For Whom

Will the Liberty Bell Toll?

From Controversy to Cooperation

Gary B. Nash

In early 2002, controversy erupted in the City of Brotherly Love over the interpretive exhibits planned for the venerable Liberty Bell, which would soon occupy a shimmering new glass-and-steel home. For many years after its arrival from France in 1752, the bell had hung in the bell tower of the Pennsylvania State House (later to be named Independence Hall); since 1976, it had made its home in an undistinguished building on Market Street between Fifth and Sixth Streets. The controversy hinged on matters of great importance to the National Park Service and the nation at large: how to present the history and meaning of the Liberty Bell to the several hundred thousand visitors, both Americans and people from overseas, who troop by the cracked bell each year. To be sure, the Liberty Bell is only a sliver of American history. But only a few slivers have had such resonance. Until the mid-nineteenth century, when abolitionists first named it the “Liberty Bell,” it was an unremarkable two-thousand-pound piece of unstable mixed metals that could not even ring properly. Since then, the Liberty Bell has captured American affections. With its inscription “Proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all the inhabitants thereof” (Leviticus 25:10), it has become a stand-in for America’s vaunted qualities: independence, freedom, unalienable rights, and equality—virtually a touchstone of American identity. For years, people have gazed at the bell, reached out to touch it, dabbed their eyes, and departed,
perhaps without quite knowing why the bell grips them so emotionally. Put on the road a century ago for national and international exhibitions, and held up as a symbol of the best America stands for, the Liberty Bell has achieved global reach as a symbol of freedom and human rights. It has become what one former Park Service staffer calls “the greatest relic of America’s heroic age.”²

Planning for new Liberty Bell exhibits began in the early 1990s, when Independence National Historical Park (INHP) planners decided to build a new Liberty Bell Center and move the bell to what had been 190 High Street in the eighteenth century, the site of one of the city’s stateliest mansions. Much was at stake here, and nobody knew better than the superintendent and staff at Philadelphia’s INHP that they were the custodians of one of the premier sites of our revolutionary heritage. The Liberty Bell and Independence Hall are beacons, attracting people sensing or searching for links between the past and the present and trying to refresh their memories of what many nostalgically think of as a golden age. Now, with some $13 million for a new pavilion to be erected at the southeast corner of Sixth and Market Streets, right across the street from the new Independence Visitor Center, INHP had a chance to rethink what the Liberty Bell meant at different points in its history and what it means today. INHP shouldered a weighty responsibility; it also enjoyed a rare opportunity.

INHP planners had to reckon with how American history had unfolded in the last generation and how the National Park Service had been changing, particularly since its 1997 General Management Plan, which called for “a new VISION for the park in the twenty-first century.”³ Had the opportunity to build a sparkling new home for the Liberty Bell arisen in the 1950s, the task would have been simpler—tell the story as the National Park Service rangers in their nifty World War I–style hats had told the story for a long time: how the founding fathers engineered independence and constructed the world’s most durable constitution and how liberty was proclaimed throughout the land and seized by all the good people. This was a story drained of ambiguity, complexity, paradox, and irony. It was an account that thrilled most visitors, to be sure, yet it was a simplistic tale that catered to a barely historically literate public rather than offering nuanced interpretation, contradictory meanings of the Liberty Bell, new ideas, and fresh information for visitors to chew on as they
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t looked over their shoulders after they left the Liberty Bell Center. To do this, INHP leaders would have to take account of how the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, the women's rights movement, the American Indian movement, and the countercultural revolution of the 1960s fractured the historical consensus interpretation popular in the post–World War II period and ushered in a wholesale questioning of how the American democracy had produced a decidedly undemocratic, elitist interpretation of its past.

The special challenge for the INHP leaders was how to treat African American history, particularly slavery, in its new interpretative exhibits at the Liberty Bell Center. How should the Park Service, which conducts one of the largest outdoor history classrooms in the world, address how the new nation, fresh from wresting its independence from England, built a freedom-loving republic based on slavery? This would require going beyond the institutional history of the Liberty Bell and the plain-vanilla story of the nation's founding. How, asks one former staffer, would INHP "deal with a national sin older than the nation itself" in "a park and a city long accustomed to a glorious role in American history?" Would the symbolic power of the bell be compromised if visitors learned that if the bell tolls for the independent and free, this freedom and independence was built on the backs of the enslaved one-fifth of the American colonial population? Might the public accept a proposition argued thirty years before by Edmund Morgan that "to a large degree it may be said that Americans bought their independence with slave labor" and that this "paradox is American, and it behooves Americans to understand it if they would understand themselves"? Would this draw charges of being antipatriotic? Or did the Park Service have a civic responsibility to encourage visitors to become more reflective and engaged citizens in a dangerous and complex world? As the INHP leaders planned the exhibits for the new Liberty Bell Center, they were acutely aware that Americans were fresh from a series of smoking debates over whose history we learn, or should learn, at public history sites, who gets to tell the stories, and who, in the end, owns the property of history?

Adding to the drama in presenting the Liberty Bell anew was the chunk of real estate upon which the new glass-and-steel pavilion was to be erected. The site is where the widow of William Masters, mighty merchant and Philadelphia mayor in the 1750s, erected a fine mansion in
about 1767–68. As it happens, Masters was probably Philadelphia’s largest slave owner. In 1761, after his death, his probated estate listed the names of thirty-four slaves. Some may have helped build the house. In 1772, Masters’s widow gifted the mansion to her daughter Polly, who had married Richard Penn, grandson of William Penn. Polly and Richard Penn were also slave owners, but on a small scale. The mansion’s next occupant, shortly after the Revolution erupted, was Sir William Howe, the British general whose army occupied Philadelphia from September 1777 to June 1778. After Howe’s recall, Sir Henry Clinton moved in and, like Howe, his enslaved Africans toiled on this site. After the British decamped, a new occupant arrived: Benedict Arnold, who ruled the city under martial law. Two enslaved Africans were among his household retinue of seven. Then came John Holker, French consul to the new United States, who was residing in the mansion when it suffered great damage from a fire on January 2, 1780. A year later, Robert Morris, financier of the American Revolution in its closing years, purchased the house and began to reconstruct it, probably with the labor of his several slaves. Thus, for the late colonial and entire Revolutionary period, the lives of the free and unfree mingled intimately on this piece of Philadelphia ground.

