



Summer 2004

"Creating Dissonance for the Visitor": The Heart of the Liberty Bell Controversy

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Ogline, Jill. "Creating Dissonance for the Visitor": The Heart of the Liberty Bell Controversy." *The Public Historian* 26.3 (Summer 2004), 49-57.

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Abstract

This paper examines the controversy surrounding the location and proposed interpretive plan for Independence National Historical Park's new pavilion for the Liberty Bell. Written from the perspective of a graduate student and former Independence NHP employee, it attempts to help historians and Park Service employees to better understand each other's positions, and to penetrate to the heart of the issue at stake - the park's own sense of self-understanding and mission. It then moves on to show the relevance of this specific controversy to questions of broader significance, such as the fundamental character of American history, the post-September 11th responsibility of historic sites, the strength of national mythology, and the vital importance of critical public history.

Keywords

National Park Service, Liberty Bell, public history, Independence National Historical Park, historical interpretation

Disciplines

Community-Based Learning | History | Social History | Social Influence and Political Communication | Tourism | United States History

Report from the Field

“Creating Dissonance for the Visitor”: The Heart of the Liberty Bell Controversy

JILL OGLINE

This paper examines the controversy surrounding the location and proposed interpretive plan for Independence National Historical Park's new pavilion for the Liberty Bell. Written from the perspective of a graduate student and former Independence NHP employee, it attempts to help historians and Park Service employees to better understand each other's positions, and to penetrate to the heart of the issue at stake—the park's own sense of self-understanding and mission. It then moves on to show the relevance of this specific controversy to questions of broader significance, such as the fundamental character of American history, the post-September 11th responsibility of historic sites, the strength of national mythology, and the vital importance of critical public history.

FOR YEARS, THE SITE has been a public restroom. The residents of 190 High Street, both free and enslaved, have had little presence on Independence Mall. Few of the nearly one million visitors who come annually to the Liberty Bell are aware that they are standing only a few yards from what was the home of the president of the United States throughout Philadelphia's decade as national capital (1790–1800). Fewer still have ever heard of Moll, Austin,

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The views expressed are the author's alone and do not represent the position of Independence National Historical Park or the National Park Service.

Special thanks to Max Page, without whom this article would never have been written.

Hercules, Richmond, Giles, Paris, Christopher Sheels, or Oney Judge—the president’s slaves. Since 1976, the Liberty Bell has stood near a site exposing the dark underside of American liberty: its foundation of chattel slavery.

An Independence National Historical Park wayside in front of the restroom marked the site of the home that had served as the first White House. Over the years, a variety of interpretive programs had explored the early history of the executive branch of the federal government. But no one spoke of the slaves—not out of any deliberate conspiracy of silence, but because Washington’s labor arrangements lay outside the park’s field of vision. Founded to tell the stories of the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention, the park reflected the priorities and outlook of the larger society. From a contemporary vantage point, it can be difficult to remember that interpreting the history of the marginalized has not always been considered important. The history of slavery on Independence Mall has not so much been suppressed as considered irrelevant to the park’s primary narratives: the political history of the late eighteenth century and the institutional history of Independence Square.

The events of the last two years have challenged this marginalization. The story began with Independence National Historical Park’s decision to move the bell from its current location to a new pavilion which happened to be directly adjacent to the site of Washington’s slave quarters. It intensified with the publication of local historian Edward Lawler, Jr.’s history of the site in the January 2002 issue of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*.¹ Lawler’s article introduced many to the facts that the corner of Sixth and Market (formerly High) had once housed the president of the United States and that George and Martha Washington had not lived alone, but rather in the company of at least eight black slaves: slaves who slept and worked in the yard adjacent to the new Liberty Bell complex.

