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African-American History & the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Introduction

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation is an acknowledged leader in its field of living history. Its re-creation of 18th-century Williamsburg architecture and lifestyles has been lauded throughout the museum profession as an example to many. Its influence is widespread, both in scholarly study and in lay interest in American colonial history.

It is just this influence that brings with it a responsibility for accuracy. Responsibility is an odd word, it seems, for a private foundation, as it really carries with it no governmental “shoulds.” However, its own mission statement acknowledges a feeling of needing to be responsible in interpretation and preservation:

To restore, recreate, preserve and interpret eighteenth-century Williamsburg. To restore, recreate, preserve, and interpret the physical presence of eighteenth-century Williamsburg, the environs in which the Virginia colonists and their leaders chose revolution, transforming this British colonial possession into a free country, and to help visitors understand how Williamsburg buildings were used—who lived in them and what their lives were like.

To teach the history of early America. To teach American history, using the setting of Williamsburg to help visitors understand the relationship of the Virginia colonists to the king and mother country, to the other colonies and to each other; the politics, economy, culture and society of eighteenth-century

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America—before it was America, through the transition,
and as a new nation.

This mission statement, distributed to all employees and prospective employees, clearly asserts the Foundation's commitment to education. The second paragraph above outlines the educational goals in specific terms. The seven-year objectives of the Foundation, also distributed to actual and prospective employees, focuses even more on particular ways in which the Foundation aims to develop its educational programs in the coming years. One of these objectives, or "priority concerns that will guide the application of resources...[and whose pursuit] will best enable Colonial Williamsburg to fulfill its mission," is "to strengthen the educational program by concentrating resources on interpreting the Historic Area, expanding exhibition facilities, integrating museums more fully into the educational effort and focusing outreach activities more sharply."

This educational goal-setting of the Foundation indicates that it has assumed the role of prominence that local and national society—both inside and outside of the museum field—have been all too willing to assign to them. The resources here are tremendous, both natural and constructed, and the Foundation has built upon them to gain the status it carries now.

There is, however, perhaps something lacking in the Foundation's interpretive programs. Although the Foundation's own research and publications reveal that "by the eve of the American Revolution nearly two thousand men, women, and children—roughly half white, half black—lived in the capital city," the interpretation of the African-American half of this equation receives far less than half of the total interpretive effort and funding.

Besides the quantity of African-American interpretation available at the Foundation, there is also the matter of the content of the existing interpretation. The histories of Africans and African-Americans presented in the Foundation's publications and interpretation are of slaves almost exclusively, though there were some free blacks at the time, and those histories are restricted to those aspects that involved the work they did for or within the dominating (European or European-American) culture. Little attention is paid to the free blacks that were living there and owning property, although they are mentioned in the special tour, "The Other Half." With all of the emphasis at the Foundation on research, education, and historical realities, it seems odd that little or no mention is made in

interpretation of the lives these people had before they arrived in the colonies, if they were brought over from Africa; even if they were born at the house or plantation where they later worked, it is difficult for the visitor to gain the same kind of understanding of the black population that they get of the white population. It seems that the bulk of the material culture interpretation at the Foundation is done in regards to the Europeans and European-Americans who owned the objects, not the slave labor that produced them or the slave work for which they were used. John Fleming, once director of the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center project of the Ohio Historical Society and former second vice president of the African American Museums Association, visited several Southern museums in search of African-American history. He writes,

I had come to the South on a search. There's history buried here. Not the history we all learned in "Four score and seven years ago," but the history of the thousands upon thousands of blacks, both freedmen and slaves, who spent their days, not in politics and governance, but in the daily tasks of subsistence. It's a history that barely survived slavery and segregation only to run smack against Great Men and elitist determiners of what's valuable.⁴

The remaining material culture left to us for interpretation as a result of generations of prejudice, a desire to erase uncomfortable memories, progress, and lack of foresight can be preserved and used to interpret all we can about a vital half of late 18th-century Williamsburg.

The question then remains, what *is* the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation doing to educate its visitors about the history of half of the population? Moreover, is this enough? To answer these questions, an examination of the two major functions of the Foundation—publishing and interpretation—is in order.

Publications

One of the influential activities of the Foundation is its publishing. Books and pamphlets are disseminated widely through the visiting population, employees, and bookstores on every aspect of the living history museum as well as the history itself. Through these publications, the Foundation's influence is felt internationally by museums large and small who look to

the Foundation as a paradigm of what a living history museum ought to be. These publications include two basic types: visitor's guides and scholarly research materials.

