● THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

interpreter

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Afro-American Tour of Colonial Williamsburg

Rex Ellis is like the Pied Piper of Hamelin without a flute. As he moves across the Palace Green, he coaxes and conjures his followers with calculated gestures, poignant tales, and a controlled boisterousness woven into a steady stream of carefully chosen facts and themes about Afro-American history in the Tidewater and Chesapeake.

Rex Ellis is an actor, a teacher, and a neophyte historian. He draws on all of these skills to accomplish an extremely difficult task — explaining several hundred years of Afro-American history and culture and its peculiarities to Williamsburg and neighboring areas in a limited amount of time and within a tour format. Rex accomplishes his task with the skillful choice of powerful themes. They are: (1) racial interaction, (2) slave culture, and (3) plantation vs. urban life.

In the Palace gardens where slaves once labored, Rex examines racial interaction to get at the origins of Afro-American life. He informs visitors that the beginnings of the slave trade were a clear indication that this transformation from African to Afro-American was to be a long and painful one. Africans were captured, and forcefully removed from the security of family, kinship, society, and culture. Rex paints a vivid picture of the uncertainty and horror of the ocean voyage in what is commonly referred to as the middle passage.

Slaves were not shipped directly to Virginia from Africa until the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were first shipped to the West Indies, and those not sold were transported to the Chesapeake. Rex describes the complicated process of adaptation. He makes it apparent that early familial and kin organizations were impossible because of the high proportion of men to women. This unbalanced sex ratio continued throughout the seventeenth century, and not until the mid-eighteenth century did it begin to come into balance. An additional problem was the large number of African imports who were considered newcomers and outsiders by native Afro-Americans. Rex punctuates his presentation with information gleaned from the memoirs of Olaudah Equiano — an African who came to the Chesapeake as a slave, and, later, under unusual circumstances, recorded his feelings and ideas about slavery.

By the mid-eighteenth century the possibilities for familial and kin organization increased because of demographic changes. African immigration declined, allowing fewer and fewer disruptions. The sex ratio balanced out and slaves married, birthed children, and more often lived with their spouses and children. Black population density increased, and with it the likelihood of black interaction with other blacks. Black interaction with whites, including supervisors, decreased. Rex footnotes this argument with the controversial

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The Exchange

Mike Kipps gives us a progress report on two life-on-the-scene projects in the Historic Area.

The craft department is excited about two experimental programs that were initiated this summer. These two projects center on the care and maintenance of bees and the cultivation and harvesting of tobacco. Our hope is that these two experimental programs will provide a base from which we can expand our interpretations of the agricultural aspects of the town and Carter's Grove.

To begin the "bee" project, Lew LeCompte graciously donated the services of one queen bee, a handful of passionate drones, and 25,000 workers. Wright Horne and his staff of cabinetmakers carefully constructed an experimental beehive. This beehive is taken from a French design that has been altered slightly to permit modern health inspectors to examine it without damaging the hive. The hive is currently located in the orchard on the north side of the Elkanah Deane House. The honey and beeswax from this hive will be used in our domestic crafts cooking and candlemaking programs, and a description of bee care and hive maintenance will be incorporated into our interpretation.

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subject of slave sale and family disruption. Clearly, families were disrupted by sale. Those sold were usually younger members of the family, and these sales were usually made to masters living nearby. So reprehensible an act benefited the Afro-American community because it permitted, by default, inter-plantation networks and extended kinship patterns. These patterns persisted throughout the period of slavery and provided the vertebrae for the survival of Afro-American life and culture.

Rex is most comfortable with his discussions of the development of Afro-American culture, especially expressive culture, which he takes up behind the cabinetmaker's shop. He tells us that owning and playing percussion instruments were prohibited by a House of Burgesses resolution, but they flourished nonetheless. Slaves played an assortment of instruments, some European, some African, and others a unique mixture of African and Euro-American. They blended the complex polyrhythms of Africa with the more structural European forms. The result was unique, and although rhapsodic for the creator, it was disturbing to most white listeners.

Religion, like kinship organization, was an essential element of Afro-American culture. Blacks may have begun to use Christian social and cultural definitions as a means of explaining their "origins and destiny," but the meanings they attached to them, as well as the overall effect, were different from the Anglo-Virginian experience. The local Anglican church baptized slaves on occasion but did not make a concerted effort to do so until after the Great Awakening. Rex notes that during this period from 1748 to 1768, 980 blacks were baptized at Bruton Parish Church, a relatively significant number. The Afro-American response to the Great Awakening, on the other hand, was overwhelming, as indicated by the number of black members in the Methodist and Baptist churches by 1790 — 8,000 Baptists and 4,000 Methodists in Virginia. In telling this part of the story Rex certainly rises to the occasion. He has a bit of the gospel preacher in him. The power of his sermon, which he delivers, in the character of Gowan Pamphlet, in the low ground behind the Tayloe House, suggests the strength, creativity, and stamina of old slave preachers and exhorters. Rex's choice of a clandestine, yet natural, setting conveys the essential elements of an independent slave religion.

