

The Stories That Shape Us All: The Presentation of
Slavery at Public History Sites in Virginia

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In May, June, and July of 2021 my SIP was completely different than what has been written on these pages. By the middle of July what I thought I was doing could no longer happen, and in the span of two weeks my topic changed entirely. At first, like most people would, I panicked, but was reassured that I would find a topic even more exciting than my initial plan. And, through an opportunity presented to me by my advisor, Dr. Charlene Boyer Lewis, what I found, or rather, what found me, was definitely more exciting. During a 2018 fellowship with George Washington's Mount Vernon in Mount Vernon, Virginia, Dr. Boyer Lewis became connected to a number of the institution's staff, and that summer, as I worried about whether or not I would actually complete my SIP, she worked with them to create an internship that simultaneously kept me on-track and allowed me to explore my passion for museums more thoroughly. Since that day, I have worked both remotely and on-site with members of the curatorial department at George Washington's Mount Vernon to compile information about the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association (MVLA), the all-woman board of directors at Mount Vernon, for an interactive display featured in *Becoming Mount Vernon*, an exhibit that traces the legacy and history of the estate beginning with the Native Americans who once inhabited the land to its present-day operations.

The research I have done for *Becoming Mount Vernon* and my short visits to the estate prompted my interest in the topic of my SIP, and while it has been far from a traditional experience, it has nonetheless been formative and fascinating. Leading up to my first visit in August 2021, I researched the history of the property and the MVLA, a history that has endured for nearly three hundred years. Initially constructed on three thousand acres of land as a one-and-a-half story house by George Washington's father, Augustine Washington, George inherited the house and plantation in 1754. Throughout the next forty-five years, he oversaw a

series of expansions and renovations that turned the house at Mount Vernon into the expansive mansion that the public visits today. By the time of Washington's death in 1799, Mount Vernon consisted of over seven thousand acres and an almost eleven-thousand-square-foot mansion. After the death of his wife Martha in 1802, four thousand acres of Mount Vernon were left to Washington's nephew, Bushrod Washington, whose work as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court often kept him away from the estate. Following his death in 1829, twelve hundred acres of the property were passed down to his nephew, John Augustine Washington II, who lived only three more years. In 1840, Mount Vernon was left to his son, John Augustine Washington III, the last Washington family member to own the estate. Over the next decade or so, the mansion began deteriorating, and in 1853, after passing by the mansion on the Potomac River, Louisa Bird Cunningham became disappointed in its state of decay and feared it would soon be lost. She wrote to her daughter, Ann Pamela Cunningham, and she questioned, "If the men of America have seen fit to allow the home of its most respected hero to go to ruin, why can't the women of America band together to save it?"¹ This exchange encouraged Ann Pamela Cunningham to found the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, the first national historic preservation organization and the oldest women's "patriotic society" in the United States.² Cunningham spent the next five years campaigning across the country to raise the necessary \$200,000 and purchased the mansion, along with two hundred acres, in 1858. Since then, the MVLA, composed of around thirty well-connected and notable women in American society, most often descendants of well-known government officials or founding fathers, has owned and operated the property.³

¹"Mount Vernon Ladies; Association," Preservation, Mount Vernon, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/mount-vernon-ladies-association/>.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

This, of course, is only a small part of the larger history of Mount Vernon, one that archeologists at the site contend dates back to at least the Early/Middle Archaic Period (approximately 10,000-4,000 years ago), when human populations began to grow and expand around the Chesapeake Bay with its wealth of marine and plant species as well as game animals. The arrival of Europeans in the Late Woodland Period (1,000-400 years ago) was followed by disease and colonial efforts to take any land inhabited by Native communities, which included what would eventually become known as Mount Vernon. It is, therefore, important to recognize that while European colonialism did not cause indigenous peoples to disappear almost entirely from the area, its effects—oppression, and extreme disruptions to daily life—have generationally impacted the Native Americans in unimaginable ways despite their active presence in the areas surrounding Mount Vernon.⁴ This history of colonialism and racism against non-White populations is a reality the United States was founded on and continues to perpetuate, and deliberate attempts by White Virginian planters to inhibit Native American and Black populations from any sort of social or political liberty by enslaving them gave way to the systems of racism present in twenty-first-century America.

While the history of Native Americans is pertinent to the greater history of Mount Vernon, so too is that of the hundreds of Africans and African Americans enslaved by the Washington family over the course of nearly one century. In 1619, the first group of enslaved Africans were brought to Jamestown in the colony of Virginia, and between 1619 and 1743, when Washington inherited the ten people his father enslaved, the Virginia House of Burgesses enacted severely restrictive slaves codes that all of the colonies adopted soon after. By the age of eleven Washington was an enslaver, and he would remain so until his death in 1799 despite his

⁴“Native American Occupation,” Native Americans, Mount Vernon, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/archaeology/native-american-occupation/>.

evolving views on slavery later in his life. The Washington family, over the course of about fifty years, enslaved over five hundred men, women, and children on their property. Slavery played an integral role at Mount Vernon and in Washington's life, and the plantation's success depended on the labor of the enslaved. Despite the horrors and trauma of slavery, Mount Vernon's enslaved community formed its own families and traditions and acquired personal belongings. Most, however, were not literate, and they left no written documentation about their lives and experiences on the property. Instead, Mount Vernon relies on "Washington's records, archeology, and oral histories from descendants" to tell or represent their stories.⁵ Washington's meticulous records of enslaved people show that despite his internal struggle with slavery, Mount Vernon relied on enslaved people to care for the Washington family and the property. The history of both are incomplete without appropriately recognizing and honoring the significant contributions of the enslaved population, and Mount Vernon continues to simultaneously confront its past with halfhearted slavery interpretation while creating content that explicitly intertwines the lives of its enslaved community with the Washington family's.

American slavery, as an institution, played and continues to play, an exceedingly important role in, not only the greater history of Mount Vernon, but also in the history of the United States. As I began my internship with Mount Vernon, I knew that in order to understand the estate's significance in the history of the United States, it was also important to understand the people who literally and physically gave Mount Vernon its legacy as both plantation and well-manicured estate. As a history major, but more importantly as a young American growing up in the era of mass incarceration and policing, it has become nearly impossible to watch, read,

⁵"Life of the Enslaved," Slavery at Mount Vernon, Mount Vernon, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/slavery-at-mount-vernon/>.

or listen to the news without seeing a direct connection to the history and impact of slavery. It is, therefore, the responsibility of educational institutions like museums and schools to use whatever resources are readily available to them to educate the public about not only the role of race and slavery in United States history, but also specifically at their historic sites. This is particularly relevant for public history sites such as Mount Vernon. During my initial visit in August 2021, as I toured the grounds for the first time, I paid particular attention to how their staff, programs, and exhibitions talked about slavery and its relation to the Washingtons and their home. I was particularly struck by the noticeable contrast between the education center and a recent exhibition, *Lives Bound Together*, which highlighted and honored the lives and stories of Mount Vernon's enslaved population.

The Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center traces the life of George Washington from birth to death, as well as notable experiences and people throughout his life, like his troublesome teeth and the Marquis de Lafayette. Each gallery in the education center interprets a different period of his life, particularly those relevant to his time at Mount Vernon, as the commander in chief of the Continental Army, and as the first president of the United States. In the Donald and Nancy de Laski Gallery, for example, a set of his notorious dentures and a timeline of his dental progression are displayed, beginning with the loss of two teeth during the French and Indian War and ending with the acquisition of his last set of dentures.⁶ Washington's mouth caused him immense pain throughout the majority of his life, and, by the time he was elected, and later sworn-in as President, his jaw was so swollen that the shape of his face began to change, and he had only one of his actual teeth left. One of the classic American fables told to school-aged children asserts that Washington's dentures were composed entirely of wood, and

⁶“Washington's Dentures,” Discovering the Real George Washington, Mount Vernon, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.mountvernon.org/the-estate-gardens/museum/education-center-galleries/>.

the gallery addresses this tale along with others that have become more popular on a plaque next to the main display. Rather than wood, experts contend that “Washington’s false teeth were...made of human and cow teeth as well as elephant ivory.”⁷ Since my first encounter with this gallery, I have thought about its language. It seemed misleading, especially considering that in recent years, a tale contending they were actually composed of the teeth of the people enslaved by the Washington family, acquired violently and maliciously, seems to have replaced the original fable. That there is no background in the gallery on how the dentures were created during the eighteenth century is disappointing and, in my experience, leaves room for visitors to misinterpret the historical facts about Washington’s own set. And, while it is highly unlikely that the teeth were *forcefully* taken from Mount Vernon’s enslaved people, the use of “human” is rather ambiguous and requires further explanation of what it actually means, not just for the dentures but in the broader context of the fable, Washington’s life, and American slavery and race relations.

When I returned from my visit I frequently thought about the language in the de Laski Gallery and whether or not Mount Vernon, and other institutions like it, were educating the public about slavery and the enslaved to the best of their ability given the immense amount of resources they had at their disposal. As I began to think more seriously about a potential SIP topic, I kept reflecting on the gallery and thinking about the implications of a single word: human. Historically, museums have been trusted as institutions of complete and total honesty, never misinforming the public or favoring one group or story over another. More recently, though, that same public has realized that the idea of neutrality, especially in museums, never really existed. Therefore, museums and historic sites have to be deliberately clear in their language, otherwise they risk misinterpretation. I felt that, although “human” was such a simple

⁷Object label, *Dentures*, George Washington’s Mount Vernon, Mount Vernon, Virginia.

word, it needed to be changed. Did Mount Vernon use “human” to show their ambivalence surrounding the tale of Washington’s dentures, or do they not actually know which humans’ teeth were used? Did this choice mean the institution used “human” as a deliberate way to neither confirm nor deny any historical accuracy surrounding his false teeth? Mount Vernon’s willingness to use ambiguous language to describe the components of Washington’s dentures was astounding. I questioned what other information regarding enslaved people the institution was downplaying, and how invested they were in permanently including the stories of the enslaved in the greater history of the Washington family and the estate. While the ultimate purpose of Mount Vernon and the MVLA is to center Washington’s life and legacy as a defender of American liberty and a founding father, it seemed as if they were ambivalent to recognize Washington as both an enslaver and an iconic American figure.

My continuing reflections on the de Laski Gallery and Washington’s dentures ultimately prompted my interest in slavery interpretation and education at Mount Vernon, but in order to truly understand the state of slavery education at the institution, I needed to compare its history, methods, and current practices to similar historic sites, namely Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, James Madison’s Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg. All located in Virginia, Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg are historic sites with shared traits: histories that begin in or around the same era, and programs, tours, and exhibitions that are currently working to center the lives and stories of *all* of the people who once called these places home, not just their White inhabitants. Importantly, the people each institution centered their operations around, up until the later half of the twentieth century, were almost entirely White. And while they still are, in many ways, the focus of tours, exhibitions, and other programs today, Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg are working to appropriately honor

their enslaved communities and honestly present their pasts with slavery through the perspective of their enslaved populations. Even though these sites were never necessarily opposed to recognizing, honoring, and talking honestly about the enslaved people and their families, it was not a priority, especially considering their target audiences were (and for the most part still are) elderly or retired White couples and school children.

The similarities between Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg—histories rooted in eighteenth-century America, attempts to appropriately represent their enslaved communities, and target audiences—are apparent despite their differences. The varied approaches to and pasts with slavery education at each site are perhaps directly correlated with when they officially opened to the public, and while they have worked with one another to create general guidelines for slavery presentation in their spaces, they are at very different points. Limited by space, money, boards of directors, visitors, and more, Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg are constantly evolving their approaches to slavery education. They have started to shift their understandings and presentations of the founding fathers and first American citizens as champions of liberty *and* as enslavers. While they still focus on George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and others, they have, over time, come to understand the importance of presenting their visitors with a more comprehensive, inclusive, and honest history. These institutions and so many others have accepted that we, the public, cannot possibly grasp the complexities and overall histories of these important figures without understanding the role they played in the continuation of the severe oppression of and racism toward Africans and African Americans through forced labor in the United States.

To best understand the state of slavery education at Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg, however, it is necessary to trace its progression, beginning with the year each institution officially opened to the public through today. Each site's past with slavery education is distinctly different than the others. While Mount Vernon has operated as a public history site for over 160 years, Monticello and Colonial Williamsburg opened less than 100 years ago. Of the four sites in this project, these three have struggled the most to reckon with their pasts as plantations and with their central figures as enslavers. Montpelier, on the other hand, was privately owned until 1987 and has worked to highlight its enslaved community since. But, this does not necessarily mean that Montpelier has done and is doing significantly better than the others to educate their visitors about slavery at their site. What was considered an acceptable form of recognition of enslaved labor when the MVLA first placed a marker at the gravesite of Mount Vernon's enslaved peoples, and when Monticello and Colonial Williamsburg first opened to the public, was not the same in 1987. Montpelier does not have a legacy of halfhearted slavery interpretation because they simply were not around to have one at the time. Since the late-twentieth century each site has made a considerable effort to enact permanent change across their organizations in order to appropriately represent and commemorate the lives and contributions of their enslaved communities.

Today the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg looks drastically different than it did when each site first opened to the public. Through both scholarly and public reactions to their most recent exhibitions on slavery, interviews with curators, virtual research, and my personal experiences at Mount Vernon, this project aims to explore and compare each site's approach to slavery interpretation by looking at exhibitions, tours, and other programs like podcasts and teacher institutes produced on the topic.

Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg have, throughout their tenures as public history sites, worked to confront their pasts with slavery by connecting the lives and stories of the enslaved to those of their enslavers, and while they have paid more attention to and created better-informed content on the topic, they all have room to grow. The future of slavery education at these sites rests on their willingness to not only present the topic to the best of their abilities, but to also make clear connections between slavery and the treatment of Africans and African Americans throughout the twentieth century and today.

Slavery education and interpretation at public history sites like Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg are rooted in the establishment of the African American museum. As more African Americans pushed and protested for their civil rights across the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, the public became more invested and interested in preserving and promoting Black histories. Active participants of the movement connected their own struggles for voting rights, desegregation, and more to their ancestors' struggles for emancipation during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The African American museum was a manifestation of the sudden interest in these histories, and they showed their unwavering support for the movement by telling the stories of African Americans and placing them in conversation with the White historical narrative. These museums were deliberately placed in Black communities and aimed to establish themselves as community-oriented institutions who engaged the areas in which they existed. By providing spaces where the different cultures, experiences, stories, and histories of African Americans not only mattered, but were also important to the broader narrative of American history, these institutions became more reputable and influential.

