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HST 572
December 3, 2014

Still Standing Project: Visitor Evaluation Report

Introduction

While there is a proliferation of books and articles on slavery and even descriptive works about slave dwellings more broadly, scholarly works specifically on the preservation of these structures are much harder to find. This observation is perhaps part of a larger issue in public history of preserving and interpreting the history of slave dwellings. A visitor survey and several focus groups conducted as part of the Still Standing Project shed light on popular interest and assumptions regarding slave dwellings. By analyzing visitor evaluation results and placing them in the context of scholarship, several major themes emerge that should be considered for inclusion in an exhibit about the history of slave dwellings and their preservation in order to challenge visitors' assumptions and expand dialogue about slavery and its importance in preservation and interpretation at historic sites and museums. One overarching theme is the limit to visitors' expectations and associations with slavery and slave dwellings. Many visitors imagine only rural plantation slavery rather than thinking about how slavery manifested itself in other localities, most notably cities. Additionally, the time period most often associated with slavery is the antebellum period. However, slavery had a much longer history in the United States and changed in structure and character over time. Visitors also emphasized the harsh conditions imposed on slaves rather than thinking about the active choices, opinions, and activities of enslaved people. Slave dwellings offer an opportunity to interpret aspects of enslaved people's lives outside of work, such as family, religion, resistance, and survival. Many enslaved people claimed certain spaces as their own even if in a legal sense they could not. Slave dwellings present an opportunity to balance discussions of slaves as both victims and survivors. The ability to tell more about the daily lives of enslaved people can also satisfy visitor desires for

specificity and small details. Another theme emerging from the visitor evaluation is that of the desire for authenticity, both in the technical terms of preservation and in terms of how slave dwellings are interpreted. Many participants in focus groups expressed concern about the whitewashing of slavery in history as well as non-educational uses for remaining slave quarters. The exhibit should consider what an authentic interpretation of slave dwellings should be. Because of their frequency of occurrence both in scholarship and in visitor feedback these themes and topics are central to the discussion of the history of slave dwellings and their preservation and should be included in the upcoming exhibit on the topic.

Joseph McGill, National Trust for Historic Preservation employee and Civil War re-enactor, noticed the neglect of slave cabins in his native Charleston and in an effort to raise awareness for and save one of them he decided to spend the night in the cabin. McGill recognizes the importance of preserving and restoring slave dwellings because of their ability, like the living history he had experienced through reenacting, to make "history come alive."[1] As part of the Slave Dwelling Project McGill, along with others who accompany him, now spends the night in extant slave dwellings throughout the country and presents public programs on his experiences. McGill began the Slave Dwelling Project as a response to the neglect, deterioration, and demolition of slave quarters, cabins, and other spaces related to the lives of enslaved Africans and African Americans. McGill is aware of the challenges to the preservation of slave dwellings that exist, such as cheap original construction materials and modern suburban and resort development. Ultimately McGill wants to "save slave dwellings and the history they hold before it's too late" explaining that "if we lose slave dwellings, it's that much easier to forget the

[1] Tony Horwitz, "Cabin Fever," *Smithsonian*, (44:6), October 2013, accessed via EBSCOHost, accessed November 20, 2014.

slaves themselves."[2] McGill's efforts have helped to bring attention to the importance of preserving slave dwellings; however, in order to fully understand the context of slave dwellings and their preservation today it is necessary to explore the histories of slavery, the field of historic preservation, and slave dwellings themselves. The Slave Dwelling Project, together with the recent completion of the restoration of slave quarters at the Bellamy Mansion Museum, served as the impetus behind the Still Standing Project and a visitor evaluation meant to inform exhibit research and design for a traveling exhibition about the history of slave dwellings and their preservation. The methods and statistical results of the visitor evaluation are described below followed by a discussion of visitor and focus group participant opinions and scholarship surrounding the recommended themes to be considered in the planning process for the exhibit.

Visitor Evaluation: Methods

In partnership with the Bellamy Mansion Museum, the UNCW Public History Program's Still Standing Project conducted formative visitor evaluation through surveys and focus groups which will inform an exhibit on the history of slave dwellings and their preservation. Since the exhibit will initially open at the Bellamy Mansion Museum and since that site already includes a restored slave quarters in the tour, the visitor surveys were conducted with casual visitors to the Bellamy Mansion. The evaluation team surveyed a total of 90 visitors at the site. Each visitor was approached at random as they completed the tour, which included the mansion, slave quarters, and grounds. Visitors surveyed included those on all of the tour options, including guided, audio, and self-guided (paper handout). The survey questions were a mixture of closed and open-ended and were asked in interview format. The answers were recorded in writing by

[2] Ibid.

the researchers. Survey questions probed visitors' interest levels in slave dwellings and the lives of enslaved workers as compared to interest in architecture, decorative arts, or lives of owners. The survey also asked visitors about their average museum visitation, their past experiences, if any, visiting slave dwellings, and their associations or assumptions regarding slave dwellings. Visitors were additionally asked for non-identifying demographic information, including age, sex, race, and zip code. All of the responses were compiled together.

