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Living History of Undying Racism Colonial Williamsburg 'Slave Auction' Draws Protest, Support

Tamara Jones
Washington Post

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In The News

Living History of Undying Racism Colonial Williamsburg 'Slave Auction' Draws Protest, Support

The following are excerpts from an article published in the Washington Post about the "slave auction" held on October 10, in Colonial Williamsburg. I tried to get a formal statement from Colonial Williamsburg, or at least a copy of any press releases they may have prepared. They suggested the newspaper articles about the event. The NAACP did not return my calls. Many readers outside the mid Atlantic may not have heard about the re-creation of a slave auction, and even though such an event does not deal directly with archaeology, archaeology has provided and will continue to provide one of the main sources of information on slave life. As such, we as archaeologists cannot ignore the social and political impact of what we do and how it is viewed and used by the public. As the following excerpts show, there is no clear, "politically correct" position on whether or not such auctions should be held. My own personal view is that it is not only wrong, but it is potentially dangerous, to pretend that slavery did not exist or was too painful to talk about, and that events such as the one at Williamsburg, if done in the proper context and with a seriousness of purpose, can bring to life for people who might otherwise ignore it, the trauma and personal price of slavery. What would really be a travesty would be a Disneyesque depiction of plantation life.

Excerpts from Washington Post October 11, 1994

Tamara Jones, Staff Writer

...

For the first time, the tourist attraction that calls itself living history was depicting the most shameful chapter of Williamsburg's past -- the buying and selling of human beings.

The performance was an emotional departure on the streets of Colonial Williamsburg, where the usual Monday fare includes such presentations as "How Now, Red Cow: Dairying in the 18th Century" or "Thomas Jefferson Discourses About Horticulture." It was a far cry, too, from the wandering history lectures of costumed characters such as the cobbler or constable, or some 30-minute film on "The Process of Making a Barrel."

Featuring four black staffers from the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's African-American research department portraying slaves on the auction block, the skit proved to be as much a commentary on the present as the past.

As the crowd outside swelled to several hundred -- people coming out of curiosity or coincidence or for the controversy -- the event's organizers and performers inside joined hands and prayed for strength before opening the doors of the moss-covered tavern.

A small group of protesters immediately broke into a chorus of "We Shall Overcome" as the presentation's announcer emerged.

...

Speakers from the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference threaded their way through the crowd to angrily decry the pending performances as "the degradation" and "trivialization" of African Americans and their heritage.

...

Christy Coleman, director of the foundation's African-American department and organizer of the performance, came out in costume and cheerfully told the crowd: '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.'

...

After urging the audience to withhold judgment until the program was over, Coleman retreated and the auction began. The spectators were silent. Sukie, a laundress, was sold first, for 42 pounds sterling to her free husband. Billy, a carpenter with his tools, went next for 70 pounds; then Daniel; and finally a weeping Coleman as the pregnant Lucy. The show was over.

Coleman then took the mike to answer questions from the crowd. How were runaway slaves punished? First time, up to 39 lashes on the bare back. Second time, pilloried. Third time, death. Were children slaves too? Yes, Coleman replied. A 3-year-old could pick worms off tobacco leaves. A 4-year-old could feed chickens.

[Upon being allowed a chance to address the crowd at the conclusion of Coleman's question and answer period, the protesters declined.]

...

As the crowd began to disperse, Rosalind Smith, a black mother of two, gathered her children. She had taken the oldest, 9-year-old Christina, out of school 'so she could see this history. I wanted her to see it so she would really know that it happened and that there's nothing to be ashamed of.

'When I was in school it wasn't taught,' Smith said.

...

The decision to play Daniel did not come easily to Owens, 26, who reflected afterward on the 'myriad emotions' he went through standing on the auction block. 'I felt proud. I felt angry. I felt extreme sadness,' he said.

'So many people don't know what's going on,' he added. 'The protest [by the NAACP & SCLC] gives the appearance of being ashamed, instead of being proud of our triumph.'

Coleman isn't sure whether she'll try to put on another such reenactment, but her hesitation has nothing to do with what she believes to be the integrity of the project. 'Is it dehumanizing? No, it's not! It's humanizing,' she said. 'It puts a face to what happened. People will remember what they see and feel and hear far more than what they read.'