

interpreter

Black Programs Come of Age

Rex Ellis, assistant director for African-American interpretation, has participated in the various phases of Colonial Williamsburg's interpretation of black history since it began. He gives us a chronological review of these programs from the beginning through the most recent developments.

Comprehensive interpretation of black history began at Colonial Williamsburg in June 1979. Shomer Zwelling (research historian), Dennis O'Toole (then deputy director of Museum Operations), and Harvey Credle (former supervisor of character interpretation) were the first to include the black experience as part of the newly formulated "living history" program.

Theater students at local black colleges were invited to audition for summer jobs. The jobs would focus on the creation of characters representing blacks living in the town.

A core of six character interpreters was formed. Each interpreter was responsible for creating two roles that would be presented during the summer months. Six of the twelve characters represented slaves or free blacks of the old town.

Gowan Pamphlet, a black minister who began the first black Baptist church in Williamsburg; Nioto, a newly arrived African youth; Belinda, a scullery maid at Wetherburn's Tavern; Rebecca, a maid for Archibald Blair; Jack, an apprentice cooper; and Caesar Valentine, a free black barber, represented the first major effort to interpret Afro-American history at Colonial Williamsburg.

In 1980 the "Black Music Program" was implemented. Incorporating religious, secular, vocal, and instrumental music, this program focused on the importance of music and storytelling to the survival of Afro-American culture. The popularity of the program over the past six years has been phenomenal. Its diversity allows it to be incorporated into various formats, and it remains our most requested outreach program.

Two new Afro-American programs were

created in 1981: "African Traditions," an evening program of vignettes, stories, and music; and "The Other Half Tour," a two-hour walking tour focusing on Williamsburg's black population. The latter program uses first and third person interpretation to discuss West Africa, the middle passage, urban and rural lifestyles, freedom, and many other topics that relate to the eighteenth-century black experience.

In 1982 "Black Life," an evening program for student groups, was initiated. The program focused on family, religion, and leisure-time activities.

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Daily Schedule for an Eighteenth-century Cook

Pat Gibbs acknowledges that this daily schedule for a cook (like her schedules for a young woman in the November 1984 issue of the Interpreter and an urban housewife in the November 1981 issue of Fresh Advices) is biased toward the gentry household. Lacking writings by the cooks themselves and with few references to their owners, she readily admits that most of the details are conjectural. Times are approximate, varied from one household to the next, and changed slightly in the winter to take better advantage of natural light.

How essential was a good cook to the smooth running of a household? The words of two Williamsburg residents suggest they considered a good cook second only to a good wife. Thomas Jones reported "much disorder with our Servants" in his 1728 letter to his wife who was then visiting in England. Venus, in particular, had become "so incorrigible in her bad Habits" that she would not "send in a dish of Meat fit to Set before any body" and Jones had resolved "to send her up to some of the Quarts."

At the death of his wife Elizabeth in mid-August 1787, George Wythe found that
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offered an elective in-service course entitled "Afro-American History" in the winter of 1983. It was taught by Philip Morgan, Reginald Butler, and Lorena Walsh of Colonial Williamsburg's research department.

Colonial Williamsburg also provided funding to the Institute for Early American History and Culture for a fellowship to support the work of Dr. Morgan on slave economy in the Chesapeake.

In 1982, a subcommittee for interpretation of the black experience was appointed. Its report was filed in March 1983 and served as impetus for inclusion of black history in the recently published *Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg*.

In 1984 "On Myne Own Time" was presented at the Williamsburg Lodge auditorium. This program is a ninety-minute presentation using scenes, vignettes, and storytelling to discuss the private time of colonial blacks.

An experimental outreach program also began designed to take colonial black history to local junior and senior high schools. In return, each school visits Colonial Williamsburg as part of its pre-visit agreement with the Foundation. The schools are all concentrated within a geographic area that includes Richmond and Norfolk. This "on site" portion of the program, led by HIs and black interpreters together, is essential in providing a greater understanding of contributions by Afro-Americans and their lives as part of the larger community of Williamsburg.

