A Slavery Museum?
Race, Memory, and Landscape in Fredericksburg, Virginia

STEPHEN P. HANNA
University of Mary Washington

In spring 2001, former governor Douglas Wilder announced that he might locate the United States National Slavery Museum in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Despite some recent changes, Fredericksburg’s heritage tourism landscape, as it is built and performed, reproduces a white American nationalism extolling the virtues of individualism, valor, and free enterprise. The mere potential of adding the Museum to Fredericksburg’s landscape engendered intense debates about the ways the City’s cherished Colonial and Civil War pasts are remembered. In this article, I use recent literature on landscape, memory, and race to explore changes in how African-American histories are represented in and through the landscape. Then, I examine one venue for these debates—the letters-to-the-editor, op-ed pieces, and online reader responses published by Fredericksburg’s newspaper of record, The Free Lance Star. In these texts, Museum opponents and supporters selectively deploy constructions of race, versions of Fredericksburg’s past, and visions for the City’s future to support their arguments. I conclude by noting how debates over the Slavery Museum continue to inform more recent proposals to change Fredericksburg’s landscape.

KEY WORDS: collective memory, slavery, landscape, Fredericksburg, Virginia, museum, heritage tourism

On the evening of November 17, 2007, I attended a program at the antebellum Fredericksburg Baptist Church entitled, “To Freedom: The World and Words of John Washington.” John Washington was a rare individual, but also representative of the larger slave population during the Civil War. A literate slave, he was one of the first to escape bondage in spring 1862 when the Union Army reached the bank of the Rappahannock River opposite Fredericksburg. Some estimate that 10,000 slaves escaped through Fredericksburg in the months that followed (Hennessy 2006). In 1873 Washington detailed his life as a slave and his escape to Union lines in his memoir, Memorys of the Past.¹ The 270 people attending the “To Freedom” program witnessed dramatic readings of Washington’s and other residents’ written memories of slavery and emancipation in this southern city. It was a performance of local memory—an attempt to remind us of African-American sacrifice, bravery, and struggles for freedom.

One month later, sixty Confederate re-enactors marched by my house on their way to “skirmish” with Union forces in Fredericksburg’s streets. As has happened every December for almost twenty years, the City government closed residential streets to traffic to accommodate this practice of memory. Thousands of visitors and residents of Fredericksburg witnessed the re-enactors’ commemoration of the brav-
ery and sacrifice of soldiers. As always, the focus of this performance was on the Battle of Fredericksburg itself. Few of the programs held that weekend mentioned that slavery was the primary cause of the war or that it secured the emancipation of African-American slaves.

These two events symbolize the uneven and unequal ways memory is performed and inscribed in the heritage tourism landscape of Fredericksburg, Virginia. More specifically, they offer evidence that while African-American narratives continue to be marginalized in the City’s collective memory, individuals and institutions within and beyond Fredericksburg are making slavery, resistance, and emancipation more visible in the landscape as it is built and performed. This is a key aspect of broader debates over Fredericksburg’s identity as a historic small town increasingly surrounded by suburban sprawl. In this struggle, City officials, tourism workers, residents, and tourists embrace and deploy different memories of the City’s past, different accounts of the role of race in that past, and different visions for Fredericksburg’s future.

At no point was this more evident than in the days and months that followed former Virginia Governor Douglas Wilder’s April 28, 2001 announcement that he was considering Fredericksburg as the site for the United States National Slavery Museum. In a May 4, 2001 editorial, the editors of the Free Lance Star, Fredericksburg’s paper of record, began with the question, “A Slavery Museum?” and provided their answer, “Ok, but slavery wasn’t the main history that happened here.” Within the context of how Fredericksburg’s past is inscribed in its landscape, this statement is not surprising. The City’s official and dominant historical narratives remain focused on very traditional versions of its Colonial and Civil War heritage. Prior to 2001, representations and performances of these two eras in Fredericksburg reproduced memories focused almost exclusively on the contributions of white-elites and brave soldiers to the nation’s history (Hanna et al. 2004). African-American experiences were all but invisible in the tourism landscape. This collective memory—and forgetfulness—was truly dominant; debate over the importance of these eras and the ways they should be commemorated was seldom if ever public or visible. Wilder’s announcement and subsequent events changed that.

On October 8, 2001, Wilder chose Fredericksburg as the Slavery Museum’s home. More specifically, the Museum, when and if completed, will sit on a bluff overlooking the Rappahannock River within a controversial tourism development called “Celebrate Virginia.” Located partially within City limits but almost five kilometers away from Fredericksburg’s historic downtown, Celebrate Virginia will include hotels, an exhibition center, retail stores, and golf courses (Figure 1). Most recently, the developer and the City reached an agreement-in-principle with the Kalahari Resorts company to locate a massive indoor-outdoor water park and hotel within the development.

