

Interpreter

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Sleepy Hollow Visits Colonial Williamsburg

Renee Friedman is director of education and interpretation at Sleepy Hollow Restorations in New York. She and most of the SHR interpreters visited Colonial Williamsburg recently, and they share their impressions with us.

"People were shorter back then" must be the most common visitor comment at both Colonial Williamsburg and Sleepy Hollow Restorations. We established that right away. From there, the visit of Sleepy Hollow interpreters with CWF domestic crafts interpreters and members of the Department of Interpretive Education proceeded to lively discussions ranging from first person/third person presentations to training, interpreting slavery and crafts, and costuming.

Our training visits in March and November consisted of a variety of activities. Formal tours included an overview of Colonial Williamsburg, the Powell property, Bassett Hall, and Carter's Grove. Free time allowed individual interpreters an opportunity to follow their own interests. Informal discussions took place in the evenings. Feet were tired, but heads were full of ideas, questions, and excited impressions.

Twenty-two of us came in March; twenty-one in November. That represents about 80 percent of the interpretive staff at SHR. We came for many reasons: We wanted to see how other interpreters do the same job we do. We wanted to experience first person interpretation. We wanted to see fine craftsmanship and hear it interpreted. We wanted to concentrate on the craft of interpretation for an extended period of time. We wanted to compare and contrast, to learn and to teach, to experience and to participate. We wanted to be on the visitor end of interpretation. And we wanted to begin a face-to-face relationship with others who share our interpretive role.

In contrast to the community of Colonial

Williamsburg—with its many houses, shops, and activities connected as one whole—Sleepy Hollow Restorations is three different domestic-scale residences separated by twelve miles of asphalt highway and by two hundred years of history. The strong connecting link is the Hudson River. It flows by each one, and each was sited where it is because of the river: Sunnyside, Washington Irving's home between 1835 and 1859; Phillipsburg Manor, Upper Mills, a trading and agricultural center of pre-Revolutionary America; and Van Cortlandt Manor, originally the main residence of the Dutch Van Cortlandt family who presided over some 86,213 acres of land.

As we toured Colonial Williamsburg, we thought about four interpretive issues that we at SHR have in common with CWF interpreters. Following are selected responses from our group to the four questions we asked ourselves:

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Conceptualizing Community: Ways to Organize Information

John Caramia reviews his 1983 Core Curriculum presentation that showed us how we can organize course content around four basic components of community life.

An interpreter has two very important roles, those of creator and decision maker. All interpreters constantly make decisions in three major areas—planning, implementation, and evaluation. The aim of this creative process is the development of effective, meaningful, and enjoyable interpretive interactions with the many visitors who come here each year. Each interpretation begins with planning, which involves decisions concerning interpretive goals and objectives and the selection and organization of information needed to achieve those objectives.

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Community, *continued*,

One of the most difficult tasks is the organization of the vast amount of information there is concerning Williamsburg, the specific sites in town, and the crafts that have been re-established. Knowledge is acquired and organized through the use of concepts. Concepts are the categories into which we organize all experiences. Each concept consists of a name or label, critical attributes or basic characteristics, and a structure or pattern of relationships of these components. Concepts may be simple and primarily descriptive, such as "chair," "table," "ax," "gun," or broader, such as "producer," "consumer," "family," "role," "process." Concepts are essential because they are pegboards on which to hang information in order to make sense out of it. They help in the retention of what has been learned by providing a structure, acting as an aid in summarizing what is known, and generating questions that can be asked of new knowledge. Concepts, as inventions of the human mind, are developed from experiences and become more complex and generalized as these experiences vary.

The concepts we develop, use, and modify are based upon our needs to know, understand, and organize the information we encounter. Community is one of the major concepts of importance to us as interpreters. Since part of our mission, as stated by the Board of Trustees is "to interpret the community of eighteenth-century Williamsburg," we should understand what a community is. The concept of community helps us to understand the component parts and the significant relationships among these components. As we learn about and interpret different aspects of eighteenth-century Williamsburg, we can begin to see their relationships to the total community.

As part of the 1983 Core Curriculum, a concept of community was presented. A community is composed of four interrelated and interdependent components—spatial, sociocultural, temporal, and extralocal. Each of these components involves a set of relationships between human beings living in association with one another within a particular environment.

