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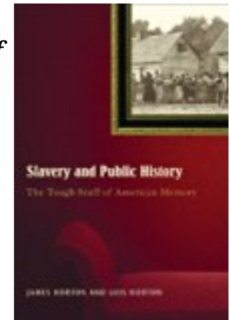

James Oliver Horton, Lois E. Horton, eds. *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory.* New York: New Press, 2006. xiv + 272 pp. $25.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56584-960-0.

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Making the History of Slavery Public

James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton have long been at the forefront of efforts to re-orient both academic and popular understandings of slavery and African American history. Their commitment to this project has led to such pathbreaking exhibits as the New York Historical Society's "Slavery in New York" and the recently unveiled "New York Divided: Slavery and the Civil War," which have brought new historical scholarship on slavery to a broad audience. It is fitting, then, that they should serve as editors for this important and much-needed collection of essays on slavery and public history.

As many of the volume's authors note, public discussions of the history of slavery have become widespread in the past fifteen years and a growing number of people are willing to engage critically with this aspect of American history. Still, much work remains to be done if the historical amnesia concerning African and African American slavery in North America is to be reversed. The essays in *Slavery and Public History* detail recent efforts to overcome the unwillingness, which has stubbornly persisted from the end of the Civil War to the present day, in many quarters to openly discuss the issue of slavery. Returning a mixed verdict, the authors are optimistic that exhibitions dealing with slavery will continue to multiply; yet, they demonstrate that creating exhibits and programs that present the history of slavery in accurate, sensitive, and engaging ways remains a formidable challenge for public institutions.

Opening the volume is historian Ira Berlin, who combines a brief discussion of recent popular interest in the subject of slavery with an extended survey of current scholarship on African and African American slavery. Berlin provides a useful and concise portrait of three centuries of North American slavery, emphasizing his own important work which demonstrates that slavery was quite varied in different places and times. The essay stumbles a bit, however, when he attempts to explain recent interest in the history of slavery. Berlin asserts that public enthusiasm for the subject derives from contemporary frustrations over the inability to resolve problems of race in Ameri-

ca. This seems to give the public too much credit for facing up to difficult social issues. Indeed, expanded public interest in the history of slavery might more plausibly be attributed to its perceived irrelevance to contemporary problems. In the volume's second essay, David Blight, a historian of race and memory, offers a more realistic assessment of public interest in slavery, arguing convincingly that discussions of remembrance and forgetting must be at the center of analyses of popular representations of slavery. He persuasively shows that public discussions of the history of slavery have been and continue to be quite complicated and marked by discord.

Blight concludes his essay with an anecdote about his participation in a roundtable to discuss the creation of a museum about slavery. While many of the roundtable's participants stressed the need for such a museum to tell an uplifting story, one participant asserted that "If you don't tell it like was ... it can never be as it ought to be" (p. 33). This memorable line serves as a fine entry point into the remainder of the volume's essays, which provide close analyses of specific efforts over the past fifteen years to present a "realistic" history of slavery in museums, historic sites, and other public institutions.

James Oliver Horton's essay offers an overview of contemporary challenges in presenting the history of slavery to a broad audience. Reflecting his committed engagement to the project of moving slavery to the center of popular narratives of American history, Horton offers a litany of examples from the previous decade and a half that reveal the public's continued discomfort with confronting this aspect of the American past. Horton details, for example, protests by Confederate and southern heritage groups against Ken Burns's Civil War documentary, which they argued overemphasized the role of slavery in the conflict. Similarly, he discusses organized protests that opposed discussions of slavery at Civil War battlefields and challenged Virginia Governor James S. Gilmore's 1998 attempt to include an acknowledgment of the brutality of slavery in his state's commemoration of Confederate History Month. To explain these reactions, Horton not only points to persistent racism, but also to the failure of historical education. Balancing this examination of white resistance to public representations of slavery is a sensitive analysis of the emotional and interpretive challenges African American historical re-enactors face when they portray slaves in public. Discussing Colonial Williamsburg's efforts to interpret the history of slavery through living history programs, Horton acknowledges both the benefits and drawbacks of such an approach. Above all, he shows that African American interpreters who portray slaves want their work to be perceived as education, not entertainment.

From Horton's overview, the collection moves to case studies. John Michael Vlach offers a detailed narrative of the controversial exhibit, "Back of the Big House: The Cultural Landscape of the Plantation," which he created for the Library of Congress in 1995. Although many readers are familiar with the basic details of this controversy, Vlach's insider perspective fills out the story of both the exhibit's development and public reactions to it.

Gary Nash narrates another highly public fight over the representation of slavery--the recent effort to transform the historical interpretation of the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. He demonstrates how a concerted effort on the part of scholars and local community leaders successfully pressured the National Park Service to reconsider its plan for a new Liberty Bell Pavilion. Instead of a sterile site that celebrated abstract American principles of liberty and freedom, Nash and others pressured the Park Service to develop an interpretive plan that acknowledged the complex history of liberty and servitude that marked the site's history. Through a public campaign to exert pressure on the Park Service as well as a collaborative advisement system that included historians, government

officials, and local leaders, the Park Service devised a new Liberty Bell Center, which opened in September 2003. Rather than ignoring or silencing the complexities of the American past, this new center engaged the bitter ironies of freedom and unfreedom in both Philadelphia's and the nation's history.

