

# Interpreter

## Jill's Household Effects

*In the May issue we followed the evolution of vernacular house plans in America and found the social reasons behind regional variations. The buildings by themselves tell only part of the story; furnishings and equipment add detail to the history of housekeeping. Inventories of personal property were the source of information Cary Carson and Lorena Walsh used for this portion of their women's history paper.*

Until the eighteenth century, household artifacts were generally simple, utilitarian, unspecialized, few in number, and less important than the architectural spaces in which they were used. A pervasive uniformity characterized material life before the end of the seventeenth century. Being rich meant owning more and living better, but not really being different. Inasmuch as housework puts many domestic artifacts to use, it follows that there was a close correspondence between the sameness of material life in the seventeenth century and a common experience among housekeepers.

During the second half of the seventeenth century most tenant farmers and small planters had some sort of house, a hearth, mattress, basic clothing, a storage chest, a few tools to prepare food (mortar and pestle, ax and knives, a pot or two), some wooden trenchers, a few spoons, stored crops, and very little else. Middling planters of the same era improved their modest furnishings with better bedding (a shuck or flock mattress for every two or three family members, later a feather bed for the master and mistress), pewter plates and porringers, coarse earthenware for the dairy, frying pans, and maybe a roasting spit. The most affluent households of the time had all the above plus chairs, tables with cloths and napkins, more beds on frames and with sheets, assortments of cooking equipment, lanterns, candlesticks, chamber pots or close stools, and occasionally a piece of case furniture. Luxuries such as silver and clocks appear once in a while. (There seems to have

been no general agreement on particular items that were more appropriate than others to be taken a family's rise to gentry status. After acquiring standard amenities like skillets and sheets, the choices of additional household goods were apparently a matter of individual preference.)

The wife of a tenant farmer or small planter without house slaves or servants had to provide the family with food. Its cultivation, preparation, and preservation were mostly her responsibility. In addition, she was obliged to wash and mend, perform basic chores like sweeping and tidying the house, and care for infants, children, and the sick. Her spare time she spent in the orchards or fields. Her contribution to the family's success was leaving her husband and the field hands, if any, free to work full time on the tobacco crop.

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## Breathing Life Into History

*John E. Harbour, director of the historic sites division of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, was a guest speaker at the AASLH meeting in Williamsburg last fall. We asked him to summarize his address for The Interpreter. John E. Harbour is the son of John W. Harbour, Jr., who was vice president of our Division of Presentation for many years. We think you'll enjoy this editorial perspective on interpretation.*

Something very exciting has been developing, evolving perhaps, over the past ten to fifteen years in the way we view the role of the historic site and in the ways in which we interpret them. A recent survey of 110 museum villages in the United States and Canada noted that "the most apparent shift in emphasis for village museums has been from buildings and furnishings to interpretation and demonstrations. This shift is pervasive, affecting all museums including the most richly endowed." This movement has also been given a name—Living History.

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### Household Effects, *continued*

If the housewife had a helper or two, she probably delegated chores like carrying wood and water, building fires, gardening, and other heavy work. While each additional pair of hands meant another mouth to feed and more clothes to launder and patch, it also allowed the housewife to superintend an important division of labor. She set the extra hands to carding and spinning when the other work was done. The wife herself might have more time for sewing and knitting.

Houses changed over the course of the colonial period in the direction of ever greater specialization, social separation, and privacy. Partitioning the hall, heating the parlor, demoting the kitchen, and multiplying the bedchambers started a process that eventually brought a multitude of people into closer, more intimate association with their personal possessions and self-made surroundings. Where artifacts were numerous enough for everyone to have his own, people developed a closer personal identification with the everyday things they used. Matched sets of chairs, dishes, forks, and so on helped define peer groups, and the artifacts themselves became emblems of the group's self-consciousness.

The years between the late seventeenth century and the late eighteenth were a period of social and economic adjustment to demographic expansion, religious reformation, and popular education. More people became involved in a world outside the confines of their own local communities. The wider world was unacquainted with a person's social standing at home since the traditional and continuing measures of status such as property, family, and offices couldn't be carried round. People had to invent a portable system of status identification—a system of manners, rituals, and conventions discernable by anyone in the know. Artifacts were the medium of this new social communication. Their use was learned at home and practiced abroad in activities that never before had been part of ordinary domestic routines. Tea ceremonies, formal dinners, social calls, promenades, balls, assemblies, and musical evenings required much specialized equipment not to be found in the chests and cupboards of an older way of life. Thus began the proliferation of artifacts for specific uses (smoking chairs, card tables, dessert plates, chocolate cups) and for specific placement (end tables, corner chairs, sideboards).