Morris’s rebuilding of the Masters-Penn house made it suitable quarters for George and Martha Washington after the nation’s capital moved from New York to Philadelphia in 1790. But some alterations were needed, especially for sheltering a household staff of about thirty—a mixed lot of waged employees, white indentured servants, and enslaved African Americans. Through the work of Edward Lawler Jr., an urban archaeologist and architectural historian who for several years has been researching meticulously the history of the Morris mansion and its use by Washington, we know that each day the thousands of visitors at the Liberty Bell Pavilion will be walking directly over the “servants hall,” as it was called, as well as near the smokehouse, the octagonal icehouse, and the stables. After the Washingtons decamped for Mount Vernon in 1797, John and Abigail Adams became the new tenants at what Philadelphians were coming to call the President’s House.

For nearly seven years, George Washington and the First Lady occupied the President’s House; the indentured servants and slaves prepared the meals, cleaned the mansion, groomed the horses, drove the coaches, tended the fireplaces, hauled the ashes, and performed countless other
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tasks indispensable to running the executive office efficiently and graciously. Like their well-to-do owners, these men and women had emotions, ideas, spiritual yearnings, hopes, and fears; they also had family commitments, agendas to pursue, and thoughts of improving their condition. They speak to us as much as Martha and George Washington about what it meant to live in Philadelphia at the center of the new American republic, though history had dictated that they carry out their lives in severely circumscribed stations. They speak to us, however, only if we give them voice.

Site and symbol, freedom and slavery, black and white, upstairs and downstairs—how should the INHP explain the Liberty Bell and its new site to the swarming visitors who would come to venerate the bell? In December 2001 I had an inkling that the Liberty Bell story line, as it had been devised by INHP, would be simplistic and vainglorious and that this piece of history-soaked land where the new pavilion would soon rise would be ignored. Philadelphia's National Public Radio station, WHYY, had interviewed me on December 5, 2001, by hookup from Los Angeles, and having read Edward Lawler's account of the slaves from Mount Vernon who had served the First Family at this site for nearly seven years (to be published in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* a month later), I mentioned that it would be a misfortune to perpetuate the historical amnesia about the founding fathers and slavery at the Liberty Bell venue. But the alarm bell I tried to ring had no effect whatever. I had not read the exhibit script written by several INHP staffers, nor did I know that they were moving ahead at flank speed to get bids to construct the new exhibits. That became apparent when I went to Philadelphia on March 12, 2002, to give a talk on my book, *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory*, published by the University of Pennsylvania Press a few months before. I had e-mailed Philip Lapsansky, curator of the Afro-Americana Collection at the Library Company, before going east to see if my December attempt had borne fruit. He told me that "INHP regards the whole thing as a nuisance in the way of paving over everything for the Liberty Bell plaza" and opined that "this might be one of the most significant black history sites in town, clearly and physically factoring in African American slavery to the founding and early governance of the nation." Lapsansky promised to try "to build a black constituency... at the least insisting on some major and very public
interpretation at the site.” But the story of the president’s mansion and its many slaves would never surface if the Independence Hall leadership had its way. “How naive of me,” e-mailed Lapsansky, “to have thought your WHYY bit in December, which was very powerful, would actually be heard by many folks much less acted upon.” At this point, on March 7, I e-mailed Dwight Pitcaithley, chief historian of the National Park Service, to alert him to the situation and asked what he knew of what promised to be a disturbing burial of poignant history at one of NPS’s most visited and revered sites.10

After reaching Philadelphia on March 12 and talking more with Lapsansky, I called Chris Schillizzi, the chief of interpretation and visitors’ services at INHP, to ask what visitors would learn about the history of the President’s House, its many illustrious tenants, and their slaves and servants. Not much, he replied. His staff had done research for several years in devising the interpretative plan, he had solicited scholarly and public input, and he had made the decision to keep the focus squarely on the Liberty Bell and its venerable history. Drawing attention to the President’s House and the deep historical significance of the site on which the new pavilion was being built, he explained, would confuse the public and divert attention from the venerable bell. I objected that the Liberty Bell meant many things to many people, among them slaves for whom the biblical inscription on the bell—“Proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all the inhabitants thereof”—surely had a hollow ring. Were not liberty and unfreedom locked in deadly embrace? Wasn’t the liberty of some built on the enslavement of others? Whether this was true or not, Schillizzi replied, they were out of time and out of money. “The train has left the station,” he claimed, using a metaphor not designed to continue the conversation and easy to recognize as a rationale for stifling dissenting views. Would the public hear not a word about how they were walking over the sleeping quarters of indentured servants and slaves, no less the human property of the first president, as they approached the entrance of the Liberty Bell Pavilion? Would they learn nothing about how they were stepping in the footsteps of Richard Penn, Benedict Arnold, Sir William Howe, Robert Morris, John and Abigail Adams, and a host of others? The most I could garner from Schillizzi was a half-promise to consider a curbside plasticized panel on Market Street that would note that this was
the site of the President’s House, the executive mansion of our first two presidents.

Muttering to myself as I walked to the old Friends Meetinghouse at Fourth and Arch to give a talk on *First City*, a book about the contest for public memory that had agitated Philadelphia for generations, I pondered whether my concluding chapter, titled “Restoring Memory,” was too optimistic. I mused about how the property in history has been redistributed as Philadelphia’s collecting institutions have widened their vision about what is collectible and as the production of stories about the past has increased. I recalled how the Republican National Committee had sanctioned a thirty-foot-high mural portraying the Underground Railroad and its radical abolitionist leaders in Philadelphia and unveiled it as the convention of July 2000 met to nominate George W. Bush.\(^1\) And I remembered the letter INHP Superintendent Martha Aikens showed me from Tony Johnston of Williamstown, New Jersey. Johnston had written how his children wanted to see Independence Hall when he and his family were visiting Philadelphia on July 4, 1995. “I did not want to go,” he explained. “I am an African American and spent most of my life in the west. I did not think this place had anything to do with me.” But their tour guide, Frances Delmar, changed his mind. “She made me understand that even if I am not blood related to those men in Independence Hall, I am idea and dream related,” he wrote. “She told her story just like my mother used to do her quilts. She put the pieces together and when she was done I saw the pattern and where I fit in the pattern.” Ranger Delmar, Johnston concluded, “saw I was uneasy being African American in that place. She faced the race thing head on with charm and truth. Thank you for giving us tour guides like her. Bless you.”\(^2\)