Official Guide to Colonial Williamsburg

The *Official Guide to Colonial Williamsburg* is the publication of the Foundation that is most widely read by visitors. Prominently displayed in virtually every local store, whether owned by the Foundation or not, it can be seen carried under the arm of nearly every tourist or tourist group. If one buys no other publication during one's visit to the Foundation's buildings, one is almost certain to get this book.

In such a widely distributed guide to the museum complex, one might expect to find the most comprehensive information about the interpretation of the museum. It is, in fact, the *only* publication that speaks directly to the Foundation's role in interpreting African-American history. Articles have been published in trade magazines, but there are no other materials for "popular consumption" available on the subject.

Biographical Sketches

The *Guide* acknowledges that "much of the heavy and domestic work around town was performed by blacks, most of them slaves, although a few were free."⁵ Throughout the *Guide* are biographical sketches about individuals about whom the Foundation has found a great deal of information. These sketches appear in color boxes throughout the *Guide*. There are four boxes about African-Americans in Williamsburg, one of which regards a free man. The lives of the slaves are explored in terms of the work that they did ("Caesar managed the stable and cared for horses of customers at Wetherburn's Tavern. He drove the tavern wagon around town and to nearby plantations like Carter's Grove where Wetherburn bought produce...."), the restrictions on people of color at the time ("Caesar always carried a travel permit from Wetherburn if he went as far away as Norfolk or Richmond because an unaccompanied black might be stopped and questioned"), the financial value of slavery to the dominating culture, ("Caesar had been appraised at seventy pounds in the inventory taken after his master's death in 1760"⁸), the reliance individual members of the society felt upon slave labor ("she depended heavily on slave labor to do much of the work at a busy tavern like Wetherburn's"⁹), and religious life ("Caesar and Sarah worshipped at Bruton Parish Church. Slaves sat apart in the north gallery. After divine

services blacks could talk with one another and pass along the latest news and gossip. Caesar and Sarah's two sons, William and Pompey, were both baptized in Bruton Church...."). Some mention is made in the boxes of members of a slave's family, of possible romantic interests in other slaves, political interest, and ability to read as an asset to the slaveholder. The sketch of the free black included in the *Guide* notes him as an exception to every rule: Adam Waterford "had learned a trade; he had acquired basic reading and writing skills; and he owned a piece of land." It also explains some of his family difficulties:

Although Waterford was free, his wife, Rachel, was not. She belonged to tavern keeper Gabriel Maupin, for whom she worked as a chambermaid and laundress. Adam realized that it would take years to accumulate enough money to buy Rachel's freedom—if Maupin agreed to sell her. In the meantime, any children born to Adam and Rachel while Rachel was still a slave were the property of Maupin.

These sketches seem to tell the reader something about many dimensions of the lives of these individuals: personal and family, working conditions, living conditions, and sometimes recreation. This same tone is carried over into the interpretation that does go on in the Foundation. However, the African-American population made up approximately half of the late 18th-century Williamsburg population (the percentage was even higher in the surrounding areas), and without this half, the other—highly visible in present-day interpretation at the Foundation—segment could not have existed a day. The dependence upon this population is often undervalued in the Foundation's interpretation. Many of the roles played by blacks in this period are not represented. Numerically, the African-American population is very much neglected in contemporary interpretation. Admittedly, some of this may be due to difficulties common to many employers with recruiting African-Americans.

Other References

Most of the other references to Africans and African-Americans are casually made individually in terms of those free (usually white) people for whom they worked, or collectively in terms of structures built or tasks accomplished; in other words, these individuals are portrayed solely in terms of other people or of things. There are 22 references to Africans or African-Americans other than the biographical sketches throughout the

Guide, and all but two are made in terms of their being the property of their owners (i.e., presence in inventories, being bequeathed to heirs), of the functions they had in the businesses in which they worked, or the crimes which might land them in the Public Gaol. This is not a full enough depiction of a vital, dynamic, living part of the culture being portrayed.

