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“Like Nixon Going to China”: The Exhibition of Slavery in the Valentine Museum and the  
Museum of the Confederacy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in  
History at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by:

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## Abstract

### LIKE NIXON TO CHINA: THE EXHIBITION OF SLAVERY IN THE VALENTINE MUSEUM AND THE MUSEUM OF THE CONFEDERACY

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009

Major Director: Dr. John Kneebone, Professor of History, History Department

This study analyzes two successful exhibitions on American slavery in the South: *In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life in Richmond, Virginia, 1790-1860* by the Valentine Museum and *Before Freedom Came: African American Life in the Antebellum South* by the Museum of the Confederacy. It puts the exhibitions in the context of the social history movement, and explains the difficulties exhibiting a sensitive topic. It examines the creation of the exhibitions, the controversies because of the subject, both real and potential, and the overwhelmingly positive reaction.

## Introduction

The field of public history encompasses many different roles and institutions, and history museums play a large part. The expansion of public history as a field for academically trained historians coincided with the social history movement among academic historians. The research accomplished by academic social historians influenced history museum staffs to tell a more inclusive story in their exhibits. This development provided tangible results in 1989 when the Rockefeller Foundation and Smithsonian Institute asserted through many publications that museums must have a more inclusive narrative in their exhibitions. Museums play a major role in the cultural fabric of a community by preserving and expressing the knowledge that the particular community values. Until this movement began, many museums regarded the possessions and accomplishments of a select few great men as the past worth preserving. Museums, however, are the communicators of social ideas, and as such, must justify their existence to the *entire* society. This new movement insisted that class, ethnic, and racial conflicts were a part of society and history, and museum exhibitions could no longer ignore them. This required museums to embrace a broad public, take a fresh look at the American experience, and break down assumptions regarding their own institutions.<sup>1</sup> They also had to take on controversial and sensitive topics.

When museums interpreted a few great men and their possessions, curators largely determined exhibition topics. Curators concentrated on the collection and centered exhibitions on objects. When institutions began to embrace social history, the emphasis of exhibitions

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<sup>1</sup> Weil, Stephen. *Making Museums Matter*. Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 2002.

shifted. Ideas drove exhibits rather than the collection. The field of experts also widened to include educators, scholars and outside curators. In order to succeed, museums looked outward instead of inward, had a serious reckoning with their own pasts, and declared they existed to serve the public.<sup>2</sup> This service included making the museum's resources accessible to as many different people in the community as possible.

A controversial topic to tackle in any history exhibition is American slavery. The history of slavery is a topic with very little presence in the world of historical museums and plantation house museums. Like earlier textbooks, museums either avoided the topic all together or explained it away within the Lost Cause interpretation of the Civil War. Docents leading tours of plantation house museums, even with slave quarters still on the property, never mentioned the presence of slaves or referred to them as "servants."<sup>3</sup> Before the Smithsonian's Anacostia Neighborhood exhibit, *Out of Africa*, in 1979, museums were virtually silent on the subject of slavery. The number of African American museums grew in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but many did not broach the subject of slavery, instead opting to concentrate on the modern civil rights movement. Colonial Williamsburg, acknowledging its omission of the enslaved, added an African American interpretation department in the mid-1980s. In 1985, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History opened its first social history exhibition, *After the Revolution: Everyday Life in America, 1780-1800*, which discussed slavery. Exhibitions about women, immigrants and African-Americans appeared all over the country, but no sizeable exhibitions exclusively on slavery. Why was slavery avoided, even during a "renaissance" in the museum field that embraced social history?

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Hudson, "From Being about Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum," *Daedalus* 128 America's Museums (Summer, 1999): pp. 229-258.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington D.C., 2002)

The discussion of slavery brings with it a high level of discomfort that intimidates many Americans. Despite this, many public historians believe it is “ground zero” for race relations and that a full understanding of American history must include a full understanding of American slavery.<sup>4</sup> Out of slavery developed the hierarchy of color that is still very much present today; immigrants continue to be put into this hierarchy. As vital as it is to understand slavery, it is incredibly uncomfortable for museum visitors, who are largely ignorant on the subject. “[T]he history of race in America, and especially of slavery, is a painful, contentious, anxiety-producing topic for Americans to confront, especially in a public setting. Slavery is so uncomfortable, both for visitors and interpreters, that some have understandably asked ‘Why confront it at all?’”<sup>5</sup> To be sure, visitors do not go to museums to learn about a potentially uncomfortable subject: “Much of the public looks to the past for reassurance and diversion rather than understanding and insight.”<sup>6</sup>

Considering that slavery and its legacies are essential to the understanding of American history, and that museums must embrace social history topics in order to become essential to their communities, *and* that the topic makes people incredibly uncomfortable, how can museums go about presenting slavery? James Oliver Horton said that “the first task of the public historian is to assess and attempt to address popular ignorance of slavery’s diversity, longevity, complexity and centrality.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1988, the Valentine Richmond History Center, then the Valentine Museum, in Richmond, Virginia, opened the exhibition *In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life in*

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<sup>4</sup> Ira Berlin, “Coming to Terms with Slavery in the Twenty-first Century,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* ed. James O. Horton and Lois Horton (New York: New York Press, 2006), 26.

<sup>5</sup> James O. Horton, “Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America’s Racial Story,” *The Public Historian* 21 (Autumn, 1999), 30.

<sup>6</sup> David Peterson, “The New Social History and Local Museums,” *Journal of American Culture* 12 (Summer, 1989), 61.

<sup>7</sup> Horton, “Presenting Slavery,” 21.



*Richmond, Virginia, 1790-1860.* In 1991, the neighboring Museum of the Confederacy opened the exhibition *Before Freedom Came: African American Life in the Antebellum South*. The Valentine had a long tradition of displaying artifacts of the elite of Richmond, while the Museum of the Confederacy began as a shrine to the Confederate cause, housing mostly military regalia. Both institutions had hired professional public historians and embraced social history in the early 1980s, while the principles of community importance were still emerging. Both institutions chose to create large-scale exhibitions with slavery as their subject in a traditionally conservative and racially charged city. The Valentine created a model for all local museums wishing to do social history exhibitions. The staff consulted with scholars, completed original research and reached out to the community through advisory committees and public programming. It addressed the media and academic reviewers with direct responses and honesty. The Museum of the Confederacy proved that even the most unlikely of institutions can and should create exhibitions that discuss slavery. In its largest effort to revise its image to that of an educational facility, it risked controversy and the possible loss of members and created a groundbreaking exhibition that assembled African American artifacts from all over the South.

This study examines the creation of these exhibitions from inception to installation using information from the archives of both institutions as well as the recollections of some of the staff members. It examines the research that fueled the exhibitions, some of it original, and their collaborations with scholars. It also describes the acquisition of artifacts, and the staffs' effort to communicate to and include their surrounding community. This study also explains the reactions to the exhibitions and how the institutions handled potential and actual controversies. The exhibitions did incite some criticisms, and negative reactions. Overall, however, the local and national media applauded both exhibitions. The scholarly community commended the efforts of

both institutions. Unfortunately, despite the success of these groundbreaking exhibitions, the recognition received from the museum world, and the institutions' newfound relationship with their community, both institutions faltered in the years following the exhibitions. The exhibitions still served as a high point in the history of these institutions, however, and should be regarded as models for success.

### *In Bondage and Freedom: The Exhibit*

The main purpose of the Valentine Richmond History Center, founded as the Valentine Museum in 1892 on the death of Mann Valentine, was always to tell the history of the city. Valentine left his house, later called the Wickham House, and eclectic collection to the city, and the trustees and board of the Valentine gradually expanded the property by buying the row houses around it, additional buildings, and eventually a storage area in the 1970s. The institution's interpretation of the history of the house itself, and the city as a whole, reflected its owner: wealthy and white. This would not change until the board of trustees hired Frank Jewell as executive director in 1984. Expansion combined with the lack of fundraising had left the Valentine deeply in debt, with a very low number of annual visitors. Jewell had a business background as well as scholarly credentials, and was determined to bring the museum into the fold of the new social history of the 1960s and 1970s. As long as Jewell kept "the trains running on time," he had the power to make the interpretive agenda.<sup>8</sup>

Frank Jewell received a doctorate in English political history from University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in 1974, but, like many others, moved on to different opportunities because of the job shortage in academia. He worked in retail for R.H. Macy Corporation, pursued a degree in rare books at Columbia University, and worked at the Chicago and Colorado Historical Societies before the Valentine hired him as director, which Jewell commented later was a mix of

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<sup>8</sup> Bruce Stave, "A Conversation with Frank Jewell: Urban History at the Valentine Museum," *Journal of Urban History* 18 (1992): 192.

circumstance and good luck.<sup>9</sup> To help get out of debt, the Valentine's board was searching for someone with management and financial experience, both of which Jewell possessed. Its agreement to give Jewell intellectual control of the museum marked the beginning of nearly a decade of innovative exhibits focused on the social history of the city.

Jewell immediately took down the museum's permanent exhibit, which, as described by Jewell, featured a life-sized photo transparency of William Byrd, or "the great white man in history with 150 watts of illumination behind it," and included a small "ghetto" for the black history of the city.<sup>10</sup> The Valentine launched a self-study in 1984-1985, and Jewell began to build a staff, encourage staff development, and bring in academic historians as consultants. Influenced by the wave of social history already sweeping institutions across the country, the staff looked for the groups previously ignored in the telling of Richmond's history. This led to ideas, and some exhibits, on the Jewish community, the working class, women, and African-Americans. Documenting black history in Richmond became very important to Jewell and the staff, and soon led to *In Bondage and Freedom*, the Valentine's third and most extensive exhibit on African Americans and race in Richmond.

The new intellectual agenda began with a small exhibit about race relations in the city, and another exhibit about the historic African-American neighborhood of Jackson Ward followed. Both were well received, and the staff wanted to take a larger step and create an exhibit on slavery and race relations in Richmond during the antebellum period.

From the beginning, this subject had built-in barriers. The staff of the Valentine had to combat a number of stereotypes regarding African-Americans and slavery in Richmond. First, not all African-Americans in Richmond were enslaved; about ten percent of the city's African-

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 196.

Americans were free, and many provided skilled labor. Another misconception was that plantation slavery was the only form of the institution, but the city of Richmond had depended upon the skilled and unskilled labor of many urban slaves. Also, running opposite to the traditional view of Richmond as the backward capital of the Confederacy was the fact that Richmond's industrial growth and canal system made it a true urban center for trade akin to Baltimore, not a small town dependent upon a plantation economy.

Another obstacle was the scarcity of information. Despite the progress of academic social history, there were few works on urban slavery. The curators relied on Richard Wade's book, *Slavery in the Cities: The South: 1820-1860* (1964), and articles in scholarly journals, but overall the scholarship on urban slavery and free blacks in the city was just emerging. Since a goal of the staff was to add to scholarship and make sure the exhibit was based upon solid research, it had to dig. The staff laboriously combed all secondary works on the subject, including master's theses and doctoral dissertations. With the help of primary sources such as census records, eyewitness accounts, business ledgers, and church minutes, researchers concluded that extensive social, family, and religious ties developed between slaves and free blacks in the city. As the city grew, the roles of industrial slaves transformed the relationship between blacks and whites. One of the most important purposes of the exhibit for the curators was to show that this industrial slave labor had held the growing city together. Slaves had the skills and did the work that made the industries successful. These slaves were hired out by their masters and thus maintained a certain amount of independence in the city, and sometimes could make extra money. Some of these slaves lived where they worked, as at Tredegar Iron Works where Joseph Reid Anderson had dormitories and a company store. But often they lived with free blacks in Richmond. Many free blacks, such as barbers, were successful business owners.

The black community was close-knit, and those who were free felt a responsibility to care for those who were not, even if they were not family. Richmond was also not formally segregated as it would be after the Civil War. The whites of the city interacted with enslaved and free blacks daily, sometimes frequenting the same barber shops and pubs. There was a “shared understanding of social distinction within the black and white communities and mutual recognition of a code of public conduct that allowed blacks and whites to share the public, semi-public, and private spaces of a city.”<sup>11</sup> How would the staff be able to get these complexities across to the visitor? Some visitors would find the idea of skilled, industrial slaves living in a city independent of their owners a hard fact to grasp. Were there enough artifacts available to successfully interpret these ideas? Staff wanted the exhibit to open the eyes of visitors to the fact that blacks and whites shared space often—would it be able to accomplish that objective? To create such an in-depth exhibit had to be done right. A large-scale exhibition on slavery had yet to be accomplished because of the sensitivity of the subject, and even though the Valentine’s prior exhibitions regarding race were successful, slavery was a much more difficult. While the public most likely did not know much about plantation slavery, it undoubtedly knew next to nothing about urban slavery. The staff was also attempting this exhibition in a city that many residents regarded only as the former capital of the Confederacy. In order to make the exhibition successful, the Valentine needed to utilize more resources than it had with previous exhibitions. It sought the help of the National Endowment for the Humanities, hired outside curator Marie Tyler-McGraw, planned a community advisory panel, and consulted with scholars of urban history.

Gregg Kimball, then the Valentine’s curator of books and manuscripts, authored a grant proposal to the National Endowment of the Humanities to help with the exhibit, tentatively

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<sup>11</sup> Valentine Richmond History Center exhibit files, *In Bondage and Freedom* (IBAF files), IBAF Final Report, p. 4

named *The Antebellum Black Community in Richmond, 1790-1860*. It was the Valentine's first ever request for funding from the organization.<sup>12</sup> The proposal summarized research findings, the interpretive goals of the exhibition, tentative public programs, and the exhibit outline with a list of objects and a bibliography. It also included a time table that began with research in January of 1987 and ended with the installation of the exhibit in February of 1988.

Kimball explained that the museum's goal was to show that industrial slavery was "the glue that held together a highly industrial southern city in a regional economic matrix of tobacco, flour, iron, coal and canals."<sup>13</sup> The exhibit would also provide a forum for the public and scholars to discuss the exhibit and any issues on race relations in the city that the exhibit might inspire. The agenda for the public programs was ambitious from the start, and it would include a living-history segment focusing on the life of Gilbert Hunt, an enslaved blacksmith in Richmond who became a hero and managed to buy his freedom late in his life. The Valentine would also provide a bus tour of sites related to antebellum black Richmond, and the proposal expressed a desire for a scholarly symposium.

The outline began with an Introductory Overview. This would cover the historiography of slavery, African-American and Euro-Southern-American culture, and the migrations of Europeans and Africans. This led into the second section, "Topography of the Black Experience in Antebellum Richmond," in the form of a "layered map." The topography section would give the visitor an overview of the black experience in Richmond, and this section would also hit on themes like the diversity of slaves, the mobility of slaves, and the shared spaces and interactions of free blacks, slaves and whites. The topographical map would show locations where blacks worked, lived, socialized and worshipped in Richmond.

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<sup>12</sup> IBAF files, IBAF correspondence.

<sup>13</sup> IBAF files, IBAF proposal to NEH, 1988.

The subject of the third section of the proposal is the “Urban Labor Force,” which would include the profitability of urban slavery for the owners as well as for the city as a whole, and would discuss the occupational limitations for the enslaved. Industries that extensively used urban slavery were tobacco factories, iron works such as Tredegar, mines and flouring mill; they were also used in the construction and maintenance of roads and buildings. This section would show that free blacks and slaves also occupied positions as clergymen, washerwomen, barbers, carpenters and blacksmiths.

The next section, titled “Conflict and Control: White/Slave Relations” covered labor competition and the intricacies of the “hiring out” slave labor. The proposal stated that slave contact with free blacks made whites question the extent of their control, resulting in legislation restricting movement, harsher punishments, threats of being “sold south,” and more restrictive laws on free blacks.

The final section focused on the personal world of the enslaved and free blacks of Richmond, taking on issues of “Creolization,” diet, family, holidays, death and funerals, and the social stratification among all blacks in Richmond, slave and free.

There are 56 objects on the list included in the grant proposal with an important note on the exhibit’s methodology. The proposal stated that the staff was aware of the potential lack of resources for an exhibition of this nature. Census records and tax assessments alleviated some of the problems the staff faced with documentation, but did not eliminate the problem of the paucity of objects, which were obviously vital to a quality interpretation. Research exposed the fact that “there is actually very little of the physical fabric of the city that was not the product of slaves.” This new perspective led the staff to consider the use of generic objects, the provenance of which did not specifically tie them to African-Americans. The staff would use these generic objects as



long as they were “intellectually consistent with the known situation of urban slavery in Richmond.”<sup>14</sup>

The National Endowment for the Humanities chose to support the Valentine’s idea, providing it with \$173,000. The staff began to construct the first major exhibit on urban slavery in the South. Preparation for the exhibit not only involved labels and objects, but the creation of the catalog, consultations with scholars, and major construction on the Wickham House itself.

