

# Interpreting a Time of Slavery

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**I**n preparing to write about the interpretation of slavery in museums, I came across a news clipping entitled, “Slavery: Museums Reveal Uncomfortable Truth of the Past.” The title alone struck several familiar chords associated with my own experience and that of the Museum’s staff in interpreting the sensitive and often highly-charged issue of slavery in America. While the impetus for our Museum’s expanded interpretation of slavery came in the form of an exhibition of slave life in the antebellum South, we recognized the necessity of evaluating our programs and tours to deal more honestly and forthrightly with the topic of slavery. As staff, we also realized that, while the transition towards a more inclusive interpretation of Southern history was needed, it would be at times uncomfortable for staff and visitors alike.

While revamping existing tours and developing new programs, we learned a great deal about our own anxieties, limitations, and strengths related to presenting the topic of slavery. As we searched to create a plan for interpreting slavery, we established strategies that combined traditional interpretative techniques with new methods tested in our tours. The following guidelines derived from our own experiences may prove helpful.

## *Getting Started*

▲ **Dispel your myths.** Before you begin your reading, make a list of facts you know about the history of slavery in America and research each point for accuracy. Books on the topic of slavery written after 1965 tend to reflect the most recent scholarship and will be your best sources of information. Many of the “facts” we learned as students are

inaccurate and outdated. Read slave narratives and interviews that present the history of enslaved African-Americans *in their own words*. These sources are readily available in published books and periodicals.

▲ **Acknowledge any uneasiness** you have about presenting the topic of slavery. Create an outlet for discussion. Form a docent roundtable. One objective of the roundtable should be addressing difficult questions that you may encounter while giving tours. Keep a notebook with the questions and research answers for quick reference.

▲ **Ask the experts.** Invite museum professionals and other educators who have had experience interpreting slavery to visit with staff and speak to docents.

▲ **Visit other sites** that interpret African-American history. You may be surprised at the number of sites in your own backyard that have already incorporated the topic of slavery in their tours and programs. Marcella Thum’s *Hippocrene U.S.A. Guide to Black America* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1991) is an excellent resource listing historic sites in towns and cities across the United States.

▲ **Be able to articulate the reasons why your institution interprets slavery as part of its mission.** We receive numerous questions from visitors challenging our motives for interpreting slavery in our historic house and museum.

▲ **Balance your presentation.** It often becomes easy to focus only on those stories of individuals who overcame oppression by escaping to freedom. While you want students and other visitors to have a positive museum experience, you should remember that

they need to understand the realities of life for enslaved African-Americans. As an alternative, focus on survival strategies.

▲ **Practice.** Take trial runs. Become more comfortable by having other docents ask tough questions during your practice runs. Remember, the audience will only be as comfortable as you are.

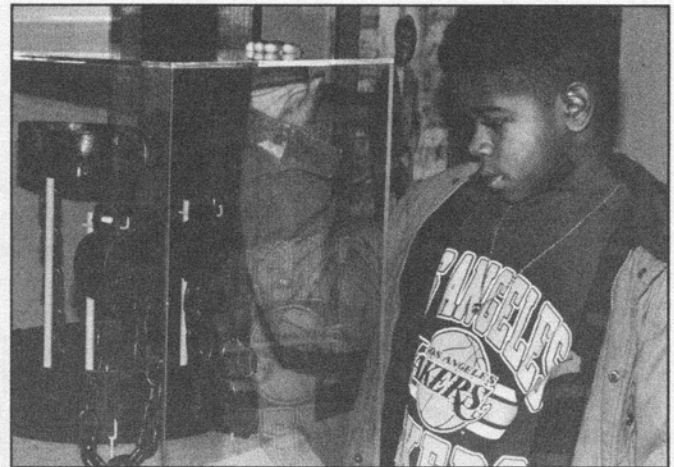
### Presenting Your Tour

▲ **Dispel their myths.** Understand your audience's perceptions and expectations. Before your tour, ascertain your group's knowledge of the history of slavery. Asking questions at the beginning of the tour allows you to clarify any misconceptions as you proceed on the tour.

▲ **Be straightforward** when answering visitors' questions. Students and other visitors often test docents by asking the most difficult questions at the beginning of the tour, particularly when the subject is controversial. Avoiding questions, or giving evasive answers, is the first step toward losing credibility.

▲ **Avoid role-playing activities.** Remain sensitive to the personal history of slavery. Avoid using first person questions, such as "If you had been a slave ...?" It is better to ask visitors to think about what life might have been like for an enslaved individual. Avoid role-play that places an individual in the position of enslavement. You risk trivializing the serious and sensitive nature of the topic.

▲ **Be flexible** in your means of interpretation. The history of slavery in the United States is an uncomfortable subject for many visitors, regardless of race. Be willing to adapt your interpretation to meet the diverse attitudes of each tour group. Remember, however, that changing the *means* of interpretation does not mean changing the *content* of your interpretation. For instance, when students upset with our



A student looks at neck-waist-wrist manacles (ca. 1830-60) in the exhibition "Before Freedom Came."

exhibition's content did not want to tour it, we modified our plans and held a roundtable discussion in another area. In this case, meeting the needs of the students was more important than completing the tour as it was planned.

▲ **Be receptive** to broadening your interpretation to discuss recent events in history. During a discussion on the limited rights of free African-Americans in the antebellum South, one student offered an account of how his father was refused the use of a water fountain in the segregated South. While the connections between the past and recent history need to be clarified for students, learning how to weave oral history shared by students into your presentation will greatly enhance the effectiveness of your tour.

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