The local responses to Wilder’s proposed Museum represent a key moment of public debate over the practices of memory within Fredericksburg’s heritage tourism landscape. To explore this debate, I begin by reviewing recent literature on landscape, memory, and race. After some brief methodological notes, I then provide a reading of how race has been coded into
Celebrate Virginia Downtown Historic Districts United States National Slavery Museum site

Figure 1. Map of Fredericksburg, Virginia.
the landscape as built and as practiced. This provides the necessary context to examine the public debate over the Slavery Museum appearing in the *The Free-Lance Star*. The letters-to-the-editor, op-ed essays, news stories, and online reader responses may not reflect whether the majority of Fredericksburg residents and visitors believe it fits in with their memories of the City's past or their visions for its future. Nevertheless, the ways in which these authors selectively mine the City's past, characterize local and national racial issues, and describe ongoing development in the region reveal the importance of public memory to the ways people work to identify with this place. They also suggest that the identities and memories attached to and practiced through Fredericksburg's heritage tourism landscape are now more open to debate than at any other time in recent history.

**Race and Memory in Place and Landscape**

The past, as constructed through formal history, popular culture, and collective memory, is a definitional aspect of place and place-based identities (Johnson 1996; McCabe 1996; Summerby-Murray 2002; Gold and Gold 2003). As a place's past is selectively mined to serve current needs, dominant social groups construct and support particular versions of events and biographies while marginalizing others (Norkunas 1994; see also Massey 1991; Massey 1993; Philo and Kearns 1993). In much if not most of America, this is a thoroughly racialized process. Certainly, the preserved houses, memorials, practices and performances commemorating the contributions that white elites and soldiers made to Fredericksburg’s and our nation’s history simultaneously hide and are made possible by American constructions of race. Race in America is conceived as the other to whiteness and, for much of our history, this other was African or African-American (Morrison 1992; Schein 2006). Our national memory as well as the collective memories and landscapes of cities, towns, and rural areas are constructed of white-centric narratives containing an often hidden Africanist presence (Morrison 1992).

Recent work on place and landscape utilizes the concept of collective memory—the dynamic processes through which people make and remake their pasts to meet their constantly changing present and future needs (Lowenthal 1975; Hoelscher 1998; Till 1999; DeLyser 2001). Drawing partially from critical museum studies (e.g., Katriel 1993; Nora 1989; Potter and Leone 1992; Katriel 1994; Nora 1997; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Rowe et al. 2002), some geographers have focused on how such memories become materialized in place through the production and manipulation of the cultural landscape (Alderman 1996; Schein 1997; Dwyer 2000; Hoelscher and Alderman 2004). Schein (1997), for example, details how historic preservation and tourism development discourses become codified in tangible landscape elements. Using Schein's concept of “discourse materialized,” Dwyer (2003) argues that monuments and other heritage tourism spaces are the physical results of enacting discourses of commemoration on the landscape. “The weighty materiality” of monuments and memorials secure memory in place, putting “it beyond the reach of time by etching it in the land itself” (Dwyer 2003, pg 31). Rec-
Recognizing this fact, different interest groups may fiercely resist or promote efforts to change the memorial landscape. Collective memories in places are not just preserved and contested in the landscape, but through work, practice, and performance as well. The meanings of heritage sites are constantly reinscribed by tourists walking the grounds (DeLyser 1999, 2003) and by the everyday work of guides, docents, and other tourism workers (Hanna et al. 2004). Rob Shields (2003, pg 9), for example, notes that places and landscapes become “memory banks for societies . . . by virtue of retaining and displaying the inscribed traces of rhythmic repetition of routines in time and space.” As Steve Hoelsher (2006, pg 52) argues, “stories need to be told and linked to the landscape so that the landscape embodies these stories.”

As stories and performances change, the buildings, memorials, practices and performances comprising the heritage tourism landscape and its meanings are often contested. Geographers and other social researchers have written extensively on the changing representations of the past in the US South and how these changes are inscribed, and struggled over, in the urban landscape. Most note that until the 1980s, the memorial landscape in most southern cities and towns was dominated by monuments and markers devoted to Confederate military heroes and the grand “Lost Cause” for which they fought and died (Dwyer 2000, 2003; Hoelscher 2006). These were complemented by plantation museums that evoked a nostalgia for a “Gone with the Wind” southern society in which loyal slaves appreciated their white masters’ benevolent paternalism (Blight 2001; Butler 2001; Eichstedt and Small 2002; Hoelscher 2006). These invented traditions propped up Jim Crow legislation in southern states and helped remove slavery and emancipation from the nation’s memory of the Civil War (Blight 2001).

Beginning in the 1980s, Civil Rights memorials and museums represented a major challenge to the heritage landscapes of southern cities and towns. Alderman (1996, 2000), for example, has examined the politics of naming streets after Martin Luther King while Dwyer (2000, 2003) has focused on the creation of an increasingly nationally-scaled Civil Rights heritage landscape. Both note how neo-Confederates and other guardians of white southern memory resisted these new memorials (see also Leib 2002). This struggle was often accompanied by debates concerning the display of the Confederate Battle Flag (Webster and Leib 2001).