The meticulous research conducted by the staff was synthesized into a catalog written by Marie Tyler-McGraw and Gregg Kimball, the draft of which went to scholars for editing. Scholars such as James O. Horton, then-director of the Afro-American Communities Project, National Museum of American History; David Goldfield, of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; Harold Skramstad, then-director of the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village; and Edgar A. Toppin, then-dean of Graduate Studies, Virginia State University, among others, either helped to edit the catalog, agreed to participate in the symposium, or both. The staff was adamant that the exhibition and the catalog make a contribution to the scholarship.

When the script was ready, the staff dealt with the logistics. The gallery space in the museum, a series of rooms with low ceilings, was a problematic space for a sizeable exhibit. Before installation, the Valentine invested in structural changes. New lighting and hardwood floors were installed throughout the gallery space, and a rolling fire door was also installed which connected the lower floor with the basement. Leaving the lower floor, the visitor walked down a ramp into the basement of the Wickham House, in which the staff recreated a room of Amanda Cousins, a free black who lived in Richmond.

With the exhibit space cleared, the staff focused on how to get the word out about the exhibition, especially to the black community, and garner support for the exhibit. In June 1987

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<sup>14</sup>IBAF files, IBAF proposal to NEH page 7.

the Valentine hired the Martin Agency, advertisers with experience working with Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village to help with public relations. It also organized a Minority Affairs Committee, and the committee suggested placing advertisements in predominantly black publications such as *American Visions* and *Slant*. It also inserted advertisements for the exhibit in local church bulletins. The Valentine invited black community leaders to an early opening of the exhibit and enlisted the help of the Coalition of 100 Black Women to recruit them.

Press releases began in December 1987 and continued through the exhibit's run. The Valentine staff invited the press to view the exhibit on February 11, 1988, along with invitation-only guests. Another invitation-only opening for members was on February 12, followed by a free, public opening on February 14.

On entering the museum and paying the entry fee, visitors saw a large "How to See" panel, which explained that there were several ways the visitor could go through the exhibition. All labels within the exhibit had a visual hierarchy, with main points in large red font for the self-guided guest with limited time. Additional details about concepts and objects appeared in a smaller black font.

The first thing the visitor encountered in the exhibit was a large label with the six main points of the exhibit:

- Richmond, the most industrial city in the South, depended on black labor for its growth and development;
- Thousands of slaves were hired from the countryside to work in the city, living in Richmond without their master's close supervision;
- Free blacks made up 5 to 10 percent of Richmond's population before the Civil War;
- Family, social and work ties created a genuine and tight knit black community;
- Whites and blacks shared a Virginia culture, which blended English and African elements;
- The slave system in Richmond produced rules of behavior that allowed blacks and whites to share spaces without more rigid public or private segregation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> IBAF files, catalog.

Next to this label was Eyre Crowe's 1853 painting, *After the Sale: Slaves Going South from Richmond*, which showed slave families being torn apart, with a factory in the background. Frank Jewell believed the painting set the tone of the exhibit, and would "dominate viewers' perceptions of the history that followed."<sup>16</sup> The themes and sections following the introductory label remained the same as in the original proposal. Theatrical scrims, which silhouetted the objects, put objects into context. The idea of designer Patricia Chester, of Chester Designs Associates, the scrims helped the museum's reinterpretation of generic work objects by giving them a human element, and also helped the visitor understand the constant presence of the enslaved.

The exhibit included three videos. The first was a first-person living-history interpretation of Gilbert Hunt by Dylan Pritchett, then director of African-American interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg, as indicated in the proposal. The staff intended that the videos emphasize points that visitors may not have gleaned from the labels. The staff added two more videos within the exhibit. One of them was seven minutes in length, had living history interpreters reading the narratives of former Richmond slaves, collected by the Works Project Administration in the 1930s, while photographs of former slaves faded in and out. The third video was eleven minutes long and was located where the exhibit space met the Wickham House, in order to tie the major points of the exhibit to the archaeology and restoration of the House.

The museum offered exhibit-related tours of the Wickham House. The tour began in the basement where the exhibit concluded, the space the staff recreated to look like the bedroom of free black Amanda Cousins, who boarded slaves working in the city. The white-washed walls,

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<sup>16</sup> IBAF files, Final report, May 23, 1989, page 8. Painting borrowed by the Valentine from Mr. and Mrs. Delbert D. Ruch, Washington D.C.v

scant furniture and small bed showed that, even if they were free, resources were limited for blacks. The docents made sure to connect the house itself to the exhibit, using it as an artifact. The house showed the close physical proximity of the Wickham family and their slaves. The bedrooms had sleeping pallets on the floor where slaves may have slept, and there were scrim throughout the house, representing the enslaved men and women who cared for the children and did housework.

The agenda for public programs ended up more ambitious than the proposal had indicated in order to reach as many people as possible. The Valentine did have the scholarly symposium, the bus tour, and living history. But the living history was more extensive, and was present in the exhibit. The Valentine also added the play *Do Lord Remember Me* to the docket, helping to expand the exhibition's audience.

Living history interpreters were present throughout the exhibit. The researchers were clearly drawn to Gilbert Hunt, a well-known slave in antebellum Richmond who acquired skills as a blacksmith, rescued people from two Richmond fires, and eventually bought his freedom. Hunt, a photograph of whom is featured on the cover of the catalog, migrated to Liberia only to return to Richmond and be extremely influential in the black community. Hunt left a diary which Dylan Pritchett used to write a script about Hunt saving people from the theater fire of 1811 and buying his freedom. Pritchett told these stories in the exhibit videos which featured Gilbert Hunt. Pritchett was also present on opening night, in "character," telling Hunt's stories to guests.

Pritchett was not the only living history interpreter. The Valentine brought in four Richmond Community Theater Guild actors and actresses, trained by Pritchett, to interpret the Wickham slaves during tours on twenty Sundays during the exhibit. These actors remained

silent in the room until the house tour walked in and the docent called out to them. The interpreters then engaged the tour, telling them of their many duties, their interests, and their hardships.

Accuracy, of course, was a main goal, so the costumes of these actors had to be as authentic as possible. In order to do this, Colleen Callahan, curator of textiles, used the work of textile historian Linda Baumgarten about antebellum slave clothing.<sup>17</sup> She also collected information from one hundred twenty one runaway slave advertisements in antebellum Richmond newspapers. Any reference to clothing was noted, and she created the costumes from this research.

The living history interpreters stirred so much interest and were so successful that the staff added a public program not originally in the proposal. On July 10, 1988, the museum hosted a viewing of “Black on White,” an hour-long video that was part of the larger series, “The Story of English.” “The Story of English” was a nine-part television series on the development of the English language produced in 1986. “Black on White” discussed the development of Black English, beginning with the influx of Africans to the continent during the slave trade. The show featured the different dialects and styles of speech on plantations, and also discussed the origins of rap and jive talk. The guests first watched the video, then curator Gregg Kimball discussed the difficulties with living-history interpretation in a museum setting: there was a lack of written records, and some of those records were inaccurate. The guests then took a tour of the Wickham house, where they encountered first-person living-history interpreters who described the duties required of slaves in the Wickham house.

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<sup>17</sup> Linda Baumgarten, “Clothes for the People: Slave Clothing in Early Virginia,” *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* 14 (1988) : 26-70.

The bus tour, given on May 8, 1988, and guided by Gregg Kimball and Patricia Pearsall, began in the Wickham House itself. Kimball explained the different roles of the Wickham's thirteen slaves, and used the house once again as an artifact. The tour then went to Ebenezer Baptist Church, the only antebellum Richmond black church worshipping on its original site. The guides pointed out several wood houses similar to the types in which free blacks lived on the way to Union Burial Ground. Free blacks Ebenezer and Margaret Roper first bought the property in 1847, but ownership soon morphed into an association of free blacks, including Gilbert Hunt. The association left room in the cemetery for the burial of slaves or strangers.

A still-standing out-building from the 1830s was next before the tour led to downtown Richmond and focused on the industrial slave labor that was so prominent in the exhibit. What became the Pohlig Brothers Box Factory building in Shockoe Bottom near the former canal slip was once the Turpin-Yarbrough Tobacco Factory, which employed 98 slaves in 1860. The factory itself owned 69 of those slaves while 29 were hired from their masters. The last site on the tour was Tredegar Iron Works, where slaves held many skilled positions. Owner Joseph Reid Anderson later used this slave labor to furnish the Confederate army with cannons.

The play, *Do Lord Remember Me*, performed Fridays at 8p.m. and Sunday afternoons at 1:30 and 3:30 in April, and showings lasted through early May. The play featured a series of skits acting out reminiscences of former slaves. Set in the 1930s, and collected through the Works Projects Administration during the New Deal, the play was yet another format through which the Valentine could reach a wider audience.

The staff of the Valentine used original research to construct one of the first exhibitions on slavery in the country, received scholarly support, led many public programs and enlisted the

support of the black community. How successful was this endeavor? Was the staff able to reach a wide audience and enjoy a large number of visitors? Did the exhibition meet with any controversy? How would the local and national media react to the exhibition? Would they even consider it newsworthy?

## *Before Freedom Came: The Exhibit*

*Before Freedom Came* was the culmination of the Museum of the Confederacy's wider effort to incorporate mainstream historical interpretations of the Civil War and shake its reputation for being a shrine to the Lost Cause. The effort to modernize the Museum began in 1962, when the Museum hired its first professional director. The hiring of Edward D. C. "Kip" Campbell, Jr., in 1979 brought the Museum even further along, as Campbell embraced the new social history. The Museum also built a modern facility with modern museum storage, and began to renovate the Confederate White House.

In an interview for *Virginia Magazine* in October of 1982, Campbell explicitly expressed his view that the Museum should change the interpretation of its artifacts and that subjects previously ignored deserved attention. As the article put it, "Campbell's view of the Old South is unclouded by the reverence many native sons and daughters harbor for their ancestral homeland."<sup>18</sup> This comes as somewhat of a surprise, given that Campbell grew up in Richmond, in one of the oldest, wealthiest neighborhoods, and went to St. Christopher's Academy, one of the most prestigious private schools in the city. He also, however, earned a triple doctorate in history, film and literature at the University of South Carolina after graduating from Virginia Tech, and his first book, *The Celluloid South: Hollywood and the Southern Myth* (1981), examined false portrayals of the antebellum South in theater and film. A self-declared social

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<sup>18</sup> Tim Wheeler "Of Human Bondage: And other evidence that Tara wasn't all it was cracked up to be" *Virginia Magazine*, October 24, 1982



historian, Campbell came to the Museum of the Confederacy largely through happenstance, but with a determination to destroy some of the mythology surrounding his home region, especially in regards to the Civil War. “Quite frankly, I don’t see how anybody can say the war was not fought over slavery,” Campbell said in the interview. “It is beyond my comprehension.”

Campbell was fully aware that this perspective differed greatly from some of the Museum’s longtime supporters, such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans, who have traditionally clung tight to Lost Cause hagiography. Campbell classified the organizations’ goals as perpetuation of the Lost Cause, while “we’re just trying to be a museum.”<sup>19</sup>

The focus of the article was two artifacts the museum had displayed: a slave whip and identity tag. The artifacts were in “The People of the Land” case in the Museum’s flagship exhibit, “The Confederate Years.” Campbell made clear that the whip and tag received regular comments, some by individuals who flatly denied that slavery ever really happened. Such comments would not deter the staff from its objectivity and its goals to interpret social history, including slavery. The article also quoted two members of the museum’s board, Penelope Eure and Joanne Williams, who stated their complete support for Campbell and the new professional direction of the Museum.

Campbell reflected later on the comments about the slave whip and how the constant attention to it led the staff to discuss the possibility of larger exhibitions about African Americans. “I remember someone coming up to me, a very long-standing, very supportive member that those things couldn’t be. And I asked him, well how do you account for their existence, and how do you account for the fact that they’ve obviously been weathered, used, more than just being in museum storage for fifty or a hundred years, to which there was no

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

answer.” Discussions like that led the staff to believe more and more that they could do an African American exhibition, and the fact that it would be the Museum of the Confederacy would be even better. As Campbell put it, it would be “almost like Nixon going to China.” Campbell and Betsy McKemie, then director of education, and the rest of the staff continued to discuss the possibilities.

Campbell also commented on the “remarkable” support of the board during his tenure. “The board then, by tradition, was all female. The board of advisors was, by tradition, all male and both of them were very heavy hitters. In both of them, the average age hinted towards sixties, but I cannot imagine a more supportive, friendly, eager, listen to any idea, collection of folks. Particularly this topic...which you would not necessarily see support for, but they were phenomenal.”<sup>20</sup> Campbell left the Museum of the Confederacy in 1983, but McKemie continued to move forward with the idea.

In 1985, the Museum adopted a long range plan to “collect, preserve and interpret aspects of nineteenth century southern life,” aided by a sizeable National Endowment for the Humanities challenge grant given to the Museum “in recognition of its modern institutional direction.” This began with an exhibit which gave a broader interpretation of slavery, “Old Times Here: The South as Depicted in the Collections of The Valentine Museum and The Museum of the Confederacy.” In order to be a modern institution, the museum would not be limited by its military collection, would include more social history exhibitions, and would shake its image as a shrine to the Lost Cause.

In July 1986, the Museum received a commissioned proposal for a large-scale, special project specifically on slavery from Sally Frittata, a public relations consultant. Frittata suggested that the museum needed to “mount a major, definitive, scholarly, even-handed

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr., August 14, 2009.

exhibition on slavery.” Frittata advised the Museum to bring in an independent curator, “aided by a panel of academically ‘above reproach’ advisors, both Black and White.”<sup>21</sup>

The Museum staff, led by McKemie, immediately moved forward with it, hoping that the Museum would “foster a constructive dialogue about a sensitive and still controversial issue, and create a bridge between its white constituency and the black community.”<sup>22</sup> The board showed its support again by approving the idea.

Taking the advice of Sue Ann Messmer, of Virginia Commonwealth University, the Museum of the Confederacy hired Kym Rice to be the independent curator for this exhibit. Rice was known to Richmond for her curation of “*A Share of Honor*”: *Virginia Women 1600-1945*, for the Virginia Women’s Cultural Project. In 1984-1985, the Virginia Women’s Cultural History project had teamed with the Museum on an earlier social history exhibit, *Women in Mourning*. Rice had her reservations: “I had some of my friends in Richmond tell me I would ruin my career.” Rice explained it was also a time in which there was a lot more consciousness that African American subjects should be interpreted by only African Americans.<sup>23</sup> Despite her reservations, Rice agreed to take on the project, provided it was factual and was not an apology for slavery. In February 1987, Rice began contacting organizations across the south, searching for artifacts in order to submit a feasibility report to Tucker Hill, the Museum’s Director of Exhibits and Publications, by June 10 of that year.<sup>24</sup>

The Museum knew that this exhibit would be challenging, given the fact that the vast majority of the objects would be borrowed, and the paucity of artifacts connected to slavery created by African Americans. Rice contacted nearly 170 institutions by letter, including

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<sup>21</sup>John Coski, Before Freedom Came Project Summary, Boxes VI-19 and VI-20, Eleanor Brockenbrough Library, Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia (BFC, MOC Archives)

<sup>22</sup>BFC, MOC Archives

<sup>23</sup>Interview with Kym Rice, August 19, 2009.

<sup>24</sup>BFC, MOC Archives

community-based African-American institutions not yet formally recognized by American Association of Museums or the American Association of State and Local History. She had connections with some institutions from prior projects, but some were “cold calls.” She received a 70% response rate, and mostly positive feedback. Most institutions did not have anything they felt they could contribute, but offered good wishes for success with the exhibit. Some places had one or two objects they felt would be helpful, and some were already using their objects in plantation exhibits, such as the Coastal Georgia Historical Society’s exhibit, *Not Soon Forgotten: Cotton Planters and Plantations of the Golden Isles of Georgia, 1784-1812*. There were institutions that expressed suspicion, such as the Beauvoir House, Jefferson Davis’s last home, whose superintendent stated “I do hope you will portray black life in the antebellum South truthfully, avoiding the false stereotypes which *Roots*, *Uncle Remus* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* have presented to the public.”<sup>25</sup>

Rice’s most successful ‘find’ was the bust of Nora August, which would eventually grace the cover of the exhibit catalog. Linda King, director of the Historical Society on St. Simon’s Island, told her about the bust, which was displayed at the Sea Island Golf Club, and asked if she was interested. She naturally was, and after seeing ‘Nora’ in a glass case outside the pro shop, wanted her in the exhibit. The inscription on the statue’s neck says “Carved from life, Retreat Plantation, Presented to the Nurses of Darien GA in the year of our Lord 1865/ Nora August (Slave)/ Age 23/ Purchased from the Market, St. Augustine, Florida April 17<sup>th</sup> 1860/ Now a Free Woman.” An unidentified Union soldier carved the bust from ivory in 1865 and Rice learned from the owners that it had been in England before they bought it at auction and put it on display. She would be one of over one hundred objects acquired by Rice.

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<sup>25</sup> BFC, MOC Archives.

