

Abstract from the Eighth Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference
at Yale University

Slavery and Public History: An International Symposium

November 2-4, 2006
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Hidden in the Cane: Interpreting Slavery at a Puerto Rican Hacienda

Jane Clark Chermayeff, Jane Clark Chermayeff Associates, LLC

Available online at www.yale.edu/glc/publichistory/chermayeff.pdf

For nearly 25 years Jane Clark Chermayeff & Associates (JCC&A) developed exhibitions, visitor centers, and nature reserves for the Fideicomiso de Conservación de Puerto Rico, a private non-profit organization that preserves sites of historic and natural importance. Interpretive planning and exhibition development for two projects in particular required project staff and advisers to delve into the subject of slavery in Puerto Rico: Hacienda Buena Vista near the southern town of Ponce, where enslaved Africans raised food for those at other plantations in the region, and Hacienda La Esperanza on the island's northern coast, once one of the Puerto Rico's largest sugar plantations with its greatest slave population.

Given the significant imprint slavery has left on the Puerto Rican populace in terms of its identity, racial make-up, culture, religion, music, food, language, and history, it was an essential component in discussions of the island's history,

ecology, and agriculture. Yet in the 1980s, when JCC&A began interpretive work at Hacienda Buena Vista, slavery was rarely discussed in public forums, and debates about how it could be presented at the site were strained and inconclusive. Two decades later at Hacienda La Esperanza, a younger generation of scholars and researchers from diverse fields energetically embraced the topic as central to the contemporary experience of the place. One participant in a seminal 2005 symposium, *Sugar and Slavery at Hacienda La Esperanza: Interpreting 19th-Century Slavery in Puerto Rico and the Spanish Caribbean*, suggested that narratives of slavery were the primary stories to be told there, overshadowing even the site's pre-Columbian significance and its rare biodiversity.

There is power in the experience of a place, and a key question to be answered by place-based interpretation is “How do we know what really happened here?” One source, clearly, is official documentation, including municipal slave registers, church records, court testimonials, and production inventories. From these seemingly impersonal sources, we can discover individual stories of human agency and struggle, derive details of daily life, and draw a picture of the plantation's operations and the diversity of people working there. But essential information also must be discovered “on the ground”—by exploring the landscape for clues about the practical experience of life in bondage and by recording oral histories that reflect the communal memory of slavery and its lasting reverberations.

Other inputs from a broad range of disciplines—history, folklore, musicology, nutrition, ecology, archaeology—and the participation of the community in interpretive planning efforts are vital to a more complete understanding of the complex factors that shaped and supported slavery in Puerto Rico. In the words of another participant in the 2005 symposium at La Esperanza, “There is a changed thinking about slavery and so many views of what slavery is. We have an obligation to let people know about these different points of view.”