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Land of the (Un)Free: Slavery and Memory at the President's House

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Abstract: In 2002, historical research revealed that Philadelphia's new Liberty Bell Pavilion was to be built at the former location of President George Washington's Philadelphia home—a site where America's first President held nine slaves in bondage through a legal loophole. A public controversy soon erupted over the paradoxical coexistence of liberty and slavery during America's founding, the importance of recognizing slavery's centrality in American history, and the inclusion of Black Americans within the country's commemorative landscape. The controversy ultimately illustrates the contested nature of slavery's legacy and the challenges inherent in public memory construction.

Introduction

In a controversy that spanned the early 2000s, a number of different historical actors worked to construct or dismiss the history of slavery at Philadelphia's Independence National Historic Park (INHP), or America's "Cradle of Liberty." In 2002, historian Edward Lawler, Jr., with the help of several other historians and newspapers, informed the public that the city was planning to build a new Liberty Bell Pavilion at the former site of President Washington's late 18th century home—the site where the President kept nine slaves in bondage through a legal loophole, transporting them to and from Virginia so they would never stay in Pennsylvania for the six months required to make them legally free under the state's Gradual Abolition Act of 1780. Historians and journalists in 2002 pointed out the inherent contradiction in constructing a new home for the Liberty Bell—a prominent symbol of American liberty, and one used by abolitionists in their fight against slavery—at the same physical space where the nation's first President imprisoned his slaves, especially without informing the public. They argued that the public deserved to know about this rich history, and it was both dishonest and ahistorical to efface the role of slavery at the heart of the nation's founding. Rather, they argued, exploring the

paradoxical coexistence of bondage and slavery at the site would do justice to the complexities of the country's founding. Many members of the public vocally agreed, and the ensuing debate launched an almost ten-year controversy involving a wide range of public actors.

The story of the President's House controversy is part of Philadelphia's local history but also a major part of the history of America's commemorative landscape. The nearly ten year-long controversy involved park officials, curators, historians, politicians, multiple organizations and activists, newspaper writers, readers, visitors, and members of the general public. In their own ways, these actors show that memory is neither a static phenomena, nor relegated to the past with no relevance in the present. Rather, these groups and individuals actively worked to construct and resist certain memories. Relying largely on articles in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and comment cards filled out by members of the public containing their commentary on the designs for the President's House exhibit, I aim to explore the ways in which memory at the President's House was contested by a variety of competing forces who worked to promote or resist specific memorial narratives about slavery at the site. Personal accounts of those involved, including Gary Nash, a historian who helped raise initial awareness about the controversy, and Louis Massiah, a filmmaker who was involved with the grassroots movement pushing for slavery's remembrance at the site, are also important in gaining deeper insight into the nuances of the controversy. The *Inquirer* articles represent the media's importance in informing the public about the initial inaction of the Park Service, and the comment cards show the myriad ways in which members of the public actively relied on the memory of slavery in the past to make arguments about the present.

The history of Independence National Historic Park provides important context for the battle over slavery's memory at the site during the 2000s. Since the park's inception, its content

and interpretive material have been relatively, straightforwardly patriotic. The park promoted a specific narrative of American history, emphasizing liberty and freedom as the nation's founding ideals, and valorizing the founding fathers as heroic mavericks who conceived of an entirely unique and superior form of government. However, the straightforward hero narrative grows more complex once its audience becomes aware of the inherent exclusions of such an account. The cracks begin to show if a curious park visitor begins to inquire about the indigenous communities and tribes who lived on the park's land before the colonists arrived, or about the laborers who toiled in the homes of many of America's founding figures and built Independence Hall, the birthplace of America's Constitution. To dig deeper into the history of the park and the nation's founding is to discover the stains of genocide and slavery and their centrality in the nation's history. The story of "the cradle of liberty," then, takes on a drastically different tone from a different perspective.

How that story has been remembered in public spaces has less to do with the "objective" truth and more to do with memory, whose memory is being commemorated, and what function that memorialization serves. As anthropologists Argenti and Schramm argue, "memory is not a simple, unmediated reproduction of the past, but rather a selective re-creation that is dependent for its meaning on the remembering individual or community's contemporary social context, beliefs and aspirations."[1] As a result, sites of memory are contested by their very nature, as the inclusion of one perspective, in many cases, implies the exclusion of another. In *First City*, Gary Nash also explores memory, and documents the myriad ways in which historical actors and

[1] Nicolas Argenti and Katharina Schramm, eds., "Introduction: Remembering Violence: Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission," in *Remembering Violence: Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission*, 1st ed. (Berghahn Books, 2010), 2, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qcs96.6.

institutions understood and worked to construct memory in the earliest years after the nation's founding. Nash writes:

> Philadelphians, in their growing diversity, came to understand that memory-making was neither a value-free and politically sanitized matter nor a mental activity promising everyone the same rewards. As soon as people began to see that the shaping of Philadelphia's past was a partisan activity, involving a certain silencing of the city's history, the process of remembering Philadelphia became a contested matter—and has remained so ever since.[2]

In documenting some of the city's earliest efforts to construct memory, Nash evokes many of the themes surrounding commemoration and memory formation today. Memory-making in Philadelphia had crucial political implications, and from the earliest years of the city, always involved "a certain silencing of the city's history." Much like Argenti and Schramm argued, memory in Philadelphia was not an "unmediated reproduction of the past," but dependent on the "contemporary social context, beliefs and aspirations" of those constructing sites of memory in the city. As Nash documents, this silencing historically neglected the lives and histories of marginalized groups such as the city's African American population. In making this claim, Nash illustrates the inherently political nature of both historical recognition and erasure. Both individuals and organizations intentionally work to construct memory, understanding its partisan and political importance, and engaging in contested battles over memory. The dynamics outlined by Argenti, Schramm and Nash were all active forces during the President's House controversy of the early 2000s.

In the case of the President's House controversy, political, scholarly, and civilians actors invested in the commemoration of slavery at the site largely understood the importance of recognizing historical injustices as a means of addressing contemporary issues of race and racism

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[2] Gary B. Nash, *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006): 8, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fj3c5.

in the United States. In particular, many Black Philadelphians advocated for the inclusion of slavery at the President's House, specifically as a means of recognizing Black contributions to the nation's founding in the context of a largely white and exclusionary commemorative landscape. However, these demands for recognition were also met with hostility and opposition by those who characterized any kind of focus on slavery as grievance-mongering detracting from the sanctity of the executive branch and the legacy of America's first president. The controversy over slavery's role at the President's House exhibit thus indicates the United States' larger struggles to fully address its history of slavery and acknowledge the painful realities of its legacy for many Americans.

