● THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

interpreter

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Thomas Burney: Frontiersman in the Capital

Tom Strohfeldt is an escort as well as a former apprentice gunsmith. Before coming to CWF, Tom was the Assistant Curator and Gunsmith for the Ohio Historical Society. He is the author of articles on riflemaking and gives us this account of Thomas Burney, a frontier craftsman.

The far-reaching effects of the influence and authority of the royal governor at Williamsburg are underscored by the narrative of "one Thomas Burney," blacksmith, gunsmith, and Indian trader on the Ohio frontier at the time of the French and Indian War.

The account is relevant for us as interpreters because it offers an opportunity to illuminate Williamsburg as the center of a wider world. The immediacy of contact between this town and areas six or seven hundred miles to the west provides a refreshing addition to interpretation of the microcosm of Williamsburg. This larger context is a facet of Williamsburg's significance to which many of our visitors can relate since, indeed, many of them would be "back-country Virginians" by the boundaries of the eighteenth-century colony.

Contrasting the rough and ready circumstances under which artisans labored on the frontier with the sophisticated practices of a James Geddy or James Anderson enriches and vitalizes our understanding of the scope of work by eighteenth-century craftsmen. Those of us who study the trade of gunsmithing in depth have uncovered little material to tell us how far west the English workmen operated by the mid-eighteenth century, or how much of the gun's manufacture they undertook. Burney's career is surprising in both respects.

Thomas Burney first appeared in the literature of the Ohio frontier when Christopher Gist encountered him at Muskingum during his explorations on behalf of the Ohio Company of Virginia in 1750, identifying him as "one Thomas Burney, a blacksmith who is settled there." Muskingum was a town of 100 Wyandot Indian families, which stood upon the site of modern Millersburg, Ohio.

While it may seem unlikely to find the trades of blacksmithing and gunsmithing practiced in such a remote situation and at such an early date, it was apparently customary at frontier "factories" or trading posts. On his initial trek through the Ohio Country in 1750, Gist was solicited by the Twightwees (Miami), to provide such an artisan. The Twightwees spoke at Pickawilinay:

> Brother our hearts are glad that you have taken notice of us, and surely, brother, we hope that you will order a smith to settle here to mend our guns and hatchets.

More substantial documentation to affirm this point is provided by the account of a witness to the negotiations of the Logstown Treaty. George Croghan recorded:

> After which the chiefs . . . told me it was a custom with their brothers, whenever they went to a council, to have their guns, kettles, and hatchets mended, and desired I might order that done, for they could not go home till they had that done.

By 1752 Burney was located at Pickawilinay, the extreme western British outpost, where it is likely that the scope of his work included the repair of damaged guns and possibly the manufacture of arms, since Dinwiddie later proposed his "acting as armorer." Burney was also involved in the trade of goods including "stroud, duffils, powder, lead, linen, paint and gartering."

In June 1752, Pickawilinay was attacked by a party of "French and French Indians" sent from Detroit by the governor of Canada. The remnants of the defeated Twightwee band, who had occupied the fort, sent letters of appeal to the governor of Virginia. Dinwiddie described the encounter in a letter to the

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Thomas Burney, *continued*

Board of Trade in London:

> The Twightwees have sent one Thomas Burney, express who brought me a belt of wampum, a scalp of one of the Indians that are at war with them and in the interest of the French, with a calmute [*sic*] pipe (being an emblem of peace with those they send it to), and two letters, copies therof I here enclose to your lordships; they are of an odd style, but are copied literally as I received them. I dispatched Burney back to them with a belt of wampum.

When the fort fell, Burney and a fellow trader, Andrew McBryer, were hidden by the Twightwees while the other white inhabitants surrendered along with goods in an attempt to placate the "French Indians." Burney and McBryer made their escape to the lower Shawnee town (site of modern Portsmouth, Ohio) where they encountered William Trent, who had been sent by Dinwiddie with goods promised the Twightwees at the Logstown conference. Trent persuaded Burney to accompany him and his party of Indians back to Pickawilinay, where they found two French flags flying at the abandoned fort. They returned to the lower Shawnee town and held a council on August 4, where the Indians reaffirmed their alliance to the British cause. By August 30 Burney was in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, at the house of Robert Callander, an Indian trader, who drafted a letter to the governor of Pennsylvania describing the catastrophe of Pickawilinay. To his description of the battle, he added, "Mr. Burney is now here, and is willing to be qualified not only to this, but to sundry other matters which he can discover concerning this affair."

