

# interpreter

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## "Becoming Americans": The Interpretive Story at Colonial Williamsburg

by Bill White

*Bill is director of the Department of Presentations and Tours, a member of the committee that is currently rewriting "Teaching History," and chair of the Summer Interpretive Experiment Committee.*

Over the past year I've enjoyed the extraordinary advantage of working with our new interpretive theme. Most exciting was the privilege of working with so many different individuals from throughout the Foundation. The talents and dedication of all the staff are the Foundation's greatest asset. As we look to the future of our interpretive program, we are standing on a strong foundation. The interpretive program has always been strong. We only need to consider how we can make it stronger. To that end, a tremendous planning effort has been underway for some time now involving a broad cross section of the Foundation's staff.

The discussion of *Vision '95* began in 1989. Over the next couple of years we refined that discussion and it became the *History Initiatives* project and study. History Initiative Teams headed by Conny Graft, Larry Henry, and John Sands examined the Historic Area and our interpretation carefully, making recommendations for future development. They reviewed the learning experi-

ence, visitor preparation, and Historic Area integrity. As they formulated recommendations, one theme resonated. It was time to refocus our interpretive theme and program. In the fall of 1993, Cary Carson called together a group that included Christy Coleman, Kevin Kelly, and me to discuss interpretive planning and review the 1985 edition of *Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg*.

An interpretive theme can provide the Historic Area with strong unifying direction. As the Learning Experience Team noted, an interpretive theme unifies our message to visitors and helps focus our interpretive resources. The History Initiatives Team on Visitor Preparation and Orientation reminded us that orientation was a challenge in coordination. In preparing our guests for their experience, we must provide consistent messages about our interpretation in all our promotional and orientation information. Improving the integrity of the Historic Area depends on focusing our resources.

This was not the first time that Colonial Williamsburg examined its program to clarify and focus interpretive themes, nor will it be the last. As with any educational institution, reexamination is constant and necessary. Throughout the history of our institution, historians have reexamined and refined their interpretations of the past. Listening to their new interpretations, we too have changed the message we carry to the public. That reexamination led to the 1985 publication of *Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg* and adoption of the theme "Becoming Americans."

This issue of *the interpreter* marks changes in the editorial staff. Mark Howell, editor, stepped down from this position in June. He took the editorial helm in January 1989 and steered this publication in new and innovative directions. Mark moves from Interpretive Education to Presentations and Tours with new duties and challenges ahead. The editorial staff and board would like to thank him for the dedication and creative leadership he brought to this publication over the last five years. With this issue I take over the position as editor, and Mary Jamerson, a key player in the production of *the interpreter* since its inception in 1980, becomes assistant editor.

Nancy Milton

In 1993-1994 we confirmed the basic theme "Becoming Americans," but refined it. "The Williamsburg story—which we call 'Becoming Americans'—tells how diverse peoples, holding conflicting personal ambitions, evolved into a society that valued both liberty and equality. Americans cherish these values as their birthright, even when their promise remains unfulfilled." Instead of broad topics like government, work and enterprise, family and community, and cultural life, the team focused on storylines. Exciting and engaging history is a narrative that tells of the interactions and events between people. The history of Virginia and the town of Williamsburg is a distinctive one. The particular conditions of everyday life in this region shaped that experience. So did the way that peoples interacted with each other, the institutions they created, and the events that affected their lives. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Virginians (white, black, and native) had created a distinctive culture and society that we now call Virginian and American.

The storylines chosen illustrate this story for our visitors. "Nurturing Families" describes the way the Virginia experience shaped family structures and relationships. "Choosing Revolution" is the story of Virginia's shift from loyal Britons to a rebellious colony. The institution of slavery affected every Virginian and is the story of "Enslaving Virginia." In "Buying Culture" colonists became participants in a consumer revolution affecting the entire western world. "Unfettering Faith" not only examines the religious lives of Virginians (gentry to slave), it describes how Virginians stepped away from an established church. The importance of land ownership (the opportunities and hardships it imposed on individuals) is the story of "Taking Possession."

As the summer approached, interpretive staff, historians, and visitors looked over the proposed "Becoming Americans" theme and its storylines. This new version of *Teaching History* underwent—and is still undergoing—a variety of changes suggested by interpreters and others who reviewed the work. We also began asking a series of questions about implementing the theme. Most important, could the storylines work interpretively in the Historic Area? With that major question in mind, Steve Elliott called together a team

and charged them with developing a summer interpretive experiment. The team was drawn from across the education divisions: Cary Carson, Doc Hassell, Tom Hay, Graham Hood, Marianne Hull, Kevin Kelly, Anne Schone, Darci Tucker, Robert Watson, Mary Wiseman, and myself.

