

>artist*profile<

Dr. Ngô Thanh Nhàn: Scholar, musician, and activist

interview conducted & edited by Elizabeth Sayre

Nhàn tuning a đàn tranh at FACTS. Photos: Elizabeth Sayre, 2009

DR. NGÔ THANH NHÀN teaches đàn tranh, a traditional Vietnamese 16- or 17-string pentatonic board zither, to middle school students at the Folk Arts Cultural Treasures School in Philadelphia. The class is part of a residency organized by the Philadelphia Folklore Project and Asian Americans United, who co-founded the school and continue to coordinate folk arts and community projects there. Nhàn clearly enjoys introducing his young students to Vietnamese music, food, and culture. I visited his class in May 2009. It was the last day of class, and they were preparing for a school concert. Nhàn gave students the freedom to laugh, talk, and be themselves as he directed a focused rehearsal. The middle-schoolers are learning how to wear and use finger picks on the thumbs and index and middle fingers of their right hands, how to press the strings with their left hands to alter and decorate the plucked pitches, how to read the special notation for the instrument, and how to coordinate with each other as an ensemble in music that is sometimes based on non-metric phrases—that is, in some parts, there is no steady pulse.

Nhàn's students perhaps have little idea that their teacher witnessed firsthand the de-colonization of Vietnam and the Tết Offensive,¹ became an antiwar activist in the U.S. in the late 1960s, and is an internationally recognized scholar of Vietnam's ancient Nôm script²—or that Nhàn, like many postcolonial cosmopolitan artists, has expanded the uses and contexts of his instrument, collaborating with jazz, blues, and Asian American experimental artists since the 1970s.

The đàn tranh has features in common with other Asian zithers like the Chinese guzheng, the Japanese koto, and the Korean kayagum. Its origins are unknown, but a similar instrument is depicted on ninth-century temple sculpture. The đàn tranh was used in court music in Vietnam before the 1800s, and in the 20th century was used in chamber music, music for the cải lương or “reformed theater,”³ and folk music from many of the country's distinct regions.⁴ As with other unfretted string instruments from Asia, the melodic ornaments created through pressing its

strings, though often quieter than a given piece's main melody, are part of a signature sound that corresponds to the tonal and dialect-specific sound of language in Vietnam.

In our May 2009 interview, Nhàn talked about his childhood, his entry into music and political activism, and the scholarship and research that gave him insight into the deep meanings of song lyrics and the history of gender dynamics in Vietnam.



NTN: My name is Ngô Thanh Nhàn. Ngô is a family name; Thanh Nhàn means “pure leisure.” My father had a very hard life, so he wanted the children to be relaxed, to have a good time. He was aiming for a girl; Thanh Nhàn is the name of a girl. When I grew up, everybody thought it was a girl's name. But I stuck with this name.

I was born in Saigon in 1948, on May 1. My father met my mother in Saigon. He was from way up north. He worked in the rice fields when he was 14, and one day he came back home, and all the family had been killed. And so he got scared

and he left his hometown. He went to Saigon somehow. And then my mother, she was born in the central part of Vietnam. She had a hard life too, and my grandma had to marry her off in order to get the dowry to feed 18 children. My mother went to the south. She ran away from an arranged marriage, and then she met my father.

ES: Why was your father's family killed?

NTN: Until the time he died, we tried to figure out what happened. We still don't know. It was 1928, and so it could have been the French, it could have been robbery, it could have been gangs up in the mountains.

ES: Once your parents were living in Saigon . . .

NTN: My father joined the French army. He never went to school, so he was very low in rank. He married my mother. They lived in the soldiers' barracks. We lived like that for almost 10 years. I have eight brothers and sisters. I have an older brother who died in 1973–74. Now I am the oldest. I have two sisters, and five other brothers. My father was always away from home because he was in the army. So my mother, when she gave birth to the others, said to me, “What's the name?” I just opened the dictionary and said, “This is the name...” I named them all.

ES: When did music start to come into your life?

NTN: I grew up with more traditional music because at that time the French hadn't imported a lot of European music into Vietnam yet. When performing troupes came, they took over the market at night, and then they performed for free. I got used to that, and I loved that life. But my mother was very hard on me. She kept me from running away with the troupes.

