

## For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll? From Controversy to Collaboration

The Liberty Bell controversy, which began in late 2001, had a painful beginning but appears to be nearing a productive ending that will please most Philadelphians, most visitors to Independence National Historical Park (INHP), and most National Park Service people. Some public squabbles waste time and bring about no lasting good. This controversy has been different. By now it is widely known that the controversy centered on how INHP would present the Liberty Bell in its new pavilion built at the southeast corner of Sixth and Market streets.

Much was at stake here, and nobody knew it better than the superintendent and staff at Philadelphia's INHP. Each year several million people from home and abroad troop past the Liberty Bell and neighboring Independence Hall, eager to see one of the premier sites of America's heritage. The Liberty Bell and Independence Hall are beacons attracting people to find links between the past and the present. But what do visitors hear from Park Service rangers these days, and what will they see as they gaze at what has become one of the nation's most memorable icons—a 2,000-pound piece of unstable mixed metals molded 250 years ago that has achieved an almost global reach as a symbol of freedom and human rights? Now, with some \$13 million for a new pavilion, INHP had a new chance to rethink what the Liberty Bell meant at different points in its history and what it means today. INHP shouldered a weighty responsibility—and enjoyed a rare opportunity.

What has added to the drama in presenting the Liberty Bell anew is the chunk of real estate upon which the new 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 turns out, Masters was probably Philadelphia's largest slave owner. In 1761, after his death, his probated estate listed the names of 34 slaves. Some may have helped build the house. In 1772, Widow Masters gave 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, Benedict Arnold arrived to declare martial law and occupy the Masters–Penn mansion. Two enslaved Africans were among his household retinue of seven. Then in 1781, Robert Morris, financier of the American Revolution as he has been called, purchased the house and began to reconstruct it, probably with the labor of his several slaves (though

not including Hero, who had fled to the British just before they took the city). Thus, for the entire revolutionary period, the lives of the free and unfree mingled intimately on this piece of Philadelphia ground.

The 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 white indentured servants and enslaved African Americans. Through the work of Ed Lawler, an urban archeologist and architectural historian, who has been writing a 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, over the smokehouse, over the octagon icehouse, and over the added slave quarters apparently built by Washington with Robert Morris’s consent (Figure 1). After the Washingtons decamped for Mount Vernon, 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 Morris House, and no day went by without the services provided by the indentured servants and slaves who prepared the meals, cleaned the mansion, drove the coaches, managed the horses, tended the fireplaces, hauled the ashes, and performed countless other 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 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 at very different social levels and in severely circumscribed stations.

They speak to us, however, only if we give them voice. Here are two stories that have come, as it were, from underground—stories about life at Sixth and Market streets, stories that have found their way neither into the history books nor into the national

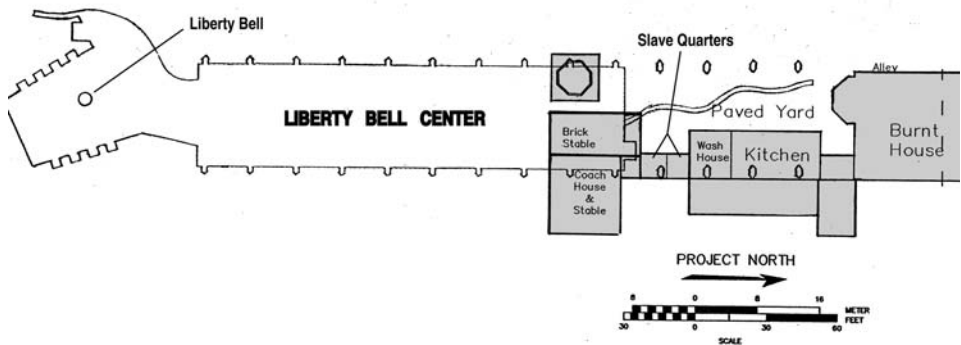


Figure 1. Ground plan of Liberty Bell Center, showing the former site of the President’s House and associated structures (shaded). National Park Service map (2002), with additions by Edward Lawler, Jr.; courtesy of [www.ushistory.org](http://www.ushistory.org).

consciousness, stories that ought to be restored to memory in the maturity of our 21st-century democracy.