At the Quaker meetinghouse, I spoke of these things and concluded with what I had just heard from INHP’s chief of interpretation. To my surprise, the audience was more interested in the disremembering of history at the Liberty Bell Pavilion than in my new book. One after another, those attending deplored INHP’s inattention to the Liberty Bell’s historically rich site. Then Randall Miller, former editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* and a prolific author who teaches in the Department of History at St. Joseph’s University, suggested that I write an op-ed piece for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* to bring the issue before the
public. Not quite ready to have him paint a bull’s-eye on the back of someone who had made useful target practice for the ultrapatriotic attack on the National History Standards in 1994–96, I agreed only if Miller would coauthor the piece. When he agreed, we were off to the races. The next day, Marty Moss-Coane, host of WHYY’s Radio Times, interviewed me about my book, and she followed my suggestion that she segue into a discussion of the planned Liberty Bell exhibits. This gave me a chance to be provocative. “Our memory of the past is often managed and manipulated,” I said. “Here it is being downright murdered.” The switchboard lit up as people called in from all compass points. Overwhelmingly, they supported my plea for presenting the history of the Liberty Bell site, along with the bell itself, in ways that mingled stories of freedom and unfreedom, black and white, mighty and humble, giving the public food for thought rather than leaving them simply with a warm, cozy glow about the old cracked bell.

Fifteen minutes of on-air discussion about the Liberty Bell on Radio Times proved a crucial turning point. The public was getting aroused. Equally important, Stephan Salisbury at the Inquirer decided to cover the story. Writing with Inga Saffron, he splashed the story on the front page on Sunday, March 24, with a headline reading “Echoes of Slavery at Liberty Bell Site.” Thousands of Inquirer readers were learning about a chapter of forgotten history—the presence of slaves at the heart of one of the nation’s most potent symbols of freedom.” Salisbury and Saffron included a defensive statement from INHP that “the Liberty Bell is its own story, and Washington’s slaves are a different one better told elsewhere.” Philadelphia’s African American mayor, John Street, was quoted as being disturbed by this and calling for “a very earnest dialogue . . . about how to address the issue of Washington and his slaves.” The Inquirer quoted Randall Miller at length. The Park Service, he charged, was missing an opportunity “to tell the real story of the American Revolution and the meaning of freedom. Americans, through Washington, were working out the definition of freedom in a new republic. And Washington had slaves. Meanwhile, the slaves were defining freedom for themselves by running away. There are endless contradictions embedded in this site.” I was quoted as saying, “Maybe the National Park Service feels it would besmirch the Liberty Bell to discuss [the slavery issue] and that the Liberty
Bell should be pure. But that’s not history [in the whole that] people deserve to know.”

Two days later, the *Inquirer* devoted a full page to the issue, with a clever headline—“Site Unseen”—and an article about how Mayor Street was dialoguing with Park Service officials, who now seemed willing to rethink their exhibits a bit, especially if the mayor agreed that work on the new pavilion would not be delayed. Meanwhile, Miller and I began organizing a committee of Philadelphia-area historians and institutional leaders to hold the feet of Park Service officials to the fire, while offering to work with them to rethink their plans for the Liberty Bell pavilion and the site on which it would rise. Among them were Charlene Mires, an American historian at Villanova University and author of a soon-to-be-published history of Independence Hall. Mires told the press about how Independence Hall, as well as the President’s House, was deeply involved with slavery—in fact, was the place where fugitive slaves were tried as late as 1854. “These issues of slavery and freedom run throughout Independence Mall,” Mires said to the *Inquirer*. “It doesn’t diminish the story to address them.”

Nancy Gilboy, president of the Independence Hall Association, a volunteer group, argued for making the footprint of the President’s House visible to visitors.

The *Inquirer’s* March 27 lead editorial, titled “Freedom and Slavery: Just as They Coexisted in the 1700s, Both Must Be Part of Liberty Bell’s Story,” turned up the heat. The *Inquirer* wagged its finger at INHP, reminded them that “the old cracked bell will be situated on ground that enhances it as a cherished symbol of the struggle for liberty, especially to African Americans,” and expressed confidence that “the Liberty Bell in its new home will not bury an ugly part of the country’s history.”

Then on Easter Sunday, March 31, the *Inquirer* published an op-ed piece that Randall Miller and I had written, along with an essay by Charlene Mires. A eye-catching image dominated the op-ed page: a slave’s ankle shackles superimposed on a replica of the Declaration of Independence. The next day, the Associated Press put a story on the wire, to be picked up around the country, titled “Historians Decry Liberty Bell Site.”

The history of slavery on Independence Mall was now becoming a hot issue. Letters were pouring in to the *Inquirer*, mostly favoring our position. In our op-ed essay, Miller and I argued that the Park Service should
enlist historians to help bring out the rich stories showing how freedom and slavery commingled at the Liberty Bell site and elsewhere. "Washington was the living symbol of freedom and independence," we wrote, and "Washington's slaves were living symbols of the most paradoxical part of the nation's birth—freedom and unfreedom side by side, with the enslavement of some making possible the liberty of others. An exhibition of documents and artifacts should show slavery's and freedom's many meanings at the dawn of the new nation. Doing so will make the Liberty Bell's own story ring loud and true." "A free people," we concluded, "dare not bury evidence or silence long-forgotten African Americans, whose stories make the meaning of the Liberty Bell and the Revolution real and palpable, here and abroad." We also pled for exhibits that would document the battery of servants and slaves who made the lives of the President and the First Lady comfortable, how they "prepared the meals for incessant banquets for congressmen and dignitaries, drove the founding father and his family around the city in their carriages, washed their clothes, groomed their hair, tended their horses, cleaned the house, chopped the wood, and much more." "The Park Service," we concluded, "must deliver on its promise that these stories will not be buried."

In the Easter Sunday issue, the Inquirer also ran an article by Inga Saffron about how the Park Service was marginalizing the President's House and its thought-provoking history. Chiding the Park Service for its announced plan to have a "wayside panel" that would point out where the executive mansion stood during the presidencies of Washington and Adams, Saffron asked bitingy: "Would the Park Service make do with a sign on the site where the Declaration of Independence was signed and the Constitution written? Where the battle of Yorktown was fought?" Struggling to defend the interpretive plan for the new Liberty Bell exhibits, Superintendent Martha Aikens argued that NPS rangers often spoke of slaveholding in Philadelphia (especially at the infrequently visited Morris-Deschler House in Germantown, eight miles from the city center) but conceded only that "public interest" convinced her that INHP could mark the sidewalk along Market Street to indicate that the President's House had stood there and that "people in the household, including Washington's slaves," toiled at this location. 20