The revelation that the new Bell pavilion would be placed upon a site intimately associated with slavery was a symbolic bombshell setting the stage for sustained public dialogue on both the interplay of freedom and unfreedom in American history and the extent to which that tension can and should be expressed in interpretation for the public. Throughout the controversy, the fundamentals at stake have been nothing less than the place of slavery in the American narrative and Independence National Historical Park’s own sense of self-understanding and mission. The unique place of Independence Mall in national mythology has heightened the significance of the debate, raising the question of how a park and a city long accustomed to a glorious role in American history will deal with a national sin older than the nation itself. Finally, the timing of the controversy, appearing on the heels of a formal commitment to civic responsibility on the part of the National Park Service (NPS), offers an immediate opportunity for an NPS site to act on that commitment.

1. Edward Lawler, Jr., “The President’s House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 126, no. 1 (January 2002): 5-96.

The construction of a new building for the bell had been in the works for years. At the current pavilion, exceptionally high visitation rates and public impatience with long lines have long demanded that a complex story of contradiction, irony, and symbolism be compressed into a three-minute interpretive talk. From the beginning, the plan for the new building included written text, visual images, and audiovisual programming designed to provide visitors a more extensive interpretive experience. A sidebar on symbolism was slated to explore the psychological appeal of symbolic objects, while another promised to examine the bell's employment in forging a link between women's suffrage, the civil rights movement, and the fulfillment of constitutional promises. Yet the focus of the narrative remained the physical history of the object, the political history of American independence, and modern ideals of freedom. It took no notice of the site itself, a plot of land forever imprinted with the fundamental contradiction of American history: the construction of the nation—politically, socially, economically, and ideologically—upon a foundation of slavery. Though the new plan included more developed discussion of the bell's connection to the antislavery movement, it shied away from grappling with the historical relationship between freedom and slavery and the struggles of many segments of the American population to secure access to the liberties associated with the bell.

In the aftermath of Edward Lawler's publication, newspapers across the nation picked up the story and many historians, led by UCLA's Gary Nash and St. Joseph's University's Randall Miller, publicly criticized Independence National Historical Park for whitewashing Philadelphia's history of slavery. Though long aware of the complex history of the site, park administrators, who had had access to Lawler's research a year before publication, continued to proceed toward implementation of an interpretive plan that focused on the story of the Liberty Bell rather than on the contested history of liberty itself. The Independence Hall Association (IHA), a citizens' organization with a history of frequently contentious relations with the park, launched an online petition to encourage interpretation of the property upon which Washington had lived. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* enthusiastically picked up the story. To date, it has run at least sixty articles, op-ed pieces, and editorials relating to the issue.

Park administration responded to the widespread criticism by taking the position that planning for the new structure had moved too far along to sustain any substantive changes. It defended its original plan by pointing out that interpretive talks at the Liberty Bell already include the bell's career as a symbol of the abolitionist movement, agreed to consider placing an interpretive panel dealing with slavery in eighteenth-century Philadelphia inside the new Liberty Bell pavilion, and suggested that the Deshler-Morris House, Washington's surviving Germantown summer residence, might be a better place than the Market Street property to engage the topic of the president as a slave-owner.

Yet these proposals missed the mark. The symbolic power of the Liberty

Bell lifted the issue to an entirely different plane. From its earliest days of notoriety, the value and importance of the Liberty Bell have derived less from documented historical usage than from the way in which the object has been mythologized and remembered. Teetering in a half-rotted steeple in July 1776, the bell did not ring on the Fourth of July, but along with other bells in the city, probably rang on the eighth to announce what became the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence. Appropriated as a symbol for human liberty by a Massachusetts antislavery group in the 1840s, thanks to its biblical inscription, “proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all the inhabitants thereof” (Leviticus 25:10), and historical association with the events of July 1776, the bell has undergone a radical transformation from functional object to international symbol of freedom. It would be difficult to imagine a better conduit for linking the antislavery movement to the founding ideals of the republic than the old Pennsylvania State House bell and its “all the inhabitants” phrase.

