Cliveden officials to work with black-reparations group

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Abstract: In 1982, the family donated its papers to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. [...] more documents have turned up; the society only completed processing them last month.

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Full text: Aug. 12--In an unusual alliance, officials of a historic Germantown mansion and an African American reparations group have agreed to work together on projects and programs growing from a vast document archive associated with the mansion and slavery.

Officials at Cliveden, a National Trust historic site built in the 18th century as a summer retreat for the Chew family of Philadelphia, met Monday with leaders of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, known as N'COBRA, and agreed "to collaborate on as many projects as we can," said David Young, Cliveden director.

Ari Merretazon, head of N'COBRA in this region and a national board member of the organization, said an educational, genealogical, and community-programming effort would help "to repair what has been done" as a result of enslavement in the United States.

The meeting was precipitated by an Inquirer account detailing the trove of Chew family records dating to the 18th century that shed light on the family's extensive holdings of chattel slaves in Philadelphia and on plantations in Delaware and Maryland.

Generations of Chews lived at Cliveden -- best known as the site of the Battle of Germantown in 1777 -- until 1972, when the home was given to the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

In 1982, the family donated its papers to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Since then, more documents have turned up; the society only completed processing them last month.

Phillip Seitz, Cliveden curator, said the papers -- amounting to 400 to 500 feet of shelf space -- provided a multigenerational portrait of family business and personal matters and a striking picture of northern slaveholding.

Perhaps most important, he noted, the papers depict individual Africans held in at least three states, imbuing often-hidden lives with personality and human lineaments.

The exact nature of the Cliveden-N'COBRA alliance has yet to be worked out, but the long meeting at Cliveden Monday afternoon saw broad agreement.

Over the next several weeks, specific programs and areas of cooperation should emerge, participants agreed.

For N'COBRA, the effort is part of the "healing process" of wounds derived from racial bondage. "Education is the key," Merretazon said.

Young said his organization was completely supportive of the effort.

"We're not here to put Cliveden in the best possible light," he said. "We are here to make history useful. . . . Nothing could be more powerful than to make what's known more widely available."

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