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*Mount Vernon and Monticello: The Changing Representation at Two Presidents' Estates*

*By*

*Katherine J. Simmons*

*Honors Thesis*

*In*

*Department of History  
University of Richmond  
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*April 29, 2016*

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## ABSTRACT

Before 1980, complex and controversial topics were ignored and avoided at Mount Vernon and Monticello. Instead their curators favored the enshrinement of the presidents and their mansions, without any mention of the hundreds of people who built and managed these estates. In the 1980s, this began to change. This thesis discusses why and how the expansion of the interpretation of slavery happened over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. Additionally, it seeks to understand how Mount Vernon and Monticello experienced this expansion, and the internal and external reactions to the process. Specifically, it examines this trend as it relates to museum professionalization, African American history, and the political and historical tensions that also emerged during this time.

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I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for Honors in History

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Dr. Robert C. Kenzer, Thesis Director

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Dr. Hugh West, Thesis Advisor

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Dr. Edward L. Ayers, Thesis Advisor

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## Introduction

In the fall of 2014, I felt obligated to pay a visit to the Tower of London while studying abroad as a history major. London was marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of World War I and commemorated this historic moment by covering the moat of the Tower in red glass poppies to represent each British soldier killed during the Great War. While the façade of this grand structure reflected the passing of time, the interior captured the contrasting permanence of the past. Specifically, the White Tower at the center of the Tower of London, with its *Line of Kings* exhibit, serves as a monument to human continuity and progress over the past one thousand years.

“The world’s longest-running visitor attraction,” *Line of Kings*, opened for the first time in 1652, and in 2013 the Tower of London redesigned the exhibition.<sup>1</sup> The exhibit showcases armor from a long line of English Kings, and the current iteration varied only slightly from the original. This lack of change struck me during my visit. The Tower takes pride in the continuity of this exhibit, but this begged me to ask how the *Line of Kings* might have transformed over the past 300 years. This question then led me to consider how museums on a more general level experience change and to investigate this question in Virginia.

After working closely with a house museum the previous summer, my interests gravitated towards similar institutions. These historic houses differ from the typical museum in that they “exhibit artifacts arranged in the context of a preserved or recreated environment to communicate something significant about the past.”<sup>2</sup> In particular, they attempt to capture a

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<sup>1</sup>“Line of Kings,” Historic Royal Palaces, accessed March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <http://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/visit-us/top-things-to-see-and-do/line-of-kings/>.

<sup>2</sup>Suzanne B. Schell, “On Interpretation and Historic Sites,” *The Journal of Museum Education* 10 no. 3 (Summer, 1985): 7.



specific moment from the past as it relates to the house and those who lived in it. Through this focus, these sites approach history more holistically. They try not only to render the lives of the people who lived there, but also “the social, political, economic, religious, and cultural influences, trends, and events in American history.”<sup>3</sup>

This infatuation with historic houses eventually led me to consider the most famous examples in Virginia: Mount Vernon and Monticello. Juxtaposing the two estates unearthed the motivations behind the evolutions that took place on each estate and revealed their place in the larger museum context. Beyond the relationship between the estates, I wanted to investigate and understand the changes they experienced.

With a particular focus on changes in presentation and narrative, initially the project intended to cover each institution’s entire history. However, when my research yielded more information than anticipated, I realized the project needed limits. Moreover, the institutions themselves proved divergent when considered from their inception. Mount Vernon and Monticello opened to the public at different times and under very different circumstances. Mount Vernon became a museum for the public in the late 1850s under the directorship of an association of ladies, whereas Monticello opened its doors officially under the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation in 1923.<sup>4</sup> During the time in between Mount Vernon functioned as a museum, whereas a wealthy New York family used Monticello as a vacation home.<sup>5</sup> And while Mount Vernon and the Ladies Association kept copious detailed records from the start,

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<sup>3</sup>Schell, “On Interpretation and Historic Sites,” 8.

<sup>4</sup>“Thomas Jefferson Foundation Chronology,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., accessed March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <https://www.monticello.org/site/about/thomas-jefferson-foundation-chronology>; James C. Rees, *Mount Vernon Commemorative Guidebook, 1999* (Mount Vernon, VA: Mount Vernon Ladies Association, 1999): 9.

<sup>5</sup>Melvin Urofsky, *The Levy Family and Monticello, 1834-1923: Saving Thomas Jefferson’s House* (Charlottesville, VA: Thomas Jefferson Foundation, 2001).

Monticello only began keeping comparable records in the 1970s. To consider these institutions from their outset would necessarily provide an unbalanced comparison. Though they each accomplished similar goals in the long-run, up until the 1980s each estate kept to its own timeline. Beginning in the 1980s, their records began to parallel each other and provide intriguing links between the two estates.

At the center of this comparison are the changes in interpretation from the 1980s to the late-1990s. Interpretation refers to “a planned effort, to create for the visitor an understanding of the history and significance of events, people, and objects with which the site is associated.”<sup>6</sup> In particular, this work covers the drastic transformation of the interpretation of slavery at these estates. In the 1980s, slaves hardly received mention. They suffered from what Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small term “symbolic annihilation,” which refers to the “rhetorical and representational strategy for obscuring the institution of slavery” within the general narrative of the estate.<sup>7</sup> In sharp contrast, currently in 2016 each estate boasts a slavery tour, as well as extensive historical and archaeological scholarship on the subject.

In order to understand the inner workings of these museums a few terms need to be defined. Different councils and associations define museums in a variety of ways, but the International Council of Museums’ definition is the most widely accepted:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Schell, “On Interpretation and Historic Sites,” 8.

<sup>7</sup>Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002): 106.

<sup>8</sup>“Code of Ethics: Glossary” International Council of Museums, accessed March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <http://icom.museum/the-vision/code-of-ethics/glossary/>.

This definition covers the basic tenets of museums recognized in most definitions: non-profit, permanent, open to and serving the public, with collections, and exhibits.<sup>9</sup> Collections refer to the artifacts and archival materials that are under a museum's care and are typically used in the creation of an exhibit.

Critical to the creation of the exhibits and programs are the museum professionals who direct these initiatives. According to the ICM definition, these individuals have received some sort of specialized training and play a role in the "management and operations" of a museum.<sup>10</sup> They usually work in the education/programming department or the curatorial department of museums. The programming and education department works to engage the public and bring new exhibits to the museum. Curators, on the other hand, typically have a more focused background and interpret the artifacts within a museum's collections. In house museums the tour guides – also often referred to as docents – play an integral role in the education of the visitor. Mount Vernon and Monticello guides either work in the house or lead tours around the grounds.<sup>11</sup> Surprisingly, clear definitions of museum administration and education emerged relatively recently, circa 1980.

The process of defining these different aspects of museums began in the United States around 1906 when the American Association of Museums (AAM) was formed. This organization and others like it helped to establish museum standards and created a community of museums to maintain them. Museum training programs emerged out of this culture during the

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<sup>9</sup>Eugene Dillenburg, "What, if anything, is a museum?" *Exhibitionist* (Spring, 2011): 9.

<sup>10</sup>"Code of Ethics: Glossary," International Council of Museums, <http://icom.museum/the-vision/code-of-ethics/glossary/>.

<sup>11</sup>"Thomas Jefferson Foundation Chronology," <https://www.monticello.org/site/about/thomas-jefferson-foundation-chronology>. "1980: hostesses became guides with the employment of the first male guide."

mid-1960s and they “contributed substantially to the growth of standards of training and provided models for the creation of later university programs.”<sup>12</sup> As they started out, these programs functioned to establish a group of museum professionals armed with the ability to transform the haphazard “cabinets of curiosity” of museums past into organized interpretive exhibits.<sup>13</sup> A movement of specialization within museums followed this transition as they became more concerned with education over delivering mere information.<sup>14</sup>

By 1984 the AAM had declared education to be the primary purpose of museums, and soon training programs followed suit.<sup>15</sup> In 1985, the *Journal of Museum Education* “Training for Museum Education Professionals” reported on a colloquium on museum education training that mapped out goals and recommendations for future programs.<sup>16</sup> In addition to mapping out the future of museum training programs, the article also provided “ideas for reasonable action” that included adding a researcher to the museum staff.<sup>17</sup> So, as museums began to shift their focus to education, research also began to serve a larger purpose. Stephen Weil aptly describes this

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<sup>12</sup>Gretchen Sullivan Sorin and Martin D. Sorin, “Museums, Professional training, and the challenge of leadership for the future,” 59 no. 4 (Autumn, 2004): 17.

<sup>13</sup>“Cabinet of Curiosity” is a term used to describe the type of presentation used in earlier museums, dating back to the late 1800s. These cabinets typically held an overwhelming amount of “curiosities” collected typically from overseas explorations. The objects in them loosely related to each other and were there for their visual impact, not as an educational tool. Interpretive exhibits, on the other hand, imply a sense of purpose. Instead of randomly placed within a room these an exhibit suggest objects are organized and given a meaning and context.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Stephen E. Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002): 32.

<sup>16</sup>The *Journal of Museum Education* is the “premier peer-reviewed publication exploring and reporting on theory, training, and practice in the museum education field,” and was established in 1973 under the name of *Roundtable Report* and renamed to *JME* in 1985. See: “Journal of Museum Education,” Museum Education Roundtable, <http://museumeducation.info/jme>.

<sup>17</sup>Nina Jensen and Mary Ellen Munley, “Training for Museum Education Professionals,” *Journal of Museum Education* 10:4 (Fall, 1985), 14.

process as the shift “from being about something to being for somebody.”<sup>18</sup> This can also be captured in the term “professionalization.” In the case of museums, this term is defined as the gradual reformatting of museums as educational and research institutions. The effort made by museums to professionalize, such as the creation of educational and research departments, motivated the changes in museums from the 1980s onwards. This transition preoccupied the directors at Mount Vernon and Monticello during the 1980s.<sup>19</sup>

To understand how these changes fit into the larger historical context, one needs to look at the time leading up to the late 1970s. At the beginning of the nineteenth century rumors began to circulate about a relationship between Thomas Jefferson and one of his female slaves, Sally Hemings. Madison Hemings’, Sally Hemings’ son, memoirs were the only physical evidence supporting the supposed relationship up until the late 1990s.<sup>20</sup> As Madison’s memoirs have no factual basis, Jefferson historians disregarded them citing Jefferson’s character and ideals as proof against them. As early as 1954, ten years after America celebrated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jefferson’s birth, sources came out doubting the scholarly explanation.<sup>21</sup> The article, which appeared in *Ebony*, frankly addressed the contradictions in Jefferson’s life. Through its condemning rhetoric, the piece received public notice and succeeded in bringing the Sally Hemings controversy back into the public’s eye. Despite several historians desire to squash the

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid. 28.

<sup>19</sup>“Monticello: Daniel P. Jordan” (1985-2008), Mount Vernon: John E. Harbour (1984-1987) and Neil Horstman (1987-1994)

<sup>20</sup>Madison Hemings’ is Sally Hemings’ son, supposedly with Thomas Jefferson. The DNA evidence released in 1998 by Dr. Eugene Foster (see citation: Eugene A Foster et al. “Jefferson Fathered Slaves’ Last Child,” *Nature* 396 (November 1998)) proved without doubt only the paternity of Eston Hemings, though scholarly research suggests that Thomas Jefferson also fathered Madison, Beverly, and Harriet.

<sup>21</sup>Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers, “The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson,” in *Jeffersonian Legacies* ed. Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993): 422.

unfounded claims, the story continued to reappear and cast doubt on Jefferson scholars.<sup>22</sup> This tension follows a similar pattern that Andrew Hartman describes in *War for the Soul of America* that in the fallout of the 1960s America was caught between two opposing forces each vying for a stake in its future.<sup>23</sup> Though the tension between Jefferson scholars and their opponents was not as extreme, it was palpable. This conflict between the traditional history and the new interpretation can be seen not only at Monticello during the 1980s and 1990s, but also throughout the museum field between the museum liberals and the conservative museum board and public.

As this tension rose leading up to the late 1970s, so too did African American scholarship. Though Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. Dubois began recording African American history in the first half of the twentieth century, during the 1960s and 1970s the scholarship on the subject grew exponentially. Professional historians such as John Hope Franklin, John Blassingame, Robert L. Harris, and Darlene Clark Hines, and unconventional historians such as Harold Cruse and Lerone Bennett proliferated the study of African American history. Coinciding with this time period, universities started adding African American studies programs to their curriculum. This movement greatly influenced the development of African American scholarship in the mid-1970s, and these programs “now supply a critical focal point for continuing learning and research in this critical but often neglected area of our cultural and intellectual history and heritage.”<sup>24</sup> The creation of these programs, especially in universities such as University of Virginia in 1969, and the growing recognition of the discipline through the 1980s is important

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<sup>22</sup>This overview hardly scratches the surface of the discourse on the subject. For more information, refer to Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers, “The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson.”

<sup>23</sup>See Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>24</sup>Rhett S. Jones et al., “The Lasting Contributions of African American Studies,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 6 (Winter, 1994-1995), 92.

when considering changing interpretations of slavery during this time. Especially as museums grew more concerned with historical accuracy, the development of African American history helps to answer the question of “why now?”