By involving their local communities, these museums gave ordinary people an active role in their institutions as they attempted to paint a new picture of African American history through a Black perspective— one that depicted the traumas of enslavement, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the ongoing Civil Rights Movement honestly, but also emphasized Black accomplishments and contributions to the United States. As engaging surrounding communities and challenging White conventional histories proved mostly successful, new African American museums established themselves nationwide. Along with the formation of the African American Museums Association (AAMA) in 1978, other more predominantly White museums were encouraged to seriously consider creating programs, exhibitions, and other content centered around Black history and experiences. Following a series of regional and national meetings that explored the evolving role of museums in both their surrounding communities and society as a whole, it became clear that larger museums were not actively engaged with the communities nearest to them, nor were they working to improve those relationships either.⁸ Rather, they seemed to be ignoring these communities and their people entirely. These larger institutions were urged to prioritize forming relationships with the communities and neighborhoods in which they existed and faced serious consequences if they continued to ignore them. Furthermore, museum activists recognized the importance of having dedicated spaces and institutions for Black history, but urged non-African American museums to create content centered around that history as well. They felt as if Black inclusion in White spaces was not prioritized enough and that non-African American museums, especially Colonial Williamsburg, did not understand the significance of including Black history and stories in the White narrative. As a result, these museums were encouraged to allow “[Black] perspectives and input to help shape the themes and the

⁸ Spencer R. Crew, “African Americans, History, and Museums: Preserving African American History in the Public Arena,” in *Making Histories in Museums*, (London: Continuum, 1996), 84-85.

conclusions of museum activities,” not just in content related to African American history and culture, but also in everyday operations.⁹ Mount Vernon, Monticello, and especially Colonial Williamsburg were prime examples of large institutions that had “...expunged [African Americans] from the visible [histories]...” of their sites by confining them to a single space and talking about their status dishonestly.¹⁰ And, collaboration between institution and community, or in the case of Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg, what became known as descendant engagement, was the important approach to inclusive history that public history sites and museums were missing.

While these institutions worked to present African and African American history more appropriately and honestly, a number of years would pass before changes became noticeable and impactful. Foundational literature related to African American history at public history sites and museums, such as Richard Handler’s *The New History in an Old Museum*, shed a light on this slow implementation process.¹¹ While only about a single ethnographic study conducted at one site, Handler’s book influenced institutions similar to take African American and slavery history more seriously. He concluded that “Everyone [at Colonial Williamsburg] affirmed the institution's commitment to the new way of telling the American story. Yet, the more closely [he] examined the history Colonial Williamsburg was making, the more it seemed the messages...” of inclusion in planning were not occurring in practice.¹² It had been over twenty years since African American museums and museum activists urged large institutions like Colonial

⁹Spencer R. Crew, “African Americans, History, and Museums: Preserving African American History in the Public Arena,” in *Making Histories in Museums*, (London: Continuum, 1996), 86.

¹⁰Ibid, 87.

¹¹ For other important works on slavery interpretation at museums and historic sites see Horton and Horton, *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*; Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*; Gallas and DeWolf Perry, *Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*; van Balgooy, *Interpreting African American History and Culture at Museums and Historic Sites*; Rose, *Interpreting Difficult History at Museums and Historic Sites*.

¹²Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 220.

Williamsburg to include the stories and lives of the people who contributed most significantly to their sites, yet, for the most part, they were failing to implement more comprehensive programs and content related to slavery and African Americans like they had promised. And, the cooperative relationships they were encouraged to form with their descendant communities had not yet happened, and would not for a number of years after the publication of *The New History in an Old Museum*.

Museums struggled (and still do) to create and maintain cooperative, cohesive relationships with their surrounding communities, including those made up of descendants like at Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg. The traditional model these sites often adopted usually “...ignored the contributions of African Americans or relegated them to peripheral status within a larger context,” and they were rarely depicted as important historical figures.¹³ However, the public’s increased fascination with the history of slavery and of African Americans, coupled with the publication of foundational and influential literature like Handler’s ethnography, pushed museums and public history sites to ensure these histories were everywhere. By itself, *Old History in a New Museum* encouraged not only Colonial Williamsburg, but also other similar sites to follow through with what the Black community and African American museums had already been doing (or trying to do) for decades. For institutions as large as Colonial Williamsburg, this meant showing that the stories of the enslaved community mattered to the entire history of the site. To exclude Black voices and stories in exhibitions, programs, and other content would mean that it was willing to paint an inaccurate, entirely romanticized and White-washed account of their history.

¹³Spencer R. Crew, “African Americans, History, and Museums: Preserving African American History in the Public Arena,” in *Making Histories in Museums*, (London: Continuum, 1996), 87.

Today, the presentation of slavery at public history sites like Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg looks drastically different than it did during the twentieth century. The public's rising interest in African American history, as well as critiques about the quality of content related to those stories during the mid-twentieth century forced predominantly White institutions to make serious changes to how they presented slavery and Black history. Forming genuine relationships with and engaging the descendant communities of Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg has, similar to the implementation process, been difficult and, at times, slow. Because of the meticulous records kept by their enslavers, these institutions, especially Mount Vernon, have the rare ability to trace the lineage of almost every person once enslaved on the property. This invaluable access allows these sites to maintain relationships with their descendant communities, and they often work with them to ensure their programs appropriately represent their ancestors. Large institutions like Mount Vernon, Monticello and Colonial Williamsburg are far from permanent and holistic inclusion, but they are getting there. And, while Montpelier has a different legacy of descendant engagement than its counterparts, the institution is constantly making changes. All four institutions have distinct reputations related to the presentation of slavery at their sites, and they have come to recognize over time that as "...keepers and caretakers of the nation's history, [they] also reflect each community's past and provide historical grounding of contemporary issues."¹⁴ The histories of Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg are forever indebted to enslaved people, and highlighting their stories is and always has been their responsibility.

Efforts to properly educate visitors about the enslaved communities of Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg have increased over time, and interestingly,

¹⁴ Kathleen Munn and K. Allison Wickens, "Public History Institutions: Leaders in Civics Through the Power of the Past," *Journal of Museum Education* 43, no. 2 (June 2016): 92.

while these sites occasionally work together on the topic of slavery education, their approaches vary. The presentation of slavery at museums and historic sites in the early twentieth century differs greatly from that in the twenty-first century, and the attention given to enslaved people as well as the terminology used to describe their status were widely accepted. Today, however, confining the stories of the enslaved community into one space (or not making space for them at all), and characterizing an enslaved person as a servant is not only insensitive, but negates any sort of responsibility on behalf of the enslaver and promotes a one-sided history. Enslaved people could not choose their status nor resist being enslaved, and they certainly did not exist in a singular space. Those who enslaved them controlled every aspect of their lives, from the moment they were captured or born into bondage until their death. While public history sites still struggle to incorporate and prioritize slavery education throughout their institutions, they have drastically evolved over time, turning their out-dated and over-simplified approaches into more inclusive and comprehensive narratives, and this progress has, perhaps, been best exemplified by Mount Vernon.

Ann Pamela Cunningham and the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association took full possession of Mount Vernon in February 1860, almost one year before the Civil War began. Immediately, Cunningham insisted on "preserving the estate as Washington knew it, including the outbuildings where enslaved people worked and lived," but the Civil War hung imminently overhead and eventually halted reconstruction on the estate.¹⁵ Amidst the rising social and political tensions between the North and the South, the MVLA grew concerned with the safety of the mansion and its surrounding farms and outbuildings, and they began prioritizing its protection rather than its restoration. While records show that the use of slave labor left Mount Vernon long before its

¹⁵"Interpretation of Slavery at Mount Vernon," Timeline, Mount Vernon, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/timeline-of-interpretation-of-slavery-at-mount-vernon/>.

acquisition, formerly enslaved workers and their descendants worked in paid positions alongside the MVLA to ensure the property remained in-tact until the end of the war in 1865. While Cunningham was concerned about the restoration of the outbuildings where the enslaved community once lived, slavery education did not really exist and was, therefore, not a priority of the institution like it has become today.