Joanne Pope Melish's engaging piece examines four recent cases in which historic sites and public institutions attempted to rectify longstanding silences concerning the issue of slavery. She begins by discussing the efforts of two historic house museums (Providence's John Brown House and the Bardstown, Kentucky mansion known as "My Old Kentucky Home," which was the inspiration for the Stephen Foster song of the same name) to incorporate discussions of slavery into their exhibits and public programs, exposing the often intense resistance that historians, public officials, and activists face when they seek to end historical silences about slavery in public spaces. In her examination of "My Old Kentucky Home," for example, Melish explores an unsuccessful effort to incorporate slavery into the historic site's interpretive plan. From historic house museums, Melish moves to a discussion of Brown University's efforts to determine its complicity in the slave trade, the particulars of which are well known because of the national media's coverage of the issue. Melish's analysis adds little to what is already known but does serve as a concise overview of the controversy. Her final case study, however, presents a fascinating and little-known narrative about the effort to build a memorial in Rhode Island to the First Rhode Island regiment of the Continental Army, which was "composed entirely of men of color" (p. 125). Complicating what on the face of it may seem a relatively benign public memorial was not white resistance to the recognition of non-white contributions to the Patriot cause; rather, the complications arose from the various groups of color the monument proposed to memorialize. The "black" regiment was composed of men of African descent, mixed African and native descent, and native descent. As a result, both African American histories and various native histories of the regiment and the famous battle in which it was victorious, the Battle of Rhode Island, had to be accommodated if the memorial was to prove satisfactory to the constituencies whose ancestors it purported to celebrate. The process of reconciling these disparate narratives, Melish demonstrates, spanned over four years and required countless revisions of the memorial.

Lois E. Horton's essay returns to another widely-known controversy. Horton provides both a concise summary of current scholarship on the relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson and an analysis of public perceptions of that relationship. In 1998, DNA testing confirmed evidence from black oral histories that Jefferson had fathered at least one of Sally Hemings's children. In May 1999, Lois E. Horton and James Oliver Horton oversaw a research project in which George Washington University Ph.D. students interviewed Monticello visitors and staff about the representation of slavery at the site and the interpretation of the Hemings-Jefferson relationship. The range of responses they gathered suggests that although Monticello has made some progress in including discussions of slavery in their interpretive program, considerable room for improvement remains.

Marie Tyler-McGraw shifts the terrain from the relatively isolated site of Monticello to the crowded urban space of a modern southern city. Evaluating the recent efforts of Richmond, Virginia to address the history of the Civil War, slavery, and African Americans in its public spaces, Tyler-McGraw concludes that "[historic] sites [and public memorials] are ... forums, not temples" (p. 167). Attempts to redefine the city's historic sites and memorials have made it clear to city officials that consensus is not easily achieved. Both white and black civic leaders, Tyler-McGraw shows, are nevertheless committed to improving the economic status of the city through the promotion of "her-

itage tourism." In a city that has been committed for a century and a half to perpetuating the romanticized "Lost Cause" view of antebellum life, however, addressing the harsh realities of slavery and racism have proven challenging. Yet, in her estimation, there is reason for cautious optimism.

Dwight T. Pithcailey, who was Chief Historian of the National Park Service for 25 years until his retirement in 2005, offers a counterbalance to Tyler-McGraw's positive outlook with his sobering account of the Park Service's efforts to expand the interpretation of slavery and African American history at Civil War sites. In the 1990s, the Park Service undertook sweeping revisions of the interpretive plans of Civil War battlefields, expanding the scope of history presented at these sites beyond the narrow bounds of military history in order to provide a fuller account of the social and political context in which the war was fought. The changes sparked an intense response from certain southern whites who favored a strict focus on military history and an emphasis on the heroism and "honor" of soldiers on both sides. A campaign organized by the Sons of Confederate Veterans, for example, elicited "approximately 2,200 cards and letters of complaint" (p. 176). Pithcailey offers some reason for optimism, however. In general, he writes, public reactions to the Park Service's recent re-interpretation of the war have been "overwhelmingly positive" (p. 185). He holds out little hope for those on the extreme end of this debate, however, who see any attempt to discuss slavery at Civil War sites as "South-bashing" (p. 175).

Bruce Levine's essay, which rounds out the collection, offers a similarly pessimistic appraisal of amateur and popular historians who refuse to acknowledge slavery's central role in the Civil War. Debunking the myth of the "Black Confederate," Levine criticizes those Civil War historians and enthusiasts who propagate the false idea that large numbers of slaves willingly fought for the Confederacy. He finds no credible evidence to support this claim and castigates those who perpetuate it.

An essential text for public historians and museum professionals, *Slavery and Public History* epitomizes the high level of work being done inside and outside the academy to bring the leading edge of historical scholarship to a broad audience. Destined to become a popular text in museum studies and public history courses, *Slavery and Public History* also merits attention from anyone interested in the history of slavery, memory, and contemporary American culture.

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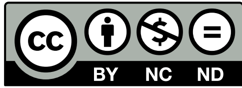

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