Yet the bell’s connection to the currents of national memory is generally not the stuff of which visitor questions are made. Though the bell’s symbolism is ever-present, it is rarely seriously analyzed. The crack elicits more questions than the symbolism. However, as a tangible “piece of history” electrified by a surrounding web of legend, the Liberty Bell has become the greatest relic of America’s heroic age. Though historians may cringe at the inherent antiquarianism in the word “relic,” the truth remains that desire for an emotional connection with the past is a prime motivator in drawing visitors to historic sites. Disillusioned by the contemporary political scene, many visitors may approach the bell not as an artifact to be analyzed but as a bridge to an imagined historical moment in which public officials were idealistic, politicians virtuous, and citizens optimistic about the future—the lost heroic age. Thus, the appeal of the bell lies less in “understanding” it than in being strengthened and encouraged by its very presence. Yet the role expands beyond comforter and sustainer. For citizens across the globe, the Liberty Bell has become a powerful symbol of freedom and human rights. The broken, worthless bell that so far exceeded the expectations of those who cast it provides inspiration to those who appropriate its imagery that they may also do the same.

The bell’s intangible association with the highest of human ideals demands that even its physical surroundings be judged on the basis of their concurrence with the principles of liberty and justice. A slave site is jarring. Yet the answer is not to move the two thousand-pound piece of bronze to some more “suitable” site than Washington’s slave quarters, to a bucolic setting that poses no challenge to its ideals. The reality of American history has perpetually challenged those ideals. Neither is it to remove discussion of the slavery story to another site. Visitors to the new Liberty Bell pavilion will be unable to avoid the contradiction. The quarters stood on the last piece of ground across which they will walk on their way to the main entrance.

Edmund Morgan’s powerful analysis of the symbiotic relationship between

a particularly American system of slavery and a particularly American conception of freedom has shaped historians' understandings of the colonial era since the publication of his masterwork *American Slavery, American Freedom* in 1975. Morgan argued that a culture of enslavement made possible the genteel society in which many of the luminaries of the Revolution had the time and resources to immerse themselves in Enlightenment thought and created a rough sort of theoretical equality among white men, regardless of economic status. In his own words, "To a large degree it may be said that Americans bought their independence with slave labor. The paradox is American, and it behooves Americans to understand it if they would understand themselves."² The debate surrounding the place of slavery on Independence Mall has already made a significant contribution toward getting this paradox into public discourse. Responsible, challenging, nuanced interpretation of the Liberty Bell in its new home has further potential to give visceral meaning to the contradiction.

Interpretive talks at the site already include discussion of the bell's growth into a symbol through its adoption by the abolitionist movement. But the abolitionist connection is not the sum total of the Liberty Bell's relevance to slavery in America. In its current location, interpretation of the Liberty Bell focuses upon the history of the bell itself: its life as an object and a symbol. But when viewing it will require visitors to cross the foundations of rooms in which enslaved Africans waited upon white revolutionaries, interpreters of the Liberty Bell will have the opportunity to transcend the object and interpret something much bigger. Through exhibit text and interpretive presentations, the story of a nation perpetually grappling with its own conscience could come to life. If, in that space, members of the visiting public could be drawn into a similar sort of engagement with their own conscience, history will have taken a step toward the center of civic life.

No party involved in the debate ever made a conscious decision to place the Liberty Bell on a slave site, yet events have ensured the paradox. Ignoring the dichotomy can only engender bitterness, deepen racial divisions, and undermine the credibility of the National Park Service. The darkest stages of this controversy were those in which the park clung to its original narrative, disregarding historians' objections, public commentary, the suggestions of the Independence Hall Association, the grievances of the newly formed Avenging the Ancestors Coalition, and the growing frustration of black Philadelphians. On the other hand, fully embracing the interpretive possibilities presented by the juxtaposition would create an unprecedented opportunity to involve the public (city residents and visitors from across the nation and around the world) in reflection upon a complex, contradictory story relevant to the lives of twenty-first-century visitors to the park. Such an action would allow the park to act upon the principles of the National Park Ser-

2. Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1975), 5.

vice's own Civic Engagement project, a broad "re-conceptualization" initiative seeking to shift the crux of an interpretive experience toward discovery of the conceptual questions and contemporary dimensions surrounding historical events and issues. The kind of conceptual questions raised by this paradox have great potential to engage visitors in the ongoing national debate over how the legacy of bondage should be remembered, and to present in tangible form the centrality of slavery to the narrative of American history.

