

interpreter

VOL. 5 NO. 4

JULY 1984

What Products Can Teach

Kate Karsen, manager of the Craft House group, and Liza Gusler, teaching curator, collaborated on the following article about how our reproductions program aids in educating the visitor.

From the early days of restored Williamsburg in the 1930s, visitors have been interested in purchasing accurate reproductions of antique furnishings in the exhibition buildings. Colonial Williamsburg realized that offering for sale carefully made copies would extend the educational mission of the Foundation in teaching the public about life in colonial Virginia.

The reproductions program began in this way, and its home became the Craft House, a place to purchase items and to learn about them. Colonial Williamsburg sought manufacturers willing to cooperate in reproducing original objects to exacting standards of authenticity. The first licensed manufacturer became Wedgwood, offering the "Queensware Husk" pattern of earthenware, developed from sherds found during excavation of the Raleigh Tavern lot. Ironically, modern visitors were then able to purchase reproductions made by a firm which supplied goods to colonial Virginians. Josiah Wedgwood's cream-colored earthenware was sold in Williamsburg stores in the 1770s and appears frequently in period inventories and archaeological artifacts. Soon furniture, silver, and textiles were being reproduced from originals in the collections, offering modern Americans an opportunity to re-create a historical atmosphere in their homes.

Since then the educational aspects and authenticity have continued to maintain high quality standards. Product development guidelines are strictly adhered to, and each potential product must be approved by a review committee of historians, curators, craftsmen, and archaeologists. Information tags relate historical background on each reproduction in an effort to educate consumers.

New programs and products at Craft House

continue to teach the public about colonial America. The new kit furniture program strives to educate consumers about furniture made in eastern Virginia in the eighteenth century. The kits have a two-fold educational purpose: to stress appropriate forms used in tidewater Virginia—such as a high post bed complete with cornice—and to teach correct period furniture construction. Purchasers of the kits will better understand the structural soundness of dovetail case construction on a chest of drawers, or the mortise and tenon joint on a chair and appreciate their superiority to modern cabinetmaking methods.

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The Theme In Question

Interpreters sometimes ask, "What is it we're teaching here at Colonial Williamsburg? What am I supposed to say about Williamsburg's eighteenth-century history, anyway?"

The questions stem in part from a desire to know whether and how one's own interpretation fits into some larger whole. It also recognizes, it seems to me, the fragmentary nature of the visitor's experience of Williamsburg. After a day of waiting in lines; several craft demonstrations; a hurried lunch; interpretations in a tavern, colonial home, and the Capitol; and an end-of-day chorus of fifes, drums, and musketry, the weary visitor, when taking stock of it all, may well find that he or she can't make it all add up.

The educational planning we've been doing, among other things, offers an answer to the "So what does it all mean?" question. Over the next ten years, all interpreters and all interpretations are invited to add something to the telling of how the original English, African, and European settlers of Virginia and the

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Products, continued

The Craft House sales staff is well prepared to explain these kits to consumers. Frank Cross, reproduction program director, and developers from the Kittinger furniture manufacturers conducted a two-day "hands on" workshop for the staff. They demonstrated the step-by-step details of putting together and finishing pieces of the new kits. Eighteenth-century design and construction details were emphasized to show the correlation between the original and the exactness of the reproduction kit.

One of the most important tasks performed by the Craft House staff is selling eighteenth-century reproductions for modern lifestyles. Some products, such as the "William and Mary" coverlet, have the same use today as they did in the eighteenth century. Others have been creatively adapted for use in today's homes. For instance, a Dutch delft tobacco jar has been interpreted as a lamp for today's interiors. Some period forms may not be familiar to modern shoppers, so the Craft House staff helps to educate consumers on their original use. The "lipped finger bowl," for example, was used in the period for rinsing wine glasses between courses of a meal. Now these crystal bowls may be used for flowers, nuts, candies, or ice. A pewter caster or muffineer used two hundred years ago to serve spices is used in the same manner on modern-day tables. A silver sucket fork, however, takes on multi-use purposes today. Once used for syrupy desserts and sweetmeats that would require both a fork and spoon, now it is a practical server for cocktail olives or relish. A modern hostess may set out an eighteenth-century style symmetrical dessert table using reproductions of saltglaze stoneware leaf or star-shaped sweetmeat dishes. An adaptive use would be as an ashtray or individual candy dish.

Teaching exhibits at Craft House have been an active part of visitor education. Exhibits featuring antique prototypes and the carefully crafted reproductions have given viewers a chance . . . to view objects in Colonial Williamsburg's study collection and appreciate the authenticity of the copies. The annual Antiques Forum has provided opportunities to use areas of Craft House as a gallery for showing antique furnitures, silver, textiles, and ceramics relating to Forum themes. Such installations have included furniture from colonial capitals, and, recently, southern furnishings relevant to the topic "Arts of the Early South."

