

interpreter

VOL. 5 NO. 6

NOVEMBER 1984

Hominy—The Seventeenth-Century Way

Anne Willis, a teaching interpreter in the department of interpretive education, describes preparing hominy under seventeenth-century conditions as part of a research department study.

The Freedman's Cottage stands in a small clearing surrounded by loblolly pines near St. Michael's Creek, which flows into St. Mary's River. St. Mary's County is in eastern Maryland. The land surrounding the cottage is low and marshy, but the higher ground is partially cleared, providing a field for tobacco and corn among the stumps and girdled trees. Worm fences surround the small field, protecting the crops from the freely roaming cattle and swine. A vegetable garden and apple orchard grow close to the nearby Planter's House.

Cary Carson and Pat Gibbs from the research department, Warren Winchester from the audio-visual department, and I had come to St. Mary's City, the first capital of Maryland, to conduct a seventeenth-century cooking experiment. We were curious to know how much time and physical labor it took to prepare hominy as it was made by seventeenth-century settlers in the Chesapeake. From research in primary sources, Pat and Cary knew that hominy was the most important food in the early planter's diet; from the documents they had learned how it was made. We planned to reenact the daily process of preparing hominy for a household of six persons and, while doing so, learn more about how those men and women lived.

To re-create the process as accurately as possible, we wanted to use seventeenth-century spaces, furnishings, and objects. We chose the Freedman's Cottage at St. Mary's because it has been very carefully reconstructed and furnished. The one-room cottage measures twenty feet by eighteen feet and is made of hole-set-post construction. The walls and steep gable roof are

covered unevenly with rough riven clapboards. Attached to one gable end is a wattle and daub chimney large enough for several people to stand inside and look up through the opening to the sky.

Inside this crudely constructed cottage the rafters are open and the unplastered walls and roof are only as thick as the ill-fitting clapboards. The dirt floor was damp around the edges from rain. There are two doors and two windows cut opposite each other in the front and back walls. The windows are unglazed and crudely shuttered. We would have to choose between light and air or rain and cold.

Daily Schedule for a Young Gentry Woman

Pat Gibbs's schedule of the daily routine of a young woman in eighteenth-century Virginia complements that of the colonial urban housewife printed in the November 1981 issue of "Fresh Advice." Because the surviving letters, diaries, and poems written by these young women or the men in their lives generally represent well-to-do families, this schedule is biased toward the upper ranks of early Virginia society. An expanded, footnoted version is available in the research department. All times are approximate.

"City daughters from well-to-do homes were the only eighteenth-century women who can accurately be described as leisured," writes Mary Beth Norton in *Liberty's Daughters*. The records left by and about young Virginia women support her statement and document this relatively carefree period of their lives.

(continued, page 2)

Hominy, *continued*

A simple blanket chest was the only piece of furniture in the house that day. There were two hogsheds but no table, chairs, or stools. Cornhusks, stacked in a corner, and old blankets hung on the wall were for bedding. Using probate inventories, Pat Gibbs added the few essential cooking utensils that such a household needed—an iron pot, wooden bowls, a knife, an oak basket, a gourd dipper, and a water bucket. Roy Black and Robert Watson had made a cherry wood mortar and hickory pestle, and Wayne Randolph furnished corn from Carter's Grove for the experiment. Before leaving Williamsburg, Pat and I had practiced making hominy to duplicate seventeenth-century domestic skills. We arrived at St. Mary's a day early to arrange the work space and to practice.

The early December morning was clear and cold. As we stepped into the bare cottage, the bright morning light gave way to a dimly lit interior. The room felt cold and damp. It had not rained during the night so the fireplace was dry, and I was able to start a small fire easily. I filled the large iron kettle with water and then drained the water from the six cups of hard white corn that had soaked overnight. I put a cup of corn into the mortar, hunkered down, and began to grind. After I pounded and ground the corn for about twenty minutes, the damp cornmeal was fine enough to sift. I spread the meal in a wooden bowl and put it in front of the fire to dry. Before grinding another cup of corn, I put more logs on the fire and added dried beans and salt pork to the water in the kettle to enrich the hominy, making "great hominy." After the ground meal dried, I carefully sifted it through the white oak basket, removing all the husks.

It took me (with Pat's help) over three and a half hours of steady grinding, drying, and sifting to produce the three and a half cups of cornmeal necessary for our proposed dinner. I added the cornmeal to the pot as I completed drying and sifting it and then sat back to tend the fire and occasionally stir the pot while it cooked. After simmering for about four hours, the beans, salt pork, and cornmeal had thickened into hominy and was ready to eat. It had taken seven and a half hours of intermittent labor to produce this meal for six. The gray, lumpy hominy was heavy, bland, and only slightly improved by the salt pork flavor. Somehow it suited the rough, bare cottage where it was prepared.

