
Space in the Early American City

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It remains an astonishing fact that historians of all stripes continue to wrestle with the evidential legitimacy and interpretive opportunities afforded by the worlds of objects and images people made and the ways in which the critical space of “things” can shape and direct our understanding of the past in new and important ways. Despite notable contributions, the interpretation of urban life in the early republic remains curiously detached from the material substance of the lives of those who lived in the early American city. Our challenge is twofold. First, we need to commit ourselves with greater confidence to the integration of the evidence of material culture into the history of the early republic. Second, our ability to make this happen demands that we truly embrace interdisciplinary approaches—and this means that we embrace different strategies for the consideration of evidence as well as underutilized bodies of evidence.

A 2003 roundtable discussion on how best to incorporate the lives of George Washington’s enslaved servants into the interpretation of his house and the larger contexts, both historical and political, of Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia illustrates the problem and points to the need to incorporate material culture more effectively.

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George Washington's Philadelphia presidential mansion has been the subject of a thoroughgoing research effort. Edward Lawler's detailed history of the house mapped out the physical history of the site and the evolution of the building over time, and it is his work that provides the basis for the observations about the layout and appearance of the house.¹ Lawler reconstructed plans of the house as it stood at the time the Washingtons lived there. Coupled with the information on the house, Lawler also charted Washington's lodging assignments for his household, including free and enslaved servants. His discussion of the location of the principal reception rooms on the ground floor and the president's private chambers in the upper stories is well grounded in the documentary record. Similarly, the National Park Service invested considerable effort in researching the site and its occupants. Their work extended beyond the written record and included archaeological explorations with particular attention to an icehouse that stood near the rear of the property. The combined evidence—written, architectural, and archaeological—for the first president's urban mansion is extraordinary in its variety, depth, and, significantly, its ambiguities.

What we do not know about the president's house focuses on the ways in which its many and varied residents inhabited those spaces and what those spaces signified to them and to those around them. Given the historic proximity of the president's house to Independence Hall (less than 500 feet) and all the buildings and public spaces that housed the operations of the newly formed federal government, we are compelled to consider the broader interpretive implications of urban space and culture. An issue that underscores the difficulty and importance of these considerations for writing inclusive histories of the early American republic is how we narrate the lives of the occupants of the president's house. Washington's correspondence, for example, clearly documents the presence of the enslaved Africans forced to accompany the president's family from Mount Vernon to the streets of Philadelphia, but it provides no commentary on their lives in the Washington household. Washington wrote at length about the remodeling of the house in preparation for his tenure, and in those letters he described changes he wished

1. Edward Lawler Jr., "The President's House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 136 (2002): 5-95.

undertaken for the accommodation of his servants. Prominent among the renovations were provisions for servant housing and work spaces including the conversion of a smokehouse, the division of the attic into additional lodging rooms, and the construction of a servants' hall for dining.²

The interpretive debates engendered by the lives of servants (slave and free) in George Washington's presidential mansion cannot be resolved in a single narrative strand. Rather, those debates respond to narrative demands—the need to relate specific histories to particular, all too often unarticulated ideological ends. In essence, we write the histories that for varying political and narrative reasons need telling at a given moment in time. Moreover, the question of free and enslaved servants is not just one of presences, but of experiences, contributions, and legacies. The need to convey this history invites the development of new strategies for writing the spatial history of the urban world of the early republic. At the heart of any strategy, however, is the attainment of specified goals. We can readily craft multiple narratives that incorporate all of the actors, but which of those stories should receive privilege of place? Narrative preeminence is situational and ideological—we advance the narratives that most need telling at a given moment in time. So it is with the Washington household's extended sojourn in the Philadelphia presidential mansion and what it tells us about the deeply conflicted and contested terrain of urban space, social interaction, and political ideologies. I do not propose to resolve those ongoing debates here but instead to offer observations on how we might begin to think about the materiality of experience as an opportunity to develop open-ended approaches to research on and interpretations of the city in the early republic.

Among Washington's many penned observations about the remodeling of his Philadelphia residence and the relocation of his household to the new capital were a series of comments about servant staffing and accommodations. In a letter written from Baltimore in September 1790, the president noted: "In my last I left it with you to decide on the propriety of bringing the Washer women. I do so still. But with respect to Mrs. Lewis and her daughter, I wish it may not be done, especially as it is in contemplation to transplant Hercules and Nathan from the Kitchen at Mount Vernon to that in Philadelphia; and because the dirty figures of

2. Mark A. Mastromarino, ed., *The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series* (Charlottesville, 1996), 6: 397.

