Exhibiting Slavery: How Plantation Museums in Virginia Represent Slavery

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Exhibiting Slavery: How Plantation Museums in Virginia Represent Slavery

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in History from the College of William and Mary in Virginia,

by

Jill Found

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Introduction

There is no typical Virginia plantation museum. From Mount Vernon to Belle Grove, from the Lynnhaven House to Kenmore, they differ in myriad ways, from who owns them to how they advertise. No two museums have the exact same approach to their interpretation, an obvious statement considering that no two museums have the exact same original product to work with. Plantations in Virginia prior to the Civil War possessed individual characteristics that defined how they operated and the lives of the people who lived there. All plantations, however, had at least one thing in common: they were all primarily worked by enslaved African American laborers, which is to say, slaves. The methods of management differed, the size of the labor force fluctuated, relationships between enslaved and free people varied and the social and political prominence of the owners ranged widely, but slavery remained constant all across Virginia from at least the eighteenth century until the Civil War. Today, one basic fact remains true across the Commonwealth, no matter the museum’s location or annual income — every plantation museum in Virginia emphasizes the lives of free white people over the lives of enslaved African Americans.

The paradox of American liberty, the fact that the United States of America established as its founding principle the idea that all men are created equal while many of its inhabitants had the same legal rights as cattle, has preoccupied American historians for at least four decades. Even in the years before the American Revolution, people commented on this hypocrisy. As Samuel Johnson put it, “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?” Thomas Jefferson often serves as an example for this contradiction, as he wrote the Declaration of Independence while
holding people as slaves at on his
Albermarle County plantation. Statues
in Jefferson’s memory stand on the
National Mall, on the campuses of his
alma mater and the university he
founded, and, of course, at his home,
Monticello. Today, the home he
dedicated so much of his time to
designing, while enslaved people tore it
down and built it back up again, stands
as a monument to his genius and
greatness. Like the man himself, Monticello serves as an excellent stand-in for the
problem of the representations of slavery in modern America. While it has obviously
undertaken a great deal of academic inquiry into countless aspects of the plantation, as
evidenced by its galleries and published works, the telling of the story of Thomas
Jefferson as a great man rises head and shoulders above all else. American ideology
claims that all men are created equal, but its cultural institutions say something
completely different. Plantation museums place the “great men” of American history
above the people they owned, who not only made up a larger percentage of the
population as a whole, but did much of the hard labor that is credited to the memory of
their owners and created a unique culture against a backdrop of systematic oppression.
This problem, the problem of American representation, serves as the focus of this study.
How does a country that takes such pride it its status of a place of liberty and freedom for
all, so willingly ignore the fact that it refused to live up to this promise for much of its history at the very place where this degradation occurred?¹

History museums attract visitors from near and far who visit to understand or experience something from the past. Whether the visitors seek genuine historical knowledge or a nostalgic fantasy is outside the realm of this project, but regardless, these museums have a duty to impart upon their visitors a better understanding of history. The past of these plantations rested upon the denial of basic human rights to large groups of people for the economic, social, and political gain of others. Slaves, quite literally, built Virginia’s plantations. If enslaved people did not directly construct the plantation manor house itself, they produced the crops with provided the funds necessary for such an undertaking. More than that, much of the American economy has been built on the foundations laid by slaves. The work done by enslaved people in the production of cash crops allowed the American colonies and the United States of America to flourish.²

As slaves built plantations, Virginia plantations served as the foremost incubators of slavery in America. Though Spaniards first brought African slaves to the New World in the 1500s, the first captured Africans purchased by Englishmen in the colonies landed


² In their study of how people relate to the past, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen found that 57% of Americans had visited a history museum or historic site in the past year and that museums ranked as the most trustworthy source of information about the past, as well as the situations in which participants felt the second-most connection to the past, after gatherings with family. These results varied across ethnic groups, income, education, and age. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Ira Berlin, “Coming to Terms with Slavery in Twenty-First-Century America” in Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2.
in Tidewater Virginia on Dutch ships in 1619. These first Africans, and those that followed after them, helped to produce the main crop of seventeenth century Virginia: tobacco. As fewer English people showed an interest in picking up and moving to Virginia and Virginia planters recognized the economic value of purchasing humans over temporarily enslaving them, the economy and demography of Virginia changed dramatically during the second half of the seventeenth century. The development of a plantation economy served as the backbone for this change, and produced a social and political system that placed whites solidly above blacks in the Virginia society. Meanwhile, enslaved African Americans on plantations created their own culture that flourished, despite repressive laws and social systems. While the American Civil War and the amendments that followed put an official end to the system of slavery, the inequality created by the system of slavery can be felt to this day. For this reason, plantations in Virginia serve as the perfect place to tell the story of American slavery. No other institution in any other place more fully illustrates the lives of enslaved African Americans in the new world before the Civil War. Virginia plantations were ground zero of American slavery. 3

For the vast majority, the bodies that own the plantation museums today, whether they are families or foundations, did not own enslaved people. However, they still engage in a process that began in the years after the Civil War, when white people worked tirelessly to all but erase the memories of enslaved people from the landscapes that they created. The extent to which museums have continued this practice or attempted to

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remedy it serves as a major point of this project. I endeavor to uncover how plantation museums in Virginia that focus their interpretation before 1820 discuss and interpret the lives of enslaved people. To do this I studied the public presentation put forth by the museums on house tours, galleries, informational signs, brochures, booklets, and websites. I also looked at what topics garner discussion aside from slavery, especially those topics, such as Revolutionary ideals and material culture, which make up the bulk of the interpretation. I set out to determine if a connection existed between the impulse of museums to emphasize the stories of founding fathers and an unwillingness to discuss the lives of the people they enslaved. This, however, did not tend to be the case. Rather, I discovered that museums highlight the greatness of the white owners in general, regardless of their association with the founding of the United States, at the expense of enslaved African Americans. The harder a site attempts to expound upon the greatness of individual white men, the more they ignore the lives of enslaved people. A few important exceptions to this trend exist, and will be discussed later, but for the most part, greater white men means lesser African Americans.4

Defining Terms

In popular culture, plantations tend to conjure up images of tall white pillars and tree-lined drives more frequently than backbreaking work and oppression. For some, plantations hold the stench of decades of brutal subjugation and relentless toil. To others, plantations represent a past to be appreciated and celebrated, a time of simpler life, gentle manners, and easy living. Still others see them as places of cultural creation and symbols

of survival. For the purpose of my research, I defined a plantation as “an estate or farm producing a crop with servile labor.” This 1706 definition is the earliest to encapsulate a contemporary understanding of the term plantation. Prior to this date, the meaning of a plantation focused on settlements of people rather than farming and servile labor. The definition of a plantation used here coincides more directly with the idea of the plantation in the antebellum South that holds cultural weight to this day.  

Museums can prove more difficult to define. Merriam-Webster defines a museum as “an institution devoted to the procurement, care, study, and display of objects of lasting interest or value; a place where objects are exhibited.” Though this definition might function for traditional museums such as the National Museum of American History in Washington D.C., it does not accurately encapsulate different types of museums, especially living history museums such as Colonial Williamsburg. While living history museums may engage in many of the actions covered by this definition, their aim is for education more than simple display. Plantation museums fall somewhere between these two types. While they certainly concern themselves with collecting objects (most notably the home that usually makes up the centerpiece of the museum) they also engage in a much more complete educational process that includes tours and interpretations of the landscapes. For this study, museums are places that aim to educate an audience about the past.

In this project, the plantation museums met certain specific requirements. Most importantly, they had regular hours in which they opened to the public. Regular in this context means that people can visit the plantation without arranging for a private tour. I did take one privately arranged tour while considering whether or not to include such places in my study. I found that such tours focused less on history and education and much more on discussing the lives of the current owners. Not to say that a privately arranged tour cannot be educational, but I decided to not include them. One of the major aims of this study is to explore public rhetoric concerning slavery through the museum context and I found that I could not substantiate to the claim that a plantation only open by appointment could contribute significantly to this discussion. Such a place might indeed be “a place where objects are exhibited” but it certainly has no interest in education. Furthermore, the museums I visited had to be plantations rather than town
homes, an unexpectedly complex distinction. For example, Kenmore is now located in downtown Fredericksburg, Virginia, however it was originally established as a large plantation and in 1775 spanned over 1500 acres worked by 50 slaves. The sites I visited also had to be somehow original. This proved equally challenging to define. Wilton, for example, was moved in 1933 to the West End of Richmond from its original location and Red Hill was rebuilt in the 1960s on the original location. These sites I included in my study because they maintained (or had been restored to) their appearance in the period I studied. The original question of my project focused on founding fathers and in order to focus on that question I tried to limit my scope to museums that could reasonably discuss the lives of these men. To this end, I limited my visits to plantation museums that focused their interpretation on any time before 1820. As this proved trying to determine for many sites, I visited almost every site in Virginia built before 1820. The few left out explicitly stated in information I found that they did not focus their interpretation on this period. For example, though Endview Planation in Newport News was built in 1769, the museum’s website states that it dedicates its time to interpreting the Civil War. Arlington House, though completed in 1818, similarly depicts itself as a Civil War site as evidenced by the title “Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial.” It is worth mentioning, as it rests so large in the realm of public history in Virginia, that Colonial Williamsburg has no sites that meet my qualifications. Included in this study are all the museums I could find in the Commonwealth of Virginia that met my parameters that I could visit in the summer of 2012. In the end I visited 31 museums, 28 of which will be included in this study.⁶

⁶ For a full list of the plantations included in this study, see Appendix.
Methods of Study

I approach this project from the perspective of a historian. Though the interpretations of plantation museums seems an obvious research area for a historian, to my knowledge, no historians have undertaken a project such as this. Historians and public historians have studied plantation museums for the purpose of developing alternative interpretation or to examine their historical development, and sociologists and anthropologists have studied plantation museums as agents of cultural interaction. This project does not aim to make direct suggestions for changes to museum interpretation or explore completely their places in a larger, and extremely important, discussion of the role plantation museums have in representations of race, gender, and class. I aim to examine the choices museum professionals make concerning slavery as they come across in public presentation and which historical facts and themes the museums present in order to understand what visitors learn about slavery from plantation museums in Virginia. While I care about why museums talk about what they talk about, I am more concerned with what they talk about. Historians have an important duty to help portray the nature of slavery and the lives of enslaved people in Virginia plantation museums. Important inequalities existed on Virginia plantations and have served as the focus of historians’ studies, with the study of the lives of enslaved people becoming an important field for American historians after the 1960s. In 2002, Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small found in their study of plantation museums that this expansion had not similarly enhanced what plantation museums interpret. Since 2002, how much have things changed in plantation museums? What choices do the museum professionals make concerning slavery in their interpretation? What do these choices mean about how museum professionals, as a

I chose my method of study to better examine these issues. I visited each museum one time and took the basic tour. I also took any other available tours that dealt with slavery. Only three of the museums I visited — Monticello, Montpelier, and Mount Vernon — had tours in this vein. I also read any interpretive panels on the site and fully toured any visitors’ centers and galleries. In hopes of getting a genuine visitor experience I did not tell tour guides or other members of the museum staff that I intended to study their interpretation. While I obviously approached the museums with a much different perspective than most visitors, coming to critically examine the museum’s interpretation, I attempted to take on the outlook of a visitor and maintain that to the museum personnel. At some museums that proved simple, as I was only one of hundreds of visitors at a time or one of a dozen people on a tour. At other museums, I toured alone. A single person on a tour taking notes can raise questions from some tour guides. At these sites, when asked by guides why I was visiting, I told him or her that I was working on a project on historic homes. I took notes on the interpretive themes presented on the tour, setting aside specific spaces on each page to note the terms used by tour guides to refer to enslaved people, as well as founding fathers and women. My research took place over the course of the summer of 2012; therefore all the museum visits are contemporaneous of one another.
This serves as a look at a recent moment in museum studies, a specific window through which to view the interpretation of slavery.

