

primary and secondary interpretive themes for a forthcoming general management plan gave a new chance to address the issues. Contributions of Philadelphia's diverse (religious, ethnic, and racial) population were incorporated into the park's planning documents—into its interpretive themes and its management goals—giving new energy to the park staff's ongoing social history programs.

One such program, *The Silent Majority* walking tour, focuses on African Americans, women, children, and people of different faiths and economic levels. Actors hired by the park performed vignettes of 18th-century African street vendors who offered such eatables as pepper pot soup, a dish with African origins. The goal was not to create a separate slate of programs with minority themes, but to incorporate this information into the mainstream of interpretation. The Liberty Bell, for instance, besides being an international symbol of freedom, also has a story as an abolitionist and civil rights symbol. Special topic tours which focus on servants and women include information on the African servants who toiled in obscurity. Visitors have been pleased with the new tours, and the park has enjoyed requests for these special tours from audiences new to the National Park Service.

Highlighting the contributions of African Americans, or any minority, is controversial, not just with visitors but with park staff, regardless of racial makeup. While many interpreters appreciate the richness that diversity brings to interpretation, others are reluctant to tell the stories of less famous people. There are complaints about the scarcity of source material for "diversity" tours, discussions about the relative merit of political

accomplishments over social history, and nagging claims that programs based on social history are somehow forced or false.

Ongoing, vigorous debate among interpreters weigh the value of telling the stories of the "silent majority" who are mostly missing from mainstream texts. The anniversary of the yellow fever epidemic coincided with the 250th anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's birth, so that several Independence staff members lobbied hard to reserve the park's focus and energy for a traditional observance centered on the life of the author of the Declaration of Independence. On another occasion the search for a contemporary image of an African-American Continental soldier for a park publication and exhibit generated lively discussion among interpreters, historians, and curators about context, the benefits of using a contemporary image, 18th-century attitudes and 20th-century suitability. These debates were, in themselves, an enlightening measure of our own times, values, and attitudes.

To make history relevant to an increasingly diverse American population, the National Park Service needs a more inclusive vision. It is indeed headed in that direction and at Independence National Historical Park the challenge remains to present a balanced and accurate narrative of the events and people that shaped the founding of the nation.

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Christopher D. Geist

## African-American History at Colonial Williamsburg

**C**olonial Williamsburg, Virginia, restored Capital of England's largest, most populous, and wealthiest colony is the most expansive and comprehensive museum village in the nation. Spread over 173 acres with about 500 restored and reconstructed homes, dependencies, shops, taverns, public, and government buildings—88 are original structures—and hundreds of costumed visitors' aides, artisans, and character interpreters the village represents an unparalleled opportunity to interpret the complex social fabric of an important colonial legislative, cultural, and commercial center on the eve of the Revolution.

Until fairly recently that promise was imperfectly realized. In 1775, Williamsburg's population was just short of two thousand, about half of them white. The "Other Half," to use the title of a popular walking tour offered to visitors, was African or African American, most of them slaves.

From early restoration efforts in the 1920s through the 1960s it was the rare visitor who encountered evidence that African Americans had played any role at all in Williamsburg society. Early editions of the village's *Official Guidebook* offered discrete references to "servants," but generally slavery and the major role played by slaves in 18th-century Williamsburg was not evident. By

1972, the *Guidebook* acknowledged slavery here and there, notably in the introduction where slaves were mentioned several times and a brief paragraph was devoted to their lives. But there was still no evidence of the major African-American contributions to the culture and society of Virginia's capital and the colony in general, no attention to how and under what circumstances the slave and free black residents of Williamsburg interacted with and influenced the white population, no mention of the realities of living as a slave or of the complexity of a society forged in the crucible of racial slavery.

In 1979, interpretive programming offered by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the not-for-profit entity which administers every aspect of the village, was expanded to include first person interpretations to supplement the third person, costumed tour guides and historic trades interpreters who had been typical of the village's interpretations. This initiative included a few character interpreters who portrayed slaves. Visitors encountered the first person interpreters as they walked through the town in a random and rather unstructured fashion. Almost immediately it became apparent that there were problems inherent in this program strategy. While visitors to the village generally adapted to the role playing necessary to interact with white character interpreters, this was not always the case when visitors encountered black interpreters. At least a few visitors meeting slave interpreters believed they were modern Colonial Williamsburg employees complaining about working conditions at the Foundation rather than interpreters in 1770's character commenting on their masters. Quite probably these misunderstandings drew from the nearly complete absence of the portrayal of slavery and African Americans

*"Jumping the Broom" at Carter's Grove Slave Quarters. Photo courtesy Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, VA.*



in general throughout the interpretations in Williamsburg to that time. Not having been properly prepared to experience African-American interpretation, the visitors were missing sufficient context with which to accept, evaluate, and learn from such encounters. With rare exceptions, they had not encountered African-American characters before and heard only few and fleeting references to slavery at the various sites they had visited.

