

## Preface

This has become our Mount Rushmore, our Liberty Bell, our Statue of Liberty.

As the Philadelphia attorney and African American political activist Michael Coard spoke these words in Independence National Historical Park (INHP) on December 15, 2011, he underscored the symbolic importance of the newest commemoration within the park known as “the cradle of liberty,” a site called the President’s House. Coard’s comments, however, spoke not to the nation’s early embrace of liberty but to its systematic denial of liberty to the enslaved of the time and their African American descendants. “This site,” Coard proclaimed, “is the only site in the history of America on federal property where a slave memorial exists.”<sup>1</sup>

How did this place, the site of the executive mansion of George Washington and John Adams, become the Mount Rushmore, Liberty Bell, and Statue of Liberty for Coard and other African Americans? The short answer is George Washington. As Washington prepared to move into the nation’s first White House, he arranged to have nine of his slaves from Mount Vernon move into the house as well. But Washington faced a dilemma: Pennsylvania law mandated that any enslaved person who resided within the state for more than six months would be considered free. Washington and his personal secretary, Tobias Lear, hatched a plan designed to mislead both the nine en-

slaved Africans and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: shortly before six months elapsed, the enslaved would be briefly rotated back to Mount Vernon and/or transported across the Delaware River to New Jersey.<sup>2</sup>

When Washington's deceit was unearthed by historian Edward Lawler, Jr., in 2002, the President's House became the battleground for an eight-year controversy in which National Park Service officials, historians, African American activists, and citizens from all places on the political spectrum argued about the role of slavery in America's commemorative landscape, the identity of INHP, contemporary racial politics, and who controls the stories of history. The story of the President's House offers a compelling narrative packed with history, contemporary political intrigue, and conflict among individuals and groups with competing motives and agendas.

As this description suggests, the story of the President's House appeals to several different audiences: scholars in the interdisciplinary fields of public memory studies and African American studies; scholars interested in the cultural, social, and/or political dimensions of our built environment; students of U.S. history; professionals working in the fields of public history and design; and Philadelphia residents who watched the drama unfold in their city over a number of years. As a result, I embraced a writing style that I hope treats each of these audiences with respect. I touch on relevant academic concepts and scholarship in history, geography, rhetoric, environmental psychology, and the like, but I do so in a way that allows these ideas to inform my discussion without dominating the story. My writing in the pages that follow is also informed by the wisdom I gained in visiting with some of the people involved in the President's House story, people who played very different roles in the controversy. Their willingness to share their ideas with me has, I hope, emerged both in the way I tell the story and in the variety of perspectives present in that story. Their openness to speaking with a stranger with no previous attachments to the park, Philadelphia, or the profession of memorial design gave me the necessary knowledge to honor the deep investments they all held in the project.

My distance from the site, and the need to rely on the kindness of strangers, points to a question that some readers may have: how did I get involved in this story? The answer begins with my family's ritual viewing of the musical *1776* on the Fourth of July. I had long been interested in the study of meanings in places and had recently begun to research public memory places as we watched the musical in the summer of 2006. Realizing that I did not know much about Independence National Historical Park, I decided to learn more. I quickly discovered that the park was in the midst of struggling with how to manage the revelations unearthed by Lawler four years earlier.

As I continued to read about Lawler's telling discovery and its aftermath, I learned that the symbolic power of the President's House was astounding. Some public historians were thrilled about the possibility of adding the executive branch to the park's portrayal of the nation's founding. Social historians were excited to see an opportunity to address more fully the complexities of liberty in the country's early years. African American activists eagerly embraced the idea of the federal government commemorating the efforts of the enslaved in general and the nine Africans enslaved by Washington in particular. I was also stunned to find that park officials initially wanted little to do with these ideas.

The story of the President's House, I came to discover, tells us much about the politics of remembering the past, the deep-seated tensions about how the United States defines its history and future, and the daunting challenges of working through those tensions in a public place of memory. It is a story packed with conflict, suspicion, and backstage maneuvering. It features heroes, villains, and fools—some of whom serve different roles for different audiences. And, most of all, it is a story that has revealed the need to face—in the symbolically powerful place of our nation's birth—the secrets of our collective national memory: our heroes weren't saints, and our country was built on the backs of enslaved Africans.

