Controversies and Representations at Historic Sites

Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America’s Racial Story

JAMES OLIVER HORTON

Introduction

On a sad and solemn occasion in November 1963, Chief Justice Earl Warren spoke to the nation. “It has been said that the only thing we learn from history is that we do not learn.” Then he added an observation and a profound wish. “But surely we can learn if we have the will to do so. Surely there is a lesson to be learned from this tragic event.”

JAMES OLIVER HORTON is Benjamin Banneker Professor of American Studies and History at George Washington University and Director of the African American Communities Project of the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution. He is author of Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community (1993) and co-author with Lois E. Horton of In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Protest, and Community Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860 (1997). In 1993 Professor Horton was appointed by Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt to serve on the National Park System Advisory Board, and in 1996 he was elected board chair. In 1994–95 he served as Senior Advisor on Historical Interpretation and Public Education for the Director of the National Park Service.

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Warren's words referred directly to the recent assassination of President John F. Kennedy, but they were more generally relevant to the politics of that volatile era and to America's need to acknowledge and learn from its tragedies as well as its triumphs. Although Thomas Jefferson believed that a nation is happiest which "furnishes nothing for history to say," there is considerable public interest in historical topics, as both the recent commercial success of the History Channel's full-time presentation of history-related subjects to the television audience and Hollywood's continuing interest in historical presentations have shown. Academic historians know well, however, that there is a noticeable "gap between academic historical scholarship and the public's seemingly insatiable appetite for popular history in its various forms." The public audience is larger for and more enthusiastic about history that confirms rather than confronts revered popular assumptions about America. The immense popularity of the film Titanic over the far more unsettling and less popular films Amistad and Beloved partly confirms this point. The former film dealt with a tragic historical event softened by the melodrama of class differences overcome by youthful love. The latter films presented the impact of race and the devastating consequences of slavery in stark, unrelenting, and for most, dramatically uncomfortable terms. The tendency is to turn away from history that is upsetting, but Americans cannot afford to ignore their past, even the less flattering parts of it. As countless scholars have recently reminded us, "history matters." It provides our identity, it structures our relationships, and it defines the terms of our debates. We must learn from it, even if doing so is, at times, annoying and uncomfortable. Yet experience makes clear that classrooms cannot be relied on to teach the lessons that must be learned by the vast numbers of Americans whose collective future may depend on that education. History must be taught not only in the academy but in the variety of nonacademic settings where Americans go to learn.

The history of slavery and its role in the formation of the American experience is one of the most sensitive and difficult subjects to present in a public setting. At historic plantation sites and at historic houses, in museum exhibitions, in film, and in historic parks, public historians and historical interpreters are called upon to deal with this critical and uncomfortable topic, under less than ideal teaching conditions. Moreover, they are asked to educate a public generally unprepared and often reluctant to deal with a history which, at times, can seem very personal. Recent historical scholarship has made new material available, and new interpretations have refocused attention on slavery and its significance for understanding the role of race in American history. As we debate the possibility of broad public

discussions about race in contemporary America, public historians can play a critical role in providing historical context for this conversation. This is not easy, but it is essential. Historian and chair of President Clinton’s committee on race John Hope Franklin said it directly: “We should never forget slavery. We should talk about it every morning and every day of the year to remind this country that there’s an enormous gap between its practices and its professions.” As historians set about this task, it is useful to explore the efforts already underway, the impact of these efforts on interpreters as well as visitors, and the contemporary political and social climate which makes these efforts problematic.

_Slavery and Public Knowledge_

Public historians giving presentations on the history and impact of slavery on America and Americans immediately confront a daunting problem. The vast majority of Americans react strongly to the topic, but few know much about it. Generally, Americans believe that slavery was a southern phenomenon, date it from the antebellum period, and do not think of it as central to the American story. The first task for the public historian is to assess and attempt to address popular ignorance of slavery’s diversity, longevity, complexity, and centrality. By the time of the Revolution, slavery in British North America was already a century and a half old. It had become a significant economic and social institution in every one of the thirteen colonies and would remain so in every region of the new nation well into the nineteenth century. In the tobacco fields of the Chesapeake or the rice fields of Carolina; as cargo in slave ships fitted out in New England or as trade items financed by the merchants of New York and Pennsylvania, African slaves were integral to the American economy. Politically and philosophically, slavery had also become the major contradiction to the national purpose and a critical source of irritation at the core of the American conscience. By contrast, it defined American freedom and simultaneously denied America’s unrestricted commitment to natural human rights.⁵

During the first half of the nineteenth century slavery evolved, becoming peculiarly southern and increasingly controversial. On the eve of the Civil War, the political stands on slavery defined the battle lines of secession. Even after war brought abolition, the racial assumptions that had rationalized slavery continued to circumscribe the lives and racial associations of all


Americans. For the next century and beyond, slavery provided the political, social, economic, and philosophical context for American race relations.