One of the two exceptions to this majority is a paragraph regarding a bit of the religious lives of blacks:

Blacks living in the parish also worshipped at Bruton Church. Scores of slaves—who sat apart in the north gallery—attended Sunday services. After the mid-eighteenth century, more than one thousand slaves, many of them infants, were baptized in Bruton Church. Inspired by two black preachers, Gowan Pamphlet and Moses, a number of black parishioners established a church of their own after the Revolution. With a membership of five hundred, “The Baptist Church of black people at Williamsburg” was received into the Dover Baptist Association in 1793. The site of their church, on Nassau Street opposite the Taliaferro-Cole stable, is marked by a plaque.

The other exception is this paragraph on some of their cultural life:

Here and there, tucked into corners or hidden in lofts above kitchens, stables, and other outbuildings were their scant personal possessions: a straw-filled mattress, one or two extra pieces of clothing, an occasional fiddle or banjo. These few material goods only begin to suggest the full cultural life that Africans and their descendants in the New World. In Williamsburg’s backyards black men and women courted, married, and reared children. They told African folk tales adapted to life in Virginia, taught their children how to cope with the harsh realities of slavery, and attempted¹⁴ to subvert the system by harboring runaway slaves.

It is important to recognize the multiple dimensions of the lives of human beings and not portray flat stereotypes. These two exceptions are a good sign, but it is a shame that this type of discourse is not more preva-

lent; perhaps future revisions will include some new research on black life in the late 19th century in Virginia.

Other Publications

The only scholarly publication published by the Foundation that is dedicated to the history of Africans and African-Americans in Williamsburg during the period represented in the historic area is Thad W. Tate's *The Negro in 18th-Century Williamsburg*, which was published in 1965. Although it is cited as a leading source of scholarly research information on the subject, thirty years is a long time to pass before a historical foundation that does as much publishing as does the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation publishes new research pertaining to half of their period's and location's population. The research for the book was done primarily in 1957, and the third edition, which is the 1965 one currently available in bookstores, involved only minor revisions. This book is still considered the authoritative guide to the subject, and when asked what training materials are used in preparing them for their roles, African-American historical interpreters consistently cite this book. When further inquiries are made, however, members of the Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation of the Foundation also state that they are constantly reading new research being published outside the Foundation. The Foundation's bookstores do carry several titles on related topics, such as African-American life in the region (i.e., Virginia, the Carolinas, and Maryland) and includes some pertaining to the same time period (though the selections span anywhere from the early 18th to the early 20th century). The sales associates at the Visitor Center bookstore name four titles that are used especially by the Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation in their lectures and training programs, two of which are collections of oral histories of former slaves in the Carolinas collected in the 1930s. In any case, the Foundation's own publishing record is less important than its interpretive record.

Interpretation: The Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation

There are some specific primary modes through which African-American history is presented by the Foundation to visitors: the slave quarters at Carter's Grove plantation several miles out of town, and a special tour

(available at no extra charge to visitors already carrying the usual passes sold at the Visitor Center) called “The Other Half: African-American Colonial Life.” All of the programs in which African-American history is interpreted stem from one source: the Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation.

The Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation

This mode of interpretation should not be viewed as a separate entity from the other modes, as the Department endeavors to work as a team with other departments to provide the best possible interpretation. The Department is responsible basically for all programs offered by the Foundation related to African-American interpretation. In an interview with African-American Interpreter Arthur Johnson of the Department, some of the goals of the Department were informally outlined. Through such interpretation, the staff of the Department tries to teach about African-American history as it pertains to history up to and including the 18th century. Upon request, they will also perform certain characters or types of characters, and will also provide talks to groups, such as schools. They spearhead the interpretation of African-Americans throughout the Foundation.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a program was started at the Foundation called “In Living History,” which was an attempt to bring live characters to the street to intermingle with visitors walking through the historic area. Rex Ellis was a teacher in dramatic arts at Hampton University and was called upon to put together some slave characters with his students. This project was so successful that Ellis was asked to stay on. From here began the special tours and other interpretive programs that would eventually blossom into the Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation. At first, Ellis and his crew were part of a larger group of interpreters, both black and white, who were providing character interpretations of all kinds. Ellis became the unspoken leader for the African-American sector of this larger group, and he eventually gained his own department and expanded the African-American interpretation available. When Ellis left in 1991 to work for the Smithsonian, Robert Watson was promoted from being the Department’s Assistant Director to being its Director.

A major goal of the Department is to eventually mainstream African-American interpretation to become part of all interpretation at the Foundation. For instance, when crafts and trades are being interpreted, it should not be overlooked that both free and enslaved blacks worked in these craft and trade shops as apprentices and as full-fledged laborers. The Department acknowledges its role as a leader in the field of interpreting African-American history, and knows that many people look to it as an example. Corporate grants allow them to continue and expand their programs even when Foundation funding falls short.

