

# interpreter

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## Looking at the Eighteenth-century Child

*Anne Schone, instructor, learned a lot about what we know and do not know about eighteenth-century children as she prepared to teach a Core Curriculum elective last winter. She describes available resources.*

What was childhood like two hundred years ago? Today's visitors are enchanted by imagining all sorts of possibilities. They see our junior interpreters playing, dancing, sewing, or working with animals and become even more curious. Often visitors' ideas of the Chesapeake child are colored by the New England experience or the victorian world of the nineteenth century. Our problem is to determine what can be told about childhood here in the Chesapeake during the eighteenth century and how that story is different from other times and other places.

During the past several years historians have become interested in the study of family, and authors such as Jan Lewis, Philip Greven, and Daniel Blake Smith are looking at the Chesapeake in provocative and creative ways. Their work is helpful in examining family life, especially among the gentry. To complement and to understand their work, we rely on three kinds of evidence to expand the picture of childhood: material, literary, and demographic. Each of these can be helpful in several ways, and each has its limitations. It is useful to examine what can be learned from such evidence.

Material culture is a valuable way to explore childhood. The child's ring with the words, "fear God! Mary Broadnax" recently found by archaeologists at Shields Tavern is a good example. Mary lived in what is now the western portion of the Coke-Garrett House and possibly played with the Marot children since they were of similar ages. How did Mary's ring get into the ground? Were children actually brought up to be fearful? How

did Mary and her family react when they discovered the loss of the ring? Was such jewelry common among children, or did the fact that her father was a goldsmith set Mary apart from other children? It is possible to ask many questions about that one artifact. Most of these questions will never be answered, but it is still important to consider them.

The nature of existing material evidence sometimes presents problems. Often what we know of children's toys and clothing comes from special items like the christening dress or the baby rattle belonging to children of the gentry. These are items with a "keep me" factor. Imagine what was used up, worn out, broken, passed on to younger siblings, or just "loved to pieces." What did the slave child play with? Will we ever know? Obviously, we can understand only part of the story as we look at the artifacts of childhood, but that is

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## "Welcome Little Stranger"

*Linda Baumgarten, Kim Funke, and Betsy Carson, along with many others have recently installed a new exhibit at the Wallace Gallery featuring objects used by eighteenth-century children. Linda, curator of textiles, describes what we can learn from the study of these objects.*

"Welcome Little Stranger," a new exhibit in the Textile and Print Galleries at the Wallace Gallery through February 7, 1988, explores the lives of eighteenth-century children through objects from the Williamsburg collections. The eighteenth century was a period of change in family life, inspired in part by the philosophies of reformers John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Dr. William Buchan. (Joseph Prentis of Williamsburg

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### **Eighteenth-century Child, *continued***

still useful. Visitors will enjoy a special opportunity this summer to see artifacts of childhood on view at the Wallace Gallery in the "Welcome Little Stranger" exhibit developed by Linda Baumgarten and her staff.

Consider portraits of children. How are they posed? What are they wearing, carrying, playing with, and what do they tell us? What is artistic convention, what gives us a glance into children's thoughts and feelings?

Literary evidence is a second way to explore childhood. Unfortunately, there are few diaries and letters written by children. The diary of Sally Cary Fairfax is a delightful exception. Ordinary activities such as making a cardboard box for her "neclass," winning ten shillings playing checkers, and her father's measuring her height on the door speak to the universality of childhood, then and now. This is something the visitor can relate to. It would be wonderful to have many more Chesapeake examples.

Letters and diary notations written about children also help. Affectionate nicknames, worries about teething, and other outpourings can be useful views into families. One comes away from these sources feeling the importance of children in the family, especially prosperous planter families. Often the writers were male heads of these affluent households, however, giving rise to concern about how representative their observations were. Also one has to consider these were examples that survived; think of the ones that were lost.

Literary evidence of slave children comes mostly from white observations, making it difficult to assess how valid their observations were. And how little we have of diaries and letters of the middling sort.

Another literary example is the childrearing manual, which became popular during the eighteenth century. Advice ranged from care of illnesses, treatises on breast-feeding and childbirth, to, most importantly, instruction on manners and deportment. As in today's world, it is impossible to judge just how much impact these books had on parents. Consider what Dr. Spock has meant in rearing recent generations of children.

John Locke's book *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* is particularly useful when interpreting children of two hundred years ago. His views on education covered everything from advocating loose-fitting clothing and simple diet to the importance of recreation. A statement such as "Learning anything . . .

might be made as much a Recreation to their Play, as their Play is to their Learning" sounds similar to advice to modern parents instead of the words of a philosopher dead more than 275 years.

Did adults actually heed such advice? Eliza Lucas Pinckney, a wealthy South Carolina plantation manager, is one parent who seemed to try. She wrote to a friend in England asking her to send her infant son a "new toy (a description of wch I inclose) to teach him according to Mr. Lock's method (wch I have carefully studied) to play himself into learning."

Inexpensive storybooks for children were readily available in Williamsburg. Filled with moral lessons and woodcuts depicting good and bad children, the point of the stories can hardly be missed, although it is impossible to know if the lessons were heeded by Williamsburg youngsters. In addition, the many available academic books give some insight into children's education.

