



**Museum Presentations of Slavery:
The Problems of Evidence and the Challenge of Representation**

by

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Academic historians trained in the “New Social History” of the 1960s and 1970s have advocated the inclusion of more diverse stories in the telling of American history. Responding to the need to be more inclusive and make museums relevant to a broader audience, curators have followed the social historians’ lead and incorporated the stories of women, minorities, and the lower classes in their presentation of American history.

The current number of exhibits about African-American history in museums is an encouraging sign of an improvement long overdue.¹ Yet, museum presentations specifically about slavery lag far behind their academic counterparts. A search for books about slavery in the George Washington University’s holdings database yields well over 6,000 hits, while museum exhibitions on this topic number far, far fewer. A study of several exhibitions about slavery illuminates the challenges of interpreting this particularly dark, yet significant, moment of African American history to the public. The contested nature of the topic explains why many shy away it. Evaluating these exhibits also offers successful models for meeting these challenges.

One difficulty in developing an exhibition on slavery is the problem of evidence. Far fewer objects and records pertaining to slaves survive in comparison to their white elite contemporaries. This is a predicament of social history presentations; the well-established paper (and goods) trail for the “Great Men of American history” simply does not exist for the “not-so-great women and men.” This paucity of materials is not only a matter of what has not survived; it is also the legacy of the collections strategies of previous generations of museum professionals. Objects primarily relating to white elites were collected and preserved. It is difficult for museums to present today’s interpretive themes using yesterday’s collections. This is the problem Colonial Williamsburg’s curators face.

Colonial Williamsburg was established in the late 1920s as an institution intended to instill patriotism by encouraging an appreciation of the courage, self-reliance, and “devotion to

the common welfare” embodied by America’s Revolutionary leaders.² From its founding through the late 1970s, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation focused its restoration, interpretive, and collections efforts on the lives of the white gentry.

Since the late 1970s, Colonial Williamsburg has worked to reflect social history’s scholarship by portraying the lives of the lower classes, women, blacks, and Native Americans.³ A major component of correcting the record has been the task of better reflecting Williamsburg’s black presence, which comprised half of the colonial capital’s population,⁴ and demonstrating slaves’ essential role in maintaining the plantation aristocracy portrayed so well at Colonial Williamsburg. These efforts were formalized in 1988 with the formation of the Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation (AAIP).⁵

As a result, Colonial Williamsburg presents African-American life and slavery through demonstrations in outbuildings, discussions of slaves on tours of elite houses, living history programs, and reconstructed slave quarters at Carter’s Grove Plantation, also operated by Colonial Williamsburg. These are no small victories for a place that more or less ignored the reality of slavery in the colonial economy and referred to them as “servants” well into the mid-1980s.⁶ These engaging, well-researched efforts to interpret Williamsburg’s African-American past are to be applauded.

Despite these programs, the average visitor to Colonial Williamsburg does not leave with an understanding of the pervasiveness of slavery in the colonial city’s society. The quality of AAIP’s programs, most of which are not readily accessible because they require advance reservations, cannot compete with the preponderance of visual evidence of the colonial gentry. The presence of blacks in period costume is nowhere near the correct proportion for colonial times. The few outbuildings used to portray slave life are overwhelmed by the grand houses, Governor’s Palace, and civic buildings on which Colonial Williamsburg’s founders focused their preservation, restoration, and interpretive efforts.

On house tours, interpreters verbally relay a hazy picture of slave life derived from documents and archaeological findings while the visitor is surrounded by the very concrete evidence -- furnishings, portraits, textiles -- of elite life. Without visual evidence, the slave history appears less real and cannot make an equal impact on visitors.⁷

The effectiveness of AAIP's efforts are limited by what Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims in "Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue" refer to as the "collecting biases" of past generations of curators.⁸ Nothing short of the acquisition of new types of objects and the reconstruction of additional slave cabins and other African-American spaces *within* Williamsburg, can correct this current inaccurate visual portrait. Until then, the portrayal of slavery at Colonial Williamsburg will remain an example of the shortcomings of presentations which do not have the support of adequate material evidence. (Carter's Grove plantation has a reconstructed slave quarter on site but its distance eight miles away from Colonial Williamsburg renders its presentation inaccessible to Colonial Williamsburg's average visitor.)

