

UNCOVERING THE WOMEN AT A GREAT MAN'S HOME: Material Culture, Interpretation, and Women's Histories at The Hermitage

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Andrew Jackson

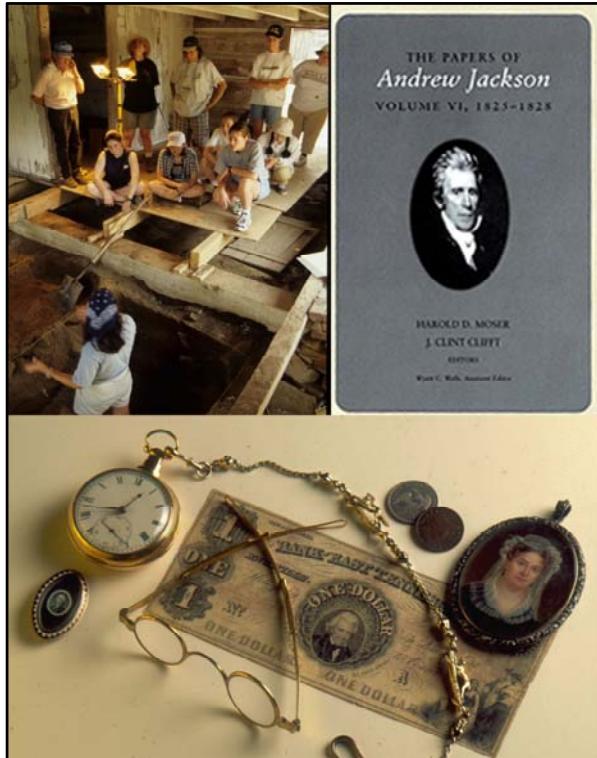
Farmer

Hero of
New Orleans

7th President

The Hermitage is the home and plantation of President Andrew Jackson. He is the reason the site has been preserved and his story takes center stage. The Ladies' Hermitage Association opened The Hermitage as a museum honoring Jackson in 1889.

But Andrew Jackson did not live alone and The Hermitage would not have been the place he treasured without the others who also called it home. In fact, from its earliest days, the LHA envisioned The Hermitage not only as a shrine to Andrew Jackson, but also to his beloved wife, Rachel. Perhaps their attraction to the Rachel story is related to the all-female make up of the early days of the organization. Nevertheless, there were many other women whose stories hadn't been told -- family members as well as the enslaved who worked in the house and on the farm. Their biographies differ, but each one tells us something about The Hermitage as well as women's experiences in general. They also reveal things about Andrew Jackson. So, it is imperative to tell their stories too.



Research

Archaeology

Collections

Jackson Papers

In the 1970s and 1980s, research at The Hermitage, like many other historic sites, began to dig deeper and seek the assistance of academic historians. We re-identified and re-interpreted collections. The LHA supported the University of Tennessee's Jackson Papers Project, which made an abundance of historical resources more easily available. The Hermitage established an archaeology program that focused on the archaeology of slavery while the curatorial staff planned for an interior restoration of the Hermitage Mansion.



Interior Restoration of the Hermitage Mansion

Among other outcomes, the restoration highlighted the women who had a role in shaping the appearance of the mansion and the life lived there – the white women (other than Rachel) who lived in the house, and the enslaved women who were a constant presence. The restoration and the curatorial, archaeological, and historical research helped to lay the foundation for a critical redesign of the interpretation of the entire site and to widen the story to other personalities besides Andrew and Rachel Jackson.

Hermitage Interpretive Themes

- Growing Democracy
- Slavery and the Cotton Economy
- Indians and Westward Expansion
- Reform and Religion
- Women's Lives in a Changing America
- Developing a Distinct American Culture

Funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, we formulated a new interpretive plan around six primary themes central to the Jacksonian Era:

Growing Democracy

Slavery and the Cotton Economy

Indians and Westward Expansion

Reform and Religion

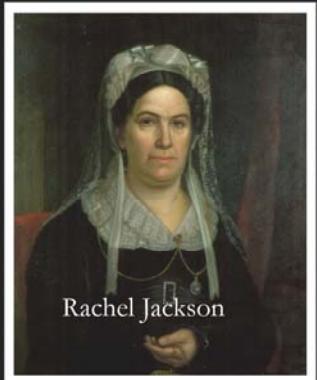
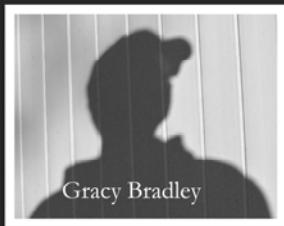
Women's Lives in a Changing America

Developing a Distinct American Culture

Of course, the most significant theme for this presentation is Women's Lives in a Changing America; however, all of the themes are inter-related.

