

Public Witness Testimony
Submitted to the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives
Regarding FY 2015 Funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities
Waddell W. Stillman, President, Historic Hudson Valley, April 10, 2014

Historic Hudson Valley (HHV) is pleased to submit written testimony to the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior supporting FY 2015 funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) at the administration's requested level of \$146.02 million.

Introduction

Good morning. My name is Waddell Stillman and I am the President of Historic Hudson Valley. We are a 63-year-old regional history museum with a mission of preservation and education modeled after that of Colonial Williamsburg. We operate a network of six National Historic Landmarks in the Hudson River Valley of New York. Each year, some 250,000 visitors come to our sites for tours, school programs, and cultural festivals—helping to create jobs and pump vital tourism dollars into the economy.

The NEH has had a far-reaching impact on our organization since the 1970s. Through strategic investments, the NEH has catalyzed pivotal projects that have illuminated overlooked American history, sparked education programs that address Common Core learning standards, and leveraged significant private funding.

Just recently, the NEH's support leveraged the largest programmatic grant in Historic Hudson Valley's history—\$643,000 from The New York Community Trust. Quite simply, neither this grant nor the resulting interdisciplinary school program called *Pretends to Be Free: Imagining Runaway Slaves* would have transpired without the validation of the NEH. Some 14,000 New York City public schoolchildren will take away powerful lessons from this program. Our focus will be underserved kids from Harlem, Upper Manhattan, and the Bronx, including many from Congressman José E. Serrano's 15th congressional district—the poorest congressional district in the nation.

But, before I go any further, let me first turn to the 18th century, a time when slavery thrived in the North and advertisements like the one I'm about to read appeared in nearly every newspaper. These ads form the basis of *Pretends to Be Free* and serve as important tools for teaching young people about a painful chapter in our nation's history.

New York *Gazette*, September 30, 1762:

“RUN AWAY last Sunday Evening from his Master, in Orange County, Johannes Blauveltd, Blacksmith, a Negro Fellow, named as he says, ADONIA, but by us, DUCA. He is a yellow Complexion, being a mixed Breed, speaks and reads pretty good LOW DUTCH, and speaks little ENGLISH: Is a very good BLACK SMITH by Trade, and can make Leather Shoes, and do something at the CARPENTERS TRADE, is about 5 and a half Feet high, full Faced, black Hair, but cut off about one Inch long, is 20 or 22 Years old ... He had been whip'd the day before he went off, which may be seen pretty much on his right side, he pretends to be

free, and perhaps will get a Pass for that Purpose. Whoever takes up and secures the said Fellow, so that his Master may have him again, shall have THREE POUNDS Reward, and all reasonable Charges paid by JOHANNES BLAUVELDT.”

Imagine seeing such an ad today in any context, let alone in a New York daily newspaper. Imagine sitting in a 7th-grade classroom in the Bronx and seeing these words for the first time. What would your reaction be?

Let me read to you the words of two students who participated in our pilot of the *Pretends to Be Free* program:

“The biases contained in an ad written by a slave owner affected me greatly in part because I am an African American myself. The ways they describe slaves were that they were like lost dogs, not as humans. They make slaves look very bad, especially if it wasn’t their first time ever running away. The use of terms like “negro” affected me in a way that I have never been affected before in my life.” – Kahlilah L., Ossining High School, Ossining, New York

“Slavery is always associated with the South, from times Pre-Civil War. Many fail to recognize that New York, a northern state, used to be the largest slave-holding state of the North during the 18th century. The way African Americans were treated, born into cruelty and unjust realities, looked down upon and not even recognized as humans, were all results of one genetic trait: their skin color.” – Kirsten S., Ossining High School, Ossining, New York

This summer, we will train the first group of teachers to present *Pretends to Be Free* in New York City classrooms. They will work side-by-side with students, using these riveting runaway slave ads as windows into the lives of enslaved individuals in 18th-century New York. Each student will create a piece of art and an accompanying essay, which will be posted on a website. The project is a sterling example of how strong humanities programming can address the Common Core and complement other disciplines including the arts and STEM.

Strategic Investments

Long before President Barack Obama took office and *12 Years a Slave* won the Academy Award for Best Picture, the NEH recognized the importance of illuminating the history of slavery in the colonial North. *Pretends to Be Free* is among a number of school workshops, after-school enrichment programs, and internships that resulted from the NEH’s investment in our multi-year effort at Philipsburg Manor to present the too often overlooked history of northern slavery.

Philipsburg is a living history museum located in Congresswoman Nita Lowey’s 17th congressional district, about 30 miles north of Midtown Manhattan. Congresswoman Lowey has been a long-standing champion of our work at Philipsburg, especially education programs that serve some 15,000 schoolchildren a year, many from underserved communities.