Other educational programs sponsored by Craft House include classes in making period flower and fruit arrangements and exhibits and demonstrations in auxiliary Craft Houses in department stores. Illustrations in the Craft House catalog show construction techniques on furniture and discuss appropriate hangings for period-style windows and beds. Charts describe eighteenth-century styles and terminology.

The Craft House hopes to extend the visitor's experience at Colonial Williamsburg by making it possible to take something of that experience home with them and to obtain good reproductions for their individual beauty and craftsmanship. The room displays at Craft House are designed to show visitors the furniture, fabrics, accessories, and floor coverings from the reproductions program as true to eighteenth-century lifestyles as is practical. This generates a relationship between what the visitor sees in our exhibition buildings and what aspects of that style the visitor would like in his or her own home.

Behind-the-scenes at Craft House there is a constant desire to keep the eighteenth century alive with fresh ideas for product use, gift giving, or home furnishings. Soon, Craft House at the Inn will be celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, while Craft House at Merchants Square just celebrated its first anniversary. Together, we hope to reach more visitors and continue the educational experience begun by CWF interpreters shedding constant light on eighteenth-century life. With the help of sales interpretation, displays, and product information cards, visitors will take home a better understanding of the reproduction program as a whole, as well as a reminder of their learning experiences here. Many times visitors purchase a reproduction, especially furniture, for posterity knowing it will be a valued possession in their family in the future and a constant reminder of our forefathers.

The Theme, continued

natives they pushed aside became, over the decades, a distinctively American people. This is the theme we call "Becoming Americans." We want it to infuse, to shape, to echo somehow within all the interpretations a person might encounter in the Historic Area and at Carter's Grove.

Many persons—historians, foreign travelers, home-grown politicians—have been intrigued by this phenomenon of many people from

many nations becoming, over a startlingly short period of time, one people, *one nation, E Pluribus Unum*, Americans. In fact, it may be one defining attribute of being an American to wonder about where we come from, to try to learn more about the lives our ancestors led here and in the old homeland, and to ask ourselves whether we and our contemporaries have lived up to the democratic ideals and the material promise of this new land.

"What then, is the American, this new man?" One transplanted foreigner, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, asked this question in 1781, the year of Yorktown. This is the first question to ask of an interpretation when thinking about it from the perspective of our theme "Becoming Americans." Answering this question requires you to *compare* the American group, object, person, or custom you are discussing with its contemporary, predecessor, or successor in America and in the homeland. Like this: "What are the European antecedents of this Virginia-built long rifle, and what is distinctively American about it?"

The sequel to this question is "How did this American person, practice, or thing come to embody this distinctive balance of the old and the new?" This question leads you to *trace change* and to explain the factors making for change. A specific example of this sort of "Becoming Americans" question might be: "Why was Virginia's established church so swiftly and easily disestablished after the War for Independence?"

We suspect that you'll find it comparatively easy to ask, to answer, and to use both these sorts of questions and answers in your interpretations. Some very important chapters in the still unfolding story of how we, all of us, became Americans were written at Martin's Hundred; at Middle Plantation; in the colonial capital, Williamsburg; and at Carter's Grove. A distinctive community, a novel amalgam in economy and government, emerged in Virginia as Indians and then English, African, British, and other European peoples worked the land, raised families, intermingled, and traded and exchanged goods, languages, beliefs, and values.

This is also one of those places where some of these gradually unfolding developments were dramatically accelerated in the 1760s and 1770s. The quarrel with Britain's parliament and the crown forced many of these Anglo- and Afro-Virginians to decide whether in obedience or rebellion lay their brightest future. In this struggle were forged the govern-

ments and civic ideals we live by to this day. And from this conflict arose claims to rights and to opportunities that still confront us personally and in the public arena. Williamsburg clearly is a place where visitors will ask and interpreters can answer how and why, in small, everyday particulars of community life as well as in revolutionary events, the town's early residents became Americans—Britains and Africans and Europeans with a difference.

Now you are invited to start thinking this way, to start asking these sorts of comparative and evolutionary questions about your interpretations. Others will join you in asking these thematic sorts of questions between now and the opening of Core Curriculum '85. The winter courses will, as a matter of fact, help you take this approach to interpretation.

Can you say how and why the artifacts and processes, the practices, persons, and ideas that you regularly present and interpret resembled and came to differ from their Old World antecedents? What was different, what was American about them, and how did they get that way? Give it a try.

—Dennis O'Toole

The Delicate Balance

Arthur (Barney) Barnes, manager of character interpretation, and Mary Wiseman, program presentation instructor for C.C.P., discuss humor in interpretation.

The use of humor in interpretation is much like the use of spices in cooking. Incorporated skillfully and with discrimination, both can highlight, enliven, and enhance basic fare; both add zest and interest to the essential, if at times bland substance that is the primary source of nourishment for body and mind. Either can, however, ruin what it was supposed to enhance if used without taste and sensitivity, and too heavy a hand in the application of either is a certain "receipt" for disaster. The line between just enough and too much in either case is a fine one; experimentation and experience are ultimately the surest guides to consistently successful results.

