

Taking the Table to the Slave Dwelling Conference:

Report on CTTT involvement in the Slave Dwelling Project Conference
September 18-20, 2014
By Prinny Anderson



[The Slave Dwelling Project](#), founded by Joe McGill, seeks to find extant slave dwellings, educate people about them and their importance, collaborate with their owners and caretakers to preserve and maintain them, and encourage their use as resources to bring forward the history and contributions of African Americans. McGill began this mission by locating dwellings and asking permission from their owners to spend the night in them. Over time, friends began to join him for the overnight stays and the history talks, fireside conversations, hearth-cooked meals, and heritage days that became part of the experience. Members of [Coming to the Table](#) have participated in slave dwelling sleepovers in Connecticut, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. I have been on 12 overnight stays.



The connection between The Slave Dwelling Project and Coming to the Table began when Joe McGill attended the 2012 National Gathering. Collaboration in 2014 included having Joe present at the CTTT National Gathering this past May, and having Leslie Stainton and me represent Coming to the Table by presenting at the Slave Dwelling Project conference



We attended all three days of the conference, and gave a one-hour presentation. I also facilitated a two-hour visioning session for the Slave Dwelling Project as a wrap up to the conference. In addition, we went to the Low Country Boil dinner at Wormsloe Plantation; the Gullah dinner theater performance; and the African American historic tour of old Savannah. In other words, we immersed ourselves in the conference experience! Our fellow presenters and participants included owners and directors of historic sites, archivists, writers and artists, curators and interpreters, doctoral students, historians and professors.

We had an hour on the first day of the conference to talk about Coming to the Table, its vision, mission, approach, and examples of its work. Leslie had interviewed Betty, James and Phoebe Kilby about their shared experience of gaining recognition in Front Royal, VA, for the work of Betty's and James' father in integrating the city's public schools. She recounted their story to illustrate the concepts of uncovering the truth of history, building connections in a divided community, taking action to make change, and working for both personal and community healing.



The last part of our hour was intended to introduce some of the tools developed and used by the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding and CTTT, such as the Touchstones and the Dialogue process. We started by asking the group what foundational values they would consider important for anybody trying to set up dialogue among disparate stakeholders over a sensitive topic such as saving a dilapidated historic building or moving an African American cemetery. That question opened a dialogue that took the rest of our time. Afterward, Leslie and I laughed about how we wanted to teach about dialogue, but instead one erupted spontaneously!

The conference offered an enormous number of sessions, at least four for every one of the seven or eight 60-minute blocks over the course of the 3 days, as well as at least two plenary sessions each day. The breakout sessions covered topics such as "Who Built America?" "Interpreting Slavery at Your Site," "Tools for Genealogical Research," and "How to Run a Slave Dwelling Visit." And there were the previously mentioned evening activities.

Across this program, it was possible for a CTTT'r to find topics related to all aspects of CTTT's work.



One of the significant values of the partnership between the two organizations is the opportunity to bring our different knowledge, experience and perspectives to strengthen each other's work. As described, CTTT'r's can learn history and participate with SDP in revealing the hidden stories. The shared commitment to history connects members of both organizations and encourages relationships. There are shared opportunities for action together to achieve large and

small measures of social justice.

The special gift that Coming to the Table can bring to the Slave Dwelling Project community is our collection of tools and practices, our commitment to and experiences in seeking healing and reconciliation. It was clear that a conference that might have been construed as intellectual and physical, in terms of history, buildings and land, was also a field for intense emotions, a forum in which people wanted to be heard, for their truths to be heard unreservedly, and an occasion full of potential for healing and for learning about healing.

At the end of the conference, there was to be a session inviting citizens of Savannah to have a public conversation



about how the history and contributions of African Americans in the city could be better acknowledged, taught, honored and celebrated. But one of the organizers of that session was taken ill, and we had to adapt to something else.

The alternative was a Slave Dwelling Project visioning session, inviting about 25 people to work in small groups to describe and record what they wanted to see the Project become over the next 3 – 5 years. After the moments of emotion and drama that had cropped up in the preceding days, I was uncertain how this session would unfold. The small groups self-organized both by size and by

membership, and the ensuing conversations hummed. The groups also self-managed. There was some passion, and there was laughter, and there was a great deal of serious thought. Back in plenary, with Leslie as time-keeper, the group presentations were clear, organized and timely. It was a highly productive and satisfying session.

It occurred to Leslie and me that, by having more than 45 minutes to really talk and really listen in small groups that felt safe, the participants had been able to use their passions for ends they considered important. Having the bigger group listen respectfully and then build on their ideas may have been a bit of the acknowledgement that some folks deeply needed.

At the end of the wrap up, we pointed out that there had been moments of strong feeling over the course of the conference, feelings triggered by many different topics, and we pointed out that when people had a chance to speak fully and be listened to, the conversations remained calmer. Then we asked whether there should be explicit, planned opportunities for dialogue in next year's conference, and the response was loud and positive. Furthermore, participants discussed and suggested that there be an altar, a healing space, and some kind of ritual or ceremony in next year's conference.

In Coming to the Table, we are likely to build ritual, healing, and sacred, safe space into our work, but these are not typical practices for many other groups. It was a strong validation to hear people who haven't yet joined CTTT call for those very practices. It was affirming to recognize how CTTT has much of value to bring to an important partner in the greater work.

Leslie added, "Prinny and I both found the "action" component of the conference--and Joe's project--to be important and compelling. The existence of so many slave dwellings, many in private hands and in need of repair, is a real call to action, as is the need to find material ways to explore and tell this history and make progress on the long journey toward racial understanding and justice. I can't recommend the conference enough to CTTT members--next year's

conference will take place in Charleston, arguably this issue's "Ground Zero." I expect it to be a rich, rich gathering."

Thanks to Prinny Anderson and Leslie Stainton for representing CTTT. And thanks to Joe McGill for all your good work with the Slave Dwelling Project. We all look forward to further collaboration!

