

# interpreter

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## Why Historians Disagree

When historians get together, they agree on one thing: historians are a cantankerous lot. It wasn't always this way. There was a day—as recently as the early twentieth century—when history was a field for gentlemen only. Institutions like the Virginia Historical Society, the Boston Athenaeum, and the American Antiquarian Society were places where a select group of gentlemen gathered in comfort to discuss the genteel lives of their august forebears.

Now historians from around the country meet at annual conventions in large, impersonal hotels in Chicago, New York, Washington, and Atlanta to present papers and quarrel about evidence, methodologies, and interpretations. It's usually done with a lot of good humor, but it's deadly serious business in which reputations and egos fluctuate like the stockmarket. Historians accept these disagreements as part of the trade. Some actually relish a healthy jostle. That's why they refer to themselves as a cantankerous bunch.

It would be easy to dismiss these disputes by claiming that some historians are fastidious in their research and others are careless (which is sometimes true), but that's not always the case. Some of the most fascinating disagreements take place between top-notch, well-disciplined historians. A look at a few of these imbroglios might explain why you sometimes get contradictory messages in the books you read and the classes you attend.

Let's begin with a couple of examples dealing with the *evidence* and its use.

About ten years ago Wesley Frank Craven, professor at Princeton University, came out with a book entitled *White, Red and Black: The Seventeenth-Century Virginian*. In his first chapter Craven attempted to unravel one of the thorniest problems in early Virginia history: how many people emigrated to the colony during the first century of settlement? Because no one took an official tally at the time, Craven had to come up with an ingenious solution. Recalling that every person who

came to Virginia during the seventeenth century acquired for himself, if he paid his own way, or for the person who did his passage, a right called a headright—fifty acres of land per immigrant—Craven began the tedious chore of tabulating headrights claimed in land patents for each year from 1635 to 1700. After a few cautious words about the accuracy of the evidence, Craven announced that of a total of 82,000 headrights claimed during the 65-year period, approximately 47,000 fell in the quarter-century after 1650. In other words, some 82,000 persons emigrated to Virginia during this period, and better than half of them came to the colony during the years 1650–1675.

The only problem with Craven's solution was that Edmund Morgan, professor of history at Yale University, didn't buy it. In a lengthy review article entitled "Headrights and Head Counts" in the July 1972 issue of the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Morgan took apart his colleague's argument. Most tellingly, Morgan demonstrated that some shrewd Virginians, anticipating that land values would someday increase, developed the habit of accumulating, but not necessarily cashing in, headrights. In other words, headrights—some of which were fabricated—tell us more about land speculation than about immigration. Indeed, Morgan indicated that the years 1650–1675 were a time of feverish landgrabbing by Virginians. Thus the large number of headrights claimed in land patents has more to do with speculators cashing in their accumulated headrights than immigrants coming to Virginia. Morgan forwarded a copy of his article to Craven, who replied that his colleague's hypothesis was "persuasively argued, but I am not persuaded."

Sometimes the problem is not so much the historian's reading of the evidence as the fact that the evidence is contradictory. In an article entitled "A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery" appearing in the August 1980 issue of the *Journal of Southern* (continued, page 2)

## Historians, *continued*

*History*, Professor David Thomas Bailey has underlined such a problem. Noting long-standing disputes on slave treatment and conditions, Bailey has observed that the evidence itself yields conflicting information. In his article Bailey deals with two so-called "black" sources: (1) book-length autobiographies and (2) oral interviews collected between 1936 and 1938 by the Federal Writers Project. In comparing these sources Bailey turns up some interesting differences. For example, 75 percent of the interviewees were born between 1840 and 1859, while 50 percent of the autobiographers were born between 1800 and 1819. Again, 50 percent of the autobiographers were between 20 and 50 years old when they wrote their memoirs, while at least 92 percent of the interviewees were at least 75 years old when they gave their recollections. Finally, 59 percent of the autobiographers lived for a time in the Upper South, while only 14.5 percent of the interviewees recalled living in these states. In other words, autobiographers remembered at an earlier point in their lives an earlier phase in the development of slavery in a different section of the South than the interviewees.

Not surprisingly their impressions differed. Generally, autobiographers considered the system far harsher than the interviewees who, as a rule, were interviewed by whites. Historians who use these sources without being aware of the contradictions in the evidence and the reasons for those contradictions, Bailey implies, proceed at their own risk.