Another literary example is the long list of the rules and regulations to be observed at the Bray School for black students. The mistress was to oversee diverse aspects of education as well as to discourage vices such as lying, cursing, and profaning the Lord's Day, while seeing that the children were neatly and cleanly dressed along with teaching females knitting and sewing. One wonders about her successes and failures. How did the academic experience change the life of the slave child? Robert Carter Nicholas wrote to the supporters of the school in England, "I have tried to enforce some of the Rules, which you were pleased to approve, but find they are not well relish'd; however I will persevere." Again, perhaps not too different from the world of today.

Looking at demographic information to understand eighteenth-century childhood is the final method to be explored. Information such as the number and spacing of children, naming patterns, age of childhood mortality, when children experienced parental death, and inheritance patterns is critical when looking at eighteenth-century society. This information is less biased toward the gentry and helps get closer to the story of childhood for the middling white child and the black child. The York County Project will be particularly useful in examining our local area.

One drawback to demographic information is that it is impossible to get a sense of how people felt about issues such as child and parent death, remarriage, and naming patterns.

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## Field to Factory

Hundreds of thousands of black Americans migrated from the South to the North between 1915 and 1940. Until recently this "Great Migration" has been inadequately studied and understood, but the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History has produced an outstanding exhibit on the subject, which we highly recommend to Colonial Williamsburg interpreters. It is called "Field to Factory" to reflect the movement of blacks from the farms of the South to the cities of the North.

This exhibit, which opened in February, was four years in planning and is the product of a great deal of effort and ingenuity on the part of its co-curators, historian Spencer Crew and designer Jim Sims of the Smithsonian's staff. Along the way they were assisted by interns from both Howard University and Smith College. Financial assistance for this exhibit came from the Smithsonian, the African American Museum Association, and Pepsi Cola, the latter of which paid for educational materials.

"Field to Factory" is significant for a number of reasons: it is the first time that the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History has attempted to interpret this topic;

the subject matter (along with its provocative presentation) is attracting audiences that haven't traditionally frequented this museum; and finally, its design ingeniously and aggressively compensates for the lack of abundant material culture through the use of music, film, and reconstructions.

"Field to Factory" is the story of the migration, told from the migrants' point of view. For this reason, it is oftentimes as stimulating to watch the audience as it is to watch the exhibits. In fact, the Smithsonian has hired an oral historian who will ask those visitors who have been migrants themselves to recall their own stories. In the end this information will be shared in a symposium scheduled for February 1988. These oral histories will also provide helpful information to historian Spencer Crew as he completes his book on the topic of the Great Migration.

"Field to Factory" is a reminder to all who visit it that individual and at times seemingly forgotten lives have an impact on greater trends in a country. It is social history at its best, and it concentrates on a topic that has been too little discussed in museums. It is provocative, extremely believable, and a welcome sight in the National Museum of American History.

—BT

## Summary of HAPO Programs September through October 1987

- Sundays:** *Capitol Concert* 8:30 P.M. September 13–October 25
- Tuesdays:** *Military Review* 5:15 P.M. on Market Square through October 27
- Wednesdays:** *Keeping the Best Company* 8:30 P.M. at the Lodge Auditorium through September 30
- Thursdays:** *Militia Muster* 5:15 P.M. on Market Square through October 29  
*The Governor's Evening Music* 8:00 and 9:30 P.M. at the Governor's Palace  
October 1–November 5
- Fridays:** *Military Retreat* 5:15 P.M. on Market Square through October 30  
*A Capitol Evening* 7:30 and 8:30 P.M. October 1–October 30
- Saturdays** *Fife and Drum Parade* NOON  
*Fire Engine Demonstration* 5:15 P.M. on Market Square July 25–October 31  
*Eighteenth-century Play* 8:00 P.M. at the Lodge
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## Special Programs

- September 5 and 6** *Publick Times*
- September 17** *Salute to the Constitution* 5:15 P.M. on Market Square

### **Eighteenth-century Child, *continued***

Another problem is that many of the Virginia records that would help complete the story have been lost. Demographic information, as with material culture and literary evidence, will always be incomplete.

Clearly, each kind of information used to build the story of eighteenth-century childhood has the same drawbacks that affect the study of all social history. There is, nonetheless, much information available as well as much to be learned from additional research. There are also hypotheses about the evolution of the American family and childhood that have gained wide acceptance among American social historians. Linda Baumgarten's article, "Welcome Little Stranger," elsewhere in this issue cites examples of these. The hope is that with the current interest in the study of childhood, further work will be done that can help the visitor more fully understand what it was like to be a child in the Chesapeake two hundred years ago.

## **Children's Furniture in the Eighteenth Century**

*Ronald Hurst, curator of furniture, describes three categories of furniture that some eighteenth-century children used.*

For most of the twentieth century the numerous pieces of small-scale furniture that survive from the eighteenth century have been interpreted by the general public as cabinetmakers' models. As the popular story goes, these diminutive objects were carried from place to place by itinerant craftsmen in search of new clientele. An interested customer could simply pick from among the small chests and tables, and the handy cabinetmaker would whip up a full-scale version. In spite of their appeal to our romantic notions about the past, however, such stories have little basis in fact. On the other hand, the evidence that small furniture was actually used by children in the eighteenth century is abundant: there are literally thousands of period illustrations and written descriptions of furniture and other objects made smaller to accommodate child-sized bodies. These little chairs, tables, chests, and desks are usually identical to adult furniture in design, construction, and function.