If Americans are to have meaningful conversations on race at the end of the twentieth century, as President Clinton has suggested they should, they must be able to converse on the topic of slavery. But few Americans know enough about the history of slavery to participate intelligently in a national debate on the subject, and until recently there have been few opportunities for them to learn. Traditionally, northern public schools taught almost nothing about slavery, and southern schools taught even less. When slavery was discussed, it was generally only as a problem that surfaced during the sectional struggle just prior to the Civil War. Consequently, many assumed that the institution was born on the eve of the Civil War. Some accepted the pro-slavery propaganda, influential beyond the nineteenth century, that pictured slavery as a benevolent system, well suited to the limitations of black people. Generally, public schools reinforced this view. One influential and respected nineteenth-century historian explained to his readers that blacks were "in natural propensities and mental abilities . . . indolent, playful, sensual, imitative, subservient, good-natured, versatile, unsteady in the purpose, devoted, and affectionate."76

This historical interpretation encouraged and was reinforced by the scientific racism used to justify twentieth-century racial segregation. Both proved resilient. Students attending school during the post–World-War-II period learned much the same racial interpretation. In 1979, Frances FitzGerald documented slavery's stereotypical treatment in some American history textbooks and its total absence from others. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, students were told that the abolition of slavery may not have been the best thing for blacks because "slaves had snug cabins to live in, plenty of food to eat and work that was not too hard for them to do." Then, as if to reaffirm the expected student conclusions, the text added, "Most of the slaves seemed happy and contented."77 When in 1950 noted historians Samuel Eliot Morrison and Henry Steele Commager discussed the antislavery movement in their text, they suggested that white abolitionists may have been more upset about slavery than were the slaves themselves. "As for Sambo, whose wrongs moved the abolitionists to wrath and tears," they argued, "there is reason to believe that he suffered less than any other class in the South from the 'peculiar institution.'"78

Public education prepared children to think about slavery and race in ways consistent with the assumption of white supremacy built into Ameri-

can law and custom. Depictions in the popular culture confirmed these notions for adults. Harriet Beecher Stowe's nineteenth-century novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Margaret Mitchell's twentieth-century novel *Gone With the Wind* (and its film adaptation) furnished the contradictory views upon which most Americans' knowledge of slavery is based. Although Stowe condemned the institution, her depiction of slaves generally confirmed Mitchell's vision of the lovable but limited servant, an image paralleling that presented in many twentieth-century textbooks. To one degree or another, this is the picture of slavery that most Americans growing to maturity before the mid-1960s carry with them. They formed their racial opinions in light of this socialization and, consciously or subconsciously, most expect to have these notions confirmed when they visit public history sites or museums.

Even at the end of the twentieth century, some of these stereotypical assumptions about slavery remain strong. Most textbooks have changed in the last two generations, influenced by some of the more recent scholarship. Slavery and the role of race more generally have become part of the best accounts of American history, although sometimes in abbreviated form. Yet much of the best and latest scholarship never reaches high-school students because most high-school history courses are taught by teachers with inadequate training in history. In some states, this situation has reached shocking proportions. In Louisiana, 88 percent of the students who take history in high school are taught by teachers who have not even a college minor in history. In Minnesota, the proportion is 83 percent, in West Virginia 82 percent, in Oklahoma 81 percent, in Pennsylvania 73 percent, and in Kansas 72 percent. In New York State, where the percentage of students who are taught history by inadequately trained teachers is relatively low (32%), those who teach history (or social studies, as most history-based courses are called) are not required to have taken a single history course. As one scholar has reminded us, in many public schools, history teacher is spelled C-O-A-C-H. No wonder that graduates of high school are likely to know little about the national past. And this situation is even worse in many public schools where history courses have been abbreviated or removed from curricula entirely. In one present-day eighth-grade class, students disagreed over whether American slavery ended in the 1900s or in 1940 or whether the Civil War was fought in 1812, 1840, or 1816.  

9. Richard M. Ingersoll and Kerry Gruber, "Out-of-Field Teaching and Educational Equality" (National Center for Education Statistics, United States Department of Education, October, 1996), 24. Other states with high percentages of non-history trained high school history teachers include Maryland (72%), Arizona (71%), South Dakota (70%), and Mississippi (70%). New York and Wisconsin had the lowest percentages, with 32% each.


History education at the college level is better, but in 82 percent of the nation’s colleges, U.S. history courses are not required, even for liberal arts majors. A recent survey of college students illustrates a possible consequence of this situation. A majority of college students could not identify such names as Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson, and many believed that George Washington was the president during the War of 1812. This lack of basic history knowledge speaks volumes about the quality of education at the college level, and the report that many college students in the South believe that Jefferson Davis was president of the United States during the Civil War is not encouraging. Even among the nation’s most educated, knowledge of American history is limited, and ideas about slavery are often stereotypical or nonexistent.

Studies show, however, that field trips outside the classroom are one effective means of education. A visit to a historic site can stimulate interest in history. As Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen explain in their study of the popular uses of history, most Americans care about and are actively engaged in some activity that allows them to feel connected to the past. Moreover, like the students who learn best on field trips, most Americans feel most connected to history when visiting historical places. According to this study, Americans believe they are more likely to discover “real” or “true” history at museums and historic sites than in classrooms. Whereas just over half of those surveyed in the Rosenzweig and Thelen study said that they trusted college professors to tell the truth about history, and just over a third trusted high school teachers, almost 80 percent had faith in museums. Public historians, then, have a significant opportunity to augment all levels of education, although they may find themselves teaching at the grammar-school level even when their visitors are adults.