**Format**

I have organized this study into two parts: the first on the methods of interpretations of slavery in plantation museums in Virginia and the second on the problems that persist across all current methods of interpretation. Those museums that have no real mention of slavery take up the first chapter, where I discuss how museums remove almost entirely the roles of enslaved people from the plantation landscape. I term this method of interpretation *erasure*. The second chapter covers those museums that only engage in a minor recognition of the lives of enslaved people on the plantations, called *acknowledgment*. Chapter three looks at those museums that have taken the initial steps to engage in an interpretation of slavery but fall short of producing a meaningful discussion or have difficulty imparting this information without discomfort. I refer to this as *recognition*. Museums successfully incorporating the stories and lives of enslaved African Americans into their interpretations make up the last chapter of the section, chapter four. The method of interpretation used by these museums I have termed *inclusion*. The second section is one chapter, detailing the ways in which all of these museums, from those that engage in erasure to inclusion, fail to truly do their duty of covering the lives of enslaved people and why this matters.
In her Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Hemingses of Monticello*, Annette Gordon-Reed writes, “It is, quite simply, impossible to tell an adequate history of the mountain without including Hemingses.” While she refers to a microcosm of the plantation world at Monticello, her statement resonates on all plantations. No complete discussion of plantation life in Virginia could ever exclude the lives of the enslaved people who lived and worked there. From the beginning of plantation life, enslaved African Americans created families, culture, and lives while toiling for the benefits of their masters. Today it is those masters’ names that adorn the commemorative plaques, not the enslaved people. Thomas Jefferson’s scrawled signature comes before Monticello on signs, brochures, and advertisements, not John Hemings’. How these lives are obscured in favor of tales of wealthy white people serves as the focal point of this study.  

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1. Erasure

Guides at Wilton House Museum in Richmond discuss slavery only three times throughout the house tour. (Photo by author, 2012)

The silences of museums say as much as their interpretations. Twelve of the 28 museums in this study make no real mentions of slavery anywhere in their interpretation. This does not mean that the tour guides at these sites never say the word “slave” or the interpretive panels do not mention of “enslaved people,” but rather that twelve of these museums fail to show enslaved African Americans as players in the plantation world. Wilton House Museum, located in the West End of Richmond, serves as a perfect example of this. In the introduction to the house, the tour guide mentioned that 100 slaves lived on the plantations and pointed out the possible location of the slave barracks, but never again mentioned slavery at Wilton on his tour. The guide made two other
references to African Americans, once to a slave in a portrait of George Washington and once to James Armistead Lafayette, a spy during the American Revolution whom the Commonwealth of Virginia purchased after the war. These two mentions lacked a connection to the house and did nothing to give visitors an idea of the nature of slavery at Wilton, or anywhere else. A visitor to Wilton learns that slavery existed, that 100 slaves lived at Wilton, working different jobs, and that they lived in barracks. One hundred people lived at Wilton, owned by the considerably less numerous white Randolph family, and modern visitors learn almost nothing about how they lived their lives or who they were.

Wilton emphasizes some of the key markers of a museum that practices erasure as its main strategy for representing slavery. Erasure museums do not simply ignore the presence of enslaved African Americans at their sites, but rather they undermine claims to an active and important African American role on the site. These sites claim the story of Virginia and America solely for white people, presenting their sites as shrines to the greatness of white Americans. Wilton does not display these traits alone. Scotchtown, Berkeley, Weston, Adam Thurogood House, Francis Land House, Bacon’s Castle, Smith’s Fort Plantation, Upper Wolfsnare, Red Hill, Long Branch, and Rippon Lodge all share the primary characteristics of erasure. Only one makes no mention of enslaved people at all: Long Branch. Though each does so differently given their various traits, none carries out a substantive discussion of slavery, or even a more than perfunctory recognition, and all disregard the idea that African Americans had an important impact on the site, Virginia, or United States history.
Minimal Mentions

How can museums erase the presence of enslaved people while still talking about them? For example, every site (save one) where a tour guide served as the main method of accessing information, the guide used the word “slave” to refer to people owned by the plantation’s white masters at least once. The method of erasure, then, does not simply mean that museums never speak about enslaved people. Rather, it serves as an active method for museums to minimize the lives of the African Americans who lived and worked there historically. Frequently, these museums mentioned the number of enslaved people who lived on the plantation and one or two other facts. This number, whether 105 or 14, served as the main piece of information provided about the lives of enslaved people. To say that reducing the lives of people to numbers minimizes their personhood understates the situation substantially. The fact that people take away from a site only a number ignores the very humanity of enslaved people. A number presented in this way, without context or explanation, cannot tell visitors what slavery meant to the people living in it. If these numbers served as one part of a description about the conditions of slavery on the plantation, one that highlighted the importance of communities in enslaved life, they would provide useful information for visitors. Instead, the stating of numbers of people portrays enslaved people as things to be counted, and little else.

Some plantations expand slightly past numbers to highlight the different jobs of slaves on the plantation or their living quarters. At Wilton, the guide stated that 100 slaves worked lived at the plantation, fifty growing tobacco, twenty as domestic workers, and twenty as artisans (the employment of the remaining ten did not receive mention) and at Berkeley Plantation in Charles City County, slaves lived to the east of the manor
house, according to the tour guide. This information takes steps to depict slaves as actual people who had duties and homes. This does not, however, give a complete, or even partially complete, picture of anyone’s life. To know that people lived and worked does not allow for an understanding of them as a collective or as individuals. The primary things described about enslaved people at plantation museums that practice erasure — number, job, and residence — define enslaved people as collections of resident workers on plantations, nothing more. When museums employ these methods, they disregard the complex world that enslaved people lived in. This denies the possibility that they actively shaped their world, endeavoring to create a place for themselves despite the systematically oppressive system of slavery in Virginia. The emphasis on these three traits perpetuates the understanding of enslaved people as essentially interchangeable bodies without thoughts or feelings of their own.

The other topics that visitors hear about instead of slavery vary from museum to museum, but general similarities exist at all museums. Historic furnishings and décor receive considerable attention on every tour. Eichstedt and Small found in their survey of plantation museums that sites mentioned furniture thirty-one times as often as enslaved people. At some sites, such as Long Branch in Millwood, furniture outshines even the white people who lived in the homes as the focus of the interpretation. Most museums used the furnishings as a method to discuss the lives of the white owners by explaining the importance of a Chinese tea set or the utility of a floor canvas. Rarely, however, did any museum tie these household items to the lives of enslaved people. Among the museums that practiced erasure, only Upper Wolfsnare connected slaves to furniture, by saying that the white family members could easily have had a slave pick up and move
furniture to transition the room from its resting state to an active one. In this manner, enslaved people are tools of whites, not actors in their own rights. They do not have their own connection or ownership of property, only that which their owners — of the furniture and the people — dictate to them. Museums connect enslaved people most closely to physical objects in the kitchen, though their methods often focused on the passive voice, as the next section describes.

As the vast majority of the tours took place exclusively in the manor home, the museums offer a considerable amount of information about the building’s construction, imparting to visitors the importance of the structure. Berkeley, for example, claims the first pediment roof in America, while Bacon’s Castle discusses the rarity of brick homes in the 1660s. Rarely do museums tie the construction to enslaved people, especially at museums that practice erasure. Two museums mentioned the involvement of enslaved people in construction; Berkeley, where the tour guide claimed the labor of 100 slaves who built the plantation as a way to emphasize the greatness of the structure and at Rippon Lodge in Fairfax the inclusion of highly skilled slaves who worked on the interior of the home on the tour served less to discuss the importance of the work of enslaved people and more to tie the home to Mount Vernon, where the enslaved craftsmen worked as well. In general, plantation museums practicing erasure attribute the construction of plantation homes to the owners, not to those who did the physical labor.

While furniture and construction feature prominently at most museums, every single one focuses on the lives of white people, usually the owners of the house during an important historical moment, or the first white family to live on the plantation. White owners serve as the main participants in the worlds plantation museums create. The
names of the plantations today remain those given to them by the white owners, just as the stories told concentrate on how they lived their lives. These museums talk about how white people used the rooms, for entertaining, eating, or sleeping, not how enslaved African Americans used them, as places of work. Nor do museums discuss the juxtaposition of these divergent uses and the cultural interactions that took place on the perimeter of the actual room usage. None of these museums make the work of African American laborers the central focus of the room. The narrative of dining rooms never emphasizes the serving, but rather the being served. Just as discussions of the purpose of the central passage do not focus on the tensions felt by the people who waited there to speak to the people that owned them, but rather the privilege of being able to decide to speak to someone immediately or make them wait. Even in the kitchens, where the major presence of enslaved African Americans cannot be contested, these museums fail to highlight the importance of enslaved laborers through the use of the passive voice, as is discussed later. The descriptions of the uses of plantation homes imagine white people over African Americans as the primary people living and working on the plantation.

Many of these museums work to tie the plantation to major historic events, either through location or the white owners. Berkeley declares itself “Virginia’s Most Historic Plantation” to encapsulate the countless titles it claims, including the location of the first Thanksgiving and the site where “Taps” was written, as well as the birthplace of a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a President of the United States. Others have less substantial ties, but tout them nonetheless. Smith’s Fort Plantation, for example, takes its name from a fort built nearby in 1609 by John Smith, though the fort saw little use and Smith certainly never knew the land as a plantation. The tour guide at Wilton Plantation
showed off a Washington bedroom, where George Washington apparently stayed during the Second Virginia Convention and where Layfayette rested during the American Revolution. These connections serve to illustrate to the visitor (and especially to prospective visitors when museums highlight them in promotional material) the significant connections the plantations have to important events and people. Relying on such methods, however, creates and maintains for the visitors the idea that these links have a greater position in American history than the everyday lives of all the people who lived there. When Wilton highlights a brief visit from Washington as noteworthy while only off-handedly mentioning the lives of the dozens of enslaved people who lived on the plantation, it creates a hierarchy of importance with all African Americans firmly below prominent whites.

**Voice/Words**

The docents at Scotchtown referred to enslaved people as “they” as well as conflating the work of the white owners and the African Americans they owned. (Photo by author, 2012)
The lack of personhood extends further at erasure museums, into the ways in which museums describe work. More often than not at museums in this group, “they” served the food or work “was done” in the fields. The passive voice serves as a method for museums to talk about activity on the plantation without ascribing it to any particular group or individual. At places such as Scotchtown in Hanover County, this allowed the museum to place an emphasis on eighteenth century domestic and agricultural work without having to provide any complex information about the institution of slavery. The docent described the practices of spinning and weaving, as well as different agricultural jobs referring to “they” as the performers of these jobs. The tour of the kitchen, where docents occasionally still cook eighteenth century food, took almost as much time as the tour of the house itself, but the activities of the cook garnered a second person description. “You” would churn butter using a rocking butter churn and after a hard day’s work “you” would appreciate it more because of the labor put into it. She failed to mention that usually the person doing the actual cooking — a slave — would not have the opportunity to enjoy the food they had worked since sunup to prepare.

