Hello and welcome to “Telling the Invisible Stories at Historic Sites and Museums”. I’m Princess Hoagland and I’m on the board of trustees of the Trent House Association, which manages the 1719 William Trent House Museum located in Trenton, New Jersey. I’ll be presenting with two of my colleagues who’ll introduce themselves.

Our presentation will give you an overview on three subject areas:

- Background on the museum
- Current interpretation and challenges, and
- Our journey to tell the stories of enslaved people of African descent and how people need to be prepared to have these conversations.

Our invisible stories are about people who were enslaved by William Trent.

This is a challenging conversation ... Take a moment to reflect on what that means to you in the context of your own work, then Sam will speak with you.
The 1719 William Trent House Museum

- Built in 1719 by a wealthy Philadelphia shipping merchant at the Delaware River on ancestral lands of the Lenni Lenape people
- Restored and furnished according to architectural analysis and the probate inventory conducted at the time of Trent’s death in 1724
- Inventory includes eleven enslaved people including six adult men, one adult woman, two boys, one girl, and one male child
- Trade ledgers also show that Trent’s business included buying and selling enslaved people

WILLIAM TRENT WAS AN IMMIGRANT FROM SCOTLAND IN HIS EARLY ADULTHOOD. SETTLED IN PHILADELPHIA AND SET UP AS A SHIPPING MERCHANT AND BECAME QUITE WEALTHY. A CONTEMPORARY OF WILLIAM PENN, HE PURCHASED 800 ACRES ON THE FALLS OF THE DELAWARE ON LAND SETTLED FOR MANY CENTURIES BY THE LENNI LENAPE PEOPLE FROM THE SON OF THE FIRST ENGLISH COLONIST IN THE AREA. HE AND HIS FAMILY BUILT HIS COUNTRY MANOR ON HIS PLANTATION AT WHAT BECAME TRENTON NJ IN 1719 AND MOVED THERE AS HIS FULL-TIME HOME IN 1721. HE DIED IN 1724 AND UP UNTIL 1929 IT WAS OCCUPIED BY A NUMBER OF WEALTHY AND WELL-CONNECTED MEN OF EUROPEAN DESCENT AND THEIR FAMILIES.

WE KNOW FROM TRENT’S TRADE LEDGERS THAT AMONG THE “GOODS” HE BOUGHT AND SOLD WERE ENSLAVED PEOPLE ORIGINALLY FROM AFRICA, THOUGH IT IS NOT KNOWN WHETHER HIS SHIPS CAPTURED PEOPLE IN AFRICA ITSELF. MORE LIKELY PURCHASES OF ENSLAVED PEOPLE TOOK PLACE IN THE WEST INDIES WITH WHICH TRENT TRADED EXTENSIVELY. WE ALSO KNOW, FROM THE INVENTORY OF HIS POSSESSIONS AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH, THAT TRENT INCLUDED 11 ENSLAVED PEOPLE – 6 MEN, 1 WOMEN, 3 YOUTH, AND 1 CHILD.
Our Goals

- Integrate presentation about what we know about the enslaved people into tours and exhibits
- Incorporate information about the institution of slavery in the northern colonies as historical context
- Link the history of slavery in New Jersey and the United States to our nation's long-standing issues of racism
- Serve as a place for civil discourse and learning about local, state, and national social justice issues

AS YOU MIGHT EXPECT, FOR MANY YEARS AFTER THE HOUSE BECAME A MUSEUM IN THE 1930S, TOURS, PROGRAMS, AND PUBLICATIONS ABOUT THE HOUSE FOCUSED ON TRENT HIMSELF – THE WEALTHY, EUROPEAN-BORN, WHITE, WELL-CONNECTED MAN.

BEGINNING ABOUT 10 YEARS AGO, THE TRENT HOUSE ASSOCIATION, WHICH NOW MANAGES THE CITY-OWNED PROPERTY, BEGAN EXPLORING HOW TO INCORPORATE INFORMATION ABOUT THE LIVES OF "INVISIBLE" INHABITANTS OF THE HOUSE INTO OUR INTERPRETATION. SOME OF THOSE "INVISIBLE" INHABITANTS INCLUDE THE NATIVE PEOPLES WHOSE ANCESTRAL LAND WAS GRANTED TO ENGLISH COLONISTS; TRENT'S WIFE AND JOAN – THE ONLY TWO WOMEN IN THE HOUSE IN THE EARLY 1700S – AS WELL AS THE OTHER WOMEN WHO WERE RESIDENTS DURING THE NEXT 300 YEARS; IMMIGRANTS, USUALLY WOMEN, WHO LIVED AND WORKED IN THE HOUSE; AND PEOPLE FROM AFRICA ENSLAVED BY TRENT AS WELL AS BY OTHER OWNERS OF THE HOUSE. IN THIS PRESENTATION WE ARE FOCUSING ON THE "INVISIBLE STORIES" OF THESE ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS.
Our Motivation

- As an historic site, we have a responsibility to tell the full story – but in the past we have not done so

- If we ignore the painful elements of our history, our community will see us as irrelevant

- If we present difficult information with honesty and respect, we can serve as a safe space for dialogue

ONCE WE LOOKED PAST THE "RICH WHITE MAN" STORY, WE REALIZED THE DEPTH OF THE HISTORY AT OUR SITE. AND RESEARCH CONTINUED TO UNCOVER MORE OF THE STORIES OF THE OTHERS LIVING THERE. IT BECAME AN ESSENTIAL PART OF OUR MISSION TO TELL THE FULL STORY TO THE EXTENT WE CAN.