The media-romanticized mythology of the old south, the racial stereotypes it reinforces, and a public education system that does not provide an adequate corrective—theses are but a few of the challenges faced by public historians who seek to interpret slavery at historic houses, sites, and museums. Many others are complicated by the combination of public ignorance, stereotypical racial assumptions, and the volatility of contemporary American politics.

Slavery and Contemporary Politics

The culture wars are, by now, old news. Over the last few years, professional and political careers have been made and destroyed in the

struggle to control the historical and cultural interpretations of American society.\textsuperscript{15} When it comes to issues of race or the interpretation of slavery, the South is a particularly explosive arena. The recent controversy over a proclamation issued by Virginia Governor James S. Gilmore declaring April 1998 Confederate History Month illustrates this point. The proclamation began:

WHEREAS, it was during the month of April that the people of the Confederate States of America began at Fort Sumter, South Carolina and ended at Appomattox, Virginia a four-year tragic, heroic and determined struggle for deeply held beliefs;

Similar proclamations are issued each year in Virginia, and by governors in Louisiana, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama for their states. This year, however, for the first time, Virginia broke with tradition when Gilmore included a brief mention of slavery in his message:

WHEREAS, our recognition of Confederate history also recognizes that slavery was one of the causes of the war;

WHEREAS, slavery was a practice that deprived African-Americans of their God-given inalienable rights, which degraded the human spirit, is abhorred and condemned by Virginians, and ended by this war;

At first glance, the inclusion of a condemnation of slavery and its basic denial of human rights would not seem controversial at the end of the twentieth century in Virginia. This was, after all, a relatively mild statement of the historically obvious. But there are few noncontroversial means of addressing the issue of slavery in a public setting, and no comfortable way to deal with this question that resides at the core of American identity and conscience. Reaction was swift and direct. R. Wayne Byrd, president of Virginia’s Heritage Preservation Association, labeled Governor Gilmore’s reference to slavery an insult to the state and as bowing to what Byrd termed the political pressure of “racist hate groups such as the NAACP.” He took issue with Gilmore’s negative description of slavery, painting instead a picture of the plantation worthy of mid-nineteenth century proslavery apologists. It is alarming that at the end of the twentieth century, in a public statement, Byrd could call the slave plantation of the old South a place “where master and slave loved and cared for each other and had genuine family concern.”\textsuperscript{16}

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Byrd was not alone in his assessment of Gilmore's remarks. Centered in the South, but spread throughout the country, networks of Civil War reenactors, mostly men, dress in period costume and meet on weekends to recreate "authentic" versions of the Civil War. Members in these groups range from those who see this as an opportunity for outdoor recreation to serious history buffs who attempt to capture the look and feel of life in the Civil War military. Many of these groups are linked by the Internet, and almost immediately after Gilmore's proclamation, their lines were buzzing with reaction. Larry Beane, past commander of the J.E.B. Stuart Camp #1506 of the Sons of Confederate Veterans in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania attacked Gilmore's reference to slavery as "a slap in the faces of the Confederate soldiers, their grandchildren, and the State of Virginia as a whole." 17 Other Internet correspondents expressed similar sentiments. Probably most white Americans would not argue this case so blatantly. Still, most white Virginians accepted state recognition of Confederate History Month without question, as did other white southerners.

Many groups that celebrate the Confederacy, like the Sons of Confederate Veterans or the Daughters of the Confederacy, claim that slavery was not central to the Confederacy. A few agree with Byrd and actually romanticize slavery to fit their idealized visions of the "moonlight and magnolia South" of legend. Their visits to historic sites associated with the Civil War often pose problems for historical interpreters. Historians in the National Park Service who attempt to interpret slavery within the Civil War context face a continuing challenge. Often the temptation is to eliminate or at least to diminish discussion of the subject. In the permanent exhibitions at Gettysburg National Battlefield in Pennsylvania, slavery is not interpreted as a central cause of the Civil War, and as park superintendent John Latschar discovered recently, even the mention of slavery as a cause of the war can carry significant consequences. After a public lecture in which Latschar suggested that the war may have been fought over slavery, the Southern Heritage Coalition condemned his words, and 1,100 postcards calling for his immediate removal flooded the Office of the Secretary of the Interior. Obviously, many Americans do not wish to discuss slavery at all and especially want to minimize or deny its connection to the Confederacy and the Civil War.