By December of that year, Dinwiddie relayed news of the raid to the Board of Trade affixing a letter from the Twightwees which stated that "this comes by our brother Thomas Burney, who was with us in the last unhappy battle we had with our enemies."

In June of the following year, 1753, Burney again sought the aid of Governor Dinwiddie on behalf of the Indians at Logstown, who were alarmed at the proximity of the French and Indians. The document stated, "This letter was copied by Edwin Shippen while Thomas Burney, its bearer, passed through Lancaster County on his way to Williamsburg."

When the Virginia council met the following month, it was "ordered that the Receiver General pay Thomas Burney fifty pounds for his trouble in going to and returning from the Twightwees."

In November 1754 Burney carried the following message to Governor Sharpe in Maryland:

> Sir: The bearer hereof, Thos. Burney, lived some years among the Twightwees as a blacksmith, he may be of some service and [I] believe he would go to the Twightwees with an escort of some Ind's. He wanted a Co'n [commission] but I did not think it proper to give him one, but offered him 2s6d day, if he w'd, on occasion, work at his trade and be ready to go messages. I sent him to you to examine him, and if you find he can be of service, you may increase his pay to 3s day or more if you see proper. I cannot say much to his character, as he once disappointed me in a message to the Twightwees, he s'd it was by sickness but now promises all in his power for the Success of the Expedition.

Burney apparently found employment as a military scout. Washington mentioned in his correspondence from Great Meadows, May 29, 1754, that Burney brought him a letter from Dinwiddie. Burney's saga comes to an end with the disastrous campaign of Edward Braddock, in which Burney was killed, according to a petition for a pension by his widow, Mary Burney, before the House of Burgesses April 12, 1756.

A 1979 archaeological investigation revealed the waste products of an armorer's shop near the traditional site of Pickawilinay. It is the opinion of Stanley W. Baker, who was then an archaeologist for the Ohio Historical Society, that they may be remains from Burney's shop. His hypothesis is based on several stylistically related tomahawk heads recovered from the area, some of which bear

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The Bowen Map

This map, drawn by Emanuel Bowen, shows "Pikkavalinna" at the western extreme of the territory claimed by the British. A later map by Bowen hung in the parlor of the Governor's Palace, according to Botetourt's inventory.

Thomas Burney, *continued*

the touch-mark "B." The majority of the artifacts are locks, barrels, and mountings of French trade fusils, natural enough since the Miami were allied to the French from about 1680 until the early 1740s. The most revealing object is a section of broken boring bit of small diameter, which suggests that in 1752, at a fort at "the extent of the English Settlements," Thomas Burney undertook the making of gun barrels, which is considered the most difficult technological operation in the entire manufacture of a gun.

The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790

by Rhys Isaac

A book review by Barney Barnes

Rhys Isaac's *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* is an enormously intelligent, provocative examination of the forces and events that reshaped Virginia society and culture in the mid-to late eighteenth century. It is not an easy book to categorize or to evaluate because Isaac's reliance on an analytical methodology drawn in part from cultural anthropology and from theater makes it decidedly non-traditional from a historian's perspective. His line of reasoning, although highly personal in some ways, is consistently and cogently pursued throughout the course of the book's 350 pages. The reaction of historians to Isaac's study will be highly diverse, with the degree of acceptance it wins depending on the individual's willingness to abandon (temporarily) traditional criteria of historical scholarship for the insights that can be gained from an unusual, highly imaginative approach to the evidence. I personally consider it to be a very substantial achievement.

The Transformation of Virginia contains a great deal of substance for each of us, and, although the task of extracting the best of its insights will by no means be an easy one, our efforts will be well rewarded. Isaac offers an interpretive scheme that, both in orientation and in substance, will, if carefully employed, expand our consciousness and heighten our sensitivity as interpreters of eighteenth-century Virginia.

Take, for example, his warning against taking too much for granted when analyzing a culture separated from our own in time or space. Too often we tend to assume subconsciously that human motivation is a constant, that rational analysis of a given set of circumstances will produce predictable reactions. Isaac opens our eyes to the fact that different cultures may have different sets of assumptions about reality, different value systems, and that the response to a set of circumstances may vary considerably from culture to culture and yet in each case be internally consistent. The likelihood of our falling into the error of "taking-for-granted" increases in direct proportion to the degree to which the culture being examined resembles our own. Hence we have a tendency to overlook that which separates us from our eighteenth-century Virginia forbears in an effort to find that which unites us. Clearly, much of what we are derives from what they were, but the descent (or ascent) is not always as direct or linear as it may appear. The important thing to do, then, is to attempt to determine what was real for eighteenth-century Virginians by immersing ourselves in their value system to the extent we are able. Do not allow superficial resemblance to blunt your sensitivity to what things really meant for them.

