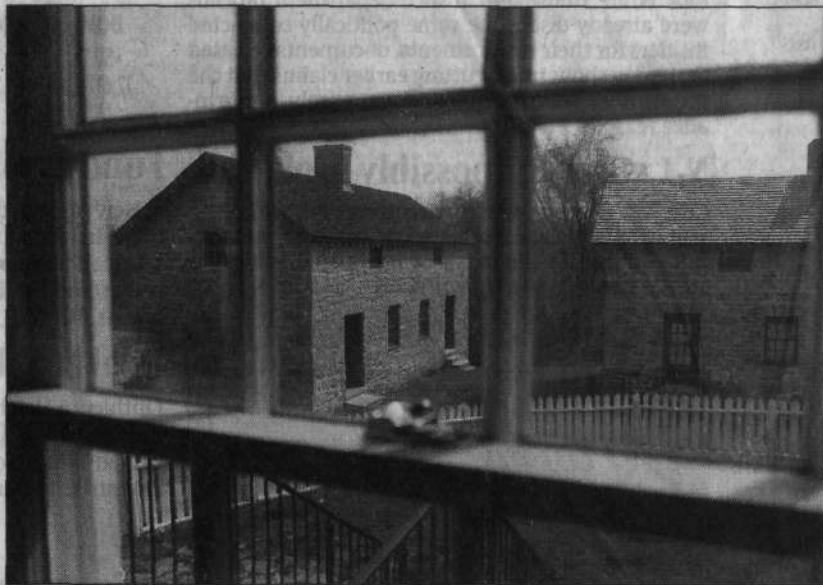


Telling stories once ignored

4-14-2007

[1A]

Historical sites try to add discussion of slaves' lives



Slave quarters, seen from the overseer's house at Hampton National Historic Site, were recently renovated. The buildings opened to the public yesterday.

BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

BY JULIE SCHARPER
[SUN REPORTER]

For years, visitors marveled over the lushly furnished mansion, the elaborate gardens and the luxurious lives of the inhabitants, with their horse races and imported wines.

But they learned little about the lives of the hundreds of slaves at what is now the Hampton National Historic Site in Towson — the men, women and children whose sweat made the estate grand.

While the mansion had been preserved, the few remaining slave quarters were not open to visitors until last fall. In fact, they were used for storage. Now, in an effort to tell about the lives of all the estate's residents, the stone quarters have been restored as part of an exhibit about the lives of slaves that opened to the public yesterday.

At a symposium at Goucher College yesterday, speakers mentioned the site as they discussed the importance — and the challenges — of teaching about slavery at historic sites.

"If we don't explore the fundamental questions about the enslaved, then we are doing the public an injustice," said Lonnie G. Bunch III, the symposium's keynote speaker and the director of the yet-to-be-built National Museum of African American History and Culture.

For decades, guides at historic homes across the South glossed over the issue of slavery. In recent years, more of an effort has been made to provide information. *[Please see SLAVERY, 6A]*

Sites try more complete historical view

SLAVERY [From Page 1A]

tion about slavery, yet the exhibits often fail to broach the centrality of slavery to early American life, the interdependent relationships between slaves, free blacks and whites, and slavery's continuing legacy, Bunch said.

"As museums develop in the 21st century, we want to give the best that we can give in terms of the complete story," said Dianne Swann-Wright, the curator of the Frederick Douglass-Isaac Myers Maritime Park in Fells Point and a speaker at the symposium. "We're not just satisfied talking about the furniture, talking about the person whose name is on the deed."

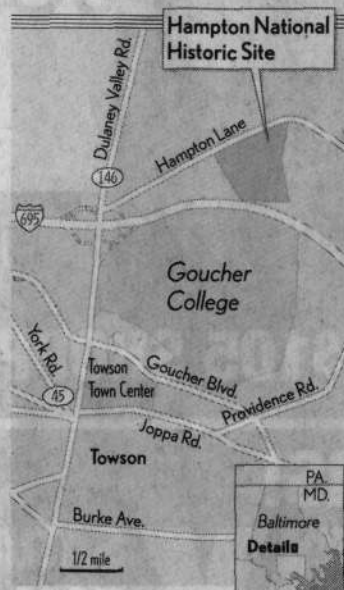
Slavery exhibits have become a bigger part of the experience at Mount Vernon, George Washington's former plantation, and Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's former home, both in Virginia.

At Mount Vernon, museum "interpreters" give daily tours of slaves' quarters and go over what slaves wore and ate, said museum spokeswoman Stephanie Brown. In the fall, the museum opened a new education center that includes an exhibit, *The Dilemma of Slavery*, that features videotaped interviews of scholars and descendants of Washington's slaves, Brown said. The museum also is reconstructing a slave cabin on a farming area near the mansion.

At Monticello, a slave cook's living area in the main mansion was recently reconstructed, said spokesman Wayne Mogielnicki. The project complements the museum's presentation on slave life, which for several years has featured tours of the former site of Mulberry Row, where many slaves lived and worked.

Built in the late 1700s and inhabited by six generations of the Ridgely family, Hampton Mansion has been run by the National Park Service since 1979. The original estate encompassed about 25,000 acres, including the land where Goucher College is located.