From this point forward, the key was to move from publicity to concrete results that would go far beyond what Aikens promised. To this end,
Randall Miller convened the Ad Hoc Historians on April 8, 2002, for a brown bag lunch at the Library Company of Philadelphia, where the group agreed to reach out directly to Aikens to meet and discuss what we regarded as a flawed plan. "The planned interpretation of the Liberty Bell's new site, as we understand it," we wrote in a letter to her a week later,

will focus on the Liberty Bell, its history, and its significance as a national icon symbolizing the commitment to freedom in America. But the Liberty Bell story so envisioned speaks mostly to the achievement of American independence and the devotion to the ideal of freedom thereafter. This does not address the braided historical relationship between freedom and slavery, how interdependent they were, and how the freedom of some was built upon the unfreedom of others. Moreover this singular focus on liberty as the achievement of white Americans leaves African Americans out of the story, except as objects of others' benevolence and concern. The issue of how white freedom lived cheek by jowl with slavery, and how this played itself out on the now sacred ground of the Independence Hall area (including the presidential house in the 1790s), is what has occasioned so much public interest and comment.21

We ended our letter with a request for the interpretive plan, which we had not been able to pry from her office.

Protracted negotiations with the Park Service leaders now ensued. Three stages evolved. First, INHP's leaders, under a barrage of negative press commentary (intensified by a long New York Times article on April 20), continued its finger-in-the-dike approach.22 On April 20, Aikens released a brief description of the ten exhibit zones designed to interpret the Liberty Bell inside the pavilion, our group's first glimpse of the interpretive plan. Two days later, she invited five of our ad hoc group to talk about Zone 6, which included a brief mention of slavery and the antebellum abolitionists' use of the bell (calling it "the Liberty Bell" for the first time). The superintendent remained silent on giving us access to the script, would not agree to discuss the exhibit in its entirety, and warned that the Park Service would not contemplate any major changes inside the pavilion because "the plans and specifications for the Liberty Bell Center were completed on March 22, 2002." However, she invited us to discuss possi-
ble interpretations of the President’s House site, where people would line up to enter the Liberty Bell Pavilion. Drafting a second letter for the ad hoc group, Miller and I asked again for the interpretive plan, noted that we did not believe it had ever received non-NPS scholarly review, suggested that the bidding process for constructing the exhibits should be suspended while the plan was being fully reviewed and revised, and resisted the implication that all interpretations of the site of the pavilion should be relegated to curbside or wayside panels rather than in the Liberty Bell Center itself. Delivered on April 25, this letter urged that at the meeting the slavery issue should be addressed as it related to the entire exhibition rather than to a single exhibit panel on slavery inside the pavilion.

Second, the intervention of the NPS’s chief historian, Dwight Pitcaithley, became crucially important. When he first saw the interpretative plan, Pitcaithley was dismayed to find a chest-thumping, celebratory script, “an exhibit to make people feel good but not to think,” an exhibition that “would be an embarrassment if it went up,” and one that “works exactly against NPS’s new thinking.” With these indictments, Pitcaithley urged Aikens to rethink the exhibits along lines advocated by the Ad Hoc Historians. “The potential for interpreting Washington’s residence and slavery on the site,” he counseled, “presents the National Park Service with several exciting opportunities.” The President’s House, he prodded, should be explained and interpreted, and “the juxtaposition of slave quarters (George Washington’s slave quarters, no less) and the Liberty Bell” provided “some stirring interpretive possibilities.”

The contradiction in the founding of the country between freedom and slavery becomes palpable when one actually crosses through a slave quarters site when entering a shrine to a major symbol of the abolition movement. . . . How better to establish the proper historical context for understanding the Liberty Bell than by talking about the institution of slavery? And not the institution as generalized phenomenon, but as lived by George Washington’s own slaves. The fact that Washington’s slaves Hercules and Oney Judge sought and gained freedom from this very spot gives us interpretive opportunities other historic sites can only long for. This juxtaposition is an interpretive gift that can make the Liberty Bell “experience” much more meaningful to the visiting public. We will have missed a real educational opportunity if we do not act on this possibility.
Shuttling between Washington and Philadelphia, Pitcaithley's meetings with the INHP staff and its NPS eastern regional supervisors began to bear fruit. In a summary of his criticisms of the exhibition text, he explained that "if the exhibit only celebrates the Bell, the visitor will learn nothing about the meaning of liberty as it played out in this country over the last one hundred and fifty years or so." Pitcaithley cautioned,

The text assumes that the inspirational message of the Bell has resulted in a steady progression of the expansion of liberty throughout the United States and the world. . . . It assumes there is only one interpretation of the message. . . . How much more interesting (and useful) the exhibit would be if it acknowledged that the "liberty road" has been filled with potholes and obstacles and while the United States has a more expansive definition of freedom and liberty than it did one hundred or even fifty years ago, the struggle is not over. There is a long tradition of assumed freedoms sliding backward on occasion.

Providing many detailed examples, Pitcaithley concluded:

The complexity found in the history of liberty in this country is not to be found in this exhibit. . . . The exhibit should make people think about the concept of liberty, not just feel good about it. Quality interpretation provides revelation, offers provocation, and demonstrates relationships. . . . There is much work to be done on this exhibit before it is ready for public display.

Pitcaithley left the meeting encouraged that his advice to reconsider the plan and collaborate with the historians who had intervened in the matter would bring results.

This brought us to the third stage of the process: many months of parleying and jockeying. At 9 a.m. on May 13, 2002, a group of twenty met at the Independence Visitor Center, a stone's throw from where the Liberty Bell pavilion would shortly begin to rise. The Park Service enlisted Tom Tankersley, an interpretive planner for the Harpers Ferry National Historic Park Design Center, as facilitator; Dwight Pitcaithley, who came up again from Washington; Russell Smith, chief of interpretation for the NPS northeast region; key staff members of INHP; and David Hollen-
berg, associate northeast regional director, representing director Marie Rust.\(^{28}\) Five of our group—Rosalind Remer, Randall Miller, Ed Lawler, Charlene Mires, and Stephanie Wolf—filed into the room. Showing that the furor over the Liberty Bell exhibits had become a potent political issue, Congressman Robert Brady had sent three representatives, including Charles Blockson, an African American historian at Temple University.