Between 1860 and the 1920s, despite the physical presence of free African Americans and the MVLA's minimal work on the greenhouse and slave quarters, the Washington family's legacy as enslavers was not really recognized. In 1929, the contributions of Mount Vernon's enslaved community were more formally commemorated when the MVLA placed a small marker dedicated to the "faithful colored servants of the Washington family."¹⁶ Although the organization acknowledged slavery's presence on the property and the work that enslaved men, women, and children performed on a daily basis, it overlooked that they had been held in bondage by the Washington's, *forced* to maintain the property and take care of the family. The language romanticized slavery, an unfortunate but common tactic used to describe topics that were uncomfortable to talk about or that did not fit into the narrative of American history up to that point. Decades after the erection of the memorial stone, various buildings on the property were finally repaired and restored to what the MVLA believed were eighteenth-century interiors, including the greenhouse and living quarters where Mount Vernon's enslaved community spent a significant portion of their lives.

Throughout the 1950s, the MVLA oversaw the restoration of the greenhouse and living quarters of Mount Vernon's enslaved community, as well as the refurbishment of their interiors. Once the buildings officially opened to the public in the 1960s, visitors could, for the first time,

¹⁶Jessie Macleod (Associate Curator, George Washington's Mount Vernon) in discussion with the author, October 14, 2021.

see a space that related to the private lives of the enslaved community. While one of Ann Pamela Cunningham's goals for the MVLA was to restore this area, it took over one century after the organization purchased Mount Vernon and began its preservation campaign to complete, its interpretation was limited, and enslaved people were still referred to as servants. Furthermore, the reality of their living conditions were not talked about honestly, and the interior was considerably nicer than what it actually would have been.¹⁷ As the Civil Rights Movement ignited across the country and Africans and African Americans pushed for desegregation, voting rights, and more, Mount Vernon and the MVLA remained ambivalent to recognize not only the Washington family's reliance on slave labor, but also slavery's direct connection to the social and political structures of the twentieth century. Their approach to slavery education—dishonest presentation and deceptive language—remained the same until the 1980s, when internal research on slavery increased and the public began paying closer attention to the lives of Mount Vernon's enslaved men, women, and children.

In 1982, a reporter for the Washington Post discovered that the memorial stone noting the location of the slave cemetery was left unattended after its initial dedication in 1929 and had become overgrown, making it hard for visitors to find. The attention she drew to Mount Vernon about the marker created a community-led movement that urged the MVLA to place something more visible and more appropriate at the gravesite. By the next year, the organization dedicated the marker that visitors encounter today, honoring the enslaved community as “the Afro Americans who served as slaves at Mount Vernon,” rather than the Washington family's “faithful colored servants.”¹⁸ While this language was not as openly honest about the status of Mount

¹⁷Jessie Macleod (Associate Curator, George Washington's Mount Vernon) in discussion with the author, October 14, 2021.

¹⁸“The Slave Memorial,” Mount Vernon, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/the-slave-memorial-at-mount-vernon>.

Vernon's enslaved community as it could have been (and that it is today), the institution's recognition that they were more than servants, as well as their willingness to no longer romanticize slavery in the same ways it had done before, was a notable change. Seven years after the placement of the new marker Mount Vernon began holding an annual ceremony dedicated to the enslaved community, their lives, and their contributions to the estate. This ceremony created more visibility for the cemetery, as well as Mount Vernon's enslaved community, and it also held the institution accountable for its care and maintenance, ensuring it would not become overgrown and forgotten again. As a result of the public's increased interest in and attention to slavery's legacy in the United States, Mount Vernon started offering what they called a "Slave Life" tour, which, despite its title, focused more on Washington and his views related to slavery, rather than the individual lives of the enslaved and their perspectives.¹⁹ That the institution seemed no longer ambivalent to discuss slavery and the first president's role in it was remarkable, yet by focusing on Washington's increased anxieties about slavery, especially later in his life, and that he freed them in his will, Mount Vernon was able to distance themselves from any sort of negative portrayal. The Washington-centered approach to exhibitions, tours, ceremonies, and other programs at Mount Vernon made sense, and it still does, but in a tour supposedly dedicated to the people he enslaved for many years, it seemed less than appropriate to center *his* perspectives. As slavery education at Mount Vernon, and public history sites in general, started to become a topic of focus in the late '90s the institution concentrated on ensuring slavery's presence was elsewhere on the property, not solely in a cemetery or on a tour.

Between the late '90s and the early 2000s, as Mount Vernon focused on including the enslaved community throughout the property, the pioneer farm and replica slave cabin opened to

¹⁹Jessie Macleod (Associate Curator, George Washington's Mount Vernon) in discussion with the author, October 14, 2021.

the public. By recreating the 18th century scenery, daily activities, and family life that took place on the farm, visitors gained a better sense of how enslaved people contributed to the success of Mount Vernon and the Washington family. In 2013, employees of Mount Vernon along with the MVLA unanimously decided to create a large-scale exhibition on slavery and the Washington family's role as enslavers. The exhibition centered the lives and stories of nineteen people held in bondage at Mount Vernon while "providing insight into George Washington's evolving opposition to slavery" and it relied on Washington's personal extensive records, "...household furnishings, art works, archaeological discoveries...and interactive displays" to do so.²⁰

Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon was mostly well-received by the public, and it was praised for its attempt to weave the stories of enslaved people into the larger narrative of George Washington's life and legacy by giving visitors a deeper understanding of "...how slaves supported and provided for those at Mount Vernon."²¹ The exhibition officially opened to the public in 2016 and it emphasized the important contributions of enslaved people, such as Washington's chef Hercules, and created a sort of interconnectivity between the Washington family and the over five hundred men, women, and children enslaved on the property. It also depicted our first President as both an influential leader *and* an enslaver. The notion that one of the United States' most ardent supporters of "liberty and justice for all" also relied on the labor of the hundreds of people he enslaved to maintain his property and care for his family has been hard for some visitors and employees to reckon with, but it has nonetheless become a vitally important framework for understanding American history.

And, Mount Vernon recognizes that we cannot actually comprehend our history nor that of the

²⁰"About the Exhibition," *Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon*, Mount Vernon, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://www.mountvernon.org/plan-your-visit/calendar/exhibitions/lives-bound-together-slavery-at-george-washington-s-mount-vernon/>.

²¹Wynne Davis, "Records, Descendants Help Weave Stories of George Washington's Slaves," *NPR*, October 16, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/10/16/496770465/records-descendants-help-weave-stories-of-george-washingtons-slaves>.

Washington family's without recognizing how deeply intertwined slavery was with the founding of the United States.

Lives Bound Together, in general, focused on introducing the biographies of Mount Vernon's enslaved community and sharing what the institution knows about them, and while it still talked about George Washington and his changing views on slavery, he was not the sole focus of the exhibition. In its physical space, visitors were guided by the stories or biographies of the enslaved community, learning about slavery on the property and what it meant to be enslaved by the Washington family. In its virtual space, however, the exhibition is more interactive, allowing visitors to peruse the website and focus on what interests them most by clicking on external resources linked on the page and more. The online exhibition, furthermore, is highly accessible and permanent. While *Lives Bound Together* is no longer at Mount Vernon, anyone can access the exhibition on the website from almost anywhere and at any time. Visitors are still guided by the biographies of the nineteen enslaved people of focus, but the virtual set-up is quite different than that of the physical. In both forms of the exhibition this biographical approach highlights the extensive research that went into *Lives Bound Together* by humanizing the enslaved community in ways it had never done before, and it gave them the opportunity to tell their stories. Most interestingly, because the enslaved community left little in the way of written sources, Mount Vernon relied on artifacts and objects it had already been using for decades in its exhibition spaces to tell these stories, really only changing the context in which they were presented.²² The exhibition received praise for these approaches from multiple popular magazines and mass media outlets, but simultaneously faced some mild criticism from others.