Mrs. Lewis and her daughter will not be a pleasant sight in view (as the Kitchen always will be) of principal entertaining rooms in our new habitation."³

Even as a fragment taken from an extensive correspondence, this brief passage encourages us to think about the character of spatial experience in Philadelphia at the close of the eighteenth century. First, Washington identifies a set of actors: himself, Tobias Lear (his on-site representative in Philadelphia), Mrs. Lewis and her daughter (white household servants who worked in the Washington household in New York City), Hercules and Nathan (enslaved African servants from Mount Vernon), and the implied guests in the "principal entertaining rooms."⁴ Second, Washington notes a network of connected domestic spaces, specifically the kitchen and entertaining rooms, implicitly the back garden and kitchen dooryard. His expressed anxiety about actors and spaces focuses on the ways in which spaces could become transgressive. To gain a larger sense of the ways in which urban domestic space worked relies on an understanding of the president's house as an object.

Despite debates over the details, our understanding of George Washington's presidential townhouse is generally resolved. Extensively reworked and enlarged within its eighteenth-century lot lines, the house reflected upon in Washington's correspondence began its life in the mid-eighteenth century. Two rooms deep, the brick dwelling occupied by the Washington household stood a full three stories in height and was organized around a variation of a formal side-entry plan supported by a complex array of back buildings including kitchen, wash house, stable, and ice house. In form, appearance, and detailing, it was an urban house closely identified with city elites in every English-speaking seaport city on both sides of the Atlantic. Houses of this quality and organization stood in London, Bristol, Hull, Boston, and Charleston. They were primarily the residences of families grown wealthy and powerful through trade. The first spatial contexts that concern us here, however, are those identified with Mrs. Lewis, her daughter, Hercules, and Nathan—the kitchen—and those with the polite guests in the "principal entertaining

3. *Ibid.*, 409.

4. The Washingtons ultimately left Nathan at Mount Vernon and brought Hercules's son Richmond to Philadelphia in his stead. Edward Lawler Jr., personal communication (Jan. 22, 2004).

rooms”—the state dining room and adjacent family dining room on the ground floor and “two public (drawing) Rooms” in the second story.⁵ In addition to these rooms, Washington identified the sightlines across the paved yard that linked them, fearing that the view of the “dirty” Mrs. Lewis and her daughter might offend his guests. Significantly, Washington’s enslaved servants do not figure into this statement of offensive visibility.

In Washington’s view, the best rooms in the house—those set aside for formal receptions and entertainments—were also the most vulnerable domestic spaces. As settings for the display of power and ritualized events such as levees or state dinners that bound elites together and provided them the means of distinguishing themselves from each other and *hoi poloi*, but these spaces were ritualized through performance and generally accessible only by invitation or service. The view from Washington’s nineteen-foot bow window, an improvement he added in the remodeling of the house, took in the kitchen, the dooryard, and a range of other service structures. The kitchen dooryard and paved yard were functionally conflicted spaces. Envisioned as an occasional entertaining space and visible through the dining room bow window during levees, the area was kept well swept and reflected Washington’s concern with the symbolic representation of regularity and order in every aspect of domestic, social, military, and political life. Still, the proximity of the paved yard to the kitchen and the inevitable overflow of tasks related to cooking, washing, and cleaning along with service traffic including deliveries and temporary storage left the area within the gaze of the bow window vulnerable to the disorderly aspects of everyday life. The amenity of a paved yard enabled servants to sweep these workspaces—a definite visual enhancement over the common alternative of a packed-earth yard scattered with broken ceramics, shell, bone, and other household debris. Washington’s concern with the view through his bow window from his “principal entertaining rooms” was precisely one of the threat of dirtiness and disorder. What was deemed “dirty,” however, was not so much the physical space of the kitchen dooryard but of the people who stood there. Moreover his notion of the offending denizens of his space appears to have extended in this brief passage only to his

5. Mastromarino, ed., *The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series*, 6: 397.

white servants and not to the enslaved Hercules and his son Richmond who traveled to Philadelphia in Nathan's place.

My intent here is not to interpret the dynamics of the domestic spaces within and around Washington's Philadelphia townhouse but to suggest strategies through which we might think about those spaces and their place in larger social, political, and cultural contexts. Space—both architectural and experiential—lies at the heart of interpreting the lives of all the residents within Washington's Philadelphia house. Spatiality, however, is an idea that entails much more than the re-creation of physical settings for the placement of individual events. At its most basic level space superintends notions of form in its physical sense. We can think of urban spaces as very formal constellations; the plan of the city, for example, at its largest, or the arrangement of objects within a particular room at its most intimate and specific. These are the kinds of urban space with which we are most familiar and comfortable—spaces that are tangible. Space also is an abstract construction based on perceptions of borders and bodies: those objects that bound as well as those objects that inhabit. Space is experiential. We know space, even in its most abstracted sense, as a category of experience within which the body and/or the imagination works. Space is inscriptive. That is, space can never be empty in the sense that it is always meaningful in some context, especially in the context of describing how people organized and made sense of their lives simultaneously at their most intimate level and most public. Given all these qualities of space (and there are surely others), then we can imagine overlapping categories of space, for example, critical space, contested/conflicted space, invasive space, negotiated space. And, we can use terms like silence, noise, anonymity, fiction, and history to describe spatial "content."

