Colonial Williamsburg's Slave Auction Re-Enactment: Controversy, African American History and Public Memory

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COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG'S SLAVE AUCTION RE-ENACTMENT

Controversy, African American History and Public Memory

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree Of

Master of Arts

by
Erin Krutko
2003
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Approved, December 2003

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the national controversy surrounding the re-enactment of a slave auction at Colonial Williamsburg in 1994. It reconstructs the conflict from the perspective of program planners and protestors. It examines how the program was conceived, developed and approved within the museum. It also explores how civil rights leaders learned about the event and outlines some of their concerns.

This study also attempts to place the controversy in a broader context by unraveling three threads of analysis. First, it contrasts the ways in which Colonial Williamsburg interpreters and civil rights leaders described the museum's portrayal of African American history. While Colonial Williamsburg has constructed a narrative of progress, which celebrates its contribution to the public presentation of African American history, many (but not all) members of the black community have developed a counter-narrative which questions the quantity, quality and content of African American programming at the museum. This study will explore these two different perspectives and their impact on how interpreters and protestors viewed the slave auction.

Second, this study examines the conflicts and consequences that arise when twentieth-century African American interpreters are transformed into eighteenth-century slave characters in the living history context. This metamorphosis can be disturbing, and even psychologically traumatic, for African American visitors and interpreters. Operating in a society which still struggles with racism, some members of the black community are uncomfortable with the re-enactment of slavery. While living history advocates believe that the medium can educate the public about the construction of racism, opponents argue that the presentation format reproduces and reinforces racial subjugation. This study looks at how these concerns shaped the development of the program and the protestors' critique of it.

Third, this study explores both the interpreters' and the protestors' claims of authority over the painful history of slavery. Groups who believe they have a vested interest in a museum's presentation fight for the right to influence or control how "their story" is told. Within Colonial Williamsburg, it was the museum's all-black interpretive corps that challenged the museum to address a previously taboo topic. In the public arena, the civil rights leaders claimed the authority to pass judgement on the presentation. This study addresses how museums like Colonial Williamsburg determine who should have the authority to develop and shape sensitive programs like the slave auction. It examines how museums can engage the public in the process of history making without sacrificing their educational curriculum or intellectual integrity.

Finally, using information gleaned from protestors and interpreters, this study proposes an alternative or amended re-enactment that avoids some of the pitfalls and problems uncovered in the rest of the text. The program is reconstructed from the bottom up, beginning with the development process. Essentially, this imaginative exercise is attempt to apply the knowledge acquired while writing this thesis to a practical problem.
COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG’S SLAVE AUCTION RE-ENACTMENT

Controversy, African American History and Public Memory
INTRODUCTION

On October 10, 1994, Colonial Williamsburg re-enacted an estate sale. As the program unfolded, white interpreters placed bids on and purchased costumed black interpreters portraying “slaves.” The event attracted the attention of the national media—not just for its content, but because of the controversy that surrounded it. The program had been developed by the museum’s all-black Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations (AAIP). However, in the week before the auction, the Virginia National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) challenged the museum’s ability to depict a slave auction with sensitivity. They ordered museum administrators to “stop the show” and cancel the presentation. Colonial Williamsburg officials refused. After a brief delay, and emotional statements by African American interpreters and protestors, the museum staged the re-enactment. In the end, the program received mixed reviews. Some applauded the museum for its bravery, while others denounced it. Colonial Williamsburg has not staged a slave auction re-enactment since.

This event was just one of many controversies that swirled around museums in the early 1990s. These conflicts have come to be known as the “Culture Wars.” Across the country, historians, politicians and special interest groups fought over how the nation’s past would be represented in public institutions. In 1991, The National Museum of American Art (NMAA) came under fire for displaying western art in a critical context,
pointing to the ways in which artists had glossed over the displacement and exploitation of native peoples.1 Early in 1994, Congress censured the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) for developing an exhibit which reconsidered the United States’ decision to drop the atomic bomb.2 Eventually, almost the entire exhibit was scrapped and the Smithsonian displayed the Enola Gay without analysis or interpretation. A few months after Colonial Williamsburg’s auction, Lynne Cheney launched an attack against the National Standards for United States History, a document intended to help teachers introduce new scholarship in the classroom. The guidelines had been drafted with the help of the Organization of American Historians, the American Historical Association, the Organization of History Teachers, the National Education Association and more than 6,000 teachers, parents, scholars and school administrators. Nevertheless, Cheney argued that the guidelines had been shaped by a “great hatred for traditional history.”3

Scholars have explained these frequently cited controversies as the product of a conservative “backlash” that emerged in the early 1990s. Vocal conservatives argued that “liberal” curators and historians were sacrificing traditional historical narratives in order to produce a “politically correct” version of our nation’s past. They believed that public institutions, like the Smithsonian, had been contaminated by what Lynne Cheney called a “revisionist agenda.” These critics were determined to preserve “traditional” American history—as they understood it—in the nation’s museums, schools, and universities. Within this context, museums became battlegrounds and exhibitions became sites of symbolic power.

Yet, the protest organized in opposition to Colonial Williamsburg’s re-enactment does not fit neatly into this characterization of the culture wars. The protest was not
mounted by conservative citizens who believed the program defiled an older, more graceful picture of Williamsburg’s past. Instead, it came from civil rights groups who argued that the presentation was racist and dehumanizing. The culture wars had a broad impact. They cannot be defined simply as a struggle between conservative pundits and liberal curators, academics or historians. While museums were mounting more inclusive exhibits, some racial and ethnic groups felt “their” history was being co-opted and displayed inappropriately. The Virginia civil rights leaders were part of this broader trend. As Patrick Hagiopan noted in 1998,

Over the years the increasingly vexatious aspects of the nation’s history have been brought into the public gaze, but this process of incremental exposure seems to have hit some sort of unseen limit. At first, African American activists were united in demanding that the presence of an African American population and the history of racial oppression be represented adequately in historic sites. Lately, an opposition to the successive representation of one aspect after another of the history of slavery has arisen among some African Americans in civil rights organizations.4

This struggle over slavery’s public memory played itself out at Colonial Williamsburg and other sites.

Indeed, just a few months before Colonial Williamsburg’s re-enactment, African American civil rights organizations in Virginia and Washington, D.C. had responded with outrage when The Walt Disney Co. unveiled plans to build a historical theme park in Northern Virginia called Disney’s America. Blurring the line between museums and amusement parks, Disney CEO Michael Eisner announced that he felt a civic obligation to “educate through entertainment.”5 Disney Imagineers promised that the park would be a “serious fun celebration” of American history. The company dedicated itself to exploring “painful, disturbing, and agonizing” topics like slavery and the Vietnam War in
nine multimedia “playlands.” Disney Vice President Robert Weis said, “We want to make you feel what it was like to be a slave or to escape through the Underground Railroad.” However, in the same press conference, Imagineers also claimed that the park would be “fun with a capitol F.” They said, “The idea is to walk out of Disney’s America with a smile on your face.”

When reporters asked Disney executives how a theme park could be “fun” and make visitors feel what is was like to be a slave, Robert Weis answered that it was important for the historical theme park to address “dark points” in the past like slavery. Weis promised, “this park will deal with the highs and lows.” Portraying slavery was important “in order [for visitors] to have a sense of uplift” when they encountered sunnier chapters in America’s history. Nevertheless, Disney’s brand of “edutainment” was not well received by historians, the national media or civil rights organizations. Courtland Milloy, a columnist from the Washington Post wrote,

To walk in a theme park with an exhibit designed to make me ‘feel what it is like to be a slave’ simply lacks that amusing quality that I’ve come to expect... I wonder what kind of food goes with the spectacle of a slave being raped? (Oh, that won’t be in there? Then what is Weis talking about when he says, ‘This is not a Pollyanna view of America.”?)

William Stryon, author of The Confessions of Nat Turner, doubted that Disney’s technical wizardry could “do anything but mock a theme as momentous as slavery.” He asserted that Disney would “cheaply romanticize suffering.” A reader of the St. Petersburg Times questioned whether a “moneymaking juggernaut in the business of selling fantasy and make-believe” could educate Americans fairly and accurately about history. The Black History Action Coalition even threatened to boycott the park unless the Civil War and slavery were omitted from the list of playlands.
Just two weeks before Colonial Williamsburg was embroiled in its own controversy, The Walt Disney Co. abandoned its proposed theme park, citing critical media coverage, internal disagreements, and unanticipated costs. Fresh from their victory with the corporate Goliath, leaders of the Virginia NAACP and SCLC soon learned that the nation's largest outdoor history museum, Colonial Williamsburg, was planning to stage a slave auction re-enactment. The leaders believed that the difference between Disney's proposal and Colonial Williamsburg's plan could be measured by degrees, rather than kind. Consequently, they launched another protest, determined to stop the re-enactment. Chapter One, "The Slave Auction Controversy," reconstructs the resulting conflict from the perspective of program planners and protestors. It examines how the program was conceived, developed and approved within Colonial Williamsburg. It also explores how the protestors learned about the event and outlines some of their concerns. Then it describes the re-enactment itself and "behind-the-scenes" interactions between protestors, AAIP interpreters and Colonial Williamsburg administrators. Finally, it analyzes how the media characterized the auction and how visitors responded to the event.

Chapters 2-4 attempt to place the controversy in a broader context by unraveling three threads of analysis. The second chapter, "African American History at Colonial Williamsburg," examines the content of the program by looking at the museum's "track record" and how it has portrayed African American culture throughout its history. It contrasts the ways in which Colonial Williamsburg interpreters and the civil rights leaders describe the museum's past and its efforts in 1994. It also explores internal and external disagreements about how African American history should be portrayed in
public institutions. The third chapter, "Presenting Slavery in the First Person," discusses the limitations of living history as a presentation format. It explores the conflicts and consequences that arise when twentieth-century African American interpreters are transformed into eighteenth-century slave characters. It examines how interpreters at the museum have tried to avoid the reproduction of racial stereotypes and preserve their own dignity. It also addresses how the museum "contextualizes" its presentations to ensure that visitors absorb the intended message. The fourth chapter, "Outside Interest Groups and Program Development," addresses the question: Who Owns History? It explores both the interpreters' and the protestors' claims of authority over the painful history of slavery. It also discusses how Colonial Williamsburg and other museums have (or have not) engaged outside interest groups.

Finally, Chapter 5, titled "Reconsidering the Slave Auction," explores the museum’s reluctance to reproduce the program. Using information gleaned from protestors and interpreters, it proposes an alternative or amended re-enactment that avoids some of the pitfalls and problems uncovered in the rest of the text. The program is reconstructed from the bottom up, beginning with the development process. Essentially, this imaginative exercise is attempt to apply the knowledge acquired while writing this thesis to a practical problem.

A variety of sources were used to research the controversy and reconstruct the event. Colonial Williamsburg Productions, the museum’s in-house audiovisual department, taped the auction in its entirety. Consequently, a videocassette of the auction is available at the museum’s John D. Rockefeller Library. However, the tape has been edited: scenes were “tightly,” the question and answer session following the
re-enactment was pared down, and a crucial statement by the protestors was cut out entirely. Moreover, the videocassette does not document behind-the-scenes meetings between the protestors, Colonial Williamsburg administrators and AAIP interpreters. And, although it is prefaced with two short introductions, it does not really address how the program was developed.

Therefore, a number of other sources were used to reconstruct and analyze the auction. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation has graciously allowed the author to read documents in the corporate archives, including AAIP departmental records from 1991-1993 and other documents related to the re-enactment. The author has also conducted eighteen interviews with protestors, interpreters and administrators about the event. These informants have proved to be an invaluable, if biased, resource. For the most part, the one-sided nature of their opinions has not been an obstacle, largely because this study revolves around the different perspectives of the parties involved. Moreover, most of the information provided in the interviews has been corroborated through other sources. For example, leaders of the Virginia NAACP and interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg both contended that Phil Cooke, the president of the Williamsburg NAACP, had supported their side of the argument. Cooke has passed away since 1994, but Herbert Rainey, the organization’s former vice president, was able to explain the local branch’s real position. Newspaper research completed after the interview confirmed Rainey’s version of events.

Local papers covered the auction extensively. Their reporters interviewed key members of the local community, and recorded the arguments of civil rights leaders and museum employees. The Newport News Daily Press ran articles about the re-enactment
for nearly three weeks. National news outlets like the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* also sent staff writers to view the program, providing a broader, more general perspective. And the Norfolk *New Journal & Guide*, the local African American newspaper, offered an entirely different view of the auction. Colonial Williamsburg Productions has also assembled media clips from local television stations, which provided on-the-scene reactions from visitors immediately after the event.

Published books, articles, dissertations, reports and newsletters placed the auction in a broader context. Colonial Williamsburg publications, like the *Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter*, *Colonial Williamsburg News*, the museum’s journal *Colonial Williamsburg*, and the AAIP’s defunct newsletter *Broken Chains*, provided background on the museum’s interpretation of African American history and its living history program. Articles and other works written by AAIP employees, including the department’s charter document and Rex Ellis’ dissertation “Presenting the Past: Education, Interpretation, and the Teaching of Black History at Colonial Williamsburg,” provided insight into the department’s educational philosophy and programmatic history. Other studies of Colonial Williamsburg, like Richard Handler and Eric Gable’s *The New History in an Old Museum*, Anders Greenspan’s *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, and Anna Lawson’s dissertation “‘The Other Half’: Making African-American History at Colonial Williamsburg,” offered a more critical view of the museum. Museums studies texts focused on the interpretation of slavery, living history and controversy have also shaped this thesis.
NOTES FOR INTRODUCTION


2. Dubin, 194.


7. Synnot, 52-53. Weis also noted that the film *Bambi* would not have been dramatically successful if Bambi’s mother had not been shot.


11. Synnot, 53.


CHAPTER ONE

THE SLAVE AUCTION CONTROVERSY

In 1989, a scholarly critique of Colonial Williamsburg’s Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations (AAIP) predicted that while music, religion and work were suitable subjects for interpretation, “slave auctions and the daily humiliations masters visited on slaves would probably never be shown because they would be unpleasant for the staff members who recreated them and because they might alienate visitors.”1 Indeed, Rex Ellis, founder and director of the AAIP, had made it clear he would resign before asking “his folk” to display themselves on an auction block. He suggested that a program depicting a slave auction would be “too humiliating” for African American interpreters.2

However, Ellis understood that slave auctions were an important part of the black community’s experience in the colonial capital. The AAIP charter document he authored, titled Teaching African-American History at Colonial Williamsburg, stated,

Since a substantial percentage of the revenue earned by the colony came from the importation, sale, possession and/or labor of Africans, their value to the economic health of the colony is significant and should be interpreted. Slave auctions and their significance to the reality of being chattel should be explained; especially at a site such as the Raleigh Tavern where documents reveal they were being sold at years’ end . . . Slave auctions and their significance in helping contemporary audiences understand the concept of chattel slavery must be discussed [emphasis added].3

While Ellis and other members of the AAIP were not comfortable re-enacting slave
auctions, they did discuss them on museum tours given in the third-person. Occasionally, character interpreters also referred to auctions and their impact in first-person programs. Nevertheless, whenever the museum portrayed auctions or estate sales, slaves were rarely (if ever) mentioned and never visibly displayed.4

The impetus for producing the 1994 estate sale may have its roots in a series of brainstorming sessions held in the Spring of 1991. Dozens of employees, visitors and members of the community were asked: “How can we [Colonial Williamsburg] make the Historic Area experience more like 18th century Williamsburg?” The ideas produced by these sessions were documented, although participants were not identified by their age, sex or race. However, at least one AAIP staff member attended each of the six sessions. During the sessions, twelve participants suggested that the re-enactment of slave auctions would make the historic area more accurate and authentic. One participant even suggested holding a slave auction with visitor participation. Ultimately, the museum produced a program that was similar to the suggestion of another participant, simply recorded as “household estate sale, including concept of slave auction.”5

Planning the Program

Enthusiasm for re-enacting an estate sale/slave auction seems to have developed in conjunction with Christy Coleman’s appointment as director of the AAIP in August of 1994. Coleman was a native of Williamsburg who had made a name for herself in the Foundation by tackling controversial issues. Before she was appointed as director, Coleman developed a program titled “Affairs of the Heart,” which explored miscegenation. She had also developed “Jumpin’ the Broom,” a program which discussed slave marriages and black concerns about white interference or abuse.6
Coleman was committed to taking on difficult topics. She told a local reporter, "I came to the African-American Department [at Colonial Williamsburg] to explore controversial issues."7

The same month Coleman was appointed director, Colonial Williamsburg re-enacted the funeral of printer William Rind. The museum wanted to show how Rind’s death would affect his family and their property, including his only slave Dick. Interpreters began to discuss portraying Rind’s estate auction in October, during Colonial Williamsburg’s annual Publick Times weekend.8 During Publick Times, educators and interpreters recreated the festive atmosphere surrounding King George’s ascension to the throne. In the eighteenth century, public auctions and estate sales were part of the celebration. Marcel Riddick, the AAIP’s representative on the Annual Events Committee, the body which approved programming for Publick Times, came to Coleman with an idea she wanted to present: the public sale of Dick during Rind’s estate sale with an African American interpreter standing on the block. Coleman had also been thinking about portraying a slave auction and embraced the idea.9 Eventually, the concept expanded beyond Dick’s sale to include several estate auctions and the sale of four slaves.10

Coleman called a departmental meeting to discuss the possibility of re-creating an auction. She felt that consensus was required to move forward. In the end, the entire staff agreed that it was time to show, rather than just discuss slave auctions. However, only four members of the ten person staff volunteered to participate.11 Bridgette Jackson would play Sukey, a laundress. Robert Watson Jr., who had helped to build the slave quarter at Carter’s Grove, agreed to portray a skilled black carpenter. Eran Owens would
depict a house servant and Christy Coleman would play his wife. Coleman turned to a former AAIP employee, Dylan Pritchett, for the final character—Sukey’s free black husband. Some other members of the staff, like Harvey Bakari, declined to participate because they felt that standing on the auction block would be too emotionally disturbing. After the event, interpreter Eran Owens admitted, “I did have some doubts. I didn’t really want to do it . . . My concerns were my personal feelings. Sure, it’s history, but it’s a very painful part of history— for anyone to go through, much less for me to portray someone linked to me personally.”

After discussing it with AAIP staff members, Coleman and Riddick took their idea to the Annual Events Committee. According to Coleman, “jaws dropped.” The Virginian-Pilot and Ledger-Star reported that “several members of the . . . Annual Events Committee . . . were reticent about showing the sale of slaves . . . there was fear . . . of what the public and employees, black and white, would think.” Nevertheless, Arthur “Barney” Barnes, chairman of the committee and manager of 18th century entertainment and programs, endorsed the proposed auction. The president of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Robert Wilburn, also approved the idea. Wilburn recently stated, “I couldn’t see anyway that I could have told the African American interpreters that they couldn’t do this program. It seemed to me that this was something they wanted to do and it was part of history . . . So I was willing, if you will, to defend their right to give this program.”