With the air fairly crackling with electricity, an INHP staffer gave a PowerPoint walk through the much-guarded interpretive plan. As facilitator, Tankersley then tried to lay down narrowly defined ground rules so as to limit the discussion to only a small part of the exhibition. But this circle-the-wagons approach fell apart. Blockson opened by questioning the accuracy of the present interpretive materials on slavery being sold at the Visitor Center. Karen Warrington, representing Congressman Brady, challenged the governing philosophy of the exhibit. Russell Smith argued for a discussion of \textit{all} issues rather than confining comments to a single panel on slavery, and urged an integrated discussion on slavery and the President's House rather than having them sit as separate issues. Remer spoke at length about why a segregated, isolated slavery panel would ghettoize the subject and miss the opportunity to raise more compelling interpretive issues of freedom and unfreedom. After a coffee break—really a chance for Pitcaithley to play the role of Metternich by huddling with recalcitrant INHP staffers—the dynamics of the meeting changed. The door, which previously had been open just a crack, was now flung wide open. In what Randall Miller characterized as an "honest and intelligent discussion," the INHP leadership agreed that (1) the meaning of freedom in a democracy built on slave foundations would be a central theme in the exhibit; (2) that the treatment of the President's House outside the pavilion would be interpreted with attention to the slaves and servants who toiled there; and (3) that the Park Service people would mull over all ideas brought forward in order to modify and improve the script, which would then be sent out for review by noted scholars of the African American experience and the history of liberty in America. David Hollenberg pledged that "we are looking at the bell as a symbol of an ongoing continuous struggle for liberty rather than [a symbol] of liberty attained."\(^{29}\)

Within days INHP leaders contacted a group of highly respected his-
torians to review the revised exhibit script as soon as it was available—precisely the kind of collaboration with scholars that the Ad Hoc Historians had urged. Stephan Salisbury, of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, optimistically wrote on May 14 that the daylong meeting "effectively ended the controversy over the depiction of slavery at Independence National Historical Park," as park officials agreed that the "story of the Liberty Bell will acknowledge the nation's complex and contradictory roots in freedom and slavery"—a "major departure from the current bell story told by park rangers, which focuses almost exclusively on the bell's presence during the Revolutionary War era." *Inquirer* columnist Acel Moore was less sanguine, opining that the controversy was far from over and that "the battle for a more accurate account at the park concerning African American history and the role of the bell in the abolitionist movement ... may just be beginning." Letters continued to fill the op-ed pages of the *Inquirer*, reinforced by another Salisbury article, which floated rumors of an African American protest at the site of the new Liberty Bell Center on July 4, 2002.31

INHP called another summit meeting for May 29–30 to digest and refine the frantic work of their internal group to shore up their exhibition. Rosalind Remer represented the Ad Hoc Historians (which was allowed only one representative), but now the working group included two key figures who had not helped plan the exhibits. The NPS insider was Martin Blatt, former head of the NPS historic site at the textile mill village at Lowell, Massachusetts, and now chief of cultural resources for Boston National Historical Park. The outsider was Edward Linenthal, veteran of many contests over historical memory and commemoration at NPS sites, author of several books on the subject, and coeditor of *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*. Pitcaithley, Russell Smith, and a full array of INHP staffers were present, including the African American supervisory ranger, Joseph Becton, who had never been consulted in the development of the interpretive plan.

Pinned up on the walls of the meeting room were blown-up images with large-print captions as well as the text that would guide visitors through the ten zones or panel displays. The task at hand was to rewrite the script in order to implement the reconceptualization agreed to at the May 13 meeting. The comments of Blatt, Linenthal, and Columbia University historian Eric Foner, who had been asked to review the original
script, were read to the group. Inasmuch as their comments aligned with Pitcaithley's criticisms, it was now agreed that the breathless and uncomplicated prose relating the history of freedom that the bell symbolized should be toned down, while the issue of freedom intertwined with slavery was given a central place in the interpretation. Now the group split into teams of two in order to tackle the subheads, new images, fresh text, and captions for each zone. In sum, INHP abandoned the attempt to restrict changes to one panel and work only around the edges of the original script. Working at breakneck speed, the group overhauled five of the ten zones in two days on May 29–30, rewriting the text, modifying captions, and dropping some images while adding others. For example, INHP agreed to adopt my suggestion to use a slave's head harness with a bell that would ring if the slave took flight—what might be called an “unfreedom bell” intended to thwart those seeking freedom. In many other cases, mindful of the need to use as many images already contracted for as possible, INHP agreed to new text designed to give visitors varying interpretive readings of an artifact rather than simply an informational caption.

Here is one example. In the initially planned exhibition, in a section on how the Liberty Bell traveled around the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the INHP interpretive team had captioned four photographs of visitors at San Francisco's 1915 Panama-Pacific Expo with these words: “1915 scenes: men holding children up to the Bell; top-hatted men lining up for a picture at the Bell; Native American; Thomas Edison.” The new text reads: “As the Liberty Bell increased in popularity as a symbol of freedom and liberty for white Americans during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it reminded African Americans, Native Americans, other ethnic groups, and women of unrealized ideals. While the Bell traveled the nation as a symbol of liberty, intermittent race riots, lynchings, and Indian wars presented an alternative picture of freedom denied.” Under the photo of Chief Little Bear, the caption now reads: “Forced to choose between segregation and assimilation that insisted upon the suppression of their unique cultural practices, Native Americans may not have seen the hope of fair treatment and equal rights embodied in the Bell.”

Remer reported back to the Ad Hoc Historians that the two exhausting days were “extremely productive” and that she believed the result would be “an amazingly thoughtful, provocative exhibit that will ask vis-
itors to confront the complex relationship of freedom and unfreedom as part of their consideration of Liberty Bell—as–icon. The ongoing struggle for equality is central to all of the panels. The celebratory tone is gone, replaced by subtle discussion of symbols and popular uses of the past. . . . The complicated story of Reconstruction and racism is at the heart of the exhibit—in some ways, I think, a pivotal section that makes clear that all of the appropriations of the Liberty Bell image are not the same—nor do they stem from the same impulses. . . . Images that were before seen simply as celebratory odes to the bell can now be interpreted in various ways.” Remer commended the “responsiveness and openness” of the INHP staff and credited Pitcaithley’s intercession for much of this. The major conceptualization and rewriting left the INHP staff “a little nervous,” reported Remer, “but also strengthened . . . because they very clearly seemed to see that this is now an exhibit to be proud of, rather than one to hide from scholarly scrutiny.”

