

# Compromising liberty's story for money



PHILADELPHIA — Independence National Historical Park's dedication of a new \$12.6 million

center for the Liberty Bell and the historic move of the bell from its existing pavilion today should be a cause for celebration.

Instead, the event will be marred by a public protest planned by African-American historians, academics, civic organizations, and community activists who believe that the National Park Service is more concerned about an immediate return on tourist dollars than the potential to learn more about the greatest paradox in American history — how the freedom of some was forged upon the slavery of others.

At issue is the Park Service's attempt to cover up a less noble aspect of American history that occurred in the shadow of Independence Hall — the existence of slave quarters built by President George Washington. Washington, a Virginia slave holder, lived in a brick house on the site between 1790 and 1800 when Philadelphia was the nation's capitol.

When the Park Service announced its initial design plans for the new center in April of last year, interpretation was limited to the celebratory aspects of the Liberty Bell's history and included very little information on the icon's relationship to slavery and nothing about Washington's slaves.

## COMMENTARY

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Shortly after, a coalition of historians led by Gary B. Nash, a noted scholar of the American Revolution and Philadelphia's African-American community, charged the Park Service with "trying to perpetuate historical amnesia" and demanded a more detailed interpretation of the site's history that would address the issue of slavery.

To pacify the historians, then-Superintendent Martha B. Aikens agreed to collaborate on an exhibit that will address the nation's complex and contradictory roots in freedom and slavery. While there appeared to be a greater willingness within the Park Service to address the concern, the compromise proved to be half-hearted. According to Nash, the Park Service's revised plan "speaks mostly to the achievement of American independence and the devotion to the ideal of freedom thereafter. It does not address the braided relationship between freedom and slavery and how interdependent they were."

Now others have joined the fray. Several black organizations, including the NAACP, are demanding a "culturally dignified and physically dramatic commemorative project, including a footprint of the slave quarters, to be installed at the site." On Thursday, these groups will join with historians, scholars and other independent citizens to demand that Congress appro-

priate the money for such a memorial.

It is no small coincidence that the demonstration will take place at the new home of the Liberty Bell. One of America's most treasured relics and a universal symbol of freedom, the Liberty Bell defines the birth of our nation as well as our values and our peculiar forms of virtue, beauty, and heroism. But the bell also reminds us of the diversity of the American experience and of our responsibility as Americans to reach for a higher standard when it comes to human freedom.

Our history is not as pristine as we would like to believe. It is a history that has been forged, in part, on human bondage and genocide. Freedom for some has been achieved at the expense of the freedom of others. When, in 1839, a group of Boston abolitionists adopted the bell as a symbol for their cause and coined the name "Liberty Bell," they were speaking to that very same paradox.

Trivializing the issue of slavery, especially when it is so intimately related to the most venerable symbol of liberty, can only compromise our integrity as a people. If the National Park Service cannot appreciate the responsibility that comes with being a steward of our history, there are those of us who will remind them of it today.

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William Kashatus, formerly an interpreter at the Liberty Bell Pavilion, is among the ad hoc historians lobbying for a more comprehensive treatment of slavery. He is author of "Historic Philadelphia: The City, Symbols & Patriots."