Despite this rubber-stamp of approval, the museum did not actively promote or advertise the program. Although it sent press releases to major news outlets about scheduled Publick Times events, both the Richmond Times-Dispatch and the Newport
News Daily Press reported that their itineraries did not mention that “slaves” were going to be “sold” as part of the estate sale. Wilburn admitted that the auction “wasn’t something we wanted to draw much attention to . . . we were sort of doing it with mixed emotions.” In order to avoid controversy and reduce the risk that the program would be sensationalized, the museum decided not to call attention to the re-enactment.

Controversy Develops

Nevertheless, even without publicity, news about Colonial Williamsburg’s “slave auction” broke in the Richmond Times-Dispatch on October 5, 1994—five days before the event was scheduled to take place. The lead paragraph of a brief article buried in the Metro section read,

Colonial Williamsburg will take a new step in exploring the hardships of early African-American life next week with its first dramatic presentation of a slave auction. “The goal is to re-create it,” said Lorraine C. Brooks, a spokeswoman for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. “These things did happen.” Plans call for the dramatized auction of two slaves, a husband and a wife, in an outdoor setting from noon to 12:45 p.m. Monday at the Wetherburn Tavern on Duke of Gloucester Street in the historic area.

This unassuming article launched a nationwide debate about the re-enactment. After reading the article in the Times-Dispatch, members of the Virginia National Association of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) began calling each other, the press and Colonial Williamsburg to voice their concerns.

Indeed, the president of the York/James City/Williamsburg NAACP Phil Cooke began receiving calls from African Americans concerned about the estate sale from as far away as New York and Philadelphia. Coleman was personally connected to the local NAACP through family members. Before the story broke, she had offered to come speak
with the organization about the program. Due to the irate phone calls, the vice president of the Williamsburg NAACP, Herbert Rainey, called Coleman to schedule a special meeting with branch members the next day. According to Rainey, members of the local branch were concerned because it was not clear whether people in the audience would be permitted to bid on the interpreters. When she met with the organization, Coleman explained that only Colonial Williamsburg staff with “authentic” letters of credit would be allowed to bid. She also explained why the auction was historically appropriate and reassured the branch that the auction would be portrayed with dignity. Coleman’s presentation persuaded the local branch to withhold judgement until after they saw the program; members decided that as long as the auction was presented “in good taste,” they would support AAIP staff.

In the days that followed, members of the state NAACP adopted a more aggressive stance. King Salim Khalfani, branch field activities coordinator for the Virginia NAACP and spokesperson, asserted that Colonial Williamsburg’s secrecy made the program seem like a “covert operation.” Khalfani suggested that the museum was trivializing the horror of slave auctions for public entertainment. He told the Washington Post, “Whenever entertainment is used to teach history there is the possibility for error or insensitivity and historical inaccuracy.” Other members of the black community were also concerned that the slave auction would not be presented with “good taste.” One of Christy Coleman’s friends in Washington, D.C. reported that a radio disc jockey was telling listeners that they were “planning to sell niggers to white folks [tourists] on the street at that place Colonial Williamsburg.” Another friend in New York City told Coleman that the students in her graduate school were outraged when they heard about
the re-enactment. She told Coleman they were asking, “What kinda [sic] sister is that
down there that’s getting ready to do that?”

Coleman and the rest of the AAIP staff refused to back down. Colonial
Williamsburg’s public relations department forwarded all media inquiries to Coleman’s
desk and the AAIP director vigorously defended the program. She told a local paper, the
Daily Press, “We know this is pushing the envelope, and that people will call, saying this
outrageous . . . But they said that 15 years ago when we started African-American
programs, and five years ago, when we opened the slave quarter at Carter’s Grove.” She
continued, “His [Khalfani’s] concerns are very real, and ones our staff is taking seriously.
[But] our goal is to educate, and if doing so upsets people from time to time, we’re
willing to do that.” In the Virginia Gazette, Coleman stated, “You can dance around
things that are uncomfortable, but we’d be no better than Disney . . . There has been a lot
of soul-searching, but there’s no turning back.” In the face of mounting controversy,
Coleman and her team were determined to forge ahead.

Setting the Stage

Khalfani and other civil rights leaders had requested background information on
the event, a synopsis or a copy of the program’s script so they could evaluate the
program’s educational merit themselves. Coleman refused. There was no script of the
program— the scenario had only been outlined. The lack of a formal script is not
unusual in living history museums. In many cases, it is impossible to script dialogue
because living history presentations are often interactive and improvisational.
Consequently, the interpreters involved with the auction were comfortable ad-libbing
their speech and body language. Nevertheless, the AAIP did not tell the civil rights
leaders that the event was unscripted—they may have wanted to avoid the charge that they were “winging it.” Khalfani and the others would have been even more outraged to discover that the interpreters never even rehearsed the scenario until two and a half hours before the auction was scheduled to begin.\(^3\)\(^2\)

While Colonial Williamsburg interpreters met to discuss how the auction would unfold on the morning of October 10th, a dozen civil rights leaders from the Virginia NAACP and SCLC gathered in Williamsburg, Virginia. They had scheduled a meeting with Colonial Williamsburg Foundation President Robert Wilburn and Steve Elliott, the vice president of the Historic Area.\(^3\)\(^3\) Once seated in the boardroom of the Goodwin Building, the civil rights leaders explained their concerns to the administrators. However, they did not speak with a unified voice. One gentleman felt that the history of slavery was so painful that the entire subject was better left in the past.\(^3\)\(^4\) Others supported exploring the history of slavery, but felt that re-enactments were more entertainment than education. Some asserted that it was inappropriate to stage the event during a celebratory weekend devoted to King George’s ascension to the throne. Others argued that a program scheduled to last for 45-minutes could not fully explain the horror and significance of slave auctions. Khalfani recalled that he told the administrators it was “crass” to try to portray “something as traumatic as a slave auction” during “fifteen minutes out of a three-day weekend.” He felt the program required more context and that it needed to be “reinforced” with opportunities to discuss and learn about slave auctions in more traditional educational formats.\(^3\)\(^5\) A few of the leaders suggested that Colonial Williamsburg was commercializing the slave auction in order to profit from it.\(^3\)\(^6\) Despite their different perspectives and concerns, all of the protestors wanted President Wilburn
to cancel the program. If he refused to comply with their request, they threatened to boycott the museum.\textsuperscript{37}

Robert Wilburn was not dissuaded. He appealed to the AAIP’s experience portraying sensitive issues. He explained that the African American staff had come to him and asked if they could put on what he believed was a historically accurate program. Wilburn remembered, “I asked them whether or not, if they were in my [white male] shoes . . . they would tell our African American interpreters that they could \textit{not} do the slave auction. Wouldn’t that be a form of censorship?”\textsuperscript{38} Essentially, Wilburn informed the civil rights leaders that he believed the program was well conceived, thoroughly researched and adequately prepared. He told them he had approved the program and that the museum had explained and defended it in the press. Colonial Williamsburg had an obligation to deliver what it promised to the public and the estate sale program would not be canceled.\textsuperscript{39}

The civil rights leaders felt their grievances were not taken seriously. King Salim Khalfani recaptured the moment from his perspective, “We were sitting across from an all white, all male group. And that’s pretty telling . . . unless forced, there is no sensitivity to the horrors of Africa’s enslavement.” He continued,

I just really remember the crassness of the officials from Colonial Williamsburg when we tried to dialog about it. And it was like women in the feminist movement say about men— that you all just don’t get it . . . To sit across from those guys and look them in the eye and see that it didn’t matter what presentation we brought— they were going to do what they were going to do. It was really a lesson in power dynamics.\textsuperscript{40}

Colonial Williamsburg officials were also frustrated that the civil rights representatives refused to recognize that while other museums still used the euphemism “servants” when
speaking of slaves, Colonial Williamsburg had been portraying African American history for fifteen years. Both groups were talking at, not with, each other. Christy Coleman later characterized the meeting as “a bully pit not an actual dialogue.” After an hour of discussion, there was little more to say. The civil rights leaders and the Colonial Williamsburg administrators decided to proceed to the site of the auction. The controversy simmering in the press brought an unprecedented number of people to Williamsburg to see the auction. When they initially planned the program, the AAIP and the Annual Events Committee predicted that one to two hundred people would attend. However, as the protestors approached the site of the auction, more than 2,000 spectators crowded Colonial Williamsburg’s Duke of Gloucester Street [Figure 1]. Reporters and camera crews surrounded the porch in front of the Wetherburn Tavern, broadcasting live reports for the midday news. The civil rights leaders’ public protest may have had the unintended effect of producing the atmosphere they feared— the event had become a sensationalized media sideshow. In his book Displays of Power: Controversy in the American Museum, Steven C. Dubin notes that those who try to limit the public’s exposure to museum exhibits often stoke that same public’s desire to see exactly what they want to prohibit.

Although the majority of the audience waited quietly for the sale to start, the crowd became increasingly agitated as noon approached. White students from the College of William & Mary’s International Socialist Organization (ISO) had brought signs to the event reading, “Say NO to Racist Shows!,” “Fight Racism by Any Means Necessary,” and “Don’t Make Money Off Oppression.” Other audience members who claimed the signs were blocking their view, knocked the placards out of the students’
Figure 1

Observers estimate that more than 2,000 people crowded Duke of Gloucester Street to watch the re-enactment.
hands, sparking a brief scuffle which was quickly broken up by Colonial Williamsburg
security staff.\textsuperscript{44} The students were asked to take their signs to the rear.\textsuperscript{45} Black protestors
from the civil rights organizations began singing "We Shall Overcome." Some members
of the audience responded with anger. As Marc Tibbs of the \textit{Virginian-Pilot and Ledger-
Star} reported, "In protest of the protestors, several people screamed catcalls from the
audience. For a minute, the crowd seemed on the verge of anarchy, yelling at the
protestors to move on. ‘Let the show begin!’ shouted one historically starved
spectator."\textsuperscript{46} Tom Hay, a white interpreter participating in the event, saw a young black
man confront one of the civil rights leaders, asking, "Who are you to tell me what part of
my history I can or cannot see?"\textsuperscript{47} From her position inside the Wetherburn Tavern,
Christy Coleman watched as another member of the crowd pushed a black protestors. At
the request of a museum employee, Coleman agreed to speak with the civil rights leaders
inside the building.\textsuperscript{48}

The civil rights leaders had found Robert Wilburn and Steve Elliott unresponsive,
but they were eager to speak with Christy Coleman, the African American director of the
AAIP. As Coleman later recalled, the political action chairman of the Virginia NAACP,
Jack Gravely, stormed into the tavern and demanded that she cancel the auction
immediately. She responded by telling him that Colonial Williamsburg was a museum
with a responsibility to teach accurate history. Gravely countered saying, "Colonial
Williamsburg does not deal with real black history . . . everything about Colonial
Williamsburg is about the oppression of my people." Coleman told the protestors that
she wanted to portray an auction to inform and educate Americans about the evils of
slavery. King Salim Khalfani would not accept her explanation. According to Coleman,
he turned to her and said, “You just want to do what white men tell you to do, period.”

The conversation was over almost as soon as it started. Coleman dismissed the protestors and prepared to start the auction.49

While the interpreters who would portray slaves, bidders and auctioneers prepared inside the tavern, program planner Marcel Riddick muscled her way through the protestors and began the event. Riddick was supposed to provide the introduction for the auction in third-person and help facilitate the question and answer session afterwards.

However, as she spoke, Jack Gravely shouted over her,

We think that you cannot portray our history in 21-minutes . . . and make it some kind of sideshow. If you want to do that, do it in the proper context and proper place. No one here is denying the fact that slavery existed, no one is denying the fact that auctions and black folk were sold.

Someone in the crowd yelled back, “We don’t want to hear you!” Gravely retorted, “They didn’t want to hear Martin Luther King or Malcolm X either. If no one else will stand, we will stand!”50

Inside the tavern, Christy Coleman asked President Robert Wilburn whether the program should go on. Wilburn told her that the final decision was in her hands, but he advised her that if she believed there was going to be any violence, the program could be postponed.51 Coleman went out onto the porch steps and took the microphone from Marcel Riddick. After quickly surveying the crowd, she announced that the event could not continue.52 Someone in the crowd asked, “Why? What’s going on here?” Coleman then turned to Jack Gravely and asked him to explain why he was trying to stop the program. Gravely seized the moment, took the microphone, and tried to explain his position. He said, “We don’t want the history of a people who have come so far to be
trivialized in a carnival atmosphere such as we have here."\textsuperscript{53} He added, "We do not want the pain and suffering of a great people in this land to be trivialized in a contemporary pleasure-seeking course."\textsuperscript{54} The longer Gravely spoke, the more agitated the crowd became. His remarks were met with more boos and catcalls. Finally, he handed the microphone back to Coleman and said the protestors would pass judgement after the auction was over.\textsuperscript{55}

The AAIP director turned to the audience and introduced herself. She began,

\begin{quote}
What is happening today, I think, is a very real tragedy. However, we came here to teach the story of our mothers and grandmothers. We came here, we came here to do this voluntarily . . . We wanted to do this so that each and every one of you never forget what happened to them.
\end{quote}

The audience applauded as she continued, "I am grateful for all of you who came out here in support . . . who came out here with an open mind . . . Those of you who . . . oppose [us] . . . don't understand our track record, our history, our respect and our integrity for what we do." Turning to the protestors, Coleman stated, "I wish to God that you had come and talked to me and we would have told you what we were planning. But no, that did not happen . . . You all are going to watch. And after you see this, I want you with honest hearts and honest minds to judge what happens here."\textsuperscript{56}

As the program was about to begin, Rev. Curtis Harris (Hopewell, SCLC) made one last stand. The 70-year-old man announced that he had been arrested thirteen times at civil rights demonstrations and was ready to be arrested again in order to stop the event. Harris and his companion Rev. Milton Reid (Norfolk, SCLC) sat down on the steps of the porch where the auction would be staged. Colonial Williamsburg officials respected their right to protest and the two civil rights veterans remained rooted to the spot for the
duration of the performance.  

To the Highest Bidder

The event was billed in Colonial Williamsburg’s Visitor’s Companion as a program titled “To the Highest Bidder.” The guide’s short description simply read, “three tracts of land and slaves are up for auction.” Consequently, the tourists, locals and reporters who gathered to witness the auction had a limited understanding of what they were about to see.

The re-enactment was solidly rooted in published and unpublished reports from Colonial Williamsburg’s research department. In his book, The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg, Thad Tate noted, “few weeks went by [in the colonial capital] in which there was not some trading in Negroes.” However, Williamsburg was not heavily involved in the large-scale commercial trade of slaves. Like the slaves sold in the re-enactment, most slaves sold in Williamsburg were locally owned and sold in small lots. Furthermore, they were frequently sold in front of taverns on court days or during other public gatherings when there were large numbers of potential bidders in the capital.

The owners selling slaves in the re-enactment demonstrated similar business savvy by selling their slaves during Publick Times. In his research report, Tate argued that public sales in Williamsburg had this profile because most of the auctions in the capital “were actions of law.” Tate wrote, “the typical auction of slaves in Williamsburg was likely to be an executor’s or sheriff’s sale.” Residents in Williamsburg, like William Kennan’s trustees in the re-enactment, sold slaves to settle estates of deceased family members. Courts in Williamsburg also seized slaves for “ready money” sales organized to settle debts. All of the slaves in the re-enactment were “to be sold to satisfy court ordered
debt settlements.  

Setting the tone, the auctioneer (Bob Chandler) introduced the land and property for sale in a flat, indifferent voice. He cautioned members of the audience that only “gentlemen” with appropriate “letters of credit” would be permitted to bid. While this was historically accurate, it was also a safeguard that Coleman and other members of the AAIP staff had built into the program to ensure that audience members would not try to participate. As the first plot of land was auctioned, interpreters demonstrated how unwelcome bidders could be excluded from the proceedings. One of the bidders was called out for not having sufficient security in his letter of credit to cover his bid and he was asked to withdraw “his bid and his voice” from the auction. Audience members were subtly but effectively informed of their role as passive spectators rather than active participants.

The first “slave” that mounted the steps of the tavern porch was introduced as Sukey (Bridgette Jackson), a “well-skilled,” Virginia-born laundress. A black man, John Ashby (Dylan Pritchett), opened the bidding and a white “gentleman” immediately challenged his “right to bid and his ability to pay.” The sergeant of the city (Tom Hay) announced that the black bidder had presented a valid letter of credit as a free man. A white planter placed a higher bid, but Pritchett’s character continued to match him, driving the price up to £42. The bidding stalled, and the auctioneer asked the white planter if he wished to bid higher. The white bidder turned away in disgust, muttering, “She’s not worth that much.” Bridgette Jackson later told a newspaper reporter that this comment caught her off guard. She said, “I felt weak. It really hit me for someone to say, ‘You’re not worth that, you’re nobody, you’re a piece of property.’”
During the question and answer period following the auction, Christy Coleman explained that the free black man bidding was meant to be Sukey’s husband, which explained why he would pay such an extraordinary amount for her. The scenario was supposed to demonstrate that public auctions provided a window of opportunity for free members of the African American community to unite their families. Historians have found that free blacks regularly purchased family members in order to free them. In *Many Thousands Gone*, Ira Berlin argued that the “numerous collaborations necessary for a slave to purchase freedom challenged the notion of self-purchase in the Upper South.” Berlin found that one-third of the slaves freed in Norfolk between 1791 and 1820 were purchased by themselves or family members. Indeed, in 1769, a Matthew Ashby of Williamsburg petitioned the colony’s council for the freedom of his wife and two children. Months earlier he had laboriously saved £150 to purchase them. The council granted his request, which shielded Ashby’s family from exploitation when he died only two years later.

After auctioning off another tract of land, a skilled carpenter from the estate of William Byrd named Billy (Robert Watson, Jr.) was displayed for the crowd. The auctioneer emphasized Billy’s value as capital, “I do not have to remind you gentleman that this a very valuable slave. He can be rented with his skills at great advantage.” As Billy was surveyed by the bidders, he adopted a stance of silent defiance—dropping his tools with a loud thud, he stood hands on hips, eyes staring straight ahead. Interpreter Robert Watson Jr. remembered his thoughts that day,

When the bids started bouncing around from gentryman to gentryman, I was turning to look at each of them to say, “You’re bidding on me?!” My mind was racing. I knew that in 1773, Billy was standing right there having to go
through this same thing. And I was thinking, “Someone’s going to be my new owner. There’s nothing I can do about it, but I don’t have to like it.”

Ultimately, Mr. Prentis purchased Billy for £70, a relatively significant sum.

This scenario was designed to educate visitors about the skilled slaves that lived and worked in eighteenth-century Williamsburg. Coleman later told spectators, “there were few trades from which they were prohibited. So everything you see in this town, somebody’s black hand had something to do with building it or making it and we wanted you to see the skills of the craftspeople.” In his study of eighteenth-century Williamsburg, historian Thad Tate found that skilled craftsmen were frequently sold in the colonial capital. Furthermore, his data indicated that “carpentry was rather clearly the most frequently practiced trade among Williamsburg’s Negro artisans.” Woodworkers were in high demand because the production of tobacco and other staples required barrels and hogsheads for shipping the crop, and cabins and quarters for housing labor. Elite carpenters, like Billy, carried out the most skilled tasks and fetched high prices at auction.

