

# Interpreter

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## What Did It Cost?

Many's the interpreter who's been put on the spot when a visitor asked the modern equivalent of a colonial price. The conversion of money values from 1750 to 1980 is almost impossible; even the most highly qualified economic historians shy away from direct conversions. The best way for any of us to handle this question is to hint at the complexities involved and then compare prices of a few eighteenth-century goods.

Giving an up-to-date dollar amount equal to a colonial pound just isn't feasible. The dollar value of a pound sterling today varies greatly from what it was even twenty years ago. Consider the difference in buying power between a dollar now and a dollar only five years ago. We have a sense of the change, but which of us can assign a value?

Some of us vividly remember 1940. Here's an example from a family budget in those days: about a fourth of the family's income paid for its shelter (rent or mortgage plus utilities). Today as much as 35 or 40 percent of our considerably higher incomes is required to cover housing costs. This degree of change came about in only forty years, so imagine 240 years' difference!

Stop to contemplate how dramatically life has changed since the eighteenth century. One historian calls the colonial milieu "a wooden world": wood for building, wood fires for heating and cooking, wooden ships. The list goes on. All this seems light-years away from our steel, concrete, and aluminum structures, our electricity and atomic energy. Our value system, too, is very different from our colonial ancestors'. What we now consider necessities of life — electric stoves and refrigerators, central heating, gasoline-powered vehicles, and factory-made clothing — were unthinkable even a hundred years ago and certainly were so in the eighteenth century.

Converting colonial prices to modern money is, as your grade school teacher would probably put it, like comparing apples and oranges.

The problems are many, but there is a solution through comparison of prices in the same era. For example, in the 1740s and '50s, two dozen sheets of writing paper cost about the same as a pound of double refined sugar or dinner and a night's lodging at a Williamsburg tavern (one shilling sixpence), and only a few pence more than a quart of rum (one shilling threepence). Keep in mind that in Virginia during this period craftsmen like blacksmiths and carpenters earned seven shillings sixpence a day, for an annual income of about £100.

For prices relevant to your area, consult craft reports, house histories, and interpretive manuals. Harold Gill's essay, "Prices and Wages in 1750" (September 29, 1977), may also be useful. You'll find it among your in-service training materials from last winter. The essay puts prices in the context of earnings and cost of living and also includes retail prices of some widely available items.

## The Interpreter

*The Interpreter*, a bimonthly publication of the Department of Interpretive Education, will include information of importance and interest to the entire community of interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg.

Our community is diverse. It consists of Craftspeople, Escorts, Hosts and Hostesses, the Company of Colonial Performers, Visitors' Aides, Desk Attendants, and others in Historic Area Services. Our staff is also large. We number 350 in the slower seasons and swell to over 500 during the summer months. This makes us the largest interpretive staff of any museum in the country.

Although we are diverse and large, *The Interpreter* will attempt to identify and underscore all we have in common. What are some of these similarities? The answers are obvious. Through our appearances, actions, and words, we work diligently to interpret the historical  
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## “Townstead” Research

The current “townstead” research project is designed to answer many questions we are asked daily about family life in eighteenth-century Williamsburg. Historian Arthur G. Barnes is sifting through information from diverse sources to piece together a comprehensive picture of the urban household economy.

Asked to explain the term, he replied, “The concept of the ‘townstead’ is perhaps most easily understood by comparing it with the ‘homestead,’ a term familiar to most people. The homestead in nineteenth-century America was ‘forty acres and a mule,’ the frontier farm that the hardworking pioneer wrested from the land. It brings to mind the image of an independent life style with most, if not all, necessities of life produced right on the farm.

“The townstead is similar in that we are focusing on a family, its land and buildings, and the production and consumption that went on within the household. The major difference between the ‘townstead’ and the ‘homestead’ is that the former, being in a town or city, was much smaller in area; therefore, the range of subsistence activities in which the townsteader could engage was much narrower. However, a city resident had neither the need nor the desire to produce his household’s subsistence requirements on the townstead itself. Skilled craftsmen, professionals, and other specialists spent their cash incomes to purchase from others in the town those goods and services they couldn’t provide for themselves. What we are most interested in achieving with this research is a detailed explanation of the types of production and consumption carried out on a typical Williamsburg townstead.”

Barnes went on to say that much information has already been gathered and is in the process of being analyzed. Part of the project — examination of the types of buildings found on urban lots and the uses of those buildings — is being computerized to reveal different townstead types and the uses to which they were put. Differences in the patterns can be tied to other factors like economic and social status of the family, the neighborhood, and occupation of the wage earner.

