HIDDEN CITY
EXPLORING PHILADELPHIA'S URBAN LANDSCAPE

Public Art Examines Freedom and Slavery at Declaration House

AUGUST 8, 2024 | by Amy Cohen

Sonya Clark's *Declaration House* exhibition at 7th and Market Streets. | Photo: Steve Weinik for Monument Lab

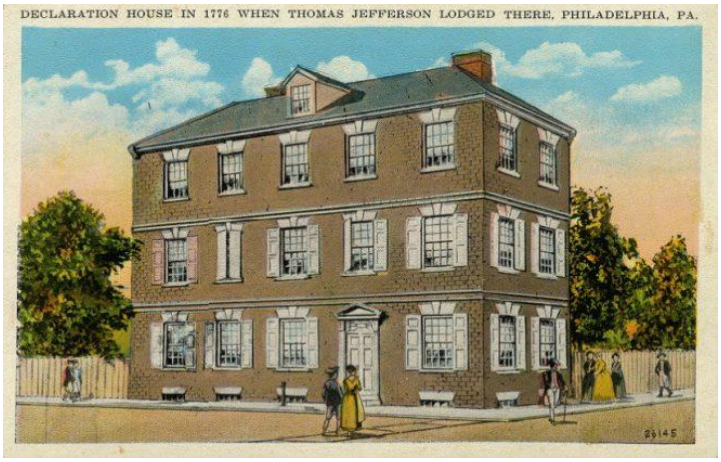
When Thomas Jefferson penned the words "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," he was the enslaver of scores of Black people back home in Virginia. This fact may be familiar to Hidden City readers. It is less well-known, however, that when Jefferson came to Philadelphia as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, he was accompanied by a 14-year-old enslaved boy. The boy served as his valet, on call 24 hours a day to take care of Jefferson's clothing, grooming, and other personal needs. He may well have been in the room, or at least not far from it, when Jefferson inked his most famous lines. This boy, Robert Hemmings, was also the half-brother of Jefferson's wife and the future uncle of Jefferson's children by Hemmings' enslaved sister Sally. Hemmings' presence during that long, hot summer of 1776 adds a layer of complexity to the hypocrisy inherent in the Declaration of Independence, our quintessential founding document.

This complexity is at the heart of *Declaration House*, an art and history exhibition on the southwest corner of 7th and Market Streets curated by Monument Lab. Enormous blinking eyes fill the windows of Declaration House, a 1976 reproduction of the home Hemmings and Jefferson stayed in as the Declaration of Independence was being drafted. The installation is the brainchild of renowned artist Sonya Clark who was challenged by Monument Lab to bring Hemmings to the center of the question, "What does the Declaration of Independence mean to us today?"

Given that no known images of Hemmings exist, Clark sought to represent his presence by showcasing the eyes of descendants of his extended family, people who share Hemmings' genetic material. A fortuitous and unplanned collaboration with Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and the Getting Word African American Oral History Project expanded the project to include the eyes of descendants of all the families enslaved at Monticello. Clark led a team that took video portraits of people ranging in age from seven to over 70. Images from Monticello's archives were animated to include the eyes of deceased family members from as long ago as the Civil War.

On the surface, Clark's work, "The Descendants of Monticello," is simply a rotating set of blinking eyes projected onto screens that are housed in the windows of an ersatz Colonial-era building. If you happen to spot it as you wait for the bus on Market Street or catch a glimpse as you walk by, it will strike you perhaps as odd, or melancholy, or strangely haunting. But if you linger a bit and ponder all that this installation conveys, it may just shift how you see the city of Philadelphia, the United States of America, and the Declaration of Independence.

An Essential Crossroads



A postcard depicting what the Graff House, where Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independance, would have looked like in 1776. | Image courtesy of The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

The southwest corner of 7th and Market Streets, if shown in time-lapse photography from Jefferson's time to ours, would reveal a microcosm of Philadelphia history. The house was erected in 1775 for German American brick maker Jacob Graff and his wife Maria, on land purchased from Edmund Physick, the British-born agent of William Penn who was one of the founders of the American Philosophical Society. When Jefferson rented the furnished second floor of the newly-built home, 7th and High (Market) Streets was in the outskirts of the city, surrounded by open fields and across the street from a stable. The location was desirable to Jefferson, as he sought the quiet needed for a serious writing project. Hemmings likely slept in the attic or in the hallway outside of Jefferson's bedroom.

After two years, the Graff family sold the house to neighbor Jabob Hiltzheimer, a German immigrant who perished, like so many other late 18th-century Philadelphians, during the yellow fever epidemic. The house was then sold to brothers Simon and Hyman Gratz, members of a prominent Jewish merchant family. Also known as loyal patriots and generous philanthropists, they were founders of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and their estate established Gratz College.

