

Symposium: Interpreting African American History at Historic Sites and Museums

January 24, 2017

Co-hosted by The Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum & The Trent House Museum and Association

Panel Discussion moderated by Dr. Linda Caldwell Epps

Opening remarks by Dr. Epps:

Good Morning and welcome to this ambitious Symposium. Interpreting African American History at Historic Sites and Museums conceived, developed, and arranged by The Trent House Museum and Association and the Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum. We thank Trinity Episcopal Cathedral for opening its doors to us and I thank each of you for braving the elements to be here this morning.

The heroism and desperate struggle that many of our people have had to endure under the terrible oppression that they were under should be kept green in the memory of this and coming generations.

These words were said by William Still, whom most of you most likely know, was one of the most famous figures of the Underground Railroad. Although known by many as leader of the Philadelphia URR movement, he was born and raised in NJ and very active in the NJ URR and Abolitionist movement. A native of Burlington County, many of his siblings and relatives are buried in a cemetery in the heart of downtown Burlington.

As James Baldwin has stated: History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.

For most of us, we were trained by scholars who were trained using the single narrative. The move to embrace diversity that became so popular 20 or more years ago has cautioned us about the danger of believing in the single narrative. It is far too dangerous to deny the multiple perspectives and talents that have made us what we are today. We are doing each other and even more important, our public a disservice if we continue to advance the single narrative.

So, today is meant to be a conversation, a discovery, an opportunity to examine and grapple with ways to expand what we do from presenting the single narrative to the diverse narrative that will send us on the road to developing institutions that are more inclusive and a bit closer to the truth of what is our history.

Discussion Question:

How can Historic Sites and institutions confirm the significant influence African Americans have had on the development of American society and culture?

Acknowledgement first! We must start with their contributions. The unheard, often untold presence of African Americans need to be brought to the fore because sometimes they are omitted and or relegated to a small part in history. We must begin acknowledging their contributions in all aspects of life and also realizing that not all African American history is slave history. An example of this acknowledgement is that many people do not know that segregation was a huge part of Princeton history, and that Einstein was a humanist who supported African American rights. Personal stories can also change the existing narrative, and then it is our job to repair and inform after acknowledgement is reached.

One of the biggest obstacles is convincing the board and trustees to broach the subject. People, visitors, and board members tend not to want to discuss these tough topics. Institutions do not want to alienate guests and donors and as a result large sections of history are omitted from the record. There is a large section of approximately 150 years in Antebellum America that is left out of the historical record. It seems that history has references from the late 1600's and then all of a sudden references do not show up again until the mid 1800's!

African American history is often segregated to either separate wings or halls within institutions and is just labeled as "part and parcel" of our history, while it needs to be integrated within other exhibits, this will help us build a comprehensive narrative.

The real danger however lies in telling a single narrative story, it must be expanded. The unknown knowns (African American people with no names or traceable history) must be put in plain sight with the known knowns (The African American people who do have names and a traceable history). However the actual research can be difficult to find, as the enslaved people were meant to be invisible. It is our job as historians to uncover this history and bring it in front of the public eye. Archaeology is a very effective tool to help bring their identities to the surface as it exposes behaviors, ways and methods of doing everyday things, and provides clues to architectural elements as well as religious practices.

Since both our lives and the lives of African Americans have been intertwined since the 1600's we must provide a balanced perspective of New Jersey history and that includes all voices.

Discussion Question:

How can historic sites and institutions prepare their leadership and their staff to represent the lives of people of African American descent in authentic, deep, and nuanced way?

We must identify specific opportunities and activities that will expand this knowledge. All of the fantastic research in the world is meaningless if it cannot be disseminated properly. Museum leadership and staff need to teach this and be prepared and know that this knowledge, this history cannot be turned off, it is historical fact and we must share it!

Leaders must charge ahead and realize that we have an obligation to the public and that this history deserves to be shared. The exhibits must be dynamic in order to help guests learn about history that they may have had no idea that they were a part of, and we must realize that people like making these connections. Things such as women's history, landowner vs slaveholder history, indentured servant history, are all relevant and deserve a voice in the narrative.

So, how do we ask the right questions? Who speaks for museums? It must be a layered approach and interpretation is a series of steps... never one and done!

Discussion question:

How can historic sites and institutions engage visitors in understanding difficult issues related to slavery, injustice, discrimination, racism while recognizing and dealing with the discomfort and resistance that may arise?

We as leaders need to make it more than words on a page and make it engaging. Techniques such as re enactor portrayal and readings, involving visitors in the narrative, and at the end of the day realizing that the subject matter is hard. Tools like the use of inclusive language, meeting people halfway and building up to hard topics, making sure that visitors know that this is history, knowing our facts, as Knowledge is Power, and last but certainly not least is RESPECT! Respect in this instance means using names when and where available, it humanizes the whole experience, and we must realize that it is not our job to provide comfort, but that we must be truthful in our portrayal and dissemination of knowledge.

We should make it a practice to take trips to institutions that are gaining positive support for this type of thing. There are practices in place to combat visitor issues and we must access and use them. We should start a dialogue and reach out to minority communities in order to make a conscious effort to be inclusive and this practice of inclusivity is so important. If we don't put this history out there it is subject to misinterpretation.

We need to be aware that not all visitors will be equally receptive- things such as denial, sensitivity, non inclusive feelings, these are all real and we need to make the narrative human and historical, as opposed to it being strictly racial.

Discussion Question:

How can historic sites and institutions help visitors see the connections between the experiences of African Americans in the past with our society and our lives today?

We can discuss related ancestry and make it personal and real. We can discuss how traditions are preserved and help people understand how material culture items were valued differently. Example: Candlesticks. Owners vs slave usage was very different. Owners used them for status

symbols, while African Americans may have used them for religious practices. Different usage creates a new narrative.

We can also become involved in participation history. Things such as archaeology and on site research give visitors the opportunity to participate- all levels of ability and interest are welcome and they can learn a new narrative as they unearth the material culture. Bring people with different backgrounds together to work toward a common goal while informing them as well.

Post Symposium Discussion:

Civic and civil dialogue is what museums were created and meant for, we are research based and we provide facts. Besides, the truth should not have to be defended anyway, there is a chance that you may not change anyone's mind. The solution to this problem is simply saying that we can prove it, and continuing to create a thoughtful dialogue.

History is part fact, part fiction, and part interpretation.