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CITYSPACE

Bell Jarred



REVERENCE: Larry Washington walks next to the remains of 419 Africans once enslaved in New York as they're led through Washington Square on their trip back from D.C. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

The Liberty Bell's new home remains controversial.

by [Deborah Bolling](#)

Things that are important can never be rushed. Perhaps that is why it'll take seven painstaking hours to move the historically revered Liberty Bell a mere 100 yards from Fifth and Market streets to its new home at Sixth and Chestnut today. Perhaps that's also why it'll take even longer for National Park Service officials to erect what some would consider a proper monument on the site of the new Liberty Bell Center that pays homage to Africans who once lived there as the chattel of America's first president, George Washington.

While many argue that the Liberty Bell has traditionally symbolized America's freedom and bravery, perhaps its distinctive crack has meaning related to the damage it sustained in the mid-1800s as it rang in celebration of President Washington's birthday. Maybe the crack crystallizes an ideological divide in how the Liberty Bell should be displayed and understood.

A year and a half ago, historians presented evidence that between 1790 and 1797, the years of Washington's presidency, his household slaves lived in a two-room shed adjacent to America's first White House -- situated only five feet from the entrance of the new Liberty Bell Center. So far, the National Park Service has refused to acknowledge the full significance of this historical fact, citing a lack of sufficient corroborating evidence.

Edward Lawler Jr., a member of the Ad Hoc Historians, was part of the team that uncovered documentation verifying the presence of the shed, known as the Slave Quarters.

The people at INHP [Independence National Historical Park] agree that the buildings were there, but they're not positive that they housed slaves, Lawler says. For me, the proof rests on documentation from Washington's own correspondence, but there may never be any other really good, strong evidence. What's important is not to think of Washington's eight enslaved Africans as his property, but rather as individuals. The reason they should be honored is that they were enslaved within what was then the executive mansion of the United States. I'd love for people who come to Independence Park to understand where they are and what happened here.

While festivities to celebrate the antique bell's arduous move are scheduled throughout the day, as the Philadelphia Boys Choir belts out patriotic songs, members of the Avenging The Ancestors Coalition (ATAC) will be staging a protest at Sixth and Market. The organization, which identifies its membership as the descendants of the victims of the greatest holocaust in humankind, want to draw attention to what they view as the hypocrisy of acknowledging America's history while ignoring Philadelphia's own slave past.

Think how upsetting it would be for the average white American to know that as they enter the Liberty Center, they are passing over hallowed ground, says Michael Coard, one of the ATAC founders. I think it would be embarrassing for the people at Independence National Historical Park to have to fully acknowledge that Africans were enslaved there by the first president of the United States in the worst type of human degradation known to mankind.

Last week, in an impressive demonstration of respect for the dead, the bones of 419 Africans once enslaved in New York City passed through Philadelphia on their way back to New York for reburial. In 1991, the bones were excavated from a site in Lower Manhattan known as the African Burial Ground. After an exhaustive, 12-year forensic examination conducted at Howard University in Washington, D.C., they returned to the burial ground at the end of a ceremonious four-city tour that also included Baltimore, Wilmington, Del. and Newark, N.J.

While Philadelphia is heralded as the birthplace of freedom and the cradle of liberty, there is still plenty of debate on how to handle the subterranean bones of enslaved Africans that are undoubtedly scattered throughout Society Hill and other parts of the city.



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so much publicity can only help our efforts here, Coard says. It made a hilly can and should be seen as a nationwide movement.

tion requires a culturally dignified, historically complete, physically mented commemorative project at the President's House site

In June, INHP agreed to install a marker at the Liberty Bell Center addressing the fact that the slave quarters were somewhere in the vicinity, but the precise location is still in question. Coard says that he's hopeful that under the leadership of newly appointed Superintendent Mary Bomar, the INHP will eventually honor Washington's former slaves properly.

It's all about history, Coard says. It's about the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth -- whether it's good or bad.



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