As Market Street became increasingly commercial, the building, to which the Gratz family had added a fourth floor, housed a printing company. In 1883, the structure was torn down. At one point, a bank designed by Frank Furness stood on the site. From the late 1940s through at least the late 1960s, the Tom Thumb dining counter and take-out stand occupied the corner.

Tom Thumb diner was built in the site of the Graff House, which was demolished in 1883. | Photo courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center

A Lit Brothers advertisement from the July 4, 1960 issue of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*reads, “Two good American institutions, the hot dog and the hamburger, stand as testimonials to our nation’s neglect of ‘one of the notable sites in the world.’” Lit Brothers invited potential customers to view a replica of the historic house displayed in a store window. In 1963, a state historical marker signifying the site as the place where Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence was installed on 7th Street next to the popular lunch spot.

Eventually, the property was incorporated into Independence National Historical Park. In 1975, the impending Bicentennial inspired the National Park Service to build a reconstructed version of the Graff House along with a Brutalist visitor’s center adjacent to the site. Although Declaration House has been closed to visitors since 2013, there are plans to refurbish and improve the structure in time for the Semi quincentennial in 2026.

All Roads Lead to 7th Street?


The rebuilt Declaration House upon completion in 1975. | Photo courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Research Center

If the corner of 7th and Market Streets is a microcosm of Philadelphia, Monument Lab director Paul Farber is convinced that 7th Street from Walnut to Race Streets is Philadelphia’s archetypal street. Consider the wealth of cultural sites (PhillyCam, WHYY, the African American Museum of Philadelphia), retail establishments (Jewelers’ Row, Lit Brothers), city buildings (the Independence

Branch of Free Library, Constitution High School), and federal sites (the Federal Reserve Bank, the James A. Byrne United States Courthouse, and a federal detention center unfortunately sited across from the African American Museum).

7th Street also contains two of our most controversial, yet promising empty buildings: the former Police Administration Building (aka the Roundhouse) and the now-vacant Philadelphia History Museum at the Atwater Kent. This stretch from Washington Square to Franklin Square touches on Washington Square West, Market East, Old City, Chinatown, and Center City, but it is not fully part of any of these neighborhoods. Should the proposed Philadelphia 76ers arena ever be built, the 7th Street corridor promises to transform in ways yet to be seen.

African Americans in Old Philadelphia

John Trumbull's 1819 painting, *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776*. | Image courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery

The Declaration House project is about so much more than its historic location. The colossal eyes gazing out are sending a message about reversing centuries of intentional erasure. Our collective view of the signing of the Declaration of Independence looks something like the image above. What we don't see is that the hallways and outdoor areas just beyond this room would have been populated with enslaved people ready to attend to the needs of the delegates who had brought them to this city. 41 of the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence were enslavers.

Black people had been on the shores of the Delaware River since before the arrival of William Penn. By 1776, Philadelphia had many Black residents. The area we now call Washington Square was a potter's field and a community gathering place for both the enslaved majority and the less numerous free Black people. The Forten family, for example, had been in Philadelphia for four generations and was able to garner a bit of wealth by working at the busy Delaware River port. Nine-year-old James Forten, who had been educated at the Friends' African School, was present when the Declaration of Independence was read aloud in public for the first time. Forten went on to serve in the Continental Army, run a highly successful sailmaking business, and become a financial and moral leader of the Black community.

By the time Jefferson returned to Philadelphia in the 1790s to serve as Secretary of State in George Washington's cabinet, the city was not only the national capital, but was also emerging as the national center of free Black life. Hemmings' brother James was accompanying Jefferson at this time, and he would certainly have seen and interacted with members of the city's vibrant, ambitious, and growing Black community.

Making the Invisible, Visible

A 1955 advertisement for Dromedary pound cake mix perpetuates a whitewashed version of Monticello, the home of Thomas and Martha Jefferson. | Image: Etsy

Jefferson's image is widespread and well-known. It graces our nickel, the $2 bill, and many public buildings including the Market Street side of the Declaration House annex. Of Hemmings, there is no likeness. Disparity exists in the written record as well. Historians have access to over 50,000 letters written by Jefferson. There are only four known letters written by people he enslaved. (During the time the Declaration House project was underway, the marriage certificate of Hemmings' daughter was discovered, revealing his signature. That is why I am spelling his last name as Hemmings, while using the more common Hemings for the rest of his family.) Black people outnumbered whites in and around Monticello by a factor of about 11 to one, but mainstream historical narratives long strained to portray Jefferson's home, the only private home on U.S. currency, as a white space. There is a stark asymmetry between Black and white images, words, and presence in popular history surrounding Jefferson. These multiple and extreme imbalances in Jeffersonian history are emblematic of the challenges we face in trying to get a more inclusive view of our nation's history.