Women's roles and work habits were greatly altered by what a French eighteenth-century

traveler called the "sweeping train of luxury" between 1715 and 1740. Both men and women were participants in the new fashionable style of living, but women carried more of the growing burden of behind-the-scene preparations. The new style affected all economic levels, the lowest aspiring to the highest's way of life. One of the major showcases of the new style was formal dining. Especially here women's work increased. Extra attention was required to produce a multitude of elaborate dishes brought forth in specialized serving pieces. Carefully orchestrated mealtime rituals were the way workaday wives and household mothers took part in civilized conversation and displayed social graces to company. This was the reward for all their kitchen labors. Both the social rewards and attention to household matters increased over the years and culminated in the nineteenth-century wife, mother, and homemaker's sacred place within her "earthly tabernacle."

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### Living History, *continued*

The 1970s saw the awakening of interest in the new social history. The life of the common man and the societal relationships that bind us together became grist for scholarship that fueled both the printing industry and the historic site. Process and change became the buzzwords for a whole new generation of historians and museum staff who wanted to understand and provide for the museum visitor an experience of what "real life" was all about. In a recent article, Cary Carson admonishes visitors and museum staff to be more critical of the increasing number of living history museums that assume that a recreated past speaks for itself and that an accurate portrayal of activity provides sufficient explanation. Living history must explain something worth knowing about the past. Demonstration for its sake alone is worth little. However, the headlong dash into what one of my site managers calls "the usual trendy crafts popular in the museum world of the moment" is the legacy that has become known as living history. Indeed, Ellis Burcaw went so far as to suggest that living history enjoys such popularity that to not engage in some form of it

implies an inexcusable backwardness. It is not that living history is wrong, but that what is wrong are the ways in which we are implementing the concept.

By its very nature living history requires that we understand the past, not simply portray isolated aspects of it for our public. We, who insist on documentary proof of the written word, seem curiously willing to settle for something less for the living history which we serve up to the museum visitor. If the new social history does concern itself with the totality of the human experience, does it not follow that we must learn not only all that it is possible to know about the lives of people, but more importantly, place these experiences in a context, specific to time and place? This is the fallacy of living history as it is practiced by many museums. The context is missing. We must not only understand how something happened, but why.

There is a sameness to the American historic site that is numbing. How was life on a German immigrant farm in Wisconsin different from that of a Yankee in Connecticut, or village life in Indiana from that in North Carolina? Many of the day-to-day necessities were the same. But, were they accomplished differently, with different tools, with different materials, and if so, why? The list of questions is endless. The answers require more research. That is the missing ingredient. We must put the history back into living history. If we do not, we are simply portraying some undefined past living, without reference to time or place. In this age of competition with various forms of mass entertainment, we are dangerously close to succumbing to the lure of more activity for the sake of increased attendance.

How can we correct this drift away from history as we are caught up in the excitement and stimulation of more activity? Our program goals must be clear. They must be related to the specific nature of the historic site. Sound scholarship must be the underpinning of the entire program.

A basic misunderstanding has developed. Living history is a technique, not the program.

Living history is a concept of historic site development and interpretation that seeks to re-create an historical environment where people actively pursue the daily activities of the life which the museum seeks to preserve. Living history interpretation seeks to teach inductively, through demonstration, informal

communication, and participation, rather than lecture. Living history can enable us to interpret the new social history more fully and completely.

Living history is an art, as interpretation is an art. It is so easy to learn the what of history, but far more difficult to understand the how and why. The presentation of ideas, the understanding of cause, the role of setting, selectivity—these are abstractions which play a key role in understanding the past. Bridging the gap between fact and understanding is the hurdle over which we are stumbling. Making this connection creates the context. How is this accomplished? There must be a totality to the experience, so that the whole is not missing some of its parts. Relationships must be correct, whether they are buildings, objects, or landscapes.