Whether consciously or not, it seems that the fundamentals at stake in this controversy are nothing less than the park's own sense of self-understanding and mission. The past ten to twenty years have been ones of great dynamism within the NPS, producing genuine interest across the agency in broadening scope and context to encompass the untold stories. In December 1999, the Northeast Region of the National Park Service pledged itself as a founding member of the International Coalition of Historic Sites of Conscience. Subscribing to the Coalition's assertion that "it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our site and its contemporary implications. We view stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and democratic values as a primary function," the NPS asserted its depth of commitment to an ongoing broadening of discussion of controversial issues.³ The sincerity of this commitment has been further evidenced in the development of an internal "moral concern" initiative, *The National Park Service and Civic Engagement*.

Given this sincere commitment to "doing" history differently, why the roadblocks encountered on Independence Mall? Part of the answer lies in the fact that within the NPS, most decisions regarding a site's planning and interpretation are usually made on a local level. Though parks receive substantial assistance and advice from other Service personnel and remain accountable to organizational hierarchy, their administrators exercise a great degree of local control. Public hearings, visitor input, and community opinion are powerful forces in shaping park policy, and frequently exert more immediate impact than national or regional agency policy. Independence National Historical Park's position regarding the Liberty Bell controversy should not be taken as indicative of the National Park Service's fundamental stance toward the interpretation of slavery at its sites. Rather, it should be understood as a position profoundly shaped by both Independence NHP's unique location in the constellation of Park Service sites and its own conception of itself.

The responsibility of preserving and interpreting icons of American civil religion such as Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell has been the crucible in which the park has forged its sense of identity. The by-product of this trust has been an assortment of unarticulated assumptions and expectations often invisible to the general observer. In an active response to its resources and narrative, the park has long viewed itself as a site of celebration, a site at

3. Bulletin, *International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience* (December 13, 2000), 1.

which the divisions that fracture American life can be subsumed in a triumphant and unifying national narrative of self-determination, equality, and self-sacrifice. In an age in which icons are few and far between, the Founding Fathers and their work in the old Pennsylvania State House still stir a profound sense of patriotism in most visitors. In the wake of September 11th, park staff and administration have increasingly viewed themselves as a place for a grieving nation to mourn, and to begin to find healing through reaffirmation of the basic tenets of its national creation story.

If that creation story were to encompass the story of slavery to its fullest extent, could it still prove to unite rather than divide? Could it build national identity and provide comfort in the wake of tragedy? It is one thing to talk about slavery on a battlefield, a landscape already scarred by suffering. It is quite another for a site synonymous with democracy and liberty to acknowledge explicitly the fundamental contradiction at the root of the American Revolution. Yet the admirable and dishonorable in American history are intertwined—the past is an integrated reality. If slavery is engaged only at Civil War parks and plantation sites, not only is the broad reach of the peculiar institution underestimated, but a highly complex past is artificially divided into neat and mutually exclusive boxes. A historical perspective that denies the interconnection of issues and experiences provides poor preparation for life in a complex and contradictory present.

Park administration is highly conscious that due to its urban location, Independence National Historical Park serves as many visitors' first, or most memorable, encounter with the NPS. Thus, visitor comfort and enjoyment are given highest priority, and complaint letters accorded great attention. Former park superintendent Martha Aikens' concern that outlining the floor plan of the President's House would "create dissonance for visitors" expresses, in a nutshell, the heart of the problem.⁴ Whether in the stories it tells, the exhibits it designs, or the building policies it enacts, creating dissonance for visitors is the park's greatest fear. At some National Park Service sites, dissonance is unavoidable, obvious, and expected—the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, Manzanar National Historic Site, and Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, to name only a few. Visitors must negotiate opposing points of view and conflicting interpretations in order to assemble their own understanding of these sites' meanings.

