Washington shuttled his slaves between Philadelphia and Virginia to prevent them from being freed. (Associated Press)

PHILADELPHIA -- Archaeologist Jed Levin keeps a hand-held click counter at the ready, even while answering a busy cellphone and addressing the curious crowds that have gathered at the site he is excavating. Since March, when he began digging for historical remains in a small, square pit in this city's historic district, the onlookers have come in steadily increasing numbers. On a good day, his little clicker registers some 4,000 to 5,000 visitors.

Given how little there is to see, those are impressive numbers -- and a striking lesson about how history is told in this country. The site Levin is excavating once contained a structure many consider the first real White House, the presidential mansion where George Washington and John Adams lived while Philadelphia served as the capital of the United States in the 1790s. Plans to build a memorial marker over the site have kindled a broader interest not just in the house but in the people, including slaves, who lived there.

At the same time, spontaneous public curiosity about the dig (done in preparation for building the memorial over the house's remains) has shown how poorly Philadelphia, and the nation, has been served by efforts to generate tourist interest at all costs at Independence National Historical Park, where the site is located. All around this muddy little hole, private tour buses clog the streets, new and undistinguished buildings have risen, and the latest in interactive history with all the bells and whistles has been marketed to visitors. Yet in a low pit on a street corner near the Liberty Bell, a few archaeologists are carefully digging a story that doesn't need gimmickry.
archaeologists are carefully excavating some very minimal foundation walls, uncovering old wells and privies and sifting dirt for shards of crockery. And they're stealing the show.

"In this house, Washington and Adams worked out what a president in a democracy would be," Levin said to a small crowd one afternoon last week. Levin is bearded and avuncular, a scruffy-clean sort of guy who embodies the mind's image of an ideal park ranger. He moves effortlessly between the two poles of curiosity that bring people to the dig: What did the presidential mansion look like, and what can it tell us about the slaves Washington kept there?

Levin points to a faint white remnant of a bay window that Washington added to the house. He draws attention to little flags that mark the foundation walls of the original structure, the one built in the 18th century, demolished and built over in the 19th, and unearthed in the 21st. And he tells the crowds about Hercules, the cook and slave who fled from Washington's possession during a move back to Mount Vernon, and Ona Judge, Martha's personal servant who escaped in 1796.

The site has become a phenomenon -- tracked with a live Web cam-- in a city where history is the basic coin of the tourist trade. It sits on National Park Service land, next to a new pavilion that houses the Liberty Bell. The entryway to that pavilion was built over the site where Washington ordered an addition to the house - to create quarters for his slaves and servants.

Scholar Edward Lawler Jr., who has diligently traced the history of the house, called that "an extraordinary juxtaposition," in a major paper devoted to the design and history of the mansion published in 2002. It was a fact so pregnant with perverse historical resonance that shortly after Lawler's paper was published, local African American leaders suggested that some kind of memorial to the house's unwilling inhabitants be built.

"As you enter the heaven of liberty you literally have to cross the hell of slavery," says Michael Coard, founding member of the Avenging the Ancestors Coalition, a group formed to lobby for proper treatment of the historical and memorialization issues in what he calls the "first White House."

"That was for the National Park Service a public relations nightmare," says Coard.

"We actually appreciate the fact that people spoke up," says Jane Cowley, a public affairs officer at Independence National Historical Park.

Coard says it took about 2 1/2 years of speaking up, plus a management change at the park, before his group made headway. A contest to design the President's House memorial, which would include substantial recognition of the slaves kept there, was held. An overly literal and not very inspiring design was chosen: It looks a bit like half-finished framing of the original house, using
brick and an outline of the old windows on a small corner plot. With a design chosen, the preliminary architectural dig began.

And then, among other things, they discovered "the tunnel." Levin, the archaeologist, points out a muddy patch to the crowd, but it requires imagination to see it. Most likely it was a passageway used by servants and slaves to move about without being seen. This wasn't just a matter of hiding slaves and servants from view, but also part of standard practice in the 18th-century operation of a household.

"One side of it is simply practical," says Levin. "It's not that different from service hallways in a modern hotel or resort."