Based on Rice's feasibility report, which included a tentative object list, consultant suggestions, and a public programs agenda, Rice and Tucker Hill applied for and received a planning grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in December 1987. John Vlach, of George Washington University; Drew Gilpin Faust, then Annenberg Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania; Charles Joyner, Burroughs Distinguished Professor of Southern History at Coastal Carolina College; Deborah Gray White, of Rutgers University; Theresa Singleton, of the Smithsonian Institute; David Goldfield, of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte; and Dr. Edward Chappell, the architectural historian at Colonial Williamsburg, made up the team of scholars, and they were involved early and often. All agreed to provide academic guidance for the exhibit, and with the exception of Chappell, who had other commitments, to help with the accompanying catalog, for which they would each contribute an essay. Former director Campbell, who had remained abreast of the project's progress, agreed to edit the catalog. The grant proposal also outlined that the museum would host a scholarly symposium, a lecture series, and reach out to Richmond public schools. Tentatively called "Waiting for Freedom," the grant proposal identified the different sections of the exhibit as The Antebellum South, Plantation Life, the Afro-American Family, The Slave Community, African Survivals, Religion, The Urban Experience, and Resistance to Slavery. The exhibit would primarily focus on the plantation, but would also contrast plantation life with the lives of urban slaves and free blacks.

The Museum also planned to involve members of the community to help spread the word and deal with public reaction. This committee of local professionals would help to deal with responses to the inevitable question: Why is the Museum of the Confederacy doing an exhibit about slavery? The staff anticipated suspicion from African Americans, especially those who

might hold that African American history properly belonged in an African American museum. Then there were the Museum's own members, some of whom might hold that the history of African Americans had no business in a museum whose mission was to display the glories of the former Confederacy.

If the Museum of the Confederacy harbored any hope that the exhibit would not be controversial among some of its constituents, that hope was dashed a full year before its installation. On June 16, 1990, the Virginia Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans passed a resolution requesting that the Museum of the Confederacy no longer display the slave whip. The label for the slave whip, installed in 1978 when it first faced criticism, stated that whipping was one form of punishment sometimes used by masters, and that slaves did not have the right to bring suit against any white person.

The Virginia Division outlined nine points of contention that it hoped the staff of the Museum would consider. Their largest concern was that the whip was in close proximity to the recreation of General Lee's tent and headquarters. It also insisted that Lee did not own slaves, having freed them in 1848. In fact, they continued, some of the generals the Museum included in their exhibit did not own slaves. General "Stonewall" Jackson did, but taught his slaves to read in Sunday school and even freed a slave who questioned his status. The resolution went on: only one private in ten owned a slave, slavery was legal under the Constitution of the United States, General Ulysses S. Grant owned slaves until 1858, and one of the first steps made by the Confederate government in its constitution was to abolish the importation of slaves. The resolution returned to the whip and its label in the ninth point, stating that in several areas of the South, at several different points in time, "slaves could testify and even bring suit against whites."

Mr. Lou Gorr, the director of the Museum, passed the task of a response to John Coski, the Museum historian. Coski, not wanting to “snub” the organization with a non-committal response, broke down each of the nine points. First, the slave whip and Lee’s tent were about as far apart as they could get in the Museum, and were not interpreted together. Even if they were close, proximity does not necessarily mean a relationship between artifacts. Coski pointed out that while Lee drafted a will to free his slaves in 1848, the will instructed that this would not be carried out until his death. Lee controlled slaves at several locations as late as 1864. Coski did support the Resolution’s view that Lee found slavery morally abhorrent, as Lee stated this several times in papers and correspondence before his death.

Coski refuted the Resolution’s statements about General Stonewall Jackson. The story of Jackson emancipating one of his slaves was not supported by proper documentation, and if Jackson did teach slaves to read in Sunday school, which Coski acknowledged was feasible given Jackson’s religious devotion, he was in violation of Virginia law. Coski pointed out that if Lee and Jackson both took action against the system of slavery, why did the SCV find it inappropriate for the Museum to interpret the institution in a negative light? Coski also showed that the United States Constitution left the decision up to the states, the Confederate Constitution sought foreign favor with its ban, and the lack of slave ownership among Confederate privates, who were nonetheless fighting to uphold the system, all had very little to do with the slave whip. The slave whip was installed in 1978—why did the SCV take issue with it now? Coski later said that he felt the SCV’s late reaction to the slave whip could have been a “rediscovery” as leadership changed in the SCV, but was more than likely a “shot across the institutional bow” considering *Before Freedom Came* had already been front page news.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with John Coski, August 27, 2009.

The staff had begun to assemble the Community Advisory Committee and take public relations action even before it received what the someone dubbed the “(Pre)reaction” from the SCV. Rice believed the committee should represent all levels of government and include professional people. The staff hand-delivered letters to potential committee members, stating they would be asked to:

- Discuss and consider the likely reaction by various segments of the public to the exhibition and The Museum of the Confederacy’s sponsorship of it;
- To work with the Museum’s education director to develop suitable school programs;
- To work with the project staff to develop outreach programs for adults;
- To advise on the planning and execution of public events.<sup>27</sup>

The final committee members were: Mr. Earl Beech, Mrs. Mary Tyler Freeman Cheek, Dr. Francis M. Foster, Dr. J. Samuel Gillespie, Mrs. Barbara Grey, Mr. Walter Kenney, then mayor of Richmond, Mr. Robert Norfleet, Dr. Armstead L. Robinson, director of the Carter G. Woodson Institute at the University of Virginia, Dr. Philip J. Schwarz, professor of history at Virginia Commonwealth University, Ms. Bernadine Simmons, public affairs correspondent for WWBT TV, and Dr. Edgar Toppin, professor of history at Virginia State University. Outreach consultant was Janine Bell. Also advising the committee and the Museum staff were John Siddall and Bill Hamby of the public relations firm Siddall, Matus and Coughter, Inc., who provided services *pro bono*. The panel met three times before the exhibit opened; the first meeting was December 6, 1990.

That meeting began with a slide-show presentation from Rice, taking the group step-by-step through the exhibit. Then the staff wasted no time in directing discussion to the public’s reaction to the exhibit, as well as the reaction from the Museum’s constituency. Siddall insisted that the committee create a crisis plan in case of negative publicity. The group also agreed that a main goal was to generate positive publicity about the exhibit, especially closer to the opening.

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<sup>27</sup> BFC, MOC Archives.



The group knew that one of the first questions people would have was why the Museum of the Confederacy? All agreed the exhibit was well within the interpretive mission of the Museum to present the history of the Civil War, including its causes and legacies. The group agreed that up to now, the Museum only told the story of 60% of the population of the South. This project was part of the Museum's effort to tell the story of the neglected 40%. This was a tentative response; a more detailed response was the responsibility of a crisis subcommittee.

The next meeting occurred in February 1991. The meeting began with a presentation from exhibit designer Dan Murphy, of Planning, Research and Design, Inc. PRD had won the contract in competition with two other design companies the previous June. Since the target opening was July, the exhibition design schedule was fast paced, but the committee and scholars were kept up to date. The committee suggested that the exhibit add a map of Africa, comparing its size with the size of the United States. They also wanted clarification as the size of the free black population, and wanted the exhibit to deal with the issue of miscegenation, both accurately and sensitively. Committee members asked whether the exhibition gave any attention to positive or loving relationships between black and white. Rice advised against too much attention to this particular subject. Recognition that "good associations" between blacks and whites existed was fine, but there was a fine line between recognition and giving the impression that slavery was somehow justified or a good thing. There was also a question as to whether the exhibit would give attention to the accomplishments of African Americans in the last century. Rice also advised against this. A visitor could get the impression that the present United States was a place of complete racial equality, and that the ramifications of slavery were no longer felt.

The third and final committee meeting took place in April 1991. The meeting began once again with a presentation from the staff, this time from Robin Reed and Sheryl Kingery

describing the educational programs the Museum had in store for the exhibit. This close to the opening, the discussion also focused on public relations. The crisis subcommittee presented their ideas for the committee's unified response.

The group decided that the best strategy was a straight-forward approach. The Museum began to interpret the history of slavery and African-Americans in small ways in the 1970s; this next step was a logical progression for the interpretation. The exhibit was well within the mission of the Museum of the Confederacy. This was an educational project that had the endorsement of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The need for open communication was key to the success of the project and its reception by the public. The staff and committee decided to keep a notebook in the exhibit for public comment, and it would remain there throughout the entire run of the exhibit without editing. "Town hall" meetings were suggested, in order to keep an open dialogue. The staff and committee focused on creating forums through which the public could discuss the sensitivity of race in the city's past and present.

There was also the matter of the museum's board, which was all white and all female, as had been the tradition. The committee decided that only the board would take questions regarding whether this new step in interpretation would lead to changes in its composition. Members would most likely be asked why they chose to be a part of this project, but that answer would be from the individual member. The committee would meet a final time in September to discuss the success of the exhibit up to that point.

Public relations had to include specific training for staff members, which occurred right after the exhibit opened. With Siddall's help, the Museum's leaders outlined the goals of the institution and the objectives for meeting those goals for the staff. They reviewed the critical

transition points in the Museum's history: the move to the modern building in 1976, the opening of the restored White House in 1988, and the heightened interest in the Civil War and tourism to Richmond. The goals of the Museum were to become the premier educational facility for the study of all things relating to the Civil War, and to present an objective, collection-driven interpretation of the Confederate experience. The ways to meet these goals were to create a new audience while maintaining its core constituency, raise attendance from its present 74,000 to 100,000 annually, work for acceptance by the African American community, raise the annual fund from \$93,000 to \$150,000, and become a community resource. The staff also received a brief outline of the exhibit and its objects. This training for cohesiveness among the Museum's employees was essential because the staff had to make sure that the public understood these transition points and the progress the Museum had made since the mid-1970s. *Before Freedom Came* was the culmination of these efforts, and the Museum's greatest attempt, fiscally and intellectually, to reposition itself with its public. The Museum was now an educational facility, not a shrine.

For an exhibit of this magnitude, the staff and PRD had to do quite a bit of construction, including essentially gutting the upper-level exhibition space of the Museum. After carpets were installed, the area was subdivided into five spaces, one to be used as an introductory mezzanine and the other four being further subdivided into the eight titled sections. Listening stations were created so the visitor could listen to readings from the WPA slave narratives and slave letters. Dylan Pritchett, Christy Coleman, Robert Watson, Jr. and Sylvia Tabb Lee, all veterans of the African-American Programs Department at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, recorded these along with helping in the Education department. The staff felt that even though it

complicated the lay-out of the exhibit, the listening stations helped focus the visitor on the people, their faces and their words.

The public programs began before the opening of *Before Freedom Came* and continued through its entire run. They included a free lecture by philosophy professor Dr. Yushau Sodiq on Islamic tradition among African Americans and a discussion on the development of African-American music with a performance of music from Africa, the Caribbean and the United States by saxophonist and producer Plunky Branch. “To Be Sold” was a presentation about slavery and slave marketing given by Dr. Phillip Schwarz, committee member and VCU historian. Dr. Schwarz fittingly gave the lecture in Shockoe Bottom, where a slave market had once existed. “Nat Turner,” a play written by Shepard Randolph Edmonds in 1930, was performed twice in June 1991 and was so successful that the Museum added more dates. There were presentations on African American Folk Art and Artists and on the Gullah culture of the South Carolina Sea Islands. “Voices... ‘Many Thousand Gone’” was an outdoor presentation at Dogwood Dell amphitheater at Byrd Park featuring Living History interpreters, including Dylan Pritchett and Christy Coleman, and “Nineteenth-Century African American Sacred Song Traditions” was presented by Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, curator of the Division of Community Life at the Smithsonian, and founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock. The Museum also helped sponsor the first annual Family Reunion, a large festival with music, crafts and food which took place in Jackson Ward. The Museum would continue to sponsor the Reunion in subsequent years. All of the public programs were free of charge, utilizing buildings and businesses all around downtown Richmond. Janine Bell, director of Capital City Productions and founder of Elegba Folklore Society, and also the outreach coordinator for the Advisory Committee, arranged these programs.

Along with these public programs were the educational programs, which included a ten-section resource packet for teachers created by Sheryl Kingery, assistant director of education. Rich with exercises, teacher resources, glossaries, document excerpts, and slides, the packet also included an audiotape of slave narratives read aloud and songs performed by Pritchett, Tabb Lee, Coleman, and Watson, Jr.<sup>28</sup> The Museum also hosted a week-long summer day camp at Westover Hills Elementary School. Also organized and implemented by Kingery, the camp gave children the opportunity to learn about community traditions, African folklore and music, African-American soldiers, and food.

Another public program hosted by the Museum was a scholarly symposium, which took place on October 18, 1991. Held at the Richmond Academy of Medicine, the turnout was a disappointing 44 people. But this was certainly not the only contribution of the Museum's academic council, for it helped to create the award-winning catalog which accompanied the exhibit.

The work on the book began when the Museum received the planning grant. The scholars met three times, the first in September 1988, then in February 1989 and once more in May 1990 to review the essays for publication. Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr., former director, author and then editor for *Virginia Cavalcade* at the Library of Virginia, had the credentials to satisfy the group of scholars. The Museum of the Confederacy, on the recommendation and then the action of Campbell, sought the support of the University of Virginia Press. Campbell believed it would distinguish the book as a scholarly work and help with marketing. Despite the Press's agreement to help, this was limited to marketing and distribution and the Museum took on the responsibility of the creation and printing.

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<sup>28</sup> Coski, Project summary, BFC, MOC Archives.

The catalog begins with an introduction by Rice, which references an article by Gary Kulik in *History News* in 1990. According to Rice, Kulik's article praised history institutions small and large for their inclusion of social history topics such as women, the poor and immigrants, but it did not discuss the absence from museums of a key topic: American slavery. It was one of the "central paradoxes in our history," yet museums largely ignored it. She stated that "*Before Freedom Came* demonstrates that it is possible for a 'majority' institution to take a critical look at this subject and to produce a book that displays both objectivity and integrity."<sup>29</sup>

The first essay is a general historiography of slavery by Drew Gilpin Faust, followed by John Michael Vlach's essay on the landscape of the plantation and how it impacted slave life. Charles Joyner's general essay on life on plantations follows Vlach. Deborah Gray White's essay is next, which "summarizes her seminal work on the lives of slave women," followed by David Goldfield's essay, which analyzed the lives of urban slaves and free blacks in southern cities. Theresa Singleton's essay on the ongoing archaeological investigation of slave plantations ended the book.<sup>30</sup> Rice and Campbell, with the help of Coski and Tucker, incorporated an abundance of images from the exhibit into the catalog, with the goal in mind to appeal to the casual reader as much as the academic scholar, and to give the reader a good idea of what the exhibit itself had offered.

An ambitious plan, from the very early planning stages, was that the exhibit would travel to other institutions. Many expressed interest, but the McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina and the National African-American Museum in Wilberforce, Ohio, acted. In December 1991, the McKissick Museum agreed to host the exhibit from January to April 1992, and the National Afro-American Museum signed a contract in October 1991 to show the exhibit

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<sup>29</sup>Edward DC Campbell and Kym Rice, ed. *Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991), xii.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

from April to July 1992. The staff appreciated that a Museum of African American history was extremely enthusiastic about hosting the exhibit. John Fleming, director of the African American Museum in Wilberforce, was on the NEH committee which approved the implementation grant, and had already made up his mind when he met with the Museum staff. “It was beyond our wildest dreams that an African-American museum would want the show,” recalled Kym Rice.<sup>31</sup>

How did the public react to *Before Freedom Came*? The institution began to receive some negative feedback before the exhibition even opened. Once visitors and the press saw the exhibition, would they react positively? Most importantly, could the public overcome the irony of the exhibition’s home and recognize that it was the first of its kind?

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Kym Rice, August 19, 2009.

### *In Bondage and Freedom: The Reaction*

The Valentine sent the press release for *In Bondage and Freedom* nationwide, and reviews and reactions began to pour in even before opening night. Announcements for the exhibit appeared numerous times in local papers like *Style Weekly* and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, but also reached a national audience through publications like the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *American Visions*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. All reviews acknowledged that the exhibit was ground-breaking in itself and surprising fare for a conservative town.