Through ledgers, diaries and letters, scholars have created a detailed portrait of the family that lived in the mansion during its heyday. But little is known about



[SUN NEWS GRAPHIC]

the slaves that lived there at that time.

"For Hampton, there's no account of what it was like to be a slave here," said park ranger Kirby Shedlowski. "What the slaves' lives were like, we really don't know."

Although no known narratives written by slaves at Hampton exist, the park's staff gleaned information from other documents. According to the exhibit, records show that Charles Carnan Ridgely owned more than 350 slaves at the time of his death in 1829, at a time when most county slave owners kept fewer than five. Upon his death, he freed nearly 300 slaves, although his son later bought about 60 more.

Documents list food — corn, herring, bacon — and clothing that the Ridgelys parceled out to slaves.

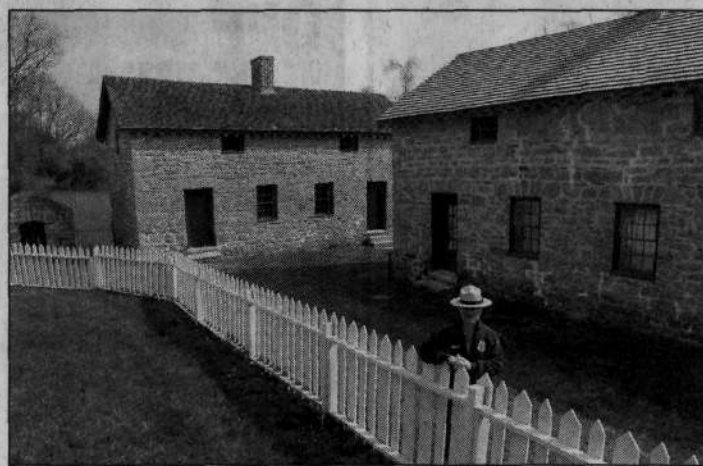
A teenage daughter, Eliza "Didy" Ridgely, kept a list of Christmas gifts that she gave to the children who lived on the plantation in the early 1840s. Elsewhere, she writes of a fishing trip: "Even the little black servants are taken out with us as a great treat and while we are eating our dinners they are allowed to fish for themselves or for us."

Only two slave quarters remain on the Hampton property. The newly renovated building is locat-



Kirby Shedlowski, a park ranger at Hampton National Historical Site, sweeps a room in the recently renovated slave quarters.

PHOTOS BY BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]



William Curtis, a park ranger, stands near the slave quarters. Many historical sites are making a greater effort to address slaves' lives and contributions.

ed a stone's throw from what was once the overseer's house. Two families probably occupied the small building that was divided duplex style. Guides think that occupants cooked at large hearths downstairs and slept upstairs.

Posters that describe the lives of

Hampton's slaves hang in one room. Another room holds a recreation of how the living quarters may have once looked.

Some of the most specific information about the slaves and their lives comes from ads announcing rewards for the return of runaways from Hampton Farm. One

offers a \$100 reward for the return of a 15-year-old girl named Rebecca Posey. She had a "round good looking face" and was wearing "a dark blue striped dress, a dark colored shawl and no bonnet" when she left, according to an ad.

Letters and memoirs give some clue to the harsh treatment slaves received. A 1796 letter from Walter Bowie to Charles Carnan Ridgely asks him to be compassionate to a man who had escaped and been recaptured.

"I could wish if it is possible ... that you have instructions not to whip him, as he appears truly penitent for transgression," he writes. "He very much laments the parting from his wife and says he will stay with you if you purchase his wife."

Talking about slavery can make guides and visitors uncomfortable, said Iris Beasley, an employee of the National Park Service who organized the symposium. But it's necessary to discuss and understand this part of our nation's history, she said.

"It's still important to see where we started to really see how far we've come," she said.

The goal of the symposium was to bring together scholars with those who deal with the public at historical sites, Beasley said. Speakers included staff members from Historical Williamsburg and the head of the National Park Service's Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program.

Among the crowd of about 100 participants were several staff members and volunteers from the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History, where there is an exhibit titled "At Freedom's Door: Challenging Slavery in Maryland."

The symposium "speaks to so many issues that aren't always spoken of when slavery is seen as only an African-American issue, not a national issue and an international issue," said Rae Whelchel, a volunteer docent at the Lewis museum.

Bettye Gardner, a history professor from Coppin State University, discussed the unique experience of slaves in Baltimore, who lived in close proximity to their white owners and interacted with the city's large population of free African-Americans.

She said that historical sites must draw attention to the realities of slavery.

"People are able to put a different spin on what plantation life was like," she said in an interview. "You were not dealing with groups of happy slaves who enjoyed their lives, but they did have lives."

Bunch, the director of the national museum, said it is important to celebrate not only former slaves who became great civic leaders like Frederick Douglass, but the ordinary people who did not let their forced labor break their spirits.

"I want us to understand ... a woman who held a hoe taller than she was, who went out in that field every day and believed it could be better for the next generation," he said.

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julie.scharper@baltsun.com
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Sun reporter Josh Mitchell contributed to this story.