

# The Public Historian

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for Cherokee Nation Cultural Tourism who served as curator, working with Southwest Exhibit Concepts who prepared the displays and Sikes Abernathie Architects who planned and supervised the project.<sup>1</sup> Narrative panels are written in a casual but grammatically correct style and adequately explain developments to visitors not familiar with the subjects. Effective use of timelines and specific dates provide a chronology but not a list of events. Historical documents, artifacts, and photographs are drawn from the National Archives, National Park Service, the Oklahoma Historical Society, and from the holdings of the Cherokee Nation and local citizens. The individual vignettes they create enhance and exemplify the period and the people. For residents of northwest Arkansas, southwest Missouri, and southeast Kansas, as well as eastern Oklahoma, visiting this historic site of the Cherokee Nation is an easy day trip and for others passing through the area it is a worthwhile stop.

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1. Travis Owens to Bill Corbett, e-mail message, November 8, 2012.

*The Choice: Risking Your Life for Freedom*, Sotterley Plantation, Hollywood, Maryland. JEANNE PIRTLE, Education Director. May 25, 2013.

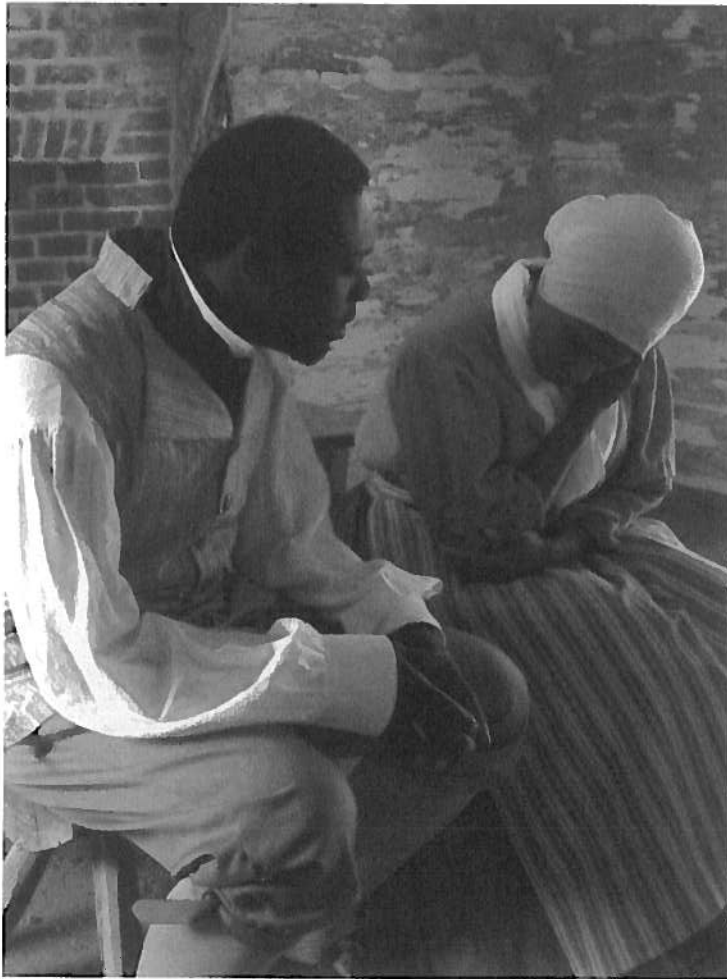
The state of Maryland has been celebrating the bicentennial of the War of 1812 since 2012, with most of the events focusing on the war through the eyes of soldiers or the average American citizen. At Sotterley Plantation, the staff chose a different story to tell. Firmly rooted on the Chesapeake Bay in southern Maryland, Sotterley Plantation dates from as early as 1700, and has played a role in every chapter of American history. Their living history event, *The Choice: Risking Your Life for Freedom*, draws on the plantation's own historical conflict in the War of 1812.

On April 2, 1814, British Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane issued a proclamation that read in part:

all persons who may be disposed to be emigrated from the United States will with their families be rec'd on board His Majesty's ships or vessels of war or at the military posts that may be established upon or near the Coast of the United States when they will have their choice of either entering into His Majesty's Sea or Land forces, or of being sent as a Free Settler to the British Possessions in North America or the West Indies, where they will meet with all due Encouragement.<sup>1</sup>

With the issuance of this proclamation, many enslaved African Americans, particularly in the Chesapeake Bay Region, were confronted with a choice—

1. Sir Alexander Cochrane, "A Proclamation," Commissioner of Public Records NSARM RG 1 vol. 111 pages 99-100 (microfilm no. 15262), (Apr. 2, 1814), <http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/africans/archives.asp?ID=70> (accessed March 20, 2013).



Peregrine Young (portrayed by Jay Hunter) urges Elcie (Shemika Berry) to ally with the British and the promise of freedom in *The Choice*, Sotterley Plantation's scripted history presentation on the War of 1812. Written by Dale Jones, directed by Dawna Diaz, costumes by Leon Wichers. (Photo courtesy of Historic Sotterley Plantation.)

ignore Cochrane's offer and remain enslaved in relative security with family, friends, and a familiar environment, or risk everything to obtain freedom in a strange land, separated from their loved ones. Using Sotterley Plantation's history as its framework, *The Choice* sets up the scenario of the time, presenting the audience with the same choice the enslaved population was forced to make when a British naval fleet appeared in the Patuxent River on the shores of Sotterley Creek in June 1814.

