

# interpreter

VOL. 8 NO. 1

JANUARY 1987

## Carter's Grove Furnishings and the Colonial Revival

*Diane Dunkley, curator for Carter's Grove, explains why the mansion is furnished as it is.*

The furnishings of Carter's Grove are an eclectic group of objects that represent what scholars call the "Colonial Revival" taste of the 1930s. The Colonial Revival movement, which began in the 1870s, was a repudiation of Victorian tastes and the excesses of the post-Civil War industrial era as well as a response to the Centennial celebrations of 1876. The Colonial Revival included an increased appreciation of early architecture, antique objects, America's history and heroes, and an interest in one's own origins. The first burst of enthusiasm for "Colonial" had ended by 1910, but by 1930 there was a renewed interest in the "Colonial," spurred perhaps by the trauma of the first World War and new waves of immigrants. The Depression accelerated the movement. The bicentennial of the birth of George Washington created as much interest and excitement as the recent centennial of the Statue of Liberty. The American public, rejecting modern styles such as Art Deco, turned to the "Colonial" for comfort, inspiration, and reassurance. Thus a new style of interior decoration evolved that its proponents called "Colonial." Everyone, it seems, wanted a "Colonial" home.

To be "Colonial," a home needed objects that were of or represented pre-industrial America, when life was supposedly simple and virtuous. It is surprising to us today to realize that "Colonial" included objects made as late as 1840, as well as reproductions of items produced during the colonial period.

In order to understand the furnishings of Carter's Grove, it is necessary to realize that Mr. and Mrs. Archibald McCrea were not collectors in the true sense. They did not seek out fine objects to satisfy an aesthetic urge. Rather, they purchased objects in the "Colo-

nial" taste that would comfortably and attractively furnish their home. These included some real antiques, many nineteenth-century pieces, and as many twentieth-century objects. Some were chosen because they added to the proper "Colonial" atmosphere, some for comfort. Together they formed a pleasing group of objects that set the stage of what was to become a well-known center for "Colonial" hospitality.

Home decorating guides from the early twentieth century exist that give instructions on how to furnish a "Colonial" home. Objects of different styles could be mixed, just as they are at Carter's Grove, so that a neoclassic-style  
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## Carter's Grove and the New South

*Mark R. Wenger, architectural historian, wrote part of a report for the Carter's Grove project. Barbara Beaman summarizes his chapter on Edwin G. Booth, a late nineteenth-century owner of Carter's Grove.*

What is, or was, the "New South," and how is Carter's Grove related to it?

C. Vann Woodward describes the New South as a post-Civil War impulse aimed at reconciliation with the North as well as economic rehabilitation through new industrial enterprises financed with northern capital. In his *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, Woodward identifies some of the accompanying changes: the break-up of the plantation system, the rise of a middle class, and new attitudes towards metropolitan and industrial cities as well as money-making goals—a veritable "revolution in values, manners, and institutions."

But at the same time and without any sense of contradiction, "there developed a cult of archaism, a nostalgic vision of the past," says Woodward. Some writers thought that after its  
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### Carter's Grove Furnishings, *continued*

table might be set with baroque-style chairs in a dining room with an Empire sideboard. There was no attempt to choose one date or period and try to recapture it. Rather, quaintness and charm were the object. One wanted to "reconstruct the atmosphere" of the past, not reproduce it.

Reproductions were not to be sneered at. As Elsie de Wolfe stated in the 1920 edition of her classic decorating guide, *The House in Good Taste*:

I am not one of those decorators who insist on originals. I believe good reproductions are more valuable than feeble originals. . . . If your object is to furnish your home suitably, what need have you of antiques?

Mrs. McCrea, it appears, felt the same way, since many objects in Carter's Grove, including family portraits, are reproductions.

Reproduction or not, there were some items that were absolutely necessary for the well-appointed "Colonial" home. One was a spinning wheel, symbolic of the virtue and industry of the past. Mrs. McCrea's spinning wheel is in her kitchen, along with flat irons, candle molds, and other objects chosen for their symbolic importance rather than their usefulness.

Another object considered necessary was a grandfather clock, preferably placed on a stair landing, as is the one at Carter's Grove. The term "grandfather clock" dates from 1876, when the popular song "Grandfather's Clock" was written. Our colonial ancestors called these items "tall case clocks" and would have been mystified by the appellation of "grandfather." Newly minted or misapplied traditional terminology for old items is another characteristic of the Colonial Revival.