First, we identified the two storylines we would focus on for the summer. "Nurturing Families" offered opportunities for supporting the children and family programming already in development. The Historic Area also has some impressive resources readily at hand for telling the "Choosing Revolution" storyline. Selecting the storylines was easy. As the team discussed how the storylines affected interpretation, we identified three basic principles that needed testing.

#### **1. Linkages:**

Visitors can only come to understand the full scope of a storyline by experiencing several interpretations. No single site, program, or interpretation can tell the entire story. We must therefore find ways of linking interpreters and their interpretations so they can support each other and the storylines. We also noted obvious connections between the storylines. Often it's impossible to address one storyline without referring to the other.

#### **2. Personal Stories:**

We identified personal stories of the individuals living and working in this eighteenth-century community as a basic building block for the interpretive program. The lives and choices of Williamsburg residents illustrate the key points of the storylines and provide our visitors with vibrant, dramatic history examples.

#### **3. Personal Stories Meet the Public World:**

Every personal story relates directly to the public community. Individuals made choices and decisions in the context of the community. The decisions they made also influenced and changed their community. This relationship between the private and public worlds is essential to understanding the storylines and the "Becoming Americans" theme.

With summer knocking at our door, we asked for help from several people in the Historic Area. By the end of May we had

expanded the team to include Christy Coleman, Elaine Dawson, Lisa Kause, Judy Kristoffersen, Kate McBride, Nancy Milton, Willie Parker, Phyllis Putnam, Marcel Riddick, Diane Schwarz, Ken Schwarz, Kristen Spivey, Valeria Tabb, and Anne Willis. The members of the team began working with their staffs at the Capitol, Anderson Blacksmith, Randolph's House, Raleigh Tavern, Printer and Bindery, Women of Williamsburg Tour, African American Interpretations and Presentations, Geddy's House and Foundry, Character Interpretation, and the Powell's. A host of others helped with the project. Marilyn Ogden developed an introductory brochure that described the summer program for visitors. Pat Saylor made sure that the *CW News* included an article on the summer experiments every week of the summer. Bill Weldon stepped in and became Patrick Henry for some experimental programming at the Capitol. The list goes on and on. Help seemed to come from just about every quarter of the Foundation.

Time was very short, but interpreters pulled together and met the challenge of the summer experiment. Our flexibility as an organization and the dedication of our interpretive staff always amaze and impress me. The summer experiments stand out as another great example. In less than a month new and refashioned interpretations appeared for the public. As the summer progressed, the interpretation strengthened. Randi Korn and Associates conducted an independent survey of visitors and interpreters. We are now circulating the results, and several things stand out in the comments of visitors and staff.

Storyline interpretation can work effectively to strengthen our interpretation. Visitors found the personal stories an engaging and exciting way to learn. Some new interpretations and techniques we experimented with this summer were also very well received. There are many ways we can improve, particularly in planning and implementation. The most effective interpretive programming occurs when front line interpreters design, develop, and carry out interpretations. The short time schedule this summer did not provide enough time to do this effectively. We had also hoped to strengthen the connections between interpretations, programs, and sites. But the pressure of the summer schedule did not give us enough time for interpreters from several different sites to discuss and strengthen the linkages between

interpretive programs. We also needed more time to develop interpretive material such as biographies and time for staff to discuss the various ways of illustrating those personal stories in their interpretations. One cornerstone of the "Becoming Americans" theme rests in the diversity of the community. We must still concentrate on better representing the lives of African Americans, native Americans, women, poor and middling whites, and various European cultural groups. The short time schedule also kept us from developing the orientation programs so desperately needed.

Even with the shortcomings of this summer's experiment, however, the future of "Becoming Americans" is very exciting. We have an opportunity to work together and cooperatively to strengthen the interpretive program and our visitors' experience. It's a job that will require commitment from every level and area of the Foundation. In fact, it's the kind of project that can unite us all. Some of that uniting has already begun. This summer Historic Area staff, historians, and curators worked effectively together toward a common end. We can, and will, expand that circle of departments and individuals as we develop the future of interpretive programming at Colonial Williamsburg.

So, what is next? The summer experiment team has been meeting to finish designing the interpretive objectives for the "Nurturing Families" and "Choosing Revolution" storylines. Full implementation will go forward in 1995. Planning teams for each of the other storylines will meet sometime this fall or winter. Each team will make recommendations for developing and implementing the storylines as they phase in over the next several years. "Enslaving Virginia" will come into the interpretive program in 1996, "Buying Culture" in 1997, "Unfettering Faith" in 1998, and "Taking Possession" in 1999.

It's an ambitious schedule, and we have only just scratched the surface. Over the next several months as the storyline teams develop their individual plans, we must combine all the initiatives into one development plan. New research projects, training opportunities, interpretive plans, and orientation efforts must be coordinated carefully, building on the many strong interpretive programs already in existence. The next several years will be exciting ones as we work together for the future of our interpretive program.



