

interpreter

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The Theme: A Personal View

"Becoming Americans" has been the theme—the conceptual framework designed to promote logical coherence—of interpretation at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation for several years now. The *Interpreter's* editorial board believes that we could all benefit from a discussion of how it is functioning. Accordingly, interpretive planning teams will continue to be invited to preview their revised interpretations, and individual interpreters will be asked to describe how they have gone about incorporating the thematic directives into their programmatic and individual interpretations. Their responses will appear in upcoming issues of the *Interpreter*. We also thought it useful to initiate the series with one that examines the theme from a broad, somewhat theoretical perspective. I was chosen to write the initial article; the following are my observations on and thoughts about the theme.

I began by rereading *Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg* since I remembered that it begins with a detailed explanation of the theme as conceptual framework and then proceeds rigorously to work through the logical and practical implications of the theme and its topics for each interpretive site, program, and tour. I must say that I was, and am, thoroughly impressed by the authors' accomplishments.

The authors' goal was not simply to superimpose an academically sound theoretical concept on existing interpretations as an intellectual exercise or for cosmetic purposes. They were intensely aware that the theme had to be both broad enough to encompass the entire history of a regional society over centuries of growth and change, yet practical enough in its logical ramifications to incorporate and accommodate much of the existing interpretive program at the Foundation. They knew that the theme must serve to rationalize

the plethora of discrete data—the dense fog of historical fact—that has dominated interpretation here in the past. Their goal was not to replace facts with concepts, for to do so would eliminate the specifics that breathe life into abstract concepts. Rather, they sought to erect a framework to synthesize the data into a coherent whole, recognizing that isolated bits of information are no more meaningful, no more significant, than loose tesserae wrenched from the context of a mosaic. And they succeeded to a remarkable degree.

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The Theme: An Outsider Speaks

Dana Falk is graduating this year from UCLA with a major in sociology. She recently spent several weeks at Colonial Williamsburg with the program sponsored by the University of California, Riverside. We think interpreters will be interested in excerpts from one of her assigned papers, which she called "Learning to Appreciate Our Place in History."

"On the whole, themes are a pretty groovy concept. Just as Mickey Mouse evokes immediate recognition as Disneyland's chief protagonist, so too may educators reap the benefits of program development along a single theme. The Colonial Williamsburg decision to take on such a project is especially well conceived, I think, because 'Becoming Americans' lends itself to the mission of and challenges inherent in teaching history in an outdoor museum setting.

"Specifically, a theme affords museum scholars some markings as they wade through the historical information, and in effect funnels their research efforts—a much more satisfying (and expedient) way to go about garnering knowledge. The use of a theme also

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A Personal View, *continued*

The theme the authors of *Teaching History* selected, "Becoming Americans," is awe-inspiring in its scope; it sets out to do no less than explain a historical process of multicultural interaction and amalgamation in an alien environment that, over time, produced a distinctively American society. The theme focuses on the history of the entire community without discounting the significance of individual accomplishments. Finally, the authors note that, although late colonial society was already "distinctively American," the process is an ongoing one. This clearly places the whole process of American societal evolution in a continuum linking us and our visitors to our colonial forefathers through a body of shared values and experiences.

The scope of the theme and the elegance of its conception may be awe-inspiring, but does it, can it, serve as a practical guide for interpretation at the Foundation? In my judgment, the answer is a resounding "Yes!"

The interpretive system delineated in *Teaching History* is rigorous, logical, and almost always practical. It recognizes that because of time constraints, no single interpretive entity can, in normal circumstances, possibly treat the theme in its entirety *and* supply the particularity of detail that animates it. The system therefore assigns each entity a specific role to fulfill in the interpretive process. It strikes me that the interpretive system resembles a kind of non-hierarchic Great Chain of Being in that each of its elements has a discrete niche and functions largely independently within that niche, yet all are united in a coherent whole by a system that makes perfect sense in its totality.

Quite obviously, the most important entities in the system are interpreters, since they are its only variable elements. That is, the system relies on the ability of each interpreter to develop a series of interpretations custom-designed to meet the objectives of the various sites, programs, and tours in which he or she works. The task is undoubtedly feasible, however daunting it may seem to be initially.

At this point, you may ask if I think there is any weakness in the system on which I have, uncharacteristically for me, lavished such praise. The answer is yes. Personally, I believe its weakness lies in its failure to prescribe some explicit means of introducing visitors to the thematic concept and helping them to integrate information that they have absorbed.

I know that it all makes sense and is beautifully interconnected in theory—the interpretive plan and system prove that. But I am not so certain that many visitors, unaware of the theme and the tight web it weaves among specific interpretations, will be able to make the necessary connections. There are a number of ways that proper introduction of the theme *could* be accomplished, but I don't think that can concern us here.

