



Press Release



Independence National Historical Park and City of Philadelphia

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PRESIDENT'S HOUSE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE MEETS TO RESOLVE DESIGN CONTROVERSY

(Philadelphia, PA – October 9, 2009) The Mayor's Oversight Committee for the President's House met on Tuesday, August 25, 2009, to discuss the controversy over accuracy of the design plans for the footprint of the historic President's House site. The meeting was called by Clarence Armbrister, Chief of Staff for the City of Philadelphia and head of the Committee, because of concerns raised publicly by the Independence Hall Association and several independent historians who alleged that the Kelly/Maiello Architects and Planners design contained inaccuracies that could compromise the authenticity of the site.

The meeting was well attended, with representatives from various city departments, the Ad Hoc Historians, Independence National Historical Park, the Independence Hall Association, Avenging the Ancestors Coalition (ATAC), the African American Museum of Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Convention and Visitors Bureau and others.

An important question posed by a number of Committee members was the impact of design accuracy on the interpretive experience. The majority of the Committee agreed that the main purpose of the site is to tell the stories of the people who lived and toiled at the site, especially the enslaved Africans who lived the hypocrisy of slavery in a new nation built on the ideals of freedom for all men. They also reaffirmed the importance of dimensions that were as accurate as possible, even if not exact.

After a spirited discussion, the committee agreed to the following:

- The façade will *not* move from its present location as shown on the Kelly/Maiello drawings. Regarding the location and demarcation of the facade of the President's House, Kelly/Maiello will review alternatives with the National Park Service. The final resolution will be one that ensures safe pedestrian traffic flow on the present Market Street sidewalk area, possibly by using dimensions marked in the pavement. There will be an explanation on the panels about how the dimensions of the house were obtained. The enlarged footprint will be shown in the pavement to reflect the north property line from the Burnt House Survey Plan.

- The Bay Window will be built as shown on the Kelly/Maiello drawings with a curved wall on the interior. On the most contentious issue – the shape of the window – Kelly argued that the archeology and the known structural patterns of construction argued for an octagonal or like shape rather than a bow window. Ed Lawler, representing the Independence Hall Association, made a case that the archeology and written documents related to the construction of the White House argued for a bow window. Emanuel Kelly, Principal of Kelly/Maiello Architects and Planners presented the current design and showed through documentation how his team had arrived at their design with respect to the shape of the window, the location of the facade, and the place to mark the "slave quarters." Three major sources were used to create the Kelly/Maiello plan including the Ed Lawler drawing, the Burnt House survey plan, and the survey that resulted from the 2007 archeological dig. Kelly reviewed how his firm had used overlays of at least three different documents to come up with what they believed to be the best and most accurate layout. He also shared with the group that the results from archeology were in fact the only authentic representations for the layout of the house, especially given that 18th century surveys were handwritten and did not have the benefit of today's technology to be more accurate.

The enclosed memorial to the enslaved Africans will be located on the footprint of what is thought to have been the wash house. Regarding the location of the "slave quarters," Kelly acknowledged that it was necessary to move the demarcation from the "south" to the "north" stable building, keeping the power of place by marking that place as "slave quarters." It once again became apparent that the documentation was not a definitive statement on exactly where the slave quarters stood. Documentation suggested that the enslaved people in the household lived and worked throughout the property. So, moving the "marker" northward would not compromise the facts but would instead remedy logistical challenges related to ADA access, fire code, and other practical problems due to the close proximity to the Liberty Bell Center.

Interpretations over time change and dimensions are subject to human interpretation and human error. In fact, the structural remains uncovered during the 2007 archeological dig pointed to errors in the original assumptions about the layout of the house and even unearthed some unexpected findings, including a sub-basement or root cellar.

Based on the information presented, it was determined that the documentation was inconclusive. Historians present at the meeting suggested that the best course was to use the "window" as a teachable moment, showing visitors to the site how different evidence, archeological and written, might lead to varying interpretations. This would underscore the site's usefulness as a place of authentic commemoration and interpretation.

The Oversight Committee was created in September 2005 as a way to have representatives from a broad cross section of constituencies in the Philadelphia region throughout the decision-making process of the design and construction of the site. The assembling of this committee was also a mechanism for transparency and democracy in ensuring that the project be completed in the most honorable way possible.

From its inception, the group has dealt with varying opinions and perspectives. "The beauty of the process has been that through open and honest dialogue, this group has been able to come up with resolutions and decisions based on agreement of the majority," stated committee member, Karen Warrington. "The controversy over the design was an example of the committee's willingness to hear divergent opinions, synthesize research findings, and offer solutions that everyone agreed would be in the best interest of the project's integrity, authenticity, and responsibility to expand the knowledge base of American history."

The debate also underscored the ambiguity of history. “In many instances, history is what we think we know and that can be challenged as new evidence is revealed,” said Dr. Randall Miller, a representative for the Ad Hoc Historians. “The story of the African American experience is by far one of the greatest omissions of fact from history books and history courses in the United States,” observed ATAC’s Michael Coard.

The construction phase of the project is now well underway with the excavation phase. Content development is the next major aspect of the project and the team anticipates a July 4, 2010 opening.

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Members of the Mayor's Oversight Committee

President's House: Slavery and Freedom in Making a New Nation

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