Spatial involves the relationship between human beings and their natural and modified environment. The natural environment includes physical features, natural resources, soils, vegetation, climate, and weather—all of which provide numerous opportunities as well

as limitations to the development of a community. What opportunities and limitations did the natural environment at Middle Plantation present to those who were responsible for the development of Williamsburg? People are not only consumers of the natural environment; they also act as agents of change. The types and rates of these changes are based upon a community's values, perceptions, and technology. These developing cultural landscapes consist of a variety of buildings and open spaces arranged in distinctive patterns. Interior spaces also reflect distinctive patterns. Associated with these patterns are clusters of artifacts that define and give meaning to a community as well as reflect the values, attitudes, and perceptions of the community.

Sociocultural involves the relationships among the people living in a community. These relationships can be seen in three major areas—material base, social organization, and ideology. At the core is the material base, the ways a community provides its citizens with the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and other perceived necessities, as well as the maintenance of health. Methods are developed for producing and distributing these goods and services. A variety of social organizations is part of each community. These include such things as family and kinship, roles and status, socialization and education, government. The third major area, ideology, a guiding set of beliefs and values, provides motivation, a sense of purpose, and goals for the community.

Temporal involves the relationship of time to a community. Time has many meanings and takes many forms. The most common and widely used is linear, where events are arranged chronologically. This helps to provide a sequence and setting (distinctive periods in a community's history). We could look at the chronological development of Williamsburg or at distinctive periods, such as the first quarter of the eighteenth century or 1763–1783. Time can also be viewed from the perception of those living in the community. Each community allots segments of time for specific purposes and gives them social meanings. Activities may take place periodically throughout the year like Public Times in Williamsburg. Seasonality affects certain activities: the obtaining and eating of certain foods, for example. Daily schedules in homes and businesses influence the way of life in a community. Cultural time can be viewed as yearly,

seasonal, or daily, each of which gives meaning to a community. Within a community time sequences or cycles may be different for families or individuals. Changes in the patterns of family structures and household organization are influenced by cultural time and individual time. In turn, individual time or life histories are affected by a person's life cycle, family time, and cultural time.

Extralocal involves the relationships with other communities, regions, and the world at large. These networks of relationships provide a context in which to view the community. They may take many forms such as political, economic, ideological, or social. Associations may be based upon family, kinship, or personal ties. Each of these provides links with the world outside a community.

The concept of community as outlined here provides one way to organize the information we learn about Williamsburg. It provides a means by which various aspects of a community can be related to the whole. Finally, it can assist in the development of appropriate themes and planning for interpretation. For example, the four components could be used in planning an interpretation for a tavern kitchen. Spatially, the specific organization and arrangement of artifacts within the kitchen could be interpreted. Socioculturally, the various roles of the kitchen staff could be discussed. The effect of seasonality on menu selection and the daily schedules of the kitchen operation are part of the temporal component. Finally, an interpretation dealing with how and where the tavern owner obtains the food, spices, and fuel needed to run the kitchen is concerned with the last component—extralocal.

Sleepy Hollow, *continued*

How are crafts used in interpretation? Are they ends in themselves or are they used as means of explaining concepts?

"I think the crafts program is one of the biggest attractions of Williamsburg. It was seeing the craftsmen at work that brought Colonial Williamsburg to life for me. At the Boot and Shoemaker's Shop I saw *how* shoes were made and I gained greater insight into eighteenth-century life. I think that just *seeing* the craft being done provokes the tourist to ask questions about the life-style."

"To the extent that a good craftsman is totally

absorbed in his work, the crafts are ends in themselves; the craft processes also seem to be of greatest interest to most visitors. However, the historical context is generally included in the interpretation. Occasionally the evidence of modern supplies or paraphernalia injected a somewhat jarring note."

How is Colonial Williamsburg put into its historical context? Does it come across as a separate entity or as part of history of the United States?

"I got a strong [sense of the] continuity of life and history on the walking town tour with Anne [Willis] and a very strong feeling of family life with Jane [Strauss]. I couldn't help but feel a great deal of the American Revolution took place in New York State and we were never once mentioned. But then I never mention Virginia!"