They performed dance—they did what's called reformed theater (cải lương) and traditional theater (hát bội). The traditional classical theater was performed usually in temple, the temple of heroes. Every year they have a festival for that hero, and then you have performers come in and re-enact his life or her life. We would go to the temple and have free food and watch the performance.

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In Vietnam you have the audience squatting and standing in four directions, and you perform in the middle. You have to repeat each act so that everybody sees what is happening in that story. You act a part of the story, and then you turn to the left, and you act that part of the story again, and then you do it to all four sides. And that's how I got to like them, because of the costumes, the very nice colors, and the stories are very nice, and there was singing and music.

ES: Where do the stories come from? Who are the heroes?

NTN: They are folk stories. Reformed theater uses a lot of folk songs and court songs. Some of the stories have Confucian influences, so the characters have to be loyal to the king, loyal to their partners, and children have to be loyal to the parents. That's the basics of the story, the moral of the story. And heroes are people who are loyal to the country, or a king—a good king. Some of the court music developed into popular music. There are also other stories besides those of heroes—you have love affairs, you have all these wrenching stories about people who got lost in their riches, and then they lost their love for their children and their wives, and that caused a drama.

The French left Vietnam in '54. My father didn't have any money at all; my mother had saved some money because she did sewing work, and she built a house in the outskirts of Saigon. We were living in our own home with no electricity for about four or five years. There was a market nearby; there was an elementary school, and also a theater. I just spent most of my time at the theater. And that's when the influence of European music started. I watched a lot of Indian movies. And in Indian movies, you know, you have to have dance and music in every story. Mostly the story of Rama and Krishna and Shiva—that story was quite popular. I watched those movies and reformed theater and also traditional theater, and then European movies, like "Dancing in the Dark" [a Charisse-Astaire number from the 1953 film *The Band Wagon*] and Humphrey Bogart. When the Americans came in, we started to have a lot of American music. So I grew up with radio and French music and then

American music. Suddenly in the '60s we started to hear Bob Dylan—the Beatles first and then Bob Dylan. And then we heard Peter, Paul, and Mary from the GIs who were living nearby. They played antiwar songs during that time—that was like '65, '66. There were a lot of conflicts during '65 and '66, and the changing of governments, and turbulence. The Buddhists were repressed [in Vietnam], and then they revolted, right in the city. My mother was a Buddhist—we were all Buddhists at that time, so we joined in. And I started thinking about bad government and good government, and what they mean to us. And then one day I came back from school, and I saw Thích Quảng Đức, who burned himself right in the middle of the square, and that changed my view about government.

He was a Buddhist monk, very venerable. He burned himself in protest of the Ngô Đình Diệm government. We got involved into politics unintentionally, and it started to seep into the story. By the time I was in high school. I started to go to boy scouts. The scout leader was a Buddhist. He got conscripted, and he went away. We had to manage ourselves. So every Sunday I led the troops, and we'd go around and see whatever good we could do. We went into the area where the war was raging, and we tried to help. I spoke some English and asked the Americans for tin roof and tin sheets and wood. We went there and we tried to build houses. And then one day one of the youngest boy scouts [said], "How come when we were building houses for them, people were standing around and looking at us and laughing?" I didn't know how to answer that. Actually, we didn't know how to build houses.

We tried to build houses, and when we left, they took apart everything and then rebuilt them themselves. Sometimes we went back to the same place, and the youngest kid was always asking, "How come we're doing the same thing? Is this the place where we were before?" Then I started thinking maybe helping people on Sunday was not a good solution, because a good solution has to be permanent. You had to think—if you ended the war, then this wouldn't happen anymore; people could fix it

themselves. And so that seeped into the story.

By 1967 I graduated from high school, at the top of the school. I got a scholarship from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); it was called the leadership scholarship. The aim was to create a younger generation of leadership in Vietnam who could speak English. The older generation didn't go to school, and they didn't speak English. They thought maybe taking us to the U.S. to learn about U.S. culture and the American way of thinking for four years, we'd come back—yeah, a lot of my friends came back and became deputy ministers, very high level. But unfortunately for us, 1968 came, and then there was the Tết offensive, just two days before we were supposed to leave for the U.S. So, [the trip] was delayed for about a month and a half.