While the emergence of Civil Rights memorials and museums diversified the heritage landscapes of the South, they did not constitute a direct challenge to the dominant narratives constructing the region’s antebellum and Civil War commemorative spaces. This challenge came with more recent efforts to build slavery museums and to question or disrupt the histories performed within plantation museums and on Civil War battlefields. Eichstedt and Small (2002) note that such “black sites” offer counter-narratives to the representations of slavery found in plantation museums. In Natchez, Mississippi, for example, a gospel performance entitled A Southern Road to Freedom, challenges the white-washed memories inscribed in the town’s well-preserved antebellum mansions (Hoelscher 2006).
The sites and performances designed to re-inscribe slavery, resistance, and emancipation into the landscapes commemorating the 18th and 19th century South are often under-funded, under-staffed, and/or off the beaten track (Eichstedt and Small 2002). Efforts to re-make the memorial landscape encounter fierce resistance when they include removing or altering memorials celebrating southern white heroes like Robert E. Lee (Leib 2004). In places where more permanent or visible memorials are built or planned, resistance to such changes can be intense as well. Yet, the existence of these efforts when combined with new or planned museums dealing with slavery and other aspects of African-American history in Cincinnati, Ohio; Washington, DC; Charleston, South Carolina; and Baltimore, Maryland suggests that the narratives and landscapes of the “Lost Cause” are losing—but have not yet lost—their dominance in both the region’s and nation’s collective memory.

The local responses to Governor Wilder’s choice of Fredericksburg for the United States National Slavery Museum reflect this trend. Slavery was mostly hidden in the local heritage tourism landscape and, as a result, those who most identified with the City’s Colonial and Civil War pasts could forget the role slavery played in building that landscape. These same people, not surprisingly, have been the loudest opponents of the Museum which, if built, would be a massive, visible, and permanent challenge to their cherished memories of Fredericksburg’s past. At the same time, the mere possibility of the Slavery Museum has encouraged some local efforts to change the meaning of this landscape with performances and tourist practices based on narratives such as John Washington’s memoirs.

**Methodological Notes**

I approach this work as both a researcher and ten-year resident of Fredericksburg. I walk to work, enjoy strolling through historic Old Town with my family, and try to avoid driving to the big box stores and malls surrounding Fredericksburg. During my time here, I have joined discussions over both presences and absences in this landscape. I have engaged in arguments over whether the Celebrate Virginia development will threaten the viability of shops and restaurants in the Historic District, violate the town’s historic fabric, or contribute to the environmental problems and congestion associated with sprawl.

These experiences help me read the heritage tourism landscape and track the changes that have occurred over the last decade. They are complemented by a series of interviews with tourism workers, City officials, and residents conducted between 2002 and 2006. The material produced by these interviews include both facts concerning when certain additions were made to the landscape and opinions regarding the meanings residents and tourists attach to the sites and performances constituting that landscape.

My experiences and these interviews also give me a context within which to qualitatively examine the 179 Free Lance Star editorials, letters-to-the-editor and opinion pieces about the US National Slavery Museum published between April 2001 and February 2008. Rather than focus on the negative or positive content of the opin-
ions published in the *Free Lance Star*, I searched for the themes writers used to express those opinions. My coding system was in part inductive and in part informed by previous research on race, memory, and landscape in the U.S. South (Cope 2003). As a result, I grouped phrases within the editorials, opinion pieces, and letters-to-the-editor according to their use of heritage, race, and development. These three themes are not mutually exclusive; some phrases were placed in more than one category. The first grouping included phrases focused on the Museum as an economic development project or on its location within the Celebrate Virginia development. I placed a piece in the heritage category if the phrase cited the City’s past as the primary reason the Slavery Museum should or should not be located in Fredericksburg. Letters and opinion pieces invoking present and past constructions of race or race relations were placed in the third category.

TRACING RACE IN FREDERICKSBURG’S HERITAGE TOURISM LANDSCAPE

When reading Fredericksburg’s heritage tourism landscape, the most obvious and longstanding representation of race is a slave auction block that still stands at its original site (Figure 2). In fact, until 2001, the slave block was the only permanent memorial to any aspect of African-American history. At best this is an ambivalent memorial. The bronze plaque simply reads “Fredericksburg’s Principle Auction Site in Pre-Civil War Days for Slaves and Property.” I have seen white tourists take pictures of their partners or children standing on the block. Usually accompanied by laughter and teasing, such acts only make more distant the terror and degradation experienced by slaves in the 18th and 19th centuries. For some African-American residents, the auction block is a more ominous presence in the landscape. When interviewed, one black woman remembers that during her childhood in the 1950s and 1960s,

the slave block, that loomed as a symbol of oppression, and . . . anybody would get beat if you got near it, you know. Your mommas would spank you if you got near that slave block. It was just totally off limits, you know. So that was really the historic site I knew most about, was the slave block. Other permanent memorials to African Americans in the City’s past remain rare. While the City began publishing a brochure for an African-American walking tour in the early 1990s, the on-location interpretative information provided at the sites on this tour contains few references to black history. Roadside displays and tour guides at these and the other sites comprising Fredericksburg’s tourism landscape focus almost exclusively on two historic periods, the Civil War and the Colonial/Revolutionary era. The dominant narratives inscribed in the landscape and performed by tour guides at these sites tend to erase or trivialize the presence of African Americans in both eras (Eichstedt and Small 2002).