Upon arriving at Sotterley for the program, visitors were directed to sign-in at the warehouse, an eighteenth-century stable, where we received a calendar of events, a program, and a character card from one of the volunteers. The character cards featured a short biography of one of the forty-eight enslaved African Americans who left Sotterley in the summer of 1814. The card I



Jay Hunter masks Peregrine's emotions as he stands firm in his decision to join the British. (Photo courtesy of Historic Sotterley Plantation.)

received was of Peregrine Young, described as a domestic slave who was “a most valuable servant” of John Rousby Plater, the plantation’s owner. Each card concluded with the question and the theme of the event: “Will you run with the British or stay at Sotterley?” This question would set the tone as we progressed through the three vignettes we encountered.

I approached this living history event with an extremely critical eye. As a graduate student fresh out of my first public history course and as a museum professional, I was interested to see how effective a living history event could be, not only in general, but specifically in the treatment of the history of slavery. As an African American working in public history, I am aware of how difficult this subject matter is not only as a visitor, but also as a producer of such content. *The Choice* was scripted by Dale Jones, founder of Making History Connections, an independent company that works with museums and historic sites to create “meaningful programs and experiences that connect with visitors.” Working with historical background provided by the staff of



Sotterley Plantation owner John Rousby Plater (Stephen Rumpf)<sup>2</sup> confronts British Commodore Brown (Eric Zabiegalski) right outside his door as an interested audience looks on. (Photo courtesy of Historic Sotterley Plantation.)

Sotterley, Jones's script successfully bridged the gap between entertainment and history.

The structure of the story in three vignettes was its greatest strength. The first vignette took place in the slave cabin as we witnessed Peregrine trying to convince Elcie, a house servant, to run away with him to the British. Elcie's hesitance and eventual refusal forced visitors to ponder what they would have done in that situation. Would you risk losing everything—your family and friends, and relative security—to run to the British and be relocated in a British colony abroad as a free person? Or would you stay enslaved in that relative security amongst your loved ones? This was the strongest of the three vignettes as the dilemma it presented is relevant to the broader history of enslaved people.

The second vignette, which took place in the plantation house, provided visitors with the perspective of the plantation owner, John Plater, and his wife, Elizabeth. In the scene, the Platers are reluctant to believe that Peregrine or any of their enslaved servants would leave Sotterley; it was their home. As household items are hurriedly packed so Elizabeth can move to a safe location, the couple eventually realizes their naïveté, and Plater, as general of the local militia stays behind and prepares for the arrival of the British army. The

2. Trevor Diaz portrayed John Rousby Plater in the performance reviewed.

actors made use of the sparse furnishings in the drawing room during this scene, which helped the audience engage with their surroundings. This vignette also provided an interesting look into the dynamics of the relationships between slave owners and enslaved people. For some slave-owning families, enslaved people were viewed as members of the extended plantation family, a view that was put on display and tested in the final vignette. Now on the portico, the third vignette brings Plater and Peregrine in direct conflict with each other as the latter returns to Sotterley as an enlisted soldier in the British Colonial Marines. As visitors, we got to see the two men deal with this dramatic change in their relationship. Although Plater commanded Peregrine to return to his side, the latter stood firm as free man as he left Sotterley.

The event concluded with a question and answer period, during which Jeanne Pirtle, the education director, filled us in on what happened not only to the enslaved people of Sotterley during the war, but the larger group of Black refugees who were resettled abroad by the British. Because of my recent study of this group, this question and answer period was rather difficult for me to sit through. I understand the delicate balance that exists between wanting to share everything you know with your visitors, and not overwhelming them with information. However, as a result of the narrow focus on Peregrine Young and Elcie, I felt as though the connection between the forty-eight enslaved people who left Sotterley and the larger group of Black refugees was lacking. There was some mention of their resettlement in places like Halifax or Trinidad, but perhaps this particular program was not the correct setting for that aspect of the discussion.

Although there were some minor distractions caused by production challenges inherent in scripted reenactments (costume issues and flubbed lines), these did not undermine the power of the presentation and the intended message resonated with the group. A question posed by a visitor addressed the potential for future living history productions at Sotterley. Extremely forthcoming, Pirtle discussed the problem that museums like Sotterley face. Run by a non-profit public charity organization, Sotterley relies on the financial assistance of grants to put on such productions. It was through grants from the Maryland Arts Council, the Star Spangled 200, and a sponsorship from Old Line Bank that Sotterley was able to obtain the funding that acquired costuming and the services of Making History Connections and Dale Jones, who assisted in the grant application process. Stipends for the actors were provided through the fee that visitors paid to view the production.

Sotterley Plantation was fortunate to receive funding for this production; without it, this particular story of enslaved Americans in the War of 1812 might not have been conveyed in the compelling way that a living history production allows. Slavery is a difficult subject to handle. It is because of this difficulty that more risks should be taken to portray the lives of enslaved people. Sotterley's *The Choice* should serve as an example.

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