## Discovering the Truth

### *The Revelation of Ugly History*

The story of the President's House begins, innocuously enough, with a typical tourist moment. One summer day in 1996, Philadelphian Edward Lawler, Jr., was giving an informal tour of some of the city's historic sites when he was asked, "Where was the White House?" Lawler had already noted the early homes of the nation's legislative branch and judicial branch, but the question threw him; he could not definitively identify the site of the executive mansion where Presidents George Washington and John Adams once resided. Lawler recalled, "I pointed behind me and I said, 'I think it's over there where the women's restroom is.'"¹

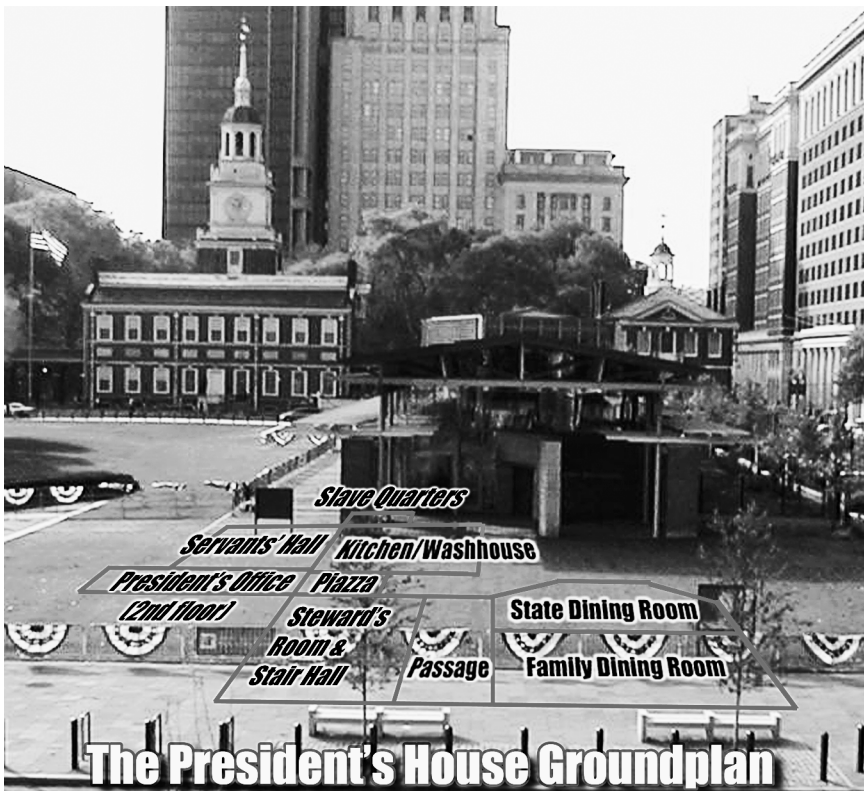
Indeed, a wayside marker indicated that Presidents Washington and Adams lived in a home only one block away from the buildings where the Congress and Supreme Court convened (Congress Hall and Old City Hall) and from Independence Hall, where the members of the Continental Congress declared their independence from Great Britain. Yet the National Park Service (NPS) marker within Independence National Historical Park (INHP) provided little additional information about the long-destroyed building. Although the sprawling historical park offers more than two dozen sites, many of which are the original colonial-era structures, to visitors seeking encounters with tangible signs of the nation's beginnings, the only physical presence of the executive branch, beyond the wayside marker, was Washington's version of Camp David, the Deshler-Morris House, which is located in

Germantown, miles away from the park's heart in Independence Mall—and one of the least popular sites in the park.<sup>2</sup>

Stirred by his realization of this hole in the park's commemorative landscape, Lawler initiated an archival expedition that eventually produced a historical treasure: the exact location and floor plans of the elegant structure that once served as home to the nation's first two presidents—and before them, financier Robert Morris, British general Sir William Howe, and Benedict Arnold.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Lawler's historical excursion uncovered an architectural fact with contemporary repercussions: Washington had ordered modifications to the home before moving in, the most intriguing of which was the installation of a striking bow window in the state dining room. This bow window, which Washington used as a backdrop when greeting guests to the house, very likely served as the inspiration for the design of the Oval Office in the White House. Lawler's discoveries, published initially in the January 2002 issue of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, provided INHP officials with the information needed to tell park visitors the story of the development of the presidency as well as the legislative and judicial branches.<sup>4</sup> The building—which came to be known as the President's House (as Washington and Adams referred to it in their communication)—could complete the park's story of how the U.S. government took shape in its early years.

