. Blockson demanded an account of all owners/residents of the house and their slaves, not only the Washingtons. Frequent comments were to tell the many stories of free and enslaved Africans at this site, and to tell the stories of as many individuals as we know lived there. Several commentators boldly stated that they didn't care if the Washingtons were part of the story.

### 3. System and methods of slavery.

The group demanded that the interpretation focus on the full meaning of slavery and freedom. The story should reference back to Africa and it should also include the information that Pennsylvania was a slave state during the federal era. This is why Washington was able to bring his slaves to the city with comparatively little comment.

### 4. African American Philadelphia. Emphasis on free Blacks. Most comments accrue to this theme.

African American history and links to the present are critical to understanding Philadelphia.

Show the larger relationships and sites (for example, there was a slave auction on Market Street near Front)

African Americans were quasi-free. Being free was tenuous.

Tell the history of people as they were. How the people saw themselves. Many enslaved Africans saw themselves carrying great dignity.

Tell the importance of the African American community in Philadelphia and its networks.

Helping one another; self-sustaining.

Historic church archives contain a wealth of resources for interpretation.

Include other sites such as Germantown, Congo Square. Connect the histories.

Tell the full background that African Americans themselves owned slaves.

### 5. Escape to Freedom

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smoke house. We agreed to the wording "Smoke House/Washington designated that his stable workers, some of whom were enslaved Africans, be housed here."

Subsequently, at the wrap-up meeting on November 22, 2004 and at a smaller meeting on December 9, the forum's planners agreed to give the location the label, "Slave Quarters" [note the absence of the limiting article] indicating that it was one site, but not the only site on the property where enslaved Africans were housed.

Greatest interest here was in the stories of Oney Judge and Hercules, the Washingtons' slaves who escaped rather than return to Mt. Vernon.

### Summary

The five themes of the Olin/Ciulla plan are very broad. All of the comments heard at the forum fall under four of the five existing themes, with no comments regarding the Executive Branch of government. John Adams was also not mentioned.

### Additional Comments

While not thematic in nature, several comments on the site's attraction to tourists were noted. Patricia Washington of the Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation (GPTMC) noted that part of their economic development strategy is to promote the city to African American tourists. This group represents a growing segment in the heritage tourism market. The Park Service must tell meaningful, compelling stories that speak to the African American community. The interpretation should be complex, not a gloss. Tourists are a highly sophisticated, well-educated group who expect interpretation that prompts them to investigate the subject further after their visit.

Many people in the audience expressed their eagerness for the design and construction phase of the project. "Let's roll up our sleeves and get it done," said one man. There is a marked interest in having African American designers and contractors create the site. The audience requested that the National Park Service develop a process to move the project forward. Several commenters called for action, not more talk about the project.

### Written Comments

Recognizing that the time for comments during the forum was brief and not everyone had the opportunity to share their thoughts, we sent additional requests for written comments to people who attended the forum. Response pages were provided in each registration packet. Through the park's website, we also received comments.

We received 15 comments via e-mail, U.S. mail and telephone. Nine of the commenters attended the forum; the remainder learned about the project through the media.

Two of those comments offered specific design suggestions. Another respondent recommended using drama to interpret the site. Of the three writers who reminded the park to offer balanced interpretation by including the Executive Branch of government at the site, one posited a binary argument that placed the “great men” in opposition to the slaves. “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?”

One respondent asked why this topic is important. “The past is over. How does this advance a cause?” she asked. Another commenter asked why public funds should be used to construct a memorial for oppressed people. He cited the Irish Memorial in Philadelphia (not located in Independence Park), which was commissioned entirely with donated funds.

A writer analyzed the event in terms of models for truth/reconciliation and for vindication. The author favored the former model as having greater resonance with the international visitation that Independence National Historical Park receives. This same writer noted that attenders saw slavery as the only acceptable “truth.” The stories of free blacks were less authentic.

Two writers noted the “anger and despair” carried by many of the members of the audience.

We received praise for the forum from more than one commenter. Although time didn’t permit us to break the audience into small groups, a writer suggested that such a technique would have permitted more people to offer varying points of view. She called for a follow-up event. Another writer took a wait and see attitude whether promises are kept.

Analysis of the written and spoken comments above demonstrates that theme 4, African American Philadelphia with its emphasis on free blacks as told to establish the context of the President’s House site, was the most-cited theme.

In both written and oral comments, important questions of ownership and qualification emerged. Whose history is it and who is most qualified to tell it? Is a member of a group better qualified to recount the stories of their ancestors by virtue of their membership? Or is a dispassionate, objective scholar a better judge of the past?

A similar question arose regarding the best people to design and fabricate the commemorative site. Collectively, we have developed the site's themes based upon input from a wide variety of sources, scholars, the community, and applied history professionals. Public sentiment, however, is clear in its insistence that the park employ an African American design and fabrication team.