In many ways, the process of memory-making itself is inherently exclusionary. This practice of exclusion is also highly political when those whose histories are effaced are also those with limited political and social power. In recent years, activists and historians have worked to incorporate the histories of a greater variety of groups and actors into America's broader historical framework by recognizing the roles of Black Americans, women, and working class communities. Historically, the erasure of slavery in particular has allowed white Americans to justify racism and to actively exclude Black Americans from claims to citizenship and a place in the larger polity. Erasing the history of slavery is one way these groups have continued to establish and perpetuate systemically racist institutions and exclude African Americans. In exploring the controversy surrounding the President's House and its relationship with public memory, I argue that the Park Service's initial resistance to Black narratives at the President's House, the organizing of Black Philadelphians to fight for this representation, and the racialized critiques of the comment cards all represent sites of political contestation regarding slavery and memory in America's collective memory. The historical erasure of slavery in Philadelphia serves

a larger goal—it effaces the origins of systemic, race-based oppression within Philadelphia's institutions, and thus undermines contemporary calls for systemic change.

Historiography

In order to fully understand the weight and significance of efforts to remember slavery in America's commemorative landscape, it is important to recognize and explore the long and storied history of slavery's erasure throughout the country. Efforts to construct a history of slavery that downplayed the institution's brutality and promoted a narrative of natural white supremacy gained significant traction after the Civil War's end. Historian Leslie A. Schwalm documents the ways in which whites advocating for post-war sectional reconciliation "elevated a culture of reunion that not only depoliticized the Civil War but also softened and blurred the ways slavery was remembered and portrayed."[3] These efforts resulted in a "white-authored collective popular history of slavery…in which slavery had been an inoffensive institution, and African Americans were faithful, devoted slaves—'old time darkies,' who were content with white supremacy."[4] Erasing the violence and terror of slavery allowed white Americans to both undermine Black claims to full equality and citizenship rights, and avoid fully addressing the racial issues that incited the Civil War.

However, while many scholars tend to cite the end of the Civil War as the beginning of the struggle over slavery's memory, recent scholarship by historians like Joanne Pope Melish and Margot Minardi identify efforts to efface slavery in the earliest months of northern gradual emancipation. Writing about New Englander efforts to erase slavery's memory in their region,

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[3] Leslie A. Schwalm, "'Agonizing Groans of Mothers' and 'Slave-Scarred Veterans': The Commemoration of Slavery and Emancipation," *American Nineteenth Century History* 9, no. 3 (September 2008): 290-291, https://doi.org/10.1080/14664650802288407.
[4] Ibid.

almost a century before the Emancipation Proclamation, Minardi argues that "the memory of slavery, and the continuing presence of people who were reminders of the past, simply didn't suit a region that, due to its influential role in the American Revolution, was touting itself as the 'Birthplace of American Liberty.'"[5] Even in the 18th century, white Americans recognized the incompatibility of slavery as an institution and liberty as a central component of their national identity. As a result, white northerners worked to efface their regional history of human bondage in order to make their history more consistent with their self-proclaimed ideals.

In *Disowning Slavery*, Melish documents how New Englanders crafted a nationalist regional mythology to portray the region as the perpetually free and white birthplace of republicanism, strongly contrasted "with a Jacobin, Africanized South."[6] By the outset of the Civil War, New England's "nationalist trope of virtuous, historical whiteness, clothed as it was in a distinctive set of cultural, moral, and political values associated with New England's Puritan mission and Revolutionary struggle, had come to define the Unionist North as a whole."[7] Melish effectively illustrates the ways in which the white, moral, and perpetually free New England trope increasingly included the larger northern region, including Philadelphia, in its mythology. By constructing this narrative, the North could be contrasted with the comparatively unfree South, whose Black population, both free and enslaved, caused problems for the North. One former anti-slavery activist "noted that freed southern slaves 'are of course exported to the North, where we have to provide for, and support them, with all their vices upon them.'"[8] In this

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[5] Margot Minardi, "Making Slavery Visible (Again): The Nineteenth-Century Roots of a Revisionist Recovery in New England," in *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*, ed. Ana Lucia Araujo, 1st ed., Routledge Studies in Cultural History Ser. (Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 92-93.
[6] Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 223, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1tm7jcc.
[7] Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 224.
[8] Ibid, 226.

sense, free Black people in Philadelphia are cast as completely dependent on and burdensome to the larger (white) public. This argument also promotes the myth that Philadelphia's Black population was "exported to the North" from the South, further dissociating the North from its regional history of slavery. By erasing slavery's history in the region, white Northerners were able to effectively avoid taking responsibility for the oppressive poverty and social ostracizing that plagued the Black community and resulted from the exploitation and theft of generations of wealth under slavery.

While Melish argues that the presence of Philadelphia's Black population was too large for white elites to easily overlook, Philadelphia was still greatly involved with the construction of the nation as a free, white republic.[9] By working to create a white, free mythology in the North, these northern actors contrasted their region with the South and consequentially downplayed the mere existence of slavery in their region. The ensuing "consequence of that interpretation" for northern African Americans, "in effacing their history of enslavement, was to render them an unaccountable population of innately and permanently degraded 'aliens and outcasts in the midst of the people.'"[10] By erasing the history of slavery in the North, especially in a place with a sizable Black population like Philadelphia, white Americans evaded responsibility for slavery's consequences. The construction of Black Americans as "aliens and outcasts" within the larger population of "the people" has important implications for current battles over memory. If "the people" were constructed as white and Black Americans were an unfamiliar population, forever incompatible with the nation's polity, then there was no place for Black Americans within the construction of American political memory and identity.

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[9] Efforts to erase the history of slavery and the free Black community were easier in New England, where rural slavery and a low Black population aided the mythology of a historically free region.
Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 225.
[10] Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 237.