The story wasn't that simple, though. Lawler not only identified the structure and location of the home; he also unearthed a generally overlooked historical fact: "Washington held enslaved Africans in the President's House for the whole time he lived in Philadelphia"—willfully violating a 1780 Pennsylvania law that would have released the enslaved from bondage after six months of living in the state.<sup>5</sup> Washington evaded this law by taking those he had enslaved out of the state, typically to Mount Vernon in Virginia, just before six months had passed; he then had them returned to the executive mansion in Philadelphia.<sup>6</sup>

This story, described by one former INHP employee as a "symbolic bombshell,"<sup>7</sup> was brought to the attention of a broader audience by the historian Gary Nash during an interview on a Philadelphia radio station;<sup>8</sup> it was initially not well received by INHP officials. In addition to providing evidence that the nation's ideals were subverted by its most revered founding father, Lawler revealed another troubling, and untimely, fact for the park: the footprint of the part of the home where many of the enslaved slept was a mere six feet from the entrance to the soon-to-be-constructed Liberty Bell Center (LBC)—the \$12.9 million crown jewel of a \$314 million makeover of the park that had been years in the making (see Figure 1.1).<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 1.1.** The footprint of the President's House, with the Liberty Bell Center and Independence Hall in the background. (Copyright © by, and used with permission of, Edward Lawler, Jr., and the Independence Hall Association; on the web at [www.ushistory.org](http://www.ushistory.org).)

The Liberty Bell is, of course, one of the nation's most iconic symbols. "It is virtually a touchstone of American identity," asserted Nash, "because Americans have adopted it, along with the flag, as the symbol of justice, the rule of law, and the guardian of sovereign rights."<sup>10</sup> Thus, even though abolitionists adopted the bell as their symbol in the 1830s, it has long been treated as a positive and revered symbol of freedom enacted, not denied. Lawler's discovery that Washington kept enslaved Africans only feet away from the entrance to the LBC was more than ironic—it was a threat to the core identity of INHP, affectionately known as "the cradle of liberty." Writing in *The Public Historian*, former park employee Jill Ogleline noted that "the responsibility of preserving and interpreting icons of American civil religion such as Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell has been the crucible in which [INHP] has forged its sense of identity."<sup>11</sup>

Lawler's revelations created a quandary for INHP officials. If the park refused to acknowledge his discoveries, it would be seen as evading an indisputable truth (an uncomfortable and ironic prospect given the myth of Washington's reputed insistence on not telling lies). Yet if the park embraced the story he unearthed, the fidelity of the story trumpeted throughout the park's installations and interpretation would be threatened. Ogline aptly summarized the controversy: "The fundamentals at stake have been nothing less than the place of slavery in the American narrative and Independence National Historical Park's own sense of self-understanding and mission."<sup>12</sup>

That mission, of course, is not greatly different from those often found at other commemorative sites across the country and around the world. Put simply, public memory places are the sites in which collective *we's* mark timeless truths about what we ought to remember. As Kenneth Foote has written, "The very durability of the landscape and of the memorials placed in the landscape makes [memory places] effective for symbolizing and sustaining collective values over long periods of time."<sup>13</sup> Often these sites tell a story that Henry Tudor labels a foundation myth, or "the tale of how a political society came to be founded."<sup>14</sup> These narratives are especially powerful, for they form the bedrock of a nation's identity. They are part of what we informally call our *heritage*. We do not trifle with heritage, for it "attests our identity and affirms our worth"<sup>15</sup> by representing "all that is good and important about the past."<sup>16</sup>

Public memory sites provide only partial glimpses into our collective past, largely because the resources of commemoration are insufficient for sharing a variety of stories, perspectives, and details. So instead of complex, multi-layered stories illustrating the messiness of historical moments, events, and figures, we often encounter only one version of how our heritage was represented in this place, at that time, and/or within some person(s). In short, places of public memory typically are made to reaffirm a collective's heritage, a practice that Kristen Hoerl called, in a slightly different context, *selective amnesia*, or "the rhetorical processes by which public discourse routinely omits events that defy seamless narratives of national progress and unity."<sup>17</sup> For example, officials at INHP knew of Washington's slave-holding within the executive mansion when the NPS took control of the land on which it was located in 1974, yet they made no effort to include this story within their interpretation at the park (nor had Philadelphia and Pennsylvania officials before that time, when they were in control of the site) because that story, in Ogline's words, was "considered irrelevant to the park's primary narratives."<sup>18</sup> Even then, park officials knew that to acknowledge Washington's actions, as well as other stories of slavery within the park's sites, would be incommensurate with the scenes of American heritage crafted throughout INHP.