Information is also being collected on patterns of food production, consumption, preparation, and preservation, as well as on the types of crafts most commonly practiced

on residential sites. When the project is completed, we will have a much better idea of how city folk organized their work and their space to produce those things they did not or could not buy in the larger economy of the town.

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## Occurrences

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Visitors to Colonial Williamsburg this summer will have a choice of diverting and informative events to attend which rivals those that greeted travelers to Virginia’s eighteenth-century capital.

The two national holidays that bracket the weeks of summer, the Fourth of July and Labor Day, are rousingly celebrated in Williamsburg. Independence Day was marked by the traditional morning program of military music and drill on Market Square and a ceremony at Bruton Parish Church. New this year was entertainment of the period in the gardens of the Governor’s Palace from 6:00 to 8:00 P.M., followed by a parade and assembly of elements of the Fife and Drum Corps at Market Square, a torchlight tattoo, and, the grand finale, a display of fireworks in the nighttime skies above the town. The Labor Day weekend will be the occasion for the joint encampment of our own Virginia State Garrison Regiment and the visiting First Virginia Regiment in the vicinity of the Capitol. A variety of parades, camp scenes, drills, and special evening events will mark this occasion.

As in summers past, a Salute to Independence celebration will take place on July 25, the day the people of Williamsburg first heard the Declaration of Independence proclaimed. Those of Loyalist sympathies will have their day on August 22, Monarch’s Day, when we latter-day colonials pay homage to America’s last British sovereigns with appropriate pomp and ceremony.

Every day of the summer will also have its special occurrences for visitors to attend and, if the spirit moves them, participate in. Actors on the street, programs of military music and arts, musical diversions, historical dramatizations, presentations of eighteenth-century Afro-American culture, and special evening programs designed both to entertain and instruct are offered daily. Each day’s activities are listed in *The Visitor’s Companion*, a broadside guide to special events in the Historic Area published daily during the summer.

### The Interpreter, *continued*

significance of our setting to the millions of visitors who enter into our lives. Through experience we have grown to understand our visitors and therefore we are able to interpret their particular interests and needs. Finally, we are all members of a much larger museum community. Historians, curators, archaeologists, librarians, and archivists among many others are all engaged in projects that are essential to our efforts.

Twice a year the Research Department will prepare a special supplement to the newsletter reporting at length on studies in progress. The purpose is to bring you the first fruits of research — information and interpretation — which you can use long before the final reports are finished. We think this is an exciting innovation at CWF — the opportunity for our historians to pass on late-breaking news from the eighteenth century.

*The Interpreter* will serve as a forum for all that concerns interpreters and interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg. Not only do we invite your interpretive ideas, we exist chiefly to encourage and reflect them. We hope you will send us your questions, suggestions, book reviews, and other information relating to our purpose. Simply contact one of the members of the Department of Interpretive Education. Lynne Lochen did. Her contribution follows.

#### Trip to Explorers' Hall

Who would have thought that it would only take about an hour to go back in time 350 years — back to a time when merely existing was a day-to-day challenge; when famine, disease, and possible Indian attack were the realities of daily life. This journey can be accomplished by visiting Explorer's Hall in Washington, D. C. There, at the National Geographic Society headquarters, one can visit the exhibit entitled "Searching for Another Century."

Recently a group of interpreters from the Department of Exhibition Buildings did just that. The exhibit displays many of the artifacts that were unearthed at Wolstenholme Towne and its surroundings, just a quarter of a mile from the Carter's Grove house.

Since May 1979, visitors to the house have had the added pleasure of a tour down to the Wolstenholme Towne site. With the opening of the National Geographic Society exhibit in April 1980, visitors can also see the artifacts

it were found there.  
As part of the group of people who interpret

the site, we found our visit to the exhibit not only enjoyable but educational as well. It was really exciting to actually *see* the pottery, the two close helmets, and the other pieces of armor that we had been talking about and explaining for months.

The exhibit uses a variety of audiovisual techniques to complete the story of Wolstenholme Towne and what was found there. Not only are the artifacts displayed, but an explanation of archaeological techniques is presented, as well as a brief outline of this area's seventeenth-century history. There is also a vivid presentation of the 1622 Indian massacre, which brought an end to the little town and an appropriate end to the exhibit!

This journey into the past can be experienced daily at Explorer's Hall, 17th and M Streets, N. W., Washington, D. C.

