● THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

interpreter

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The House That Jill Built

Cary Carson and Lorena Walsh's paper, "The Material Life of the Early American Housewife," presented last fall at the women's history conference in Williamsburg, uses the history of material life to make sense of the slow but thorough transformation of the English and early American furnished house.

From all-purpose, one-room houses to multi-room, highly specialized residences, the change in house plans is one way of getting at women's history. Since the house has been the woman's sphere throughout most of American history, the study of vernacular or commonplace houses can tell us how and approximately when the housewife's work and work place changed. Vernacular buildings and their contents are the most helpful because builders constructed what housekeepers needed, and their changing needs are reflected in changing house plans.

From medieval times to the early seventeenth century, English houses were mostly hall, a central interior space open to the rafters, where smoke from the cooking fire accumulated, and large enough to accommodate a whole family and all their activities from cheese-making to love-making. At more or less the same time that settlers were boarding ships for the colonies in North America, English building traditions were revolutionized by the use of substantial construction materials and the invention of chimneys. These innovations permitted taller structures of two full stories. The medieval concept of house as mainly hall gave way to the newer notion of house as a large box containing several small boxes. What the colonists began building were these new-style English houses. The result was a compartmentalization that gradually isolated women in their own houses.

While New England and Chesapeake house types share the same origins, housekeepers and their families in the two regions hit upon different adaptations to suit their needs. Immigrants to New England came in family groups and established farming communities in which they practiced a system of mixed farming not unlike what they had known in the Old World. Their farmhouses were similar too. For a hundred years or more the typical New England house was a hall and perhaps a sleeping room on the ground floor with loft or chamber above. As finances permitted, lean-tos were added for workrooms. Eventually the lean-tos acquired hearths and became kitchens. This meant the hall in New England houses was freed of its cooking and other chores to become a sitting room. By 1700 most New Englanders sat or ate in halls, slept and sometimes dined in parlors, and almost invariably cooked in lean-to kitchens. The whole back portion of the house became a consolidated, efficient woman's work place.

Maryland and Virginia were first settled

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Virginia Gardeners

Peter Martin, garden historian for the Foundation, discusses amateur gardeners in eighteenth-century Virginia.

Who were the designers of Virginia's eighteenth-century gardens? More specifically, who laid out the gardens in Williamsburg? It is plain, at least, that they were not what we know today as landscape architects, individuals who employ drafting skills and understand the technical aspects of laying our ground precisely according to scale and with an architectural sense of possibilities. Such professionals did not begin to flourish in Britain until well into the second half of the eighteenth century, but even then their number was small indeed. People come to mind like Launcelot "Capability" Brown, who was not beyond removing a village in its entirety if it was in the way of a landscape garden he was hired to lay out; others were Humphrey Repton and Richard Payne Knight. In America the era of the professional landscape architect did not arrive until the nineteenth century, with the likes of

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predominantly by young men who came in hopes of making fortunes in tobacco. Every loose shilling was best invested in workers to raise the labor-intensive money crop. Chesapeake planters built temporary dwellings and made do with minimal repairs as long as possible. When they could afford something larger than a hall-house, Chesapeake planters were as likely as New Englanders to reproduce a version of their English houses. Gradually, one of the assortment of building plans remembered from England was deemed more suitable than the rest for family life in Virginia and Maryland. This was the three-part farmhouse typical of the English West Country. In it the cross-passage divided the hall from the kitchen; it seems also to have divided the house along social lines by separating family members, who increasingly used the hall as a sitting room, from servants or slaves who worked in the kitchen and slept in a loft above it. The plan's ready-made division recommended itself to planters who, unlike New Englanders, needed an architecture that helped define the ambiguous place of indentured servants and later the unambiguous inferiority of slaves. Ultimately, the kitchen was detached completely from the rest of the house. It became a separate structure close enough to the house for the mistress to supervise and close enough to be convenient to the dinner table, but sufficiently removed so that those coming and going from house and kitchen had no need to encounter one another in the same passage.

After a room has been comfortably heated, adequately lit with windows, and arranged in convenient relation to other rooms, architecture can do little more. Furniture and other personal belongings in the rooms must do the rest. We shall look at them in an article on Jill's household effects in a future issue of *The Interpreter*. In the meantime if you'd like to read the full paper, ask for it at your departmental library.

—LP

Tact

What shall I do when a guest does not wait in line to enter a bulding or refuses to go through with a group?

Signed,
Resigned

Politely suggest that he join the other guests who have been waiting to enter. It is important that you be aware of which guests were waiting and punch their tickets first. If possible, try to speak privately so as not to embarrass this person in front of everyone else. Loud and angry directions will only increase his resistance.

Give the guest the benefit of doubt. Perhaps he was unaware of the procedure. Explain that a limited number of persons in a group insures a more enjoyable opportunity to see and to hear. Emphasize that his best interests are being considered. Often, it is only a simple explanation that is needed.