I went to California March 23, 1968. After some seminars for us by the USAID, I was sent to San Jose State. San Jose State was the hub of the antiwar movement. The first day I was there, people were demonstrating in the school against the war, and I saw for the first time the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam flag—we called it the Viet Cong flag—and also the North Vietnamese flag, in college, in a U.S. college! I didn't see it in South Vietnam; if you had that in your house in South Vietnam, you were in trouble. In April Martin Luther King was assassinated. I had to write something about him. I read his speeches. I read the speech "Beyond Vietnam," which he gave one year before in 1967, in New York. I read that, and then I read the Geneva Accords between the French and the Vietnamese, and the promise of the U.S. not to intervene in Vietnam, from the conference in 1954. At the end of our classes, Bobby Kennedy got killed, too, and we had to write something about him and his political stance. And so a group of three or four of us started to oppose the war. Right in the first year.

ES: I guess that's not what the USAID had in mind.

NTN: All my life my mother tried to keep me from going into music and from running away with the performing troupes. I got into high school with high grades, and so I asked my



Nhàn and đàn tranh students at FACTS. Photo: Elizabeth Sayre, 2009

mother for a guitar at that time. The guy came by with the guitar—\$25 or \$10 or something like that, and my mother said, “How about \$5?” The guy was hungry, but he couldn’t sell it for \$5. So, in the end, I didn’t have the guitar until I graduated from high school. When I graduated from high school, my mind had changed already. At that time, after listening to European music and French music, then Peter, Paul, and Mary, and Joan Baez, folk music became interesting and then the antiwar music came in. I went to listen to antiwar music in Saigon in the evening. [Vietnamese] folk music came in. People started to sing folk music again. I discovered that it was very intelligent, very honest, to the point, no skirting around anything. And the sound—the tunes were so new, and so difficult; they came from your speech. Vietnamese popular music at that time was trying to tap into European music, Vietnamese language to European music. It’s so difficult! It’s so unreal, pretentious. That’s why, in high school and at the end of high school, I started to like folk music. Vietnamese folk music and Vietnamese folk

songs, and then usually song and poetry and music, are one, unseparated. And dialect...

ES: Do you mean regional dialects from different areas?

NTN: From different areas. The Vietnamese have four or five major, and then many minor, dialects. Hanoi is one, and then Huế, central Vietnam, is one. Saigon is one major group, and then you have the Nghệ An and Quảng Ngãi area, and then the north central part of Vietnam. These folk songs usually go with the dialects—you can’t sing them without using the dialects.

ES: Can people understand each other from dialect to dialect? Are they very different?

NTN: By studying folk music, I understood different dialects that I didn’t use to understand. We started to understand the nuance of their feelings. Folk music is really intelligent. Folk music is straight ahead, talking about women, talking about sex, talking about men, making fun of men, making fun of women, all that sort of thing. Making fun of monks, about sex, and their bad habits, and making fun of pretentious

Confucian types...they make fun of everything. From the Buddha to the kings, yeah! In Vietnam, there is no song that hasn’t been rewritten, recast into funny stories, including the national anthem. People are like that.

When I graduated from high school, I had some money, and I started to learn the đàn tranh. I saw a group playing, and it was so impressive, and I said, “Oh my God, this is really good!” It was a group of đàn tranh playing together. I didn’t appreciate the other musical instruments yet. But the one that impacted me the most was the zither. But the đàn tranh is usually for women. I went into class, and there were all women in the class. I was learning how to play like that for about three or four months. Then I ran out of money.

ES: When they play in an ensemble, does everyone play the same melody?

NTN: Yes. Some people lead, and there are a lot of variations, and you could play counterpoint. When I went to college in the U.S., in my suitcase there were only books—and

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and did you see changes?

NTN: I see a lot of changes. In the old days when I grew up, some of the folk songs that were in the traditional theater were really hard to master. The younger generation has dropped some of that music because it was so hard. In the old days, they studied really hard. When I went home, I followed some of the music from the northern part of Vietnam, like ca trù — it's really good.⁷ I studied that. We recorded it, and I was trying to get one of the ca trù troupes to the U.S. to perform. Chèo is also a kind of folk theater with singing and dancing. The older generation is really good, and I learned how they moved. Now we are trying to do a book on classical theater. I go to old books, and I look at the oldest book to see how theater was formed at that time, and I try to revive it and see what happens. I'm older now; I can't run around and try to learn everything.

