

THERE IS NOTHING UNTRUE OR INSANE ABOUT THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE ON INDEPENDENCE MALL

Wait! There were enslaved people in Philadelphia? Yes, and some of them lived with George Washington in the President's House, on Market Street. You may ask, where did you learn this? At Independence National Historical Park, of course. Does this news bother you? No! Because one of America's boldest ideas was the eradication of slavery, and that is something to celebrate. It makes us proud to know that we have the honesty to acknowledge that it once existed, to share that knowledge, and to study its consequences.

Federal plans are underway to remove exhibits, allegedly to return "truth and sanity" to the historic area. Let us therefore examine the story of one of the most prominent exhibits, that of the President's House, to see if it is untruthful or insane.

It's a long story with many meetings and a book (Roger C. Aden, *Upon the Ruins of Liberty*, Temple University Press, 2015). The short version is that, upon being reminded of the facts of enslaved people at the President's house, hundreds of people worked in various capacities on how to tell the story. One of them was Charles Blockson, creator of the Blockson Collection on African American history housed at Temple University. His advice shaped the consensus of a 2003 roundtable meeting of fourteen historians and Park Service officials as recorded by the Park Service itself:

"It is extremely important that the graphics chosen, whether period or newly created, carry images that are read positively in terms of the cognition of both the white and African American communities. Mr. Blockson stressed the necessity that the graphics portray African agency, and the roundtable encourages the designers to be mindful of this sensitive cultural issue."

Hardly the voice of insanity. A national design competition for an installation on the site of the President's house was initiated by the City of Philadelphia in cooperation with the Park Service. In early 2007, Kelly Maiello Architects, led at the time by its indefatigable leader, the late Emanuel Kelly FAIA, won the competition.

Design progress on the project was halted in May 2007 when archaeology at the site uncovered fragments of the original house. The archaeological excavation attracted more than 300,000 visitors between May and the end of July, prompting the City of Philadelphia, the National Park Service, and the community to consider how to incorporate the findings into the proposed design.

The excavation caused a change in the original design and introduced a different narrative emphasizing the building as George Washington's home. This was achieved through a series of stories, dialogues, or narratives conveyed via visual media (video screens), voices, and graphic panels. It is accomplished by presenting an interpretation of freedom and slavery within the house, symbolizing these core issues and providing a platform to explore history and slavery from a new perspective. Slavery becomes more tangible through the stories of the nine enslaved Africans in the house. Visitors learn about the free black community in Philadelphia and discover that George Washington moved enslaved people to Mount Vernon every six months to prevent them from gaining freedom under Pennsylvania law. Through exhibit panels, videos, and archaeology, the enslaved are depicted as real people, serving as witnesses and participants in the country's early history.

Equally important, the design emphasizes that this occurred in Philadelphia, in the house of the President of the United States. It underscores the importance of telling this truth.

The design process was a multi-year, inclusive, interactive, and transparent effort involving many discussions, deliberations, and charrettes among experienced professionals from various fields, including historians, artists, graphic and sound designers, a curator, an author, and a filmmaker. Additionally, each design idea,

graphic, and narrative was carefully evaluated and reviewed by stakeholders from more than nineteen organizations. At each stage, information about the project's progress was shared with the public through meetings and a city-run website.

The President's House, as it exists today, clearly and rightly reflects its deep association with slavery from the beginning, with the contrast between slavery and freedom serving as the central theme of its interpretation. This idea is evident throughout. If edits, deletions, or cover-ups occur, visitors won't fully understand the complete picture of The President's House. Ultimately, they will be denied the truth.

The DAG Steering Committee and Kelly Maiello Architects

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