

The President's House Overview

This is a National Park Service/City of Philadelphia press release.

From 1790 to 1800, when the city of Philadelphia was our new nation's capital, Presidents George Washington and John Adams lived and worked in a mansion – the President's House – that stood roughly one block north of Independence Hall. In that house, the first two American presidents literally invented what it meant to be Chief Executive of the United States.

The mansion also held a profoundly disturbing truth. It has been documented that George Washington, who owned over 300 enslaved Africans at his Mount Vernon home, brought at least nine of these servants to Philadelphia to live and work in the President's House. This fact creates a challenge to the notion of American liberty; while the founders of our country declared "all men are created equal," the brutal institution of slavery was still being cultivated and maintained. It was in this very house that George Washington signed the notorious Fugitive Slave Act of 1793.

The presidential mansion is replete with stories of both achievement and infamy – the birth of a free nation and its tenacious first steps, co-existing with widely practiced, indefensible enslavement of human beings. It is worth noting that John Adams was not himself a slave owner, and his wife Abigail was an outspoken critic of slavery.

Ultimately, President's House: Freedom and Slavery in Making a New Nation is designed with a dual purpose. The site indeed commemorates the location and importance of the original executive mansion of George Washington and John Adams – key architects of American democracy. It also tells the long-obscured story of the enslaved Africans who toiled at the house, two of whom made a remarkable escape to freedom during Washington's presidency.

Moreover, we have a compelling obligation as a nation to illuminate the history of this house and all its inhabitants – willing and unwilling – to the fullest. What better place to tell these fascinating stories but in the Independence Mall footprint, at the very threshold of the Liberty Bell?

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