## Questions & Answers

### Church and State

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by Linda Rowe

*This series of questions, posed by John Turner, manager of Religious Studies, to Linda Rowe, historian in the Department of Historical Research, focuses on the overlapping jurisdictions and revenue requirements of colony, county, and parish governments in colonial Virginia where church and state were closely linked.*

#### **1. Were there other taxes based on tithables, or only the church tax?**

The variety of public taxes and dues with which colonial Virginians were faced can be grouped into several broad categories: poll taxes; import and export duties, and port charges; royal quit rents (on land); and special taxes for the support of paper currency. It is poll taxes we are concerned with here. Poll or head taxes were the most widely paid levies in the Virginia colony. Poll taxes can be defined as any levy assessed at a flat rate (amount due) per tithable (taxable person). **Three different poll taxes were collected in colonial Virginia—the public levy, the county levy, and the parish levy.** Former Colonial Williamsburg historian Peter V. Bergstrom explained these three poll taxes this way in "Nothing So Certain: Taxes in Colonial Virginia" (1984):

*Public Levy.* The public levy, laid on by the General Assembly, dates back to 1623 before the dissolution of the Virginia Company. This

tax, assessed on tithable persons in the colony, was normally used to pay for expenses of the central government including such things as construction and upkeep of government buildings (first at Jamestown, then Williamsburg), salaries of minor colonial clerks, and compensation for masters whose slaves were executed. During the eighteenth century the public levy was also the source of funds to pay burgesses. After 1699 the General Assembly imposed a public levy every time it met, but it did not meet every year.

*County Levy.* Counties in colonial Virginia also charged a poll tax on the tithable population in each county to meet the expenses of county government. Counties collected these taxes regularly after 1647. County levies covered the costs of local justice such as stipends to county court clerks, constables, and coroners. Among the most expensive charges against county levies were construction and upkeep of county facilities (courthouses, jails, bridges, roads). Wolf bounties ran into money in frontier counties. County justices of the peace laid on the county levy annually.

*Parish Levy.* Vestries in Virginia imposed this poll tax on parish tithables to support the activities of the Church of England in Virginia. The parish rate was not established in law until 1629 when specific legislation for payment of ministers' salaries was enacted. It is safe to assume, however, that parishioners paid some sort of tax for ministers' salaries from the earliest years of the Virginia colony. By the middle of the seventeenth century the parish rate was also used to pay for building and upkeep of churches

and chapels, to purchase and maintain glebe farms (established as a further support for parish ministers), and to relieve the "worthy poor" in the parish. The parish rate was an annual levy.

## 2. Tithables.

Many visitors to Colonial Williamsburg are familiar with the term *tithe* (tenth) through their churches. In the tradition of ancient Jewish law, they are encouraged to pledge one-tenth of their earnings for the maintenance of ministers, buildings, and programs. In England tithes for support of the priesthood and the religious establishment were first enforced in the tenth century. *Tithe* also had a more general meaning—any levy, tax, or tribute of one tenth. In England *tithable* crops, livestock, and earnings determined the tithes paid by individuals for support of the clergy and church. In addition, *Tithing-penny* referred to revenues paid to sheriffs in England by the several tithings of their counties. A *tithing* (from Saxon law) was a group of ten households that formed the tenth part of a hundred, an administrative unit. Colonial Virginians on the other hand paid poll taxes (a set tax rate per person—not based on crops, livestock, or earnings) not only for parish support, but colony and county expenses, too. Moreover, poll tax rates in the colony were not valued at a tenth part of anything. As early as the 1620s in Virginia, the term *tithable* meant liable to pay taxes or one subject to payment of taxes.

It was just as necessary to define the taxable population in the colonial period as it is today. In Virginia any person legally subject to a poll tax (see #1) was tithable, that is, taxable. The tax base (tithable population) for the public levy, the county levy, and the parish rate was determined by age, sex, and race. The legal definition of a tithable changed several times during the seventeenth century but remained constant in Virginia after 1705. In that year the legislature defined tithables to include males aged sixteen years and upwards (all races) and "all negro, mulatto, and Indian women" aged sixteen and over. All children under sixteen and white women were excepted. Household heads normally paid taxes for all tithable persons attached to their households. Level of income (ability to pay) was not among the criteria for determining who paid how much in poll taxes.

The list of tithables used by the General

Assembly, the county, and the parish was recast every year. The law concerning tithables ordered that the county court divide each county into "convenient precincts" [such as Upper Bruton (York County) and Lower Bruton (James City County)] and annually appoint one of the justices of the court for each precinct to take the list of tithes for that precinct. Each tithetaker put a notice at the church or chapel in his precinct stating where he would be on June 10 so that heads of families could bring him the names of the tithables in their households as of June 9. At the meeting of the county court in August each tithetaker delivered the lists he had collected to the courthouse so that all who wanted to could view them "for discovery of such [tithables] as shall be concealed." The county clerk then compiled a master list arranged by parish and precinct.

