

Bias in History: The Many Colors of Truth

Folks: In the article below, you will not only learn about slavery and the hypocrisy of the first president of the United States but also how U.S. history is rarely as it is portrayed to be in school/college textbooks (never telling us the *whole* story—remember; history is always written by the powerful and the mighty; therefore it is always biased against the oppressed, the conquered, the marginalized, the masses, and so on!). Notice also that there is a specific reason why this article appeared during the mid-point of the first term of Barack Obama's presidency: to remind him of the need to fight for one's principled convictions.

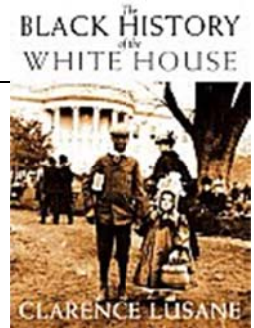
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The President's House Exhibit

Slavery, Jim Crow and the White House

By CLARENCE LUSANE



On December 15, 2010 the National Park Service inaugurated its new exhibit "The President's House: Freedom and Slavery in Making a New Nation" at the Liberty Bell Center pavilion in Philadelphia's Independence Park. The pavilion has been built on the site where the first home for U.S. presidents once stood, and specifically where George Washington's domestic slaves labored while he commanded the nation for most of his two terms as the first President of the United States.

For nearly a decade, members of the local community organized to ensure that the exhibit would address the fact that President George Washington enslaved people in this locale, and that their historic presence would be acknowledged and represented here as well. Although initially resistant to the idea, the National Park Service has inaugurated an exhibit that features material telling the story of the nine people enslaved by the Washingtons, and a long struggle has resulted in a very public revelation of some painful truths about the founding of our nation.

The President's House exhibit provides some critical lessons that would be wise to observe. One lesson is that presidents ought to fight for their convictions. George Washington's stated anti-slavery beliefs misaligned with his actual political behavior. While professing to abhor slavery and hope for its eventual demise, as president Washington took no real steps in that direction. Freeing his own slaves during his lifetime could have been one of those steps, but, instead, Washington promised their emancipation upon his wife Martha's death. Whether he was simply bowing to the political tenor of a time dominated by Southerners' defense of slavery or a personal lack of will to stand up to them as the growing abolitionist movement did, we will never conclusively know. But the fact is, Washington not only enslaved a number of individuals in the president's house during his two terms in office, he aggressively sought to recapture them after they fled to freedom.

A second lesson to consider is that despite Washington's reluctance to carry out his stated anti-slavery predilections, the movement against slavery grew anyway, including within the president's very own household (among the men and women he enslaved). While Washington was president and commanding from Philadelphia, at least two people made bold escapes. Oney Judge, who worked principally for the First Lady, escaped to freedom one evening while George and Martha were eating dinner. Hercules, Washington's well-known personal family chef, took off one year later in 1797. He left on the night the Washingtons were scheduled to move back to Mount Vernon after Washington's term came to an end. Although Washington considered Hercules one of his most loyal and trusted servants, the prospect of freedom was too powerful to resist.

In both cases, Washington had the opportunity to enact his convictions about "freedom" for those whose lives he had direct control over: he could have simply let them go. Instead, in each instance, he sought persistently and repeatedly, and ultimately unsuccessfully to track them down and have them re-enslaved. Oney Judge and Hercules believed in freedom too, and they risked

everything to defy the most powerful man in America to achieve it. Against all odds, they succeeded. It is a tribute to their brave and defiant spirit that the National Park Service has erected this important new historical exhibit.

Thus, the President House exhibit's most important lesson is not about the country's first President, but about the voiceless people whose stories have gone untold for centuries. History is not just a series of dates and facts, it involves interpretation, analysis, and point of view. Historic understanding shapes public consciousness, and thus politics and policy decisions, social relations, and access to resources and opportunity.

Philadelphia's black community fought long and hard to have the commemoration focus on the lives of the people enslaved at the first White House as a way to both redress the past and address the present. While legal slavery no longer exists in this country, the economic and social disparities between whites and people of color in the United States have been stubbornly persistent for decades, with little focused attention from either the White House or Congress. Certainly, a critical part of black support for Barack Obama was rooted in the belief that, as he stated, he would be president to all Americans. While this meant that he would not (and could not) be president only to African Americans, it also should have meant that black interests would not be ignored as they have been so consistently in most administrations. Policies that specifically address the impact of social and economic dislocation on black Americans are as vital to implement as those policies specifically constructed to address the needs of seniors, rural workers, or women.

The opening of the President's House exhibit and its exposure of the role of slavery in the founding of the country is a propitious moment for reflecting not only on the history of black Americans vis-à-vis the White House and the presidency, but also for a redirection in public policy that begins to seriously address the specific needs of the black community, which will not be met sufficiently by a general, one-size-fits-all approach.

In perhaps his most memorable speech, delivered in Philadelphia during the 2008 campaign, and his only major public address to focus on race, Obama stated "[Race] is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now," pushing back against those who contend that racial discrimination is no longer an issue. He went on to say, "[We] do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from earlier generations that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow."

U.S. history is taught—and for the most part, learned—through filters. In everything from schoolbooks and movies to oral traditions, historical markers, and museums, we are presented with narratives of the nation's history and evolution. For generations, the dominant stories have validated a view that overly centralizes the experiences, lives, and issues of privileged, white male Americans and silences the voices of others. It has been as though some have an entitlement to historic representation and everyone else does not. "History is always written wrong," said George Santayana, "and so always needs to be rewritten." The new President's House exhibit opening in Philadelphia this week does not rewrite history, but it does finally include the names, stories, and freedom struggles of Americans who for too long have been written out of the national narrative.

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