In addition to the visitor surveys conducted on-site at the Bellamy Mansion, each of the six evaluators conducted two focus group interviews with groups ranging in size from two to four participants. These twelve small groups represented subsections of the population that may have an increased interest in the exhibit on slave dwellings and their preservation or a unique insight into how this history could be presented thoughtfully and sensitively due to their membership in certain racial, ethnic, vocational, professional, or other interest groups. The focus group categories included African American community leaders, African American genealogists, members of African American student groups at UNCW, community college students enrolled in American history courses, UNCW international students, local museum professionals working at sites that actively interpret slavery, historic preservation professionals, African American parents, Pender County Library patrons, docents at local history sites that interpret slavery, members of the local Juneteenth Committee, and UNCW history graduate students. The total number of participants in these focus groups was 35. While demographic information was not recorded for these participants, a much higher proportion were African American than those surveyed at the Bellamy Mansion, as can be seen by noting the titles of the focus groups and comparing the demographic analysis of the survey below. Members of these focus groups were asked about their experiences, if any, visiting slave dwellings as well as their opinions on the

preservation of slave dwellings and any involvement they may have had in preservation efforts. They were also asked specific questions based on their relevant experience, expertise, or unique viewpoint. The evaluators recorded and transcribed these focus group discussions.

Visitor Evaluation: General Results

Some general trends can be found in the results of the visitor evaluation. Both the visitor survey and the focus groups provided useful information with the visitor survey yielding more easily generalized information and the focus groups providing more in depth qualitative responses. The visitor survey provides insight into who is currently attending the Bellamy Mansion Museum, the first venue of the proposed exhibit, and those visitors' assumptions about and interests in slave dwellings. Based on the demographic information provided by visitors, the "average" visitor would be a white female over the age of 50 from the Southeast region of the United States.[3] The racial or ethnic categories of current visitors may be particularly interesting to the exhibit team. The vast majority of visitors were white with only five out of the 90 visitors surveyed identifying as African American or black and only six identifying as either mixed race, Hispanic, or Native American. Seventy-nine of those surveyed identified as white, making up over 87% of the visitors surveyed. The racial makeup of those surveyed at the Bellamy is indicative of larger national trends in museum attendance. A report sponsored by the American Association of Museums (now the American Alliance of Museums) published in 2010 summarizes the available data regarding the shifting racial makeup of the population of the United States against the statistics on racial or ethnic groups' use of museums. The study found

[3] For the purposes of aggregating data from the visitor survey the Southeast region has been defined as North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Florida.

that minority populations represented just 9% of current core museum visitors.[4] The same report discussed the reasons for lack of attendance on the part of minorities, particularly African Americans. These reasons range from structural issues, including problems of location, transportation, and financial barriers that tend to affect African Americans disproportionately, to cultural and psychological reasons. The latter reasons have to do with historic problems of segregation and exclusion resulting in African Americans being less likely to instill museum-going habits in their children. However, African Americans are more likely to attend cultural events that are "characterized by black themes and in which blacks are well-represented among performers, staff and audience members."[5] African Americans are also more likely to list a desire to celebrate heritage or to support a community group as motives for attending a cultural event.[6] Despite a low attendance rate among African Americans, those who do attend various cultural events seem to do so out of an interest in a shared heritage. The Bellamy Mansion Museum, despite having a restored slave quarters on site, represents the larger trend of low minority attendance.

Based on the information given by the African American visitors who did attend the Bellamy Mansion Museum and take part in the survey, it would seem that interest in slave dwellings correlates somewhat to racial identity. Visitors were asked about their interests when visiting house museums in general and were instructed to rate their interest in five separate categories: slave dwellings; antiques, furniture and decorative arts; the lives of those who lived in the main house; the lives of those who worked on the property; and architecture and

[4] Betty Farrell and Maria Medvedeva, "Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums," Center for the Future of Museums, American Association of Museums, (Washington, DC: The AAM Press), 2010, 5.
[5] Farrell and Medvedeva, 14.
[6] Ibid.

landscape. The average interest in slave dwellings reported by those who identified as white (with 5 being the most interested) was 3.75. For those who identified as black or African American the average interest in slave dwellings was considerably higher at 4.6. African Americans also reported a higher level of interest in the lives of those who worked at the house, however the difference was not as stark with African Americans averaging 4.6 and white visitors 4.3. Interestingly, African American respondents reported higher interest in the lives of those who lived in the main house, averaging 4.6 as compared to the average of 4.4 reported by white visitors. Those visitors who identified as either multi-racial, Native American, or Hispanic/Latino also averaged higher interest levels in slave dwellings than white visitors but reported very similar interest in the lives of the workers. This group also reported lower interest in the lives of those who lived in the main house (3.83 as compared to white visitors' 4.4). Despite these correlations, it is difficult to truly determine if race is an accurate indicator of interest in slave dwellings and the lives of enslaved workers due to the very small sample of non-white visitors; however, it would appear, based on the available results, that African Americans are more interested in slave dwellings than either white visitors or those of other races. This result would further corroborate the AAM report referenced above stating that African American visitation is highest when the subject matter deals with African American heritage. In this case attendance might not necessarily be higher, but interest appears to be so.

In addition to a clear racial majority in visitation at the Bellamy Mansion Museum, the majority of visitors were also overwhelmingly senior citizens with most being over the age of 50. The largest single age category represented were those between the ages of 60 and 69 and the same number of visitors in between the ages of 70 and 79 visited as those between the ages of 18 and 29 despite the latter being a larger age range. In addition to having a numerical majority of

participation in the survey, those aged 50 and above reported higher numbers of museum visits per year on average than those aged 40 and below. The report conducted by AAM cited above also compiled information on generational differences in museum visitation, explaining that young people were more interested in engaging, unique experiences at museums, perhaps explaining the lower levels of young adult attendance at the Bellamy which offers little participatory options and follows a traditional house museum approach to tours.[7]

Women also made up a clear majority of visitors to the site with 59 females and 31 males participating in the survey. Female visitors reported higher interest in all categories as compared to male visitors; however, these variations were very small. The largest difference was the average interest in the lives of those who lived in the main house with women's interest averaging 4.457 and men's 4.258. All other variances were less than one tenth of difference, suggesting that men's and women's interests pertaining to house museums and slave dwellings are not substantially different despite women's increased attendance.

