



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Statement of the Society for American Archaeology on the Recent Action by the Board of Directors of the Montpelier Foundation to Rescind Its June 2021 Agreement with the Montpelier Descendants Community

April 12, 2022

Montpelier is a plantation in central Virginia that was established in the 1760s and was the home of James and Dolley Madison, the fourth President and First Lady of the United States. They both played enormously important roles in the creation and early history of the nation. Montpelier is a National Historic Landmark and a National Trust Historic Site. According to the National Trust, the location serves as “a monument to James Madison and the enslaved community, a museum of American history, and a center for constitutional education that engages the public with the enduring legacy of Madison’s most powerful idea: government by the people.”

The estate is owned by the Trust but is administered by the Montpelier Foundation, which leases the property and operates it under a formal agreement between the Trust and the Foundation’s board. While the Trust “has the right to appoint one ex officio representative on the board,” it does not “have the authority to make changes to either the board or staff” of the Foundation.

In June 2021, the board formally recognized the Montpelier Descendants Committee (MDC) as the sole representative group of those descended from enslaved persons at Montpelier and amended its bylaws to provide the MDC the opportunity to recommend directors to the board who would “advance the goal of structural parity.” According to its website, the MDC is dedicated to “restoring the narratives of enslaved Americans at plantation sites” throughout the central Virginia region. On March 25, 2022, however, the board voted to revise its bylaws again without explanation, rescinding the role given to MDC as the sole representative of descendants of Montpelier’s enslaved persons. The National Trust opposed this move by the board, and its ex officio member on the board voted against the change.

For far too long, interpretation of the nation’s historic places—including archaeological sites—has minimized or excluded altogether the stories and narratives of persons belonging to racial minorities and cultures of non-European origins. It is essential that our understanding of the past be as complete as possible so that such descendant communities can embrace and appreciate their heritage. This means that the full story of all of those who came before us—regardless of race, creed, or socioeconomic status—must be reflected in our interpretations, to the greatest possible extent. Structural parity, an administrative framework outlined at a 2018 conference at Montpelier for the administration of slavery-related historic sites, helps achieve that objective by

ensuring that the descendants of persons who were enslaved at an historic site are represented at every level of the site's management and operations.

The recent move by the board to rescind the status of the MDC represents a major step backward from the goal of parity, away from telling the whole story of those who lived during a crucial time in our history. Given Montpelier's prior leadership in advocating for collaboration with descendant communities, it is essential that this situation be rectified as soon as possible. The SAA calls upon the board to resolve its differences with the MDC and any other descendant communities and restore parity as an utmost priority by honoring its 2018 guidelines and working with descendants. Research and interpretation are powerful tools, and the framework of parity is essential to ensuring a balanced and mutually beneficial result.