PRESENTING RACE AND SLAVERY AT HISTORIC SITES

Arlington House, Robert E. Lee National Memorial

A Cooperative Research Project between the National Park Service and the Center for the Study of Public Culture and Public History of The George Washington University

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1. Project Description and Objectives

The history of race relations and slavery in the United States is a sensitive topic, hotly debated in the public realm and continually contested among academics. Its interpretation at historic sites presents significant challenges to public historians and the frontline staff who are charged with presenting the nation's history. Information gathered from face-to-face interviews with visitors and historic site interpreters about race and slavery provides a varied perspective on ways in which to enhance the overall presentation of the topic.

The "Presenting Race and Slavery at Historic Sites" project analyzes the presentation and interpretation of the various issues concerning slavery and race at three units of the national park system: the Robert E. Lee Memorial/Arlington House in Arlington, Virginia; Frederick Douglass National Historic Site in Washington, DC; and Manassas National Battlefield Park in Virginia. The purpose of the project is to examine how race and slavery are interpreted, represented, and displayed at historic sites. This research project supplies essential primary information that will provide an opportunity for useful dialogue among historians, interpreters, and academics on ways to enhance historical presentations.

The "Presenting Race and Slavery at Historic Sites" project is a research study conducted under a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and George Washington University and is an extension of previous independent surveys under the university's Center for the Study of Public Culture and Public History. This installment of surveys at Arlington House was conducted during March 2004 to June 2004.

2. Methodology

The data for this analysis was collected by three methods: 1) members of the research project team observed and recorded current interpretation practices at Arlington House, 2) researchers interviewed Arlington House staff, and 3) researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with visitors.

The bulk of the research was compiled through the face-to-face interviews with visitors during which 60 site visitors voiced their own perceptions of how race and slavery are presented by Arlington House. After initial attempts to record the visitors with an audio device, the method was eschewed in favor of a two-page written survey in which the visitors responded to written questions and filled out the surveys for themselves and without the aid of others. This method was favored in part due to its overall efficiency as multiple visitors could be interviewed at the same time. Also this method provided an assurance of certainty for questions to be asked and answered, given that the survey questions were precisely focused on the topics. These three- to fiveminute interviews were collected exclusively on the grounds of the property as visitors exited the Main House and entered the area near the Slave Quarters and Bookstore. After visiting these additional buildings, visitors were approached by an interviewer and asked if they were willing to take part in a survey to document their experience at the Arlington House and how they felt race and slavery were presented there. The questions were designed to inquire about the following subjects:

- The parts of the site the visitor toured
- Visitors' individual perceptions of the site experience as it relates to portraying a historical perspective about slavery

- Visitors' individual opinions on the park management's approach to addressing race and slavery
- Whether or not visitors learned anything about the subject of slavery from the site
- Visitors' opinion of how the site could enhance the presentation of slavery
 Visitors' responses were recorded by hand-written surveys as they documented their
 thoughts and perceptions pertaining to their individual experiences at the site. All visitors
 surveyed were over the age of 18 and were recorded anonymously.

Additional research from a separate list of questions was compiled from taped interviews with two members of the Arlington House staff involved in interpretive programming. These perspectives were recorded in face-to-face audio-recorded interviews over ten to fifteen minutes in the management offices of the site and were designed to inquire about the following subjects:

- The staff person's education and experience at the site
- The explanation of their role as a site interpreter and what they feel are the major objectives and messages of site interpretation
- The staff person's perspective on how slavery is addressed and represented
- Whether or not the subject of slavery is adequately portrayed
- The staff person's own comfort level in talking to the public about race and slavery
- The staff person's insight as to how historical interpretation could be enhanced All of the data was compiled by the two-member research team of the Arlington House project. By taking part in the site's tour, surveying the site's grounds, and speaking with site interpreters and visitors, the research team has amassed qualitative

data for an overall analysis in order to provide insight and perspective on the site's treatment and interpretation of race and slavery.

3. Interpretation Practices at Arlington House

A preliminary research report on Arlington House conducted in the summer of 2003 provides a detailed overview of the site's architectural and geographical features as well as an expanded historical summary of the various inhabitants of the Main House, often called the mansion. The report also provides a concise synopsis of the landscape of the site, briefly identifying the interpretive areas on the grounds of the site that a visitor would encounter. The mansion sits on the hillside of the former Lee estate overlooking the Potomac River. During the Civil War, most of the land of the former estate was converted into gravesites for dead soldiers and in 1864, the property was purchased by the Federal Government. Eventually, the estate became part of Arlington National Cemetery. Many visitors to the cemetery pass through Arlington House.