*In Bondage and Freedom* opened on February 12 with a special invitation-only event hosted in part by the Richmond chapter of the Coalition of 100 Black Women, who the Valentine enlisted to help raise support. The Coalition was successful in getting the word out, as many of Richmond's prominent African-Americans attended opening night. Their reactions to the exhibition were enthusiastic and emotional. In a later interview, Frank Jewell recalled the reaction of then-state Senator Benjamin Lambert's wife. Crying, she turned to Jewell and commented that she knew they, referring to herself and African-Americans as a people, had a history, but she had never actually seen it until *In Bondage and Freedom*. The media was there to capture that evening, and covered the exhibit throughout its run.<sup>32</sup>

The *Richmond News Leader* monitored the creation of *In Bondage and Freedom*, beginning its press coverage months before it opened. It published an article on the filming of

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<sup>32</sup> Stave, Bruce. "A Conversation with Frank Jewell," pp. 199-201.



the Gilbert Hunt video, one of the three in the exhibit, featuring photographs of the make-up process that transformed living history interpreter Dylan Pritchett into Gilbert Hunt.<sup>33</sup> The *News Leader* went into greater depth with the exhibit itself in its February 3 article that quoted comments from museum director Frank Jewell: “I think it is probably the best researched exhibit we’ve ever done, the most significant scholarly show we’ve ever done.”<sup>34</sup> Given that the Valentine’s accomplishments in the few years prior to this exhibit had been extremely well received, this was not routine self promotion. Curators Marie Tyler-McGraw and Gregg Kimball adopted a straight-forward manner in dealing with the press, stating the poignant facts of the exhibition. Tyler-McGraw stated, “it was as bad as people believe, but the resourcefulness of a people who saw vulnerabilities in the system and used them to create a life, that resourcefulness and inventiveness is what needs to be documented.” Direct statements like this undoubtedly drew visitors. The *News Leader* covered opening night with the headline “Early Reviews are In: Freedom/Bondage is a hit.”<sup>35</sup>

The exhibition brought a lot of national media attention to the Valentine. Announcements about the exhibition or exhibit reviews appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Washington Post*. Reviews of the exhibition were syndicated nation-wide, praising the Valentine’s work.

Pat Aufderheide wrote two articles for the *Washington Post* on the exhibit based upon a single visit. The first article appeared in the *Post* on July 10, 1988, and was later syndicated via the Associated Press. Aufderheide wrote an additional article in the Art section of the *Post* published on August 17. Aufderheide gave the broadest and most thorough review of the exhibit, covering the catalog, the exhibit itself, and public reaction. Aufderheide described

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<sup>33</sup> *Richmond News Leader*, January 22, 1988. Richmond Valentine History Center Archives, Richmond, VA.

<sup>34</sup> *Richmond News Leader*, February 3, 1988.

<sup>35</sup> “Early Reviews are In: Freedom/Bondage is a hit,” *Richmond News Leader*, February 13, 1988.

Jewell's leadership and new interpretive mission at the Valentine not as affirmative action, but a new effort to recognize that African-Americans were central to the development of the United States. Defying its own tradition of displaying "little jewels of Civil War artifacts and Victoriana," the exhibit showed the work, community, and family among slaves and free blacks. Aufderheide complimented the innovation of the exhibit design, especially the theatrical scrim whose "ghostly aura hints at their semi-invisible status but pervasive presence." He also praised the reinterpretation of the Wickham House as a slave space.<sup>36</sup>

The biggest contribution of the article was that it covered the public reaction, either witnessed by Aufderheide or recalled by staff. Aufderheide said that visitors certainly got the point, and sometimes became uneasy, too. Enlightening readers to the difficulties docents sometimes encounter, Aufderheide described the angry reaction of a young man to a tour led by docent Michelle Mitchell. "What do you mean 'free blacks'?" he said. "If blacks could be free, why was there slavery? And I never heard of a slave being able to make money. I don't believe you." Another staff member recalled a white visitor leaving the exhibit after telling the front desk "I'm not interested in slavery. It's over and done with." Kimball recalled a white visitor warning him that the exhibit would "make black people hate white people." The staff noticed that the incorporation of the Wickham House as slave artifact also made people uneasy. "There are lots of people who go from restored home to restored home, but get very uncomfortable with the idea that servants lived here, and even slept in the bedroom with the white family," said Marie Tyler-McGraw. Of course some found great comfort in the exhibit, which answered questions for them. Retired schoolteachers Walter and Charlotte Brooks were very enthusiastic. The couple was visiting Richmond to trace Walter's genealogy, and they found that the life of

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<sup>36</sup> Aufderheide, Pat. "Pointing Up Black History in Richmond," *Washington Post*, July 10, 1988 and "The Have-nots of history find a place in museums," *Washington Post*, July 17-30, 1988, Art.

Walter's great-grandfather mirrored the exhibit. The Brooks were so supportive that they later shared their extensive research with the curators.<sup>37</sup>

The exhibit did make some African-Americans uneasy, Aufderheide pointed out, specifically in its condensed travelling panel form. The Valentine prepared a signboard sized travelling exhibit for people in the community to check out from the museum. The Medical College of Virginia director of arts J. Wayne Fitzgerald borrowed the exhibit, only to return it a week later. "Some of the black staff had become overly concerned about the 'negative content.' Our multicultural committee dealt with it and decided that the information on the board—unlike, I think, the Valentine exhibit itself—was enough to stir someone's emotions but not enough to help them resolve those emotions," said Fitzgerald. Despite the negative feedback, the director still found the experience valuable, especially because he planned to mount an exhibit on black memorabilia.<sup>38</sup>

Despite these incidences, the exhibit was a contribution to the city and public history as a whole. McGraw acknowledged the change in exhibits from those based on objects to analytical exhibits based on research. "It's time for regional and city museums to get plugged into the social history research that's changed the field in the past two decades." Aufderheide pointed out that "if there ever was a volatile place to test the new approach to public history, it is Richmond, profoundly schizophrenic about its own past. And if there was ever a volatile subject, it is the lives of blacks during Richmond's old regime." Rex Ellis, assistant director of African-American interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg, said that slavery was still a

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<sup>37</sup> Gregg Kimball and Marie Tyler-McGraw "Integrating the Interpretation of a Southern City: An Exhibition Case Study," *The Public Historian* 12 (1990), 40.

<sup>38</sup> Aufderheide, "The Have-nots of History."

controversial topic among visitors and staff, and the Valentine “deserves accolades—they seem to have much more of the black community in Richmond on their side than in the past.”<sup>39</sup>

The exhibit also received national attention through National Public Radio. On August 9, 1988, the show “Morning Edition” featured an interview with Gregg Kimball and Marie Tyler-McGraw by reporter Rebekah Presson. This gave the curators the opportunity to reach a national audience. Kimball reiterated on the show that even though the topic was sensitive, the staff was well equipped to deal with controversy because the exhibition was rooted in scholarship.<sup>40</sup>

Later in August, Presson wrote a complimentary review of the exhibit in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. Titled “Richmond Examines a Subject City Would Rather Forget,” Presson stated that “normally, the lives of blacks between the period of the Revolutionary and Civil War, or the antebellum period, are not talked about much in Richmond. It’s possible to walk through an hour-long plantation tour without hearing the word ‘slave’ mentioned.” She determined that the exhibit certainly did not fit this preconception of the city, and quoted the curators, who again gave direct responses. “Much of the emotion people feel for this period, particularly among whites, is this notion of paternalism. They say ‘Our people didn’t do that. They didn’t sell their people away.’ They replace what really happened with a sentimentality that, I think, is uncalled for.” Tyler-McGraw commented on the social dynamic of antebellum Richmond shown in the exhibit: “The central power of white Richmond was that they could sell most of the black residents of Richmond, if it came to that. The central power of blacks was that they could stop working or run away. And both sides made that threat known to each other.” Noting the surprise of a group of University of Virginia students when they learned that slaves

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<sup>39</sup> Aufderheide, “Pointing up Black History”

<sup>40</sup> IBAF Files.

slept in the house, Presson concluded that the exhibit successfully unhinged the misconception that slavery was strictly a rural institution.<sup>41</sup>

The local media also praised the exhibit. *Style Weekly* published several articles on the exhibit, one of which discussed the effectiveness of the theatrical scrim. “The scrim...provides an effective, almost otherworldly, visual portrayal of black-white relationships in Richmond in the early 1800s. The exhibit does not solely concentrate on white man’s use of slavery, but throughout the exhibit, one experiences odd twinges of conscience. Evidence of slavery is everywhere.”<sup>42</sup> It was the first time the museum received such extensive coverage from the local media.<sup>43</sup>

The exhibition also resulted in some additions to the Valentine’s collection. The now defunct Independent Order of St. Luke, described by its leader Maggie Lena Walker as “one of the most powerful institutions managed and controlled by our people,” traced its history back to 1869 when it was founded by W. M. T. Forrester. The order provided death and illness benefits. An oak lectern, photographs of the Order’s officers and businesses and publications were given to or purchased by the Valentine. Later, a private donor gave the museum a ritual robe from the Order.<sup>44</sup>

Besides the three films used in the exhibition, the museum created a 28-minute film for television. Narrated by local newswoman Sabrina Squires, it highlighted photographs used in the exhibition, some of the locations on the bus tour, and Pritchett again played Gilbert Hunt, telling the stories of the theater fire and the acquisition of his freedom. This film, the museum’s first attempt at television production, stretched far beyond the exhibit. By the time Frank Jewell

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<sup>41</sup> Rebekah Presson, “Richmond Examines a Subject City Would Rather Forget,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, Sunday, August 28, 1988.

<sup>42</sup> Hankins, Susan B. “MUSEUMS: Of Pride and Prejudice: The Valentine Inspires a Look Backward and Inward,” *Style Weekly*, March 8, 1988, Richmond, VA.

<sup>43</sup> IBAF Files, Final Report.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5

wrote the final report for the grant that funded the exhibition, television stations had aired the show four times. More than 128 groups also borrowed the film. The Gilbert Hunt video along with the exhibition video was borrowed by a combined 230 groups. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch*'s television critic said that the video was the next best thing if one could not see the exhibit. The positive feedback pleased the staff since it was the Valentine's first attempt at television production.<sup>45</sup>

The public program agenda also proved to be a success and reached a variety of people. *Do Lord Remember Me* was performed twelve times in the Valentine's auditorium during the exhibit's run, and drew almost 1,000 guests, more than any other black history program. The audiences included church groups, a college drama group, and a large number from the local chapter of the "Jack and Jills of America," which helps black parents and their children.

The school programs proved successful, too. Over 2600 school children received tours of the exhibit. The staff noted that in contrast to their usual reluctance to participate, middle and high school students started to ask questions and interacted with the docent about 20 minutes into the tour. History teachers checked out the exhibit's panel show for classroom use, and reported back stories of success.<sup>46</sup>

At a time when obtaining visitor feedback was just beginning regularly in museums, the staff at the Valentine began to take visitor polls and conduct exit interviews with guests. The exit poll was taken February and March 1988. The questionnaire revealed that even if the visitors did not come specifically to see *In Bondage and Freedom*, they spent a considerable amount of time there. Through their responses, the visitors showed the staff that they now had a

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 10.

better understanding that there was a free black presence in Richmond, and that the industrial city depended on the work of both black and white.

The exit poll included questions about which artifacts stood out to the visitor and how easy to follow the design was for the visitor. Visitors liked the overall design, but there were a few criticisms on label placement. The exhibit space itself prevented the design from moving in a straight path; instead it took a path which “conceptually and physically took many interesting turns.”<sup>47</sup> This was fine for the leisurely visitor, but confusing for the visitor on a shorter time constraint. This was especially the case for those wishing just to take the hour-long house tour, for these visitors had to walk through the often-crowded exhibit space in order to join the tour guide. Many of these visitors, however, ended up returning to the exhibit. Artifacts that the visitors noticed the most were the leg irons and the recreated room of Amanda Cousins, but they were also very interested in the freedom papers and some of the generic work objects.

While the purpose of the exit poll was a quick “once over,” the staff sought more in depth information from the visitor interviews. The curatorial and public programs staff interviewed adults only; most were between the ages of 26-50 years old. Most had college educations, and two thirds of the visitors came from out of town, and often visited other historical or cultural museums.<sup>48</sup>

In the interviews, visitors were able to elaborate on the main ideas of black and white interdependence in Richmond, and offered details regarding the black community. They gave very positive feedback about the videos and theatrical scrimms, which made the exhibit more personal. The staff did discover that the 19-minute Gilbert Hunt video ran a bit too long, while the 7-minute and 11-minute videos managed to hold viewers’ attention. Visitors gave positive

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 15.

feedback about the hierarchy of the labels, noting that this method left it up to them how much they wanted to read.

The audio tour received mixed reviews throughout the run of the exhibition from both professional reviewers and visitors. Visitors did not utilize the audio tour with any kind of regularity. The usage increased when the staff dropped the fee, but visitors still became confused with the numerical sequencing of the tour. The final report stated that given the exhibit space, the Valentine may always have logistical issues with directionality in audio tours.<sup>49</sup>

In July 1988, to determine how well visitors comprehended information on the labels, staff selected the “History Wall” to test visitors using cued questions. This wall was located at the entrance to the exhibition, and explained the background of the slave trade and the growth of industry and the staff let the visitors take as much time as needed to read the wall. The labels did their job. Visitors figured out what the word antebellum meant using contextual clues, even if they did not know its meaning. They were able to answer questions regarding the international slave trade, and Richmond’s role in it and growth because of it. They also offered up specific industries that thrived in Richmond during this time, and those industries’ use of black labor.

Overall, the responses the staff collected directly were extremely positive. Visitors more often than not found that the Valentine had surpassed their expectations. “The combination of scrim figures, powerful artifacts, and audio-visual presentations realized the experience of free blacks and slaves even for less interested visitors.”<sup>50</sup>

Not only did the exhibition capture the attention and win the praise of the mainstream media and most visitors, it also grabbed the attention of the scholarly world. Much to the surprise of the curators, the *Public Historian*, the *Journal of American History* and *American*

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 16.



*Quarterly* all published reviews of the exhibit. The *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* and the *Pennsylvania Historical Society* also reviewed the exhibit catalog.

Brent Tarter, a public historian at the Library of Virginia, wrote a review of *In Bondage and Freedom* published by the *Public Historian* in fall 1988. Tarter explained that *In Bondage and Freedom* effectively taught that blacks had as much to do with Richmond's celebrated way of life as whites did, and the lives of Richmond blacks were different than in other cities in the South. Their lives also had nothing in common with rural blacks. Tarter complimented Kimball and Tyler McGraw's interpretation, and especially praised the catalog's content, but did have several criticisms.

Tarter visited the exhibit on a "hot Sunday afternoon," and utilized the audio cassette tour to take him through the exhibit. He felt that the audio cassette and the catalog effectively explained the exhibit, but without them the design was confusing. He observed that visitors who did not utilize the audio tour, which was nearly all of them, finished the exhibit rather quickly. Tarter did not attribute this to any lack of interest, because his fellow visitors on a tour of the Wickham House were completely engaged and asked questions. In the house, visitors learned that "the lives of black and white intersected with intense intimacy and inescapable inequality.....history was lived by real people."<sup>51</sup> Tarter said that the design did not take best advantage of the artifacts, or invite the visitor to read and reflect: "the interpretive text in the display cases is inadequate to explain what can be learned from the illustrations and artifacts." He also criticized the catalog's cover, which displays a photograph of Gilbert Hunt, only the top of Hunt's head is cut off. The strange cover perhaps kept people from taking a good look at the catalog, several of which were available throughout the exhibit.

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<sup>51</sup> Brent Tartar. "Review, *In Bondage and Freedom: The Antebellum Black Life in Richmond, 1790-1860*" *The Public Historian* 10 (1988): 91-93.

Overall, Tarter stated that the catalog was a serious piece of historical writing, thoroughly documented, and a great contribution to the history of Richmond, even if it did not look like it. While critical of the design, Tartar said that the exhibit was the most thorough look at Richmond African-Americans.

Lonnie Bunch was more complimentary in his review of the exhibit in the *Journal of American History*, published in June 1989.<sup>52</sup> He began by naming other recent exhibits about race: The National Museum of American History's *From Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration, 1915-1940*, the California Afro-American Museum's *Black Olympians: The Afro-American in the Olympic Games, 1904-1984*, and the National Museum of Afro-American History and Culture's *Black Life in the 1950s*. These exhibits were part of a "renaissance" in the museum field, inspired by the work in social history. He explained that this had led to a change in institutional focus: "institutions' exhibitions and programs must reflect the diversity of their communities if they hope to broaden their audience and attract public funding."<sup>53</sup> Bunch said that *In Bondage and Freedom* was a mighty contribution to this renaissance.

The staff members of the Valentine, benefitting greatly from the help of scholars, "have crafted a rich and memorable exhibit that not only illuminates black presence in antebellum Richmond but also broadens our definition of African American material culture." This "transcends mere translation of current scholarship for a general audience." Bunch said that the exhibit effectively argued the importance of black labor to the development of Richmond, and that Richmond's economy was dependent on industrial slave labor, which set it apart from other Southern cities whose economies were dependent upon rural plantation slave labor. The exhibit also persuasively argued that black-white proximity and interaction "precluded the form of

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<sup>52</sup> Bunch, Lonnie. "Review: *In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life in Richmond: 1790-1860*," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 76, no. 1 (June, 1989): 202-207.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

segregation the held sway in the South after Reconstruction.” Bunch credited the exhibit for showing that the African American community, whether free or enslaved, “worked, prayed, lived and at times conspired to be free, together,” and pointed out that this sense of community among blacks, free and enslaved, was often lost upon scholars.<sup>54</sup>

Bunch praised the variety of objects in the exhibit, and the way the curators reinterpreted objects to illustrate black contributions. He gave the examples of the dug-out canoe, used in reference to the life of black bateaux men, and the set of cupping instruments, paired with the account book of Phebe Jackson, a free black leecher and cupper. While museums often struggle with the paucity of African-American artifacts, Bunch believed that the Valentine had created a model method for other institutions.