Oney Judge, born of a Mount Vernon enslaved 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. Her days of helping the first lady dress and 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 of *Granite Freedom*, 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."

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 after her, to cuff her and bring her back or bargain her into returning. Hunted down, Oney sent word that, if guaranteed freedom, she would return out of affection for the Washington family. The first family refused. With several hundred of their enslaved Africans at stake, they feared that rewarding her flight from slavery with a grant of free-

dom would set "a dangerous precedent." 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. Not until Washington's death in 1799 could Oney feel some measure of safety. By now she was married, had a baby, and had put roots down in New Hampshire where she lived out her life, poor but free.

Just as the site on which the new Liberty Bell Pavilion was rising was a stage for a personal declaration of independence by a 22-year-old enslaved woman, it became so again nine months after her escape, just as the Washingtons were leaving Philadelphia to take up life as private citizens on their beloved Mount Vernon plantation. To the Washingtons, Hercules enjoyed a special status in the executive mansion, one that in their view should have made him immune to the fever for freedom. As their prize cook, he had prepared countless state dinners for a number of years. 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, even purchased homes, and began mounting attacks on the fortress of slavery.

Hercules slipped away from the president's house, melted into the

countryside, and outwitted all of Washington's attempts to capture him. When a visitor to Mount Vernon asked Hercules' six-year-old daughter whether she was broken-hearted at the prospect of never seeing her father again, she replied, "Oh sir! I am very glad because he is free now."

All of Washington's fears, since his first arrival in Philadelphia, were being realized. In 1791, he wrote to his secretary, Tobias Lear, 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 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."

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 will 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 the piece of history-soaked land the bell would occupy would be ignored. Philadelphia's National Public Radio station, WHYY, had interviewed me on December 5, 2001, by hookup in Los Angeles; and having read Ed Lawler's account of the eight slaves

from Mount Vernon who had served the first family at this site for nearly seven years (soon to be published in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*), 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 script written by INHP, 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 returned to Philadelphia on March 12, 2002, to give a talk on my *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory*, published by University of Pennsylvania Press a few months before.

After reaching Philadelphia, I called the chief of interpretation 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. The interpretative plan had been researched for several years, scholarly and public input had been solicited, and the decision had been made to keep the focus squarely on the Liberty Bell and its venerable history. Drawing attention to 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 together in deadly embrace? Wasn't the liberty of some built on the

enslavement of others? Whether true or not, he replied, “the train has left the station”—a metaphor that has become the standard rationale for those who do not want to entertain dissenting views. We are out of time, out of money, and the interpretive plan was put before the public with plenty of opportunity for comment and criticism, explained the chief of interpretation. Would the public hear not a word about how they were walking over the slave quarters Washington built as they approached the entrance of the Liberty Bell Pavilion? Would they learn nothing about how they were stepping in the footprints of Richard Penn, Benedict Arnold, Sir William Howe, Robert Morris, Abigail Adams, and a host of others? The most I could eke from him was a half-promise to consider a wayside panel out on Market Street that would note that this was the site of the Masters–Morris house that became the executive mansion of our first two presidents.

Muttering to myself as I walked to the old Friends Meetinghouse 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 collecting institutions have broadened their vision about what is collectible and as the access to the means of producing stories about the past has widened greatly.” I related how the Republican National Committee had sanctioned a 30-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. And I remembered the letter which Martha Aikens, the superintendent of INHP, showed me: from Mr. 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,” explained Johnston. “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 white I fit in the pattern.” Johnston concluded that Ranger Delmar “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.”

Here is exactly how the National Park Service was changing from my boyhood days in Philadelphia. This was why our historians’ group was convinced that serious missteps were being made. Was the process of memory-making, the process of overcoming historical amnesia, going into reverse gear at the Liberty Bell Pavilion?

