

Reliving the Troubled Past in “Republican Disneyland”: The 1994 Colonial Williamsburg
Auction and Living History Representations of Enslavement



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The author, aged 10, at Colonial Williamsburg.

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Introduction

On October 10, 1994, interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg—perhaps the nation’s preeminent living history institution—staged a mock auction of enslaved African Americans in a controversial performance intended to communicate the centrality of enslavement to 18th century colonial life. The auction immediately sparked a media firestorm, prompting intense national debates about the role of reenactment in educating Americans about slavery. The public discussion about the auction, which spanned from op-ed pages to historical journals, centered around whether the auction was voyeuristic entertainment or necessary education; it engendered a complex network of questions about the necessity of confronting difficult racial histories, the relationship between education and entertainment, and the connection between historical and contemporary racism.

This thesis presents an intellectual history of the Colonial Williamsburg auction controversy, analyzing how thought leaders, public commentators, historians, and others discussed race, enslavement, American history, and the role of historians through the nexus of the auction. Looking at the Colonial Williamsburg controversy along other contemporary social conflicts, especially the 1993-4 debate over historical theme park Disney’s America, illuminates how the early 1990s culture wars influenced national discourses about race, history, and the changing social position of historians. Framing the Colonial Williamsburg controversy within the context of the culture wars and the Disney’s America debate reveals how enslavement was alternately concealed and discussed as a central component of American history. In the 1990s, it seemed that living history might help Americans confront the lingering history of enslavement; thirty years later, entertainment has facilitated racial erasure instead.

Literature Review

This thesis draws from the large pool of scholarship on the 1990s culture wars, living history institutions, museum studies, and Colonial Williamsburg. My analysis of the culture wars and the Disney's America controversy relies on Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt's *History Wars: the Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, Gary B. Nash et al.'s *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, and Mike Wallace's *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*. *History Wars* (1996) is an essay collection which takes as its central topic the *Enola Gay* controversy and its ramifications for the "history wars," for American history, and for America as a nation; contributors argue that the controversy revealed a deep-seated cultural anxiety about America's role in the post-Cold-War order.¹ Similarly, in *History On Trial*, published in 1997, Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn argue that the culture wars uncovered a contentious national discourse about the role of history in supporting the nation.² Finally, Wallace argues in *Mickey Mouse History* that the Disney's America controversy laid bare American anxieties about the history of slavery and the prospect of "edu-tainment" about enslavement.³

Analyzing reactions to the Colonial Williamsburg auction reenactment also requires drawing on scholarship from the fields of museum studies and public history. Most notably, *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, edited by Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig and published in 1990, tracks the development of the new social history in museums

¹ Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, 1st ed (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 6.

² Notably, Nash and his cowriters, all of whom worked at UCLA's National Center for History in Schools, experienced the conflict firsthand as contributors to the *National Standards in US History*, a planning document intended to guide history curricula in American public schools which set off a culture war storm in 1994 and 1995. Gary B. Nash, Charlotte A. Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, 1st ed (New York: A.A. Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1997).

³ Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*, Critical Perspectives on the Past (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

and indicates the necessity of engaging the public in public history exhibits.⁴ *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, edited by James O. and Lois E. Horton and published in 2006, adds a specifically race-based layer to the discussion, analyzing how public history controversies such as the Williamsburg auction demonstrate the difficulty—and the necessity—of employing public history to educate Americans about enslavement.

As one of the most popular living history institutions in the country, Colonial Williamsburg has been widely discussed by historians and scholars in other fields. The most influential work about the site is Richard Handler and Eric Gable's *The New History in an Old Museum*, a 1997 anthropological analysis of Colonial Williamsburg's corporate culture. They conclude that the museum operates as a sort of "Republican Disneyland," promoting patriotic narratives despite ongoing internal efforts to democratize the history on display. *The New History in an Old Museum* is exhaustive on the subject of living historical interpretation at the institution, as well as the corporate politics which influence it. The other crucial work on Colonial Williamsburg's past is Anders Greenspan's 2002 monograph *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia's Eighteenth-Century Capital*. Greenspan provides a far-reaching overview of the institution's history from its inception in the 1920s to the early 2000s.⁵ Both Greenspan and Handler and Gable discuss Colonial Williamsburg's changing interpretations of Black history over the course of the 20th century; Greenspan specifically discusses the auction, while Handler and Gable do not (they performed their fieldwork in 1990-1991, while the auction occurred in 1994).

⁴ Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

⁵ Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 2nd ed. (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469664323_greenspan.

The most significant scholarship addressing the auction reenactment and representations of Black history at Williamsburg is, unsurprisingly, scholarly work from the College of William and Mary, which sits mere minutes from Colonial Williamsburg. Most notably, Rex Ellis' 1989 PhD dissertation "Presenting The Past: Education, Interpretation And The Teaching Of Black History At Colonial Williamsburg" argues that Colonial Williamsburg broke new ground in its interpretations of Black history in the 1970s and 1980s, driven by the rise of social history as a field. Additionally, Erin Krutko Devlin's 2003 Master's thesis "Colonial Williamsburg's Slave Auction Re-Enactment: Controversy, African American History And Public Memory" is by far the most exhaustive scholarly work on the subject of the auction itself; Devlin argues that the auction controversy revealed an ongoing struggle over the public memory of enslavement. Other than Devlin's work, there has been no formal scholarly work solely devoted to the auction and its reverberations: this thesis attempts to fill this gap.

Because this thesis is an intellectual history of the Colonial Williamsburg auction reenactment, what would in other projects be secondary sources are in this case primary. Historians discussed the auction widely in professional organization newsletters and journals, and in newspapers' op-ed pages; Colonial Williamsburg employees and members of the AAIP department have published widely about the auction and about Black history at Colonial Williamsburg. Other than the discussions analyzed in this thesis, for the most part the Colonial Williamsburg auction appears in contemporary historical scholarship as a wisp, a throwaway example in a dependent clause, treated as nothing more than one controversy among many (the *Enola Gay*, the "West as America", the National Education Standards, Disney's America, and more). In the twenty-first century, historians seem loath to dig up this particular part of the past. Rather than looking at the Colonial Williamsburg auction as one example of the culture wars

writ large, this thesis seeks to place it at the center of a specific debate about representing Black history in museums and living history sites in the early 1990s.

Methods

In order to sample and assess the widest array of published contemporaneous reactions to the auction, this thesis looked at news coverage in daily papers and weekly news magazines, opinion columns, letters to the editor, journal articles, and other forms of commentary; to analyze discussions specifically among historians, it drew on articles in professional and scholarly journals, professional organizations' newsletters, and trade publications such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. These roughly 100 primary sources indicate the grounds of discussion both in the public sphere and among historians, and allow us to track the evolution of discourse over time.

Sources include 50 distinct news or commentary publications, from the *New York Times* and *Associated Press* down to the *Newport News Daily Press* and the *Richmond Afro-American* (See Addendum). The auction was discussed and commented upon widely in both national and local publications, which raised different questions and concerns based on their audiences. 28 of the publications referenced in this thesis had either a national audience (for example, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*) or a local audience not located in Virginia (such as the *Orlando Sentinel* or *Harrisburg Patriot*). Five others had international audiences, including the *International Herald Tribune* and *Toronto Star*.

Of the fifty, eight publications catered to the Black community, including *Jet Magazine* and the *Washington Informer*. Because their journalists wrote for a specifically Black audience, they raised different questions and qualms than other publications, focusing on what the auction meant for African Americans and Black history writ large. Three of those—*Emerge*, the

Richmond Afro-American, and the *Washington Informer*—were papers local to the area of Virginia where Colonial Williamsburg is located, further complicating their perspective. Regional papers more generally, of which this thesis will draw on twelve including the *Virginian-Pilot* and *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, also figure largely in the discussion around the Williamsburg auction. Because regional publications often reported more extensively on the auction, they provide not only more information but also insight into how the communities most affected by the auction responded. Taken together, these 50 publications provide an overview of American media in the early 1990s, and thus can indicate the currents of popular discourse which swirled around the auction and other culture war issues in different locations.

In order to gauge how historians discussed the Colonial Williamsburg auction, Disney's America, and the culture wars at large, I relied on professional journals and publications, as well as newsletters produced by professional organizations. Most notably, this thesis draws on the Organization of American Historians' newsletter and magazine, as well as the American Historical Association's newsletter *Perspectives on History*, the National Council on Public History's *Public History News*. Individual articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Black Issues in Higher Education*, *The Public Historian*, and other such publications were also instructive. Documents produced at Colonial Williamsburg, including the *Colonial Williamsburg News*, a weekly newspaper produced for staffers, and planning documents, provided insight into the inner workings of the Foundation and staffers' decision-making processes.

[Culture Warriors, Beware!](#)

In the early 1990s, the United States were wracked by a series of political and social eruptions fueled by economic and social upheaval, a surging conservative movement, and American anxiety about the post-Cold-War world order. Popularly called the culture wars, the

pulsing center of the conflict was American history and by extension American identity: who could claim it? Who could tell it? As historian Mike Wallace put it in 1996, “hot heritage skirmishes” broke out “all along the history front” of the country’s culture war.⁶ The military metaphor is apt: the culture wars raged over who could tell what histories, in what contexts, and what those histories meant for the nation as a whole.

Conservatives, who in the early 1990s recognized that ‘protecting’ American history and identity was an effective wedge issue for many voters, fueled the culture wars as a political tactic. Many of those who gained power in the Republican take-over of the House of Representatives in 1994, most notably Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, boosted their political base by targeting the Smithsonian, the NEA, the NEH, leftist historians, those who wanted to preserve the right to burn the American flag, gays in the military, and more. As historian Paul Boyer noted in 1996, “By such issues, the New Right defined itself, rallied the faithful, and demonized its enemies.”⁷ The culture wars, especially on their history front, made for effective, if noxious, politics. The great uncertainty of the early 1990s—amidst the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Gulf War in 1990-1991, economic instability from the 1990-1991 recession, and more— magnified perceived challenges to national narratives, making history even more important. Historian Edward T. Linenthal argued in 1996 that the collapse of the Soviet Union destabilized Americans’ conceptions of the nation. This made history more important as a nationalizing bulwark; when the left seemed to challenge a patriotic vision of the past, the right went on attack.⁸

⁶ Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory*, Critical Perspectives on the Past (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), xi.

⁷ Paul Boyer, “Whose History Is It Anyway? Memory, Politics, and Historical Scholarship,” in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, 1st ed (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 133.

⁸ Linenthal, “Anatomy of a Controversy,” 62.

The culture wars as a phenomenon began with the 1989 National Endowment for the Arts controversy. In December 1989, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia mounted a retrospective exhibit of photographs, some nude or homoerotic, by Robert Mapplethorpe, supported by a \$30,000 grant from the NEA. Republican Senator Jesse Helms, already incensed over an NEA award for artist Andres Serrano's controversial photo *Piss Christ*, jumped on the opportunity to castigate the agency. Helms threatened the NEA's funding and whipped up a fervor over supposed government-funded obscenity, a furor which led to the arrest (and later acquittal) of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center curator on obscenity.⁹ Ironically, the controversy served to increase public interest in the show, leading to record-breaking attendance and auction prices which indicated the high level of engagement on all sides.¹⁰ With the NEA debacle, the culture wars had begun.

With the debate over "The West as America," a 1991 exhibit at the National Museum of American Art that encouraged critical reevaluation of works of art about the West, the culture wars' history front opened. As art historian Alan Wallach noted in 1998, "the central point of the exhibition was that, in conquering the West, palette and paintbrush were as much instruments of domination as Colt revolvers or the pony express."¹¹ This attack on traditional American history seemed anathema to some conservatives, who raged in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Times*. The *WSJ* Editorial Board, for example, declared: "Only in the land of the free, of course, is it possible to mount an entirely hostile ideological assault on the nation's founding and history, to recast that history in the most distorted terms—and have the taxpayers

⁹ Dustin Kidd, "Mapplethorpe and the New Obscenity," *Afterimage* 30, no. 5 (April 2003): 7.

¹⁰ Douglas M. McLeod and Jill A. MacKenzie, "Print Media and Public Reaction to the Controversy Over NEA Funding for Robert Mapplethorpe's 'The Perfect Moment' Exhibit," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (June 1, 1998): 278–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769909807500204>.

¹¹ Alan Wallach, "The Battle over 'The West As America,'" in *Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States* (Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 107.

foot the bill.”¹² Outrage quickly made its way to the halls of the Senate, where Republican Senators threatened the Smithsonian’s funding. Wallach noted that the exhibit “coincided with the opening rounds in a far reaching debate over [political correctness]...To the ideologues of the Reagan right, who displayed a curious schadenfreude in piling up examples of ‘pc’ outrages, ‘The West as America’ looked like a ripe target.”¹³ As conservative attacks on the Smithsonian mounted, it became clear that this was merely the first skirmish in a larger battle over whether America’s past was a shining, patriotic triumph—or something rather darker.

Two years later, the war on “politically correct” history found a new flashpoint in a Smithsonian exhibit of the *Enola Gay*, the American plane which dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima in 1945; the debate around the exhibit’s “revisionist” or unpatriotic history threw into vivid relief conservatives’ anxiety about America’s place in the post-Cold-War order. In 1993, the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) circulated a draft exhibit script, honed through three years of planning, which engendered early rumblings of backlash. The Air Force Association, a lobby organization for current and former service members, was the first to attack the NASM for allegedly dishonoring veterans, privately in September of 1993 and then publicly in April of the following year. They alleged that the exhibit as planned did not adequately discuss Japanese atrocities, focused on the harm to the people of Hiroshima, and ignored the potential that American lives would have been lost in a longer war.¹⁴ Throughout the spring and summer of 1994, public opinion turned against the Smithsonian, fanned by the press and military and veterans’ groups including the American Legion. Influential

¹² Editorial Board, “Pilgrims and Other Imperialists,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 1991.

¹³ Wallach, 111.

¹⁴ Edward T. Linenthal, “Anatomy of a Controversy,” in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, 1st ed (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 37-40.

commentary took the critics' side, and extensive news coverage further fanned the controversy.¹⁵ In September, the Senate declared that the exhibit was "revisionist and offensive to many World War II veterans," imperiling the Smithsonian's funding.¹⁶ The NASM wavered in the fall, making considerable concessions to detractors in subsequent drafts of the exhibit script which only succeeded in angering all sides. On January 30, 1995, after months of bedlam in the media and in Congress, the NASM cancelled the exhibit, and in May the museum's director was forced to step down.¹⁷ "Revisionist" history would no longer be tolerated.

In late 1994, the National Standards for United States History sparked the next skirmish in the war over American history. The affair was set off by an October 20, 1994, *Wall Street Journal* op-ed by Lynne Cheney, the outgoing chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, entitled "The End of History." As head of the NEH, Cheney had signed off on funding a three-year study to rewrite national guidelines for K-12 American history education by the National Center for History in the Schools. In her op-ed, published a month before the standards were set for release, Cheney complained that they had been overrun by politically correct, revisionist, ivory-tower academics with a "great hatred for traditional history" who wished to turn children against the US.¹⁸ Her allegations, which were for the most part unfair or false, were quickly picked up by right-wing radio host Rush Limbaugh, conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer, Republican commentator and politico Oliver North, and other conservative figures; In November and December of 1994, the controversy dominated TV and

¹⁵ Linenthal, "Anatomy of a Controversy," 48.

¹⁶ David Thelen, "History after the Enola Gay Controversy: An Introduction," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (1995): 1029–35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2945110>. 1029.

¹⁷ Linenthal, "Anatomy of a Controversy," 50-58; Mike Wallace, "Culture War, History Front," in *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, 1st ed (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 183-185.

¹⁸ Lynne Cheney, "The End of History," *Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 1994.

talk radio.¹⁹ Attacks on history were no longer confined to museums: now conservatives challenged historians' right to teach Americans about the country's past.

Historians were now players on a public stage, forced to defend their profession against massive political attack, including allegations of political correctness, revisionism, disloyalty, hatred of traditional American history, and more.²⁰ Their anxiety is clear in professional historical organizations' newsletters from 1994-1995, which included articles about the continuing attack on historians in nearly every issue.²¹ The NEH, "West as America", and *Enola Gay* controversies challenged historians' ability to teach Americans in museums; the National History Standards debacle challenged their ability to teach history in schools.²² When the 1993

¹⁹ Gary B. Nash, Charlotte A. Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, 1st ed (New York: A.A. Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1997), 193.

²⁰ Arnita A. Jones, "The OAH in Troublesome Times: 1980-2000," in *The Organization of American Historians and the Writing and Teaching of American History*, ed. Richard Stewart Kirkendall (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 55-58. Karen Winkler, "Who Owns History?," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 20, 1995, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/who-owns-history/>.

