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A Case Study in the Interdisciplinary: The Role of Anthropology, Archaeology and History in Academia and Museums

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A Case Study in the Interdisciplinary: The Role of Anthropology, Archaeology and History in Academia and Museums

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from
The College of William and Mary

by

Alexandra Angelica Rosenberg

Accepted for __________________________________
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA
May 1, 2017
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Abstract:

This thesis will examine the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to anthropology, archaeology and history in both academic and museum settings. Using the “Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon” exhibit as a case study, the necessity of teaching from an interdisciplinary perspective at an undergraduate level, if not before is stressed. Specific attention is given to the subfield of archaeology, the role of oral histories and descendant communities in creating museum exhibitions and the ways in which the museum presents a historical narrative about a complex and emotionally charged topic to visitors who arrive with diverse experiences and expectations.

Key Terms:

interdisciplinary, anthropology, archaeology, material culture, public history, history, engagement, descendant community, oral history

Introduction:

In the one-hundred-and-fifty-two years since the passing of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution and the subsequent abolition of slavery, the U.S. has started to take steps towards breaking down racial barriers in society. While there is still much work to be done to create a more equal society, as has been recently demonstrated by contemporary events and the Black Lives Matter movement, race relations have improved in the last 152 years. Members of African American descendant communities have gained an increasing say in representations of their ancestors and the wider political, economic, and social implications of slavery’s legacy. The experiences of formerly enslaved people themselves and their descendants, recorded by interviewers, have become integral to understandings of daily life in captivity and its effects generations later. Numerous historians, architectural historians, anthropologists, historical
archaeologists and other scholars have written extensively on the institution of slavery, enslaved life, race and race relations over the past century and a half. It is through these sources that the history of slavery and enslaved life can begin to be explained and taught to both children and adults alike.

Although academics and public historians have begun to realize that the history of women, African Americans, the enslaved population, Native Americans, and other marginalized groups are not supplementary to the historical record, but in fact a major part of it, they still seem reluctant to pursue the different avenues necessary to discover the stories of these people who did not leave a large written record. In fields like historical and landscape archaeology, architectural history and the study of material culture, the collection of oral histories plays an important role in discovering more about the social lives of those who were often left out of the historical narrative. It seems logical that historians who suggest, like the name of a new exhibition at Mount Vernon, that the lives of the enslaved and the lives of the white population of 18\textsuperscript{th}-century Virginia were “bound together” would recognize that this multidisciplinary mentality applies in more areas than just writing the historical narrative. However, it seems to be taking academics a longer time to come to the conclusion that it is not just lives that are bound together, but academic disciplines as well. Acting on this conclusion is necessary to create a more cohesive and comprehensive understanding of enslaved life and to make efforts to teach and train the next generation of scholars to look at history from multiple and interdisciplinary perspectives.

While the vast majority of the population does not subscribe to academic journals or read large academic texts on sensitive subjects, many do visit museums. As a result, museums – especially those dealing with 17\textsuperscript{th}, 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century America – have the opportunity to
explore the issue of slavery with visitors. Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington, the first President of the United States, has recently taken steps towards including slavery in its historical narrative.

Over one million visitors come to Mount Vernon every year to see the home of this preeminent and glorified founding father (Lucas, 2016, x). Many of these visitors come to the estate to learn more about Washington in his role of Commander in Chief of the Continental Army and as the President of the United States (Lucas, 2016, x). However, an increasing number of visitors come to the estate to learn more about the man himself – his ideals, beliefs, lifestyle, likes and dislikes. It is these visitors and their interest in the man underneath the multiple hats he wore, combined with the changing politics of the times, that have prompted discussions and the development of exhibits on enslaved life at the historic site; many visitors are interested in learning about the enslaved people who lived and worked on the estate (Lucas, 2016, x). Mount Vernon, being a museum, caters to its visitors and what they wish to see during their time on the estate. As a result, Mount Vernon has gone through the process of figuring out how to assuage visitors who do not wish to face the reality that Washington “was the legal owner, over the course of his life, of hundreds of enslaved black people – men, women, and children” and those who do (Gordon-Reed, 2016, XV). Their most prominent exhibit discussing enslaved life at Mount Vernon came to fruition in 2016.
Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon is a new exhibit that, while far from perfect, has begun to take the necessary steps towards presenting a specific historical narrative by drawing on sources of information from numerous academic disciplines. The exhibit has successfully utilized artifacts from on-site excavations and utilized the available documents that note enslaved life on the estate and Washington’s changing views on the institution. The exhibit has, in some parts, “muffled,” or softened the sharp and political edge of the topic of slavery for visitors, but has also included aspects in their signage that hint at the cruelties of the institution in other parts (Johnson, 2003, 19). What this exhibit has been successful in, is creating and presenting a narrative that is drawn from different academic disciplines – anthropology, archaeology, history and material culture studies. Therefore, this exhibit will serve as an example of the potential benefits and limitations that an interdisciplinary exhibit can present for academics and for museum-goers.

In her 2004 article “The Convergence of Applied, Practicing, and Public Anthropology in the 21st Century,” Louise Lamphere states that,

The interests of applied anthropologists, practicing anthropologists, and those engaged in public interest anthropology are converging. More anthropologists are creating collaborative relationships with the communities they study; they are presenting their research to a wider public through museum exhibits and web sites, and they are working to change public policy. [Lamphere’s] article summarized innovative, ongoing work in each of these areas and suggests how training in collaboration, outreach, and public policy research can be incorporated into graduate programs (Lamphere 2004, 431).
As soon as I read this, I noticed one major problem – collaboration, in her opinion, should begin to be included in graduate programs. As a senior who is about to graduate from college, memories of elementary, middle and high school curriculums are still relatively fresh in my mind. While some may equate my age with naivety or lack of experience in academia of the museum worlds, I like to think of it as a strength. As a result of my age I am more aware of what children in grades K-12 are being taught in public schools, and in my specific case, in Fairfax County Public Schools. I was in a school system that utilized the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. This program, while not taught in all schools in the county due to the popularity of the AP program, is unique in the way it promotes interdisciplinary and diverse approaches to learning.

As a result of an interdisciplinary approach being taught to IB students starting in elementary school and continuing through high school, professors at colleges and universities are quite behind on their methods of teaching if they think that implementing this approach beginning at the graduate level will be satisfactory to train the next generation. For IB students who are trained to think broadly from a young age, to come into an undergraduate institution that does not always teach from an interdisciplinary perspective, classes can be frustrating, limiting and, quite frankly, not challenging. I count myself as one of those students who felt these emotions. I remember buying traditional textbooks as a freshman in college for the first time since middle school, instead of reading different academics’ perspectives on various topics in anthropology, history and science. I remember walking into my first non-essay-style exam I had taken since beginning high school, thinking how I was turning into a cross between a robot and a sponge – absorbing new information only to regurgitate it verbatim in a short answer question or by simply filling in a bubble on a scantron.
Essentially, IB teaches children to think for themselves and to constantly ask ‘why’. There was no ‘why’ in many of the classes I took; there was only one perspective being taught, tested and, therefore, learned. IB teaches children of all ages to look at not just their academics, but the world through interdisciplinary, international and multicultural perspectives. Additionally, IB encourages students to think not just by themselves, but how to better understand people with different lived and cultural experiences than them, by making either IB Psychology or IB Anthropology necessary for any student pursuing the IB Diploma alongside
their advanced diploma from their high school. An additional class that is necessary for diploma candidates is IB Theory of Knowledge (TOK). TOK is essentially a course in epistemology. It is essentially this course that epitomizes the interdisciplinary nature that all undergraduate programs, anthropology and history in particular, should strive to achieve and teach their undergraduate students. After all, if it is taught to high school students, undergraduate students must be more than capable to handle this type of thought process. The significance of IB Theory of Knowledge is outlined on the IB website and in Figure 1.