However, the dramatic climax of the program was the public sale of a husband and wife named Daniel (Eran Owens) and Lucy (Christy Coleman). The house servants had watched the other auctions silently on an adjacent porch; Coleman’s character was visibly pregnant and distraught as she leaned against her husband. Daniel was sold first (with his livery) to a Mr. Tayloe for £62. Then, Lucy was led up the porch stairs gasping and crying, her hands protectively covering her unborn child. The bidding opened with Mr. Tayloe at £20, but he was quickly challenged by a planter named Mr. Nelson. The audience followed the exchange attentively, cheering when Tayloe placed a bid and booing when Nelson matched him. When Mr. Nelson placed a final bid of £50, the auctioneer turned to Tayloe
and asked him if he wished to bid higher. Overwrought with emotion, Lucy begged Mr. Tayloe to buy her. He declined and Lucy was led away from her husband. The auctioneer quickly concluded the program in the same matter-of-fact voice he had used throughout.

The AAIP outlined this scenario so that audience members could witness the "horror" of seeing "black families torn apart." Historians frequently discuss slave auctions in the context of their impact on the black family. While some slaveowners in the Chesapeake expressed the desire to keep black families together, the records reveal that most slaves were sold individually and that even young children were separated from their parents. Consequently, no slave family or community was truly stable. As Walter Johnson has argued in his book *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, "Under the chattel principle, every advance into enslaved society—every reliance on another, every child, friend, or lover, every social relation—held within it the threat of its own dissolution." In 1771, Anthony Hay’s trustees settled his estate, in part, by auctioning nineteen slaves in Williamsburg including "a very good Cabinet Maker," "a good Coachman and Carter," and "some fine Waiting Boys, good Cooks, Washers, &c." This auction could have had a potentially devastating impact on at least three slave families. Among those sold were Peggy and her children Ben, Lucy, Jemmy and Jenney; Sarah and her daughter Mary; and Nancy and her son Edmund.

In the question and answer session that followed the performance, Coleman stood on stage in eighteenth-century dress, flanked by program planner Marcel Riddick and senior interpreter Rose McAfee [Figure 2]. As noted above, Coleman explained why the AAIP had selected the scenarios presented and then fielded other questions from the audience. The queries covered a wide range of topics: Could a free black man free his
Figure 2

Christy Coleman, Marcel Riddick and Rose McAfee stand on stage after the program and answer audience questions.
family members? What can records tell historians about slave families? How (or did) the program show African Americans resisting slavery? Were African Americans allowed to own property? Were there ever white slaves? How did whites who did not own slaves live? Did slaves have last names? After answering the questions, Coleman thanked the audience for their “support” and “dignity” during “this educational experience.” In order to mark the end of the program, Coleman asked for a moment of silence “for all those who have gone on before us. We want to cherish and honor their memory so that we could be here today.” As Coleman and the others left the porch, some members of the audience lingered in small groups, discussing what they had just seen.82

Reactions, Responses and Reports

After the event, Colonial Williamsburg interpreters and civil rights leaders were surrounded by reporters. Both groups jumped at the chance to shape how the media would report the story. Jack Gravely recalled, “We knew we had an audience . . . Let’s be real. The issue was about getting your word out in the press.”83 When asked how he felt about the auction, Rev. Curtis Harris responded, “I feel terrible about it . . . It was not authentic history. They just wanted to have a show.”84 He told another reporter that the auction served “no purpose” because everything portrayed had already been written in history books.85 Andrew Highsmith, a member of William & Mary’s International Socialist Organization, asserted, “This is pure and simple entertainment, making money off people’s oppression.”86

However, Jack Gravely’s comments caught the attention of the media. Despite his earlier criticism, Gravely told the press, “It seemed as if the actors brought that pain and suffering out. When you looked around the audience and saw the pain and agony on
a lot of African-American faces, you knew something went on here. I think it has its place.\textsuperscript{87} He told another reporter, “I would be lying if I said I didn’t come out with a different view . . . The presentation was passionate, moving and educational.” But Gravely also emphasized that the NAACP was still concerned about the slave auction reenactment and would discuss it further with Colonial Williamsburg officials.\textsuperscript{88}

The national and state NAACP later renounced the political action chairman’s remarks in an official press statement, saying Gravely spoke for himself and referring to the auction as an “atrocity.”\textsuperscript{89} Gravely also tried to distance himself from his statements the next day, calling the event “crass entertainment” and telling a reporter from the \textit{Richmond-Times Dispatch} that he supported the position of the NAACP.\textsuperscript{90} It is not clear whether Gravely retracted his comments because his opinion changed or because he was under political pressure to do so. Nevertheless, the damage was done. Newspapers across the country took note of Gravely’s “change of heart” and used it as evidence that he had been “converted” by his experience.

In contrast, Colonial Williamsburg staff presented a more unified front to the national media. Interpreters emphasized the educational merit of the program and administrators publicly congratulated the staff on a job well done. President Robert Wilburn stated, “I was very proud of our staff and the professional manner in which they handled the program. They demonstrated the ability to provide a compelling educational experience in a charged atmosphere.” He continued, “I was also pleased to see the visitors’ desire to stay, ask questions and learn more about the subject . . . The dialogue led by Christy Coleman underscored the importance of doing this program.” Bill White, director of presentations and tours, announced, “If Christy Coleman and other members
of the staff were to come to me and say, ‘Let’s do it again,’ I’d back them up all the way.”

Cary Carson, vice president of research, praised the staff’s courage and challenged them to make the portrayal a part of regular programming.91

The press also captured reactions from members of the audience— the program received mixed reviews. Some visitors complained that the auction was not real enough. A white male asserted, “I would rather see something that makes people angry and upset about what really happened rather than this watered down version.” Similarly, a black female argued, “If they’re going to show it they need to show the horrors of it. They did not show the horror of it in my opinion.” However, Colonial Williamsburg also received accolades for being the first living history museum to portray an auction. Most spectators praised the performance. A young girl said the auction made her “want to go back into history and change it all.” An older man applauded the representation because auctions “really happened” and the program allowed people to “witness man’s inhumanity to man.”92

The auction was covered by local newspapers and television stations, and by national news outlets like the New York Times, Washington Post, ABC World News Tonight, NBC Nightly News, National Public Radio’s All Things Considered, and Jet Magazine [Figure 3].93 Overall, the tone of the mainstream media coverage favored Colonial Williamsburg. As noted above, many reporters referred to Jack Gravely’s transformation. One editorial board praised Colonial Williamsburg for its “courage and conviction” in moving the discussion of slavery “into a dramatic new format.”94 Another paper agreed with Christy Coleman’s argument that “giving pain a human face is the best way to make it real.”95
Figure 3

Newspaper reporters and television crews gathered around the Wetherburn Tavern.
However, the local black newspaper, the Norfolk New Journal & Guide, offered a very different interpretation of the auction. Publisher Brenda Andrews wrote,

Colonial Williamsburg owes a debt of thanks to the protestors who sought to halt the re-enactment of a slave auction on Monday. It was their active protest that alerted the American public that what visitors to Colonial Williamsburg were to see was not to be taken lightly and that the telling of the African holocaust in America remains an emotional and painful issue.

Andrews also warned Colonial Williamsburg officials that any future slave auction re-enactments would be met with “more organized protests.” An angry letter to the editor questioned Coleman’s authority to decide for herself what was “right for the community.” The writer argued that Coleman could not claim to speak for her ancestors until she had been “run down like a vicious animal, repeatedly raped and dragged to the nearest slave ship,” forced to “sleep in the midst of her own body waste for several months,” and purchased by a white man who would impregnate her with his children then punish them with “vicious beatings and killings” for his entertainment. These kinds of comments were a marked departure from the tacit approval of the auction expressed elsewhere.

The presentation also drew criticism from individuals who believed the re-enactment drew an inordinate amount of attention to the dark side of eighteenth-century Williamsburg’s history. Robert Wilburn recalled that the museum lost a long-term multimillion dollar gift from a white donor who wanted the museum to present a more “celebratory” version of the past. Eventually, the museum was able to get most disgruntled donors “back on board.” Christy Coleman and her staff took solace in the fact that most of the phone calls that flooded the Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations in the days that followed the re-enactment were supportive.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER ONE


10. Rose McAfee, interview by author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Williamsburg, Virginia, 23 April 2003. The Rind Estate Sale was held separately on October 10, 1994. Dick was not sold as part of the property. Indeed, interpreters organized a skit in which the widow Clementine Rind reassured Dick that he would not be sold with the family’s movable goods. Harvey Bakari, the interpreter who played Dick, said the skit was meant to show the “flip side of the coin” and act as a foil to the estate sale portrayed earlier in the day. Harvey Bakari, interview by author, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1 April 2003.

11. Coleman, telephone interview by author.


15. Lackey, “Williamsburg to Stage Slaves Sale as Part of 1700s Estate Auction.”


19. Curtis Harris, interview by author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Hopewell, Virginia, 16 April 2003. See also King Salim Khalfani, interview by author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Richmond, Virginia, 21 March 2003.


23. Rainey, telephone interview by author. See also Tolbert, “Slave Auction Re-enacted Amid Some Controversy.”


33. King Salim Khalfani, interview.

34. Steve Elliott, interview by author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Richmond, Virginia, 27 May 2003.

35. King Salim Khalfani, interview.

36. Robert Wilburn, interview.

37. Steve Elliott, interview.

38. Robert Wilburn, interview. See also King Salim Khalfani, interview.

39. Steve Elliott, interview. See also Curtis Harris, interview.

40. King Salim Khalfani, interview.

41. Robert Wilburn, interview. See also Steve Elliott, interview.


44. *Publick Times: Estate/Slave Auction*, videocassette. See also Bob Chandler, interview.


50. Publick Times: Estate/Slave Auction, videocassette.

51. Robert Wilburn, interview.

52. Robert Wilburn, interview.


54. Publick Times: Estate/Slave Auction, videocassette, WAVY-10 Broadcast, Norfolk, Virginia.

55. Robert Wilburn, interview.

56. Publick Times: Estate/Slave Auction, videocassette.


60. Tate, 47.


62. Tate, 47. And Nicholls, 18-19.

63. Publick Times: Estate/Slave Auction, videocassette.

64. Publick Times: Estate/Slave Auction, videocassette.


67. Bentley Boyd, “Painful Portrayals: Black Actors Deal with Own Feelings after CW Auction.”


71. Nicholls, 126-127.

72. Bentley Boyd, “Painful Portrayals: Black Actors Deal with Own Feelings after CW Auction.”


75. Morgan, 227.


79. Morgan, 515.


81. Nicholls, 16.


83. Jack Gravely, interview.


98. Robert Wilburn, Interview by Author.

CHAPTER TWO

AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

Museum visitors can derive alternative meanings from the same presentations of the past; their experience can be fundamentally different cognitively and emotionally. Yet, when Christy Coleman stood on the steps of the Wetherburn Tavern and defended the estate sale by arguing that those who opposed it did not understand the Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations’ (AAIP) history and track record, she denied the possibility that the protestors could simply have a different interpretation of the museum’s activities. Indeed, while Colonial Williamsburg has constructed a narrative of progress, which celebrates its contribution to the public presentation of African American history, many (but not all) members of the black community have developed a counter-narrative which questions the quantity, quality and content of African American programming at the museum. This chapter will explore these two different perspectives and their impact on how interpreters and protestors viewed the Publick Times slave auction.

Colonial Williamsburg’s Narrative of Progress

When describing African American programming at Colonial Williamsburg, African American interpreters frequently admit that the museum is not where it needs to be, but they are also quick to point out how far the museum has come. In 1770, nearly half of Williamsburg’s population was black—most of this “other half” was enslaved.
Nevertheless, when Colonial Williamsburg first opened to the public in the late 1920s, the story of slavery was completely absent. Politically and economically, it was too risky to integrate the restoration’s restaurants, interpretive staff or its portrayal of the past. By the 1950s, Colonial Williamsburg had desegregated its public facilities, and employed a significant number of African Americans in low-paying service jobs, but the museum continued to exclude African Americans from its historical narrative. Thirty years later, Colonial Williamsburg became the first “mainstream” museum to tackle the topic of slavery on a significant scale. Christy Coleman has characterized this development as Colonial Williamsburg’s own twentieth-century “revolution.”

The museum took its first tentative step toward the incorporation of African American history as early as 1957 with the completion of Thad Tate’s report *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*. Three years later, Tate’s research was used to help produce a film titled *Music in Williamsburg*, which included several African American spirituals and work songs, although it reproduced some stereotypes. Nevertheless, throughout the 1960s, the museum’s depiction of slavery was minimal. In 1965, Colonial Williamsburg installed message repeaters in the Wythe House Laundry. The repeaters described urban slavery in the eighteenth century and the specific responsibilities of slaves who lived on the property when visitors pushed a button. It was the first time the museum acknowledged the presence of slavery in the historic area. However, the repeaters were vandalized and visitors were unable to hear the recorded message. As late as 1968, Colonial Williamsburg’s *Official Guidebook* included only one paragraph about black life in Williamsburg. It would take substantial pressure from inside and outside the museum to produce more significant change.
In 1969, James R. Short, a program assistant for the Department of Interpretation, prepared a report which attempted to explain why the museum’s depiction of slavery had been “incidental.” He wrote,

(1) we have had a corporate sense of embarrassment about the subject and have felt the less said the better (2) we have not felt very secure in our specific knowledge of slaves in Williamsburg (3) with mixed groups of visitors, the subject is an awkward one to handle (4) we have (so we have told ourselves) been loath to arouse tender feelings among our own Negro employees (5) we have assumed that the presence of Negroes on the staff (usually in subservient jobs) was sufficient to suggest that we recognized slavery as once having existed here (6) where some mention has proved unavoidable, we have elected to substitute the euphemism “servants” when referring to slaves—a practice well established among the hostesses [tour guides] (7) we have been under no pressure or compulsion to be more forthright.

Short concluded, “the time is now precipitous to make additions to our interpretation of slavery” because of social developments that had caused “both blacks and whites to reconsider as never before the history of their attitudes and actions.” In this new environment, Short asserted, “It is preferable, and more honest, to deal with slavery candidly rather than obliquely.”

Public pressure to create a more inclusive picture of the past increased during the 1960s and 1970s. Given the achievements of the civil rights movement, the effects of the war in Vietnam and the revelations of the “new” social history, many of Williamsburg’s visitors would no longer accept a sanitized and patriotic version of the past. Activists demanded that institutions, including museums, address issues of race, power and repression. In 1970, the New York Strike and Art Workers Coalition interrupted the annual meeting of the American Association of Museums (AAM) in New York. The coalition accused museum professionals of “complicity with the forces of social and
economic oppression in American society.” They argued that “museums must reflect community values, not the special interests of the business and social elite.”

Colonial Williamsburg did not escape unscathed in this new political climate. A visitor in 1972 complained,

At no time in no place by no person was the word or concept of slavery discussed, mentioned or hinted at . . . It seems incredible that a whole society . . . based on slavery, never showed evidences of slavery . . . Certainly our history of slavery is an unpleasant one . . . but deal with it we must, or we are guilty as a German reconstruction of the 1940s would be without mention[ing] the ‘final solution.’

A few years earlier, the historian Walter Muir Whitehall had labeled Colonial Williamsburg “an entirely artificial recreation of an imaginary past . . . [a] fantasy in which the more pleasing aspects of colonial life are evoked, with the omissions of smells, flies, pigs, dirt and slave quarters.”

Pressure for change also came from within the museum. During the 1970s, a new generation of Colonial Williamsburg historians challenged the museum’s presentation of the past. Soon after he was hired, Cary Carson noted that the visitor who wanted to learn more about the “black presence” in Colonial Williamsburg had to be “prepared to raise the subject himself to get interpreters to talk about it. Otherwise he finds that slaves and slavery still figure hardly at all in the Williamsburg story.” The historian sarcastically commented, “in short, the black presence in our interpretation of Williamsburg is as scarce as black visitors are . . . One wonders if there isn’t a connection.”

Then, in 1977, the museum’s newly-formed curriculum committee produced an educational plan titled Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg. The updated approach acknowledged the contributions of white colonists and black slaves by
exploring how both groups came to be Americans. The document pushed interpretive programs past patriotic political history and toward the portrayal of social, cultural and economic aspects of life in Williamsburg. Nevertheless, this “internal working document” was never approved by the museum’s board or officially presented to interpreters on the front line. Copies were distributed on a “need-to-know” basis with the ominous caveat that “statements in this report [do not] reflect officially adopted positions of the Foundation.”

Despite this rather unenthusiastic reception, *Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg* opened the door to the interpretation of African American history.

The museum launched its first serious African American history programming in the summer of 1979. Three African American interpreters created first-person characters that represented different facets of Williamsburg’s free and enslaved black population. However, many front-line staff members refused to participate in the museum’s reinterpretation. Some argued that visitors liked the existing programs, others contended that the black history programs were full of conjecture, and some asserted that the interpretation did not fulfil John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s inspirational vision. Charles Longworth, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation president, reassured interpreters, visitors and donors that the museum’s new social history emphasis would not replace the old patriotic story line. In 1981, he noted that the old interpretation was a “dramatic, inspiring story that never loses its significance, its appeal, or its importance.”

Despite resistance, the African American interpretation program continued to grow. By the mid-1980s, full-time staff interpreted the black experience year-round in day and evening programs, including a two-hour tour of the historic area which focused on the eighteenth-century black experience. The department had also developed a
successful outreach program with local junior and senior high schools. In 1986, the AT&T foundation recognized Colonial Williamsburg’s efforts, granting the museum $400,000 to expand its African American history programs. That April, Rex Ellis was appointed the first assistant director of African American interpretation. Two years later, in 1988, the black programs unit officially became the Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations (AAIP). This organizational shift meant that black history programs would be given a larger budget and staff. Many believed African American programming had finally become a priority at Colonial Williamsburg.

AAIP founder Rex Ellis was succeeded by Robert C. Watson in 1991 and then by Christy Coleman in 1994. The department continued to develop new programs that pushed the envelope, like “Affairs of the Heart” and “Jumpin’ the Broom.” In the early 1990s, the museum also placed a larger emphasis on “mainstreaming” African American history throughout the historic area. Colonial Williamsburg administrators wanted all of the interpreters in the museum—black and white—to discuss the black experience. As Rex Ellis noted, “our desire is not to hire a cadre of black interpreters to present this story, but to make the interpretation of African-American history so integral to what we do that there is literally no place you can visit in the Historic Area without hearing some mention of it.”

In October of 1994, Christy Coleman strongly believed that the slave auction/estate sale re-enactment was the next stage of Colonial Williamsburg’s evolution. She asserted,

Almost 15 years ago, there were some who weren’t comfortable with incorporating the African-American experience in our telling of the founding of this country. Five years ago, there was similar discomfort with the
reconstruction of the slave quarter at Carter’s Grove. Today, these stories and other African-American presentations fascinate and enlighten all our visitors. We have become a resource to other institutions that are taking their first steps in telling the African-American story. We must take our next step. I strongly believe this program is a step in the right direction.

Coleman believed that she was ushering in a new era of interpretation at the museum, which built upon the success of her predecessors. The new AAIP director was prepared to tackle difficult topics, including miscegenation, physical abuse—and slave auctions. Indeed, Coleman and others would frame the auction as the department’s “logical next step, carefully and deliberately taken.”