Another valuable lesson to be learned from Isaac's method of investigation lies in his refusal to accept as definitive what is apparently true or real about an event or a situation. He prefers to probe beneath the surface for additional, perhaps more significant, insight. Thus roadways do not simply follow objectively determined paths; rather, in Isaac's view, they often define the lines of power and authority in localities. The important point is that stopping at the superficial "reality" of an event without examining it for underlying meaning will often cause us to lose what is potentially most informative in it about eighteenth-century society.

Much of the substance of Isaac's analysis deals directly with one of our present interpretive concerns—community in eighteenth-century Virginia. He neither focuses on the community of Williamsburg specifically nor on community in the residential sense of the word. Instead he examines the concept of community as it is transformed over time and in relation to specific events. This process was neither unique to Virginia nor limited to a portion of the eighteenth-century. In fact, he is describing a limited, local manifestation of a

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Transformation, *continued*
process underway for centuries—one that began before America was even a gleam in the eye of Europeans—and that continues today. Community as a homogeneous, corporate entity with a thoroughly integrated, universally held value system and based on hierarchical relationships has progressively given way to community as a heterogeneous collection of autonomous individuals engaging in self-conscious, short-term associations of mutual benefit and lacking in any all-encompassing structure. This process has been characterized in many ways; for example, as a move from the medieval to the modern or from the religious to the secular. The transformation has had both positive and negative consequences. We must balance the liberation of the individual from arbitrary restraint, on the one hand, against the profoundly disturbing sense of isolation that comes with the absence of unifying social structures, on the other. The search for new definitions or bases of community, both in the eighteenth century and today, is eloquent testimony of society's need for some form of organizing, stabilizing principle. As I read Isaac's book, I was repeatedly struck by the similarity *of the quest* then and now, and I submit that it is this element of his study that will ultimately prove the most useful to you in your effort to link your interpretations with the interests and concerns of our visitors.

Occurrences

The new production of the eighteenth-century ballad opera, *Flora or Hob in the Well*, opened on March 19. If you didn't see it on opening night, be sure to take it in. Performances will be held on March 26, April 16, April 30, May 14, May 28, and at other times throughout the year.

An Evening of Military Life will return on Wednesday evenings, and will be presented throughout the spring. The first performance will be on March 30. Also, the sounds of fifes, drums, cannons, and muskets have returned with the opening of the 1983 militia season. Other returning programs include *Thomas and Sally* on May 6 and May 20; the Assembly at the Capitol on May 13 and May 27; Capitol concerts on Sunday evenings; and Palace concerts on Thursday evenings.

Easter weekend will begin with a Retreat program on April 1 at 5:15 P.M. followed by the Capitol Evening at 7:00, 8:00, and 9:00 P.M. On Saturday, April 2, the Easter Review will be held at 8:30 A.M.; a Junior Corps parade at noon; a Magic Show at 5:00 P.M. in the Lodge Auditorium; and the eighteenth-century play, *The Sham Doctor*, at 8:30 P.M.

The Rockefeller Concert will be held on April 17 and April 18 at 8:00 P.M. at Bruton Parish Church, and as always will be a very special evening of choral music with orchestral accompaniment.

Check the "Visitor's Companion" for details, dates, and times to be sure that our visitors, as well as employees, are aware of the many exciting spring programs.

The King's English

Calumet—a tobacco pipe with a bowl of clay and a long reed stem carved and ornamented with feathers. Used among the American Indians as a symbol of peace.

Duffel, duffle—a coarse woolen cloth having a thick nap.

Factor—one who buys or sells for another.

Factory—an establishment for traders carrying on business in a foreign country. Also a building or buildings with machinery and apparatus for the manufacture of goods.

Fusil—a light musket.

Gartering—the material from which garters are made.

Stroud—a blanket manufactured for barter or sale in trading with the North American Indians; the material from which these blankets were made.