At the Quaker Meetinghouse, I concluded with what I had just heard from the Park Service. One after another, those attending deplored INHP’s inattention to the Liberty Bell’s historically rich site. Up jumped Randall Miller, former editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, prolific author, and crown



jewel of the History Department at St. Joseph's University, to suggest 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 bulls-eye on the back of someone who had made useful target practice for the ultra-patriotic attack on the National History Standards in 1994–96, I agreed only on the condition that he would co-author the piece. When Miller agreed, we were off to the races. The next day, Marty Moss-Coane, host of WHYY's "Radio Times," interviewed me on *First City*, 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 began to light 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, in ways that mingled stories of freedom and unfreedom, black and white, mighty and humble, leaving the public with food for thought rather than simply a warm, cozy glow about the old cracked bell.

Fifteen minutes of discussion about the Liberty Bell on "Radio News" 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, 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." Randall Miller was quoted at length, pointing out that Park Service 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 that "[m]aybe 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" about the Morris–Washington house along with 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 organized a committee of well-known historians and Philadelphia 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 arise. Among them were Charlene Mires, an American historian at Villanova University and author of a soon-to-be-published history of Independence Hall, who told the press about how not only the president's house was involved with slavery but that Independence Hall itself was where runaway 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."

Upping the ante, the *Inquirer's* March 27 lead editorial was titled "Freedom & Slavery, Just as they coexisted in the 1700s, both must be part of Liberty Bell's story." 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."

And then the *Inquirer* published an op-ed piece that Randall Miller and I wrote on Easter Sunday, March 31, along with an essay by Charlene Mires. 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*.

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."

From this point forward, the key was to move from publicity to concrete results. To this end, we asked INHP Superintendent Martha Aikens to meet with us to 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, "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.” 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 and intensified by a long *New York Times* article on April 20, tried a finger-in-the-dike approach. In late April, Superintendent Aikens released a brief description—our first glimpse of the interpretive plan—of the ten zones planned to interpret the Liberty Bell inside the pavilion and invited five of our ad hoc historians’ group to review *one* panel on slavery that they agreed to fit into one of the ten exhibit zones. But the superintendent denied us access to the script sent out for bids, would not agree to consider all ten zones of the exhibits, 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 possible interpretations of the President’s House site, where people will line up to enter the Liberty Bell Pavilion.

Second, the intervention of 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 exhibit that “would be an embarrassment if it went up,” and one that “works exactly

against NPS’s new thinking,” as he wrote. Pitcaithley now wrote Superintendent Aikens urging an approach similar to that advocated by our ad hoc group. “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,” he continued, “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 regional-office supervisors bore fruit. This brought us to the third stage of the process: many months of parleying and jockeying. During this period,



Superintendent Aikens had delegated her responsibilities to Deputy Superintendent Dennis Reidenbach because she was departing for a new NPS assignment. At meetings with our group on May 13, 2002, with the air fairly crackling with electricity and Pitcaithley playing the role of Metternich, the *entire* exhibit, not just one panel in one of ten zones, was put on the table for discussion, contemplation, and revision. The door that had been opened just a crack was now flung wide open. It was agreed that the meaning of freedom in a democracy built on slave foundations would be a central theme in the exhibit; that the treatment of the President's House outside the pavilion would be interpreted with attention to the enslaved Africans and indentured servants who toiled there; and that the Park Service would rewrite the script and send it out for review by noted scholars of the African American experience and the history of liberty in America. David Hollenberg, Associate Northeast Regional Director of the Park Service, pledged that "we are looking at the bell as a symbol of an ongoing continuous struggle for liberty rather than [as a symbol] of liberty attained."

In two days in late May 2002, the Liberty Bell exhibits were overhauled. Five of the ten zones were reorganized, rescripted, and changed to drop some images while adding others. For example, INHP agreed to adopt my suggestion to use a slave head harness with a bell that announced slave 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 exhibit, in a section on how the Liberty Bell traveled around the country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the INHP interpretive team juxtaposed four photographs of visitors at San Francisco's 1915 Panama-Pacific Expo, with a caption reading: "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 19th 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 Indians wars presented an alternative picture of freedom denied." Under the photo of Chief Little Bear, the caption now read: "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."