I look forward to other articles on interpreting the "Becoming Americans" theme because I am interested in learning of the many skillful and, I expect, ingenious ways in which individuals have risen to meet the challenge, and the opportunity, the theme represents.

—Barney Barnes

An Outsider Speaks, *continued*

removes some of the ambiguity of interpreters' roles in the educational process, providing some guidelines for conduct as they greet the public on the front lines. This in turn gives visitors some schema with which to work, some way to file and recall what they learn during their stay.

"Truly, employing a theme can be a very imaginative, productive venture, so it pains me just a bit to take this sustained whack at the way in which the 'Becoming Americans' theme falters at a number of sites in Colonial Williamsburg. My first concern with the Foundation's treatment of the theme lies in the observation that all too often, interpretation stresses the stark *differences* between everyday life in the colonies and life as we know it now, a distinction I view as unnecessary and destructive to the spirit of continuity between us and our patriot forefathers. I agree wholeheartedly with Bill Tramosch's assertion that 'astute scholars work to ensure that the visitor has a true place in the great conversations that museums continue' and am disappointed, therefore, in the sites that treat the historical information not as an *evolution* of a people but as an exercise in seventeenth century/twentieth century comparison and contrast."

In addition to proposing a more evolution-oriented approach to interpretation, Dana cites examples where similarities or continuities would

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An Outsider Speaks, continued

be more effective than differences in provoking important insights into our modern behavior and reactions: the speed with which fashions change—then as well as now; the helpless feeling when the best medical technology known cannot cure disease and prevent death, a tragedy we share with our forebears.

“My second complaint with Colonial Williamsburg’s presentation of ‘Becoming Americans’ is that many sites share a sense of *incredulity* about the primitive ways of the colonists. I judge from the quote ‘We acknowledge that a process of change, begun 300 years ago, continues today and that every generation must become Americans’ (*Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg*) that Colonial Williamsburg administrators would share my disdain for this attitude of ethnocentrism. *Above all*, I would expect from a museum an opportunity to be put in perspective historically, to understand where I stand in the overall scheme of things, *not* by means of emphasizing the absurdity of the past.”

Dana illustrates her point by citing some of our ridiculous modern cosmetic rituals that make colonial practices look tame. And she speculates that as horrible as punishments and death sentences were for colonists, much of what goes on in some of today’s correctional institutions is just as grim. We would be very misguided if we thought that we are not doing things now that will soon be considered archaic—this is what Dana means by understanding our place in history.

“My third major criticism of the ‘Becoming Americans’ theme is simply that it is not fully explored in some interpretations where it would not only be ‘appropriate’ but very powerful as well.

“For example, as I visited various sites, I was filled with questions, usually ‘why’ questions, that were not resolved: Why did people keep diaries? Was there an element of self-absorption to this practice? And most interesting to me, did these people have a sense that they were making history, which compelled them to record their daily life? At the Courthouse, that regal, upright building, I learned about earcropping for a culprit caught stealing a hog, and I wondered why a terrific potential for expansion [of the theme] is not even touched on.

“Despite these illustrations of the inadequacy of the ‘Becoming Americans’ theme in Colonial Williamsburg, I feel it is important to

point out the exceptional successes as well, and certainly there are many examples of ways in which the theme is used most poignantly on the sites.

“Wetherburn’s Tavern was an outstanding look at becoming American in the way it represented one ordering of priorities at that time. Most meals cost more than a night’s sleep at the tavern; people who had little money often had to share a bed with a stranger, and if you came late, you might find yourself on the floor, so apparently a good meal was more important to them than were the amenities.

“‘What we’re trying to do here is give a sense of the complexity of society at the time, explained the Wetherburn’s interpreter, and it was a job well done.

“The bootmaker’s shop captured the essence of work and enterprise in colonial Virginia beautifully. An apprentice worked for a master craftsman and learned from him how to read and write. The division of labor, even within shoes, was surprisingly specialized: the shoemaker *crafted* the shoes from a last (mold), but only after someone else had acquired that leather and still another had tanned it. Shoe *repairs* were left to the cobblers. As there were no shoe rubbers at that time, the colonists had to make do, gumming up the soles of their shoes on a rainy day. All this paints a very vivid picture of the structure of society and the need to cope with the challenges of daily life.

“The Capitol building was a very pleasant surprise as well. The interpreter detailed the steps needed to pass a law at that time, and as the bills were often aimed at ameliorating a *particular* problem, the visitor can empathize with how aggravating it was to wait anywhere from three months to two years for results, probably far beyond the heat of the actual problem. This provides great insight, I think.

