Cliveden 'emancipates' its history in new exhibition

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Silhouette of Benjamin Chew Sr.

By Stephan Salisbury and INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

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Since 1972, when members of Philadelphia's long-prominent Chew family transferred ownership of Cliveden, the historic family residence, to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, it has functioned as a traditional house museum.

Every day, visitors serenely toured the mansion, built by patriarch Benjamin Chew in 1767, admiring the elegant period furniture and listening to stories of the old-money gentry and the exciting days of the War of Independence. Every year, crowds massed to watch a vivid reenactment of the 1777 Battle of Germantown, George Washington's gallant but failed attack on British troops holed up at Cliveden.

But in addition to the house on 5.5 acres along Germantown Avenue, the Chew family left behind hundreds of thousands of family documents. It seems they never threw anything away over the centuries, and now the ghosts of those papers are lighting the path to Cliveden's future.

From aged ledgers and letters, bills and receipts, diaries, notes, logs, and commonplace books lodged at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, a new perspective on the Chew family's involvement with African slavery has emerged, and Cliveden is incorporating the findings into new public programs and tours of the mansion. An exhibition exploring the revised perspective, called "Emancipating Cliveden," will open Wednesday in the estate's carriage house.

"This changes what this historical site means," said David Young, Cliveden's director, referring to the exhibition and the documents. "It extends its significance beyond the battle and the Chews."

Cliveden may represent old money, gentry and achievement, but the family papers show in vivid detail that Cliveden also represents status

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built on and maintained by enslaved Africans.

Cliveden, said Young, will tell the story of slaves and indentured servants, and through those stories become relevant to a wider swath of people. In this context — of power and powerlessness, people and property — Cliveden will also tell the story of the wealthy Chew family.

Visitors will learn about Charity Castle, an enslaved servant brought to Cliveden by Harriet Chew in 1814, sparking a legal controversy over slavery in Pennsylvania.

They will learn of the family's plantations in Delaware and Maryland, all staffed by slave labor.

Visitors will also be able to see an 1867 photograph of James Smith, a former slavc who purchased his own freedom and stayed with the Chews from 1819 until his death in 1871. In the photo, the elderly, white-gloved Smith sits on the front steps of Cliveden, hat and walking stick in hand.

A timeline of African American life in Germantown, an array of Chew-related artifacts — from beer stein to Ortlieb's can — and a video featuring voices, black and white, from Cliveden's past will broaden the notion of the family and its reach.

Young said the rethinking of Cliveden, which involved discussions with members of the surrounding largely African American Germantown community, scholars, funders, the National Trust, and many others, was driven by a desire to "tell the truth."

The road has not always been smooth. Award-winning curator Phillip Seitz, a passionate advocate for unflinchingly following the Chew document trail, was let go over a year and a half ago in what some in the African American community have said was a disagreement over Cliveden's new direction.

Young declined to discuss Seitz's departure, characterizing it as a "personal matter" unrelated to interpretation at the historic site.

"Emancipating Cliveden," said Young, will introduce visitors to a house openly acknowledged to have been staffed by the indentured and enslaved. For the first time in many years, the house kitchen area will be explored in tours, with opportunities for discussion of what has been ignored for decades.

Organized meetings with neighbors and visitors, so-called Cliveden Conversations, will also continue.

"We're going to continue to find out more from these documents," Young said. "We are moving toward more of an open dialog and discussion."

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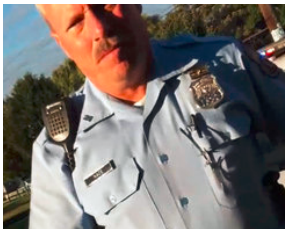

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