The final demographic area measured in the survey was location. Visitors were asked to report their zip code and these were then sorted by region of the United States. Regionally, the majority of visitors were from the Southeast, followed by the Mid-Atlantic and the Northeast.[8] Sixty of the 90 visitors were from the Southeast with the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast both following with 6 visitors. These regions are, however, closer in proximity and cannot be used to determine regional interest in museums or sites with slave quarters. Additionally, as with race, such small numbers of visitors from some regions, such as the Southwest which is represented by

[7] Farrell and Medvedeva, 23-26.
[8] For the purposes of this evaluation report, the Mid-Atlantic is defined as Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey. The Northeast is defined as Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York.

only 3 visitors, makes the average levels of interest less useful.[9] Visitors from the Southeast did average the second highest interest level in slave dwellings, following behind only the Southwest. This result combined with a few anecdotal comments made by survey participants proposes the notion that people from other regions believe slavery is less central to their history. For example, one visitor responded that his interest in slave dwellings was a 4 if in the South and a 2 if in the North. However, more research would be necessary to validate this claim.

While the demographic information above alludes to some interesting trends in museum visitation and interest in slave dwellings, a larger view on the survey responses may be more useful for development of the exhibit. Of all 90 respondents, the average interest in slave dwellings was 3.837 out of 5; however, slave dwellings ranked 4th out of the five categories of interest. The category with the highest average interest was the lives of those who lived in the main house followed closely by architecture and landscape. The third highest rated category was the lives of those worked at the house. Finally, the lowest rated category was that of antiques, furniture and decorative arts. These results indicate a higher interest in the architecture and lives of the main house with the lives of workers and their dwellings ranking lower in interest. However, the overall disparity between interest levels is not glaringly large and demonstrates that interest in enslaved workers, their lives, and their living spaces does exist in the current visitor pool of the Bellamy Mansion. Additionally, out of the 90 visitors surveyed, 62 had previously visited slave dwellings, further indicating some potential interest in the history of slavery and enslaved people's lives.

[9] The Southwest is defined as Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arizona for the purposes of this study.

Urban vs. Rural Slavery

Beyond indicating some general interest in slave dwellings, the visitor survey illuminated some key themes necessary to address. The first is that of the variety of slavery across space and time. While there were differences in slavery between the North and South, those between urban and rural slavery will be the focus of this section due to the sheer number of responses suggesting that visitors saw stark differences between their perceptions of slavery, which were based heavily on rural images, and what they saw at the Bellamy, an urban slave quarter. Of the specific sites where visitors reported previously seeing slave dwellings Monticello, Mount Vernon and Colonial Williamsburg topped the list. Charleston in general and several of its surrounding plantations were also mentioned frequently. While some visitors were more general in their responses, listing cities or states where they visited slave dwellings, it can be deduced from the specific sites mentioned that a large number of visitors had previously toured slave dwellings located on large, rural plantations. This information combined with the themes found in the qualitative responses to the visitor survey demonstrates that visitors more readily associate slavery and slave dwellings with an image of rural plantation slavery rather than urban slavery or that of small farms. Some of the most commonly recurring words listed as associations with slave dwellings are shack, dirty or dirt, small, cramped or crowded, dark, and plantation and at least five responses made reference to television or movies, which commonly depict rural slavery.

In addition to a large number of word associations conjuring images of plantation slavery, visitors also indicated that what they experienced at the Bellamy Mansion Museum slave quarters, which is an example of antebellum era urban slave quarters, was not what they expected. Fifty-one out of the 90 respondents clearly indicated that what they had experienced in

the slave quarters at the Bellamy Mansion was not what they had expected while only 19 said that what they saw was what they expected. The remaining twenty gave no clear answer to the question. Many of those who indicated that the Bellamy's slave quarters were different from their expectations commented that the quarters were "nicer," "cleaner," or "better" than they expected. At least 39 visitors used the words nice or nicer when describing the visit to Bellamy's slave quarters and about 12 people used the word "better" in reply to the same question. A few respondents made connections between the circumstances and differences between urban and rural slavery; however, most did not. A few visitors seemed instead to take away an understanding that the Bellamy family treated the enslaved people there exceptionally well, making comments about how the family was "good to slaves" and they allowed the enslaved people to eat from the family kitchen. Another visitor used the word "sophisticated" to describe the Bellamy's slave quarters. These responses seem to indicate that the appearance of the slave quarters, which were restored to look as they did upon their original construction, may be skewing some visitors' interpretation of slavery and the treatment of slaves. Moreover, it clearly shows that visitors are more accustomed to seeing the kinds of slave dwellings associated with rural plantations, like wooden cabins, or with seeing slavery conditions as depicted in popular culture. In fact, some visitors compared what they experienced at the Bellamy with depictions of slave quarters in movies and on television. One visitor noted that the quarters at the Bellamy were nicer than those he had seen in movies and another specifically stated that the Bellamy's quarters were not like he had seen in *12 Years a Slave* and *Glory*. Three visitors mentioned that when hearing the word slave dwellings they thought of movies they had seen and two other visitors mentioned the miniseries *Roots* specifically when asked about their associations with the words slave dwellings. Thus, over half of the visitors surveyed indicated that the Bellamy slave

quarters were surprising to them and many more clarified that the quarters appeared "better" or "nicer" than what they had previously experienced or expected.