The curators’ effective reinterpretation of the Wickham House and making it a part of the exhibit was another strength of *In Bondage and Freedom*. Bunch said, as other reviewers did, that the scrim was a poignant reminder of slave presence. “This integration of house and exhibition, of setting and interpretation, is exceptional.”<sup>55</sup>

Unlike Tarter, who did not like the layout of the exhibit, Bunch found that although the space was sometimes tight because of the number of artifacts, he felt this feeling reflected the tight living quarters experienced by the exhibition’s subjects. Nowhere in the exhibit were living conditions felt more than in the Valentine’s recreation of the room of Amanda Cousins, a free black. In this room, the visitor “feels the starkness of free black existence.”<sup>56</sup>

Bunch criticized the location of two of the videotapes, the Gilbert Hunt video located at the beginning, and the WPA slave narratives read by actors and actresses at the end, because he thought the visitors would be too hurried to watch them in their entirety, and felt this was a

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

shame considering the quality of their content. Pritchett brought Gilbert Hunt to life, and seeing him may have been the visitors' first exposure to slave speech, slave mannerisms and slave dress. The slave narratives addressed the common life of slaves, while the third video used documents to tell the story of the Wickham House slaves. The videos were "riveting and deserve more than a cursory examination."<sup>57</sup>

Bunch asserted that while so many exhibitions often suffer from poor or non-existent public programs, the Valentine went above and beyond with *In Bondage and Freedom*. After listing its efforts, Bunch acknowledged that these programs helped the Valentine to "attract and challenge a diverse audience."<sup>58</sup>

Bunch saved his technical criticisms for the end of the review, noticing that the exhibit was uneven in detail. While the curators provided in-depth analysis of material culture, they did not with subjects like burial grounds and self-help organizations. He also noticed that the curators omitted discussion of Gabriel and Nat Turner's rebellions and their effect on the city, which he felt would have contributed to the discussion of urban slavery. Despite these minor problems, the exhibition was a success because "the scholarship is sound, the objects are strong and communicate well, and the story is important and well told."<sup>59</sup>

*American Quarterly* published a review of *In Bondage and Freedom* written by Thomas J. Davis the same month as Bunch's review. Davis did not share Bunch's view of the exhibit, instead categorizing it as suffering from the "they, too, were here" syndrome, defined by Davis

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

as “static, undifferentiated, impersonal exhibits that sweep across time with the aim of showing that blacks, like whites, were also here.”<sup>60</sup>

Davis’s review also assessed *Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration, 1915-1940*, put on by the National Museum of History, *From Victory to Freedom: Afro-American Life in the Fifties*, put on by the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center in Wilberforce, Ohio, and *Philadelphia African Americans: Color, Class & Style, 1840-1940*, put on by the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies. The review was intended to assess how well these museums, whatever the reasons they might have for doing those exhibits, fulfilled what Davis called “the obligation” of unveiling African-American life and culture in order to tell a more complete history. Davis acknowledged that all of the institutions under review were different sizes, with different budgets and in different locations. Despite those differences, however, he attested that in order to “hold human interest and extend understanding,” museums must avoid the “they, too, were here syndrome.”

Davis’s review restated the Valentine’s intent, quoting from the catalog, and said that he took the thirty-minute audio tour, but he was not convinced the Valentine succeeded in its mission.<sup>61</sup> He mentioned the reinterpreted items, like the canoe and water main, emphasizing the skilled and unskilled work that blacks did, but said that the objects and the text lacked substance. The photographs were one of the few features which brought the people to life. They brought blacks “out of the shadows” and “offered a glimmer of personality and lent momentary life to the exhibit by focusing on people rather than on broad, impersonal themes.”<sup>62</sup> Davis also praised Dylan Pritchett’s depiction of Gilbert Hunt.

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<sup>60</sup> Davis, Thomas J. “Review: “They, too, were here”: The Afro-American Experience and History Museums,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 41, no. 2 (June, 1989), pp. 328-340.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> Ibid 330.

Davis stated that the curators' purpose was too broad. The exhibit showed that black presence was there in Richmond, but it was not a unique experience. Davis suggested that the curators should have done a more specific study, perhaps on the differences between enslaved blacks and free blacks. An exhibit of this nature would show whether free and enslaved used different tools, or did different work. Interestingly, Davis praised all of the other exhibitions in his review.

The catalog received mostly positive feedback also and stood alone as a praise-worthy addition to scholarship. In his review in *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Michael Chesson pointed out a few errors and omissions, which he admitted were "slips." "Such lapses are rare, however. This work helps to restore the heart, and the brain to the history of Richmond's antebellum black community, along with its soul..."<sup>63</sup> Julie Winch also wrote a positive review in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. She said that the catalog left the reader with unanswered questions, but this was an indication of the value of the work done by curators. The Valentine drew upon untapped sources and proved what can be done. She stated, as others did, that the Valentine was a model for other institutions.<sup>64</sup>

As the reviews, scholarly and otherwise, came out, Gregg Kimball and Marie Tyler-McGraw had many discussions about the exhibit review process and the absence of set standards. They wrote their own scholarly article about *In Bondage and Freedom*, published by the *Public Historian* in Spring 1990, entitled "Integrating the Interpretation of the Southern City: An Exhibition Case Study." In the article, they explained main problems they encountered in the

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Chesson. *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97 "A Sense of Their Own Power": Black Virginians, 1619-1989 (1989): 403-404.

<sup>64</sup> Winch, Julie. "Review: *In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life in Richmond, Virginia, 1790-1860*," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 113 (1989): 478-480.

exhibition's development, and the range of reviews it received. They also proposed a set of standards for museum exhibition reviews.

Kimball and Tyler-McGraw explained that many of the groups that social history explores left behind few clear written records on object provenance, making the creation of an exhibition on such groups difficult for museums. This was very much the case with *In Bondage and Freedom*; the objects they found with clear African-American provenance could not alone bear the weight of the concepts they were attempting to convey. Their research showed that blacks, enslaved and free, were central to an industrial antebellum Richmond, and their communities were complicated. They struggled with how to communicate this, especially with the "romance of the Lost Cause" and the "hazy filter" it created.

The curators reviewed their meticulous research in the article and discussed the problems it presented. The research indicated that whites and blacks shared private and public spaces. It also indicated that Richmond had a complex black community, made up of slave and free. The free felt responsibility for and sometimes took in the enslaved, whether they knew them personally or not. How could they use traditional African-American made artifacts without separating the worlds of black and white, which were linked daily? How could they explain the close-knit black community without trivializing slavery and its hardships?<sup>65</sup>

Another problem with developing the exhibit was it did not match up well with the Valentine's collections. The Valentine was founded in 1892, and collected what most museums then collected: objects that were luxurious or aesthetically pleasing, or items of tradition. The curators did find a painting of a slave who spied for Lafayette during the Revolution, and a photograph of Gilbert Hunt, who was known to have saved people from a theater fire. Hunt's entire story proved advantageous for the curators. Not only was he a hero, but a blacksmith,

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<sup>65</sup> McGraw and Kimball, "Integrating the Interpretation of a Southern City," pp 34.

showing the skill of the enslaved, and he earned enough money to purchase his own freedom, showing that Richmond slaves could attain some financial independence, and that they had the determination to gain their own freedom.

A major development in their research concerned shared material culture. The Valentine staff found that most people of Richmond, white and black, wore the same clothes and used the same tools. Museums usually tried to emphasize slave-made items in exhibitions on slavery, but when it came to Richmond, such items would be nearly impossible to find. Most known slave-made objects came from plantations of the deeper South. Research supported the theory that whites and blacks used the same items; therefore, separating them in the exhibit would be false to their experience. This conclusion gave the staff more artifacts to work with, allowing them to interpret generic artifacts in the context of black daily life.<sup>66</sup> The generic artifacts paired with the theatrical scrimms emphasized “the importance of black labor and life and....the day-to-day reality of black life.”<sup>67</sup>

The curators then explained the public programs, going into detail about the bus tour, which enlightened visitors that Richmond was not sectioned off into black and white districts, but was made up of mixed neighborhoods of blacks, whites, Jews and German and Irish immigrants. They also explained their incorporation of the Wickham house into the exhibit, and the scholarly symposium.

The curators admitted that the information in any exhibition, the method of presentation, and the ancillary public programs “pose a daunting array of media for the reviewer to digest.”<sup>68</sup> Kimball and Tyler-McGraw wondered who was qualified to review an exhibit, given that design

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 38.



layout, label copy, working audio and video, the flow of the exhibit, visitor feedback and public programming were all categories for assessment.

Kimball and Tyler-McGraw addressed Davis's criticism first. Davis had categorized the exhibit as suffering from "they, too, were here" syndrome, giving no particulars to *this* African-American experience. The curators disagreed, stating that the fact that the exhibit dealt with industrial, urban slavery set it apart from the usual discussion of rural, plantation slavery and that Lonnie Bunch had noted that in his review.

All the reviewers had acknowledged the scarcity of African-American objects, especially slave-made, but not all had the same reaction. Kimball and Tyler-McGraw again targeted Davis' criticisms. Davis claimed the photographs were the only items that brought the slaves to life, and criticized the generic objects for coldness. Kimball and Tyler-McGraw pointed out that few photographs of antebellum black Virginians exist, hence the reproduction of only a few photographs. Perhaps Davis was unaware of this fact, they granted, but all the same, this scarcity inspired the creation of the videos and the use of the Wickham House.<sup>69</sup>

The curators referenced Thomas Schlereth's standards for museum reviews.<sup>70</sup> He stated that a reviewer must take into account the museum's intended audience. Living history, public programming, plays, bus tours and symposiums are all intended to reach different audiences, and therefore susceptible to review. Kimball and Tyler-McGraw agreed with this point of view and added that the reviewer must also take into consideration the intended result, and the only way to determine the success of that result was with visitor feedback. They believed that Pat Aufderheide's article in the *Washington Post* best assessed the exhibit, largely because it

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 39

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Schlereth, "Reviewing History Museum Exhibits," paper delivered at the Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting, St. Louis, Missouri, April, 1989.

included public reaction, both positive and negative, well-informed and not. And exhibits, after all, are public events.

The curators highlighted one comment from the public, which they felt summarized the challenges faced by museums. One man accused them of “rewriting” history. He was not wrong, as the curators put it, because “history is not a static truth based on immutable ‘facts.’” They went on to state that “Correcting the public’s belief in an absolute history (which in itself is different for each visitor), without destroying their faith in the historical ‘competence’ of our interpretations, is a major challenge to museum educators and curators, and is a central goal of the Valentine’s exhibitions, which openly question long-held historical beliefs through scholarship and public interaction.”<sup>71</sup> The curators again defended their exhibition against Davis’s criticisms. They stated that their attention to scholarship drove their determination to show that blacks and whites in the city had constant interaction and could never really be separated. This was more than saying “they, too, were here.”

The curators also mentioned the criticisms regarding label text, visitor flow, and the visibility of the objects and the labels, all of which the Valentine staff took to heart and tried to correct.

The curators then discussed the fact that exhibition reviewing was new to history journals. Some reviewers may not understand the multi-faceted nature of exhibitions. They proposed a method of evaluation in which the reviewer, presumably with no time limit, assessed all that the exhibit has to offer. This would include evaluation of any possible programming and reading the accompanying catalog. Then the reviewer would go through the exhibit in 30 minutes, as the average visitor does, and the reviewer would weigh its effectiveness against

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 41

“claims the museum makes about educating the public and presenting current scholarship in an accessible manner.”<sup>72</sup>

The two closed their article by voicing their agreement with David Levering Lewis, who promoted the integration of history. The lives of African-Americans have been analyzed separately to better understand them. The curators agreed with Lewis in that it was time to tell a complete history. Their reinterpretation of the Wickham House, and Richmond as a whole, as black history was their attempt at this re-integration. Kimball and Tyler-McGraw have continued to restate this view in their later works: that a history of Richmond was not whole unless you looked at the city as a dynamic, industrial and integrated home of blacks, whites, immigrants and Jews.<sup>73</sup>

Gregg Kimball stated later that despite the references to Davis’ criticisms, they did not inspire the article; he and McGraw had been discussing how to go about museum reviews for quite awhile. “It wasn’t necessarily a rebuttal, but I think it was important to put out there, these are the realities that one had to deal with.” Kimball explained that a museum exhibit, unlike a book, is a collaborative process with designers, curators, object specialists and outside reviewers. While an academic book is meant for a certain readership, museums had to translate to the public in general. “That’s the hardest part of exhibitions, is to find a way to express the themes you want to express, do it in a visually interesting way, and to stay within some kind of realistic budget. All of those forces are at play.” Kimball doubted whether anyone who did not understand the process could write a thorough and fair review.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 42

<sup>73</sup> Marie Tyler-McGraw *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia and its People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) and Gregg Kimball *American City, Southern Place* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000)

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Gregg Kimball, July 30, 2009.

Reviews and reactions to the exhibition were extremely positive and recognized locally, nationally, and in the museum profession. The staff had several opportunities to share their findings with colleagues at conferences, and the black community of Richmond hailed the Valentine's efforts toward race relations.

Frank Jewell, Marie Tyler-McGraw, and Gregg Kimball presented papers to their professional colleagues at several meetings in the months following *In Bondage and Freedom* to share their findings and success with the exhibit. Jewell presented papers at meetings of the National Museum of American History/Cooperstown Graduate Program Conference in Washington, D.C., the American Historical Association, and the American Association for State and Local History. Marie Tyler-McGraw presented papers at the fiftieth anniversary of the American Studies Department at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., the Black History Conference at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian, and the American Studies Association meeting in Miami. Gregg Kimball presented papers at the Vernacular Architecture Forum in Staunton, Virginia, and also at the American Studies Association meeting in Miami. Kimball and Tyler-McGraw both authored a paper presented at the joint meeting of the National Council on Public History and the Organization of American Historians in St. Louis.

The staff also made presentations in the local community and gave tours to staff and students from George Washington University, Duke University, Temple University, The American University and colleagues from Colonial Williamsburg.

One of the exhibition's main goals was to create a dialogue regarding race relations in the city, and this goal did not go unnoticed by the black community. In one of the focus groups, a community leader "heard the city manager comment that the Valentine was promoting good race

relations more than any other organization.”<sup>75</sup> A city council member later voiced the same opinion. The efforts of the Valentine led the Richmond city council to vote unanimously to increase the museum’s operating support, based on the museum’s work on race relations. The *Richmond Afro-American* sang praises for the Valentine in April, stating “The Valentine, the Museum of the Life and History of Richmond, must be accorded acclamations, adulation and applause for their current exhibition, *In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life In Richmond, 1770-1860.*”<sup>76</sup>

The success of *In Bondage and Freedom* and the progress the Valentine made in its community was recognized nationally, and the institution set a model for museums still struggling with social history exhibitions and making connections with their communities. The staff under the leadership of Frank Jewell continued to create social history exhibitions which challenged the community. They created a model for exhibition success, but had they created a model for institutional longevity?

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<sup>75</sup> IBAF Files, Final Report, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> “Play Defines Black History exhibition,” *Richmond Afro-American*, April 29, 1988.

### *Before Freedom Came: The Reaction*

When the Valentine Richmond History Center changed its focus of interpretation and incorporated social history, it may have surprised some. And a few more were probably surprised when the museum embraced the history of the city's African Americans. The change that met with the most surprise, and suspicion, however, was that of the Museum of the Confederacy and its groundbreaking exhibit, *Before Freedom Came: African American Life in the Antebellum South, 1790-1865*.

The Museum staff always knew reactions would be mixed. After all, the Museum had been perceived as a shrine to the Confederacy for most of its existence. It had an all-white female board of supervisors and had previously aligned its exhibitions with Lost Cause hagiography.

In the 1960s, the board began to hire museum professionals, and the Museum concentrated on changing its image and becoming an educational facility. After years of small exhibits on social history, the institution grew determined to grab the attention of the public and make a statement. That statement was the largest exhibit on slavery mounted by any museum in the country. This exhibit did receive some criticism and caused the Museum to lose some of its members. For the most part, however, local and national media hailed it as groundbreaking. It also helped to foster a dialogue between the Museum of the Confederacy and Richmond's African American community.

As the staff expected and prepared for, some people were extremely critical that the Museum of the Confederacy presumed to interpret African-American history, especially a subject as sensitive as slavery. They complained that the Museum was giving in to political correctness and that African-American history had no place in the Museum of the Confederacy. Some African-Americans agreed with the latter point, but on the grounds that African-American history properly belonged in an African-American museum.