Gilmore may have hoped that his mention and condemnation of slavery in his proclamation would defuse opposition to Confederate History Month, but many Virginians, some white as well as black, were not happy with what they saw as a hollow racial gesture. Tommy J. Baer, president of B'nai B'rith International, questioned Gilmore's attempt to include a condemnation of slavery with a celebration of the Confederacy. "It's like Germany having a World War II—I would even call it Nazi—history month

but [saying] We’re going to include the suffering of the Jews,” he argued, “It doesn’t pass the common-sense test.” Salim Khalfani of the NAACP Virginia State Conference acknowledged Gilmore’s inclusion “respecting the horrors of African enslavement,” but added, “We’re not pleased that April once again will commemorate Confederate history and heritage month.” Civil Rights groups generally view the celebration of the Confederacy, like efforts to maintain the Confederate flag, as part of a general attempt to preserve southern racist traditions. Many white southerners, on the other hand, continue to deny the racial connotations of these reminders of the pre–Civil War South. Frances Chapman, of Todd County, Kentucky, who supported the use of two Confederate flags as symbols of her county high school, claimed that they were neither racist nor a defense of slavery. Besides, she argued, “Slavery was not all that bad. A lot of people were quite happy to be living on large plantations.” Then, in what seems a contradiction, she added, “Blacks just need to get over slavery. You can’t live in the past.”

The Confederate flags waved by fans at University of Mississippi football games, seen on special license plates in Maryland, or flown over South Carolina’s state capitol continue to be controversial. The playing of “Dixie” at official state functions throughout the South, Virginia’s recently retired state song, “Carry Me Back to Old Virginia,” with its references to “darkies,” and “old massa,” and the recent surge in Confederate reenactments are all enormously relevant to the discussion about slavery and the centrality of race that Americans seem unable to have. Given the volatility of the topic, recent calls by thirteen members of Congress that President Clinton issue a public apology to African Americans for slavery and the President’s challenge to all Americans to join in a national conversation on race were bold and understandably controversial steps. Many whites refused to believe that an apology for slavery was needed or that a conversation on race would be fruitful. Some blacks feared that an apology at this late date would trivialize their history, resurrect the horror and pain of slavery, and divert attention from pressing contemporary racial problems. Conversations on race, many believed, would not be honest and would add little of value to the debates over welfare and economic disparity, affirmative action, and the lingering impact of racism in American society. For different reasons, Americans, both blacks and whites, are reluctant to bring a painful historical context to bear on contemporary race relations.

Thus, the discussions about race and history that often take place inside the academy are atypical. There, the state of historical scholarship has made it all but impossible for any serious study of American history, especially one focused on the nineteenth century or before, to ignore slavery. But, of

18. “Slavery ‘Abhorred.”’
course, few Americans have access to those conversations. Public historians confronted with uncomfortable, historically ignorant, and resistant visitors often find the subject difficult or unapproachable.

**Interpretation and Public Reaction**

At historical plantation sites, where the subject of slavery is difficult to avoid, Park Service interpreters struggle to present the subject in the least offensive manner. Interpreters at Arlington House, National Park Service historic site and pre–Civil War home of the Lee Custis family, address the subject of slavery and Robert E. Lee as a slaveholder with extreme delicacy, if at all. White visitors often bristle at the mention of Lee as the owner of slaves and have difficulty accepting the fact that he and his compatriots took up arms against the United States in order to preserve a society based on slave labor and white supremacy. Stephanie Batiste-Bentham, an African-American interpreter who worked for a number of months at Arlington House outside of Washington, D.C., explained that visitors sometimes took her aside to ask in hushed tones, "Were there really slaves here?" She also observed that some white interpreters at the site used the less emotionally charged term "servants" instead of "slaves" to describe the plantation laborers. In the last few years, historians at Arlington House have tried to include slavery in the plantation story and have opened the restored slave quarters at the rear of the main house. Batiste-Bentham found that visitor expectations made it easier to interpret slavery in the slave quarters than in the main house. She found that visitors were ready to ask questions and engage in discussion about slavery while in the slave quarters, but expected interpretation at the main house to focus exclusively on the Custis-Lee family. When Batiste-Bentham suggested the extensive slave presence in Arlington House proper, and slaves' role in its construction, for example, visitors were often surprised. She was careful to point out the kitchen and other work places in the house as almost exclusively slave work and social space. She explained the difficulty house slaves had navigating the steep, narrow, dark back staircase carrying large trays or other awkward and heavy objects. Apparently visitors reacted positively to observations which suggested the reality of everyday slave life but were less willing to focus on the unpleasant aspects of slave-master relationships.

Most visitors thought of slavery and slaveholding in very simple terms. White visitors, confronted with Robert E. Lee as a slave master, were concerned that he be pictured as a "good master," although most had only the vaguest idea of what that might mean. On the other hand, black visitors expected to be told about the atrocities of slavery and expected an African American interpreter to do so in the most horrendous detail. Both black visitors and white visitors seemed to expect an African American interpreter
to deal with racial issues, including slavery, but were less likely to expect a white interpreter to do so. Regardless of their expectation, visitors generally were uncomfortable talking about slavery, especially in interracial groups. One memorable incident at Arlington House makes this point clearly. Batiste-Bentham was conducting a tour of the second floor of the house when from the floor below, ascending the back staircase, a black female visitor approached playfully chanting the refrain, “I’s in the master’s house, I’s in the master’s house.” This visitor was not aware of the tour group and they could not see her, but her improvised refrain created a long, embarrassed silence especially among the white visitors. Interestingly, Batiste-Bentham found that she had a somewhat easier time discussing slavery with white visitors than with black visitors, a fact that she attributed to the pain that many black visitors report from talking about the subject.21