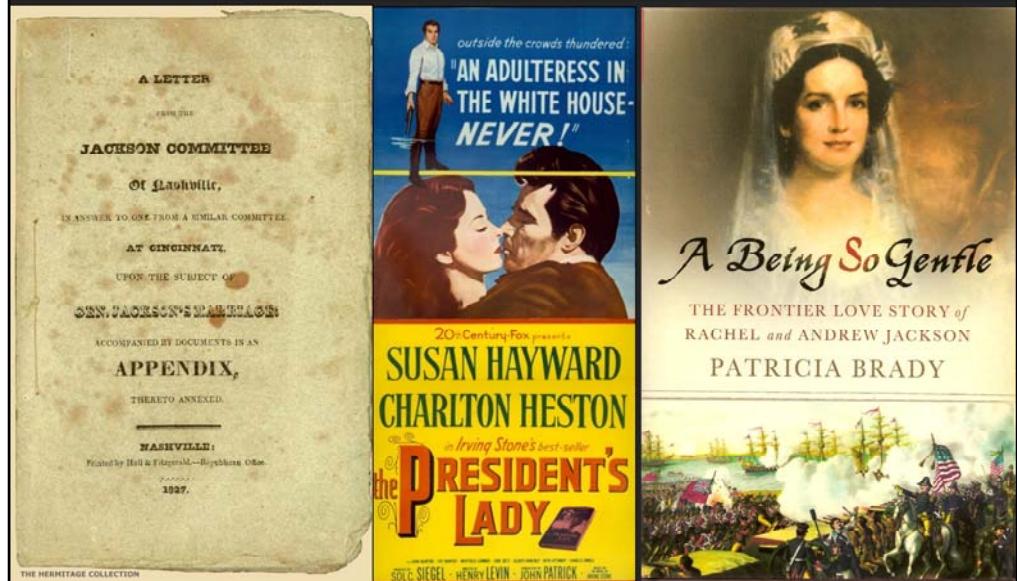
There were so many different stories of women at The Hermitage --women of different races, classes, and legal status. Where and how to tell them all? We did not want to perform "interpretive segregation" by only telling the stories of white women in the mansion and black women in the quarters. This would leave our visitors with the feeling that the two spheres never intersected.

Women of The Hermitage



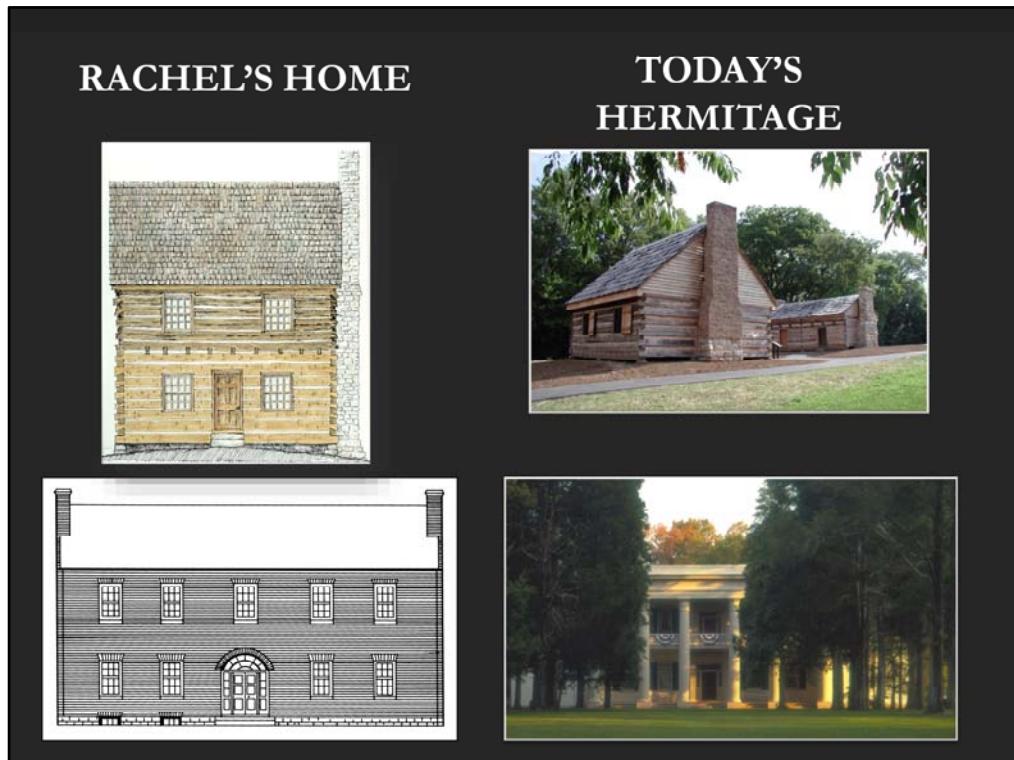
Today, I'm going to talk about the stories of four women, two enslaved: the head housemaid, Hannah and the seamstress, Gracy, and two free: Andrew Jackson's wife Rachel and his daughter-in-law Sarah. We tell these stories in many ways-- through the mansion tour, interpretive waysides, audio tour stops, on our website, museum exhibits, and the introductory film and with developing technologies we will find new ways to bring these women to life.