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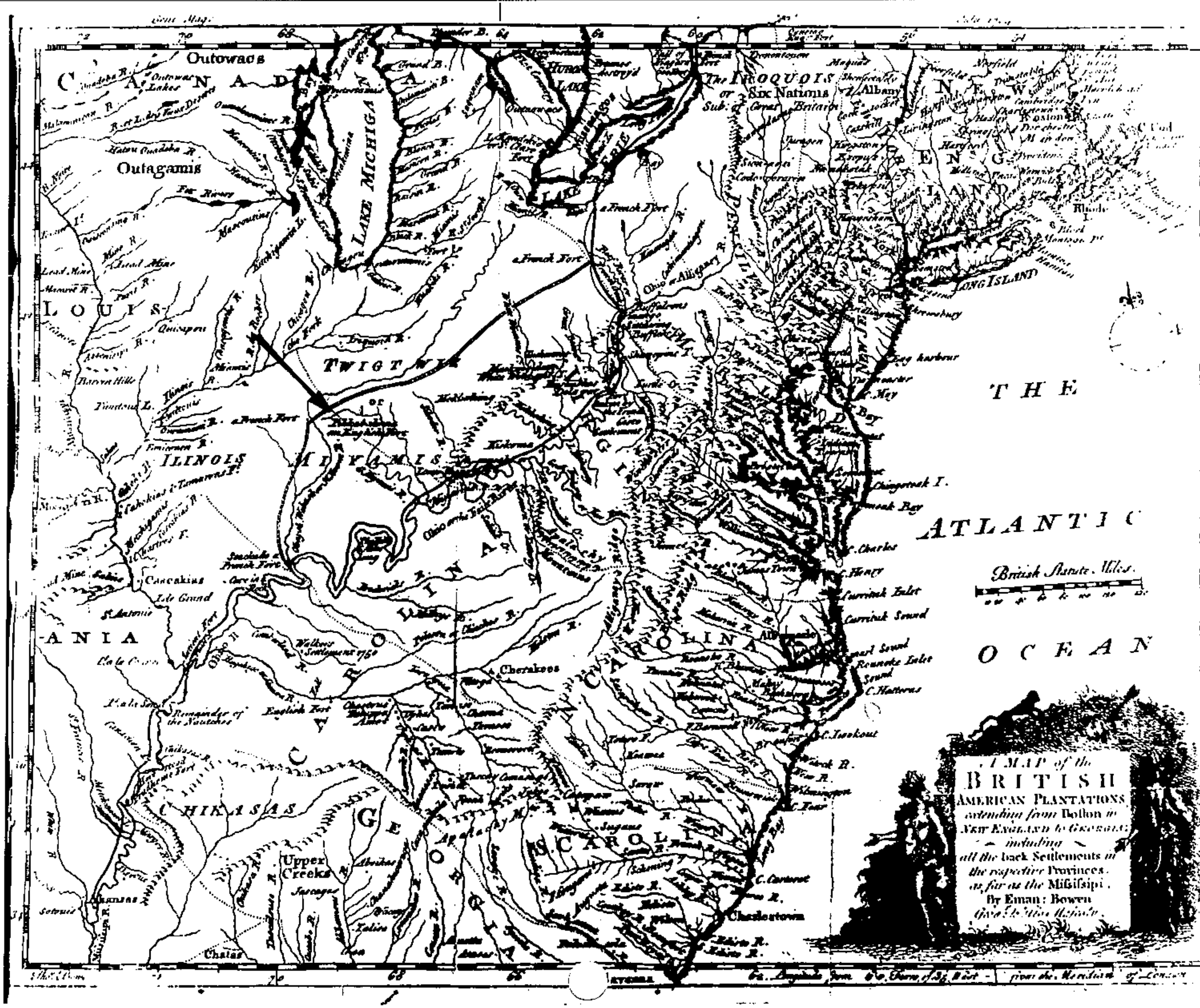
A MAP of the BRITISH AMERICAN PLANTATIONS extending from Boston in New England to Georgia; including all the back Settlements in the respective Provinces, as far as the Mississipi. By Eman: Bowen
British Statute Miles
THE ATLANTIC OCEAN
CANADA
Outowacs
Outagamis
LAKE MICHIGAN
THE IROQUOIS or Six Nations
NEW ENGLAND
LONG ISLAND
TWIGTWIS
ILINOIS
LOUISIANA
Cascakias
Cherakees
CAROLINA
S. CAROLINA
GEORGIA
CHIKASAS
Upper Creeks
Chatas
C. Hatteras
Charlestown
Longitude from the Meridian of London