But tunnels have a fascination that transcends their pragmatic explanations. For historians and archaeologists, the discovery of the tunnel was an interesting new bit of knowledge about the house, and a reminder that Washington kept slaves while he lived there in the 1790s. For others, it seemed to suggest that a man whose name is synonymous with probity was trying to deceive both his neighbors and history about his deep involvement with the peculiar institution of slavery.

"People jumped to the conclusion that Washington was hiding slaves," says Levin. "But he couldn't." He couldn't because they cooked his meals, cleaned his stables, tended his carriage and managed just about every mundane detail of life. But he wasn't advertising their extended presence in Philadelphia either. Pennsylvania had a law that required slaves to be freed after six months of residence. So Washington was forced to shuttle his slaves back and forth between Philadelphia and Mount Vernon to evade the residency clause -- which he hoped in vain could be done without his slaves realizing the reason.

"I wish to have it accomplished under pretext that may deceive both them and the Public," he wrote to his secretary, an act that author and Washington biographer Henry Wieneck called "perhaps the only documented incident of George Washington's telling a lie." Perhaps even more disturbing than Washington's lie was his very vigorous pursuit of slaves who escaped his service. When Ona Judge, a slave who tended primarily to Martha Washington, carefully planned and successfully executed an escape to New Hampshire, Washington was furious and attempted to use his prestige to pressure a federal official to help recapture her.

"Everything about this was illegal," wrote Wieneck in "An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America."

Agitation for a memorial that included discussion of Washington's slaves and women such as Judge, who lived with Washington at the President's House, was fueled by a sense that the Park Service was hiding this history. With discovery of the foundations of the original house and evidence of the tunnel, it seemed as if the city of Philadelphia had discovered a bombshell bit of new history: that the father of the country kept slaves in the first executive mansion. But this was well known. The archaeological dig merely brought forth visible, tangible evidence of a house that, like so many houses at the time, was what a later president would call "divided against itself."
The success of the dig may help build momentum to reconsider the design of the memorial, by Philadelphia-based Kelly/Maiello architects. There's already discussion about revising it to include some view down into the dig site. More important, it may also force Philadelphia and the Park Service to think about the sad state of affairs at Independence National Historical Park, which includes the President's House, the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall.

Just about every mistake that a city can make has been made here -- and the consequences are increasingly apparent. In the 1950s, in a sadly misguided effort at urban renewal, Philadelphia created a long, green mall of open space, tearing down old buildings and whole neighborhoods in the process, to give a parklike feel in front of Independence Hall. The larger historical and urban context of the city's Colonial center was severely damaged, and despite the gain of some green space, the elegant Colonial proportions of Independence Hall are now jarringly at odds with block-busting and brutal office towers.

After tearing down history to put in some sod, they are now filling in the very open space they created. At one end of the Mall is an unfortunate (too big and derivative) building designed by the architecture firm of Pei Cobb Freed &amp; Partners. The 160,000-square-foot National Constitution Center, which opened in 2003, includes a busy din of interactive exhibits and an embarrassingly overheated theatrical spectacle devoted to the history of the Constitution. The private nonprofit organization was chartered by Congress, but the real momentum came from Philadelphia civic boosters who wanted to put some tourist pizazz on the Mall.

The 1998 master plan also included a new home for the Liberty Bell, and worse, a shoddy new visitor center teeming with touts for private tour companies. The Park Service maintains a desk there, but it is almost overwhelmed by the din of private commerce.

The sad result is that one of the golden brands in American public life -- the National Park Service, with its doughty and earnest rangers -- has been diluted and tarnished. The infusion of private interests into the experience has resulted not in vitality, but in chaos and vulgarity. Even the glitzy show at the Constitution Center leaves you with a creepy feeling, the realization that it's not so much selling history as marketing patriotism.

All of which makes the crowds at the small dirt patch of the President's House the more poignant. Here is history unprocessed and unhyped, without 101 Strings on the soundtrack, and nothing more interactive than a Park Service archaeologist talking to curious onlookers. Washington, who would free his slaves in his will, is fleshed out as a man of his times, diligent in the protection of his property, which happened to include human beings.

Architects and civic planners and exhibit designers and tourist companies are struggling all around this little patch of earth to make people feel something about history; and here, for now, people are gathering, spontaneously, to look in and think about it.
Plain as Dirt: History Without Gimmickry

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