Scotchtown is not alone in using the passive voice or indefinite “they” or “you” to describe work done by enslaved people. Every plantation museum that practices erasure used these techniques at least once on their tour or in interpretive information to describe work done on the plantation without any context to allow the visitor to understand to whom the museums referred. For some museums this could have indicated a lack of understanding about the role of enslaved people on the plantation. This alternatively may have been an unintentional slip on the part of the tour guide or sign writer who themselves understood that enslaved people did the work described. However, the
possession of this knowledge by the museum personnel serves little good pedagogically if the museums does not impart this information to visitors. For example, Weston Plantation in Hopewell showed a video before the tour that talks about the habitations for enslaved people above the kitchen and laundry before going on to talk about other inhabitants of the plantation. The tour guide on my visit then started the tour by going to the reconstructed kitchen, where she explained that “they” cooked here in the summer, as opposed to the kitchen below the mansion house where “she” would cook in the winter and where some of the slaves would have slept. At no point in the tour did the docent clarify that the cook would have been an enslaved woman, not the white owner’s wife. While any reasonably well-informed visitor could infer such information, the guide further confused the visitor by using “they” to refer to both the white owners of the house and enslaved people without any other context. Visitors could easily have walked away from the plantation with the idea that the “they” who slept in the upstairs bedroom consisted of the same “they” that fished for dinner in the river.

The use of “you” on tours provokes even more complex issues than “they.” When utilizing the second person plantation museums deal with the difficulty of association. Just who is it that visitors to plantation museum identify with? Eric Gable suggests that antebellum heritage museums encourage segregated identification by assuming that white visitors identify with white people in history and African American visitors with African American historical figures rather than drawing lines of identification by class. Gable’s study focused on Monticello, but I found similar traits at all of the museums in this study. One of the primary foundations of museum interpretation suggests that in order to create an effective interpretation, the visitor must be able to identify with what the museum
presents them. Many museum professionals understand, then, that in order to make the visitors connect with the information they must present visitors with something to which they feel a personal connection. For most plantation museums, whose audiences I observed as overwhelmingly white, this means the lives of whites in the past. However, as Gable points out, “Nowadays you would be hard pressed to find more than a few white Americans, even white Americans whose ancestors may have owned plantations; who want to think of themselves as masters. Instead you would be much more likely to encounter white Americans who express sympathy, even admiration, for slaves.” Rather than utilizing this connection though, plantation museums promote, as evidenced by their interpretation, the idea that white people identify with white people in the past over others. When museums fail to acknowledge this association, the result is confusing language. Who is the “you” in Scotchtown’s description? Obviously it refers to the visitors, but for whom do the visitors stand? Slaves or free people? From other uses of first and second person throughout the tour, the docents encourage visitors to identify with the white owners of the home and see the enslaved people as an other, “they.”

To further complicate issues of race and identification, museums often conflated slavery and service in general. At over half of the museums practicing erasure, tour guides or descriptive panels referred to enslaved people as “servants” or “help.” While this method of interpretation proved popular among museums practicing erasure, it certainly breaks little ground, having served as a technique for minimizing the role of enslaved people since the early 20th century in plantation museums. Enslaved people

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were indeed a type of servant, but classifying them simply as servants misleads visitors entirely about the nature of early Virginia plantations. Rather than giving the understanding that enslaved people did the vast majority of the work on plantations, it blurs the line between free and enslaved. Free people and indentured servants lived and worked on plantations in jobs similar to those of enslaved people, but their lives had very different trajectories. While free people could leave a plantation without fear of capture or beating and indentured servants received their freedom after a set period of time, slaves had no such guarantees. Slaves worked for their masters until the day they died, unless their masters sold them or they ran away. To fail to clarify the differences between these two groups of people undermines the disparities that existed in their lives. At Bacon’s Castle in Surry, the tour guide described people who worked in the home as “household servants” and claimed that the family that lived there garnered accolades from visitors for their “hospitality and servants.” Unlike the majority of the sites in this project, Bacon’s Castle probably served as the workplace for a good number of indentured servants, as it was built in 1665, before the majority of Virginia’s compelled workforce shifted to enslaved Africans. The tour however spans the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries without ever clarifying the very real changes in the demographics of workers during that time. Oversights such as these give visitors a very strong misconception about the lives of people enslaved in colonial Virginia and deny visitors fruitful learning opportunities.  

Utilizing indefinite language in describing the actions of enslaved people results in visitors leaving plantation museums with knowing anything new about the lives of enslaved people. The museum misses out on an excellent teaching opportunity as the most prominent event associated with the site, Bacon’s Rebellion, served as an important moment in the shift from indentured to enslaved laborers in the Virginia colony. Work on plantations was not simply done by indiscrete bodies. Individual people did it, oftentimes because not doing it meant that they could be legally physically punished. Similarly, museums mislead visitors with their use of identification or confuse visitors about the nature of work and the lives of enslaved African Americans. Museums that practice erasure effectively remove the lines between free and enslaved when they fail to identify the work done by enslaved people as their labor. This labor becomes, once again, that of the white people who owned them.

**Locating Slavery**

The confusion over who names refer to or an individual’s status in life result in the same outcome: misinformation. By confusing the visitors about who did what work on the plantation, museums promote a number of misconceptions about the lives of enslaved people. First, visitors can infer that enslaved people and white people shared work inside the house, rather than African Americans doing much of the work for whites, as was the case on large plantations. In this case, it suggests a retroactive equality between blacks and whites. While a white woman or man may have overseen the work of enslaved people engaged in domestic work or even worked along side of them, whites and blacks did not join together in this work as equals. Conversely, other museums...
referred to enslaved people as agricultural workers, essentially writing them out of the story of the home, where the bulk of the tours take place. If museums locate the lives of enslaved people entirely out of the big house, it makes it much easier to ignore their presence on the tour, and in the museum as a whole. While many of these places functioned as plantations, today many call themselves “historic homes” or “manors,” erring away from the more complicated term “plantation.” These disparate methods create different views of life inside the home. The first places blacks and whites on equal footing while the second writes enslaved people out entirely. They both, however, ignore the tensions and complex relationships that existed between people of different races and social statuses who lived and worked on the same plantations.\(^3\)

The first method of location works actively to expunge the home of the wrongs committed by whites towards enslaved people. For example, at Berkeley Plantation in Charles City County, the tour guide said that masters “took care of” older enslaved people without further explanation of what this meant. At Scotchtown, the tour guide told visitors nothing about the suffering of enslaved people, but pointed out their “break room” and emphasized that they could take the unwanted leftovers from the kitchen. The emphasis on what white people gave enslaved people serves a twofold purpose. This benevolence enlarges the image of white people, in institutions already designed to celebrate the apparent achievements of whites. Not only did whites create beautiful homes and run massive plantations smoothly, they treated those who worked well for them. No matter that those who worked for them had no legal say in the matter.

Secondly, this portrayal of the relationship between enslaved people and their owners

blatantly denies the cruelty of whites and the horrors enslaved individuals faced. It
negates the idea that slaves suffered in any real ways and also deprives enslaved people
agency over their own lives. In this depiction white masters treated their enslaved people
well because they were nice people, not because they understood the power enslaved
people had, despite their lack of legal rights. Enslaved people could, and did, in many
ways, resist the power of their masters, giving masters a reason to treat them “well.”
Certainly, nice people owned slaves, but to allow visitors to believe that owners treated
enslaved people well because they wished to, ignores the fact that this did not always
happen and that when it did, enslaved African Americans had as much of a role in forcing
this to occur as slave owning whites. While some erase the important work of African
Americans by minimizing the impact of enslaved people inside the home, other museums
locate slavery entirely outside of the large plantation house. The
majority of museums that practice erasure emphasize that slave labor took place away
from the house, oftentimes in fields. The interpretation at Francis

The "servant's quarter" at Red Hill is the only place in the museum that alludes to slavery. (Photo by author, 2012)

Land House talked about enslaved laborers working in the fields and bringing food to the house, but never discussed their work inside the home. Red Hill, the only museum in this group without a tour, provided very little information about slavery at all, only mentioning “servants” at Red Hill once, in a cabin in back of the house. Notably, Red Hill had the only slave quarter designated as a “servant’s” home rather than that of an enslaved person. When visiting Smith’s Fort Plantation, one only receives a tour of the house, and nothing of the outside, suggesting to visitors that everything important to be learned about the plantation can be gleaned inside the house. Since so many of these museums focus the entirety of their interpretation on the “big house,” those that exclude enslaved people from this narrative give visitors the impression that slaves had very little impact on the plantation.

**Implications**

Museums that practice erasure use a particular sleight of hand that destroys the importance of African Americans on historic sites. Rather than ignoring the lives of enslaved people at plantation museums altogether, these museums take an active role in creating a narrative of American history that prioritizes African Americans below whites, especially wealthy whites. Slaves garner a mention, perhaps even a brief remark about the basic facts of their lives, but nothing more than that. In this framework, slaves did not shape their own lives or impact their world, but rather exist as a very small, secondary part of the larger American community. Erasure does not portray slaves as people, but as symbols to enlarge their masters, then and now. By mentioning slaves, and then
summarily dismissing them, erasure does more than simply ignore enslaved people; it actively erases their importance.

Enslaved people serve in these museums to enlarge the lives and memories of the people who owned them. Rather than predicting enslaved people as actively working to make their lives better or exert effort over the world around them, museums that practice erasure portray them as objects that were acted upon. When discussing enslaved people, the museums do not discuss slaves as people, but as symbols for their masters. A number of slaves in these museums serve as a measure of wealth, not as a measure of how much the white owner took advantage of people. If enslaved people had different jobs, that meant that the white owner ran a self-sufficient plantation, not that individuals had worthy skills. The museums do not look past what the account books told them about slaves, that they had values only in dollars, not as people. If museums looked past this shallow portrayal, even reading more deeply into account books, letters, court documents, and more, they could find a much more vivid picture of life in Virginia. Enslaved people pushed back against their owners, they did not simply accept the fact that their existence could be counted in dollars without any concern for their person, and this shows in historical documentation. While ownership of slaves may have enlarged their owners’ pocketbooks, enslaved people fought to have their own place in the world not dictated by their circumstances alone.⁵

By denying their importance as individuals, museums engaging in erasure work on a larger scale as well. Excluding enslaved people from personhood prohibits them from impacting the world around them. Portraying the lives of enslaved people as

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⁵ Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*. 
numbers and nothing else puts them on the same level as livestock. Cattle cannot develop a culture or create a society, but people can. Enslaved people’s skill and muscle created much of the American South in the colonial and early republic periods. They created enduring cultural systems that clearly reverberate in almost every aspect of American culture today. Denying the roles of enslaved people on plantations — as family members, workers, resisters, creators, and much more — disregards not only historical fact but contemporary truth.  

