



Press Release

Independence National Historical Park and City of Philadelphia

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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PRESIDENT'S HOUSE EXHIBIT CONCEPTS UNDER REVISION

Site Opening Postponed until Fall 2010

Philadelphia, PA [December 23, 2009] – The City of Philadelphia and Independence National Historical Park today announced plans to revise the exhibit portion of the site's visitor experience, opting to postpone the opening of the site until Fall 2010. "This is a complex story to tell in a site with limited space. We must get the interpretation of extensive research distilled into a quality visitor experience," stated Clarence Armbrister, Chief of Staff for the City of Philadelphia. The construction of the site is already underway and will not be impacted by the additional time needed to develop and enhance the exhibit plan.

After two months of extensive review, the Oversight Committee met on December 11 and again on December 18, 2009 and concluded that more time was needed to incorporate recommended content and graphic design changes into the exhibit plan. Dr. Randall Miller, noted historian from St. Joseph's University, participated in the December 11 session along with City officials and National Park Service staff. "The exhibit is a very important part of interpreting the site and it must meet the expectations of a public with varying perspectives and expectations," stated Superintendent of Independence National Historical Park, Cynthia MacLeod. It is clear from our internal review and from the comments of the Oversight Committee that the exhibit needs more work and perhaps fresh eyes."

The December 18 meeting was an opportunity for all committee members to voice their concerns about the current direction. There continues to be disagreement on content; however, the Oversight Committee agrees that total consensus is not the goal. There is broad agreement that the optimum visitor experience will evoke critical thought and compelling questions about the

complex paradoxes that existed during the early days of the new nation. Karen Warrington, Committee member and Communications Director for Congressman Robert A. Brady gave reassurance that “Congressman Brady fully supports the decision to revise the exhibition interpretation in order to ensure that visitors to the site will better understand the complex, painful and untold history of the President's House.”

There are several themes that Committee members are committed to portraying. The issue of slavery in the new democracy is a dominant feature. It is a topic that is rarely addressed in history classes and it is an important fact that has had far-reaching impact on American society, especially given that the nation’s successful economy was due in large part to the system of forced labor. The Executive Branch of Government is another important topic for visitors to encounter in the site. It was at the Philadelphia Presidential mansion that the first two presidents set the tone for how the nation would be governed. They met with important heads of state from various countries and they negotiated with leaders of Indigenous nations. The intricate lives of the people who lived at the house, indentured and enslaved, is a central story for this site. And the meta-story, the voice of protests from the African American community that resulted in the funding of the site is a story of passion and the importance of participating in the actions to make a difference in society.

A number of guest scholars, including Dr. Molefi Asante (Temple University); Mr. Howard Dodson (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture); Dr. Cheryl LaRoche (University of Maryland); Dr. Emma Lapsansky (Haverford College); and Rev. Dr. Mark Kelly Tyler (Mother Bethel AME Church; Dr. Tukufu Zuberi (University of Pennsylvania) provided feedback on historical content, tone, and approach. “This team is providing an important telling of a perspective that you don’t get at other national visitor experiences, the voice of people of African descent,” stated Dr. Zuberi. He was supportive of the exhibit team’s efforts to bring that missing voice to the forefront of the President’s House commemoration. Dr. Asante and Dr. Lapsansky suggested that the site is an important venue for explaining the difference between liberty and freedom.

With numerous stakeholders for the President’s House, and both historic and modern perspectives to be accounted for, the Oversight Committee has a challenging task ahead. It was agreed that a few more weeks to take the time to reassemble the research into a more compelling interpretation would do justice to this important national project. “The additional time gives us the opportunity to review the historical research and focus on completing this important exhibit that tells the stories of the enslaved Africans and the Presidents who lived here and reveals the paradox of slavery and freedom in the President’s house,” said Emanuel Kelly.

From the project’s inception, Oversight Committee has sought to fairly include a variety of viewpoints and perspectives and members have participated in the intensive process of reading research, evolving scripts, and vetting historical images. They have also provided recommendations and voiced concerns of the factions of the public that they represent. Exhibit development is often punctuated with starts and stops as exhibit developers and stakeholders go through the painstaking task of creating a stellar commemoration.

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 in ensuring that the project be completed in the most honorable way possible.

“While 50-50 equality in the exhibit's interpretation is the perfect goal in a perfect society, America is not a perfect society and American history has not been told perfectly- or even equally. Therefore, the goal here must be *equity*, in order to finally begin to level the playing field. In other words, while the always-told story of George Washington and the presidency obviously should be included here, the never-told story of the enslaved and free blacks who made the historic George Washington possible and this historic presidency possible must not only be included in the exhibit but also must conspicuously permeate it,” stated Michael Coard, founder of Avenging the Ancestors Coalition (ATAC).

The Oversight Committee is dedicating its energy to a successful completion of this project. “A more complete and truthful story about the history of this city and nation needs to be told and the Committee recognizes the need to pause and ensure that these concerns are adequately addressed” said Romona Riscoe Benson, CEO of the African American Museum in Philadelphia.

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