## 3. How was the amount of poll taxes per tithable determined?

It is important to keep in mind that the size of tax bills paid by household heads depended upon both the number of tithables in each household and amounts of money needed in any given year by the General Assembly, county governments, and parish vestries.

Operating funds needed by the central government were divided by the number of tithables in the colony as a whole; county budgetary totals by the number of tithables in the county; and church-related expenses by the number of tithables in the parish.

Here's an example. Suppose John Doe's household consists of himself, his wife, one adult slave woman, and her child about ten years old (total = 2 tithables). Jane Roe heads a household composed of her two sons ages seventeen and nineteen, two slave men, and a slave woman with a babe-in-arms (total = 5 tithables). Their parish vestry adds up expenses for the year including the minister's salary, repairs to the church building, upkeep for several poor or incapacitated persons in the parish, supplies for four celebrations of the Eucharist, light cleaning around the church and grounds, and laundering church linens. The vestry divides that total by the number of tithables in the parish (which they know from the list of tithables they purchased from the court clerk—or clerks in the case of Bruton). This computation reveals that twenty pounds of tobacco is due for each tithable. This amount is then

multiplied by John's two tithables—he owes forty pounds of tobacco and Jane's five tithables—she owes one hundred pounds of tobacco. Meanwhile, similar calculations at the county and provincial levels have produced additional amounts due per tithable that must also be multiplied by John's two tithables and Jane's five.

#### **4. Who collected taxes based on the tithable population?**

Originally, it was the churchwardens of the parish who collected the parish levy, usually by naming a place and time for parishioners to bring their dues to him. This proved exceedingly inconvenient for the people, and by the late seventeenth century it was the county sheriff, with the help of his undersheriff (deputy sheriff) and county constables, who collected the parish tax. This they could do with no added inconvenience at the same time they collected the county public levies.

#### **5. Was the sheriff really as much of a treasurer as Webb (George Webb, justice of the peace in New Kent County, and author of *The Office and Authority of a Justice of the Peace, an eighteenth-century handbook for Virginia's JPs*) makes him sound? Where did the money go? How was transfer of funds handled?**

The sheriff certainly needed bookkeeping skills. All taxes were due at the same time of year, so the sheriff had to keep account of how much he and his fellow officers (undersheriff, constables) had collected from whom, how much went to central, county, and parish governments, and which funds he had turned over to whom.

Sheriffs were personally responsible for the funds they and their assistants collected. Since there were no banks in colonial Virginia, sheriffs usually kept revenues in their personal possession, undoubtedly socked away with whatever personal cash, tobacco warehouse receipts, or bills of exchange they had on hand—an unthinkable conflict of interest in the modern United States. These public funds remained in private hands until they were turned over to provincial, county, or parish officials who were also personally responsible until the funds were used to pay for work or other charges against each body. If the sheriff lost collected revenues through negligence or misuse, or if he failed to collect all taxes due, government units needed a way to recover public funds. Thus the requirement that sheriffs post bond. It was not

uncommon for suit to be brought against a sheriff who failed to turn over public funds or for the county to attach a sheriff's estate for recovery of tax monies in his hands when he died.

One further note. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, taxes were collected in actual tobacco that was used as commodity money until 1730, the year the General Assembly passed the Tobacco Inspection Act. The act required inspection and bonding at public warehouses of all tobacco shipped abroad, and thereafter warehouse receipts became legal tender in lieu of tobacco itself. Taxes could not be paid in cash except in areas that did not grow tobacco, for which the General Assembly made a special exception. The Twopenny Acts of 1755 and 1758 permitted Virginians to pay their taxes in money during those two years of short crops and abnormally high tobacco prices at a rate of twopence per pound of tobacco, well below the market value at the time.

#### **6. Who ultimately made the decision to build a new church and who decided how much the tax had to be to pay for it?**

The vestry. Colonial law did require that every parish have a church, but it was not necessary to get approval for a new church from the General Assembly or the governor and Council or the county court. The vestry simply added up the costs of a new church and divided that amount by the number of tithables in the parish to determine how much was due per tithable to pay for construction. Because church buildings were expensive, payments were usually spread out over several years, often for the two or three years *preceding* anticipated construction. Personal contributions and bequests in wills occasionally supplemented monies obtained through parish taxes for church construction. For instance, large contributions from Robert "King" Carter and his heirs helped build Christ Church, Lancaster County. Pew sales were another source of funding for construction.

That being said, there are a couple of things to keep in mind about planning and construction of Bruton Parish Church. The Bruton vestry probably did respond to pressure from the General Assembly that the old parish church completed in 1683 be replaced with a more elegant "state church" suitable for the capital of the colony. Moreover, since

the governor and members of the legislature regularly attended Bruton Parish Church, funding for construction came partly from the General Assembly. Governor Spotswood personally financed twenty-two feet of the church's seventy-five-foot length. The government also helped pay for additions to Bruton later in the century. These actions by the Assembly and governor are unique to Bruton.