An Alternative Interpretation

Others read Colonial Williamsburg’s past and its bearing on the auction differently. For many, the museum’s track record was not an inspiring tale of progress, but a catalog of injustice. From the beginning, some members of the black community questioned the museum’s commitment to African American history. In 1978, the newly-hired director of planning, Robert Birney, spoke with employees about the African American history program which would be launched the next summer. He reported,

I got it straight from the shoulder of our black employees—they were extremely skeptical that the present interpretative core could be trusted to develop a story of black colonial life. They could not really conceive that the institution they knew as Colonial Williamsburg could possibly interpret their history the way it needed to be done—it was that simple.

Mistrust of the museum was so acute that when the African American history program started, a local minister told his congregation, “Colonial Williamsburg is bringing back slavery times,” literally.

Colonial Williamsburg’s lily-white past has produced a climate of skepticism and cynicism that plagues the museum to this day, and the foundation is not alone. A recent
survey by the Center on History-Making in America found that African Americans and Native Americans seemed “more likely to distrust mainstream sources of historical authority.” African Americans reported that mainstream institutions, like schools and museums, “ignored,” “distorted,” or “lied” about black history. These were the same concerns King Salim Khalfani articulated before the auction, telling reporters, “we are always concerned when the African holocaust is going to be portrayed . . . there have been so many myths and lies and distortions in the past.” For the protestors, Colonial Williamsburg’s track record did not inspire confidence, it produced anxiety.

During the controversy, Coleman felt that the protestors’ concerns were misplaced. She acknowledged that the museum had distorted the past during its early history, but argued that the AAIP was trying to set the record straight. She suggested that the protestors were misinformed and unaware of the museum’s progress during the preceding fifteen years. In the midst of her heated argument with Jack Gravely at the Wetherburn Tavern, Coleman told him, “The Williamsburg you think we are is no longer the Williamsburg we really are. We spend a whole lot of blood, sweat and tears everyday making sure that the story of our ancestors is told!”

However, the museum must accept some responsibility for its public image. Those who were familiar with Colonial Williamsburg’s programming had reason to be dissatisfied. In 1994, the museum’s marketing still emphasized the traditional patriotic storyline, and African American history continued to be marginalized and segregated from mainstream historical interpretation. Moreover, many African Americans were concerned about the content of the programming. Some felt the museum needed to place a stronger emphasis on cultural survival and individual resistance, instead of the
victimization and degradation of a slave auction. These concerns fueled the protest. It is from this perspective that the civil rights leaders challenged Colonial Williamsburg's commitment to discussing "real black history."

Marketing: Colonial Williamsburg's Public Image

In the early 1990s, the museum sent visitors and critics mixed messages about what it represented. Williamsburg promoted itself as a tourist destination rather than an educational institution—a place where visitors could enjoy a relaxing eighteenth-century atmosphere, fine dining, world-class spa treatments, patriotic entertainment, and rounds of golf. In The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg (1997), anthropologists Richard Handler and Eric Gable noted,

Colonial Williamsburg . . . markets itself as a place where one will experience uniquely gratifying hospitality and courtesy. It consistently associates history with light or pleasant thrills—eating in a colonial atmosphere, with comedy, with the upscale life.28

Indeed, Colonial Williamsburg's marketing image was not far from Jack Gravely's description of the museum as a "contemporary pleasure-seeking course."

Advertisers emphasized red-cheeked fife players and downplayed the presence of African American interpreters. This marketing strategy was predicated on the belief that critical social history was not a marketable commodity.29 Even Christy Coleman admitted, "Our own marketing efforts [in 1994] did not show that complex history was a part of our offerings. The rational for this marketing approach was, get them through the door, once they're in do what you want."30 But as Handler and Gable asserted, this type of marketing does more than respond to the public's demands, "in a sense, it creates that public and defines its expectations."31 Indeed, other critics of the museum have suggested
that by billing itself as a popular tourist destination, Colonial Williamsburg attracts
visitors that neither expect nor want to encounter the darker side of American history
during their leisure time.32

Even some members of the press seemed unfamiliar with the museum’s African
American history programming. This is hardly surprising if the museum was as
forthcoming about other programs as it was about the auction. As noted in the first
chapter, Colonial Williamsburg did not even include the event in the description of
Publick Times activities distributed to the press. During a live broadcast from the
Wetherburn Tavern, a local television reporter contrasted the auction with the museum’s
general image, noting, “Here in Colonial Williamsburg we’re used to seeing the more
jaunty aspects of life . . . the fife and drums, the period dress, the taverns and all the fun
that goes on here.”33 After the event, a marketing executive admitted, “the press had no
idea that we had been doing African American programs for [more than] ten years and
they thought the slave auction was our very first attempt to teach Americans about
slavery.” Learning from the controversy surrounding the estate sale, the executive
advised,

We really need to show the press all the programs we are doing now . . . so
that they understand we are treating this subject with integrity . . . I believe
we have much to gain by getting the story out to the marketplace that we
do teach an inclusive story that is exciting, meaningful and memorable.34

Nevertheless, in 1994, that was not the message the museum was promoting.

Consequently, Colonial Williamsburg’s marketing did not attract a large African
American audience. Instead, it perpetuated the perception that museum was a “white
organization” that presented “sanitized history.”35 AAIP Director Christy Coleman
estimated that 97% of the museum’s visitors were white during her tenure. In this context, some people in the black community argued that AAIP interpreters were simply “playing slaves for white folks” and protestors worried that the auction would be “trivialized for entertainment.” If the protestors were unfamiliar with the AAIP’s programs, it was because Colonial Williamsburg had made little or no effort to reintroduce the museum and redefine their expectations.

Segregation and Marginalization: Limited Access and Availability

However, some of the protestors were familiar with the organization’s African American programming. Many of Colonial Williamsburg’s critics acknowledge that the museum has moved beyond the lily-white, sanitized version of the past it presented to the public through the 1970s. However, they question whether the museum is doing enough to educate the public about African American history in the present. Although Rex Ellis and others had urged the museum to “mainstream” black history, in 1994, it was still possible for tourists to visit the historic area without encountering the subject of slavery. The AAIP employed only ten full-time staff members when the slave auction was presented. As a result, the number of black history programs the museum could offer was limited. Just three weeks before the slave auction, Christy Coleman estimated that only 10% of visitors saw or participated in AAIP programs.

African American history at Colonial Williamsburg had not been incorporated throughout the historic area. Information about enslaved people was provided at separate sites, on separate tours, and in special programs. For example, in 1994, the Carter’s Grove slave quarter was Colonial Williamsburg’s primary site for African American interpretation. It was the only site that provided an interpretation of the slave experience
throughout the day, six days a week, even during the winter. However, the site was located miles away from the heart of the museum’s historic area. Although the museum bussed guests from the Visitor’s Center to the historic town, Colonial Williamsburg did not provide transportation to Carter’s Grove. Only those guests who drove to the site experienced the AAIP’s interpretation of plantation slavery and African American domestic life. Indeed, a Colonial Williamsburg grant proposal submitted in April 1994, acknowledged that it was “still possible for a number of our visitors to pass through the town [the historic area in the center of Williamsburg] without ever having the opportunity to confront the reality of life for the enslaved Virginians who made up about half of the colony and city’s population in 1770.\(^{\text{39}}\)

In their recent book, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums*, Jennifer Eischstedt and Stephen Small have defined this strategy for presenting African American history as “segregation and marginalization.” Museums that employ this strategy provide “information about enslaved people but present it largely through separate tours and displays that visitors can choose to see or ignore, depending upon their desire.”\(^{\text{41}}\) They argue,

> While a step in the right direction, in that slavery is actually discussed, sites that follow the segregation-ofnowledge strategy don’t necessarily increase the likelihood that visitors will learn about slavery, since visitors self-select to attend special tours. At these sites it is easy to escape any real contemplation of or education about slavery.\(^{\text{42}}\)

Eischstedt and Small suggest that the segregation of knowledge limits the public’s exposure to the subject of slavery and reinforces a white-centric view of history.

An experiment conducted at Colonial Williamsburg in 1995 supports the authors’ premise. Two groups of visitors toured the museum—an experimental group was asked to
visit specific sites and a control group was permitted to tour sites of their own choosing. At the end of the day, the museum discovered, “more experimental group visitors witnessed the slave experience and heard about slaves than control group visitors.” Furthermore, experimental group visitors were three times more likely to comment on or discuss slavery than their counterparts. Consciously or unconsciously, control group visitors had opted out of African American programming and avoided the subject of slavery.

In 1994, almost all of the AAIP’s programs were self-selecting. Not only that, but many of the African American history programs in the historic area required the purchase of an additional ticket on top of the regular admission fee. For example, in 1991, the museum charged guests an additional $5 to go on the “Other Half Tour,” which provided a comprehensive overview of slavery in Virginia. This did not provide an incentive to attend the program. Furthermore, the extra fee sent the signal that these types of programs were supplemental rather than essential parts of the Colonial Williamsburg experience visitors purchased with their pass. By 1994, visitors who purchased an annual ticket could reserve a space on the “Other Half Tour” for no charge. However, the number of visitors who could walk through the historic area with a guide was still limited. Consequently, even if they were willing to pay, only a small percentage of the guests visiting the museum could participate.

The “Other Half Tour” and the interpretation at Carter’s Grove were the only AAIP programs offered daily. The scheduling of other programs and events was often sporadic. In 1997, a marketing firm hired to develop an African American outreach program warned,
In reading the summary of African-American programming provided by Christy [Coleman], we are struck by the fact that regular programming is limited to certain days of the week and even alternate weeks in some cases, while some special programming is offered on a limited and irregular schedule only. Clearly, if we are going to make any sort of broad appeal [to African Americans] this must be changed to offer at least a core group of programs daily. We can't (nor should we) insist that our costumers plan their vacation itineraries around our scheduling, and without change we will suffer the wrath of people arriving to find there is nothing offered. 45

An analysis of Colonial Williamsburg’s Visitor’s Companion from the week proceeding the auction (3-9 October 1994) revealed that there were no AAIP programs offered in the historic area, besides the “Other Half Tour,” on Thursday, Friday, Saturday or Sunday. The only program offered on Tuesday was “Affairs of the Heart,” a special evening program that cost visitors who had not purchased the museum’s annual pass $8. That week, there were more programs offered about the colonial capital’s livestock than its enslaved population.46

In summary, AAIP programming was often sporadic, segregated, and open to a limited number of guests for additional fees. All of these factors limited the public’s exposure to the interpretation of slavery. Arguably, then, the slave auction moved the depiction of slavery in a dramatically new direction. Unlike many AAIP programs, the auction was held in the middle of Duke of Gloucester Street. It was open to an unlimited number of ticketed visitors and unticketed observers for no charge. Furthermore, the program was not segregated or self-selecting, since any guest walking down the street, including small children, would be exposed to the public sale of human beings. However, given the museum’s track record, King Salim Khalfani’s concern that the auction would be treated as a “trifling aside” was not unjustified, even if it proved to be
A Painful Past: Balancing Survival and Victimization

The protestors also had concerns about the AAIP’s depiction of slavery and the content of its programming. The museum and the AAIP had struggled with how to present this difficult topic for decades. They had tried to depict the horror of slavery, while still acknowledging the survival of African American individuals and cultural practices. In the process, the department was criticized on both sides—by those who believed the debasement of slavery should be left in the past and by those who believed that it should dominate the interpretation of the period. Negotiating the terms of this balancing act lay at the heart of the slave auction/estate sale controversy.

Some of the protestors felt that the slave auction epitomized the degradation and victimization of slavery— a source of pain that should be left in the past. Rex Ellis, the founder of the AAIP, was familiar with this line of reasoning. Those who espoused it, he said, often asked, “Isn’t contemporary reality enough of a reminder that the horrors of slavery are still with us?” A Williamsburg native, Ellis recalled his family’s own personal sense of shame in the introduction to his dissertation “Presenting the Past: Education, Interpretation and the Teaching of Black History at Colonial Williamsburg,”

Whether you worked as a janitor, waiter, busboy or maid, working at Colonial Williamsburg made you feel ashamed . . . Colonial Williamsburg constantly reminded us all of a place and time that flourished because we had been slaves. That was why my dad and most black people who lived on the periphery of the town felt the way they did. They were (economically) forced to work at a place that reminded them of a time they were desperately trying to forget; a time that was responsible for their continued dependence. No one maligned those who worked there . . . But anyone who went there to visit, I grew to learn, had to be white or crazy . . . anything that brought up the institution responsible for our present condition was to be avoided like the plague.
Two weeks after the auction, Leonard Colvin, a columnist in the local African American newspaper, the Norfolk *New Journal & Guide*, echoed Ellis' sentiments, "We are a proud people, and to be characterized in a position less that what we perceive ourselves is embarrassing."

Yet Colvin also asked, "But why should the ancestral victim feel shame? And why does it still debilitate us, attributing somewhat to the feeling of powerlessness many black people feel?" Rose McAfee, a former AAIP interpreter and current Colonial Williamsburg employee, believes many African Americans feel as though "we should have done something, we should have rose up and rebelled." Others, like the scholar Deborah C. Hine, reject this reasoning. In a review of the slave auction published in the journal *Black Issues in Higher Education*, Hine argued, "Some people feel stigmatized and ashamed about what happened, but they had nothing to do with it. No one living is responsible for the past." Whatever the reasoning, some African Americans, especially older people, would prefer to avoid the topic. Many do not want their culture to be defined by their enslavement. As the associate director for curatorial affairs at the National Museum of American History (NMAH), Lonnie Bunch, an African American, counseled a white colleague, "Slavery remains for most black people the last great taboo subject."

Some African Americans would rather place an emphasis on the accomplishments of their ancestors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In their study of southern museums, Jennifer Eischstedt and Stephen Small found that African American museums "place more of a focus on periods . . . after slavery, and in particular on the civil rights era and on the heroes and events that are a part of the grand narrative of that
In 1994, the National Park Service (NPS) established the Cane River Creole National Historical Park in Louisiana. NPS historians wanted to explore the evolution of the black community that had lived in the area for more than two hundred years. They quickly found that most people in the community wanted the park to emphasize the events of the twentieth century. Muriel Crespi reported that “people came to agree that slavery was a legitimate interpretive topic, but not as the major or single focus. Slavery was acceptable for public discussion only if presented as one phase in a historical sequence.” A local African American told NPS representatives that if the Park Service wanted to discuss slavery, “then get into it and get out.” Similarly, Rev. Curtis Harris, the gentleman who staged the sit-in on the Wetherburn Tavern steps, asserted, “We were not trying to deny our history, but we wanted to play up the more positive side—the fact that we were able to come out of it—that out of slavery we have Ph. D.’s.” He concluded, “so therefore, we don’t need to have an auction to remind us that white folks sold us as slaves.”

In an article written for Broken Chains, the AAIP’s newsletter, Rex Ellis noted that all Americans have “been raised on healthy diets of heroes and heroines. We have studied, written about, and revered those founding fathers . . . whose history is worthy of our memory.” Ellis contended that it should not be surprising that African Americans want to “talk about the virtue of their culture too.” Yet, within the context of Colonial Williamsburg, Ellis and other AAIP staff members could not focus their presentations on more uplifting periods of African American history. They could not build their programs around inspiring and familiar characters like Harriet Tubman or Frederick Douglass. Their first-person interpretations were restricted to the late eighteenth century and their
cast of characters was pulled from records for the colonial capital. With these limitations, how could they produce an interpretation of slavery that would appeal to African Americans?

In response to this challenge, Ellis produced programs that placed an emphasis on cultural survival and resistance rather than victimization. This approach was written into the AAIP’s charter document,

We should constantly remind our visitors that the world of African Americans was not simply a world of incessant work under the yoke of the master. Although many lived painful and humiliating lives . . . blacks were not just inhuman wretches who understood little of white men’s ways; they were resourceful survivors who did what had to be done, who resisted by running away during tobacco transplanting time, feigning illness, breaking tools, or slowing down the pace of work . . . This entire story must be told, the story of a diverse people who survived an inhuman system as well as a story of how these resourceful people influenced American culture in ways still discernable today.

For the most part, the principles outlined above guided the development of African American programming at the museum. They manifested themselves in Colonial Williamsburg films like “The Runaway,” and in programs which celebrated African American contributions to music and storytelling.

In William Van Deburg’s study Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture, the author argues that black scholars, writers and artists have historically approached the topic of slavery by underscoring the ways in which people triumphed over bondage. He suggests that antebellum novelists and playwrights “denied that slaves were helpless and dependent by highlighting the bondsmen’s noble souls, heroism, and the deceptions necessary to survive in a racist society.” Similarly, Van Deburg writes that one of the “key premises” that defined Black Studies scholarship was “that a slave culture, distinct
from Euro-American culture, could and did serve as an effective form of physical and psychological resistance. This approach is frequently reproduced today in African American history museums. In their survey, Eischstedt and Small found that black-run sites emphasized “resistance against brutality,” “resilience in the face of injustice,” and “dignity in the face of inhumanity.” Thus, the principles Ellis outlined were part of a long tradition in the black community—a tradition which could transform the average bondsman into a noble hero.

Despite their objections to the slave auction re-enactment, several of the protestors embraced first-person interpretations that emphasized the resistance of individuals and the survival of their culture. For example, Rev. Curtis Harris renounced the slave auction program because it portrayed slaves as passive victims, but praised programs like “The Runaway” because they showed slaves trying to “save themselves.” Curtis stated, “To resist is a natural thing . . . I think it’s a different situation. I see it in a different perspective.” Likewise, five years after the auction, King Salim Khalfani publicly applauded a Colonial Williamsburg program which portrayed slaves evading a slave patrol. One angry audience member at the slave auction seemed to be looking for evidence of resistance when he angrily asked Christy Coleman to explain how the auction portrayed African Americans as “fighters.”