A team of INHP staffers, including Doris Fanelli, Cokey Toogood, and Becton, none of whom had seen the original script, produced a much-revised script in several weeks. It went out to scholars on June 14. Replies from Eric Foner, James Oliver Horton, Fath Davis Ruffins, and Spencer Crew brought further changes, and then the script went to the Ad Hoc Historians group for a final review. Betokening the new spirit of collaboration with non-NPS historians, INHP accepted most of the changes and wove them into the final text. The involvement of political, scholarly, and public groups that occurred in these action-packed months was, in effect, what the General Management Plan of 1997 had promised. The result after a half year of controversy was that “the paradox of slavery in a land of the free will be a major exhibition theme when the $12.6 million Liberty Bell Center . . . opens next spring,” as the Inquirer reported on August 11. “The text of the exhibition . . . has been completely reworked over the last three months and is nearing completion, according to NPS officials.”

With general agreement on the Liberty Bell exhibits, the focus now shifted outside—to the site of the President’s House and its interpretation. Giving special urgency to addressing how INHP might incorporate interpretation of the executive mansion and its inhabitants was the involvement of black Philadelphians, who constitute about half the city’s population. On July 4, 2002, hundreds of African Americans demon-
strated at the Liberty Bell site, while the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition, headed by lawyer Michael Coard, organized a letter-writing campaign and a petition with several thousand signatures that called for a monument to commemorate Washington’s slaves. The African People’s Solidarity Committee wanted more discussion of slavery inside the pavilion, much along the lines that the Ad Hoc Historians had recommended. In what would turn out to be a key move, Congressman Chaka Fattah introduced an amendment to the 2003 budget of the Department of the Interior requiring that the Park Service report to Congress about an appropriate commemoration of the President’s House and the slaves who toiled there. The Appropriations Committee, which oversees the National Park Service, voted unanimously for the amendment. Shortly, the Multicultural Affairs Congress, a division of the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau, joined the call for a “prominent monument or memorial” fixing in the public memory the contributions of Washington’s slaves to the early years of the new republic and making Philadelphia a premier destination for African American visitors. The City Council followed suit with a resolution endorsing this idea.35

The site of the President’s House is where crowds were expected to stand while waiting to see the sacred bell, in effect a captive audience for ranger presentations. Dwight Pitcaithley had argued that this was a rare interpretive opportunity where rangers could show the outlines of the Morris house and relate stories of the First Families—the Washingtons and Adamses—who lived there, along with the slaves and servants. The power of the place was inarguable. What Park Service ranger would not want to stand on this history-drenched site and tell stories to knots of visitors waiting to enter the pavilion? I fantasized that I was starting a new career as an INHP ranger. “Come over here,” I would say to a group of overseas visitors. “Here the first two presidents wrestled with how the infant United States would deal with the French Revolution, which divided Philadelphians, like the nation at large, into warring camps. On this spot he signed orders for a federal army to march west to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794.” “Step right here,” I would tell a group of schoolchildren. “Just over where you are standing, Nelly Custis, on the second floor of the executive mansion, helped her grandmother prepare for bed and kneeled in prayer with Martha Washington and sang her to sleep.” “Now come a few yards this way,” my fellow ranger would tell a
group of African American visitors. “From this spot, George Washington watched white planters, who were fleeing the black revolution in Haiti in the early 1790s, come up Market Street after tumbling off ships a few blocks east of here with scores of slaves in tow. These French-speaking slaves would soon be free in Philadelphia, as the 1780 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery required, and many would worship at the city’s Catholic churches, giving St. Joseph’s and Holy Trinity bilingual congregations and new cuisines.” When another ranger spotted visitors from Oklahoma, he would say, “Please step right here, good people. You are standing just over the place where the young John Quincy Adams sat in the mansion’s front hall with President Washington and seventeen visiting Chickasaw chiefs, passing a ceremonial peace pipe around the circle.”

Most compelling of all, perhaps, are the stories rangers could tell of two prized slaves who lived in the executive mansion. Oney Judge, born of an enslaved Mount Vernon seamstress and sired by a white indentured servant from Leeds, England, had served Martha Washington since 1784, when the young mixed-race girl was about ten years of age. Martha Washington brought her to Philadelphia in 1790, when Oney was sixteen. Six years later, in 1796, her privileged position in the Washington household notwithstanding, she fled the president’s mansion just before the Washingtons were ready to return to Mount Vernon for summer recess.36 Her days of helping the First Lady powder up for levees and state functions, running errands for her, and accompanying her on visits to the wives of other political and diplomatic leaders were now at an end. Many years later she recalled to a journalist from the Granite Freeman, a New Hampshire abolitionist paper, “I had friends among the colored people of Philadelphia, had my things carried there [to a waiting ship] before hand, and left while [the Washingtons] were at dinner.”37

The Washingtons railed at the ingratitude of Oney Judge fleeing slavery—“without the least provocation,” as Washington wrote. Oney’s “thirst for compleat freedom,” as she called it, did not register with the president. The Washingtons sent agents to track her down, cuff her, and bring her back. Hunted down, Oney sent word that if guaranteed freedom, she would return out of affection for the Washington family. The First Family refused, fearing that rewarding her flight from slavery with a grant of freedom would set a dangerous precedent among their several hundred slaves. At that, Oney Judge swore she “should rather suffer
death than return to slavery.” When Washington persisted, his agent in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, reported in September 1796 that “popular opinion here is in favor of universal freedom,” which made it difficult for him to seize and shackle Oney. Two years later, the Washington family was still trying to snag Martha’s ingrate chambermaid by sending George’s nephew, Burwell Bassett, after her. The Washingtons conducted all their attempts to capture her surreptitiously because they wanted no public knowledge, in the middle of the new nation’s fierce debates over the liberté, égalité, and fraternité of the French Revolution, about their attempts to quash Oney’s quest for freedom. Not until Washington’s death in 1799 could Oney feel some measure of safety. By now she was married to a man named Staines, had a baby, and had put roots down in New Hampshire, where she lived out her life, poor but free.38

Just as the site on which the new Liberty Bell Pavilion was rising had been a stage for a personal declaration of independence by a twenty-two-year-old enslaved woman, it became so again nine months after her escape, just as the Washingtons were leaving Philadelphia for good to take up life as private citizens on their beloved Mount Vernon plantation. To the Washingtons, their prize cook, Hercules, enjoyed a special status in the executive mansion, one that in their view should have made him immune to the fever for freedom. Celebrated for being “as highly accomplished and proficient in the culinary art as could be found in the United States,” the handsome, well-appointed chef had prepared countless state dinners over the ten years he had been with them, as well as the daily family meals.39 But Hercules, like Oney Judge, had mingled with numerous free black Philadelphians, who by this time had built two churches of their own, started schools and mutual aid societies, carved out niches in the urban economy, purchased homes, and begun mounting attacks on the fortress of slavery.40