Overall, visitor comments clearly demonstrate that the image most had prior to visiting the Bellamy was of large, rural plantations with small, wooden slave cabins, like those most often depicted in movies and on television. It also appears that visitors have previously toured rural slave quarters most often. Because of visitors' assumptions regarding what slave quarters should look like, it will be necessary in the exhibit to contextualize slave dwellings in order to more fully encompass the variety that existed and to expand visitors' ideas of where slave quarters might be located and what kinds of conditions might have existed in different localities.

The interest and association with plantation slavery can also be found in scholars' descriptions of slavery. Mary Beth Norton's work, *Liberty's Daughters*, which focuses on the lives of upper class white women in the colonial era, also describes the lives of lower class and enslaved women. Her discussion of enslaved women, however, only describes the lives and work of those on large plantations in the south. This work, published in 1980, demonstrates that some scholars have in the past, like much of the public today, focused disproportionately on the image of slavery on plantations in the south.[10] This approach to slavery leaves out many other experiences including urban slavery, slavery on smaller farms, and slavery in the North.

Other scholars have tried to correct this imbalance by focusing on urban slavery. Urban slavery was less common than rural slavery with rural slaves making up more than 90 percent of enslaved people at most points in the history of slavery in the United States. This fact caused

[10] Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1996.

historians to largely ignore urban slavery until the 1960s.[11] However, more recently work has been done to understand how urban slavery fit into the larger system of slavery and how and why it differed from rural slavery.[12] Largely due to economic reasons, enslaved African Americans living in cities often experienced greater mobility, physical "freedom," and personal autonomy than those enslaved on rural, isolated plantations. In Wilmington, for example, enslaved African American workmen made up a substantial portion of the construction workforce. Urban areas "realized that the economy, grounded on the work of enslaved people, required a delicate balance of white control and flexibility."[13] Punishment, curfews, special passes, and other measures were meant to create the sense of control; however, these measures were often not enforced. Slave owners in Wilmington, as was also common in other urban areas, allowed enslaved workers to "live out" and "hire their own time" because the owners continued to profit from the enslaved labor, making a certain cut of whatever the slave worker earned. However, this practice angered many white laborers and artisans who had to compete with enslaved labor, which was often cheaper.[14]

In terms of urban slave quarters, those at the Bellamy Mansion were more substantial than many others; however, brick slave quarters were more common in urban areas due to the risk of fire as well as the owners' desire to have these nearby buildings complement the main house.[15] It will be necessary to explain that despite urban slaves appearing to have more freedom and "better" living quarters, they were still enslaved. They also typically lived closer to the main

[11] Claudia Dale Goldin, *Urban Slavery in the American South, 1820-1860: A Quantitative History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1976, 1.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Catherine W. Bishir, "Urban Slavery at Work: The Bellamy Mansion Compound, Wilmington, North Carolina," *Buildings and Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum*, (17:2), 2010, 15.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Bishir, 21.

house and may have faced greater scrutiny and surveillance than those on rural plantations who often lived farther from view of the main house. Another point to consider in attempting to weigh relative degrees of freedom and treatment is the use of housing as coercion. John Michael Vlach's article, "'Snug Li'l House with Flue and Oven': Nineteenth-Century Reforms in Plantation Slave Housing," focuses on rural slavery; however, he makes the point that owners "understood that housing had the potential to be used as a benign technique of coercion" and that improvements made to slave dwellings could be "an attempt to disguise the more oppressive aspects of a labor system."[16] Like rural plantation owners who improved slave dwellings in order to encourage better behavior among enslaved workers, urban slave owners may have also offered better housing for their own motivations. Thus, the exhibit should consider reframing the way visitors judge the living conditions of enslaved people, which are often ruled better in urban situations, making sure to consider the master's agenda. For more information about urban slavery and its relationship to rural slavery the exhibit team may be interested in John Michael Vlach's articles, "The Plantation Tradition in an Urban Setting: The Case of the Aiken-Rhett House in Charleston, South Carolina"[17] and "'Without Recourse to Owners': The Architecture of Urban Slavery in the Antebellum South,"[18] which can be compared to his work on the architecture of plantation slavery, *Back of the Big House*.[19]

[16] John Michael Vlach, "'Snug Li'l House with Flue and Oven': Nineteenth-Century Reforms in Plantation Slave Housing," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, (5), 1995, 118-119.
[17] John Michael Vlach, "The Plantation Tradition in an Urban Setting: The Case of the Aiken-Rhett House in Charleston, South Carolina," *Southern Cultures*, (5:4), 1999, 52-69.
[18] John Michael Vlach, "'Without Recourse to Owners': The Architecture of Urban Slavery in the Antebellum South," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, (6), 1997, 150-160.
[19] John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1993.

Change Over Time

While it is clear that plantations and rural slavery imagery dominated the results of the visitor survey, it is less clear what time period visitors might have had in mind when thinking about slave dwellings. However, focus group participant and museum manager at the Burgwin-Wright House, Christine Lamberton, discusses the importance of understanding slavery's evolution over time. She explains that in her experience at a site interpreting colonial history, visitors are surprised to learn about colonial slavery because as Lamberton puts it, "when I tell them about colonial slavery and some of the norms here, they picture Poplar Grove essentially. 'That's not what I see in the movies.'" She goes on to reiterate that most visitors thinks of antebellum slavery, especially rural slavery, thus making her job to interpret urban colonial slavery even more important.[20] Historian Ira Berlin has also argued that the most attention to slavery has been focused on the last 50 years prior to the Civil War. Berlin argues though that this period witnessed more change in slavery than the previous 200 years. The first enslaved Africans arrived in what would become the United States in 1619. Ira Berlin's work usefully describes the changes in slavery over time by creating categories he calls generations. Within each generation Berlin details the characteristics of slavery in that time period, focusing largely on the ways slavery was the same despite regional or other difference; however, he does, of course, concede these regional differences. The first time period is termed the charter generations. These earliest enslaved people faced a less rigid system of slavery than later generations. Berlin describes these first generations as cosmopolitan Atlantic creoles. These earliest slaves were not as isolated linguistically or culturally as later slaves having become accustomed to Europeans through trade. They spoke multiple languages and understood the

[20] Christine Lamberton, Museum Professionals Focus Group.