Objects whose original use was no longer needed or which were no longer functional were adapted to other purposes. In the Drawing Room at Carter's Grove, the desk was made from an early piano. In the New Sitting Room, Mrs. McCrea used eighteenth-century-style basin stands as ivy planters, as was suggested by Nancy McClelland in her 1936 book, *Furnishing the Colonial and Federal House*. Old oil lamps and chandeliers were electrified, for electricity was "far more efficient and practical than to run the risks of fires and undertake the work involved by attempting to have real candle-light in every room in the house."

It was recognized that for a house to be truly comfortable, certain concessions must be made and one had to "sacrifice a little of what is called 'purity of style.'" Just as Mrs. McCrea's architect Duncan Lee recognized the need for modern plumbing and heating, so did her decorator Oscar Mertz understand the need for comfortable upholstered chairs and sofas.

The Colonial Revival interest in history is represented at Carter's Grove by the many historical prints that Mrs. McCrea placed on the walls. Even with most of her original prints removed for conservation, there are still at least seven representations of George Washington in the house—three in one room! Mrs. McCrea had a deep interest in Virginia history especially, as evidenced by these prints and her large collection of books on that subject.

The McCreas also shared the Colonial Revival interest in family genealogy. They had copies made of at least eight family portraits they did not own and displayed them proudly in the public rooms of their home. In the Smoking Room, which was their main living room, they had copies of family crests and mottoes.

In the years that Colonial Williamsburg has exhibited Carter's Grove, some important Colonial Revival elements have gradually disappeared. As they wore out, the brightly flowered chintzes (used for ruffled draperies and slipcovers) were replaced with silks and other fabrics, which at that time seemed more appropriate for an eighteenth-century house. In months to come, these will be replaced in turn with fabrics that represent the Colonial Revival taste of the early twentieth century. After they are conserved, many prints of historic events or famous men from Virginia or U. S. history will be returned to the walls.

The Colonial Revival furnishings of Carter's Grove will be supplemented with personal items and ephemera of the 1930s and 1940s to give an impression of the personal presence of the McCrea family. Although the objects at Carter's Grove represent just one family, they can have meaning for all who see them. The Colonial Revival movement began with a rejection of modern styles and went on to shape the way America saw its past. Its influence is ongoing and inescapable. What visitors learn at Carter's Grove about the Colonial Revival can help them understand their own perceptions of the past.

### New South, *continued*

defeat in the Civil War, the South yearned to lay claim to an idealized image of her heritage. Genealogy came into vogue with its admiration for "fabled southern aristocracy." Curiously, even though this looking back would seem to be in opposition to the desired industrial programs, New South leaders were able to use this veneration of the past to generate interest among northern industrialists and investors. As Woodward puts it, "One of the most significant inventions of the New South was the 'Old South.'"

A very strong advocate of an industrialized and progressive Virginia, Edwin G. Booth purchased Carter's Grove in 1879 largely because of its links to the heroic Revolutionary era. Booth was a transplanted Virginian who lived, married, and apparently prospered in Philadelphia after the Civil War. He remained proud of his Virginia heritage, and his activities epitomized New South thinking. He was heavily involved in seeking northern investors' support for new industry in Virginia, advocated the extension and improvement of the state's railroad system, and did much to promote agricultural as well as educational reform.

When Virginia was in danger of not being represented at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876—a splendid opportunity for promoting statewide industry and growth—Booth offered to pay for the construction of a Virginia pavilion. He chose a site surrounded by shade trees that would be a welcome respite from the summer heat as would the piazzas that wrapped around the building, "Old Virginia," on two floors. Apparently Booth not only financed and supervised construction of the pavilion, but he personally greeted thousands of visitors and dignitaries during the exposition. One of its featured events that must have impressed him was a commemoration of the 95th anniversary of Washington's victory at Yorktown. Within three years he purchased Carter's Grove with the intention of making it a "commemorative shrine," that, like the "Old Virginia" building, would serve to entertain guests and dignitaries during the observance of historical anniversaries—possibly the centennial observation of the victory at Yorktown, for example. Booth undoubtedly saw the potential of these celebrations as a means by which to propagate the gospel of the New South. In February 1879 historian Robert A. Brock wrote the following mem-

orandum in his notebook:

Feb. 1879. E. G. Booth has purchased the famous estate "The Grove" situated upon Burwell's Bay 6 miles from Williamsburg, which originally belonged to Robt. Carter, Presdt. of the Council and acting Gov. of Va. known as "King Carter," he renovated and restored it and proposes that it shall be a place for holding celebrations of state historic anniversaries &c.

