● THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

interpreter

VOL. 2 NO. 3 MAY 1981

How To Do Family History

We here at Colonial Williamsburg are often asked the histories of prominent families — the ones houses are named for and famous ones like the Henrys and Harrisons. The Research Department has some information from the colonial period (but nothing at all after 1862) and has already put together genealogies of several eighteenth-century Williamsburg residents. But if visitors ask you how to go about tracing their "Uncle Wythe" back to George the Signer or if you want to find your own roots, follow this brief guide for doing it successfully.

Start with yourself, your parents, and grandparents and work backwards. It sounds obvious, but many would-be genealogists assume that everyone with the same last name is related. To get anywhere you have to be sure you're following your relatives, not just the name. Records such as family Bibles, diaries, and letters can sometimes help too, but you might hold suspect family trees drawn up long ago by old Aunt Nelly: they may be more fiction than fact. On the other hand, Aunt Nelly could have learned about her ancestors at her grandmother's knee and worked it all out accurately in her genealogical study. There's nearly always a kernel of truth in family stories about origins and ancestors, but it may take a lot of work to prove any one part of all the several stories.

When you've exhausted the leads provided by your family, the next place to check is the bureau of vital statistics for the state your family lived in. The Virginia bureau's records go back to 1856 but with sizable gaps. With some luck you'll find birth and death dates, parents' names, and — most important — county of residence. Once you know what county you're dealing with, you have narrowed down the search to a task of manageable dimensions. County records can be very helpful, but unfortunately not all have survived. Wills, deeds, and records of taxes for both land and personal property are useful to genealogists.

Once you've traced back your family to the mid-nineteenth century, you should check the Census of 1850, a gold mine of information. It's chock full of goodies that earlier censuses omit. From 1790 to 1840 the census records are merely lists of names; the 1850 census includes parents' names and place of birth.

Don't be too concerned if you can't locate marriage licenses for your ancestors. Very often licenses don't exist, but the marriages were legal because banns were published in church on three consecutive Sundays.

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The Exchange

Bev Lewis and Mary Stebbins tell us about the interpreter exchange program in which they participated last December.

Have you wondered if interpreters in other museums face some of the same tough questions we have working in Williamsburg? We found that interpreters at Sturbridge, Sleepy Hollow, and Plimoth Plantation (all museums in the Northeast) have different ways of approaching the same problems. We were the first to participate in an interpreter exchange program between outdoor history museums. We spent five days going to these museums to see how they handle different aspects of domestic crafts. In return three interpreters from Sturbridge came to Williamsburg in mid-March.

Our favorite site in Old Sturbridge Village was the Freeman farm. It's a long walk to the secluded setting that really gives the impression we are seeing a nineteenth-century farm. The work is divided strictly into men's and women's chores. At seven in the morning the "farmer" brings the cows in, cleans stalls, and feeds the stock. He spent the rest of the day we saw him spreading dung in the fields with his cart and oxen. Before the morning passed,

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Family History, *continued*

If all these suggestions lead you nowhere, you can still try one other source, the pension applications of Revolutionary soldiers or their widows. Among other information they indicate the place of birth and usually something about marriage and offspring.

If you're working on Virginia people, you'll want to look at Clayton Torrence's wonderful printed guide to county records. *Virginia Wills and Administrations, 1632 – 1800* is arranged alphabetically by surname and under that by county. It gives references to documents that genealogists find invaluable.

The ways of going about family history are different from state to state, depending on the records that survive and the finding aids available. Maryland, for example, has wonderful indexes and genealogical work already compiled at the Hall of Records in Annapolis. The Virginia State Archives in Richmond hasn't that degree of access, but has on hand genealogical charts for some families. When you write for information to these or any other state library, be very specific in your request. More often than not if you ask for any and all available information, you'll get back a form letter referring you to a professional genealogist; but if you ask for the 1788 will of Cornelius Whipoorwill of Kesiak, they'll do their best to search it out for you.

Job Descriptions

Government jobs in Williamsburg? In the eighteenth century there were quite a few. We thought you might be interested in descriptions of four of these:

Public Gaoler

The position of gaoler required a person of good judgment, discretion, spotless reputation, sobriety, and some means. He answered directly to the General Court of Virginia, following their directions and commands, but was appointed by the governor. The gaoler had to have a clear financial background in order to enter into a £500 bond to the king with sufficient security; this bond involved the condition that he fulfill to the letter all the responsibilities of the post.