Erasure opens and shuts the book on enslaved people on plantations. It says, “Slaves lived here, but they contributed nothing.” It erases any possibility for people to place slaves as significant forces in the plantation world. No part of a plantation exists which enslaved people did not touch, literally and metaphorically. Museums that practice erasure ignore this fact by discussing it at the beginning and never again. Slaves are presented and then swept aside, a mere feature of the plantation that requires no further consideration, like the number of bricks in the foundation. Wealthy white people had the only real roles on these plantations, according to museums that practice erasure. Whites built homes, faced challenges, ran plantations, met famous people, and decided on décor as the only active inhabitants of the plantation world. These museums are unabashedly white identity shrines. Their interpretation exuberantly celebrates the lives of people who owned other people without acknowledging the personhood of those owned people.

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2. Acknowledgment

“Now this is a plantation,”
exclaims a brochure for Shirley
Plantation — and Shirley does not
disappoint in its role as the
quintessential Virginia plantation
museum. Visitors travel down the
idyllic John Tyler Memorial
Highway to get to Shirley
Plantation Road where, once they
have parked, the stately mansion,
flanked by symmetrical
outbuildings, stands, as it has since
1734. After purchasing their tickets
in the gift shop (housed in the
former laundry), visitors can view the exhibits in the kitchen and other outbuildings.
Within these spaces visitors learn about the different aspects of labor in various
plantation buildings (for example, the kitchen, dovecote, or laundry). The tour guide rings
a bell, signaling for visitors to gather and enter the house, where the guides regale them
with stories of the Hill-Carter family, which has lived on the plantation for eleven
generations. From the Georgian brick architecture to the view of the James River,
labeling Shirley as the epitome of a plantation rings true. While the continuing historical
features of the plantation ensure Shirley’s status, aspects of Shirley’s modern
interpretation make it a prime example of how museums today interpret slavery. Neither massive, like Mount Vernon or Monticello, nor miniscule, like Upper Wolfsnare or Francis Land House, Shirley is easy to find information about without having to wait for hours on a summer weekend to take a tour. Like every plantation museum in Virginia, Shirley struggles with how to interpret slavery.

Shirley utilizes a method of interpreting slavery called acknowledgment in this study. The seven museums characterized by this method of interpretation are: Kenmore Plantation, Oatlands, Gunston Hall, Lynnhaven House, Poplar Forest, Prestwould Plantation, and Shirley Plantation. While museums that practice erasure actively work to diminish the lives of enslaved people within the museum, acknowledgment museums discuss enslaved people in more active terms and as more complex people, but fail to include the stories of enslaved people in a meaningful way across the museum. These museums make some steps to actually discuss the lives of enslaved people, but never take them the focus of the interpretation. At these museums enslaved people are interpreted as actual participants of plantation life, but remain firmly secondary in the interpretation. Museums undertake this acknowledgment in many different ways, but a few features remain consistent across museums. Rather than strive to provide the visitor with the best possible interpretation that covers the whole history of the plantations while provoking the visitor to think about history, museums that engage in acknowledgment seem to discuss slavery for the sole purpose of fending off criticism. Attention to the lives of enslaved people has increased dramatically over the past fifty years, which has significantly changed what a number of plantation museums represent, as many prominent museums have expanded their interpretations of slavery. Museums in this
category have certainly recognized that movement and have shallowly embraced these changes in their interpretation. Again, Shirley serves as a perfect example. Jennifer Ley Page’s University of Delaware doctoral dissertation, which she worked with Shirley to develop in 1995, outlines many steps that the museum could take to better incorporate the lives of enslaved people into its interpretation. In June 2012, some of these suggestions had obviously gone into practice, but the larger changes needed to effectively incorporate an enslaved narrative of the plantation remained absent. The tour guide mentioned enslaved people briefly inside the house, and panels and videos in the outbuildings expanded on the lives and work of enslaved people, but the tour retained the same structure as the 1995 tour described in Page’s dissertation, rather than shifting to accommodate the possibility of a more in depth discussion of slavery. One leaves Shirley, and in fact all museums practicing acknowledgment, with the distinct impression that the museums mentioned slavery less to educate visitors and more to stave off any possible complaints of erasure. ¹

Acknowledgment features two different types of interpretation that can work separately or in combination to underrepresent enslaved people. The first, minimization, depicts enslaved people as less important inhabitants of the plantation and echoes many of the characteristics of erasure. Minimization, however, offers somewhat more expanded discussions of slavery. This effectively satisfies any interest visitors may have in slavery without actually going into great description about the institution of slavery or the lives of enslaved people themselves. The second method, segregation, separates the stories of

enslaved people from the stories of their white owners rhetorically. Instead of covering the lives of enslaved people alongside those of whites, these museums go into detail about enslaved people, but only away from the main house. This perpetuates the inequality of enslaved and free people as well as suggesting that enslaved people have no place within the main story of the plantation.

**Minimization**

The main difference between the manner in which erasure museums and acknowledgment museums minimize the contributions of enslaved people stems from the frequency with which they mention enslaved people. Erasure museums generally do not mention enslaved people more than three times on a house tour. In acknowledgment museums, tour guides talk about “enslaved people,” “slaves,” or “servants” at least five times over the course of the house tour. Shirley is the only exception to this rule, but that museum’s extensive discussion of slavery in segregated spaces places it in this category. By increasing the number of times these museums discuss slavery on their tours, they significantly augment the quality of information provided. By talking more about enslaved people museums present different aspects of the lives of enslaved people. Rather than simply mentioning enslaved people as a group to be counted or workers to do work, these museums can further explore the lives of enslaved people. On the tours at both Kenmore Plantation in Fredericksburg and Gunston Hall in Fairfax County, the tour guide told visitors that slaves entered the home through a different door than the white owners and utilized different spaces to get around the house, such as the master’s office and servant’s staircase. While these brief mentions certainly do not fully explore the
different ways African Americans and whites experienced the same spaces, it highlights the inequality of slavery, as whites insisted in separation from slaves even in the ways they entered the manor house. Other museums expanded their interpretation to touch on types of work within the household and interactions with the white owners. While the rest of the dialogue about enslaved people covers similar topics to those emphasized in museums displaying erasure, this increased nuance in interpretation allows for a slightly more complete picture of enslaved life.

Despite this, museums which fall into acknowledgment do so because, while they may offer a slight increase in information from erasure museums, they do not make any real steps toward an in depth portrayal of enslaved people. Many acknowledgment museums refer to enslaved people as servants and discuss them mainly as workers. Moreover, the minimization presented in acknowledgment museums parallels a technique used in erasure museums, but intensifies its impact. Visitors could believe that since the museum discusses a number of aspects of the lives of enslaved people, they tell the whole story, a misconception with powerful ramifications. Walking away from the museum, visitors
could believe that enslaved people inhabited only a secondary role on the plantation, not as wholly active people, but rather as those who existed only in relation to white owners. Minimization presents more aspects of slave life, but does not follow through on discussion. While the tour guide at Gunston Hall showed the servant stairs, she did not encourage the visitor to imagine the difficulty an enslaved woman would have had moving up the steep, thin stairs in a skirt, carrying bed linens or a chamber pot. Only touching briefly on the work of enslaved people without encouraging connection allows visitors to overlook the realities of enslaved people.

**Segregation**

Museums that utilize segregation often present a greater amount and depth of information, but fail to integrate the contributions of enslaved people to the greater story of Virginia plantations. Anne Marie Lindsay summarizes the point: “This development of artificial separation within the history of a heritage site gives guests the false impression that African-American history is a lesser history or a separate history from the history that is being presented in the main.” Shirley highlights this more than any other museum. While it discusses slavery very little on the actual house tour, the informative panels in the outbuildings at Shirley cover a much wider array of topics, relating the lives of enslaved people to the life of the plantation. In the kitchen panels describe the development of slavery at Shirley through time, using primary sources, the slave quarters at Shirley, and the role of the cook on the plantation. In another outbuilding, a video on constant loop talks about the coming of the Civil War to Shirley plantation, including slavery as one of the causes of the Civil War and telling visitors that many enslaved
people stayed at Shirley as free laborers. A timeline that places events at Shirley in a historical context highlights a number of incidences relating to slavery, including Robert Carter III’s freeing of his slaves and Nat Turner’s Rebellion. Gunston Hall goes further into the lives of enslaved people, describing everyday life from clothing to resistance as well as the political ramifications of slavery. Gunston Hall also reconstructs the outline of a slave quarter in wood and brick with a description of the conditions of life in slave quarters. Prestwould in Clarksville still has a standing slave cabin, which remains open to visitors. The information provided in these spaces gives visitors rich depictions of enslaved life and is easily accompanied by visual representations it is are presented in the spaces being interpreting or feature pictures. ²

While acknowledgment museums that segregate information offer visitors the

The outline at Gunston Hall (left) and slave quarter at Prestwould Plantation (right) are two examples of depictions of the places where enslaved people lived. (Photos by author, 2012)

opportunity to learn more, they do little to incite the visitor to take the opportunities presented. Aside from the occasional map provided with ticket purchase, little suggests that anything besides the house is relevant to interpretation on these plantations. The outbuildings and interpretive panels are easily skipped by visitors who think that the real story takes place in the house, an idea perpetuated by the museums themselves. Their brochures feature photographs of the exterior and the interior of the house, but rarely of the outbuildings. Visitors, then, have very little reason to see the outlying buildings as a primary part of the plantation. The tours themselves focus on life inside the manor house, rarely mentioning plantation life as something more than what happened inside the house. While tour guides occasionally encourage visitors to tour the outbuildings if they have an interest in slave life, few of the visitors on my trips spent more than a few minutes looking through the outbuildings or exterior panels. After spending between 45 and 90 minutes on a tour the unstructured few minutes visitors spend examining panels very likely have little chance of impacting what they take away from the plantation experience.

**Combining Minimization and Segregation**

While some of the museums under acknowledgment utilize either minimization or segregation, most combine the two. In these museums, minimization reinforces the delineations of space established by segregation. By discussing very little about the lives of enslaved people inside the manor house and focusing on them only outside suggests that their lives belong apart from the main story of the plantation. These two methods work together to create a system of museum interpretation that does not allow visitors to
see enslaved people as primary inhabitants of Virginia plantations. Plantation museums create a story focused around the house. As discussed in the previous chapter, the only people whose lives receive any in depth discussion in most plantation museums are white people and the only significant historical structure is the plantation house itself. Minimizing the presence of African Americans inside the plantation home and discussing them in the outbuildings removes African Americans from this narrative. By providing only a superficial understanding of enslaved life, or locating a more complex one outside of the primary narrative, these museums place slavery as an insignificant aspect of the plantation.
3. Recognition

In the best museums, good information and compelling presentation complement one another to create an interpretation that informs and engages visitors. When one of these falls short visitors can leave without taking anything with them. The five museums in this section — Ash Lawn-Highland, Stratford Hall, Sully Historic Site, Belle Grove, and Smithfield — fall short of meeting both of these marks in different ways on the topic of slavery. A first group of Belle Grove and Smithfield provides excellent information about the lives of enslaved people, but in a small number of instances. Stratford Hall and Sully Historic Site provide a more comprehensive exposition of the lives of enslaved people on the plantation, but present information that does not accurately depict the important roles of enslaved people on plantations. Ash Lawn-Highland occupies a middle ground between these two; with information and presentation that have shortcomings but keep the discussion of slavery from slipping back into the previously discussed categories.