This pain was enough for black employees at the Library of Congress to demand that a historical exhibit containing rare photos of slavery and plantation life be removed from an area near the entrance to the staff dining room. The exhibit, “Back of The Big House: The Cultural Landscape of the Plantation,” curated by anthropologist John Vlach, was apparently viewed by some African Americans at the library as too disturbing to be presented. One explained that after viewing a picture of a shotgun-toting overseer on horseback watching a group of slaves picking cotton, he was “so upset [he] couldn’t look at the rest of the exhibit.” Another was offended by the “broken dialect” in the captions that accompanied the photographs. The exhibit was an attempt to present not only the institution of slavery, but also the ability of slaves to carve out social and cultural space within which to support their community and family life in the midst of the inhumanity of their bondage. Yet, largely because of the difficulty they had dealing with any presentation depicting slaves, some blacks did not appreciate the implicit display of slave resistance in the exhibit. Apparently some had difficulty distinguishing between historical presentations of the history of slavery and the celebration of it. “We haven’t gotten over slavery, so we don’t need to celebrate it,” one African-American employee asserted.22

One particularly interesting aspect of blacks’ objections to the exhibit was their readiness to relate the memory of slavery to their contemporary situation as Library of Congress employees. Black staff members were engaged in a long-term labor dispute with the library resulting from charges of job discrimination. Some blacks regularly referred to the administrative offices of the library as “The Big House” and talked about themselves as working on the “plantation.” Thus, reaction to the exhibit was a reaction to the racial tensions of the late twentieth century as much as to those of the

antebellum South. "We have a very fragile work environment," one black staffer observed, and "we still have a lot of healing to do." The library's administration, which from all indications was more committed to the exhibit as a racial appeasement tool than as an educational device, was quick to act when twenty African-American staff members complained. Less than three hours after it was installed, the exhibit was removed. "There is an atmosphere of fear in the library now." said one senior official who was white. There is an irony in the fact that much of the material used to create the exhibit was from the collections at the Library of Congress. There is also a lesson. Slavery is not only about the past and because Americans react to it on an emotional level, the more preparation in the form of intellectual discussion and study beforehand, the more likely a successful presentation. But even this is not easy.23  

Slavery and Living History

The discomfort many blacks associate with any discussion of slavery was also evident in interviews with interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. In this restored capital of colonial Virginia, costumed interpreters portray historical figures in living-history vignettes designed to educate and entertain visitors. Costumed interpreters portray the colonial governor and his wife and eighteenth-century artisans, merchants, and various village workers. In 1979, slavery was interpreted for the first time when Williamsburg employed six African-American interpreters to present first-person portrayals of the slaves who accounted for roughly half of the town's population in the eighteenth century.

Immediately it became evident that interpreting slavery was not simply a matter of adding a few blacks to the presentation. Bringing visitors and the interpretive staff of Williamsburg face to face with the most blatant and extreme form of American racism was, for some, a wrenching experience. African-American interpreters found that they had to make significant adjustments in their presentation. Originally, interpreters were instructed not to "break character," to act and respond in a manner appropriate to an eighteenth-century resident no matter what question was asked by twentieth-century visitors. Although most visitors quickly understood the period characterization, especially when white interpreters were involved, black interpreters found that sometimes visitors took their performance seriously. A few visitors became upset seeing a black person seemingly in bondage. One white visitor, outraged at the thought of slaves being kept in contemporary Williamsburg, actually wrote a letter of complaint to the local newspaper.24

24. Rex Ellis, former director of Williamsburg African American Department, telephone interview with James Oliver Horton, 14 May 1998.
Public anxiety about confronting the history of slavery mushroomed in the fall of 1994 when Colonial Williamsburg’s African American Department announced that it would recreate a slave auction. The recreation was part of a three-day program built around the annual commemoration of King George’s ascension to the English throne. The sale of personal property, including slaves, was part of the original eighteenth-century celebration, and the staff at the African American Department proposed the auction as a way to “teach the history of our mothers and grandmothers so that every one of you will never forget what happened to them.” The statement and the recreation of the auction drew strong reaction. At the end of the extremely moving reenactment of a family being broken apart through the sale, the crowd of visitors grew silent, and many wept. Clearly emotions were mixed. A black visitor and a white visitor jointly displayed a sign that read, “Say no to racist shows.” The Richmond chapter of the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Council attempted to interrupt the event, accusing the reenactment of “glorifying the horrors and humiliation of the evil of slavery” and calling it a “trivialization of [our] African American heritage.”