If you know, tell him the length of time he will have to wait in line and how long the tour takes. Often guests appreciate this information because of their schedules. This has become more important because of timed reservations at the Governor's Palace and at Bassett Hall.

If guests do not want to go through with a group, the response is simple: "I'm very sorry, but we only show this building by guided tour." You could suggest the houses where they might walk through on their own. Then let the guests decide.

And remember: the *what* we say is not nearly so important as *how* we say it!

The Woodwright's Shop

by Roy Underhill

A book review by Dan Stebbins

Though written as a companion to his successful PBS television series, Underhill's book competently serves the needs of an inquisitive woodworker on its own. Well organized, informative, and readable, this book takes one through a progressively challenging series of projects.

Initially, the reader is given information that is essential to getting started. There is a good introduction to trees, how they grow and what they have to offer; also a basic description of tools, types available, how to find, use, and maintain them. This culminates with that first important step, procuring raw material. One is then introduced to the methods and techniques necessary to make a variety of objects such as chairs, bowls, and rakes. These projects provide the fundamental skills needed to fabricate the more complex items, dovetails and panel-frame construction for example, that the woodworker is progressing towards.

Thus, from basic wood technology through the finished product, Underhill is "promoting experience." This concern is pervasive; Roy constantly challenges the interested novice to learn by doing, to experiment and further develop his newly found talents.

One of the many interesting aspects of the book is the way in which the structuring of the various chapters reveals the author's goals and attitudes. Underhill's enthusiasm for his work is well served by the introduction to each project. He has chosen descriptive quotes from classics such as Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises* and by sources that have a technical, even philosophical, relevance to the undertaking ahead. Once a project is completed, the newly initiated woodworker is complimented on a job well done and treated to often humorous accounts of the author's personal experiences and lessons learned along the way. Importantly, this puts the projects into proper perspective. The successful completion of a given project is attainable only through continued effort. Underhill offers no shortcuts.

This genuine concern for progression is what makes *The Woodwright's Shop* different, if not superior, when compared to most introductory works. This book leads the reader beyond mere how-to-do-it, beyond raw materials and finished goods to a higher level of progression: that of the "development of confidence in your senses." To achieve this is to achieve success. *The Woodwright's Shop* points one in the right direction.

Gardeners, *continued*

Andrew Jackson Downing. Jefferson, for all his competence and brilliance, was not a professional; that is, he was neither trained nor paid for the purpose. He practiced the art because he liked it. The word "art" here is the clue to the eighteenth-century "gardenist" (one who approaches gardening as an art, not only horticulturally).

In Britain and to some extent the American colonies, the eighteenth century was the era of gardening as an art, one of the so-called "sister" arts to poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, and music, practiced by amateurs who regarded it as highly personal, even "poetic." They brought to the art the sketch-pencil rather than the T-square. As an art, garden design reflected evolving notions of taste and beauty as well as ideas about man's relationship to the landscape. As the century progressed, this became more and more the case in Virginia, too, at plantations and in towns like Williamsburg where pleasure gardening, in addition to practical gardening, was pursued with energy and imagination. Virginia's gardeners certainly lagged behind their English counterparts in terms of design and even the culture of plants, but not by much—surely not by more than twenty-five years. There is not space enough here to demonstrate that, but some Williamsburg residents and "amateur" garden designers may be cited to illustrate the point briefly.

To begin with, Governor Spotswood's garden layouts at the Palace—and they were his idea—derived immediately from current fashion in England in the first decade of the century, when Italian terraces, French parterres, and Dutch canals were still in the ascendancy there. His transformation of the ravine into terraces, a canal, and a fish pond was brilliant but derivative—that is, he was guided by contemporary English practice. If the Bodleian Plate can be taken as a clue to what Spotswood laid out before he left the governorship in 1721—and that can be argued either way—then the diamond beds (which have been restored to the garden) also reflected current European taste in his day.

John Custis was in constant touch with English botanists and kept abreast of English gardening trends through extensive correspondence between 1717 and the late 1740s. His large gardens on the corner of Nassau and Francis streets probably disappeared by the end of the eighteenth century, neglected by George Washington, who owned the property toward the end of the century. He was a moving example of how a gardener could identify emotionally and psychologically with his garden. As one of Williamsburg's "poetic" gardeners, he "composed" his garden, "read" it pictorially, interpreted its significance or meaning, endowed it with iconography through statues of classical deities, and propagated native and English plants suffused with overtones of the Anglo-American divided self that he, William Byrd II, and others keenly felt. This sort of personal creation is not easily possible if you bring in a landscape architect to do the designing for you.

At Westover plantation, Byrd II sounded similar themes through his gardens; his letters reveal this more than his diaries. Spotswood, Custis, and Byrd were all so closely in touch with England that it is scarcely credible to me they would have laid out gardens without being heavily influenced by English gardening ideas of the early eighteenth century. And later in the century people like Joseph Prentis

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Occurrences

With summer upon us there are many special program offerings for our visitors. We invite you to come out to see them all and help us in giving the word to our guests.