²²Wynne Davis, "Records, Descendants Help Weave Stories of George Washington's Slaves," *NPR*, October 16, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/10/16/496770465/records-descendants-help-weave-stories-of-george-washingtons-slaves>.

While *Lives Bound Together* was praised by *Smithsonian Magazine* for the ways in which it “[reconsidered] the 18th-century world’s understanding of slavery and freedom” and for “[completing] the picture by depicting the shared journey of the Washingtons and the enslaved,” it still faced critique. In 2019 a journalist for *The Washington Post*, Sadie Dingfelder, reported that, despite the exhibition’s presence, she felt as if Mount Vernon was still separating George Washington’s story from those of the people he enslaved, and although she acknowledged that *Lives Bound Together* did “...a wonderful job reconstructing the experiences of people who left little in the way of written records,” she was more focused on her experiences with interpreters.²³ In an article dedicated to the interpretation of slavery at Mount Vernon, Dingfelder really only focused on one aspect of programming related to the enslaved community: a tour. Instead, she paid little attention to *Lives Bound Together*, the most comprehensive presentation of slavery the institution had ever completed in its 160 years as a public history site. Despite the little attention she seemed to pay to the exhibition, the two points she raised about it were, for the most part, understandable, noting that visitors did not find it until the end of their visit and that its tone was bleak in comparison to the rest of the property which felt lively.²⁴ Dingfelder seemed to be one of the only critics of *Lives Bound Together*, but even her comments were mild. Instead, the overwhelming praise the exhibition received from national media outlets far outweighed its location in the museum and its tone, showing Mount Vernon’s newfound dedication to telling the stories of its enslaved community in a more comprehensive and appropriate way throughout the institution.

²³Sadie Dingfelder, “A tale of two Mount Vernons: How Washington’s estate separates his story from his slaves’,” *The Washington Post*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/express/2019/05/23/tale-two-mount-vernons-how-washingtons-estate-separates-his-story-his-slaves/>.

²⁴ Ibid.

The research and interpretation that went into *Lives Bound Together* informed other endeavors on the property, namely the language used to describe the status of enslaved people and the content of slavery-specific programs, like the newly updated “Enslaved People of Mount Vernon” tour that focused on the lives and experiences of the enslaved community. While it still talked about George Washington and his changing views on slavery, its sole focus was the enslaved people, not the Washington family like it had been before. Since the MVLA’s acquisition of the estate, slavery education at Mount Vernon has changed drastically. Language, for the most part, no longer romanticizes slavery or glosses over its horrors, and slavery-specific programs, such as a new podcast and yearly teacher’s institutes on the topic, work to center the lives of the enslaved community in ways the institution had not done before. The ambivalent nature of slavery representation at public history sites, especially during the bulk of the twentieth century was not just prevalent at Mount Vernon, however. Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg each have their own distinct pasts with and reputations as places where men, women, and children were held in bondage for the entirety of their lives, and these sites have, over time, adapted to changing public interest in and attention to the lives of their respective enslaved communities.

Purchased by the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation (today the Thomas Jefferson Foundation) in 1923, Monticello opened to the public in 1927, over sixty years after the MVLA’s acquisition of Mount Vernon. As the former home of the third president of the United States, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation aimed to preserve Monticello while simultaneously educating the public about Jefferson’s life, legacy, and impact on American history. Important to that history, not just of Jefferson but also of the property, were the stories of Monticello’s enslaved community, and it took nearly two decades before serious archeological research on Mulberry

Row, the hub of enslaved life on the property, began. By the 1950s, the institution started analyzing Jefferson's 1796 Mutual Assurance Plan, a document that detailed the layout of Mulberry Row, in order to better understand slavery at Monticello.²⁵ As claims that Jefferson fathered children with Sally Hemings, a young woman who was enslaved at Monticello from 1789 until she was "unofficially freed" after Jefferson's death in 1826, slavery at Monticello became exceedingly more important than it had been in the past.²⁶ Rumors about the Jefferson-Hemings relationship had been circulating since the early-nineteenth century and only gained more attention from historians as the twentieth century progressed. But, Monticello was ambivalent to acknowledge them and instead turned their attention toward other initiatives, such as publishing works that featured recollections from overseers and members of the enslaved community during the 1960s and 1970s, and further excavations on Mulberry Row during the 1980s.

By 1993, only five years before the groundbreaking (albeit not surprising) DNA study that confirmed Jefferson likely fathered children with Hemings, Monticello launched "Getting Word: An African American Oral History Project" which "preserved and recorded interviews with nearly 200 descendants of Monticello's enslaved community."²⁷ Like *Lives Bound Together* at Mount Vernon, "Getting Word" informed other endeavors throughout the institution, such as new tours designed specifically to talk about slavery on the property and Jefferson's role as an enslaver. Importantly, however, Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings still remained an uncomfortable topic for the institution, and failed to really address the rumors altogether until 2000. While they were making progress toward ensuring Monticello's enslaved community was

²⁵"Timeline," Milestones, Monticello, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.monticello.org/milestones/>.

²⁶"Life at Monticello," The Life of Sally Hemings, Monticello, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.monticello.org/sallyhemings/>.

²⁷"Timeline," Milestones, Monticello, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.monticello.org/milestones/>.

present on the property by offering tours, restoring and rebuilding the former hub of its enslaved life, and publishing first-hand recollections of slavery at Monticello, the institution, for one reason or another, avoided Sally Hemings almost entirely.

After Dr. Eugene Foster's 1998 DNA study concluded that Jefferson was likely the father of all of Hemings' children, Monticello was essentially forced to respond to the evidence, but did not do so until 2000 after the conduction of their own DNA study and historical research. In this same year, coincidentally, the institution published a book that detailed the lives of five families who were enslaved by the Jeffersons, Hemings family included. It seemed, especially after the institution published their report, that Monticello was finally ready to talk about Sally Hemings honestly. The DNA study marked a significant turning point for the institution, and after two hundred years worth of rumors and speculation, Monticello could no longer turn toward other endeavors in order to mask their ambivalence about Jefferson's actions.

In the last decade, Monticello has restored and opened various rooms and buildings where enslaved laborers worked, hosted symposiums and conferences that focus on slavery research, and created exhibitions that center the lives and stories of the enslaved community. The decision to create exhibitions which emphasized and acknowledged the lives and contributions of the people enslaved by the Jefferson family was necessary. *Slavery at Jefferson's Monticello: Paradox of Liberty* and *The Life of Sally Hemings* both told the stories of the men, women, and children who were once enslaved at Monticello by the Jefferson family. Like *Lives Bound Together*, they were both generally well-received, especially for the ways in which they specifically focused on individuals and their stories, an approach that gave visitors the opportunity to learn about enslaved people through their perspective, not necessarily Jefferson's.

