

Exhibit Review- *Morven Museum & Garden***Curator: Elizabeth Allan****Permanent Exhibition (Open September 7, 2018 to present)****55 Stockton Street, Princeton, NJ****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.165>**

In September 2018, the Morven Museum & Garden debuted a new permanent exhibition, re-evaluating the history of a more than 250-year-old New Jersey landmark. Located in Princeton—just a few minutes’ walk from the University—Morven was built in the 1750s by Richard Stockton, a delegate to the Continental Congress, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and distinguished member of one of Princeton’s most distinguished families. Yet as the new exhibition makes clear, Morven’s storied connection to the Revolutionary-era struggle for liberty has often obscured its history as a site of bondage.

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the mansion’s residents included enslaved men, women, and children whose labor made the wealthy Stocktons’ lifestyle possible. Morven Museum & Garden addresses this history with forthright, unflinching exhibit content. Runaway slave ads, records of an enslaved child’s birth at Morven, and excerpts from slave-owning Stocktons’ letters provide sobering (if unsurprising) reminders of the limits of liberty even among the nation’s celebrated patriots.

The exhibit features the story of freed slave Marcus Marsh, whose experiences perhaps best illustrate the complicated history of slavery at Morven. When Marsh’s mother died or was sold shortly after his birth in 1765, Annis Boudinot Stockton—published poet and wife of Richard Stockton—nursed the infant boy herself, manumitting him in 1781 after her husband’s death. Marcus Marsh went on to work alongside Annis’s son-in-law Dr. Benjamin Rush during Philadelphia’s devastating yellow fever epidemic, at great risk to his own life and health. “I cannot

tell you how much we all owe to Marcus,” Rush wrote in 1793. 225 years later, his inclusion in the exhibit alongside Morven’s elite white residents is long overdue.

The Stockton family’s relationship to slavery and racism are central to the narrative of the exhibition’s first three galleries, which trace Morven’s history from the 1750s through the early 20th century. Commodore Robert F. Stockton, a U.S. Naval officer during the 19th century, gazes at visitors from an impressive full-length portrait in the second gallery, his dress sword and dueling pistols displayed nearby. But the exhibit also addresses the Commodore’s commitment to white supremacy—first through his involvement in the American Colonization Society (an organization dedicated to removing free and enslaved African Americans to the colony of Liberia), and later as a sugar planter with more than 100 slaves himself.

The exhibit dedicates considerable space to Helen Hamilton Shields Stockton, whose restoration of the house and garden in the early 1900s ensured its survival as a valued historic site even as she spun “webs of myths” about Morven’s past. Helen romanticized Morven’s history, writing profusely (and often inaccurately) about the house, holding lavish anniversary celebrations, and even creating a silent film starring her grandchildren and other relatives as prominent figures from Princeton’s past. The 1926 film, which features children in blackface and a “negro mammy” (à la contemporary minstrel shows and the following decade’s blockbuster *Gone with the Wind*), is projected onto a corridor wall, adding an interesting multimedia component to the numerous examples of material culture and historical artifacts on display throughout the exhibition.

The final two galleries explore Morven’s history after the Stocktons—from the 1940s, when the house was rented by Robert Wood Johnson Jr., founder of the Johnson & Johnson company, through the four decades Morven served as the New Jersey Governor’s Mansion, to its eventual conversion into the Morven Museum & Garden in 2004. Though these galleries provide

interesting facts about Morven's later residents and their numerous famous visitors during the 20th century (John F. Kennedy, Fidel Castro, and Buzz Aldrin among them) and continue to pay attention to servants and staff at the house, the exhibition's real strengths lay in its re-examination of Morven's early history.

Like the Princeton & Slavery Project—which launched a website exploring Princeton University's historical links to the institution of slavery in November 2017—Morven's new permanent exhibition complicates traditional, celebratory narratives of American history. With this exhibit, the Morven Museum & Garden makes a valuable contribution to public understanding of the deeply intertwined history of liberty and slavery in New Jersey.

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