A significant element in Washington's statement is his perception of the dirtiness of Mrs. Lewis and her daughter. In Washington's comments we can deduce that her dirtiness was personal and invasive. The very idea of dirtiness and women's bodies was deeply ingrained in the popular imagination of the early modern world, and its appearance in the context of Washington's remark immediately engages a broader constellation of associations. Although we cannot explore these connections here, we should realize that the perception of dirtiness constituted a visible expression of cultural and social disorder that could be read as a metaphor for civic tensions with the larger society. The appearance of irregularity in a spatial setting (composed of the principal entertaining rooms, the

kitchen, and the sightlines that connected them) that was simultaneously public and private preyed on Washington's acute awareness of the symbolic impact of his actions, the creation of precedent, and his insecurities about the ways in which his own person refracted perceptions of the new nation. The dirty Mrs. Lewis and her daughter, when viewed from the formal environs of the president's public rooms, reflected badly not just on the president and his family but on the turbulent, fractious character of the new nation.

Washington's brief commentary reveals the ways in which perceptions of the physical realities of urban space implicate and are implicated by larger concerns. Robert Blair St. George provides a way for us to engage and unravel these relationships through his notion of the "poetics of implication":

Implication opens to view much of what we normally term the symbolic; however, it exposes it not by reifying "meaning" in isolated events but by suggesting an open-ended skein of entangled, involved descriptive passages that loop back continually and bring normally latent tissues that tie one referent to another, and another, and another, and . . . into public view.⁶

Key to St. George's poetics are the notions that cultural productions are systemically related and possess the capacity to convey an array of meanings symbolically. St. George's poetics of implication owes much to the concept of "haunting" advanced in Susan Stewart's writings on poetry. Stewart observes that, "The poet needs a continuing reader—both the social and historical context in which the poem is on a continuum with other poems, making it intelligible" as "knowledge of reference necessarily withers, the poem does not lose fullness or complexity but rather acquires a residue of accrued meanings that expand the possibilities for poetry's significance."⁷

The spatialities of the new republic, however, were experiential in nature—and it was the body that both occupied and defined those spatialities. The polite sensibilities of Washington and his guests were offended, not by the prospect of the kitchen dooryard itself but by the

6. Robert Blair St. George, *Conversing by Signs: Poetics of Implication in Colonial New England Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 3.

7. Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago, 2001), 117.

prospect of the “dirty” Mrs. Lewis in it. Thus, Washington’s letter in its discussion of people, spaces, and views communicates the symbolic substance of experience only in implicit terms. What Washington’s letter also communicates is the subjective nature of urban space as a category of social and symbolic experience. His immediate concerns are his own, but they quickly expand to include his perception of those who share his sensibilities. It is their space that is threatened by the physical presence of the “dirty” Mrs. Lewis and her daughter. But what of Mrs. Lewis’s view from the dooryard looking up to the best rooms in the house visible from her station through the bow windows that break the plane of the rear elevation? And, what of Hercules and Richmond—the enslaved Africans who are present but not included in the same perceptions of dirtiness that condemn Mrs. Lewis?

The tension between individual experience and collective sense remains problematic at the center of these discussions. Numerous scholars have investigated the dynamics of place that create sense of space and in doing so have demonstrated the ways in which actions and objects that seem profoundly singular in fact provide windows into larger patterns of association. Dell Upton provocatively addresses the issues of the “practice of place” and the interplay of its many subjectivities.⁸ “Everyday life,” Upton observes, “can be oppressive or liberating, depending on the ways it is organized temporally and spatially.” It shaped, he continues, “selfhood and personhood through material, and particularly bodily, practices.” Practice, in turn, is shaped by routine, repetition, occasion, and significantly unpredictability. Thus, the spatialities of everyday life achieve the status of actors in shaping our understanding of broader, more abstract ideological, social, and economic contexts in the urban worlds of the early republic. In the end we can begin to imagine how the prospect of the “dirty Mrs. Lewis” returning the gaze of the Washingtons’ guests as she stood in the kitchen dooryard of the president’s Philadelphia townhouse played to the cultural anxieties and political tensions that attended the struggle to shape the discourses of the new nation.

8. Dell Upton, “The City as Material Culture,” in Mary C. Beaudry and Ann Yentsch, eds., *The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology* (Boca Raton, FL, 1992); Upton, “Another City: The Urban Cultural Landscape in the Early Republic,” in Catherine E. Hutchins, ed., *Everyday Life in the Early Republic* (Winterthur, 1994); Upton, “Architecture in Everyday Life,” *New Literary History*, 33 (2002): 707–23.

9. Upton, “Architecture in Everyday Life,” 720.