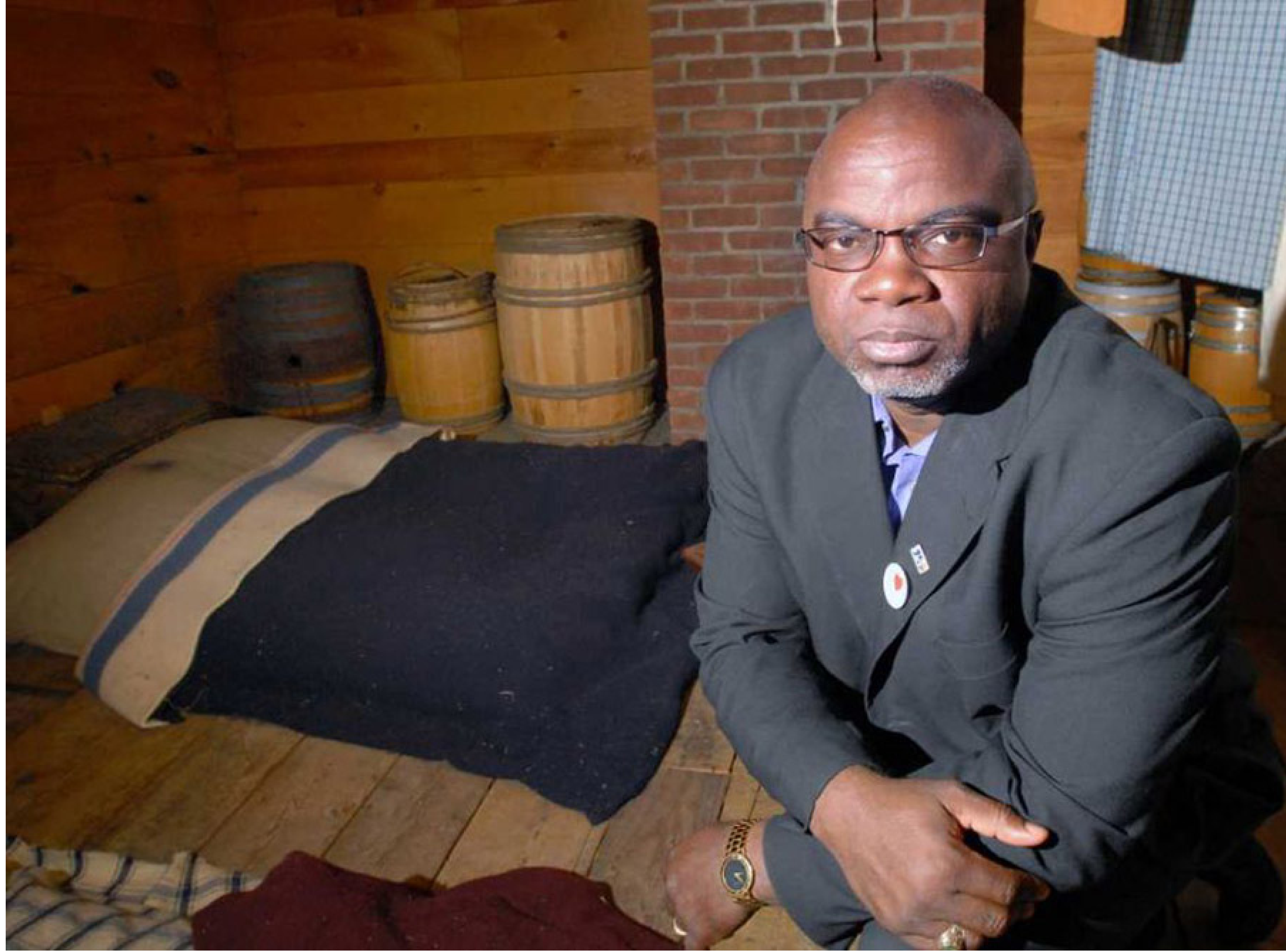


More than a Memory: The Complex Relationship Between Living History and Slavery

Sofia Biegeleisen, advised by Dr. Jordan Biro Walters

College of Wooster Department of History



Joseph McGill, founder of the Slave Dwelling Project, posing at a slave dwelling

Abstract

This project, which includes a podcast in addition to two written chapters, deals with the connection between historical memory of the US Civil War and living history, with a special focus on the role that slavery plays in this relationship. To fill the gap in scholarship that deals with both Civil War memory and living history, I explain how and why living historians interpret slavery. I also connect these themes with the idea that living history which fails to interpret slavery as the primary cause of the Civil War helps to perpetuate modern racial divisions. I argue that living history must interpret slavery, despite the challenges. When living historians, living history sites, and living history organizations do interpret slavery, they represent the past more truthfully and cultivate important discussions about racism both historically and in the contemporary context. In both parts of my project, I aim to bring the discussion of slavery to the forefront of living history. If slavery is missing from the historical narrative, understanding modern racial tensions is impossible.

Historiography

My historiographical section engages two main topics: Civil War memory and public history. One source I use in the memory section *Race and Reunion*, in which scholar David Blight argues that the desire for reunion helped to erase issue of race from America's memory. In contrast, Walter Johnson's *Soul By Soul* focuses on the New Orleans slave market to show the daily realities of slavery. Although it is inherently impossible to tell the full story of slavery, the works in this section help modern readers to begin to understand slavery's impact on the American consciousness. Important works relating to how public historians grapple with slavery include Dwight Pitcaithley's article "'A Cosmic Threat': The Nation Park Service Addresses the Causes of the American Civil War" and Drew Swanson's article "In Living Color: Early 'Impressions' of Slavery and the Limits of Living History." I use these articles and others to contextualize the section on Civil War memory by showing how public history venues portray slavery. In my historiography as a whole, I argue that living history is a powerful form of education because it helps audience members to think of slavery as something real as opposed to something theoretical.

Primary Sources

The most important primary sources for this project are my oral history interviews. I conducted these interviews with Naomi Glaser, a living historian, and Joseph McGill, the founder of the Slave Dwelling Project. These interviews helped me to gain a more personal perspective on how historical interpreters can use living history to teach about slavery. Both interviews are integral to the project, both in the written portion and the podcast and I use them as key evidence in supporting my argument that living history is a valuable way of educating the public about slavery.



Cheyney McKnight, founder of Not Your Momma's History, wearing historical clothing

Conclusions

To conclude this project, I emphasize the importance of living history. Today, many people only have a basic understanding of slavery's history. Living history is useful in this case because it can help them to think of slavery as a historical reality, rather than as simply an abstract idea. Additionally, many living history events provide spaces where people can have candid conversations about racism and slavery's legacy. In this way, living history events connect education about history with modern racial issues. While there is still much to be learned about the relationship between living history and its application as an interpretive tool in addressing historic issues of slavery, doing so may lead to reparations for past wrongs.