If children are taught not to sort things into one category or another, not to judge a book by its cover, or to see things in black and white they will, consequently, learn to question why dividing categories exist in the first place, slowly making the world a better place. History has shown that humans tend to see things in dichotomous relationships, especially in regard to race. The fact that an exhibit on enslaved life at Mount Vernon is only now being opened shows how damaging categorizing people can be to humankind. So why then, are these boundaries on opinions and theories still being taught and implied with such strength in academia?

In every anthropology class I have ever had – from IB Anthropology in high school, to my senior seminars in college– I have been told that peoples and cultures do not exist within a vacuum. Why then, is theory taught as if it exists within a vacuum? An anthropological, historical, biocultural and/or academic vacuum? Why are undergraduate students only supposed to memorize theory and then sort all of their other readings and things they observe into preexisting theoretical categories? Has history not shown how dangerous and limiting that mentality can be? In other words, why do undergraduate programs still teach theory this way? Why do they perpetuate the existence of these boundaries? Would it not be easier and more comprehensible to teach subjects in an interdisciplinary manner? There can be no objection to
teaching from an interdisciplinary perspective on the part of the professor, as many museum exhibits utilize multiple ways of accessing the past – archaeological artifacts, pieces of material culture, architectural remains, human remains and historical documentation. Museum exhibits are meant to engage the general public, not only young academics.

While an argument can be made regarding the differences between academic historians/anthropologists and public historians/anthropologists, that is not the problem being addressed in this thesis. The fact remains that if the general public is able to comprehend historical narratives presented at museums in an interdisciplinary manner, why is that understanding not taken a step further and taught, analyzed and discussed in undergraduate programs? Why is this interdisciplinary understanding of the past not nurtured until later in an undergraduate’s education, or not at all? Why wait until graduate school? Why continue to separate all anthropological, archaeological and historical theory when teaching undergraduates? Children are exposed to interdisciplinary perspectives during school field trips and/or family visits to museums that present a multitude of information from various written, material, archaeological and historical sources. Why not push their understanding of places they have seen and visited a step further by looking at it from an interdisciplinary academic perspective?

**Academic Disciplines at War**

Theresa A. Singleton (2010, 132) suggests that the academic disciplines of archaeology and history address different scales of investigation. “Most archaeological research is site specific. Some historical writing is also at this scale, but there is a greater tendency for historians to study a region, an island, or an entire nation” (Singleton, 2010, 132). Another problem, she
says, lies in the different “narrative styles of archaeology and history. Historians often present their interpretations as fact…. Archaeologists traditionally present their interpretations very cautiously, qualifying every statement because numerous factors such as site presentation, excavation methods, and recovery techniques… all affect what kinds of data are collected and…interpreted” (Singleton, 2010, 132). If these are some of the main problems, I am shocked that the disciplines are not more closely intertwined than they are at present. A quote I came across while taking a study break seems to epitomize this problem. The quote, which came from the popular pop culture website, Pinterest, surprisingly fits this situation rather well. The quote states that, “the problem is not the problem. The problem is how you approach the problem” (Pinterest Quote, 2017).

If the problem is how archaeologists and historians approach looking at and discussing the past, in this case enslaved life, then why fight over whose theories and methodologies are correct? The answer I would give, if asked this question, is that academics should not segregate each other, as their disciplines are simply two sides of the same coin. Without either side of a coin being present – a head or a tail – the coin would not be ‘usable’ or ‘valuable;’ it would be incomplete and unusable in everyday life. Multiple theories of knowledge and ways of thinking about this knowledge should be accessible to all, not just academics; museum exhibitions like Lives Bound Together help to expose the general public to the various perspectives.

This sentiment leads me to another statement that will, undoubtedly cause much controversy. I wish to present the idea that history is not even a separate discipline at all, that it is, in fact just another subfield of anthropology with its own theories and methodologies just like linguistic anthropology, biological anthropology, cultural and social anthropology and archaeology. After all, is anthropology not the study of humankind? History studies events
participated in/initiated by humans, pieces of material culture constructed by humans, documents written by humans, human bias presented in written documents, and much more. As a result, the argument for disciplinary barriers seems quite silly when examined through the mindset that history is the fifth subfield of anthropology. It is with this perspective of history in mind that this thesis should be read. The term ‘interdisciplinary’ is, therefore, used with the assumption that history could be a fifth subfield of anthropology; making this study not multidisciplinary, but interdisciplinary. The theory presented and word choice used throughout this paper will, likewise, switch between what some would label anthropological and others would label historical because I am of the opinion that the two disciplines/subfields are too closely “bound together” to constitute the use of one academic lexicon over another.

**Building an Anthropological Context and a Foundation for Research Methods**

Although a slightly dated study, in their ethnography of Colonial Williamsburg (CW), *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (1997), Richard Handler and Eric Gable examine the role that the new realm of social history, which aims to include all members of society in contrast to the “great men” emphasis that came before it, plays in the manner The Foundation conducts historical research and develops its programming (Handler & Gable, 1997, 4). They do so by extensive observation, interviewing employees, attending Colonial Williamsburg programming, and analyzing the messages and themes present in the show or site interpretation. The new social history was brought into the old museum of “Colonial Williamsburg in the 1970s [where it] developed…out of the previous decade as a new way of telling the American story” (Handler & Gable, 1997, 4). After extensive
research, Handler and Gable eventually come to the conclusion that, “the new history [did] not [thrive] in this old museum, yet… [they] can[not] account for this outcome” (Handler & Gable, 1997, 221). However, explaining why the new social history did not reach its full potential at Colonial Williamsburg was not the main goal of this ethnography. Handler and Gable’s goal for this book was “to put into an ethnographic context” the theories that went into the decision-making process at a large multi-faceted institution, such as Colonial Williamsburg (Handler & Gable, 1997, 8). The research conducted at George Washington’s Mount Vernon was conducted through a similar approach, but on a smaller scale. This study focuses on enslaved life at Washington’s estate as displayed through the new Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon exhibition.

Throughout this thesis, the role of the discipline of anthropology in a public history and museum setting will be discussed as opposed to Handler and Gable’s examination of the role of the new social history. Special attention will be given to the roles of historical archaeology, material culture, oral histories and the role of the descendant community.

Figure 2
Photo by Author: Entrance to Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon Exhibit (2016)
Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon is a new, seven-gallery exhibition that opened to the public in the Fall of 2016. This exhibition seeks to tell the story of Washington’s changing views on the issue of slavery over the course of his lifetime, while also “exploring the experiences of those whose lives were spent in bondage” (Lucas, 2016, IX). The exhibit draws upon “archaeological findings, plantation buildings…landscape features… [oral histories, and] Washington’s extensive writing[s] – his letters and diaries, ledgers, account books, and detailed reports compiled by his farm and plantation managers” to tell this vast and important story of slavery at Mount Vernon (Lucas, 2016, IX).