Atlantic economy, thus making them better able to negotiate their circumstances. These early slaves also worked with white laborers in the same tasks. A better ability to negotiate made the boundary between slavery and freedom much more permeable at this stage. This permeability was also due to the fact that early American slavery was much less race-based than later. All laborers and subordinates were seen equally and social mobility was possible for all.

However, large scale commodity production changed the ability of slaves to negotiate. As cash crops were grown more labor was needed, thus increasing the number of slaves and moving the colonies from a society with slave to a slave society. This next era, the plantation generations, faced a more rigid slave system that was becoming more heavily based on race. Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, which involved angry poor whites and indentured servants, prompted many planters to replace their indentured white servants with African slaves. Slaves were also imported more from the African interior than the coast of Africa. Those from the interior were less acquainted with the Atlantic system and spoke different languages. The plantation generations were less able to create families or maintain traditions.

Some members of the next era, revolutionary generations, were able to appropriate some of the language of the Revolution or take advantage of the physical chaos created by war in order to obtain freedom. The Revolution temporarily threatened slavery because of its emphasis on human equality and liberty; however, the institution remained in place and continued to expand west with the new United States.

The final two generations are the migration generations and the freedom generations. The migration generations were those who were either forced to migrate from the Southern seaboard

further inland or left behind without family. This forced migration created the prevailing view of slavery of enslaved people working on cotton plantations in the Deep South.[21]

Despite this longer history, the popular view of slavery in American memory has been that of slavery in the last 50 years before the Civil War: Christianized African-American slaves working in cotton fields on large plantations in the Deep South. Berlin specifically seeks to challenge that notion.[22] He makes a strong case for broadening the popular view of slavery by understanding how slavery changed over time. Dennis J. Pogue echoes this view specifically in regard to slave quarters in his article on the architecture of slavery at Mount Vernon. Pogue describes the "generic image of southern slave quarters that has emerged from their repeated depictions in American popular culture" as "small cabins aligned in rickety rows along the margins of plantation society."[23] However, he points out that this image represents a small portion of the kinds of slave quarters used by enslaved people over time and across space in the United States. The type described was most often found in the years immediately preceding the Civil War in the Deep South. Pogue then goes on to describe the several different types of slave quarters found on colonial-era plantations, specifically those found at George Washington's Mount Vernon home. The dwellings at Washington's Mount Vernon ranged from the small wooden cabins, those most often imagined on antebellum plantations, to a large brick building designed in barracks style. The variety of slave dwellings reflects many different factors such as size of enslaved population, social position of the master, demographic makeup of the slave community, and master attitudes toward enslaved people. These factors affected the type and

[21] Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 2003.
[22] Berlin, 16.
[23] Dennis Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon," *Winterthur Portfolio,* (37:1), 2002, 3.

size of dwellings as well as their location relative to the main house and each other.[24] While the number and variety of dwellings at Mount Vernon is not typical for smaller plantations and farms, the types of dwellings, especially log quarters and cabins, were present across the region. Therefore, the images that visitors associate with slave dwellings are not wrong; however, there was more variety of housing across time than many visitors realize. For the exhibit, it will be necessary to put slavery in its temporal context when discussing the variety of types of slave dwellings. More descriptions of slavery and slave dwellings in the colonial period for both urban and rural contexts are available including Edward Lawler, Jr.'s article "The President's House Revisited," which describes the lives and living spaces of Washington's slaves in the president's Philadelphia home as well as the process to interpret that space.[25] Peter Kolchin's work, *American Slavery, 1619-1877*, like Berlin, presents a chronological narrative of slavery and places it in an international context.[26]

Passive Victims vs. Active Survivors: Daily Lives, Religion, Family

In addition to demonstrating that many visitors have a narrow view of slavery and slave dwellings in terms of location and time period, the visitor survey responses also indicate that visitors have an overwhelmingly negative view of slavery. While this is not inaccurate, it is interesting that very few visitors expressed positive emotions about survival or resistance. Out of all of the responses only 8 comments could be considered to relate to the active, more positive aspects of enslaved people's lives, such as family, community, heritage, survival, or resistance. One visitor mentioned the Underground Railroad, a system of resistance, survival, and freedom

[24] Pogue, 3-4.
[25] Edward Lawler, Jr., "The President's House Revisited," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, (129:4), 2005, 371-410.
[26] Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877*, (New York: Hill and Wang), 1993.

that demonstrates agency of the enslaved. Another visitor commented about the sense of community among enslaved people while another discussed African American heritage. Some acknowledged the positive alongside the negative with one visitor pointing out both the "beauty" and the "brutality." Finally, a couple of visitors used more neutral terms. Rather than describing the harsh conditions, these visitors used the words "home" and "residence." The rest of the comments focused on the conditions imposed upon enslaved people.

Different results are seen in the focus group conversations, especially those with African American individuals. Many in the focus groups expressed a desire to learn more about and appreciate the strength necessary to survive the conditions of slavery. They also expressed interest in the daily lives of enslaved people and aspects of living outside of work. In the discussion with African American community leaders several participants spoke of the pride they felt in their ancestors and their ability to survive. When describing his experience visiting a slave dwelling, Todd McFadden, the director of the Upperman Center at UNCW, spoke of his mixed feelings:

> It really encompasses, like they said, quite a lot of feelings. For me, I think the one that stood out the most though was a sense of pride almost even though that would seem contradictory. But you look at that and you say, wow, we went from that to this and in not a very long amount of time did we go from that to this. It makes you marvel at the strength of the folks who endured that.