²¹ In the Organization of American Historians newsletter, see Alfred Young, "SOS: Storm Warning for American Museums," *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 22, no. 4 (November 1994); 1, 6-8. Gary B. Nash, "National Standards in U.S. History: A Note from the President," *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 22, no. 4 (November 1994); 1, 16. Michael Kammen, "History as a Lightning Rod," *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 23, no. 2 (May 1995): 1, 6. *Organization of American Historians Newsletter*, vol. 23 no. 3 (August 1995). In the American Historical Association newsletter *Perspectives on History*, see the monthly "NCC Advocacy Update"; see also AHA Staff, "National History Standards Published," *Perspectives on History - American Historical Association* 32, no. 9 (December 1, 1994); AHA Staff, "Council Resolves Support for NEH," *Perspectives on History - American Historical Association* 33, no. 2 (February 1, 1995); Sandria Freitag, John Hammer, and Catherine Rudder, "Facing the Big Questions: Federal Support for the Civilizing Side of Life," *Perspectives on History - American Historical Association* 33, no. 2 (February 1, 1995); Sandria Freitag, "Facing the Debate on the Support of New Knowledge," *Perspectives on History - American Historical Association* 33, no. 2 (February 2, 1995); AHA Staff, "National Humanities Alliance Reports on Status of Endowments," *Perspectives on History - American Historical Association* 33, no. 4 (April 1, 1995); Barbara Franco, "Doing History in Public: Balancing Historical Fact with Public Meaning," *Perspectives on History - American Historical Association* 33, no. 5 (May 1, 1995); AHA Staff, "Council for Basic Education Reviewing National History Standards," *Perspectives on History - American Historical Association* 33, no. 6 (September 1, 1995); Nash, "National Center for History in the Schools to Revise History Standards," *Perspectives on History - American Historical Association* 33, no. 9 (December 1, 1995).

²² *Back of the Big House* is sometimes seen as one of these culture war controversies, but it's actually somewhat closer to the Colonial Williamsburg auction response in that it involved some African-Americans rejecting a specific interpretation/representation of Black history; see Linton Weeks, "Plantation Life Display Revived," *Washington Post*, January 4, 1996, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/01/04/plantation-life-display-revived/14cdb51c-4cf4-4140-9b92-e755ca94ab71/>; Karen de Witt, "After Protests, Library of Congress Closes Exhibition on Slavery," *The New York Times*, December 21, 1995, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/21/us/after-protests-library-of-congress-closes-exhibition-on-slavery.html>;

Disney's America theme park and the 1994 Colonial Williamsburg slave auction emerged as topics of discussion, they did so in the context of an ongoing and very fraught debate about the role of history, historians, and museums in American life. Indeed, the environment of the culture wars primed both controversies to explode.

The Fight Over Disney's America

In November of 1993, the Disney Corporation captured headlines when they announced their plan for Disney's America, a history-themed amusement park in Northern Virginia which would immerse visitors in history, making them, for example, "feel what it was like to be a slave."²³ After nearly a year of pitched fighting in the public arena over the location and the history to be displayed, Disney admitted defeat in September 1994. Disney's America was just one front in the ongoing history wars, but the complex discussions which swirled around it in 1993 and 1994 are crucial to any understanding of the Colonial Williamsburg auction controversy. As conflicting discourses about the park's vision of history, goals, and location emerged, recorded in letters to the editor, editorials, articles in newspapers and historical journals, professional newsletters, and even Senate hearings, the ongoing history wars made any conflict over American history seem deeply urgent.²⁴ The Disney's America debacle engendered a vigorous public debate about balancing entertainment and education at immersive living history sites, especially in regards to the history of enslavement; this set the scene for the Colonial Williamsburg auction controversy. Most importantly, the cultural position of historians

Linton Weeks, "The Continuing Hurt Of History," *Washington Post*, December 22, 1995, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1995/12/22/the-continuing-hurt-of-history/96e8b4ba-60b6-4f25-b159-5cc9d8e80c43/>.

²³ Singletary and Hsu, "Disney Says Va. Park Will Be Serious Fun,."

²⁴ Bethanee Bemis, "Mirror, Mirror for Us All: Disney Theme Parks and the Collective Memory of the American National Narrative," *The Public Historian* 42, no. 1 (2020): 54, 58-61.

in the ongoing history wars meant that race was the ultimate subtext of the Disney's America discussion.

Disney executives made a splash when they first announced their intention to build an American history and culture-themed park in Haymarket, Virginia on November 11, 1993.²⁵ At Disney's America, visitors would be able to ride an Industrial Revolution or Lewis and Clark themed attraction, walk through a reconstructed Native American village, and sleep in a Civil War era style inn; each of the park's nine "playlands" would be devoted to a different period of American history.²⁶ Aware of the company's reputation for sanitizing history, Disney executives assured the public that the history put forth in the park would not be the company's typical fare. Instead, Disney Chairman Michael Eisner told reporters that the company would not shy away from "painful, disturbing and agonizing" history; "We are going to be sensitive, but we will not be showing the absolute propaganda of the country," he told the *Washington Post*. "We will show the Civil War with all its racial conflict."²⁷ Similarly, Disney senior vice president Bob Weis told reporters: "This is not a Pollyanna view of America... We want to make you a Civil War soldier. We want to make you feel what it was like to be a slave or what it was like to escape through the underground railroad."²⁸ Even so, Disney representatives emphasized that the park would still be enjoyable to tourists: Mark L. Pacala, senior vice president and general manager of Disney's America told the *Washington Post* that "The idea is to walk out of Disney's America with a smile on your face... We don't want people to come out with a dour face. It is

²⁵ Kirstin Downey Grimsley and Kent Jenkins Jr, "DISNEY PLANS THEME PARK HERE," *Washington Post*, November 10, 1993.

²⁶ Drew Taylor, "Inside Disney's America: The Most Controversial Never-Built Theme Park," *Collider*, July 3, 2020, <https://collider.com/disneys-america-cancelled-theme-park-explained/>.

²⁷ Michelle Singletary and Spencer S. Hsu, "Disney Says Va. Park Will Be Serious Fun," *Washington Post*, November 12, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/11/12/disney-says-va-park-will-be-serious-fun/a1c0ef16-ae33-4d99-a489-3fbfeedd1c7b/>."

²⁸ Singletary and Hsu, "Disney Says Va. Park Will Be Serious Fun,"

going to be fun with a capital F.”²⁹ From the project’s very beginning, Disney walked a public relations tightrope between reassuring the public that the park would present real history in an educational manner, and insisting that visitors would still have fun. For many, the idea that the Disney corporation could responsibly combine painful history and entertainment was entirely absurd, and thus the Disney’s America controversy was born.

Disney’s America quickly became a hot-button topic, and by the summer of 1994 it had reached a fever pitch. The *New York Times* op-ed pages became a battleground, the Senate held a hearing on the theme park’s potential environmental impact, and there were several protests, the largest of which (in September 1994) attracted 3,000 marchers on the Mall in DC, including Ralph Nader.³⁰ By September of 1994, Disney—despite spending a reported \$50,000 on public relations per week—was forced to admit defeat. On September 28, 1994, the corporation announced that it would begin searching for another location.³¹

Disney’s reputation for nationalist, sanitized visions of the past contributed significantly to opposition to the park. For much of the prior half century, the Disney corporation’s Mickey Mouse cartoons, movies about historical figures like Davey Crockett, and theme park exhibits

²⁹Michelle Singletary, “Disney Sees Challenge In Honest And Entertaining Past,” *Washington Post*, November 13, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1993/11/13/disney-sees-challenge-in-honest-and-entertaining-past/d8408d17-df71-4ff2-bfcb-e9ae82a36343/>.

³⁰For a few examples from the *New York Times*, see Editorial Board, “Virginia, Say No to the Mouse,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 1994, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/02/24/opinion/virginia-say-no-to-the-mouse.html>; David Verbraska, “Disney Can Make American History Fun,” *The New York Times*, March 11, 1994, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/03/11/opinion/l-disney-can-make-american-history-fun-435031.html>.; William Safire, “Third Manassas,” *The New York Times*, May 26, 1994, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/26/opinion/essay-third-manassas.html>; Arlie Schardt, “The Trouble With a Bull Run Theme Park,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 1994, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/08/opinion/l-the-trouble-with-a-bull-run-theme-park-334162.html>. Regarding protests, see D’Vera Cohn and Michael D. Shear, “TWO VIEWS OF DISNEY ON PARADE,” *Washington Post*, September 18, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1994/09/18/two-views-of-disney-on-parade/bbc121d8-6187-4c4c-84a1-e738f8f9dfa9/>; Reuters, “Disney Park Is Protested,” *The New York Times*, September 18, 1994, sec. U.S.

³¹Richard Perez-Pena, “Disney Drops Plan for History Theme Park in Virginia,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 1994, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/29/us/disney-drops-plan-for-history-theme-park-in-virginia.html>; Charles W Bailey, “How Washington Insiders Ambushed Mickey Mouse,” *The Washington Monthly* (Washington, United States: Washington Monthly, December 1994), 12-14.

like Main Street, USA, Frontierland, and the Hall of Presidents had provided Americans with a folksy and placatingly patriotic view of history. When it came to enslavement and Black history, Disney had an even worse track record. While many of the company's films feature racist stereotypes, the company had—despite its own efforts to pull the horrifically racist movie from circulation at the time—based the popular 1980s *Splash Mountain* ride at Disneyland on one of the most appallingly racist films in its catalog, the 1946 film *Song of the South*.³² Little surprise, then, that even before its pseudo-nationalist animated film *Pocahontas* came out in 1995 and before the corporation toppled headfirst into the Disney's America debate in 1993, “Disney History” or “Mickey Mouse History” was a synonym for a sanitized, commercial, and fundamentally dishonest view of the past.³³ When Disney executives declared that Disney's America would make visitors “feel what it was like to be a slave,” many thus assumed the worst.

Indeed, the first attacks on Disney's America condemned its “Disney History” version of the American past. The *New York Times* Editorial Board fired the first substantive shot in the public relations war in February of 1994, critiquing the economic changes and demands on the state which the theme park would inflict and warning readers that “What the kids would remember about such an experience would be the technology and the thrills, not the history.”³⁴ Most importantly, it argued that the location posed a threat to the hallowed battleground of Manassas—just five miles from the proposed site—and the Virginia Piedmont, writing instead that parents who wanted to expose their children to history should show their children the “real”

³² Jason Sperb, “On Tar Babies and Honey Pots: Splash Mountain, ‘Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah,’ and the Transmedia Dissipation of *Song of the South*,” in *Disney's Most Notorious Film: Race, Convergence, and the Hidden Histories of Song of the South*, 1st ed (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 158–99.

³³ Mike Wallace, “Introduction,” *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory, Critical Perspectives on the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Bethanee Bemis, “Mirror, Mirror for Us All: Disney Theme Parks and the Collective Memory of the American National Narrative,” *The Public Historian* 42, no. 1 (2020): 57.

³⁴ Editorial Board, “Virginia, Say No to the Mouse.”

history that Disney's America threatened: "Let them sit still at Manassas, and listen for the presence of the dead." Manassas, as the site of two bloody battles of the American Civil War, represented the theme park's polar opposite: it was grave, somber, and, most importantly, authentic history. Defending Manassas—and, by proxy, "real" American history—became a cornerstone of many attacks on Disney's America.

In the press, Disney became a villain, threatening American history at its most historic sites. In May 1994, *New York Times* op-ed columnist Frank Rich railed against Disney's America as a villain of the ongoing "cultural civil war." He complained about both its location—which made it a potential replacement for visitors for the "bona fide historical trusts" of Washington, D.C. and the surrounding region—and its potential content. Rich argued that history itself was under attack in the culture-war "struggle between theme-park America and authentic America", questioning: "Will this country preserve its real history, which requires education and reflection to be understood, or simply turn it over to the Imagineers of Disney, to be repackaged as socko virtual reality?" He concluded that "With the advent of Disney's America, the big bad wolf is standing right outside the door, poised to devour our past."³⁵ Similarly but less colorfully, journalist Peter Carlson opined in the *Washington Post* in May that "Disney's history is to history as Disney's Main Street U.S.A. is to Main Street—it's spruced up, prettified, mythologized. There's no "Other America" and no other-side-of-the-tracks."³⁶ Within the context of the culture war, Disney thus emerged as a cartoon villain threatening not only the cultural institutions of the surrounding region, but the fabric of "real" American history as a whole.

³⁵ Frank Rich, "Disney's Bull Run," *New York Times*, May 22, 1994, sec. OP-ED.

³⁶ Peter Carlson, "MORE REAL THAN REALITY," *Washington Post*, May 15, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/magazine/1994/05/15/more-real-than-reality/1cdd0fc9-dab0-4bc3-a9eb-044ce12d9ae0/>. See also Editorial Board, "Historyland: 'Real America' Park to Break Disney Mold," *Patriot*, November 13, 1993, sec. Editorial, America's Historical Newspapers.

The stage was perfectly set for historians to attack Disney in defense of the past: many chose to challenge Disney on the park's location, though, rather than the corporation's representation of American history. In May of 1994, a group of notable historians, inventively named Protect Historic America, officially launched a counter-attack on the Disney Corporation. The group's leaders included former Yale University professor C. Vann Woodward and Duke University professor John Hope Franklin, two well-respected scholars of Southern and Black history. Protect Historic America also boasted David McCullough (the host of PBS' 'American Experience', narrator of Ken Burns' *Civil War* miniseries, and noted citizen historian), controversial novelist William Styron, journalist Tom Wicker, Southern public historian and novelist Shelby Foote (immortalized in Tony Horwitz's 1998 bestseller *Confederates in the Attic*), head of the National Trust for Historic Preservation Richard Moe, Pulitzer Prize-winning historians Arthur Schlesinger Jr, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and James McPherson; and more.³⁷ Even Ken Burns, who was by then famous on the strength of his 1990 PBS miniseries *The Civil War*, made media appearances and testified on Protect Historic America's behalf during the Disney's America Senate hearings. The National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society and the Wilderness Society joined the PHA's side in the fight over Disney's America; as a group, they received significant media attention and directed much of the public discussion about the theme park.

Despite the fact that the PHA was largely headed by historians, they did not attack Disney's America on historical grounds; they claimed that they objected not to Disney's

³⁷ Spencer S. Hsu, "Historians, Writers Organize Against Disney Theme Park," *Washington Post*, May 11, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/1994/05/11/historians-writers-organize-against-disney-theme-park/6b3834a6-2af0-4649-81c3-783e27624a1d/>. Michael Janofsky, "Learned Opposition to New Disney Park," *The New York Times*, May 12, 1994, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/12/us/learned-opposition-to-new-disney-park.html>.

commercialized history but to the desecration of Civil War battlefields. Indeed, Civil War historian James McPherson wrote in August 1994 that “As historians we do not challenge Disney's right to present and interpret history... Rather, we oppose their doing so at the 3,000-acre site near Haymarket.”³⁸ McPherson argued that Disney’s America would “virtually destroy” the Manassas battlefield, making it impossible for visitors to comprehend the scope of its “real” history: “The ambience necessary for the imagination to re-create and the mind to understand the battles in which thousands of men gave their lives in a war that shaped the destiny of the American people would be destroyed forever.”³⁹ Similarly, Pulitzer-Prize winning Southern historian and PHA president C. Vann Woodward contended in one of the earliest articles on PHA that Disney’s America would represent “an appalling commercialization and vulgarization of the scene of our most tragic history”: not the history itself, but its setting.⁴⁰ Most notably, Woodward wrote that “most of us [in Protect Historic America] are not worried that Disney will ‘misinterpret the past.’ With Disney it is pretty much taken for granted.” Instead, PHA members were troubled by the “desecration” Manassas’ “sacred” soil, which had “soaked up more of the blood, sweat and tears of American history than any other area of the country.”⁴¹ Indeed, several PHA members emphasized that the area contained 13 historic towns, 16 Civil War battlefields, and 17 historic districts, focusing on the detriment to the terrain rather than to Civil War history.⁴²

³⁸ James Oliver Horton et al., “A House Divided: Historians Confront Disney’s America,” *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 22, no. 3 (August 1994): 1.

³⁹ Horton et al., “A House Divided: Historians Confront Disney’s America,” *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 22, no. 3 (August 1994): 9.

⁴⁰ Hsu, “Historians, Writers Organize Against Disney Theme Park.”

⁴¹ Woodward, “A Mickey Mouse Idea,” 16.