The majority of visitors seemed comfortable with an interpretation of the slave experience that emphasized cultural survival. The museum’s largely white audience flocked to programs that showcased traditional African American music and folk tales. Indeed, six years after its introduction, the AAIP’s “Black Music Program” was the museum’s most successful outreach program. These kinds of programs were offered
regularly and had been staples of Colonial Williamsburg's annual *Publick Times* weekend since 1991. Rex Ellis believed that the museum's "wide range of programming that emphasizes the rich legacy of music, dance, oral literature, religion" was another way of depicting "defiance of the system of slavery." At the same time, the programs allowed interpreters to "uphold the dignity and integrity of the historic black community."67

However, not everyone in the modern black community was satisfied with this approach. Some scholars, like anthropologist Michael Blakey, would argue that it is hardly surprising that the "Black Music Program" was one of the AAIP's most popular public presentations. These critics suggest that music and art are "safe" or nonthreatening ways to introduce the black experience to white museum visitors; the presentations often produce a picture of slave life that is "shorn of struggle and violence." Furthermore, the popularity of these topics in history museums reflects a racially slanted view of the strengths of African-American society.68

Others would argue that this approach to the slave experience is more aptly described as "heritage" not "history." Michael Kammen has defined the "heritage syndrome" as "an impulse to remember what is attractive or flattering and to ignore all the rest . . . heritage accentuates the positive but sifts away what is problematic."69 In the mid-1990s, some African American scholars, like Lonnie Bunch (NMAH), were encouraging museums to move in a different direction. Bunch wrote,

The African American community is depicted as comprising upwardly mobile heroes, to whom racism and discrimination were simply obstacles to overcome. While that scenario did occur, it was the exception to the rule during much of America's history. What is needed is a commitment to explore the full range of African American experiences, including the difficult, controversial and ambiguous episodes. It is essential that the harsh
realities of black life are seen side-by-side with achievements and victorious struggles.70

Literary analyst Lawrence Langer offered a similar critique of Holocaust memory, asserting,

When we write of martyrs instead of victims; focus on resistance instead of mass murder; celebrate the human spirit and bypass the human body; invoke the dignity of the self and ignore its humiliation, we are initiating the evolution of preferred narratives that use embattled words to build buffers of insulation against the terrors of the Holocaust [or, in this case, enslavement], without bringing us any closer to its complex and elusive truths.71

A few years later, Colonial Williamsburg’s own vice president of research, Cary Carson, made a similar argument when he noted that the country’s “achievements are diminished if the struggle, the messiness, the setbacks, and the heartbreaks are left out.”72

As AAIP director, Christy Coleman wanted to move the department toward programs that depicted the dark side of slavery, including arguments and disagreements within the slave community. In an interview, Coleman remembered, that the AAIP’s black characters always seemed to be “so damn noble and struggling . . . just to be.” She suggested, “It was kind of a carry over from Rex [Ellis] . . . you don’t air dirty laundry, you don’t do that.” Coleman argued, “Well maybe we ought to.”73 Coleman’s conviction was rooted in the same sentiment that had inspired the museum’s motto: “that the future may learn from the past.” Coleman contended, “By delving into these harsher areas, we become more cognizant of the challenges that lie ahead and better prepared to find the solutions to problems that continue to plague us.”74 The AAIP director felt that the exploration of topics like slave auctions would prepare visitors confront the legacy of slavery in the twentieth century—racism.
Coleman and other AAIP staff members believed that slave auctions epitomized the institution of slavery. In focusing the public's attention on slave auctions, Coleman tapped into another African American tradition. During the antebellum era, abolitionist tracts and slave narratives used the slave auction as a graphic symbol of slavery's worst evil. While pro-slavery writers and orators argued that whippings, beatings and rapes were exceptions in a system of benevolent rule, they could not deny the fundamental precept of slavery - that slaves were people with prices. The slave trade, in the form of private sales and auctions, connected individual slaveholders to a broader system. Consequently, slave auctions were placed at the center of the abolitionist critique with increasing frequency. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Charles Ball, William Wells Brown, Solomon Northup, John Brown, Henry Bibb, William Lloyd Garrison and Harriet Beecher Stowe all utilized the powerful image of the slave sale. The Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations (AAIP) rearticulated this argument in 1994. Director Christy Coleman believed a slave auction re-enactment could be a powerful educational tool; its impact in 1994 could be as potent as it was in 1850.

The reaction to the auction can be placed in this larger context. Interpreters had been walking a thin line between portraying the degradation of slavery and slave resistance to the system. Ellis and Coleman had fundamentally different ideas about how slavery should be presented to a public audience, each director appealing to a long-standing tradition within the African American community. The most popular programming at the museum had been geared toward depictions of African American cultural survival, not victimization. The protestors lashed out at Coleman's change in direction. Gravely and others acknowledged that slave auctions happened, but they
believed that the auction recast slaves at chattel—"they were just sold, they didn’t do
nothing else." Coleman was not moved by their argument, telling reporters, “For those
who said it showed blacks in a powerless role, they were exactly right. That was the
point.”

The slave auction can be read as “the logical next step” in the museum’s
programming, but it can also be interpreted a “radical departure from past practice.”
Either way, the estate sale was a bold statement by a new director. Christy Coleman was
more willing to tackle controversial and taboo topics than her predecessors. However, it
may have been a mark of her inexperience that Coleman did not seem to consider how the
program would play out in the larger African American community. The auction was
performed in a climate of mistrust, skepticism and cynicism. The protestors’ complaints
must be understood in the context of their concerns about the museum’s “track record”
and their particular definition of “real black history.”
NOTES FOR CHAPTER TWO


2. Greenspan, 88-90.


4. Thad Tate, interview by Peggy Aarlien, Tape Recording and Transcript, College of William and Mary Music Library, Williamsburg, VA, Spring 2003.


9. Greenspan, 143.


17. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, Black History Chronology.


29. Handler & Gable, 12-13, 24.


31. Handler & Gable, 228.
32. West & Hoffschwelle, 78.


35. Harvey Bakari, interview by author, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1 April 2003.


42. Eischstedt and Small, 170-171.


50. Rose McAfee, interview by author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Williamsburg, Virginia, 23 April 2003.


53. Eischstedt & Small, 255-256.


55. Curtis Harris, interview by author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Hopewell, Virginia, 16 April 2003.


57. Rex Ellis, Interview by Author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Williamsburg, Virginia, 10 April 2003.


60. Van Deburg, 137.


62. Curtis Harris, interview.


64. Publick Times: Estate/Slave Auction, videocasette.


76. Jack Gravely, interview by author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Petersburg, Virginia, 4 May 2003.
CHAPTER THREE

PRESENTING SLAVERY IN THE FIRST PERSON

The protestors' complaints went beyond concerns about the museum's track record or the content of the program. They also objected to the format of the presentation. Rev. Curtis Harris acknowledged that slave auctions should be "remembered" in public institutions, like museums, but he questioned whether they should be "re-enacted." Scholars, critics, administrators and interpreters have raised questions about first-person interpretation since the method was introduced. The presentation format has been vigorously defended by those who believe it is a powerful educational tool, and dismissed by others who underscore the medium's flaws and limitations. However, few people have addressed how first-person interpretation serves the interests of visitors and interpreters when used to discuss specific topics. This chapter will focus on the depiction of slavery in the first person at Colonial Williamsburg, exploring the unique challenges presented by this controversial format.

In 1979, Colonial Williamsburg launched its living history program by hiring six "character interpreters"—three black and three white—to present the history of eighteenth-century Williamsburg in the first person. The African American interpreters developed six characters that represented different facets of the colonial capital's black population. As noted in Chapter 2, this fledgling African American interpretation program was the museum's first attempt to seriously address the experiences of the "other half." Rex Ellis,
one of the original interpreters, recalled, "When I started working at the Foundation it was as a ‘street actor’—not because it was a ‘neat’ thing to do but because it was the only area in all of Williamsburg where black history was beginning to be discussed." The African American characters provided visitors with a different perspective of eighteenth-century Williamsburg and introduced an alternative view of the past.

However, the first-person interpretation of slavery would prove to be more challenging than the presentation of other topics at the museum. When the museum first launched the living history program, many African American craftsmen and third-person interpreters did not applaud the initiative as a progressive step forward. According to Christy Coleman, they believed that the program was a “slap in the face to their years of enduring racial slurs and slights to get visitors to see black men and women in roles other than servile ones." African American craftsmen and third-person interpreters were also concerned that the living history program would lead visitors to assume that they were portraying slaves. For white craftsmen, this kind of confusion may have been annoying or amusing. However, being mistaken for a “slave” would have been insulting and demeaning.

The Conflation of Past and Present

Other African Americans have also raised questions about the conflation of past and present in living history exhibits. In the reconstructed environment of living history museums, interpreters teach visitors about the past “in character” and generally, they are not supposed to “break” this frame of reference. At Colonial Williamsburg, character interpreters speak to visitors from the eighteenth century. In a sense, they become part of the museum’s display. In the words of a Colonial Williamsburg administrator, they
become “living artifact[s].” Consequently, in the living history context, twentieth-century African American interpreters are transformed into eighteenth-century slave characters. This metamorphosis can be disturbing, and even psychologically traumatic, for African American visitors and interpreters. Operating in a society which still struggles with racism, some members of the black community are uncomfortable with the re-enactment of slavery. While living history advocates believe that the medium can educate the public about the construction of racism, opponents argue that the presentation format reproduces and reinforces racial subjugation.

A nationwide survey by the Anti-Defamation League in 1992 found that three-quarters of white respondents believed that African Americans “prefer to accept welfare,” were “less ambitious,” “more prone to violence,” or had “less native intelligence.” More than half of white respondents agreed with at least two of these stereotypes, and a third agreed with four or more. In this environment, the first-person interpretation of slavery can be extremely difficult. As Rex Ellis has noted,

[Colonial Williamsburg is] an eighteenth-century living-history museum, with a multicultural history in which one culture is the enslaver and the other culture is enslaved. As if that weren’t enough, the story of these two cultures is being told for the most part by the same two cultures—most of whom are still dealing with the alienation, distrust, fear, intimidation, non-communication, and frustration they historically inherited. To top it off, they incorporate a method of presenting the story that removes the comfort, separation, and safety of third-person presentation and tells the most controversial part of the town’s history through a medium that is stark, conspicuous, and evocative . . . And therein lies the difficulty.

In this volatile context, it can be difficult for visitors and interpreters to determine who is playacting and who is not. Some African American interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg have spoken and written about situations in which white visitors acted out
their racist fantasies or misinterpreted the behavior of their characters.

For example, many African American interpreters can recount the story of a white visitor who picked up one of Colonial Williamsburg’s junior interpreters in costume, addressed him as a “little monkey,” and said, “Now don’t you think you’re better off in America than in Africa?” On another occasion, a visitor asked a costumed African American interpreter to shine his shoes. Some visitors become so completely immersed in the living history experience that they cast themselves in the role of eighteenth-century characters and refuse to engage interpreters in a twentieth-century context. The visitors described above may have been “playing along” and “trying on” an eighteenth-century worldview. More likely than not, they used the guise of playacting to voice their own twentieth-century opinions. The living history environment can provide visitors with the opportunity to act out their racist fantasies.

Additionally, some visitors “misread” first-person interpretations. Unconsciously or deliberately, visitors view programs through the lens of their own stereotypes. As noted in Chapter 2, programs depicting African American musical traditions often draw large crowds. Anthropologist Michael Blakey believes that the popularity of these kinds of programs reflects a racially-slanted view of African American society. Just as the majority of the respondents in the Anti-Defamation League’s survey believed that African Americans were “more prone to violence,” many people believe that African Americans are more artistically or musically gifted than Euro-Americans. Rex Ellis recalled that after one of the AAIP’s music programs, a guest pleaded, “please sing Amazing Grace one more time. You people have such lovely voices.”

Occasionally, visitors also confused the behavior of eighteenth-century characters
and twentieth-century interpreters. For example, in the early 1990s, Christy Coleman created a slave character called “Cate.” When visitors encountered Cate, she was supposed to observe them silently and answer their questions in a sullen monotone. Anna Lawson, an anthropology student at the University of Virginia, observed Cate’s interactions with visitors and noted that almost every recorded conversation “got around to the subject of beatings.” One visitor suggested that Cate was beaten because her master “didn’t approve of the way she was treating his guests [i.e., Colonial Williamsburg visitors].” Another guest who left the presentation early told the student that she thought the interpreter, rather than the slave character she was portraying, “had an attitude” and she had not come all the way from Chicago to see a “black with an attitude.” Cate’s character was developed by Coleman when she was part of the museum’s theatrical corps, not the Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations (AAIP). Rex Ejlis, then the director of the AAIP, did not support the portrayal because he believed the presentation would “allow visitors to confirm negative preconceptions of black people.” Indeed, the incident recorded above was not the first time visitors had mistaken an eighteenth-century slave character for a disgruntled employee. When the living history program first started, “a few visitors meeting slave interpreters believed they were modern Colonial Williamsburg employees complaining about working conditions at the Foundation rather than interpreters in 1770’s character commenting on their masters.”

Many members of the black community could not understand why AAIP interpreters would want to “demean” themselves by speaking and acting as slaves. Even the interpreters’ family and friends avoided coming to their programs. On one occasion,
Christy Coleman told visitors about angry phone calls she had received from members of the local black community. One of the members of her audience recalled, “they were incensed that a black [woman] would willingly take a job where she would set herself up for racist attacks.” During a recent interview, another AAIP interpreter recalled a colleague’s interaction with a group of African American students. After her colleague finished his presentation he asked the class if they had any questions. One of the students raised his hand and said, “Yeah, are you retarded?” When the interpreter asked the boy why he would ask him that question, the boy responded, “You must be retarded to put on a costume like that and act like a slave.”

Despite this kind of criticism, AAIP interpreters adamantly denied that their presentations pandered to the racist or sadistic fantasies of white visitors. Nevertheless, the interpretation of slavery in the first person was a daunting task. AAIP interpreters worried that white and black visitors would misinterpret their presentations or their intentions. They also struggled with the burden of portraying slave characters. Rex Ellis has noted that interpreting slavery day after day can affect interpreters psychologically, especially if they start to internalize the degraded status of their characters. This psychological trauma can be compounded when visitors operating in a living history context either do not understand or acknowledge the distinction between their twentieth-century person and their eighteenth-century persona.

The censure of the black community and the psychological burden of representing a slave character daily made it difficult for Colonial Williamsburg’s Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations (AAIP) to attract interpreters. As noted in Chapter 2, in 1994, the department was operating with only ten full-time staff
members. Rex Ellis wrote about the problem in the AAIP’s newsletter *Broken Chains* in 1992,

In the last decade, many museums have begun programming for the public that mentions the unmentionable... slavery. But as these institutions begin grappling with the slavery issue, they are finding it increasingly difficult to attract African Americans who are willing to tell the story... what kind of fortitude, self-esteem, and daring does it take to portray a character who openly discusses a topic that has remained tabu [sic] in the black community for over two hundred years? What does one gain by discussing family matters outside the family?^{20}

In order to recruit and retain interpreters, the AAIP took steps to help visitors interpret their presentations correctly and allow interpreters retain their dignity.

**Breaking Character**

Proponents of living history believe that the presentation format personalizes and humanizes the past, encouraging empathy and understanding. However, it can be difficult for first-person interpreters to provide visitors with the context they need to understand their personalized presentations, and visitors may not be able to connect the experiences of individual characters to broader historical themes on their own. First-person interpreters can only speak to visitors through their “character”; they are not supposed to “break” this frame of reference. Consequently, interpreters cannot speak about events or people *in their character’s time* that their character would not have known about. This can make it difficult to make explicit connections between a character’s personal experience and more general themes. First-person interpreters also deny any knowledge of events *after their character’s time*. As a result, they are unable to draw connections between the past and present. Moreover, as noted above, some visitors confuse the behavior, speech and mannerisms of interpreters and their characters. For
these reasons, African American interpreters began "breaking character" during their presentations. By providing third-person introductions to their programs, interpreters were able to orient visitors and make sure they understood the presentations. They were also able to distance themselves from their characters and the history they presented.

Notably, black interpreters adopted this strategy soon after the living history program was launched. However, white interpreters retained their original interpretive strategy—they remained in character throughout their presentations. Today, some "mainstream" presentations are prefaced with third-person introductions, but African American history programs are still more likely to be contextualized. An article published in the Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter titled "Giving Life to Black History," noted that responses to "black presentations differed from other [white] living history presentations at Williamsburg" because "misunderstandings could occur quite easily."

The internal newsletter reported that African American interpreters had taken the necessary steps to "insure the public received the proper message" by providing visitors with more context.21 According to the article, black interpretation "differed" because the museum's visitors were unfamiliar with the eighteenth-century slave experience. Furthermore, Rex Ellis argued that white interpreters "didn't have to contend with same kinds of questions, issues, and racist remarks that the black actors had encountered."22 Breaking character allowed black interpreters to mitigate the conflation of their eighteenth- and twentieth-century identities.

For example, in 1994, with the exception of special events or evening programs, all interpretation at the Carter's Grove slave quarter was given in the third person. This decision was made deliberately. When the exhibit first opened to the public in 1988, "it
was decided that except for organized staged performances, interpreters would do no first-person interpretation in the quarter. AAIP interpreters feared that the complete reconstruction of the slave quarter would allow visitors to suspend too much of their disbelief. They were worried that, in this context, they would literally "become" slaves in the eyes of visitors. Despite the objections of management-level administrators, African American interpreters also underscored the difference between their eighteenth-century personas and twentieth-century persons by wearing modern clothing in the quarter. The modern clothing insured that visitors would not address them as "slaves" outside of the living history context. It also reminded visitors that they were acting when they were in costume. This practice continued until 1992 when the department's director Robert C. Watson made the executive decision that costumes would enhance interpretation. In an internal memo, Watson informed interpreters who objected to the change that it was their responsibility to use their dress "as a teaching tool." To illustrate his point, Watson suggested that an interpreter who was called "Aunt Jemima" in costume, should "educate visitors about the origin of the term."

Clothing was also used to signal when it was or was not appropriate to address an interpreter as a "slave" in the central historic area. Many African American interpreters wore twentieth-century clothing when they delivered the "Other Half Tour." Some interpreters also wore modern clothing when they introduced programs in the third-person. In the early 1990s, the AAIP developed a ninety-minute tour of the historic area led by a slave character named "Judith." The tour began with a ten- to twenty-minute introduction and concluded with five- to fifteen-minute question and answer session. Christy Coleman often introduced the tour in twentieth-century clothing. She would
reappear later in the program as Judith’s friend in eighteenth-century costume, and then change back into her twentieth-century clothing to facilitate the question and answer session. In short, during the regularly scheduled ninety-minute program, Coleman changed twice. In the process, she was able to distance herself from her eighteenth-century slave character.

Resisting Mimetic Accuracy

African American interpreters have also tried to preserve their dignity and avoid the conflation of past and present by avoiding stereotypical re-enactments. Historians and curators at Colonial Williamsburg have attempted to recreate the “complete” environment of an eighteenth-century colonial capital in a twentieth century tourist town. In recent years, this pursuit of what anthropologists Richard Handler and Eric Gable have termed “mimetic accuracy,” has included the interpretation of African American history and the portrayal of slavery. Generally, African American interpreters in the museum have supported and promoted this more “inclusive” and “accurate” picture of the past. However, in some circumstances, they have resisted and compromised the museum’s “authenticity.” The AAIP’s charter document noted, “There is little educational value, for visitors or for those playing the parts, in recreating humiliating and degrading scenarios for the sake of nostalgia or historical accuracy alone.” Instead, the first-person interpretation of slavery “should be used when the goal is to create awareness, an understanding, and an appreciation of the colonial black experience.” Valuable interpretation would compel “visitors to examine their images of the past and their current attitudes, values and beliefs- and to continue that examination.”

Using those guidelines, AAIP interpreters have occasionally refused to depict
certain elements of eighteenth-century slavery that could reinforce stereotypes. For example, written records and archaeological excavations indicate that there was a huge production of watermelons at the Carter’s Grove slave quarter during the eighteenth century. However, African American interpreters have objected to growing the fruit because of negative stereotypes associated with watermelons. Consequently, other fruits and vegetables have been substituted. Similarly, written documentation suggests that the slave cabins at Carter’s Grove were sparsely furnished. When the quarter opened to the public in the late 1980s, museum curators wanted to furnish the cabins with straw pallets rather than real bedsteads. However,

[AAIP interpreters] feared comments— and they said they had heard them— about slovenly blacks not keeping their things neat and clean. They felt that what many visitors would see, was not a poor slave with no time to straighten or wash his blanket, but a person who did not care enough about his belongings and living quarters to keep them ‘nice.’