Behind the Wythe House, Rex explains that plantations were the physical center for the organization of Afro-American life and culture. Usually the work routine determined how slaves occupied a given day. Gang labor predominated in the Tidewater. Slaves worked from sun to sun at a variety of tasks, generally structured around the cultivation of tobacco, wheat, and corn. Thus, most slaves were agricultural laborers. Rex informs us that some slaves acted as foremen and overseers. There were also carpenters, stone masons, carters, and boatmen. The black overseer's responsibility was made particularly difficult by his divided loyalties. On the one hand, he was a leader possessed of the authority to manage and control the labor force. Still he remained a slave. Therefore, his leadership and authority had no social significance within the greater white community. Rex illuminates this ambiguity in his portrayal of a troubled foreman, Jesse, who visits Williamsburg occasionally for suplies.

Rex's foreman, who he makes us believe is before us on his wagon, also alludes to the differences between urban slavery and rural slavery. He suggests that urban slaves had more latitude than rural slaves, that they had less supervision, and that their work was task-oriented rather than defined by time and season. In addition, Williamsburg slaves found a wider variety of opportunities. Thad Tate identifies twelve crafts that they followed — slaves were barbers, blacksmiths, butchers, carpenters, shoemakers, coopers, and tailors. Blacks who lived and worked in Williamsburg interacted, as well as intermarried, with plantation slaves. Urban blacks, like rural blacks, also dealt with poor and working-class whites. Rex notes the legislation against "night shops" and other places where liquor was sold and whites and blacks fraternized. He concludes that the latitude and autonomy enjoyed by urban slaves was relative to the plantation experience, and that urban slavery was also severe.

Rex's tour is consistent with the innovative summer programs exploring the Afro-American past. The tour complements these programs and gives the visitor a more thorough understanding of the development than the three-or-four-minute situational portrayals and the longer but carefully focused evening programs.

Rex's tour is an interdepartmental effort drawing on the research department, the company of colonial performers, interpretive edu-

cation, and group visits. Thad Tate's *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* remains the definitive study of the Afro-American experience in Williamsburg. In the last ten years, a number of other historians have researched and written about blacks in the Chesapeake. Most notable are Philip Morgan (now a fellow at Colonial Williamsburg and the Institute of Early American History and Culture), and Edmund Morgan, Alan Kulikoff, Russell Menard, and Rhys Isaac. Gerald Mullins's study of slave resistance in the colony and state and Robert McColly's analysis of slavery in Jeffersonian Virginia are significant for the late eighteenth century.

Visitor response to the tour has been exceptional. The future also suggests promise. From the York County Project a substantial body of research data about Afro-Americans will be available. The summer program will continue; Rex's tour will be broadened and enhanced. Phil Morgan and the author are currently involved in research on the Afro-American experience in the tidewater area. Colonial Williamsburg, then, is clearly committed to scholarly research and an accurate interpretation of Afro-American life in the Tidewater and Chesapeake.

— Reginald Butler

Craft Projects, *continued*

Although tobacco has been grown in the Historic Area for a number of years, this summer provided us with our first real opportunity to grow tobacco using eighteenth-century techniques and equipment. Victor Shone started the process by turning the fields with the traditional horse and plow. Next, the seedlings were planted. In the eighteenth century, the seedlings were normally started in January by planting seeds in carefully prepared beds covered with cedar or pine brush. Because of our late start, we enlisted the help of the landscape department to grow our seedlings. Neil Black and Russell Steele set these plants out in "hills" — raised mounds of earth with a plant set in the top of the mound — that were about six feet apart. During the summer, Neil, Russell, and Mark Pepper weeded the field with several different types of field hoes.

The plants matured in the first weeks of September. At this point, the tops of the plants were cut off. This was done to stop further growth of the plant. Further growth and the production of flowers and seed pods could take nutrients away from the leaves. At the same time, the plants were "primed," that is, the undesirable bottom leaves were removed. About two weeks later the plants were cut down, allowed to wilt in the field for a few hours, and were then put on tobacco poles. Two plants are tied together and draped over four-and-one-half-foot split poles, or a pointed pole is used to pierce the stalks of the plants. We found that piercing is the faster method.

