

# Interpreter

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## Life on Courthouse Green: A View from the St. George Tucker House

*Since April 1985 Kathleen Bragdon and Patricia Gibbs of the department of historical research have been studying five generations of the Tucker and Coleman women of Williamsburg. To date their research has focused on a large collection of letters and journals written by Cynthia Beverley Tucker Coleman (1832-1908) and Mary Haldane Coleman (1875-1967). The study also includes oral history interviews with Dr. Janet Coleman Kimbrough (b. 1902), the life tenant in the St. George Tucker House and a direct descendant of St. George Tucker. This material, along with the Tucker-Coleman Papers at the Earl Gregg Swem Library at William and Mary, forms a remarkable 200-year record of a Virginia family.*

*Kathleen Bragdon wrote the following article based on interviews with Dr. Kimbrough, Mary Haldane Coleman's journals, and other writings.*

St. George Tucker, a resident and an admirer of Williamsburg, described the Courthouse green of his day as "a pleasant square of about ten acres, which is generally covered with a delightful verdure." On this green he witnessed some of the stirring events leading to the Revolution and later excitements as well. There, for example, he watched students of the College of William and Mary launch a hot-air balloon in April or early May of 1801, and from there he made many of the astronomical observations that occupied his leisure hours and filled his memorandum books. For St. George and others, the grassy, open spaces of the Courthouse and Palace greens gave the "old city" of Williamsburg an air of beauty and spaciousness and provided a place for social activity not always available in larger cities.

St. George's son, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, moved into the St. George Tucker House in 1833 or 1834 and eventually purchased it from St. George's other heirs. He too delighted in the view of the "Court Green," as he called it, afforded by the location of the

Tucker House and had additional windows installed in the two lower front rooms to take further advantage of it. There, after the Civil War, residents continued to meet, school-children to play, and tradesmen to guide their wagons along the perimeters.

As important as they were to Williamsburg's citizens, the greens suffered encroachments in the nineteenth century. Financial problems forced the city council to sell some of the public lands, particularly around the Magazine, to private citizens, prompting Cynthia Beverley Tucker Coleman, St. George's granddaughter, to remark that the city fathers had acted "more like step-fathers."

In spite of its diminished size, Courthouse  
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## Tobacco Culture

by T. H. Breen

*A book review by Barbara Beaman*

What did a bountiful tobacco crop mean to a great mid-eighteenth-century planter? Given a sound international economy, it meant the obvious material rewards that could be used to furnish fine homes, purchase clothing and carriages, or invest in more land and slaves.

In *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution*, T. H. Breen holds that it meant a great deal more. Good crops afforded a "visible estate," which was an index to a man's standing in the community, a public record of his credit rating, and the cornerstone of his independence. His self-esteem was bound up in judgments of the quality of his tobacco, in its certification by tobacco inspectors, and in the price it brought on the English market. According to Breen, the certification process called for by the Tobacco Act of 1730 "provided a powerful new incentive for these gentlemen to best their rivals, to establish bragging rights." Only a truly exemplary planter could be recognized as a "crop master," one who personally followed each step of the demanding tobacco  
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### Courthouse Green, *continued*

green in the early twentieth century was probably much as it had been in St. George's day. Dr. Janet Kimbrough, who moved to the St. George Tucker House with her family early in 1907, remembers her first views of "the Green" through a large hole in the front door. This hole, caused by a shotgun fired accidentally from inside the house, remained for several years to the delight of young Janet and her sister Cynthia. Dr. Kimbrough remembers that the green was blanketed in long grass and filled in the spring with masses of buttercups, which she says, "were much more beautiful than now." The green was crisscrossed with paths and was scythed once or twice a year. Although easily passable in fine weather, it could become, in Dr. Kimbrough's words, "a lovely little lake" after a heavy rain. The green was still a place for social gatherings for adults and children as well. Dr. Kimbrough recalls ball games played when weather permitted and many other children's games as well. Contests, Maypole dances, athletic competitions, and school parades took place there. A particular sport for young children in summer was the capture of fireflies at dusk, when they seemed to swarm by the thousands.

Although there were a number of shops along Duke of Gloucester Street in the early part of this century, tradesmen also did business door-to-door. Local farmers frequently visited houses on the greens and allowed residents to choose their own fresh fruits and vegetables. The "fish man" also stopped at each house where he would shuck oysters on the spot. Dr. Kimbrough recalls that the oyster shells were left where they fell and "helped to pave the road and fill in the mud holes very nicely."

One prominent feature of Courthouse green was the old Colonial Inn. Located on the eastern edge of the green, where Chowning's now stands, it served as the main hostelry for visitors to Williamsburg. Guests were brought from the railroad station to the inn by means of a carriage driven by a liveried servant, who drove them grandly around by Duke of Gloucester Street and up to the inn's entrance.