Rachel's Image



For more than a century, women's history at The Hermitage was Rachel Jackson's story. For many visitors today, this story is still THE story of The Hermitage. Films, novels, and even non-fiction biographies have almost mythologized Rachel Jackson's life. For those of you who aren't familiar with the story – Rachel was married to another man when she met Andrew Jackson and she and Jackson eloped to Natchez before the first marriage was dissolved. This became a controversial issue during the 1828 presidential campaign. Jackson's handlers reconfigured a more acceptable version of events in the face of charges of bigamy from the Adams campaign. Jackson always believed the slanders of the campaign led to Rachel's death soon after the election.

This “cult of Rachel” and the presentation of her at the museum did little to dissuade the notion that Rachel was both a tragic heroine and the only woman at The Hermitage.



However, little remains of the Hermitage landscape that Rachel would recognize. She lived at The Hermitage for 24 years, 17 in a two-story log farmhouse and the final seven years of her life in the first Federal style Hermitage mansion. The current Greek Revival version of the mansion was completed at the end of Jackson's second term -- 8 years after her death.

Her first Hermitage home was turned into a slave quarter even before she died and so it looks nothing like it did during Rachel's occupation when it was a comfortable, well furnished, two story farmhouse. This lack of setting plays into some of the confusion and misunderstandings about the story of Rachel. The lack of a tangible past is only one of our problems with the telling of Rachel's story.

Rachel Jackson



As the wife of one of the most popular public figures in her time, Rachel was thrust into the spotlight in ways she never imagined or wanted. Journalists, politicians, elites, and common people used Rachel and her story to their own purposes. Hindered by time, the loss of much of her correspondence, a life spent in relative obscurity until middle age, and the passions of presidential campaigns, Rachel herself nearly disappeared.

But a more nuanced understanding of Rachel's story is crucial to understanding one of the most important episodes of Jackson's first term as President – The Petticoat Affair. Ultimately, historians believe, Jackson transferred his feelings about the slurs heaped on Rachel to Peggy Eaton, wife of his secretary of War John Eaton. This precipitated the controversies, which lead to the mass resignation of Jackson's entire cabinet – the first time such a thing had happened.