The Arlington House tour is primarily a self-guided venture as numerous visitors move freely throughout the house with the optional aid of an information pamphlet and a strategically placed site interpreter. There are no interpretative signs inside the house. The self-guided tour begins from the Portico entranceway. The Portico, with its large white columns, was designed to mimic a Greek temple and now serves as the primary meeting area for the tour. (Figure 1) Visitors begin their tour with an information pamphlet and a brief history of the site provided by the site interpreter. During its busiest season of the year, the number of visitors entering the Arlington House each day can

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¹ The preliminary research report was conducted by the project team intern, Daphne Dador, during June-August 2003. The report is on file with the Office of Diversity and Special Projects, National Center for Cultural Resources, National Park Service.

reach several thousand.² Visitors crowd the Portico steps and begin their tour by walking through the Center Hall (Figure 2) while observing the antique paintings and furnishings of the Custis-Lee mansion.



(Figure 1)



(Figure 2)

The self-guided tour allows visitors to observe the elaborately decorated rooms of the house. However, due to the sheer volume of visitors, heavy foot traffic, and the need to protect the antique and pristine artifacts of the house, visitors are relegated to observe

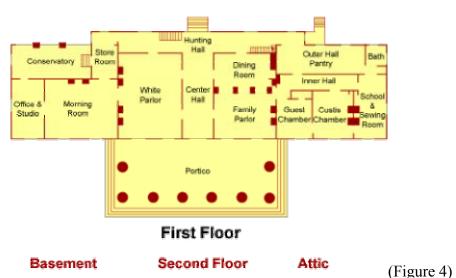
² Karen Kinzey, a historian at Arlington House, stated that the interviews occurred during the busiest season of the year, when several thousand people tour the house on a daily basis. Total recreational visitation recorded for FY 2003 was 363,353 and for FY 2002 it was 419,511.

the rooms from a safe distance as their walking paths are limited to the hallways and velvet-roped pathways within the rooms.



(Figure 3)

On the first floor, visitors walk through the
Center Hall to observe the Family Parlor
(Figure 3) and Dining Room. The visitors then
turn left at Hunting Hall and continue their tour
upstairs to the second floor. A diagram
(Figure 4) details the floor plan of the first
floor.



Once in the Upper Hall (Figure 5), visitors can view the various sleeping chambers of Colonel and Mrs. Lee, the Lee Girls', Miss Mary (the eldest Lee daughter), the guest room, and the Lee Boys' chambers.



(Figure 5)

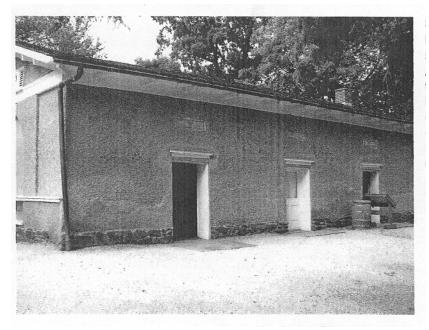
Visitors then follow another set of stairs back down to the first floor, through the White Parlor towards the Store Room. Visitors continue walking through the Conservatory (Figure 6) and exit the house to the backyard grounds area.



(Figure 6)

As the self-guided tour of the house concludes, visitors exit to the backyard of the Main House and find alongside the park benches two adjacent former slave quarters. This is a rest area for visitors as many take advantage of the bench seating spaces. This area also serves as a site for visitors to independently find out more information concerning the history of those who lived and worked outside of the confines of the Arlington House

mansion. There are two outdoor signs (called waysides) that display a map of the grounds identifying all its structures and showing the locations of the Slave Quarters; one wayside is located at the tour mobile stop and an identical one is at Custis Walk, the pathway leading toward the Main House. The two Slave Quarters are rectangular structures, which are set at right angles to the house, forming a small service court. These buildings have three rooms each, and have stone foundations with rough stucco walls featuring Greek revival architectural details.³



(Figure 7)