In 1985 internships for two black graduate students were provided by Judy and Tony Curtis, Raleigh Tavern Society members—one intern assisted in gathering information on the First Baptist Church, and the other worked on a "black dictionary." The dictionary is to be a compilation of names and other information concerning blacks known to have lived in the town. The project will provide a collection of all available information concerning black history and eventually will be given to interpreters.

This year "Behind Closed Doors" was introduced. An evening program developed for school children, it uses first person interpretive techniques to create "a slice of life" within the colonial black community. By using reproduction artifacts in historic buildings, a special look into black family life is created.

"The Storyteller," another new evening program focusing on the art of storytelling, provides a look at the oral legacy of Africans and how it was transformed by Afro-Americans.

Most recently, the AT&T Foundation awarded Colonial Williamsburg a grant of \$400,000 to help expand its black history programs. The money, to be spent over four years, will be used to hire a senior scholar in black history, to do archaeological research at the Brush-Everard site, to help support the educational outreach program, to aid in teaching interpreters, and to purchase artifacts to convey the black presence in Williamsburg.

The visiting scholar will be appointed for two years to study and teach Afro-American history and culture of the colonial Chesapeake. He or she will collaborate with other teachers and scholars from the departments of research, collections, archaeology, architectural research, and interpretive education.

The Brush-Everard complex has been designated as the principal site for interpretation of the black experience at Colonial Williamsburg. A major portion of the AT&T funding will be used to undertake the necessary archaeology to excavate what is believed to be a slave quarter site in the north yard of the property. The work is scheduled to be performed during two seasons (June to August in 1987 and 1988).

A portion of the grant will be used to expand the educational outreach program already described: students in junior and senior high schools will receive pre-visit materials, and black programs staff members will travel to the schools to teach black history to classes participating in the program.

The grant will also enable our black musicians to consult with Afro-American ethnomusicologists, historians, and performers in support of programs offered by the Foundation. Outside artists will be invited to share their talents with our own black programs performers. By keeping abreast of the latest information and techniques of interpretation, the programs offered will maintain a high level of credibility.

The Brush-Everard and Wythe sites, Wetherburn's Tavern, the Ludwell-Paradise stable, and Anderson's Blacksmith shop are areas that have been selected to exhibit articles representative of the material culture of black residents in Williamsburg. The AT&T gift will be used to secure or reproduce artifacts for these sites, and information about them will be given to all interpreters.

In addition to the programs supported by AT&T, a black music record will be made in the near future to provide our visitors with an example of the most current representation of

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Characters' Progress

Alex Clark began work for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in the Raleigh Tavern Bake Shop while pursuing graduate studies in English literature at the College of William and Mary. While Alex has worked as a character interpreter for over three years, he has portrayed the Reverend Mr. Samuel Henley in the program described below for the past year.

What would you think of a person whose occupation it is to pretend to be what he is not? Immediately images of confidence men and corrupt politicians spring to mind. The aim these people share is the deception of their audiences, a trait also basic to the character interpreter (CI).

Fortunately the deception practiced by character interpreters is directly beneficial to the public. The CI presents the visitor with an eighteenth-century person to interact with in appropriate historical settings. To prepare for these occurrences the CI must understand the social history and learn the personal details of an actual historical person so that he can react as that person would in any given situation. This is "living history" as I understand it. How the ideal conforms to reality at Colonial Williamsburg is a little understood subject that deserves examination for its potential in interpreting social history.

The existing program differs from earlier living history at CWF in that now CIs consistently portray a single character who goes about his daily business in the buildings and streets as naturally as possible. The naturalness requires a depth of knowledge commensurate with the CI's role. The CI overlays his in-service training with a character biography and a thorough familiarity with her personal and professional situation acquired from primary and secondary sources and sometimes guided by research assistance. Research is an ongoing process whereby the CI supplements his knowledge of his character and the period. For example, we are now preparing a time line that will provide a consistent series of events for our target year, 1770. The CI fills permanent gaps in the record with parallels from existing sources. He must balance raw knowledge with a believable delivery, and it is this ability that causes the confusion between CIs and actors in people's minds. In contrast to an actor who generally interprets a script on stage, a CI's duty is to teach history to the

visitor, which he does in a subtle way.

