

By **WILLIAM C. KASHATUS**

Burying slave past is a travesty

INDEPENDENCE Mall, once again, has become a battleground for the National Park Service and scholars over the historical integrity of the city's illustrious past.

At issue is the construction of a new Liberty Bell Center on the northwest corner of the block between Chestnut and Market. At present, a public restroom is located there, squarely over the footprint of a building that served as the president's house from 1790 to 1800, when Philadelphia was the nation's capital. Behind the house were slave quarters, added by George Washington himself.

This Philadelphia "White House" — originally, the Robert Morris Mansion — was demolished in the 1830s. Today, only a plaque marks the spot.

The National Park Service plans a \$9.2 million Liberty Bell Center on the site. The complex will consist of a two-story porch where visitors will enter at the north end, a central corridor that will be used for exhibits

and the Bell Chamber itself, dramatically angled to face Independence Hall. According to that plan, the area of Washington's slave quarters are the last thing visitors will pass before entering the new bell center.

The historians are miffed. Randall Miller of St. Joseph's University believes that the Park Service is missing "an important opportunity to tell the real story of the American Revolution and the meaning of freedom in a new republic" by failing to complete an extensive archaeological study.

To be sure, the Park Service, in compliance with federal law, oversaw a preliminary excavation of the site in November 2000, uncovering an ice-house and a deep hole that might have been a well or privy.

But nothing more extensive was done, and the archaeological features have been reburied for another generation to ex-

plore. Recently, Mayor Street gave his approval to allow the construction of the Liberty Bell complex to proceed.

Told of the decision, Gary B. Nash, a noted scholar of the Revolution and Philadelphia history, called it a "travesty."

"Our memory of the past is often managed and manipulated," he said. "Here, it is downright being buried."

The Park Service has refused to do a more comprehensive excavation on the grounds of "not having enough time, or money." In other words, the tourist dollars won't wait. But both Nash and Miller make a strong case against that.

If, in fact, the deep columnar hole was a privy, it could reveal important insights about the daily lives of Washington's slaves. But what makes this particular site so important is that slavery and freedom were inextricably intertwined on it.

Here, Washington, as the first president, gave force and meaning to the rights of white Americans while conveniently ignoring those of blacks. The irony is central to understanding a paradox of American history: the simultaneous rise of freedom and slavery in our nation.

Last week, Martha Aikens, superintendent of Independence Park, responded to the critics by insisting that the Park Service "plans to interpret several aspects of the Morris mansion, including Washington's slaves," at the new Liberty Bell Center, and that the story of slavery is already told throughout the park. She said the Deshler-Morris House in Germantown, Washington's residence during the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793, should not be overlooked. Aikens says that the Park Service is developing a virtual tour of the site that will "generally discuss Washington as a slave

owner."

So what's the beef?

The Morris mansion and its environs have much greater historical value and should be studied more carefully than the Deshler-Morris House, which is little more than a footnote to the significant events that occurred at Independence Park.

Even if the Park Service creates an exhibition on slavery in the new bell pavilion, or commemorates the house and the slave quarters by marking the outline of its floor plan, those gestures would not be as significant as studying artifacts that can reveal telling details about our nation's blemished history.

It's difficult to understand why the Park Service and its black superintendent as well as the city's black mayor are not doing more to study this site.

After all, there's more to this city's history than the tourist industry it generates. ★

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