The first duty of the gaoler was to maintain the Public Gaol; after 1722 he cared for the Debtors' Prison as well. This entailed keeping the buildings in good order in terms of general appearance and secure imprisonment of the inmates.

Guarding the prisoners often required more than one man, so as conditions required, the gaoler could select guards using his own discretion as to the necessary number. Looking after those in the cells must have been quite a job; there were accused felons from all over the colony, runaway slaves and servants awaiting their masters from anywhere in Virginia, and until 1773 the Gaol was the destiny of "persons of unsound Mind."

Different prisoners received different treatment. If they could pay for their food, the gaoler ordered it from a tavern and they could have anything they could afford. In the case of paupers, the gaoler provided food and clothing (and medicine, if necessary) on the *per diem* amount allowed from public monies by the General Court. Until 1711 the public gaoler used his own money for this and petitioned the court for reimbursement; again we see that the position of gaoler had to be filled by a man of some means.

But there were benefits to the position. A salary of £30 a year was set in 1701 (about the same as a journeyman craftsman's average yearly income) and raised to £40 annually in 1718. Quarters were provided for the gaoler and his family within the Gaol, which were later enlarged by additions. The gaoler was exempt from both militia and jury duty.

Keeper of the Public Hospital

When the Public Hospital first opened in 1773, its keeper was not a medical man but more of a steward, and eventually the position came to be called just that. Until modern psychiatric methods were instated in the nineteenth century, the head man at the facility held a post that closely resembled that of a gaoler; indeed the first keeper, James Galt, was a former public gaoler.

The keeper worked directly for the hospital's court of directors. Along with maintaining the physical plant, the keeper provided a secure, sanitary environment for the patients. He kept records of admissions, discharges, and deaths. There was an appointed physician for the institution, and the keeper requested the doctor's attendance on patients when they arrived and later as necessary. He often relayed medical instructions from the doctor to the nurses. A matron who cared for female patients was the only other permanent employee at the hospital. Nurses, guards, and

manual laborers were hired by the keeper as the number of patients and other conditions demanded.

Besides seeing that his charges got medical attention, the keeper supplied food and clothing for patients — either at their personal expense or, in the case of those too poor to pay, from public funds. Charges against the colony's accounts had to be detailed in a form suitable for audit by Virginia officials.

A modest salary was provided for the keeper, as well as an apartment in the main hospital building. In the early years the position of matron was filled by the keeper's wife. Since they lived on the premises, the two permanent employees were available to patients and other staff at all times.

Keeper of the Magazine and Public Armorer

These positions were usually filled by two men, but occasionally one man held both simultaneously. The keeper was responsible for looking after and repairing the Magazine and the arms and ammunition stored there. When the Guardhouse was built in 1755, that too became his charge. The Guardhouse was needed during the French and Indian War to provide shelter, heat, and candlelight away from the explosives in the Magazine for the guards on their twelve-hour shifts. The keeper also served as the "Gunner" of Williamsburg, who fired the guns during municipal celebrations.

When the armorer post was filled by a separate individual, he received his work from the keeper who set out the arms in need of repair. The armorer had to have detailed knowledge of firearms and experience as a gunsmith. His specific duties were to take care of, keep clean, and mend the public arms stored in the Magazine and the Governor's Palace. Three of the public armorers were John Brush and two of Williamsburg's blacksmiths, Hugh Orr and James Anderson.

Occurrences

The actors are coming back to town. Characters from eighteenth-century Williamsburg will be walking the streets from June 1 until September 1, gossiping, recruiting, auctioning, tailoring, tutoring, cajoling, and persuading people to their opinions. This summer's program will be composed of twelve to fifteen actors, some working on a part-time basis, some on a full-time basis. The performances will run from 10 A.M. to 1 P.M. and 2 P.M. to 5 P.M.

This summer there will be several innovations. Plans are afoot for a morning and afternoon group event or happening — such as recruitment, an auction, or an election — in which the characters each day will be introduced to the public. All of our characters will be from the era of Botetourt's governorship, 1768–1770, and familiar with the basic concerns of the day. More characters will be about town, moving within a one-block area rather than tied to only one spot. This will yield more interaction between characters and with the visitors.