**7. Explain the working relationship between vestry, local (county), and colonial governments. What was the governing relationship between vestry and county governments?**

It is very important to remember that the personnel of the three governmental units in colonial Virginia were often the same people. Vestrymen usually served as county justices of the peace (Bruton vestrymen could be found on the courts of York and James City Counties, depending upon their place of residence), and it was from among local justices that burgesses were usually elected to represent a county in the General Assembly. The right hand usually knew what the left hand was doing. Still, the relationship between the General Assembly, the county courts, and the vestries is complex and not always clearcut.

*General Assembly.* It was the House of Burgesses and the governor and Council who passed the laws under which colonial Virginians lived. A number of those laws provided the grounds on which people could be prosecuted by the churchwardens for Sabbath-breaking and a number of other moral offenses. Duties and responsibilities of the vestry also were spelled out in a variety of laws. The governor and his Council approved proposed new parishes and ordered vestry elections be carried out in them. The governor and Council occasionally heard grievances against vestries or ministers from local church members. The governor, as the British monarch's representative in Virginia, came with instructions in hand that included a number of responsibilities for the religious life of the colony. For instance, he was to induct Anglican ministers and ensure conformity to the Church of England and the *Book of Common Prayer*. In practice vestries rarely presented their ministers for induction, and the governor did little "hands-on" supervision of church life.

Members of a parish could appeal to or

petition the General Assembly for redress of grievances in their parishes. Remedy against a parish levy considered oppressive is one example. Boundary disputes that sometimes erupted when an old large parish was divided into two new parishes were referred to the central government for resolution.

*County Courts.* Justices of the peace in colonial Virginia bear almost no resemblance to modern officials of the same title. In colonial times, JPs had broad judicial and administrative powers. They adjudicated debt cases and other civil matters, heard evidence against accused criminals in the free population (except crimes that might result in the death penalty, which were referred to the General Court in Williamsburg), and passed judgment including the death penalty on slaves. They recorded deeds and probate documents (such as wills, estate inventories, and estate settlements,) and orphans' accounts. Young slaves recently imported appeared before county justices to have their ages adjudged so that their new masters would know when to count them as tithables. Justices delegated responsibilities to lesser officials such as surveyors of the highways, constables, county jailers, and others. Coroners appointed from among the justices conducted inquests when suspicious deaths were reported. And the list goes on.

Since there were no ecclesiastical courts in Virginia, the law directed churchwardens to resort to the county courts to prosecute Sabbath-breaking and other breaches of the moral code. The vestry and churchwardens could be prosecuted in the county courts if they did not carry out their responsibilities.

*Vestry.* The parish was the local unit for administration of church and religious affairs in the community and the promotion of moral health in the community. Broadly speaking, the vestry had several important duties: to appoint the clergyman of the parish; to investigate cases of drunkenness, adultery and fornication, Sabbath-breaking, and other moral offenses; to lay the parish levy, and to keep a record of births and baptisms in the parish. These responsibilities required year-round attention entrusted to two churchwardens elected annually from among vestry members.

Churchwardens were authorized to investigate breaches of the moral code and to present well-founded charges to the county

court for final judgment. Part of this process also gave churchwardens authority to protect the parish from charges for upkeep of bastard children born in the parish by collecting a sum of money from the mother, or requiring the father to post bond, or accepting payment from her master if the mother was an indentured servant. If none of these funds was forthcoming, churchwardens could "sell" the woman into a period of bound servitude to the highest bidder to recover expenses the parish incurred. Churchwardens also were authorized to bind out bastard children whose financial support fell to the parish. They also were supposed to make sure these children were decently treated during their servitude or apprenticeship. They could present cruel or neglectful masters to the county court.

The vestry usually met twice a year. One of these meetings was scheduled for October or November for the laying of the levy. (County courts devised a budget in October or November as well.) To figure the parish budget, the vestry needed information about all sorts of expenses including the needs of poor and disabled people of the parish, the existence of illegitimate children born in the parish, and the names of parishioners willing to take—or who had taken—indigent persons into their homes. Churchwardens could supply most of these details.

**8. When county lines and parish boundaries did not coincide (e.g., Bruton Parish covered parts of James City and York Counties), who collected fines for non-attendance, etc.? Where did the money go?**

The county court of the county in which the Sabbath-breaker or other offender lived ordered the fine which was then collected by the county sheriff or his fellow officers (undersheriff or constable) and turned over to the vestry of the parish in which the person lived to be applied to poor relief there.

