A RESEARCH SUPPLEMENT

Fresh Advices

JANUARY 1981

Update from the Director of Research

Late-breaking news from the eighteenth century? "Hot copy" two hundred years old? Why not? It happens all the time. Graham Hood rummages through papers in an English country house and discovers Lord Botetourt's household account books missing and presumed lost for two centuries! A computer at the College flies into action and seconds later prints out for the first time since the founding of Yorktown a complete list of that settlement's initial investors!

The past is full of "fresh advices." The problem is getting them to interpreters promptly. It is the stubborn nature of reports, books, articles, and catalogs — if they treat a topic broadly and thoroughly — to take a long time in writing. It often takes longer still for their information to filter down into training materials. The process itself cannot be hurried up very much, but there may be shortcuts by which important pieces of information can be released before they are eventually joined up with other pieces to make a final report or publication. A periodic research supplement to *The Interpreter* is one such solution. Published two or three times a year, it offers the Foundation's historians, archaeologists, curators, architectural historians, and preservationists a forum to discuss current research and call attention to opportunities in the Historic Area where new information—"fresh advices" — can be used by interpreters.

This maiden issue of the supplement is devoted to the much talked about but so far little seen York County Project, the largest and most labor-intensive study undertaken by the research department in many years. Two historians on our regular staff, plus nine more hired with funds received from the National Endowment for the Humanities, are busy reading every page in every book of the York County court records from the 1630s (when the records begin) to 1820 or '30. The scope and complexity of the project are not alone in making it different from other assignments. Most of the department's work comes in the form of specific requests, nowadays mainly from the Program Planning and Review Committee. The York County Project got started another way. It was invented and organized entirely "in house" when staff historians asked themselves the question, "What kind of history should Colonial Williamsburg be teaching that it isn't teaching now?" Their answer went something like this: "There can hardly be a better place than a restored eighteenth-century town and a nearby plantation to show visitors how transplanted European and African cultures developed over a period of years a distinctively American character, an identity and an allegiance to home-grown interests that explain the colony's eventual separation from England." A similar idea, summarized in the phrase "Becoming Americans," was later identified by the Interpretive Practices Committee as the central historical theme round which interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg would be organized in the 1980s.

Studying social change in the colonial period is easier said than done, especially given Virginia's imperfect and incomplete records.

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New Towns, 1690 — 1720

At the November 1980 meeting of the Southern Historical Association Kevin Kelly and Peter Bergstrom presented the first results of the York County Project. The title of their paper was "'Well Built Towns, convenient ports and markets': The Beginnings of Yorktown, 1690–1720." From their analysis of the earliest York County data, Kelly and Bergstrom advanced a theory of urbanization that is a refinement over other scholars' work on Chesapeake towns.

Since November these two historians have

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New Towns, *continued*

tabulated Williamsburg data, and we present here in summary form information on early residents of both York County towns.

Yorktown lots were bought up in two batches. Some sold when they first became available in 1692. The people who bought lots then stand out as a different group from subsequent purchasers of Yorktown lots and buyers of Williamsburg lots. Kevin Kelly's idea is that these initial purchasers were motivated by what he calls "civic mindedness" to invest in the town at its establishment. Among the first buyers were many planters well established in the county for years and years. Their "civic mindedness" made the town a success from the start, because the county's expenses for establishing the town were paid off right away. (Other Virginia towns dragged out for years the reimbursement of their start-up costs.) The first buyers were obviously taking on the lots as investments only; few left their plantations and actually moved to town.

The second wave of lot buyers got their Yorktown lots after 1692, mostly in 1698. They are a more representative sample of townspeople, both in comparison to Williamsburg and to Yorktown as a whole. Less than 30 percent were known residents of rural York or James City county when deeds were drawn up for their Yorktown or Williamburg lots. About two-thirds gave Williamsburg or Yorktown as their residence at the time of purchase; these were the urban "pioneers" who came from outside the area to live in new tidewater towns. In other words, most had no previous tie to the area at all. Few (about 20 percent) are known to have owned land other than their town lots.

In Yorktown and especially in Williamsburg there was among early lot owners a large number of craftsmen, professionals, and ordinary keepers. The services they offered imply that the town drew customers from outside the cities' limits and brought in a clientele that could not get these services in the countryside.