“[Criticisms] notwithstanding, I am enormously impressed. It is important to recognize that a college student on assignment, in all my glorious objectivity can be awfully hypercritical, a sort of down-and-out actor turned theater critic. Although I am sincere in my objections to some of the interpretation, my overall sentiments toward the Colonial Williamsburg rendition of open-air history are of respect for attention to detail and for obvious great care about the visitors’ experience.”

—BB

Reinterpretation of the Anthony Hay Site

Gary Brumfield describes the changes that are occurring at the Musical Instrument Maker/Cabinetmaking Shop complex.

A new interpretative plan is now in use at the Anthony Hay Cabinetmaking Shop. In January a memo from Dennis O'Toole to all public contact personnel gave a brief description of the changes taking place there. This article will expand upon that memo and answer some of the questions you are likely to get about the change.

Reinterpretation of the Hay site was another step in the long process of bringing all of the Historic Area in line with the plan outlined in *Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg*. The James Geddy House was the first site under the department of historic trades to benefit from this process, and the new interpretation introduced there in 1986 has been well received. In both cases, the changes were the result of lengthy discussions by planning teams that called upon the advice of specialists from throughout the Foundation.

Several people have asked, "Why change the interpretations at the Hay site when they were among the most popular in town?" Sites are selected for reinterpretation by the educational planning group, based upon the recommendations of the HAPO directors and Mr. O'Toole. Many factors, from the amount of documentation that survives to the anticipated cost of any changes, go into the decision to put a site at the top of the list. The wealth of information about the Hay site and its products made it an excellent candidate for reinterpretation. We should all remember that eventually every site will be reviewed and changed as necessary to comply with the Foundation's interpretive goals.

Documentation indicates that musical instrument construction and repair were, like interior decoration, coffin making, and funeral services, often a part of the business of cabinetmaking shops. Based on this evidence, the new plan at the Hay Shop has merged the Musical Instrument Maker and Cabinetmaking shops. The combined staff is working together in interpretation and craft work with Mack Headley as supervisor and Marcus Hansen as assistant supervisor. Production of both furniture and musical instruments, especially spinets and harpsichords, continues.

Combining the two activities presents a more accurate historical picture and, by including the work of the instrument makers in the main workroom, gives our visitors a chance to see the shop as a busy place with lots of ongoing work. The latter consideration is an important one because visitors often express disappointment in not seeing more actual work in all of our shops.

The visitor traffic pattern has been changed and the interpretation modified to fit the new layout. Entrance to the property is now through the gate at the southwest corner and down the steps to what was the Musical Instrument Maker's Shop. When visitation is light, traffic is flow-through, but during times of normal and heavy visitation, guests are grouped by a visitor aide stationed either at the gate or at the west door.

When grouping is necessary, the visitor aide also gives the initial interpretation. While the content of this part of the interpretation varies with the length of time a group waits, the emphasis is on topics not covered in the shop. These include the site's history and the reconstruction of the shop, the hiring and training of the craftsmen and the nature of their work, and comparison of the modern situation to that of the eighteenth century. The visitor aide's role is to help prepare the visitors for the experience within the shop and clear up some of those general questions about who works here and what they do.

Moving the tools and benches out of the west room has allowed that room to be converted into a "wareroom" (an eighteenth-century term for a combination showroom and warehouse). Warerooms appear in the inventories of several English and American shops and appear to have been the place for storage of custom pieces awaiting delivery and the display of ready-made items for sale. Here, away from the noise and dirt of the shop, a cabinetmaker met his customers and conducted the majority of his business.

Reproduction furniture is now being made for this space, and it will include some chairs for visitors to sit on and other pieces they can examine. The wareroom interpretation includes the range of products and services provided by this shop, the business aspects of the trade, the interaction between the cabinetmaker and his customers, the origins of design, and other related subjects that are difficult to address in a workshop environment.

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Anthony Hay Site, *continued*

After hearing about these subjects, visitors move on into the east room to see work going on and learn more about the materials, processes, and techniques used in the production of furniture and musical instruments. This room is arranged so that one craftsman can interpret while the others continue to work at their trade. The ongoing work provides illustrations for the talk and, as the work changes from day to day, presents a variety of subjects to which the interpretation can be linked.

Visitors exit the shop through the north door to see the lumber yard. It is set up to show the preparation of the raw materials and some additional cabinetmaking activities such as decorative gothic fence making, sale of coal and lumber, coarse woodworking, turning, and so forth. Eventually a hearse and storage shed will illustrate funeral services. At times when staffing permits, craftsmen will be working in the yard as well.

The first six months of this new program will be a time for evaluation and change, where necessary. A formative evaluation in March, April, and May will be followed by a visitor survey in June. The site supervisors and members of the interpretive planning team welcome your comments, thoughts, or suggestions. Send them in writing to Mrs. Conny Graft in the Goodwin Building or give one of us a call.

