A Message from the Executive Director

Did you feel that? It felt like the earth shifted on its axis and nothing seems the same. There is widespread anxiety and uncertainty about the future of this country. What we have all felt is, in fact, history in the making.

While Henry Clay’s Ashland has been a favorite spot for history-buffs, tree-lovers, dog walkers, and people who admire its peacefulness, for many, it is a place for reflection and even mourning. In addition to the five generations of Clay families, Ashland was home to more than 120 enslaved men, women, and children.

For the past two years, staff has been working with scholars and community members to create a new tour – Traces: Slavery at Ashland. It was to be launched this March when we reopened. The Coronavirus pandemic changed all that. The world shifted as we learned to self-quarantine and, if we were lucky, continue to work but from home. Then the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis unleashed an extraordinary level of frustration and anger – peaceful and violent protests erupted all over the world. The world shifted again.

Traces was designed to provide a fuller and more accurate picture of Clay’s legacy by focusing on the lives of the people he enslaved - a tour that gives voice to the enslaved as human beings not property – as fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers. For too long their history was not documented except in property transfers, bills of sale, and wills.

Ashland has a cultural and moral obligation to share this relevant history. Slavery has created lasting effects on our society that reverberate to this day. History can enable us to gain perspective and guide us to an understanding of the current moment. We believe the lessons of history can be instrumental in the healing process.
As an organization entrusted with the stewardship of history, it is imperative that we tell the complete story, one that is inclusive, one that invites participants to see themselves reflected in their community’s narrative. This is especially important for young people to understand the context of history, how culture is shaped, and their role in the community.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the demonstrations and social unrest provoked by the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor have caused us to consider how we as an institution relate to one another and our community. Just as we are taking steps to make Ashland a safe and healthy place for our staff, volunteers, and visitors, we must continue to develop inclusive programming and engage the Black community in our efforts to document Ashland’s Black history.

This year, 70 years after it opened to the public as a museum, we will offer Kentucky’s first guided tour exploring the lives of the enslaved. Traces is just the first step in telling a more complete story. Ashland and other historic sites of Lexington should be places of a shared identity that affirms each person’s connection to the community.

The greatest threat to social justice and a civil society is indifference. As a historic site and Kentucky’s first National Historic Landmark, we cannot afford to be indifferent to any part of our community. We are committed to listening, learning, and sharing Ashland and Lexington’s Black history.

James M. Clark, Executive Director