The occupational structures of Yorktown and Williamsburg gave Kelly and Bergstrom new ideas about the establishment of Chesapeake towns. Services offered by townspeople were not tied to the area's agricultural economy. Contrary to other theories of urbanization, York County towns were not just centralized points for processing and shipping tobacco. Williamsburg and Yorktown offered services that made them true urban areas.

Setting the Record Straight

Estate Inventories

Harold Gill has worked with colonial Virginia records for twenty-five years. In the following discussion he explains the purposes and limitations of estate inventories.

Inventories are invaluable sources of information for historians, curators, and interpreters; but, like any other piece of evidence, they must be used with both care and discretion. Taken by court-appointed agents upon the death of the owner, estate inventories are lists of personal property such as slaves, furniture, clothing, tools, household utensils, and livestock. In most instances the court agents also appraised the values of items — usually in cash amount but sometimes in pounds of tobacco. By comparing a large number of estate inventories from a specific place over a period of time, historians — like the members of the research team working on the York County Project — are able to draw conclusions about wealth distribution, slave holdings, and capital investment, as well as how these factors changed during the period under consideration.

In some instances the inventory or appraisement (as the document is called if the agents assigned values) actually gives a room-by-room breakdown of items. Governor Botetourt's possessions at the Palace, as you know, are listed that way. It is not unusual to see headings like "in the Hall," "in the Store," or even "in the Chamber over the Parlour" in inventories. Such information helps modern day researchers understand how the colonists used rooms, and it also gives clues about relationships within the household.

Notwithstanding the richness of the source, these documents have their own peculiar problems. For example, even though it had been law in Virginia from the early seventeenth century that every estate be inventoried, the law was never fully complied with. In short, many estates were not inventoried. Did they belong to the poor? the wealthy? those somewhere in between? We simply do not know. There is good reason to belive that the elderly are underrepresented in the records; by the time of their deaths many had already given away their possessions in exchange for maintenance while they lived.

A second problem arises from the fact that inventories do not include real property such as land, buildings, perishables, and crops in

the fields. Only movable items — personal property — were enumerated. As a result, architectural fittings like bookcases and cupboards nailed to the wall, for example, as well as stationary equipment like cider presses fastened to the ground, were systematically excluded.

Thirdly, some historians claim that executors or the family of the deceased purposely concealed some items from the appraisers when inventories were taken. Appraisers often noted that they examined "such part of the estate. . . as was brought to our view." Was this a hedge in which they were legally protecting themselves or were there real grounds for suspicion? More likely, the executors did not conceal anything, but other property on the premises was claimed by other members of the household. In the few cases where it is possible to compare the will, inventory, and orphan's account of a single decedent, we have found instances in which the names of certain slaves appear in one document but not all three. Whether or not the exclusion was intentional we have no way of knowing.

Finally, some inventories are the products of sloppy appraisers. Mathematical errors are the most obvious kind of carelessness, and they are far from rare.

Given the facts that not every estate was inventoried and that even the best inventory does not include the entire estate, it is understandable why historians must exercise caution in dealing with even the best sources.

From the Editor

Here we begin a series of articles on documents and their uses. Mr. Gill's article on estate inventories has as a companion piece Mr. Kelly's discussion of black family life and slave holdings. All the latter comes from analysis of inventories and takes into account the shortcomings Mr. Gill points out.

In future issues we'll feature in the Setting the Record Straight column other documents — from diaries to pipe stems, from court orders to engravings. Please tell us the types of evidence you're curious about. We'll search out the appropriate experts for their explanations of the records and then give examples of the records' uses. If there are research projects you've heard about only in passing and want more information on, we'd like to know that too. Feel free to call extension 2274 or send a note to the research department.

Black Family Life

By the eve of the American Revolution over half the people in Williamsburg and York County were black slaves. It follows that any social history of this area is incomplete unless it includes them. Evidence about eighteenth-century black families and communities is extremely rare. For this reason, estate inventories — despite their shortcomings — are an important source of information. York County inventories, when used carefully, provide us with one of the few possible views of the local eighteenth-century black family experience. It's an intriguing picture.

The inventories reveal a general rise by 1770 in the number of planters who owned eleven or more slaves. At the same time the number of inventories listing any slaves at all also increased. Larger holdings (by increasing the field of eligible mates) should have improved the chances of slaves to marry within their home plantation groups. Furthermore as more planters acquired slaves, which dispersed slave groups throughout the county, the distance and isolation between them diminished and interaction increased. This should have improved the likelihood of marriages between slaves living on neighboring plantations. These figures, taken from inventories, indicate favorable prospects for black family formation.