Much of the relatively accessible evidence about slave life is not "exhibit-ready" material. Inventories, diaries, letters, newspapers, and other documents, can be used in crafting persuasive books, but not a visually engaging display. "Back of the Big House: The Cultural Landscape of the Plantation" was a traveling exhibition curated by GWU professor John Vlach and based on his book of the same name. It sought to show life on the plantation from the slaves' perspective. Because the exhibit relied solely on two-dimensional artifacts such as photographs, reproduced architectural drawings, and excerpts of interview transcripts for its evidence, its visual dimension was weak. Museum visitors want to see in exhibitions what they cannot see in books -- the three-dimensional and the real. Hunting down "real" artifacts and three-dimensional objects requires time and effort that many curators cannot spare. As a result, exhibitions that rely on documentary evidence suffer in comparison to those that have "stuff" that is visually engaging.

Several museums have resolved problems of evidence by emphasizing, as Crew and Sims recommend, “the narrative possibilities of artifacts rather than their specific provenance.”⁹ “In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life in Richmond, Virginia,” exhibited at Richmond’s Valentine Museum in 1988, successfully used objects without specific African-American provenance to make a persuasive argument about their lives.¹⁰ For example, generic blacksmith tools were included in the presentation of African-American material culture because slaves and free blacks dominated this trade.¹¹ The curators’ creative interpretation of generic artifacts demonstrates a successful method that museums can use to tell slave history despite the gaps in the material record.

Eric Gable, Richard Handler, and Anna Lawson in “On the Uses of Relativism: Fact, Conjecture, and Black and White Histories at Colonial Williamsburg” encourage curators to look beyond conventional definitions of ownership to achieve a broader view of what constitutes slave artifacts.¹² Objects traditionally identified as symbols of elite life can be incorporated in the story of slaves. While a tea table is the setting of an elite ritual, it was set and maintained by black hands¹³ and was a point of intersection between black and white. Reinterpreting white artifacts in this manner certainly yields a richer pool of objects to use in presenting slave history.

Curators at Alexandria’s Carlyle House who sought to portray the experiences of slaves for the exhibition “Don’t Get Weary: Enslaved African-Americans in Eighteenth Century Alexandria” were forced to reinterpret elite artifacts because they had little material outside of the historic house itself. Attempting to convey the slave presence at the Carlyle House, where blacks made up a majority of the household, curators “peopled” traditionally elite spaces such as Carlyle’s dining room, drawing room, and bed chamber with costumed black mannequins engaged in dialogue with each other via an audio program.¹⁴

This exhibition effectively conveyed how the story of elite spaces was equally inhabited by the black slaves whose work maintained the household. This is an excellent model for

historic house museums and sites for it enables the telling of slave history without the need for additional space and even more importantly, brings home the point that black and white existences were intertwined and should be viewed as a *single*, interconnected story.

The Valentine Museum communicated a similar message when it integrated aspects of "In Bondage and Freedom" into the story at Wickham House, an historic structure in its complex. Silk-screened images of slaves were placed throughout the interior to remind the visitor of the slaves' presence and of their constant interaction with their white masters.¹⁵

These exhibits demonstrated creative, effective responses to the lack of slave artifacts. The success of these methods were possible because of the scholarship of these projects. Only comprehensive research coupled with input from historians well-versed in the topic can yield such detail and conclusions about everyday life.

Even with the creative reinterpretation of artifacts, limiting an exhibit to using only actual objects would mean not telling the aspects of the narrative for which no artifacts can be located. For this reason, curators have turned to reproductions to complete the story. While the use of reproductions raises questions of authenticity, cautious use of them can be an effective way of telling the story.

As mentioned earlier, Colonial Williamsburg could not adequately portray slave life in the few African-American spaces it has within the colonial capital. In order to present this subject with the depth that it deserved, Colonial Williamsburg opened a reconstruction of slave quarters in 1989 at Carter's Grove. The result of years of archaeological and historical research, this thoughtful, stimulating exhibit makes a persuasive argument for the power of reproductions - its primary drawback being that its location eight miles out of Colonial Williamsburg proper prevents most visitors from seeing it.

Carter's Grove is the site of an eighteenth-century mansion built by Carter Burwell, one of Colonial Chesapeake society's wealthiest and most elite landowners. The quarters,

reconstructed using eighteenth-century techniques,¹⁶ include a barracks-type of structure, a multi-family dwelling, and a slave foreman's cabin, furnished with reproductions of the few objects slaves would have owned; a corn crib, gardens, and enclosures. Costumed guides interpret the site for visitors; emphasizing the hardships of slaves' existence, the role of community among slaves, their subtle methods of resistance, and the complex nature of relationships -- between master and slave, between master, enslaved foreman, and other slaves, and among the slaves themselves.