Special events occurred on the greens at all seasons. Traveling sideshows set up on Courthouse green included games and spectacles. According to Dr. Kimbrough, "there would very often be the equivalent of a medicine man selling some sort of miraculous cure." There were minstrel shows as well as circuses. An entry from Mary Haldane Coleman's jour-

nal from April 21, 1919, reads

An enormous circus and wild beast show has planted itself on the green in front of the [St. George Tucker] house to be here for a week. Lions are roaring in front of the Garretts' house [Grissell Hay Lodging House]. The fat lady strolls along our fence gathering violets. There is a two-headed lady and a tattooed man, a Ferris wheel and everything else and of course an awful noise and crowd.

Entertainment of a more serious nature was provided yearly by the Chautauqua, supported through local subscriptions and by tickets sold at the gate. The Chautauqua had its origins in a summer school program developed in Chautauqua, New York, and sought to bring notions of morality and citizenship to small communities throughout the country through theater, art, and music. In Williamsburg the Chautauqua offered plays, lectures, and entertainment in booths and tents set up on Courthouse green. Dr. Kimbrough remembers being part of a children's dramatic group, which learned and then performed a short play for the community at the close of the Chautauqua's stay. Although the Chautauqua's popularity diminished over time, Dr. Kimbrough recalls that "later in life I found that all through Virginia, in groups where you really didn't know anybody and they had not had at all the same experiences, somebody would start up singing some of the Chautauqua songs and immediately everybody would join in."

The greens were also the location of political events, speeches, and parades. On January first, Emancipation Day was celebrated by the black community in Williamsburg with a parade down Duke of Gloucester Street. Crowds gathered on the Courthouse green to hear political speeches, including one made by Booker T. Washington on November 11, 1914.

In spite of their continuing importance to the community, the greens shrank even more in the early decades of the twentieth century when public sidewalks were laid and Matthew Whaley School was constructed in front of the site of the Governor's Palace. Mrs. Coleman wrote in her journal for the fall of 1919 that

All the town is much stirred by a proposal to erect a public school on the Palace Green and this evening there was a mass meeting at the Court House to protest against the action of the Council in permitting such a proposal.

Further diminishing of the greens occurred

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### Courthouse Green, *continued*

in the succeeding decade as roads were widened to accommodate increasing automobile traffic and poles were installed for electric wires and telephone lines. By the mid-1920s, Courthouse green, particularly that on the south side of Duke of Gloucester Street, was thickly built up with several stores, a hospital, two banks, an office building, and the lovely Greek Revival Zion Baptist Church.

In part because of this threat to the historic "landscape" of Williamsburg, the Reverend Mr. W. A. R. Goodwin of Bruton Parish Church sought aid from John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to restore the old capital. Early in the restoration process, the greens were cleared of later buildings and the spaces familiar to St. George Tucker gradually restored. During the restoration of the St. George Tucker House, Mary Haldane Coleman wrote on November 12, 1930

There is a great deal of tearing down and building up going on all over town. The old red brick hotel (lately used as a hospital) and the building which was once Spencer's Grocery store were torn down this week. The Powder Horn [Magazine] stands open and uncrowded now.

Along with the restored beauty and dignity of the greens came new experiences. Tourists visited Williamsburg in increasing numbers in the decades following World War II, strolling in the streets, across the greens, and sometimes into private yards as well.

Residents had front-row seats for such visits as that of General Dwight Eisenhower and Winston Churchill on March 8, 1946, the King and Queen of Greece on November 22, 1952, the Queen Mother on November 11, 1953, and Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip on October 16, 1957. More recently, the Economic Summit Conference in 1983 occasioned many helicopter landings on Courthouse green affording the residents of the Tucker House much amusement.

Dr. Kimbrough and her family witnessed many changes in Williamsburg from their vantage point at the St. George Tucker House. The greens have provided a continuous link with the past but are also an important part of the living community that still remains here, who enjoy the verdant, open spaces much as St. George Tucker, the "hermit on the Green," did in the eighteenth century.

(Further results of the research on the Tucker-Coleman women, which has been conducted with the cooperation of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation archives and

the Department of Special Collections at the Earl Gregg Swem Library, will be presented in a series of lectures to be given at the Botetourt Theater in March and April of 1987 by Patricia Gibbs, Lou Powers, and Kathleen Bradgon. The lectures will be accompanied by an exhibit of manuscripts, books, portraits, and other artifacts associated with the five generations of Tucker Coleman women.)