We have considered important catalysts in this story, but in order to understand how the estates reached the 1980s one needs a brief history lesson on Mount Vernon and Monticello. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Mount Vernon had fallen into disrepair. Words such as “ruin and desolation” were used to describe the estate.<sup>25</sup> Ann Pamela Cunningham decided to dedicate herself to the cause. Cunningham grew up in South Carolina on a successful plantation. In 1853 she followed the advice of her mother and began her journey to rehabilitate Mount Vernon. She reached out to southern women, asking “why was it that the women of his country did not try to keep it in repair if the men could not do it?”<sup>26</sup> So Cunningham sent letters to newspapers across the South enlisting women to help raise money to buy the estate from Augustine Washington, who then owned the property. Cunningham obtained a lawyer to organize this group into a legal entity, the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union (MVLA). After officially purchasing the estate in 1858, Cunningham organized the Association, Edward Alexander describes, as a “centralized and elitist organization.”<sup>27</sup> She named herself regent, and over the next two years appointed 31 vice-regents, each representing a state. The Association at this time concerned itself with repairing damage done after years of neglect by raising funds to finance the necessary repairs. Additionally, the regents representing the original

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<sup>25</sup>Edward P. Alexander, *Museum Masters: Their Museums and Their Influence* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1983): 179. The words are attributed to Ann Pamela Cunningham’s mother, Louisa Bird.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 183

13 states each furnished one room in the mansion.<sup>28</sup> Their furniture decisions, though, were based on their own tastes, and not on the historical accuracy of the pieces, and in 1910 the Association ended that practice.

More than preserving the home, the Association hoped to preserve the memory of George Washington as the founding father of America. In the early 1920s the *Annual Report of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union* began including “the object” of the MVLA:

Its object shall be to perpetuate the sacred memory of ‘The Father of his Country’ and, with loving hands, to guard and protect the hallowed spot where rest his mortal remains. To forever hold, manage and preserve the estate, properties and relics at Mount Vernon belonging to the Association, and, under proper regulations, open the same to the inspection of all who love the cause of Liberty, and revere the name of Washington.<sup>29</sup>

This “object” became a mainstay in each edition of the *Annual Report* until the late 1970s. In the report no reason is provided for why it then stopped, but it could be a reflection of the changes to come. Since its inception the Association accessioned – brought into its collection of artifacts under its care – images and furniture that donors sent to Mount Vernon. In the early 1940s the Association put into its *Annual Report* an accession policy to better control the quality of artifacts that came in and to assure their link to Washington.<sup>30</sup> The addition of this policy affirmed the Association’s desire to bring the estate back to the way it was during Washington’s lifetime.

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 192

<sup>29</sup>*Annual Report* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1924): 7.

<sup>30</sup>*Annual Report* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1940): 14. “Through the years since 1860, the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association has pursued a policy of collecting based upon the recovery of the original household furnishings of Mount Vernon and the personal possessions of General and Mrs. Washington. Slowly by gift, loan and purchase, authentic items have been assembled, while information on outstanding pieces has been gathered and evaluated. The Association invites by gift or loan objects which qualify under this accession policy. It is also desirous of receiving data relating to Mount Vernon pieces whether publicly or privately owned.”



In addition to accumulating the furnishings, the Association began to restore the outbuildings – buildings associated with the estate that were not a part of the mansion proper, i.e. the kitchen or slave quarters. It started to rebuild the “servant’s quarters,” a term which was not changed in the guide books until the mid-1980s, in the 1950s. In the 1960s it officially opened the first onsite museum, a temporary exhibit space was held in the “east negro quarters.” It exhibited papers pertaining to the title and settlement of the Mount Vernon estate. Despite efforts to restore these out buildings, the Association kept a clear focus on the public life of George Washington and the development of his estate. Even today, though the narrative now includes discussion of slavery and women, the mission of the MVLA remains to “educate visitors and people throughout the world about the life and legacies of George Washington.”<sup>31</sup>

As for Monticello, after Jefferson’s death it needed to be sold to cover the large debt associated with the estate. In 1834, after the previous owner lost interest in the estate, Uriah P. Levy bought Monticello. Unlike his predecessor, who left the house to rot, Levy wanted to use the home and preserve it.<sup>32</sup> It became a vacation destination for the New York-based Navy Lieutenant who, while adding his own furniture also made sure to maintain the remaining relics. Levy died in 1862, leaving the home to the United States government, but at the same time the Confederate government seized the house, claiming it to be alien-owned property. Levy’s heir broke the will, and in 1882 Jefferson Monroe Levy bought out the rest of the heirs and set about repairing the estate.<sup>33</sup> Groups that advocated the public ownership of Monticello merged in 1923 to form the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation (TJMF) and bought the estate from the Levy

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<sup>31</sup>“Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association,” Mount Vernon, accessed March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016, [www.mountvernon.org/about/mount-vernon-ladies-association/](http://www.mountvernon.org/about/mount-vernon-ladies-association/).

<sup>32</sup>John Barnwell, “Monticello: 1856”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 34 no. 4 (December, 1975): 280.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

family.<sup>34</sup> This group became the governing financial body presiding over Monticello, similar to the MVLA at Mount Vernon.

The TJMF formed “to purchase, preserve, and maintain Monticello as a memorial to Thomas Jefferson and his ideals.”<sup>35</sup> Before the 1980s, the TJMF used its resources for the restoration and redecoration of the mansion and the outbuildings on the estate. The foundation also funded two major archaeological digs during this time, and supported research on Thomas Jefferson through scholarships and fellowships.<sup>36</sup> The digs investigated the vegetable garden on the grounds and Mulberry Row. Mulberry Row was an avenue south of the Southern Terrace lined by mulberry trees where the domestic slaves resided. This row of dependencies – outbuildings – had a joinery, weaving cottage, and the small wooden cabins where the slaves lived. The research done during this time endeavored to understand how the estate would have looked during the time of Jefferson, and to investigate further his life and ideals.

## **The Argument**

As Mount Vernon and Monticello moved into the 1980s, new sources emerged, illustrating the changes these two institutions experienced. These primary sources form the basis of the argument in this thesis. Mount Vernon’s library contains a wide variety of sources including the annual reports, minutes of council meetings, guide books, interpreters’ handbooks, and the Mount Vernon newsletter. The annual reports include a note from the Regent discussing the major changes at Mount Vernon during the past year. The report also features information

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>“Thomas Jefferson Foundation Chronology,”  
<https://www.monticello.org/site/about/thomas-jefferson-foundation-chronology>

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

about newly accessioned pieces, and moving towards the 1990s these reports also include articles which detail new educational programs. The minutes of the council recount the meetings of the MVLA in more detail than the annual report. The guide books, which date back to the inception of the MVLA, chronicle the changes on the estate and the way these were presented by the MVLA. These guide books highlight rooms in the mansion and some of the outbuildings for estate visitors. Starting in the 1990s, Mount Vernon created a handbook for the guides. These handbooks instructed how best to lead a tour, what questions to be prepared for, and what points to touch on. The Mount Vernon newsletter, *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, (which began in 1985) was sent out to those who donated to the MVLA. It contains new findings, and updates on the mansion and the estate.

Starting in the 1980s, Monticello began keeping copious records on interpretation, tours, and exhibitions. Almost every year from 1985 onward Monticello and TJMF created a new guide training manual, detailing the new tours and information to be added to the tour outline. Beginning in the late 1970s every other year Monticello created a new interpretive plan. The interpretive plan essentially outlined new tours and changes to the overall narrative told by the guides and expressed through the interpretive signs and buildings. Additionally, in 1990 the TJMF restarted its newsletter *Monticello*, which had been inactive for over two decades. Similar to that of Mount Vernon, this newsletter was sent to donors to keep them updated on new projects and to encourage them to donate again. These newsletters provide insight into the progress of new initiatives, unlike guide books that only show the end product. These sources, in addition to the secondary sources that supply context for the primary documents, form the basis of this thesis.

The secondary sources used in this thesis consist mainly of books discussing house museums and those that focus on the decades leading up to the 1980s. These books range from theory to discussing the representation of slavery in house museums.<sup>37</sup> They provide a context for the occurrences at Mount Vernon and Monticello within the museum field. Other secondary sources reveal an image of the larger context in which this time-period is situated. These importantly help understand the external motivations of the small-scale interpretation changes on going at both Mount Vernon and Monticello.

Professionalization, the rise of African American history, and the tension between historians, politicians, and museums administrators all converged at the beginning of the 1980s. The influence of these pressures multiplied and continued through to the 1990s and together sparked a revolution in how museums presented themselves and their collections. The word revolution, and not transition, best describes this process, as it was not just an internal change but a reformation with implications and reactions within the larger historical and political world. Additionally, the process was not easy; museums and directors were met with significant obstacles along the way. Despite these roadblocks, Monticello and Mount Vernon, through the 1980s and 1990s, adjusted their administration and interpretation to match a changing picture, both within museums and with out.

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<sup>37</sup>Sherry Butcher-Youngmans, *Historic House Museums: A Practical Handbook for their Care, Preservation, and Management* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993); Jessica Foy Donnelly, eds., *Interpreting Historic House Museums* (New York: Altamira Press, 2002); Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*; James Oliver Horton, and Lois E. Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (New York: The New Press, 2006), etc.

## Chapter 1

### “An Adjustment Period”: The 1980s

In 1982, Dorothy Gilliam wrote “Remembrance” for *The Washington Post* discussing the way that Mount Vernon memorialized its slaves.<sup>38</sup> She described “a modest memorial, apparently too unimportant to be roped off or otherwise distinguished from the other parts of the property.”<sup>39</sup> The article criticized Mount Vernon’s minimal efforts to recognize the slaves, or even maintain the site of this memorial. Gilliam observed that the maps of the estate left the overgrown site unacknowledged, making it that much more unapproachable.<sup>40</sup> When the MVLA placed the marker in 1929, it simply intended to mark where the slaves had buried their dead. The marker read, “In memory of the Many Faithful Colored Servants of the Washington Family Buried at Mount Vernon from 1760-1860.”<sup>41</sup> “No one,” Gilliam commented, in one of the article’s more poignant statements, “seems to have thought much about it since.”<sup>42</sup> Gilliam’s article brought the marker to the attention of the public and pushed the MVLA to rethink its commemoration of the slaves of Mount Vernon.

Immediately following the article, the minutes of the MVLA noted “the area was groomed and paths and signs installed.”<sup>43</sup> The MVLA even contacted the Howard University

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<sup>38</sup>Dorothy Butler Gilliam, interview by Charles Henry Rowell, *Callaloo* 37 no. 2 (Spring 2014): 223-243. In 1961 Dorothy Gilliam became the first black woman reporter hired by *The Washington Post*. She also served as the president of the National Association of Black Journalists.

<sup>39</sup>Dorothy Gilliam, “Remembrance,” *The Washington Post*, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1982.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>*Minutes of the Council of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union*, (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1982): 12.

School of Architecture to commemorate the site in a more meaningful way.”<sup>44</sup> The MVLA also placed information on the site in the guidebook in order to attract visitors to the improved memorial. On September 21, 1983, the MVLA dedicated the new memorial, and the day after the dedication *The Washington Post* published, “Repaying a debt at Mount Vernon: National Memorial Honors Washington’s Slaves.”<sup>45</sup> The article reported on the ceremony the MVLA held for the dedication, which included speeches from Governor Charles Robb of Virginia and prominent African American scholars and community members. In this way, the article not only served as a neat bookend to the slave memorial crisis, but also exposed a larger discussion on the need to recognize slaves on sites such as Mount Vernon. Governor Robb characterized the memorial as “the repayment of an immeasurable debt long unacknowledged and even longer in arrears.”<sup>46</sup> Fittingly, the keynote speaker of the event was Professor James Turner, the director of Africana Studies at Cornell University.<sup>47</sup> While he commended Mount Vernon and Virginia on the creation of such a site, he also implied the need for more.<sup>48</sup> The Mount Vernon slave memorial did not signify an end, but merely the beginning of the commemoration of slavery across America.

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Phil McCombs, “Repaying a Debt at Mount Vernon: National Memorial Honors Washington’s Slaves,” *Washington Post*, September 22, 1983.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>In the early 1980s, African American studies programs were growing, albeit slowly due to roadblocks from University’s administration. Additionally in the beginning of the 1980s many theoretical books were released dealing with African American studies, such as *Women, Race, and Class* (Angela Davis, 1981) and *Black Marxism* (Cedric Robinson, 1983). Claudrena N. Harold, “On the Wings of Atalanta’: The Struggle for African American Studies at the University of Virginia, 1969-1995,” *Journal of African American Studies* 16 no. 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43525474>.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid. Prof. James Turner observed, “the memorial is unique and makes Virginia a leader in recognizing the accomplishments of black slaves.”

John Castellani, the Resident-Director of Mount Vernon, characterized 1982 as “the year Mount Vernon’s ivory tower was shaken.”<sup>49</sup> Mount Vernon came under a significant pressure to quickly and effectively respond to the criticisms leveled against it. In many ways, though, Mount Vernon took a cue from this experience with the slave memorial to begin actively conducting research on the lives of slaves. In the Regent’s report on the new memorial, Helen Sharp Anderson commented, “Fresh study of the lives of all who lived and worked here has been discussed for several years and research is underway.”<sup>50</sup> This renewed commitment to research and the issue of slavery seen in the creation of the new slave memorial foreshadowed larger changes that occurred at Mount Vernon and Monticello. While the tower trembled in the wake of February of 1982, the response was speedy and successful in abating the criticism from the outside.<sup>51</sup> Castellani aptly noted at the end of his letter, “We are a conspicuous public institution and we must realize that our actions are subject to scrutiny by a very diverse public.” This captures the tension sites such as Mount Vernon and Monticello faced with the public, as well as a major motivating factor in the shifts to come. Other motivations for change came in the form of museum professionalization and changes in larger historical trends.

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<sup>49</sup>*Minutes of the Council of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union*, 1982, 15. The rest of the quote reads: “Certainly our privacy was threatened by the challenge of a formidable community action group made up of prominent black leader. Over a nine month period beginning in early February, the regent, John Rhodehamel and I used all of our recourses to make a potentially ugly situation into an asset for this Association.”