These five museums all share one important quality. They seem to make a point of discussing slavery. Slavery has a notable presence in each museum that leaves an impact on the visitor. An inattentive visitor could leave most of the plantation museums discussed previously without learning anything significant about slavery. These museums take a purposeful approach to presenting slavery, though they do so in different ways to different effects. Recognizing the significant presence of enslaved people and the institution of slavery on Virginia plantations drives these museums to more effectively elucidate these topics for visitors. Thus, each museum in this section engages in a significant amount of recognition, though that alone does not resolve every problem.
associated with interpreting slavery. These museums take a significant step in creating a more effective and accurate representation of slavery.

**Here and There**

Many plantation museums in Virginia allow glaring opportunities to slip by without mentioning enslaved people. The moments that would most obviously lend themselves to a discussion of slave life pass without a mention of enslaved men and women. At Belle Grove and Smithfield, none of these instances exists. These museums fill the obvious moments with information about enslaved people. At Belle Grove, the tour guide noted how slaves would tighten the beds every night but stop tightening them for guests once they had over-stayed their welcome and the tour guide at Smithfield pointed out the landing where the slaves who worked inside would sleep, suggesting that the slaves who would have slept there had a better condition than those living outside, but still had to live with the vagaries of slavery. By combining the portrayals of every day life at Belle Grove and Smithfield, these museums offer a more complete picture of plantation life.
life with the same basic information given at other plantation museums, Belle Grove and Smithfield present slavery beyond the bare bones, adding a more personal aspect to it. These small pieces, and similar information provided throughout the tour, give visitors to these museums nuances not provided at other plantation museums.

When bringing enslaved people to the forefront of the discussion the tour guides at these museums integrated the stories of those often casually ignored people, giving them a role in the story of the plantation. By seamlessly moving the interpretation from focusing on the lives of the white inhabitants to the enslaved people they owned, the tour guides put enslaved people in the same realm as whites, if not on the same level of importance. The discussion of black and white people in the same rooms, in relation to the same objects and ideas, allows visitors to imagine a more holistic view of the plantation. Enslaved people and white people on Virginia plantations interacted on a daily basis in a number of ways, and they both had important relationships with the material world they lived in. While white owners and their visitors may have slept in the rope beds, enslaved people cared for the feather mattresses and tightened them nightly. Including both of these stories side by side presents a history that involves enslaved and free people.

The stories of enslaved African Americans and the free white people who owned them do not receive equal discussion in these museums, however. While these museums discuss slave life few times throughout their tours, the moments of interpretation unceremoniously and effectively integrate the lives of enslaved people and wealthy whites into the museum. This does not create a thorough combination of African American and white history. Despite including enslaved people as a significant part of the
museum story, these museums continue to stress the lives of white people over the stories of black people. Though the two exist side by side, one story clearly takes precedence over the other. The two museums have an obvious appreciation for the important place African Americans had in the story of plantations in the past, but they do not allow this to become the focal point in the present. The effective use of minimal moments of interpretation takes a step towards equality in interpretation, but does not begin to bridge the void that exists across Virginia plantation museums.

“Slavery wasn’t an issue with them”

According to a tour guide at Sully Historic Site, Richard Bland Lee and his family had very good relationships with the enslaved people they owned. So good, in fact, that Mrs. Lee taught enslaved children how to read and write and one enslaved person sent a letter to Mrs. Lee after Mr. Lee’s death expressing sympathy for his passing. These facts, and a number of others, apparently induced the tour guide at Sully to inform visitors that slavery was not an issue for people on the plantation and that Sully was “a happy place.” Sully complicates this...
blatant removal of the white owners from a position of responsibility for the horrors of slavery by providing visitors with thorough information about the lives of enslaved people and the ways in which they contributed to plantation life. Throughout the tour the guide discussed the work of enslaved people and how they interacted with the white owners of the house on a daily basis. In a room of the house an exhibit about Sully described not only the work enslaved people did, but also listed names, discussed the desire for freedom, and showed a video about the enslaved people who lived at Sully and the archaeology done to research their lives. The site also features a small slave cabin, marked on maps of the site but without much interpretation itself. Stratford Hall, the birthplace of Robert E. Lee similarly offers a larger depth and breadth of information than most museums while still focusing on the “positive” aspects of slavery rather than the negative.

These two museums most clearly display the perils of recognition without full admission of culpability. While the museums incorporate the lives of enslaved people into their museums, making them a major part of the interpretation, the information they use proves problematic. For example, at Stratford Hall the docent consistently conflated slavery and indentured servitude. Many of his descriptions of work on the plantation discussed enslaved people and indentured servants together. The claim that indentured servants and enslaved African Americans appeared in equal measure at Stratford Hall is extremely problematic. Construction on Stratford Hall began in 1738 but the interpretation focuses mainly on the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth. The wealthy plantation owners of Virginia had moved away from indentured servants as the primary source of labor well before this time. While there very
well may have been white workers at Stratford, indentured or otherwise, enslaved African Americans comprised the vast majority of the labor force. Removing this fact disconnects the relationship of race and labor in the eighteenth century, the defining element of plantation life in Virginia.¹

While these museums impart basic facts to visitors, they do not interpret these facts effectively. The lives of enslaved people cannot be condensed into single, straightforward narratives and remain honest. While the enslaved people at Sully may have experienced less suffering than their counterparts at other plantations, that does not mean they had good lives all of the time. It would be equally inaccurate to suggest that the lives of enslaved people featured only unending toil without the opportunity for enjoyment. For museums, finding a middle ground in their portrayal of enslaved life can cause significant problems, especially if tour guides have certain expectations or beliefs that do not match those of the individuals developing the tour. Sully and Stratford make clear the importance of having all participants in the museum interpretation share similar ideas regarding interpretation. Stratford possesses extensive interpretive space besides the guided tour, including outbuildings with interpretive panels and an entire separate gallery. Sully uses a room inside the main house to display interpretive panels and show videos, as discussed above, and features a slave cabin without much interpretive material inside. The information provided in these permanent (or at least non-human) sources is, across the board, more reflective of academic historians' discussions of slavery than that presented by tour guides. A panel at Stratford Hall juxtaposes the tendency of enslaved people to purchase fashionable goods and the uncertainty of slave life due to sale. A

video at Sully not only discusses slave life on the plantation but the methods historians use to research such information as well. While these aspects of the interpretation may provide interested visitors with substantial information, they are not the main focus of the site. Both sites orient visitors toward the tour as the primary method for learning about the plantation. Taken alone, the tours provide a considerably less complex view of slave life. While this view is mitigated by what visitors can choose to read or watch, it is still the primary part of the museum interpretation. Museums that present such disparate views of slave life in different aspects of the museum do not just complicate visitors’ views of slavery, but rather give conflicting messages to the visitors. One portrays slavery as a complex institution that impacted people in many different ways while the other minimizes the structural problems created by slavery, instead relying on simplistic interpretations that minimize the ills of slavery on the plantation. The discord created by these opposing views denies visitors a full understanding of slavery that could be more effectively conveyed through consistent interpretation.

**Just Short**

Ash-Lawn Highland lives in the shadow of Monticello, almost literally. A short drive from the home of Thomas Jefferson, the site works very hard to show visitors the importance of James Monroe in his own right. While Monticello possesses numerous research resources and large exhibits to complement the plantation, Ash-Lawn Highland lacks such boons. Within these means Ash-Lawn Highland presents slavery with modest effectiveness, echoing many of the characteristics that museums in the next chapter use to interpret slavery more successfully. Ash-Lawn Highland features positive and negative
characteristics of both of the types of museums discussed above, highlighting what recognition means and where it succeeds and falls short in interpreting slavery effectively.

The tour at Ash-Lawn Highland touches on slavery repeatedly and in detail. While it emphasized politics and furnishings as the most important aspects of the house after the lives of the white owners, the guide discussed slavery at various points throughout the tour. Topics concerning slavery ranged from the African Colonization Society, of which Monroe was a founding member, to the age at which enslaved people began to work, six. While these frequent instances incorporated slavery throughout the tour, the tour guide did not delve deeply into slavery, mentioning a certain topic relating to slavery briefly before moving on to the next point of discussion. This created a disjointed narrative that brought slavery to the front frequently without allowing visitors to understand any specific aspect in great detail or depth. The non-tour aspects of the interpretation provide equally mixed results. While the site features a slave cabin and guest room next to one another, creating a strong comparison, the numerous plantation sites not on the tour that are open to visitors feature very little description. When present, such as in the kitchen, the description is in the passive voice, describing how work was done rather than who did it.

As an overall site, Ash-Lawn Highland recognizes slavery as an important part of the story without actually shifting much of the focus away from the white family and onto the enslaved African Americans they owned. The frequent mentions of slavery serve to fill out the story of the plantation, but this story revolves certainly around the Monroes and the other white people they interacted with. This recognition plays a significant role
in moving towards a more inclusive interpretation of slavery but falls short of completely incorporating enslaved people into the main story of the plantation or making them the focus of the site. Ash-Lawn Highland, like the other four museums in this chapter, presents slavery as secondary to the main story of the plantation, relegating it to a less significant spot in history. Beginning to incorporate slavery into the interpretation and present complex aspects of slavery shows an initial willingness to discuss slavery, but it does not allow for a paradigm shift to move plantations from the domain of wealthy whites in the public mindset to one of a shared space, where whites and blacks lived and worked, constantly negotiating relationships. Moreover, it fails to bring to visitors the interesting and intricate world that enslaved people created on plantations, one whose impact can still be felt today.

Ash Lawn-Highland begins to bring an interpretation of slavery into the museum, but does not fully integrate it. (Photo by author, 2012)
4. Inclusion

Four plantation museums in Virginia stand out those in this study for their interpretations of slavery. While none of these possesses a magic formula for balancing the lives of enslaved people with those of their owners, they show the possibilities of interpreting slavery on the ground at the sites that have some of the strongest ties to the atrocities of American slavery. The lives of the white owners take center stage, but the enslaved people they owned appear as central players in the history of the site. Each site has specific characteristics that grant it advantages in interpreting slavery and each utilizes these resources unlike the others. The interpretation of slavery can come in many different forms, many of which appear in the four museums in the inclusion category. Inclusion, not incorporation, because no museum makes the stories of enslaved people an equal player in the story of the plantation.

In Fredericksburg Chatham Manor tells the more than 200 year history of the plantation, including its time as home to more than 100 slaves and the uprising that took place there. The National Park Service uses a video and self-guided tour to deliver this history, resulting in a sparser interpretation than other museums, while remaining consistent. The other three plantations have a great deal in common. Each served as the home of a president and all three have more extensive galleries and, based on even a glance, more visitors, than any other museum in this study. Among these, Mount Vernon holds the most prominent place in American memory as the home of George Washington. A house tour, supplemented by other tours, extensive descriptive panels, and state of the art exhibits and galleries, allows Mount Vernon to give visitors information and choices unavailable at other museums. The controversies surrounding Monticello’s owner,
Thomas Jefferson, has forced the museum to discuss slavery, which it does wholeheartedly not only on the house tour but in supplementary tours and galleries as well. The last museum in this study, Montpelier, features the most comprehensive and complex interpretation of slavery seen at any Virginia plantation museum. Though not as massive as Mount Vernon or Monticello, it shares many of their traits and takes their interpretive efforts to interpret slavery further than any other.