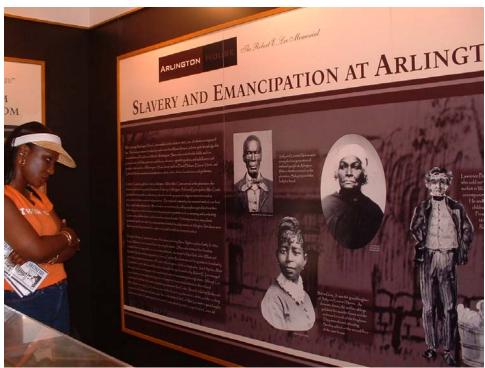
The south Slave Quarters closest to the Conservatory exit (Figure 7) contains an exhibit on slavery and has as a centerpiece an encased model of the 1863 Freedman's Village. The Freedman's Village served as a camp for thousands of emancipated slaves who fled the southern states for the nation's capital and later relocated to Arlington in search of work and freedom. The model provides a brief description of the camp's

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³ The south slave quarters consist of two rooms serving as interpretive areas; the middle room is used as the first aid station. The three rooms in the north slave quarters are used for the book store, bookstore storage, and a room closed for archeological investigation during the visitor interviews.

history and also notes how free African Americans populated the site until their eviction in 1900. These people formed the basis of some present-day neighborhoods in Arlington: Arlington View and Nauck.

The model of the Freedman's Village provides an overview of the seemingly autonomous black society that survived as a community for former enslaved African Americans outside of the Lee estate until 1900. This history can be read on exhibit panels fastened on the interior walls of the structure. The information begins at the entranceway as the visitor walks from left to right through the four-sided room. The exhibit panels display text and images that outline the historical stories of slave life at Arlington House. An exhibit panel entitled, "Slavery and Emancipation at Arlington" (Figure 8) describes the contributions of enslaved African Americans at Arlington House and some individual stories of emancipated slaves.



(Figure 8)

The information found in the Slave Quarters attempts to emphasize what Karen Kinzey and Kendell Thompson⁴ describe as an important objective of the site's historical interpretation—the primary accounts of enslaved people and their individual histories—providing more factual detail on not only the Lee family narrative but also as to how slavery shaped the lives of *all* of the historical figures presented at this site. The information presented on the exhibit panels posits enslaved African Americans and their contributions as "vital components" to the Arlington House history (and from the accounts of the Freedman Village model, Arlington history), listing their labor and their primary accounts as integral pieces in the overall maintenance and understanding of the historic site. The information on the exhibit panels briefly describes the labor activities of enslaved African Americans and their responsibilities to their masters, and also traces their various family histories. The panels do not provide an account of any of the potential (and certain) hardships of enslaved peoples' lives, however, it does mention Lee's view of the institution as an "unpleasant legacy."

At the time of the visitor interviews, the second section of the south Slave

Quarters, known as "Selina Gray's Quarters," was closed for archeological investigation.⁵

(Figure 9) However, there is an interpretive wayside outside of the closed door explaining her important support of the family during the war, her family's efforts to restore the house, and the family's post-war life. The sign serves as one of two indicators of slave life that are found in the backyard grounds. The other interpretive

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⁴ Thompson stated, "Probably the most central theme to Robert E. Lee is his character. Well, if you want to talk about his character you got to talk about the ...things he was disparaged for...and that goes directly to the issue of slavery." Thompson, the site manager, and Kinzey, the site historian, were interviewed as part of this research project.

⁵This period room will be restored and open to the public. In the summer months when the site has seasonal staff, Selina Gray's Quarters are often staffed with interpreters to answer questions.

wayside sign (Figure 10) is located beyond the Slave Quarters in the vegetable garden, which shows drawings of enslaved people working in the garden and a post-Civil War photograph of a former slave sitting in the doorway of the north Slave Quarters.





(Figure 9) (Figure 10)

One room in the north Slave Quarters has been converted into a bookstore that sells books, videotapes, and games devoted to Arlington House history and a second room is used as storage and workspace for the National Park Service. The third room was previously used as a storage space and during the visitor interviews it was closed for archeological investigation. By October of 2004, the room was reopened as an exhibit about the continuing archeological work. Visitors can walk on a viewing platform to see the work and read the interpretive waysides.

4. Staff Interviews

As described by its site manager Kendell Thompson, Arlington House is a memorial site designed almost exclusively to "tell the story of Robert E. Lee," and to give a brief description of his and his family's home life. When a visitor first approaches the site's main doorway they are greeted by an interpreter who provides a very brief overview of the estate, its inhabitants, their family lineage, and how the plantation house

was acquired and maintained throughout the years. The tour itself is very brief because of the large volume of site visitors limits the ability of site interpreters to conduct a thorough review of the various histories of the site. To provide an immediate context for the site, visitors are given a pamphlet that provides a layout of the house, a history of the estate, and "a Lee Chronology" tracing Robert E. Lee's birth and death, his military credentials, and his family tree.