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Castellani ends his letter to the MVLA by writing, “I want to thank you all for your understanding and cooperation.” Throughout the discourse on this subject in the minutes there has been no evidence suggesting resistance from within the MVLA. Especially as the process went so quickly there was not much time within conversations to discuss any opposition. This last sentence, though, could be interpreted as an acknowledgement of some sort of antagonism toward the new slave memorial. The use of the word cooperation could suggest that some of the vice-regents were less than thrilled about the new memorial and had to be convinced to approve the memorial. This is all speculation, though, as there is no concrete evidence in the minutes.

Museums prior to the late nineteenth century felt responsibility solely to maintaining their collections. But as the 1980s dawned, their commitments shifted.<sup>52</sup> Beginning in the 1960s the federal government began providing aid to institutions dedicated to the sustaining the humanities. The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) began in 1965 and supported “increasing knowledge, improving the competence of scholars and teachers, and improving the public understanding of the humanities through education.”<sup>53</sup> Though the program grew exponentially in the 1960s, by the 1970s funding slowed down significantly.<sup>54</sup> This decrease in funding meant that museums had to rely more heavily on private donations and admissions fees. In order to be successful in this climate, museums needed to engage and appeal to the visitor.

Around the same time in 1973, the AAM held its annual meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. At this meeting, during a sub-meeting on museum education, Linda Sweet led a discussion on the status of educators in the museum field. She observed that “the lack of programs of interest to museum educators in the AAM’s 1973 annual meeting was typical of the disregard of other museum professionals for the needs of educators.”<sup>55</sup> This struck a chord with others who attended this meeting and the decision was made to form an ad hoc committee. The

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<sup>52</sup>Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002): 31.

<sup>53</sup>Barnaby W. Guthrie and Judith J. Culligan, “National Endowment for the Humanities,” in *Encyclopedia of Education*, 5, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2002): 1774-1776. Gale Virtual Reference Library.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.* By the end of the 1980s, funding had increased significantly. In the 1980s the program came under scrutiny from public officials, claiming that some of the funds were not being allocated appropriately. In 1981 President Reagan created a task force to stimulate the growth of private funding for these institutions. The task force found, though, that the most effective way to fund these institutions was through the NEH, and funding was expanded.

<sup>55</sup>Joan Madden, “The AAM Education Committee: Who, What, When, Where, Why?” *Roundtable Reports* (Winter, 1976).



purpose of which was to increase the status and recognition of educators within museums, and within the AAM.<sup>56</sup> In addition to this, the committee also worked to define the position of museum educators, as previously the role was unclear. During the next three years, the committee accomplished its goals, and in 1976 “as a gesture of conciliation, a change in the AAM’s constitution granted a committee of educators...a role in the association’s governance.”<sup>57</sup> In the coming years museum education would become a cornerstone of the definition of museums.

In 1980 the AAM formed a commission “charged with assuring the continued vitality of America’s museums.”<sup>58</sup> The commission intended to adjust museum priorities to better match the changing society. Mary Ellen Munley’s article argues that in order for museums to remain relevant, “it is essential for museum professionals to understand that the educational role of museums is at least as important as the museums collecting responsibilities.”<sup>59</sup> Education, as opposed to collections suggests more than just a mirror of the past. Instead, through an education-focused museum, visitors gain an understanding of the past and how it relates to current events and their lives. Especially, as Munley suggests, “people seem to be grasping for explanations and solutions,” this type of museum would be dedicated to finding the significance of history, over just presenting the aesthetics of it.<sup>60</sup> The commission also encouraged the reconfiguration of museum administration to allow for more leadership opportunities in

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid. The ad hoc committee discussed and passed three main goals: 1) for museum education to be represented on the executive council of the AAM, 2) for their committee to be registered as an official committee, and 3) for museum education to be represented in the AAM’s publications, planning, and meetings.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Mary Ellen Munley, “Museums as Learning Environments: A Prospectus for a New Century,” 9 no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 1984): 29.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 31.

museums, as well as the increase in research on museum collections.<sup>61</sup> This commission culminated in the fall of 1984 with the AAM declaring education to be the main purpose of museums.

Both the establishment of the education committee in 1973 and the commission report of 1984 directly impacted the development of professionalization and the new research initiatives and programs of the 1980s. Andrew Hartman terms the late twentieth century “the adjustment period.”<sup>62</sup> This directly applies to the 1980s at both Mount Vernon and Monticello as new directors and external influences truly began motivating change at both estates.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, the rise of conservatism in American politics served as a potential roadblock to these innovations. The conservative mindset that dominated policies elevated tensions between museums and external agents.

As a result of these external pressures, and sometimes in spite of them, Mount Vernon and Monticello began in the 1980s to professionalize and expand their interpretation. Both institutions began to adjust to fit into this new idea of the museum and reimagine the meaning of interpretation and the means of it.

### **Professionalism**

According to Stephen Weil, “Tomorrow’s museums cannot be operated with yesterday’s skills.” While he wrote this in 2002, it captures the principle of the professionalization that began

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>63</sup>The distinction made here between the 1980s and the 1990s is arbitrary. As these sites professionalized, contemporary directors and historians did not conceptualize the time by decade. Professionalization and the subsequent expansion of the interpretation of slavery was fluid. The evidence suggests that for the most part the 1980s was a time of pure professionalization, without many changes to interpretation. The 1990s on the other hand, saw significant changes to the interpretation of slavery. It is important to note that the shifts that took place in the 1980s directly lead into those during the 1990s, and that in reality the distinction made in this thesis is arbitrary.

in the 1980s.<sup>64</sup> Significant administrative shifts considerably altered the museum field. Rather than needing just a general historical interest to be considered for a position museum, students now were required to be trained in basic museum standards and practices. The emergence of museum professionals and consistent training standards directly correlated with the standardization of museums in general. This standardization began in 1906 with the formation of the AAM, and then expanded with the accreditation program.<sup>65</sup> When the report of the commission came out in 1984, museums needed to reevaluate their organization and their purpose to better fit the expectation. Instead of focusing on the care and preservation of collections and the maintenance of donors, museums now had to consider education and research in addition to those mentioned. For example, under the core characteristic of education, the American Alliance defined the main standards that museums need to meet to be accredited, including increased research and a cohesive education plan.<sup>66</sup> Through the remainder of the 1980s and into the 1990s both Mount Vernon and Monticello needed to adjust their administration and planning to fit into these new standards.

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<sup>64</sup>Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 46.

<sup>65</sup>“Accreditation,” *American Alliance of Museums*, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/assessment-programs/accreditation>. This program began in 1971, and is method of ensuring museum standards across American Museums. “Characteristics of Excellence,” *American Alliance of Museums*, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/characteristics-of-excellence>. There are 38 core characteristics that each museum is judged through. For example: mission and planning, leadership, education and interpretation, etc.

<sup>66</sup>“Characteristics of Excellence,” <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/characteristics-of-excellence>

Before the concept of professionalization, in 1951 Monticello began hiring women to serve as hostesses on the estate.<sup>67</sup> Prior to 1951, the former servants of Monticello served as guides to the estate for visitors, the tours consisted of “numerous and exaggerated, but delightful ‘tales’ reaching well beyond Thomas Jefferson’s recognized abilities and accomplishments.”<sup>68</sup> Once introduced to Monticello, the new hostess program endeavored to do away with these tales, and set about conducting more accurate research on Jefferson. Even in this early program, Monticello trained hostesses and encouraged them to read books that provided background on Jefferson. In the early 1970s, hostesses began to focus and conduct individual research on more specialized topics regarding Jefferson and Monticello.<sup>69</sup> Clearly this process reflects a movement towards professionalism, but the term “hostess” and the associated position fits into the sphere of the household and not the entire estate. Though this system reflected a relative depth of knowledge, it was limited by the walls of the house. In the 1980s Monticello hired its first male “hostess” and subsequently changed the name of the position to “guide.”<sup>70</sup> The adjustment of the name and gender of the position foreshadowed a larger shift at Monticello, reflecting a more inclusive and encompassing narrative of the entire estate.

Increased research became crucial to this transformation of the tour program, as “research is the key to creating a credible interpretive program.”<sup>71</sup> In 1980, for example, Monticello

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<sup>67</sup>“Thomas Jefferson Foundation Chronology,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., accessed March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <https://www.monticello.org/site/about/thomas-jefferson-foundation-chronology>.

<sup>68</sup>“Report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Interpretation,” 1978, Collection: *Ad Hoc Interpretation Committee*, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, 7.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>70</sup>“Thomas Jefferson Foundation Chronology,” <https://www.monticello.org/site/about/thomas-jefferson-foundation-chronology>.

<sup>71</sup>Suzanne B. Schell, “On Interpretation and Historic Sites,” *The Journal of Museum Education* 10 no. 3 (Summer, 1985): 8.

received a grant from the National Endowment Humanities to finance new archaeological excavations on the estate.<sup>72</sup> Monticello used this money to fund an archaeological project that began two years later. Archaeological explorations began at Monticello in the late-1950s and continued through to the 1980s and beyond. In 1979, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation created the Archaeology Department to head future endeavors. In the ten years after 1980, an excavation began on Mulberry Row, an archaeological field school was started, and findings from previous excavations were incorporated into the interpretation of the estate.<sup>73</sup> The funding come from the NEH sparked an explosion of archaeological and scholarly research at Monticello.

Mount Vernon began the 1980s with a similar inclination towards increasing research, but approached it slightly differently. The first year of this new decade was used to fundraise and plan for upcoming developments at the estate, especially the restoration of the exhibition space and other aspects of the estate. Research became crucial to this process of restoration. As the Director of Mount Vernon, John Castellani put it, “Refinement of restoration continues with renewed vigor, based on a fresh and objective reevaluation of the sources of our knowledge of Mount Vernon.”<sup>74</sup> This process of critical analysis, it would soon, did not exist before. It was time to be professional.

As Mount Vernon improved its research process, Monticello continued to conduct archaeological research. Specifically, in 1982 it restarted excavations on Mulberry Row. The initial excavations there had started in 1963. This project was lead by Oriol Pi-Sunyer, an

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>*Minutes of the Council of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1980): 5.

associate professor of archaeology at Case Institute of Technology. The goal was to identify and locate the various buildings along Mulberry Row.<sup>75</sup> Three buildings were excavated during this preliminary exploration: the nailery, the joinery, and the storehouse. After the archaeological department was created, Monticello restarted excavations on the site under William Kelso's direction. The excavations of 1982, on the other hand, endeavored to locate a fence line to the back of the Row.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, this new project, as opposed to the 1960s one, attempted to not only excavate the area, but collect artifacts from the sites.<sup>77</sup> After this initial investigation, Kelso led other explorations across Mulberry Row, including the smokehouse/dairy and domestic sites.<sup>78</sup> Though the first excavations helped map out Mulberry Row, the second series of excavations led by Kelso tried to better understand the lives of the slaves who lived on Mulberry Row.

Mount Vernon soon followed in Monticello's footsteps and began to plan for future archaeological projects. In 1983, archaeologists attended a MVLA council meeting and proposed their plan of action for archaeology on the estate. The proposal anticipated archaeology projects to be realized as the 1980s progressed. As the head archaeologist Alain Outlaw explained to the Regent, this work "will add to our understanding of George Washington, the citizen-planter, as opposed to the well-known soldier-statesman."<sup>79</sup> Instead of perpetuating a one-sided narrative of Washington, this archaeology intended to uncover artifacts and information that provided insight

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<sup>75</sup>Jonathan Scholnick, Derek Wheeler, and Fraser Neiman, "Mulberry Row Reassessment: The Building / Site," *Monticello Department of Archaeology Technical Report Series no. 3* (April 2001): 3.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 1. "[The Mulberry Row excavations] brought to light in a sustained fashion the material remains of the slave society of which the real historical Monticello had been a part."

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 5

<sup>79</sup>*Minutes of the Council of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1983): 40.

on other aspects of his character. Even in this planning stage Outlaw developed clear objectives consisting of significant background research on the property and past archaeological excavations to determine the most advantageous first project. The thoroughness of this project filtered through to other projects at Mount Vernon.

In 1984 Mount Vernon welcomed a new Resident-Director, John E. Harbour.<sup>80</sup> Previous to working at Mount Vernon, Harbour worked for Colonial Williamsburg and served as the director of the historic sites under the Wisconsin State Historical Society. Harbour immediately set to work professionalizing Mount Vernon. In 1984 the MVLA approved a reorganization plan to further expand research and professionalism. This plan created the Research Department, an expansion of the Department of Development and Communication, and a redefinition of the Department of Education.<sup>81</sup> This reorganization also directly coincided with the publication of the 1984 work *Museums for a New Century* (an AAM distributed/published journal) declaring education the primary purpose of museums.<sup>82</sup> While the discussion of the role of education in museums began in the early 1980s, but this clear definition, along with a push towards professionalization, seemed to influence Mount Vernon to also specify the role of education on the estate:

The department is responsible for the interpretive program at Mount Vernon, which includes the planning, implementation and direction of general and specific educational programs for school children, adults and special interest groups. The department will

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<sup>80</sup>Mark A. Sutton, "Mount Vernon Director Lives with History," *Washington Post*, June 14, 1984, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. The Resident-Director position was created in 1858 to take the place of the estate managers who managed the estate under the other owners of Mount Vernon. Harbour was the 7<sup>th</sup> such director of Mount Vernon, and served until 1987.

<sup>81</sup>*Annual Report* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1984): 6.