The subtlety results in varied reactions from the visitor. Some people never realize what sort of interpretation is taking place. Some don't want to. The CI hopes that after receiving a few eighteenth-century cues, the visitor will discover the character's purpose and will interact with him in his assumed identity. Sometimes the visitor receives assistance—for example, when the character interpretation program is explained by the third person interpreter at the Governor's Palace. (There is a slide program nearing completion, "People Who Present the Past," that will help introduce our visitors to all the different modes of interpretation used in the Historic Area.)

Of all the possible interpretive settings, the CI's one-on-one encounter offers the greatest freedom to improvise according to the visitor's needs, but that is no reason for situations involving other interpreters to be any less effective. The objectives of both interpreters must be kept in mind, however. The historical interpreter (HI) escorting a group through town must cover a certain amount of territory, just as the CI must follow his own daily schedule. The sales interpreter is responsible for selling goods to the visitors, and it is up to the CI to make this a more attractive prospect. Only at the Palace and at the Powell House are both the CI's and HI's objectives subject to the timing of the building. Inevitably slips will occur—anachronisms, for example—whether on the part of the CI or another interpreter. But when they do, both parties can use "selective oversight" and seize on that part of the interpretation that is useful and ignore what is not. Regardless of the situation, the object of a CI's interaction with any other interpreter is to foster mutually reinforcing interpretations.

While it is true that each department is excellent at interpreting its thread of the historical plot, a coherent whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. In view of the Foundation's commitment to teaching social history, CIs are a valuable tool to help tie together people, places, things, and abstract ideas in the visitor's mind. To do so effectively we look forward to more CIs, more interaction training between CIs and other HAPO interpreters, and a broader range of interpretive settings for interactions with CIs. Together all interpreters can work to reweave the social fabric of eighteenth-century Williamsburg.

Summary of HAPO Programs

June 29 through August 23, 1986

- Sundays:** *The Other Half Tour* 1:30 P.M.
Lantern Tours 7:00 and 8:30 P.M.
Keeping the Best Company 8:30 P.M. at the Lodge Auditorium
- Mondays:** *Reveille* 8:45 A.M. at the Magazine
According to the Ladies 8:30 A.M.
Junior Corps Parade at NOON
The Other Half Tour 1:30 P.M.
Military Demonstrations 4:00 P.M. on Market Square
The Black Music Program 5:00 P.M.
Lantern Tours 7:00 and 8:30 P.M.
On Myne Own Time 8:30 P.M. at the Lodge Auditorium
- Tuesdays:** *Military Review* 8:45 A.M. on Market Square
The Other Half Tour 1:30 P.M.
Military Demonstrations 4:00 P.M. on Market Square
Lantern Tours 7:00 and 8:30 P.M.
Musical Diversions 8:30 P.M. at the Capitol
- Wednesdays:** *The Morning Gun* firing at the Magazine at 8:45 A.M.
According to the Ladies 8:30 A.M.
Junior Corps Parade at NOON
The Other Half Tour 1:30 P.M.
Military Demonstrations 4:00 P.M. on Market Square
The Black Music Program 5:00 P.M.
Lantern Tours 7:00 and 8:30 P.M.
An Eighteenth-century Play 8:30 P.M. at the Lodge Auditorium
- Thursdays:** *Militia Muster* 8:45 A.M. on Market Square
The Other Half Tour 1:30 P.M.
Military Demonstrations 4:00 P.M. on Market Square
Lantern Tours 7:00 and 8:30 P.M.
The Assembly 8:00 and 8:30 P.M. at the Capitol
- Fridays:** *Reveille* 8:45 A.M. at the Magazine
According to the Ladies 8:30 A.M.
Junior Corps Parade at NOON
The Other Half Tour 1:30 P.M.
Military Demonstrations 4:00 P.M. on Market Square
Lantern Tours 7:00 and 8:30 P.M.
The Capitol Evening 7:30 and 8:30 P.M.
- Saturdays:** *The Morning Gun* firing 8:45 A.M. at the Magazine
According to the Ladies 8:30 A.M.
Junior Corps Parade NOON
The Other Half Tour 1:30 P.M.
Military Demonstrations 4:00 P.M. on Market Square
Lantern Tours 7:00 and 8:30 P.M.
An Eighteenth-century Play 8:30 P.M. at the Lodge Auditorium