**9. If Bruton vestry made a decision and York officials agreed and James City County officials didn't, what happened?**

This kind of conflict does not appear to have arisen. Although I cannot cite an example, county courts could refuse to go forward with a case presented by the churchwardens if the grand jury thought the case was without merit. Sometimes boundary disputes erupted when old parishes were divided to make two new parishes, but these

disputes were referred to the central government for resolution. Conflicts also arose between parishes. For instance, a question arose in 1660 about where the parish taxes of the family of Mrs. Elizabeth Jones should be paid. All members of the family resided in Hampton Parish but some of them worked in another parish. These workers returned to the main family dwelling house at night. The county court directed that the whole amount of the parish tax levied against Mrs. Jones be paid to the vestry of Hampton Parish.

**10. Was there a county board of supervisors or equivalent—or did the parish vestry serve this function?**

There was no county board of supervisors in colonial Virginia. In the well-developed system of local courts, county justices of the peace (and members of the Williamsburg or Norfolk common halls) performed not only in a judicial capacity but administratively as well. The administration aspect of justices' duties resemble in some respects the functions of modern boards of supervisors or city councils. For instance, they issued orders for construction or repair of roads, bridges, and landings; they saw to the construction and upkeep of the courthouse; regulated prices charged in taverns; issued yearly licenses to tavern keepers; delegated duties to an array of lesser officials; and figured a budget and levied taxes to defray county expenses. Justices and common councilmen also drew up regulations for dealing with smallpox epidemics and other public safety concerns.

Obviously, some of the social services provided by parish vestries also resemble those of modern boards of supervisors or city councils or state agencies. Vestries were authorized to draw up bylaws for regulation of their affairs.

**11. What social services provided by the parish other than support of orphans and widows can be documented?**

Let's be clear about this. The vestry assisted *poor* orphans and *poor* widows in very reduced circumstances. Keep in mind that many orphans and widows were left with substantial estates. Then it was the county courts to which guardians presented regular accounts of those estates for inspection. Guardians or trustees could be prosecuted in court if they were found to be "wasting" or otherwise mismanaging the estates entrusted to them.



It was the churchwardens' duty to report to the vestry all cases of extreme poverty in the parish. The ever-present poor without resources, the aged pauper, the wife and children refused maintenance by husband and father, and the physically and mentally disabled sought assistance from the parish. Funds were sometimes given directly to the needy person, but without a local almshouse, more often he or she was boarded in the home of another parishioner who was then paid at the time of the parish levy for expenses incurred in the previous twelve months. Sometimes parish aid consisted of payment for a specific service such as a physician's fee for treating a pauper's injured leg.

Bruton Parish vestry eventually found that the burden of the poor so stretched the parish's resources that it petitioned the House of Burgesses in 1755 to be allowed to erect a "workhouse, where [able-bodied] Poor might be more cheaply maintained and usefully employed." An act was passed giving vestries the right to erect, purchase, or rent houses for the lodging, maintenance, and employment of the poor in their parishes. Bruton's workhouse was located near Capitol Landing on Queen's Creek. We do not know much about its operations because Bruton vestry records from the period do not survive.

Vestries sometimes suspended payment of parish taxes by paupers, the aged, or the physically disabled. County courts usually followed suit by suspending county taxes paid by these unfortunate persons. The position of sexton (responsible for cleaning up around churches and chapels, laundering church linens, or perhaps digging graves) was sometimes given to a parishioner who needed additional income.

Children whose parents were living but unable or unwilling to provide decently for them could be bound out to learn a trade. If any of these children were mistreated by their masters, the churchwardens were authorized to inform the county court so that the child could be moved and the master punished (they would "present" the master to the county court in much the same way they would a Sabbath-breaker).

**12. When did parishes stop being concerned with roads, bridges, etc.? What other responsibilities transferred from parish to county? When?**

The county courts always had responsibility for roads and bridges in Virginia. In the early 1780s vestries of Rockbridge, Botetourt, Montgomery, Washington, Greenbrier, Augusta, and Frederick Counties and several other western counties were dissolved by the General Assembly and their duty to provide for the poor turned over to elected bodies thereafter called Overseers of the Poor. In 1785 legislation required all counties in Virginia to elect Overseers of the Poor.

**13. What had processioning of the bounds become by the third quarter of the eighteenth century? Were individual's property lines processed or just overall parish boundaries?**

Between 1662 and 1748, the General Assembly repeatedly passed laws that required "once in every four years, the bounds of every person's land shall be processioned, or gone round." In the summer of the appointed year, county courts ordered vestries to set a date between September 30 and March 31 following for all persons whose tracts of land touched each other's lands to walk in procession around the boundaries of each tract, renewing blazes on trees and noting or replacing landmarks. Information gathered during these walk arounds and names of people taking part were recorded by clerks of the vestries in special books. Property lines processioned three times were "held, deemed, and taken, to be sufficient to settle the bounds, so as the same may never thereafter be altered."

Processioning was important in rural areas where trees, creeks, or other natural features served as boundary markers. Processioning did not go on in towns where lot lines were well established and documented.