However, at Independence and many sites like it, dissonance is viewed as a threat to maintaining smooth operations. In an environment so focused on ensuring comfort—physical, intellectual, and emotional—an upset visitor is a sign of failure. Yet under a different ordering of values, dissonance and an intellectually unsettled visitor might be considered signs of great success. Not only acknowledging the Liberty Bell's proximity to a site upon which enslaved

4. Martha B. Aikens, Superintendent, Independence National Historical Park, letter to Nancy Gilboy, Chair, Independence Hall Association, 11 October 2001, www.ushistory.org/presidenthouse/quotes3.htm.

people toiled, but actually integrating that story of enslavement into the bell's narrative of freedom might possibly be the greatest dissonance ever to be interpreted at a national historic site.

Any account of the controversy on Independence Mall will by nature contain an element of artificiality, freezing developments at a certain point in time. Yet the situation in Philadelphia is dynamic, changing almost every day as positions shift and new developments reveal or create new issues. Throughout the late spring and early summer of 2002, spurred on by historians' critiques, public protest, and the increasing involvement of NPS Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley and the staff of the Northeast Regional Office, the park's position underwent a major shift. Gone were the one interpretive panel and the Deshler-Morris House. In their place stood a promise that freedom and unfreedom would stand together in the nation's most sacred space.

A new script for the exhibit, this time framed around the central theme of "freedom vs. unfreedom," was hammered out in late May and submitted for review to an ad hoc group of historians who had joined Gary Nash in calling for a narrative mature enough to integrate contradiction and complexity. Focused on the meaning of freedom in a democracy built on slave foundations, the role of symbols in creating meaning, the alternative meanings of the Liberty Bell for those denied the "blessings of liberty," and the appropriation of its imagery by diverse groups seeking to link their causes and products to the ideals embodied in the bell, the finalized version of the script is incomparably richer, more complex, and more engaging than the original narrative.⁵

Yet the issues brought to light by the controversy are hardly resolved in a single interpretive script. A summer of demonstrations and a letter-writing campaign coordinated by the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition, calling for the erection of a monument to Washington's slaves, culminated in a congressional directive to the Park Service requiring Independence National Historical Park to "appropriately commemorate" both the home in which the Washingtons resided and its enslaved inhabitants. Design plans released by the park in January 2003, including a partial footprint of the building, interpretive sculpture, and text detailing the stories of the two slaves who escaped to freedom from the site, Philadelphia's dynamic free black community, the presidencies of house residents George Washington and John Adams, and a short history of American slavery, have received largely positive feedback.⁶

September and October of 2002 witnessed a debate over wording: whether the structure in which the slaves slept should be referred to by the period euphemism used in Washington's correspondence, "servants' hall," or by the unmistakably clear "slave quarters." They also brought a new dimension to the debate—calls for archaeological excavation and proper interpretation of sites crucial to understanding Philadelphia's eighteenth-century free black com-

5. Exhibit text can be viewed at www.nps.gov/inde/lbc.html.

6. Proposed design plans can be viewed at www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/plans/jan2003/index.htm.

munity. These land-use issues involve not only Independence National Historical Park but the National Constitution Center as well, slated to open on Independence Mall in July 2003. They move the issue beyond Washington's slaves to broader narratives of the city's black history and the status of African-American historic preservation in Philadelphia.

At this stage, the Liberty Bell controversy can certainly be considered a victory for good public history. Yet the story is far from over. The issue has produced new stories, new challenges, new opportunities, and new dangers. Public historians cannot afford to congratulate themselves on a job well done and cease to follow further developments. Most of the decisions made at Independence NHP took place at high levels, and it is difficult to predict how they will be interpreted, negotiated, and reshaped on the frontline. How will the bell's new thematic framework affect the stories told in other areas of the park? Will frontline interpreters be encouraged and supported in attempting to engage difficult or intangible issues? What incentive will they be given to risk upsetting visitors or complicating operational procedures at a busy urban park? What will be the public response? Will some visitors be angered at the "desacralization" of the Liberty Bell and ascribe the new interpretation to political correctness? Much still remains to be seen. The park has pledged to interpret the greatest dissonance in American history, but in order to do so, must rethink its own understanding of its reason for existence.