Between 2012 and 2014, the institution partnered with the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History to create a large-scale exhibition that featured about forty years of research on slavery at Monticello and Jefferson's role as an enslaver. *Slavery at Jefferson's Monticello: Paradox of Liberty* reached two million visitors from across the country, both in-person and virtually. Both institutions received high praise for how they talked about "the many people, enslaved and free, who called Monticello their homes: the lives they built, the labor they performed, and the complicated legacies they left their descendants."²⁸ Upon entering the space, visitors encountered a life-sized bronze statue of Jefferson that was overshadowed by "a high wall bearing the names of the 607 men, women, and children whom the founder legally owned during his lifetime."²⁹ *Paradox of Liberty* was structured into three parts, the first provided a historical framework for the exhibition, the second introduced visitors to six of Monticello's enslaved families, and the third connected the enslaved families to their descendants in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The exhibition, first and foremost, challenged visitors to recognize that an iconic American figure as well known and beloved like Jefferson also enslaved hundreds of people over the course of his life, and it also highlighted the important contributions of Monticello's enslaved community by using material possessions of the Jefferson family, photographs, and other artifacts such as a child-sized pair of shackles. The exhibition was perhaps the most comprehensive program Monticello had produced on slavery at the site in its eighty-three years as a public history institution, and it also coincided with the publication of Lucia Stanton's *Those Who Labor for My Happiness*, in which she combined "...previously published essays on the enslaved families of Monticello with new work based on

²⁸ Jordan Grant, "'Slavery at Jefferson's Monticello: Paradox of Liberty,' Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello by Elizabeth Chew and Rex Ellis," *The Journal of American History* 11, no. 1 (June 2013):160.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Getting Word oral histories that [described] lives and experiences after slavery.”³⁰ And, most recently, the institution opened *The Life of Sally Hemings* in 2018, an exhibition that explored the life and legacy of the woman with whom Jefferson fathered multiple children.

Monticello’s restoration of the north and south wings of Jefferson’s mansion gave way to *The Life of Sally Hemings*, the institution’s comprehensive exhibition on who they call “one of the most famous—and least known—African American women in U.S. history.”³¹ By telling Hemings’ story, Monticello finally faces the relationship that persisted with Jefferson for a number of years. The exhibition, which guests can still visit today, attempts to trace Hemings’ life by relying on the words of her son, Madison, and it has been commended by historians and the public for how it “confronts the problems of representation when the subjects are of unknown appearance and the anonymity of slavery prevents us from knowing particular details of their lives.”³² *The Life of Sally Hemings* not only worked to confront Monticello’s past with the Jefferson-Hemings relationship, but it also showed that the institution was willing (and able) to talk about Jefferson as both an important American historical figure and an enslaver in ways it had not done before by allowing visitors to experience private spaces where Monticello’s enslaved community once lived. The first room in the physical exhibition features a Hemings-esque shadowed projection and a recording that described her through the writings of her son Madison. The virtual exhibition, on the other hand, reads more like a blog post and features the same videos. It is far less interactive, but both forms of *The Life of Sally Hemings* address “in frank terms how people were sold from Monticello, how they struggled under the legacies of slavery, and how family stories from this single plantation represent a national

³⁰“Timeline,” Milestones, Monticello, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.monticello.org/milestones/>.

³¹ “The Life of Sally Hemings,” Sally Hemings, Monticello, accessed September 12, 2021, <https://www.monticello.org/sallyhemings/>.

³² Susan Kern, “Restoration and Slavery: Two New Exhibits,” *Buildings & Landscapes* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 108.

history.”³³ The research and interpretation that went into both *Paradox of Liberty* and *The Life of Sally Hemings* have also clearly impacted other programs and content related to slavery at Monticello, namely tours and a mobile application that allow visitors to interact on a more personal level with Monticello’s enslaved community, whether they are on the property or across the world.

Since *Paradox of Liberty* and *The Life of Sally Hemings*, staff at Monticello have worked to implement new, more comprehensive programming that relates to slavery both virtually and on the property. The institution offers two tours explicitly dedicated to enslaved life, the “Hemings Family Tour” and the “Slavery at Monticello Tour”. While the tour centered around the Hemings family is far less general than the “Slavery at Monticello Tour”, both aim to give visitors an interactive, immersive experience in order to better understand what it meant to be enslaved by the third president of the United States. The effects of the ongoing global pandemic have also contributed to changes to Monticello’s main tour, which gave them the opportunity to not only restructure it, but to also recenter the people of focus and emphasize more of the contributions of the enslaved community. Redesigned so visitors only spend a portion of their time in the mansion, the tour begins outside and ends near the Hemings’ living quarters, practically pushing them into *The Life of Sally Hemings*. This deliberate approach to the main tour creates a dynamic between Jefferson’s home and those of the people he enslaved, one that is unignorable and pushes visitors to think critically about slavery in the United States and about one of America’s most well-known Presidents as a fierce advocate for independence *and* an enslaver. Monticello also recognizes that visiting a history site is not possible nor accessible for everyone, and in order to reach a broader audience, they launched a mobile app in 2016 solely

³³ Ibid.

dedicated to slavery on the property, as well as the Jefferson family's reliance on their enslaved community.

Slavery at Monticello: Life and Work on Mulberry Row is a highly interactive app created to give people from any location access to the stories of Monticello's enslaved community. Virtual exhibitions are accessible and valuable platforms to reach a broad audience, but a mobile app like *Slavery at Monticello* engages visitors in a different way by presenting all of the information available in one distinct space. Furthermore, the app is categorized into three different sections, "Sites," "People," and "Themes" and presents life on Mulberry Row from multiple enslaved perspectives in order to show Monticello's role in the broader context of slavery. The application also relies on visual aids to tell the stories of Monticello's enslaved community and gives users the opportunity to explore individual enslaved peoples' lives. Education, not just in regards to slavery, but also in general, has become so technological that museums and other educational institutions have no choice but to create content specifically geared or adapted for virtual spaces. And, while Monticello's app is interactive and comprehensive, it is also "missing a serious consideration of some of the pressing issues in the history of slavery."³⁴ But, Monticello is not the only institution that tends to leave out this type of information, many, such as Mount Vernon and Colonial Williamsburg, still struggle to connect slavery at their institutions to the present, however, *Slavery at Monticello*, should be seen as a quality adaptation of or approach to slavery education despite its various weaknesses, and the institution's legacy with poor slavery education.

Less than fifteen years after being forced to confront a reality they tried to avoid for decades, the opening of *The Life of Sally Hemings* changed slavery education at Monticello for

³⁴ Itohan Osayimwese, "Slavery at Monticello: Life and Work on Mulberry Row," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 75, no. 3 (September 2016): 384.

the better, and it looked entirely different than it had throughout the twentieth century. All of the work Monticello had done to highlight its enslaved community and their descendants still mattered, but their decision to largely ignore claims that Jefferson fathered children with Hemings mattered more. All of the work they had done up to the DNA study was nonetheless important, and while they never outright ignored Monticello's legacy as a plantation where men, women, and children were enslaved, their failure to include Sally Hemings' story showed that the institution was reluctant to portray Jefferson as the man who wrote that "all men are created equal" yet believed that enslaved people were racially inferior. The culmination of both exhibitions, as well as the effects of the ongoing global pandemic have influenced a number of changes throughout the institution, namely a mobile app that allows visitors to explore the property's center of enslaved life and a restructured mansion tour inspired by Monticello.

Monticello's amassed fame as the architecturally stunning home of Thomas Jefferson featured on the back of the nickel stands in stark contrast to James Madison's Montpelier. As a public history site, Montpelier only opened in 1987. Before then it was privately owned and operated by the duPonts for most of the twentieth century, a family who "greatly expanded and changed the house," so that by the time it opened to the public "it was not the Madison's house, it was the duPont's house."³⁵ Once Montpelier officially opened, the institution began work to restore the Madison's home back to what it would have looked like originally. The size of the property, furthermore, is much smaller than Mount Vernon's, Monticello's, and Colonial Williamsburg, and, partly because it opened in 1987, does not attract nearly as many visitors either. Because of Montpelier's young age, however, they "do not have a history of having done the wrong thing vis a vis slavery, [they have] always talked about it... and worked with the

³⁵Elizabeth Chew (Vice President for Museum Programs, James Madison's Montpelier) in discussion with the author, November 22, 2021.

community of descendants of people who were enslaved... as partners in research and interpretation.”³⁶ The institution, in other words, has viewed descendant engagement and slavery education as a priority for the majority of its existence and worked with descendants to create content that represents the stories and lives of Montpelier’s enslaved community as accurately and appropriately as possible. But, for Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Colonial Williamsburg, it took decades before they stopped referring to enslaved people as servants, and decades after that before they thought to engage their own descendant communities.