Surry County has processioning records at least as late as the 1760s. Even after post-revolutionary vestries were no longer responsible, processioning continued in new divisions called districts. For instance, processioning records exist for York County in the early nineteenth century and Southampton County has processioning records to 1854 at least. Processioning probably became obsolete as surveying and recording techniques improved.



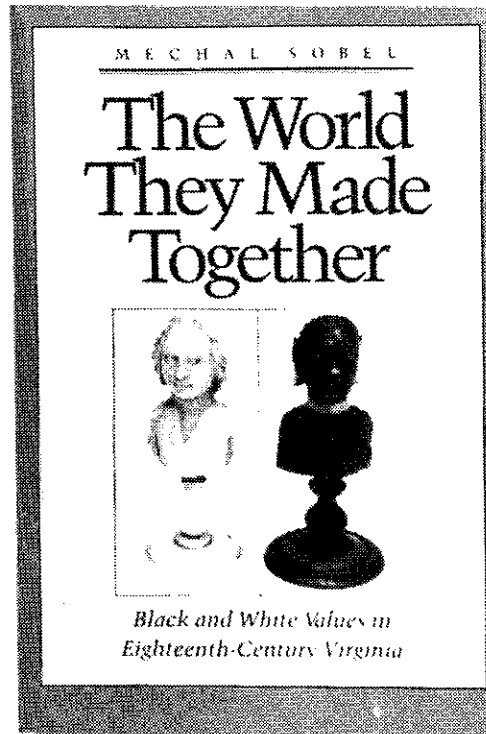
## The 1993 Book Club Reviewed Continued

*In the June issue of the interpreter Cary Carson and Kevin Kelly reviewed two of the books selected for the book club discussions held at the Hennage Auditorium last year. What follows are synopses of the final two books used in those discussions. The first is an interview with Bill White on Mechal Sobel's *The World They Made Together* (an earlier review of this important work first appeared in the May 1989 issue of the interpreter); the second is an overview of Gordon Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* by Christy Coleman, director of African American Interpretation and Presentations.*

### *The World They Made Together*

by Mechal Sobel (Princeton University Press, 1987)

**Nancy Milton** Why was Sobel's work chosen?  
**Bill White** It was chosen for two reasons. First, Sobel represents relatively new scholarship. Second, and more important, is the author's main argument. Sobel maintains that Virginia or Chesapeake society wasn't constructed by Europeans alone, nor was it constructed by Africans alone. You can't even think in terms of several separate cultures. Sobel challenges us to look at the whole picture. We've had plenty of studies focused on planter society. Others concentrate on African American culture. Sobel is the first one really to examine carefully how those two cultures mixed together and formed a distinctive Virginia society. Her book moves the reader away from the idea of Virginia as a transplanted European society. White Virginians identified themselves as a European society and that may be how they thought about themselves. But, there are too many other influences present in Virginia culture. One major influence is represented by the interaction between African and European cultures. So often the study of slavery assumes that the white society—because it's the dominant culture—imposed new societal and cultural forms on blacks. Sobel makes a very strong case that the cultural exchange was very complex. Certainly many elements of European culture were imposed on slaves. But there are many ways that African influences began creeping into the culture, and



an awful lot of ways Africans maintained *their* old world traditions. African influences helped make Virginia a distinctive culture.  
**NM** What did you find that indicated Sobel's ideas concerning this merging of cultures? What influences did Africans have on this Anglo-Virginia culture?

**BW** Sobel looks at several areas. For example, traditional European and African societies have attitudes about time and work that are actually very similar and support each other. They came together very nicely. Europeans and Africans shared the rural rhythms of task and seasons. The newer gentry idea—one geared to the clock and productivity—altered traditional concepts. In the section she calls "Space and the Natural World," Sobel does a pretty good job moving the reader through the environment and demonstrating the various ways Africans influenced Virginia culture. Finally, she focuses on the Great Awakening in Virginia and demonstrates the profound influence of African belief systems. The spiritual awakening certainly reached the slave communities.

**NM** The slave communities seemed to have embraced a more emotional belief system than most Virginia Anglicans. They appeared to be more outwardly fervent in their reli-

gious feelings, more impassioned.

**BW** I think that's right. Davies and Whitefield found their message well received by blacks. They also found their message influenced and changed by the African culture. It's a complicated give and take. I think that's what's difficult about Sobel, for me at least. She's often hard to follow, but I think that's because she works in the middle ground between document history and folkways. She works with tangible document sources and physical evidence to reveal attitudes and ties them to folkways. Then she unravels the many ways these cultural elements influence and impact each other. If you can stick with her as she decodes all of that—and there's a lot there to really provoke—she makes us question the way we look at eighteenth-century Virginia society. It's a powerful book.