Why have we so willingly embraced this new interpretation, this living history? Traditional methods of interpretation leave us unfulfilled. The why is absent, the context is missing. We must breathe life into history. We must understand history before we can expect the interpreter to weave the spell from which the visitor gains greater insight and understanding. This is the challenge of the 1980s for historic site interpretation.

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## The King's English

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**Flock**—shredded bits or tufts of wool or cotton used for stuffing mattresses, beds, cushions, etc.

**Piggin**—a small pail, especially a wooden one, with one stave longer than the rest serving as a handle.

**Salamander**—a circular iron plate with a long handle. The plate is heated and placed over a pudding, etc. to brown it.

**Trammel**—a series of rings or links or some other device to bear a crook at different heights for holding a pot over the fire.

**Treenware**—a wide variety of small, useful articles made from wood: spoons, bowls, mugs, trenchers, etc. The term is derived from *tree*.

**Trencher**—a square or circular piece of wood, shaped like a plate or dish, from which food was served or eaten.

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## The Exchange

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What's a Senior Interpreter? Presently, it's a host/hostess or escort who has, by dint of study and effort, succeeded in producing three projects that are judged to be exceptional and useful for interpretation or education. Three people serve on a review committee to approve each project, and one of these people is a specialist in the subject area studied by the applicant. Each project equips the host/hostess or escort to conduct training in a particular area or to provide an educational aid or program for visitors or other interpreters. Promotion after three such projects recognizes the special qualifications of the Senior Interpreter. June Shields was the first to earn the new title with her extraordinary program, "Once Upon a Town," and other programs designed to educate young people. You are all familiar with Cynthia Long's *Garden Journal* and her essay on the Palace gardens in the Governor's Palace brochure. She used these pieces to help her become a Senior Interpreter and continues to write the *Garden Journal*.

Doris Hammes submitted several published pieces (including her book, *A Williamsburg Hornbook*), a biographical tour, and a lecture as her projects. Margaret Schober pursued her interest in herbs and health by researching eighteenth-century knowledge and practices in these areas. Her paper, "A Glossary of Eighteenth-Century Diseases, Medical Terms, and Medication," is available to borrow from the Davidson Shop library. What is St. Anthony's Fire, anyway? If Lord Boteourt died of it, maybe you'll want to know. John Lowe, our fifth Senior Interpreter, qualified with programs based on his extensive studies of Peter Pelham and with another enrichment lecture on General Braddock and his part in the French and Indian War.

A number of other hosts, hostesses, and escorts are at various stages in their progress toward promotion to Senior Interpreter. Our hats are off to all of you who have undertaken this challenge.

Working with Cliff Burket and the entire Department of Interpretive Education, Jeanne Whitney has been developing a handbook that will be studied by all new interpreters as they go through Preliminary Training. The various chapters of the book correspond to the areas addressed during Preliminary Training: interpretation; history studied

through family, work, community, and material culture; and CWF history and surroundings. The book will include articles by curators and historians, informational outlines and descriptions, as well as training aids such as a glossary of fashion terms before 1775.

We think you'll want this resource in your library, so each veteran interpreter will receive a personal copy of the new handbook as soon as it is printed.

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## Occurrences

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As we continue through the summer, be sure to come and see the many events that are offered to our visitors. Check the *Visitor's Companion* for the events, times, and locations. We would appreciate your efforts to help keep our visitors informed about these special opportunities which are available for them.

On August 21, the Fifes and Drums, Militia, and Garrison Regiment will celebrate the *Monarch's Birthday* on Palace Green. During Labor Day Weekend a *Military Encampment* will be held. Troops from the re-created Southern Battalion and the Yorktown Bicentennial Brigade will be camped on Market Square and the Capitol Exchange. It will be an excellent weekend of living history.

*Keeping the Best Company* will be presented at 8:00 P.M. on Friday evenings in September. Also, at 7:00 P.M. beginning September 1, Lt. Henry Williams will be court-martialed every Wednesday during the *Evening of Military Life* program, which begins at the Magazine. So take your employee's pass in hand and come out during the evening to enjoy yourself.

In October CWF will host a six-day AASLH seminar entitled "Successful Interpretive Planning." Twenty-five participants will be selected from applicants throughout the country. For more information about how such seminars work, call Bill Tramposch (Ext. 2711) or Frances Griffin (Ext. 2389).

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

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