

“What Slavery Started Is Not Over Yet:” James Madison’s Montpelier And The Problem Of Slavery In Public History

Kayla Wendt

Historic sites and institutions of public memory face countless competing pressures in attempting to tell all-inclusive histories. Public historians handle the task of pleasing their donors, executives, communities, and audiences all at the same time. A particular place wherein this issue is highlighted, is in American house museums. Museums that often began as shrines to American patriotism, filled with velvet ropes and glass cases, today intend to break down these barriers and focus on the narratives of the everyday person, in interactive and educational ways. James Madison’s Estate, Montpelier, in Virginia offers an example of the ways in which house museums are evolving, and how museum professionals are dealing with the issues of presenting marginalized histories in the most responsible way possible, despite the complexity of their circumstances. The important primary data comes from my trip to the museum including staff interviews, photos of the museum, and an analysis of the award-winning exhibit on slavery, *The Mere Distinction of Colour*. I argue that by fostering relationships with diverse groups, employing specific methods of training for interpreters, and acknowledging and incorporating a variety of historiographies, professionals at Montpelier are successfully grappling with the complexities associated with their efforts to tell inclusive histories. I will analyze the intersection of the following avenues: the evolution of house museums, the narrative of slavery in public memory, and where these meet in the example of Montpelier to say something important about understanding public memory as a whole- how it can be constructed, portrayed, and received.