Yet, to the then park superintendent's chagrin, local African American activists and politicians, historians both near and far, and members of the Independence Hall Association (a nonprofit entity that monitors how the park is managed) coalesced to suggest that INHP make a different kind of place on Independence Mall and, in so doing, make a bigger place for African Americans in the nation's commemorative landscape. Operating relatively autonomously, each of these groups agitated for recognition of the President's House within INHP. A collection of prominent historians banded together as the Ad Hoc Historians to raise public awareness of the site and to urge NPS historians in Washington, D.C., to intervene. Philadelphia-area African Americans founded two groups, Generations Unlimited and Avenging the Ancestors Coalition (ATAC); the latter, founded by the Philadelphia attorney Michael Coard, became the more prominent of the two because of its multifaceted advocacy efforts, including staged protests in the park, collection of petition signatures, and lobbying of elected officials in city, state, and federal government. The Independence Hall Association (IHA) developed a website to catalog the controversy and invited outraged citizens to sign an online petition. Philadelphia's media were drawn to the controversy, as were national media outlets such as the Associated Press, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Seattle Times*, and *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

As the controversy exploded, INHP staff received pressure from higher-ranking NPS officials, especially Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley, to engage rather than ignore the individuals and groups eager to be heard on the subject of slavery at the President's House. At the same time as Lawler's article was being published and distributed, Marie Rust, who was serving as director of the Northeast Region of the NPS (and therefore supervising the staff at INHP), was leading efforts to encourage the integration of citizen participation at park sites and to diversify the stories told within the parks. The result of her work to make a place for citizen participation in park management became known as the Park Service's Civic Engagement Initiative, which later led to significant community participation in the development of the President's House site.

That participation, of course, was generated for a number of other reasons beyond the site's status as the home of Presidents George Washington and John Adams. First, the arguments about whether and how to acknowledge the house and all its residents highlighted the fact that the U.S. commemorative landscape had long failed to make a place for both slavery and the contributions of the enslaved and their ancestors. The President's House was not just a site where two presidents and nine enslaved African resided; it was also



a place that represented the nation's ongoing failure to come to terms with its racial history. Public history generally, argued Derek Alderman, has engaged in "marginalizing if not altogether ignoring the memories, contributions and struggles of African Americans."<sup>19</sup>

The near-absence of African American history from the commemorative landscape is only one part of a larger pattern of the historical exclusion of black Americans from public places. "Slavery," observed the historian Eric Foner, "rendered blacks all but invisible to those imagining the American community."<sup>20</sup> Knowing "their place," in fact, was used as a none-too-subtle code in Reconstruction-era rhetoric to continue the exclusion of black Americans from public life.<sup>21</sup> Nearly a century later, Ralph Ellison confirmed that being black in America still meant being invisible in public places. Whether through Jim Crow laws, violent responses to nonviolent public protests during the civil rights movement, or contemporary phenomena such as "Driving While Black," the descendants of the enslaved have been told to avoid many public places.

Considered in this context, the President's House offered an opportunity to make a place for African American history squarely in the middle of the story of America's founding—an even more potent possibility for recognition than the one that occurred during the controversy surrounding what is now the African Burial Ground National Monument in New York City. There advocates sought recognition of the humanity and economic contributions of the enslaved. In Philadelphia, advocates also had the opportunity to make a place for African Americans in the heart of America's political and philosophical narrative.<sup>22</sup>

Second, the vociferous response from prominent African American leaders in Philadelphia, such as Coard, not only underscored the general unhappiness about the small presence of black Americans in the commemorative landscape; it also illuminated long-standing local tensions. Although "for two generations after the Revolution, Philadelphia was the largest and most important center of free black life in the United States," white residents of the city also increasingly excluded their black counterparts from public spaces during this time period.<sup>23</sup> This process of exclusion continued throughout the 1800s, as W. E. B. DuBois observed in his extensive 1890s investigation of black life in Philadelphia,<sup>24</sup> and throughout the following century. The federal government's 1974 takeover of Independence Mall, whose creation displaced a large number of black Philadelphia residents from the city's center, added a further layer of separation between the city's African American residents and the city's core. Even though INHP held historic structures still owned by the city, many black Philadelphians felt as if the site was in another world.