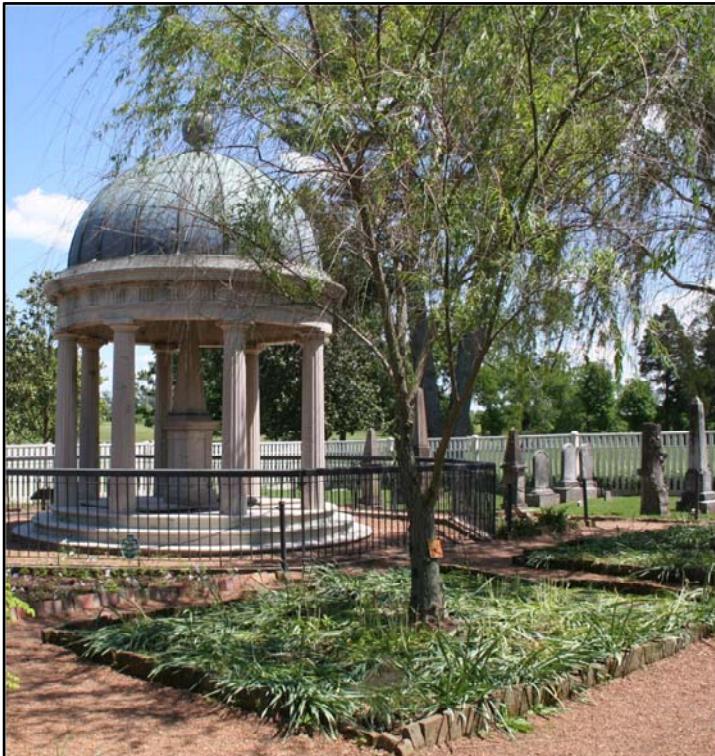


From Life



Post Mortem Copy

We think that Rachel, in death, became someone quite different from Rachel in life. Andrew Jackson was a willing participant in the "re-creation" of Rachel – both before her death when he frequently reminded her of her new station as a General's wife and through the campaign information his political friends composed. After her death, Jackson had her portraits copied, and all of the copies present a much sweeter appearance than the original portraits.



Her face
was fair,
her person
pleasing...

Even her epitaph praises her saintly qualities! So where can we logically tell this complicated and important story? While Rachel does receive some treatment in the mansion tour, we primarily tell her story at her grave, in our visitor's center, and, in the "First Hermitage," her original home on the property.

Rachel played many roles in her life. In each --from pioneer girl to wife, mother, aunt, and sister, and from faithful friend and Hermitage mistress to reluctant General's wife -- Rachel Jackson was representative of many women of her time and place. Recently we introduced an audio tour devoted to Rachel to tell – we hope—a more coherent biography and to place her back upon a landscape that has seen as much change as her own personal history.



Hannah Jackson

When visitors first enter the Hermitage mansion, they expect to hear the stories of the Jackson Family. The mansion stands as a testament to one of the most important political figures in American history. Yet, when the visitor is greeted at the front door of the mansion, the first story that they hear is not of Andrew or Rachel Jackson, but of an enslaved woman named Hannah.

Andrew Jackson purchased Hannah Jackson when she was a young girl in the 1790s. She rose to become the head of the household slaves and personal servant to Rachel Jackson. She was perhaps the single enslaved individual who was closest to the Jackson Family. Without her, their daily lives would not have functioned.

Stories in the Hermitage Mansion



Some visitors feel it unusual to hear the stories of the enslaved at the “big house.” But the mansion was as much inhabited by them as it was by the Jackson Family so it is quite appropriate that Hannah’s story is the first our visitors encounter, just as she would have been the first person Jackson’s visitors saw. This opening to the mansion tour helps reframe the story of The Hermitage for our visitors. Archaeology in particular was important to the inclusion of the slavery story as part of the interpretation. Excavations were open to public observation visitors’ fascination made slavery somewhat more open and easier to discuss.



Hannah and
Aaron Jackson

But Hannah was not just an enslaved woman and trusted servant, but a strong woman who made important decisions for herself. After learning about Hannah, visitors are usually somewhat surprised to learn that she freed herself during the Civil War by fleeing to Union occupied Nashville. The Jackson Family was certainly quite shocked. As more of the enslaved community followed Hannah's example, they felt betrayed and angry.