**NM** What do scholars who work in African-American studies think about her scholarship?

**BW** The reviews and commentaries I've read have been very complimentary. African-American historians have a unique challenge to work with the sources. Most documents describe slavery and African-American culture from a white point of view. There's a large gap in black expression until you reach the emancipation movement. Then you begin to get the black narratives, and a wealth of oral history material like the WPA project. Historians like Eugene Genovese, Lawrence Levine, Winthrop Jordan, and others analyze this material to construct a cultural history that reveals the attitudes and beliefs of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century African-Americans. Sobel's adopted her methodology from others. I think what's unusual about Sobel is the way she's counterbalanced African-American folkways with the folkways of Europeans. It creates a nice point and counterpoint between the two cultures that helps you see the places where they blend and interconnect.

**NM** What is the relevance of the book for Colonial Williamsburg, especially in light of the current revision of *Teaching History*?

**BW** At Colonial Williamsburg we must interpret an eighteenth-century community. One of our biggest challenges has been to try to figure out how we integrate not just the black and white story, but how to integrate various status levels and provide visitors with a picture of all of these people interacting and working together. We tend to compartmentalize people.

**NM** I know we do. This is the white story. This is the black story.

**BW** Or this is the tradesmen's story. This is the gentry's story. Or this is the women's story. This the men's story. Or this is the children's story. This is the parents' story. We compartmentalize things. And what Sobel does, I think, is give you a good model for blending those various elements together. Okay, granted, she's taken the white and the black as the major focus here, but you can also read her work and get a good picture of the differences between the genteel culture and the working class culture, for example. She spends a lot of time discussing traditional European and African folkways and how genteel culture changed and shaped them. Most of the tradesmen here in town, all the day laborers, most of the small farmers were still linked to that traditional way of life. Genteel culture represented a different way. There are two different perspectives on the world that aren't confined to slave or free. Sobel provides a model for describing an interactive and dynamic community.

**NM** Is there anything else you consider important?

**BW** I'm sure there's lots more. One of the nice things about Sobel is that you can read her so many different ways. I think it's one of those books that you keep going back to and each time find something new. I've been through Sobel's book a couple of times now, and every time there's a new perspective that pops out at you. It really is one of those thought provoking books.

### *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*

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by Gordon S. Wood (Alfred A. Knopf, 1992)

**Nancy Milton** Why was this particular book chosen?

**Christy Coleman** The fact that the book received the Pulitzer Prize and that it speaks directly to the period we interpret made it a "must read" for anyone serious about their study and understanding of the American Revolutionary era. In addition, *Radicalism* proved to be extremely important for those of us charged with revising the "Becoming Americans" curriculum.



# OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

"THE MOST IMPORTANT STUDY OF THE  
AMERICAN REVOLUTION TO APPEAR IN OVER  
TWENTY YEARS . . . A LANDMARK BOOK."  
—THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

**GORDON S. WOOD**

**NM** What is the author's main argument?

**CC** With uncanny clarity and impressive documentation, Gordon S. Wood challenges the notion that the American Revolution was an inevitable event. Instead, he argues that the Revolution was radical in the fact that the standard conditions (i.e., reigns of terror, blood thirsty, angry, and often reckless men, class conflict) did not characterize the American experience. It was not a clash between the elite and the proletariat. As Wood states, "[But] if we measure the radicalism by the amount of social change that actually took place—by transformations in the relationships that bound people to each other—then the American Revolution was not conservative at all; on the contrary: it was as radical and as revolutionary as any in history." Wood goes on to state that not only did our revolutionaries change their form of government, but the social character of the country forever. We transformed from a paternalistic monarchy to a republic state that eventually developed into a democracy by the early nineteenth century.

**NM** Is this a new argument or a summation of recent scholarship?

**CC** Essentially, Wood's work is a summation of recent scholarship and a new argument. He fills in several holes that have plagued the work of progressive and neo-progressive

historians. By doing so, he completely changes their argument into one that is far more plausible.

**NM** What are the book's weaknesses?

**CC** As pointed out during the Book Club series, Wood gives passing mention to how the societal and governmental changes affected women and African-Americans. As a matter of fact, when the reader begins to include these groups into his argument, there are blatant inconsistencies. But there are some interesting notes that (with further inquiry) lead the reader to understand that many of the social changes were the result of the presence and, to some degree, rights given to these two groups.

**NM** What is the relevance of the book's argument for colonial Virginia society?

**CC** Most are aware of the shifts in thought and practice that were taking place in pre-Revolutionary Virginia, but to see these governmental changes in light of the societal shift is extremely relevant. Wood does this very well.

## What Else is New

The Foundation Library continues to acquire CD-ROMs as reference sources for Foundation Library researchers. Now available are:

- Apple Pie Music
- Art Gallery
- Book Shelf
- CD Sourcebook of American History
- Genealogical Research System
- Oxford English Dictionary
- Shakespeare

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