In the first-floor tour and in the informational pamphlet, the issue of slavery and race is not addressed without a direct question from a member of the audience. Site interpreters are strategically placed to guard artifacts and answer questions from visitors walking through the house. Because the site's mission focus is directly tied to Lee and his family, the subject of slavery and race are not always brought up unless addressed by an individual interpreter or individual site visitor.

Kendell Thompson and site historian Karen Kinzey provide a detailed portrait of these mission-focused objectives. In his interview, Thompson stated plainly, "we don't do much interpretation—we do as much as we can," referring directly to how the large volume of people contributes to a lack of staff and resources that can provide a detailed account of more subjects relating to the history of Arlington House. Thompson acknowledges the dual role of imparting Lee's story and providing a social and political context for the time period. Thompson notes how specialized tours, particularly during African American History Month, serve this purpose, allowing for "a much more cohesive interpretive program" that addresses race and slavery directly and moves beyond the narrow topic of the Lee family history. However, Thompson maintains that

the majority of visitors are only exposed to the direct objectives of the site: the historical narrative of Robert E. Lee and his family.

Kinzey adds that, "in the ideal world we would do guided tours" and emphasizes the "ticket-system" as a method to expand upon the direct mission focus of Arlington House. Kinzey cites religion, women's issues, and race as "under-represented topics" at Arlington House and the problems of a lack of time and too many visitors as the central issues that prohibit an expansion of historical dialogue at the site. Kinzey concedes, "in terms of what the typical visitor would hear about slavery, it's not as much as we'd like because they're gone in five minutes…it's mostly focused on Lee." When asked whether or not slavery is accurately portrayed at the site, both subjects said "no." Thompson added that it was because he knows "what the potential is" at Arlington House.

Thompson made the following assessment: "There is still not going to be any strong idea of what it was like to be the majority of enslaved African Americans on the plantation…

[because] we don't have the where-with-all to tell the story."

In summation, the tour of the Main House remains committed to its stated mission focus—to provide a resource for the public to ask questions about the various histories of the house (including its history of slavery and the treatment of race) but foremost to provide an overview of Robert E. Lee's life as well as a history of the plantation itself during his residence in the home.

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⁶ A ticket system is one in which visitors stay for a specialized tour that would allow for a hands-on approach to talking about more historical subjects.

5. Visitor Surveys

The visitor survey indicates that there are consistencies of opinion among site visitors in their evaluation of the overall historical interpretation of slavery at Arlington House. Below is a table of the survey results from the 60 visitors interviewed:

Visitor Survey Questions	Number of Responses ⁷			
Question Number	Yes	No	Undecided	No Answer
3. When touring the house did you learn anything about slavery?	10	50	0	0
4. Did you gain any insight on the relationships between slaves and masters? Between slaves and slaves?	10	50	0	0
6. In your opinion, was the subject of slavery adequately portrayed, discussed?	11	22	5	22
7. Do you think the topic of slavery should be presented in more or less detail?	26	12	3	19
8. Did you learn anything new about race or slavery during				

When asked if they learned anything about slavery during their self-guided tour of the house (question 3), only 10 people checked "yes." Of those responses, some visitors stated that they learned about slave labor practices, "their contribution to the construction of the Arlington House," and that enslaved people "were viewed to be individuals."

60

0

0

your visit?

⁷ For question number 6, 22 respondents left the question blank and 3 respondents were unclear or undecided. For question number 7, respondents who indicated "more detail" are listed as answering "yes" and respondents who indicated no change was necessary or "less detail" are listed as answering "no"; 19 respondents left question 7 blank and 3 respondents were unclear or undecided. See the appendix for the complete questionnaire.

Visitors also stated that enslaved African Americans "worked hard all the time," that they were "very nice," that the "steep stairs in the main house were used by slaves." One visitor also stated that she/he didn't learn "as much as at Mt. Vernon," but did learn about "the household slaves here and on neighboring plantations."

When asked if any insight was gained on the relationships between slaves and masters or the relationships between slaves and slaves (question 4), again only 10 people checked "yes." Of those responses, one visitor commented on how the "masters ruled all the time," yet three commented on "the great dependency and trust between the two." One visitor commented on the small slave quarters being a revelation, while one stated that "the master thought very little of his slaves," and another stated that "slaves had their place," in terms of their relegated societal position. One visitor commented that she/he gained no new insight on the matter and another remarked that her/his insight would have been augmented had the information on slavery been more "clearly marked."