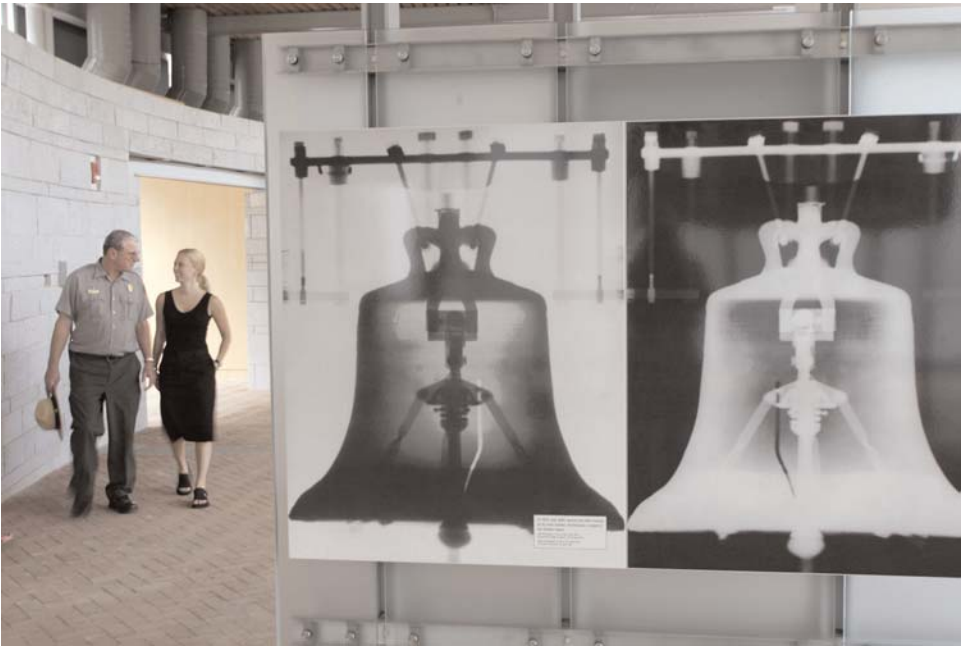
In sum, INHP abandoned the attempt to restrict changes to one zone and work only around the edges of the original script. Rosalind Remer, historian at Moravian College and director of museum planning and programming at the National Constitution Center from 1997 to 1999, reported back to our committee that after two exhausting days "an amazingly thoughtful, provocative exhibit" was being hammered out, one "that will ask visitors 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.” The major reconceptualization 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 IHNP staffers, including Doris Fanelli, Coxey Toogood, and Joe Becton, none of whom had been given an opportunity to help shape the original script, produced a much-revised script, which then went out to a brace of scholars, just as the Park Service’s general management plan requires. Replies brought further changes to the script, which was then on its way toward a final review, with our ad hoc historians’ group involved. “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,” reported the *Inquirer* 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.” The completion would take another ten weeks. After INHP mounted the new

script on their website, complete with most of the images, our group offered small but important changes in the wording of what several million visitors each year would read. Betokening the new spirit of collaboration with non-NPS historians, most of the changes were accepted and woven into the nearly final text (see Figures 2 and 3).

What gave special urgency to revising the Liberty Bell exhibit and incorporating site interpretation into it was the involvement of black Philadelphians, who represent about half the city’s population. On July 3, 2002, hundreds of African Americans demonstrated 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, though much along the lines that our committee was pursuing. 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 NPS budget, voted unanimously for the Fattah 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



Figures 2–3. New exhibits at the Liberty Bell Center. Photos by R. Kennedy for the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Association.

Philadelphia a premier destination for African American visitors. The city council followed suit with a resolution endorsing this idea.

With general agreement on what

would be seen inside the Liberty Bell Pavilion, the focus now shifted *outside*—to the site of the President’s House and its interpretation. The power of the place—some 12,000

square feet—is enormous. 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 fantasize that I am starting a new career as an INHP ranger. “Come over here,” I 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.” “Step right here,” I tell a group of school children. “Just over where you are standing, on the second floor, Nelly Custis helped her grandmother, Martha Washington, two centuries ago, preparing for bed and kneeling in prayer with the first lady and singing her grandmother to sleep.” “Now come a few yards this way,” I tell a group of African American visitors. “From this spot, George Washington watched white slave planters, who were fleeing the black revolution in Haiti in the early 1790s, 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 gradual abolition act of 1780 required, and many would worship at the city’s Catholic churches.” When I see some visitors from Oklahoma, I say: “Please stand right here, good people. You are standing just over the place where the young John Quincy Adams sat in the front hall with President Washington and seventeen visiting Chickasaw chiefs, passing a ceremonial peace pipe around the circle.”