While Melish explores the erasure of slavery's history in New England, Gary Nash focuses on memory-making within Philadelphia's historical institutions in *First City*. While many white historical institutions emphasized the lives and works of prominent white Americans in their memory-making processes, African-Americans also understood the political stakes of memorialization and worked to construct histories that centered the lives of people in their communities. One example of such efforts is that of a successful Black coal merchant, William Still, who joined the Vigilant Committee of Philadelphia, an organization that aided runaway slaves, and eventually published an enormous oral history transcript of runaway slave narratives. Still was "convinced that the fugitives' escape stories and family connections were politically useful and enormously valuable as a vital part of the political and historical record," so he "began interviewing southern blacks fleeing north to Philadelphia."[11] Despite their intentional exclusion from memory-making institutions, Black Philadelphians like Still understood the stakes involved in commemoration and worked to construct an inclusive historical record. Still's example and others illustrate the ways African Americans, despite facing constant systemic oppression, were active participants in the memory-making landscape of their time. These efforts also allowed Black Philadelphians to maintain a degree of independence from historically white memory institutions, whose collection policies varied but rarely included the works and narratives of African Americans.

While the historical and memorial establishment largely ignored both the every-day and the exceptional struggles and accomplishments of African Americans, William Still's efforts show that Black Philadelphians understood the political importance of memory-making and worked to document their realities in their own ways. While many white Americans constructed

[11] Nash, *First City*, 194.

a history of slavery that erased the institutions' inherent violence and brutality by portraying slaves as content with their subjugated status on plantations and appreciative of racial hierarchy, African Americans countered white supremacist notions of slave deference and asserted their humanity and claims to equal citizenship. Black Americans actively claimed the history of slavery and its destruction, honoring the contributions of enslaved individuals and working to achieve full political and social equality, even under the repressive system of Jim Crow. Throughout the history of their efforts to commemorate slavery, African Americans consistently recognized "the centrality of the past in understanding and negotiating the present."[12] In order to fully combat white supremacy and racial subjugation, it was important to acknowledge their origins within the institution of slavery.

Role of the Media & Grassroots Activism

When independent historian and urban archaeologist Edward Lawler Jr. published research on President George Washington's one-time Philadelphia home in a 2002 article, "The President's House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark," he probably did not assume the findings would spark a near ten-year controversy. However, the paradoxical co-existence of slavery in the home of America's first president, and the new Liberty Bell Pavilion, proved to be a topic of contentious public debate. When Lawler published his findings, Independence National Historical Park (INHP) was planning to build its new Liberty Bell Pavilion at the site of Washington's former home. In 2001, before the story gained a national following, the Independence Hall Association[13] (IHA) wrote to INHP Superintendent Martha B.

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[12] Nash, *First City*, 294.

[13] According to USHistory.org, the Independence Hall Association was formed in 1942 and led effort to create Independence National Historic Park. Presently, the group is composed of public citizens who generally oversee the management of the park and consult on issues related to its function.

Aikens, requesting that the site of the President's House be "marked with a paved outline," to "provide opportunities for interpretation around the lives of the early Presidents and show their proximity to the seat of Government in a way that would be unique, immediate and convincing to visitors."[14] For the IHA, the commemoration of the President's House was largely about incorporating narratives of the executive branch in the context of Independence Hall and a park that heavily emphasizes the legislative and judicial branches.[15]

In her response, Superintendent Aikens declined IHA's request for a commemorative outline, arguing that those at the Park Service did "not feel that an outline of the rooms and walls will serve to foster any greater understanding of the activities and impacts of our first two Presidents."[16] Instead, she suggested a pavement marker accompanied by a "full-color interpretive panel, describing the use of the mansion as the executive residence during the first ten years of the federal government."[17] The dialogue between the IHA and the INHP Superintendent initially had little to do with slavery and focused instead on the interpretive potential of the executive branch at the President's House site. The direct connection between slavery and the President's House would not gain mainstream prominence until the following year. While the efforts of the IHA were significant, their push for recognition of the President's House was largely confined to the realm of the Park Service and did not focus on either educating or influencing a larger audience. In contrast, the ensuing media coverage conducted by

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[14] Independence Hall Association Board, "The President's House: IHA Letter to Park Superintendent Martha B. Aikens," September 15, 2001, https://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/controversy/iha1.php.

[15] This emphasis on the President's House as a potential vessel to interpret and educate the public on the Executive Branch would later be echoed by many public citizens who were critical of some proposed designs' emphasizing of slavery.

[16] Martha B. Aikens, "Park Superintendent Martha B. Aikens reply to IHA Letter," October 11, 2001, https://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/controversy/aikens1.php.

[17] Ibid.

local outlets such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and Philadelphia's WHYY radio station would be hugely influential in amplifying the efforts of historians to educate the public on the issues at play, and ultimately evoke a large-scale public response.

The movement to include slavery's history at the President's House involved a wide breadth of people who were actively invested in the inclusion of Black stories in American public memory. Historians, journalists at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and Philadelphia's WHYY radio station, Black activists, artists, and politicians all worked to solidify the recognition of slavery at the President's House and within America's commemorative landscape. While public activism was crucial in pressuring park officials and the local government to include slavery's history at the President's House, local media outlets like the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and Philadelphia's WHYY played essential roles in informing the public about the unfolding controversy in its earliest stages.

After reading Lawler's account describing the presence of nine enslaved people who worked in President Washington's home in the 18th century, serving America's first family, historian Gary Nash also became invested in the commemoration of the site. However, rather than valuing the site for its interpretive potential of the executive branch, Nash was concerned that the new Liberty Bell exhibit "as it had been designed by INHP, would be simplistic and vainglorious and that the piece of history-soaked land the bell would occupy would be ignored."[18] He worried that the complex history of enslavement and exploitation in the physical space soon to be occupied by the Liberty Bell would be effaced by a shallow, jingoistic interpretation of the Bell. During an interview with Philadelphia's WHYY, Nash attempted to raise awareness about this issue, "mention[ing] that it would be a misfortune to perpetuate the

[18] Gary B. Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll? From Controversy to Collaboration," *The George Wright Forum* 21, no. 1 (2004): 42.

historical amnesia about the founding fathers and slavery at the Liberty Bell venue."[19] In what Nash describes as his attempt to ring an "alarm bell" about this issue, the historian references a broader, national "historical amnesia" that simplifies and effaces the complex relationships between freedom, independence, and bondage during America's founding years. In doing so, Nash recognized an existing national aversion to acknowledging the role of slavery in America, especially at the heart of the nation's founding.