Yet the inventories also disclose conditions unsuited for stable family development. Although the overall balance between adult black men and women evened out by 1770, most individual plantation were still characterized by severe imbalances. Households with equal numbers of men and women accounted for less than 40 percent of the total, while groups of only one sex made up about a third of the total. Such sexual imbalances within the slave population meant that many black men and women, if they married at all, were forced to live apart from their spouses.

The black population finally overcame this obstacle and succeeded in growing naturally by the 1780s. This fact, also drawn from the inventories, is clear evidence of successful family formation. It came about slowly, and that points out an important aspect of black life locally. A strong family offered compensation against the hardships of slavery. Yet blacks living in York County had to struggle throughout the colonial period to establish this basic human support.

Update, *continued*

Historians who have tried soon find it necessary to reconstruct whole communities, county by county, name by name, year by year. The procedures we follow in abstracting the York County records, linking the names we find recorded there, compiling biographies, and coding each file for computer analysis were described in the summer 1979 issue of *Colonial Williamsburg Today*. The time has come to explain how we will use this storehouse of information to explore questions of social change in a case study of Williamsburg, Yorktown, and rural York County.

The computerized data bank will eventually contain the names of tens of thousands of planters, merchants, craftsmen, doctors, innkeepers, slaves, masters, women, children, aunts, and uncles whose affairs for one reason or another came to the attention of the county court. This reconstituted "telephone book" has already been much consulted to find representative historical characters for the summer acting program. Notwithstanding this and other immediately useful applications, an ordered list of names is only a first step towards understanding something more important.

Williamsburg and Yorktown, being unusually successful, unusually early tidewater towns, were anomalies in eighteenth-century Virginia. Historians are eager to learn what special circumstances led to their founding and their subsequent growth and development. They also want to know how they influenced the lives and fortunes of nearby farmers and planters. Clearly such issues are of central importance to those of us who must interpret Wolstenholme Town, Martin's Hundred, Carter's Grove, the eighteenth-century capital, and the town that was left behind when the state government moved to Richmond. We need to know who settled on this peninsula in the seventeenth century. When the best farm land was filled up, diminished opportunities for indentured servants may have resulted in the early importation of slaves, and that may have contributed to the ascendancy of those families who already owned land. We know that the staple crop was top-grade, sweet-scented tobacco. Conceivably, its consistently high price concentrated wealth on this peninsula, thereby attracting larger numbers of merchants whose presence may explain why early attempts to establish towns here were successful.

Kevin Kelly and Peter Bergstrom recently presented a paper to the Southern Historical Association on the promoters and early residents of Yorktown, a paper that is summarized elsewhere in this supplement. Once the founding fathers have been identified, it follows logically to ask how the towns grew afterwards. We know that many of the early residents were not country folk come to town, but new immigrants to the colony. As our research moves further into the eighteenth century, we should be able to tell if a distinctively urban social order emerged after a generation or two. We will also be seeking answers to questions about the variety of goods and services provided by the towns and whether they were major markets for surrounding farms. We expect that they were, but we have yet to determine how the demand that towns created may have altered the region's agricultural economy and how that regional market may have influenced trade with England.

The period after 1780, when the capital had been moved to Richmond, gives us a chance to test the conclusions we have reached about the earlier period. The comparison will show us what aspects of the town's economy and occupational structure had not been dependent on the business of government.

These are questions basic to our understanding and interpretation of eighteenth-century Williamsburg. By extension they are also questions that examine the subtle transformations by which Virginians came to think of themselves as Americans. Future *Fresh Advices* will report on later developments from eighteenth-century York County and other major research projects as well. Sometimes your reporter will be a historian, other times a curator, architectural historian, or archaeologist. Each issue will include a column devoted to eighteenth-century documents and the kinds of useful information historians find in them. Harold Gill begins that series in this issue with an essay on probate inventories, whose use Kevin Kelly illustrates in another article on slave holding in York County.

The *Virginia Gazette* was fond of saying that it was "open to All Parties, but influenced by None." That goes for us too. Watch for future *Fresh Advices*.

An occasional supplement to *The Interpreter* newsletter, *Fresh Advices* is the coordinated effort of Colonial Williamsburg's research departments.
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