<sup>82</sup>Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 32.

supervise the Museum Attendant Staff, schedule special events, prepare the weekly gate memorandum and schedule and oversee the use of the Ann Pamela Cunningham.<sup>83</sup>

Previously, at Mount Vernon the education department served very little function. Here we see not only a conscious shift to incorporate educational programs, but also a demonstrated move toward more distinctive roles within the museum's administration.

The other departments that emerged from the reorganization plan were a response to a demonstrated need for more organization and specialization of the administration. These were the Research Department, Curatorial Department, Library Department, and Development and Communications Department. These departments worked together to produce more accurate and accessible information about Mount Vernon to the public. The Research Department had "the broad goals of providing accurate information to support restoration and interpretive programs."<sup>84</sup> By creating a department – and thus positions – specifically dedicated to research, Mount Vernon established a system in which scholarly research became more accessible to the museum educators and the entire estate. This new Research Department, in conjunction with the others mentioned, further developed Mount Vernon as a research and education-oriented institution.

The Long Range Planning Committee of the MVLA cited additional influences beyond the AAM declaration that sparked the reorganization plan. A description of the reorganization plan provided by the committee stated, "This is only the beginning of a process to seek the best possible structure... and to effectively respond to the changing times and the different demands

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<sup>83</sup>*Minutes of the Council of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1984): 44. This is from a part of the reorganization plan, where each new department is described in detail, including their tasks and goals.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*



from the public and professional museum and restoration experts.”<sup>85</sup> The reorganization plan, even in its initial stage, gave Mount Vernon the opportunity to welcome museum professionals and facilitate more scholarly research on George Washington and the estate. The Regent of the MVLA, Helen Sharp Anderson, quoted a past Vice-Regent who emphasized, “We should stress the ideas and ideals of George Washington and the founders of this nation rather than their material possessions.”<sup>86</sup> This seems to capture the intention behind the reorganization plan and the future of Mount Vernon interpretation.

In 1985 these new departments began their work. The new Development and Communications Department raised funds for the estate and sought positive coverage of Mount Vernon. Beginning in 1985, it started publishing and distributing the Mount Vernon newsletter for donors, *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, that highlighted “historical stories and those describing current activities and programs at Mount Vernon.”<sup>87</sup> The inaugural issue introduced new initiatives on the estate and changes to come. The Education Department expanded into 1985, and in this first issue the newsletter announced Mount Vernon’s first Director of Education. The article illustrated the emerging commitment to education. It also underscored the growth of the department as Mount Vernon hired its first professional museum educator.

This issue also introduced donors to the archaeological project that the MVLA had been planning for two years. The article “Digs Reveal Details of Domestic Life” discussed the project that focused on a site where slave families lived.<sup>88</sup> In 1985 work began to survey and dig in the

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>87</sup>*Minutes of the Council of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1985): 53.

<sup>88</sup>“Digs Reveal Details of Domestic Life,” *Mount Vernon: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* 1 no. 1 (Fall 1985): 6.

area of the “House for Families.” By the end of the year, the project already yielded new information regarding slaves’ lives and rituals. Excavations of the cellar located under the structure turned up artifacts pertaining to the diet and lifestyle of the slaves who lived there.<sup>89</sup>

Though these changes were innovations at Mount Vernon and Monticello, Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small help identify where both estates fit into the larger pattern of the interpretation of slavery. They suggest that the representation of slavery has four stages: symbolic annihilation, trivialization, segregated knowledge, and relative incorporation. Trivialization and segregated knowledge were particularly applicable to the 1980s at Mount Vernon and Monticello. Trivialization suggests that these sites incorporate slavery, but within the discussion of a benevolent master and institution in general.<sup>90</sup> Segregated knowledge, on the other hand, refers to the systematic separation of the main “white-centric” narrative (told inside the mansion) and the slave narrative (typically told only within the context of a slavery tour).<sup>91</sup> Though distinct from the rest of the site, these slavery tours discuss the “who” and “how” questions of the institution. Mount Vernon and Monticello, at this point, fell between the two on the spectrum. Indeed, as the 1980s neared to a close, each institution was seriously researching the lives of the slaves on their estates. As evidenced by their guide books, the time of trivialization had passed along with the conservative mind set.<sup>92</sup> Neither institution had created a guided tour from their research, but continued to conduct archaeological explorations and expand their internal structures.

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002): 147.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 170.

<sup>92</sup>*Mount Vernon, A Handbook* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1988): 110-112.

In 1985, Monticello welcomed Daniel P. Jordan as the new Director of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation. Unlike his predecessor, Jordan received a PhD and taught history at Virginia Commonwealth University before working at Monticello.<sup>93</sup> The next year, following in Mount Vernon's footsteps, Monticello organized its own Education Department.<sup>94</sup> In the next three years Monticello also added a Visitor Services Department (1987), a Development and Public Affairs Department (1988), a Restoration Department (1988), and an Operations Department (1989). By the end of the 1980s, the new configuration of Monticello's administration paralleled that of Mount Vernon. These departments, similar to Mount Vernon's, led Monticello to respond to the changes in culture and public interests, as well as the growing professionalism in the field. Finally, in an effort to increase scholarly research on Jefferson and Monticello, in 1987 the TJMF opened a research center. The successful reformation of and addition to the administration is attributed to Jordan. A chairman of the Foundation's Board of Trustees noted Jordan "was one of those transformational leaders who had a vision for what Monticello could be and never let the normal roadblocks to innovation stop him."<sup>95</sup> While professionalism clearly characterized the changes at Monticello during this time, the motivation in this case is Jordan and his determination to bring Monticello up to par.

Through directors and resident directors like Jordan and Harbour, Monticello and Mount Vernon began the process of professionalization.<sup>96</sup> As a result of the AAM commission report of

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<sup>93</sup>“Jordan Leaves Monticello,” *Monticello* 19 no. 2 (Fall, 2008).

<sup>94</sup>“Thomas Jefferson Foundation Chronology,”  
<https://www.monticello.org/site/about/thomas-jefferson-foundation-chronology>.

<sup>95</sup>“Jordan Leaves Monticello,” *Monticello*, 2008.

<sup>96</sup>John E. Harbour resigned in 1987 and was replaced with Neil Horstman who served until 1994. There is no information pertaining to the reason behind Harbour's resignation other than, “The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association declined to say why he resigned.” From: Virginia

1984, professionalism and the rise of education-oriented interpretation are directly linked. The creation of new administrative departments through professionalization, not only allowed for more leadership opportunities in museums, but also aided in the expansion of interpretive and educational programs. Specifically, the definition of departments such as research and education directly impacted the changes seen in interpretation during this time as well, however small they were in the beginning.

### **Interpretation/Education**

The National Endowment for the Humanities had defined interpretation as “the bridge between the object and the observer.”<sup>97</sup> Beginning in 1984, this definition took on new meaning reflecting the changing purpose of museums as centered on education. Now interpretation seemed to be defined as a bridge between the observer and the understanding of the object as it relates to history and events in a larger context. Crucial in this expanded type of interpretation was the interpreter at historic houses who facilitated a “dialogue between the artifact and the visitor.”<sup>98</sup> The interpreter began to play a larger role as museums shifted their focus to education. In addition to interpreters, museums at this time began to focus on how to “explore the true potential of learning through objects,” and creating a more “visual than symbolic experience,” for the visitor.<sup>99</sup> The AAM commission report also highlighted the possibility for museums to

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Mansfield, “New Resident Director for Mount Vernon Named,” *Washington Post*, 20 August, 1987, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>97</sup>Schell, “On Interpretation and Historic Sites,” 8.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup>Mary Ellen Munley, “Museums as Learning Environments: A Prospectus for a New Century,” *Roundtable Reports* 9 no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer, 1984): 30.

engage more with schools and create programs for their students.<sup>100</sup> As this occurred, interpretation necessarily shifted as well.

The influences of professionalization and the rise of museum education are apparent, but were not the only motivated factors changing interpretation. The decrease in NEH funding for cultural institutions during the 1970s forced sites such as Mount Vernon and Monticello to rely more heavily on their private donors and admissions fees. This coupled with reported falling attendance rates in the late 1970s necessitated a reevaluation from both estates in order to curtail the problem. From 1976 to 1980 attendance at Monticello decreased by 31.2%, and similarly at Mount Vernon between those same years attendance dropped by 30%.<sup>101</sup> In the beginning of the 1980s both estates reported a slight increase, which Mount Vernon attributed to the active promotion of the estate, especially by travel agents.<sup>102</sup> Stephen Weil's claims support this explanation: "that museums are increasingly conscious of what might be of interest to the public."<sup>103</sup> In many ways, as a result of the admissions concerns in the late 1970s, museums needed to better engage their visitors and expand their interpretation in order to encourage visitors to revisit the estate.

Interpretation typically came in two forms for historic house museums: passive interpretation and functional interpretation. Passive consisted of labels and tours that mostly

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<sup>100</sup>Ibid.

<sup>101</sup>"Thomas Jefferson Foundation Chronology," <https://www.monticello.org/site/about/thomas-jefferson-foundation-chronology#1980>. *Minutes of the Council of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1981): 64.

<sup>102</sup>*Minutes*, 1981, 64. It is unclear what motivated the increase at Monticello in the year 1980.

<sup>103</sup>Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 31.

pointed out aesthetic aspects of the site.<sup>104</sup> Functional referred to the tours that discussed the “how and why” of the structure and its objects.<sup>105</sup> As Mount Vernon and Monticello approached the mid-1980s, their interpretation began to veer towards functional interpretation. As the standards of museums shifted in favor of educational programs, sites such as Mount Vernon and Monticello began reimagining their interpretation and educational programs. Functional interpretation fit perfectly within this new set of standards because it highlighted context and meaning over aesthetics. Mount Vernon and Monticello applied this type of interpretation through tours, some based on the “inductive educational method of inquiry.”<sup>106</sup> This type of tour format encouraged visitors to interact more actively with the estate. Additionally, house museums also developed more school programs in order to engage and educate the younger generation.

Despite a general trend towards the expansion of interpretation and the growth of African American Studies programs in universities across America, there was a rise of conservatism beginning in the 1980s. Reagan’s presidency directly contrasted with these innovations that occurred in museums during this decade, and stirred tensions between politics and museums that continued into the 1990s. Though Reagan mostly focused his policy changes to tax-reform, he still advocated “‘turning back the clock’ to values that had governed America when he was a young man.”<sup>107</sup> This conservatism served as the antithesis to what museums, and in particular Mount Vernon and Monticello, had planned for interpretation in the next two decades.

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<sup>104</sup>Schell, “On Interpretation and Historic Sites,” 8.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010): 207.

Following the release of the AAM commission report and the installment of the reorganization plan of 1984, the MVLA hired Mary Alexander as Director of Education. Alexander had worked in the National Archives in Washington where “she planned, developed, and evaluated outreach programs for secondary school teachers.”<sup>108</sup> As soon as she arrived, plans for the next year’s educational programs began. The campaign was underway to increase “visitor awareness and understanding of Mount Vernon and George and Martha Washington.”<sup>109</sup> And, as the archaeological dig began to yield impressive results, this also became an important aspect of the Mount Vernon’s expanding interpretation.

Prior to the mid-1980s Mount Vernon was “displaying memorabilia and objects, not interpreting them.”<sup>110</sup> Visitors experienced the mansion and the grounds through interpretive signs and labels displayed throughout the estate. By mid-1986, this began to change. In order to facilitate the transformation, Alexander organized a group of staff members to meet and discuss interpretation at Mount Vernon. The group focused on three main areas of interpretation: the mansion, the museum, and the outbuildings and grounds. They intended to build a “bridge” between the visitor and the estate.

In order to build this bridge the group identified the shortcomings of the current interpretation at Mount Vernon and then how best to overcome them. The central concerns of the group were the scant interpretation, the lack of an overall interpretive plan, the absence of a

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<sup>108</sup>“Education a Plus at Mount Vernon,” *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, 5

<sup>109</sup>*Minutes of the Council of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1985): 31.

<sup>110</sup>John E. Harbour, “Report on Recommended Improvements to the Museum, Museum Annex, and Outbuildings,” September 25, 1986, 1.

central theme, and the cramped and inadequate presentation of the museum annex.<sup>111</sup> The group then set about outlining its plan of action.

In the museum proper, the group intended to create a central interpretive theme, as well as expand the exhibitions.<sup>112</sup> An interpretive theme creates a more consistent and purposeful exhibit. Instead of objects without any relation to one another, or without any explained connection, an interpretive theme forms the link within an exhibit and its larger context. On that same vein, the group hoped to reduce the clutter in the exhibits in the museum and the museum annex. Through the removal of excess artifacts, the museums became more legible and accessible. The reduction of unnecessary artifacts emphasized the important ones and thus made it easier for the visitor audience to understand the meaning of an exhibit.

In regard to the outbuildings the question became “What is the philosophical and practical relationship of the outbuildings to the mansion and the grounds?”<sup>113</sup> As previously these areas were not interpreted, this question surfaced and became important over the course of these discussions as the group was faced with how to interpret these places and link them with the rest of the estate. The group proposed placing more interpretive signs and staff members around the estate to encourage visitors to explore beyond the mansion. The expansion of Mount Vernon’s interpretation outward from the mansion opened up more educational opportunities as well. All of these interpretive changes were geared towards making Mount Vernon more accessible and understandable to the general public. By the end of 1986 and into 1987 Mount

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<sup>111</sup>Ibid.; An interpretive plan functions as the outline and basis for interpretation at a given site. Typically, these documents provide tour outlines and in depth information about what to cover on the tour.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid.