However, while reading the companion publication to the new museum exhibition it became obvious that, although the artifacts and material items literally constitute almost all of the exhibit, they are treated as supplementary to the historical narrative. In other words, the archaeological and material records are viewed as conformation of a pre-existing written narrative of history. This is made rather clear in two instances in the exhibit book. The first time the supplementary nature of archaeology and material culture is hinted at is in the foreword:

Although Mount Vernon’s eighteenth-century slaves left no written accounts, rich evidence of their experiences survives in the form of archaeological findings, plantation buildings and landscape features, and in Washington’s extensive writings – his letters and diaries, ledgers, account books, and detailed reports compiled by his farm and plantation managers. Indeed, it might be said that through his meticulous recordkeeping, Washington wrote the biographies of the enslaved people of Mount Vernon (Lucas, 2016, IX).
While this passage treats archaeology, architecture and landscape as of seemingly equal importance to documents in the beginning, it moves on to ensure readers know that there are, in fact, written records and that George Washington “wrote the biographies” of his slaves (Lucas, 2016, IX). While Washington did keep extremely thorough records, and his role in helping to preserve information about his enslaved workers should not be discounted, it does make one stop and think about his role in a historical context. Washington ran a plantation in Virginia that was involved in numerous enterprises such as fishing, distilling, tobacco and grain production. It was his duty to keep records of his businesses and accounts so that he would be able to maintain and improve his economic and social standing. Therefore, Washington’s record-keeping regarding his slaves was economically beneficial, in keeping with an 18th-century socioeconomic mindset.

An opposing view on Washington’s role in writing his slaves’ biographies is discussed in a M.A. thesis by Mount Vernon’s Archaeological Crew Chief, Joseph Downer and in an essay by Jean B. Lee in *Slavery at the Home of George Washington* (2009, 13-45). Downer states that, “slave life, beyond the labor those individuals provided, was rarely considered worth recording by plantation owners and managers; the writings of Washington, his overseers, and the subsequent executors of the estate prove no different” (Downer, 2015). In fact, Downer and Lee assert that overseers and plantation managers – not Washington – recorded what occurred weekly on Washington’s five farms. Downer states that, Mount Vernon’s overseers and managers from the five farms were required to produce reports that would be complied into a weekly summary by the plantation manager. These reports detailed the overall workings of the plantation, as well as served to log the work and activities performed by enslaved African Americans (Downer, 2016).

It was most likely on Washington’s orders that these reports were compiled, but credit must be given where credit is due.
Additionally, it is important to note that one reason these reports and meticulous records are still in existence today, is simply the fact that they are associated with George Washington – a well-known and respected man. America’s idolization of him has only perpetuated his importance in U.S. history, ensuring that his belongings and writings are preserved. What would have happened if Washington’s written records on his slaves did not survive? While a tragic amount of information would have been lost, there would still be hope of piecing together the material and social lives of his slaves through archaeological investigations and an architectural analysis of existing outbuildings and a reading of the historical landscape. In some cases, the archaeological, architectural, material and landscape evidence provides some of the most plentiful information when learning about a site’s history.

Another instance where the companion book to the Lives Bound Together exhibit appears to view archaeology as a supplement to the written record is in the introduction to the first part of the book. However, this time oral histories, visitor descriptions of the estate and enslaved life, and public records are added to the mix.

“Thousands of references in [Washington’s] voluminous papers make it possible to trace the experiences of specific individuals through time and follow family lineages through multiple generations. Visitor descriptions, public records, oral histories, and archaeology fill in some of the blanks” (Schoelwer, 2016, 1).

Visitor descriptions are written records as are the public records. Why then, is it implied that their significance comes from “fill[ing] in the blanks” in the pre-existing historical narrative (Schoelwer, 2016, 1)? It seems that it is simply because they come from a source that is not George Washington, or an employee of Washington. However, they are written records and, therefore, typically viewed in a more favorable light than oral histories or archaeological artifacts by historians and curators.
How Historical Narratives Change

Just as Handler and Gable (1997, 10) decided to treat the entire Colonial Williamsburg museum, “as a complete social world,” I will consider Mount Vernon as its own social world. Within this social world there are social facts ingrained into the museum and estate that the historians and museum curators have to contend with as they attempt to make changes or shifts in interpretative narratives. Before going any further into the social facts present at Mount Vernon, it is essential to address “social facts” according to Durkheim (1965, 13). Durkheim’s idea of a social fact encompasses “every way of acting, fixed or not, [that is] capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations” (Durkheim, 1965, 13). More simply stated, social facts are the values, concepts, expectations, and practices that a given society – in this case, George Washington’s Mount Vernon – imposes on its employees.

The Lives Bound Together companion book makes it clear that the intended focus of the exhibit is on enslaved life at Mount Vernon with an emphasis on Washington’s changing views on slavery and the individual stories of enslaved workers at Mount Vernon. The exhibit focuses on different experiences of enslaved individuals. Therefore, the different galleries in the exhibit focus on different experiences within the institution of slavery at Mount Vernon. This is done through the use of a combination of sources of information – anthropological, archaeological, historical and ethnographical. Assistant Curator Jessie MacLeod explained why certain individuals were chosen to have their time in the spotlight in the new exhibit while others with similar experiences were not. MacLeod started off by stating that having personal histories on
display makes stories more relatable; focusing on one enslaved individual’s history at a time “humanizes” and “personalizes” the story (MacLeod, 2016). She provided me with three main reasons why the enslaved individuals chosen for this exhibit were picked. The first was simply that they had the most written information on these individuals and their roles in the Washington household or outlying farms. The second was that they represented a diverse group of individuals with different experiences within the institution of slavery. Ira Berlin (1998, 13) makes it clear that “understanding that a person was a slave is not the end of the story but the beginning, for the slaves’ history was derived from experiences that differed from place to place and time to time and not from some unchanging transhistorical verity”. This seems to be along the lines of what Jessie MacLeod was attempting to present in the exhibition she helped create. The third, and final reason that Jessie presented me with for deciding to focus on particular individual stories was because it is more engaging for visitors.

The nineteen individuals whose personal histories are addressed in this exhibit are portrayed mainly through touch screens that make their history and experiences virtual and interactive. The intended message of the exhibit that came to fruition was done under the current structures in place at Mount Vernon. The current themes and messages coincided with the institution’s desire to share the story of the enslaved population of Mount Vernon with the public. MacLeod also stated that the exhibit will hopefully make it
clear that the life of Washington and those of his slaves were “deeply interconnected” and that it is impossible to tell his story without discussing enslaved people’s lives or the institution of slavery (MacLeod, 2016).

The statement that Jessie MacLeod made on the history of the enslaved population being “deeply interconnected” with George Washington’s is essential to understanding and critiquing not just this exhibit, but Mount Vernon itself (MacLeod, 2016). If their lives were so interconnected, why not show that interconnectedness by making the lives of the slaves apparent in the mansion tour? Why not begin to include their personal histories into the natural dialogue on the estate instead of separating their stories and keeping their histories limited to the Lives Bound Together exhibit, the enslaved life tour, the reconstructed slave quarter and the cemetery excavation? When asked how Mount Vernon plans to ensure visitors actually go through this exhibit, Jessie said that all they can do is encourage visitation; that they will not be able to get rid of “selection bias” (MacLeod, 2016). In other words, visitors have the choice to come to Mount Vernon and learn about George Washington, his slaves, his house and his various economic enterprises, or they can simply go and tour his house (which is the main attraction) and never go through the exhibit on slavery, never sign up for an enslaved life tour, never make it down the hill to the slave cemetery or down to the pioneer farm to see the reconstructed slave dwelling. Visitors can come to the estate and only see what they want to see. Under the current structure in place at Mount Vernon, there is great potential for selection bias to take place.

