

Would You Feel More Comfortable Talking About African American History If You Were African American?

This is an edited excerpt from the session, “Challenges and Opportunities of Interpreting African American History at Historic Places” that was presented on September 17, 2011 at the annual meeting of the American Association for State and Local History.

Max A. van Balgooy, President, Engaging Places, LLC (moderator)

I have a couple questions from the audience stating they would be more comfortable talking about African American history if they were African American. So let me toss that out to the panel and ask David and Pam to start the conversation: I’m a white guy, how you feel about me talking about African American history? David—as another white guy—do you have the right to talk about this story? And Pam, as an African American, do you want me to hear me—a white guy—talking about African American stories?

David Young, Executive Director, Cliveden

I was the first-ever, full-time director of what was considered an African American heritage organization, the Johnson House, the Underground Railroad Station in Germantown, built by the same man who built Cliveden, a block and half away. I basically went from the Underground Railroad Station to slave owner’s Mansion on the Hill—and it’s the same story and I understood it as the same story. I saw that any resistance I would get and would continue to get at Cliveden about, “how can you tell this story?” needed the response that, “I’m an historian. I’m interested in history and I’m interested in telling the story of this place so it means something and we understand the context of this place.” The challenge is to be as prepared as possible but also to be able to give-and-take.

But what is the real interest in this question? Often we make the mistake in assuming that people aren’t interested in history if they’re not coming to our sites. In fact, people are *really* interested in history but they just get it in their own way. That might be because there are parochialized historic sites serving one only descendent group, one audience, or one affinity. If we did our jobs better, people would see that any historic site should be telling a very full context in a way that can challenge the visitor. So I saw that the interest in the question gave energy to the dialogue that we could have at the Johnson House about the Underground Railroad as an African American enterprise that white people helped with, so let’s explore that together. I don’t know much about Methodism or the African Methodist Episcopal Church, but I am really interested in Richard Allen, this self-starter who purchased his own freedom after being born to the Chew family of Cliveden. If it’s history, everyone should have a democratic way of getting into it with whatever their terms are.

Pamela Green, Executive Director, Weeksville Heritage Center

One of the things I would say out front is that it bothers me that any of you would think that it's a sensitive subject, it's a difficult subject, and you are going to have a problem with it because you're not African American. This is useless. This is the twenty-first century. It's 2011 and about to be 2012. This is not secret-society kind of stuff. This is about American history. We all know there was slavery, we all know people were enslaved. We know white people did it, we know they did it to people of African descent. We know a whole bunch of things. The point is to make sure your information is correct. Know what you are trying to get across and make sure that you know what you are talking about.

It is *not* enough to say, "This would be a better site if we told the whole story." If I visit your site and I feel that, I'm going to be angry. You ought to *want* to tell the story. It almost has to be internalized. This has to be so important to you that whoever is going to tell the story has to be the *best* person to tell that story. You can't just wake up one day and say, "I think this young person is going to tell this story" and send them to Colonial Williamsburg and expect that when they come back, they're going to be great. That is not true. The young woman that we hired had already spent a long, long time studying African American history. She came to us to talk about our particular stories. She learned those stories so well that she knew them better than anybody else. So when she was confronted by difficult questions (and I do believe there are difficult questions), she knew exactly how to respond because she had immersed herself into the story (and had talked to others, obviously) so she was never taken off track.

Yes, white people can tell the African American story, or maybe it's more accurate to say that they can tell *an* African American story or they can tell a piece of it. But you need to read, do your research, and take the time to talk to African Americans, as David is doing at Cliveden. It's important to know *why* you're doing this—and it's not because you're trying to get more people there and not because you're trying to get more money. You must believe it's an important story to tell, and that you're getting all the information and getting it as accurately as you can.

I have people on my board who are uncomfortable saying they're on my board because they're white people. They have a hard time going up to an African American person and saying, "Could you please support Weeksville?" I tell them, "you have got the jump on that person" because it's an African American person who doesn't know something about the African American history that you know. Use that, exploit that, instead of being afraid to tell them that you sit on the board of an African American institution. You can know more about African American history than African Americans. It's possible.

Kirstin Gallas, Director of Interpretation Projects, The Tracing Center on Histories and Legacies of Slavery

I just want to tag-team on what Pam has been saying. We find for a lot of white folks that it's the underlying issue of race, it's not about interpreting the history. For anybody of any ethnicity, it's about the discomfort of confronting race and race issues. Ninety percent of

the training we recommend is to help interpreters, staff, and boards unpack their own racial baggage—and race and racism is an entire spectrum of baggage. You need to understand that before you can understand the history and help your visitors understand that history.

Tanya Bowers, Director of Diversity, National Trust for Historic Preservation

Max, when you first asked that question, I said, “yeah, that makes me mad.” But what makes me even madder is if you don’t talk about black history, if you talk about black history without being informed, or you don’t have colleagues who are black.

If there were a silver bullet, we wouldn’t have to do this work any more but there isn’t. It’s messy. It’s uncomfortable. To have the courage to walk on this path, it’s really important to admit when you are wrong and make a diversity faux pas. By saying you are going to take this on at your historic site, you have thrown down the gauntlet. People are going to throw all sorts of stuff at you, and sometimes it’s going to bring up some of your own stuff. Just be honest about it and look at your own baggage and biases, and the people who are the best at doing this work are those who are most open about it.

George McDaniel, Director, Drayton Hall

The main thing is to do it. You can talk about plans but you have to break the ice, get the commitment, find ways to get it done, experiment, and have the confidence that you’re doing what you feel is right.

Another challenge you may face is the time of the visitors. Many of us have house tours and by the time you explain the furniture, the architecture, the landscape, the family, how do you get African American history in there in sufficient depth? One thing I might suggest, we’ve created a special program focusing on African American history—not as a separate chapter but as a supplement to the tours we offer. We started off very informally by gathering around a picnic table, now we have a pole tent so there’s shelter. It’s conceptualized around the topic of “connections” and Drayton Hall-based, connected to national and international themes, and uses our existing resources. Like the tour, it’s one of the programs we offer to our visitors.

The main thing is to get out there and do it, and make it part of your organization’s mission and your personal mission to tell the complete story to engage people in history.

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