We have found a few general guidelines useful in developing presentations that incorporate humor effectively and appropriately, and we offer them for your consideration. They are here presented as a short check list

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Balance, *continued*

of "do's" and "don'ts." Do incorporate humor if:

- the anecdote or situation plays a positive, complementary role in helping you reach your ultimate interpretive objectives;
- it accords to the people of the past their essential humanity and dignity;
- it has educational as well as entertainment value.

Do not incorporate humor if:

- the anecdote or situation is an end unto itself;
- it is a "cheap shot" taken at the expense of the people of the past, with the purpose of eliciting laughter at how odd, strange, or primitive colonists were in their beliefs, customs, practices, or mores;
- it has entertainment value but no interpretive purpose.

Most of these guidelines are simply common sense applied to the interpretive situation, and most of you probably run through just such a check list as a matter of course each time you interpret. Still there are times when the urge to elicit a response from a particularly passive group overrides your self-monitoring systems. You *need* for them to laugh—if only to assure yourself that they are still breathing! You probably will not be able to resist the impulse, so don't try. But yield intelligently; choose something that will both lighten the atmosphere and move you forward, interpretively speaking, at the same time.

People find the differences between themselves and another society or culture fascinating and, at times, quite funny. Take advantage of this trait, remembering only that the differences are effective opportunities to lead the visitor into an examination of eighteenth-century society. The effort is counterproductive if the message you convey is that they were freaks or oddballs because they had a different set of values or practices.

Most of the time the attitude that you have towards the humor will determine the quality of the audience's response to it. If you treat your subjects as caricatures or stereotypes, then so will the audience. If, however, you use the expressed differences as valuable insights into those lives that ultimately shaped our own, then they will be both amused and enlightened.

For example, Mrs. Powell's oft repeated opinion, "A lady's chief business in life is to conquer domestic economy" and, of course,

"the getting of a husband," is almost certain to elicit a response, an amused one at that. It provides you with the entrée you need to discuss the lives of women of the period.

Another example of the same thing is Ann Blair's reflection on the social advantages of life in Williamsburg, with its balls, races, and so forth: "these diversions has [*sic*] greatly postponed my day of marital reckoning." Left there, Ann may simply be seen as a frivolous young lady. It does, however, offer you the opportunity to discuss why marriage and its attendant responsibilities might not be overwhelmingly attractive to a lady of her position. Urban life, at least in polite society, might indeed seem preferable to plantation life with its isolation and constant work.

On the other hand, similarities between then and now can often be as amusing as the differences. The colonists poked a little fun at themselves, and you can certainly use this to your advantage. Landon Carter once said, "I was turned out of the House [of Burgesses];" Jefferson said that "I lulled my audience into sweet repose—like a minister who preaches overlong on some obscure text." Now there's a situation familiar to one and all.

One last observation: if you have decided that your humorous anecdote or situation meets the above criteria, pause just an instant longer and decide if it is also appropriate for the visitors to whom you are interpreting at the moment. Certain things might be highly effective with one type of individual but not really as effective with another. It is highly unlikely that the multi-ethnic, multi-racial mass of our visitors with their diverse backgrounds, interests, educational levels, and sensitivities always agree on what is humorous. When you do come across a universally humorous piece, share it—they're too few and too far between for hoarding. Give some thought to the particular characteristics of your audience when deciding on whether or not you should use any specific bit of humor in that day's interpretation. Good luck and good humor.

The Interpreter is a bimonthly publication of the Department of Interpretive Education.

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Occurrences

Look for the following programs daily until August 25:

- Mondays:** *Black Music Programs* at 5:00 and 5:30 P.M. behind the
Brush-Everard House
Junior Corps Parade at NOON
Musical Diversions, 8:00 P.M. at the Capitol
- Tuesdays:** *Militia Review* at 8:30 A.M.
Eighteenth-century Plays, 8:30 P.M. at the Lodge Auditorium
- Wednesdays:** *Junior Corps Parade* at NOON
Black Music Programs at 5:00 and 5:30 P.M. behind the
Brush-Everard House
Assembly at the Capitol at 8:00, 8:20, and 8:40 P.M.
- Thursdays:** *Militia Muster* at 8:30 A.M.
"On Myne Own Time," 8:00 P.M. at the Lodge Auditorium
- Fridays:** *Reveille* at 8:30 A.M.
Musical Diversions, 8:00 P.M. at the Capitol
- Saturdays:** *Junior Corps Parade* at NOON
Eighteenth-century Plays, 8:30 P.M. at the Lodge Auditorium

Special Events:

- July 25:** Anniversary of *The Reading of the Declaration of Independence* in
Williamsburg at NOON
- September 1:** begins *Senior Time* in Williamsburg
- September 8-9:** *The Colonial Fair and Publick Times*