When discussing my thesis with Dr. Audrey Horning, she asked if I was “suggesting [that museums should] tie visitors down and force-feed them what we [academics & museum professionals] want them to learn” (Horning, 2017)? The answer to her question is obviously no, but when faced with purposefully ignorant and prejudiced museum visitors, the idea becomes
slightly tempting. This raises a problem that museums have to contend with regarding any and all narratives they present to visitors. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be a definitive answer to the problem except for encouraging visitation and leaving the potential for selection bias open, like Jessie MacLeod suggested to me in conversation.

**A Changing Historical Narrative & Performativity**

Handler and Gable asked Colonial Williamsburg employees, why they think the history presented in the Historic Area changes over time. Interviewees stated that, “history changes depending on the outlooks and interests of the people who write it” (Handler & Gable, 1997, 59). This was one of the common answers they received. After analyzing the interviews, they review two main theories of why history changes. The “constructionist version” of history holds that “history is more than the sum of available facts; the construction of history depends on the viewpoint of historians, on the messages or meanings that historian choose (perhaps unconsciously) to convey” (Handler & Gable, 1997, 59). Handler and Gable argue that, “To say that history needs a theme that ‘sets the agenda’ is to recognize that history is more than just facts…themes and agendas – paradigms, conceptual frameworks – guide historians to choose particular facts and to use them in particular ways. Themes and agendas also make it possible for historians to be unconcerned with facts that have no bearing on the issues that excite them, or even overlook them altogether” (Handler & Gable, 1997, 61).

Mount Vernon, therefore, had already established a number of “social facts” about Washington’s reputation and the museum’s mission to present historical narratives consistent with these “facts” (Durkheim, 1965, 13).
Handler and Gable’s (1997, 70) second theory about why history changes, is called “progressive realism.” This theory states that, “histories depend not on the historians’ ideological biases or personal interests…but on the accumulated weight of evidence” (Handler & Gable, 1997, 60). Essentially, this theory states that as new facts are discovered and added to the existing pool, a “better,” history emerges that is “closer to the truth of the past as it really was” (Handler & Gable, 1997, 70). Similarly, at George Washington’s Mount Vernon as new information is found, it is added to the historical narrative and the representation of enslaved life on the estate and in the museum. However, just because new facts are continuously being added does not mean that there is no filtration system that the newly discovered information must go through before it can be added to the historical narrative presented on site. This new information must fit with the message or theme that the institution is presenting to the public. Handler and Gable (1997, 76) conclude that this progressive theory of why history changes can be “paradigm driven.” At this moment in time, more information and acknowledgement of enslaved life at Mount Vernon is what the association feels is necessary to present to the public; however, at the same time this addition must not undermine, overthrow or radically change the core message of Washington, the hero and champion of American freedom.

Erving Goffman’s theory of performativity essentially states that life is a performance (Goffman, 1956, 1-46). People are always performing in order to create and convey a specific image of themselves to others. This applies to not just Mount Vernon, but all museums that actively interpret history to the public. Researchers, architects, archaeologists, historians, interpreters and program writers, work together to help Mount Vernon with this act of performativity. Mount Vernon’s exhibits and interpreted tours end up being performances of
their own – symbolic and dynamic representations and presentations of the association’s most important messages.

Material Culture and “Material Culture with the Dirt on It”

E. McClung Fleming (1974, 153) states that, “every culture, however primitive or advanced, is absolutely dependent on its artifacts for its survival and self-realization.” By studying artifacts, or material remains of the past, it is possible to learn about human culture. “If a basic wonder about man is his capacity for building culture, certainly the next wonder is his astounding capacity for making things as part of his culture” (Fleming, 1974, 153). Fleming discusses how museums display artifacts and use them as part of their exhibits, but have paid “relatively little attention to developing a [theoretical] discipline of artifact study” (Fleming, 1974, 154). As a result, Fleming proposes a model for studying artifacts.

The model Fleming presents is based on the study of the decorative arts of early America. “The model utilizes two conceptual tools – a fivefold classification of the basic properties of an artifact and a set of four operations to be performed on these properties” (Fleming, 1974, 154). The model begins with the artifact itself – its history, material construction, design and function. Next, is the identification of the artifact through a physical description, followed by an evaluation of the artifact by making judgments and comparisons with other objects. A cultural analysis is then completed, examining the relationship of the artifact to its culture. Finally, is the interpretation of the artifact’s significance through the values of the present culture.

Jules David Prown (1982, 1) defines material culture “as a study based upon the obvious fact that the existence of a man-made object is concrete evidence of the presence of human
intelligence operating at the time of fabrication.” He then goes on to assert a methodology for studying material culture. This methodology is “based on the proposition that artifacts are primary data for the study of material culture, and therefore, they can be used actively as evidence rather than passively as illustrations” (Prown, 1982, 1). Prown then goes on to discuss systems of classification for material culture. He states that, “the most promising mode…is by function… art… diversions… adornment… modifications of the landscape… applied arts…[and] devices” (Prown, 1982, 3). However, promising the study of material culture may be, Prown (1982, 16) believes that “artifacts are disappointing as communicators of historical fact” due to the fact that people are the product of the times of which they live.

Both Fleming (1974) and Prown (1982) assert that material culture is worth studying and that more attention should be paid to the discipline. However, they have different ways of going about studying the objects. Fleming has a structured model of study, while Prown categorizes objects on their use and goes from there. However, what if something used in the 18th century is used completely differently today? Incorrectly placing an object into a category based on modern-day perceptions of its uses may limit the research into its actual usage. However, by employing Fleming’s model, the object is open to multiple uses and not bound by a single category of investigative study. Critical to both Fleming and Prown’s arguments is the statement that material culture reflects human intelligence and demonstrates the capacity for creating culture.

Museums have often displayed beautiful, shiny and pristine pieces of material culture to the public. However, not all have been kept in perfect condition. Sometimes they are broken, lost, disposed of and later dug up by archaeologists. These artifacts are considered by Ivor Noël Hume (1978, 21) to be pieces of “material culture with the dirt on” them. Additionally, pristine,
beautifully crafted pieces of material culture do not represent the entirety of a population. Who was more likely to own something of value in 18th-century Virginia? The white elite. Therefore, by choosing to only display pieces of material culture without the dirt on them, museums only present one side of the material history of a society and people. Where do the “dirty” pieces of material culture fit into a museum exhibition? Often, they are archaeological artifacts and these artifacts have just as much of an “active voice” in a museum exhibit as fancy/shiny pieces of material culture (Mary C. Beaudry, et. al, 1990, 150). Mary Beaudry, et. al. (1990, 150) states that,

“the relationship of behavior to the material world is far from passive; artifacts are tangible incarnations of social relationships embodying the attitudes and behaviors of the past. ‘The underlying premise [of material culture study] is that objects made or modified by man reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged.’”

Material culture is important simply for aesthetic purposes as well. However, there is one thing that is necessary to carefully analyze before, during and after placing a material object, artifact or document in a public history or museum setting: context.

“Context is where meaning is located and constituted and provides the key to its interpretation. Recovery of meaning is predicated on recovery of context because context not only frames meaning by tying it to actual situations and events, but it is inextricably bound up with meaning. The existence of a context implies the presence of meaning’s functioning within it, and, conversely, meanings cannot exist in the absence of context. While we can talk about meaning taking place ‘out of context,’ we are not implying the absence of context, but rather that the context of use it not the usual or expected context. Often it is in unusual or unexpected contexts that meaning is renegotiated or redefined” (Mary C. Beaudry, et. al., 1990, 160).
The context of the material objects and artifacts in the *Lives Bound Together* exhibit provide the key to interpreting the meaning and significance behind the entire exhibition. What follows is a material culture analysis of the objects used in the exhibit.