⁴² Otis L. Graham, “Editor’s Corner: Learning Together: Disney and the Historians,” *The Public Historian* 16, no. 4 (1994): 5–8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3378007>, 6. Schardt, “The Trouble With a Bull Run Theme Park”; Richard Moe, James Oliver Horton et al., “A House Divided: Historians Confront Disney’s America,” *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 22, no. 3 (August 1994): 9.

This is likely in part because, amidst culture war attacks on historians, it was an easier battle to win. During the PHA's earliest days, the Washington politicians and PR experts in its ranks decided that the best tactic would be to focus on the location of Disney's America, rather than the thornier question of Disney's capacity to accurately represent American history.⁴³ As one letter to the editor in the February 1995 edition of the *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* notes, "the public's tastes run more toward flag waving and musket fire than migration patterns and social analysis." Historians who attempted to correct Disney's history would receive "yet another round of harangues concerning the wicked designs of the supposedly leftist and politically correct academic intelligentsia."⁴⁴ In fact, Disney and their supporters had done their best to cast Protect Historic America and the anti-Disney contingent as rich, out-of-touch environmentalists, intellectuals, and members of Virginia's fox-hunting elite on the attack against a beloved American institution; attacking the location rather than Disney meant that the PHA could avoid the brunt of such allegations.⁴⁵ Indeed, when conservative political columnist William Safire took to the pages of the *New York Times* to call the PHA a "little band of well-credentialed historians, litigating greens, liberal columnists and self-protective landowners... drawn together in paternalistic protection" and sneer that "Historians don't own history", PHA members and affiliated groups responded that he was wrong. "Historians don't really care if Disney is interested in American history", they argued, instead emphasizing the fragility of the region.⁴⁶ Ronald Walters, professor of history at Johns Hopkins University, observed in the

⁴³ Bailey, "How Washington Insiders Ambushed Mickey Mouse." 12.

⁴⁴ Brian Dirck, "Correspondence," *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 22, no. 4 (February 1995): 24–25.

⁴⁵ Mike Feinsilber, "In Va. Countryside, 2 Towns Square Off Over Disney Plan Residents of Haymarket See Opportunity. Just Over the Mountain, The Plains Wants None Of It," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 22, 1994, Access World News Research Collection; Nick Gillespie, "Disney in Virginia: See How They Cry," *Washington Post*, July 18, 1994.

⁴⁶ Safire, "Third Manassas"; Schardt, "The Trouble With a Bull Run Theme Park."

March 1995 edition of the AHA's *Perspectives on History* newsletter that this decision "had the further advantage of dodging other knotty questions by leaving open the possibility that such an American history theme park might be fine somewhere else."⁴⁷ What the debate makes clear is that, amidst the history wars, the question "who owns history" was one that the PHA's historians wanted to avoid.

Because historians were so influential to the anti-Disney movement, debates within the profession became a crucial center for discourse. While, as historian Richard Francaviglia noted dryly in a 1995 article for *The Public Historian*, "Disney-bashing remains quite fashionable in our field," historians and museum professionals frequently espoused diverging and complex views about Disney's America.⁴⁸ Indeed, the Organization of American Historians devoted an entire issue of their newsletter to the subject in August 1994, featuring guest essays from respected historians James O. Horton, James A McPherson, and John Bodnar, as well as National Trust for Historic Preservation head Richard Moe, Disney executive Peter Rummell, and conservative commentator William Safire. In the PHA's camp, McPherson emphasized the fragility of landscape rather than Disney's history, and Moe argued that the park's sprawl would overwhelm local government and infrastructure.⁴⁹ Horton, Rummell, and Safire defended Disney, while Bodnar critiqued other historians for overly valorizing Manassas while ignoring social history.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ronald Walters, "In Our Backyard," *Perspectives on History - American Historical Association* 33, no. 3 (March 1, 1995), <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/march-1995/in-our-backyard>.

⁴⁸ Richard Francaviglia, "History after Disney: The Significance of 'Imagineered' Historical Places," *The Public Historian* 17, no. 4 (1995): 69–74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3378386>, 71.

⁴⁹ James Oliver Horton et al., "A House Divided: Historians Confront Disney's America," *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 22, no. 3 (August 1994): 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 11; for a concurring opinion, see Robert J. Gough, "Correspondence," *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 22, no. 4 (February 1995): 24.

Disney recognized the importance of historians to the controversy, lobbying them in the pages of their own professional organization's newsletter. Indeed, Peter Rummell, the President of Disney Design and Development, attempted to defend Disney in the newsletter, arguing that the corporation would rely on historical experts to create "a historically responsible portrait of America" and would not encroach on other historic sites but instead enthuse visitors about history. The park, he wrote, would "not whitewash history or ignore the blemishes" but would still put forth the idea that, "even with America's mistakes, the American story is profoundly positive and uplifting."⁵¹ This was exactly the kind of moralizing history which some historians were concerned about, and while Rummell argued that entertainment and education were not mutually exclusive, his essay was not likely to inspire faith in the OAH's readers. More enlightening, however, is the single fact of the essay's existence and publication: while Disney also attempted to defend itself in the pages of the *Washington Post* several times, that Disney felt the need to have a senior executive publish an article in the OAH newsletter in an attempt to mitigate historians' discontent indicates the importance of historians to the Disney's America controversy.⁵²

The deep divisions between historians are evident in the issue's title, "A House Divided," as well as in the experience of James O. Horton. Horton—a very well-respected Black professor at George Washington University, an expert in African-American history, and a major influence on the field of public history in the 1990s—defended Disney's America and critiqued other

⁵¹ Horton et al., "A House Divided", 10.

⁵² See William F. Powers, "Eisner Says Disney Won't Back Down," *Washington Post*, June 14, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/06/14/eisner-says-disney-wont-back-down/edafc8a2-5000-40d2-ac20-cfd4fdca4c27/>. Michael D. Eisner, "Let's Celebrate America," *Washington Post*, June 20, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1994/06/20/lets-celebrate-america/dfcad325-134e-4475-8f80-4f1095602ff8/>. Mark Pacala, "In Defense Of Disney's America," *Washington Post*, January 28, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1994/01/28/in-defense-of-disneys-america/cb070078-dae8-4fb4-85ae-5cb94d0ff3ed/>.

historians for valorizing Civil War history while ignoring social history and public history, and for being elitist with regards to public history and Disney. While Horton admitted that “[Disney’s] past forays into history do not inspire confidence” and the corporation often “reinforces popularly-held misperceptions about our past [and] miseducates the public,” he noted that “there is no law against the presentation of fantasy disguised as history.”⁵³ Instead of weakly attempting to stop Disney’s efforts entirely, Horton thought that the historical profession should embrace the corporation’s public history potential and make sure that Disney’s America was as accurate as possible, thus reaching more people: “There are real possibilities here if only we can grasp them and important responsibilities if only we would assume them. If Disney is going to do history, and they almost certainly will, somewhere, why not encourage them to use their considerable technology to do it well?”⁵⁴ Notably, Horton had agreed to serve as a historical advisor to Disney for that same reason: the corporation was going to build the theme park in any case and a historian should be involved.⁵⁵ He faced significant backlash from public intellectuals and other historians, who argued that he was complicit in a Disney “whitewash” of American history.⁵⁶ Most vividly, William Styron, the controversial novelist and member of the PHA, told *Entertainment Weekly* that Horton and Eric Foner, a respected professor of history at Columbia who had also signed on, had “whored [themselves] to Disney” and were “disgracing themselves.”⁵⁷ Ironically enough, a mostly White group of historians and commentators

⁵³ Horton et al., “A House Divided,” 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; C. Vann Woodward, “Correspondence,” *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 22, no. 4 (November 1994): 24.

⁵⁶ Woodward, “Correspondence,”; Courtland Milloy, “Slavery Is Not Amusing,” *Washington Post*, November 14, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1993/11/14/slavery-is-not-amusing/498ac2dd-ab1a-478d-ad48-8c4eb780173a/>; Brian Dirck, “Correspondence,” *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 22, no. 4 (February 1995): 25.

⁵⁷ Tim Appelo, “Disney’s America,” *Entertainment Weekly*, July 15, 1994, <https://ew.com/article/1994/07/15/disneys-america/>.

accused Horton—himself a Black scholar of enslavement—of whitewashing Black history. Horton, as a public historian and a Black scholar of enslavement, approached the issue from a different perspective than the PHA historians, who tended to be older White men who specialized in more traditional Civil War history. Horton’s specific experience within the larger controversy indicates that historians were hardly a PHA-supporting monolith; instead, there were deep divisions and polarization within the profession.

While the sticky problem of representing enslavement at Disney’s America never quite left the public discourse, it was commentators both Black and White, not historians, who attacked the park for attempting to combine entertainment and painful history. Courtland Milloy, a Black columnist for the *Washington Post*, was one of the most vociferous and early detractors. In an editorial entitled “Slavery Is Not Amusing,” published November 14, 1993, he wrote: “A Lewis and Clark river ride? Fine. An Industrial Revolution Ferris wheel? Just strap me in. But to walk into a theme park with an exhibit designed to make me ‘feel what it was like to be a slave’ simply lacks that amusing quality that I’ve come to expect.”⁵⁸ Notably, Milloy did not take issue with Disney history generally, just the difficulty of representing Black history. Referencing Weis’ claims that tourists would still leave “feeling good”, Milloy argued that amidst “a continuing distortion of African American history” and America’s “self-induced amnesia about the legacy of slavery,” Disney should simply leave enslavement out of the park. Milloy’s distaste for Disney did not diminish over time: he opined on February 23, 1994, that Disney’s America was “enough to make me scream... I say stick with roller coasters.”⁵⁹ Slavery is a difficult subject to represent in even the most solemn of historical settings: to do it respectfully and

⁵⁸ Courtland Milloy, “Slavery Is Not Amusing,” *Washington Post*, November 14, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1993/11/14/slavery-is-not-amusing/498ac2dd-ab1a-478d-ad48-8c4eb780173a/>. See also Robert E Thibault, “Multicultural Theme Park,” *The Oswegonian*, November 18, 1993.

⁵⁹ Courtland Milloy, “Helping Disney, Hurting America?,” *Washington Post*, February 23, 1994.

carefully without minimizing its harms in a theme park seemed nearly impossible. As a result, the question of mixing entertainment and enslavement could hardly escape the public discourse about Disney's America, especially for African Americans.⁶⁰

In early August of 1994, controversial novelist William Styron attacked Disney's America on much the same grounds, arguing that enslavement was so horrific as to be unrepresentable; to put it in a theme park would be an abomination. Styron was a controversial figure in his own right: the White author of the highly contentious historical novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which lightly fictionalized the 1831 uprising and which won the 1968 Pulitzer Prize, he was alternately considered a racial justice advocate who humanized the enslaved and attacked enslavement as the central question of American history, or simply a racist who perpetuated offensive stereotypes.⁶¹ Writing in the *New York Times*, Styron drew upon his own history as a novelist and as the descendent of slave owners to argue that "the technical wizardry that so entrances children and grown-ups at other Disney parks" could not fail to "mock a theme as momentous as slavery," which he described as "the great transforming circumstance of American history." Styron had grown up in the Tidewater region of Virginia, giving him a connection to both the

⁶⁰ Similar concerns appeared during a debate in the Virginia state legislature over proposed subsidies for the theme park's construction. A Black state Senator argued that the state government should require Disney to have Black history experts review attractions for historical accuracy, stating "There's a possibility of abuse when you show slavery in an entertainment fashion." This is not to argue that African Americans were possessed of a single opinion: His suggestion was rejected, and Black members of the Virginia General Assembly were crucial to the approval of \$163 million of state funds towards Disney's America. The Virginia Legislative Black Caucus required Disney's promise that the corporation would not discriminate against minorities. As the title of an article in Black business community magazine *Black Enterprise* succinctly put it, the approach was "If We Help Build It, We Will Come." See ; Cliff Hocker, "If We Help Build It, We Will Come," *Black Enterprise* (New York, United States: Earl G. Graves Publishing Company, Inc., October 1994). Hocker also notes the hiring of Black historian James O Horton: "Disney must also deal with some historians' fears that issues such as slavery will be trivialized by the theme park."

⁶¹ For an excellent overview of the controversy over the novel and over Nat Turner as a figure, see the American Antiquarian Society's online exhibition "Revisiting Rebellion: Nat Turner in the American Imagination." Sam Tanenhaus, "The Literary Battle for Nat Turner's Legacy," *Vanity Fair*, August 3, 2016, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/08/the-literary-battle-for-nat-turners-legacy>; "Revisiting Rebellion: Nat Turner in the American Imagination," Digital exhibition, American Antiquarian Society, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://americanantiquarian.org/NatTurner/>.

land and the history Disney would desecrate. Styron considered enslavement unrepresentable: the “collective anguish” of enslavement’s aftermath “underlines the falseness of any Disneyesque rendition of slavery.” To present tourists with even the most violent representations of enslavement “would be to cheaply romanticize suffering” and give them the idea that it was a history that had concluded, permitting them “a shudder of horror before they turned away, smug and self-exculpatory, from a world that may be dead but has not really been laid to rest.”⁶² To Styron, Disney’s America could only sanitize a history which America desperately needed to confront. Styron could enter the debate on his own terms, constrained only by his public reputation as a White racial provocateur; in arguing that Disney’s entertainment could not fail to trivialize the history of enslavement, he joined a larger debate about the relationship between entertainment and education in representing enslavement at Disney’s America.

The controversy over the Disney’s America theme park lost steam after the Disney corporation announced that they would be pulling out in late September, 1994. However, the debate would go on to influence discussion about the Colonial Williamsburg auction, which occurred a scant few weeks later. In analyzing the Disney’s America debate as a precursor to the Colonial Williamsburg auction, it becomes clear that the theme park raised serious questions about the representation of enslavement at immersive or living history sites, and about such sites’ capacity to balance education and entertainment. Moreover, it indicates the particular constraints of discourse for historians, who largely buried the question of race under arguments about preserving Manassas’ sanctity. As historians analyzed the Colonial Williamsburg auction, they did so from a place of racial sublimation.

⁶² William Styron, “Slavery’s Pain, Disney’s Gain,” *The New York Times*, August 4, 1994, sec. Opinion.

The Colonial Williamsburg Auction Controversy

On October 10, 1994, a group of historical interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg reenacted the sale of enslaved African Americans on the steps of the town tavern in a first-of-its-kind historical theater performance. The reenactment set off an intense media firestorm, as Americans questioned whether it was possible to represent enslavement honestly at a site like Colonial Williamsburg, and whether it was possible to balance education and entertainment in doing so. The debate was influenced by Colonial Williamsburg's reputation for sanitizing history as well as comparisons to Disney, continuing the ongoing debate about representing enslavement at immersive or living history sites. The question of whether such sites could balance education and entertainment became the central axis around which debate swirled among public intellectuals and historians; unlike Disney's America, the auction's direct engagement with the history of enslavement meant that questions of race were no longer subtext but the main topic of discussion.

Colonial Williamsburg is a living history museum in the town of Williamsburg, Virginia, founded in the 1920s as a way to preserve colonial history. Williamsburg is roughly 150 miles from Washington, DC, and is located in a part of the state rich with both Revolutionary and Civil War history, including Jamestown, the site of the first permanent English settlement in the Americas, and Yorktown, the site of British surrender in the Revolutionary War. Williamsburg had significant colonial history—it was the state capitol from 1699 to 1780, home of the College of William and Mary, and was the site of many events leading up to the Revolutionary War—but it had not completely modernized, unlike Philadelphia or Boston, and retained many preserved eighteenth-century buildings. Historians credit Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin, rector of a local church, with the idea of preserving Williamsburg's colonial history. In 1926, after several years

of discussion, he convinced philanthropist and businessman John D. Rockefeller Jr. to begin funding the project, and the first colonial restoration, the Raleigh Tavern, opened to visitors in 1932. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation restored nearly 88 buildings in the town to their late 18th century condition and entirely rebuilt others, including the Capitol, the Governor's Palace, and the Raleigh Tavern.⁶³

From the beginning, Colonial Williamsburg was torn between representing the colonial period as accurately as possible and representing it in a way that would keep tourists coming back, a tightrope walk which gave the site a reputation for sanitizing the past. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation from its inception balanced the two competing drives: Rockefeller Jr. wanted the reconstruction to be as historically accurate as humanly possible as well as a site of significant historical research, but he also intended it to be a financially self-sufficient private organization, which influenced the type of histories on display.⁶⁴ As a result, beginning with the opening of the first restored building in 1932, Colonial Williamsburg promoted an inoffensive and patriotic view of American history which valorized the town as a cradle of American democracy and freedom.⁶⁵ Even the development of their interactive living history model was intended to raise the site's profits, increasing audience engagement and thus ensuring economic growth.⁶⁶ During the Second World War, the Foundation's leaders emphasized patriotism and liberty in their programming in order to match the tenor of the times; this phenomenon only increased as the Cold War dawned in the 1950s.⁶⁷

⁶³ Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 2nd ed. (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469664323_greenspan, 17-21.