One of the main concerns voiced by opponents of the reenactment was that it might be misinterpreted by visitors as entertainment instead of the educational dramatization that Williamsburg interpreters intended. Sensitive to this concern, Christy Coleman, director of Colonial Williamsburg’s African American Department, went to great lengths to prepare her staff. “We are eminently qualified to do this presentation,” she explained, having extensively researched the general history of Williamsburg during the period and the specific auction that was recreated. “Our programs have proved a success in the past because we do them in a dignified manner,” she said. Still, many blacks were not convinced. Salim Khalfani, NAACP field coordinator, worried that “whenever entertainment is used to teach history there is the possibility for error or insensitivity and historical inaccuracy.” Yet for some, like political director of the Virginia branch of the NAACP Jack Gravely, who had initially expressed opposition, the reenactment was a transforming experience. “Pain had a face;” he said; “indignity had a body, suffering had tears.”

Academic historians were generally in favor of the auction recreation, but they urged that great care be taken so that it not become entertainment. In the end, most seemed satisfied that Williamsburg’s presentation was indeed

educational. Princeton’s Nell Painter observed, “The whole point of slavery was [that] you made people into economic units, you dehumanize them and if you are an economic unit, you have the ability to be bought and sold. Slave sales were the bedrock of slavery.”

Painter was right, of course. Sale or the possibility of sale was a part of a slave’s daily life, and it may be impossible to understand slavery, even in the most cursory manner, without facing the implications of slave sale and the inhumanity of the auctions that were public events in American slaveholding society. Even more disturbing for today’s conversation about race and history is the realization that many people attended auctions not to buy, but for their “entertainment value.” This point was apparently not raised in the debate over the Williamsburg reenactment, but it is the sobering truth of the impact of slavery on America’s understanding of humanity.

The experience of first-person interpretation at historic sites like Williamsburg can be more difficult for blacks than for whites. Wearing eighteenth-century costumes and presenting history before an interested public audience can be, as one said, a “thrilling experience.” There is prestige attached to the role of a Williamsburg interpreter. Although some blacks share this feeling, for most, the feelings are more complex. For them there is also the somber realization that their work day centers on “playing slaves” for a public audience that is often unsympathetic. As one wrote, “I had a job that very few would envy, especially if [they were] black.” This interpreter explained that many of his friends and members of his family would not talk to him about his job once they understood what he did, and few came to see his interpretation at Williamsburg.

A number of Williamsburg’s African-American interpreters find it uncomfortable to leave the colonial area in costume. Whereas white interpreters might take a lunch break, going to the local fast-food restaurant in costume, black interpreters almost never do. One women explained that she felt self-conscious eating at a restaurant dressed as a slave. Some recalled incidents in which whites made racist remarks or screamed racist insults from passing cars on seeing black interpreters in costume. Public historians contemplating developing living history at their sites should be aware of the potential problems involved in such a venture.

These complex feelings can affect the entire operation of the site or museum when blacks and whites are working together. One African-American interpreter who participated in the slave auction reenactment explained that even though it was a recreation and not a real auction, he felt strong emotions, anger and extreme sadness as well as pride, to be part of

31. Rex Ellis, former director of Williamsburg African American Department, phone interview by James Oliver Horton, 14 May 1998.
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this bold historical statement. Another found that his vast research on the
subject did not fully prepare him to stand on an auction block and contemplate the sale of his ancestors in such a public venue. Frequent and honest discussions of feelings among interpreters encouraged blacks and whites to deal with the variety of feelings that arose after a long day of interpreting. Interracial interaction under such circumstances required trust and tolerance. 

One chilling moment occurred when Williamsburg interpreters were invited to attend the opening of a gallery of Colonial Williamsburg products in a shopping mall in Cleveland, Ohio. Interpreters dressed in their colonial costumes were to parade through the mall to the gallery through a large crowd of shoppers and invited guests. The center aisle of one of the major stores was arranged with seats on either side, where special guests dressed in formal attire sat to review the procession. Local bands and a Cleveland ballet troupe were to lead the way, followed by local dignitaries. Towards the end of the procession came the Williamsburg interpreters, with black interpreters dressed as slaves at the rear. African-American interpreters had intended to be part of the procession, but at the last minute some refused. Rex Ellis had not fully realized what it would be like until he was actually there, dressed as a slave, parading through a shopping mall. This was not interpreting slavery, he thought, this was playing a slave for a white elite audience. The context was wrong and too emotionally painful. Some of the white interpreters from Williamsburg had a difficult time understanding his explanation, but Ellis was adamant in his decision not to “be a slave in that context.” Ellis’s point is significant and effectively underscores the major theme of this essay. Slavery is a sobering subject, too difficult to interpret in the atmosphere of a shopping mall or any place not primarily devoted to education. Central in these experiences is the realization that the contemporary racial atmosphere complicates any history involving race. It is hardly possible for historians to remain detached, even in the most scholarly public setting. The public world can be an emotionally threatening place for such interpretation.