Another focus group with library patrons similarly expressed interest in the ability of individuals to overcome slavery. Carolyn Whitley spoke of the importance to preserve not only slave dwellings but also the "first dwellings built by people immediately after being freed, you know, I think that's as important as the slave dwellings themselves. How they began to pull themselves out of that circumstance." Two African American parents had similar opinions,

stating that it was sometimes necessary, especially for those who disliked visiting slave quarters due to the difficult emotions it causes, to look at the more positive aspects of slave dwellings. Discussion in the focus group with African American parents also discussed the "transcendence of the human spirit that slavery and beyond represents that's quite often left out because people focus on that moment in time and the devastating effects of slavery on this particular family," explaining that they had never seen an exhibit that "has effectively captured that triumph collectively. That although this particular group didn't do well, black people transcended." These comments represent a desire for some African Americans to see more than the brutal treatment of their ancestors when they visit slave quarters and attest to the need to include enslaved people's active choices and ability to survive and live despite slavery's oppression.

Several historians have written of the need to include not only the conditions of slavery, but how enslaved people responded to them. Even the word choice of enslaved versus slave is meant to convey the active personhood and agency that they had. Enslavement was a condition, not a complete identity. Ira Berlin argues for the importance of remembering that slaves had some agency "despite the uneven nature of the contest…," explaining that "although denied the right to marry, they made families; denied the right to an independent religious life, they established churches; denied the right to hold property, they owned many things."[27] Throughout the generations he describes, Berlin seeks to understand the various ways that slaves negotiated their status and their relationship with their masters.

John Michael Vlach similarly argues for enslaved people's agency in his book, *Back of the Big House*, in which he describes how slaves, "well before their official emancipation," were

[27] Berlin, 4.

already "laying claims to portions of the plantation landscape."[28] Vlach explains how slaves were able to create their own landscape in the midst of the plantation, appropriating spaces for their own social needs despite their legal inability to own property. Another landmark work is that of Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. Genovese focuses on enslaved people's creation of culture through religion, music, and other cultural forms.[29] Genovese specifically discusses slave agency in terms of family life, individual attempts to improve dwellings, and various forms of resistance. Thus, there is scholarly support for interpreting slaves and their dwellings with more agency and active roles for enslaved people.

Other works that focus on specific aspects of slavery such as family, religion, or resistance also attest to the agency and individual character of enslaved people and can offer insight into the lives of slaves beyond their treatment and work. Many focus group participants expressed interest in knowing more about slaves' lives within their homes. For example, one participant spoke of how some slave dwellings' interpretations are "incomplete" because "it's not just a story about the structure, it's a story about people and their interactions and relationships and the cause and the history from which they came, and that often is absent, so you've got this space and you've got this story of the space but it doesn't connect with who these people might have been before they arrived and who they might have been if they ever were able to leave."[30] Another participant simply expressed her desire to "know who the people were."[31] Topics commonly listed as interesting to participants were religion or spirituality, diet, and their overall daily lives. These desires for information on daily lives were also coupled with interest in

[28] Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, xi.
[29] Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, (New York: Vintage Books), 1976.
[30] Donyell Roseboro, African American Parents focus group.
[31] Bertha Todd, African American Community Leaders focus group.

specific individuals and small details. Because of this repeated desire for specificity, the exhibit team should consider the use of case studies in order to elucidate the themes of the exhibit, allowing visitors to see examples of specific lives lived out in slave dwellings as well as specific examples of the preservation of slave dwellings.

However, it is often difficult to find specific details for a specific enslaved person or dwelling. Some details of the lives of slaves will have to be inferred based on information gathered from other locations. Secondary source knowledge of the topics of interest to participants offers some insights. A great deal of work has been done on the spiritual lives of slaves, including archaeological investigations as well as historical. Genovese's work again is helpful in describing religious practices of enslaved people and the relationship between slaves and slave owners in the context of religious belief and practice. Genovese argues that slaves' religion was one way that slaves attempted to force their owners to acknowledge their humanity. According to Genovese, Christianity appealed to slaves because it "preached the dignity and worth of the individual" and it "threatened to stimulate defiance to authority…For no class was this message more vital than for slaves."[32] While Genovese focuses on Christianity among slaves, other works discuss African beliefs that survived the trans-Atlantic voyage. M. Drake Patten's article discusses the archaeological evidence for various spiritual beliefs among slaves such as personal articles known as fetishes and the belief in the power of personal charms, many of which have been uncovered in excavations.[33]A more recent resource is available for exploring

[32] Genovese, 165.
[33] M. Drake Patten, "African-American Spiritual Beliefs: An Archaeological Testimony from the Slave Quarter," *Wonders of the Invisible World*, 1600-1900, (17), 1992, 47-48.

the religious lives of enslaved people in Yolanda Pierce's *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative*.[34]