One of the first displays of material culture in the exhibit is a case and table and chairs set full of porcelain, silver, glassware and decorative ornaments used by the Washingtons when dining. The purpose of showcasing these luxury goods appears to be to tell the story of the enslaved population that worked in the house. These workers came into contact with the best of the best in regard to trade goods.

“Frank Lee, Caroline Branham, Doll, and others cleaned the Washingtons’ home, cooked their meals, and served the family and guests in Mount Vernon’s dining room, parlors, and bedrooms. As they scrubbed, dusted, and polished, these enslaved people interacted with many of the family’s elegant furnishings and tablewares as much as, if not more than, the Washingtons themselves” (MacLeod, 2016, 4-5).
However, what is not noted is the type of interactions these enslaved workers would have had with these objects. Was their interaction limited to cleaning? Would they have been severely punished if a piece of dinner or glassware was broken? This interaction with the goods is not made especially clear. This could be to take the edge off of the idea of punishment for visitors, or it could be a lack of current evidence available to the researchers and/or curators, as some rather cruel and descriptive punishments are discussed in another gallery of the exhibit. Whatever the case may be, this statement that the enslaved workers interacted with the fine pieces of material culture more than the Washingtons implies that they benefitted somehow by working with these luxury goods, benefitted by working in the house rather than the fields, and benefitted from belonging to a rich gentleman such as George Washington. While it makes sense that these enslaved individuals would come into close contact with the Washingtons’ elegant possessions, the purpose of having this gallery of house workers come first in the exhibit is rather strategic. Once you go through the doors of the exhibit, you are faced with a bust of George Washington and a rather elegant circular room that discusses the basics of the institution of slavery, what it meant to be a slave, the size of the enslaved population at Mount Vernon and the intended
message that Mount Vernon wishes to express: that Washington’s views on slavery changed over the course of his life. In other words, visitors to the museum are greeted with a refresher course in the Atlantic Slave Trade.

In a small side room, a short film that depicts the diversified experiences enslaved peoples could have while in bondage plays on a loop for visitors to sit and view. The first gallery after the entrance room, however, is this room with the obviously affluent material possessions of the Washingtons. The abrupt change from a crash course in the Atlantic Slave Trade, to displaying material culture, might have been used as a means to take the edge off this highly emotional exhibit for visitors who might have been wary that the exhibition would elicit negative feelings. After all, most museumgoers visit a museum to see grand pieces. In other words, this gallery gives the sensitive visitors a chance to see what they expect to see while also telling the individual histories of several enslaved house-workers.

In the same gallery, there is a sign up called “Reading Between the Lines”. This information board focuses on explaining to the public how historians interpret primary sources, determine who was probably involved in the situations described in the primary source and relate social interactions described back to material culture, enslaved life and the general social history of Mount Vernon. The primary sources are diary entries written by Benjamin Henry Latrobe on his visit to the estate in July of 1796. Several quotes from his diary show visitors just how historians read between the lines to determine the social history of a people whose history was not typically recorded. In one of his diary entries, Latrobe states that, “Having alighted, I sent in my letter of introduction and walked into the portico next to the river.” Below this quote is an
interpretation by historians which says, “Through not an invited guest, Latrobe brought a letter of
introduction from George Washington’s nephew Bushrod. He probably handed it to the butler,
Frank Lee.” Other examples follow, and can be viewed in Figure 6 below.

The inclusion of this information in the gallery alongside the material culture, silhouettes
and stories of the enslaved house workers show the importance of looking at objects and
documents together. These two different types of telling history really are not all that different.
In fact, I would say that it would be difficult to tell this story of enslaved life, and portray the enslaved population of Mount Vernon as social actors in a social arena without combining the analysis of material culture and traditional historical documentation. The combination of these two approaches to history and the use of the touch screens to tell personal histories of enslaved workers makes the museum gallery not just educational, but interactive and more personal for visitors.

When entering the next gallery, the first thing the visitor would notice are two paintings. The one on the right is of George Washington. Most people would not think much of seeing yet another picture of Washington at Mount Vernon. Therefore, the painting beside him appears all the more striking. The painting to the left of Washington is thought to be of Hercules, the Washingtons’ cook. Painted by Gilbert Stuart sometime between 1795-1797, this painting is unusual for its time, as it depicts an enslaved (or formerly enslaved) man sitting for a portrait, just like an upper-class gentleman, such as Washington, would have the leisure time to do. The information adjacent to the portrait of Hercules does not hide the fact that Hercules ran away from Mount Vernon, implying that the creators of the exhibit did not wish to hide the fact that many of the enslaved individuals on the estate were not happy with their condition in life. The board states that,

“The subject of this painting may be Hercules, the talented enslaved cook who prepared meals for the Washington family at Mount Vernon and in Philadelphia. The dignified portrait differs starkly from more common 18th-century depictions of enslaved people as accessories to white masters or mistresses. The circumstances of this painting’s creation remain a mystery. Hercules ran away from Mount Vernon on February 22, 1797 – George Washington’s 65th birthday. He was later seen in Philadelphia and New York City but was never recaptured. Hercules may have ended up in England, where this portrait surfaced in the early 20th-century” (Museum Exhibit, 2016).
The touch screen that contains the personal story of Hercules describes the man as dressing “something like a ‘dandy,’ dressing every evening in the height of fashion” because he was able to supplement his wardrobe with fancier clothes. Hercules was able to have nicer clothes than many other slaves due to his position as cook (Museum Exhibit, 2016). As cook, Hercules was able to sell the Washingtons’ leftovers for a little bit of income. One of the more elaborate outfits that Hercules wore was described by George Washington Parke Custis on the interactive touch screen. He describes one of Hercules’ ensembles as including a “‘blue cloth coat with a velvet collar and bright metal buttons,’ silk waistcoat, fine white linen shirt, black silk knee breeches, and silk stockings with a cocked hat. He wore polished shoes with large buckles and carried a watch with a long chain and a gold-headed cane” (Museum Exhibit, 2016).

It is clear from the fact that Hercules’ attire is a matter of discussion, that it is unusual for a member of the enslaved community to be wearing such fine clothing that is not livery. Although probably not easily traceable, it would have been nice to see a discussion of who else Hercules would have interacted with while selling the Washingtons’ leftovers. Where was he selling them? The market in Alexandria? To other slaves? Were there any connections had
through this exchange that enabled him to successfully escape from Mount Vernon? These are but a few questions that came to mind while using the interactive touch screen and examining his portrait.

Also in this same gallery is information on Martha Washington and her views regarding slavery. The curators and writers for the exhibit came right out and said that, “her actions suggest she did not question slavery as George Washington did” (Museum exhibit, 2016). George Washington’s opinion on slavery changed over time due to self-interest as a successful farmer, the American Revolutionary War, members of his personal staff like the Marquis de Lafayette, Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens, and is also clearly noted in this gallery of the exhibition (Morgan, 2016, 68-69). It seems that George took a more optimistic approach towards the institution of slavery and, while he did not hold a very high opinion of free or enslaved black people, he thought that their inferiority was due to nurture not nature; “he seems not to have thought of them as inherently inferior” (Morgan, 2016, 69). George Washington “believed that education – as reflected in a progressive provision of his will directed at enslaved children – and hard work could overcome the deleterious effects of slavery” (Morgan, 2016, 69).