The reconstructed slave quarters are a superb presentation of slave life. When visitors stoop into the cabins, they are able to observe the personal touches within the crude dwellings; to see straw pallets on the dirt floor and imagine sleeping there both in August's humidity and winter's chill; to smell communal fires burning; to hear black voices singing spirituals;¹⁷ and to stand in a place that was simultaneously a symbol of their bondage and a testament to their triumphs. This multi-sensory experience offers the visitor a window into slave life that no book and few exhibits incorporating only "real" artifacts can match.

While the re-creation is legitimated by solid research and vast amounts of historical and archaeological documentation, its authenticity ultimately comes from the "realness" of the experience. It is this authenticity in the event, Crew and Sims argue, that takes primacy over the requirement for authentic objects.¹⁸

Reproductions can be used successfully, but each use must be carefully considered. "Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South, 1795-1865," a groundbreaking exhibition at the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond in 1991, demonstrated an appropriate questioning of the use of reproductions. A massive assemblage of some 300 objects,¹⁹ the exhibition team considered reconstructing a slave auction block when one could not be located. In the end, it was concluded that other artifacts such as shackles, a slave collar, and a plan of a slave ship, were sufficient to portray the brutal, dehumanizing aspects of

slavery.²⁰ A reproduction auction block would have only made the brutality seem contrived and would have undermined the power of the real artifacts.

Many historical institutions have successfully dealt with the paucity of slave artifacts by using living history in its presentations. Generally, these dramatic reenactments create memorable visual images, provide an opportunity to show artifacts in use, and more effectively convey the complex human relationships tied up in the institution of slavery. They can also be the target of vehement protest, as a reenactment of a slave auction at Colonial Williamsburg demonstrated.

In October 1994, Colonial Williamsburg's AAIP reenacted a slave auction in front of one of the town's taverns. Groups, including various chapters of NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference decried what they viewed as an event which degraded and trivialized the experience of slavery by exploiting it for entertainment purposes.²¹ Colonial Williamsburg continued with its presentation, which was met with mixed reviews.

The protests surrounding Colonial Williamsburg's reenactment point to another challenge in the presentation of slave history. This is the dilemma of representation, which reflects the changing expectations of museum interpretations. Groups whose histories have been excluded or marginalized in the past are now trying to define their role in the telling of their story. In presenting any of these groups' histories, particularly one as sensitive and politically loaded as slavery, museums must be prepared to grapple with three important questions. *Which events* should represent the history of the group? *Who* can legitimately represent the group? *How* should these stories be presented?

Curators seeking to present slave history face protests that slavery is not an appropriate subject for museum exhibitions and programs. While some of these are based in racist sentiments, the more significant objections which curators must contend with are those which come from within the group being represented. Brenda Andrews, a black newspaper publisher,

summarizes this line of thinking, arguing that "[t]he story of slavery needs to be remembered, not necessarily retold . . ." ²² Dr. Milton A. Reid, a Baptist minister, felt that dredging up slavery's anguish detracted from all the positive achievements that blacks have made since then. ²³ A similar sentiment was echoed by some critics of "Before Freedom Came." ²⁴ Costumed, black re-enactors at Williamsburg have been subject to criticism from fellow African-Americans for presenting the degradation of slavery instead of the achievements of figures such as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Benjamin Banneker. ²⁵

These protests have not stopped curators who believe these stories must be told. Presentations such as "Before Freedom Came," "In Bondage and Freedom," the slave auction at Colonial Williamsburg, and the slave quarters at Carter's Grove argue for the existence of continuities between past and present. ²⁶ It seems that for the curators of these exhibits, what legitimates the telling of these particular stories is the conviction that exploring these problematic roots of black and white relationships, with all their complexities and pain, is essential to understanding contemporary race relations.

Who has the authority to tell the story? Christy Coleman, director of AAIP and organizer of the slave auction reenactment, was convinced that Colonial Williamsburg was "eminently qualified to do this presentation." ²⁷ The project's solid research and input of historians was brought to life by re-enactors whose African-American heritage ensured a treatment of the subject that was sensitive and informed by the realities of being black in today's society. Coleman had met with NAACP leaders prior to the reenactment to review their concerns but proceeded with the program since she believed their fears were unfounded. ²⁸

The exhibition team of "Before Freedom Came" expected attacks on the authority of the Museum of the Confederacy, with its close ideological link with the white South, to do this presentation of slavery. They prepared themselves with years of extensive research and the input of an advisory board composed of black and white scholars, community and civic leaders. ²⁹ The

Museum of the Confederacy did receive complaints about the exhibit, but they were primarily emotional reactions to the subject matter rather than rational objections to the museum's authority to present the story.

It will be interesting to see whether the incorporation of the voice of the African-American community ("our African heritage"; "our African-American past"³⁰) in Detroit's new Museum of African-American History will protect it from doubts about its authority to present slavery's history.