Ultimately, the position of the AAIP prevailed and the cabins were furnished with bedsteads.

**Depicting a Slave Auction**

Initially, as noted in Chapter 2, interpreters also resisted portraying slave auctions. They discussed them in the third person or referred to them in first person, but they drew the line at placing themselves on the auction block. Christy Coleman and the members of her staff changed this policy, arguing that “black folks can’t afford not to have our history told just because it’s uncomfortable or because it may seem inconvenient to us.” From Coleman’s perspective, if slave auctions occurred in the colonial capital during the eighteenth century, then they should be reproduced at Colonial Williamsburg. Essentially, she defended the auction by asserting that the AAIP was simply representing
the past "as it was." Interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg justified the re-enactment of a slave auction by arguing that the presentation was historically accurate—slaves were sold during *Publick Times*.

AAIP staff also believed the re-enactment would "personalize" and "humanize" slave auctions. Dylan Pritchett, the interpreter who portrayed John Ashby, felt that the auction forced visitors to relate to the slaves on the block as "real people with real lives." Similarly, Christy Coleman argued that the auction "puts a face on what happened." The performance underscored universal emotions of joy, relief, pride, pain and suffering. Stacy Roth, one of the medium's most ardent defenders, has argued that living history is "particularly suited to the depiction of human feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and social interactions." Roth suggests that first person interpretation "promotes understanding rather than memorization, empathy rather than detachment." The Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations' (AAIP) charter document asserted,

> The slave experience is more readily understood when slaves are seen as human beings caught in an inhuman situation. When they are shown laughing, crying, hurting, loving, hating, wondering and struggling with the same human emotions as their captors, the institution of slavery ceases to be something separate from the human experience.

Living history allowed the museum's social historians to introduce audiences to three-dimensional people rather than statistics. AAIP interpreters believed the estate sale re-enactment would allow museum visitors to connect with slave characters as human beings with names, faces, values and emotions.

However, protesters argued the re-enactment *dehumanized* slaves because it re-enacted the public display of black bodies and recreated their racial subjugation. They
believed the re-enactment would allow visitors like those described above to act out their racist fantasies or reaffirm negative preconceptions of black people. Before the event, Jack Gravely expressed concern that the auction would reproduce the same racist attitudes and beliefs that had allowed the practice to continue for 250 years. He contended, “We know it happened . . . we are not denying that, but that is not going to be the image. That is not going to be the whole view that people get of my people in Virginia . . . ‘Oh, they were slaves, they were just sold, they didn’t do nothing else.’”

The protestors believed the slave characters were not developed. Instead, they were displayed as “living artifacts,” “things,” or “property.” With the exception of Christy Coleman’s emotional outburst, the AAIP interpreters on the Wetherburn Tavern porch did not speak. The scholar Saidiya Hartman has criticized these kinds of displays, asking, “Beyond evidence of slavery’s crime, what does this exposure of the suffering body yield? Does this not reinforce the “thingly” quality of the captive by reducing the body to evidence in the very effort to establish the humanity of the enslaved?” The performance artist Coco Fusco has noted,

Black people’s entry into the symbolic order of Western culture hinged on the theft of their bodies, the severing of will from their bodies, the reduction of their bodies to things . . . the reality behind memories of black trauma forges a different subjectivity and relation to certain iconic representations of the body . . . The interrelationship of nudity, enslavement and public display of the black body is historically linked to the spectacles of the auction block and lynching. Both these scenarios operate in two registers simultaneously: as actual historical referents and as fantasmatic scenes that stand for the origin of the racial subjugation of the black subject in American culture.

Colonial Williamsburg interpreters primarily understood their presentation as an “actual historical referent.” From their perspective, the re-enactment enhanced the authenticity of
the historic area. The protestors, however, saw the portrayal as an “iconic representation” of black subjugation.

Some of the protestors, like Rev. Curtis Harris, felt this “spectacle” would allow Colonial Williamsburg’s largely white audience to adopt the role of voyeur, just as their predecessors had in the eighteenth-century. In her study of slavery, *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman argues that slave auctions functioned as public entertainment for whites. Hartman also suggests that when these scenes are recreated in history texts, literature, theater, film or living history museums, modern viewers/readers also walk an “uncertain line between witness and spectator.” She asks,

> Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? What does the exposure of the violated body yield?  

Brenda Andrews, publisher of the Norfolk *New Journal & Guide*, raised similar questions about the auction. She asked, “How much of the auction seen would be ‘our history’ and how much entertainment?” She challenged AAIP interpreters to demonstrate the “redemptive value” of the re-enactment—How would the display of black bodies help America resolve its past? Protestor Rev. Milton Reid, for one, did not believe that the auction any redemptive value. Outraged, he told a reporter, “This is 1994. As far as we have come, to go back to this, for entertainment, is despicable and disgusting. This is the kind of anguish we need not display.” Other protestors accused AAIP staff of turning their history into a “sideshow,” producing the event in a “carnival atmosphere,” and “trivializing” slave auctions for “entertainment.”

Some protestors and critics went even further, accusing the museum of
commercializing the auction for profit. Both Jack Gravely and Rev. Curtis Harris suggested that the re-enactment was driven by “economic” factors. Even Robert C. Watson, the AAIP’s former director, wrote a letter to the museum that questioned whether the program had been performed to “decrease the [museum’s budget] deficit.” He recalled, “I wanted to make certain that this important event would not be used to increase the coffers of the [foundation] at the expense of something that was really traumatic for people during slavery.” As the scholar Patrick Hagiopan asserted, 

If the performance were intended to garner income for the performers or their employers, this might make the economic transaction portrayed all the more disturbing, since the historical transaction would be amplified by contemporary commerce, with both dependent on the presence of black bodies on the block.

If the museum produced the auction for profit, then two parallel auctions were occurring simultaneously on October 10, 1994— the reproduction of an eighteenth-century auction in which black slaves were publicly sold for their owners profit, and a twentieth-century auction in which the bodies of black interpreters were displayed for publicity or revenue. However, this argument is not particularly compelling. The museum did not heavily promote the program in order to increase admission sales. Furthermore, because the program was performed on a public street, Colonial Williamsburg could not ticket everyone who attended. Certainly, some visitors had purchased tickets, but a large percentage of guests were probably unticketed observers.

Of course, the re-enactment was not the first time that AAIP interpreters had been charged with “playing slaves for white folks.” Most of them also recognized the symbolic power of the re-enactment, and there is some evidence that AAIP interpreters tried to limit “humiliating” or particularly painful aspects of auctions. For example, the
re-enactment did not illuminate the physical degradation of slavery. Interpreters were not poked, prodded, or examined. Instead, the auctioneer referred to the practice during the sale of Sukey, noting that the bidders had already had the opportunity to examine the laundress. In his analysis of the auction, Bruce McConachie noted that the re-enactment lacked “the festive atmosphere, the course inspection of black bodies by white hands, and the denigrating performances of servility, sexuality, and jollity for white eyes.” He suggested that because the interpreters “excluded” these details, they “ennobled” rather than “degraded” their characters. Indeed, Robert Watson Jr.’s stance of stoic defiance implied that his slave character’s sense of his own worth allowed him to transcend the humiliation of the auction. Similarly, John Ashby’s ability to buy his own wife out of slavery challenged the notion that African Americans “prefer to accept welfare.” Of course, while this interpretation of the slave auction may have allowed interpreters to retain some of their dignity, it also generated additional criticism of the auction from visitors like the black female who argued, “If they’re going to show it they need to show the horrors of it.”

The AAIP also emphasized the educational merit and historical value of the re-enactment during third-person introductions and a question-and-answer session. Employing a familiar strategy, Marcel Riddick introduced the event in twentieth-century clothing, explaining why slaves were frequently sold during Publick Times. Although Christy Coleman delivered her impassioned defense of the event and answered audience questions afterwards in her eighteenth-century costume, few visitors could confuse the defiant twentieth-century AAIP director with the eighteenth-century character who stood crying on stage twenty minutes later.
However, while AAIP interpreters may have successfully distanced themselves from their characters, many of the protestors believed the introductions did not provide visitors with enough context to understand the auction as it unfolded. An explicit explanation of why certain scenarios were chosen and developed was not provided until after the event. Consequently, visitors and guests watching the re-enactment may have misinterpreted or misunderstood the message of the program. For example, rather than making the connection that the character John Ashby was purchasing his wife Sukey, visitors may have assumed that Pritchett was simply portraying a black slaveholder.

Furthermore, despite the fact that Christy Coleman told reporters that the slave auction re-enactment would help Americans confront the “legacy of slavery” in the twentieth century, AAIP interpreters did not explain how auctions produced, shaped and reinforced the racist beliefs America still struggles with today.

The protestors’ concerns about the living history presentation were familiar to AAIP interpreters. Throughout the department’s history, they had also been demonstrably concerned about the reproduction or reinforcement of stereotypes during first-person presentations. Many of them had been the targets of racial slurs or slights while working at the museum. However, they rejected the protestors’ argument that they were “playing slaves for white folks” and “entertaining” tourists by placing themselves on an auction block. Using a variety of strategies, the AAIP tried to mitigate the conflation of past and present in the living history environment. They oriented visitors and underscored the difference between their eighteenth- and twentieth-century identities by breaking character and speaking to guests in the third person. They also resisted programming that could potentially reproduce stereotypes or recreate degrading images of
African Americans. During the slave auction re-enactment they employed both of these techniques.

However, even with these adjustments, the protestors believed that it was inappropriate to re-enact a slave auction. For them, the image of Christy Coleman's character Lucy begging Mr. Tayloe to reunite her with her husband was too stark for public consumption. They questioned the social and cultural value of resurrecting that painful image from the past. While they empathized with Coleman's character, they worried that white visitors would view her as a victim, rather than a stoic survivor. They were also concerned that the dehumanization of the "slaves" on the auction block would have a negative impact on how visitors viewed African Americans in the twentieth-century. The protestors argued that the auction needed to be placed in a more robust educational context to avoid the reproduction of racism. They urged the museum to surround the program with workshops, panel discussions, public forums and extensive contextualization.

Groups who believe they have a vested interest in a museum's presentation fight for the right to influence or control how "their story" is told. Within Colonial Williamsburg, it was the AAIP who suggested and created the re-enactment, challenging the museum to address a taboo topic. In the public arena, the civil rights leaders claimed the authority to pass judgement on the presentation. As noted here and in Chapter 2, the civil rights leaders and AAIP interpreters were seriously divided about the content of the program and the presentation format. Chapter 4 will explore how museums like Colonial Williamsburg determine who should have the authority to develop and shape sensitive programs like the slave auction.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER THREE

1. Curtis Harris, interview by author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Hopewell, Virginia, 16 April 2003.


3. Rex Ellis, “Presenting the Past”, viii.


10. Lawson, 331.


17. Lawson, 220.

18. Rose McAfee, Interview by Author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Williamsburg, Virginia, 23 April 2003.


23. Lawson, 334.


25. Lawson, 142-143.


29. Lawson, 305.


37. Jack Gravely, interview by author.


40. Curtis Harris, Interview by Author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Hopewell, Virginia, 16 April 2003.

41. Hartman, 37.

42. Hartman, 3-4.


45. Jack Gravely, Interview by Author. And Curtis Harris, Interview by Author.


47. Hagiopan, 281.

CHAPTER FOUR

OUTSIDE INTEREST GROUPS AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Those standing on both sides of the conflict—civil rights leaders and AAIP interpreters—claimed the painful history of slavery for themselves. Before the auction started, Jack Gravely asserted, “you cannot portray our history in 21-minutes . . . and make it some kind of sideshow.” Moments later, Christy Coleman defended the program, arguing that the Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations (AAIP) only wanted to “teach the story of our mothers and grandmothers.” Just as Gravely based his right to criticize the program on the color of his skin, Christy Coleman claimed the authority to develop it through her ancestry. As African Americans, they “owned” this piece of the past. Both felt it was their responsibility to make sure the story was told accurately, fairly and tastefully. However, they fundamentally disagreed about the substance of the program and the mode of presentation.

Tension between both groups escalated around the presentation of the slave auction because of its stark imagery and symbolic impact. As Edward Lilenthal has noted, “The more volatile the memory, the more difficult a task to reach a consensual vision of how the memory should be appropriately expressed, and the more intense become the struggles to shape, to ‘own’ the memory’s public presence.” The scholar Patrick Hagiopan has asserted that claims of “ownership” not only involve contesting how presentations are shaped, but whether certain topics are appropriate for
representation at all. In his essay “Race and Politics of Public History in the United States,” Hagiopan suggested that African Americans, in particular, may prefer to keep some information “protected from the gaze of outsiders.” Hagiopan wrote, “for African Americans, once deprived of all possessions except their secret pain, decisions about what should and should not be brought within the horizon of representation have a special sharpness.” The previous chapters have explored this struggle over public memory. Chapter 4 will address how museums decide who has the authority to develop and produce culturally sensitive exhibitions and presentations.

Claiming Authority

During the slave auction, the protestors and interpreters both claimed the right to shape and define America’s public image of slavery. As the voice of the black civil rights community, the protestors demanded that Colonial Williamsburg’s administrators, interpreters and visitors acknowledge their right to veto or alter any program they thought was insensitive. At the very least, they believed they were entitled to a place at the negotiating table as civil rights veterans. In the end, they had no faith in the presentation because they had been shut out of the development process. As a result, they protested the program, insisted that it be canceled, and threatened to boycott the museum. And when they failed to persuade Colonial Williamsburg executives in private conference rooms, they took their argument to the public. By employing familiar strategies from the civil rights movement—staging a sit-in, voicing their objections, and encouraging onlookers to join them in a rendition of “We Shall Overcome”—the protestors connected the re-enactment to well-known forms of institutionalized racism. They based their right to judge the program on their emotional and personal connection to the history of
slavery. As one scholar recently noted, this is a "powerful credential to invoke" since "it is virtually impossible for someone else to rebut without seeming arrogant or insensitive."³

In a recent survey, the Center on History-Making in America found that as a group, African Americans place a heavy emphasis on racial or cultural history. Indeed, a quarter of black respondents stressed the importance of racial history over 'mainstream' national narratives, local, and even familial histories. In contrast, only four-percent of white respondents felt a stronger connection to racial or ethnic history than the other categories noted above. Moreover, while interviewers found that white Americans tended to visit museums on their way somewhere else, African American respondents often deliberately sought out museums that "commemorated the black past."⁴ These responses may suggest that African Americans feel more connected to their community's past than other groups. They may also be more invested in the way it is presented.

Unlike mainstream organizations like Colonial Williamsburg, African American history museums are visited and supported by an overwhelmingly black audience.⁵ Many of these institutions were founded at the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, the public role of museums was redefined and transformed— they became "forums" rather than "temples."⁶ Increasingly, museums became places where people could engage, discuss and debate history. Many African American museums were swept into this movement. As Jeffery Stewart and Fath Davis Ruffins noted in their study of African American public history,

Rather than holders of precious artifacts, stored and exhibited in isolated splendor, Afro-American historical museums became cultural centers, providing outlets for many separate and sometimes contradictory impulses
in local black communities. Black-supported museums . . . fostered a ‘living’ environment and fulfilled social and entertainment functions as well as presenting historical artifacts and art.7

These “new” museums encouraged public participation and involvement in the curatorial process. Communities were allowed to interpret their own history, with the assistance of museum professionals. This tradition of inclusion may have fostered and encouraged the idea that leaders in the black community were entitled to shape how their history was presented.

Some critics have argued that African Americans should be included in the program development process because presentations of slavery or later periods of black history affect their community more than the general population. In a recent interview, Rex Ellis suggested that he would have contacted the civil rights leaders about the slave auction re-enactment before the story broke in the newspapers. He speculated, “I think I might have called the head of the NAACP. I might have talked to the black community because I have . . . understood that the history that we teach here [at Colonial Williamsburg] impacts them more than it does anybody else. It’s their community we’re representing.”8 Jennifer Eischstedt and Steven Small also argue that representations of slavery affect blacks more than whites because of present-day stereotypes, discrimination, and racial hostility.9 As noted in the previous chapters, museum exhibits or presentations can inadvertently reflect, reproduce and even reinforce racial stereotypes. King Salim Khalfani asserted that without black contributions, “white” museums like the Museum of the Confederacy, Colonial Williamsburg, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, “perpetuate the status quo.”10

To a certain extent, Colonial Williamsburg seems to have relied on its own
employees as representatives of the “black community.” The museum has established a reputation as a public educational institution and a national identity-maker. Its presentations are grounded in historical documentation and hours of research by staff historians. Years of education, sound scholarship and professional work experience support the authenticity and authority of the museum’s interpretation. However, the “authenticity” of African American history programs has also been validated through the ancestry of black interpreters and program planners. As African American scholars, AAIP staff members could draw upon the museum’s reputation for solid historical scholarship as well as their own personal connection to a painful past. Anna Lawson, an anthropology student who observed the museum’s interpretation of slavery with Eric Gable and Richard Handler, suggested that “black guides and their narratives” served as “icons of authenticity” in the museum.11

As noted in previous chapters, African Americans have shaped the content of African American programming and its mode of presentation. The museum did not consult civil rights groups or other civic organizations until the controversy developed largely because Christy Coleman and the Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations had created and pushed for the program. King Salim Khalfani remembered, “The crux of their argument was based on the fact that Christy Coleman was a person of African descent . . . she wanted to do it and felt it was right . . . so it couldn’t be bad.”12 Indeed, museum administrators approved the slave auction reenactment in spite of their misgivings about how the program would be received. Since slave auctions were a part of the colonial capital’s past and the department had volunteered to develop the program, Robert Wilburn recalled, “I couldn’t see anyway that
I could have told the African American interpreters that they couldn’t do this program.”

However, this position was and is untenable. Even if one accepts to the premise that black interpreters are more qualified to develop African American history programs than their white counterparts, ten to twelve African American interpreters cannot “speak” for an entire community. Brenda Andrews of the Norfolk New Journal & Guide noted,

Colonial Williamsburg officials in acquiescing to the recommendation of the 13-member all black committee that introduced the idea of the slave auction, probably thought they had covered the right bases. But blacks are no more monolithic than are any other race of people. Thirteen blacks cannot speak for all blacks on such a sensitive topic.13

Indeed, AAIP interpreters may have been distinctly unrepresentative of the “community” response. While most African Americans were voting with their feet and avoiding the museum, interpreters chose to work there and subject themselves to the psychological trauma of playing “slaves.”

Interpreters believed that they were reclaiming what Christy Coleman called “the story of our mothers and grandmothers” through their work at the museum. Before the slave sale re-enactment Coleman told the audience, “We wanted to do this so that each and every one of you never forget what happened to them.” AAIP interpreters took the mandate laid out in Langston Hughes’ “Negro Mother” to heart:

All you dark children in the world out there,
Remember my sweat, my pain, my despair.
Remember my years, heavy with sorrow—
And make of those years a torch for tomorrow.
Make of my past a road to the light
Out of the darkness, the ignorance, the night.14

When Jennifer Eischstedt and Stephen Small toured the American South in their survey of plantation museums, they recorded a conversation with an African American
interpreter at Colonial Williamsburg. She told them, if “my boss told me seven years ago that I’d be out here dressed like this [in eighteenth-century costume], I would say no, I wouldn’t do it.” However, after working in the museum her opinion changed. “I’ve learned I shouldn’t be ashamed to tell my grandmother’s story . . . I’ve found telling the story to be very cathartic.”