When asked whether or not the visitor learned anything new about race or slavery during their visit (question 8), not one participant checked "yes." When asked whether or not the subject of slavery was adequately portrayed and/or discussed at the site (question 6), of those who answered the question, 11 wrote "yes," 22 wrote "no," 5 were undecided and 22 did not answer. Of those who wrote "no," several stated that slavery was "not discussed at all," and referred to the "minor references to the slave quarters on the info map" as insufficient data for an adequate portrayal of slavery. Others stated that they "didn't hear anything much," that "there really was not much discussion," and that they wanted "to know more about their daily life in detail." Others were curious about the

daily treatment of the enslaved, asking if they were punished. Still others agreed that they did not believe that "the focus of this site is slavery."

When asked whether or not the topic of slavery should be presented in more or less detail (question 7), of the 41 who answered, 26 indicated "yes," 12 indicated "no," and 3 were undecided. Of those agreeing with the notion of more details, some stated that they believed more information should be available for those with such interests and "for those who wish to learn." Others stated that the site "needs a more realistic view" and were interested in finding out "how they lived and were treated." Others found it contradictory that more information was not provided "especially since this is the house of Robert E. Lee," and were also interested in slavery and its contribution as "a main factor in the Civil War."

Perhaps the most engaging dialogue came from those who did not agree that slavery should be presented at the site. Alongside a few comments such as "[it is] alright the way it is," and that slavery should be taught "only in schools," one visitor wrote, "this is sacred ground. It is a neutral place, no race, color, religion should be mentioned here." Among the answers to the survey questions, these responses express the commitment of some visitors' beliefs that slavery should not be addressed at the site (both in the survey and in an informal discussion with the interviewer), providing examples of the oftentimes incendiary response that visitors had towards the question of race and slavery and how it is presented at historic sites.

6. Post-Analysis and Conclusion

One site visitor stated that race has no place in the historical discussion and presentation of a slave plantation. Yet, more revealing is the overwhelming number of respondents from this sample who indicated that they did not learn anything new about slavery at Arlington House. For both questions 3 and 4, 83 percent of respondents stated that they learned nothing new concerning slavery inside the Main House and that they gained no insight about master-slave relations. All respondents answered that at the Arlington House historic site, they learned nothing new about slavery or race (question 8).

The fact that all visitors surveyed responded that they learned nothing new about slavery indicates that the exhibit and wayside panels located in and near the Slave Quarters have not integrated the story of slavery with the narrative of Robert E. Lee. The physical and conceptual separateness of the two topics undermines an important tenet of National Park Service Civil War-related sites: to provide visitors with interpretation that presents the broader context of that war, including the existence and controversy over slavery in that time period. While some respondents' answers suggested they were not interested in learning about slavery, 65 percent of the respondents to question 7 indicated that slavery should be a part of interpretation at Arlington House.

The results of the visitor survey tell us that the full history of the site is not being conveyed. The "full history" is the history that Thompson and Kinzey identified as the "ideal" and "potential" settings of historical interpretation at Arlington House where the often under-represented and marginalized subjects of history are retold in full and equal

⁸ For background on and suggestions for broadening the interpretation of Civil War sites, see

[&]quot;Interpretation at Civil War Sites: A Report to Congress," National Park Service, March 2003. This report is available online at http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online books/icws/index.htm.

detail. The focus on interpreting Robert E. Lee's family history precludes visitors from engaging in the broader historical context of that story on two fronts: 1) learning about the daily realities of everyone who lived and worked at Arlington House, including the enslaved, and 2) learning about Robert E. Lee as a complex and even controversial figure, the leader of the Confederate Army. Minimizing these aspects of the site's historical context tends to de-legitimize the historical weight of these topics and stymies the efforts of interpretation at its base. Current interpretive practices inhibit visitors from making links between what could be perceived as "minor" and "major" historical subjects.

The role of site interpretation at Arlington House must complement the site's mission—to present the narrative of the Lee family—with a greater focus and emphasis on the broader historical context of slavery in conjunction with the particular experiences of enslaved African Americans at Arlington House. Indeed, there is potential for this kind of interpretation with the ongoing work on the north Slave Quarters that will generate a Historic Structures Report and provide an additional setting to interpret slavery. The mission focus on the Lee family, however, does not preclude incorporating race and slavery into the interpretation programs inside the Main House. Rather, the story of slavery and the experiences of enslaved people who lived and worked at Arlington House would provide visitors with a fuller understanding of the economic and social forces that shaped the everyday lives of everyone who lived there.

