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Philadelphia Site Honoring Washington and His Slaves Ready for Dedication

By Stephan Salisbury



**Philadelphia Inquirer
December 12, 2010
[http://www.philly.com/inquirer/front_page/
20101212_Oppressed_lives_open_house.html](http://www.philly.com/inquirer/front_page/20101212_Oppressed_lives_open_house.html)**

After more than eight years of street demonstrations, arguments, haggling, and missed deadlines; after unprecedented public debate about the impact of slavery on life in Philadelphia and the United States and on the life and moral character of George Washington; after thousands of news articles, feature stories, and TV and radio programs, the site marking the intertwined lives of presidents and slaves is set to open to the public with a simple ribbon-cutting at noon Wednesday.

It may be snowing or raining. It may be bitterly cold. The public may be distracted by the holidays. President Obama will not be there on Independence Mall. No matter.

"President's House: Freedom and Slavery in Making a New Nation" is done, and project managers say that given all the talk, sweat, and sometimes-rancorous disagreement that have gone into it, what's done should be open and seen.

"It's either the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end," said Randall Miller, a professor of American history at St. Joseph's University who has been involved for the whole length of the winding, bumpy road leading to the doorway of the President's House.

"Finally, the public will get to weigh in," he said, on whether the memorial has found the right balance in evoking two presidents and commemorating nine slaves.

Clay Armbrister, Mayor Nutter's chief of staff, called the site virtually iconic at birth.

Not only does it define the small piece of ground at Sixth and Market Streets where Presidents Washington and John Adams lived, but it focuses on the enslaved Africans held by Washington at the house, which was largely demolished in 1832.

Behind the site, a few feet from the Liberty Bell Center's entrance, an enclosure of glass, wood, and steel commemorates the nine.

"The installation in and of itself will do what educational exhibitions are meant to do -- provoke thought and debate -- and I think there will be a lot of thought and debate," Armbrister said.

Cynthia MacLeod, superintendent of Independence National Historical Park, acknowledged that mid-December was not the best time to open, but "to have it finished and not bring some attention to that would be unfortunate," she said.

"The exhibit really brings to the fore this dichotomy in our country of freedom and slavery," MacLeod said. "The Declaration of Independence at that time did not mean everyone. It took the Civil War to abolish slavery, and the civil-rights movement of the 1960s to make civil rights more of a reality in addition to freedom." [Read the full article online at the [Philadelphia Inquirer](http://articles.philly.com/2010-12-12/news/25293256_1_slavery-unprecedented-public-debate-open-house)web site.] http://articles.philly.com/2010-12-12/news/25293256_1_slavery-unprecedented-public-debate-open-house