The protestors rejected this characterization of African American interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg. They felt the AAIP interpreters had absorbed the museum’s ideology so completely that they had abandoned their “roots.” Jack Gravely remembered,

The most disappointing thing in Colonial Williamsburg was how a number of black folk had really bought into the system down there and really had just bought into the fact that ‘this was the way it was, and we play our little peon role in it and we get our paycheck and we go home.’ And really that was the tension between myself and that woman in that room [Christy Coleman in the Wetherburn Tavern] . . . How can you participate in this stuff and not be aware of the larger picture, and its impact?

In later conversations, both Gravely and King Salim Khalfani remarked on Coleman’s “insensitivity” to “issues that affect African people.” Most of the protestors and critics dismissed the idea that AAIP interpreters could voice their opinions within the museum simply because they were employees. Anthropologist Michael Blakey recently noted that African Americans working at Colonial Williamsburg operate within a “power structure.” He suggested that employees can only push so far and retain their jobs or any hope of promotion. Rev. Curtis Harris cynically noted after the event, “She [Christy Coleman] was a professional and she had a job. And if you have a job, you have to produce.”

Similarly, in her dissertation “‘The Other Half’: Making African American History at Colonial Williamsburg,” Anna Lawson observed “two kinds of acting” in the museum. She contended that AAIP interpreters not only adopted the personas of the eighteenth-
century slaves, they also performed as “20th century, cooperative black museum employee[s].”

Protestors argued that economic complications also made it impossible for members of the Williamsburg NAACP to participate in the protest. Many members of the local branch worked for Colonial Williamsburg or had family members that worked for the museum. Consequently, the protestors rejected the argument that local branch members had been swayed by Christy Coleman’s explanation of the program. Citing personal conversations with Williamsburg residents, they argued that many members of the local black community were outraged by the program, but afraid to take a stand. Jack Gravely explained,

The politics—the internal politics—the family secret was that many of the NAACP [members] . . . worked at Colonial Williamsburg. And there was fear. There really was fear . . . The local NAACP did not have a meeting and pass a resolution and say ‘we want this [protest] done.’ They did not do that . . . But I came down [to speak with them] and clearly realized that many of the people that we were asking to march and be over there with us and support us couldn’t. [They said.] ‘I can’t do that. I work there. My son works there.’ I remember once in the church meeting that someone said, ‘Well, I work there, my wife works there. That’s my son—he works there, his wife works there.’ That’s a whole family.

A black man laying bricks in the historic area told Michael Janofsky, a New York Times reporter, that he opposed the re-enactment, “Blacks around here don’t want to be reminded . . . It bothers people. People think it’s very insensitive to dig it all up again.” However, the bricklayer refused to give Janofsky his name, saying he feared “retribution” from Colonial Williamsburg administrators. Whether the museum would have actually punished employees for speaking out is almost irrelevant. If employees, like the bricklayer, feared “retribution,” their expectations were a powerful deterrent.
From the protestors' perspective, then, only black community leaders from outside Williamsburg were in a position to oppose the museum. The majority of those who protested the program lived about an hour away from Williamsburg— in Hopewell, Petersburg, Norfolk, and Richmond. In conversations with Colonial Williamsburg employees, several administrators dismissed the protestors, saying that NAACP officials from Richmond were "out of towners" grandstanding in order to attract votes in an upcoming NAACP election. However, according to Jack Gravely, the election had already taken place by October 10th. King Salim Khalfani of the NAACP also rejected the administrators’ statements, asserting,

We’ve been in existence over 90 years and we don’t have to grandstand to get attention: we’re the oldest, the largest, the boldest, the baddest, the most cussed and discussed organization on the planet when it comes to civil rights issues. So, no need for grandstanding . . . Because some things, you can’t be guided by what fear or the thermometer of public opinion says. You do what you know is right and you take a stand . . . What we did wasn’t for the faint of heart.

Khalfani, Gravely and others believed they were speaking on the behalf of members of the local NAACP who could not afford to voice their own opinions. Furthermore, until they arrived in Williamsburg on the day of the auction, they were unaware of the AAIP’s role in developing the program. Consequently, at the time, they also believed they were standing up for exploited or brainwashed African American employees who were being economically coerced, even forced, to degrade themselves on the auction block.

The protestors overestimated their role. Christy Coleman insisted on the day of the event that AAIP interpreters “came here to do this voluntarily.” Indeed, the department had been the driving force behind the re-enactment. Furthermore, some members of the local NAACP had been persuaded by Christy Coleman’s presentation a
few days earlier. Other local leaders, like Rev. Dr. Thomas Shields, pastor of First
Baptist Church, vocally defended the presentation and AAIP interpreters. Shields told a
local reporter, "It was obvious to me in conversations with Harris and Gravely that they
did not have sufficient information to make a proper judgement" before the re-enactment
was staged. Shields suggested that black leaders from outside of Williamsburg were
unfamiliar with "the consistency as well as the integrity that Christy and her group have
displayed in the past." However, Shields also encouraged Colonial Williamsburg to
reach out to African American leaders around the country and familiarize them with the
museum’s programming. Arguably, as a national museum, Colonial Williamsburg had a
responsibility to engage leaders on the state and national level.

Negotiating Boundaries and Sharing Authority

However, when museums choose to engage outside interest groups they often
struggle with how to define the relationship between museum educators and community
leaders. In recent years, some institutions have tried to avoid conflicts, like the
controversy surrounding the slave auction re-enactment, by democratizing the
development of their programs and engaging outside interest groups in a dialogue about
their presentations. Michael Frisch has called this kind of interaction with museum
visitors "shared authority." He has urged museum scholars and exhibit designers to
"respect, understand, invoke, and involve the very real authority their audiences bring to a
museum exhibit . . . or a public program." In 1990 he wrote,

Although grounded in culture and experience rather than academic
expertise, this [nonprofessional] authority can become central to an
exhibit’s capacity to provide a meaningful engagement with history—to
what should be not only a distribution of knowledge from those who have
it to those who do not, but a more profound sharing of knowledges, an
implicit and sometimes explicit dialogue from very different vantages about the shape, meaning, and implications of history.

Frisch has also contended that "shared authority" may "promote a more democratized and widely shared historical consciousness, consequently encouraging broader participation in debates about history, debates that will be informed by a more deeply representative range of experiences, perspectives, and values." Similarly, Mike Wallace has suggested that engaging communities would help visitors "develop their historical sensibilities, strengthening their ability to locate themselves in time, and enhancing their capacity as citizens to be historically informed makers of history."

In the early 1990s, several museums tested Frisch's theoretical premise, turning passive audiences into active participants. The Valentine Museum (Richmond, Virginia) assembled advisory groups to help plan public programs and invited community leaders to "public editing sessions" of completed shows. When they invited local African American leaders and scholars to help them develop an exhibit about the black community in Richmond during the antebellum era, the response was overwhelming. Their efforts were applauded by critics, and the exhibit, titled "In Bondage and Freedom," attracted a significant number of black visitors. Nevertheless, in 1994, most, if not all, Colonial Williamsburg programs were still developed without external input, although some sensitive programs like "Affairs of the Heart" were subjected to pilot testing.

Not all museum professionals have embraced the idea of "sharing" their authority. Calls for public participation in program planning have often fallen on deaf ears. In *Displays of Power: Controversy in the American Museum*, Steven C. Dubin noted that what activists, like the slave auction protestors, perceive as museum democratization,
insiders see as "heavy-handed, uniformed, and unprofessional interference." After experiencing the Irish community’s intense scrutiny of the Museum of the City of New York’s (MCNY) exhibit *Gaelic Gotham*, curator Jan Ramirez suggested that museums were turning to billboards: "venues where a group could temporarily squat and ‘do its own thing.’” Ramirez said critics of the *Gaelic Gotham* exhibit attributed “no importance whatsoever to the professional staff at the museum. If anything, we were here to be passive vessels, to allow the community’s voice to go unedited onto the wall.” After the controversy, MCNY curator Jane McNamara noted that museum professionals needed to figure out how to negotiate “boundaries and relationships [with their audiences] that are productive.”

While engaging visitors and community leaders can be beneficial, granting them the power to alter or veto exhibit content can have disastrous consequences. In 1994, the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum (NASM) bowed to political pressure from the Air Force Association (AFA) and ultimately scrapped an exhibit which took a critical look at the United States’ decision to drop the atomic bomb in World War 2. The AFA had launched a microscopic examination of exhibition scripts and lobbied Congress to withdraw funding from the museum if it mounted the exhibit. When the museum capitulated, historians and scholars around the country responded to the decision with outrage, accusing NASM of “historical cleansing” by producing a “patriotically correct” exhibit. In his analysis of the controversy, Richard Kohn wrote,

One of the premier cultural institutions of the United States and its foremost museum system surrendered its scholarly independence and a significant amount of its authority in American intellectual life to accommodate a political perspective . . . These troubling developments have led some observers to label the cancellation political censorship. If
such a famous and prestigious cultural institution cannot present scholarship to the public, they ask, can there be any displays, exhibitions, or programs that offend politically powerful or vocal groups? . . . Unable to explore their past openly or critically, Americans might endanger their political system and damage the liberty on which that system is based and which it is designed to preserve.33

Museums should not sacrifice their curriculum, their educational agenda, or their intellectual integrity in order to appease outside interest groups. As Mike Wallace has noted, “If one institution yields to noisy minorities, or even perceived majorities, the hard-won credibility of all museums will quickly unravel, for who can sustain confidence in institutions whose exhibitions have been purchased or imposed.”34 Similarly, Christy Coleman urged her colleagues not to be “driven by public opinion.”35 She refused to cede her authority to the protestors. She would not even give them an advance copy of the script or an outline of the scenario. Arguably, if she had done so, she would have exposed Colonial Williamsburg to the same kind of detailed examination that had plagued curators at the National Air and Space Museum.

Nevertheless, museums like Colonial Williamsburg are private institutions with a public function. If they include visitors and constituents in the development of their programs, they foster a more active engagement with the past and enhance their ability to mount successful exhibitions. Fundamentally, sharing authority involves creating a dialogue, providing the opportunity to persuade and be persuaded. Of course, agreeing to listen to the community does not necessarily solve the problem of deciding who represents it. There is really no such thing as the “black community.” However, museums should make an effort to identify groups that may be affected by their presentations and initiate contact with self-selected community leaders.
This kind of inclusive approach had been written into the AAIP’s charter document in 1989,

The only legitimate gauge of a program’s success is the response it elicits from the audience. Thoughtful surveys, opinion polls, and evaluations by employees and visitors are a valuable source of information. In order to maintain quality and consistency, we must constantly seek out feedback from the general public as well as employees of the Foundation.36

With boundaries in place, Colonial Williamsburg could have initiated a dialogue with African American community leaders on the local, state and national level, rather than just relying on the perspective of AAIP interpreters. This would virtually have guaranteed that the museum would have heard a variety of opinions about the reenactment. Moreover, if they had engaged members of the community during the development process they may have been able to make adjustments that would have allowed them to meet their educational goals without offending people. As it was, the AAIP only approached the local branch of the NAACP to explain their rationale for developing an already completed program.

Christy Coleman acknowledged after the event that “forming and maintaining effective relationships and communication with our communities is critical to institutional success.”37 Outside interest groups often feel they have stake in how “their” history is interpreted. Their cultural authority is often not based on their education or even their professional occupation. Rather, it is based on lived experience and motivated by the fear that a museum’s presentation of the past could have a negative impact on how people perceive them in the present. Museums can ignore these groups and develop programs without their input. However, when they do so, they risk the censure of community leaders and sacrifice their respect. In order to increase visitation and improve
their own presentations, museums should engage in a dialogue with the public and include their constituents in the process of history-making. Nevertheless, while it may be appropriate to “share” authority, museums should not sacrifice their educational curriculum or their exhibitions. With appropriate boundaries in place, museums and visitors can both benefit from a mutually reciprocal relationship based on trust and respect.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER FOUR


6. Dubin, 10.

7. Stewart and Ruffins, 331-332.

8. Rex Ellis, Interview by Author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Williamsburg, Virginia, 10 April 2003.


12. King Salim Khalfani, Interview by Author


15. Eischstedt and Small, 186.

17. Jack Gravely, Interview by Author. And King Salim Khalfani, Interview by Author.


23. King Salim Khalfani, Interview by author.


27. Mike Wallace, Mickey Mouse History, 127.


29. Dubin, 16.

30. Dubin, 78.


32. Dubin, 223.


Today, Colonial Williamsburg interpreters still defend the educational merit of the estate sale re-enactment. Christy Coleman and others have argued that the program “epitomized” chattel slavery, showing visitors exactly what it meant to be a person with a price. Moreover, it placed the museum’s interpretation of slavery front and center. Vice President Cary Carson, has suggested that the news coverage of the event was the “best advertising” the institution could ask for— it announced to the world that Colonial Williamsburg was committed to portraying black history.1 As noted in Chapter 1, Carson and several other administrators encouraged the staff to make the portrayal part of the museum’s regular programming. Bill White, director of presentations and tours, announced, “If Christy Coleman and other members of the staff were to come to me and say, ‘Let’s do it again,’ I’d back them up all the way.”2

Nevertheless, Colonial Williamsburg has never reproduced the event.3 Some members of the staff believe the museum has missed a tremendous opportunity. In 1997, a Colonial Williamsburg marketing executive argued,

I continue to believe strongly that, following the event [the slave auction], we had the opportunity and the momentum to position ourselves as the pre-eminent African American history program in the country, but [redacted text] we gave up that opportunity. We’re back to where we were before that event, and those opportunities come once in a lifetime, if that often.4
Others have suggested that the museum’s decision not to repeat the re-enactment has cast a shadow of doubt over the original presentation. Immediately after the auction, Colonial Williamsburg employee John Hamant insisted in a memo, “we have to do the program again, or invalidate the effort that was made today.” Indeed, many of the protestors believe the museum buckled under pressure from the NAACP and SCLC. They are convinced that their demonstration had a decisive impact. Rev. Curtis Harris proudly asserted, “I succeeded. If I had not sat on the steps, if they had not had a protest, then it would have gone down in history that ‘annually, we’re going to have slave auctions.’”

Interestingly, virtually none of the interpreters interviewed suggested that the protestors had influenced the museum’s decision not to repeat the re-enactment. Instead, most of the Colonial Williamsburg administrators and AAIP interpreters cited the re-enactment’s emotional impact as the primary reason the estate sale program was never staged again. Former Colonial Williamsburg President Robert Wilburn asserted,

The staff didn’t want to do again. I think everybody in management was willing to support them doing it again, and thought that it had achieved the purpose which it had set out to accomplish. It’s just that they didn’t want to do it because it was such an emotional drain on the participants. And I think part of that emotional drain came with the controversy. Even within their own communities, there was a split about whether they should be doing it or not doing it. They just didn’t want to face it again.

However, most of the interpreters suggested that it was the re-enactment itself, not the controversy, which affected them. Robert Watson Jr. recalled, “you take yourself back in time, and you’re standing on the steps . . . where people were once sold as property. This experience leaves part of you right where you stood. The impact is hard to describe.”

The estate sale re-enactment was also difficult for white interpreters. Bob Chandler, the auctioneer, stated, “the selling of human beings, even if it is a theatrical presentation, just
creates too many problems both from the slave point of view, but also from the white
point of view . . . it’s very emotional to be in a situation where you are either selling or
buying a human being.” Remembering the tense atmosphere, Chandler continued, “I was
emotionally drained because how could one legitimize selling another human being? . . .
[It] was very traumatic for me to see the tearing [apart] of families and so forth.”9  Steve
Elliott, then vice president of the historic area, remembered watching interpreters return
to the Wetherburn Tavern after the program in tears.

Just as Robert Wilburn and others had found it impossible to refuse the AAIP’s
request to stage the auction, their ability to push the department into producing the re-
enactment again was limited. Steve Elliott explained,

It requires such a huge personal investment that one doesn’t say to the
staff, ‘OK, now we’re going to do this every Thursday,’ or whatever. It
really needs to come from them, or it would not be successful. And
Christy felt that it was not something they could do on a regular basis—
they could not sustain it.10

The psychological trauma of portraying a slave daily already made it difficult for the
AAIP to retain staff members. If employees were asked to participate in slave auction re-
enactments regularly, or even occasionally, it might become impossible to find enough
interpreters to fill the roles.

However, some people within in the museum also raised questions about the
educational value of repeating of the program. Its impact was emotional, even visceral,
but did it really help visitors understand slavery as an institution that shaped daily life? If
museum visitors know anything about slavery, it is that slaves could be bought and sold
as property. In his analysis, “In Black & White: Interpreting African American Culture in
Contemporary Museums” (1995), Smithsonian Curator Lonnie C. Bunch wrote, “My
major concern is that museums are too often crafting exhibitions that simply say, ‘African Americans were here too,’ rather than examining the complexities, interactions and difficulties of race in America.”

When asked whether the museum should ever reproduce the auction, Coleman questioned whether repeating the estate sale auction would contribute anything to the public’s understanding of the institution. The former AAIP director asserted that the original re-enactment had served its purpose. While she felt that auction re-enactments could be valuable, she contended that the “subtleties of slavery are a much more interesting and important story.”

As a result, Christy Coleman and others believe the re-enactment should be remembered “as a moment of exceptional programming.” Immediately after the re-enactment, Coleman told reporters that she did not think the auction should be “normalized” because repetition would “diminish its power.”

Rex Ellis, AAIP founder and current vice president of the historic area, suggested that a regularly scheduled slave auction re-enactment would be “tasteless.” He stated, “The negativity of its reception would be far greater than any positive educational value that would come of it.”

Similarly, Tom Hay, a white interpreter who participated in the re-enactment as a sheriff, asserted,

I think it would be a tragedy if it ever became a regularly scheduled program where it became, ‘Oh, one o’clock . . . We’ve seen the fife and drum corp. Now let’s run down and see the two o’clock slave auction.’ That might end up trivializing it, which we wouldn’t want to do.

Colonial Williamsburg interpreters and administrators seem to have considered the protestors’ complaint that the re-enactment could have “trivialized” the slave experience.

While they still believe the 1994 re-enactment was appropriate, they have consciously
avoided repeating it.

However, if the museum decided to stage another re-enactment, it would not have to reproduce or duplicate the original program. Considering the protestors' explosive reaction, it would be foolish to do. Would it be possible to create a slave auction re-enactment that avoided the pitfalls and problems noted above and in previous chapters? The rest of this chapter will reconsider the program’s development, presentation format and educational content. What follows is essentially an imaginative exercise—the construction of an alternative auction.