The Department consists of a dozen interpreters, two administrators, and a secretary. Among these are individuals with diverse backgrounds, educationally, professionally, and socioeconomically. The commitment to teaching their subject, however, is a common bond between these diverse co-workers; as Arthur Johnson puts it, “I think it would be difficult to work this job if all you saw it as was just a job.”¹⁶ He says one must be willing to talk about, read about, and explain African-American history to audiences who are there for many different reasons, and that sometimes audience members can be challenging and even hostile. The Department staff make every effort to be accurate and to keep up with changing research, and to interact well with their audiences. Once hired, a new staff member is given a reading list and several training manuals and spends the first several weeks learning a base of knowledge upon which they will build, and they observe programs going on.

The interpreters in this Department show an uncommon level of commitment to their work, and a personal interest that transcends mere professionalism. They are dedicated to accurate interpretation, to teaching, to broadening the horizons of every visitor from every racial or ethnic background.

Carter’s Grove

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation spent seven years on architectural research in building the slave quarters at Carter’s Grove plantation. The slave dwellings were built using period construction techniques, including “rough-hewed timbers felled by hand tools and carried from the forest in ox-hauled carts. A wealth of archaeological research over the past decade—spawned by increased focus on black history and vernacular architecture among archaeologists, architectural historians, curators, and preservationists—has led to deeper understandings of slave life and the largely undocumented realm of black material culture.”¹⁷

Although it has been nearly 30 years since Thad Tate's research was published, the Foundation's research did not end in 1965. Excavations have continued, as has research into oral histories, material culture, similar sites, and other primary sources. Exploratory excavations at the plantation resulted in the discovery of

thirteen pits lined with boards, dating from the late eighteenth century. Archaeologists first speculated that these had been tanning vats. Subsequent excavations at nearby Kings-Mill Plantation and elsewhere, however, found slave quarters with storage pits beneath the houses. Such pits, or root cellars, had also been described in first-hand accounts.

Edward Chappell, the director of archaeological research for the Foundation at the time, "drew on existing eighteenth-century regional examples, notably a one-room, 12-by-16-foot, clapboard¹⁹-covered frame slave dwelling at Prestwould, near Clarksville, Virginia."

The work for the Foundation did not end with architectural restoration and reconstruction, though. The interpretive end of the slave quarters at Carter's Grove is the definite focal point for most visitors. The interpreters demonstrate the same quality of interpretation and commitment to cause as do the interpreters at other sites throughout the Foundation's properties. These interpreters are on the staff of the Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation, and their research, knowledge, and ability to communicate sometimes uncomfortable information to visitors of many backgrounds once again manifests itself here.

Some of the information given during the interpretation normally offered to visitors to the slave quarters is not the ordinary depiction of what life on the plantation might have been like for a slave. Information about the lifestyles of the slaves and what has been learned from the material culture of the site is also given. One surprise for many visitors is the relative differences in living conditions among slaves depending on "marital status, position in the work force, and owner's inclinations. There is one large framed house—where eight people are believed to have lived—with a brick fireplace and chimney, and two smaller log houses with stick and mud²⁰ chimneys. The three buildings housed roughly two dozen field hands."

The excavations at Carter's Grove also taught the Foundation and its visitors about some of the food ways of the African-American plantation slave, which can be a telling facet of understanding the intimate, everyday lives of people. "Slaves raised chickens and tended gardens. Evidence also suggests that slaves may have retained cultural distinctions, such as cooking one-pot African meals, while using mass-produced English ceramic ware."

The growing research and interpretation on the part of the Foundation in the past 30 years or so is no accident. The civil rights movement of the 1960s and increasing awareness on the part of the visiting public of multiple cultural groups interacting in historical contexts have both resulted in a heightened appreciation for the contributions of Africans and African-Americans on a traditionally Eurocentric continent. "The reconstruction at Carter's Grove may signal a shift in attitude paralleled at Williamsburg, where officials report a growing curiosity about slavery on the part of visitors. 'How are we going to deal with where we came from,' indicates Rex Ellis, 'if we continue to pretend it didn't exist? The subject of slavery is certainly painful, which is one of the reasons it needs to be dealt with. We need to learn from all of history, including the uncomfortable parts.'"