**Chatham**

The National Park Service interpretation of Chatham Manor covers its construction in 1768 to its time as a 1920s Colonial Revival retreat. This expansive period prohibits Chatham from focusing too extensively on a single owner or time period, as many plantation museums choose to do. Instead, the plantation itself serves as

Chatham Manor does not have a guided tour or numerous exhibits, but its interpretation makes enslaved people an important part of the history of the plantation. (Photo by author, 2012)
the centerpiece of the interpretation. While this interpretation is outlined by the shifts in white ownership, the enslaved people feature largely in the story of the plantation.

When visitors enter the main house NPS employees direct them to a film that tells the story of the plantation. This video serves the same purpose a guided house tour does at many other plantation museums, giving visitors a compelling narrative of the plantation. Unlike a tour guide however, a video presents a consistent story to visitors, meaning that every person touring Chatham hears this interpretation of enslaved life. Even if information remains consistent from tour to tour, the tone and presentation of a tour guide can dramatically change how visitors understand the information presented and what they take away. Delivered via video the interpretation can represent a collaborative effort to establish the significant history of the plantation and present it in a compelling manner. However, unlike a tour, a video cannot be tailored to the specific interests of a group or individual. While visitors can ask NPS workers questions after the video, it removes the interactions between visitors and guides that can help to clarify and focus interpretation during a tour.

While moving through the colonial and early republic history of the plantation, the video emphasizes not just the work of enslaved people for the existence of the plantation, but also their lives as individuals. In a moving segment the video lists the names of the enslaved people at Chatham while highlighting their lack of legal personhood. The video highlights a rebellion by enslaved people, in which they killed their overseer before being executed, as well as the formerly enslaved men who joined the Union Army and the struggles newly freed people faced with the end of slavery. At the same time, the museum mourns the financial losses of the Civil War in the form of
enslaved people, painting it as a tragedy for the white owners. Further exhibits discuss the slave quarters, slave work, and the history of the plantation over the years, including a large display on the Civil War. Apart from the video, the inside and the outside exhibits of the plantation include enslaved people, but do not focus on them.

The video and limited exhibitions combine to present visitors to Chatham with an extremely consistent and thoughtful interpretation, one that makes slavery a main feature of the plantation. The minimal amount of interpretation allows for specific aspects to take up a significant proportion of the interpretation, but decreases the impact of the interpretation on the visitor. Visitors see much of Chatham through no eyes except their own. While slavery plays a large part of the interpretation of Chatham, the NPS interpretation does not play a large role at Chatham. This does not necessarily mean that Chatham does a poor job of interpretation, just that visitors could easily ignore the story the NPS wishes to tell, a very compelling story.

**Mount Vernon**

In terms of size and consistent experience, Mount Vernon occupies the other end of the spectrum from Chatham. Mount Vernon contains many exhibit spaces, including an education center, orientation center, and twelve original buildings, not to mention the extensive gardens and reconstructed buildings. Gift shops and dining opportunities complement these educational experiences and help to make Mount Vernon a massive attraction. Mount Vernon’s website features a tool for helping visitors plan their trips, suggesting almost six hours for visitors who wish to see all the attractions, not including eating, shopping, or tours aside from the mansion, which cover topics such as the Civil
War and the film *National Treasure* at Mount Vernon. The museums and educational center offer a traditional history museum approach to presenting history, supplemented by a number of theaters, including one featuring false snow. Outside, Mount Vernon’s plantation buildings offer tours and interpretive panels typical of many other plantation museums, but Mount Vernon’s living history program makes them markedly different, especially at the pioneer farm, where interpreters and animals allow visitors to experience life on an eighteenth century farm.

Where does slavery fit into all of this? Multiple locations throughout the estate and museums discuss the lives of enslaved people and the institution of slavery, but the most basic aspect of any visit to a plantation museum, the house tour, ignores slavery almost entirely. George Washington’s residence sees a seemingly unending stream of visitors in the summer months and has a different approach to its house tour. Rather than having a set tour group and guide stay together through the house, visitors at Mount

The house tour at Mount Vernon features little information about the lives of enslaved people, but the rest of the museum is replete with it. (Photo by author, 2012).
Vernon find themselves moving from room to room, each occupied by a different docent who discusses the talking points of his or her room on loop. Very few of these points deal with slavery. The only time the word a guide said “slave” inside the mansion, she referred to the work that enslaved people did for the many guests of the Washingtons. The names of maids, a cook, and a butler also receive mention over the course of the tour, but none of the guides clarify that those individuals did not receive pay for their work and were owned by the Washingtons. By the end of the tour the discussion of Washington’s greatness and his property greatly overwhelmed any mentions of enslaved people.

In stark contrast to the house tour, Mount Vernon’s interpretation outside the mansion shows slavery as an extremely complex institution, provoking visitors mentally and emotionally. The exhibits in the slave quarters and workshops do an excellent job talking about the life and work of specific enslaved people at Mount Vernon along side explanations of enslaved life in general. The quarters, furnished in barrack style clearly display contrasts between the lives of enslaved people and their owners, serving as a poignant symbol of slave life. The strongest information about slave life comes from the slave life tour, but problems exist even there. The tour does not appear on the Mount Vernon website or in any of the information given to visitors upon their arrival. In the middle of the summer, the only advertisement for the tour was a sign in the bowling green outside of the mansion house. On the only tour of the day, about twenty people gathered to hear about slavery at Mount Vernon. While twenty people a day may not mark as too paltry for most museums, Mount Vernon welcomed one million visitors in 2011, making twenty participants in the tour a rather small number. The tour itself, however, serves as a perfect example of how museums can engage visitors in difficult
discussions of slavery. After starting with an overview of the basics of slavery in Virginia, the tour guide moved into a discussion of the enslaved people owned by George Washington, not just who they were and what their jobs were, but the complex relationships and lives that slavery created in Virginia. While focusing strongly on the lives of the enslaved people in general, the tour includes much about individuals and never lets the visitor forget that George Washington owned the people discussed in the tour. Comparing the situations of dower slaves and those belonging to George Washington, as well as domestic and field slaves, the tour also highlighted the resistance of enslaved people through different methods.\(^2\)

An even more powerful symbol stands further from the house. The Mount Vernon slave memorial, suggested to be the only such memorial on a plantation in America and certainly the only one in this study, has the capacity to evoke powerful emotions from visitors. Located at the site of a slave burial ground, not too far from Washington’s own tomb, the site does not possess a strictly educational purpose, rather serving to call attention to the lives of enslaved people at Mount Vernon. There is a distinct paucity of slave memorials across the United States, which, according to some, presents an obstacle in collectively recognizing the trauma of slavery. It is certainly true that a memorial such as this forces visitors to consider the evils of slavery in and of themselves, rather than as a part of a larger historical period. While presenting slavery in conjunction with furniture and stories of famous visitors serves to make slavery part of the historical narrative, it

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also normalizes it. Making slavery digestible for the average visitor means making it comprehensible, an idea that is in and of itself almost incomprehensible.³

Mount Vernon balances discussing the historical facts of slavery and memorializing the enslaved people, but does not manage to fully integrate slavery into its interpretation on all fronts. In the many of the places slavery is discussed, the tone of the museum makes it clear that Mount Vernon does not ignore the lives of enslaved people. However, many of the main attractions on the plantation leave out slavery almost entirely. The house tour provides the most glaring example, but none of the action packed or dramatic videos playing in theaters around the museum seriously take on slavery and the beautiful gardens enchant visitors without informing of them of just who exactly would have had the responsibility of tending the flowers and vegetables. Parts of Mount Vernon exceed all other plantation museums in Virginia with how they handle slavery, specifically the slave life tour and the memorial, while others look more like tours at museums that practice erasure. If visitors look for the lives of enslaved people at Mount Vernon, they can learn important things, but if they choose not to, they can leave without realizing George Washington owned any slaves at all.

Monticello

The sign welcoming visitors to the plantation of the third president of the United States reads: “Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello,” with the name written in Jefferson’s distinctive scrawling signature. Up and down the mountain, the lives of enslaved people impacted the story of Monticello, in the past as they do now. Monticello’s multifaceted

interpretation of slavery shows a great deal of consideration for telling the stories of enslaved people. Monticello makes slavery a part of the story of Monticello as a plantation in countless ways, but the focus of Monticello the museum is less Monticello the plantation and more Jefferson himself. The power of Jefferson’s memory takes up just as much interpretive space as the entirety of the plantation, meaning that while slavery appears as a significant aspect of plantation life at Monticello, it pales in comparison to the amount of time spent discussing the character and achievements of Jefferson.

Like Mount Vernon, the museum of Monticello does not simply consist of a house and grounds, but extensive traditional galleries and shops as well. Within these spaces, it is easy to see the aims of Monticello as a museum, to tell the story of Jefferson through his home plantation. Unlike many other similar plantations however, Monticello recognizes that enslaved people made up an important part of Jefferson’s world and home. For example, the slave life tour is offered hourly in the summer and featured on the museum’s website, unlike the less frequent and less advertised tours at other museums. It seems unlikely that this stems from Jefferson’s famous stature alone, as Mount Vernon divorces Washington the man from slavery throughout the museum, but rather from the fame of some of Jefferson’s slaves, specifically Sally Hemings. Jefferson’s relationship with Hemings has inextricably linked his legacy with slavery since the beginning of the nineteenth century, perhaps more than any of his fellow founding fathers. Jefferson’s story cannot be told without including slavery.

Monticello faces a difficult situation, then. How to celebrate Jefferson while fully acknowledging his complex and divisive legacy? Monticello choses to embrace that complex character and use it to shape their interpretation, suggesting that the only
The museum of Monticello struggles with how to encapsulate the many legacies of its former owner, Thomas Jefferson. (Photo by author, 2012)

narrative of Jefferson worth telling is one that explores all his facets. Inside and outside the mansion house, one of the important facets of Jefferson is his ownership of other human beings. On the house tour, the topic of slavery comes up naturally and is discussed with ease by the tour guides, who work mentions of enslaved people into every room. Occasionally these references serve the purpose of emphasizing the legacy of Jefferson, such as the story of the methods for concealing the labor of enslaved people in the dining room, which celebrates Jefferson’s ingenuity while missing an opportunity to explore why exactly Jefferson concerned himself with minimizing the appearance of enslaved people within the dining room. Others, however, focus on the labor of enslaved people, including the craftsmanship of John Hemings. Of course, the enumeration of Jefferson’s multifaceted personality takes up the majority of the tour, portraying him as a philosopher, statesman, scientist, debtor, and much more.

