

Making Visible the Peculiar Institution: Interpreting Slavery at the Sotterley Plantation

► Sotterley Plantation, Inc., Hollywood, Maryland

Sotterley Plantation is one of Maryland's best preserved 18th century tobacco plantations. It includes a c. 1717 manor house and a rare slave cabin along with a full array of outbuildings.



In 1999, in response to new directions in historical scholarship and a realization that the site presented a skewed perspective, Sotterley undertook an extensive reexamination of its interpretive program. As a result of this reexamination, the site significantly expanded its interpretive framework to include the story of slavery. The site's willingness to examine itself, rethink the stories it tells, and work with its interpreters to present a complex and highly sensitive historical narrative has made it a leader in presenting the story of the enslaved.

A Decision to Change

Before 1999, interpretive and educational programming at the site included little on enslaved culture or the labor system that fueled the plantation's prosperity, despite the presence of an 1840s slave cabin on the grounds. Like many other sites that launched museum operations in the 1950s, Sotterley's programming concentrated on decorative arts, architecture, and the lifestyle of the manor house. Slavery was a daunting interpretive prospect, and there were fears of upsetting visitors, appearing insensitive, or providing inaccurate information. The result for Sotterley was an unintentional dismissal or distortion of the site's full historical narrative.

The big change came in 1999 when staff became concerned that site programming did not address the full history of the plantation. The staff was especially troubled that few African Americans came to the site and those that did were not accorded any opportunity to learn about the experiences of the African American past. Several new information sources influenced the staff to take a new look at how to present the site's history and meaning. These included new archaeological evidence from the restoration of an on-site slave cabin, new research findings on the plantation's enslaved population, and the results of a 1996 Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) study concluding that a majority of young people had little knowledge of African American history. In response, the staff initiated a fundamental change in the site's interpretive framework.

A New Framework to Tell the Fuller Story

The core of the site's new interpretive framework is *Slavery to Freedom*, a hands-on program for 7th to 12th graders. It teaches about 19th century Tidewater Maryland slavery basing the curriculum on the particular experiences of specific individuals enslaved at Sotterley. The program uses research done by genealogist and former trustee Agnes Kane Callum, the great-granddaughter of a Sotterley slave family, on the lives of her mid-19th century ancestors. The program revolves around the daily activities, material culture, and relationships of the Kane family and culminates in a site visit.

The site developed and funded the *Slavery to Freedom* program in conjunction with the St. Mary's County Public Schools. A team composed of the plantation's education director, a multidisciplinary group of teachers, and the school district's supervisor of history wrote the curriculum as well as grant proposals for funding. In addition to the grant money that the team secured, the county school district contributed additional funds. Since the initial startup, the program draws financial support from the site's budget, county funds, and grant monies, as well as from student fees. Students from outside the St. Mary's County Public Schools can participate in the program; however, students from the county pay a reduced rate.

The plantation used the scholarship behind *Slavery to Freedom* as the foundation to revamp all its on-site tours and on-site programs to include the experiences of enslaved persons. Traditional manor house tours have been expanded to encompass the experiences of bonded laborers, both enslaved and indentured. A self-guided tour of the grounds leads visitors to the surviving slave cabin, while specialty tours on African Americans at Sotterley tie together the social, agricultural, and architectural landscapes. Forthcoming projects include a brochure and an interactive exhibit on the enslaved.



Building Interpreter Confidence

The expanded historical narrative has posed several challenges to Sotterley's predominantly volunteer interpretation staff. Interpreters were initially reluctant to talk about slavery for fear of upsetting visitors or provoking controversy. In response, the site managers have established an on-going training and coaching program designed to build staff confidence and provide feedback for staff concerns. The interpreters are given materials on the daily lives of the Kane family and background information about slavery and plantation economics at Sotterley. They also attend a question and answer session with Agnes Kane Callum and observe the student programs. In addition, managers work with the interpreters to provide strategies for defusing potential confrontations. Interpreters meet together once a month to share experiences and exchange new information.

As the months pass, the interpreters are slowly becoming more comfortable incorporating new perspectives into the landscape they recreate for visitors. The process is not yet complete—talking about racial slavery with a multicultural tour group is still difficult for some staff—but as a whole, most are far more willing to engage this complicated story than they were a year ago.

Leading the Way

Sotterley Plantation has become recognized for its slavery programs presenting new opportunities to train others on interpreting slavery. In 2000 Sotterley partnered with Prince George's Community College and the National Endowment for the Humanities to present a summer teachers institute on early slave cultures. As part of the institute, thirty teachers spent five days on-site developing lesson plans on slavery.¹

In response to requests from other historic sites, Sotterley's education director has created a field study training program. Interpreters from other sites come to Sotterley for a one-day exploration of such topics as how to develop an African American history program, how to interpret sensitive topics such as slavery to the general public, and how to develop an education program like *Slavery To Freedom*. Participants examine lesson plans and discuss their development, listen to presentations, and participate in hands-on activities exploring all aspects of presenting this topic.

Sotterley Plantation also participated in a Preserving Memory Seminar at Hampton National Historic Site discussing with park staff the issues surrounding interpreting slavery as well as the necessity for doing so.

Sotterley successfully engages a range of communities, including their own interpretation staff, in an on-going dialogue about richness and complexity of southern plantation life. Their willingness to challenge conventional site practices, reach out to the community for continued input, and provide critical internal staff support for presenting a complicated historical narrative has made Sotterley a regional leader in interpretive planning for historic sites.

¹ The lesson plans are available on line through the Prince George's Community College website. The plantation's website describes the program and has a link to the college's website.

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Civic Engagement Principles & Practices

Sotterley Plantation's successful incorporation of slavery into its interpretive programs and tours is a model for presenting more complex and still contentious stories at historic sites. Key elements include:

- Being open to new directions in historical scholarship.
- Investing considerable time to reexamine the site's historical narrative in light of new scholarship and demographic realities.
- Using the site and its specific history to tell a larger story previously marginalized or invisible.
- Listening to the concerns of interpreters and developing a training program to increase staff knowledge and comfort in presenting a highly sensitive subject.
- Continuing to meet with interpreters and together devising strategies to diffuse potential controversies.

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