

Forging Partnerships, Creating Contexts

Interpreting controversial aspects of American history and culture poses a significant challenge to historians. Standing on the front lines of public history, interpreters at the National Park Service are faced with this challenge every day.

At several historical sites managed by the National Park Service, this dilemma is particularly clear. Interpreters are grappling with questions about how to tell the history of plantations which were homes to prominent Americans including George Washington's Birthplace and Robert E. Lee's home. While these sites were established to memorialize the famous men who lived there they were also homes to many others, including slaves. An ongoing question for the National Park Service is how to interpret the story of these inhabitants in exhibits and tours? How much of the site's story should be devoted to them? How can their stories be interwoven with those of their white owners?

One of the ways in which National Park Service historians are approaching these questions is by drawing on the academic specialization of faculty and graduate students at The George Washington University. Members of the American Studies Department there produced a lengthy bibliographic essay for the Park Service on slavery and the South.

The sites that participated in the project were Hampton National Historic Site in Towson, Maryland; Booker T. Washington National Monument in Hardy, Virginia; George Washington Birthplace National Monument in Washington's

Birthplace, Virginia; and Arlington House (the Robert E. Lee Memorial), in Arlington, Virginia. All four are well aware that slavery existed on their sites, and currently include discussions of slavery in their tours and presentations. However, most staff agreed they would benefit from a consolidated source of background information on African-American history.

The American Studies team observed the specific problems the National Park Service encounters in interpreting slavery. Because it confronts all Americans with the conflicts and paradoxes of their heritage, the interpretation of slavery is controversial. These challenges are evident in the interpretive language at some sites. For instance, the term "servant" instead of "slave" has been used. However, interpreters realize that this euphemism misrepresents the experience of all inhabitants at the site.

NPS interpreters wrestle with the issue of using the language of the former inhabitants—whose lives they are interpreting—versus using the terminology of current historical scholarship. If slave owners consistently referred to their slaves as servants, which term should interpreters use? If a landowner did not call his or her estate a plantation, but the site fits the modern definition of the term, what should they call it?

Such matters are compounded by the popular notions held by visitors; for example, some Park Service staff are reluctant to use the term "plantation," believing that the word conjures up images of "Gone with the Wind" cotton plantations. Nonetheless, this problem can be seen as an opportunity to re-educate visitors about the diversity of southern plantations and farms. These dilemmas remain an ongoing challenge.

One of the main challenges for the American Studies team was to make a large body of scholarship useful to each site which, although linked by the practice of slavery, differ widely in size and interpretive focus. We attempted this by tailoring specific aspects of the bibliographic essay directly to the sites; for example, general information about the architecture and landscape of plantations and farms in the South and Mid-Atlantic region was linked to specific buildings and landscape features at each site. We also discussed studies in material culture, slave family and domestic life, slave and free black communities, and Reconstruction in the South while making

George Washington Birthplace National Monument, VA. NPS photo.





Hampton National Historic Site in Towson, MD. NPS photo.

connections between the scholarship of these topics and each site's history.

Many valuable lessons were learned from this experience. The most favorable reaction came from the Booker T. Washington site in which the team worked on a specific project with a tangible outcome.

Members of the American Studies team reviewed label text for a new exhibit and provided substantive suggestions for revision. As a result of this collaborative effort on a specific aspect of the site's interpretation, the uses of the assessment and essay were readily apparent. This experience may signal a useful way to structure future collaborations between the National Park Service and The George Washington University.

National Park Service sites are faced with practical problems in seeking to revise and expand interpretive programs; they are often under-staffed and short of funds. This is why collaborative efforts such as our project provide a unique oppor-

tunity for both the Park Service and members of the academy. By forging extensive relations with the Park Service, we gain the practical experience of interpreting history to the public at the same time that we assist the National Park Service in its effort to teach history grounded in the best and most current scholarship. We hope to continue to develop professional partnerships with these and other sites to enhance historical interpretation at the National Park Service.

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African-American History at Independence NHP

Independence National Historical Park recently had the opportunity to incorporate African-American history into its interpretive program. To commemorate the bicentennial of the devastating yellow fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia in the summer of 1793, the park highlighted the heroic volunteer efforts of two local African-American leaders—Absolom Jones and Richard Allen. Both preachers, Jones and Allen called on their community to nurse the sick and bury the dead. They labored in a climate of public panic and revulsion, because yellow fever, which brought on black bile vomiting, was generally considered highly contagious. At first thought to be immune, the black volunteers succumbed with whites to the mosquito-borne virus.

After the epidemic ceased in November, the African community's heroic efforts received little recognition. In fact, the first published account of

the epidemic that month accused some of the black nurses of stealing from their patients and gouging them with high prices. Richard Allen and Absolom Jones countered by publishing their own account, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793*, which included a refutation of the charges.

Independence National Historical Park republished the Jones and Allen *Narrative* and mounted an exhibit explaining the strategic role black Americans played during the crisis in the nation's capital. The park invited members of local institutions that dated back to 1793 and had associations with the epidemic, including representatives from the nation's first African Methodist Episcopal church, to share in a city-wide observation of its bicentennial. The park also featured the story in special tours, drawing on a letter in its own collections written by an apprentice who,