In the end, INHP and Northeast Region staffers agreed that the executive mansion and the people who lived and worked there deserved commem-

oration. Representing our historians’ group, Professor Stephanie Wolf presented three important themes that INHP had earlier dismissed as a diversion and source of confusion from the Liberty Bell focus: the need to make visible the executive branch of government that has always been missing in the Independence Mall interpretation since park rangers had no physical representation around which to work this interpretation; the need to interpret the president’s house as home and office of Washington and Adams—the one a slave owner, the other a proto-abolitionist—as a way of expressing the split that runs through the nation’s history; and the need to focus on the many and 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 all of what we and other community organizations had asked for, and even more: (1) inscriptions of passages condemning slavery that were stricken from drafts of the Declaration of Independence on the front wall of the visitor center (which faces the Liberty Bell site); (2) physical representations of the President’s House—a partial footprint of it, perhaps in slate; (3) side walls detailing the presidencies of Washington and Adams; (4) 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; (5) the history of slavery in Philadelphia and in the nation at large; (6) material on the emergence of the free black com-

munity 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 (7) large sculptures of Oney Judge and Hercules, 12–16 feet high and visible from both inside and outside the site, with a contemplative garden space as well as a third sculpture interpreting enslavement and emancipation. In the view of our ad hoc historians' group, the design was innovative, exciting, and responsive to what we and the Park Service's chief historian 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."

The story of the Liberty Bell Pavilion and the site it occupies is not quite over. Money must be raised to transform the 12,000 square feet outside the pavilion into a contemplative and commemorative set of exhibits. The design of the exhibits—whether statues, symbolic walls, plaques—needs final approval. The "words on the walls" that will explain the President's House, the administrations of Washington and Adams, and the lives of those who served there have yet to be written. The images, such as the painting of Hercules that has been uncovered in a Spanish museum, still need to be selected. But the process for reaching the finish line is in place, and the finish line is within view. The new superintendent of INHP, Mary Bomar, has opened her door to interested parties to this dispute and has participated vigorously in several meetings and roundtable discussions, where she has given

encouragement to most of the parties concerned with her open-mindedness and commitment to see this important presentation of history through to a satisfactory conclusion.

Here are the two most salient points that marked the Liberty Bell contretemps and distinguish it from the history wars of the early 1990s. Almost all such squabbles in recent years involve an old question: whose story gets told, who gets to speak, and who has a say-so on stimulating—or anaesthetizing—public memory? First, the media—whether newspapers, radio, or television—was overwhelmingly opposed to the narrow and unflinchingly heroic story of the Liberty Bell and the exclusion of the rich history about the site on which it will rest. In particular, 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, seemed offensive and mistaken. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran about a dozen stories, three editorials, at least six op-ed essays, and dozens of letters to the editors, while WHYY, Philadelphia's National Public Radio station, interviewed many of the contestants in this battle. Because of this mini-media blitz Park Service staffers came to recognize they were missing a major opportunity in telling a story, laced with paradox and ambiguity, worthy of the American democracy in what is destined to become one of the most visited historic sites in the world.

Second, the leadership team at INHP mistakenly lost faith in collaborative interpretive planning with



scholars and the public, as well as with some of its talented historical researchers and park rangers. We may never know exactly why. Yet the train that had left the station was made to return for an overhaul. Something of great importance to those involved in public history finally gained acceptance all around the table where the cards were dealt: 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 the American democracy best if its sites become forums, as historian 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 a misguided interpretive plan. The struggle was not between historians and the National Park Service but between a handful of Park Service officials and a combination of historians, the public, media moguls, the Park Service chief historian. After several months of resistance, the originators of the plan to commemorate and interpret the Liberty Bell 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, we 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, namely 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 and 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.” Eight years later, this appears to be the case—at least here. When the Liberty Bell Center opened in October 2003, the old cracked bell began to toll symbolically for all the people, and the scholars’ history became the public’s history.

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