Also categorized as children's furniture are forms designed specifically for use in child-rearing. These objects often have no counterparts in adult-sized furniture. Among the most common survivals in this category are cradles, high chairs, and going-carts (today commonly called "walkers").

Doll furniture constitutes yet another category of miniatures. These pieces, often no more than twelve inches in height, were copied from adult forms like tea tables and chests, but were scaled even smaller than children's furniture.

Examples from each of these categories are currently displayed in "Welcome Little Stranger: Children in the Eighteenth Century" at the Wallace Gallery.

### **Little Stranger, *continued***

owned a copy of Dr. Buchan's 1774 *Domestic Medicine* in 1778.) After the middle of the century more families, particularly those of the middling and upper sort, were characterized by visibly affectionate relationships, less repressive discipline, and a new view of childhood as a distinct period in life, not an extension of adulthood. These and other social trends affected the objects with which children lived, and children's clothing naturally reflected society's changing views.

It is always fascinating to compare eighteenth-century children's clothing with that of today's children. Instead of paper throw-away diapers, eighteenth-century parents used cheap linen fabrics, usually called "clouting." Written records indicate that poor people used worn-out household linens for their children's diapers. Because the safety pin was not commercially available until the nineteenth century, children's clothing was fastened with straight pins (or for the more fortunate, with ties.) The custom for putting little boys in frock dresses or skirts continued from the eighteenth century well into the twentieth, as documented by early photographs of some of our fathers and grandfathers in their skirts.

One of the biggest differences then and now is the amount of restriction experienced by eighteenth-century children through their wearing apparel before the reforms began to take effect among the general public. Early in the century, many infants were still being

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# Index

Thanks to Bob Gerling, supervisor of the Geddy House, Nancy Wooten, and others in the department of interpretive education, we have a current and very useful index for the *Interpreter, Questions & Answers*, and *Fresh Advice*. We have also made a separate index for "The King's English." Please call Nancy at ext. 7624 or come by the Davidson Shop for your copy.

—BB

## Little Stranger, *continued*

swaddled—tightly bound with fabric wrappings to keep the body and limbs immobile. Even after swaddling gradually went out of favor, children continued to be laced into stays from a very young age. Although Dr. Buchan reported that the madness for stays—"the very bane of infants"—seemed to have abated by 1774, Williamsburg milliner Catherine Rathell was advertising stays for children three months old and upward as late as 1771. Some boys shared in the fashion for stays, though they did not wear them as long as girls. Two pairs of children's whalebone stays, both with American histories, can be seen in the exhibit.

Another method of restraint was the use of leading strings—fabric pieces sewn to the shoulders of tight garments to rein in active youngsters and assist them in walking. (We might compare these to our modern day tethers attached to a child's wrist or worn like a harness.) Even after children passed the stage of frequent falls, leading strings continued to be used on children's dresses as a symbol of youth.

An additional aid in learning to walk was the padded bonnet or pudding cap. Abigail Adams borrowed a pudding cap for her little girl who was learning to walk in 1766. She wrote in a letter, "I should be obliged if you would Lend me that quilted contrivance Mrs. Fuller made for Betsy. Nabby [little Abigail] Bruses her forehead sadly she is fat as a porpose and falls heavy."

The familiar belief that "eighteenth-century children dressed like little adults" is only partly true. (And who is to say that we don't do the same today, with out children in alligator polo shirts and designer jeans!) By the 1760s

and 1770s, the clothing of English and American children was responding to the new social trends and philosophies, and little boys and girls wore loose white frock dresses with wide colored sashes, rather than uncomfortable stiffened gowns. Older boys wore suits with long trousers rather than adult-style suits with tight knee breeches. Interestingly, these trends in children's clothing eventually found their way into the clothing of adults, and by the early 1800s women were wearing loose white frocks with raised waists, and most men were wearing trousers.

Unfortunately, the survival rate of poor children's clothing precludes its being shown in a museum, as only the finer, decorative examples have come down to us. In order to interpret the clothing of slave children, we shall use reproductions shown in various locations in the exhibition buildings. Research and development of reproductions are now in progress. We know from written records that as late as 1798, the children of Robert Carter's slaves wore clothing patterned after that of the adult slaves. The boys age nine and older were to have a waistcoat, shirt and breeches; and the girls over eight were given a "Jack-coat" (probably a fitted, front-lacing bodice with sleeves), a petticoat (equivalent to a modern skirt), and a linen shift for underwear. The little boys and girls wore frocks (dresses) and a linen undergarment appropriate to their sex.

Not only is children's clothing shown in the exhibit, but also clothing for pregnant women, feeding accessories, toys, little girls' needlework, and furniture used by children. The exhibit will be open until February 7, 1988.

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