Fredericksburg is best known as a Civil War battlefield. In December of 1862, Union forces under General Ambrose Burnside attacked General Robert E. Lee’s Confederate Army entrenched along Marye’s Heights just south of the City. While only a small portion of the City is
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Figure 2. The Slave Auction Block. Photograph by author.

within the Fredericksburg-Spotsylvania National Military Park, street-fighting occurred throughout much of the old town. People touring the battlefield may interact with personnel at the City’s Visitors Center, take a privately run trolley or horse-carriage tour, or rely on National Park Service (NPS) interpreters and a film to experience Civil War Fredericksburg.

Or, they may trust printed brochures to guide them to the monuments and markers identifying the landscape as sacred ground.

For the most part, all of these texts and practices emphasize that this is where valiant soldiers in Blue and Grey suffered and died. Of the more than thirty signs guiding visitors through Civil War Fredericksburg,
only one mentions slavery or emancipation. The rest detail the order of battle, note the devastation to the City caused by Union shells, or mark monuments celebrating the heroism and sacrifice of soldiers. Complementing these texts, tour guides use vivid language delivered in solemn tones to encourage visitors to imagine the hardships of Union troops advancing toward the well-fortified Confederate positions. As David Blight (2001) and Dwight Pitcaithley (2002) argue, such a focused interpretation helps visitors celebrate the sacrifices of soldiers and the sectional reunion that took place after the war. The main casualties of this approach are the facts that slavery was a central cause of the southern states’ secession and that the war secured the emancipation of African Americans throughout the country.

Over the past half decade, the NPS, the chief interpreter of the battlefield sites in and around Fredericksburg, has begun augmenting its traditional emphasis on the order of battle and the honor and heroism of both Confederate and Union soldiers with broader contextual material—including slavery as a cause of the war. The NPS now shows two films at their Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitors Center. The first, shown several times daily, focuses on the battle, but responds to the 2000 Congressional mandate, “to encourage Civil War battle sites to recognize and include in all of their public displays and multimedia educational presentations the unique role that the institution of slavery played in causing the Civil War” (Babbitt 2001, np). The second debuted in June 2006. Virginians Desolate, Virginians Free represents the impact of the war on the area’s civilian population, both slave and free, and includes a dramatization of John Washington’s escape across the Rappahannock to Union lines. The film, while well received by residents and the local press, drew criticism from at least some of the battlefield’s visitors and is no longer shown regularly at the Visitors Center.

Fredericksburg’s second claim to a place in the United States’ historical narrative focuses on the role it played in this nation’s origins. In the eighteenth century, Fredericksburg was the home or workplace for several of America’s “Founding fathers” or, at least, their close relatives. George Washington grew up across the Rappahannock River at Ferry Farm and both his sister and his mother lived in the City. James Monroe began practicing law in Fredericksburg in the early 1800s and Thomas Jefferson worked on the Virginia Declaration of Religious Freedom while visiting the town. These persons and their contributions to the nation’s history continue to be memorialized through the preservation and interpretation of their homes and offices. Tour guides at these sites, as in plantation museums across the South, direct visitor’s attentions to the lives and interests of these persons as represented by the architecture and furnishings they left behind (Eichstedt and Small 2002). Such artifacts reveal the tastes, talents, and accomplishments of their owners and help make eighteen century America more familiar to the twenty-first century tourist (DeLyser 2003).

Despite the importance of the “peculiar institution” in the Colonial and Revolutionary eras, most guided tours of the City’s historical attractions devoted to these historical periods seldom mention slavery. For example, at Mary Washington’s house, docents in period dress only
mention Mary’s slaves when talking about her complaints of poverty to her son, George. After all, she “only” owned four slaves. Fielding Lewis, George Washington’s brother-in-law and master of Kenmore Plantation owned more than 80 slaves. Tour guides at this house, however, focus more on the indentured servant who crafted the intricate plaster ceilings than on the enslaved persons who accounted for a hefty portion of Lewis’ property and profit.

In part, slavery, emancipation, and more recent African-American experiences are hidden by representations of the mythic South of the “Lost Cause” (Blight 2001; Pitcaithley 2002; Eichstadt and Small 2002; Dwyer 2003). However, most sites and markers—and the tourism workers that interpret them for visitors—emphasize the Fredericksburg’s role in forging the United States as a nation. Thus, the dominant collective memory of Fredericksburg, as performed and preserved in the most visible parts of the City’s landscape, is safely white and middle class and reproduces an American nationalism extolling the virtues of individualism, valor, and free enterprise.