Across the exhibits at Monticello, a similar interpretation appears. Underneath the mansion house, informative panels fill the rooms formerly used by enslaved people for
everyday work. Here, there are cutout of different enslaved people and panels describing their work. Usually, these panels describe their work as how it aided the Jeffertsons rather than the impact it had on the lives of the enslaved people. One panel about a bell explains that Burwell Colbert would have monitored a bell that one of the Jeffertsons would ring in various parts of the house and other enslaved people would have travelled up and down the stairs to tend to the wishes of the Jeffertsons. This is interesting information and seemingly given from the perspective of the enslaved people, but rather than portraying the full lives of enslaved people it shows them as tools to carry out the needs of the white Jeffertsons. What would Burwell Colbert also have been doing while monitoring the bell? Would the bell have been one of a number of things he oversaw? Would the people carrying things up and down Jeffertson’s notoriously narrow stairs struggled, hands full of food for other people? Answering questions like these can help illuminate the lives of enslaved people beyond just workers, making their lives a larger part of the Monticello story. An exhibit about Monticello as a plantation features fifteen different people, nine of whom were enslaved. This is in no way insignificant, and these people cover a wide swath of the experiences of enslaved people. Despite all of this, much of the discussion focuses on Jeffertson. His words cover many of the panels and individuals’ connections to him appear as defining characteristics. The work they did, as decided by Jeffertson, takes precedence over their relationships to other enslaved people or their personal lives. While attempting to discuss slaves from a perspective other than that of their masters has proved a trying task for historians for decades, Monticello has access (even in its own bookstore) to some of the most complete examinations of a plantation community. At Monticello, perhaps more than at any other plantation museum, interpreting Jeffertson as the central

The slave life tour at Monticello has the same tone as the house tour and the museums, but with a shifted focus. Enslaved people obviously take center stage on the tour, but the underlying theme is still that of learning about Jefferson. From beginning to end, the tour uses Jefferson, rather than the enslaved people at Monticello, as its guiding theme. The tour presented the similarities between the people mentioned not as their enslaved status or even their living on Mulberry Row, but rather the fact that they all had some connection to Jefferson. The tour guide opened with an anecdote about Jefferson’s first memory, being carried on a pillow by a slave. She then moved on to talk about Jefferson’s first playmate, Jupiter, an enslaved boy who later served as his valet and went to Williamsburg with him. The overwhelming majority of the tour focuses on the lives of enslaved people who lived on Mulberry Row, meaning mostly domestic or skilled workers who would have interacted with Jefferson personally. This does not mean that the tour never stops talking about Jefferson. Much of the tour focuses on the lives of individual enslaved people, but Jefferson’s influence appears in their stories consistently. This might not be surprising, considering the fact that the owner of any slave had an important role in the life of any enslaved person. However, so consistently coming back to Jefferson takes away from the community of enslaved people that certainly existed outside of Jefferson’s view. The tour never ventures to talk about the lives of field hands or enslaved communities in any serious way beyond Mulberry Row. The slaves who
lived there interacted with the other slaves belonging to Jefferson and people, free and enslaved, in the larger Charlottesville area. Extending beyond the bounds of the little mountain, enslaved life at Monticello did not revolve around Jefferson as completely as the slave life tour would have one believe.⁵

Monticello makes enslaved people visible across the museum, adding information about enslaved people to almost every aspect of the museum’s interpretation. Visitors learn a considerable amount about different aspects of life as an enslaved individual at Monticello, but not a considerable amount about slavery in Virginia in general. None of this seems to take the perspective of enslaved people for the sole purpose of telling their stories. Rather, the museum seems to want to try and find more ways to talk about aspects of Jefferson’s life. Monticello makes the lives of enslaved people important not in their own right but because they are part of Jefferson’s world and help visitors to understand him better.

**Montpelier**

Montpelier’s history stretches across four centuries, and the current museum interprets a great deal of it incorporating the lives of enslaved people and free African Americans into this discussion in countless ways. Montpelier, in terms of size of museum, comes in somewhere under Mount Vernon and Monticello, but above the majority of Virginia plantation museums. This museum manages to interpret the lives of enslaved people to a much more significant extent than all other plantation museums. Of course, it does not completely disregard the famous owner of the plantation, James

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⁵ Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family.*
Madison, in favor of discussing only enslaved people. Similar to Monticello, the sign for Montpelier touts it as “James Madison’s Montpelier” and his life, family, and achievements take up a considerable amount of the interpretive time and space. The methods employed by Montpelier show how far plantation museums can go when making an effort to interpret slavery, but also highlight the areas where all plantation museums fall short.

Specialty tours appear at many major plantation museums in Virginia, but Montpelier has two that focus on the lives of African Americans at Montpelier. Unlike at Monticello, they are not offered every day, providing visitors with fewer opportunities to take the in depth tours. However, these tours are advertised on the museum’s website as well as prominently at the Visitor’s Center, unlike at Mount Vernon. When visitors do get a chance to take a tour about African American life they stand to learn a great deal. In my experience, the longer tour, “From Slavery to Freedom” took a considerable amount of time and travelled to various sites across the museum grounds. The tour took visitors from the beginnings of slavery in Virginia to a segregated train station built by the DuPonts, who were the last private owners of Montpelier during the Jim Crow era. When discussing slavery, the tour guide balanced discussing individual slaves, slavery in general, and not removing the white Madisons from the story of people they owned. Moving across different parts of the plantations, from the skeletons of reconstructed slave cabins, to a burial ground for enslaved people, the tour touched on the political, social, and religious aspects of slavery. It actively engaged visitors with the hypocrisies of slave owners and compared the lives of slaves with the people who owned them. The portrayals of slave life were complex and thoughtful, not shying away from many
difficult aspects of slavery that other plantation museums completely ignore. After discussing slavery, the tour moved on to a cabin built by a former Montpelier slave freed by the Civil War, and the DuPont train station, explicitly tying slavery to later historical events.

While the tour is only offered on occasion, all of Montpelier’s interpretation integrates slavery, from the lives of enslaved people to the political divisions of slavery. The most in depth discussion of slavery outside of the tours specifically devoted to that subject can be found in the basement of the mansion house, where panels discuss the lives of enslaved people and an available self-guided audio tour continues to illuminate their lives. On the house tour, the actual words of enslaved people help to tell the story of Montpelier. A quote from Paul Jennings’s book about his time serving Madison plays in the room where Madison died, giving a firsthand account of an important event in the history of Montpelier from the perspective of an enslaved man, a practice unheard of among most Virginia plantations. Throughout the house tour enslaved people make their way into the discussion, from their work on the plantation to their presence in the dining room. The roles of enslaved people are not glossed over, with Montpelier pointing to contributions enslaved people made not just on the plantation, but to American history in general, such as Jennings’s help in saving the famous portrait of Washington from the White House. Describing relationships between enslaved people and their white owners as interdependent allows the tour guide to point out to visitors how much of what happened at Montpelier relied on the labor of enslaved people and helped to make the America we know today alongside The United States Constitution. Unlike many other plantations, Montpelier takes care to draw attention to the political arguments
surrounding slavery. Montpelier celebrates Madison as the father of the Constitution, but does not shy away from discussing the fact that slavery was written into the very body of the Constitution. The interpretation at Montpelier places enslaved people where they would have been at the time of Madison’s retirement: everywhere.

Excellence, in this case, helps to show the larger problems that impact plantation museums across the Commonwealth when dealing with slavery. While embracing interpretation of the lives of enslaved people, Montpelier’s interpretation of the life of Madison is in no way ambiguous. It unabashedly celebrates the man and the document most associated with him. The same phenomenon exists across plantation museums, where the lives of white people receive commemoration and honor despite their active involvement in one of the most horrific institutions known to mankind. Every day of his life Madison lived as a master to enslaved people, and yet the museum pulls out all the stops when celebrating his name.

The next chapter explores more fully the problems associated with celebrating the lives...
of slave owners and the ways in which all plantation museums undermine the importance of enslaved people to American history.
5. Across All Museums

Museums do not just reflect the cultures that they exist in, but help to shape them as well. On a daily basis, museums serve as purveyors of history for people of all ages, making them an integral part of the historical discussion in the United States. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, historic homes have a special place in the museum landscape. In celebration of the 200th anniversary of Virginia’s executive mansion, Governor Bob McDonnell declared 2013 the Year of the Virginia Historic Home to encourage visitation to sites around the Commonwealth. In conjunction with this decision, the Office of the Governor created a website listing 75 historic homes in the Commonwealth. The vast number of such historic homes suggests, at the very least, an affinity for creating historic house museums. These sites teach visitors about the history of the Commonwealth, but also what it means to be a Virginian and, in many ways, an American.¹

These museums provide an in depth and in person look at plantation life in Virginia, an opportunity unavailable in many classrooms and books. For many visitors then, these museums serve as their main route to understanding plantation life. How they portray slavery has a significant impact on how many people view the institution and the lives of people who lived in it. While the ways in which museums interpret slavery vary greatly from museum to museum, certain underlying principles exist across all museums and detract from a thorough understanding of slave life and undermine a nuanced view of plantation life that includes all people. This is highlighted by a simple fact: not one museum emphasizes the lives of enslaved people in equal measure to the lives of their

white owners. This occurs despite the fact that at every plantation, aside from a few of the seventeenth century sites, enslaved African Americans overwhelmingly outnumbered the white owners. Every museum acknowledges the presence of enslaved African Americans on the site at least once, indicating at least a basic awareness that they made up some part of the plantation population, but not one makes them equal figures in the present day interpretation.

**Separating Stories**

![Plaque on the "Negro Quarters" at Stratford Hall illuminates the buildings' history to visitors. (Photo by author)](image)

Historically, the lives of enslaved people and the families of white masters connected in countless places throughout their lives, inextricably intertwining individuals. Enslaved people working in far-flung fields may have experienced less one-on-one connection with their white masters than domestic slaves, but their lives were shaped by their enslavement. White owners relied on enslaved people for their material wealth and day-to-day wellbeing. No matter the location on the plantation, whites and
African Americans had a presence. While some Virginia plantation museums erase the presence of African Americans on the landscape altogether, others create false dichotomies, placing enslaved people outside and white people inside. A select few manage to bring the lives of enslaved African Americans into the house, but none actively engages in interpretation that shows enslaved African Americans and their white owners created not just the landscape, but the larger world that they lived in, together.

This problem does not exist only on Virginia plantation museums of course, but is a larger theme of much of the cultural landscape of the United States. As Toni Morrison writes, “Our national memory as well as the collective memories and landscape of cities, towns, and rural areas are constructed of white-centric narratives containing an often hidden African presence.” People decide how to depict the history of sites, and in the case of plantation museums, those decisions almost always come out in favor of focusing on the lives of the wealthy white owners rather than the people they enslaved. This occurs for a number of reasons at plantation museums, and can occur unthinkingly, as many, even historians, see plantations as the sites of white wealth before sites of African American toil. Museums rely on visitors to keep their doors open, and many visitors see museums in a similar vein, focusing on the ideals of beauty and a pleasant past associated with plantations and perpetuated by popular culture. The simple fact is that people do not expect to see depictions of slavery on plantations, and most Virginia plantation museums uphold this expectation. Visitors do not demand to see the role of slavery, and therefore many museums, struggling to maintain their already dwindling visitation numbers, keep with what has inspired visitors to come in the past. By doing so, they perpetuate the idea

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that slavery does not need to be depicted at plantations. However, these museums miss an opportunity to attract new visitors who might not otherwise find an interest in the plantation. According to Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, people are interested in history that they feel connected to, and most plantation museums focus on the lives of people who most modern day Americans would not feel had any link to their own lives. Many museums try to bridge this gap by highlighting the ways in which the white families on the plantation impacted the larger world around them, often through political involvement. A different route could be suggested however, that shows the lives of common people, meaning enslaved people, indentured servants, and hired laborers.  