The examples from AAIP and the Museum of the Confederacy demonstrate that due to the increased expectations of today's museums, no single entity is equipped to relate slavery's complex history. Only a team of curators, leading historian consultants, and community and group representatives can legitimately tell the story. It is the collaboration of their efforts and experiences that will generate the necessary research, local support, and presentation methods, directed by the latest scholarship, and informed by the unique experiences of the group whose story is being told. While no complex topic can be free of controversy, if an exhibition results from the marriage of scholarly research and the concerns of the represented group and the community, curators should feel confident about their interpretations in the face criticism.

The slave auction reenactment also shows the limits of respecting a group's concerns. Had Coleman heeded the NAACP's recommendations, she never would have presented the program. Her conviction of Colonial Williamsburg's qualifications allowed her to stick to her guns and continue as she had intended. Although some protesters remained steadfast in their opposition to the event, others changed their minds after viewing it.³¹

Coleman's example is one with lessons for any museum presenting a contested history. The Enola Gay exhibition comes to mind. Had the Smithsonian's leadership possessed the same conviction of the soundness of their curators' scholarship, they would have listened to the

veterans' groups but known at what point incorporating their views would have undermined the effectiveness of the exhibit.

The question of how the story is to be presented is perhaps the toughest of the three because there are so many choices and so many levels of enacting it. Every decision about image, word, artifact, and design affects the presentation. In the telling of slave history, some advocate a no-holds-barred recounting of the brutality and tragedy; others want to forget the negative and focus on the celebratory moments; and most stand on the ambiguous ground somewhere in between the two. Museums must be prepared to weigh the importance their exhibition goals, research findings, recent scholarship, community relations, and the group's concerns to determine how to best tell the story in their institution.

"Before Freedom Came" balanced the presence of brutal artifacts such as shackles and a slave collar with evidence of how they resisted the dehumanizing effects of slavery.³² Similarly, "In Bondage and Freedom" incorporated slave leg-irons as well as inspirational photographs of church communities.³³ Although the slaves in "Don't Get Weary" were portrayed performing their tasks as dictated by their master, their audio dialogues presented their thoughts, hopes, and dreams that were not bound or beaten down by the realities of their existence.

Colonial Williamsburg's slave auction depicted a dehumanizing event, but the one free black appropriated this process to buy freedom for his wife, while others displayed admirable qualities of strength and dignity amidst the deepest of suffering. The interpreters at Carter's Grove painted an unpleasant picture of the harshness of slave life but counterbalanced that with evidence of cunning survival, resistance, and appropriation.

These successful examples all incorporate complexity and balance in their presentations. Curators did not shy away from using graphic evidence but avoided excessive portrayals of brutality which not only sensationalize the subject, but also paints a flat, inaccurate picture of

slaves as passive victims of evil white masters. By interweaving aspects of tragedy with moments of celebration, exhibits more accurately portray the complexity of slavery.

The most effective exhibits focus on the human relationships within the institution of slavery. This avoids the inaccurate simplification of black and white relations as two discrete, opposing sides. The relationships between master and slave, enslaved foreman and other slaves, slaves among each other, slaves and free blacks were complicated. Focusing on these relationships illuminates important components of slavery such as paternalism, passive resistance, and community. The focus on relationships is particularly effective because its human aspect makes the topic more relevant for visitors; it also contributes to the understanding of race relations today.

Portraying these human relationships is not easy. One of the main criticisms of “Before Freedom Came” was that despite all its artifacts, it inadequately dealt with the complex relationships between black and white *individuals*.³⁴ The “Back of the Big House” exhibit’s type of evidence and its small size precluded a satisfactory exploration of the human relationships within slavery; it was not possible to deal with such complexity without sufficient space and a rich variety of artifacts. The elements of the success of “In Bondage and Freedom,” “Don’t Get Weary,” the Carter’s Grove slave quarters, and the auction re-enactment in their depictions of human relationships is the use of living history, video or audio programs, and interpreters in their presentations.

What provides the tools for these exhibits to successfully demonstrate slavery’s complexities is, once again, the research. It is only extensive research that can yield the sheer amount of material these curators were able to work with. Since some of the concepts are complex and abstract, they must be presented with a corresponding amount of evidence in order to make their arguments clearly and persuasively.

As this study of the presentation of slave history in museums demonstrates, museums seeking to include this history in their presentations face some daunting challenges. Curators must deal with a scarcity of exhibit-ready objects and be prepared to grapple with hotly debated issues of representation. These challenges require a serious commitment of time and funds to perform the research and locate the material and interpretive evidence which will undergird and fill the exhibition; a creativity which will revel in the opportunities presented by the complexities of slavery's history; and the savvy to know how to negotiate with groups to incorporate their concerns without compromising the exhibit. In light of all these obstacles, it is no wonder that relatively few museums have followed academic historians' numerous forays into this subject matter.