Beginning in 2001, however, the City government began to make Fredericksburg’s African-American history a bit more visible in the landscape. Joining many southern cities in the effort to memorialize the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 60s, they planned and erected a roadside display commemorating sit-ins at downtown lunch counters (Figure 3).
Over the next few years, the City placed other roadside displays marking historically black churches and the core of the black commercial area during the segregation era. Still, neither the City nor the private foundations and companies that run most historic sites and tours did much to memorialize slavery and emancipation in the heritage tourism landscape or other tourism-oriented representations. Because they focus on a different period, adding Civil Rights and segregation-era black history memorials to the landscape did not threaten the dominant memories of Fredericksburg’s Colonial and Civil War eras.

**A SLAVERY MUSEUM?**

The proposed United States National Slavery Museum, of course, is a direct challenge to the ways Fredericksburg has previously commemorated its past. As a January 11, 2006 editorial in the *Free Lance Star* states, “there should be no mystery as to why we’re interested in finding out more about the Slavery Museum. That project has been presented as a national initiative that will fundamentally change Fredericksburg’s identity as a tourist destination.” It is not just the City’s tourism identity that is at stake, however. Grappling with slavery and race requires residents to re-remember the most cherished eras in Fredericksburg’s history and, perhaps, find a new way of identifying with their City’s and nation’s past.

On its website and in its newsletters, the United States National Slavery Museum begins its own historical narrative with Douglas Wilder’s 1993 trip to Goree Island in Senegal. Upon his return, he decided that the United States needed a museum dedicated to telling the story of slavery. To quote Vonita Foster (2004, pg 1), the Museum’s executive director, Wilder believes the Museum is necessary for Americans to “fully realize our collective national potential as an enlightened and progressive-minded citizenry.” This will only be possible once Americans understand that “slavery was the primary genesis for the socio-political construction of race in the United States” (Foster 2004, pg 2). Wilder, Foster, and other Museum officials view their project as central to that effort and state that the museum’s mission “is to vitalize and interpret more completely the human drama and toll of slavery in America” (Foster 2004, pg 1). The exact content of this interpretation is still being developed as the Museum builds its collection.

Artists’ sketches of some of the planned exhibits emphasize the national and international scale of the Museum. Narratives and artifacts of slavery, resistance, and emancipation will come from all parts of the country. Furthermore, the Middle Passage is integral to the design of the Museum. From the outset, Wilder wanted the Museum to include a full sized replica of a slave ship and C.C. Pei’s design for the Museum incorporates such a ship. Most current estimates state that the Museum will cost approximately $150 million to build (Gould 2007). Currently, the Museum reports that it has raised—in cash and in pledges—over $50 million and Wilder is courting corporate donations, especially from banks, tobacco firms, and others that historically profited from slavery. While Wilder hoped to open the Museum in 2007, construction has yet to begin as the Museum struggles to raise the donations necessary (Gould 2007).
Despite these difficulties, Museum officials have secured the zoning variances necessary to make C.C. Pei’s design a reality. In addition the site was cleared and graded several years ago. Finally, the Museum installed and opened the “Spirit of Freedom Garden” at the entrance to the site in June 2007 (Figure 4). The garden honors “those who risked everything in order to be free” and features a sculpture of a man with broken manacles dangling from his upraised arms. The garden has an overabundance of text. Nearly twenty interpretative panels recount the Middle Passage, summarize notable slave revolts, and commemorate the efforts of African-American slaves to resist, cope with, and escape from slavery.

In his article on the placing of the Arthur Ashe monument on Richmond’s Monument Avenue, Jonathan Leib (2002, pg 287) notes “both African American supporters and much of the traditional white southern population . . . tried to define and redefine their separate heroic eras (Civil Rights vs. Civil War) within the same public space.” In Fredericksburg, the Slavery Museum’s theme covers the same eras as the Civil War and Colonial memorials dominating the City’s heritage tourism landscape, but occupies a very separate space. Wilder chose the Celebrate Virginia location in part because of the views of the Rappahannock River and in part because the land was donated by the Silver Companies, the developer of Celebrate Virginia. In 2001, this locally owned company was looking for a centerpiece for
their tourism-oriented development and a nationally recognized museum would certainly serve that purpose. As a result, the Museum site, while within City limits, is almost five kilometers from Fredericksburg’s historic district (see Figure 1). This combination of spatial distance from and temporal proximity to the most cherished aspects of Fredericksburg’s historic landscape largely shapes the ongoing local debates concerning the Museum’s location.

**RESPONSES TO THE SLAVERY MUSEUM**

After Douglas Wilder’s April 28, 2001 announcement that Fredericksburg was a possible location for the Slavery Museum, the City Council asked the City Manager to meet with Wilder and representatives of the Silver Companies. This led to a closed meeting of the Council on August 9. At that very controversial meeting, Wilder and Silver Companies’ CEO Larry Silver announced that the developer would donate at least twenty-five acres of the Celebrate Virginia project to the Museum if it located in Fredericksburg. At the same meeting, Wilder asked the City Council to grant the Museum $1 million to prove the City’s commitment to the project. At the time, Wilder, the Silver Companies, and several members of Council argued that Richmond and the City of Hampton, Virginia, were competing with Fredericksburg for the Museum and the tourism-related economic development it might bring. Five days later, the City Council considered a motion to lend $1 million dollars to the Slavery Museum. After nearly five hours of public comments, the council voted unanimously to loan the money to the Museum contingent on Wilder making a public presentation about the Museum in Fredericksburg later that year.