The milestone that kickstarted increased efforts to engage Montpelier’s descendant community began in 2000, when the institution announced its newest project, restoring the Gilmore Cabin. The year before this, in 1999, the ownership of the cabin was brought to the attention of Montpelier’s director. The cabin, according to Rebecca Gilmore Coleman, belonged to George Gilmore, her great-grandfather and a man who had been enslaved by the Madison’s.³⁷ After his emancipation, Gilmore purchased the land and built the cabin that, by 1999, was mostly deteriorated. When the institution first opened, it was entirely concerned with restoring the mansion and the temple, both sites on the property that centered Madison, but Gilmore Coleman’s curiosity about her grandfather’s cabin, the home where her father was born, shifted Montpelier’s focus. Between 2000 and 2005, despite limited funding, the institution worked to restore the cabin in the hopes that they would use it to “...tell the story of Emancipation and Reconstruction.”³⁸ Since the opening of the cabin, descendant engagement at Montpelier has become central to its mission, not just for the production of content about enslavement and the

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Christian Cotz, Patrice Preston Grimes, and Price Thomas, “Confronting Hard History at Montpelier,” interview by Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*, Teaching Tolerance, n.d., audio, 1:15:20, <https://www.learningforjustice.org/podcasts/teaching-hard-history/american-slavery/confronting-hard-history-at-montpelier>.

³⁸Ibid.

enslaved community but also in its day-to-day operations. Over the last few years, however, Montpelier has increased the quality of its slavery education and research by hosting workshops on the topic, leading the collaboration of other public history sites to create a set of guidelines for engaging descendant communities, and creating striking and comprehensive exhibitions that draw relevant connections between slavery and the twenty-first century. They understand that Madison's role as an enslaver is important to the historical narrative of Montpelier—just as Washington's role is pertinent to that of Mount Vernon, Jefferson's to Monticello's, and Colonial Williamsburg's residents' to Colonial Williamsburg's—and the institution has used its young age to its advantage by including descendant and enslaved perspectives in most everything it has done since 1999 or 2000. And, similar to *Lives Bound Together*, *The Life of Sally Hemings*, and *Paradox of Liberty*, James Madison's Montpelier's most profound exhibition, *The Mere Distinction of Colour*, also tells the stories of the men, women, and children who were, at one point, enslaved on the property by the Madison family.

The Mere Distinction of Colour, of every exhibition featured in this project, has been the most successful, winning seven national awards for the ways in which it comprehensively and appropriately presented the enslaved community of Montpelier to the general public. The exhibition tears apart conventional understandings about slavery in the United States and places Montpelier and the Madison family in conversation with the stories and experiences of their enslaved community. It also, unlike *Lives Bound Together*, *The Life of Sally Hemings*, and *Paradox of Liberty*, makes explicit connections to the social and political structures of today that have been and continue to be greatly impacted by slavery, and it traces the evolution of slavery through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Lives Matter Movement. Montpelier also relied on the guidance of their descendant community throughout

the entirety of the planning and execution processes because they understand how vitally important descendant perspectives are. The access the institution has to their descendant community is an extreme privilege, and they wholeheartedly understand that “honest and authentic slavery integration is rooted in descendant engagement.”³⁹ The exhibition, furthermore, has received immense praise from other historians, academic scholars, and the general public for the ways in which it, as honestly and appropriately as possible, tells the story of the enslaved men, women, and children held in bondage by the Madison family. Aside from the frank presentation of the enslaved community that forcibly worked for the Madisons, the most important and interesting part of the exhibition is the beginning, where visitors encounter a film that “confronts the legacies of racism in the continued racial violence wielded against African Americans.”⁴⁰ The exhibition, also commended for how it let “Montpelier descendants tell their stories” rather than rely on White perspectives and experiences to tell enslaved stories, created a “powerful and provocative new exhibition” that shaped a better relationship between the institution and its descendant community.⁴¹

Today, Montpelier’s relationship with and dedication to its descendant community has progressed immensely since the beginning of the twenty-first century. While the institution has only been open to the public for thirty five years, it has perhaps made the most progress of each institution in this project. Before Rebecca Gilmore Coleman and Montpelier’s discovery of the Gilmore Cabin, descendant engagement was limited at the institution. By 2017, Montpelier’s organization of descendants were included in the entire exhibition process of *The Mere*

³⁹Elizabeth Chew (Vice President for Museum Programs, James Madison’s Montpelier) in discussion with the author, November 22, 2021.

⁴⁰Megan Taylor-Shockley, “The Mere Distinction of Colour,” *The Public Historian*, 40, no. 4 (November 2018): 165.

⁴¹Sophia A. Nelson, “The Mere Distinction of Colour: Montpelier Descendants Tell Their Stories,” *NBC News*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/mere-distinction-colour-descendants-tell-their-story-n804906>.

Distinction of Colour, and in 2018, Montpelier hosted a national summit on slavery where they created and published a rubric that described methods to increase descendant engagement at other historic sites. But, in 2021, the institution achieved an almost unheard of feat in the museum field—the board was completely restructured and gave “co-stewardship authority” to Montpelier’s organization of descendants.⁴² More often than not, boards do not necessarily represent the actual composition of organizations. They are usually composed of White men or women with deep financial, social, or familial connections to the organization. At historic sites like Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg, the majority of visitors are White, however, many of the people who gave these sites their histories were not. Montpelier’s decision to create what it calls “structural parity” is unprecedented and important.⁴³ It exemplifies the sort of descendant engagement museums and historic sites should aim for, and it also shows that Montpelier understands the importance of having a diverse board composed of people with different sorts of connections to the institution, whether in the past or in the present. Slavery is not a topic the institution is ambivalent about presenting, rather, they view it as central to the majority of the Madison family’s lives and the institution’s day-to-day operations. Montpelier, like Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Colonial Williamsburg, has struggled since its opening to properly commemorate its enslaved community, and, as it has enacted change throughout the organization, it has shown that the age of an institution is not representative of the quality of its programs nor the pace of its progression. Had it opened to the public earlier, its legacy with slavery education might look similar to that at the other sites in this project. But, even in 1987, Mount Vernon’s, Monticello’s, and Colonial Williamsburg’s presentation of

⁴²“‘Structural Parity’ in Unprecedented Board Restructuring,” Learn, Montpelier, accessed September 17, 2021, <https://www.montpelier.org/learn/montpelier-board-restructure-parity>.

⁴³ “‘Structural Parity’ in Unprecedented Board Restructuring,” Learn, Montpelier, accessed September 17, 2021, <https://www.montpelier.org/learn/montpelier-board-restructure-parity>.

slavery was still relatively limited. And, while Montpelier serves as an excellent example of progressive and appropriate slavery interpretation, Colonial Williamsburg represents many of the reasons why slavery education at museums and historic sites has to be prioritized and visible.

