

# Philadelphia's nasty slave secret unearthed

By Michael Z. Muhammad  
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PHILADELPHIA (NNPA)—The names are shrouded by a history that was never told—Moll, Austin, Hercules, Richmond, Giles, Paris, Christopher Sheels and Oney Judge. All labored without pay as slave servants to the first family of this nation, in George and Martha Washington's Philadelphia household.

In all probability their unique story would never have been revealed had it not been for a committed group of community leaders. The group known as the Avenging The Ancestors Coalition (ATAC) disrupted the plan of the National Park Service and the Independence National Historical Parks to yet again sweep Black history under the rug. In this instance, to literally bury it, Colonialist

William Penn owned at least 12 slaves, according to writer Melissa Dribben in a recent article in the "Philadelphia Inquirer" Sunday magazine. In the mid to late 1760s, nearly 1,500 Blacks lived in slavery in Philadelphia, the article said. Among those who owned slaves were Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Mifflin, Robert Morris and John Dickerson.

It is the Robert Morris mansion—which served as the first presidential home of President Washington and family—that is the source of the controversy.

The mansion, now demolished, sat at the exact site where the park service now plans to move the Liberty Bell. Initially, White critics of the Liberty Bell project were concerned that the federal agencies were ignoring the fact that the spot was the

original site of the home of America's first president. It was later discovered, however, that the entrance to the planned Liberty Bell Pavilion was being constructed directly on top of the stable where President Washington quartered his slaves. It was at this point that ATAC began to attack.

The coalition of Black community activists, elected officials, historians, religious leaders and civic organizations went into public relations high gear, demanding that the slaves be given a voice at the historical site. Initially, the park service remained steadfast in its position that the only story to be told was that of the Liberty Bell, according to spokesperson Phil Sheridan. Through public protest and unceasing lobbying, the park service began to back down.

Daniel Reidenbach, acting superintendent of Independence Park, recently unveiled the new plans at the African American Museum. The preliminary design for the site of the president's house not only prominently recognizes the eight Black slaves but other acknowledgments honoring slaves in America.

Gary B. Nash, a noted historian from the University of California at Los Angeles who has been characterized as "spending half a century pushing history beyond the stories of powerful White men," appeared at Christ Church on Jan. 25. He aligned with ATAC in a speech titled, "For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll?"

"There is such a thing as managing memory, manipulating memory, and there's also such a thing as murder-

ing memory. I wouldn't want memory murdered at the Liberty Bell," he said.

ATAC spokesman Michael Coard, Esq., called the preliminary design plan "really impressive."

"I can't be more pleased with what we witnessed at the meeting," Coard said. "What I see ahead is something our little Black boys and girls can beam with pride at when they walk through Independence Mall and witness the true history of America and their brave ancestors."

The project, however, still remains embroiled in controversy. Sheridan, the park service spokesperson, indicated there was no money presently to fund the exhibit, which would cost \$4.5 million.

Adding insult to injury, according to Philadelphia historian Lorene Cary, "The

Constitution Center's bus depot will allow tourists to drive over the place where James Oronke Dexter lived." Dexter, she said, was a free Black man and a member of the Free African Society, one of the earliest self-help groups in the United States.

"Because construction has not paused for excavation, the remains of the Dexter house, with its wealth of buried artifacts, will lie underneath the depot," Cary said.

A source associated with the Park Service Planning Committee who wished to remain anonymous, told The Final Call, "The artifacts stand a real chance of being destroyed as the intention is to use the Dexter family home as a storage facility (for the bus depot) without benefit of excavation."

Michael Z. Muhammad writes for the Final Call

## Slavery tags show dark glimpse of American history

CHARLESTON, S.C. (AP) - In the decades before the Civil War, slaveholders in this seaside city could rent their slaves to others to work in a variety of jobs - porters, maids, carpenters, fishermen.

The city fathers, to raise revenue and control the movement of slaves, issued metal badges for the rented slaves to wear.

The rare tags, which have brought as much as \$26,000 at auction and are actively bought and sold by collectors, provide a little-known glimpse into a dark chapter of American history.

"People like the rarity," says Harlan Greene, author of a forthcoming book on the slave badges. "But I also think it is the drama, the gothic horror in that it was worn by a slave."

One of the earliest known badges is dated 1800. Stamped on thin copper, the badges are normally square, about 2 inches a side, and bear the year of issue and occupation the slave performed - servant the most common, fisherman, carpenter and mechanic more rare.

In different years, the badges might be shaped differently and some years had larger badges. Slave owners paid the city a higher tag fee for slaves who had more skills.

The only genuine badges are stamped with either Charleston or Charleston Neck, says J. Grahame Long, curator of history at the Charleston Museum, which

has almost 50 tags, thought to be the largest public collection of the artifacts. The exhibit is part of the museum's permanent low country display and there are no plans for it to travel to other museums and galleries.

But some private collectors, some of whom prefer to remain anonymous, have as many as 60, says Greene. Later this year, Greene and Harry Hutchins will publish "Slavery's Badge: A History of the Slave Hiring System of Charleston, S.C., 1783-1865."

About 1,000 genuine badges are known to exist, but many more than that were stamped, says Greene, who works in the South Carolina Room of the Charleston Public Library.

The tags, like license plates for cars, were issued each year for rented slaves and one of those in the museum collection is badge No. 2,348, issued in 1860.

"The Civil War, depending on how you look at it, was fought over a variety of causes and slavery was a big part of it," says Harry Ridgeway, a Winchester, Va., collector and dealer who has sold the tags over the Internet. "Slave tags represent a tangible relic of slavery ... and not much else fits the bill."

"Slave tags are kind of personal in a sense. Even though there are no names on them, the numbers did represent a real human being."

Charleston was not alone in having laws regulating ur-

ban slavery. Richmond, Va., Savannah, Ga., and Wilmington, N.C., had similar laws, Greene says, but the badge didn't survive.

"It goes back before the Revolution, but there is no artifact," he says. "Were (the badges) made out of paper or were they made out of tin or, as in other cities, the laws were on the books but they weren't enforced? I just can't speculate."

In Charleston, owners were fined if slaves wore the wrong badge or no badge at all.

"It gives the slave some power as to being his own boss, and that's why so many people reacted so strongly against them. They didn't like the idea that slaves could walk around," Greene says.

Much of the opposition to the tags was from working-class whites who felt their jobs could be threatened by skilled, badge-holding slaves.

"They would petition the city, and the city would basically say, 'We're a slave-holding people and there is nothing more important than not to interfere with the rights of a slave holder and his slave. That's sacred,'" Greene says.

Recent interest in the badges, particularly trade among collectors on the Internet, has resulted in numerous fake tags.

With tens of thousands of the genuine badges apparently stamped, and only a relative handful found, where are the rest? Because former slaves generally threw away

the badges after the Civil War, many might still be buried in yards and building sites in Charleston, experts say.

And treasure hunters are

trying to find and sell the tags, Greene says.

"There are numbers of dishonest people in this town who jump fences at night and

get on other people's property," he says. "It's easy. It's quick and dirty. It doesn't take any particular skill if you have a metal detector."

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