Perhaps even more fitting in an exhibit about slave dwellings is the topic of family life. Focus group participants' interest in the daily lives and relationships of slaves, as well as an interest in their lives beyond their work make the topic of family particularly helpful. Additionally, slave dwellings offer a unique opportunity for interpreting this aspect of enslaved people's lives and lend another lens through which to see enslaved agency. Marie Jenkins Schwartz's article, "Family Life in the Slave Quarters: Survival Strategies," emphasizes the prior lack of attention given to enslaved life in the slave quarters, explaining that visitors to plantations have "frequently spent more time thinking about how slavery looked from the vantage of the Big house (slave owners) than from the quarters cabins (enslaved people)."[35] Schwartz describes the shift in emphasis from how owners treated slaves to a more recent interest in slaves' lives when the owners were not around. To this end, Schwartz argues that family relationships helped slaves to survive slavery and improved their quality of life, despite the fact that the stability of families were threatened by slave owners' dominance and the risk of separation. Schwartz focuses on antebellum slavery, describing the structure and activities of families and their attempts to "fashion a private life for themselves" in the slave quarters.[36] Specifically, Schwartz describes the family division of economic activities that slaves carried out in their quarters for their own families' benefit as well as leisure activities such as storytelling and music shared by parents

[34] Yolanda Pierce, *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 2005.
[35] Marie Jenkins Schwartz, "Family Life in the Slave Quarters: Survival Strategies," *OAH Magazine of History*, (15:4), 2001, 36.
[36] Ibid.

with their children and other kin.[37] A more recent work on enslaved families, Damian Alan Pargas's *The Quarters and the Fields*, describes slaves on non-cotton plantations in the South as part of a move away from the traditional emphasis on the cotton south. The work examines the interplay between the external forces that affected families, such as owners' dominance, and the agency and choices of enslaved people themselves. Thus the family lives of slaves were influenced both by the conditions of slavery and by individual actions on the part of the enslaved. Pargas includes topics such as family contact during working hours, forced separation, slave family economic activities, and marriage strategies.[38] Slave narratives are also a valuable source of information about personal lives, living conditions, and family connections. However, these interviews were often conducted much later in life with formers slaves who were children the time of emancipation.[39]

Overall, when discussing the history of slave dwellings, it will be important for the exhibit team to consider the lived experiences within these dwellings, not only in the context of the harsh conditions, which is important to provide, but also through how enslaved people actually used these spaces and how they created lives, families, communities, and cultural traditions within them despite the circumstances. Work was done in these spaces, but other activities were as well and a balanced representation will include all aspects of life in slave dwellings.

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[37] Ibid, 39.
[38] Damian Alan Pargas, *The Quarters and the Fields: Slave Families in the Non-cotton South*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 2010.
[39] A collection of slave narratives is available via the online database, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, George P. Rawick, General Editor, Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2002, http://0-gem.greenwood.com.libcat.uncw.edu/as/start.jsp??ws=WS_AS&as=start.jsp&token=215BF5D8F623720D2F34EA32D9DB6D86. Those informing my comments specifically are those of Betty Abernathy and Louisa Adams who briefly describe their slave quarters.

Authenticity in Preservation and Representation

Another prevalent theme found predominantly in the focus group discussions is that of authenticity. This term specifically, as well as ideas relating to it, came up often and passionately in focus group discussions. The meaning and necessity of authenticity are disputed in the field of preservation.[40] David G. DeLong describes two types of authenticity in preservation, literal and conceptual. Literal authenticity or traditional authenticity means the retention of original material when possible while conceptual authenticity does not necessarily use all original materials, but the original concept of the structure is maintained.[41] The word authenticity was used in the focus group discussions in context of how slave dwellings are physically preserved as well as how slavery itself is represented through these dwellings. One participant seemed to champion the importance of what DeLong called literal authenticity. Mr. Todd McFadden spoke at length of the importance of reusing original materials or saving original materials in the preservation of slave dwellings as evidence and examples of both the homes of slaves, but also of their handiwork:

> Where did they get that brick or who made that brick? Were there other slaves that were actually responsible for making the brick? Were they able to use…for some there were part brick dwellings that they would use, did some of them had chimneys if they were in cooler climates… So nothing for me is invaluable, nothing for me does not have value in the preservation of that thing. Again, some of the parts may not be able to stay in their original position to be safe. You may have to remove a ceiling beam but you keep that ceiling beam and that could be part of the display. This is the original beam from the ceiling. This was hewn by slaves from this land as the slaves had to clear it in this particular period. All of that has value.

[40] David N. Fixler, "Is It Real and Does it Matter?: Rethinking Authenticity and Preservation," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, (67:1), 2008, 11-13.
[41] David G. DeLong, "Changeable Degrees of Authenticity," *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship*, (5:2), 2008, 6-14.

McFadden, as well as others in the focus groups, also spoke of the importance of authenticity in interpretation. As one library patron put it, "You can't whitewash it." Others emphasized the need to "tell the truth," discussing the problems with history books "not telling history like it really was."[42] Specifically, participants in the focus group spoke of the issue of misrepresentations of history in the appearance of preserved slave dwellings. Todd McFadden described his experiences of seeing the "tendency sometimes when the restoration of these slave quarters…to sort of make it nice and maybe put something on the walls and that's not how it was and you have to be very careful, if you're going to essentially recreate conditions, to recreate them with some authenticity. If you make things too nice, it doesn't give one a sense of the conditions that real people endured every day, day to day and gives a false sense of the entire institution and a false sense of the nature of the experience of those folks." A library patron echoed this concern when she explained that a slave dwelling "has to be a true representation, you know, you're duplicating something so it can't be made to look pretty because it wasn't pretty. It's a harsh story to tell, but everybody has a part in it because we're still trying to rectify the consequences of that period of our history." Members of the African American parents focus group also expressed concern over authentic representation and interpretation with one suggesting that tour guides at slave dwellings should be African American in order to convey the most real, authentic sense of the experience.