The tobacco is then taken to a loft or barn for drying. Currently we are drying three hundred plants in the Blair Stables and fifty plants in the herb drying building behind the Apothecary Shop. The plants hang in the loft for six to eight weeks. On a very misty, moist day — the moisture in the air softens the dried leaves so they can be handled — the tobacco is formed into "hands." Hands are made by laying one leaf on top of another and then binding the stalks with another tobacco leaf. The next step is to sweat the leaves. This is done by putting the hands under weights. This traps the remaining moisture in the leaves and raises the leaf temperature. When the leaves are "warm," the weights are removed and the remaining moisture is allowed to evaporate. If all this is carefully done, the result is a sweet smelling and sweet smoking tobacco.

Along with Neil, Russell, Victor, and Mark, George Pettengell and Kerry Shackelford are experimenting with the drying and curing processes. It is our hope that our combined efforts will produce enough tobacco to properly "prize" or pack it in a tobacco hogshead. We also hope to turn this summer's experimental program into an ongoing one that will enable us to interpret not only the growing and harvesting of tobacco, but also its important role in the economic development of Virginia.

The King's English

Drone — the male honeybee. It is a non-worker.

Hogshead — a cask. Casks used for shipping tobacco in the colonial period measured four feet high with thirty-inch diameters at the ends. The capacity could vary from a few hundred pounds to twelve hundred pounds, according to how tightly the tobacco was packed. After 1745, Virginia law required every tobacco hogshead to contain at least 950 pounds.

Skep — a straw beehive.

King George III

by John Brooke

A book review by John Hemphill

This book by an acknowledged authority in English history is both readable and immensely informative.

The focus of much of our interpretive efforts in Williamsburg is on the period when the king of England was George III. Negative images of King George III were enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and in the caricatures of English and American historians of the nineteenth century. "Bad King George, the Mad King" may have served psychological needs for Americans trying to justify the break with Great Britain and for Englishmen embarrassed by the loss of the American colonies. John Brooke enables us to move beyond those needs to see George III as he really was: as a child, as a student, as the heir apparent, and as a man.

If Brooke had been writing in the eighteenth century, his book might well have borne some such expanded subtitle as: "How George III overcame the effects of his father's early death, his mother's needless fears, his own loveless childhood and youthful dependence on one of his tutors, to become, after enduring a decade of political turmoil, in maturity, a king devoted to his people and the constitution, humble, hard-working, and true to the principles of political liberty and limited government that made eighteenth-century England the envy of the western world."

Fortunately for George III, he not only gets from John Brooke a fair assessment of his character and his career, but gets it in a book full of worldly views and wise observations about politics. George's early idol and tutor, the Earl of Bute, was a man of idealistic principles but hopelessly naive opinions. The Bute who emerges in the early pages of Brooke's book is the classic case of the intellectual in politics who wants power without responsibility. To his credit, George III internalized Bute's valuable teaching about personal morality, love of learning and culture, and the nature of the English constitution, while rejecting, as he matured, Bute's fantasies and false opinions about English politicians and the world of English politics. In Lord North, who became his chief minister in 1770, George III found the politician who could manage the House of Commons. Nonetheless, North was only a politician — not a statesman, only a superb manager of the House of Commons — not an effective prime minister in the tradition of William Pitt or Winston Churchill.

Against this background, the author explains why Great Britain lost the American colonies. According to Brooke, political separation between Great Britain and her colonies was inevitable. War was not. Lord North, and not George III, should bear more of the responsibility for the way the American colonies were lost.

Brooke does not overlook the personal aspects of the king's life — he makes ample references to his illnesses, physical and mental, his devotion to his consort, Charlotte of Mecklenburg, and his lifelong patronage of the arts and sciences.

John Brooke's book can be recommended as a happy marriage of scholarship and readability.

Occurrences

If you were unable to attend the conference on women in colonial society held here in Williamsburg in early November, you have a second chance to be brought up to date in this important area of historical research and interpretation. At 8:00 P.M. on Thursday, November 19, Cary Carson, head of our research department, and Lorena Walsh, research fellow of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, will give a talk they've titled "The House That Jill Built: The Material Culture of Early American Women." See you at the Botetourt Theater in the basement level of Swem Library at the College of William and Mary.

If Thanksgiving is upon us, can Christmas be far behind? Of course not. This year Grand Illumination occurs on Wednesday, December 16. Special "Christmas Previews" programs begin Sunday, December 13, with decorating Carter's Grove. Following will be tree decorations workshops, lecture demonstrations on making Christmas decorations, and two performances of Handel's *Messiah* at Bruton Parish Church (December 15 and 16). These "Christmas Previews" launch a Colonial Williamsburg Christmas season that will be at least as merry and bright as any we've known before. Look to the "Christmas Season 1981" brochure for program specifics.

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