⁶⁴ Greenspan, 36-37.

⁶⁵ Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*, 32.

⁶⁶ Carson, "Colonial Williamsburg and the Practice of Interpretive Planning in American History Museums." *The Public Historian* 20, no. 3 (1998): 16.

⁶⁷ Greenspan, "To Preserve A Nation," in *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 2nd ed. (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 60-76, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469664323_greenspan. Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*, 63.

By the 1960s, Colonial Williamsburg was cemented in the national consciousness as an emblem of American exceptionalism and history, a place which exhorted visitors to uphold the values of the Founding Fathers.⁶⁸ The dominant narrative surrounding Colonial Williamsburg was one of historical triumphalism, especially during the Cold War. Conservative historian Daniel J. Boorstin observed in 1958 that while other historians denigrated Colonial Williamsburg, to him the restored town was “a symbol of what distinguishes our American attitude to our national past from that of people in other parts of the world... Colonial Williamsburg is a more democratic kind of national monument.”⁶⁹ This vision of Colonial Williamsburg’s historical offerings—as nationalist, patriotic, and happily sanitized—would persist through the 1990s and shape the discussion around the 1994 slave auction reenactment.

Colonial Williamsburg’s reputation made an easy target for historians, commentators, and critics to accuse it of Disney-esque crimes against history. Various commentators had long compared Colonial Williamsburg to Disney, especially given the federal government’s penchant for bringing foreign dignitaries to Williamsburg to show off the ideals of American democracy.⁷⁰ For example, Jonathan Yardley colorfully argued in the *Washington Post* in 1983 that “Colonial Williamsburg is the Disney World of the American past,” cute “in just the same artificial, cloying, idealized way that the town square in Disney World is cute... It’s all so, well, historic that it just makes you proud to be an American.” Yardley continued: “Williamsburg is actually a

⁶⁸ Greenspan, “For The Greater Good,” in *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 2nd ed. (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 95–120.

⁶⁹ Daniel J. Boorstin, “Past and Present in America: A Historian Visits Colonial Williamsburg,” *Commentary Magazine*, no. 25 (January 1958), <https://www.commentary.org/articles/commentary-bk/past-and-present-in-americaa-historian-visits-colonial-williamsburg/>.

⁷⁰ Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 2nd ed. (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469664323_greenspan, 153- 164; see especially “Distinguished Tourists, From Lafayette On,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 1983, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/05/23/business/distinguished-tourists-from-lafayette-on.html>; Jonathan Yardley, “The America That Never Was Williamsburg: The Way We Wish It Had Been,” *The Washington Post*, May 30, 1983.

theme park... engaged not in preserving and restoring but in prettifying and mythologizing,” “a period piece that has been constructed to suit the convenience and self-interest of hindsight.”⁷¹ The comparison to Disney indicted Williamsburg’s version of history. These critics argued that Williamsburg’s “Disneyfied” history was too patriotic, too cheerful to be trusted. As Anders Greenspan notes in his history of Colonial Williamsburg, the frequent comparisons between Colonial Williamsburg and Disney theme parks “lessened the conception that Colonial Williamsburg was pursuing serious history and instead promoted the notion that all the restoration did was put on shows to amuse its visitors.”⁷² The equivalencies to Disney and the historical theme park undercut Williamsburg’s claim to “real history” and shifted it firmly towards the entertainment side of the education-entertainment spectrum.

As 1994 began, however, the prospect of an actual Disney park in Northern Virginia made Colonial Williamsburg look significantly better. One *Philadelphia Inquirer* article cooed in January 1994 that “For years, Colonial Williamsburg was burdened with a reputation - among a somewhat cynical group of travelers who, no doubt, thought of themselves as the cognoscenti - as a too-cute, too-contrived, Disneyesque re-creation of what was once the capital of the British colony of Virginia.” It continued, however, that unlike Disney, the Foundation sought authenticity and provided “an educational experience, a chance to learn about... a seedbed of the American Revolution.”⁷³ The specter of Disney and of Disneyfied history loomed large over Colonial Williamsburg, especially given the proposed new park.

⁷¹ Yardley, “The America That Never Was,” D8.

⁷² Greenspan, 164.

⁷³ Jack Severson, “Authenticity That’s Revolutionary: Colonial Williamsburg Isn’t Some Hollywood Back Lot with The Attendant Contrivances. It’s An Education, A History Lesson in The Place Where the Notion Of American Independence First Flowered,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 9, 1994.

Colonial Williamsburg's uncomfortable position as a non-profit, "facts-first" historical attraction which was nevertheless still profit-driven and tourist-supported put it in an uncomfortable position halfway between museums and Disney. Handler and Gable note that the museum, which is a nonprofit corporate tourist attraction, "operated on the border between mass entertainment and mass education", between "a critical history and celebratory history, a dirty past and a Disney past, a new history and an old one."⁷⁴ In short, they argue that in the early 1990s Colonial Williamsburg was experiencing an "institutional identity crisis" between entertainment and education.⁷⁵ As the debate over the 1994 auction would prove, the question of what kind of history Colonial Williamsburg was representing, and how, was at the center of its public reputation.

The fact that the Foundation substantively ignored African American history for much of its existence significantly contributed to its reputation for sanitizing history and made its efforts towards inclusion in the '70s, '80s, and '90s very fraught. Racial conflict at Colonial Williamsburg started early: while reconstructing the colonial town, the Williamsburg Holding Company effectively segregated an integrated community, maintaining the more 'historic' homes often owned by white residents while relocating their Black neighbors.⁷⁶ Furthermore, for most of its existence, Colonial Williamsburg failed to substantively address Black history, despite the fact that the 1770s, the period which the institution claims to recreate, the town's population was over half Black.⁷⁷ The original plan for Colonial Williamsburg contained no consideration of the lives of colonial African-Americans, regardless of status. Goodwin initially

⁷⁴ Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 5, 7, 24.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁶ Greenspan, 23-24.

⁷⁷ Christy Coleman Matthews, "Twenty Years Interpreting African American History: A Colonial Williamsburg Revolution," *History News* 54, no. 2 (1999): 7.

advocated the building of slave cabins near the colonial exhibition houses. In one 1930 letter, he wrote that “a great mistake would be made if we did not reproduce a sufficient number of these houses to recall the ancient atmosphere and this aspect of the ancient civilization.”⁷⁸ While enslavement might have been accurate to the period, it did not align with the patriotic vision of colonial life that Rockefeller wanted. Nor would it appeal to the mostly white visitors of the period. Notably, Colonial Williamsburg officials were very anxious to not integrate the site too quickly in the 1950s, and in order to preserve the delicate racist sensibilities of white visitors, it remained socially segregated even after the 1964 Civil Rights Act and through the late 1960s.⁷⁹ As a result, Colonial Williamsburg did not substantially address Black history until the 1970s.

Instead, the institution sidelined Black history as much as possible. Before 1979, the institution had no Black interpreters, and white guides avoided discussing enslavement, frequently referring to enslaved people as “servants.”⁸⁰ Instead, Colonial Williamsburg relied on Black staffers who performed non-interpretive work but were dressed in period clothing to tacitly represent Black history at the institution.⁸¹ During this period, Black staffers reported significant racist abuse from guests, many of who felt empowered by the racial hierarchy implicit in their colonial costuming.⁸² To find any explicit acknowledgement of the presence of enslavement, visitors had to trek out to Carter’s Grove, a restored plantation eight miles outside of the colonial town which opened in 1969. There, discussion of enslavement was limited to the plantation office, where guides explained that owners and overseers found it difficult to manage

⁷⁸ W. A. R. Goodwin to Arthur Woods, 9 April 1930, cited in Greenspan, 28.

⁷⁹ Greenspan, 155-117; 75, 89, 115.

⁸⁰ Kelly Arehard, “Researching 40 Years of African American Interpretation,” Colonial Williamsburg, April 6, 2020, <https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/learn/behind-the-scenes/researching-40-years-african-american-interpretation/>.

⁸¹ Lisa Woolfork, “Slave Tourism and Rememory,” in *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 2009), 117, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1xcq3x.8>.

⁸² Matthews, “Twenty Years Interpreting African American History.” 7.

the enslaved population; there was no mention of the experiences of enslaved people themselves.⁸³ Colonial Williamsburg rendered enslavement invisible, though it was in reality twined densely in the fabric of the town.

Colonial Williamsburg had long faced criticism for avoiding difficult racial questions and sanitizing history, but the advent of social history in the 1970s slowly moved the Foundation towards change. Social historians working inside Colonial Williamsburg pushed the institution to expand beyond a singular focus on “silk-pants patriots.” As a result, during the 1970’s Colonial Williamsburg began to more substantively represent the lives of the lower classes and marginalized groups, including African Americans.⁸⁴ In 1979, the Foundation hired six students and a professor from nearby HBCU Hampton University to play African American characters—both free and enslaved—who became Colonial Williamsburg’s first Black interpreters.⁸⁵

Throughout the ‘80s, Colonial Williamsburg worked to improve its depictions of enslaved life. The Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations (AAIP) formed in the early 1980s, and by 1985 had a full staff supporting daily programs about Black history in Williamsburg, including “The Other Half” tours, musical events, school outreach programs, and more.⁸⁶ By 1988 Carter’s Grove contained reconstructed slave quarters as well as programming addressing African American cultural practices and the daily lives of the enslaved.⁸⁷ The growth of African American programming through the 1980s made Colonial Williamsburg increasingly popular with Black visitors, and in 1993, Colonial Williamsburg’s African-American historical programming was popular and well-respected that it received a recommendation in *Essence*

⁸³ Arehard, “Researching 40 Years of African American Interpretation.”

⁸⁴ Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*. 66-69.

⁸⁵ Nicole Carroll, “Silences: African American History At Colonial Williamsburg” (Master’s Thesis, Williamsburg, VA, College of William and Mary, 1999), <http://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd/1539626197>. 9-10.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-12; Matthews, “Twenty Years Interpreting African American History.” 7-9.

⁸⁷ Arehard, “Researching 40 Years of African American Interpretation.”

Magazine.⁸⁸ Despite this progress, changing the public perception of Colonial Williamsburg as a whitewashed historical Disneyland was slow going.⁸⁹

After nearly fifteen years of Black historical interpretation, some members of the AAIP felt that Colonial Williamsburg still was not honestly representing enslavement. Internal conflict over Black history at Colonial Williamsburg ratcheted up and by 1994, the AAIP felt ready for revolutionary shifts, even if they promised controversy.⁹⁰ Cary Carson, the vice president of research at Colonial Williamsburg, argued in 1998 that the auction “was not a stunt or a fluke [but rather] was the logical next step, carefully and deliberately taken” in the institution’s efforts to interpret enslavement since the late ‘70s.⁹¹ Furthermore, as Coleman noted in a 1997 article for *Historical Archaeology*, the department chose the auction precisely because of its visceral nature. Black staffers who had interpreted many other elements of enslaved colonial life “felt the time had come to reenact this aspect of slavery that most epitomized the true horrors of the institution. Talking about it was no longer enough.”⁹² In ratcheting up the emotional and historical stakes of their interpretation, they courted controversy.

Even so, the auction was never meant to spark the kind of public relations maelstrom that it did. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation announced the auction a week ahead of time and publicized it in a low-key way. Despite the fact that it did not appear on the itinerary of events distributed to the media, the daring topic meant that controversy immediately began to swirl.⁹³

⁸⁸ Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 158; Valerie Vaz, “Roots,” *Essence* (New York, United States: Essence Communications, Inc., May 1993).

⁸⁹ Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 156.

⁹⁰ Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*, 86-100.

⁹¹ Cary Carson, “Colonial Williamsburg and the Practice of Interpretive Planning in American History Museums,” *The Public Historian* 20, no. 3 (1998): 11–51, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3379773>. 12.

⁹² Christy S. Matthews, “Where Do We Go from Here? Researching and Interpreting the African-American Experience,” *Historical Archaeology* 31, no. 3 (1997): 107–13.

⁹³ “Around the South REGION IN BRIEF First Lady’s Brother Wins Runoff,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, October 5, 1994, Wednesday edition, sec. National News.

While the auction occupied only a small part of the schedule for “Publick Times,” a three-day program series commemorating King George III’s ascent to the British throne, it quickly overshadowed other events in media coverage. As a result, even before the actual event, the looming controversy forced Coleman to defend her department and the reenactment against allegations that it would sensationalize, trivialize, or otherwise turn Black historical trauma into entertainment.⁹⁴

Despite the fact that Monday, October 10, 1994, was gloomy and overcast, two thousand spectators showed up. They crowded Duke of Gloucester Street, with some audience members arriving an hour early to ensure that they would get a good view.⁹⁵ At least six TV cameras were present, and spectators complained that reporters blocked their view of the tavern steps.⁹⁶ Before the presentation even began, six demonstrators from the Virginia NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference attempted to disrupt it, linking arms and singing “We Shall Overcome.” Some spectators booed, while others applauded; some hoisted signs alleging racism on the part of reenactors. Reverend Curtis Harris, the state president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Dr. Milton A. Reid, a Baptist pastor, pushed past Williamsburg staff to sit down on the tavern’s porch, challenging spectators to call the police. They remained seated on the porch for the duration of the event.⁹⁷

Christy Coleman grabbed a microphone and requested through tears that protestors reserve their judgement. Coleman, who interpreted the role of an enslaved pregnant woman named Lucy,

⁹⁴ Alison Freehling, “Colonial Williamsburg Plans Slave Auction Reenactment,” *Associated Press*, October 6, 1994, PM edition, sec. Domestic News; Michael Janofsky, “Mock Auction of Slaves: Education or Outrage?,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 1994, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/08/us/mock-auction-of-slaves-education-or-outrage.html>.

⁹⁵ Patrick Lacey, ““Our History Must Be Told”’: The Re-Enactment Of A Slave Auction At Colonial Williamsburg Sparked Emotions And Debate.,” *The Virginian-Pilot*, October 11, 1994, sec. Local. Janofsky, “Mock Auction of Slaves.”

⁹⁶ Lacey, “Our History Must Be Told.”

⁹⁷ Janofsky, “Mock Auction of Slaves.”

declared: "We came here to teach the story of our mothers and grandmothers so each and every one of you will never forget what happened to them."⁹⁸ After a few moments, Coleman returned inside the tavern, the audience quieted, and the auction commenced. The auctioneer was staid as he solicited bids on four enslaved people and three tracts of land.⁹⁹ Sukie, an enslaved laundress, was sold to her free husband for £42; Billy, a carpenter, was sold with his tools for £70. Daniel was sold for £62, while his wife Lucy sobbed and begged to be sold to the same bidder: "Please, please don't do this. Please, Mr. Taylor, buy me too."¹⁰⁰ The actor playing Mr. Taylor declined, provoking emotional reactions from the crowd.¹⁰¹ The auction concluded after twenty minutes, and Coleman then took up the microphone to answer audience questions which ranged from the work expected of enslaved children to punishments for escape attempts. The auction was by design an intensely emotional event, and it left many spectators—and interpreters—in tears. It was painful to reenact slavery, and impossible to do so in a way that would not deeply upset and unsettle some spectators. The AAIP expected the auction to stir discussion on a small scale, and correspondingly discussed it with the local NAACP chapter.¹⁰² However, they did not anticipate the national whirlwind which the controversy would soon become.

While few people protested the auction in the moment—only six protestors attempted to disrupt the event and a few others held signs—the AAIP's daring decision to reenact a slave auction fueled national controversy. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation vice president of research Cary Carson noted in 1998 that the auction was "the most widely talked about event in

⁹⁸ Tamara Jones, "Living History or Undying Racism? Colonial Williamsburg 'Slave Auction' Draws Protest, Support," *Washington Post*, October 11, 1994.

⁹⁹ AP Wire, "Tears and Protest at Mock Slave Sale," *The New York Times*, October 11, 1994, sec. National Report.

¹⁰⁰ Alison Freehling, "Slave Auction Re-Enactment Quells Some Critics," *Associated Press*, October 11, 1994, Tuesday PM edition, sec. Domestic News.

¹⁰¹ James Oliver Horton, "Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America's Racial Story," *The Public Historian* 21, no. 4 (1999): 19–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3379471>.

¹⁰² Waldron.