When we had finished the time and motion study and the photographic documentation, we had answered some of our questions but generated some new ones. We knew more about the time and labor required to prepare the daily diet. We also became acutely aware of the challenges of living in such a space and the impact of daily weather and changing seasons. We wondered how long other domestic tasks took, and how that work was accomplished in conjunction with work in the fields. For me, however, the most interesting part of the experience was my own impression of what life may have been like in a similar cottage for those seventeenth-century settlers.

While I became lost in the grinding and sifting of the corn by the fire in that cold, rough cottage, I had a strange sort of time trip into the past. In spite of the artificiality of the whole arrangement with the official clock, the photographer, the witnesses—I became totally absorbed in what I was doing and lost my sense of the present. The dampness, the cold, and the smoke, my tired back and cramped legs, my coarse linen clothing and wool shawl, the shifting patterns of light through the window, and the wind that swept across that room from time to time became for me the only reality. There was a certain lulling quality to the experience, and I felt as if I were rooted to the ground as I sat there working by the fire. With so little stimuli, I became aware of every sound in the woods. I noticed the heavy thickening of the clouds, the dropping temperature, and the shifting wind as the weather changed. I can still see framed by that small window the dark pines etched against the cold gray sky.

Daily Schedule, *continued*

From their mid-teens (when their formal schooling was completed) until they married (occasionally as young as sixteen but typically in their early twenties and sometimes later), these young women generally lived a relaxed pace. Diversions included reading novels, plays, poems, and more serious literature, penning letters or writing in their journals, drawing, singing or playing musical instruments, walking or taking an airing in a chair or on horseback, boating, picking wild flowers or gathering fruit, dancing, playing cards and other games, and visiting with male and female friends.

(continued, page 3)

Daily Schedule, *continued*

Generally when these young women "work'd," they picked up a needle and thread and stitched. In fact, cutting out and sewing clothes and household linens and knitting stockings occupied a considerable portion of their time. Considerably less time was spent executing fancy needlework. Since both plain and fancy stitching were portable, young women often took sewing projects along on short and extended visits. They acquired other domestic skills—including cooking and baking—by assisting their mothers with household management. Temporarily when their mothers were sick or permanently if they died, these young women assumed their mothers' roles as household managers.

Instructed in the arts of conversation and deportment, as well as a knowledge of reading, writing, and simple arithmetic, young women were pleased to be regarded as "amiable," "accomplished," and "industrious"—qualities likely to enhance their chances of contracting a good marriage and some day providing their husbands with "domestic happiness."

About 7:30 a.m. she is awakened, freshens up, is laced into stays, and dresses—perhaps assisted by a young slave woman about her age or older. On some mornings she may choose to rise earlier. "I am awakened out of a sound Sleep with some croaking voice either Patty's, Milly's, or some other of our Domestic with Miss Polly Miss Polly get up, tis time to rise" (Maria Carter letter, 1756).

From about 8 to about 8:30 a.m. she breakfasts with the family. "I must bid you Adieu, for the Ladies are just dressed, and I shall not be ready for Breakfast" (Lucinda Lee journal, 1787).

After breakfast she assists her mother with supervising the daily activities of the household. Otherwise she reads, writes letters, draws, practices music, or sews. "Got up early knit a little, read, wrote a letter to Cousin Betsy Hill by Papa, cut out a piece of linning and sew'd on Mama's apron" (Frances Baylor Hill diary, 1797). "We arrived at Colonel Tayloe's however by half after nine—The young Ladies we found in the Hall playing the Harpsichord" (Philip Fithian journal, 1774).

About 10 a.m. or earlier, if she plans to go walking, visiting, or shopping, she might curl her hair with assistance from a friend or female slave. (Most young women of leisure considered making a handsome, genteel appearance in public essential. Achieving this goal could be time consuming.) If she stays

home, she is likely to continue with any of the activities begun after breakfast. "At 10 a.m. went a shopping, bought green morroco shoes and thread" (Ruth Henshaw Bascom diary, 1802). "I have spent the morning in reading; and much to my satisfaction, old Mrs. Gordon is just come to spend the day here. Lucy Gordon and I are just returned from walking out" (Lucinda Lee journal, 1787). "I went out and made Tarts Aple pies & Biscuit, set in the pockets of a waistcoat was all the work I did just before dinner" (Frances Baylor Hill diary, 1797). "I must crape my hair for dinner" (Lucinda Lee journal, 1787).

Before 2 p.m. she goes to her room, freshens up, and possibly changes her outer garments before going to dinner. "It is time to spruce myself for dinner—after wch expect Company for Tea" (Ann Blair letter, 1769).