A new program, *To Delight the Ear*, will be presented this summer in the Williamsburg Lodge Auditorium. This musical concert, a must for even the most casual music listener, is a new opportunity to hear the music popular during the eighteenth century performed on the baroque style instruments and by ensembles.

Two programs that emphasize the African heritage of eighteenth-century Virginia will return. First is the *Black Music* program, which will occur behind the Wythe House on Mondays and Wednesdays at 5:30 P.M. and 6:00 P.M. beginning June 7. Second is the *African Traditions* program on Thursdays at 6:15 P.M. in the garden behind the Music Teacher's Room. *The Other Half* tour will also be returning to the streets. If you have not yet experienced this tour, please take time to do so. It is a very special way of focusing on the black experience in Williamsburg.

During June and July many daily events are scheduled throughout the Historic Area. Theatrical living history portrayals, afternoon concerts behind the Music Teacher's Room, and living history demonstrations at the Powder Magazine provide different ways for our visitors to learn about the eighteenth century. Read "How to Enjoy Colonial Williamsburg" and the "Visitor's Companion" for specific times, dates, and ticket prices for all these offerings. For your ready reference, the insert of this issue of *The Interpreter* summarizes this summer's daily programs and special events.

June is also the month during which the Twenty-fourth Annual Seminar for Historical Administration meets in Williamsburg. Eighteen museum professionals will be representing sites throughout the country. This program is sponsored by the American Association for State and Local History, the American Association of Museums, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. It is funded by a grant through the National Museum Act. If you'd like to know more about how this program works, call Bill Tramposch on Ext. 2711 or Frances Griffin on Ext. 2389.

Gardeners, *continued*

and St. George Tucker, two other "poetic" gardeners emotively tied to their gardens, drew upon sources that show their attention to English practice of the day. Even Jefferson, who was exceptional in that he was more deliberate than the others (except perhaps for Byrd), rambled in England from garden to garden taking notes on what he saw and apparently priming himself for the time when he could concentrate on his own Monticello gardens.

Personal involvement and contemporary English practice adapted to Virginia's climate and soil are two touchstones in an understanding of Williamsburg's eighteenth-century gardens.

The King's English

Bowling green—very popular in England in the first half of the eighteenth century, the bowling green was a garden feature that had both recreational and ornamental value. Long and narrow, smooth and level, turfed bowling greens were highly desirable in gardens. People laid out bowling greens who had no intention of playing bowls upon them, and they ornamented them with temples, monuments, statuary, terraces, summer houses, canals, etc. They were popular in Virginia from early in the century: there was one in the Market Square in Williamsburg, at Westover, and at Green Spring. Byrd liked to play on them, not just look at them.

Parterre—this feature was a garden area close to the house laid out in geometrically shaped beds separated by paths and planted ornamentally with bushes and flowers in elaborate patterns. Like topiary, the parterre became outdated in England by 1725–1730 and was replaced by more naturalized features.

Topiary—evergreen bushes and trees clipped into shapes and figures. These were common in English gardens up to the second decade of the eighteenth century, but then fell quickly out of favor and became synonymous with old-fashioned gardens.

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Summary of Company of Colonial Performers Programs Summer 1982

Mondays:
Black Music Programs behind the Wythe House begin June 7, 5:30 P.M. & 6:00 P.M.
Musical Diversions at the Capitol begin July 5

Tuesdays:
Militia Reviews
Eighteenth-century Plays at the Williamsburg Lodge Auditorium begin June 15

Wednesdays:
An Evening of Military Life beginning at the Magazine through May 26, 7:00 P.M.
Black Music Programs behind the Wythe House. First Wednesday night program June 9, 5:30 P.M. & 6:00 P.M.
A Capitol Evening begins June 16
Fifes and Drums Parades begin June 30

Thursdays:
Militia Reviews through June 24
Militia Musters begin July1
Palace Concerts through May 27
African Traditions behind the Music Teacher's Room begin July 1, 6:15 P.M.

Fridays:
Retreat by the Fifes and Drums, May 21 through July 2 and July 23 through October
Assembly at the Capitol, May 21, June 4, and June 18 at 7:00 P.M.
Thomas and Sally, Williamsburg Lodge, May 28 and June 11
To Delight the Ear, a musical concert at the Williamsburg Lodge Auditorium, begins July 2
Reveille Ceremony July 9 and 16

Saturdays:
Fifes and Drums Parades
Eighteenth-century Plays at the Williamsburg Lodge Auditorium

Sunday:
Capitol Concert on May 23

Special Events

May 31:
The Memorial Day Review Program at 10:00 A.M.

July 4:
The Independence Day Review at 5:00 P.M.
The Palace Garden Party from 6:00 P.M. to 8:00 P.M.
Annual Tatoo and Fireworks begin at 8:30 P.M.

July 24:
Military Review celebrating the 206th anniversary of the reading of the Declaration of Independence in Williamsburg, 5:45 P.M.