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## The King's English

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Eighteenth-century money terms that appear in interpretation and reading materials may require some explanation.

**Specie** — any type of coined metallic money.

The most common types in colonial Virginia were Spanish silver Reales (called *dollars*), Spanish gold Pistoles, Portuguese gold Moeadas (pronounced *moi' dorés*), and Portuguese gold Dobras (called *Joes* and *Half-Joes*).

Few English coins actually circulated in Virginia. Even though they did not have English coins, Virginians used English denominations in their record keeping.

**Pound** — English monetary unit, equal to 20 shillings. Symbol: £.

**Shilling** — 1/20 of a pound. Symbol: s.

**Pence** — the plural of penny. One penny equals 1/12 of a shilling. Symbol: d.

**Farthing** — 1/4 of a penny.

Some words in our modern vocabularies were used quite differently in the eighteenth century. Consider what the colonists meant by:

**Electricity** — the power of certain bodies to acquire the property of repelling or attracting and frequently emitting sparks or streams of light.

**Fabric** — the structure or construction of anything, especially of buildings.

The word "cloth" was used to describe a manufacture made of wool, hemp, flax, cotton, or other fibers woven on a loom.

## Public Times

"Publick Times" has become a catch phrase in both the interpretation and promotion of Colonial Williamsburg. To colonists it meant only that the General Court or Court of Oyer and Terminer was in session. Recent research leads us to believe that we've overstated its importance to eighteenth-century store- and shopkeepers in Williamsburg. Let's look at the facts.

Public Times were in April and October (when the General Court met) and again in June and December (sessions of Oyer and Terminer). The Meeting of Merchants usually coincided with court dates. Unfortunately, we have only one reference to the number of visitors in town during court sessions. The 1765 account of an anonymous French traveler tells us that the population increased three- or fourfold. But we can't base our interpretation of Public Times solely on his estimate for two reasons. First, 1765 may not have been a typical year, given the political and economic furor over the Stamp Act at that time. Also, we know that this same traveler is given to exaggeration in other descriptions, so we can't totally trust what he says about Williamsburg either. Regardless of the exact size of crowds, obviously judges, plaintiffs, defendants, witnesses, and merchants, some with families and servants, were required in Williamsburg for the courts or at the Meeting of Merchants.

As Governor Fauquier wrote in 1765, all "persons engaged in Business of any kind constantly attend" the Meetings of Merchants: They came to determine exchange rates and commodity prices. Merchants' bids and offers for tobacco and some other commodities reflected supply and demand, therefore establishing price ranges.

Taverns and private lodging houses brimmed with out-of-towners, but shops and stores carried on sales at their usual steady pace. Harold Gill's research on storekeeping in colonial Virginia has shown that Public Times were not retail booms — which makes sense if you stop to consider that

- wealthy planters sending tobacco to an English agent used their credit by ordering goods from him to avoid American merchants' markups, and
- less affluent farmers and frontiersmen couldn't afford to transport staples and tools to the Valley and beyond; they bought from their local stores.

But some Williamsburg businesses did

have brisker trade during court sessions. Harnessmakers and blacksmiths, for example, probably did more repair jobs than usual. Purchases of books and newspaper advertisements likely increased. Perhaps some carried home from Williamsburg luxury items such as jewelry as presents. Visitors chose Williamsburg craftsmen rather than English ones for these because of the time factor — the urgency of repairs, the desire to be up-to-date on literature and public notices, and the wish to make a timely gift.

It's important to keep Public Times in perspective. Four times a year two courts and the merchants convened, obviously bringing in a "bed-and-board business" and some special trade. However, these weren't the only occasions for visits to Williamsburg. The Assembly met for long periods — sometimes for months at a stretch. College professors and students, militiamen and the governors' petitioners, "socialites" and Indians, those attending the courts of Admiralty, James City County, and Hustings, as well as farmers hauling in goods for market days kept up a constant coming and going through Williamsburg all year.

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## Questions & Answers

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A large and very important part of effective interpretation involves answering visitors' questions. Jane Strauss has been trying to find answers to difficult or frequently asked questions so that we can give visitors consistently correct answers. When you want information, call her on extension 2449.

**What was the population of Williamsburg on the eve of the Revolution?**

The total population was 1,880.

52% black	48% white
469 black male	505 white male
517 black female	389 white female

**Were hogs penned or allowed to roam free in the streets of Williamsburg?**

The law stated that they had to be penned, but researchers have not found hogs listed in inventories of persons definitely identified as Williamsburg residents.

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