From about 2 to about 3 p.m. she dines with the family and guests. "Look'd for Aunt Temple & family over to dinner, they were prevent'd by the ice, saw no company that day" (Frances Baylor Hill diary, 1797). "Mr. Bell din'd here on boiled eggs, bacon, sallad &c" (Ruth Henshaw Bascom diary, 1802).

After dinner she and the other females leave the men at the dinner table and retire to the hall or parlor for conversation over tea or coffee. Or perhaps she takes a walk, rides, goes for a drive, visits friends, or shops. If she stays at home, she and her mother, and perhaps sisters or friends, may visit while sewing or knitting. One of the group may read aloud to amuse or instruct the others. Walking in the garden was a common late afternoon diversion. "I have been very busy to-day working a little screne, to hold in my hand to prevent the fire from burning my face. I think it will be beautifull." [another day] "About sunset, Nancy, Milly and myself took a walk in the Garden (it is a most butifull place)" (Lucinda Lee journal, 1787).

About 8 p.m. she joins the family and guests for a light supper. "I rode to Nomini Hall about Eight in the Evening . . . [with older children] sup'd on Crabs & an elegant dish of Strawberries & cream" (Philip Fithian journal, 1774).

From about 8:30 p.m. until 10 or 11 p.m. she, members of her family, and guests socialize at home or with neighbors. Their evening activities include conversation, toasting friends, singing or listening to music, reading aloud, playing cards or board games such as backgammon, dancing, and taking moonlight

(continued, page 4)

Daily Schedule, *continued*

strolls. Town residents or visitors might also occasionally attend the theater, lectures, concerts, or a subscription ball at the courthouse or one of the taverns. "Kate read the *Vicar of Wakefield* to me this evening and highly entertained me" (Robert Hunter journal, 1786). "After Supper when I was call'd upon for my Tost I mentioned with Pleasure Miss Betsy Beaty" (Philip Fithian diary, 1774). "We play'd whist from 9 to 11. Capt. Clopper & myself, Mr. Harris & Munroe" (Ruth Henshaw Bascom diary, 1802).

This schedule was altered on Sundays when a young woman and her family went to church or read sermons and prayed at home and on days when a young woman prepared for or attended a social event such as a barbecue or fish feast, a ball, a birthday or holiday party, a christening, or a wedding. As these events occasionally required extended visits (overnight or longer), preparations included putting finishing touches on new or newly altered clothes and accessories and packing several changes of clothing. On the appointed day much time was spent in fixing hair, getting dressed, and chatting in anticipation of an event, which often extended well past midnight. The following morning the partygoers generally appeared sleepy-eyed at a later-than-usual breakfast after which they either continued the festivities for another day or the guests returned home.

The King's English

Colonial inventories often list articles that are unfamiliar to us, and variant spellings can make even the familiar look unfamiliar:

Bands—a white collar, whether standing or turned down, worn by women and men; or the narrow linen pendants worn by ministers, collegians, or barristers.

Barrow—a castrated male hog.

Fishgigs—a kind of fish spear.

Gorget, gorgett—a linen neckcover for a male or female; also for a male, a metal plate hung about the neck.

Linning, lynen—Variant spellings of *linen*.

Pied, pyed, py'd, pide—multicolored; originally black and white like a magpie; therefore, of any two colors, especially of white blotched with another color; e.g., a pied heifer.

Quofe—a close-fitting cap.

Runlett, runtlett—a cask; runlets were made with varying capacities.

Steelyards, stillyards—a balance with two unequal arms, the longer one having a movable counterpoise, and the shorter one bearing a hook or the like for holding the object to be weighed.

Trewell—variant spelling of *trowel*.

Occurrences

As the Christmas season approaches, you will want to keep Colonial Williamsburg holiday events in mind. Though the Grand Illumination officially begins our celebration, there are some programs available earlier for our visitors. AARFAC opens its exhibit on December 9. On December 12 decorations start going up throughout town and Carter's Grove opens for the season.

December 14 is the Grand Illumination, and through December 31 you and our visitors are invited to attend the plays, tavern nights, colonial games, militia programs, concerts, lectures, and demonstrations that make Colonial Williamsburg a special place to be during the holidays. Check the Christmas brochure and "Visitor's Companion" for information on seasonal programs.

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

Editor: Barbara Beaman

Assistant Editor and Feature Writer: Lou Powers

Production: Mary Jamerson and Nancy Milton

Editorial Board: Bill Tramposch, Arthur Barnes,

John Caramia, George Collins, Lisa Gusler,

Dennis O'Toole, and Jane Strauss

© 1984 by The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