Special Events

- July 4:** *The Independence Day Review* 10:00 A.M. on Market Square
A Celebration Ball at the Palace 7:00 to 9:00 P.M.
Grand Tatum and Fireworks 9:15 P.M. on Palace Green

Daily Schedule, *continued*

"necessary domestic duties occupied so much of his time. . . . He was irritated and vexed by a thousand little occurrences he had never foreseen." During this period he became even more dependent on Lydia Broadnax, the Wythes' cook. In recognition of her faithful service, Wythe freed Lydia on August 20, 1787, two days after his wife's death, and testified she was more than forty-five years old. Although free, Lydia continued as Wythe's cook until his death.

We can assume that most black cooks, the vast majority of whom were female slaves, fell somewhere between incorrigible Venus and faithful Lydia. Generally the cook was the most skillful female slave and the one on whom the household was most dependent. She ranked at the top of the domestic hierarchy in well-to-do eighteenth-century Virginia urban households, which were usually staffed by several other black women who cleaned, gardened, laundered, helped care for the children, and did other chores their mistresses ordered them to do.

Preparing food over a hot fire was a hazardous occupation, and alertness was an essential characteristic of a good cook. The register that lists York County free blacks from the late eighteenth through the first quarter of the nineteenth century describes many women with burn scars on their faces, arms, hands, breasts, and legs. Sarah Williams was described as "a dark mulatto about 17 years of age 5 feet 5 inches high a large scar on the left arm from a burn or scald & one over the right eye." "Comfort (alias Comfort James)," was described as "a very black woman about 34 years of age 5 feet 1½ inches high has lost several teeth, verry grey, she has a large scar on the breast occasioned (as she says) by her being frequently employed over the fire."

Cooks worked long hours beginning before sunrise and extending into early evening, and the work was physically demanding. Lifting heavy iron pots and huge brass kettles was tiring, as were carrying wood into the kitchen (30 large pieces a day by conservative estimate), hauling countless buckets of water (wooden buckets full of water weigh about 20 pounds), and bending over fires year-round (recent cooking experiments recorded temperatures over 170 degrees Fahrenheit on the hearth). Although the drudgery continued through the day, there were slack periods, such as after dinner, when cooks could slow their pace. However, watchful mistresses made certain their slaves, unless they were sick, were never idle.

The cook's work, although often mundane and repetitive, had certain advantages. Cooks tasted foods being prepared and had first call on leftovers returned to the kitchen from the mistress's table. They often slept in a room adjoining or above the kitchen. Because of their close relationship with their mistresses, the cooks frequently received hand-me-down clothing and household effects. They usually accompanied their mistresses to market, which gave them several opportunities each week to leave the property. The mistresses' desire to try out new recipes occasionally gave cooks a break in their routine. An elderly Monticello slave named Isaac, interviewed in the 1840s, recalled this scene from his boyhood: "Mrs. Jefferson would come out there with a cookery book in her hand & read out of it to Isaac's mother how to make cakes, tarts & so on."

A skilled cook knew more than how to prepare a variety of foods using an assortment of equipment that became more varied as the century progressed. A sense of timing was essential. All parts of a meal had to be ready to send to the table when they were called for. She also needed the ability to make-do and master the art of disguise when the gravy burned, the cake fell, or the carefully garnished platter overturned.

When the master of the household or his dinner guests praised the meal, the mistress took credit but we can only hope, if she was truly a "Lady," that she complimented the cook at the earliest opportunity.