These difficulties were not fully remedied until the early 1980s and the founding of the Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentations (AAIP), initially headed by Rex Ellis and now by Christy Matthews. Since its founding, AAIP has developed a comprehensive plan to present the social and cultural history of African Americans in 1770s Williamsburg through living history presentations which are researched, planned, and staged by the Department throughout the village. Additionally, sites and presentations not specifically attached to AAIP have been encouraged to incorporate aspects of the African-American story whenever possible within their own interpretive repertoire, often using first person character interpretation. Lives of household slaves are now interpreted at all major domestic sites, how the various Royal Governors responded to the reality of slavery is interpreted at the Governor's Palace (one of the village's most popular sites), comparisons of slave artisans and indentured servants are offered at many of the village's 14 historic trades sites, and the legal status of free blacks and slaves, including punishment under law, is interpreted at the Public Gaol and the Courthouse. Evidence of slave life is encountered even when live interpreters are not present, as exhibit sites have been filled with the material culture of slavery—clothing, the master's discarded furniture and household artifacts, and the slaves' own personal items recreate environments in which slaves lived and worked.

AAIP also collaborates with other units to offer living history presentations, as when AAIP and Military Programs reenacted the raising of the Royal Ethiopian Regiment organized by Royal Governor Dunmore in 1775 to enlist, on promise of freedom, slaves of rebellious Virginia masters. Experimental programs and one-time-only events, including 1994's controversial reenactment of a slave auction during the village's "Publick Times" program, take advantage of unique and emerging opportunities to present material to large numbers of visitors. And in 1989, interpretation began at the reconstructed slave quarter at Carter's Grove Plantation which is owned and operated by the Foundation. Because it is situated between the entrance to the plantation site and the mansion itself, all visitors to Carter's Grove are funnelled

through the slave quarter interpretation, the nation's only reconstructed 18th-century slave quarter on an original site..

Through trial and error, tireless research, and creative initiatives AAIP, in concert with other Colonial Williamsburg interpretive units, developed the comprehensive program for African-American interpretations now permeating the restored village. It is unlikely that any visitor, no matter how brief the stay, will leave Williamsburg without some understanding of African-American history and culture. The longer the visit the greater the learning, and repeat visitors—CWF estimates that 64% of annual visitors are returning at least the second time with about 18% the ninth—are afforded many opportunities to enhance and expand their understanding of African-American issues in the 1770s. African-American interpretations are available every day of the year with multiple programs on many days, especially during peak summer and Christmas seasons.

Visitors locate these opportunities in the weekly *Visitor's Companion*, a day-by-day guide to special events and evening programs. The "Other Half" tour, essentially a walking lecture set against the backdrop of the restored village, provides orientation on the history of African Americans in Virginia from 1619 through the Colonial Era and has become a popular staple of AAIP presentations. Initially offered at an extra fee but now included with the most popular ticket option, this daily tour provides deep background and context for visitors wishing to explore African-American life in the colonial capital. "Neither Seen nor Heard—Life Under the Master's Roof" is a one-hour tour of the Brush-Everard House told solely from the point of view of Everard's slaves, an opportunity unique within the village. This tour extends beyond the material related to the Everard slaves to include a good deal of the information related on the "Other Half" tour and is open to all general admission ticket holders at no additional cost.

Each AAIP program—only a few selected examples are mentioned here—develops and reinforces key themes central to understanding the lives of slave and free black men and women of 18th-century Williamsburg. Many visitors encounter these themes on several occasions during their stay. First and foremost, black colonists—both slave and free—are portrayed as a community of *individuals* drawing on traditions maintained from their homelands to forge a distinctive community and culture within Colonial Virginia by melding folk beliefs, foodways, entertainments (especially music, storytelling and dancing), family structure, social organization, and religions of Africa with those imposed by their new

situation. This is not a monolithic presentation. Care is taken to demonstrate that Africans arrived in the colonies with very different backgrounds, depending on their social circumstances and point of origin.

Among the best of the programs is "Jumpin' the Broom," a representation of a slave marriage ceremony which is nearly derailed when the groom learns that the woman he plans to marry was once molested by a white man. He does not wish to enter a situation wherein he would be helpless to protect his wife—his father had suffered similar humiliation helplessly. "Affairs of the Heart" deals with the impact of interracial sexuality as a planter's new wife learns that he has a son by his slave mistress and lover. The program explores the impact of this revelation on both master and slave, including a variety of slave responses toward the mother, some sympathetic and others not. "She should have stayed with her own kind," one male slave comments.

"Prime Time History Hour," staged not within the historic village but in a modern theater, brings together three black characters from the 1770s to participate in a modern television talk show, complete with host, cameras, commercials, and an audience composed of Williamsburg's visitors who are invited to participate as in "real" talk shows. Characters include an urban house slave who repeatedly insists that women "keep to their own place and station in life," a field slave from a large plantation who had been born in Africa, and a free black woman who successfully supports herself while raising the free children she bore with her slave husband. The latter character helps to illustrate that in the 18th century the children of African Americans held the status of the mother, a point made in "Affairs of the Heart," where the mulatto child of the master becomes a slave. In the initial interview by the talk show's "host" and in the audience's question-and-answer session which follows, all of the major themes of African-American interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg are developed.

This brief essay only begins to outline the rich and highly effective African-American programming throughout Colonial Williamsburg. Constantly building on past successes and learning from each new initiative, the AAIP Department has developed what is certainly the most comprehensive and effective interpretation of 18th-century African-American life in the United States.

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