Characters returning from previous summers, though possibly having a new look, are: an indentured servant in the pillory for public drunkenness, a merchant recruiting for a militia company, a naturalist comparing nature and society, a tailor working on a customer's new coat, a crotchety, narrow-minded old man with opinions about everything, a gravedigger reminiscing about the people and the earlier days of Williamsburg, an auctioneer and jack-of-all-trades "urban" man, and a newly arrived tutor teaching a variety of skills. Other characters include a woman tavern keeper discussing women's rights and the "art of tavern keeping," a young lady in a garden, a gossipy midwife, a mother talking about her growing children, and a shopkeeper with Tory leanings. Once again we will try to depict the human drama of a black colonial's experience with a gardener at the Palace who has worked for three governors, an overseer come-to-town on business, a preacher trying to start the first black Baptist church, two different apprentices comparing crafts and lifestyles between Africa and the colonies, a scullery maid trying to keep her family together, a house servant whose master is on his deathbed, a woman speaking about her private time, and a free black seamstress.

We hope that you as interpreters will greet and talk with these characters from eighteenth-century Williamsburg, and will incorporate their existence and characters into your interpretations, as you do other physical aids, in our attempt to bring to life the colonial period in Williamsburg.

The Exchange, *continued*

a class of school children were up on the wagon helping him. The morning "milkmaid" milked all seven cows, readied her cheese, and made breakfast for the field hands. We joined the farmers for a special hog-butchering meeting. There was excitement in their voices as they talked about the approaching weekend of pork-curing and sausage- and souse-making. A noticeable difference was that everyone in costume worked in one department. All the women knew how to cook on the open hearth and took turns knitting and sewing costumes.

At Van Cortland Manor, a part of Sleepy Hollow Restorations, interpreters were busy with sausages and baking bread. They are lucky to have the DePeyser family manuscripts for all their recipes. The school groups were invited to participate and knead the bread or clean off the cheese rounds that require careful watching. There was evidence of candlemaking, spinning and weaving, and other crafts, some of which are added in the summertime.

Plimoth Plantation, where strict first-person interpretation is used, was closed except to school groups. Here the forty or so interpreters literally take up the lives of people who existed at the seventeenth-century site. They talk, walk, and eat seventeenth century. The director calls the employees "cultural informants" or "human artifacts" (Pilgrims, for short). They exist to show the visitor (called the "interpreter") the culture, attitudes, and social interaction of the early settlers. We tried hard to break the Pilgrims out of their roles. We felt sorry for the schoolboy who asked for the john and was directed to the next hut where a John lived. The surroundings were stark, cold, and lifeless. The lunch of dried fish and cornmeal mush they offered us made us homesick for Williamsburg.

We enjoyed most of all talking to the interpreters during the exchange. We heard the same remarks: how hot the costumes were, how long the days, how wonderful to see a face light up when it understands some new fact about the past, and how most of them wouldn't trade their jobs teaching history for anything in the world.

The King's English

The following words were suggested by interpreters on the winter in-service evaluation forms as words we should all be able to define:

Headright — a grant of fifty acres of land made for each person transported to the colony; the land was assigned to the one who paid the transportation expenses. The headright system began in 1617 as an inducement to settle Virginia and lasted throughout most of the seventeenth century and, in a modified form, for many years later.

Quit rent — *Quit* means to satisfy a debt, repay. Quit rents were sums, usually small, paid by individual landowners to the crown for use of the land. Theoretically, all land belonged to the crown.

Militiaman — each free white male from ages 16 to 60 was required to serve in the county militia to be called to arms in time of emergency.

Muster — a periodic calling together of militia troops from their homes for inspection and training.

Retreat — from Smith's *Universal Military Dictionary*, "A beat of the drum, at the firing of the evening-gun." This is to warn the soldiers to forbear firing; sentinels are posted, and the password goes into effect. This marks the end of the soldier's working day.

Review — Smith's definition is "the drawing out all, or part of the army, to . . . know the condition of the troops. The manual exercise must be performed in good time, and with life. . . . All maneuvers must be performed with the utmost regularity."

Tattoo or **Tap-Too** — the order for all to retire to their quarters. The word is derived from the Dutch "doe-tap-toe" meaning turn off the taps as a signal to tavern keepers to stop serving soldiers.

Warp — lengthwise thread on the loom.

Weft or **Woof** — crosswise thread carried in the shuttle.

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