Officially open to the public in 1929, Colonial Williamsburg has always been an entirely different entity than Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Montpelier, despite also being a public history site. Founded in 1699, Williamsburg was one of the United States' "first planned cities" and became a center of colonial life in Virginia quickly after its founding.⁴⁴ Williamsburg also attracted well-known political figures such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, but after the relocation of Virginia's capital city in the late-eighteenth century, the town's activity slowed. In 1926, around the same time Monticello was preparing to open to the public, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. backed Reverend Dr. William Archer Rutherford Goodwin's plans to restore Williamsburg "to its original colonial estate."⁴⁵ Today, Colonial Williamsburg operates as the "largest living outdoor museum in the country" through an immersive experience that aims to educate visitors about what it calls "authentic" colonial life.⁴⁶ While the institution's mission was relatively similar when it opened to the public in 1929, its definition of authentic was not. We can never truly replicate the past, nor will we ever know if an experience is truly authentic, but we can infer based on available primary source material what a period of time *may* have been like and how people *may* have experienced it. But, Colonial Williamsburg's interpretation of its authentic eighteenth-century past, at least from 1929 until 1979, did not include a group of people who, at one point, made up over half of the city's population: its enslaved community.

⁴⁴"A Brief History of Williamsburg," History, City of Williamsburg, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.williamsburgva.gov/488/History>.

⁴⁵"About Colonial Williamsburg," Learn, Colonial Williamsburg, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/learn/about-colonial-williamsburg/>.

⁴⁶Ibid.

For a period of roughly fifty years, Colonial Williamsburg’s “authentic” history really only featured the stories of its former White residents and famous White visitors. In 1979, well after the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, the institution began to research and create programs about the people who were enslaved at its site. Colonial Williamsburg’s decision to exclude the enslaved community from any sort of representation for the majority of the twentieth century was representative of museums and public history sites as a whole, especially those like Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Montpelier. The prioritization of White residents with histories that were perhaps easier to track signaled the importance (or lack thereof) these institutions placed on enslaved people in general. Historians proved long ago that White enslavers heavily depended on the people they held in bondage to support their families and their plantations, yet, between the late-nineteenth and the late-twentieth centuries, public history sites that existed where these plantations once stood failed to recognize enslaved peoples’ impact and legacy altogether.

While increased efforts to include enslaved people in the Colonial Williamsburg immersive experience really began in 1979, this section focuses on its decision to re-enact a slave auction in 1994, an event which the foundation has since boasted about, calling it a “...major African American history initiative.”⁴⁷ In reality, the re-enactment was major only for the ways in which it attracted national media attention and controversy. The intent of the program, to “teach the story” of slavery so that it would not be forgotten, divided visitors.⁴⁸ Some felt as if Colonial Williamsburg’s re-enactment trivialized or made a show out of slavery, while others believed it was educational and provided important context for the horrors of slavery and

⁴⁷“The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation,” Sites & Museums, Slavery and Remembrance, accessed September 17, 2021, <https://slaveryandremembrance.org/partners/partner/index.cfm?id=P0000>.

⁴⁸Tamara Jones, “Living History or Undying Racism? Colonial Williamsburg ‘Slave Auction’ Draws Protest, Support,” *Washington Post*, October 11, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/10/11/living-history-or-undying-racism-colonial-williamsburg-slave-auction-draws-protest-support/>.

of being separated from one's family. In the broader framework of slavery education at Colonial Williamsburg, however, the auction showed, similar to Mount Vernon calling its enslaved community servants for over fifty years, that comprehensive and appropriate slavery education was not as big a priority as other initiatives at the site.

A mere three years after this event, Richard Handler published his groundbreaking and field-altering book, *The New History in an Old Museum*. Handler's study humbled Colonial Williamsburg and showed that despite the foundation's claims it viewed slavery education as a central framework for understanding life in eighteenth-century America, it was extremely hard to find and almost non-existent in practice. Handler's book was published almost twenty years after Colonial Williamsburg began implementing the presence of slavery throughout its site, yet, interestingly, they appeared stuck. During a time in which Mount Vernon had just placed a new, more visible marker at the cemetery of its enslaved community, Colonial Williamsburg seemed to be playing catch-up. While Mount Vernon and Monticello were, as public history sites, a number of years older than Colonial Williamsburg, they both, for the most part, seemed decades ahead of the foundation in terms of slavery education. And, media coverage of the auction and Handler's book emphasized these differences by showing how slow implementation efforts had actually been, and they practically forced the institution to reflect more seriously on their role as a public history site that claimed to give visitors an authentic eighteenth-century colonial experience.

After the publication of *New History in an Old Museum*, Colonial Williamsburg underwent a series of transformations across the institution. As the site simultaneously grappled with Handler's conclusions and the discrepancies in their interpretation style, it worked to redefine its mission and role as a public history site. In 2003, it closed Carter's Grove Plantation,

one of the properties at Williamsburg where slavery was perhaps most present, and by 2007, it sold the home to a private buyer. Carter's Grove Plantation, on a larger scale, represented the slave society that Virginia had become during the seventeenth century, but the sprawling property, seven miles from Colonial Williamsburg, was too hard to maintain. Furthermore, in 2003 Hurricane Isabel seriously damaged the only road to the property, making it even harder for guests to visit the plantation. Since 2007, the institution has seemingly improved the quality and visibility of slavery education at Colonial Williamsburg. As part of a collaboration between the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Slave Route Project and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, a website that acted as a guide to different public history sites and museums around the world was launched in 2014. "Slavery and Rememberance" aimed to educate the public about slavery and the slave trade, and by linking Colonial Williamsburg to plantation museums in Barbados or to museums in Ghana, visitors were able to see how interconnected these sites were via the slave trade. And, less than a decade later, the institution continues to increase the quality of their programs and immersive or interactive experiences related to slavery in eighteenth-century Williamsburg. Today, visitors encounter interpreters acting as enslaved individuals, tours aimed specifically around enslaved lives and culture, and other programs related to slavery at the site, and while there is always room for improvement, especially for a institution as influential as Colonial Williamsburg, slavery education is more present than it ever has been.

While Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg have very different legacies, as public history institutions they have employed similar tactics relating to slavery education, and in some instances worked with one another to create more comprehensive exhibitions, tours, and programs. The work each institution has done over the course of the last

few decades has contributed significantly to the present state of slavery education in their spaces. Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg have adopted approaches that best suit their interpretation styles, yet they similarly aim to create programs and content that are more representative of slavery and the people who were enslaved at their sites. They have all come to understand that their histories are incomplete without the stories of the enslaved and their contributions, and the old approaches—to confine them to one space and talk about them passively—are no longer sufficient, and quite frankly never were. Their struggles to simultaneously confront their pasts with slavery education and create more comprehensive content can be seen throughout each site, as new exhibitions that center the lives of the enslaved stand in stark contrast to their outdated language and their museum and education centers. The future of slavery education at Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg relies on each institutions' willingness to honestly represent enslaved stories and experiences. Each site still struggles to make slavery's presence visible throughout their properties, as well as, with the exception of Montpelier, make explicit connections between slavery in the United States and the social and political structures present today. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and other important American historical figures held hundreds of men, women, and children in bondage for the majority of their lives, and while Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier, and Colonial Williamsburg have become comfortable addressing them as enslavers, most of these institutions still refuse to connect slavery to monumental eras beyond Reconstruction and Jim Crow. Slavery in the United States impacted everyone, everywhere, and its effects, especially in the midst of the Black Lives Matter Movement and the era of mass incarceration and policing, have become more prevalent than ever. As state-wide debates about Critical Race Theory in educational institutions ensue, Mount Vernon, Monticello, Montpelier,

and Colonial Williamsburg each face important but necessary decisions—do they continue to confront their legacies with poor slavery education and wholeheartedly present enslaved voices, stories, and experiences, or do they remain complacent and inch ever-slowly toward progress in the hopes that one day they will get there?

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