Hercules slipped away from the President’s House, melted into the countryside, reached New York, and outwitted all of Washington’s attempts to capture him. When a visitor to Mount Vernon asked Hercules’s six-year-old daughter whether she was brokenhearted at the prospect of never seeing her father again, she replied, “Oh sir! I am very glad because he is free now.” All that Washington had feared since first arriving in Philadelphia was being realized. Writing his secretary Tobias Lear in 1791, he opined that he did not think his slaves “would be benefited” by
achieving freedom, "yet the idea of freedom might be too great a temptation to resist," and breathing the free air of Philadelphia, where the pesky Quakers were helping enslaved Pennsylvanians break their shackles, might "make them insolent in a state of slavery." Near the end of his presidency, and still grating at Oney Judge’s flight, he ordered his secretary to get his slaves out of Philadelphia and back to Mount Vernon. "I wish to have it accomplished under a pretext that may deceive both them and the public," he wrote. "I request that these sentiments and this advice may be known to none but yourself and Mrs. Washington." 41

In the fall of 2002, while articles, op-ed essays, editorials, and letters to the editor continued to pepper Philadelphia newspapers, 42 INHP and Eastern regional staffers agreed that the executive mansion and the people who had lived and worked there deserved commemoration in the wide space over which visitors would walk to enter the new Liberty Bell Pavilion. Representing the Ad Hoc Historians, noted Philadelphia historian Stephanie Wolf presented three important themes that INHP had earlier dismissed as a diversion from the Liberty Bell focus and a potential source of confusion: treating the executive branch of government that has always been missing in the Independence Mall interpretations, since park rangers had no physical representation around which to work this story; interpreting the President’s House as home and office of Washington and Adams—one a slave owner, the other a protoabolitionist—as a way of expressing the split that runs through the nation’s history; and focusing on the diverse people who lived and worked at this site or in neighboring households. By late summer, INHP had commissioned two design firms—Olin Partnership of Philadelphia and Vincent Ciulla Design of Brooklyn—to work on a plan. On January 15, 2003, the Park Service unveiled plans for the outside exhibits. They included most of what the Ad Hoc Historians and other community organizations had asked for: passages condemning slavery that were stricken from drafts of the Declaration of Independence, to be inscribed on the front wall of the Visitor Center (which faces the Liberty Bell site); physical representations of the President’s House, such as a partial footprint of it, perhaps in slate; side walls detailing the presidencies of Washington and Adams; a curved black marble wall winding through the spacious approach to the pavilion, with stories of the free, unfree, and partially free people who labored there; the history of slavery in Philadelphia and in the nation at large; ma-
terial on the emergence of the free black community in Philadelphia and the struggle to dismantle the house of slavery, represented by a breach in the wall through which the enslaved figuratively escaped; and, finally, large sculptures of Oney Judge and Hercules, twelve to sixteen feet high and visible from both inside and outside the Liberty Bell Pavilion, with a contemplative garden space as well as a third sculpture interpreting enslavement and emancipation. The sculptures, if effected, would be the first federal monuments to individual slaves. The Ad Hoc Historians viewed the design as innovative, exciting, and responsive to what they had urged. Michael Coard from the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition applauded the designs, predicting that "our little Black boys and girls [will] beam with pride when they walk through Independence Mall and witness the true history of America and their brave ancestors."  

However, at a tumultuous public meeting on January 14, 2003, held at the city's African American Museum, long-simmering resentments about INHP policies and procedures, particularly harbored by African American activists, showed that the controversy over the Liberty Bell Center and the site it occupies was not over. Calls for a new design involving African American planners and architects was one issue. More fundamental was how to raise about $3 million (supplementing $1.5 million promised by the city's mayor) to transform the area outside the pavilion into a contemplative and commemorative set of exhibits. The text panels that would explain the history of the President's House, the administrations of Washington and Adams, and the lives of those who served their presidencies remained to be written once a final plan was in place. The images, such as a reproduction of the painting of Hercules that has been uncovered in a Spanish museum, still needed to be selected.  

The arrival of a new INHP superintendent, Mary Bomar, on February 10, 2003, helped clear the air as soon as it became evident that she backed the efforts to interpret fully the President's House site and was determined to work cooperatively with interested citizens and the professional groups that had formed over the past year. Though absorbed with security issues after September 11, which played havoc with the flow of visitors along Independence Mall, Bomar opened her door to parties in this dispute and participated vigorously in meetings and roundtable discussions. This led to a meeting on November 18, 2003, where scholars
pored over primary evidence about Washington's residency at the Morris mansion and attempted to determine precisely where slaves and indentured servants had been housed. After nearly four months of e-mail discussion, including the emotionally freighted matter of whether “servants hall” or “slave quarters” should be the operative term, INHP released a Consensus Document on these controverted issues.\(^6\) Where each slave and servant put his or her head down at night is an issue about which architectural historians have passionate arguments, but far more important for rangers and historians was agreement that at various locations of the property—in the garret of the main house and in several outbuildings—scores of documented slaves and servants were part of the scene and therefore should be incorporated into the narratives told about the new nation’s first White House.\(^7\)

Almost a year later, on October 30, 2004, a high-spirited overflow crowd gathered at the Visitor Center to see what thirty-two months of contention, confrontation, and cooperation had accomplished. Supervisory ranger Joseph Becton opened the session with a PowerPoint presentation about the many lives of the house that had stood at 190 High Street. Six panelists, representing a spectrum of interested parties, then summarized the progress made and the issues still unresolved.\(^8\) In a Philadelphia version of a New England town meeting, people from assorted backgrounds unburdened themselves of complaints, criticisms, and suggestions. Nobody present thought it was a tame affair. Some activists thought that INHP was still dragging its feet on the matter, but the Ad Hoc Historians believed that to have come so far was a clear victory for progressive public history. By the end of the day a firm if not quite stable consensus emerged, taking the form of a long-range and a short-range plan:

- Bomar would push ahead to obtain the $4.5 million needed to redesign and build the sculptures, walls, plaques, and other features outside the Liberty Bell Center and would urge the NPS regional director to give priority to this project. Choosing a new design firm would go forward.
- INHP agreed to mark the site, only a few feet from the door through which visitors will pass to enter the Liberty Bell Center, where Washington’s stable hands (both white servants and black slaves) were
housed. By marking the place where slaves worked and resided, visitors, remarked Michael Coard, would metaphorically "pass from the hell of slavery into the heaven of liberty."