**Program Development**

Designing a re-enactment of a slave auction requires delicate and long-term planning. It is difficult to pin down exactly when the AAIP started planning the original re-enactment. However, Christy Coleman became the director of the department in August 1994 and her predecessor Robert C. Watson was not involved in the planning process. Therefore, the department must have prepared the re-enactment in less than two months. Arguably, this was not sufficient time to research, develop, write, rehearse and test such a sensitive program. After the event, Robert C. Watson wrote a long letter criticizing the way the program was developed. Watson believed that the estate sale re-enactment was a “logical next step” for the department, but he questioned whether it was done with the “care and attention to detail that other programs had received.” In a recent interview, Watson explained that the auction had been pushed through the museum’s approval process due to the compressed time frame. Drawing on his own experience developing programs, Watson recalled,

You and I could have the best idea going, but we had to present it in such a
way to get the approval of people who make the costumes, people who do the research... So it's a beautiful process. So by the time you get to the final product, [the] product of implementation, you've had several hands, you've had several eyes, you've had several analyses [and] that ensures quality for public programming.

Watson asserted, "I don't think the slave auction got that and that was my concern. That still is a concern." The department had not even solicited Watson's opinion as a recent director of the AAIP and a senior research historian.17

In order to employ a program planning strategy like the one outlined in Chapter 4, the museum would have to allot more time for program development. With more time, the foundation could collect opinions within the museum and include external community leaders and scholars in the development process. Rather than seeking a stamp of approval from the local NAACP a few days before the event, the museum could engage outsiders in a real dialogue. This would allow the program to develop naturally, with input from scholars inside and outside the museum. If the museum had engaged local, state, and national community leaders early, AAIP interpreters could have familiarized them with the museum's African American history programming. They might even have been able to convince their critics that the re-enactment had educational merit.

Even if administrators and interpreters at the museum did not want to include outsiders in program planning, they could have solicited their reactions during rehearsals of the program. Robert C. Watson suggested that he would have assembled a panel of community leaders, black scholars and visitors to view a pilot of the auction. Other sensitive programs, like Coleman's "Affairs of the Heart," had been subjected to this kind of testing.18 Indeed, a few months later, Colonial Williamsburg conducted "formative evaluations" on a variety of programs to determine if visitors absorbed the museum's
narrative storyline “Becoming Americans.” In an article about the tests, museum employees and consultants explained,

Formative evaluation of interpretive programs helps interpretive planners understand how visitors experience and understand a program’s concepts and themes before presentation methods are finalized. It is an interim examination of a program . . . Do visitors’ experiences and thoughts correspond with the program’s goals and objectives? What are the program’s successes, and what are its shortcomings? What meaning do visitors take away from their experiences?19

Planners could use the answers to these kinds of questions to guide the final phase of program development. If the museum had taken this approach initially, interpreters could have made small adjustments in order to ensure that visitors would not be offended by the program and the audience would absorb the intended message.

Given more time, the museum could also launch a more extensive public relations campaign or an outreach program to support the re-enactment. As noted in Chapter 1, the museum did not include the auction in the information distributed to the media about *Publick Times* events. Most community leaders only heard about the re-enactment after the story was leaked to the press. Rex Ellis speculated that if he had been in charge of the program he would have been more forthcoming. He said, “whether it was an estate auction or slave sale—whatever it was—seeing black folks sold on the streets of Virginia—no matter what you call it— is pretty big.”20 In a newspaper article, Ellis suggested that the lack of public outreach was a product of Coleman’s inexperience. Ellis told the *Daily Press*, “It was so quick and not part of a larger educational program, like a seminar, and more comprehensive contact with the media.” He noted, “If I had done it, people who were going to be upset would probably have been upset anyway, but it wouldn’t have been because they didn’t know about it ahead of time from me.”21 In part, the controversy
developed because protestors felt blind-sided by what they characterized as the museum’s “covert” activities. Proactive outreach would diffuse some of these misunderstandings. The museum would also have the opportunity to shape the public’s perception of the event. Instead, Coleman and her staff spent the days leading up to the auction reacting to news reports and defending their program.

**Presentation and Contextualization**

Of course the impetus for producing the program in less than two months was the department’s desire to stage the re-enactment in conjunction with *Publick Times*. Colonial Williamsburg interpreters and administrators justified the presentation by arguing that slaves were frequently sold at large public celebrations or gatherings. The protestors, on the other hand, believed that performing the program within a celebratory context was inappropriate, even though it was historically accurate. They believed it reproduced the “carnival atmosphere” that existed at eighteenth-century auctions. King Salim Khalfani felt the presentation was “callous.” He recalled,

> I remember seeing an ad that said ‘slave auction’ and it was set up to be just a short little thing in the course of a whole three day weekend on King George’s Ascension to the throne. And I thought that was rather disrespectful— to have something as traumatic as a slave auction— where you’re selling human flesh— and to do it in the context of a weekend about someone else.²²

Dylan Pritchett, a former AAIP interpreter, dismissed Khalfani’s perspective, “*Publick Times* is when the estate auctions were held . . . if he wants to change history, the heck with changing *Publick Times*, change slavery . . . [Colonial Williamsburg] can’t do that, again you have to be historically accurate.”²³

Pritchett’s perspective echoes a generally accepted premise at the museum— that
living history museums educate the public by recreating the past as accurately as possible. However, as noted in Chapter 3, when depicting racial conflicts and interactions, this kind of reproduction can have unintended consequences. Furthermore, Rex Ellis has suggested that the museum’s pursuit of mimetic accuracy can become a “barrier to communication.” If visitors are so offended by a presentation that they cannot absorb the program’s intended message, then the museum has not fulfilled its educational mission. As the AAIP discovered early on, interpreters operating in a pure living history context are often unable to address visitors’ concerns or explain their educational intent. The department has employed several strategies to address this problem, primarily by “breaking character” and introducing presentations in the first person. Arguably, however, interpreters needed to build even more contextualization into the slave auction program because of its hyper-sensitive content.

Khalfani and others believed that a slave auction re-enactment would have been more appropriate if it was performed in a different context. Khalfani suggested that the dramatization of slave auction could be valuable if it was performed during a “three day educational weekend at Colonial Williamsburg on the horrors of African enslavement in the West— and there were going to be workshops, seminars, and that was just one part of a whole weekend of activities.” Essentially, instead of re-enacting the auction within an eighteenth century context, Khalfani wanted to surround the program with educational content— seminars, panel discussions and traditional exhibits. Colonial Williamsburg could incorporate some of these suggestions if they ever staged the re-enactment again.

For example, interpreters could strengthen the third-person interpretation offered before and after the program. Stacy Roth, a living history advocate, contends that one of
the medium's most "meaningful achievements" has been its ability to open discussion on previously taboo topics. However, Roth also cautions that when museums address controversial issues, "interpreters and sponsors bear a responsibility to their audiences to provide orientation, and if necessary, opportunities for closure, clarification, and processing emotions." As noted in Chapter 3, Marcel Riddick's introduction did not provide the audience with all the information they needed to understand the presentation. Moreover, the presentation's conclusion— a question and answer session— was completely driven by audience concerns and interests, rather than the educational goals of the museum. In recent years, exhibition evaluators have discovered that "visitors who are provided concepts and storylines at the beginning of their visit are more likely to recognize and realize the educational goals of the exhibition."27

The AAIP could also prepare the audience through other media. For example, the museum could prepare brochures or pamphlets which explained the presentation. In hindsight, Dylan Pritchett noted that the museum could have used fliers to provide the audience with historical material about estate sales— What are they? What is being sold? Why is it being sold? They could have also been used to explain why the AAIP wanted to perform the re-enactment— Why are they doing it now? What sources were used to reconstruct it? Who is participating in it? How does it relate to life in the twentieth century? The brochures could even have outlined the scenarios— Who are the slaves? Who are the bidders? What is each interaction supposed to teach the audience?28 The pamphlets could have also included source materials for visitors who wanted more information. The AAIP's charter documented noted,

Printed materials such as brochures and pamphlets should also be part of
our on-going interpretive efforts. Visitors must be allowed and encouraged to take home information about the black experience that can be referred to and used to encourage their continued investigation of the themes that have been introduced here [at Colonial Williamsburg].

While museums frequently prepare exhibit catalogues for static exhibits, living history museums rarely produce tangible documents that explain specific presentations. However, pamphlets or brochures distributed before or after the presentation could underscore the museum’s educational message.

Alternatively, Colonial Williamsburg could prepare the audience with a traditional museum exhibit, mounted in the museum’s DeWitt Wallace Gallery. Visitors could explore the themes and ideas underpinning the re-enactment in a more familiar format. An exhibit that featured paintings and drawings of auctions, newspaper advertisements, travelers’ accounts and excerpts from slave narratives would “authenticate” the living history performance. In a portion of the exhibit, the museum could even provide visitors with access to the primary resource materials that shaped the AAIP’s interpretation. This encounter with the raw material of history-making could provide visitors with insights into how the museum reconstructs the past. The exhibit could also serve as a space for reflection and closure after the re-enactment.

Along these same lines, the museum could sponsor an educational forum after the program. Building on Christy Coleman’s question and answer session, Colonial Williamsburg could assemble a panel of experts to discuss the re-enactment or slave auctions in general. Using the same format developed in the museum’s Antiques Forum, AAIP interpreters and Colonial Williamsburg administrators could facilitate or participate in group discussion. The forum would provide the audience with closure, and more
information than the abbreviated question and answer session. It would also situate it in a more “academic” or “educational” context. As Colonial Williamsburg’s internal newsletter noted, “visitors lingered long after the debriefing session . . . discussing the auction in groups.”30 It may be the case that these lingering visitors craved more information and the opportunity to discuss what they had just seen in a twentieth-century context.

Four years before the auction, an article in the Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter noted,

If there is a weakness to the [AAIP] program, it is the heavy reliance on living history presentations as the primary mode for discussing black life. Living history programs are only one part of a larger array of interpretive activities at Colonial Williamsburg, and interpretation of black history should include more options such as increased third-person presentations, static exhibits, and audiovisual programs.31

The kinds of displays, brochures and forums described above would not detract from the impact of the slave auction re-enactment. Instead, they would support or reinforce the AAIP’s interpretation and enhance the visitors’ educational experience. They would improve the audience’s ability to place the auction in a larger context within the eighteenth century and in relation to the twentieth century. More traditional educational programs may have persuaded critics that the auction was not being “trivialized” in a carnival atmosphere.

Educational Content

As for the re-enactment itself, the educational value of the original program was limited, largely because the internal motivations, desires and emotions of the slaves and slaveholders were withheld from the audience. The auction was reduced to a business
transaction—slaves stood silently on the block, and slaveholders with their backs to the audience yelled out bids. Although this may have been historically accurate, eighteenth-century audiences had the background to understand the underpinnings of the system. Twentieth-century visitors do not have the same advantage. Therefore, the AAIP needed to educate visitors and help them read the subtle cues presented as the scenarios unfolded.

The auction could have been supported and surrounded by “mini events” which would have familiarized the visitors with the participants—black and white. In practice, slave sales did not begin and end on the auction block. The slave market was present in everyday life—in the aspirations of slaveholders and the concerns of slaves. Furthermore, slaves and slaveowners negotiated old and new relationships before and after auctions. The re-enactment could have provided opportunities for the parties involved, black and white, to voice their expectations, motivations and concerns in a variety of forums. The visitor would not only have experienced the power of the slave market on the auction block, but also in conversations with slaves in the kitchens and with bidders on the streets. In this context, the slave auction would not be employed as a symbol of a system, but as an integral part of a way of life.

These “mini events” would support the primary re-enactment by demonstrating why slave auctions were such important and significant events. For example, during the original re-enactment, the motivations and desires behind the bids of slaveholders were completely absent. If visitors were given the opportunity to “listen in” or “overhear” conversations between slaveholders before the auction, white interpreters could unobtrusively reveal their characters’ motives. Interpreters could explain the economic incentives which drove the slave trade. While interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg
frequently refer to the status-building potential of commercial goods, they rarely mention that transformative potential of other forms of property. Slaves were potent symbols of status and power, and white men could establish their reputation or mark their maturation through the purchase of slaves. As Walter Johnson notes in his study of the antebellum slave market, slaveholders “imagined who they could be by thinking about whom they could buy.” Furthermore, high bidders placed their wealth on display at public sales and demonstrated expertise as they placed money behind their knowledgeable survey of flesh. As Johnson writes, “high prices were as much a measure of the buyer as the bought.”

Conversations among white female interpreters could illuminate the auction’s impact on their status and station. Through their husband’s purchase of slaves, white women could abandon field labor or the tedious monotony of domestic chores. Moreover, the purchase of slaves made a gentleman’s daughters more attractive on the white marriage market. The colonial slave market also allowed white men to purchase “life insurance” that would insulate their families from the effects of their death. However, in Colonial Williamsburg’s re-enactment, none of these motivations were articulated. Bidders simply indicated how much they were willing to pay.

The fears and concerns of the slaves may be more self-evident. However, supportive events could have developed the characters. For example, a conversation between Sukey the laundress and Lucy the house servant could reveal their very different expectations and concerns as the auction approached. While Lucy worried that she would be sold away from her husband Daniel, Sukey hoped her husband John Ashby would be able to purchase her and reunite their family. Similarly, the relationship between Daniel and Lucy, and their fear for their unborn child, could be developed. This would only
heighten the emotional drama of their separation during the primary re-enactment and increase audience empathy.

Supportive re-enactments could also be used to demonstrate individual agency and slave resistance. As noted in Chapter 1, an angry audience member had asked Christy Coleman how the auction had portrayed African Americans as fighters. Coleman responded that every aspect of the black experience could not be portrayed in every program.36 Later she stated, “For those who said it showed blacks in a powerless role, they were exactly right. That was the point. The enslaved were at the mercy of a variety of factors that determined whether or not they went to the auction block.”37 However, as Walter Johnson notes, slaveholders could never fully commodify the slaves they placed on the auction block. Ultimately, slaves had to present themselves as valuable and attractive property.38 Through sullen expressions, angry or agitated behavior and feigned sickness, slaves could discourage bidders and postpone sale.

However, opportunities for resistance were relatively limited once the slave reached the auction block. Slaves had more leverage with their masters before and after auction. For example, some slaves resisted sale by threatening to “liquidate” their own value through maiming or self-destruction.39 Furthermore, slaves could psychologically and physically deny the effects of sale by running away and returning to their communities of origin. Of the 59 slaves who ran away in Williamsburg during the eighteenth century, 29 had recently been sold.40 Slaves could also resist the effects of a sale by refusing to work. In 1777, Williamsburg’s Anne Drummond sold one of her slaves to a planter near Albemarle County, nearly one hundred and twenty miles northwest of the capital. The slave’s mother, Drummond’s cook, refused to work for
almost two years, complaining of a sore leg that prevented her from completing her chores. Ultimately, Drummond concluded that the only way to recoup the value of her recalcitrant cook was to reunite her with her son by selling her to the same planter.41 Other slaves invoked the paternalist rhetoric of slaveholders in strategic attempts to persuade their owners not to sell them or to sell them in groups. In 1780, a slave mother of two convinced Anne Drummond not to sell her to South Carolina. The woman had begged Drummond “not to distress her so much.” Drummond conceded, noting, “as she has never offended me I really must indulge her thus far.”42 Skits that reconstructed the tactics above could be used to counteract the image of victimization later displayed on the auction block.

The suggestions outlined in this chapter would not have resolved all of the disagreements between the interpreters and protestors, but they may have prevented the conflict from developing into a national controversy. If the museum had included members of the African American community in the program’s development, they would have been more prepared for the reaction they received. Moreover, they might have been able to make some small adjustments which would have satisfied all the parties. The museum may have also been able to avoid the controversy if it had launched a more proactive public outreach program. However, these kinds of strategies require a long-term, and a relatively open, planning process.

Furthermore, the protestors’ concerns about the first-person presentation of the auction may have been ameliorated if the re-enactment had been surrounded by third-person interpretation. Third-person presentations, exhibits, and educational forums, would have allowed the museum to place the auction in a broader context. Colonial
Williamsburg would have been able to accommodate African American visitors who felt more comfortable exploring slavery within a historical time line. Interpreters also would have been able to articulate how auctions contributed to and relate to racism in the present. Additional exhibits, publications or discussions would have provided visitors with more opportunities to have their questions answered or their concerns addressed. Moreover, providing interpreters with the opportunity to engage with and discuss the auction in a twentieth-century context would have allowed them to psychologically distance themselves from the characters they represented.

Finally, the educational content of the program could have been adjusted in order to allow visitors to explore the institution of slavery from a variety of perspectives—black and white. Re-enactments designed to support the slave auction presentation could have provided visitors with insight into the characters’ motives. Within this context, the auction would have had an educational as well as visceral impact. Visitors could explore the underpinnings of the system by examining what motivated slaveholders to buy or sell slaves. They could also witness a variety of responses to enslavement and the ways in which individuals struggled to survive—through accommodation, direct or indirect resistance.

These “solutions” or “compromises” were produced by engaging interpreters and protesters on both sides of the conflict in a dialogue. The suggestions above attempt to accommodate the museum’s educational goals without offending visitors who could be profoundly affected by how black history is represented. This approach embraces controversy and alternative perspectives while striving to produce a program that serves everyone’s needs.
NOTES FOR CHAPTER 5


3. There may be one exception to this statement. A condensed version of Colonial Williamsburg’s Education Division Monthly Report from October 1999, included the notation, “Staff presented the Estate Sale/Slave Auction to a group visiting from Russia.” However, none of the interpreters interviewed by the author mentioned this performance.


6. Curtis Harris, Interview by Author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Hopewell, Virginia, 16 April 2003.


10. Steve Elliott, Interview by Author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Richmond, Virginia, 27 May 2003.


12. Rose McAfee, Interview by Author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Williamsburg, Virginia, 23 April 2003.


15. Rex Ellis, Interview by Author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Williamsburg, Virginia, 10 April 2003.


18. Robert C. Watson, Interview by Author.


20. Rex Ellis, Interview by Author.


22. King Salim Khalfani, Interview by Author, Tape Recording and Transcript, Richmond, Virginia, 21 March 2003.


24. Rex Ellis, Interview by Author.

25. King Salim Khalfani, Interview by Author.


33. Johnson, 103-113

34. Johnson, 92

35. Johnson, 94-95.


38. Johnson, 16.


41. Nicholls, 60-61.

42. Nicholls, 62.


Bakari, Harvey. Interview by Author. Williamsburg, VA, 1 April 2003.


_____.. Interview by Author. Williamsburg, VA, 3 April 2003.


_____. “Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall, Whose History Is the Fairest of Them All?” The Public Historian: 17.4: 63-64.


_____. Black History Chronology.
_____. Educational Division Files (selected 1994-1997).
_____. President’s Files (selected 1994-1995).


Interview by Author. Tape recording and transcript. Williamsburg, VA, 10 April 2003.


Foster, Andrea Kim. “‘They’re Turning the Town All Upside Down’: the Community Identity of Williamsburg, Virginia Before and After the Reconstruction.” Ph. D. diss., George Washington University, 1993.


———. Telephone Interview by Author. 21 March 2003.


*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 11-14 October 1994.


*Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg, VA), 8-12 October 1994.


*Visitor's Companion* (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation), 26 August-1 September 1991, August 31- September 6, 1993, 4-10 October 1993, and 3-16 October 1994.


——. “Serious Fun.” *The Public Historian* 17.4: 86.


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VITA

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