Thus, the President's House was not just a site in a national historical park; it was also a place that exemplified the ways in which local African Americans felt disenfranchised. A 1994 ethnographic assessment of local groups' impressions of the park confirmed that African Americans "saw a lack of their cultural representation in the park's official history." One black Philadelphia resident observed, "So much for them (tourists, white people) and so little for us (African Americans, working-class neighborhood residents)."<sup>25</sup> INHP's initial response to Lawler's findings so irked local African Americans that Philadelphia mayor John F. Street showed up the park by announcing, at the grand opening of the LBC no less, that the city would contribute \$1.5 million toward building a commemorative installation at the site. The President's House controversy thus also pivoted around local African Americans' desire to make a bigger place for the black community within the white-hued confines of INHP.<sup>26</sup>

Third, the intense national reactions surrounding any decision regarding the site backlit the fact that the United States is undergoing inexorable demographic changes in which white residents will soon no longer constitute a majority of the population. In May 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that as of July 2011 over half the members of the nation's population under one year of age were minorities.<sup>27</sup> Then, one year later, the bureau revealed that in 2012 white deaths outnumbered white births in the United States, an unprecedented development. "We're jumping the gun on a long, slow decline of our white population, which is going to characterize this century," William Frey, a Brookings Institution demographer told the *Washington Post*. "It's a bookend from the last century, when whites helped us grow. Now it's minorities who are going to make the contributions to our economic and population growth over the next 50 years."<sup>28</sup> The President's House was not just a site where historical events and figures could be acknowledged; it was also a place where a battle for the nation's future identity would be fought. These battles reflect "the shifting dynamics of the national narrative, of who 'counts' in the unfolding of American history, whose story is most important, who is telling the tale."<sup>29</sup> In short, as Foner asked in the title of his book, the question becomes, "Who owns history?"<sup>30</sup>

In this respect, the President's House controversy represented a widespread concern about how places were going to be made for all Americans in the shaping of the nation's identity. "Debates over American identity," asserted James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, "are often characterized by issues of race and shaped by the urge to forget slavery's long and critically influential history."<sup>31</sup> Thus, for many African Americans, the President's House dispute served as a new test of the nation's willingness to enact its long-stated creed of

equality and to face up to its hypocritical embrace of slavery. Would INHP and the NPS acknowledge Washington's duplicity? Would the lives of nine enslaved Africans be recognized in a national historical park where a shining story of liberty enacted is told? In short, would the federal government make a place for an African American narrative? At the same time, for individuals uncertain about the evolving stories and demographics of the United States, the President's House controversy served as a test of the nation's ability to envision itself as a particular kind of country in the face of growing challenges to its traditions. Would Washington's reputation be stained? Would the founding narrative of the nation be threatened? And, most pointedly, would the site of the home of the nation's first two presidents be turned into a slave memorial? In short, would the "cradle of liberty" be redefined, and thus change the traditional story of the United States of America?<sup>32</sup>

Thus, while Lawler's archival excavation unearthed an opportunity to add the presence of the executive branch to INHP, it also revealed long-buried issues about selective storytelling across the commemorative landscape, a city's lack of control of its own core, and a nation's changing identity. The emergence of the President's House reminded us that "no heritage discourse or moment of heritage is necessarily uniformly shared or homogenously constructed; rather, there are always elements of dissent and challenge, and thus the possibility of change within it."<sup>33</sup> For African Americans (not to mention social historians), the President's House offered the possibility of making black history a fundamental part of the nation's founding and development. Such an opportunity was especially tantalizing because, as Nathan Glazer has argued, the United States has been unable or unwilling "to incorporate into its society African Americans, in the same way and to the same degree that it has incorporated so many groups."<sup>34</sup> At the same time, of course, the President's House—as situated in INHP—was perhaps one of the least likely sites at which to attempt this task. "For many Americans," reminded Clarence Lusane in his *The Black History of the White House*, "it is an act of unacceptable subversion to criticize the nation's founders, the founding documents, the presidency, the president's house, and other institutions that have come to symbolize the official story of the United States."<sup>35</sup>