Vernon introduced a general public tour of the mansion that provided a “more intimate and in-depth tour of Washington’s home.”<sup>114</sup>

While Mount Vernon planned its improved interpretation, Monticello too began work on its interpretation and educational programs. In 1987, Monticello introduced school programs.<sup>115</sup> These programs encouraged students to learn about Monticello in the context of American history and represented another shift towards education-driven programs at the estate. In 1988 Monticello released a self-guided tour for the public. These two initiatives created a more educational environment on the estate for both students and adults. Monticello at this time also began to plan for the future, releasing in 1988 a Master Plan for 1988-1997. This document discussed the trajectory of the estate and its interpretation over the next decade. It focused on the introduction of more educational programs and the expansion of interpretation to include slavery and the garden area. Like Mount Vernon’s interpretive plans, it outlined the shortcomings and the goals of Monticello as it entered a new decade.

Following the adoption of the Master Plan, in 1989 Monticello introduced self-guided tours for Mulberry Row and the grounds and gardens.<sup>116</sup> These self-guided tours allowed visitors to experience and learn about different places on the estate. They expanded on the interpretive signs already in place and created a base for growth in the 1990s. The self-guided tour for the grounds and gardens discussed the various fauna and aspects of the estate of which visitors were previously unaware. It not only provided a wealth of information about the gardens of Monticello, but it related the gardens back to Jefferson and the mansion. Visitors were

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<sup>114</sup>*Annual Report* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1985): 12.

<sup>115</sup>“Thomas Jefferson Foundation Chronology,”

<https://www.monticello.org/site/about/thomas-jefferson-foundation-chronology>.

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*

introduced to the idea of Jefferson as an architect of buildings and landscape, and not just a president. The tour also discussed his interest in horticulture, as “the grounds became a kind of living laboratory for the study of useful and ornamental plants from around the world. His Garden Book chronicles a lifetime of gardening activities.”<sup>117</sup> The alternate view of Jefferson illustrated in this tour also foreshadowed a larger shift that occurred in the 1990s as Monticello began rethinking its interpretation of Jefferson the man.

The Mulberry Row self-guided tour opened the door for another interpretive shift. For now it represented segregated knowledge at Monticello.<sup>118</sup> While it clearly examined some of the more complex issues of slavery, the theme was not fully incorporated into the general narrative of the estate. In the winter tour of the 1988-1989 season, slavery came up once. “In winter,” the entrance hall label explained that “the slaves received a set of winter clothes and every third winter, a new blanket. Special wintertime additions to the slaves’ basic food rations included molasses and, at Christmas, a small allotment of whiskey.”<sup>119</sup> That was all. There was a true divide between the information provided within the mansion and on the estate as a whole. Eichstedt and Small point out that these other tours are presented as addendums to the “normal tour.”<sup>120</sup> They contended, “These terms are used for the tours that are about white people and in which the whiteness of the master-enslavers...was left unarticulated.”<sup>121</sup> The distinction between

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<sup>117</sup>“The Grounds,” (Charlottesville, VA: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1989).

<sup>118</sup>Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, 170.

<sup>119</sup>Elizabeth D. Taylor, “Winter Tour Theme, 1988-89,” 1988-1989, Winter Tour: Jefferson and Family, Jefferson Library at Monticello, 3.

<sup>120</sup>Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery, Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, 171.

<sup>121</sup>*Ibid.*, 171-172. “These terms” refer to the language of normalcy that Eichstedt and Small discuss. They in particular refer to the use of the word normal, or regular, to characterize the house tour over other tours offered at plantation museums.

the normal tour and the tour dedicated to slavery and Mulberry Row clearly demonstrated a segregation of knowledge on the estate.

But despite such segregation, the self-guided tour provided new information to the visitors about slavery at Monticello. It incorporated information discovered through the archaeological studies conducted earlier in the 1980s. Though Mulberry Row only consisted of a few remaining foundations, the map included in the brochure illustrated the hypothesized size and shape of the buildings. As the visitors traveled down the Row, they garnered information about buildings they passed. They also learned the names and roles of some of the slaves who worked on Mulberry Row. For example, in regards to the Blacksmith Shop/Nailery: “~~Here Jefferson’s slaves~~ Little George, Moses, and Joseph Fossett shoed horses, repaired the metal parts of plows and hoes, replaced gun parts, and made the iron portions of the carriages that Jefferson designed.”<sup>122</sup> In this edited version of the brochure the phrase intimating lack of agency of the slaves were crossed out. The editor replaced these phrases with those that presented the slaves as humans with individuality. In similar fashion, the phrase “~~many of the Monticello slaves had their own,~~” was replaced with “enslaved families at Monticello had their own vegetable plots.”<sup>123</sup> By switching the subject to emphasize the slave, a sense of agency was replaced. So despite a distinct separateness between the slave tour and the general tour, Monticello began to emphasize the individuality and agency of the slaves at Monticello.

As the 1980s ended, Mount Vernon celebrated the bicentennial of George Washington’s inauguration. In the *Annual Report*, the Regent wrote that the bicentennial “has given us a fine opportunity to improve our educational programs and special events so that all of our visitors

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<sup>122</sup>“Mulberry Row,” (Charlottesville, VA: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1989). It is unclear who exactly wrote the text in the brochure, but it likely was Lucinda Stanton.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid.

will leave Mount Vernon with a greater understanding of the ‘Father of Our Country.’”<sup>124</sup> Mount Vernon took advantage of this opportunity and introduced a multitude of educational programs, building on the ones introduced in 1986. It also launched in commemoration of this event the “Hail to George Washington” program.<sup>125</sup> This included a school program for fourth and fifth graders that involved a lesson plan exclusively about Washington. To ensure the absorption of the information, the participants took “scratch-and-learn” test afterwards. In addition to this, Mount Vernon sponsored an essay-writing contest for middle school and high school students.<sup>126</sup> Together these programs intended to broaden the reach of Mount Vernon beyond the surrounding area. Through these new initiatives, Mount Vernon increased access to information of George Washington, on the estate and off.

During the 1980s both Mount Vernon and Monticello adjusted to the changing standards in museums and their methods of interpretation and research to fit into this new mold. As the 1980s turned into the 1990s, professionalization continued as well as the expansion of interpretation. As museums grew into their new administration, the number of educational programs and tours increased. Especially in terms of the discussion on slavery at these estates, this is particularly relevant.

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<sup>124</sup>*Annual Report*, 1989, 5.

<sup>125</sup>James C. Rees, “Inauguration Comes Alive Through Education,” in “Washington: Still First in the Hearts of His Countrymen,” supplement, *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (1988).

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*

## Chapter 2

### The Museum of the Near Future: The 1990s

The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation's (TJMF, until 2000) inaugural issue of its newsletter, *Monticello*, in the summer of 1990 portended transformations that materialized over the rest of the decade.<sup>127</sup> Themes of achievement, innovation, and exploration permeated the issue and evoked a sense of rejuvenation. Notably, its last article, "Mulberry Row Tells the Story of Monticello Slaves," alluded to a renewed investment in the study and presentation of accurate and diverse histories of the estate in its entirety. The Foundation not only used this article to discuss the archaeological exploration of Mulberry Row, but even broached the conundrum of Jefferson's contradictory position on slavery. By tackling the discrepancy between Jefferson's words and actions, the TMFJ opened up a larger dialogue on slavery and plantation life at Monticello that would define the 1990s. The foundation also used this article to introduce a new tour focusing on the plantation and the lives of the slaves living at Monticello, and demonstrate its "commitment to the interpretation of plantation life."<sup>128</sup>

Coincidentally, this article paralleled the cover article of Mount Vernon's newsletter's winter 1990 issue. Entitled "Exciting excavations shed light on slave life," this article likewise illustrated Mount Vernon's dedication to revamping its interpretation of the estate and its plantation.<sup>129</sup> In contrast to the article in *Monticello*, this one delved more into the findings and interpretations of archaeological explorations. These excavations yielded information regarding

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<sup>127</sup>The newsletter originally began in 1957, but was discontinued and then revitalized in 1990. "Thomas Jefferson Foundation Chronology," accessed February 7, 2016, <https://www.monticello.org/site/about/thomas-jefferson-foundation-chronology>.

<sup>128</sup>"Mulberry Row Tells Story of Monticello Slaves, Industrial Workers," *Monticello* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1990): 5.

<sup>129</sup>Ann M. Rauscher, "Exciting excavations shed light on slave life," *Mount Vernon: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 1-3.

the diet of the domestic slaves who lived close to the mansion. The author noted that the “the slaves’ rations were still of lower quality than the food consumed by the Washington family.”<sup>130</sup> This finding referred to the diet of the domestic slaves, whose diet was considered better than that of the field. These findings merged into the general interpretation of the mansion and newly opened slave quarters. The conscious attention now paid to depicting the reality of slave life at Mount Vernon in this article and the rest of the 1990s, contrasts starkly with the sparse mentions of slave life in previous decades.

The timing and content of these articles helped redefine the image of both estates not only in terms of the interpretation of slavery, but also in regards to a more inclusive narrative across the board. This reimagined picture emerged out of the programs and initiatives started in the 1980s, such as the aforementioned archaeology projects and, especially at Mount Vernon, the new slave memorial. The 1980s, at both estates, present an interesting case study, as in many ways they equally demonstrate the practice of “symbolic annihilation” introduced by Eichstedt and Small.<sup>131</sup> Eichstedt and Small explain symbolic annihilation as the conscious decision “to obscure the institution of slavery.”<sup>132</sup> As evidenced in guidebooks and interpretation materials, these estates fell into this category. Monticello’s guidebook from 1982, for example, replaced the word slave with “servant,” and even in the section “Mulberry Row” the authors dedicated only one sentence to the “slave occupants” who lived there.<sup>133</sup> Similarly Mount Vernon’s 1974 guidebook, which would have been used until the next one was published in 1988, bypassed the

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<sup>130</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>131</sup>Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery* (London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002): 105-107.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>133</sup>Frederick D. Nichols and James A. Bear, Jr., *Monticello* (Monticello, VA: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1982): 55.

issue of slavery in favor of discussing Washington’s farming accomplishments.<sup>134</sup> In spite of this, each institution took efforts during the 1980s to set the stage for the inclusion rather than the erasure of the other narratives at their estates in the 1990s.

Stephen Weil has written about the “ongoing effort to build the museum of the near future.”<sup>135</sup> This new museum concept began to form in the mid to late 1990s with the recognition that the narrative of the “great men” lacked its previous appeal to the public. Instead of the being centered on the presidents, museums started to include more diverse narratives. Weil noted for example the creation of the National Museum of Industrial History in Washington, D.C. in 1997, and the wide range of experiences included in the general narrative, spanning the workers who ran the factories.<sup>136</sup> Mount Vernon and Monticello followed a similar trajectory throughout the 1990s as indicated through guide training materials and the expanding content of tours at each estate. These interpretive changes were partially inspired by visitor reactions to museums and a need to raise attendance rates. Internal documents at Mount Vernon and Monticello cite attendance rates as one reason motivating major transformations in presentation and mission.<sup>137</sup> This demonstrates an increased interest in appealing to the public and creating exhibits that allow for a “degree of personal self-affirmation” for the visitor.<sup>138</sup> Attention paid to the visitors and their personal connections to the museum and the stories told at the museum became a focal point at these institutions. In 1984 Mary Ellen Munley observed that “people seem to be grasping

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<sup>134</sup>*Mount Vernon: An Illustrated Handbook* (Mount Vernon, VA: Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, 1974): 23.

<sup>135</sup>Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press): 208.

<sup>136</sup>*Ibid.*, 204-205.

<sup>137</sup>*Annual Report* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1994): 2; “Thomas Jefferson Foundation Chronology,” <https://www.monticello.org/site/about/thomas-jefferson-foundation-chronology>.

<sup>138</sup>Weil, *Making Museums Matter*, 207.

for explanations and solutions.”<sup>139</sup> Museums from the 1980s and into the 1990s attempted to answer these questions through their interpretation. Especially at Mount Vernon and Monticello, these questions revolved around the topic of slavery. So throughout the 1990s both estates endeavored to address this question, but even in 2016 they continue to struggle to answer it definitively, and continue to move towards the museum of the near future.

During the 1990s, though, there was an institutional shift towards incorporating more varied and engaging narratives as well as dedicating serious efforts to present these histories accurately. This renewed dedication to historical accuracy emerged as a result of a variety of factors. These included the professionalization and the influence of African American scholarship, which both emerged in force at the beginning of the 1980s. Though it has been argued that during this time Monticello and Mount Vernon, and other such sites, were responding to the public, in many cases it was more a result of larger internal changes that occurred in the previous decade. The reformation of the administration and the new directors, such as Daniel P. Jordan (1985, Monticello) and James C. Rees (1994, Mount Vernon) especially seemed to have the largest impact on change at both institutions.

### **“Symbolic Incorporation”: The Creation of the Slave Narrative**

On December 15<sup>th</sup> of 1992, the Advisory Committee of African American History met for the first time at Monticello. Lucinda Stanton (Cinder), Monticello’s Shannon Senior Historian (1979 to 2016), pushed this new initiative forward out of a recognized need to better

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<sup>139</sup> Mary Ellen Munley, “Museums as Learning Environments: A Prespectus for a New Century,” *Roundtable Reports* 9 no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer, 1984): 31.



tell the story of the African Americans at Monticello.<sup>140</sup> The discussion at this inaugural meeting centered on the past, present, and future of African American interpretation at the estate. As the discussion on plans for 1993 shifted to the incorporation of the slave narrative, an attendee asked of these changes “can we teach complex history to people who come with simple expectations?”<sup>141</sup> People, Dr. Reginald Butler went on to suggest, visit estates such as Monticello with the intention of learning about the president and the great things he accomplished. Visitors arrive at estates such as Monticello and Mount Vernon with the illusion of “the great man” and with the expectation of having this illusion nourished. The incorporation of the slave narrative complicates the overall story and consequently disturbs the visitor’s illusion. This became a central concern for the two estates during the 1990s as they attempted to reconcile the historical truth and the visitor’s illusions.

