

FRIDAY'S MEMORY: A Simple Lawn Ornament?

By: Beverly Mills

Coming to terms with America's painful history can be just that, painful. To tell the story about slavery and the enduring plight of the African American in a non-threatening way can be challenging to say the least. We continue to press toward the day the African American story receives "equal billing" when it comes to American history. We look for each teachable moment to help illustrate how African American history is American history and how the past and present continue to connect. We look to bring to all children the conversation of how their identity and inheritance as Americans possesses equal value and recognition in the eyes of history.

But what do these questions have to do with a simple lawn ornament, you might ask?

I was uncertain how to tell this story and decided to consult with a friend and colleague who is associated with the William Trent House, the same museum who hosted the event which precipitated this story. This past weekend I treated my grandchildren to an afternoon of fun activities at the Trent House. And although the day was hot and humid, it was cooler at a table under the tree where the kids penned letters with quills and ink, constructed wind chimes and listened to a story read by a re-enactor who appeared in character as George Washington.

The kids, a mixture of White, African American and Latino children, ate ice cream while listening to the re-enactor read a story about Washington's bravery and loyalty as a General in the Revolutionary War. I was pleasantly surprised when I noticed the kids were actually listening, especially when they asked questions and made comments. To further engage his young audience about Washington's sterling qualities, the re-enactor then added an oral story about a young slave boy named Jocko Graves, a story that has long been associated with George Washington.

Over the years there have been variations of the Washington and Jocko Graves story but this is the one most frequently told. On that fateful night in December, 1776, Jocko Graves, a young slave boy, supposedly wanted to accompany Washington and his troops when they launched their surprise attack on the Hessians. Told he was too young and that he should stay on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware, Washington instructed Jocko to stand there on the bank and to hold fast to the lantern so Washington and his men would know where to return after battle. One version of the story is that he was also told to hold the reins of Washington's horse, the other version has Jocko holding both the horse and lantern.

Regardless of which version is told, the story ends with Washington arriving hours later only to find the boy frozen to death still diligently clutching the lantern in his hand. The re-enactor concluded by saying that this act of loyalty on the part of the slave boy so moved Washington that he felt compelled to commission a statue in his honor which was called the "Faithful Groomsman."

I watched my grandkids, the only African American children present, as they listened to this story, wondering what they were thinking and feeling. Did they know the "Faithful Groomsman" appears locally and nationally on American lawns as a Black faced, red vested lawn jockey with the exaggerated lips and bugged eyes? That these lawn jockeys adorn the lawns right here in our own community. Had they ever seen one? And if so, would this lawn ornament instill them with feelings of pride? How was this a teachable moment for my grandchildren? That Jocko supposedly chose death over disloyalty? Would they understand that Jocko didn't have a choice?

As it turns out the story of Washington and Jocko is apocryphal. Extensive research of historical records has

shown that this story, and Washington's commissioning a statue, has never been corroborated, though the story has circulated as fact for years. So do I think the re-enactor's intent was to entertain his young audience with a story he believed would instill racial pride as well as portraying the value that Washington placed on loyalty? I'm certain this was the case.

However, this leaves us with two questions: how can the contributions of African Americans be integrated into the full story of American history rather than as a side-bar of true or untrue stories; and how can that history be presented in ways that acknowledge its complexity and sometimes painful truths – such as the fact that Washington was a slaveholder as well as hero in the fight for American independence and freedom from British rule.

Coincidentally the Trent House, the same museum where the event took place, has spearheaded symposiums that have focused on long-overdue discussions about race, history and how African American experiences have been interpreted in historic sites and museums.

Through their lead, the William Trent House, the Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum Board (SSAAM), Dr. Linda Caldwell-Epps (President of 1804 Consultants and past President & CEO of the NJ Historical Society) and the Grounds For Sculpture regard this as another teachable moment. Because, once again, we have to ask the question of how can historic sites and institutions prepare their leadership, volunteers and staff to present the lives of people of African descent in authentic ways.