Tulip poplars had already begun to shade the front yard of the mansion, and Booth had Victorian Gothic verandas added to the front and back elevations—all reminiscent of the Virginia pavilion at Philadelphia. He may have been a little overzealous when he painted the hall woodwork and indoor shutters at Carter's Grove red, white, and blue, but there can be no doubt that he was mindful of Virginia's illustrious past and wanted to pay tribute in visible ways while pointing the way to a radically different future.

It's not difficult to trace the remembrance of a venerated past from Booth's era through the proliferation of organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution, United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, and the like, and to see all of this Colonial Revival fervor as a precursor to the restoration movement of the early twentieth century.

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## The Exchange

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*Bill Tramosch is back, and we've asked him to share the fresh perspective that comes from being away for awhile, visiting other interpreted sites, and seeing Colonial Williamsburg anew.*

I have been asked if I would relate some of my impressions of Colonial Williamsburg's interpretation after returning from a Fulbright scholarship in New Zealand. The trip, as well as my return home, have reaffirmed my belief in the importance of museum interpretation. To express why, I will start with a scene in New Zealand and end with several other images back here in our own colony.

During our final days we went to a local fair. It took place on a hillside overlooking Auckland harbor. It was green, wet, and crowded

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### Tramposch, *continued*

with New Zealanders ("Kiwis"). Slaughtered pigs awaiting raffle lay face-down and smothered with greens in wheelbarrows. Hawkers were selling wares. Mud-coated kids slid down hillsides and for twenty-five cents could enter the nearby "Pirates' Tent." It was a classic English fair, relatively unchanged over the centuries.

High above all of this was a tent in which some local schoolchildren screeched out Vivaldi and Telemann on violins. Whenever it poured, all of the attendees would retreat to this tent—and it did pour. Standing there, music to our backs, looking down upon the harbor, it struck me that all of early European culture (the language, the fashion, the sonatas, and the silliness below) was brought to this remote batch of islands by boat, not even 150 years ago. To me this fact was astonishing. After all, it was a distance so vast that it still takes 24 hours to *fly* from the United Kingdom. So, as highfalutin as the concept seemed to me before in New Zealand, this notion of the transmission of culture seemed more significant than ever and very similar to what began to transpire in Virginia over a century earlier.

Now, if interpretation is about anything, it is about this transmission of culture—the continual cultivation of understanding. So it was with particular delight that I again walked down Duke of Gloucester Street to become reacquainted with some of the best museum interpreters any institution could hope for. And, although I haven't been to every site yet, here are just a few of many images that have impressed this wanderer greatly during the past few weeks:

- In the Wythe Laundry Tanya Wilson controls a potentially riotous school group, and, in fact, pulls them into such an animated discussion about slave life that even the least attentive members of the group gather close by her.

- Although Duke of Gloucester Street looks the same, there is no mistaking that new Anderson Blacksmith Shop! Yet, inside it appears as if it's always been there. This building is such a powerful statement, not only about eighteenth-century Williamsburg, but also about twentieth-century Williamsburg as a teacher of social history.

- David Harvey, blacksmith, still researches his bloomery and demonstrates just what an impact one interpreter can make with the generation of new information or the un-

covering of old.

- Character interpreters behind Wetherburn's involve visitors in lively discussions, while interpreters in the tavern seem to work very closely together with them in order to heighten the visitor's understanding of at least what we know.

- Similarly, the Carter's Grove tour now gives us a closer view of the servant class and the dynamics of change over time; while Bob Gerling and his staff at the Geddy have introduced programs that are very different from what appeared when I left; Rosemary Brandau, Kathryn Arnold, and their colleagues have wrought great changes in the homes and kitchens. Interpretations there are clearly more active, authentic, and artifactually evocative.

- Costumes are more authentic—especially with the appearance of so many appropriate eyeglasses and handmade accessories. Fully as important is the obviously increased ethic of "covering up" incongruities: I've noticed many people smuggling in those Coke cans and Spiderman thermoses when, just a year ago, such care would not have been taken by as many.

- The carriage ride at Market Square is an interpretive gem. Designed by Anne Schone and Richard Nicoll, it offers visitors a very clear picture of transportation in the colonial period. It reminds us all of the world outside of Williamsburg.

In short, social history interpretation here is appearing with all of the vitality and force of a winter crocus (please do not explore this metaphor too closely). Greater authenticity coupled with an increased sensitivity to visitors' interests seem more apparent to me in so many subtle ways. It's really a pleasure to watch the art of interpretation practiced by Williamsburg interpreters. And it is no wonder that our reputation arrived in New Zealand long, long before my visit there.

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*The Interpreter* is a bimonthly publication of the Department of Interpretive Education.

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ISSN 0883-2749

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