Clearly members of the African American Advisory Panel were concerned with people who would reject this new narrative, but there was another side to this. Beginning in the mid-1960s discourse was renewed on the subject of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Though most Jefferson scholars rejected the prospect of such a relationship, the mass media picked up the story and ran with it. Books such as Barabara Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings: A Novel* instantly attracted the attention of news outlets.<sup>142</sup> In the face of this type of novel, Monticello began discussing the relationship and slavery more, but “still seemed defensive on the subject of

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<sup>140</sup>“Cinder Stanton, “Those who Labor for my Happiness’ Slavery at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello,” accessed February 12, 2016, <https://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/cinder-stanton-author-those-who-labor-my-happiness-slavery-thomas>

<sup>141</sup>Professor Reginald Butler, “Advisory Committee on African American History: Monticello, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1992,” Collection: *1992-1999 Advisory Committee on African American Interpretation*, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, 2.

<sup>142</sup> Scot A. French and Edward L. Ayers, “The Strange Career of Thomas Jefferson,” in *Jeffersonian Legacies* Peter Onuf, ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993): 436.

race” through the mid-1990s.<sup>143</sup> Pressure from African American scholars and a part of the public demanded the recognition of the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings.<sup>144</sup> This would not come to fruition, though, until the late 1990s. So the desire to exhibit a sort of historical truth was met with pressure on both sides of the spectrum.

The concept of the historical truth in museums became ever more relevant as historians began playing a more active role in exhibitions. Museums had more consistently been hiring academically trained historians beginning in the late 1970s as they began to professionalize and commit to more researched-based narratives. Leading up to the 1990s, as historians became more integrated the trends in museums began to parallel that of academic history. Specifically, museum historians, like their academic counterparts, according to Andrew Hartman, “sought to disturb the triumphalist American story that museums had long been accustomed to telling.”<sup>145</sup> Hartman’s *A War for the Soul of America* argues that at this point most Americans accepted the story of America’s “national greatness and unbroken progress.”<sup>146</sup> Historians, by contrast, constantly question the accepted story of an event in order to reveal a new perspective and augment the historiography on a certain topic. This on-going process appeared decades before in the field of history, but within the tradition-based world of museums this approach represented a drastic change, met with significant challenges by more conservative forces involved in the museum world.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 445.

<sup>144</sup>The main reason that Monticello would not definitively respond to the Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings question was due to lack of physical evidence supporting the claim. While there was

<sup>145</sup>Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015): 261.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid., 260.

An exhibit that was supposed to open in 1994 at the Air and Space Museum in D.C. helps illustrate the convoluted relationship between museum historians and these conservative forces during the 1990s. The exhibit, which intended to focus on the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, included the *Enola Gay* as its central artifact. The *Enola Gay*, which dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, became the focus of the controversy surrounding the exhibit as a whole. The initial concept of the exhibit intended to include pictures of Hiroshima in the aftermath of the bomb. By including these images, the historians and curators endeavored to create a historically unbiased and comprehensive exhibit dealing with the end of WWII. This initial draft, though, met negative reactions from the Air Force Association and a military lobbying group.<sup>147</sup> The controversy spread beyond these military groups and reached into the media and Congress, who accused the curators and historians being anti-American for their presentation of juxtaposing the images with the *Enola Gay*. In 1995, the exhibit presented by the Smithsonian came nowhere close to the original idea created in the early 1990s. This exhibit merely venerated the *Enola Gay*.

Though not directly comparable the situation in Mount Vernon and Monticello at this time, this incident demonstrates what Edward Linenthal terms the “inevitable tension between a commemorative voice...and a historical one.”<sup>148</sup> The inherent contradiction, specifically at Mount Vernon and Monticello, became a central issue during the 1990s. Especially as these estates began to incorporate slavery into a narrative largely dominated by the “great man,” the

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<sup>147</sup>Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, “Introduction: History Under Siege” in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996): 2.

<sup>148</sup>Edward T. Linenthal, “Anatomy of a Controversy” in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996): 9.

reconciliation of these discrepancies became a central concern. This can be seen in the initiatives put forth, such as new tours and more research.

While Mount Vernon first dedicated its slave memorial in 1983 in reaction to Dorothy Gilliam's 1982 article in the *Washington Post*, it actively began to commemorate the site only in 1990.<sup>149</sup> In conjunction with the organization Black Women United for Action (BWUFA), the Mount Vernon Ladies Association started a Wreath Laying ceremony "to pay homage" to the slaves that worked on Washington's plantation.<sup>150</sup> The inspiration for the event came from the leader of the BWUFA who, like many others, noted that since the unveiling of the memorial six years prior the site had gone relatively unnoticed.<sup>151</sup> The first ceremony included a welcome speech by the Regent of the MVLA, a speech by the Virginia's Governor Douglas Wilder, a descendent of a Mount Vernon slave, and music.<sup>152</sup> At the end of the ceremony the group moved from the plantation yard to the memorial site, at which point the wreath was laid and the names of the known slaves were read out loud. This ceremony endeavored not only to honor the slaves who toiled on the plantation, but also tied the past to the present and allowed for reflection. Mount Vernon used this inaugural event to refocus its plans for the 1990s to reflect its interest in the preservation of the whole story of the estate. This marked only the beginning.

In 1990, Monticello reintroduced its newsletter, *Monticello*, to highlight the on-going changes and innovations at the estate. Intended for donors, the newsletter would serve to

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<sup>149</sup>Dorothy Gilliam, "Remembrance," *The Washington Post*, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1982.

<sup>150</sup>Chris L. Jenkins, "Tribute to Slaves Tightens Ties to History," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/23/AR2006092300749.html>.

<sup>151</sup>Ibid.

<sup>152</sup>Eugenia M. Seamans, "Report of the Regent, 1990," *Annual Report 1990* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1990): 8.

highlight the accomplishments of the Foundation over the coming decade. Monticello also added, in 1990, a brochure detailing the lives and activities of the men and women living on Mulberry Row.<sup>153</sup> This brochure built on the signs that lined the Row starting the year prior and included a self-guided tour for visitors. This self-guided tour, after many discussions and conflicts within the AAAP, became a part of a more complex and significant part of the interpretation of the site as the 1990s continued, especially with the creation of the African American Advisory Panel (AAAP).

As mentioned earlier, in 1992 Monticello organized the AAAP with the goal of guiding the estate towards a more inclusive interpretation of the mansion and the surrounding area. The creation of the panel speaks to the professionalization of the estate and the increased emphasis on historically accurate interpretation. The panel included professors, local and influential African Americans, as well as staff from Monticello. Discussions, particularly at the first few meetings, revolved around the current state of African American interpretation on the estate and the development of plans for the future. The upcoming Plantation Community Tour, scheduled to start in 1993, quickly became the central theme of the first meeting of the panel. The attendees responded by pointing out the possible negative effects of incorporating the tour, notably challenging the visitors' expectations. Their concern for the visitor's ability to process the information seemed to overshadow, in this first meeting, their desire to educate the public. One attendee aptly responded that "the issues we want to address are terrifically difficult, but only by

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<sup>153</sup> "Advisory Committee on African American History: Monticello, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1992," Collection: *1992-1999 Advisory Committee on African American Interpretation*, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, 2.

confronting them can you begin to find answers.”<sup>154</sup> This statement captured the essence of what this advisory panel attempted to accomplish through the new tour and other initiatives to be launched later in the 1990s.

Similarly, starting in 1991, Mount Vernon also began envisioning the incorporation of slavery into its general narrative. It integrated slavery into the general house tour during this time, with the separate slave tour emerging in 1994, following a trajectory similar to Monticello’s. As noted by James C. Rees, training guides for the reinterpreted house tour began in 1991, and built on the momentum from the slave memorial event in 1990.<sup>155</sup> This new addition to the house tour confronted visitors with the slave narrative, but even in the newsletter the changes to the house tour were overshadowed by a plan to reconstruct Washington’s 16-sided barn and treading mill. Indeed, in the midst of these changes to better incorporate the slave narrative the article that introduced the new barn made no mention of the slave labor that originally constructed Washington’s innovation.<sup>156</sup> Still, Mount Vernon accomplished what Eichstedt and Small describe as “relative incorporation” through their changes to the house tour.<sup>157</sup> That is Mount Vernon to some extent integrated the slave narrative and forced the visitors’ to engage with it on at least a nominal level. This can be seen occurring at Monticello as well during the first part of the 1990s as it trained guides on slavery topics and further interpreted Mulberry Row. Though

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<sup>154</sup> Sarah S. Hughes, “Advisory Committee on African American History: Monticello, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1992,” Collection: *1992-1999 Advisory Committee on African American Interpretation*, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, 2.

<sup>155</sup> James C. Rees, “Looking back and moving forward the changing interpretation of slave life on the Mount Vernon Estate,” in *Slavery at the Home of George Washington*, edited by Philip Schwartz (Mount Vernon, VA: Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, 2001): 170.

<sup>156</sup> James C. Rees, “Visitors to Learn about Washington the Farmer,” *Mount Vernon: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* 5 no. 2 (Spring, 1992): 1-2.

<sup>157</sup> Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 204.

these changes may seem minor and insignificant, Eichstedt and Small in their survey of plantation house museums concluded that only 3.3% of such museums practiced relative incorporation.<sup>158</sup>

The celebration of Thomas Jefferson's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday was the central event at Monticello during 1993. New exhibitions opened dealing with Jefferson and his accomplishments, but most significantly Monticello used this time to enlarge their interpretation of slave life on the estate. In the AAAP's first meeting in 1993 the discussion revolved around the new projects planned for 1993, namely the Plantation Community Tour (PC). The attendees of the previous meeting decided that the tour should focus on the human experience and the relationships between the slaves and those living in the mansion in order to balance the "negative subject" of the tour.<sup>159</sup> As the launch of the tour drew closer, the panel concerned itself with the logistics of the tour, such as how to handle the inherent contradiction between Jefferson's ideals and Jefferson as a slaveholder. The general consensus among the attendees affirmed that "Monticello was no different than any other southern plantation."<sup>160</sup> Jefferson was a man of his time, and despite his ideals, was dependent on the slaves. More important, though, the panel decided that in addition to the human element, the slaves' agency in this situation must be highlighted during the tour. Jefferson's detailed records and the memoirs written by former slaves made it possible to include specific slaves and their lives in the tour. The emphasis placed on the experiences and the

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> "Advisory Committee on African American History: Monticello, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1992," Collection: *1992-1999 Advisory Committee on African American Interpretation*, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, 3.

<sup>160</sup> Julian Bond, "Advisory Committee on African American History: Monticello, March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1993," Collection: *1992-1999 Advisory Committee on African American Interpretation*, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, 3.

individuality of the slaves, even in this planning stage, illustrates Monticello's and the panel's intent to create a historically accurate depiction of slave life.

In addition to the representation of slave life at Monticello, the tour aimed to foster dialogue on the subject and to further challenge the visitors' expectations. How the foundation chose to introduce the tour to different audiences (i.e. the public, and the staff) helps to illustrate this motive. In a memo sent out to the Monticello staff the week before the tour launched, Lucinda Stanton briefly described how the tour "will examine the Monticello slave community, and address the philosophical issue of Jefferson and slavery."<sup>161</sup> Instead of merely presenting slavery, Stanton emphasized the learning and questioning aspect of the tour. The *Monticello* newsletter from fall 1993 echoed this in the article "A Community of Slave and Free," which immediately addressed the relationships between the slaves and the masters at Monticello.<sup>162</sup>

In addition to stressing the dialogue aspect of the tour, the guides were expected to address the controversial topics associated with slavery, especially at Monticello. The guide training materials for the PC tour explicitly stated, "yes, we will discuss the allegation that Jefferson fathered children by his slave, Sally Hemings."<sup>163</sup> Other topics touched on during this first version of the tour included: Jefferson as a slave master, the slaves' lives and work, and a particular focus on individual slaves. The format of the tour changed over the next few years to better reflect newly discovered information and visitors' comments. The tour garnered a large amount of visitor interest in the topic of African American history on the plantation, and in a

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<sup>161</sup>Lucinda Stanton and Elizabeth Dowling Taylor, e-mail message to all staff, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1993, Collection: *1993-2001, Plantation Community Tour*, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson

<sup>162</sup>"A Community of Slave and Free," *Monticello* 4 no. 2 (Fall, 1993): 7.

<sup>163</sup>Elizabeth Dowling Taylor, "Plantation Community Tour," February 1993, Collection: *1993-2001, Plantation Community Tour*, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, 1.



survey of those who took the PC tour “99% of visitors favored the continuation of the tours.”<sup>164</sup> The visitors seemed to react positively especially to the “openness of the tour” and “the willingness to discuss complex and controversial topics.”<sup>165</sup> The success of the PC tour encouraged further development of the slavery narrative at Monticello by the end of the 1990s. Soon after Mount Vernon followed suit and introduced its first slavery-focused tour on the estate.