The Museum’s proposed location and the fact that its initial presentation to City Council took place in a meeting closed to the public ensured that the Museum would be caught up in ongoing debates over growth, sprawl, and Fredericksburg’s identity as a small town. The Free Lance Star questioned the legality of this meeting in a law suit that bitterly divided City Council. In addition, the meeting added to public perception that the Silver Companies enjoyed a special relationship with City Council. This helped slow-growth candidates win Council seats in the 2002 elections.

In October 8, 2001, Wilder picked the Fredericksburg site stating that Richmond—the City’s primary competitor—did not offer enough land for the Museum (Waters 2001). At the very next City Council meeting, Mayor Bill Beck introduced legislation requiring any museum or historic attraction seeking City funds to explain how that museum or attraction would integrate African-American history into its displays and tours. While this decision appeared to signal a watershed moment in how Fredericksburg’s heritage tourism landscape would develop in the post-slavery museum era, subsequent interviews with public officials suggest that the motion was actually aimed at Wilder’s Slavery Museum in an attempt to force the Museum Board to share its plans with the City.8

Such actions are representative of the intense debates surrounding the Slavery Museum that started the moment Wilder made his announcements. As noted in the official minutes of City Council meetings, residents and visitors supporting and op-
posing the Museum wrote City Council members and stood up at public hearings. Public school teachers encouraged their students to debate whether the Museum belonged in Fredericksburg. The Slavery Museum and its location within Celebrate Virginia also played a role in local elections. Council and mayoral candidates who support the Celebrate Virginia Development have consistently won in the heavily African-American Ward Four. Conversely, slow-growth advocates have tended to portray the Museum as a cynical attempt by the Silver Companies to build public support for their development. In all these discussions, residents invoked memories of Fredericksburg’s past to support their versions of the City’s present and future identity. In so doing, slavery, emancipation, and resistance entered into public discourse over the meanings of Fredericksburg’s historical landscape for the first time in over a century.

The letters-to-the-editor, op-ed pieces, and online readers’ comments appearing in the *Free Lance Star* reflect the actions and discussions described above in both timing and in the themes used to present their arguments. Letters were most numerous in the months following Wilder’s initial announcement and when the Council agreed to loan the Museum $1 million. Relatively few letters appeared in 2003 and 2004 as new stories about the Museum were rare and uncontroversial. A flurry of opinions were published in 2005 when the Museum asked the City to waive certain building fees and another set appeared in 2008 within a debate over the appropriateness of locating the Kalahari resort and water park next to the Museum site. Regardless of publication date, the ways in which most of these authors describe ongoing development in the region, selectively mine the City’s past, and characterize local and national racial issues reveal the importance of public memory to the ways people work to identify with this place.

As mentioned above, Wilder’s decision to locate the Slavery Museum within the Celebrate Virginia development ensured that the Museum would be embroiled within ongoing debates over the present and future development of Fredericksburg. To their opponents, the Silver Companies represent every negative aspect of suburban development. As the quotes in Table 1 indicate, these critics characterize Celebrate Virginia and the neighboring Central Park shopping area as massive, automobile-oriented retail centers that contribute to traffic congestion, harm the environment, and threaten the economic viability of shops in Fredericksburg’s historic district. They also describe the developments’ landscapes as ugly and tacky. To supporters, Central Park and Celebrate Virginia provide jobs and are vital sources of tax revenue for the City—including revenue spent on the preservation and beautification of the City’s Historic District.

Thus, it is not surprising that over a third of all letters, op-ed pieces, and readers’ online comments focused on the Slavery Museum as a development project and/or its location in Celebrate Virginia. As the sample responses in Table 1 suggest, opponents either feared the traffic congestion the Museum might cause or, more likely, criticized the Museum’s location within Celebrate Virginia. The latter group argued that this Museum should not be surrounded by a landscape of retail stores and golf courses. Many of these writers stated that they were not opposed
Table 1. Statements Placing the Museum in the Context of Local Development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opposed to Slavery Museum or its Location within Celebrate Virginia</th>
<th>Supportive of Slavery Museum</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is absurd to expect that [we] can handle the influx of visitors anticipated from the Celebrate Virginia development and proposed slavery museum. 8/29/01</td>
<td>The citizens should grasp it and let it flourish and feel honored that this little city on the banks of the Rappahannock can be a city of national importance. 10/9/01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downtown would be a better site than “Sellabrate” Virginia. 8/26/01</td>
<td>Residents of Fredericksburg who care about history and our tourist economy should remember the actions of some [council members] at election time. 8/2/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has anyone considered the appropriateness of putting a museum dedicated to remembering the abhorrent practice of buying and selling human beings in . . . a Mecca of commerce? 8/19/01</td>
<td>At any rate, history cries out to be packaged and sold—for the good of our children, consciously; and for the good of our pocketbooks. 8/26/01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagine visitors like Yasser Arafat or the Rev. Jackson, after visiting the museum, playing a round of golf or taking a ride on the Tilt-a-Whirl. Celebrate Virginia is just the wrong setting for this museum. 8/29/01</td>
<td>The museum coupled with a privately built conference center, would result in greatly increased visitation to area battlefields as well as historic downtown Fredericksburg. 9/10/01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: All statements were published by the Free Lance Star between April 2001 and February 2008 and are available at http://www.fredericksburg.com/News/FLS/archives.