Soon after his first interview with WHYY, Nash called the chief of interpretation at INHP to inquire about any plans to include the President's House story and its history of slavery in the new Liberty Bell exhibit. The park official informed Nash that the interpretive plan would "keep the focus squarely on the Liberty Bell," and that "[d]rawing attention to the site [the President's house] on which the new pavilion was being built…would confuse the public and divert attention away from the venerable Bell."[20] Through his response, the park official presented the competing stories of slavery and liberty at the physical site of the future Liberty Bell exhibit as too complex for the public to understand. Asserting that on-site references to Washington's slaves would "confuse the public" begets the questions: What public? If the lives of Washington's slaves have no place within the park, then who is the park for? And, what story of America is the park telling when the actions of the founders are commemorated, but the lives of the slaves they held warrant no mention? Was the Park Service concerned that including slavery's history at the Liberty Bell would contradict the message of American exceptionalism infused within the park's mythology? Through his response to Nash, this park official continued to perpetuate the same "historical amnesia" Nash cautioned against in his earlier WHYY

[19] Ibid.
[20] Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?" 42.

appearance and further exemplified America's cultural refusal to reckon with slavery embodied in national sites of memory.

While Nash was supremely underwhelmed by the Park's response to his concerns, the audience at a talk on his new book *First City* had a remarkably different reaction. Audience members "deplored INHP's inattention to the Liberty Bell's historically rich site," and historian Randall Miller suggested Nash publish an op-ed in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* to raise public awareness about the issue.[21] From the outset of the controversy, historians, academics and members of the public understood the importance of the media in informing the public, evoking a collaborative response, and ultimately putting pressure on the Park Service to meet the needs of an engaged and informed populace. Members of the public also understood the importance of "memory-making," and protested "a certain silencing of the city's history," laying the groundwork for the ensuing controversy.[22]

Miller's proposal to bring the issue to the public through the *Inquirer* exemplifies the importance of publications throughout the controversy. Newspaper articles in local publications played a significant role throughout the entire duration of the controversy, from its inception to the present moment. Papers like the *Philadelphia Inquirer* were instrumental in informing the public about the action and inaction of the Park Service, and provided a platform for community members to communicate their thoughts about the project's stakes and importance. In 2002 specifically, those arguing that the Park Service should rethink their Liberty Bell Pavilion plans in light of new information regarding the President's House used articles in the *Inquirer* to communicate their argument to the public and garner widespread awareness and, ultimately, support.

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[21] Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?" 43.
[22] Nash, *First City*, 8.

At the time, newspaper editorials, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor published in the *Inquirer* provided valuable insight into both the controversy and the myriad ways that various actors worked to emphasize the importance of remembering slavery at the President's House site. On March 24, 2002, *Inquirer* journalists Inga Saffron and Stephan Salisbury published a front-page article entitled "Echoes of Slavery at the Liberty Bell Site," documenting the opposing perspectives of parties involved in the earliest iterations of the controversy. In this article, INHP essentially argued that "the train [had] left the station."[23] The Park Service had already solicited public feedback and acquired the money for the pavilion; it was too late to make any changes. Miller is quoted critiquing the National Park Service for "simply moving ahead in a rush to finish the project."[24] He argued:

> Here is 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.[25]

In his argument for commemoration, Miller emphasized the contradictions that existed at the President's House site, and thus championed the importance of telling "the real story of the American Revolution." By erasing the presence of slaves in Washington's home during the founding era of the United States, he argued that INHP was not telling a complete story of history. Instead, the Park Service was actively promoting an incomplete and simplified understanding of freedom—one that valorized the nation's first President and minimized the lives of those he enslaved.

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[23] Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?" 43.
[24] Stephan Salisbury and Inga Saffron, "Echoes of Slavery at Liberty Bell Site," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 24, 2002, https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy2.library.drexel.edu/docview/1891544202/fulltext/D95FFE23EB7243C9PQ/1?accountid=10559.
[25] Ibid.

Similarly to Miller, Gary Nash argued that INHP was "burying history" by refusing to excavate and research preliminary archaeological findings at the President's House site that could have produced valuable insight into the daily lives of the enslaved individuals who lived there.[26] After conducting minor excavations, the Park Service reburied all materials, with one Park spokesperson commenting, "Are we going to dig everything up no matter what?"[27] In response to the Park Service's refusal to excavate, Nash argued that "our memory of the past is often managed and manipulated. Here it is being downright buried."[28] Again, Nash integrates INHP's erasure of slavery at the Liberty Bell site into a larger narrative of national-scale historical amnesia, referencing the way that public historical memory is "often managed and manipulated."[29] In this sense, the simultaneous valorization of an American symbol of liberty and the erasure of the narratives of Washington's slaves represented a larger theme of historical manipulation. It also, as many Black Philadelphian activists would later argue, represented a larger reluctance on the part of American institutions to fully acknowledge and grapple with the reality of slavery at the core of the nation's founding.

In response to critics advocating for a rethinking of the new Liberty Bell Pavilion and for the inclusion of slavery's history, INHP claimed that "the Liberty Bell is its own story, and Washington's slaves are a different one told better elsewhere."[30] INHP's response argued that the respective stories of the Liberty Bell and slavery at the highest levels of the nation's founding government were separate histories, and that an inclusion of the story of slavery was not relevant to the story of the Liberty Bell. Its reasoning erased countless nuances in the story of early

[26] Salisbury and Saffron, "Echoes of Slavery at Liberty Bell Site."
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

America and downplayed the tensions inherent in building a nation on the premise of liberty while keeping African Americans in human bondage mere feet away.

Saffron and Salisbury's article captured divergent opinions from historians like Miller and Nash to the Park Service. Ultimately, through this singular newspaper article, "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.'"[31] Their article introduced the public to a controversy that would span the course of nearly a decade, challenging the basic foundations of simplistically patriotic sentiments at national parks such as Philadelphia's Independence National Historical Park. A coalition of actors, ranging from professional academics, to politicians, to citizen activists, would work to challenge and dispute the long-established historical narratives that centered and valorized figures such as George Washington, pushing their city's officials to rethink the historical amnesia and erasure of Black contributions in historical memorials.