Now I understand more about Vietnamese music, and I understand more about how the language and the music go together. I use that as a way to create music. I write a poem, a nine-word poem, a nine-syllable verse, and then I try to put that into music. The way to do it is to read it over and over and over, and then you start to see the nuances of the language, and then the music comes around with it. Then when you put it into music, it's natural, it's like it was born with it. That's how I think Vietnamese poetry is. There's one form with two-syllable verses that has hundreds of songs in Vietnam. [He recites.] It means, "Who brought this blackbird across the river so that it flew away?" Out of nowhere it doesn't make any sense. But if you look at the geography of Vietnam, there are a lot of rivers, and the younger generation usually think of a boat as a way to get away from town, just like Americans think of a train. You know, in the old days a train was the way to get away from town. In Vietnam if a girl gets into an arranged marriage and wants to escape, the boat is a carrier of freedom. So that is the meaning, and that's why there are hundreds of different songs based on it.

I used to perform in different situ-

ations, and I created a different tune for different occasions. Recently, they asked me to play a piece at the U.N. So I chose a Buddhist mantra of rebirth, and I tried to put that into Vietnamese music because the chant is almost always using Vietnamese language, and from the language they go into music. I put the music and the chant together.

ES: When you teach the children here, do you talk to them about language?

NTN: Not yet. I have a different way of teaching, because the song is language already. If you start with language, then some children who are not Vietnamese may not be able to pronounce it. They express it through their fingers, and they start to learn about the properties of the instrument, and how the instrument expresses itself, and the technique to change that, to personalize your expression. For the pentatonic scale, there are ample places to personalize your music, and each master will have a different way.

ES: Do you feel like you identify with one region more than another?

NTN: My father was from the north, and I heard him talking every day, and my mother is from central Vietnam. Sometimes, when I was young, I would try to mime them, to make a joke, and when they yelled at me, I tried to mime them to make them laugh. I understand a little bit more now because I'm also an expert in the old script of Vietnam [Nôm]. I standardized it so that it's been put into computers, and now they're trying to do a project with Temple [University] in order to revive this script. All the old books are in great danger of destruction, and so we're trying to put it on the worldwide web to preserve it. In doing so, we discovered books about theater, books about music, books about all sorts of life stories, and about the culture of Vietnam, and so I understood more about regional differences, more than just musical ones.

There are stories behind it—the reasons why people go to a region, how they settle into a place, how they settle their differences, how the land was different in a village, which part of the village is richer than the

other part of the village, which class of people are downtrodden, which class of people are rich. And the rich—what the rich are doing to rice, and to pork, and to chicken food, and all that sort of thing. Some of the books tell you a little bit of those stories, and then you understand more about folk song. Because that's the story behind the simple sentence, "Who brought this blackbird across the river so that it flew away?" You know, at the beginning it makes no sense, but then it makes sense [when you know more about Vietnam]. There are generational differences, and there is a revolt against traditions that are oppressing women. In new songs they're always singing about women who cross the river, who get married to a different guy; this guy who is a musician is writing about his love story, and his girlfriend is going to get married to somebody else. It has nothing to do with anything. If you look at one piece, it is irrational. But then you read the tradition, and you see that Vietnamese women were always revolting against that. When I went to Vietnam, I went to a boat. This was a boat of farm products; they sell at the river market. I sat down and talked down to the wife and husband. The wife was very smart; she was dealing with everything. She was keeping the money; she went out and traded, and then came back, and said, "Do this, do that." The man has to keep the boat; you can't leave women with the boat. So the man has to stay in one place; the women do politicking and trading and bring food home. In the Vietnamese tradition, on the river, women are the ones who manage things. And in the Vietnamese tradition, Vietnamese women always hold the finances of the family.

Then you look at Vietnamese history, and you say, "Oh, you know, the first kings of Vietnam were women—two women." Then you discover that below them there was an army of women. When you look at the drums and all this sort of thing in the tradition, the Vietnamese were matriarchal at the beginning. That's why there was a clash

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The Cantonese-speaking ones and the Mandarin people—they're so off that they can't understand each other. They usually call that "the duck talking to the chicken."