By using the eyes of the descendants of Monticello in her work, Clark admonishes us to remember that Black people have been a part of the American story since long before the creation of the United States. The work also reminds us that Jefferson's mountaintop home, like so much of the country's wealth, was built by enslaved labor. The oversized, watchful eyes in the Declaration House windows bid us to broaden and to complicate our understanding of the founding generation. Like *Hamilton: The Musical,* the *Declaration House* exhibition provokes us to picture groups of people well beyond a bunch of white men in wigs and britches as being integral to the story of American independence.

The Hemingses of Monticello

A photograph from the early 1900s of Monticello. | Photo courtesy of Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

While *Declaration House* asks us to think about the absence of Black people in the standard American historical narrative in general, it also speaks specifically to the families enslaved by Jefferson. Jefferson, who had been attended to by enslaved people since childhood, claimed to despise the institution, but he never hated it enough to rise above his own self-interest as a large landholder. One way he assuaged his conscience was by the favorable, albeit complicated, treatment he showed the Hemings family.

The matriarch, Elizabeth Hemings, came to Monticello following the death of Jefferson's father-in-law, John Wayles. Accompanying her were her children, six of whom were fathered by Wayles. Members of the Hemings family were simultaneously Jefferson's in-laws and his property. As such, they were set apart from the scores of other enslaved people that Jefferson owned and inherited from his father-in-law.

As they became young men, Elizabeth's sons Robert and James Hemings were trained in skilled trades, a barber and a chef, respectively, permitted to work for wages they could keep, and allowed to come and go as they pleased. These privileges were conditional: the brothers had to be willing to serve Jefferson when he asked. Robert and James were the only two people Jefferson freed during his lifetime, although Jefferson was deeply hurt by Robert's request for freedom. It was with great reluctance that he allowed his erstwhile manservant to live permanently with his wife in Richmond rather than to remain tied to Jefferson at Monticello.

A Family Secret

Artist Sonya Clark in front of her installation "The Descendants of Monticello" at Independence National Historical Park. | Photo: Steve Weinik for Monument Lab

The best known of Elizabeth's children, of course, was Sally Hemings. Years after the death of his wife, Jefferson had six children with Sally, his wife's half-sister who was 30 years his junior. Four of

their children lived to adulthood. Where this relationship sits on the continuum between rape and a loving connection will never be fully understood. Their two oldest children left Monticello as young adults and lived the rest of their lives as white people. The two younger children were freed in Jefferson's will, fulfilling a pledge he had made to Sally Hemings decades earlier when their intimate liaison began.

Jefferson, a profligate spender with a taste for luxury, was perpetually in debt. At the time of his death, 90 percent of his wealth was in his human property. Thus, unlike Jefferson's offspring, the other people enslaved at Monticello were sold and scattered as his executors settled his estate.

Not surprisingly, Jefferson's white descendants did not acknowledge that they shared an ancestor with members of the Hemings family. Repudiation of the Jefferson-Hemings bond by family members, scholars, and the public hardened through the decades as Founding Fathers mythology proliferated.

"The Descendants of Monticello" is on view at Declaration House until September 8. | Photo: Steve Weinik for Monument Lab

In 1998, however, science got in the way of these denials when DNA evidence showed a link between Jefferson and the Hemings family. In the 2008 Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winning *The Hemingses of Monticello,* Annette Gordon-Reed put her degrees in both law and history to work to prove beyond a doubt that Sally Hemings bore Jefferson's children.
Although the Thomas Jefferson Historical Society was founded in 2000 to continue the fight to deny Jefferson's paternity, the 21st century has mostly seen widespread acknowledgement of the Hemingses' blood ties to the Jefferson family. Monument Lab's partners at Monticello and Getting Word are leaders in bringing these formerly concealed stories to light. Their work leads us to wrestle with the enormous complexity, the deep connections, and the profound contradictions that are embodied in the gigantic eyes currently in the windows of Declaration House.

The official closing date for "The Descendants of Monticello" installation has been extended to December 1. The interactive *Declaration House* exhibition ends September 6. If you go between noon and 5 p.m. Friday through Sunday, step into the courtyard where you can get more information and can also express what the Declaration of Independence means to you. Responses will be shared with the National Park Service. View the eyes projection any evening after dark for the next three months when the display reaches its full power. At the very least, make sure you pass by this remarkable Philadelphia crossroads and get a glance of a powerful, memorable work.