The media covered the planning of the exhibition, its opening on July 12, 1991, and when it traveled to two other museums. *Style Weekly* ran a story on March 3, 1991, which voiced what became a main concern about the exhibit. It praised the Museum for finally joining the ranks of the Smithsonian and Valentine by including social history. Clay Dye, museum public relations director, admitted in the story that slavery was a “glaring omission.” The article then wondered, however, whether the exhibition was just a publicity stunt, and if the exhibition would help the Museum shed its reputation.<sup>77</sup>

The Museum also received this criticism from the scholarly world. Spencer Crews and James Oliver Horton questioned the motives of the Museum of the Confederacy in their article “Afro-Americans and Museums: Towards a Policy of Inclusion,” in *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*. The authors acknowledged that the Museum had incorporated the importance of slavery in causing the Civil War and in the life of the Confederacy, but the exhibition had not paid much attention to the slave community itself. *Before Freedom Came* was the largest effort to date, but “the temporary nature of the exhibit

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<sup>77</sup> *Style Weekly*, March 3, 1991.

may be problematic. A temporary exhibit may not have a long-term effect on museum exhibition policy.”<sup>78</sup>

As indicated by the *Style Weekly* article long before the opening, word of the exhibit already inspired reactions. On June 10, 1991, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* published a letter to the editor by H.V. Traywick, Jr., a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, who attested, albeit tongue in cheek, that the Museum of the Confederacy was the perfect place to host the exhibit. “The announcement that the Museum of the Confederacy will be showing an exhibit on the life of blacks in the antebellum South is welcome news to a lifelong Confederate like me. Perhaps at last some of the abolitionist myths will be dispelled.” He then stated that he hoped the Museum would show what he felt to be the facts: that slavery was “as old as civilization itself....and was not invented by us so-called degenerate white Southerners, as the ‘politically correct’ would have us believe,”; that it was “imposed upon the British colonies by....the British government,”; that “black Africans kidnapped and sold other black Africans to the slave traders and they were doing so before the white man ever arrived on the Slave Coast”; that it was the abolitionist Northerners who protested the provision in the Constitution that would abolish the slave trade; and that New York and Boston were the two biggest slave trading cities at the time of Lincoln’s first inauguration. He ended the letter by stating he also hoped that the exhibition showed “under Christian Southern masters the blacks were cared for even if too old or infirm to earn their own keep, while the free North under calculating secular humanist masters they starved in miserable ghettos.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>Spencer Crews and James Oliver Horton. “Afro-Americans and Museums: Towards a Policy of Inclusion,” in Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, ed. *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 226-227.

<sup>79</sup> Traywick, H.V. “Hopes Museum Will Dispel Myths,” Letter to the Editor, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, June 10, 1991.



Philip J. Schwarz, of Virginia Commonwealth University's history department, and a member of the advisory committee for the exhibition shot back at Traywick via the *Times-Dispatch* on June 16, 1991, correcting what he felt were "grotesque fallacies." He also stated that "divergent interpretations of the same facts make the world go round, but it's impossible to have a useful discussion of history without valid evidence."<sup>80</sup> The two exchanged points of view in a few more heated letters in the newspaper, before the *Times-Dispatch* felt the need to cut them off and move on to other news.

Whether they had specific criteria for the exhibit in mind or not, some whites did not feel an exhibition about slavery belonged in the Museum of the Confederacy. The Museum of the Confederacy sent out invitations to all members to come view the exhibit, and also took a survey to gauge member response after the exhibit. One invitation came back with a message on it: "People Up North Have Ruined Our Beautiful State And I am Sick of Them. Cant [sic] Whites Have Anything? Without Blacks Pushing In? Can't White Virginians Have Something of Their Very Own? The Blacks Do!" A letter from a Los Angeles man stated that the exhibit did not conform to the Museum's purpose. It was now "an institution sponsoring social change." A lifelong member of the Museum, whose family had donated items, sent a scathing letter to staff members, stating that "when the Museum of the Confederacy was run as an amateur show by (largely) volunteer staff who were emotional Confederate sympathizers it did a better job than now. The move to make it a business, to appeal to all people, and to be 'neutral' in philosophy is ridiculous."<sup>81</sup>

The survey was sent out in 1992, and although the purpose of the survey was a general assessment of the museum, approximately 15 out of several hundred responses took the

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<sup>80</sup> Schwarz, Philip, Letter to the Editor, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, June 16, 1991.

<sup>81</sup> BFC, MOC Archives.

opportunity to voice complaints about *Before Freedom Came*. Some did not approve of the “emphasis on blacks” and encouraged the Museum to “have the courage to ignore the trendy (Negro history) and keep to your original purpose.” Others also offered sarcastic congratulations to the institution on its “total disregard for your true supporters.”<sup>82</sup> A member from Texas stated “I was very offended by ‘Before Freedom Came.’ That exhibit does not belong in our Museum. I’ve considered withdrawing my membership because of it . . . .Any more displays of this nature and you can count me out. It’s disgraceful to display that ‘mess’ with such sacred artifacts as the ‘War Years’ relics.”<sup>83</sup>

Some African-Americans in the community also felt that the exhibition had no business in the Museum of the Confederacy. *Richmond Afro-American* writer Hazel Trice Edney expressed this point of view in her July 27 article “Confederate museum preserves pre-Civil War mentality.” She stated that the Museum staff itself was still all-white, with an all female board, with only one black employee who worked part time in the summer. She said that the Museum had not lived up to the planning grant it received in the 1970s. A. Peter Bailey, local free-lance writer and former associate editor of *Ebony*, said “I feel as though these things should be exhibited by a black-controlled museum. The Museum of the Confederacy is just another museum that basically gives a White view of American history. It bothers me.” He also referenced the Black History Museum and Cultural Center in Richmond, which was suffering from financial constraints and received very little support from the black community. Activist Sa’ad El-Amin wanted blacks to boycott the exhibit because it was out of context. “I refuse to see it, because I’m not dealing with the content. I already know, Black people know, what they did to us. It is the context of that exhibition that should offend thinking Black people.” He went

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<sup>82</sup> BFC, MOC Archives. Coski, John. Summary of BFC

<sup>83</sup> BFC, MOC Archives

on to say that the exhibition is “being shown by the very institution who maintained slavery. Those who support the confederacy [sic] have never apologized for what was done to African-Americans.” The exhibit was “an exploitation of our dehumanization for the museum’s own professional and fiscal advancement,” and the “keepers of the confederacy should speak on behalf of their dead ancestors and say that this (slavery) [sic] was wrong and they should apologize.” The article interviewed Janine Bell, the community outreach member of the advisory board. She said that when she signed her contract, she warned the Museum of the Confederacy that this was not a door that they could shut when the exhibition left. Director Lou Gorr responded that the board voted to integrate and also pointed out that the issue of African-American employees was a “two-sided coin” because blacks may not be impelled to seek employment at the institution. When it came to the request for an apology, Clay Dye stated “We are an historical and educational institution. So we cannot make an apology for what people did 125 years ago. However, we believe the exhibit, itself, will show the horrors of it.”<sup>84</sup>

People who criticized and thought negatively of the exhibit were in the minority. Despite the initial skepticism, the local Richmond media embraced the exhibition. Richmond African Americans viewed the exhibit in large numbers, and praised it. The exhibition received national attention and acclaim, with several detailed and complimentary reviews syndicated nationally.

The local media continued its coverage throughout the exhibition’s run, brought attention to the public programs, applauded the Museum and encouraged citizens of Richmond to attend the exhibition. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* chose *Before Freedom Came* as one of its top weekend picks. In the article by Ann Holiday, titled “Tracing the telling chains of history: A very personal view of the anguish that was slavery,” Holiday quoted Kip Campbell: “I hope

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<sup>84</sup> Edney, Hazel Trice. “Confederate Museum preserves pre-Civil War mentality” July 27, 1991, *Richmond Afro-American*.

people will be moved by the subject. I hope they will grasp that there was an African-American community and it was an active one. I hope they will see what their lives were like, not our perception of their lives. I think that is going to surprise people, move them emotionally and move them aesthetically. You're not going to come out of it without having reacted.<sup>85</sup>

The *Richmond News Leader* published a favorable article by Katherine Calos. Director Lou Gorr expressed that the exhibition would be controversial, but hoped that it would alter peoples' view of the Museum of the Confederacy. "One of those perceived truths is that (the museum) [*sic*] exists to perpetuate the memory of the leaders of the Civil War, that it advocates the return of the Confederacy, that by even existing we do the black population a disservice." He felt that the exhibition would put some of those "perceived truths" to rest. Tucker Hill said that although national museums had not yet interpreted the antebellum period, he saw no reason to wait. Kym Rice agreed: "I think it is significant in that it is a first exhibition. There have been exhibits that have looked at black life in certain areas, such as the exhibit at the Valentine that looked at Richmond blacks. This one looks at a synthesis of things. You hope that this will be a catalyst for other people to investigate more."<sup>86</sup>

Many locals also wrote letters to the editor of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* commending the Museum. Eudice B. Segal said the exhibit "brought further understanding and knowledge of the period." The exhibition helped a viewer to appreciate the lives of blacks, enslaved and free. The Museum "performed a great service" and Segal wished that the entire exhibition could be photocopied and distributed nationwide so everyone could see it. She ended the letter with "a bow to the Museum of the Confederacy."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Holiday, Ann. "Tracing the telling chains of history: A very personal view of the anguish that was slavery," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, July 11, 1991.

<sup>86</sup> Calos, Katherine. "Black History Exhibit Should Open People's Eyes," *Richmond News Leader*

<sup>87</sup> Segal, Eudice, Letter to the Editor, *Richmond Times Dispatch*, BFC, MOC Archives

Anita Showers applauded the Museum for its courage and vision in her letter to the editor on Monday, August 26. She wished there was a way to make it required viewing, especially to whites who may have no or very little knowledge of slavery. She recalled, however, that when she visited the exhibition, she overheard a man say that he was passing through *Before Freedom Came* quickly because there's "not much to it." She turned around to see a Confederate flag pinned on his shirt, and it made her realize that the "exhibit can increase awareness but there is still much work ahead."<sup>88</sup>

Colleagues within the profession also took the time to commend the efforts of the Museum staff. Paul N. Perrot, director of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art and former Richmond resident, stated that no manifestations occurring in museums were more significant than the one taking place at the Museum of the Confederacy. He described *Before Freedom Came* as "visually rich, intellectually stimulating." He complimented the design and the "highly articulate texts which go beautifully from the general to the specific." He felt it set a new record for museums and was "head and shoulders above the norm."<sup>89</sup>

African Americans of Richmond, whether by reasons of curiosity, a sense of duty, or interest, came to see *Before Freedom Came*. No one reaction seemed more poignant than the letter received from Geraldine Seay, which deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

"I'm not sure what combination of events caused my reaction to your exhibit, 'Before Freedom Came,' but I found myself standing in the middle of it crying. I've seen attempts of such a collection many times before, and as an African American woman, I have objectively viewed those collections with a cool distance. Such was not the case on Saturday, September 21.

I am trying to figure out just what moved me so much on that afternoon. Perhaps, it was the great irony of the Museum of the Confederacy making such a gigantic effort to collect

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<sup>88</sup> Showers, Anita. Letter to the editor, *Richmond Times Dispatch* August 26, 1991.

<sup>89</sup> Letter Perrot sent to director Lou Gorr, which he also sent to the Richmond Times-Dispatch. He later sent Gorr another copy of the article, which a Virginia resident had sent to him picking apart his compliments and telling him to stay out of the South. Perrot wrote that he wondered if he did more harm than good, "inspiring the irrational."

so many artifacts from around the country. Or, perhaps it was the music playing almost in a distance the way the slave's voices must have sounded from the fields. Or, perhaps it was the awed, respectful quiet of the other visitors, both Black and White, as they made their way through the winding exhibit. I think, finally, it must have been the faces of all those magnificent slaves trying to face a camera with dignity and with hope for a future they would never see. Whichever is the case, it is an experience I will not soon forget.

In all cases, please accept this letter as my thanks for a job well done. Richmond, and its visitors, are the richer for your response to the void in museum work that occurred prior to this Renaissance in representation of the African American contributions to establishing this America.

I hope that you will find a way to represent African Americans in all that you present. There can be no doubt that such a direction would not be out of place in any discussion in the Museum of the Confederacy.”<sup>90</sup>

She was not alone, for John Coski recalled the feel of the exhibit space that summer as quieter than normal, and more solemn. African Americans came dressed in “essentially their Sunday best,” and the exhibition did feel much like going to church. He remembered visitors crying as a daily occurrence, and such reverence and emotion “made you stand up a little straighter.”<sup>91</sup>

While the local impact was huge, the national attention *Before Freedom Came* received is more noteworthy. Bob Dart and Heidi Nolte Brown both wrote favorable articles syndicated via the Associated Press and the New York Times News Service.

Bob Dart's first article, “Chilling Chapter on slavery finally taught at Rebel Museum,” appeared first in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. He described the exhibition as a “dramatic departure,” part of the Museum's change of direction in 1986. “It was thought that one way of doing that would be to address head-on and as objectively as possible the subject of slavery, which of course was a key aspect of secession, the creation of the Confederacy and the Civil War,” said Lou Gorr. Dart's article appeared in newspapers in Austin and Dallas, Texas;

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<sup>90</sup> Letter received by the Museum from Geraldine Seay, BFC, MOC Archives

<sup>91</sup> Interview with John Coski, August 27, 2009.

Salisbury and Durham, North Carolina; Des Moines; Knoxville; and York, Pennsylvania, among others. Heidi Nolte Brown's syndicated article stated that "the exhibit is described as the country's most comprehensive documentation of Southern black life in the days before the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln's proclamation of freedom."<sup>92</sup> Sarah Booth Conroy wrote an article detailing the exhibit and its inception, including how the staff took the input of an advisory board from the local community. She was intrigued by the exhibit, and said it was evident of the Museum's new willingness to take on difficult questions.<sup>93</sup> Her article first appeared in the *Washington Post* on August 11, and then ran in Fayetteville, North Carolina; Roanoke; Des Moines; Little Rock; Dayton; Asbury Park, New Jersey; Buffalo; Lakeland, Florida; and Decatur, Illinois, among others.

The exhibit also received attention from national magazines. Ed Grews wrote an article for *Americana* that said that although the Museum of the Confederacy might seem a surprising host for such an exhibition, museum staff felt it was appropriate and overdue. *Before Freedom Came* was no "moonlight-and-magnolia vision of the Old South. It is an unromantic, uncompromising view of the life of slaves and free blacks." He also said that some scholars and historians were calling the museum a landmark event because "it offers the most comprehensive view of southern black life before and during the Civil War ever presented by a national museum."<sup>94</sup>

An article about the exhibit appeared in *Southern Living* in August. In response to critics who said the exhibition did not belong there, Clay Dye once again referred to the Museum's mission and that the focus on slavery was but an expansion from the permanent exhibit, *The*

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<sup>92</sup> Brown, Heidi Nolte. "Exhibit shows black life in the Old South: Project has affected blacks and whites alike," *Lynchburg News and Daily Advance*.

<sup>93</sup> Conroy, Sarah Booth. *Washington Post*, August 11, 1991.

<sup>94</sup> Grews, Ed. "On Exhibit: Southern Blacks: Before Freedom Came," *Americana*, June 1991.

*Confederate Years*. The magazine approved of the exhibition, and stated that while no one could really know what life was like for the enslaved, visitors to the exhibition would better understand the cruelties and injustice of the institution.<sup>95</sup> On October 14, 1991, *Newsweek* published a piece about the increase in minority tourism, and mentioned the Museum of the Confederacy and *Before Freedom Came* as supporting this trend.<sup>96</sup>

Despite accolades from the local and national media, the exhibition itself only received two reviews from scholarly journals, one positive and one negative. James Oliver Horton, who in prior writings expressed suspicion of the exhibition, wrote a complimentary review for the *Public Historian* in spring 1992. Gregg Kimball, of the Valentine, the Museum of the Confederacy's neighbor, wrote a more critical review for *Perspectives*, the American Historical Association's newsletter in the same spring.

If Horton harbored any doubts about the Museum's efforts with the exhibition, he completely shed them before he wrote the review. He began by complimenting the Valentine's *In Bondage and Freedom*, stating that it set the pace for the city's museums and that the residents of Richmond "have seen some of the finest examples of museum work done anywhere." He included *Before Freedom Came* in this assessment and called it a "must-see." Horton believed that the exhibition gave a solid education about a subject that most Americans completely misunderstood, and "a serious visitor should be awarded a least an undergraduate college credit at the end of the exhibit." The exhibit is "imaginative, powerful and achieves a strong, dramatic effect."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> "Before Freedom Came," *Southern Living*, August 8, 1991.

<sup>96</sup> *Newsweek*, October 14, 1991.

<sup>97</sup> Horton, James Oliver. "Review of *Before Freedom Came*" *The Public Historian*, Vol 14, No. 2 (Spring 1992): 110.