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## The King's English

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*Kathryn Arnold, foodways specialist, and Rosemary Brandau, manager of food programs, define words that were frequently used in describing food, meals, and parties in the eighteenth century.*

**Blancmange** (also spelled bloomage)—almond cream in gelatin form; a very popular dessert.\*

**Collation**—a light meal or repast served late in the evening; one consisting of light food or delicacies (e.g., fruit, meats, sweets, and wines) or something that required little preparation. The *Virginia Gazette* of July 18, 1746, reported

In the Evening a very numerous Company of Gentlemen and Ladies appear'd at the Capitol, where a Ball was open'd, and after dancing some time, withdrew to Supper, there being a very handsome Collation spread on three Tables, in three different Rooms, consisting of near 100 Dishes, after the most delicate Taste. There was also provided a great Variety of the choicest and best Liquors, in which the Healths of the King . . . and many other loyal Healths were cheerfully drank . . . [The festivities] lasted 'til near 2 o'Clock [2:00 A.M.].

**Dessert**—fresh and preserved fruits and nuts, sweetmeats, ices, creams, small cakes, and a variety of wines. During the eighteenth century dessert did not include apple and mincemeat pie, plum pudding, and so forth, which were served as side dishes with several meats as part of the main course.

**Dinner**—the chief meal of the day eaten between 2:00 and 4:00 P.M. in colonial Virginia.

**Isinglass**—a semitransparent, whitish, pure form of gelatin made from the air bladder of sturgeons. When purchased, it looks like a

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### King's English, *continued*

small icicle. It is boiled to form a sturdy gelatin base for wine jellies or blancmange. Governor Botetourt's cook used isinglass or hartshorn for gelatin.

**Marchpane**—a kind of confectionery composed of a paste of pounded almonds, sugar, and so forth, made up into small cakes or molded into ornamental forms; marzipan.

**Rout**—the word has many meanings. As a kind of social event, it meant a fashionable gathering or assembly, a large evening party or reception, much in vogue in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

**Supper**—the last meal of the day, usually a light repast based on leftovers; also, an elaborate meal made the occasion of a social or festive gathering.

**Sweetmeat**—sweet food, as sugared cakes or pastry, confectionery; preserved or candied fruits, sugared nuts, and so forth.

\*Blancmange will be displayed in the Palace Supper Room at Christmas this year.

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## Occurrences

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### November 26–December 12

- November 26** *An Eighteenth-century Play, The Lying Valet*, at the Lodge Auditorium, 8:30 P.M.
- November 27** *The Governor's Evening Music* at the Palace, 8:00 and 9:30 P.M.  
*An Assembly at the Capitol*, 7:00, 7:20, 7:40, and 8:00 P.M.
- November 28** *Retreat* on Market Square 5:15 P.M.  
*A Capitol Evening*, 7:00, 8:00, and 9:00 P.M.
- November 29** *Thanksgiving Review* on Market Square, 4:30 P.M.  
*An Eighteenth-century Play, The Virgin Unmask'd*, at the Lodge Auditorium, 8:30 P.M.

**December 14** *The Grand Illumination*  
*The Grand Illumination* begins the holiday season at Colonial Williamsburg. The *Visitor's Companion* will have all the latest information on programs and opportunities for you and your visitors.

### Tobacco Culture, *continued*

culture and made correct decisions at each stage. A less prudent planter risked suffering the public humiliation of unfavorable assessment of his product and skills as well as lower prices than his neighbors were able to command.

Did George Washington abandon tobacco to plant wheat because he was a progressive farmer determined to use his land and slaves more profitably? Breen suspects otherwise. Washington, thoroughly frustrated with the prices he received, railed to a British merchant, "Certain I am no Person in Virginia takes more pains to make their Tobo. fine than I do and tis hard then I should not be well rewarded for it."

In addition to the attitudes born of this "tobacco mentality" and the rhythms imposed by tobacco on planters' lives, Breen examines the gentlemanly credit networks that functioned locally. He discovers that planters were stunned when British merchants did not—could not—observe the same "etiquette of debt" that prevailed in Virginia. He discloses what that meant to prominent Virginians: their outward and visible independence stood in conflict with hidden knowledge of their dependence upon and indebtedness to British merchants. And he hypothesizes about the relationship between that personal conflict and the political ideology that characterized pre-Revolutionary discourse.

Dr. Breen's colleagues are giving *Tobacco Culture* mixed reviews (see Jack P. Greene's review in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, October 1986, and Peter S. Onuf's review in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, October 1986.) Historians do disagree, and it is important to be aware of these disagreements. Nonetheless, interpreters will find *Tobacco Culture* a provocative account of Virginia's planter gentry: their values, their problems as businessmen, and their reactions to the central event in their lives—making and selling tobacco.

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

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