Williamsburg is not the only place that struggles with this issue. Few sites illustrate this sensitive issue of interpreting slavery more starkly than Thomas Jefferson’s historic Virginia plantation, Monticello. As recently as the mid-1980s, guides were careful not to mention Jefferson’s black slaves as they led visitors through the magnificent mansion. If referred to at all, slaves were euphemistically termed servants. Presentations at Monticello left no doubt that Jefferson was the center of the plantation story and that all else was simply backdrop. There was no indication of the obvious fact that the faces, voices, songs, and cultural styles of the majority of people at eighteenth-century Monticello were African. There was no suggestion that

32. Ellis interview; Phillip, “To Reenact or Not to Reenact,” 26.
everyone on that plantation, including Jefferson himself, was influenced by the cultures of Africa. The absence of slaves in site interpretation was emphasized by the careful selection of the words employed to tell Monticello’s story. Guides used the active voice to refer to Jefferson and his activities, while using the passive voice to minimize the importance of the activities of nonwhite plantation residents. “Mr. Jefferson designed and built” an elaborate clock, they might say, or “Mr. Jefferson experimented with particular crops in the lower fields.” On the other hand, meals “were cooked,” or crops “were planted,” or furniture “was built.” This language dehumanized the slaves’ very human activities. Further, such language protected Jefferson’s reputation, even at the cost of rejecting serious historical inquiry. Any reference to Sally Hemings, Jefferson’s slave mistress and the mother of his slave children, brought an icy response and a quick dismissal from Monticello staff.33

Today, Monticello has changed its story, making it more inclusive of the plantation’s population. Starting in 1993 as a single-year experiment, the interpretive staff inaugurated a “plantation community tour,” a more complete look at Monticello. A new advisory committee, including a number of university and public history scholars, helped develop historical interpretation that deals with issues of race and slavery in a more scholarly way. Extensive archival and archeological research revealed much about Monticello’s black community on Mulberry Row, an area of slave cabins occupied by several members of the Hemings family. Interpreters now point out areas of the main house and its furnishings constructed by slave craftsmen.34

Tours are designed to encourage visitors’ questions and discussion. For the most part, they seem to promote nonconfrontational exchange, with interpreters taking care to discuss Jefferson and slavery with extreme delicacy. Significantly, the plantation community tour is not a regular part of the Monticello house tour, and its participants are self-selected. Still, of the 560,000 people who visit Monticello each year, between 35,000 and 40,000 elect to take the plantation community tour. Initial reaction was overwhelmingly positive. Guides reported that many, both blacks and whites, were visibly moved by the tour. Some visitors wept as they moved over the ground where slaves lived, worked, and suffered the indignities of bondage.35

33. I find the results of DNA testing showing that Jefferson fathered at least one of the Hemings children convincing. These results were reported by Dr. Eugene Foster and conducted and verified by scientists in Britain and The Netherlands, reinforcing the strong circumstantial evidence that historians have known about for generations. → Eugene A. Foster et al., “Jefferson Fathered Slave’s Last Child,” Nature 395 (5 November 1998), 27–28. See also, James Oliver Horton and Spencer Crew, “Afro-Americans and Museums: Towards a Policy of Inclusion,” History Museums and Historic Sites in the United States, ed. Roy Rosenzweig and Warren Leon (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 215–36.
34. Lucia Stanton, Slavery at Monticello (Charlottesville, Va.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1996).
35. Lucia Stanton, director of research at Monticello, telephone interview by James Oliver Horton, 16 April 1998.
Recent disclosures of DNA evidence concluding that Jefferson fathered at least one child with his slave, Sally Hemings, have now become part of the information provided to Monticello visitors during regular tours.36 It has also intensified a public discussion in the media and among many scholars. Commentary that I provided for National Public Radio prompted considerable response. Listeners found especially provocative my comment that the hypocrisy suggested by DNA evidence that Jefferson fathered children by one of his slaves was far surpassed by the hypocrisy of a basic fact that we already understood—the author of the Declaration of Independence was also the holder of slaves. Particularly remarkable was a message left on my voice mail by one man who explained his disappointment in Jefferson and who vowed to be more realistic about all of his historical heroes. No matter my assessment, this man, who was crying by the end of the message, was deeply affected by the DNA disclosure, as were several others who were particularly disturbed by Jefferson’s fathering of a child whose mother was a slave. At least two callers seemed to find the interracial aspects of the new discovery to be particularly upsetting.37 Reports from Monticello indicate that visitor reaction has not been particularly intense as interpreters have begun speaking more directly about Sally Hemings and Jefferson’s views on slavery and race, although some comments revealed visitor suspicions about what some called revisionist history. “Where’s the great white man tour?” one visitor asked in response to a guide’s discussion of visitor suspicions about Sally Hemings and slavery on the plantation. Some are so uncomfortable with these issues that they leave the tour before its completion. African-American tour guides recruited from nearby University of Virginia tell stories of verbal confrontation with visitors that resemble those at Colonial Williamsburg. As one black guide approached a group waiting to take the plantation community tour he was about to lead on his first day at Monticello, one of the white visitors remarked, “So you are our slave for today.”38

As Williamsburg interpreters found, so too at Monticello, African Americans were not as likely as whites to enjoy assuming eighteenth-century roles in period dress. Liz Cherry Jones, an expert in eighteenth-century spinning and weaving techniques, has demonstrated her skills during several of Monticello’s special plantation weekend festivals. Although she has dressed in period slave costume for a number of her demonstrations, it is not a comfortable thing for her to do. Visitors are sometimes put off by the sight of her dressed as a slave. Some ignore her altogether, although she has found that the condition of her clothing makes a difference in visitor reaction. Her