Martha’s opinions on slavery did not seem to change as her husband’s did, and is clearly noted in this exhibit. It is made clear that Martha was an individual, a woman who was entitled to her own opinions that did not have to correlate with her husband’s. The first time reading this in the gallery I had to stop and take a moment to get over the shock that Mount Vernon portrayed Martha Washington in a harsher, more realistic, manner. I also had to applaud the curators and writers for making it clear that although Martha Washington was a traditional 18th-century wife, she still held and expressed her own opinions, even if they did not line up with George Washington’s. The same sign board also states that, “…Martha Washington…believed that
slavery was part of the natural order… [and chose] not to follow her husband’s example by freeing her enslaved property” (Museum Exhibit, 2016). Again, she chose to stay true to her beliefs, even if we do not agree with them today, and remain a separate entity from her late-husband. Personally, I found this small little board to be a prime example of Mount Vernon beginning not to sugar coat their history quite as much as they, and almost all other institutions, have done before. While the wording and phrasing of Martha Washington’s views on slavery remain carefully chosen, the implied message is that the Washingtons were far from perfect and that women had some agency and were entitled to their own beliefs in the 18th-century. However, Martha Washington’s wealth and status could play a major role in her confidence and ability in holding beliefs that differed from George Washington’s. Whatever the case may be, this single panel information board provided great insight into Martha’s opinion on the institution of slavery and on women in the 18th-century for those who actually take a moment to reflect on what they just read.

The next two galleries got me very excited. These galleries contain numerous artifacts and pieces of material culture. Many of these artifacts were found on site at either the House for Families excavation or the South Grove Midden excavation. This first gallery contains artifacts, tools and other various pieces of material culture that enslaved individuals working in the field might have used. Archaeology has the unique opportunity to help educate the public through
visible and tangible pieces of history. An interview with John L. Cotter in 1999 discusses the importance of public archaeology and public education. Cotter states that,

“...archaeology has a couple of uses. One is to try and present some kind of understanding of the past, but I think its great use is really for education to galvanize the interest of young people in discovery. Because if education is not discovery, then it’s not worth a damn. And unless it means the thrill of discovery to the individual who is in the process of education, it becomes a bore” (Roberts & Cotter, 1999, 33).

The use of archaeological artifacts found on site really brings things full circle for the public, especially for repeat visitors and children. For example, older visitors might remember the distillery excavation or the blacksmith excavation. If a visitor came to the estate during the 1990s, they would have seen the excavation of the South Grove Midden in progress. If they came to the estate within the past two years, they would have seen the South Grove excavation occurring, where field school students and Mount Vernon archaeology staff discussed not just the current excavation with visitors, but also the Midden excavation as well. These discussions would get people interested. Especially some of the children who got to touch and hold artifacts right as they came out of the ground during the South Grove excavation. Children form attachments to
materials. Public archaeology in the field gives archaeologists the chance to educate children in a way that they can understand the past, through material objects and relating their significance to something they could relate to. As Cotter states in his interview, “if a kid understands that and sees it in the past, and realized that today nothing is that different, and he or she can begin to associate his or her childhood with [for example] the childhoods of the past, then archaeology means something” (Roberts & Cotter, 1999, 34). Having these artifacts on display can help give archaeology meaning outside the world of academics.

The artifacts on display really help people to connect to the various stories of enslaved life being told in this gallery. When looking at the artifacts, it is possible to imagine how heavy a metal tool is, how temperamental a horse might be while being shoed, the sweltering working conditions in the blacksmith’s shop, etc. The wide array of artifacts on display can also engage visitors with varying interests. There are field tools, fishing instruments, botanical remains, animal bones, artifacts that show the development of African-American culture and African origins, the ever debatable colonoware, stoneware, Chinese porcelain and white clay tobacco
pipes. The artifacts, when combined with the written record, show evidence of the skilled labor and craftsmanship displayed by the enslaved workers at Mount Vernon. Additionally, the archaeology also provides

“a tangible association with real places and the people who once lived at those places; it partially restores the artifactual legacy of African-American life that museum curators, field researchers, and black intellectuals dismissed as unimportant and did not collect; it unveils stories missing from official records and other documents written by people who did not understand African-American material culture….”

(Singleton, 1997, 151).

The significance of storytelling will be examined later in a discussion on the role of the descendant community, oral histories and the exhibition opening ceremony.

Figure 11
*Photo by Author: artifacts found throughout the South that show the creation of a new African American culture (2016)*
In addition to displaying artifacts, and telling the stories of several field workers, the information boards in this gallery provide some of the best visuals and information in the entire exhibit. One of the main information panels that caught my eye as soon as I saw it was the one detailing the breakdown of enslaved laborers working at George Washington’s five farms. This sign broke down the number of enslaved people owned by Washington, the enslaved laborers who were dower slaves, which farm they worked at and the number of slaves that were rented by George Washington. The next two text boards that I was excited to see included in the exhibit were about slave resistance and running away. I was pleased to see these topics addressed in a museum setting.

Figure 12
Photo by Author: Resistance information board (2016)
“Uncomfortable topics such as [slave resistance and running away] … are aspects of the past that need to be interpreted” (Singleton, 1997, 151). The sign on resistance begins with a quote from George Washington. In 1798, Washington states that, “Negroes are growing more & more insolent and difficult to govern…” (Museum Exhibit, 2016). What is so interesting about this quote is the year. Washington’s views on slavery were considered to be turning around by this point, as he dies the following year. His remark about the enslaved population growing more insolent and hard to control shows that, while he may have become slightly uncomfortable with the institution of slavery and wished to free his slaves in his will, Washington still considered himself to be in a master-subject type of role with his enslaved workers. While there is not context noted for this comment, it makes one stop and think about just how much Washington’s views had indeed changed.

Following this quote are ways in which Washington’s enslaved workers showed resistance. Those ways included pretending to be ill, working slowly, taking and breaking the tools of their trade so that they were unable to work. There are quotations below each form of resistance that document an instance where it occurred (see Figure 12). An additional section is included on this informational sign that discusses an instance where “Mount Vernon overseer James Bloxham…feared he was ‘rather in danger of being poisoned among’ the enslaved workers on Washington’s plantation” (Museum Exhibit, 2016). The curators and exhibition writers made it clear that poisoning occurred elsewhere, but are not certain if Bloxham was justified in thinking the Mount Vernon enslaved workers would resort to poisoning him. The text also states that George Mason, who lived nearby to George Washington’s Mount Vernon at Gunston Hall, owned two slaves who were accused of attempting to poison an overseer. As
punishment and a warning to all other enslaved workers, “they were executed and their heads
displayed on the chimney of the Alexandria courthouse” (Museum Exhibit, 2016).

While cruel and inhumane, I was glad to see this punishment noted in the museum exhibit
simply because it clearly addresses the realities of enslaved life in the 18th-century. You do not
get more gruesome than two human beings being executed and their heads left on top of a
governmental building as an example to anyone and everyone who came into Alexandria just
what type of city they were entering. As Alexandria
was quite active in trade during the 18th-century, one
can only imagine just how many people saw these
heads as they passed through town to buy and sell
goods. Additionally, Washington allowed his
enslaved workers to supplement their incomes if
they were particularly skilled in one task or another
by selling or trading their work at nearby markets,
one being Alexandria. The impression those heads
would have made on enslaved workers coming into
town would have been intense. Additionally, the
heads displayed on top of the courthouse would
have provided a sense of unity amongst whites of all
classes against the ‘other’ race; racism and slavery
were some of the only things that different social
classes could more or less agree upon and stand united
against.

