

We the People: The Decision to Excavate the James Dexter Site

► Independence National Historical Park and the National Constitution Center

“It’s a real victory for reason. [NPS] listened. They processed the arguments, and responded with reason.” —Rev. Jeffrey Leath, pastor, Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church



The decision by NPS to reverse its earlier position and excavate the James Dexter site is an excellent example of where civic engagement reconnected a prominent black church with its historic roots and strengthened links to the city’s African-American community which had traditionally felt that its views and interests had been neglected by the park.

By listening to the community’s legitimate interpretation of NPS policy and responding affirmatively, NPS began a consultative process that became a true collaboration. The results were a shared decision that both supported NPS mission and policy, and that led to a deeper understanding of our nation’s history.

The Challenge

James Dexter, who lived on what is now Block 3 of Independence Mall from 1792 to 1798, was a key founding member of one of the first two independent black churches in the nation.¹ Most significantly, though, was the discovery that early planning meetings for what would become the African Episcopal Church

of St. Thomas were held in his house. Park visitor transportation plans called for the construction of a bus drop-off facility on top of the house site. The Service’s initial decision was to preserve the site underground and unexcavated since surface construction would not destroy the archaeological resources.

Representatives from St. Thomas and Mother Bethel A.M.E. churches strongly disagreed with the park’s decision arguing that NPS policy allowed excavation if there were compelling reasons. In this case the intense public interest in attempting to bring a hidden but important piece of the nation’s history to the fore warranted excavation.

Background

The bus drop-off and the adjacent National Constitution Center were part of a comprehensive redesign of Independence Mall. NPS had originally designed an archaeological excavation program as required mitigation for the construction of the NCC. However, the excavation program excluded the proposed drop-off site because of a difference in construction schedules.

Through historical research associated with the excavation, NPS and the NCC knew some details about Dexter and his role in the founding of St. Thomas Church. However, it was not until the fall of 2002 that further research by the park historian revealed that key planning meetings for the church took place in his house. Upon realizing the site’s significance the NPS archaeologist and the park’s chief of cultural resource management recommended to the superintendent and the NER deputy director for cultural resources that the site should be considered a traditional cultural property and that the church should be brought in for consultation. Both the superintendent and the deputy director approved the action, and the chief of cultural resources found a contact for the church.

Prior to the start of consultation, NPS and NCC staff had reviewed construction plans for the bus drop-off facility and had modified the design to avoid impacts to the site. With these changes, they concluded that surviving archeological remains could be preserved in-place and that archeological excavation of the James Dexter site was not immediately warranted.

Resolving A Growing Controversy

At the first meeting with the representatives from St. Thomas Church, NPS and NCC told the church of the historical discovery and of their intention to preserve the archaeological site. The church requested a second meeting with larger representation from the community. After collaborating with the church on who should be



included, NPS and NCC expanded the consultation to include Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church, the Multicultural Affairs Congress of the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the office of Philadelphia City Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds Brown.

The larger group agreed that the NCC should include an interpretive display of the history uncovered by the research and the excavations conducted elsewhere on the block. However, the community representatives strongly disagreed with NPS' decision to preserve the Dexter site without conducting an archaeological excavation. The representative from St. Thomas, after having read the Secretary's Standards, challenged NPS' interpretation of agency policy. He argued that NPS policy was not absolute on the issue of in-place preservation. While in-place preservation is often the most appropriate option and should be considered the first choice, NPS can excavate if there are compelling reasons to do so. The church argued that in this case the intense public interest in the site and the inherent value in bringing a long hidden piece of our nation's history to the fore necessitated excavation of the site.

Initially NPS managers were reluctant to change their position on non-excavation for several reasons. However, the force and legitimacy of the group's argument led NPS to view the issue in a fresh light and ultimately to reverse its decision. On February 6, 2003, after a benediction led by the pastors of both churches, the excavation of the James Dexter site began.²

Growing a New Relationship

NPS strengthened the new relationship by making the consultation group part of the archaeological process, explaining NPS processes to them, and inviting them into the archaeological laboratory to view the findings. The park continues to maintain active communications with St. Thomas Church and now includes it in its Ethnographic Resource Inventory (ERI). In addition, NPS and NCC sustained public interest in the project throughout the course of the excavation. They constructed a viewing platform next to the dig site, and the archaeology consultants produced interpretive posters for the site. NPS kept the public apprised of the excavation's progress through the media by issuing updates on a regular basis. Furthermore, a coalition of parties, including Temple University, the local public television affiliate, a local film company, and the William Penn Foundation is producing a documentary film about James Dexter and the dig that will be shown on public television

At this time, NPS has not yet completed the laboratory analysis of the findings from the site, but hopes to issue a report in summer 2004. While the ultimate scientific fruits of the project are not yet fully known, it is clear that the process of searching for answers about James Dexter's life has built strong relationships that did not exist two years ago.

¹ St. Thomas Church and Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church were both founded in 1794 emerging from the city's free African-American community.

² The excavation did not include the entire Dexter site. A portion of the site lies under Fifth Street which was widened in the mid 20th century.

Contact Information

Mary Bomar, *Superintendent*, Independence NHP, mary_bomar@nps.gov

Dennis Reidenbach, *Deputy Superintendent*, Independence NHP, dennis_reidenbach@nps.gov

Doris Fanelli, *Chief of Cultural Resource Management*, Independence NHP, doris_fanelli@nps.gov

Jed Levin, *Archeologist*, Northeast Region Archeology Program, jed_levin@nps.gov

Civic Engagement Team

Shaun Eyring, *Manager*, Resource Planning and Compliance, NER, shaun_eyring@nps.gov

Eileen Woodford, *Civic Engagement Coordinator*, NER, eileen_woodford@nps.gov

Civic Engagement Principles & Practices

The consultative process regarding the excavation of the James Dexter site illustrates that the process of reaching a resolution is as important as the outcome. Key elements that contributed to the success of the process include:

- Diligently finding and documenting the full contemporary connections to James Dexter.
- Acknowledging that there are different interpretations of NPS policy that are legitimate. The park's willingness to explore those different interpretations resulted in a shared decision that did not compromise NPS mission or policy, but ultimately benefited the park.
- Inviting the consultation group to be part of the archaeological process. Shared fact finding has strengthened the park's connection to the community.
- Continuing to sustain public interest during the archaeological process by issuing regular updates to the media. These updates brought the public into the excavation helping to build greater trust between the community and NPS.

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