[Williamsburg's] modern history."¹⁰³ Indeed, the controversy was big news from the beginning. It made the front page of the *Washington Post* below the fold on October 11th, 1994, and the first page of the National section of the *New York Times* on both October 8th and 11th.¹⁰⁴ A year later, it made news once more when Coleman announced that the AAIP would not repeat the reenactment.¹⁰⁵ This front page placement indicates the regional importance of the story (Williamsburg is roughly 150 miles away from Washington, D.C.) and its more limited but still notable national relevance. *CBS This Morning*, *NBC Nightly News*, and *ABC World News Tonight* all featured discussions of the auction and in the following days, Coleman went on the *Today Show* and National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* to publicly debate detractors and defend her department.¹⁰⁶ News of the auction even appeared in some international press outlets' American "digest" sections, in truncated format.¹⁰⁷ In the week after the auction, it was a popular topic for editorials, many of which lauded Colonial Williamsburg's efforts to confront the difficult history of enslavement. Despite the wide initial coverage of the event, the most extensive reporting appeared in Southern or regional rather than national newspapers, indicating the continuing interest and depth of feeling surrounding the auction in the area.¹⁰⁸ At the crux of

¹⁰³ Carson, "Colonial Williamsburg and the Practice of Interpretive Planning in American History Museums," 11.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, "Living History Or Undying Racism?"; Janofsky, "Mock Auction of Slaves"; AP Wire, "Tears and Protest at Mock Slave Sale."

¹⁰⁵ "Williamsburg Won't Repeat Slave Auction," *Charleston Daily Mail*, October 13, 1995, sec. News. Bobbie Harville, "A Publick Spectacle," *Daily Press*, October 25, 1995, <https://www.dailypress.com/news/dp-xpm-19951025-1995-10-25-9510250080-story.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Erin Devlin, "Colonial Williamsburg's Slave Auction Re-Enactment: Controversy, African American History And Public Memory" (College of William and Mary, 2003), <http://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd/1539626387>, pg. 33; "Opposition To Mock Slave Auction In Colonial Williamsburg," *CBS This Morning* (CBS News, October 11, 1994); "Slavery Re-Enactment in Williamsburg, VA," *ABC World News Tonight* (ABC News, October 10, 1994); Clarence Waldron, "Staged Slave Auction Sparks Debate On Slavery And Racism," *Jet Magazine*, October 31, 1994. CBS, ABC, Waldron

¹⁰⁷ Facts on File World News Digest. "Other U.S. News; News in Brief," October 20, 1994; International Herald Tribune. "Short Takes; American Topics." October 16, 1995, sec. News; The Canadian Press. "AM-News-Digest," October 10, 1994, sec. Foreign General News.

¹⁰⁸ For example, editorials for the most part appeared in the *Washington Post*, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, *Charleston Gazette*, etc. Also see Marilyn Lynch, "Facing History Head-On," *The Washington Post* (1974-), October 23, 1994; Editorial Board, "Of A-Bombs and Slaves."

the controversy rested Colonial Williamsburg's dual role as educational institution and tourist site, which led some audience members to allege that interpreters were reenacting Black pain for tourists' entertainment. Much of the contemporary news coverage brought up concerns that the reenactment trivialized the pain of enslavement or turned Black history into entertainment, and that slave auctions were too painful to reenact.

News accounts covering the auction foregrounded deep concerns over racial insensitivity raised by local civil rights groups. At least fifteen articles in the *New York Times*, the *Associated Press*, the *St Louis Post Dispatch*, the *Virginian-Pilot*, the *Baltimore Sun*, *Black Issues In Higher Education*, and *Jet Magazine* included nearly identical quotes from protestors, as did TV spots on *CBS* and *ABC World News Tonight*.¹⁰⁹ Of the twelve, five cited Curtis Harris of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, who "felt [the auction] was nothing more than a show, not an authentic history,"¹¹⁰ as well as Salim Khalfani, the Virginia field coordinator for the NAACP, who claimed that the event was too short to be educational and was "designed to entertain rather than to teach the truth" about enslavement.¹¹¹ Three cited Dr. Milton A. Reid, a Baptist pastor who protested the event, who echoed similar concerns: "As far as we have come, to go back to

¹⁰⁹ See "Opposition To Mock Slave Auction In Colonial Williamsburg," *CBS This Morning* (CBS News, October 11, 1994); "Williamsburg Slave Auction Reenactment Raises Concern," Radio Broadcast, *NPR's All Things Considered* (National Public Radio, October 11, 1994); AP Wire, "Tears and Protest at Mock Slave Sale"; "Current Quotations," *Associated Press*, October 11, 1994, Tuesday BC Cycle edition, sec. Domestic News; "Around the South REGION IN BRIEF: Horror of Slave Auctions Re-Enacted in Williamsburg," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 11, 1994, sec. National News; Bentley Boyd, "Re-Enactment of Slave Auction Sparks Emotions," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, October 11, 1994, Morning edition, sec. National News; Freehling, "Slave Auction Re-Enactment Quells Some Critics"; Freehling, "Colonial Williamsburg Plans Slave Auction Reenactment"; Janofsky, "Mock Auction of Slaves"; Jones, "Living History Or Undying Racism?"; "Slavery Re-Enactment in Williamsburg, VA," *ABC World News Tonight* (ABC News, October 10, 1994); Lacey, "Our History Must Be Told": The Re-Enactment Of A Slave Auction At Colonial Williamsburg Sparked Emotions And Debate"; New York Times News Service, "'Slave Auction' Divides Crowd in Williamsburg," *Baltimore Sun*, October 11, 1994; Mary-Christine Phillip, "To Reenact Or Not To Reenact? For Some, Williamsburg Slave Auction Shows Discomfort of Humiliating Past," *Black Issues in Higher Education* (Reston, United States: Cox, Matthews & Associates, Inc., November 3, 1994); "Slave Auction' Triggers Furor Around Colonial Williamsburg," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 9, 1994, Sunday Five Star edition, sec. News; Clarence Waldron, "Staged Slave Auction Sparks Debate On Slavery And Racism," *Jet Magazine*, October 31, 1994.

¹¹⁰ Freehling, "Slave Auction Re-Enactment Quells Some Critics."

¹¹¹ Freehling, "Colonial Williamsburg Plans Slave Auction Reenactment."

this, for entertainment, is despicable and disgusting. This is the kind of anguish we need not display.”¹¹² One article in the *Virginian-Pilot* put it even more plainly: “the civil rights protesters seemed out of the 1960s as they sang ‘We Shall Overcome’ and one offered to be arrested.”¹¹³ The Civil Rights Era cachet of the SCLC, the NAACP, and the Black church carried weight in the public discussion of the auction, lending support to their allegations of racial insensitivity and trivialization.

The question of whether the auction was entertainment or education lay at the heart of the controversy: Nearly every news article reported the protestors’ claims about trivialization. The *New York Times* reported that “critics around the state contend that education could be trivialized into entertainment,” while *CBS* noted that “Organizers say such re-enactments keep alive the memory of a very ugly truth, but civil rights protesters say they cheapen black history.”¹¹⁴ The *Virginian-Pilot*, a local newspaper, summarized: “Several people protested, saying the event used historic pain for contemporary entertainment,” the *Chicago Tribune* reported that “[protestors] before the event called it despicable entertainment”, and the *Washington Post* interviewed Khalfani, who stated: “Whenever entertainment is used to teach history there is the possibility for error or insensitivity and historical inaccuracy.”¹¹⁵ The AP Wire service similarly cited Khalfani’s concern that the auction was “designed to entertain rather than to teach the truth” and after the event reported that “Protesters complained [the auction] cheapened history

¹¹² AP Wire, “Tears and Protest at Mock Slave Sale.”

¹¹³ Lacey, “Our History Must Be Told”.

¹¹⁴ Janofsky, “Mock Auction of Slaves”; Editorial Board, “GIVING PAIN A HUMAN FACE,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 14, 1994, Friday Five Star edition, sec. Editorial; “Opposition To Mock Slave Auction In Colonial Williamsburg.”

¹¹⁵ Lacey, “Our History Must Be Told”; Richard Borcover, “History Lesson,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 23, 1994, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1994-10-23-9410230053-story.html>; Leef Smith, “WILLIAMSBURG SLAVE AUCTION RILES VA. NAACP,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1994/10/08/williamsburg-slave-auction-riles-va-naacp/d8743f16-9fee-4510-b8ce-17e0fa3cff48/>.

and dealt with an episode too painful to handle in a theater-like production.”¹¹⁶ Most of the news coverage surveyed in this analysis also gave equal weight to Colonial Williamsburg officials and interpreters’ claims that they were educators, and that the auction was a brave educational effort. The same *New York Times* article included a quote from Coleman, who said: “I recognize that this is a very, very sensitive and emotional issue. But it is also very real history, and it distresses me, personally and professionally, that there are those who would have us hide this or keep it under the rug.”¹¹⁷ Similarly, the two AP Wire services articles quoted her as saying “It humanizes slavery, it puts a face on what happened... People will remember what they see far more than what they read” and “The time has come to show, rather than simply discuss, the horrors of slavery.”¹¹⁸ At least seven of the articles surveyed cited Coleman herself, and others cited other interpreters or Foundation representatives.¹¹⁹ The majority of the news coverage of the auction shared a central question: had Colonial Williamsburg staged the auction as entertainment or as education?

Several commentators found an answer in the words of Jack Gravely, the political director of the Virginia NAACP, who had protested the auction and but changed his mind after witnessing it; his words provided ammunition to the auction’s defenders. Gravely originally protested what he saw as sensationalizing the experiences of enslaved peoples in a “carnival atmosphere,” but he found himself moved by the performance: “Pain had a face,” he told the

¹¹⁶Freehling, “Slave Auction Re-Enactment Quells Some Critics”; Freehling, “Colonial Williamsburg Plans Slave Auction Reenactment.”

¹¹⁷ Janofsky, “Mock Auction of Slaves.”

¹¹⁸ Freehling, “Slave Auction Re-Enactment Quells Some Critics”; Freehling.

¹¹⁹ “Williamsburg Slave Auction Reenactment Raises Concern”; “Around the South REGION IN BRIEF: Horror of Slave Auctions Re-Enacted in Williamsburg”; Freehling, “Colonial Williamsburg Plans Slave Auction Reenactment”; Freehling, “Slave Auction Re-Enactment Quells Some Critics”; Janofsky, “Mock Auction of Slaves”; Jones, “LIVING HISTORY OR UNDYING RACISM?”; New York Times News Service, “‘Slave Auction’ Divides Crowd in Williamsburg.”

New York Times. "Indignity had a body. Suffering had tears."¹²⁰ At least two articles in other newspapers reprinted his remarks, one titled "Slave Auction Re-enactment Quells Some Critics"; Despite the plural in the title, Gravely was the only critic cited. Three separate op-eds employed this change of heart from an NAACP officer to argue that the reenactment was a powerful attempt to portray the inhumanity of enslavement, and that the protestors had been misguided.¹²¹ The national and Virginia NAACP issued a statement the day after the auction disavowing Gravely's remarks but received little to no press attention.¹²² Gravely's very public change of heart seemed to some proof that the auction was firmly educational rather than entertainment.

At the center of the complaints about the auction was an implicit accusation, based on Colonial Williamsburg's history and reputation, that the institution could not be trusted to properly stage Black history. Specifically, the NAACP and SCLC based their claim that the auction was entertainment on Colonial Williamsburg's reputation for sanitizing Black history. When Khalfani told the *Washington Post* that "Whenever entertainment is used to teach history there is the possibility for error or insensitivity and historical inaccuracy," he based his allegation on the auction's location, assuming that Colonial Williamsburg would necessarily produce something trivializing.¹²³ When, as the *AP Wire* reported, "Protesters complained [the auction] cheapened history and dealt with an episode too painful to handle in a theater-like production", the accusation that the auction would be a "theater-like production" and thus "cheapen" the

¹²⁰ AP Wire, "Tears and Protest at Mock Slave Sale." Bentley Boyd, "Re-Enactment of Slave Auction Sparks Emotions," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, October 11, 1994, Morning edition, sec. National News.

¹²¹ Editorial Board, "Silence on Slavery Is No Solution," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, October 12, 1994, Wednesday edition, sec. Editorial; Freehling, "Slave Auction Re-Enactment Quells Some Critics"; Lacey, "Our History Must Be Told: The Re-Enactment Of A Slave Auction At Colonial Williamsburg Sparked Emotions And Debate."; Editorial Board, "GIVING PAIN A HUMAN FACE"; Editorial Board, "Of A-Bombs and Slaves."

¹²² "NAACP Rejects View of Auction," *The Roanoke Times*, October 12, 1994, sec. Virginia.

¹²³ Lacey, "Our History Must Be Told: The Re-Enactment Of A Slave Auction At Colonial Williamsburg Sparked Emotions And Debate"; Borcover, "History Lesson"; Smith, "WILLIAMSBURG SLAVE AUCTION RILES VA. NAACP."

history of enslavement stemmed from Williamsburg's reputation.¹²⁴ Detine L. Bowers, a Black local journalist who opposed the auction, confirmed this, writing in the *Richmond Afro-American* that "Programs that feature Blacks as subject at Colonial Williamsburg and elsewhere throughout the country do not yet have a firm reputation. They are relatively new. Furthermore, Colonial Williamsburg clearly needs to educate more of the African-American public about the programs there before launching into the re-enactment of slave auction."¹²⁵ While Bowers claimed that she would oppose the reenactment in any location, it clearly did not help that Colonial Williamsburg's efforts to depict Black history were, according to her, relatively new and not well known. Even some of the auction's defenders acknowledged Colonial Williamsburg's past sanitization of history but noted the irony in complaining that it was now representing enslavement too much. As one editorial noted, "One would also expect that the same civil rights groups that protested this display on slavery would criticize Colonial Williamsburg if it tried to sweep slavery under the historical rug - a criticism that has, in fact, been leveled."¹²⁶ Colonial Williamsburg came late to representing Black history, and as a result many viewed its efforts towards doing so with skepticism, a fact which cast a pall over the 1994 auction.

Colonial Williamsburg's defenders were particularly sensitive to the entertainment vs education framing because it cast aspersions on its programming. Charles Longworth, the Chairman of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, defended his employer in a letter to the editor in the *Washington Post* published October 22: "To characterize Colonial Williamsburg as a 'tourist attraction' setting for our enactment of the slave auction we staged recently is

¹²⁴ Freehling, "Slave Auction Re-Enactment Quells Some Critics"; Freehling, "Colonial Williamsburg Plans Slave Auction Reenactment."

¹²⁵ Detine L. Bowers, "Slave Auction at Williamsburg," *The Richmond Afro-American and the Richmond Planet*, November 2, 1994.

¹²⁶ John Head, "Facing the Facts: Slavery Is History," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, October 17, 1994, Monday edition, sec. Editorial.

equivalent to characterizing your paper as a ‘reader attraction’ instead of a newspaper.” He rejected the implication that because the site employed interactive immersive techniques it could not also educate visitors: “The issue of entertainment vs. education is irreconcilable. If you can separate successfully the engagement of entertainment from the enlightenment of education you will be the first to so do.”¹²⁷ The fact that Colonial Williamsburg’s chairman felt the need to dispute the *Post*’s wording is instructive: the foundation was firmly on the defensive regarding its status as an education institution. Furthermore, it demonstrates not only the dominance of this narrative but also the powerful threat it potentially posed to Williamsburg, which had its reputation as a historical institution on the line.

The recently concluded controversy over Disney’s American modulated some reactions to the Colonial Williamsburg auction, as some commentators and gave Williamsburg credit for attempting to deal honestly with enslavement, unlike the Disney corporation. Drawing a comparison between the two was simple: both Disney’s America and the auction reenactment sought to help viewers understand enslavement via immersive theater, both were local to Virginia, and Disney pulled the plug on the theme park barely two weeks before the auction. Moreover, Disney was an easy target: the corporation’s sanitized version of American history had been under attack in the national and local media for nearly a year, and its executives had gravely mishandled the park’s potential representations of Black history. In contrast, Colonial Williamsburg appeared to be attempting to deal with enslavement in a concerted, if controversial way. Consequently, least four articles and op-eds surveyed compared the two.¹²⁸ Several discussions of the 1994 auction compared Colonial Williamsburg favorably to “the

¹²⁷ Charles Longworth, “Educational Williamsburg,” *Washington Post*, October 22, 1994.

¹²⁸ Smith, “WILLIAMSBURG SLAVE AUCTION RILES VA. NAACP”; Borcover, “History Lesson”; Editorial Board, “GIVING PAIN A HUMAN FACE”; Jonathan Yardley, “The Colony’s True Colors,” *Washington Post*, October 17, 1994.