The President's House thus emerged into a murky commemorative landscape, one filled with the shadows of untold stories of bondage, the enduring appeal of a narrative of a noble nation, and a profound uncertainty about how to deal with the contradiction between the two. Given this context, the opening of the President's House commemorative installation on December 15, 2010, represented quite an achievement. "This choice, to foreground the history of slavery, at a federal monument no less, and within just steps of the

Liberty Bell and Independence Hall,” wrote the Temple University historian Seth Bruggeman, “surely ranks among the most significant in the history of American public memory.”<sup>36</sup> So how did it happen? I answer that question in the pages that follow. Relying on interviews with principal participants and visitors to the completed site, internal documents gathered through both a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request and my own expedition in the INHP archives, media coverage thoroughly catalogued and housed on the IHA website, and a wide-ranging reading of scholarship in public memory, I outline how—from beginning to end—a place was made on Independence Mall. This place, whether known by its formal name (The President’s House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation), its shorthand appellation (the President’s House), or the name preferred by Coard (the Slavery Memorial), illustrates how a place of public memory is the location of discourses and histories present and absent, immediate and distant, past and future.

As I share the story of the making of the President’s House, I begin by explaining in Chapter 2 how we can appreciate the variety of perspectives and investments that people bring to places of public memory. This approach, which I have dubbed *re-collection*, recognizes that the work of remembering is done not simply through commemorative markers of some sort but by the people who experience those places of memory. Moreover, because those people bring both shared and disparate experiences with them to the memory site, they are bound to make different kinds of sense of the site. In other words, the President’s House—and other places in the commemorative landscape—does not possess a singular meaning; it means different things to different people.

In Chapter 3, I continue the discussion I initiated in this chapter by explaining why the President’s House mattered so much to so many people. In so doing, I first outline how the development of INHP marked it as a unique and special place in the commemoration of the founding of the United States as a land of liberty. The amount of intellectual energy and public resources poured into the park over the years makes sense when INHP is considered a place, perhaps *the* place, to remember the birth of the ideas that have formed the foundation of the nation’s identity. On the other hand, when viewed from the perspective of those whose stories have been systematically excluded from public recognition over the generations, the revelation that enslaved Africans were held by the father of our country on the same block where the Liberty Bell, inscribed with “proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof,” was housed was cause for the release of years of pent-up anger. As these conflicting stories emerge in Chapter 3, the complexity of remembering at the President’s House becomes especially vivid.

The next four chapters of this book represent four distinct stages in the making of the President's House. Chapter 4 explains how advocates for the President's House, especially those who wanted to mark it as a site where white Americans enslaved black Africans, offered public arguments that INHP ultimately could not defuse. As this chapter illustrates, those seeking to change the character of INHP by acknowledging the role of slavery and the actions of the enslaved within the nation's development ultimately relied on arguments that *embraced* the stories told by the park. That chapter concludes with the decision to build a commemorative installation on the site, and the next chapter points out the difficulties in making a place that would satisfy everyone invested in the project. Specifically, Chapter 5 reviews how five semi-finalist designs envisioned the President's House installation and how the designs were assessed by those who encountered them. This chapter demonstrates that the story of the President's House is not entirely black and white; instead, it contains a variety of perspectives—many of them indeed informed by race—about what we should remember and how we should remember it.

Chapter 6 then illuminates the astonishing (and temporary) convergence of those perspectives after an excavation of the site unexpectedly revealed the foundation remains of the kitchen where the enslaved chef Hercules worked, an underground passageway to the main building, and the bow window that Washington had installed in the dining room (and which likely served as the inspiration for the Oval Office). The viewing platform at which hundreds of thousands of people converged became the most powerful place in the entire saga of the President's House and prompted a redesign of the installation. As Chapter 7 points out, this moment was the only time when widespread agreement emerged at the site. After funds were secured to integrate the foundation remains in a revised design, new battles were engaged as the interpretive material for the site was developed and then finalized. Not surprisingly, when the completed commemoration opened, the disagreements continued; the President's House, like any memory site, could not sufficiently contain all that people wanted to remember.

Perhaps, though, as the final chapter ponders, the story of the President's House provides us with the wisdom to recognize the ways in which our own preferences and perspectives color our judgments about how we continue to engage the difficult memories of slavery and race in the United States. The President's House installation is, I conclude, far from perfect, but its lessons offer a means of continuing the dialogue. More specifically, it reminds us that, as the editors of an oral history of enslaved Africans remarked, "the historical memory of slavery remains central to Americans' sense of themselves and the society in which they live."<sup>37</sup>