- While awaiting the completion of the site, INHP would add two wayside panels providing temporary interpretation of the President's House site, produce a leaflet interpreting the site for visitors, schedule the PowerPoint presentation of the President's House for visitors inside the Liberty Bell Center, and offer first-person interpretations of Oney Judge Staines and Hercules.

This much agreed upon, the finish line was within view. In the pro-longed Liberty Bell contretemps, two matters seem especially salient to the practice of public history as it pertains to race and slavery. First, the media—newspapers, radio, and television—were essential in bringing about a major overhaul of INHP's plans for the Liberty Bell Center. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* and other area newspapers ran nearly two hundred stories, editorials, op-ed essays, and letters to the editors, while WHYY, Philadelphia's National Public Radio station, interviewed many of the contestants in this battle. Overwhelmingly, the media supported the efforts of the Ad Hoc Historians, Avenging the Ancestors, the Independence Hall Association, and other groups in urging a drastic rethinking of the narrow and unflinchingly heroic rendering of the Liberty Bell story and the near-exclusion of the rich African American history intimately connected to the site. Once engaged by the media, the public strongly backed the view that not to treat the conjunction of freedom and slavery in the historic heart of old Philadelphia and the nation's capital in the 1790s, and not to bring forward the stories of African Americans, indentured servants, women, and others struggling to find their place under the canopy of freedom and equal rights, ignored the wishes of the city's large African American population, the views of professional historians and institutional leaders, and the Park Service's own self-defined civic responsibilities. Some public squabbles waste time and bring about no lasting good. But this controversy, acrid at first, moved from confrontation to edgy cooperation and produced results that promise to please most Philadelphians, most visitors to Independence National Historical Park, and most National Park Service people. The outcome of this controversy
may provide an example of how academic historians, the public, and government custodians of iconic sites can work together for the benefit of all.

Second, the Liberty Bell controversy laid bare the struggles within the National Park Service to redefine its mission in the new millennium. Largely hidden from public view, the backdrop of the Liberty Bell controversy was a tension between local Park Service sites, whose leaders have plenty of muscle to protect their own turf, and broader attempts by Park Service leaders, who operate at the regional and national levels, to shepherd the NPS toward a terrain where they practice history in a more inclusive and mature way in the twenty-first century. In a step emblematic of its leaders’ broader vision, the Park Service signed a cooperative agreement in 1995 with the Organization of American Historians whereby individual sites could draw on professional historians to deepen and gain new insights on their planned interpretations. Specifically, the Park Service pledged itself to address previously neglected and controversial topics including the history of slavery and Native American history. Then in late 1999, the northeast region of NPS, to which INHP reports, became a founding member of the International Coalition of Historic Sites of Conscience. Further bulwarking this commitment was a report of the National Park System Advisory Board in 2001, which asserted that “in many ways the National Park Service is our nation’s Department of Heritage” and that its several hundred sites “should be not just recreational destinations, but springboards for personal journeys, of intellectual and cultural enrichment,” which could be nurtured only by ensuring “that the American story is told faithfully, completely, and accurately.” In December 2001, only a month before the Liberty Bell controversy erupted, northeast regional director Marie Rust launched the Civic Engagement Initiative. From a meeting in New York City came a report that quoted the advisory committee’s advice that “in a democratic society such as ours, it is important to understand the journey of liberty and justice, together with the economic, social, religious, and other forces that barred or opened the ways for our ancestors, and the distances yet to be covered.”

That was the picture at the national and regional level. But at the local level, the INHP leadership team largely ignored collaborative interpretive planning with scholars and the public (as well as with some of its own
historical researchers and park rangers). We may never know exactly why, but it can be surmised that the INHP leadership team regarded the new thinking of the Park Service, particularly the Civic Engagement Initiative, as a migraine in the making. As former INHP staffer Jill Ogline puts it, “creating dissonance for visitors is the park’s greatest fear”—a dissonance that the superintendent believed would be the result of introducing freedom’s complex and symbiotic embrace of slavery at the Liberty Bell site, both inside and outside the center. “Not only acknowledging the Liberty Bell’s proximity to a site upon which enslaved people toiled, but actually integrating that story of enslavement into the bell’s narrative of freedom might possibly be the greatest dissonance ever to be interpreted at a national historic site,” writes Ogline. Yet dissonance is not synonymous with dissatisfaction, alienation, or anger. At the national and regional levels, “an intellectually unsettled visitor” was what civic engagement proponents hoped for, a sign of a citizen in a mature democracy who would not hate the Park Service but thank its rangers for telling hidden stories, uncovering buried ironies and paradoxes, and provoking thought. At the local level, bringing the train back to the station for overhaul seemed nightmarish. Surely, it seemed, this would delay the opening of the Liberty Bell Center and invite further controversy. But because of the way the train was freighted, controversy was all but certain.

With the near-consensus on the Liberty Bell exhibits, everyone involved in public history can take satisfaction in a matter of great importance: that it is not unhealthy in a democracy that a tension between the commemorative voice and the historical voice should manifest itself in public history sites and that the National Park Service can serve American democracy best if its sites become forums, as Edward Linenthal has said, where “diverse interpretations of complex historical events can be aired or taken home to contemplate.” What started out as a nasty fight turned into a cooperative effort to revamp and extend a narrow interpretive plan. The struggle was not between historians and the National Park Service but between a local Park Service leadership team and a combination of historians, community activists, journalists, and the Park Service’s chief historian. After months of resisting, the plan’s originators came to understand that they were much in the minority and that it was best to move ahead with what David Hollenberg now describes as a “radically transformed” plan. It probably helped that the historians’ group tried not
to personalize the argument or ascribe dark motives to anyone involved. Rather, the Ad Hoc Historians argued that the Park Service staffers had underestimated the public's capacity for grasping complex issues and—most of all—did not follow the Park Service's own dictates in the form of the General Management Plan, which calls for close collaboration with historians and other scholars, as well as the public, in arriving at a final exhibition plan.

In the heat of the National History Standards controversy in 1995, historian Kenneth Moynihan asked whether the scholars' history can be the public's history. He hoped that Americans were weaning themselves from a "just-get-the-facts-straight history" and reaching an understanding that history is "an ongoing conversation that yields not final truths but an endless succession of discoveries that change our understanding not only of the past but of ourselves and of the times we live in." Ten years later, this appears to be the case in this local situation. The Liberty Bell Center opened on September 12, 2003, and an appropriation of $3.7 million has been dedicated to exhibition outside the Liberty Bell Pavilion. When the statues to Oney Judge and Hercules are unveiled on July 4, 2007, the old cracked bell will toll symbolically for all the people, and the scholars' history will become the public's history.