Figure 13
Photo by Author: Information on the
47 slaves who ran away from Mount Vernion.
(2016)
Moving along to the information displayed on enslaved workers who ran away from Mount Vernon, the exhibition writers also make it exceedingly clear that there were individuals who were not happy with their situations in life. They display the runaway slave advertisements that most students come across at some point in their education, short stories of enslaved individuals on the estate who ran away, but they also have a separate panel that makes it clear that seven percent of the population of enslaved workers owned by Washington tried to run away at some point in their lives. There was obviously something that was occurring at Mount Vernon that made forty-seven of Washington’s enslaved workers try to run away. It can be assumed that the rhetoric of freedom that was so prominent during the American Revolutionary War was still fresh in many enslaved workers’ minds in 1781, when seventeen enslaved workers escaped to a British warship sitting on the Potomac River. While the country was undergoing the process of establishing a new society under the words “We the people,” it must have become quite obvious that free or enslaved Africans, women and Native Americans were not part of this collective “we” that would shape the policies and mentality of the new United States of America for many years yet to come.

The next gallery contains numerous documents and pieces of material culture pertaining to George Washington, Martha Washington and the Custis estate, overseers and plantation managers and the enslaved laborers on the five farms and distillery and gristmill. Using the interactive touch screens, visitors can search Washington’s lists of enslaved laborers. It is in this room that the famous Ona Judge has her silhouette. It is interesting that her story was not placed in the previous gallery with other enslaved workers who ran away. However, in regard to Ona Judge, I would like to have seen her story be played out more, as she did manage to run away, and stay away, from the Washingtons and enslavement. Since this exhibition has opened, a new
A book on Ona Judge has been published called, *Never Caught: The Washingtons’ Relentless Pursuit Of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*. Written by Eric Armstrong Dunbar, a professor of Black Studies and History at the University of Delaware in 2017, this book follows the story of Ona Judge’s journey to freedom and George and Martha Washington’s relentless pursuit of their runaway slave. Elaborating on her story in this exhibit would definitely ensure that visitors saw a different side to the Washingtons; a side that would get their property back using any and all means that they had at their disposal, told through the voice of Ona Judge herself.

**Celebrating History, Oral Histories and the Role of the Descendant Community in Public History**

Figure 14

![Descendants of the Enslaved Community](image)

Photo from MVLA: Information online about the *Lives Bound Together* exhibition and the contributions of the descendant community (2016)
I wish to look upon the last gallery of the Lives Bound Together exhibition through a different lens, but first, it is necessary to describe this portion of the exhibit. This gallery begins with discussing Washington’s will and death, Martha Washington’s freeing of the enslaved workers she owned because she feared for her life, the Custis heirs and the enslaved individuals who remained in servitude to the family. It eventually goes on in a timeline-like manner to show the evolution of the estates and its presentation of enslaved life over the years up to the present creation of the Live Bound Together exhibition. In one section of this gallery is a small collection of blue and white ceramics. These ceramics are only on display today due to a member of the descendant community, Loretta Carter Hanes (Thompson, 2016; Museum Exhibit 2016). She is a descendant of Suckey Bay and her daughter Rose Carter, both of whom were field workers at Mount Vernon owned by George Washington and who were subsequently freed in his will. Through oral history interviews with members of the descendant community, the tradition of using blue and white tablewares was discovered to be in practice by Loretta Carter Hanes and her family. They attribute this tradition to their time at Mount Vernon. The 19th-century blue and white ceramics on display were lent to Mount Vernon to display part of her family’s tradition that is still in practice today, and that has its roots at Mount Vernon.
Interviews were conducted with many members of the descendant community and parts of their conversations can be watched at the very beginning and at the very end of the exhibition on a television. Personally, I found this to be one of the most striking parts of the entire exhibition. It is their voices, their opinions, their faces that you think of when you begin walking through the galleries, and it is their voices, opinions and faces that you think of when you leave the exhibition. These are the family members of the people who you just read about and saw artifacts that they could have possibly touched and used during their time in bondage on the estate. Every descendant spoke passionately about their ancestors, enslaved life, George Washington, and sharing the story of slavery with the public. What is most striking about these interviews is how strong, proud and willing to share their stories and their ancestors’ stories they all appear to be.

The role of the descendant community adds such strength, emotionality and authenticity to the story of enslaved life being told in Lives Bound Together. However, it was not until fairly recently that the opinions of experts in African American history and culture, descendants, and the black community were really taken into consideration when telling the story of slavery (Blakey, 2010, 63). It has been discovered that,

“…museums with the most successful public programs in African-American history had a long-term commitment to developing African-American public programs; on-staff specialists in African-American studies or a black museum professional; and well-established ties with the local black communities for their input and support. These institutions also reported the highest levels of black visitation to their museums of all those participating in the survey” (Singleton, 1997, 148).

While some museums and institutions are quicker to pick up on this fact than others, interpreting enslaved life in museums and reaching out to local communities and descendant
communities has increased. Sometimes, interest in museum programs and exhibitions is low due to a misunderstanding between the local communities and the museum. For example,

“Black community members at Cahawba were not interested in their African heritage, but in stories that were relevant to their most recent history. This is not to say that archaeologists should abandon understanding the African heritage in the formation of African America, but an overemphasis of this issue may inhibit other lines of inquiry that are of interest to the communities we serve” (Singleton, 1997, 148).

One very important thing that we can gleam from this passage is that members of local and descendant communities wish to hear stories that can be related to their most recent history, or lived experiences. They want to be able to take their children into a museum and not just give them a crash course in the history of injustice and enslaved life, but be able to explain to them why this all matters that is both understandable and relatable.

A second, very important part of this passage was the use of the term ‘stories.’ The term ‘stories,’ here will be used in the sense of a narrative, not a fictitious, made-up story. Oral histories and traditions have long been associated with folklorists and anthropologists. However, recently historians have seen the importance of not just telling the stories of the elite, but of those whose history is not recorded in the written record at the same level of frequency or detail as, say, George Washington. While the battle between anthropologists and historians can become an honors thesis in and of itself, I wish to call on a sense of unity between the disciplines. In fact, I find the academic and theoretical debates taking place between and within disciplines to be rather nit-picky, petty and, quite frankly, ridiculous. Anthropologist, historians, archaeologists, architectural historians and material cultural experts all share a common love – the past. What the Lives Bound Together exhibition at Mount Vernon really does is show that disciplinary barriers are meant to be crossed. If historians did not take the initiative to interview the descendant community, there would be no blue and white bowls donated to the exhibit, there
would not be films at the beginning and end of the exhibition and there would be no artifacts on display, only more pieces of material culture that scream affluence. The only things that the museum would have are documents and written words possibly paired with material items from their collections. There really would not be a cohesive exhibit without crossing discipline barriers or, if you are of the opinion that history could possibly be a fifth subfield of anthropology, using an interdisciplinary approach. So, why then did all the departments at Mount Vernon come together to work on creating this exhibition? Because they thought that the story was worth telling, and deserved to be told and heard.

This exhibit brought together the various academic disciplines because it was more important than arguing about theory or attending a conference where only other academics read their work and listened to their accomplishments. The story, the ‘so what?’ was more important to this group of professionals and academics, as it should be. The story of George Washington is one that children hear before they can read it for themselves. However, it is always a glorified and celebratory history that is presented. The new social history introduced in the 1970s has such potential when implemented and executed correctly at a museum. People come to museums to learn about the past, to celebrate the past, but it is
becoming increasingly more common as time goes on that visitors to museums do not wish to hear a watered-down narrative of history. They wish to understand the realities of enslaved life at Mount Vernon, for example. This exhibition, while still slightly reserved in some of its statements and displays, has really begun to change the way enslaved lives are interpreted, seen and understood on the estate.