Two days after the first *Inquirer* article was released, Saffron published another article that reported on the emerging dialogue between Philadelphia Mayor John F. Street and the Park Service. A mayoral spokesperson told the *Inquirer*, "We've already begun a dialogue with the Park Service. The city is interested in finding a way to make certain that this legacy, this important piece of history, doesn't get neglected or forgotten."[32] Over the course of a few days, the Park Service's refusal to address the paradox of slavery and liberty at the site of the President's House and new Liberty Bell Pavilion had given way to an emerging dialogue

[31] Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?" 44.
[32] Inga Saffron, "Street: Let Pavilion Work Proceed," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 26, 2002, Access World News Research Collection.

between park officials and the city of Philadelphia—all resulting from the combined influence of media attention and mounting public pressure.

The next day, an article entitled "Freedom & Slavery, Just as they coexisted in the 1700s, both must be part of the Liberty Bell's story," emphasized the fact 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."[33] In making this argument, the *Inquirer* centered the paradoxical co-existence of human bondage at a site proclaiming liberty and its importance for the large African American population of Philadelphia. Rather than confusing the public or detracting from the Liberty Bell, recognition of slavery at the center of the nation's founding strengthened and elevated the meaning and importance of the Bell and its site as a "symbol of the struggle for liberty." Similarly, historian Charlene Mires argued in the *Inquirer* article that "issues of slavery and freedom run throughout Independence Mall," and, "it doesn't diminish the story to address them."[34] Letters to the *Inquirer* and ensuing public activism made it exceedingly clear that many Philadelphians believed the inclusion of the slavery narrative at the President's House was a truthful telling of America's history and enriched the story rather than diminished it.

Adding to the unfolding media blitz, on March 31, 2002, Nash and Miller co-penned an op-ed in the *Inquirer*, writing, "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."[35] At around the same time, the *Associated Press*

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[33] "Freedom & Slavery: Just as They Coexisted in the 1700s, Both Must Be Part of Liberty Bell's Story," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 27, 2002, https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy2.library.drexel.edu/northeastnews1/docview/1898409446/CAC58F9FDB974D83PQ/1?accountid=10559.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?" 45.

distributed their own national story titled, "Historians Decry Liberty Bell Site."[36] As the President's House story increasingly gained national attention, the public began flooding the *Inquirer* with letters, reacting and responding to the emerging controversy.

In the next few months, a flurry of articles were published as the controversy progressively unfolded. The articles kept the public informed and updated on the ongoing dynamic between the Park Service, the city, and Philadelphia's polity. Philadelphians also became increasingly invested in the outcome, with individuals writing letters to the editors advocating for a variety of different viewpoints. Going even further than writing to city publications, many Philadelphians organized around the project and publicly advocated for the inclusion of slavery in the new Liberty Bell exhibit. The most visible and prominent activist organization was the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition (ATAC). The group was founded in 2002 by outspoken lawyer, Michael Coard, to urge INHP and the National Park Service to create "a prominent Slavery Memorial to conspicuously permeate the President's House project."[37] The Avenging the Ancestors Coalition also "organized a letter writing campaign and a petition with several thousand signatures that called for a monument to commemorate Washington's slaves."[38] Hundreds of Black Philadelphians attended an ATAC demonstration at the Liberty Bell site on July 3, 2002, arguing that the Park Service recognize and commemorate the lives of Washington's slaves.

The community efforts and organizing that ultimately succeeded in making slavery a prominent feature of the President's House were far more nuanced and communal than the media's focus on any one individual or group might suggest. In an interview, Louis Massiah,—a

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[36] Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?" 45.
[37] "Avenging The Ancestors," accessed December 6, 2020, http://www.avengingtheancestors.com/.
[38] Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?" 48.

documentary filmmaker, founder of Philadelphia's Scribe Video Center, and director of the President's House video installations,—said that the inclusion of slavery at the President's House "very much came out of struggle," and that "it really was a grassroots and long-term organized movement [of] many, many people."[39] Some of these people included local and national politicians, artists, journalists, city employees, citizens, and what Massiah described as "culture builders" who were "struggling on a large scale for self-determining community."[40] Massiah credited one lesser-known figure, Sister Sicari [SP] Rhodes, with being one of the first individuals to understand the site as "a really important opportunity to talk about enslavement, and [*sic*] tie enslavement to the development of the country, the functioning of the country, the functioning of Philadelphia and as a way of [*sic*] understanding how fundamental this economic activity was to the functioning [of the country]."[41] In this sense, those pushing for the recognition of slavery at the President's House framed the contributions of African Americans as central, rather than peripheral, to the history of the United States.

Describing the efficacy of grassroots organizers in his book on the controversy, Roger Aden argued that the "advocates for recognizing the house and the enslaved developed a compelling public message," and that these individuals "were especially determined to share this message frequently and with people who possessed the political juice to shape INHP decisions that were…largely impervious to forces external to the park."[42] This dynamic was evident in the efforts of those Massiah described as "really important allies" who worked "in various levels of

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[39] Louis Massiah, Research Interview with Louis Massiah, interview by Sophia Stills, Zoom, October 13, 2020.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Roger C. Aden, *Upon the Ruins of Liberty: Slavery, the President's House at Independence National Historical Park, and Public Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 67, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrdf3hb.

city, state, and federal government."[43] Individuals like Karen Warrington, who worked with Congressman Bob Brady, and Joyce Wilkerson, a city solicitor who helped convince various city agencies to support the project, contributed greatly to secure funding and political support for the project. While historians and the news media played an incredibly important role in informing the public about the history of slavery at the President's House site, city and park officials were ultimately pressured to act by Black Philadelphians and grassroots activists who organized around the site pushed for slavery's recognition. Through their collective efforts, many African American Philadelphians were making a direct claim to public memory, invoking the contributions and memories of enslaved Africans who had lived and worked at the birthplace of America's most fundamental ideals.