### Cultural Values

In addition to thematic expressions proposed for the commemoration, the audience directly or indirectly expressed several values that planners, designers and interpreters should keep in mind about this site. These values permeated the comments regardless of the speaker's group affiliation.

1. Identity. Interpretation at this site offers an opportunity to put names and faces on a small 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 known 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. Mr. Blockson stressed the importance of interpreting all enslaved people, not only the Washington slaves but also those of the property's previous owners, in order to have a complete picture of the past. He also called for the portrayal of Samuel Fraunces, the New York tavern owner who Washington brought to Philadelphia as his steward. Fraunces is a legend in the African American community and his story is important to the President's House site.

### 2. Memory and sense of influence of the past on the present.

Many attenders at the forum feel a sense of connection to the site through the oral traditions they inherited from their families' personal experiences with slavery. The President's House site holds great symbolic significance as a representation of the condition of slavery that the attenders' ancestors suffered. Many in the group feel an intense responsibility to their ancestors for partially correcting the indignities they suffered through interpreting slavery at this site. It is worth noting here that, to date, no one has come forward as a direct descendant of any slave who resided at this site or who were enslaved by the Washingtons or any other slave-holding occupants. This is why I stress the symbolic function that the site performs. One attender very movingly stated "people are calling out to us from that site."

3. Agency. Successful design and interpretation at this site demands that the enslaved Africans are not portrayed as victims but as agents. Those in attendance at the forum insisted that the National Park Service “tell the whole truth.” The conditions of slavery must be directly addressed in an unvarnished manner; but we must stress the triumph of individuals over those conditions. Acts of resistance, from small actions that may have gone unnoticed by the 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 Mt. Vernon and Washington’s reactions to some of it; there is no reason to believe that such actions did not continue when the household was in Philadelphia. Power and self-determination are essential ingredients to this commemoration.

4 Dignity The enslaved population retained their dignity. While they performed the roles assigned by their owners, they did not capitulate to them. The Washington slaves adhered to an unwritten code of conduct that was as nuanced and demanding as the first president’s well-known code of civility. Members of the forum repeatedly called for portraying the dignity of the enslaved occupants of the President’s House.

5 Truth. “Tell the truth” was a frequently stated phrase at the forum. 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 slave holders. The commemoration should, for example, explain their subtle efforts to keep their slaves in bondage. Presidential collusion prevented enslaved members of the Washington household from claiming their freedom under the terms of Pennsylvania’s Gradual Abolition Act of 1780.

In addition to telling the truth about slavery, several commentators wanted INHP to tell the truth about the project-funding, and schedule. The general public perceives the National Park Service as procrastinating on the commemoration because they see many other projects underway at INDE. Superintendent Bomar explained the various funding sources in the federal system and the park’s inability to transfer funds from one project to another.

### Post Forum Actions

The planning committee met on November 22, 2004 to review the forum and its lessons and to plan next steps. The group agreed that a

sixth theme, tentatively titled “History Lost and Found” should be added to the Olin/Ciulla five. This theme would explain how our knowledge of the events at this site shifted over time with the presence of slavery lost to common memory. The story would also describe the recovery of this knowledge.

Superintendent Bomar took several immediate steps toward retaining public interest in this project. First, she sent a strongly worded memorandum to the NPS Northeast Regional Director, Marie Rust, requesting that the planned site Commemoration be moved into the region’s top three line item construction projects. This placement would assist in its consideration at the national level.

Second, the Power Point presentation shown at the forum will be shown to the public on a regular, scheduled basis in the Liberty Bell Center. Despite staffing shortages, the Park will make every effort to make this program available.

Third, the park will create two more waysides for the present site that elaborate on its history.

Fourth, we will create a site bulletin or handout about the site for the public, free of charge.

Fifth, we will also schedule performances by actors who currently portray Hercules and Oney Judge, the Washington slaves who successfully escaped to freedom while living at this site. These performances will be in February during Black History Month. Hopefully, an outside source will consider funding these programs on a more frequent schedule. We will include our various partners and stakeholders in the review of the written material for the second through fourth actions.

The planners feel the forum was a success. It confirmed that earlier work to establish the themes for this site was accurate. That work was accomplished in a small group format with only one or two representatives for each community group. The congruence between the themes chosen at the smaller meeting with the public responses at the October forum demonstrates agreement of the community groups with their leaders. We look forward to continued collaboration with the planners and the community as this project moves forward.

## **Epilogue**

On October 9, 2004, the day that the National Park Service moved the Liberty Bell to its new home on Block I of Independence Mall, John F. Street, Mayor of the City of Philadelphia, promised to contribute \$1.5 million to the President’s House commemoration. Recently, Superintendent Bomar met with City officials and reached agreement that the money will be used for design development. The

National Park Service will work with the City in the selection of a design team. The team will be charged with full design development of the project including the final deliverables of construction drawings and specifications. The City will donate the final design to the National Park Service. The City will also transfer the balance of its donation to the National Park Service for application to the construction of the commemoration. The National Park Service will contract for the fabrication of the design.

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