THIS HAS BEEN ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT FOR US IN TRENTON. TRENTON IS A CITY OF IMMIGRANTS, BEGINNING WITH TRENT AND OTHER ENGLISH SETTLERS IN THE AREA. AS AN INDUSTRIAL CENTER FOR STEEL, CERAMICS, AND MANY OTHER PRODUCTS IN THE 1800S AND EARLY 1900S, TRENTON DREW IMMIGRANTS FROM ALL OVER EUROPE. THIS CONTINUED THROUGH THE GREAT MIGRATION AS AFRICAN AMERICANS LEFT THE SOUTH TO WORK IN NORTHERN CITIES. MORE RECENTLY, TRENTON HAS BECOME A HUB FOR CENTRAL AMERICAN IMMIGRATION AS WELL AS FROM AFRICA, PARTICULARLY LIBERIA.

BEING RELEVANT GOES BEYOND BEING TRANSPARENT ABOUT THE PAINFUL ELEMENTS OF OUR SITE'S HISTORY – IT MEANS BEING WILLING AND PREPARED TO RESPOND RESPECTFULLY TO VISITOR QUESTIONS AND REACTIONS. AND WE NEED TO DEMONSTRATE IN CONCRETE WAYS OUR DESIRE AND WILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE IN AND SUPPORT DIALOGUE ON ISSUES THAT STEM FROM OUR PAST.
Questions for You

- Whose are the invisible stories at your site or institution?
- What about those stories has kept them invisible?
- What challenges do you see in telling those stories?
Approaches to Presenting and Discussing Challenging Issues – Trent’s Probate Inventory

- This is what we started with - Trent’s probate inventory,
- As you can see the inventory lists various household items and their value in pounds, shillings and pence.
- The inventory also lists 11 enslaved people: Yaff, Joan, Bob, Dick, Nanny, Tom, Julius, Bosin, Harry, Pedro, Cupid.
- Our interpretation is based on what we believe each person’s work would have been based on relative age, gender and value assigned.
- We are interpreting that the first 6 people on the inventory worked in the house and the other 5 worked on the estate and in the fields, mills and bakehouse on the plantation.
- Yaff was listed first at a high value of 40 pounds. We interpret this to mean that he was most likely the butler and Trent’s personal valet. And Joan, listed second, with a high value of 35 pounds, is interpreted to be the cook, as she is the only adult female. Both of these people had some responsibility for the overall operation of the house.

- One of our challenges – Giving them personhood – that is, helping our visitors understand that each of these individual people was more than their work for the Trents – that they had their own personalities, hopes, fears, and dreams
After Trent’s death, Yaff was sold to a man named James Alexander and he ran from him. We found this ad from the New York Gazette in 1729 offering a reward for his return.

- This ad helps to give Yaff **personhood**.
- We now know that he was about 35 years of age when he ran away from James Alexander. That means that he was in his 20s when he was in the Trent household. And he has previously been enslaved by another person before Trent.
- He was wearing a livery uniform, which confirmed our assumptions about his duties; greeting guests, serving etc
- He was heading south from New York. Was he headed back here?
- He was born in this country – therefore, we know he was born into slavery.
- He reads and writes – a valuable and relatively rare skill.
- He is a “sensible, cunning” fellow, in other words intelligent and enterprising.
- He likely forged a pass – to aid himself in resisting being enslaved.
To help our visitors see the enslaved people as more than words on an inventory, we purchased these mannequins to represent Yaff and Joan. Yaff is in the hallway by the main door as if he were greeting guests. Joan is in the kitchen where she would have spent most of her day. We also interpret them as sleeping in the house, being at the beck and call of the Trents at all times.

We also have mannequins for William Trent, Mary Trent and their son William.
All the mannequins have indistinct features because we want to represent them as people, but we don’t know what they looked like.
In the Trent House, there are pallets on the floor where enslaved people likely would have slept. This is Yaff’s area. As you can see he has a pallet or rough linen mattress stuffed with straw. He also has some personal items here; an extra shirt, an extra pair of stockings, a tobacco pipe, a comb etc, in the wooden box and some dice on the pallet. Yaff’s pallet is centrally located in between William Trent and Madame Trent’s chambers. This is so he could be available to the Trents whenever they needed something through the night. There were hand bells on Trent’s probate inventory – and we interpret that they most likely would have summoned Yaff with a bell.
This is Joan's area. She slept and likely spent most of her life in the Trent House kitchen. As you can see, she has a pallet and a wooden box for her belongings, which include some extra clothing, some fabric, some sewing equipment, a necklace, a comb and a teapot and bowl. Joan may have been able to purchase some of these things, like the comb or necklace, by growing vegetables or making things and selling them in the market. This shows that her skills not only benefitted the Trents but herself as well.
We have developed an exhibit about the diet of the elites in the 18th century, using faux foods.