Disneyfication of history” or to the reconstruction’s own reputation as a “Disneyfied history, a place where the good guys and bad guys are easy to identify, providing weary travelers with a respite from today’s more ambiguous headlines.”¹²⁹ One editorial in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* compared Colonial Williamsburg favorably to the “Walt Disney version of American history” stating: “The line between exploitation and drama is not always clear, and a danger exists that the sensitivities of any group will be trampled in the name of entertainment. But such possibilities should not make any subject out of bounds for dramatization. Giving pain a human face is the best way to make it real, no matter how much time has passed.”¹³⁰ In contrast to Disney, which exemplified entertainment, Colonial Williamsburg seemed to be a serious educational institution, even if it employed Disney-esque techniques.

Entertainment techniques could produce educational results at Colonial Williamsburg, unlike Disney. Even *Washington Post* book critic Jonathan Yardley, who described it as “less a historic site than a theme park, distinguished from the various enterprises of Walt Disney’s spiritual heirs by degrees more than kinds of fantasy and escapism”, argued that the Foundation dealt with enslavement much better. Yardley argued that the reenactment “is an all-too-familiar mixture of edification and entertainment, but at least in this instance Williamsburg seems to have had unexceptionable motives in presenting it. If the drama acted out in Williamsburg helped lead a few people to a more serious study of slavery and its apparatus, the interests of history—and of those black slaves who were its victims—will have been served.”¹³¹ While Yardley hardly provided a rousing endorsement of Colonial Williamsburg, and indeed accused them of mixing education and entertainment in much the same way as Disney, he argued that the auction was

¹²⁹ Editorial Board, “GIVING PAIN A HUMAN FACE”; Peter Feuerherd, “WILLIAMSBURG: THE PAST UNCHAINED,” *Commonweal*, November 19, 1999.

¹³⁰ Editorial Board, “GIVING PAIN A HUMAN FACE”; see also Editorial Board. “Of A-Bombs and Slaves”.

¹³¹ Jonathan Yardley, “The Colony’s True Colors,” *The Washington Post* (1974-), October 17, 1994.

effective in what should be their primary goal: getting people involved in history. The geographic and institutional proximity between Disney's America and Colonial Williamsburg invited comparison between the two, but in the case of the auction such a juxtaposition burnished Colonial Williamsburg's reputation.

Many among the auction's defenders argued that spectators' powerful reactions demonstrated the necessity of confronting the difficult history of slavery, as painful as it might be.¹³² Some, notably Khalfani and the NAACP, argued that slavery was simply too painful a topic to reenact.¹³³ On all sides, commentators noted that the auction incurred emotional reactions in spectators; *ABC News* tactlessly noted that "The slave portrayed by Coleman costs 50 pounds in 1773; the cost today - wounded feelings on all sides."¹³⁴ The *Atlanta Journal and Constitution's* Editorial Board declared strongly on October 12, 1994, that "Silence on Slavery Is No Solution" and that "[the reenactment] was a powerful indictment of the inhumanity of the slave system and of the society that allowed it." While the article acknowledged the emotions necessarily involved in representing the history of slavery, it concluded that "If we censor the literary or theatrical rendering of a historical event, we deny ourselves opportunities to delve into its meaning, and more importantly, to confront its reality. What we learn is worth the risk that the rendering might be done badly."¹³⁵ The *Christian Science Monitor's* Editorial Board espoused a similar view six days later, writing that "the truths of history, even the uncomfortable ones, can move us. And teach us. But only if we can bear to look."¹³⁶ More succinctly, syndicated columnist Cynthia Tucker noted that "Any accurate rendering of history will make not just many

¹³² See also Cynthia Tucker, "Black History Museum - a Way to Teach All Americans," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, October 16, 1994, Sunday edition, sec. Editorial; Lynch, "Facing History Head-On."

¹³³ Janofsky, "Mock Auction of Slaves."

¹³⁴ "Slavery Re-Enactment in Williamsburg, VA."

¹³⁵ Editorial Board, "Silence on Slavery Is No Solution."

¹³⁶ Editorial Board, "Of A-Bombs and Slaves."

whites but also many blacks uncomfortable,” concluding that the AAIP “rightly went on with the auction”, rendering this history visible.¹³⁷ To some, the auction—painful as it was—was an opportunity to confront a difficult and crucial part of American history; Americans had to rise to the task.

Black commentators had a complex reaction to Colonial Williamsburg, though it generally followed the contours of the larger media discussion. Some Black journalists supported the auction on the grounds that Americans needed to confront the difficult history of enslavement, some attacked it as trivializing entertainment, and some were ambivalent. Publications as diverse as *Jet Magazine*, *Black Issues in Higher Education*, and DC-area Black newspapers reported on the auction; While local newspapers were very critical of the auction, *Jet* was less so, and *Black Issues in Higher Education* interviewed major Black historians. The debate lingered long enough in the public consciousness that in January 1996, when *Emerge*—a local Virginia magazine with a largely Black audience—published their 1994/1995 Year in Review, they included the auction alongside the O.J. Simpson trial and ongoing debates over affirmative action.¹³⁸

Some Black journalists argued that emotional responses to the auction demonstrated its necessity; despite how painful representing enslavement could be, they argued, Americans both Black and white needed to confront it as an inescapable component of the country’s history. Cynthia Tucker, a Black syndicated columnist and an editor at the paper, chimed in on October 16th that Colonial Williamsburg “rightly went on with the auction” to portray history “as it really was”, and that “Any accurate rendering of history will make not just many whites but also many

¹³⁷ Cynthia Tucker, “Black History Museum - a Way to Teach All Americans,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, October 16, 1994, Sunday edition, sec. Editorial.

¹³⁸ Alayna A Gaines, “Year in Review,” *Emerge* (Rosslyn: Emerge Communications, Inc., January 1996).

blacks uncomfortable.”¹³⁹ Similarly, columnist John Head wrote that while confronting enslavement is painful, “Only by confronting slavery do we deepen our understanding of how it happened and how our people were able to triumph over it. Even though such an examination can be painful, we lose much more than we gain when we simply close our eyes to it.”¹⁴⁰ Head critiqued the NAACP, SCLC, and protestors, who he saw as overly ashamed of their own history and exemplifying the “certain schizophrenia” surrounding the history of slavery in America. In writing directly to Black readers, many of whom might have felt similarly to the protestors, Head made clear that just as the reluctance to talk about slavery was not limited to white Americans, the necessity of confronting the history of slavery was not limited either. The discomfort engendered by the auction, and discussions of enslavement more generally, only made clear their necessity as an educational tool.

Most could agree that Americans of all races desperately needed education about the history of enslavement. To some Black journalists, this indicated that Colonial Williamsburg was right to attempt to educate the public. To others, especially in Black newspapers from the Williamsburg area, the auction was tasteless voyeurism, more entertainment than education. One op-ed in the *Washington Informer*, a local Black newspaper with a circulation of 35,000, “applaud[ed]this attempt to shed light on the truth about slavery... It is time the gaps in the history of the United States be filled.”¹⁴¹ On the other hand, respected Black local journalist Detine Bowers wrote in *The Richmond Afro-American and the Richmond Planet* that the auction was a “distasteful” and “tasteless choice” which reinforced the racist idea that enslaved Africans

¹³⁹ Tucker, “Black History Museum - a Way to Teach All Americans.”; See also Head, “Facing the Facts: Slavery Is History.”

¹⁴⁰ Head, “Facing the Facts: Slavery Is History.”

¹⁴¹ Dianne Dale, “Telling The Truth About Slavery And Filling The Gaps In History,” *Washington Informer*, February 22, 1995.

were powerless, an especially dangerous thing when so many did not know enough about the history of enslavement. She directly attacked the auction as voyeuristic entertainment, writing that “I have to wonder whether more people were there for the education, the history lesson that Colonial Williamsburg say they intended, or to participate in the entertainment, the voyeurism of marketing Black bodies.”¹⁴² Similarly, *Norfolk New Journal & Guide* publisher Brenda Andrews questioned: “How much of the auction seen would be ‘our history’ and how much entertainment?”¹⁴³ Andrews was vocal enough about her distaste: not only did she debate Coleman on the *Today Show*, she published a letter to the editor from a reader which questioned Coleman’s ability to speak for the Black community until she had been “run down like a vicious animal, repeatedly raped and dragged to the nearest slave ship.”¹⁴⁴ The violent tone of that letter is unique in the discussion around the auction, but it indicates a depth of feeling about Colonial Williamsburg among some in the area.

This was the result of the very complicated racial politics surrounding Williamsburg and Colonial Williamsburg, which some outlets reported on during the auction.¹⁴⁵ Notably, the construction of Colonial Williamsburg in the 1920s and 1930s had effectively segregated an integrated town, and while white residents profited, their Black neighbors were restricted to menial or service jobs. The Black community in the town and in the surrounding area harbored thus significant resentment towards Colonial Williamsburg, a feeling which was bolstered by the restoration’s patriotic view of history and its refusal to acknowledge the presence of enslavement

¹⁴² Bowers, “Slave Auction at Williamsburg.”

¹⁴³ Bowers; Waldron, “Staged Slave Auction Sparks Debate On Slavery And Racism”; Brenda H. Andrews, “Slave Auction in Williamsburg: Protest Gives Real Meaning to Slave Sales,” *New Journal & Guide*, 12-18 October 1994, 1, cited in Krutko-Devlin, 35.

¹⁴⁴ Oscar McCarry, “Walk in Their Shoes, ‘Christy,’” Letter to the Editor, *New Journal & Guide*, 26 October-1 November 1994, p. 2. Cited in Krutko-Devlin, 35.

¹⁴⁵ Janofsky, “Mock Auction of Slaves.”

in colonial Virginia.¹⁴⁶ Rex Ellis, who had developed much of Colonial Williamsburg's early African American programming and founded the AAIP, had grown up in the town, as had Christy Coleman Matthews. He wrote that as a child, nearly everyone he knew had worked there: "[whether] you worked as a janitor, waiter, busboy or maid, working at Colonial Williamsburg made you feel ashamed... Colonial Williamsburg constantly reminded us all of a place and time that flourished because we had been slaves."¹⁴⁷ As a result, Ellis was initially hesitant to work as a reenactor there.¹⁴⁸ To the Foundation's Black employees—the janitors, the maintenance staff, the cashiers, and all the other people whose poorly compensated labor allowed Colonial Williamsburg to keep functioning—being reminded of enslavement at every turn was painful. For this reason, Black maintenance staff actively undermined early efforts to promote Black history at Colonial Williamsburg in the 1960s.¹⁴⁹ In its first years, the African American interpretation program angered other Black employees, who saw it as "a slap in the face to their years of enduring racial slurs and slights to get visitors to see black men and women in roles other than servile ones."¹⁵⁰ Even as the AAIP improved both Colonial Williamsburg's reputation and its relationship with the local Black community, tensions remained.

Nearly all of the ten Black publications surveyed for this thesis mentioned that Americans do not know enough about the history of enslavement; whether Colonial Williamsburg's reenacted auction was educational was another question. Three defended the auction and Colonial Williamsburg's educational credentials, while two others were ambivalent

¹⁴⁶ Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 23-24.

¹⁴⁷ Rex Ellis, "Presenting The Past: Education, Interpretation And The Teaching Of Black History At Colonial Williamsburg" (College of William and Mary, 1989), vii.

¹⁴⁸ Rex Ellis, "Black Programs: We've Learned a Great Deal Since the Summer of '79," *Colonial Williamsburg News*, July 1986, Vol 39, No 7 edition.

¹⁴⁹ Amy Tyson, "Interpreting Painful Histories," in *The Wages of History, Emotional Labor on Public History's Front Lines* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 145-147. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk9rt.10>.

¹⁵⁰ Matthews, "Twenty Years Interpreting African American History," 7.

on the auction but emphasized the need for more education about enslavement. Five opposed it on the grounds that it trivialized Black trauma rather than educating. The auction lingered in public discourse for several years, as some Black columnists were employed the Colonial Williamsburg auction in order to make larger arguments about racialized history or culture war conflicts over the past. In arguing that “we do the past a tremendous disservice by glossing over what's too painful to celebrate” or, citing Gravelly, that history should be moving and enlightening, they employed the auction as an example of a successful confrontation with difficult history.¹⁵¹ Black journalists and papers, conflicted, picked up on questions about the teaching of American history and how much Americans actually know about the institution of slavery; they amplified the entertainment / education discussion, questioning whether enslavement was a space in which they could overlap.

When journalists asked Black historians about the auction, their responses were heterogenous and measured: most seemed to support the auction as a way to increase awareness of Black history, and all agreed that Americans desperately needed education on the history of enslavement. As a result, it seemed fitting that in November of 1994 *Black Issues in Higher Education* took the question straight to the experts, asking well-known and well-respected Black historians such as John Hope Franklin, Nell Irvin Painter, and John W. Blassingame to weigh in. Blassingame, the editor of "The Frederick Douglass Papers" and then a professor of history and African-American history at Yale, stated: "I don't think that we as a nation are ready to deal with slavery and its legacies because it was so traumatic and painful." If properly contextualized and presented not as entertainment, he supported restaging history as a form of education. Similarly,

¹⁵¹ Michael Paul Williams, “OBSCURING PAIN DOES THE PAST A BIG DISSERVICE,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, February 26, 1996, Monday City Edition edition, sec. Area/ State; Clarence Page, “CLIMATE OF FEAR; SUPPRESSES EXHIBITS,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 10, 1996, Wednesday Five Star Lift Edition edition, sec. Editorial.

John Hope Franklin, a groundbreaking Black historian of enslavement, explained: "Nobody would ever let us forget that there was a Holocaust, and I don't want anyone to forget there was slavery... That was true in 1776, true in 1787 and it's true in 1994." He noted that while he would want to make sure that Colonial Williamsburg had accurately portrayed the auction, "I won't get exercised about the reenactment...Black people should not be ashamed of slavery, and I certainly have nothing to be ashamed of." Nell Irvin Painter, a professor of American history at Princeton and a leading scholar of the nineteenth-century South, was more effusive, declaring that the auction was "an excellent place to start" educating Americans about slavery. "Americans do not want to deal with it now or ever because it's a very ugly part of our national background, our history. But it is crucial," she stated. "The whole point of slavery was you made people into economic units, you dehumanize them and if you are an economic unit, you have the ability to be bought and sold. Slave sales were the bedrock of slavery." The only Black historian consulted who did not support the auction—Henry Lewis Suggs, a professor at Clemson University—did so because he saw it as something "staged for entertainment." He supported portrayals of slavery generally but emphasized that audiences needed to be educated beforehand, noting that slave auctions were "a rather dramatic and graphic illustration" of the trauma of slavery. Suggs suggested that Colonial Williamsburg was not the proper setting for such a reenactment. On the other hand, Darlene Clark Hine, a pioneering scholar of African-American women's history and professor at Michigan State University, pointed to the importance of Williamsburg as a site, explaining that she believed the auction was "a step in the right direction" and educational rather than "done for entertainment." She noted that Colonial Williamsburg failed to address enslavement for much of its history, framing the auction as "a way of addressing the silence."¹⁵²

¹⁵² Phillip, "To Reenact Or Not To Reenact?"

Generally, the Black historians interviewed agreed that the American public desperately needed education about Black history, and most considered the auction an effective method of doing so, but the discussion developed along the same lines—confronting a difficult history, entertainment versus education—as the larger public conversation about the auction.

Overall, the question of reenacting enslavement was just as controversial among historians as it was among the public at large, although on slightly different grounds. Generally, historians wrote positively on the auction, seeing it as an effective if somewhat misguided attempt to bring a difficult history into the public eye. Historians, especially public historians and scholars of slavery, saw it as an opportunity, a jumping-off point, to engage with the long history of slavery and racism in America. Whether or not it was misguided, acceptable, or just stupid, many historians seemed to see this as a potential method to confront difficult histories. Within the context of the emerging culture wars, some also saw it as a conflict over who had the right to tell which histories.