In the 18th-century, Philipsburg Manor was a provisioning plantation that served as a trading outpost of Adolph Philipse, one of the wealthiest New York City businessmen of his day and one of the largest slaveholders in New York State. Most importantly, Philipsburg Manor was operated by a community of enslaved men and women including Caesar the miller, Dimond the

riverboat pilot, Massy a dairymaid, and 20 other enslaved individuals from Africa and the West Indies.

Before the NEH invested \$340,000 in planning and implementation grants, this history was in the dark, both at Philipsburg Manor and in the larger context of American social studies. Not only was the educational focus at Philipsburg narrowly trained on the lives of the Philipse family, but our national understanding of slavery was largely relegated to a textbook study of the American South. We at HHV had this powerful history in our hands, yet we had not fully grasped it. In short, before this NEH-funded project, HHV—and, by extension, educators throughout the country—fell short of achieving our full potential. Today, Philipsburg Manor presents the history of northern colonial slavery and its relationship to the commercial, economic, and cultural development of New York. In fact, it is the only professionally-staffed historic site in the nation to focus exclusively on this topic.

Moreover, the NEH decided to invest in this material at a time when no other funder would. Even though slavery and its legacy are inextricably part of American history—and despite its enduring relevance today—the prospect of taking on slavery interpretation at a northern historic site was not a popular one in the 1990s. However, the NEH recognized that it could not overlook this uniquely American story. By investing in this content early and prudently, it laid the groundwork for what would be HHV’s most significant and lasting contribution to the interpretation of our nation’s history.

Community Engagement

The NEH-funded reinterpretation of Philipsburg Manor profoundly impacted HHV’s service to the community. For example, it is directly responsible for another initiative that serves schoolchildren in Congressman Serrano’s Bronx congressional district: our partnership with Rocking the Boat.

Historic Hudson Valley maintains a decade-long partnership with Rocking the Boat, a youth development organization which provides at-risk teens with hands-on boatbuilding experience and on-water environmental education. Over the years, HHV has hosted Rocking the Boat students at Philipsburg Manor where they have built boats from scratch using traditional hand tools and wearing period clothing. One of those students was a young woman named Tracy Jonsson, who, while delving into the past, discovered her own future aspirations. In the years since, Tracy went on to earn her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in historic preservation at Roger Williams University in Rhode Island. Tracy’s experience illustrates the continuum of learning and service opportunities available at historic sites like Philipsburg—opportunities that blossomed from a small seed investment from the NEH.

Support from the NEH also led to the establishment of HHV’s African American Advisory Board, from which we recruited Lynda Jones, our current Director of Human Resources. The African American Advisory Board guided the Philipsburg reinterpretation and continues to help shape a number of educational workshops, with titles such as *African Americans in Search of Freedom* and *Slavery in the Colonial North*, and public programs such as Pinkster, an African-American celebration of spring.

Institutional Impact

The NEH's investment in our work has been tactical, forward-thinking, and collaborative. We have seen firsthand how NEH staff review projects with extreme care to ensure that they represent the best possible use of government funds. Grants are issued only to those projects that embody the highest levels of impact, relevance, and sustainability.

HHV has received seven NEH grants over the past 35 years. From challenge grants to public programming dollars to seed funding that established our fund-raising department, each of these investments marked a pivotal moment in HHV's development. Additionally, our colleagues at the NEH have been hands-on, insightful partners. They have provided unwavering guidance on what at times was a rocky journey in presenting the difficult subject of slavery. Most recently, they have been an invaluable resource for best practices in digital technology in museums, inspiring exciting new 21st-century projects at our organization.

HHV is a prime example of how early NEH support can be used to leverage additional funds and deepen an organization's reach in the community. The NEH-funded reinterpretation of Philipsburg Manor has been a major catalyst for attracting support from corporations like The New York Life Insurance Company and foundations including the William Randolph Hearst Foundation. Prominent individuals have supported and associated with the project, including the actress and singer Vanessa Williams and Richard D. Parsons, the former Chairman of Citigroup and currently Council Co-chair of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

The NEH imprimatur has dramatically raised the visibility of HHV's National Historic Landmarks. It has strengthened our relationships with the surrounding community, from colleges and universities to sister museums and local school districts.

Conclusion

We at Historic Hudson Valley can attest to the vital role the humanities play in K-12 education, economic development, and the presentation of history for future generations. Robust investment in the NEH is critical, particularly at a time when many government, private foundation, and academic leaders are emphasizing the role of the humanities in children's development of 21st-century skills. Moreover, continued federal support of this type of programming demonstrates that the government values its history and is committed to preserving it in perpetuity.

As Tracy Jonsson, the former Rocking the Boat student, astutely observed:

“If we don't identify what the past has been like, what people's experience has been, we can't build an equitable, sustainable future.”