Struggling with visitation numbers, Mount Vernon used 1994 to reimagine the way it handled slavery on the estate, as well as expand other educational programs. This, in many ways, came in the form of a new Resident-Director, James C. Rees. Under his advising, the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union (MVLA) hosted a conference that explored slavery at Mount Vernon and George Washington as a slave owner. The conference covered a variety of topics pertaining to slavery such as the legal aspects of slavery and the genealogy of Mount Vernon slaves. Many of the contemporary staff members also contributed their personal research to the conference, such as Mary Thompson, whose research delved into the personal lives of individual slaves at Mount Vernon.<sup>166</sup> The conference then addressed the question of how best to interpret slavery at historic sites such as Mount Vernon. The overall consensus seemed to be “that mainstream museums no longer have the option of whether or not to discuss slavery.”<sup>167</sup> This opinion seems to come from the emergence of outright discussions of slavery at similar sites. For example, Colonial Williamsburg during this time began to interpret slavery and the

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<sup>164</sup> Lucinda Stanton, “Advisory Committee on African American History: Monticello November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1993,” Collection: *1992-1999 Advisory Committee on African American Interpretation*, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, 3.

<sup>165</sup>Ibid.

<sup>166</sup>Dennis J. Pogue, “Slavery in the Age of George Washington” in *Annual Report* (Mount Vernon, VA: MVLA, 1994): 26.

<sup>167</sup>Ibid., 27.

lives of African Americans. To fail to interpret slavery and slave life would be to isolate the institution from the progress at other plantation museums.

The question then became how best to interpret slavery at these historic sites. Mount Vernon answered this question with the introduction of their “third person walking tour.”<sup>168</sup> This tour used the research that Mary Thompson collected on individual slaves to create a discussion that explored the personalities and characters of the slaves. The tour officially launched in the spring of 1995, after taking into account the comments made by those present at the conference. Mount Vernon’s unique presentation of slave life differed from other similar tours at the time because of its access to documentation. Lack of evidence on African Americans from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries presented a major problem to many plantation museums endeavoring to expand their interpretation on the subject. Rex Ellis, previously the Vice President of the Historic Area at Colonial Williamsburg, faced this issue when attempting to interpret the African American experience in the colonial capitol. In addition to a lack of physical documentation much of the “architectural and archaeological research on black life has been done sparingly, generally only as an adjunct to research on white lifestyles.”<sup>169</sup> In the case of Mount Vernon, and Monticello the meticulous manner in which the presidents ran their estates meant copious amount of records remained. Among other southern plantation sites this type of record keeping did not exist to the extent that it did at Mount Vernon and Monticello.

Thorough record keeping at Monticello allowed for Cinder Stanton, and the rest of the AAAP, to investigate the lives of the slaves who worked on the estate. Her examination of these records prompted the oral history project, *Getting Word* in 1993. This project endeavored to

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<sup>168</sup>Ibid.

<sup>169</sup>Rex Ellis, “Interpreting Black History in the South,” in *The Journal of Museum Education* 11 no. 4 (Fall, 1986): 10.

preserve the histories of Monticello slaves through the oral traditions handed down to their descendants. Not all families wanted to participate in the project, and were not pressed to. The questions asked of the descendants gravitated toward the subject of “what connection to Monticello and descent from Jefferson has meant to the individual interviewed.”<sup>170</sup> This differed slightly from Colonial Williamsburg’s oral history project, which asked more topical questions. The personal focus of Monticello’s *Getting Word* resulted in a greater understanding of the connection felt across generations to their ancestors. This more objective approach allowed for interviewees to perpetuate their own oral history. Furthermore this project added to the bank of knowledge at Monticello and allowed for more detailed interpretation of Mulberry Row and slave life in general.<sup>171</sup>

As Monticello moved into 1994, the AAAP became less concerned with the reaction of the public and more interested in presenting the facts and the history of slavery. Eric Perkins discussed the need for “the public to understand that slavery developed from a society where free whites and blacks worked together—that racism is the basis of slavery.”<sup>172</sup> Others in attendance agreed with his comment. Instead of considering the “negativity” of the matter the conversation switched to how best to train the guides to handle the subject.<sup>173</sup> Even the phrasing of the tour suggested a desire to confront the visitors with the reality of slavery. For example, the AAAP

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<sup>170</sup> Stanton, “Advisory Committee on African American History, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1993,” 1. For the project they were not looking for historical accuracy but for the oral traditions and perspectives that these, at the time, supposed descents had to offer to the Monticello story.

<sup>171</sup>“Getting Word, African American Families of Monticello,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation, accessed March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <https://www.monticello.org/getting-word>.

<sup>172</sup>“Advisory Committee on African American History: Monticello November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1994,” 2.

<sup>173</sup>Dorothy S. Redford, “Advisory Committee on African America History, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1994,” 3. “Are interpreters approaching questions about modern day race relations? Very tough subject—staff needs to understand the institution of racism. More training on that issue.”

pointed out the term “paternalistic,” though typically used to describe relationships between master and slave, “sounds like a kind word.”<sup>174</sup> This clear transition to accepting the complexities of the slave narrative instead of “protecting” the public from them shows a clear shift in interpretation at Monticello even over the course of one year. One attendee made the encouraging comment, “Slaves weren’t mentioned in house ten years ago; we’ve made great strides. Now every tour is oriented to a more comprehensive approach.”<sup>175</sup>

The discussion at the 1994 meeting then turned toward the progress of the oral history project and how best to integrate it into the visitor experience. An important finding of this project, so far, was the distinction of Monticello as home for these slaves. Their understanding of Monticello as home, though, was “totally separate from and had nothing to do with Monticello.”<sup>176</sup> These two distinct spheres necessarily interacted. The exploration of this interaction inspired a new way to interpret and understand the estate. Monticello used this information to tell more individualized stories of the slaves. By telling these stories Monticello helped “visitors perceive slaves as people—personalized instead of abstract.”<sup>177</sup>

The descendants interviewed for this project emphasized their desire for Monticello to honor the slaves with a memorial. Discussions on the topic attempted to grasp the purpose of the memorial, and how it serves the larger community. Cinder Stanton commented, “One purpose is to make a connection with the local African American community, and the African American

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<sup>174</sup> Sarah Hughes, “Advisory Committee on African America History, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1994,” 3.

<sup>175</sup> Susan Stein, “Advisory Committee on African America History, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1994,” 4.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>177</sup> Sarah Hughes, “Advisory Committee on African America History, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1994,” 8.

community at large.”<sup>178</sup> Through these new initiatives to incorporate slavery more, Monticello also consciously attempted to engage with the community in which it is situated. The shift toward diversification of the narrative continued into Monticello’s relationship with Charlottesville and the larger community. With the information gathered from the oral history project the memorial would be able to expand on and honor the individuals. Robert Watson warned, though, if the memorial becomes the focal point “other buildings, sites, etc. become overlooked.”<sup>179</sup> Striking the balance between memorialization and still allowing for an emphasis on education became a central concern. Dorothy Redford captured this when she said the “memorial should not be an easy way out. African American experience should be reflected in all that we do—in the staff, house interpretation, restoration, etc.”<sup>180</sup> Redford’s statement grasps the Monticello’s evolution towards greater incorporation of the slavery narrative into the interpretation of the estate. It defines the balance that needs to be found between honoring and educating others about slavery. Redford continued the next year by saying “Actively teaching, by telling the stories of the enslaved African Americans at Monticello, is a better monument.”<sup>181</sup>

As Monticello struggled with how best to memorialize the slaves who worked on the estate, Mount Vernon celebrated the 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its slave memorial. For the fifth consecutive year, the MVLA and the BWUFA co-sponsored the ceremony held at the memorial. As always, it was held in late September and included a dramatic reading of the names of the slaves, singing of spirituals, and traditional African dance. But this time, the ceremony coincided

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<sup>178</sup>Ibid., 7

<sup>179</sup>Ibid.

<sup>180</sup>Ibid.

<sup>181</sup>Dorothy Redford, “Advisory Committee on African American History: Monticello December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1995,” Collection: *1992-1999 Advisory Committee on African American Interpretation*, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, 4.

with the dedication of the 16-sided-barn recently completed earlier that fall. The slave memorial ceremony served as the “finale to the dedication weekend,” both literally and symbolically. Included as part of the traditional/normal ceremony was a program referred to as the “Architects of Freedom.” This acknowledged the role of the slaves of Mount Vernon as the architects and builders of what has become a national shrine and a monument to a free America. Especially in the context of the opening of the new barn and the Pioneer Farm, the recognition of the slaves’ role in the creation of this structure illustrated a shift in Mount Vernon’s approach to the presentation of slavery.<sup>182</sup>

In 1995 Monticello began to plan for a new Master Plan, to follow the one created in 1988. The Committee on Research and Interpretation (CRI) formed to help develop “research and interpretation objectives for the new TJMF Master Plan.”<sup>183</sup> These meetings continued through to the final draft of the Master Plan in 1997. Much of the discussions centered on the subject of slavery and how best to incorporate it into the larger purpose of Monticello. Though the TJMF beautifully restored the mansion and the grounds, the committee faced the issue of modern intrusions on the hilltop. For example, in the southern dependencies, just north of Mulberry Row, the Foundation installed bathrooms. During Jefferson’s time, this space included the kitchen and the enslaved cook’s living quarters. The bathrooms took away from the interpretation of these areas. By removing the restrooms, these dependencies would be able to

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<sup>182</sup>Rees, “Visitors to Learn about Washington the Farmer,” 1-2; “Mount Vernon Salves Praised as Architects of Freedom,” *Mount Vernon, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* 11 no. 1 (Winter, 1996): 12.

<sup>183</sup>Douglas Wilson, “Minutes of the Committee on Research and Interpretation, October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1995,” Collection: 1997-2006, *Interpretive Planning, Master Plan*, Robert H. Smith International Center of Jefferson Studies, 1.

link to the interpretation of Mulberry Row.<sup>184</sup> By linking these two spaces the visitors would gain a more accurate physical image of the relationship between the domestic slaves and the Jefferson family. In addition to the interpretation of the cook's quarters, discussions about reconstruction on Mulberry Row emerged. The attendees, torn over the number of buildings to be reconstructed, turned to a visitor survey. The survey illustrated that most visitors wanted one cabin to be reconstructed, but not all of the buildings.<sup>185</sup>

The meetings also examined how the visitors received the discussion of slavery on the house tour and the PC tour. The dialogue focused on how visitors responded to the two tours, especially in reference to the topic of Sally Hemings. Through the meeting Cinder Stanton emphasized that despite opinions on the matter the claim was not substantiated. Many visitors believed that Monticello stuck to a certain party line.<sup>186</sup> Visitors on the lookout for the truth about both slavery and Sally Hemings bombarded the guides in the house for answers. In response to the attacks of interested visitors, "guides [felt] obligated to add slavery to the end of each station; not integrated into the tour."<sup>187</sup> The lack of trust the visitors associated with the guides in house were completely reversed on a PC tour. Probably due to the frank nature of the PC tour, visitors took more kindly to the provided information. Especially in regards to Sally Hemings, visitors seemed to trust the information that the guides provided on the situation on the

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<sup>184</sup>Cinder Stanton, "Minutes of the Committee of Research and Interpretation," February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1995, Collection: *1997-2006, Interpretive Planning, Master Plan*, Robert H. Smith International Center of Jefferson Studies, 2.

<sup>185</sup>"Minutes of the Committee of Research and Interpretation, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1995," Collection: *1997-2006, Interpretive Planning, Master Plan*, Robert H. Smith International Center of Jefferson Studies, 3.

<sup>186</sup>Susan Kern, "Minutes of the Committee of Research and Interpretation," February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1995," 2. The party line being that Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings never had a relationship, and that the possibility is unlikely because of lack of physical evidence and Jefferson's character.

<sup>187</sup>Peggy Newcomb, "Minutes of the Committee of Research and Interpretation, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1995," 2.

PC tour. Committee of Research and Interpretation also discussed the on-going DNA testing being done to determine the paternity of Sally Hemings' children. Though only briefly discussed, the consensus was that "DNA testing should be done by an independent party, therefore Monticello should not get involved."<sup>188</sup> In the meantime, the Committee discussed the best way to present the information to a questioning public.<sup>189</sup>

Monticello officially adopted the new Master Plan in 1997. This new plan in conjunction with a plan created by the Plantation Life Task Force emphasized a growth in the interpretation of slave life at Monticello. The PLTF worked to develop goals and new research initiatives for specifically slavery interpretation moving forward. The mission of the task force and their master plan was,

To convey to the public an understanding of the Monticello plantation as an economic and social unit, through the presentation and interpretation of the interconnections of all of its residents (Jefferson, his family, and the free and enslaved families that lived and worked on the plantation) and Monticello's relationship to the international marketplace and the political world in an age of revolutions.<sup>190</sup>

Their objectives built off of this mission and that of the CRI. The top three objectives emphasized the need to better understand and present plantation life on the estate. They called for research fellowships to expand knowledge on the plantation. Plans for the restoration of a slave cottage were also included. In line with the mission, the PLTF asserted the importance of

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<sup>188</sup>Cinder Stanton, "Minutes of the Committee of Research and Interpretation, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1995," 4.

<sup>189</sup>Elizabeth Taylor, "Minutes of the Committee of Research and Interpretation, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1995," 5; The whole quote: "acknowledge the beginning of the story as we know it...say that it has never been substantiated, that there are families today who claim to be descendants of Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Include a line about Jefferson historians tending to reject the validity of the story."

<sup>190</sup>"Master Plan Task Force: Plantation Life February 26<sup>th</sup>, 1997," Collection: *1996-1997, Plantation Task Force*, Robert H. Smith International Center of Jefferson Studies, 1.



creating a link between the mansion and the plantation at large.<sup>191</sup> Through this new Master Plan, Monticello endeavored to appeal to a larger audience and expand its interpretation in general. In regards to plantation life, the Master Plan favored increased research and a greater incorporation into the general narrative.