As you can see for this meal there is beef, oysters, bread stuffing, mashed turnips, white bread and desserts on the table. There would have been wine or some type of cordial like madeira with dinner and tea. The average European person in 18th c. Philadelphia would have eaten about 3000-3500 calories per day.

This was a diverse diet, with an excess of calories, plenty of nutrients and high fat foods.
We juxtaposed the diet of the elites in the 18th century with the diet of enslaved people. This utilizes faux foods as well.

This is an exhibit about the typical food the enslaved people would have eaten – both rations and foods they produced themselves.

There was a caloric deficit in the typical ration, so it was necessary for enslaved people to supplement their rations by growing a garden, hunting, fishing and raising livestock. This was only with the permission of the owner and if time allowed. These food items could be sold in the local market with the proceeds going to buying other things they wanted or possibly even their freedom or freedom for a family member.

Visitors are allowed to touch and handle the faux foods which makes it more real for them.
Approaches to Presenting and Discussing Challenging Issues - Challenges

• Visitors do not know – cognitive dissonance.

• They move ahead of me.

• They are outraged.

• They don’t want to hear it.

• My feelings about presenting the story.

CHALLENGES FACED BY DOCENT GIVING TOUR:

THEY DO NOT KNOW
Visitors do not know or believe that there was slavery this far north. When I show guests Trent’s probate inventory – which lists 11 enslaved people, I am met with the following responses:
• I didn’t think there was slavery this far north.
• I thought slavery was illegal in New Jersey.
• Trent must have treated his slaves better than they would have been treated in the south.

I have to take a physical step back to allow the visitor to not only absorb the information, but to grapple with the cognitive dissonance or disbelief about what they are hearing and seeing. Visitors, when confronted with New Jersey’s slaveholding past, often ask when slavery was abolished in New Jersey. When I tell them that, while a gradual emancipation law was passed in 1804, the last (16) enslaved people in NJ were not freed until the 13th amendment was ratified in 1866, they are shocked. Many people have no idea that slavery ended so late in New Jersey.

Children sometimes ask if Joan (or one of the other enslaved people) got paid. When I tell them no, they are astounded.

THEY MOVE AHEAD OF ME
The first thing visitors see in the hallway of the Trent House is a representation of the enslaved butler Yaff. I explain that he would have greeted guests in the hall and sat them down as if it were a waiting room, and then come to get them when Trent was ready to receive them. Before I can explain about Yaff’s livery uniform, and tell his story, the visitors often go ahead (on their own) into one of the parlors.

It’s either that they don’t want to stay in the hall and are anxious to see the rooms or that they simply don’t want to hear that much about Yaff.

OUTRAGE
I can see the outrage on many people’s faces when they realize that pallets on the floor were the sleeping arrangements for the enslaved people of the Trent

THEY DON’T WANT TO HEAR IT
When we enter the Trent House kitchen, I try to tell Joan’s story (that she worked very hard cooking for the Trents and most likely for the other enslaved people that lived and worked on the property) Often times guests will change the subject. They ask to hear about how the spit jack turns the spit in the hearth and about the other (interpretive) objects in the kitchen.

MY FEELINGS ABOUT TELLING THE STORY
Anger, sadness, wanting to apologize for what happened and for the legacy of slavery that still exists. I wonder if I have a right to tell the story as a white woman.
Questions for You

• How would you feel about telling these stories?

• Who has a right to tell these stories?

• How should these stories be told?

• How would you deal with certain visitor reactions to the stories?
Community Advisory Committee

**Purpose:** To learn from the perspective of African Americans the best and most respectful and honest ways to interpret the lives of:

- Enslaved people of African descent who lived on the Trent House plantation during the 1700's and 1800's and

- African Americans who lived/live in the City of Trenton throughout New Jersey's history.
Considerations and Conflicts

- Fear
- Hurt
- Confusion
- Intimidation
- Resilience
- Distress
- Retribution
- Self-love
- Determination
- Anger
- Strength
- Inheritance
- Connected
- Relief
- Reparation
- PTSD
- Community
- Invisibility
- Self Care
- Transformation
- Activism
- Acknowledgement
- Family
- Examination
- Acceptance
- Mass Incarceration
- School-to-Prison Pipeline
- Enslavement
What We Learned

Our ancestors and elders who were part of the Great Migration were/are reluctant to share painful stories:

- Inferred shared histories based on national and local “retellings” relied upon
- Second-hand stories while powerful may leave out important nuances

Our stories are varied:

- Listening sessions required to get well-rounded, diverse and inclusive understandings of the various experiences
- Common knowledge base required about the African Diaspora—how we came to be here—for cohesive, succinct storying telling about the African American experience
Emotional Intelligence

- What are the emotional considerations prior to doing this work?
- How do we address issues of white fragility?
- How do we address feelings of despair?
- How do we prepare participants for difficult conversations about historic, systematic, and institutional oppression?