ES: Did your grandfather play music when people came over?

KJ: He actually sang—he would sing the falsetto voices of the Cantonese opera. He used to know a lot. He would come in, they would play mah jong, they would eat lunch, and they would sit around in a circle and play these musics. Some of the people knew how to read the music; others did not. Some of it was done by rote memory. There was one guy that just bought a guitar and restrung it like the Chinese instruments, and was able to play it like that. You kind of just improvise on what you don't have.

ES: Did your parents play music or sing?

KJ: No, my father doesn't play Chinese music. They learned to play Western music. My father plays the guitar. Each one of us, when we were growing up, they had us play different instruments. My sister played the clarinet, I played the violin, and my brother played the sax.

We learned in school. I had private lessons. But I learned all my Chinese music from the Overseas Chinese Association. The older people that were there, they were trying to pass that on to the younger people. The people that I learned from are no longer living. I was in college when I met all these people, and they're no longer here. It was really hard not to have anyone to play these instruments with, but they passed it down through the folk method. They used to have a band, too; we used to have an orchestra here. But all these people are gone.

I started out on the erhu. Everyone starts out with that because it's the easier one; you can get it. I really liked trying something different, though. That's why I moved on to the yangqin, because it's more like a piano, it had more notes to play with, and it was a lot more

fun to play with those instruments. But they go together, the yangqin and the erhu. There's hundreds and hundreds of pieces that were written for those two instruments, and those two instruments go well together for chamber music.

So it really worked out well when I met Qin Qian. Her family is from the Guangxi province. My family's from Guangdong. They're right next to each other, so she can actually speak the dialects that we speak as well as Mandarin. She's very well known throughout the whole world, and in China. Her husband is from Philadelphia. He brought her back. It was just a stroke of luck that we met each other at a concert.

I do know a little bit how to play the moon guitar [yueqin], and the zhongruan—it's mostly a bass instrument. You hit the notes one at a time, and it just keeps the time. Of course, I don't play it as much because we don't have the players to play Chinese music. So most of the time I just concentrate on the yangqin. But I do know how to play the violin, and that was actually my first instrument. And later I took up the Irish harp, the Celtic harp. I always liked the harp. One day I met a man in Audubon, New Jersey, who teaches the Irish harp. I contacted him, and I started learning. We became very good friends.

ES: Did you go to school and high school in Philadelphia?

KJ: I grew up in Cinnaminson, New Jersey. My parents moved out of Chinatown—only because of the housing. I don't know if you know the history of Chinatown, but we're always fighting for housing, and there's just no room. We go back to Chinatown every weekend to visit family. My wife's family lived down in Chinatown, also. I play the guitar at the local Catholic church [Holy Redeemer at 10th and Vine streets] over here every week, and I direct the music there. Mostly it's folk musicians. That's why I was so excited about the FACTS school [Folk Arts – Cultural Treasures

Charter School]. Because in traditional education, you only learn about Western composers: Bach, Beethoven, Mozart. I think I know enough about them, took enough courses in them. I took a course in world music, but I wish there was a little more in schools—I mean, how many African composers, how many South American composers do you know? There's just so much more out there. Why wouldn't you be learning this? We're a country of multiculturals. Why wouldn't you be learning about Jewish klezmer music or some other type of music? I'm glad the school districts are moving away from the Shakespeare type of thing. I mean, it's great to know about Shakespeare, but there's just so much more out there . . .

ES: We should learn about Western music as just one of the world's traditions.

KJ: It's not just Western music; it's a certain type of Western music. We're missing all the Bulgarian music, music from Hungary, Romania, the gypsy music, or Turkish music. There's just so much more out there than what kids are learning in school, and the traditional do-re-mi, the Western scale. I'd rather have my children learn about Latin rhythms and something different. You know? It's like eating meat and potatoes all the time, when there are so many different flavors and foods out there that you could be trying—learning about other people, where they're from, their traditions, their culture, their art.