Interpreting slavery at Arlington House provides a basis for the understanding of how social relationships, racial hierarchies, and the overall lives of the historical actors were formed at this site. This begins with an interpretive program that can complement

the perceptions of a number of visitors that topics such as race and slavery are underrepresented at this historic site and should be strongly included for the benefit of a more encompassing historical narrative.

Appendix A

Survey Questions for Visitors

1. What parts of the Arlington House site did you visit today? (Check all that apply):
Slave quarters Main house Walked the grounds Guided tour
2. Have you visited this site before? If yes, how often have you visited in the last two years?
3. When touring the main house, did you learn anything about slavery? Yes No What did you learn about slavery in the main house?
4. Did you gain any insight on the relationships between slaves and masters? Between slaves and slaves? Yes No If yes, please describe:
5. If you visited the slave quarters: What were your first impressions of the slave quarters?
Do the slave quarters look the way you expected a slave's room might look?
If you participated in a tour, did the guide answer your questions about slavery or other aspects of the site?
6. In your opinion, was the subject of slavery adequately portrayed at this site? Please explain.
7. Do you think that the topic of slavery should be presented in more detail at this site, or should slavery be emphasized less? Please explain.
8. Did you learn anything new about race or slavery during your visit today? Yes No If yes, please describe:
9. Did you visit the bookstore today?Yes No If yes, did you see any books that you would like to read? Please explain.

or abou Arli Slav	you interested in reading more about slavery as it relates to the Arlington House, it slavery more generally? (Check if "yes") ington House very in general er				
	nsidering your experience here today, how would you rate?:				
(Ple	(Please fill in the blank with your choice of "Poor," Average," "Very Good" or "Excellent")				
The	The historic information presented				
You	Your learning experience				
	you have any additional comments about your visit here today that you would like to this survey?				
	ddition to this survey, please answer a few background questions: d are you?				
Are you	Hispanic or Latino? Yes - Hispanic or Latino No - not Hispanic or Latino				
Am Asia Blac	ck or African Americanive Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander				
15. Wha	at is the zip code of your permanent address?				

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Site Interpreters

- 1. Briefly, please tell me about yourself: your education, previous job experience, etc.
- 2. How long have you worked at the Arlington House?
- 3. Please explain your job as an interpreter here.
- 4. What do you think are the major objectives of interpretation at the Arlington House?
- 5. What is your favorite aspect of Arlington House?
- 6. Do you present material on the subject of slavery? If yes, what aspects of slavery do you present to visitors?
- 7. Do you feel that the subject of slavery is adequately portrayed at this site? Do you feel that day-to-day life of slavery is accurately portrayed at this site?
- 8. Considering the current renovations and archeological work being done on the slave quarters, do you feel that the depiction of slavery is any way compromised? Enhanced?
- 9. How do you feel about presenting slavery to the public?
- 10. What is the most difficult question you have heard from a visitor?
- 11. What is the most rewarding experience you have had in your interaction with visitors here?
- 12. In your opinion, how can the discussion of slavery be enhanced at Arlington House?
- 13. Do you have any comments about the interpretation of slavery that you would like to add to this survey?

Appendix C

Interview Protocol:

The interviewer will make a brief introduction to approach a visitor and invite them to participate in a face-to-face interview. Visitors who agree to participate will be further informed about the survey and its subject matter. Visitor's consent to be tape recorded must be confirmed. Interviewers must ask participants if they are over 18 years of age. In case a visitor does not wish to be tape recorded but would like to participate in the survey, interviewers can proceed and must record answers in writing. Inform the participant that the interview will take longer.

Introductory Statement to invite visitors to participate in a face-to face interview:

Approaching statement: Hello, I am a student with The George Washington University conducting a survey about the presentation of race and slavery at this site. This survey is a joint research project between the National Park Service and The George Washington University to learn visitors' opinions about interpretive programs. I will be asking you questions about how race and slavery are presented here. We are interested in your thoughts and would like to tape record your answers for accuracy. All of your answers are voluntary. This interview is anonymous so your answers are confidential. It should take approximately 10 minutes. The Paperwork Reduction Act requires approval of all federal government surveys by the Office of Management and Budget. This survey has been approved under this Act. The Office of Management and Budget control number and expiration date is available at your request. Additional information about this survey and its approval is available at your request.*

Would you be willing to participate in a short interview?

If yes, confirm that the participant is at least 18 years old. Continue with interview. Record observational information on the log sheet.

If no, stop the interview, thank the visitor, and record observational information on the log sheet.