Horton said that the exhibition was dense, which was positive because of the quality of information but also a detriment because the labels were numerous, with some in awkward places. The fact that some of the labels were accessible to children he thought was good, but some were difficult to read unless a visitor was about a foot tall. Horton said “the physically demanding positions assumed by some of the more athletic visitors were a tribute to the quality of the labels and the extraordinary level of visitor interest.”<sup>98</sup> Given the amount of information, Horton suggested a better label hierarchy would help visitors determine how long they could spend in the exhibition. The staff could have made more seating available, where visitors could take time to ponder what they learned. Horton also said that the connection between the enslaved people and the displayed objects was not consistent throughout the exhibition.

Horton did not believe that any of his criticisms detracted from the power of the exhibition. He praised the leadership at the Museum of the Confederacy for changing interpretation methods to better include the community. After he stated where the exhibition was set to travel, he said “I urge all those within driving distance to any of these locations to see this remarkable exhibit. Wear comfortable shoes, and do some limbering up exercises beforehand, but don’t miss it. It’s well worth your effort.”

Gregg Kimball’s review of *Before Freedom Came* was not so complimentary. He criticized the density of the exhibition as well, and told how he walked by the bust of Nora August, a highlight of the exhibition, several times before he saw her. But Kimball’s main criticism had to do with the information itself. Kimball felt that “the exhibit scrupulously avoided controversy by rooting itself firmly in a positive story of cultural survival, and by avoiding some tough historical issues of the relationship between blacks and whites.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Gregg Kimball. “Exhibit Review: *Before Freedom Came*”, *Perspectives* 30 (1992), 14-15.

Kimball stated that the exhibition emphasized that slaves in the antebellum south built a culture based upon African roots, but did not effectively make this connection. The exhibition had very few objects from or specifically relating to Africa and emphasizing this theme fostered the misconception of one African culture. Kimball was also surprised that, given this theme, the exhibition omitted information on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and establishment of the Atlantic slave trade. Kimball found some of the labels were ethnocentric. The specific label he cited said that “slaves, for their own emotional reasons, forged traditional two-parent households and raised children, even though doing so served the economic interests of their masters.” Kimball questioned whether it was accurate to call a two-parent family traditional. He also questioned several interpretations, saying that the curator took part in a “selective use of data” and stated that, in places, the labels did not reflect the established work of scholars such as Peter Kolchin, Eugene Genovese and Mechal Sobel. Only a small section at the end of the exhibit discussed the relationships between blacks and whites, and it was not enough to adequately describe them. While the public programs covered this subject, Kimball felt that the relationships needed to be included in the exhibition, even via a label.

Kimball referred to the 1989 article by Spencer Crews and James Oliver Horton questioning the Museum’s ability to maintain this inclusive interpretation, and shared their suspicion. If the Museum of the Confederacy could continue this interpretation in their permanent exhibitions, it would be better able to tell a “continuous story.”

Given the vast amount of positive feedback about the exhibition, it is interesting that a staff member of a neighboring museum would give the Museum of the Confederacy such a critical review. John Coski said that with the stature of the Valentine at the time, it made sense

for Kimball to review the exhibition.<sup>100</sup> The quality of interpretation at the Valentine was nationally recognized. He wondered, however, given how well the staffs knew each other, whether Kimball was able to be completely objective.

Kym Rice did recall one criticism of Kimball's, echoed later by Fath Davis Ruffins, that she thought was justified. Ruffins stated Rice included and critiqued "sentimental touches so dear to Southern mythology."<sup>101</sup> The section of the exhibition on relationships between black and white displayed a few objects and a listening station. The WPA narratives she used for this section were largely negative regarding the relationships between master and slave. On the wall, however, was an object made by a slave for a white planter's daughter. "What I was trying to do was show that it was a contradictory relationship and there were some instances of affection between blacks and whites even though obviously the whites were in control. They had the power and authority and African Americans always understood that they had this uneasy relationship and they could be sold at any moment no matter how much someone liked them. But that didn't come across very well in the exhibit, and I think there was one of the few instances where it [criticism] was completely justifiable."<sup>102</sup>

Despite the few criticisms, the exhibition was received so positively and without controversy that it surprised staff. Rice expected there to be more of an outcry, and "it just didn't happen." Campbell recalled that when the exhibition was in its inception phase, people wished him good luck, and commended him for nerve. Once the exhibition opened, "it was a wonderful surprise in so many cases. People were thrilled. Just thrilled. And I don't necessarily mean

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with John Coski, August 27, 2009.

<sup>101</sup> Fath Davis Ruffins, "Revisiting the Old Plantation: Reparations, Reconciliation and Museumizing American Slavery," in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations* ed. Ivan Karp, Corinne A Kratz, Lynn Szwaja and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 394.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Kym Rice, August 19, 2009.

African Americans, but just general folks of all ages....And I suspect the exhibit got some people there...who may have never come otherwise.”<sup>103</sup>

The accompanying catalog received the same acclaim, if not more, than the exhibition itself. Review copies were sent to 26 newspapers, 14 magazines, 30 scholarly journals and 18 other publications and media. Those that responded, many of them scholarly journals, were extremely complimentary.

Gerald Sorin, of State University of New York at New Paltz, writing for the *Journal of the Early Republic*, said that Kym Rice and Kip Campbell had made up for lost time, and that Drew Gilpin Faust’s essay “Slavery and the American Experience,” “is the best concise introduction to the historiography of the peculiar institution to be found anywhere.”<sup>104</sup> James Borchert, of Cleveland State University, writing for the *Journal of American History*, had a few criticisms, such as the catalog’s lack of discussion about urban slave women and its failure to “develop either distinctive slave landscapes or the roles of kinship networks and extended families.” Despite this, he largely praised the essays.<sup>105</sup> The *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*’s review by Stephanie Shaw, of Ohio State University, said that flaws were few; the catalog introduced new angles of study and had cross-curricular potential for students.<sup>106</sup> Megan Shaughnessy Farrell, of the University of Southwestern Louisiana, agreed about the catalog’s academic usefulness. In her review for the *Academic Library Book Review*, she stated that while the catalog was aimed at a general audience, it still belonged on an academic bookshelf.<sup>107</sup> The most complimentary review came from Peter Wood, of Duke University, writing for the *North*

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<sup>103</sup> Interview with Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr., August 14, 2009.

<sup>104</sup> Gerald Sorin. “Review of *Before Freedom Came: African American Life in the Antebellum South*.” *Journal of the Early Republic* 12 (1992), 138-140.

<sup>105</sup> James Borchert, “Review of *Before Freedom Came: African American Life in the Antebellum South*.” *Journal of American History* 79 (1992), 62-263.

<sup>106</sup> BFC, MOC Archives

<sup>107</sup> *Academic Library Book Review*, October 1992.

*Carolina Historical Review*. “How impressive,” he wrote, “...that that venerable Richmond institution has put together one of the finest books on plantation slavery now in print, and to realize that it stems from an exhibition of material objects.” Three ingredients made the catalog a triumph: experienced scholars writing “lucid and suggestive” essays; the objects themselves, the photographs, which Wood found “engrossing”; and the handsomely designed volume at an affordable price. He agreed with others in the catalog’s educational value; anyone teaching African American culture, plantation slavery, or the antebellum South would be well-served assigning the catalog as a general text.<sup>108</sup>

Many universities agreed with the reviews, and professors began to assign *Before Freedom Came* as soon as it was published. The attention of one university stood out in particular to Campbell. “I crossed the street and there was the book in Harvard University bookstore. I have never felt...I had published before, it wasn’t that excitement. It was just seeing that book in the window at Harvard University bookstore was an incredible adrenaline rush. I figured, we did it.”<sup>109</sup>

The catalog also received two formal and quite prestigious awards. The American Library Association named the catalog one of the 13 best non-fiction books published in 1992. It was also recognized by the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Human Rights in the United States as an Outstanding Book. The award was announced on Human Rights Day, December 10, 1992.

Like the Valentine, the Museum of the Confederacy did not leave the evaluation of the exhibition completely to the media. Specific surveys, purposely open-ended, gauged visitor feedback for the entire run of the exhibition. The visitors gave only a yes or no answer to

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<sup>108</sup> Peter Wood, “Review of *In Bondage and Freedom: African American Life in the Antebellum South*.” *North Carolina Historical Review*. 69 (1992), 116.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr., August 14, 2009.

whether they had been to the museum before and whether they had heard about the exhibition before they came. They were left to describe their race and their likes and dislikes in their own words.

Between 80-85% of African-Americans who came to the Museum of the Confederacy knew about the exhibition before coming, as compared to about half of whites. Nearly 90% of African-Americans had never been to the Museum of the Confederacy before, while about 75% of whites had not.

Examples of visitors' dislikes were: they wished that the exhibition was longer, permanent, and that it would travel to more places; they complained that it was too crowded, that the headphones did not work, that there were too few artifacts, that there was not enough opportunity to ask questions; and they resented references to "affection" between slaves and masters. The visitors liked the photographs, letters, quotations and words of slaves, the "truthfulness", "honestly," and "realism" of the exhibition, the work and scope that went into the exhibition, the artifacts and the fact that the Museum of the Confederacy was doing it.

The effect of *Before Freedom Came* was widespread and the Museum experienced a massive increase in visitors and attention. It was estimated that over 1500 people visited the exhibition in the first three days. This spike in visitation due to *Before Freedom Came* led to the most successful year in the Museum's history with over 91,000 visitors. The Museum of the Confederacy was also successful in reaching out and bringing in many from Richmond's African American community. The institution had accomplished the largest, most ground-breaking exhibition on American slavery ever to be attempted in the United States. By the end of its run in Richmond, over 300 different newspapers had covered the exhibition. It received the praise and accolades of the museum field for this effort, evident through its acquisition by SITES, the

Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. SITES used photographs of many of the objects that could not travel and took the exhibition nationwide. Viewed in museums such as the Anacostia Museum in Washington, D.C., the Tennessee State Museum in Nashville and the Atlanta History Museum, among others, feedback was extremely positive. SITES kept *Before Freedom Came* travelling in its abbreviated form until 1994.<sup>110</sup>

The Museum seemed to have its new image in 1992. But would the critics' warnings be correct? Would the Museum of the Confederacy continue efforts to include social history, including the history of African Americans? Or would the institution revert to the preferences of its most passionate constituents?

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<sup>110</sup> BFC, MOC Archives.

## Legacies

*Before Freedom Came* was part of the Museum of the Confederacy's effort to overhaul its image and become an educational facility that would include all aspects of the Confederacy. The exhibition was the largest example of this effort, and very successful. It received a huge amount of press coverage, nearly all of it positive. There were skeptics who feared that *Before Freedom Came* was a publicity stunt and any inclusion of African American history would go away when the exhibit did. The efforts the Museum has made with its interpretation since *Before Freedom Came* hold up well to criticism, especially given the limitations of the Museum's own collection for African American history. But did this project help to overhaul the Museum's image, and did the relationship with the black community of Richmond live on past the exhibit? Did it convince the public that this was now a professional, educational institution, and no longer a shrine to the Confederacy?

The Museum of the Confederacy has not had an exhibition exclusively devoted to slavery since its follow-up to *Before Freedom Came*, but this does not mean that the critics were correct. *Before Freedom Came* was not a publicity stunt, nor would the Museum ignore African-American history again once the exhibition left. Immediately after the exhibition moved on to McKissick, the Museum created the exhibit, *From Sunup to Sunup: African American Daily Life, 1800-1865* from some of the reproductions used in *Before Freedom Came*. This exhibition was part of the larger exhibition, *Views of the Confederate Experience*, which divided the gallery space into four sections, one of which was devoted to *Sunup*. The staff insisted that a portion of



*Before Freedom Came* had to remain in the Museum. The exhibition remained until 1996, when the Museum opened its centennial exhibit *A Woman's War*. *A Woman's War* received a great deal of positive media attention also, and the Museum included the lives of enslaved black women in its interpretation.

Both *A Women's War* and *The Confederate Nation*, which opened in 2003, addressed issues of race and slavery. The Museum's current flagship exhibit, *The Confederate Years* addresses the roles of African Americans as impressed laborers which aided in the Confederate war effort. The exhibition also discusses the controversy that arose in the Confederacy over whether or not to arm slaves to help the cause.

Many of *Before Freedom Came's* public programs lived on past the exhibition. "To Be Sold," which took place at Shockoe Bottom, the former slave market in downtown Richmond, was performed again in Richmond and in Jamestown in 1994 to recognize the 375<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Africans arriving in Virginia. The "Family Reunion" in Jackson Ward became the "Down Home Family Reunion." The Museum of the Confederacy sponsored the event until 1996, when it took a role as a participant. Although the Museum no longer participates, the event celebrated its 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2009. The week-long day camps organized by the Education department also continued for two years after the exhibit.

The Museum also hosted lectures to discuss the role of black Confederate soldiers. First, in 1992, Professor Ervin Jordan delivered a lecture discussing his research on the topic, published as *Afro-Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia* (1995). In 2001, the Museum received support from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy to host an Evening Lecture Series with the Library of Virginia. The series, "The Debate Over Black Confederates, Then and Now," consisted of three programs including a closing panel

discussion. Once again, the Museum took on a controversial topic and brought it to the public for open discussion. The series also included a half-hour broadcast on WRIC-TV and attracted significant media attention.

The Museum of the Confederacy was once again a sponsor of commemorative events regarding black history in April of 1994. The Museum participated in “Bluecoats in a Gray City,” a program co-created by living history interpreter Kenneth Brown, who worked with the Museum on *Before Freedom Came*. This program was a reenactment of U.S troops’ arrival in Richmond in 1865, and served as a preface for the 130<sup>th</sup> commemorative march in 1995.

The Museum also offers an on-site education program about slavery and the Civil War aligned with the Virginia Standards of Learning. Using reproduction items and photographs, students learn about the effect of cotton on the South’s economy, changes in the South caused by the war, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Civil Rights Amendments. This program is only offered to 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders, unfortunately, because it can probably be adapted for high school students, who could greatly benefit from it. The Teachers’ Institute, “America’s Defining Conflict: Through the Eyes of Soldiers, Slaves and Women,” just celebrated its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

African American life is also regularly featured in the Museum’s membership publication, which began in 2005, in order to keep the subject on the forefront with its audience. For example, in the Spring 2009 edition, an article titled “Confederate Executive Mansion was the Stage for Dramas of Loyalty and Liberty,” tells the story of the mansion’s enslaved and free servants. One servant, William Jackson, Jefferson Davis’s coachman, escaped and went on to give anti-slavery lectures in the North and in Great Britain, trying to sway foreign support away from the Confederacy. He also provided information to the Union army. The Davis’ slaves were a subject of an exhibit in the White House itself in the late 80s and early 90s, when the Museum

also created “backstairs” tours to interpret the lives of the slaves. This perspective remains in the general White House tour.

The success of *Before Freedom Came* resulted in some financial support and written support from the academic world. The Museum received Institute of Museum Services General Operating Support grants and several more grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Dr. W. Fitzhugh Brundage recognized the Museum of the Confederacy’s efforts in his work, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*. Brundage stated that the Museum followed the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in practicing the “new museumology,” or “bottom up” history which analyzed the decisions in history rather than glorifying the usual ideologies of patriotism. *Before Freedom Came* signaled that “the museum was committed to a far broader and more inclusive mission than its founders could have imagined or would have condoned.” He called the Museum a revisionist institution, and pointed out that many people were taken aback by a comprehensive exhibition about slavery at the place where Jefferson Davis spent his Confederate presidency.<sup>111</sup>

The skeptics might continue to say that the Museum is not doing enough to include African Americans to its interpretation, considering that *Before Freedom Came* is the only exhibition the Museum has ever done that focused completely on slavery. This criticism, however, lacks a full understanding of the scale of *Before Freedom Came* and the Museum of the Confederacy’s collection. The sheer amount of objects acquired by the Museum to put together the exhibition had never been attempted before the exhibition, and has not been attempted anywhere else since. The Museum intended for the exhibition to be of such a scale that duplicating it would be nearly impossible, and that the Museum would only do it once. To try to

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<sup>111</sup> Fitzhugh Brundage, *Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Identity* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2005): 299.

replicate the exhibition now, when it would actually be less controversial, would be even more difficult considering the institutions that allowed the Museum to borrow the objects now appreciate their value. The exhibition was also extremely expensive. Even with grants, the Museum of the Confederacy contributed well over \$100,000 to the entire project.