Some historians saw the auction as an opportunity to engage with and educate Americans about the long history of slavery and racism. For example, in the November 1994 issue of the Organization of American Historians' newsletter, the first after the controversy, the pioneering social historian Alfred Young drew upon the auction as an example of effective public history where controversy arose, citing Gravelly as a mind changed by the interactive effect of reenactment.¹⁵³ In the same month, *Black Issues in Higher Education* interviewed Black historians John Hope Franklin, Nell Irvin Painter, and John W. Blassingame about the auction; all agreed that Americans needed more education about enslavement and that reenactment, if done correctly, could be an excellent method to do so. This idea lingered in historians'

¹⁵³ Alfred F Young, "S.O.S.: Storm Warning for American Museums," *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 22, no. 4 (November 1994): 1, cont. 6–8. g

discussions of the auction: In the same vein, James O. Horton, a highly respected Black scholar of African-American history at George Washington University, employed it as an example of the American inability to confront racism in a November 1998 *Washington Post* essay. Like other historians, he bemoaned the lack of adequate education on enslavement in schools, concluding that “As a result, we still have not learned how to face that part of our history. At historic plantation sites and Civil War battlefields, historians often find visitors unwilling to confront slavery’s centrality to American history.”¹⁵⁴ Horton acknowledged the mixed reactions of some audience members and concerns around trivialization, but he cited Gravelly’s change of heart as evidence for its educational character and described the auction as “extremely moving.” Horton expanded on his editorial in a piece for the Autumn 1999 issue of the *Public Historian*, using the Williamsburg auction as an example of the need for historians to embrace public history which would reach Americans outside of academia. Horton argued that engagements with enslavement at Colonial Williamsburg and Monticello demonstrated the difficult but necessary nature of educating Americans about slavery. He repeated his argument that Americans were undereducated on slavery, writing that public historians “are asked to educate a public generally unprepared and often reluctant to deal with a history which, at times, can seem very personal”, especially as it brings up contemporary racial strife.¹⁵⁵ Because the history of enslavement is so painful to many, there are few noncontroversial or comfortable ways to educate Americans about it, even as it remains imperative for public history institutions. To some, the auction thus represented both the ignorance of many Americans about enslavement as well as a method of educating them.

¹⁵⁴ James Oliver Horton, “We’re Avoiding Serious Dialogue,” *Washington Post*, November 22, 1998, 1620749676, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post.

¹⁵⁵ Horton, “Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America’s Racial Story,” 20.

Like the public at large, the main point of discussion for historians during the years following the auction centered around the entertainment / education dichotomy; overall, they tended to bring up the event within larger discussions of public history praxis. Like others, historians continued to argue over the auction for years. For example, in the introduction to the Autumn 1999 issue of the *Public Historian*, which centered around living history's painful engagements with "difficult history", editor Shelley Bookspan wrote: "If the past is pain, then we public historians are the public's pain givers. Or, perhaps more accurately, we are the public's pain exposers"; reenactments of enslavement or of other painful historical events, she argued, "[are] not history as entertainment."¹⁵⁶ The painful quality of some historical reenactment thus served as an argument in support of their educational character. For others, however, auctions were simply too painful. Donald Ritchie, the former Historian of the Senate, wrote in the journal *Oral History* in 2001 that he considered the auction a "badly misguided effort [which] offended civil rights organizations and triggered organized protests and more negative publicity."¹⁵⁷ The offense, to some, was not worth the risk.

The deepest engagement with this issue came from Horton, who argued that while the emotional consequences of slavery reenactments were both inevitable and essential, it was necessary to be sensitive to the psychological toll it took on Black interpreters and to limit its use to strictly educational environments. He described the 1994 auction as a "wrenching" and "bold historical statement," acknowledging in both his 1998 op-ed and 1999 *Public Historian* article the concerns and mixed emotions of some viewers, protestors, and Williamsburg staff, as well as

¹⁵⁶ Shelley Bookspan, "Editor's Corner: The Past Is Not Always a Pretty Country," *The Public Historian* 21, no. 4 (1999): 5–7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3379469>.

¹⁵⁷ Donald A. Ritchie, "When History Goes Public: Recent Experiences in the United States," *Oral History* 29, no. 1 (2001): 92–97, pg 3.

the emotional toll that reenacting slavery took on Black interpreters.¹⁵⁸ Still, Horton saw consensus among historians in favor of the auction, even as they held concerns about the education/ entertainment question: citing no examples, he wrote that “Academic historians were generally in favor of the auction recreation, but they urged that great care be taken so that it not become entertainment. In the end, most seemed satisfied that Williamsburg’s presentation was indeed educational.”¹⁵⁹ Most notable is the qualification: with “great care” that the auction “not become entertainment.” In Colonial Williamsburg, reenacting enslavement was educational; interpreting enslavement could only be ethically done in a place “primarily devoted to education,” like Colonial Williamsburg or Monticello, at the very minimum.¹⁶⁰ These places enacted what Bookspan summarized as the “socially necessary risk” of educating the public about enslavement. In other contexts, however, Horton argued that reenacting enslavement could venture into trivialization: When CW interpreters were invited to an event at a mall, for example, it changed from “interpreting slavery” to “playing a slave for a white audience.” He concluded: “Slavery is a sobering subject, too difficult to interpret in the atmosphere of a shopping mall or any place in which education is not the obvious intent.”¹⁶¹ Horton—and some other historians—clearly saw the auction as a primarily educational event and Colonial Williamsburg as an educational institution, rather than the “Republican Disneyland” that others cast it as. Notably, Horton had experience with accusations of trivializing history: he had himself come under fire for agreeing to serve as a historical advisor on the Disney’s America project and had in 1994 based his defense of Disney’s America in the idea that the park could help popularize history.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ Horton, “Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America’s Racial Story,” pg. 30, 33.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

¹⁶⁰ Horton, “Presenting Slavery”, 33.

¹⁶¹ Horton, “We’re Avoiding Serious Dialogue.”

¹⁶² Courtland Milloy, “Helping Disney, Hurting America?,” *The Washington Post* (1974-), February 23, 1994; Cary Carson, “Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall, Whose History Is the Fairest of Them All?,” *The Public Historian* 17, no. 4 (1995): 62.

To Horton, the auction's lesson was that it was important to be very careful when reenacting enslavement, that it was very important to do it in the right way and in the right context, and that the right context was determined by the balance between entertainment and education.

Ultimately, the auction and its accompanying discourses about the education / entertainment dichotomy spawned significant discussions into the future of public history.

Like other commentators, some historians saw the auction as an effort to confront the difficult history of enslavement. Years after the fact, Ira Berlin—a respected white scholar who wrote groundbreaking works on the history of slavery—argued in 2001 that Americans needed to fully confront the importance of enslavement to the nation's development and history. He saw the auction as an effective way to address Americans' lack of knowledge about slavery. In a *New York Times* op-ed, Berlin noted that “while slavery serves as an entry point for a dialogue on race, it is not an easy one. For slavery carries with it deep anger, resentment, indignation and bitterness for some, embarrassment, humiliation and shame for others.”¹⁶³ He saw the auction as a success which led to more African-American interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg, even as it was difficult for some visitors and interpreters alike. Berlin similarly defended the auction in a 2004 article in *The Journal of American History*, in which he noted that the 1990s were characterized by an increasing public interest in racism and thus the history of enslavement. Slavery, he argued, “has become a language, a way to talk about race in a society in which race is difficult to discuss”, but slavery itself is also emotionally fraught: “Almost 140 years after slavery's demise, the question still sits on tender and sensitive ground.”¹⁶⁴ As in the 2001 op-ed, he recognized the issues necessarily raised by the auction reenactment but observed that “The

¹⁶³ Ira Berlin, “Overcome by Slavery,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 2001, Friday Late Edition, sec. Editorial.

¹⁶⁴ Ira Berlin, “American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice,” *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 4 (2004): 1251–68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3660347>, pg. 1259-1260.

results of the incorporation of the slave trade into the reenactments astounded observers, as visitors to Colonial Williamsburg became caught up in the presentation in all of the complicated ways that slavery and its memory touches Americans, black and white.”¹⁶⁵ Difficult as it might be, Berlin argued that the historical engagement the auction encouraged was something useful and necessary, and thus that it presented an opportunity for Americans to fully confront their own history in a way few had been willing to attempt prior.

Colonial Williamsburg and Disney Discourse

From the beginning, discussions of Disney’s America and the 1994 auction frequently overlapped, as both historians and the public asked what to many seemed to be the central question of the era: “Who owns history?” Reading the Colonial Williamsburg auction discourse through the lens of the Disney’s America debacle makes clear that question’s stakes, as Americans attempted to determine how living or immersive history sites could help the country confront its long history of enslavement.

Chronologically, it made sense to link the events: Disney announced that it would not pursue the theme park on September 28, 1994, and Colonial Williamsburg staged the auction on October 10, 1994. Ideologically, both Disney’s America and Colonial Williamsburg were tourist attractions which represented difficult histories of enslavement through entertainment, though in different ways. As a result, many historians discussed the events together, as did many in the public sphere; unsurprisingly, the discourse followed the contours of the larger debate.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Berlin, “American Slavery,” pg 1256.

¹⁶⁶ See, for example, Jonathan Yardley, “The Colony’s True Colors,” *The Washington Post* (1974-), October 17, 1994, 750865568, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post; Editorial Board, “GIVING PAIN A HUMAN FACE,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 14, 1994, Friday Five Star edition, sec. Editorial; Cindy Aron, “The Education-Entertainment Continuum: A Historical Perspective | Perspectives on History | AHA,” *Perspectives on History - American Historical Association* 33, no. 3 (March 1, 1995), <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/march-1995/the-education-entertainment-continuum-a-historical-perspective>; Michael Kammen, “History as a Lightning Rod,” *Organization of American Historians Newsletter* 23, no. 2 (May

Historian Otis Graham complained in his “Editor’s Corner”—also titled “Who Owns American History?”—in the Spring 1995 issue of *The Public Historian* about media coverage of the auction and Disney’s America, concluding “Move over for multiple ownership of history...History matters in contemporary America, and whoever puts forward a version of it can count upon a vigorous counterattack from somebody who is either offended or ready to declare war.”¹⁶⁷ Graham’s comment indicates that for some, both the Colonial Williamsburg auction and Disney’s America controversies reinforced anxiety about historians’ ownership of history, and around who could tell what stories.

The dominant discourse, however, surrounded the distinction between education and entertainment. Pulitzer-Prize winning social historian and then-OAH president Michael Kammen juxtaposed the two events along those lines in a May 1995 article for the *OAH Newsletter*.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, Cindy Aron, a history professor at the University of Virginia, wrote in the March 1995 issue of the American Historical Association’s newsletter *Perspectives on History* that the Disney’s America debacle raised serious questions for historians about the boundaries between entertainment and education. For Aron, Americans’ long history of combining the two meant that they did not necessarily conflict, but together challenged museum educators to “[find] ways to make the process of entertaining and the process of educating reciprocal and mutually reinforcing”; she cited the 1994 Colonial Williamsburg slave auction as an example of historians

1995): 1, 6; Otis L. Graham, “Editor’s Corner: Who Owns American History?,” *The Public Historian* 17, no. 2 (1995): 8–11, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3378121>; “Teaching History,” *Talk of the Nation* (National Public Radio, September 11, 1997); Eric Gable and Richard Handler, “In Colonial Williamsburg, the New History Meets the Old,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 30, 1998; Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Donald A. Ritchie, “When History Goes Public: Recent Experiences in the United States,” *Oral History* 29, no. 1 (2001): 92–97.

¹⁶⁷ Otis L. Graham, “Editor’s Corner: Who Owns American History?,” *The Public Historian* 17, no. 2 (1995): 9–10, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3378121>.

¹⁶⁸ Kammen, “History as a Lightning Rod”.

and museum educators employing entertainment tools, and gently chastised other historians for being overly concerned with policing the boundary between education and entertainment.

Most notably, on October 6, 1994, the National Endowment for the Humanities hosted the “Who Owns History?” panel at the National Museum of Natural History, featuring Cary Carson, James O. Horton, William Styron, and Black historian Barbara Fields—who, excepting Fields, were very involved in the debate over both Disney’s America and the Colonial Williamsburg auction. During the discussion, the panel touched on similar issues of education and entertainment: Fields even asked Horton if he would have agreed to advise the KKK, while he responded that there was nothing wrong with the idea that education and entertainment could go hand-in-hand. While the main focus of the event was the Disney’s America park, Amy Schwartz’s negative review in the *Washington Post*—aptly titled “Who Owns History?”—noted that a few days after the panel, Colonial Williamsburg’s auction raised the same question: “Who owns this history? You could hardly imagine a more graphic demonstration of an intractable question.”¹⁶⁹ Comments like this make clear just how much the issues raised by Disney’s America and the Colonial Williamsburg overlapped within the larger context of the culture wars.

In some cases, Colonial Williamsburg even emerged as preferable. As radical social historian Mike Wallace argued in *The Public Historian* in 1995, Disney was suspect not because it proposed melding history and entertainment, but because it was Disney, with all the baggage that entailed. He noted that Colonial Williamsburg had faced critiques for its dramatizations of slave life, but that complaints were “retracted when the performances proved compelling”; Williamsburg proved that institutions could mix entertainment and history without harming the latter. Instead, Wallace argued: “It’s not Disney’s techniques that are at issue, but its politics. The

¹⁶⁹ Schwartz, “Who Owns History?”.

company's perceived need to maintain a noncontroversial image in the cultural marketplace-to preserve its symbolic capital-will make it very difficult to confront historical issues honestly.”¹⁷⁰ Even as Colonial Williamsburg’s patriotic, touristy reputation had made some question its ability to confront enslavement, Disney’s reputation made the prospect of the company respectfully and honestly representing Black history seem nigh impossible.

Within Colonial Williamsburg, historians and interpreters saw the entertainment/education discussion around Disney as something with serious repercussions for their own institution. In a February 1995 interview with *Humanities* magazine, published by the NEH, Colonial Williamsburg’s vice president of research Cary Carson noted that “The whole Disney phenomenon held a mirror up to our souls.”¹⁷¹ He corroborated this in the *Public Historian* in 1995: “[Disney’s America] challenged our monopoly, it rattled our complacency, and it mocked our claims to entertain and educate the general public. Overnight, Disney redrew the line that defines the boundaries of popular history.”¹⁷² Colonial Williamsburg officials saw Disney as both a competitor for visitors and a challenger for control of public history in the region, fearing that Disney would present ahistorical conclusions; as a result, “Colonial Williamsburg opposed a location anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere” for the new Disney project.¹⁷³ However, Carson defended Disney’s right to combine history and entertainment, arguing that both CW and Disney employed the same tactics (reenactment, theater, narrative) to reach a broad audience; his institution was simply more committed to real history.¹⁷⁴ Drawing on his 25 years of experience at Colonial Williamsburg, he declared his skepticism about “attempts to draw useful distinctions

¹⁷⁰Michael Wallace, “Serious Fun,” *The Public Historian* 17, no. 4 (1995): 87.

¹⁷¹ William Styron and Cary Carson, “Who Owns History?,” *Humanities*, February 1995, LIB 11, National Endowment for the Humanities Digital Repository, 9

¹⁷²Carson, “Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall, Whose History Is the Fairest of Them All?,” 61.

¹⁷³ Carson, “Mirror,” 61.

¹⁷⁴ Styron and Carson, “Who Owns History,” 10-11.

between education and entertainment” and hit back against “professors, pundits, and purists” who worried about confusing the two and who “[had] fun shadowboxing with Disney, Colonial Williamsburg, and other popularizers of the past.”¹⁷⁵ Interestingly enough, at the time of the auction Colonial Williamsburg was very actively interrogating its own positioning with regards to entertainment vs education: in 1994, Carson sent a letter to Michael Eisner asking exactly how Disney saw its obligation to a popular history which challenged visitors.¹⁷⁶ In response, a Disney representative apparently made a joke to Carson about the auction.¹⁷⁷ As Carson noted, the whole event “[got] to the heart of our symposium question, not “Who owns history?” but who’s entitled to say what its lessons are.”¹⁷⁸ Carson was very aware that the Disney debate had significant consequences for Colonial Williamsburg, not only because Disney would siphon visitors but because it raised the specter of the entertainment /education debacle and specifically who could represent what histories.