What about the music of the people? That's what fascinates me. A lot of folk music—it's usually played by people who are ordinary citizens. They aren't musicians who are playing for a living, but they're working in the fields or something. This is their form of entertainment; this is the way they express themselves. That, to me, is so much more than the average composer telling the world,

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with Confucianism—it was a patriarchal society trying to impose on a matriarchal society. People lost land, lost their property, lost their heritage. They revolted, and that’s why. The women started to revolt.

Today, when you look at farmland, the women are always going out to the market and going out to trade. The man has to stay home to till the land, to keep the thing in place. That’s his job. The diplomatic job is for women. All of this is linked to that simple verse. It has a depth to it; it has a reason to it. That was a nice discovery, when I went to the boat and I found out how things work. It’s practical, it’s natural, and there’s no discussion about it.

Resources for further exploration

Douglas, Gavin. 2010. *Music in Mainland Southeast Asia*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Duy, Pham. 1975. *Musics of Vietnam*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Nguyen, Phong. 1998. “Vietnam” and

“*Minority Musics of Vietnam*,” in Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams (eds.), *The Garland Encyclopedia of Music, vol. 4: Southeast Asia*. New York: Garland.

Le đàn tranh: musiques d’hier et d’aujourd’hui. 1994. Paris: Ocora Radio France.

Music from Vietnam and Cambodia. 1999. EUCD 1547. ARC Music Productions.

Notes

¹ A National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) offensive in 1968 that was widely seen as a turning point in the war, leading to U.S. withdrawal.

² Ch Nôm is the ancient “ideographic vernacular script” of the Vietnamese language (<http://nomfoundation.org>). For a thousand years—from 939 CE, when Vietnam won its independence from China, into the 20th century—much of Vietnamese literature, philosophy, history, law, medicine, religion, and government policy was written in Nôm script. This heritage is now nearly lost: fewer than 100 scholars worldwide can read Nôm. Nhàn has been a leading scholar in its preservation. See <http://nomfoundation.org/index.php> and http://www.temple.edu/vietnamese_center/NomScript/index.htm for some of Nhàn’s work in this area.

³ Cải lương is a form of dance-drama that, beginning in urban Vietnam in the early 1900s, updated classical theater in combination with amateur art music. The “reformed theater” incorporated stories from many sources. The primary instrumental accompaniment was an ensemble of Vietnamese strings, but Western instruments were also used.

⁴ Vietnam has 53 ethnic minorities, four major language areas, and a wide variety of regional musical traditions.

⁵ See their website <http://www.myspace.com/peelingnyc>

⁶ Nhàn is one of the musicians on the Billy Bang recording *Vietnam: Reflections*. See <http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=18185>. Nhàn was organizing and educating about Agent Orange in this era as well. See <http://www.vn-agentorange.org/index.html>

⁷ Ca trù is a type of chamber music for poetry, with claps, đàn đáy (a four-string lute), đàn tranh. The lead singer, usually a woman, takes any poem from the audience and puts it into a song. She paces the song with the claps and leads the other instruments.

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but now you know there’s a President’s House because your feelings were stimulated. I think many of us respond to art emotionally. The kind of thing we do – modern jazz and percussive dance and John’s paintings— are not literal. So we may not be the best place to get the full story, but we would like to be a place where you can get an emotional catharsis, and then be stimulated to do the research about this. That’s the way I see it.

Ife Nii-Owoo: I want to remember, in particular, that experience. I want to learn the lessons of that experience and understand how I can move above and beyond that experience. And what I have learned from that experience, and what I have read and studied, is that we as African American people have gotten out of there, and only through a great struggle, we have been able to reach out of that experience to become accepted as human beings and as full citizens in this country.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild: It’s not even about the President’s House, but about us “in the President moment.” And us in the present moment. And us finding a way through the art that moves us. What does it mean to be a person of color living in a non-post-racist moment? And what does it mean to be a white person living in a non-post-racist moment?

None of the quotations or lyrics included here can be used or quoted without express permission of the artist or speaker.

For more information about the President’s House excavation, see:

Avenging the Ancestor’s Coalition: <http://avengingtheancestors.com/>

City of Philadelphia. *The President’s House: Freedom and Slavery in Making a New Nation*: <http://www.phila.gov/presidentshouse/>

Lawler, Edward. *The President’s House in Philadelphia*: <http://www.ushistory.org>