to the Museum, but felt it should be located either in the historic part of the City or in another city altogether. To an extent, these writers believe that it is Celebrate Virginia more than the Slavery Museum that does not fit within this small historic town.

Museum proponents who used the trope of development focused on the Museum’s location within Fredericksburg and its promise to deliver tourist-dollars and tourism jobs to the City. Some also argued that a national museum would make the City better known. Many of these authors fit the category of civic boosters. While they may value the historic landscape of Old Town, they primarily focus on the growth of Fredericksburg’s economy and reputation.

The letters and other opinion pieces most obviously drawing from and contributing to Fredericksburg’s collective memory are those arguing that the Museum does or does not fit within the City’s history as inscribed in the heritage tourism landscape. Almost 32 percent of all letters deployed selective versions of Fredericksburg’s past in their arguments. As illustrated by the examples in Table 2, letters agreeing with this assertion are products
of the dominant constructions of Colonial and Civil War Fredericksburg that is characterized by a careful forgetfulness. Plantations are remembered as the homes of great men and their families rather than as places built by the labor of slaves. Fredericksburg-as-a-battlefield is sacred because of soldiers' individual sacrifice, not because the Civil War secured emancipation. In their efforts to ignore the hidden Africanist presence (Morrison 1992) lurking throughout Fredericksburg's landscape, a few go as far as to state that slavery is best forgotten. The Museum opponents who deal more directly with slavery argue that it was more “benign” in Fredericksburg than in other places or suggest that Richmond or Jamestown were more important sites in the history of American slavery.

As shown in Table 2, Museum supporters’ arguments tend to be less historically specific. They focus on the need to educate all Americans on the role of slavery in this nation’s history. Considering that the Museum portrays its contents as national and global in scope, the dominant scale used by its supporters is not surprising. Nevertheless, several writers note that Fredericksburg was a port for the slave trade or that slavery was another chapter in the City’s rich African-American heritage.
Table 3. Statements Invoking Race or Race Relations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opposed to Slavery Museum</th>
<th>Supportive of Slavery Museum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you have a national slavery museum it will be just something else for people to complain about when it comes to the black race. 6/6/01</td>
<td>Whenever I drive past a person with the Confederate flag I wonder, “Is this person... proud of his heritage... or are they proudly displaying their hatred of everyone who is not white?” My take on the slavery museum? We need it 9/5/2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond does not want the museum there . . . No one wants the political baggage of the NAACP following, that this museum will establish. 8/14/01</td>
<td>This museum in Fredericksburg will demonstrate to black Fredericksburg citizenry that finally we are being judged by the content of our character. 9/4/01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not agree with putting a slavery museum in Fredericksburg. I feel it would be too emotional for some and may cause racial tension. 9/5/2001</td>
<td>I think there will be a major outpouring of support at Tuesday’s council meeting. I really feel the black community in this area will rally together. 8/13/01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are any of the slaves in the museum white? If not, then the term “slave museum” would not be appropriate because there were white slaves also. 9/5/01</td>
<td>Understanding, empathy and forgiveness will be needed to make America as solid as it can be. I believe the slavery museum will help to facilitate this. 9/15/2005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All statements were published by the Free Lance Star between April 2001 and February 2008 and are available at http://www.fredericksburg.com/News/FLS/archives.

Others respond directly to Museum opponents criticizing their efforts to forget about or trivialize the experiences of slaves. Taken as a group, these letters argue that the Slavery Museum will provide a necessary correction to both local and national collective memories.

While any discussion of slavery in America involves race, I made a distinction between letters and op-ed pieces focused on the role of slavery in local and national histories and those clearly invoking constructions of race and race-relations. Just under 25 percent of the total make such explicit references to race. As the examples in Table 3 indicate, a few of those opposed to the Museum argue that it will legitimate black “complaints” or only serve to make whites feel guilty about slavery. Some of these resorted to coded language ranging from one stating that we do not want the “baggage of the NAACP following” to another asserting that the Silver Companies are “giving in to the demands and perhaps pressures of certain members of society.” Others remember local race-relations during the twentieth century as more harmonious than in other southern towns and fear the Museum will increase tensions. Perhaps reflecting this fear are letters ending with some variant of “some will call me racist for stating this” no mat-
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ter the actual contents of the argument. Implicit in this pre-emption of the charge of racism is the assumption that a museum about slavery is uniquely African-American addition to the heritage tourism landscape and, therefore, that denying this addition for any reason might be considered racist. Another tactic used by opponents is to argue that the Museum will not commemorate slavery accurately if it does not tell the stories of white slaves or note that blacks enslaved each other.