"The Other Half"

"The Other Half" is one-and-a-half-hour walking tour provided at a few designated times daily by staff members of the Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation. This tour covers the slave trade from West Africa to Virginia and many nuances not addressed in typical school history curricula. The interpreters are knowledgeable and seem unruffled at any question. An interesting part of this tour is that it addresses fearlessly some uncomfortable and even taboo subjects in an interactive way with the audience. Volunteers from the audience, for example, are used to illustrate the confinement of being shackled to one another in the bowels of a slaver's ship. To hear such topics addressed in a frank, non-accusatory manner by an African-American interpreter (11 of the dozen interpreters in the Department are African Americans) in a predominantly Caucasian audience (as many on the tour seem to be) is unusual.

Material Culture

An integral part of living history interpretation is the material culture of the culture being represented. As illustrated clearly by the social history available at the Carter's Grove slave quarters, material culture can provide an excellent springboard to informed and complete interpretation and education. John Fleming, continuing his search for African-American history in Southern museums, writes that "during conversations with the staff at the center and at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, I began to see the frustrations I would face as I searched for Afro-American artifacts from the Colonial period. There simply weren't many to be found—at least not easily."²³ This frustration is felt by the visitor who goes from one of the free European-Americans' homes, with their wealth of artifacts and interpretation about the work and leisure lives of their inhabitants, to the slave quarters at the Brush-Everard House or at Carter's Grove plantation, where there are few artifacts if any, and little is told of working methods or leisure activities.

In his article, Fleming writes of the explanation he received from Carolyn Weekley, then director of the folk art center, about the dearth of period objects, and about the problems in interpreting the objects once they are found. Weekley

acknowledged that thousands of black craftsmen worked in the South before 1865, but little documentation of their work survives. These craftsmen, like those working for Thomas D. Wallace of Charleston and other whites, took on an anonymity that will not crack. Because of an extreme lack of documentation, white artisans, not their black workers, receive credit for the finely turned newels, the bas-relief carvings, the intricate combinations of inlays—in effect, for Southern decorative arts.²⁴

Rex Ellis, when he was in charge of black programs for the Foundation at the time of Fleming's tour, agreed with Weekley. He offered these solutions: "He advocated archaeological excavations of slave and free-black settlements to uncover the material culture of the black community—evidence that might include work tools, household utensils, ceramics, metal knives and forks, and other durable things. Because so few artifacts are available, Ellis uses recreations to interpret black life in his programs at Williamsburg."²⁵ This difficulty in locating and documenting material objects of African-American social history results in a limited ability on

the part of the Foundation to present material culture of that subculture. What can be done, however, is to fully “read” the objects that are available and to share the new theories with visitors.

Conclusion

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation has made great strides over the past 20 to 30 years in presenting the visitor with a picture of African-American life in 18th-century Williamsburg. Although it is still not as prevalent as it could be, it is available to the interested visitor. Perhaps in the next 20 years the Foundation will incorporate the African-American points of view into all of its programs, until they are a fully integrated part of the overall effort.

A student in the master’s degree program in museum education at the College of William and Mary recently was overheard to say, “When will it be enough?” in reference to multicultural education. The simple answer is, when it reflects at least the numerical realities of who was living at the time one attempts to represent. Although the attempts made are honorable, it is nonetheless unbalanced to present this time and place in American history without half of such presentation being of African-Americans.

Notes

1. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. *Seven-Year Objectives, 1989-1995*.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. *Official Guide to Colonial Williamsburg*. Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1985, 14-15.
4. John E. Fleming. “Taking Stock of Afro-American Material Culture.” *History news*. February 1985, 15.
5. *Official Guide*, 14-15.
6. *Official Guide*, 41.
7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Official Guide*, 124.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Official Guide*, 89-90.

14. *Official Guide*, 63.

15. Belinda Hurmence, ed. *My Folks Don't Want Me To Talk About Slavery: Twenty-One Oral Histories of Former North Carolina Slaves*. Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1984; and *Before Freedom, When I Just Can Remember: Twenty-Seven Oral Histories of Former South Carolina Slaves*. Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1989.

16. Interview, 24 November 1992.

17. Patricia Leigh Brown. "Away from the Big House: Interpreting the Uncomfortable Parts of History." *History News*. March/April 1989, 8.

18. Brown, 9.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Brown, 9-10.

21. Brown, 10.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Fleming, 15-16.

24. Fleming, 16.

25. *Ibid.*

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