Museums cannot tell the whole story of their museums while denying the inexorably entangled relationships between enslaved people and plantation masters and mistresses. To do so undermines a fundamental part of the development of the United States. Discussing the Museums of the London Docklands, David Spence wrote, “The story told in the gallery is about the making of British society. It is therefore our story, and effects us all irrespective of race.” While his focus obviously lies across the Atlantic, the same sentiment resonates just as much, if not more, in the United States. The stories of these plantations do not have one race. While white and African American people may not have personally interacted on a continuous basis every day, the tensions and

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negotiations that these people undertook shaped their society. Those individuals created, together, the world that they lived in and laid the foundations for ours today.

**Celebrating White Lives**

The separation of these stories results in the selection of one story over another to serve as the main narrative. In every case the primary story focused on the lives of the white plantation owning families. No matter the museum, and no matter how much they discuss the lives of enslaved people on some part of the plantation, the lives of the white owners are always celebrated. Each museum celebrates these differently, though for many the main focus rests on wealth and political power. These two things had connections of course, as wealthy people had access to the political arena in ways middling or poor people did not and people in politics had opportunities to increase their wealth by virtue of their positions. Wealth and political power allowed plantation owners to maintain their way of life, but what purpose does celebrating those things today have?

The first proves rather simple for most museums to emphasize. In order to remain standing, most of the houses on these plantations required more money to build than the average Virginian possessed. Museums take care to remind visitors of this, often referencing the architectural or design features of the house that separated it from its contemporaries. Tour guides often mention the number of closets as an example of the exceptionality of the home, an interesting occurrence, as closets existed in many colonial and early republic homes. On my tours colored paint, wallpaper, ceiling molding, rustication, and brick were all discussed as design evidence of the wealth of the white owners, among many others. Many of these signs had an important symbolic role in
Virginia society and were indeed utilized by plantation owners to indicate their wealth to visitors, but the way the museums discuss them validates that role in the modern era. They perpetuate the idea that wealthy people are necessarily more important than others by suggesting that the wealth is one of the significant reasons for appreciating the plantation and house.\textsuperscript{5}

Wealth as a marker of significance and its possession by the white slave owners goes unquestioned by museums. No museum grappled with the fact that the wealthier a person, the more enslaved people they detained, using them to expand their personal wealth. Enslaved people themselves served as one of the most significant sources of capital in the years before the Civil War, but their labor also helped to increase the fortunes of their owners throughout the early years of American history. Among even the museums that discussed exactly who built the plantation homes and tended the crops, few scrutinized the fact that so many enslaved people labored for the continuing comfort and increasing affluence of one white family. Slavery did not simply leave a social mark on the United States, but operated in its most

basic way as an economic institution that allowed for certain individuals to increase their riches to the detriment of others. To celebrate this today without question shows a supremely uncritical view of the relationship between wealth and power.\(^6\)

The second method of enlarging the image of the white owners, though more difficult for some museums to demonstrate, receives just as much attention. More than wealth, museums portray involvement in politics as a sign of the importance of the white families that owned the plantation, and by extension the plantation itself. A number of the plantations belonged to men known for their political positions — George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, George Mason, and James Madison, to name a few — but many others emphasized the political lives of the white owners, or at least their ties to men such as these or to other “founders” in order to enlarge the importance of the men in question. Sully Historic Site made mention of owner Richard Bland Lee’s friendship with James Madison within the first few moments of the tour. George Washington’s relationship to the owners of Kenmore is discussed at that plantation, the home of his sister and brother-in-law, and the bedroom where he stayed serves as a main stop on the tour at Wilton.

While the first example focuses on the relationship between two people, the latter examples try to make the house in and of itself an important part of American history simply because it sheltered prominent people. This orientation toward political figures detracts from a more holistic interpretation of plantation life. During the period studied only white men could vote or hold political office, excluding African Americans and women from political roles. By constantly referring to political positions or ties to

politically powerful people, these museums paint something enslaved people could not take part in as an extremely important part of colonial and early republic history. Emphasizing the role of political figures necessarily detracts from the place of enslaved people in history.

Furthermore, focusing on politics keeps plantation museums from highlighting the aspects of life that they have the ability to interpret to a greater extent than many other historic sites and museums. A large swath of people with different life experiences lived on plantations, making them an ideal place to interpret everyday life. Wealthy white people may have owned the plantations but many others lived, worked, and visited them. Enslaved people, middling and poor whites and blacks all worked on plantations in various roles. In the seventeenth century enslaved people worked side-by-side with indentured servants, just as black and white people lived along Mulberry Row at Monticello in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These people had important roles on the plantations that helped to make them the backbone of Virginia’s economic, social, and cultural landscapes during the colonial and early republic periods. Making political power alone the focus of the plantation interpretation severely diminishes the power plantation museums have to tell all of these stories and teach visitors about American history.

As with wealth, the significance of political power in museums receives little critical examination. A few museums, Monticello and Montpelier among them, discuss the fact that their owners believed that slavery was morally wrong, but most suggest they had little power to change the system. This effectively relieves the white plantation owners of culpability, ignoring their significant political power as well as the precedents
set by other prominent Virginians, such as Robert Carter III and Richard Randolph, who freed their slaves. The question of why museums find it necessary to paint their historic white owners as powerless rather than as contemptible is a significant one. Many of the figures discussed by these museums are considered founding fathers or have close ties (carefully cultivated by the museums) to such men. Many public history sites choose to celebrate these men and their contributions to American history and society. When crafting political debates or arguing for causes, politicians and everyday people claim that their position would garner support from the founding fathers, and Americans are continuously reminded to uphold their timeless values. When discussing slavery, or any of the other moral wrongs perpetrated by founding fathers however, their supporters argue that they lived in a different time and modern mindsets cannot be used to understand them. This contradiction in the way we view politically powerful people in the past goes unchallenged by plantation museums, who paint the main figures in their interpretation, the white owners, as sometimes flawed, but always above reproach.  

The focus on wealth and politics essentially leads to museums that present plantation history backwards. Rather than focusing on plantations as important places for the development of the United States socially, economically, and politically, thus encompassing the many people who inhabited plantations, they argue that the white people who lived there had important roles in creating the nation, and therefore their homes have an important role in America today. Essentially, this method of interpretation tells visitors that important white people make the site worth visiting, not any merits of

the plantation as a whole. This sells plantations short and minimizes the impact plantation museums can have on visitors. Visitors can learn more about history from a plantation than just the accomplishments of a few men and women. Plantation museums could undertake very real social history if they expand their view to include people outside of the families who owned the houses, land, and people. Actively interpreting slavery can play an important role in this more holistic interpretation, giving visitors a glimpse of the complex relationships and stark contrasts that plantation life embodied.

Talking About Slavery

Talking about slavery is hard. Ira Berlin points out that slavery was not just death, but life. It was toil, violence, and oppression alongside survival, resilience, and growth. The very man who wrote the founding ideals of the United States owned at least 150 slaves when he wrote the words “all men are created equal.” Slavery was not simply present at the country’s founding, but part of it. Today, these paradoxes are easier to ignore than to try to understand. While comprehending slavery as a form of power, a way of life, a relationship, or as one of the numerous other things it

At Montpelier, as at many plantation museums, the evidence of slavery is difficult to encounter. (Photo by author, 2012)
was seems unimaginable today, it was an all too real institution for Americans in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The legacy of slavery remains with us today, whether we acknowledge it or not.  

The costs of ignoring slavery come very high. How Americans as a collective remember the past has power over how we view the present and the future. Failing to make enslaved people an important part of the interpretation at plantation museums undermines the important role enslaved people played in the making of the nation. Most museums do not simply ignore slavery, but mention it and move on, treating it as something that happened but not as something worth dwelling on. Visitors then learn that while enslaved people lived on the plantations their contributions to history did not equal those of the white families who they hear about in great detail. No matter how many times museums mention enslaved people or talk about slave life, if the stories of their owners continue to serve as the focal point of the plantations, nothing changes. Merely including the stories of enslaved people does not do justice to their role on plantations and in the creation of early America. Enslaved people and the institutions of slavery had vital roles in the creation of the United States, which have been ignored or minimized by plantation museums for a long time. As Civil Rights activist Fred Shuttlesworth has said, “If you don’t tell it like it was, it can never be as it ought to be.”

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These problems do not affect just one or two plantation museums in Virginia. They are ubiquitous across the Commonwealth. The problem, then, must come not from the mistakes or misunderstanding of a few people. While academic historians have shifted their views of slavery to create a more complete view of plantation life, the same has not happened wholesale outside of the academy. The real power of history rests outside of the academy, and even outside of classrooms, in how we view and remember things like slavery day to day. Popular culture and public history make up a major part of Americans’ understanding of the past, and for this reason they cannot be divorced from the admirable work done by academic historians. If the study of history is to continue to move forward not just in academic discussions, then all people with an interest in history, especially academic historians, must concern themselves with how museums present history. For slavery this is especially true.10

While museum professionals and other people interested in the interpretation of museums may realize that leaving slavery out allows for a simpler and less trying representation of the past, the future of museums must start somewhere. Historic homes, of which plantation museums are a subgroup, have struggled for years to keep people visiting, while other types of historical pursuits flourish. Museum professionals differ on what they see contributing to this downturn, but the basic fact is that many plantation museums no longer tell stories that visitors find compelling. As difficult of a topic as slavery can be, many Americans find slavery an interesting topic, as evidenced by the

recent critical and commercial success of the Quentin Tarantino film *Django Unchained*.11

Plantation museums have powerful potential for teaching people about history. They possess the opportunities to explore diverse and complex people and ideas that shaped the United States. Slavery plays an integral part of this story, and no full history of Virginia or the United States can be understood without the lives of enslaved people. All of the different categories of interpretation discussed in this study serve as iterations of a common theme: a preference for the stories of white people over those of enslaved African Americans. As museums look to the future, doing away with the ways in which they have previously separated the stories of enslaved people and their owners while celebrating their wealth and political power can serve as a first step.

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11 J. Freedom du Lac, “Struggling to Attract Visitors, Historic Houses May Face Day of Reckoning.”
The sources used in this thesis have provided a basis for an interdisciplinary study of museum interpretation. Books and chapters written by historians have offered information about slavery in Virginia, slave life, plantation communities, and social structures in Early America. These have served as sources of historical information as well as a comparison to museums for their different depictions of slavery. Public history texts, especially those discussing how slavery is interpreted and giving advice on how to interpret slavery, have provided a perspective of how public history sites not included in this study interpret slavery, helping to highlight the similarities and differences in the museums I visited. Many sources have provided a close analysis of a specific site, providing information about the types of information that other museums display and what I could perhaps look for in my own research. Anthropological investigations, cultural critiques, and art historians have helped to place museums in a larger social and cultural context, moving the discussion of museum interpretation into the present day. The combination of these diverse sources has given me a complex lens through which to view museum interpretation, allowing me to see what people expect or desire from museums when they discuss slavery. The bulk of my sources, of course, have been the museums themselves. A full list of the sites I visited, the dates of my visits, and where I have categorized them in this study appears in the appendix (page 88). I have used the interpretation at these sites, which includes tours, exhibits, brochures, interpretive panels, and websites, as the primary sources in this study. The information they have yielded has provided the information that I critically analyzed for this study.


Eichstedt, Jennifer and Stephen Small. *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in*


Smith, Laurajane, Geoff Bubitt, Kalliopi Fouseki and Ross Wilson, eds. Representing


http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/winter08/stuff.cfm.


### Appendix

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