Due to the formidable nature of these obstacles to a successful treatment of slavery, only institutions which are well-equipped to meet these challenges should undertake these presentations. An institution that is ill-prepared to take on such a project could very well end up with an exhibit that is inaccurate, alienating, and far more harmful than not doing one at all. These museums should look to other stories to make their current presentations more inclusive while seriously committing their resources to acquiring the tools that will enable them to present this topic in the future.

Institutions which are equipped to deal with these challenges should by all means tackle the presentation of slavery. As the examples discussed above demonstrate, there are ample opportunities to create an impressive, engaging exhibition because of the complexities and narrative possibilities of this story.

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- ² Carroll Van West and Mary S. Hoffschwelle, "Slumbering on Its Old Foundations," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, v83 (Spring 1984): 164.
- ³ Eric Gable, Richard Handler, and Anna Lawson, "On the Uses of Relativism: Fact, Conjecture, and Black and White Histories at Colonial Williamsburg," *American Ethnologist*, v19, no 4 (November 1992): 791.
- ⁴ Gable, et. al., "On the Uses of Relativism," 791. Rex Ellis, "Re: Living History; Bringing Slavery into Play," *American Visions*, v7, no6 (December 1992): 22.
- ⁵ Donald Garfield, "Too Real for Comfort," *Museum News* (January/February 1995): 8.
- ⁶ Van West and Hoffschwelle, "Slumbering on Its Old Foundations," 172.
- ⁷ Gable, et. al., "On the Uses of Relativism," 796-98.
- ⁸ Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims, "Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue," in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, ed. *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 165.
- ⁹ Crew and Sims, "Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue," 172.
- ¹⁰ Lonnie G. Bunch, "In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life in Richmond, Virginia, 1790-1860," *Journal of American History*, v76 (June 1989): 204.
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- ¹² Gable, et. al., "On the Uses of Relativism," 797.
- ¹³ Gable, et. al., "On the Uses of Relativism," 797.
- ¹⁴ Peter Y. Hong, "Museum Depicts Slave Life: Carlyle House Focuses on History of Blacks," *The Washington Post*, (January 6, 1994), Virginia Weekly, 1. Lecture by Julia Claypool, former director of the Carlyle House, to MSTD 295 class, April 21, 1997 at the Carlyle House.
- ¹⁵ Bunch, "In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life in Richmond, Virginia, 1790-1860," 206.

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- ¹⁶ Theresa A. Singleton, "Carter's Grove," *American Anthropologist*, v95, no2 (June 1993): 525.
- ¹⁷ Author's personal observations, April 1997.
- ¹⁸ Crew and Sims, "Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue," 174.
- ¹⁹ Ed Crews, "Southern Blacks: Before Freedom Came," *Americana*, v19 (May/June 1991): 60.
- ²⁰ Per author's conversation with Kym Rice, exhibition curator, April 21, 1997.
- ²¹ Garfield, "Too Real for Comfort," 9. Clarence Waldron, "Staged Slave Auction Sparks Debate on Slavery and Racism," *Jet*, v86, no26 (December 31, 1994): 12-14. Leef Smith, "Williamsburg Slave Auction Riles Virginia NAACP," *The Washington Post*, (October 8, 1994): Metro, 1.
- ²² Waldron, "Staged Slave Auction Sparks Debate on Slavery and Racism," 14.
- ²³ Garfield, "Too Real for Comfort," 9.
- ²⁴ Per author's conversation with Kym Rice, exhibition curator, April 21, 1997.
- ²⁵ Ellis, "Re: Living History; Bringing Slavery into Play," 22-24.
- ²⁶ Smith, "Williamsburg Slave Auction Riles Virginia NAACP," 1.
- ²⁷ Smith, "Williamsburg Slave Auction Riles Virginia NAACP," 1.
- ²⁸ Smith, "Williamsburg Slave Auction Riles Virginia NAACP," 1.
- ²⁹ Crews, "Southern Blacks: Before Freedom Came," 62.
- ³⁰ Edward Rothstein, "The Black History Exhibit: Museums That Tell What to Think," *The New York Times* (April 20, 1997): Section 4, 2.
- ³¹ Garfield, "Too Real for Comfort," 9.
- ³² Crews, "Southern Blacks: Before Freedom Came," 60.
- ³³ Bunch, "In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life in Richmond, Virginia, 1790-1860," 204.
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