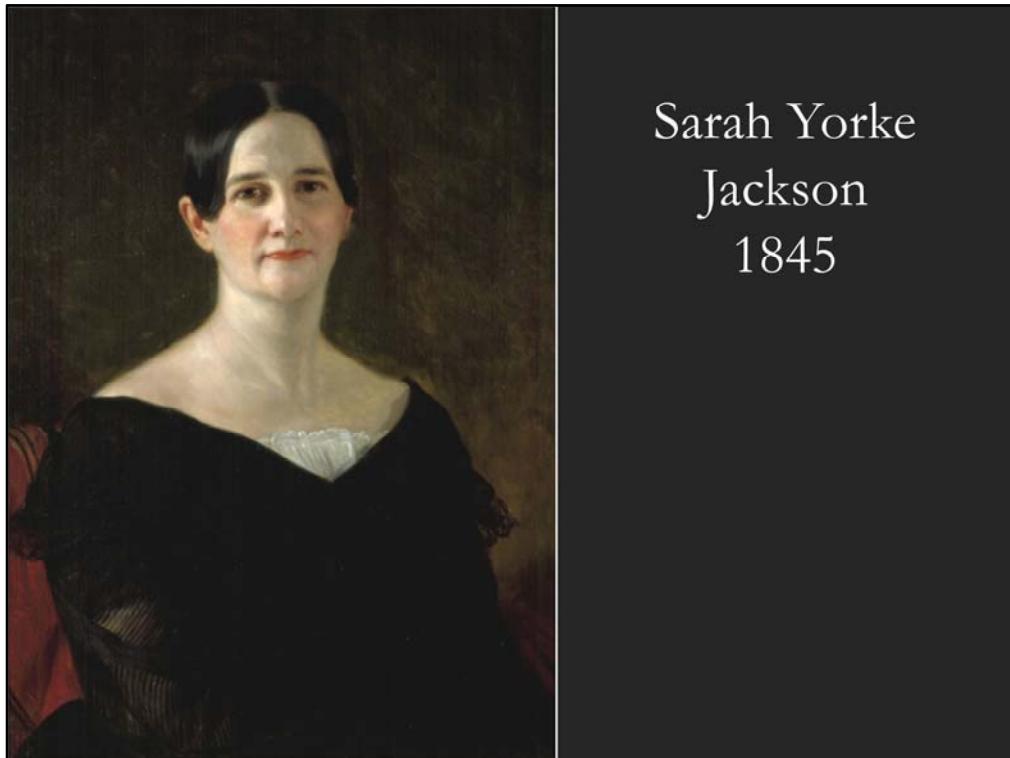
Hannah's story lived because she lived to be nearly 100. Jackson biographers and journalists as early as the 1850s interviewed her. So Hannah's story was mediated by white male writers and what Hannah thought they wanted to hear. In Hannah's interviews, she tells of her close relationship with the Jacksons but does not dwell on her move to freedom.



Sarah Yorke
Jackson
1832

Because of the persistent focus on Rachel Jackson as the mistress of The Hermitage – even though she would not recognize the house today – Sarah Yorke Jackson received the least attention on tours, although she was the one who had the most influence on The Hermitage during Jackson's retirement years of 1837-1845. The current mansion interpretation focuses upon this period.

Sarah Yorke, a native of Philadelphia, married Andrew Jackson's adopted son during Jackson's first term as President. Andrew Junior and Sarah were to manage The Hermitage in Jackson's absence, but when the mansion burned in the fall of 1834, Sarah and her two children went to live in the White House. While there, she went several times to Philadelphia, to purchase new furnishings for the Hermitage mansion. When the Jackson family returned to Tennessee in 1837 and their completely remodeled home, Sarah, was mistress of The Hermitage, for her father-in-law. It is Sarah's version of the mansion that visitors see today.



Sarah Yorke
Jackson
1845

At first glance, Sarah seems like she might be the antithesis of Plantation Mistress. The daughter of a sea captain and orphaned by age 10, she was raised by an extended family of both Quakers and Presbyterians. She was urban, and northern. Visitors ask how did a woman from that background adapt to plantation ways? It is only when we examine Sarah's family history in more detail; the apparent dichotomy falls away. Her father captained at least one voyage that transported 90 enslaved Africans to South America. Sarah's wealthy aunt one of the important figures in her life was to the widow of a Jamaican planter. And many of her schoolmates were southern girls sent to Philadelphia for their educations. Sarah exemplified the many ties (and hazy distinctions) that bound North and South together in the Antebellum United States As this letter relating Hannah's departure shows:

"I fear all our servants will leave us. Nancy, Hannah, Martha and her three children are all gone. Not one I fear is faithful – even the old tried ones are all alike –..." *[Sarah Yorke Jackson to Samuel Jackson, June 22 1863]*

Although Sarah never disappeared, her story was pushed to the background. What remained were her origins – a beautiful, accomplished, and gracious woman from a privileged Eastern background but not the woman she became living at the Hermitage.



In 1833, during his second term as president a freed woman who worked in the White House reportedly approached Andrew Jackson to tell him that the Virginia planter who owned the rest of her family was deeply in debt and that she worried that her family would be sold and separated. She pleaded with Jackson to buy her family, which included her mother, three sisters, and a brother, so they could stay together. We have not been able to corroborate the details of this dramatic incident; however, Jackson did indeed purchase an enslaved family from a Mr. Hebb of Virginia during his presidency.

