Design of President's House up in air

The project is on schedule, but debate goes on over how to tell slavery story

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The President's House Commemorative Site on Independence Mall is under construction and on target for a fall opening, but organizers and stakeholders are still battling over the final design.

The $8.5 million project, under way at 6th and Market streets next to the Liberty Bell Center, will use modern graphics, interpretative exhibits and period artifacts to tell the story of slavery within what was George Washington's home during his presidency. The house itself was torn down in 1831 and, with the exception of the long-buried foundation, the site will rely on interpretative exhibits. Once finished, it will be overseen by the National Park Service.

In recent months the exhibits have been under fire from critics on all sides — from those who say the exhibition paints too rosy a picture of the lives of nine enslaved people who lived in George and Martha Washington's house to those who say Washington's legacy will be tarnished by the exhibit.

"We've turned a corner, but until this thing is dedicated, the controversy will continue — and that's a good thing. It will continue after as well," said Rosalyn J. McPherson, who is overseeing the project.

Plans continue to evolve. The eight-member oversight committee, which is led by Mayor Michael Nutter's chief of staff Clay Armbrister, will review the latest plans June 21.

Tempers flared at a public meeting last month chaired by Armbrister. The project's lead designer, Emanuel Kelly of Kelly/Maiello Architects & Planners in Center City, was shouted down by protesters who said the planned exhibits did not fully detail the harsh realities of slavery, including rape, beatings and other mistreatment.

The stories of those slaves have, since 2002, been well known to historians.

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President's House work continues (looking toward the Liberty Bell Center.).

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A placard tells the story of the historical site.

Historian Edward Lawler Jr., writing for the Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, first published findings about Martha Washington's servant Oney Judge and eight others who lived at the site — revealing conflicts between Washington's public and private views about slavery.

Plans for a permanent commemorative site started soon after and preliminary designs were unveiled in 2003. Money for the project came from federal and city governments, the Delaware River Port Authority and private donors.

Yet stakeholders still struggled with how to tell the story, McPherson said.

Late last year, the commemorative site's oversight committee fired the original exhibit creator, Brooklyn, N.Y.-based American History Workshop Inc.

In its place, the committee hired Kansas City, Mo.-based Eisterhold Associates Inc., whose work includes the African American Museum of Philadelphia's new "Audacious Freedom" exhibit and exhibits for the International Civil Rights Center & Museum in Greensboro, N.C.

They've also received input from historians Gary Nash and Spencer R. Crew.

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