



Press Release

City of Philadelphia and Independence National Historical Park

Michael A. Nutter, Mayor, City of Philadelphia
Cynthia MacLeod, Superintendent, Independence National Historical Park

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACTS: Mark McDonald, City of Philadelphia: (215) 686-6210
LiRon Anderson-Bell, The ROZ Group: (215) 284-2964
Jane Cowley, INHP: (215) 597-0060
Cara Schneider, GPTMC: (215) 206-2034

PRESIDENT'S HOUSE OPENS ON INDEPENDENCE MALL IN PHILADELPHIA *Much-Anticipated Site Honors Lives of Enslaved Africans in Presidential Household*

(Philadelphia – December 15, 2010) – *President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation* opens today in Philadelphia after more than five years of development. The commemorative, open-air installation marks the site where the nation's first two presidents, George Washington and John Adams, served their terms of office and began to shape the executive branch of government. However, the most compelling and controversial aspect of the site is that it pays tribute to nine documented enslaved persons of African descent who were part of the Washington household. The inclusion of the topic of enslavement is an addition to the historic district of Philadelphia that has to date been absent or minimized. "The President's House is a project of major international importance because it recognizes the broader picture of the people who participated in this nation's early history, including enslaved and free people of African descent," said Mayor Michael A. Nutter. "I stand on the shoulders of the voiceless people who this site commemorates. They will now be known to the rest of the world."

Situated in Independence Mall and adjacent to the Liberty Bell Center, the President's House calls attention to the complex juxtaposition of slavery and freedom. "Originally slated for completion in 2008, the project experienced several challenges in its design, including findings from an archeological dig and a change in strategy for the interpretive elements, all of which have resulted in a stronger visitor experience," said Clarence Armbrister, Chief of Staff for Mayor Michael A. Nutter and Chair of the Oversight Committee.

Key to the site design is the basic footprint of the house that allows visitors to walk through the first floor as it was laid out in the late 18th century. The bowed window, state dining room, and kitchen complete with hearth are among the elements in the recreated layout. Narrative Porcelite exhibit panels and glass illustrations using an “if these walls could talk approach” provide visitors with a sense of events that occurred during Philadelphia’s early history. Five video re-enactments depict what life was like for the enslaved persons living in the Washington household. “Many members of the Oversight Committee felt that the site had to tell the stories that are not often told and share the perspectives of the people who up to now have been nameless and voiceless,” stated the project’s director, Rosalyn McPherson.

A glass vitrine structure is the centerpiece of the interpretive design and houses elements of the 18th century structure that were unexpectedly uncovered during a 2007 archeological dig. The dig attracted more than 300,000 visitors and resulted in a major redesign to include some of the structural fragments. Jed Levin, Chief Archeologist for Independence National Historical Park, along with Dr. Cheryl LaRoche, archeologist with URS Corporation, provided visitors with live interpretation during the dig. “We were immersed in urban archeology, a rare occurrence in a major U. S. city like Philadelphia,” said Levin.

A few feet from the entrance to the Liberty Bell Center sits a small glass structure that serves as a memorial to the enslaved Africans. Listing the names of the African tribes of origin for many enslaved, the space is intended as a place of solemn reflection. The space had been erroneously referred to as slave quarters but is actually believed to have been the sleeping quarters for stable hands. Enslaved persons are known to have slept throughout the house, not just in one space behind the house.

The President’s House project has been a source of fascinating revelations as researchers and historians perused diaries, records and other centuries-old documents. Much of the history of enslaved persons from their own perspectives remains undocumented. This is characteristic for a people who were considered to be property and who as a matter of survival were not in the habit of revealing their true feelings. Noted author of *Price of a Child*, Lorene Cary used the research from historians to create the scripts for the video re-enactments that have been directed by Louis Massiah of Scribe Video.

The design-build team was led by Kelly/Maiello Architects and Planners, a minority-owned firm. “It has been a distinct privilege for our office to have been awarded this project that focuses on issues of freedom and slavery here in Philadelphia,” said Emanuel Kelly, FAIA, principal of Kelly/Maiello and the project’s leader. “Minority participation in construction and interpretation was 67%, truly an important accomplishment in a project whose focus is the African American experience,” Kelly added. Initial core historic research and exhibit framework were developed by American History Workshop. The exhibit interpretation team was expanded and guided to completion by Eisterhold Associates with Dr. Gary Nash (UCLA) and Dr. Spencer Crew (George Mason University) as lead historians. The city’s Department of Public Property managed the day-to-day technical and fiscal aspects of the project.

A joint initiative of the City of Philadelphia and Independence National Historical Park, the project's origins are complex and often polarizing. A number of organizations including the Ad Hoc Historians and the Independence Hall Association had long advocated for an acknowledgment of the location where the new nation shaped the executive branch of the United States government. Yet the compelling and unknown story of the presence of enslaved Africans as revealed in Ed Lawler's 2002 article in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* became the catalyst of emotional protests from the African American community led by Michael Coard of the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition and Charles L. Blockson of Generations Unlimited. The outcry resulted in the City's decision to move forward.

"From its inception, this project has generated conversation and discovery, and we hope it will continue to do so. Benefitting from the voices of citizens and guiding legislation from the U.S. Congress and the collaboration between the City of Philadelphia and the National Park Service, the project is a welcome addition to Independence National Historical Park," said Cynthia MacLeod, Superintendent of Independence National Historical Park. Over the course of the next year, Park officials will conduct visitor studies and develop programming to support the important responsibility that comes with interpreting an emotionally charged site.

"There are some who will say that we provided too much information about slavery and others who will say that we did not tell enough about the brutality of slavery," said Armbrister. "Our charge to the public is to continue the quest for a deeper understanding of what it truly meant to be in a new democracy. This site is a catalyst for more programming, institutional partnerships and a deeper pursuit of the discussion of race in America."

Costing approximately \$11.9 million, the President's House was funded through a variety of sources. The City of Philadelphia under the administration of Mayor John F. Street and the Federal government through Congressmen Robert Brady and Chaka Fattah provided initial funding. Mayor Michael A. Nutter raised the additional funds needed to incorporate structural fragments into the site's design plan that were uncovered during a 2007 archeological dig. His efforts were supported by Governor Edward G. Rendell who was instrumental in securing \$3.5 million from the Delaware River Port Authority. Incremental funding needed for the site's redesign came from public, corporate, and private sources including the Bank of America, PNC Bank, The Tides Foundation, Independence Blue Cross, the Connelly Foundation, Stradley Ronon Stevens & Young, LLP, Wendy Rosen, and Manuel Stamatakis.

<http://www.visitphilly.com/presidentshouse>

<http://www.phila.gov/presidentshouse/>

<http://home.nps.gov/inde/historyculture/the-presidents-house.htm>

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