One of the daughters was a fifteen-year-old seamstress named Gracy Bradley.

On their return to The Hermitage, Gracy Bradley married Alfred Jackson, the enslaved Waggoner. She served as a seamstress for the Jackson Family as well as Sarah's personal servant. Gracy and Alfred were the only emancipated slaves who remained at The Hermitage. Written documentation provides the outline of this story.



Even though we have this information about Gracy, it took archaeology to place her firmly back upon the Hermitage landscape.

Archaeological fieldwork investigated the foundation of a three-room brick structure that served as a work area, living area, or both for the enslaved who worked in and around the Mansion.

The middle room of this building included a remarkable assortment of sewing-related artifacts, such as lace needles, crochet hooks, knitting needle guards, needle cases, and straight pins. indicating the presence of a skilled needle worker. Given our knowledge about Gracy Bradley, we believe that this room was connected to her.

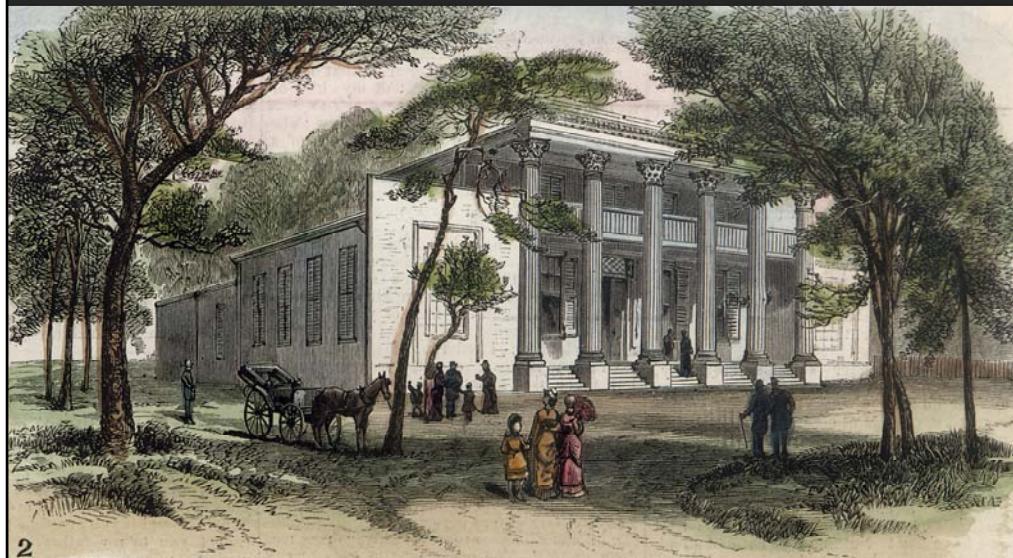
We exhibit these needlework tools and a picture of a shirt in the collection that she likely made for Andrew Jackson, Jr. in our visitor center. Through these physical remains, Gracy Bradley is now a vivid part of the Hermitage story.



These are just a few of the many stories that we relate to our visitors – *Mysteries remain. Was Rachel a woman duped deliberately into adultery or a plotting bigamist? Did the rest of enslaved community look at Hannah and Gracy with respect or jealousy --or both? Why did one leave at the first opportunity and the other stay for the rest of her life? What motivated Sarah in her life choices?*

Of course, there are others – Peggy Eaton, Jackson’s niece and White House hostess Emily Donelson, his granddaughter Rachel and others. We plan to continue to uncover the details of these stories, and others through studying written documentation and material culture so that we can again people this landscape with the wide variety of voices who once called this place home.

The Hermitage: Home of Andrew Jackson (and a lot of other people too!)



We want to tell diverse stories --not just of women, -- but the enslaved community, the overseers, Jackson's circle of friends and family – the complex community that was The Hermitage and to deal with conflict and contradiction in our interpretation. We want to leave our visitor with questions and the curiosity to examine their own previously held ideas. Someone once said that if all of our visitors had lively argument in the car on the way home, we would have done our work well. Although The Hermitage is unique in that it is a “presidential” landscape, it also reflects the story of America. All the actors upon this stage are part of this nation’s history. From a president to a seamstress, these individuals forged the history that we continue to live in the present.