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The Archaeology of Freedom and Slavery
at the President's House, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

By Patrice L. Jeppson

Ground-breaking on the President's House Site Project at Independence National Historical Park took place on March 21st, 2007. The ceremony, which was attended by students from local high schools and more than a hundred Philadelphia residents, included speeches by the Superintendent of Independence National Historical Park (Dennis Reidenbach), the Mayor of Philadelphia (John Street), the NPS Northeast Region archaeologist supervising the project (Jed Levin) and the project's Public-Outreach Cultural Heritage Specialist (Dr. Cheryl LaRoche). The excavation, which commenced immediately and will conclude in early June, is being conducted by archaeologists from URS Corporation (Research Director Dr. Warren Perry; Field Director Doug Mooney).

Hundreds of Philadelphia residents and community activists came to Independence National Historical Park for the ground-breaking ceremony.

The archaeological excavation is a targeted research effort focused on portions of the site of the executive mansion for the new American nation, 1790-1800. The site, adjacent to the Liberty Bell Pavilion, presents an opportunity to explore an important national story -- the birth of the United States side-by-side the institution of slavery. The site will eventually
house a permanent installation designed to commemorate the President's House and all who lived there, including at least nine enslaved Africans who lived and worked in the house during George Washington's years as President.

Local African American grass roots activism, NPS policy encouraging civic engagement, the Mayor of Philadelphia, legislation introduced by members of the US Congress, and a pragmatic archaeology approach have helped move this forgotten, overlooked, and evaded national story into broader public memory. The excavation and memorial project are a joint undertaking of the City of Philadelphia and the National Park Service.

Philadelphia Mayor John Street took the controls of the hydraulic excavator to officially break ground. For two hours following the ceremony the public viewed the site and took pictures of the freshly turned earth.

A public viewing platform allows park visitors to witness the progress of the excavations. Information about the project is available on the City of Philadelphia's web site and at ushistory.org which features a regularly updated photo gallery. Independence Park's web site features information on the project and on other recent archeological projects within the park, including 2003 excavations at the home site of free African American coachman James Oronoko Dexter. A live Webcam at the archeology site is also available.