The combined efforts of these actors ultimately convinced U.S. Congressman Chaka Fattah to secure national political support for the commemoration of the President's House and Washington's slaves, through a budgetary amendment that passed unanimously through the Department of the Interior's appropriations committee. The Multicultural Affairs Coalition of the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau supported this movement and specifically pushed the Park Service to cement "in public memory the contributions of Washington's slaves to the early years of the new republic and making Philadelphia a premier destination for African American visitors."[44] ATAC's website emphasizes its role in helping to secure $1.5 million in city funding for the project from Mayor Street in 2003, and for providing "substantial documentation" to U.S. House Representative Chaka Fattah, who, along with Congressman Bob Brady, eventually helped to secure $3.6 million in federal funding for the project.[45] Through

[43] Massiah, Research Interview with Louis Massiah.
[44] Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?" 48-49.
[45] "Avenging The Ancestors."

their collective efforts, these activists and organizations constructed a direct link between the commemoration of Black contributions to the republic, and the contemporary needs of Black Americans. The Bureau's emphasis on appealing to Black visitors both recognizes the large-scale exclusion and erasure of Black Americans from public memory constructed by national parks and monuments and the importance of rectifying those injustices contemporarily.

The historic exclusion of Black people from America's commemorative landscape, and many African Americans' desire for the public recognition of Black contributions to the nation's founding were two important dynamic at play in the fight over the President's House. The exclusion of African Americans from the narrative of the nation's founding can be traced back to the years during and after the Revolutionary War, when white colonists both recognized the hypocrisy of maintaining slavery while fighting for liberty and worked to actively undermine Black claims to citizenship. Before the 1990s, few public memorials or museums recognized or commemorated slavery or the history of African Americans.[46] The simplistic and exclusionary nature of Independence Historic Park was evidenced through those who visited. Because the park "has told a white story of American history," and historically excluded African Americans from its interpretive and commemorative content, "its visitors have largely been white."[47] In 2007, the park's internal study "revealed that only 3 percent of INHP's visitors were African American, and only 11 percent of the park's visitors were from the Philadelphia metropolitan area."[48] In commemorating slavery and fighting for the inclusion of African Americans in the narrative of the nation's founding, Black Americans were able to "eventually conquer the public space,

[46] Ana Lucia Araujo, "Introduction," in *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*, ed. Ana Lucia Araujo, 1st ed., Routledge Studies in Cultural History Ser. (Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 2.
[47] Aden, *Upon the Ruins of Liberty*, 49.
[48] Ibid.

allowing these groups to make their past officially recognized and to formulate demands to redress inherited social, economic, and racial inequalities."[49] In this sense, demands for recognition about the past were largely influenced by issues of the present. Massiah made this connection clear when he argued that "addressing the amnesia of the country's founding is extraordinarily important," and that bearing witness to the truth, however messy, makes it "easier for us to go forward."[50] In erasing the injustices of the past "we perpetuate the crimes and the violence."[51] Consequentially, presenting the story of the nation's founding without including the story of slavery prolongs the violence and injustice of exclusion.

Ultimately, a wide range of public actors, largely led by Black Philadelphians, successfully pushed the Park Service and the local and federal government to ensure the story of Washington's nine slaves would be told at the President's House site. After the city officially secured funding for the site, ATAC's Coard made an explicit connection between commemorating slavery at the site and Black American identity and pride, "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.'"[52] A myriad of groups and individuals collectively succeeded in incorporating the lives and contributions of African Americans into America's historical commemorative landscape after centuries of exclusion.

Remembering slavery in Philadelphia at the site of the President's House and the Liberty Bell was a contentious topic from its outset. The simplistic status quo—characterized by one-dimensional patriotism, the valorizing of white founding fathers, and largely representative of public memory on a national scale—did not meet the needs of a complex, diverse, and thoughtful

[49] Araujo, "Introduction," 2.
[50] Massiah, Research Interview with Louis Massiah.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?" 51.

populace. In his telling of the story, Gary Nash argued that, 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."[53] This "mini-media blitz," involving numerous local and national publications, played a crucial role in educating the public about the relationship between slavery and the President's House site. Working with and through various media outlets, prominent historians also organized around the memory of slavery, arguing that the public deserved to be informed about the site's rich history and making "the scholars' history…the public's history."[54] While professional historians such as Nash, Miller, and Mires initially sparked public interest in the President's House and its history of slavery, numerous letter-writers, petitioners, and activists deepened the controversy by bringing their own diverse perspectives to the topic. Historians in newspapers and media outlets may have introduced the public to the issue of slavery at the President's House, but public grassroots activism ultimately escalated the controversy and pushed the Park Service to meet the needs of a diverse and engaged populace, making the President's House exhibit what it is today.

Public Engagement and Comment Cards

As the controversy over the President's House exhibit extended into the mid-2000s, Philadelphia Mayor Street and INHP's new superintendent, Dennis Reidenbach, were eager to see the project advance into its final stages. On March 28, 2006, Mayor Street and Superintendent Reidenbach announced the six semifinalists who would be invited to submit their design proposals for the President's House installation. The semi-finalists' designs all emphasized slavery to varying degrees. One design contained nine empty chairs symbolizing the

[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid, 52.

nine enslaved individuals owned by Washington, while another featured a bas-relief sculpture depicting the nine enslaved Africans.[55] Some drew attention to the site's slave quarters while others utilized video and audio installations to tell the paradoxical stories of slavery and liberty at the President's House.[56] To gather feedback from the public, the five semi-finalist designs were displayed at the Constitution Center from August 16th to September 19th, and at the African American Museum from September 20th to October 1st.[57] The hundreds of public comment cards currently archived on the city of Philadelphia's website provide valuable insight into the varied ways the public participated in battles over slavery's memory at the proposed site of the President's House. These comments reveal what members of the public deemed worthy of commemoration and exposed their conceptions about the present moment.

Some who submitted their comments about the designs invoked ideas of representation for Black children when arguing for the importance of the exhibit. C. Keller from Philadelphia wanted the design competition to be exhibited in neighborhoods "populated by African descendants" and hoped for the inclusion of "some positivity of Africans pre-slavery."[58] Keller wanted the exhibit to include examples of "royalty, educators, inventors – so Black children could be proud of their heritage as well as learn about the horrific conditions their ancestors suffered under."[59] Keller completes the comment card writing, "Most important – slavery was

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[55] Aden, *Upon the Ruins of Liberty*," 85-87.
[56] Ibid, 84-88.
[57] The sixth semi-finalist group dropped out of the competition soon after a June 5th public meeting to introduce the finalists to the public, in which the mostly white representatives from the groups were met with an unhappy response by the largely Black audience. In their letter of withdrawal the sixth group complained that "'the most vocal, organized and disruptive stakeholder group'" — read: Black people — "'will insist on the telling of one story, built by one demographic.'"
Aden, *Upon the Ruins of Liberty*, 112.
[58] "Public Comments on the Semi-Finalists' Models," The President's House, accessed December 7, 2020, https://www.phila.gov/presidentshouse/comments.htm.
[59] Ibid.

not a picnic. Even free Africans suffered intense discrimination. Please do not 'white-wash' it!"[60] In this single comment card Keller makes a series of claims about slavery in Philadelphia and describes why it is an important story to tell in the present. Keller's desire to exhibit the designs in Black neighborhoods reflects the individual's belief in both the importance of soliciting Black feedback and of showcasing the site's design to those it would be representing. Keller largely emphasizes the representation of Black people for the younger generations of African Americans. In this sense, the commemoration of slavery at the President's House derives importance from its potential impact on African Americans in the present, specifically as a tool to promote racial pride and community knowledge.