Several other focus group participants spoke of the need to "just tell it like it is," speaking to frustrations with interpretations that had minimized aspects of slavery. Additionally, focus group participants had negative opinions of preserved slave dwellings being used in other ways. When asked about the use of slave quarters as offices or apartments, Todd McFadden replied, "I

[42] Edith Batson, Library Patrons focus group.

honestly don't like that. For me, for those sites, as much as they can be acquired to bring them back to some form of authenticity the better." Dr. Earl Sheridan shared this sentiment, explaining that in those cases, the slave dwelling "loses its instructive power if that's done with it. I think its power lies with having it look like it did at that particular time."[43]

These participants' concerns with the authentic representation of slavery and slave dwellings are well-founded when examined in context of the history of historic preservation and public memory of slavery more broadly. The field of preservation in the United States is often traced back to the Mount Vernon Ladies Association and their efforts to save and preserve the home of George Washington in the 1850s. At that time preservation was largely the result of upper and middle-class women's social activism and an extension of their roles as cultural arbiters.[44] Over time, the field professionalized and the volunteer women of the earliest years were replaced by men. While most early preservation attempts were aimed at the homes of specific, notable persons from history, over time aesthetic values began to trump historical association and the homes of many elite and upper class individuals were preserved regardless of specific acclaim, fame, or notability. Preservation has long been criticized, and continues to be, for preserving only the homes of elite, white males.[45] However, spurred by the new social history that spread from the 1960s social movements through the 1980s, preservation expanded to include vernacular homes and structures related to lesser known individuals and representative of minorities and lower class groups.[46]

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[43] Earl Sheridan, African American Community Leaders focus group.
[44] Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books), 1999.
[45] Dolores Hayden, *Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 1997.
[46] Robert Stipe, editor, *A Richer Heritage: Historic Preservation in the Twenty-First Century*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 2003, 16 and Thomas J. Schlereth, "Material Culture Studies in America:

However, despite this gradual expansion and inclusion of more sites in preservation movements, until very recently (and still in some places today)[47], the stories of enslaved African Americans were not told at historic sites. In the 50 years immediately following the Civil War and the end of slavery, the collective memory of the war's causes shifted to exclude slavery. David Blight argues this point in his work, *Race and Reunion*. In an effort to reconcile the nation, both North and South focused on memorializing the valor and heroic deaths of soldiers on both sides, minimizing drastically the role of slavery in the war or the role of African American Union soldiers.[48] Similarly, Kirk Savage demonstrates that public memory in the 19th century minimized the history of slavery and African American participation in the war through public memorialization and monument-building. Attempts to create monuments to emancipation largely ended up focusing on the image of Abraham Lincoln as the emancipator rather than memorialize agency of slaves in their own freedom. Also, monuments to average soldiers racialized their subjects as white, ignoring the contributions of African Americans to the military victory of the Union.[49]

The twentieth-century offers examples of continued marginalization and inauthentic representation of slavery as well. A 1939 article from *House and Garden* includes a featured articles on Charleston's old slave quarters; however, the article's tone presents a heavily romanticized image of slave quarters and thus slavery. The article describes the quarters of

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Notes Toward a Historical Perspective," *Material Culture Review*, (8), 1979, http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/MCR/article/view/17031/22985.

[47] For more on continued issues in the interpretation of slavery, see Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Smalls, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books), 2002.

[48] David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard University), 2001.

[49] Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1997.

plantations as a "colorful part of plantation life" and another slave dwelling in the city of Charleston that was then serving as an artist's studio as "charming."[50] As recently as 1989, when Colonial Williamsburg restored the slave quarters at Carter's Grove, Rex Ellis, the director for the African-American Interpretation and Presentations for Colonial Williamsburg, remarked that the site was in the "embryo stages in interpreting ethnic history. The typical response of museums has been one of silence."[51]

This history of misrepresentation and inauthentic portrayals of slavery and slave dwellings should be an important component of the exhibit and will help contextualize concerns over present-day efforts. The comments of participants in the focus groups do raise questions of what would qualify as an authentic representation of a slave dwelling and this is an important debate to explore in the exhibit. To this point, the exhibit team should consider using case studies of preserved slave dwellings in order to compare the ways they have been preserved and used over time. As mentioned in the article on Charleston's slave quarters, in 1939 some were being used as studios, offices, and servants' quarters. Today some slave quarters continued to be used as apartments, beds and breakfasts, offices, or storage.[52] Barbara Burlison Mooney's article offers excellent insight and case studies into where extant slave quarters remain today, how they are being used or preserved, and how they are being interpreted. She addresses issues of authenticity and the problem of "prettifying" slave quarters as well as issues related to historic sites' use of slave quarters as non-interpretive spaces such as gift shops.[53]

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[50] "The Old Slave Quarters," *House and Garden*, March, 1939, 70, 92. Accessed via EBSCOHost.
[51] Quoted in Patricia Leigh Brown, "Away from the Big House: Interpreting the Uncomfortable Parts of History," *History News*, (44:2), 1989, 9.
[52] Exhibit team should refer to the case studies prepared by the Museum Administration course on the Latimer House, Somerset Place, and the Aiken-Rhett House. These are three very different approaches to preservation and uses of slave quarters.
[53] Barbara Burlison Mooney, "Looking for History's Huts," *Winterthur Portfolio*, (39:1), 2004, 43-68.

Conclusion

Presenting the history of slave dwellings and their preservation with the above themes in mind will help the exhibit team to produce an exhibit that does justice to this history and present an authentic view of this story. Presenting information about the differences between urban and rural slavery and slave quarters, the changes in slavery over time, and both the harsh conditions imposed on slaves and their ability to survive will create a balanced exhibit that expands visitors' assumptions about slavery and slave dwellings. Considering the issue of authenticity and the variety of ways that slave quarters have been preserved will also contribute to a greater understanding of the importance of slave dwellings and what opportunities they offer to explore the history of slavery and its continued impact on our society.

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