"Actually *seeing* the excavations out at Carter's Grove was good. It left a lasting impression in my mind of the realness of the history that took place there. More than anything else, this put Williamsburg in its historical context for me."

How is slavery interpreted at Colonial Williamsburg?

"The hosts and craftspeople I saw mentioned it [only] briefly, if at all. It sounds as if the role playing done on the streets in the summer is the most effective tool for handling this issue, and we weren't able to see that."

"By implication, for the most part—a reference here, a straw mattress on a landing there, etc."

"Not much. In some cases, 'I should be black' was the extent of discussion of the issue. Where the slavery issue is handled with pride is the liveried carriage drivers. They had definite dash and dignity to their interpretation of slavery. One of them just mentioned the subject while he was working his horses."

For each site or area visited, identify the site, its historical significance, and the interpretive message that comes across. Compare the actual significance with the interpretive message.

"I think the Governor's Palace was very successful in that the interpretive message coincided with the historical message. The role playing made the business that went on there seem very real. Also, the displays in the dining room and ballroom helped me to understand what it would have been like to actually live in the Palace."

"This is a difficult question to answer. . . . My summary after reading all the quotes is that some house interpreters and craftspeople are

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Sleepy Hollow, *continued*

more successful than others in meshing the historical significance and the interpretive message."

It is through discussion of issues such as these that interpreters from different historic sites can begin to address some of the basic problems and challenges that affect all of us. Many of our questions may not have ready answers, but at least we can begin to sort out the essentials. Our interpretive training trip to Colonial Williamsburg provided us with the opportunity to begin these discussions.

And now, we look forward to return visits of CWF interpreters so that we can continue these discussions, and so that we can open our doors and have the benefit of your professional expertise.

Tact

This time of year, I find myself constantly having to explain the reduction in operating hours and alternate building openings.

Signed,
Help!

Let your guests see how much *can* be accomplished. When the Historic Area is quieter, visitors can enjoy an almost private experience, and one that caters to their special interests.

Planning a visit is more important than ever for guests who come during the slower seasons. You can help! Locate the buildings that are open within easy walking distance of one another. The "Visitor's Companion," with its table of daily building openings, can be useful. And be sure visitors realize that flags mark the open buildings. Then point out the nearest bus stop so that your guests can ride to the next area where several sites are open. They may not be aware of how efficiently the bus system can be used. On a cold and windy day, your guests will thank you!

This slower season allows us, the interpreters, a great luxury—time, time to provide our guests with additional amenities that are almost impossible to give in busier months. We can answer more questions, often in greater detail. We can chat with some of our visitors without holding others up.

We can practice some new interpretive ideas. After all, we are presently engaged in Core Curriculum. *You* decide—make the most of your *and* your guests' opportunities.

Occurrences

The first quarter of 1984 will provide some special experiences for our visitors. Beginning February 3 through March 10, the Colonial Weekend will offer guests an exciting weekend at Colonial Williamsburg to include not only the educational programs of the Historic Area but also dining and entertainment.

On February 5 the Antiques Forum will begin. This year's Forum will center around "Arts of the Early South, 1750–1810."

Washington's Birthday Weekend will begin on Friday, February 17, with a Retreat Ceremony by the Fifes and Drums at 4:30 P.M. On Saturday, February 18, through Monday, February 20, special "Washington in Williamsburg" escorted tours will be offered. On Sunday, February 19, the Palace will be open for special evening tours, and on Monday, February 20, the militia, Virginia State Garrison Regiment, and its field music will present a special review in honor of their commander in chief.

Canada Time will begin on March 10 and continue for two weeks. Other special opportunities for our visitors are the eighteenth-century plays, which will be presented every Saturday evening beginning February 4. On March 13 at 5:15 P.M., Tuesday Militia Reviews will begin their weekly programs for the season. Retreat programs will be held each Friday at 5:15 P.M. beginning March 23. The "Evening of Military Life" will begin on Wednesday, March 21 at 7:00 P.M.

The "Visitor's Companion" is also the interpreter's companion. It can help you give visitors the right times and locations for these and all our programs.

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