England Revisited

Bobbie Sanders tells us something of the wonderful trip she and others took once more with Betty Jean and Frank Lendrim. For a longer description of the trip, see her article in a later issue of the Colonial Williamsburg News.

The Dilettanti Society was first organized in London in 1732 to encourage the study of classical antiquity and to promote the arts. Expeditions journeyed to Asia Minor, Italy, and Greece. In recent years the society has been reactivated by Sarah Bowles and Phillipa Barton, lecturers with the University of London and the Victoria and Albert Museum. We had the good fortune to enjoy some extremely interesting lecturers and visits to some very special places with them.

We listened to descriptions and enjoyed slides about the evolution of furnishings in the great houses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including the use of textiles

on tables, seating, and wall tapestries. It is curious to discover how seating arrangements indicated the status of persons within households. In addition, the simple movement of cushion to bench to back stool to upholstered chair took the better part of a century to accomplish—at least to the point that it became a normal part of a household's accoutrements. The earliest form of a chair was a simple box chair, and even low chests were used for seating. During the seventeenth century stools of all kinds were the most common forms for seating.

During the course of our studies with the Dilettanti, we visited Ham House and Aston Hall, both of which retain much of their original furniture. It was remarkable to see looking glasses and portraits hanging against the beautiful tapestries that graced the walls of so many rooms. Leather wall hangings were much more prevalent in England than here in the New World. The evolution of tables was also interesting to study—from pier table to console, card, tea, and gateleg table—as room decor and entertainment changed. This includes the changing status of the main hall where dining, sleeping, and entertaining took place to the gradual separation of room and family apart from the servants.

In the 1800s, rooms were decorated with a softer look by bringing the outside in using special tables to hold plants; colors of rich blues, creams, yellows, and crimsons; larger looking glasses and chaises or daybeds gave a more relaxed atmosphere.

Our homes today reflect a little of all the ideas and styles of the past, and we can learn by looking back and taking from the best of yesterday.

The King's English

Dilettante—a lover of the fine arts; originally one who cultivates them for the love of them rather than professionally. (*Dilettanti* is the plural form.)

Pier—the solid mass between doors, windows, or other openings in a wall.

Pier table—a low table or bracket occupying the space between two windows, often under a pier glass (mirror).

Tessera—each of the small square (usually cubical) pieces of marble, glass, tile, etc., of which a mosaic pavement or the like is composed.

Franklin in Williamsburg

B. J. Pryor, historical interpreter, brought us a copy of a letter Benjamin Franklin wrote to his wife from Williamsburg. While he was here, the College of William and Mary conferred the honorary degree of Master of Arts on Dr. Franklin, and he consulted with William Hunter on post office business. The letter is quoted in The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Volume 6, Leonard W. Labaree et al., editors.

Williamsburg, March 30. 1756

My dear Child

I wrote to you via New York the Day after my Arrival, acquainting you that I had a fine Journey and Passage down the Bay, being but four Days from Philadelphia to Col. [John] Hunter's, tho' stopt near a Day on the Road. I have been well ever since, quite clear of the Dizziness I complain'd of, and as gay as a Bird, not beginning yet to long for home, the Worry of perpetual Business being yet fresh in my Memory. Mr. [William] Hunter is much better than I expected to find him, and we are daily employ'd in Settling our Affairs. About the End of the Week we are to take a Tour into the Country. Virginia is a pleasant Country, now in full Spring; the People extremely obliging and polite. I return in the Man of War to New York, with Col. Hunter and his Lady; at least this is propos'd; but if a more convenient Opportunity offers, perhaps I may not stay so long as the End of next Month, when that Ship is to sail. Present my Duty to Mother, Love to Billy, Sally and the rest, not forgetting that Goody. My respects to Mr. Masters, and all the Officers; and in short to all Philadelphia. Mr. Hunter presents his Compliments. I am, my dear Debby, Your loving Husband

B Franklin

P.S. Deliver Col. Hunter's Money to Mr. Balfour.

The Wythe Passage

We live in time and space,
But even more in images,
The texture
And the pulse of life.

We stand today
In the same place
Where once Jefferson and Wythe
Exchanged pregnant words,
Prelude to Declaration.

But how can we evoke
The images that once
Enlivened this place,
How breathe today
The spirit of Enlightenment
That made for infinite hope?

Donald Kline
April 9, 1987

Aid-memoire

Pray always say *GAOL*
And this without fail.

Who speaks of the *GOAL*
Doth torture the soul.

Of those who wrote *Ye*
But always spake *THE*.

—Rutherford Goodwin
1936

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