As Table 3 suggests, supporters invoking race have very different memories of race-relations in Fredericksburg. They hope the Slavery Museum will demonstrate to African-American residents that their City has finally made strides in combating the racism to which white residents seem oblivious. Supporters also invoke the Confederate battle flag as a symbol in the landscape proving that Fredericksburg needs the Slavery Museum. Ultimately, most supporters mentioning race hope the Museum will make black history more visible in Fredericksburg’s historic landscape and promote understanding, empathy and forgiveness among all Americans.

CONCLUSIONS

While Fredericksburg’s heritage tourism landscape remains focused on white-centric (Eichstedt and Small 2002) memories of the City’s Colonial and Civil War eras, efforts to rewrite the meanings of this landscape continue. Most notably, the National Park Service is creating a podcast designed to guide visitors through John Washington’s Fredericksburg. By identifying the places this slave worked and lived and by helping people trace his escape route, the podcast performances and the practices of those following the tour may help change the stories and actions that inscribe meaning onto the landscape (Shields 2003; Hoelscher 2006). Compared to the potential weight, visibility, and pervasiveness of the United States National Slavery Museum, however, podcast tours seem ephemeral and targeted. Perhaps because of this difference—or the fact that the tours are based on decidedly local events and experiences—the efforts to commemorate John Washington encounter little resistance when compared to that inspired by the Museum in 2001 and 2002.

As I finish this article in February 2008, most people in Fredericksburg seldom think about the Slavery Museum or are skeptical that it will be built. In recent reporting, the Free Lance Star notes that some City officials refer to the Museum in the past tense (Jones 2008). Regardless of the eventual outcome, however, the debate over whether the Museum fits within Fredericksburg has made its mark within the ways residents remember their City’s past.

In November 2007, the City announced that it had reached an agreement-in-principle to bring the Kalahari water park to the Celebrate Virginia development. This ironically named resort will be by far the largest single tourist attraction in Fredericksburg and represents the centerpiece the Silver Companies have long desired for their development. As residents grapple with this new development, many invoke Fredericksburg’s rich past once again to suggest that the Kalahari resort does not belong. Interestingly, a few people expressing this opinion in letters to the Free Lance Star suggest that the Slavery Museum is a more appropriate addition to the
City's heritage tourism landscape or at least that the Kalahari should not be located next to a Museum commemorating such a tragic chapter in American history.

It is harder to determine how much of an effect debates over the Slavery Museum have had on other efforts to make slavery, resistance, and emancipation more visible in the landscape and, therefore, less marginal in the City's collective memory. Certainly the efforts of the National Park Service to remind battlefield tourists that slavery was central to the Civil War did not result from the potential presence of such a museum. And, those working hardest on bringing John Washington's Fredericksburg to light will continue their work regardless of the Slavery Museum's fate. Nevertheless, it is now impossible to bring up slavery in Fredericksburg without mentioning the United States National Slavery Museum.

NOTES

2. In interviews conducted in 2002, tourism workers at the Fredericksburg Visitors Center confirmed that most tourists who visit know the City because of its role in the Civil War.

3. All interviewees signed consent forms that guaranteed the participants' anonymity. When quoted in this paper, participants are only identified as tourism workers, members of the City Council, or residents. The one exception to this rule in John Hennessy, historian of the Fredericksburg-Spotsylvania National Military Park. He gave me permission to credit him for the information concerning 19th century Memorial Day ceremonies.

4. All newspaper material was downloaded from the Free Lance Star archives online (http://www.fredericksburg.com/News/FLS/archives). The archive is searchable by keyword and date. I used the keywords “slavery museum” and downloaded the news stories, letter-to-the-editors, op-ed pieces, and online reader responses in which the Museum was the primary topic. All Free Lance Star quotes in the text and tables came from this source.

5. The fact that 70 percent of letters-to-the-editor and other opinion pieces oppose the Slavery Museum does not mean that most residents agree. While some studies by political scientists argue that letters-to-the-editor are representative of public opinion (Hill 1981), those findings must be balanced against the well documented decline in newspaper readership among younger age groups over the past two decades. In addition, letters may be influenced by the negative tone of the Free Lance Star's overall coverage.


7. These sketches are available on the Museum's website: http://www.usnationalslaverymuseum.org/home.asp.

8. From transcript of an interview with a member of the Fredericksburg City Council conducted on June 21, 2004.


10. Around 10 percent of letters-to-the-editor, opinion pieces, and online reader responses focused on technical aspects of the development such as zoning variances or on their perceptions of the Museum as an organization. This is especially true of letters appearing after news stories focused on the Museum's fundraising problems or on the communication between the Museum, the City, and the public.

11. This information comes from a conversation with a National Park Service employee on February 8, 2008.
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STEPHEN P. HANNA is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Geography Department at the University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, Virginia 22401. Email: shanna@umw.edu. His research interests include heritage tourism landscapes and critical cartography.