There can be a good balance between the celebration of historical figures and heroes. However, there also needs to be a time for a more realistic narrative to be presented to the public. The opening ceremony for the *Lives Bound Together* exhibition was a celebration (Annual Slave Memorial, 2016). The descendants and their families were there, as well as Mount Vernon employees, students, representatives of historically black colleges and universities, historians, archaeologists, dancers, and visitors to the estate. They all came to this exhibit opening in order to celebrate some of their heroes and/or ancestors; the enslaved workers of Mount Vernon. Yet they also came to see the historical narrative being presented in this new exhibition that they, and their ancestors, had a hand in creating. After all, is it not their ancestors’ story that is being told?

There is a time to be serious and reflect on the atrocities of the past and there is a time to celebrate life and a family’s personal history of survival and perseverance. Is not their personal history just as much a part of our nation’s as George Washington’s? Are not their personal histories “bound together” with George Washington’s? Simply making them part of the same story from a different point of view? While attending the opening ceremony there is one statement that will forever stick in my mind. I do not know the name of the individual who said it, but it will remain with me forever. A man said, “Thank God for this beautiful weather…” then paused for applause to occur. While everyone was clapping and nodding along in agreement, I was looking around thinking that this man must be crazy; it was pouring rain outside! Then he
finished his statement, “…for these are the types of days our ancestors must have dreamed of having” (Annual Slave Memorial, 2016). Then I understood.

The slight chill in the air that came with the breeze; the abundance of water to cool the body and to collect and drink; these were things that I found to be annoyances, yet these people’s ancestors would have wished to luxuriate in for a few moments. This is why oral histories, discussing the past with people who feel connections to history, not just an obsession to study the past and pursue a career in academia, but real people; whose ancestors persevered despite all the odds being against them. These are the people who can help create a successful historical narrative that can be interpreted to the public in a museum setting. They help bring their ancestors’ stories into the light, where they should have been all along; right beside George Washington. It is because their stories are so important that this exhibit was created. The uniting of academics and museum professionals to create this exhibit is so profound because the disciplines are kept so separate and theoretical throughout a students’ undergraduate years.

There is more to history and studying the past than theory, which can sometimes be overly stressed in college courses. Life and people cannot be grouped into one theory or one school of thought. I quoted Ira Berlin at the beginning of this piece and I will quote him again, one last time. He states, “understanding that a person was a slave is not the end of the story but the beginning, for the slaves’ history was derived from experiences that differed from place to place and time to time and not from some unchanging transhistorical verity” (Berlin, 1998, 13). Undergraduate programs need to heed his words not just as literally pertaining to slavery, but in regard to binding the potential of their own academic disciplines. As can be seen through this case study of the *Lives Bound Together* exhibit at Mount Vernon, the story is the most important thing that historians and anthropologists can be a part of creating, because “historians and
anthropologists are at heart storytellers” (Ulin, 1994, 398). The enslaved workers whose stories are being told at Mount Vernon today and the visitors who tour the exhibition are learning the story and importance of equality, unity, love, faith, hope, strength and determination. Being a part of that story, that lesson, is the best gift and honor that anyone could receive.

Conclusion:

As can be seen through the above discussion of *Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, while far from perfect, has begun to take the necessary steps towards presenting a specific historical narrative by drawing on sources of information from numerous academic disciplines. The exhibit has successfully utilized artifacts from on-site excavations and utilized the available documents that note enslaved life on the estate and Washington’s changing views on the institution. The exhibit has, in some parts, “muffled,” or softened the sharp and political edge of the topic of slavery for visitors, but has also included aspects in their signage that reveal the cruelties of the institution in other parts (Johnson, 2003, 19). Moreover, selection bias remains an issue within the context of curators selecting quotes from historical documents to match their intended message and, consequently, choosing material culture and artifacts that reflect the quotations and, therefore, the intended narrative; archeology is still treated as justifying the historical record in some places (Pecoraro, 2016). Selection bias also exists in terms of visitor choice. Visitors to Mount Vernon have the option to attend the estate and never hear about enslaved life and never enter this exhibit. While we cannot tie visitors to the estate down and force them to learn about enslaved life by visiting this exhibit, visitation, as Jessie MacLeod says, should continue to be encouraged. Steps should be taken
throughout the estate to include discussions of slavery into the natural dialogue of all of their
tours.

What this exhibit has been successful in, is creating and presenting a narrative that is
drawn from different academic disciplines – anthropology, archaeology, history and material
culture studies. Therefore, this exhibit serves as a good example of the potential benefits and
limitations that an interdisciplinary presentation of the past can have on museum-goers, museum
professionals, and academics. The interdisciplinary nature of the exhibit makes it appealing to
visitors of varying interests. However, what is so important about this is that it reaches a diverse
audience; it educates the public on a singular topic through multiple avenues. The story of the
enslaved individuals’ experiences with slavery was more important that creating an exhibit that
uses solely archaeology, history or anthropology.

This type of interdisciplinary education should not exist solely in museums, it should
extend to the classrooms at the primary, secondary, undergraduate and graduate levels.
Educational programs such as the International Baccalaureate program, have started teaching
children in public schools to look at the world from an interdisciplinary perspective starting in
elementary school and continuing through high school. While students go to college to
specialize, academics must not lose sight of the importance for not only tolerating different
perspectives, but encouraging, respecting and fostering the growth of new perspectives. Starting
to stress an interdisciplinary approach at the graduate level as Louise Lamphere (2004, 431)
suggests, is much too late in a student’s education. The only way to change the climate of the
world is to start with the youth.

As can be seen with contemporary issues and the Black Lives Matter movement, the
United States still has a long way to go in regard to its treatment of race and race relations.
However, if museums, schools and colleges begin to encourage interdisciplinary approaches to studying the past – teaching that other perspectives are natural; that it is okay to question current and past knowledge; that eliminating constructed barriers may be necessary; that one must respect, not just tolerate, learn about, or study people with different experiences and cultures; and to ask ‘why’ things are the way they are – tensions in the country may begin to change for the better in the country.

**Topics for Further Discussion and Research:**

There are numerous topics that were raised that need to be further discussed and/or researched. However, five topics that are of primary concern to me are 1) the AP vs. the IB program’s teaching methods and preparing students for their undergraduate years 2) the treatment of other disciplines by academics in opposing fields at the undergraduate level 3) the capability of museums to serve as an interdisciplinary tool 4) if history is its own discipline or another subfield of anthropology and 5) how museums can get visitors to attend programs and exhibits on enslaved life when the visitors who do not wish to hear about the topic are the ones who really need to hear what museums have to say.

These are all topics that should be discussed further through more research and interviews with public school children in the AP and IB programs, undergraduate students who attended AP and IB programs and their experiences within and outside of their college major, undergraduate professors and museum professionals. Education is so important for the future of our country, and an interdisciplinary approach presents diverse narratives, reflecting the diverse nature of our country. It should not have taken over 150 years since the ending of slavery for an exhibit on enslaved life at Mount Vernon to be created. However, it has taken this long for this
narrative to have been deemed worthy to be included in the historical narrative at many
museums, not just Mount Vernon, simply because it takes time for mentalities to change. It is
time for academics to help be a part of this change by working together with other disciplines to
show that the importance of these people – their stories and experiences – are more important
than the theoretical and methodological differences separating disciplines.
Bibliography


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