While Keller's focus is on the capacity of the President's House to inform younger generations about their heritage, other commenters drew overt political meaning from the relationship between past and present in the designs. Anna Rogalla from Philadelphia emphasized the connection between the historical oppression of African Americans during slavery and current systemic injustices faced by the Black community. In a critique of the existing designs, Rogalla writes:

> I think we're bypassing an opportunity to change people's awareness about the history of inequality in America. Without linking the history of yesterday's slavery to today's modern day "slavery" (i.e., police brutality, lack of equal education for minorities, white dominant government, minorities stuck in the welfare cycle, etc.) the project won't impact the lives of the people who view it but it will increase their information about (in their minds) ancient history and problems that America faced. Information without relevance to their everyday experience is easily lost and forgotten.[61]

From Rogalla's perspective, the President's House exhibit is significant for both its telling of the past and its ability to inform viewers about injustices of the current moment. Rogalla emphasizes

[60] Ibid.
[61] "Public Comments on the Semi-Finalists' Models."

"police brutality, lack of equal education," "white dominant" governments and issues of welfare. In describing these inequities as forms of "modern 'slavery,'" Rogalla draws a direct parallel between the impact of slavery as an institution and the present moment. To Rogalla, the mere inclusion of slavery's history was not enough—the exhibit must educate viewers on the connection between slavery and present-day issues. In doing so, Rogalla argues that the conditions of the past not only impact the present but that the links between the past and present must be recognized by the public in order for current conditions to change. While both Rogalla and Keller advocate for the commemoration of slavery in the exhibit, they promote this shared goal differently. Keller centers the need to commemorate both the achievements and the suffering of Black people to foster racial pride in subsequent generations, while Rogalla emphasizes the importance of drawing connections between the injustices of the past to those of the present.

While authors advocating for the commemoration of slavery in the exhibit may have disagreed on the specifics, they starkly contrast commentary from people opposed to any of the designs that emphasized slavery. One person who authorized the posting of their comment but not their name, left the entire comment card blank except for this statement: "I am very tired of the wringing of hands about slavery. We are past that.... It does not need to be embellished as if it were all guilty. We have changed for the better and that is what American stands for."[62] In making these claims, the commenter seeks to efface the history of slavery by centering the way America has "changed for the better." Within this framework, the history of slavery is irrelevant in the context of America's more celebratory achievements. Although the author does not elaborate on the claim that slavery's history is being "embellished," it is worth noting that the

[62] "Public Comments on the Semi-Finalists' Models."

mere presence of slavery as a key feature of the site evokes such language. What about the commemoration of enslaved lives in these designs constituted embellishment? In responding to slavery's history by claiming "we are past that," this author minimizes the importance of slavery as an institution that is worth commemorating. Slavery is both a specter of the past and something that "we," presumably Americans, have overcome. Thus, the author strips slavery of its significance in the present and downplays its importance in the past. Similarly to the white Northerners described by Melish in her text, this author works to downplay slavery's role in American history by denying responsibility for the institution. For this author, the commemoration of slavery also implies an allegedly unjustified guilt. While the author does not specify who exactly is being portrayed as the guilty party, the use of such language and the assertion of their own blamelessness indicates the degree to which discussions of slavery can invoke defensive reactions. This defensiveness illustrates the ways in which memory of slavery continues to be both a politically and emotionally charged topic.

While authors like the one above argue that slavery is a relic of the past and thusly need not be commemorated, other critics of slavery's commemoration took an accusatory tone in their approach. Taking an overtly political stance, G.A. Pataki from Philadelphia accused the National Park Service of allowing "radical interest groups, tenured new left academics, and extreme 'political correctness'" to drive the action surrounding the President's House.[63] He argued that other commentators are wrong, and that "slavery in the President's House was not 'forgotten.'"[64] While Pataki does not elaborate on accusations against various individuals and entities, the language reflects the ways in which the commemoration of slavery was a highly politicized topic. Pataki's lambasting of "tenured new left academics" and "'political correctness'" invokes

[63] "Public Comments on the Semi-Finalists' Models."
[64] Ibid.

culture war controversies that occurred in the 1990s. The author of this comment card does not mention Professor Gary Nash by name, but it is worth noting that Pataki attacks "new left academics" in a controversy that was largely sparked by the same professor "who had made useful target practice for the ultra-patriotic attack on the National History Standards in 1994."[65] Ultimately, the politicization of slavery's commemoration was reflected in the commentary of those members of the public who believed that the history of slavery was somehow overstated.

The myriad of views and opinions expressed in these comment cards provide insight into the ways the public understood the history of slavery, as well as the political stakes of this commemoration. While some advocates for slavery's remembrance argued for its importance by invoking racial representation for Black children and by asserting its significance in the present moment, others argued the opposite. Oppositional commentators echoed historical arguments about slavery that enforce a static representation of the institution, while also illustrating the contemporary politicization of slavery's memory. Ultimately, the intensity and vehemence of the various assertions represent the ways in which the public constructed meaning out of President's House controversy.

Coda

While the President's House controversy occurred in the early 2000s, public debates over slavery's history have also erupted in recent years. In August 2019, the *New York Times* published the 1619 Project, a commemorative series of essays and articles that marked the four-hundredth anniversary of the first African slaves to arrive in America. The project "aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of

[65] Nash, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?" 44.

black Americans at the very center of our national narrative."[66] Many of the essays draw direct links between the systems of racial hierarchy and white supremacy that developed under slavery, and current inequities that continue to plague the United States. The project ultimately seeks to reframe America's historical narrative, centering the perspectives of Black Americans and the importance of slavery in the development of America's economy, culture, and society at-large.