As Monticello worked to fulfill its Master Plan, in September 1998 Mount Vernon celebrated its slave memorial's 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Mount Vernon also started gearing up for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Washington's death. The emphasis of this commemorative event was to enlarge the general public's understanding of George Washington. The first goal of this event was to "disseminate meaningful knowledge about George Washington, particularly to younger generations."<sup>192</sup> With this particular focus in mind, Mount Vernon also produced a hands-on learning activity for high school students called *Archaeology and Slave Life at Mount Vernon*. The activity contrasted the lifestyles of the Washington's and their slaves, and then slaves who worked in the house and those who worked in the fields.<sup>193</sup> This program, like other educational programs introduced at Mount Vernon during the 1990s endeavored to engage the public in the history of the estate.

At a meeting of the Monticello Committee on Research and Interpretation in 1995 the subject turned to the Sally Hemings controversy and how best to deal with it on tours. Though the TJMF did not have a party line on the subject, Cinder Stanton continued to highlight the fact that there was no substantial proof. In early AAAP attendees wanted the focus to be on general

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<sup>191</sup>Ibid.

<sup>192</sup>"All Hands on Deck for 1999, Entire Nation Prepares to Honor Washington in Bicentennial Year," *Mount Vernon, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, 12 no. 2 (Summer 1998): 1.

<sup>193</sup>Rees, "Looking back, moving forward," 171.

themes of slavery, race and miscegenation rather than a particular focus on the Sally Hemings controversy. The public, though, wanted information. They berated guides in the house, and questioned the PC guides to share their opinion on the controversy.<sup>194</sup> The guides were encouraged by Monticello to share their opinions, but highlight the fact that none of the story had been substantiated. Doug Wilson commented that if the allegations were true “then we’ll have to reevaluate.”<sup>195</sup> Though the Committee acknowledged the on-going DNA investigations in this same meeting, none of the attendees seemed to anticipate what came out in November of 1998.

On November 1<sup>st</sup> *Nature* magazine published the findings of the DNA testing of Jefferson’s descendants, with the intention of discovering the true paternity of Sally Hemings’ children. Dr. Eugene Foster, who led the investigation, wrote the article and in addition to providing his findings included historical context which he claimed “indicated a likely sexual relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings.”<sup>196</sup> The study used the Y-chromosome, which remains relatively unchanged between father and son, to distinguish paternity.<sup>197</sup> The findings suggested that Thomas Jefferson fathered Eston Hemings Jefferson, Sally Hemings’ last child. The article mused on other possibilities, but due to lack of supporting evidence deemed them improbable.<sup>198</sup> The president of the Foundation announced in a press

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<sup>194</sup>“Committee on Research and Interpretation February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1995,” Collection: *1997-2006, Interpretive Planning, Master Plan*, Robert H. Smith International Center of Jefferson Studies, 2.

<sup>195</sup>Doug Wilson, “Committee on Research and Interpretation February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1995,” Collection: *1997-2006, Interpretive Planning, Master Plan*, Robert H. Smith International Center of Jefferson Studies, 7.

<sup>196</sup>“DNA Update,” *Monticello* 10 no. 1 (Spring 1999): 4.

<sup>197</sup>Eugene A Foster et al. “Jefferson Fathered Slaves’ Last Child,” *Nature* 396 (November 1998): 27.

<sup>198</sup>*Ibid.*, 27-28; “We cannot completely rule out other explanations of our findings based on illegitimacy in various lines of descent...but in the absence of historical evidence to support such possibilities, we consider them to be unlikely.”

conference on November 1st, “The Foundation will evaluate carefully Dr. Foster’s findings and any other relevant evidence on the subject; and then, in the Jeffersonian tradition, the Foundation will follow truth wherever it may lead us.”<sup>199</sup> Monticello stayed true to that promise and formed a committee to review and assess relevant information to the case. The Committee published its findings and conclusions in 2000.

The newspapers at the time jumped at the opportunity to cover this controversy. The number of articles dealing with Monticello, limited to anniversaries and commemorations before this moment, skyrocketed after the article came out. Their titles ranged from “Cutting the Great man down to size,” to “Tour guides at Monticello field new questions about Jefferson.” The majority of these articles mentioned the work of Daniel P. Jordan to expand the interpretation of slavery at Monticello since the mid-1980s. One particular article, “DNA Results Confirmed Old News About Jefferson, Blacks Say,” responded to the DNA oppositely. This article presented the DNA results, through interviews with African Americans, as “confirmation and vindication,” rather than “revelation.”<sup>200</sup> These two sides captured the divide that Monticello administrators were faced with and tried to alleviate through the 1980s and 1990s. They tried to strike a balance between the widely accepted tradition, and the growing opposition.

Despite the wide range of reactions from the media, Daniel P. Jordan’s immediately instructed guides to “initiate conversations with our visitors about the study.”<sup>201</sup> When the Research Committee on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings (RCTJSH) released their report in

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<sup>199</sup>“DNA Update,” *Monticello*, 4.

<sup>200</sup> Don Terry, “DNA Results Confirmed Old News About Jefferson, Blacks Say,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1998, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>201</sup>Daniel P. Jordan, “Statement on the Report by TJMF President Daniel P. Jordan,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., last modified January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2000, <https://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/statement-report-tjmf-president-daniel-p-jordan>

2000, its suggestions fell along the same lines. In its conclusion, the RCTJSH accepted the findings of the DNA tests: “The implications of the relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson should be explored and used to enrich the understanding and interpretation of Jefferson and the entire Monticello community.”<sup>202</sup> As a result of these findings and of the report on these findings produced by the TJMF, Monticello needed to rework its interpretation. In a preliminary draft of the report, the RCTJSH compiled a series of recommendations for future interpretation. Among those recommendations were expansions on “tours, exhibits, educational programs, publications, web site, forums, and conferences.”<sup>203</sup> The committee also included recommendations for current tours, to be changed as soon as possible so as to remain relevant. One of the recommendations for the PC tour was “Do not attempt to reconcile contradictions.”<sup>204</sup> This blunt instruction demonstrated the TJMF’s intention to remain transparent and impartial throughout the course of the fallout. Though this event jolted Monticello, its repercussions brought an increased awareness of the relationship between slaves and their masters. Additionally this discovery encouraged more research and educational programs to teach the public about the situation.

Even though Monticello was at the center of this controversy, Mount Vernon also got pulled in. A new oral tradition emerged from the descendants of Washington’s slaves claiming that he had fathered West Ford. After Mount Vernon researched the issue, it was concluded that

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<sup>202</sup>“Conclusions,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation, last modified January 2000, <https://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/vi-conclusions>.

<sup>203</sup>“Research Committee Recommendations,” Collection: 2000, *TJF Research Report (DNA)*, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, 1.

<sup>204</sup>“Recommendations for Existing Tours,” May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2000, Collection: 2000, *TJF Research Report (DNA)*, Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, 1

George Washington most likely never met the mother of West Ford.<sup>205</sup> Beyond this investigation Mount Vernon continued to demonstrate their commitment to presenting slave life accurately. The investigations are on-going and they continue to inspire new initiatives and programs at each institution. At the end of the 1990s research drove education at Mount Vernon and Monticello, and continued to do so through to the present.

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<sup>205</sup>Rees, "Looking Back, Moving Forward," 172.

## Conclusion

In 2000 Congress observed that the National Park Service's (NPS) interpretation of the Civil War battlefields was "often weak or missing vital information about the role that the institution of slavery played in causing the Civil War."<sup>206</sup> This statement came as preparations began for the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War, with the intention of making the park system a place of "exploration and understanding of this critical period in our history."<sup>207</sup> This process of change began for the NPS in 1998 when it asked, "How do we go about expanding the scope of interpretation on Civil War battlefields?"<sup>208</sup> This question became even more important as Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. formulated his 2000 National Park Service appropriations bill.<sup>209</sup> In response the NPS organized a symposium on the topic of how Civil War battlefields could expand their interpretive mission. The main takeaway from this conference for the NPS was that slavery – and the South's desire to protect the institution – was the cause of the Civil War, and as such it needed to be a part of the story that the NPS presented at Civil War battlefields.

The symposium explored the motivation behind the Civil War and what that meant for these Civil War battlefields. James Horton explicitly noted in his conference paper, "I want to talk about the centrality of the institution of slavery to the interpretation of battle sites and the

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<sup>206</sup>Robert K. Sutton, "Holding the High Ground: Interpreting the Civil War in National Parks," *George Wright Forum* 25 no. 3 (2008): 47.

<sup>207</sup>Ibid.

<sup>208</sup>Ibid.

<sup>209</sup>Robert K. Sutton, "Introduction," in *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War*, ed. Robert K. Sutton (For Washington, PA: Eastern National, 2001), [http://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/rthg/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/rthg/index.htm). The bill encouraged "park managers to enrich their interpretation, he envisioned that battlefields could become classrooms to explain how this cataclysmic event influenced American history and culture."

Civil War.”<sup>210</sup> He went on to stress that the cause and motivation for the Civil War was the protection of the institution of slavery. He argued that while historians have accepted this viewpoint as fact, the way that the NPS presented the Civil War disregarded it. The main reason behind this hesitation was the negative reactions from the public when such an interpretation was merely hinted at.<sup>211</sup> Clearly the goal to interpret slavery at a place where people only hope to commemorate their ancestors hit a nerve at many of these battlefields. Horton went on to support his argument through irrefutable facts regarding motivations behind the start of the Civil War. He ended by paralleling the other speakers’ sentiments: “We need for you to educate yourselves so that you feel comfortable enough to say the tough things that need to be said in the places where most people come to learn American history.”<sup>212</sup> In a similar way Monticello and Mount Vernon faced their own struggle with the interpretation of slavery, as a controversial and complex topic, but also a central and necessary one. The NPS reevaluation, in particular, paralleled the Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson controversy and Monticello’s need to reevaluate its interpretation. Both sites were faced with an irrefutable truth that needed to be addressed, despite the potential negative reactions.

Unlike the NPS, for Monticello this represented the culmination of a twenty-year-long struggle with the interpretation of slavery, as with Mount Vernon. The 1980s for both estates marked the beginning of a movement that continues today as each attempts to represent

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<sup>210</sup> James Oliver Horton, “Slavery and the Coming of the Civil War: A Matter for Interpretation,” in *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War*, ed. Robert K. Sutton (For Washington, PA: Eastern National, 2001), [http://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/rthg/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/rthg/index.htm).

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. The incident involved John Latschar, the Superintendent at Gettysburg National Military Park, when he mentioned that slavery was one of the causes of the war. The reaction was eleven hundred letters sent to the Secretary of the Interior demanding Latschar’s resignation.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

accurately and fairly a portion of history that was largely ignored for the majority of their existence. But why in the 1980s? As discussed, the years leading up to the 1980s – especially in the museum field – sparked many of the changes that evolved over the 1980s and 1990s. Two major motivators in particular were cited in this thesis: the growth of African American scholarship and the rising influence of educators and professionalization in museums. In the late 1960s and early 1970s African American studies at universities emerged as a prominent addition to the history field. The influence African American scholarship continued to grow through the 1980s and 1990s, through the increased programs and recognition granted to these scholars. During the same time period museum educators demanded recognition from the AAM and slowly altered the whole purpose of a museum to center around education. By the mid-1980s, this had been achieved as well as a plan to reformat the administration of museums to allow for more educational and leadership opportunities, as professionalization. These two factors together help to answer the question of why.

The question then became how did interpretation change? The role of directors such as Daniel P. Jordan and John E. Harbour, Neil Horstman, and James C. Rees were instrumental in the professionalization. Their leadership also inspired new research initiatives and educational programs that brought Mount Vernon and Monticello into the new image of the museum. Their work, though, was not met without conflict. As evidenced by the *Enola Gay* incident, conservatives hesitated to support these drastic changes to the traditional story of America. By 1994 both estates also boasted slavery life tours, though these new additions to interpretation still separated slavery from the “normal house tour.”<sup>213</sup> By the end of the 1990s, as Monticello responded to the DNA results and Mount Vernon dealt with similar accusations, slavery started

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<sup>213</sup>Eichstedt and Small, *Representation of Slavery*, 171.



to move towards “relative incorporation.”<sup>214</sup> At this point, as the NPS found, there was no longer an option to interpret slavery especially at two of the most important house museums in America. This, of course, does not mean that at the end of the 1990s Mount Vernon and Monticello’s administration succeeded in perfectly interpreting the lives of slaves at the respective estates.

Even within the past few years, interpretation of slave life has furthered evolved at both sites. At Mount Vernon in 2014, twenty years after the dedication of the new slave memorial, a new archaeological project began to identify the people buried in the slave cemetery adjacent to the memorial. At Monticello a new app released this past fall leads visitors on a virtual tour of Mulberry Row, complete with stories of individual slaves and virtual reconstructions of the buildings that would have been there. As recently as April 5<sup>th</sup>, new information and perspectives on Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, provide the inspiration for new educational and interpretive programs at both institutions.<sup>215</sup>

Both estates have come a long way from the symbolic annihilation of 1980 to the relative incorporation that each estate boasts today. But at each estate there is still much work to be done to better incorporate the slavery narrative into the general narrative. The interpretation of slavery at sites such as Mount Vernon and Monticello will never be “completed.” There will always be new information or a new way to present the information to better engage visitors. Interpretation, though, should be under constant revision, as stagnancy was at the root of the problem to begin with.

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<sup>214</sup>Ibid., 204. This entailed: the visitors being provided with information about the institution of slavery at the specific site, there was information about the individual slaves who lived there, acknowledge links between the slaves and the enslavers, and incorporated some of this information into the general house tour.

<sup>215</sup>Jennifer Schuessler, “Thomas Jefferson, Neither God Nor Devil,” *New York Times* April 5, 2016, <http://nyti.ms/1Wang.Js>.

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