As you read through the schedule, assume that part of the time the cook was assisted by
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Addendum

Some of you have asked how we happened to have an article by Kenneth Hudson ("Measuring the Good Museum") in the March 1986 *Interpreter*.

Bill Tramosch heard Kenneth Hudson speak at a seminar sponsored jointly by the International Council of Museums Committee of the American Association of Museums (AAM/ICOM) and the Museums Association of Britain and Oxford University. Bill asked Mr. Hudson for permission to publish his remarks in *The Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter*, and he agreed.

The full seminar is described in the December 1985 *Museum News* (the AAM magazine). You will find other interesting articles in that issue, including one by Dennis O'Toole.

Black Programs, *continued*

eighteenth-century black music. The record will focus on the African diaspora and the transformation of musical styles that took place in colonial black culture.

The interpretation of black history is the job of every person who interprets eighteenth-century Williamsburg. If we are to tell the whole story of the colonial capital, it must be in virtually every facet of our interpretation—first person, third person, and everything in between.

As interpreters, it is our responsibility to educate the visitor. An essential part of that education is the dissemination of information that includes Williamsburg's "other half." If that is not being done in your area, then the visitor is missing an important aspect of colonial life. The efforts that have been implemented over the last eight years will be of little significance if we as interpreters fail to bring this important story into the mainstream of interpretation.

As Charles Longworth recently indicated, "Because blacks are not represented physically in the Historic Area in terms of homes and room furnishings, yet represented half of the city's population and much of its productive labor, we are challenged to bring their presence to life in our interpretations."

Daily Schedule, *continued*

another slave woman and slave children who—although requiring varying attention depending on their ages—could stir a pot, watch a fire, turn the spit, or haul wood:

About 5:30 A.M. over an hour before most members of the household rise, the cook rekindles the fire, draws water, and puts it on to heat for family and general kitchen use. She feeds any chickens kept in the fattening pen and milks the cow if the family lives on the outskirts of town and has one.

About 6:30–7:30 A.M. she kneads dough for the hot bread eaten by the family for breakfast and mixes cornbread for the other house slaves and their children. She preheats the Dutch oven.

During cold weather the family and slaves often breakfast on milk hominy, prepared the previous evening and cooked slowly through the night.

About 7:30 A.M. she bakes the family's bread in the Dutch oven, makes coffee or tea, sets out milk and butter, and slices ham to be taken into the house for the family's breakfast.

About 8:00 A.M. she sends breakfast in to the family who generally have the first meal of the day in the dining room. The slaves eat in the kitchen.

About 8:30 A.M. she cleans up the kitchen, puts away breakfast food, and washes pots and pans and dishes used by the slaves.

About 9:00 A.M. the mistress of the house comes to the kitchen, gives orders for dinner, measures out ingredients, recites recipes if the cook is uncertain how to cook something, and instructs the cook on special orders for the day.

On Wednesdays and Saturdays the mistress of the house and the cook go to the market for fresh produce and meat.

About 9:30 A.M.–2 P.M. the cook begins dinner preparations, attends to or supervises dairying chores, and possibly does some gardening.

During slack periods she may spin or knit, draw more water, and split kindling. Older slave children on the property assist with some of the chores.

Occasional duties include preserving food, making soap and starch (unless purchased), roasting coffee beans, making small beer, and helping with the laundering, sewing, and mending.

About 2 P.M. she has dinner prepared and ready to be taken into the dining room. The slaves eat in the kitchen.

About 2:30–7:30 P.M. she cleans up the kitchen, prepares dough or pastry, spends time working in the garden, spins, cards, knits, splits kindling, and completes activities begun in the morning.

About 7:30 P.M. she prepares supper.

About 8:00 P.M. she sends supper into the dining room for the family.

About 8:30 P.M. she cleans up the kitchen and mixes yeast dough for the next day's breakfast bread for the family. Later she banks the kitchen fire.

Only when her work is completed, does the cook have free time to spend with her family and friends. As a much needed member of the household staff, she rarely gets a regular day off each week. When she does, she often prepares some food ahead of time for others to serve.

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