37. Interestingly enough, none of these callers left names or phone numbers. Several callers who identified themselves as African Americans found the new evidence a confirmation of what they had always taken for granted.
38. Stanton interview.
observations suggest that a costume that appears worn and shabby will often draw questions about the harsh treatment that a slave might have received, whereas bright colors are more likely to attract more general conversation about the work she is demonstrating. Most visitors assume that her skill comes from traditions passed down in her family and are surprised to learn that Jones developed her knowledge while completing a master’s degree in textile design and fine arts. Black visitors are also influenced by the specifics of her costume. Jones is sometimes caught between the demands of African Americans who demand to know all the harsh details of slavery and who suspect that she is “sugar-coating” the experience if she is less graphic than they expect, and others who are so uncomfortable with the topic that they want to ignore it all together. Generally, Jones sees living history as a valuable technique for engaging and educating the public, and she found a training session held at Williamsburg on the living history depiction of race to be very helpful in dealing with the difficulties of the task. Still, she recently decided to conduct her demonstrations in modern dress for the foreseeable future. Clearly, presenting this kind of history is no easy task, and there is much left to be done and understood, but Monticello and Colonial Williamsburg have come a great distance in their willingness and ability to deal with slavery as it is relevant to their historical sites. Together, they have become models for other sites in their region.39

Conclusion

Given the importance and the difficulty of their task, and the still largely uncharted waters of such presentations, there is a pressing need for public historians and historical interpreters to engage in serious discussions about techniques and strategies for addressing race in general and slavery in particular. Academic scholars can be of great assistance in this critical venture, helping to develop the historical context for public presentation as a step towards a broad public discussion about slavery and race in American history and in contemporary America as well. By now most realize that this is not easy and that at the same time, it is very important to do. There are a few tentative models, but no proven strategy. Perhaps each setting will require its own special approach.

As one who believes in the power of education, I argue from the premise that knowledge will facilitate understanding and tolerance. Although this cannot be taken for granted, evidence suggests a logic to this assumption. As recent changes at several historic sites and museums illustrate, scholarly research and interpretations of race in America have begun to reshape the public presentations of history. Especially since the late 1960s, some of the

39 Liz Cherry Jones, telephone interview by James Oliver Horton, 18 February 1999.
popular media have presented a more realistic view of the impact of race on the experiences of Americans. There is a distance yet to cover, but some Americans have become more sensitive to and aware of difficult subjects, like race and even slavery, and many have a more realistic picture of these topics than did their parents or grandparents. There is reason to believe that this awareness is associated with the greater racial tolerance revealed by recent sociological surveys. One study reported that “a massive and widening liberalization of racial attitudes has swept America over the last forty years.”

One need not go that far to agree that America at the end of the twentieth century is a more racially tolerant place than it was a half century ago. Yet we have only scratched the surface of the historical awareness necessary to provide a context for the hard thinking we must do and the complex conversations we must have in order to address contemporary racial issues in a meaningful way.

There are more opportunities to learn a more inclusive history of our nation, but such learning remains problematic. The overwhelming message of all of the attempts at inclusive historical presentation is obvious: the history of race in America, and especially of slavery, is a painful, contentious, anxiety-producing topic for Americans to confront, especially in a public setting. Slavery is so uncomfortable, both for interpreters and visitors, that some have understandably asked, “why confront it at all?” This was the question raised by a black woman at a recent lecture that I gave at Howard University in Washington, D.C. She was visibly distressed by my description of slavery and the slave trade. Her voice trembled as she demanded that we “put slavery behind us,” not dwell on the painful past and “get beyond all that.” This earnest reaction required more than a cursory response. The answer I gave was the one that I have suggested here. The institution of slavery formed our understanding of race and the relationships between races in America. Even for recent immigrants, the history of slavery has relevance. It established a hierarchy of color into which people of varying shades are fitted. And it has defined the social, political, and economic meaning of skin color within the American setting. The things Americans take for granted about race, those assumptions for which they require no explanation, those feelings of which they are barely conscious, are the products of a culture that slavery and efforts to justify it have shaped. It is not practical to believe that we can realistically address our society’s most vital contemporary concerns about race while ignoring the institution that has


41. The recent outrage of whites as well as blacks at the horrible dragging murder of black Texan James Byrd at the hands of a white supremacist, and the death sentence of John William King, the first white man so sentenced for murdering an African American in Texas history, is grisly evidence of this change. For a comparison of southern tolerance of violence and even murder of blacks by whites see Leon F. Litwack, Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).
been so central to American race relations. If we are to have meaningful conversations about race in contemporary society, we must do so within the context of history. As we seek to confront our national history and its relevance to our present and future, the history of slavery matters a great deal. Difficult as it is, the discussion must start immediately, and historical scholars in the academy, in museums, in historic parks and houses, and wherever else they do their work must be a part of the process.