The Museum of the Confederacy has tried to tell the African American story whenever possible, but as museum historian John Coski puts it, it is not always easy. Its collection is largely made up of military artifacts, and those are what many of its visitors come to see. To meet the expectations of visitors, the exhibitions need to include the “battles, the big guns, leaders, common soldier, and a social and political history that covers the home front and to some degree the government.”<sup>112</sup> But Coski also points out that in order to make the African American story relevant to the larger story, artifacts are needed. There is “a dilemma of whether to devote a lot of space to something in your gallery that you don’t have a lot of artifacts for, and if you can’t do it right it has an apartheid feeling to it.” A photograph from the Library of Congress may give the visitor the impression that the Museum is not trying to include the story, inserting it just to appease critics. “That does a disservice to the subject, if you treat it secondary. You give people a bad perception...this is a subject to be discounted.” For this reason, the visitor will not see a great deal having to do with African Americans, but they will see some things, and the fact that the Museum interprets that “some,” according to Coski, is due to the effort to exploit every opportunity to tell the story with quality. The Museum currently gives some attention to the mobilization of African-Americans by the Confederacy. “Were they happy about it? No—read the labels—but if you are talking about the Confederate military, the mobilization of the black population made it possible for the mobilization of the white army.

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<sup>112</sup> Coski said this reply has become a “mantra” of sorts that he has been reciting for years, one he learned from his predecessors.

That's a big story, and you don't fail to tell it." The Museum addresses the controversy over putting the enslaved in the army, and also uses slave insurance policies and slave broadsides whenever possible. "The central facet of slavery is that they were property, which could be sold."

The Museum, especially with *Before Freedom Came*, has quite a list of efforts towards the interpretation of slavery and African-American history. Despite these efforts, the Museum of the Confederacy, as all museums undoubtedly do, suffers from what Coski calls the 'what have you done for me lately' syndrome." He goes on: "As of January 1992....BFC was old news. It didn't matter at that point what we had done before.....Why don't you have a big exhibit on slavery *now*." The prior accomplishments of any museum are immaterial to the current visitor. "That was true immediately after the exhibit, and it's still true 18 years later." The Museum's collections are soon to be distributed among four different locations in Virginia, Appomattox, Chancellorsville, Hampton and Richmond, in order to make them more accessible, display them more effectively and help the institution attain financial stability. Coski hopes that with the Museum's collection distributed among different locations, there will be more exhibit space to devote to African American life.

The Museum's efforts have not kept all the critics at bay. But have the efforts of the institution to modernize its image yielded positive results? The Museum has remained a proponent of social history even when some museums have moved away from it. It also diversified its board, and now has a more diversified staff. Despite these efforts, however, the Museum continues to face a decline in attendance, and its collections will soon split to three different locations. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that the institution remains a lightning rod for race relations in the city of Richmond. A peer review requested by the Museum in 2006

found that a national decline in museum attendance, bad management, and the adjacent medical center's continual encroachment on the Museum's location were the main factors for its situation in recent years. But the review also declared that the word "Confederacy" still conjures up images of slavery and racism in the public eye and is overall a detriment to the institution.

Despite the changes in the exhibitions, the Museum has had trouble letting go of some of the traditional programs that a modern observer can clearly see are controversial. The "Bonnie Blue Centennial Ball" raised a great amount of controversy in 1997. Former-Governor Wilder, who was a supporter of *Before Freedom Came*, accused the Museum of promoting a "magnolia mentality" that ignored the horrors of slavery. Unfortunately, the controversy over the ball overshadowed *A Woman's War*, which included the perspective of enslaved black women.<sup>113</sup> The ball was eventually cancelled by director S. Waite Rawls III.

Rawls, race, and the Museum of the Confederacy were also highlighted in a *Washington Post* article in 2007. The article began with a quote from Harry Kollatz, Jr., a senior writer for *Richmond Magazine*, who stated that the city was embarrassed by the presence of the Museum of the Confederacy. Historian Gary Gallagher said that "the real issue, rarely articulated in direct terms, is race," which Gallagher said is "our great national bugaboo." While Rawls insisted in the article that a simple glance at the Museum's track record will show that it is a modern, educational institution, the subject of race remained the subject of the article. Rawls visited Lexington, Virginia, in the hopes the city may accept a portion of the Museum's collection and support a museum, and brought up that Theodore DeLaney, a history professor at Lexington's Washington and Lee University and an African American, had once sat on a panel for the Museum of the Confederacy. While Rawls hoped that DeLaney was a rallying point, he was

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<sup>113</sup> Susan Pendergast-Schoelwer, "Review: *A Woman's War: Southern Women, the Civil War and the Confederate Legacy*," *Journal of American History* 84 (1997), 997.

mistaken. “It was a miserable experience,” said DeLaney. He explained that the subject of the panel turned to Confederate monuments, and DeLaney stated that black people might not want such monuments. Visitors lined up afterwards to “chastise” DeLaney. The article concluded that the museum presented a divisive image.<sup>114</sup>

The peer review, conducted in October 2006 and led by Dr. H. Nicholas Muller III, acknowledged and gave credit to the Museum for its effort to “delicately” redefine itself over the past twenty years, but recognized that race remains an issue. The Museum has “embraced a balanced view” of the war and taken on tough issues through exhibitions like *Before Freedom Came, People of the Confederacy, The Confederate Years*, and *Embattled Emblem: The Army of Northern Virginia Battle Flag, 1861 to the present*. The leadership of the Museum has stated consistently and unequivocally that it is an institution “of” the Confederacy, not “for” the Confederacy, and is not a shrine to the Lost Cause. It “concentrates on illuminating such persistent themes” as state versus local government, the lives of African Americans, the effect of the war on all Americans, the economic and technological development before, during and after the war, and the impact of warfare. The review also complimented the Museum’s impressive collection: “It has developed collections of great value that underwrite the best scholarship and inform the public about the major issue of the Civil War era and how they impact contemporary America.”<sup>115</sup>

Despite these efforts and the professionalism of the staff, the review stated the term “Confederacy” is at the heart of the Museum’s name, and the word “carries enormous, intransigent, and negative intellectual and emotional baggage with many residents of Richmond,

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<sup>114</sup> Tucker, Neely. “Swept Away by History: Virginia’s Museum of the Confederacy is Struggling not to Become a Relic of the Past,” *Washington Post*, 4-4-2007.

<sup>115</sup> Peer Review, 10-23-2006, conducted by Dr. H. Nicholas Muller III, Ms. Elizabeth “Bitsy” Waters, Dr. Paul C. Reber, Ms. Marion G. Goethals. [www.moc.org/site/DocServer/PeerReview/FinalDraft2.pdf?docID=1821](http://www.moc.org/site/DocServer/PeerReview/FinalDraft2.pdf?docID=1821)

others in Virginia, and many beyond the state's borders." Schools shy away from visiting the museum, and corporations and the state and local government shy away from funding it. Many people equate the word with the South's effort to maintain slavery, and many African Americans equate it with contemporary problems. "Though unarticulated in direct terms, race has become the third rail that permeates every aspect of the future of the MOC."<sup>116</sup>

This leaves the institution between a rock and a hard place. The main constituents of the Museum of the Confederacy want to see artifacts and exhibitions interpreting the Confederate military and the South. Its collection easily supports this type of interpretation. But at the same time, the Museum of the Confederacy seems archaic to young adults new to Richmond, and racist to African Americans. Perhaps the splitting of the collection will lead to more exhibit space, and more freedom with topics. Or, perhaps what was one Museum of the Confederacy will become several mini-Museums of the Confederacy.

After *In Bondage and Freedom's* time was over at the Valentine, the staff focused on the next project, and then the next, creating exhibitions on everything from the Jewish population of Richmond to the marketing of cigarettes. The success and swift pace that the Valentine maintained in the late 1980s and 1990s led to an attempt to expand. It restored the Tredegar Iron Works located on the river in downtown Richmond to fit Frank Jewell's vision for *Valentine Riverside*, a historical park on the river that would eventually highlight Richmond's canal system. The project failed, however, from overextension of resources, inefficient staff members, and waning interest on the part of the investors. *Riverside's* collapse in 1995 left the Valentine

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 24.



in serious financial trouble, and also resulted in the dispersion of the staff, including the resignation of Frank Jewell.

Today the Valentine is back on its feet, brought back from the brink of financial collapse by museum director Bill Martin. While the Museum's staff has changed, the Museum remains an institution focused on the social history of Richmond. Remnants of *In Bondage and Freedom* remain in walking tours and public programs. The Valentine has also kept race relations in its focus with recent exhibitions on the Civil Rights movement in Richmond.

Despite the success of the current Valentine Museum, it is hard to realize today just how well-known the Valentine became in the mid-1980s and 1990s under the direction of Frank Jewell. Jewell and his staff did not just modernize the museum. They engaged in cutting-edge museum methods and made major contributions to public history as a whole. Jewell and his staff engaged the community, believing that the Valentine was only as important as the community felt it was. They realized the importance of scholarship, created exhibits based upon ideas and historical questions, and engaged in professional development. They set a model for modernization for small museums.

In their 1989 essay "Afro-Americans and Museums: Towards a Policy of Inclusion," Horton and Crews analyzed the gap between scholarship on African-Americans in social history and the interpretation of that history in museums. They discussed the founding of the Smithsonian Anacostia Museum, and gave examples in the 1970s of the continuing uphill battle to include African Americans. They surveyed different institutions to see how much effort they put towards engaging the African American community, and how effective these efforts were. They classified the Valentine's approach as "alternative." They cited *In Bondage and Freedom* as an example of the innovative methods the Valentine used to make connections with the black

community. The entire staff was committed to the inclusion of the black community. “The Valentine experience exemplified what was true for most of the institutions we studied. Long-range planning, community coordination, the inclusion of scholars with knowledge of social and Afro-American history and a determined staff effort supported at top administrative levels were crucial elements in broadening museum presentations.”<sup>117</sup>

Another example proving that the Valentine was ahead of the times is the work *Museums and Communities*. Published by the Smithsonian Institution Press in 1992, this book is based on discussions at two conferences held by the Smithsonian Institution and the Rockefeller Foundation in 1988 and 1992. At the conferences, museum professionals posed questions about how a museum could exhibit cultures related to their multiple communities. The work stated that museums are not exempt from history, and the institutions that have neglected or alienated parts of their own community need to rectify their errors. “Museums often justify their existence on the grounds that they play a major role in expressing, understanding, developing and preserving the objects, values and knowledge that civil society values and on which it depends.”<sup>118</sup>

Traditional museums were being called into question officially, and museums had to change their perspective, not just accommodate. “To develop a genuinely cross-cultural exhibition practice will require museum professionals to interrogate the history and unbuild assumptions of their institutions and to reflect with patient self-consciousness on their own exhibiting style.”<sup>119</sup> A museum had to have a dialogue with its surrounding community in order to contribute to the social order.

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<sup>117</sup> Crews and Horton, “Afro-Americans and Museums: Towards a policy of Inclusion”

<sup>118</sup> Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer and Steven Lavine. *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington, D.C., 1992), 5.

<sup>119</sup> Constance Perin. “The Communicative Circle: Museums as Communities,” in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington, D.C., 1992), 211.

The Smithsonian published another work, this one by Stephen Weil that also discussed the importance of a museum to its surrounding community. Weil stated that in order to deserve the support of a community, then the museum must serve the community. The simple preservation of artifacts is not what makes a museum matter; “museums matter only to the extent that they are perceived to provide the communities they serve with something of value beyond their mere existence.”<sup>120</sup> To set up one criterion by which all museums must abide is difficult considering the wide variety of purposes, budgets and locations. Weil did give four basic standards to which all museums must hold themselves: purposive, capable, effective, and efficient, in that order. As *Museums and Communities* concluded, Weil stated that communities were key, especially since support from the community led to financial support.

From the early 1990s into the 2000s professionals pressed the field to close the gap between social history and exhibitions, and for museums to embrace the communities around them. Horton and Crews acknowledge the work of the Valentine, crediting it with closing the gap between scholarship and public exhibitions. *In Bondage and Freedom* was the third of five exhibitions the Valentine created dealing with African American history in the city of Richmond. But perhaps more telling are the works which do not blatantly acknowledge the Valentine. Frank Jewell and his staff were practicing in the mid 1980s to early 1990s the methods detailed in *Museums and Communities* and the much later *Making Museums Matter*.

Karp and his colleagues call for museums to embrace their communities and rectify the errors or omissions of their institutions. Upon his hiring, Jewell immediately took down the permanent exhibit within the first six weeks of working at the Valentine. He then brought in scholars and other professionals to find out “what were the most important unanswered questions about Richmond’s history.”

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<sup>120</sup> Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington D.C. 2002) 4-5.

Frank Jewell's Valentine can easily be judged by Stephen Weil's standards. The purpose of asking and answering the important but neglected questions about the city led to exhibition after exhibition on different topics of social history. The exhibits were built on these topics. The highly capable staff constantly had the input of scholars, and performed new research on their own. It then went to the collection to find artifacts which would articulate their findings in a meaningful way. This led to staff members themselves contributing to scholarship and public history as a whole. Gregg Kimball and Marie Tyler McGraw have not only published books and articles on Richmond, but also were the first to suggest a method of exhibition review for scholarly journals when they began to take interest in museums exhibitions.

The exhibitions proved extremely effective in opening a dialogue with the community, and the staff did not hide behind public relations statements when members of the community found the Valentine's methods controversial. The Valentine displayed a Ku Klux Klan robe in its exhibition about Jim Crow in Virginia, which followed *In Bondage and Freedom*. A local activist and radio show host, August Moon, became extremely angry and picketed outside the museum. "Frank's reaction to it was well, we'll come on your radio show and we'll debate it with your listeners," recalled Gregg Kimball, "which I thought was a very clever way to.... move the dialogue forward. Of course what ended up happening, as one could predict, was that yes, there were people who called in and said no, you shouldn't be doing that. And there were people who called in and said no, you should be doing that. This is an artifact you have, it represents kind of a reprehensible part of our past but we need to know that." Kimball also found that the dialogue made him revisit how he displayed the artifact. He concluded that with a piece so provocative, a curator ran the risk of the experience being so intense that "all reason or context goes out the window." He described Jewell's approach as neither defensive nor passive. His

solution was to talk about it. The dialogue on the radio waves no doubt reached more members of Richmond's black community than the exhibit itself.

The success of *In Bondage and Freedom* alone shows that the Valentine's methods were effective, and the rate at which the Valentine turned out new exhibitions shows that during this period it was certainly efficient. The pace kept by the staff, however, would be part of its downfall, ending in the *Riverside* debacle. As Cary Carson, who worked closely with the staff during this period, put it: "Frank Jewell ran Richmond's Valentine Museum like an emergency M.A.S.H unit for several years non-stop. He rolled planning, grant-writing, exhibiting, and curating all into one exhilarating, exhausting, enormously productive, pell-mell, pressure cooker frenzy activity that transformed every staff member to a jack-of-all-tirades for as long as the individual—and the museum—lasted."<sup>121</sup> When asked if Carson's assessment was a fair one, Gregg Kimball laughed, and agreed. "It is accurate. I think anybody, honestly, who was there, would tell you that." Kimball elaborated as to why he enjoyed being at the Valentine during that time. "It was exciting to be at a place where you did have that integration of scholarship." The staff conducted in-house seminars and visited many museums in many different cities to discuss museum practice. "He really believed that if you were a real professional you needed to have as much feedback from other people doing what you do. So, as a professional, it was enormously stimulating. But the pace was insane."

James O. Horton stated in his article "Slavery in American History: An Uncomfortable National Dialogue," that "public historians giving presentations on the history and impact of

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<sup>121</sup> Cary Carson, "Colonial Williamsburg and the Practice of Interpretive Planning in American History Museums," *The Public Historian* 20 (June, 1998): 39.

slavery in America immediately confront a daunting problem: the vast majority of Americans react strongly to the topic, but few know much about it.”<sup>122</sup> This is still a problem that public historians must face, even as museums are creating more and more exhibitions on the topic. This problem was certainly a greater one in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when there were virtually no exhibitions on slavery. Nonetheless, the Valentine Museum and the Museum of the Confederacy not only took on the topic, but created outstanding exhibitions. The Valentine did not just create an exhibition; the Valentine added greatly to the scholarship of the history of Richmond, and sought to reinterpret the history of the city. Former members of that staff still insist that the city must be de-segregated in its history to move forward. The Museum of the Confederacy did not simply include the history of African Americans in the museum. It created a groundbreaking exhibition that encompassed the entire South, putting together a collection of artifacts that many believed would be impossible to acquire; that exhibition may be impossible to duplicate. And these two institutions accomplished this in Richmond, Virginia, a traditionally conservative place that has suffered from racial controversy, then and now.

Despite the financial downfall of the Valentine, and despite the Museum of the Confederacy’s current problems, both of these institutions deserve accolades for their breakthroughs. The problems that the institutions suffered in the years following these exhibitions were in no way a consequence of these two projects; in fact, *In Bondage and Freedom* and *Before Freedom Came* are high points in their histories. And while the topic of slavery has seen more time on museum floors, it still carries with it a high level of discomfort that initiates controversy and creates weariness in museum professionals that may make them shy away. Luckily, the Museum of the Confederacy and the Valentine have created models for

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<sup>122</sup> James O. Horton, “Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America’s Racial Story,” *The Public Historian* 21 (Autumn, 1999): 37.

success, not just in the interpretation of slavery, but for any potentially difficult topic for public historians.

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## Vita

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