

A sense of place

Rethinking a bucolic landscape

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Homewood Museum, Johns Hopkins University campus, Baltimore, US

Homewood Museum sits at the heart of the Johns Hopkins University (JHU) campus in Baltimore, Maryland (US) and lends its distinctive early 19th century form to the surrounding architecture. Until recently, however, it was functionally isolated from the university's mission and its deep, historical relationship to the campus grounds. New academic projects focused on that relationship, most notably courses offered through JHU's Program in Museums and Society, are helping to uncover histories that had nearly been forgotten – including the presence of enslaved African-Americans who once worked the house and land. Through its increased engagement with faculty and students, Homewood Museum is

becoming a key resource for uncovering and sharing complex and sometimes contested histories with the broader public.

Homewood, the site of the Homewood Museum, was a country retreat for the influential Carroll family, known for producing the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence. Built between 1801 and 1808, it is a landmark example of Federal architecture. The Carrolls sold the house and its grounds in 1839, and in 1902 the property was given to JHU. The university campus – a handsome brick matrix with elegant columns and pediments – responds directly to Homewood's architecture.

In 1987, Hopkins restored and opened Homewood as a historic house museum dedicated to life in early 19th century

Maryland. Since then, its staff has increasingly focused on tying the museum to the core activities of the university. These include hosting and offering courses devoted to the house, its contents, and the lives of the Carrolls and their contemporaries.

Beyond museum walls

In the spring of 2014, one of these courses spilled out from the house to consider the surrounding landscape. Led by Beth Maloney, Lecturer in Museums and Society and independent museum educator, with assistance from museum and library staff, ten students researched sites across campus in order to present a fuller picture of the place they currently call home. Each student selected archival images and wrote

the narrative for a historical signpost. The class studied how people experience interpretive text in informal settings and worked with an environmental design class at the Maryland Institute College of Art to produce signage that was erected for the opening of the 2014-15 academic year¹. The signs were so well received that the university administration funded the production of new signs after the first set – intended to last only one year – began to wear out (the original signs and the course were funded by a grant to Museums and Society from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.)

The sign that has garnered the most attention discusses former slave quarters that once occupied a corner of land that is now part of the JHU campus. The structure had been absorbed into a larger domestic building, neither of which is still standing. This was one of the things that drew student Courtney Little to the project. Little, now completing a graduate degree in public history, took on the challenge of interpreting what she calls a 'contentious, absent historic site'. Her sign featured a reproduction of a Carroll probate inventory listing the 'property' they held in 1839, including 16 men, women and children.

That enslaved people lived on and worked this land is no surprise: Maryland, which sits just below the Mason-Dixon line dividing North from South, was a slave state, and as wealthy land-holders, the Carrolls owned many slaves. Yet the paucity of material remains leads us to forget this history, allowing a nostalgic landscape of gentle hills and neat architecture to assert itself instead. A recent replanting of Homewood's historic orchard adjacent to the house, for example, is a scenic reimagining of the past that speaks of lost beauty – but not, evidently, of the labour that produced it.

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Past as present

Everyone involved in the signage project agreed that it was important to directly



A student pauses to read

address the fact of slavery at Homewood and to do this assertively, accurately and sensitively. The class embarked on lengthy discussions and testing of the signage with various audiences including faculty, staff and administrators, fellow students, passers-by, and members of several campus multi-cultural groups.

The ten signposts that resulted are a call to remember by infusing the landscape with lost stories, most of which are celebratory or honorific. But not the slavery sign: it is intended to stop people in their tracks and get them to take a second look at the place that surrounds them. This happens, even in the bustle of daily campus life, and is given a boost by faculty members such as anthropologist Anand Pandian, who uses it to help students think more carefully about the spaces they inhabit and the freedoms they enjoy. 'It [is] as though another layer of history [has] surfaced onto the landscape of the campus,' he says.

The signage programme has begun to shape museum programming as well. Two students were inspired to write and produce a theatrical interpretation of domestic life at Homewood that gives voice to William, an enslaved worker on the Carroll estate.

They see living history as a way to present stories that have gone missing, much like the slave quarters themselves. And in April 2015, the museum organised a symposium on slavery in Maryland that attracted a large and varied audience from across the city.

Only days later, Baltimore erupted in protests and unrest over the death of Freddie Gray, an unarmed black man, while in police custody. In this context, the Homewood slavery sign emerged not only as a reminder of the past, but as a way of insisting on the continued impact of the past on the present. Just as the gracious campus landscape allows us to forget the racial injustices that mark its historic grounds, so the sign binds the past to the present, compelling us to remember. Or, as JHU President Ronald J. Daniels put it in a letter of appreciation, the signs 'weave the history of the Homewood campus into the fabric of our daily lives.'

Johns Hopkins – as the dominant institution in a socially challenged city and a university intent on improving the human condition – has an obligation to tell our most painful narratives and seek their ongoing relevance. Homewood Museum is integral to this work. Its historical connection to the land, central place on campus, and ability to bridge academic and civic concerns make it a fitting steward for the stories of William and the other enslaved workers of the Carroll estate. ■

¹ See <http://retrospective.jhu.edu/our-initiatives/hidden-stories-of-homewood>