The project has been met with heated controversy, with critics ranging from professional historians and scholars to conservative political commentators, among others. Several historians took issue with what they argued were factual misstatements in some of the project's historical arguments. Before its publication, historian Leslie Harris vehemently cautioned the *Times* against arguing slavery was a primary cause of the Revolutionary War, citing her concern "that critics would use the overstated claim to discredit the entire undertaking."[67] As Harris feared, conservative political figures distorted her critique and others, claiming the project was tantamount to leftist "propaganda" and "brainwashing," with one conservative blogger accusing project creator, Nikole Hannah-Jones, of profiting from "stoking and fueling racial grievances."[68] Others claimed the goal of the project was "to delegitimize America," and accused the *New York Times* of "re-writing American history to make everything about race, racism, and slavery."[69] Taking things a step further, in July 2020, Arkansas Republican Senator Tom Cotton introduced the Saving American History Act of 2020, "a bill that would prohibit the use of deferral funds to

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[66] "The 1619 Project," *The New York Times*, August 14, 2019, sec. Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html.
[67] Leslie M. Harris, "I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project. The Times Ignored Me," Politico, March 6, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/06/1619-project-new-york-times-mistake-122248.
[68] J. Brian Charles, "Why Conservatives Are Bothered by the New York Times' Project on Slavery," Vox, August 19, 2019, https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/8/19/20812238/1619-project-slavery-conservatives.
[69] Ibid.

teach the 1619 Project by K-12 schools or school districts," and block federal professional-development grants from schools teaching the project.[70] "Not a single cent of federal funding should go to indoctrinate young Americans with this left-wing garbage," said Cotton in the announcement of his bill.[71] While the project and the myriad reactions have been the subjects of numerous articles, think-pieces, tweets, and even proposed federal legislation, the public response to the project represents the United States' larger struggle to fully confront the history of slavery and its complex legacy.

The recent controversy over the *New York Times*' 1619 Project shows that issues of slavery, history, and memory are still deeply intertwined and no less controversial than they were almost twenty years ago. This is in part because of increased public interest in slavery and an expansion in scholarly inquiry and analysis of the institution. In 2004, historian Ira Berlin argued that, for most of the 20th century, "slavery was excluded from public presentations of American history and played no visible role in American politics,"[72] but by 2004, slavery's presence in American life was at its highest point since the end of the Civil War.[73] The increase in scholarly, political and public interest in slavery was not incidental. Rather, as Berlin argued, the "intense engagement over the issue of slavery signals… a crisis in American race relations that necessarily elevates the significance of the study of the past in the search for social justice."[74] In making this argument, Berlin directly linked slavery in the past to contemporary demands for social justice. Like Berlin's argument suggests, much of public interest in slavery corresponds to

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[70] "Cotton Bill to Defund 1619 Project Curriculum," U.S. Senator Cotton of Arkansas, accessed December 5, 2020, https://www.cotton.senate.gov/news/press-releases/cotton-bill-to-defund-1619-project-curriculum.
[71] "Cotton Bill to Defund 1619 Project Curriculum."
[72] Ira Berlin, "American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice," *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 4 (2004): 1257.
[73] Ibid, 1251.
[74] Ibid.

an increased understanding of racism as a central and systemic problem plaguing American society. For some, the recognition of and attempts to combat systemic racism also involve acknowledging the centrality of slavery to the development of Americans systems and society.

The inherent link between acknowledging racism's origins in slavery and contemporary calls for racial justice are a major reason why so many Americans resist efforts to recognize slavery's significance in American history. Today, the erasure of slavery allows many white Americans to avoid reckoning with America's inherently unequal institutions and to continue profiting from them as a result. By excluding a large facet of the African American experience from the commemoration of America's founding, these individuals impose an exclusionary vision of American history as primarily white, Anglo, and male—a vision that emphasizes heroic narratives of liberty, democracy, and freedom by necessarily downplaying bondage, exploitation, and racism. This mythological hero narrative is consequentially threatened by any effort to construct a historical narrative that incorporates the stories of Black Americans, including slavery. Renée Ater explores these dynamics in her analysis of one slavery memorial in North Carolina, writing:

> 'For Americans, a people who see their history as a freedom story and themselves as defenders of freedom, the integration of slavery into their national narrative is embarrassing and can be guilt-producing and disillusioning. It can also provoke defensiveness, anger and confrontation.' The anguish of this past makes North Americans uncomfortable and often unwilling to engage in dialogue about its meaning because the slave past is linked inextricably to issues of race and race relations in the present moment.[75]

Activists pushing for slavery's commemoration in Philadelphia during the President's House controversy consequentially made larger claims about the contemporary impact of slavery, and

[75] Renée Ater, "The Challenge of Memorializing Slavery in North Carolina: The Unsung Founders Memorial and the North Carolina Freedom Monument Project," in *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*, ed. Ana Lucia Araujo, 1st ed., Routledge Studies in Cultural History Ser. (Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 142.

argued that simple recognition is an important step to creating change. Ironically, those who resisted the acknowledgement of slavery and fought the commemoration of Washington's slaves were also tacitly recognizing that the commemoration of past atrocities had important contemporary political ramifications. During the President's House controversy, individuals who denied or downplayed the significance of slavery during America's founding were also implicitly enforcing boundaries over what it means to be an American, what defines the American experience and who gets to be included in those paradigms; commenters arguing against slavery's inclusion at the President's House and political conservatives who were enraged by the goals of the 1619 Project exemplify Ater's argument almost perfectly.

The President's House controversy also shows that the more we continue to deny the centrality of slavery to the fundamental foundations of American policy, economy, and society, the gulf between historical reality and American collective memory will continue to widen. Ultimately, issues of systemic racism could be more thoroughly addressed if Americans, and American historical institutions, worked to fully incorporate the history of slavery—the origin story of anti-Black racism—into our national consciousness. A full exploration of American history, with all of its inherent contradictions and paradoxes, is crucial to combat issues of racism that continue to plague the United States today. As speculative fiction author N.K. Jemisin writes: "How can we prepare for the future if we won't acknowledge the past?"[76]

[76] N.K. Jemisin, *The Stone Sky* (New York: Orbit, 2017), 216.

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