

Slave tunnel illustrates role of blacks in fight for independence

by Marc_H._Morial

Just steps away from the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall in Philadelphia, archaeologists recently unearthed remains of a secret passageway that President George Washington's slaves used to enter and exit from his presidential home in the late 1790s, when the city served as the nation's capital.

Not far from where the Declaration of Independence was signed nearly 230 years ago, there stands evidence of the hypocrisy that shrouded the burgeoning nation at its birth.

"As you enter the heaven of liberty, you literally have to cross the hell of slavery," observed Michael Coard, leader of a group of Philadelphians working to have the slave tunnel recognized at the site, to the Associated Press. "That's the contrast. That's the contradiction. That's the hypocrisy. But that's also the truth."

The father of our country represented a contradiction in terms. On one hand, Washington played an important role in securing our America's independence from England. On the other hand, he served as king of his Mount Vernon estate in Virginia.

Like King George III whose rule he fought to rid America of, Washington had his own set of subjects - over 300 slaves he had acquired through inheritance, marriage and transaction over the course of his life. When he became president, he had a rotating cast of eight slaves living in his Philadelphia house, where there was a law on the books making slaves free after six months of residence. Hence, the rotating cast, which he reportedly aimed to keep secret from his staff and the public.

Washington started out life as a typical slave holder. But in the 1770s, he began to soften his stance and express reservations privately. The sign-up of hundreds of free blacks to join his revolutionary army made him view slavery in a harsher light at least on a personal level. He stopped selling slaves against their will to prevent breaking up families, and he was the only slave-owning Founding Father to emancipate them. This, however, didn't occur until after his wife died - not during his own lifetime. His personal servant, however, was freed following his death in 1799.

But as his president, it was a different story. Washington concealed his personal misgivings over slavery from the public, which some historians consider a tragic missed opportunity while others contend it averted the upset of a very delicate balance in the fledgling republic over the contentious issue. He signed into law the Fugitive Slave Act, which mandated the capture and release of fugitive slaves, even in states where slavery was outlawed.

The recent discovery of the slave tunnel under his home has attracted thousands of visitors as well as

prompted calls to incorporate the ruins into a new exhibit as opposed to just filling the passageway in. It has caught National Park Service and city officials by complete surprise, causing an indefinite postponement of the exhibit, originally scheduled to open in 2009. In addition to the secret passageway, archeologists also found in their search an architectural precursor to the White House's Oval Office and a large basement that had never been recorded.

"We never thought we'd be faced with this kind of decision - We would've been happy to have found a pipe! And so we don't want to proceed blindly or say, "This isn't in the plan,"" observed Joyce Wilkerson, chief of staff for Philadelphia Mayor John Street, to the Associated Press.

Philadelphia Democratic U.S. Rep. Bob Brady has called upon federal and city officials to "rethink what we're doing here" and vowed a fight to keep it open.

Before the tunnel was unveiled, the exhibit wasn't expected to display archaeological findings. But now the parties involved seem to be serious about incorporating the artifacts. As Mr. Coard noted to the AP: "Nobody is saying, 'No, it shouldn't be done.'"

This bodes well that they won't attempt to cover up evidence of a dirty little secret in American history. The irony of a nation committed to independence and freedom using slave labor to achieve those goals should never be lost on us, our children or our children's grandchildren.

After all, without the contributions of blacks, the fledgling nation would have remained a fledgling colony of Great Britain.

Our nation owes a huge debt of gratitude to the thousands of slaves brought over here against their will from Africa. That is exactly why officials in Philadelphia should seek to incorporate these fascinating artifacts into their exhibit of the Washington presidential home.

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