

# How Independence Park can be faithful to history

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

John Adams once sniffed, "The history of our Revolution will be one continuous lie from one end to the other. The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electrical rod smote the earth and out sprang Gen. Washington, fully clothed and on his horse. Franklin then proceeded to electrify them with his rod and thence forward these three — Franklin, Washington and the horse — conducted all the policy, negotiations, and war."

Although Adams' sarcasm was reflective of his infamous jealousy for being overshadowed by the other Founding Fathers, it is doubtful that the National Park Service could conjure a better image to sell Philadelphia's history. Place the entire episode in a sound-and-light pageant on Independence Square and you have created an amusing spectacle that will only serve to exploit the nation's most treasured historic site.

Proposals like that were debated last month in workshops sponsored by the National Park Service to help shape a new master plan for Independence Park. Hopefully the outcome will not compromise the integrity of the past for the tourist dollars of the future.

While I respect the National Park Service's recent initiative to revise its antiquated General Management Plan by seeking public opinion on these issues, I have trouble understanding the constructiveness of the advice they have received thus far.

Proposals for a sound-and-light show highlighting the events of the American Revolution are nothing new. Those shows were regularly held at dusk throughout the 1970s on Independence Square. But the idea ran its course. By the early 1980s the sound-and-light show was viewed as synthetic history and attracted very little public attention.

Another plan involved a team of town criers dressed in period costume to advertise special events occurring in the city. While this can be an inspirational way to recreate the past, it also runs the risk of oversimplifying it.

Perhaps the most sensational idea suggested was to increase the Liberty Bell's exposure by sending it on a nationwide tour, something that had been done several times during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Considering, however, that the Bell is nearly 250 years old and its 2,080 pounds of copper and tin must be reinforced with a steel support, it would be foolish to take it anywhere. The next crack might very well be its last.

The danger of these proposed innovations is that they often address only those aspects of history Americans cherish, ignoring the problematic. How, for example, can a sound-and-light show even begin to explain the true meaning of American independence without acknowledging the fact that it ignored the inalienable rights of the African American community? Or would we have the same ven-

eration for the Liberty Bell if everyone realized that it was cast to celebrate the 50th anniversary of William Penn's Charter of Privileges, a document that granted religious freedom to Protestant settlers but only tolerated Catholics and Jews? Probably not, but Americans *would* better appreciate the continuing struggle and sacrifices made to achieve greater religious freedom.

To ignore these realities is to compromise the fundamental integrity of the history that occurred in this city for a more appealing mythology.

I strongly encourage the various government agencies and voluntary organizations involved in this debate to exercise a greater sensitivity to the historical integrity of the city's past.

One of the best ways to ensure that integrity is to establish a partnership between the National Park Service and a consortium of academic institutions including the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University as well as some of the highly respected liberal arts colleges like Haverford and Swarthmore. This partnership would operate much like the association between the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and the College of William and Mary.

Scholars would ensure the quality of interpretation and research completed at Independence Park by serving as advisers, keeping the interpreters abreast of the most recent secondary literature in early American history, evaluating the accuracy of interpretation and securing grant money from national educational foundations for further research on Philadelphia's early history.

The academic communities would enjoy the prestige of sponsoring regular symposia of scholars at the nation's most historical site, provide talented graduate and undergraduate students with the opportunity to learn about museum studies with one of the most respected preservationist organizations in the nation, and implement some innovative educational programs that would allow them to share their scholarly research in a more public forum.

Such a partnership would not only be cost-effective because of the pooling of human and financial resources, but it could also establish an enduring relationship between public and academic history and one that could serve as a model for other urban historical parks.

Philadelphia's uniqueness as an American city lies in its 300 years of history. We can either build on that strength and earn the respect of other urban centers that have failed in the effort to capitalize on their past or we can succumb to the commercialization that cheapens it. The choice is ours to make.

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### Commentary

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