The auction controversy had a continuing if lowkey presence in the American consciousness, popping up in discussions of other culture war debates and of the history of enslavement. It popped up in a 1997 *US News and World Report* article about the culture wars, in a 1997 episode of National Public Radio’s *Talk of the Nation*, in a 1998 *New York Times* article about reenactments of controversial historical events such as the Molly Maguires, in a 1999 issue of the *Public Historian*, in articles in the *Times* and *Washington Post* by Professors James Horton and Ira Berlin in 1998 and 2001, in a 2001 op-ed about a monument to enslaved Africans in Savannah, GA; in a 2001 article in *Oral History* by Donald Ritchie, Historian Emeritus of the Senate; in a 2002 history of Colonial Williamsburg, in a 2003 *Atlanta Journal*

¹⁷⁵ Carson, “Mirror,” 63-65.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁷⁸ Styron and Carson, “Who Owns History,” 10.

and *Constitution* op-ed about the importance of museums of enslavement, in a 2004 *Time* overview of museums of African-American history, and more. In 2013, *The American Conservative* even brought it up as an example of Colonial Williamsburg not being conservative enough. In 2019, Colonial Williamsburg commemorated the event as part of an exhibit celebrating forty years of African American historical interpretation, screening footage of the event for visitors and hosting a panel. In 2020, it was discussed at length in the *New Yorker* as part of a larger conversation about the 1990s and “remembrance culture.”¹⁷⁹ Indeed, James O. Horton and Lois Horton’s 2006 essay collection *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* featured a photo of the auction on the cover of the paperback edition. Rather than disappearing into distant history, the 1994 Colonial Williamsburg auction controversy came

¹⁷⁹ Miriam Horn, “Through a Glass Darkly,” *US News and World Report*, May 26, 1997, sec. Culture & Ideas; “Teaching History”; Mark Bulik, “Dark Days of Mayhem Finally Emerge in the Light,” *The New York Times*, July 4, 1998, Saturday Late Edition edition, sec. National News; Shelley Bookspan, “Editor’s Corner: The Past Is Not Always a Pretty Country,” *The Public Historian* 21, no. 4 (1999): 5–7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3379469>; James Oliver Horton, “We’re Avoiding Serious Dialogue,” *The Washington Post* (1974-), November 22, 1998, 1620749676, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post; James Oliver Horton, “Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America’s Racial Story,” *The Public Historian* 21, no. 4 (1999): 19–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3379471>; Ira Berlin, “Overcome by Slavery,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 2001, Friday Late Edition edition, sec. Editorial; Dan Chapman, “Savannah Struggles over Inscription on Monument Depicting Slaves,” *Atlanta Constitution*, February 23, 2001, Home Edition edition, sec. News; Ritchie, “When History Goes Public: Recent Experiences in the United States”; Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 2nd ed. (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469664323_greenspan; JIM AUCHMUTEY, “Slave Museums Confront a Painful Past,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, March 9, 2003, Sunday edition; Richard Lacayo, “Slavery Under Glass,” *Time*, August 30, 2004, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,994970,00.html>; Arthur Bloom, “Colonial Williamsburg Isn’t Republican Disneyland,” *The American Conservative*, April 8, 2013, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/colonial-williamsburg-isnt-republican-disneyland/>; Jack Jacobs, “Colonial Williamsburg Commemorates Story of City’s Enslaved Inhabitants,” *The Virginia Gazette*, February 15, 2019, sec. Entertainment News, <https://www.dailypress.com/virginiagazette/news/va-vg-revealing-the-priceless-0216-story.html>; Kelly Arehard, “Researching 40 Years of African American Interpretation,” Colonial Williamsburg, April 6, 2020, <https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/learn/behind-the-scenes/researching-40-years-african-american-interpretation/>; “Interpreting Slavery at Colonial Williamsburg | C-SPAN.Org,” *Interpreting Slavery at Colonial Williamsburg* (CSPAN: American History TV, May 10, 2019), CSPAN, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?460541-2/interpreting-slavery-colonial-williamsburg>; Julian Lucas, “Can Slavery Reenactments Set Us Free?,” *The New Yorker*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/02/17/can-slavery-reenactments-set-us-free>. See also Reginald Stuart, “Painful Past,” *Emerge* (Rosslyn, United States: Emerge Communications, Inc., February 1997); Michael Colton, “Williamsburg’s Time Travelers: The Interpreters of Colonial History Live in the Here and Then,” *The Washington Post* (1974-), August 13, 1998, sec. Style; Valerie Casey, “Staging Meaning: Performance in the Modern Museum,” *The Drama Review* 49, no. 3 (2005): 78–95.

to represent daring—sometimes too daring—efforts to popularize or make accessible the history of enslavement.

Ultimately, the auction sparked a national conversation about how living history museums should confront the difficult and painful history of enslavement in America; historians, public intellectuals, and commentators debated whether the auction was entertainment or education, whether Colonial Williamsburg could be trusted to educate Americans about enslavement, and how Americans should deal with the history of slavery more generally. The auction’s lingering presence in historical and popular thought indicates just how relevant these questions remain.

[Enslaving Virginia](#)

In many ways, the auction’s coda did not arrive until five years after the fact, when “Enslaving Virginia,” a program about the struggles of Black Virginians, debuted at Colonial Williamsburg in the summer of 1999.¹⁸⁰ The controversy surrounding the 1994 auction led historians and interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg to reevaluate its African-American historical programming, and in the following years African-American history became an increasing focus, with Enslaving Virginia the most notable example. The program was sometimes graphic, featuring simulated escapes and whippings, and it invited viewers to participate in discussions with costumed interpreters about freedom, enslavement, and the meaning of human bondage.

Despite the fact that Enslaving Virginia was significantly more violent than the 1994 auction, many journalists considered it an improvement from its controversial predecessor.

¹⁸⁰ Barbara Clark Smith, review of *Review of Becoming Americans: Our Struggle to Be Both Free and Equal*, by Cary Carson, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (1999): 842–47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2674249>. pf 842, 844. See also Marie Tyler-McGraw, “Becoming Americans Again: Re-Envisioning and Revising Thematic Interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg,” *The Public Historian* 20, no. 3 (1998): 53–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3379774>.

Unlike the 1994 auction, it was relatively uncontroversial. Of the nine articles surveyed here, six contextualized it via reference to the auction, frequently framing the new programming as a better alternative to or improvement from the controversial 1994 event.¹⁸¹ For example, one *Philadelphia Inquirer* article drew a contrast between the “misguided” auction and the “well thought out” 1999 program, while another from the *Washington Post* praised Enslaving Virginia as an “edgy,” “gripping program” instead of the “sanitized and rather bloodless version of history” which Colonial Williamsburg was known for.¹⁸² Those who did not explicitly cast the auction as misguided frequently argued that it set Williamsburg on the path to making enslavement a major programming focus: one article in *Black Issues in Higher Education* celebrated that the AAIP “has shaken up the safe, smug little world of Southern historic house museums.”¹⁸³ This is particularly surprising given that, as many media reports noted, the program was “raw,” “so realistic that audiences [were] visibly shaken” and “very emotional, very disturbing”, reducing some viewers to tears.¹⁸⁴ Despite the graphic and troubling nature of Enslaving Virginia, its emphasis on slavery as central to American colonial life earned the endorsement of the same Virginia NAACP which had protested Colonial Williamsburg five

¹⁸¹ See Sonja Barisic, “Colonial Williamsburg Tries to Depict Reality of Slavery,” *Associated Press*, July 27, 1999, AM edition, sec. State and Regional; Elisabeth Bumiller, “Colonial Myth and Reality on a Visit to Williamsburg,” *New York Times*, 1999, sec. Weekend Fine Arts Leisure; Dan Eggen, “A Taste of Slavery Has Tourists Up in Arms,” *Washington Post*, July 7, 1999; Feuerherd, “WILLIAMSBURG: THE PAST UNCHAINED”; Kendra Hamilton, “Reinterpreting America’s History,” *Black Issues in Higher Education* (Reston: Cox, Matthews & Associates, Inc., August 5, 1999), 194184127, Ethnic NewsWatch; Research Library; Social Science Premium Collection; Annette John-Hall, “OPENING SOME EYES ON SLAVERY,” *Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA)*, September 5, 1999, Access World News Research Collection; Kathleen Kenna, “BLOOD PAINTS DISTURBING PICTURE OF COLONIAL AMERICA,” *Toronto Star*, August 14, 1999, Saturday, Edition 1 edition, sec. Insight; Russell Chaddock, “Williamsburg’s Tale of Two Histories”; Andrea Tortora, “Painful Piece of History Comes to Shocking Life,” *USA Today*, July 13, 1999, Tuesday edition.

¹⁸² John-Hall, “OPENING SOME EYES ON SLAVERY”; Eggen, “A Taste of Slavery Has Tourists Up in Arms.”

¹⁸³ Eggen, “A Taste of Slavery Has Tourists Up in Arms”; Hamilton, “Reinterpreting America’s History”; Tortora, “Painful Piece of History Comes to Shocking Life.”

¹⁸⁴ Eggen, “A Taste of Slavery Has Tourists Up in Arms”; Kenna, “BLOOD PAINTS DISTURBING PICTURE OF COLONIAL AMERICA”; Barisic, “Colonial Williamsburg Tries to Depict Reality of Slavery”; Hamilton, “Reinterpreting America’s History”; Russell Chaddock, “Williamsburg’s Tale of Two Histories”; Tortora, “Painful Piece of History Comes to Shocking Life.”

years before. Indeed, the group's executive director King Salim Khalfani, who had vociferously critiqued the auction, told the press: "Our feeling was that they did things differently this time."¹⁸⁵ This reversal only added to positive press attention. Despite Enslaving Virginia's more visceral and graphic representation of enslaved life, the program was significantly less controversial than the 1994 auction; indeed, it was seen by many as an improvement.

Unlike the auction, which cast viewers as bystanders, Enslaving Virginia invited visitors to engage with costumed interpreters in discussions about the nature of freedom and the value of liberty, as well as assist in escape attempts. While visitors were witnesses to the simulated whipping, they witnessed it from the point of view of other enslaved people. When Khalfani told the press that the Virginia NAACP approved of the program because it centered the experiences of the enslaved and stated, "Our feeling was that they did things differently this time," he was entirely correct.¹⁸⁶

However, Colonial Williamsburg was still presenting a history which was ultimately positive about American democratic ideals. In this regard historian Barbara Clark Smith described *Becoming Americans*, the educational programming plan from which Enslaving Virginia developed, as "important, baffling, and unsatisfactory" and "wishful thinking."¹⁸⁷ Citing, for example, the plan's insistence that "Everyone has a right and a duty to participate in the governing of society", she noted that while the democratic ideal was admirable, it was also plainly ahistorical—few eighteenth-century Americans believed in universal suffrage. She concludes: "What impedes historical thinking here is not primarily corporate thinking but wishful thinking. More specifically, it is civic thinking. What has gotten in the way of history is

¹⁸⁵ Barisic, "Colonial Williamsburg Tries to Depict Reality of Slavery"; Eggen, "A Taste of Slavery Has Tourists Up in Arms."

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Smith, "Review of *Becoming Americans*," 842, 844. See also Tyler-McGraw, "Becoming Americans Again."

the nation.”¹⁸⁸ Even as Colonial Williamsburg took step towards a more progressive and accurate social history, it found itself mired in the same old patriotic historical mud.

This was part of a larger trend at Colonial Williamsburg: Even as groups within the institution Williamsburg pushed change (most notably the ascendant social historians and the AAIP), the dominant history produced at the site did not fundamentally challenge traditional narratives about America. In their 1997 anthropological study of the institution, professors Richard Handler and Eric Gable nicknamed it “Republican Disneyland” because of its conservative historiographical outlook and “consumer preference populism,” a positive, up-by-the-bootstraps view of history which catered to middle-class tourists and suffocated more critical social history at the site.¹⁸⁹ Handler and Gable noted in 1998 that the changes wrought within Colonial Williamsburg—more Black history, more Black staffers, more focus on minoritized histories—were “just additional pieces in a narrative framework that continues to celebrate America while playing down inequalities. In the end, then, Colonial Williamsburg [continued] to be a patriotic shrine that fosters tourists' fantasies.”¹⁹⁰ Even the best efforts of the AAIP and years of vociferous public debate exhorting the site to engage a more realistic historical narrative could not defeat its traditionalist impulses and market-based historical interpretation, which ultimately determined Colonial Williamsburg’s direction.

Conclusion

In 1994, the Colonial Williamsburg auction sparked a national conversation about how living history museums and America at large should confront enslavement, a pressing question which has remained so into the present day. In the context of the ongoing debate about

¹⁸⁸ Smith, “Review of *Becoming Americans*,” 844.

¹⁸⁹ Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*, 220-235,

¹⁹⁰ Gable and Handler, “In Colonial Williamsburg, the New History Meets the Old.”

representing enslavement at immersive historical sites engendered by the Disney's America controversy, the Colonial Williamsburg reenactment revealed a complex set of anxieties about the legacy of slavery, the role of historians and historical sites in American society, and the power of experience to educate viewers about painful topics at exactly the same moment in which history became a contested space. Viewing the intellectual debate over the auction reenactment alongside the discussion over Disney's America and the culture wars, it becomes clear that the early 1990s were an inflection point for how Americans consider race and the role of public history sites.

Disney's America set the scene for the Colonial Williamsburg auction debate, raising important questions surrounding how interactive and immersive history sites could balance entertainment and education, an especially fraught question when considering the history of enslavement. For historians, constrained by the conditions of the culture wars, race became the subtext of the debate, buried under "easier" arguments about preserving the landscapes of the Civil War—and thus maintaining traditional modes of American history.

The Colonial Williamsburg auction debate picked up the entertainment / education question where Disney's America left off, though it was influenced by Colonial Williamsburg's own reputation for Disney-esque sanitization of American history. However, the auction's daring engagement with the "tough stuff of American memory," as James O. and Lois E. Horton put it, meant that historians and public commentators had to deal in a much more direct way with those questions. Race was no longer subtext: it was the text, the warp and weft of the debate.

America has always had difficulty confronting enslavement as the central fact of American life, and the contemporary uproar over efforts to teach about Black history indicate that this is as much an issue today as it was in the 1990s. Backlash against the 1619 Project, the

AP curriculum for African American Studies, Critical Race Theory, and Black history education in schools demonstrate that little progress has been made in the intervening thirty years: as the *New York Times* noted in a February 2023 article about the AP controversy, “If anything, the arguments over the curriculum underscore the fact that the United States is a country that cannot agree on its own story, especially the complex history of Black Americans.”¹⁹¹In many ways, we as a country have regressed: in 1994, nearly all commentators on the auction controversy agreed that America needed more education about enslavement, even if they disagreed on the method. In 2023, race is once again in the forefront of the debate over American history—but this time, the outlook is significantly grimmer.

¹⁹¹ Anemona Hartocollis and Eliza Fawcett, “The College Board Strips Down Its A.P. Curriculum for African American Studies,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2023, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/01/us/college-board-advanced-placement-african-american-studies.html>; Joe Heim and Lori Rozsa, “African Americans Say the Teaching of Black History Is under Threat,” *Washington Post*, February 26, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/02/23/schools-black-history-month-crt/>.

Addendum

National or non-VA regional publications:

1. *Associated Press*
2. *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*
3. *Baltimore Sun*
4. *CBS This Morning*
5. *Chicago Tribune*
6. *Christian Science Monitor*
7. *Commentary Magazine*
8. *Commonweal*
9. *Los Angeles Times*
10. *New York Times*
11. *NPR*
12. *Orlando Sentinel*
13. *Harrisburg Patriot*
14. *Philadelphia Inquirer*
15. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*
16. *Press-Republican*
17. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*
18. *Sun Sentinel (FL)*
19. *The American Conservative*
20. *The New Republic*
21. *New Yorker*
22. *Washington Post*
23. *Time*
24. *US News and World Report*
25. *Vanity Fair*
26. *Wall Street Journal*
27. *Humanities*
28. *Entertainment Weekly*

Black publications:

1. *Black Enterprise*
2. *Black Issues in Higher Education*
3. *Emerge*
4. *Essence*
5. *Jet Magazine*
6. *Los Angeles Sentinel*
7. *Richmond Afro-American*
8. *Washington Informer*

Local publications:

1. *Charleston Daily Mail*
2. *Charleston Gazette*
3. *Daily Press (Norfolk area, VA)*
4. *Newport News Daily Press*
5. *Roanoke Times*
6. *Virginia Gazette*
7. *Virginian-Pilot*
8. *Washington Monthly*
9. *Richmond Times Dispatch*
10. *Emerge*
11. *Richmond Afro-American*
12. *Washington Informer*

International publications:

1. *Country Life (UK)*
2. *Facts on File World News*
3. *International Herald Tribune*
4. *The Canadian Press*
5. *Toronto Star*

Historical publications:

1. *Perspectives on History*
2. *OAH Magazine*
3. *OAH Newsletter*
4. *Public History News*
5. *Chronicle of Higher Education*
6. *Black Issues in Higher Education*
7. *The Public Historian*
8. *The Journal of American History*
9. *Historical Archaeology*
10. *Signs and Society*
11. *William and Mary Quarterly*
12. *Theatre Journal*
13. *American History*
14. *American Quarterly*
15. *Colonial Williamsburg News*
16. *Colonial Williamsburg Journal*

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