Not all sources of dispute lie in the evidence. Just as frequently historians enter into caustic debates over *interpretation*. According to one contemporary historian, there are at least eight models of interpretation currently in use. Some of them are familiar—Whig, Conservative, Marxist. Others sound positively theological in orientation—Turnerian, Millerian, and Tocquevillian. Depending on which model a historian employs, his or her interpretation of a specific event will differ.

For example, one of the most prolonged and heated interpretive controversies deals with the causes of the American Revolution. From the 1950s to the late '60s the most popular interpretation was the neo-Whig viewpoint. Bernard Bailyn's book, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, published in 1967, is a model of this school. In brief, Bailyn

claims that concern with endangered liberties propelled the colonists into revolution. Americans went to war because they believed English policy was jeopardizing their rights as Englishmen. Whether those beliefs were valid or irrational is another matter.

During the past ten years, the neo-Whig school has been under increasing attack by a group of historians who claim that economic interest underlay the decision to go to war. In the July 1980 issue of the *William and Mary Quarterly*, Marc Egnal of York University offers a refined version of the economic interpretation. Egnal claims that during the period 1740–1775 two rather distinct but informal parties emerged in Virginia. One group, living on the frontier and along the Potomac, consisted of aggressive expansionists who entertained dreams of a prosperous and sovereign America. The other group—the non-expansionists—lived away from the frontier and the Potomac. They were generally cautious, reluctant to take up arms against the French and Indians, and disinclined to undertake radical measures to revive Virginia's economy during the Seven Years' War. Both factions were headed by upper-class gentlemen, but in the end the economically ambitious expansionists carried the day.

Who is right? When it comes to interpretive arguments the answer doesn't come simply. Whoever is able to marshal the evidence most effectively will be most persuasive . . . until another historian from another school again re-orders the evidence, discovers new sources, or develops another methodology.

For interpreters, these disagreements present a problem and an opportunity. The problem consists of the fact that visitors asking simple, straightforward questions expect answers in kind. The opportunity lies in the fact that in responding to the simplest of inquiries interpreters are able to demonstrate the processes and techniques of still another craft that is practiced in Colonial Williamsburg—the historian's craft. Of course, a willingness to inform visitors about the "art and mystery" of the historian's craft while answering an unambiguous, factual question will challenge the most experienced of teachers. But, then again, has anyone recently asked you to explain why the sky is blue? Good teaching, in short, challenges and stretches both the student and the teacher.

**Was there a church for blacks in eighteenth-century Williamsburg?**

Before the late eighteenth century, numerous references indicate that some slaves attended services in Anglican churches. By the 1780s and '90s blacks who became church members joined white congregations (mostly Baptist and Methodist) under white leadership. They sat together and had no voice in congregational affairs. About 1776 two itinerant black preachers, Gowan Pamphlet and Moses, were holding informal meetings where they preached in defiance of Baptist leadership which had forbidden blacks to preach. Beginning at Green Spring, according to tradition, and moving on to Williamsburg, Pamphlet continued to preach. He eventually—probably after 1780—formed an organized church with about 330 baptized followers. Pamphlet's Negro Baptist Church was one of the first all-black congregations in the country. Since so few free blacks lived in and around Williamsburg, we must assume that the bulk of the members were slaves and that they were allowed to attend services. The Negro Baptist Church went out of existence in the nineteenth century to be revived later as the First Baptist Church.

**Where were blacks buried in eighteenth-century Williamsburg?**

We do not have enough information as yet to be able to say where slaves (in town or on plantations) or free blacks were buried.

**Was there a school for black children in eighteenth-century Williamsburg?**

Sons of free blacks could be bound as apprentices in the same way as white children. Those who worked for the religious conversion of blacks sought to give them enough education to comprehend simple religious training. Commissary Dawson wrote in 1750 that three Negro schools existed in his parish. Nothing whatever is known about them—they may have been no more than occasional catechism classes. The English philanthropic group known as Dr. Bray's Associates operated a school for blacks in Williamsburg from 1760 to 1774. There were about 30 pupils at any given time, mostly slaves of Williamsburg residents (planters expressed hostility toward educating their slaves). A few of the students were free blacks. Mrs. Anne Wager

The holiday season will soon be upon us. Colonial Williamsburg, as is its custom, is preparing to make it a festive one. Here are some dates and events to remember:

**Thursday, November 27—Thanksgiving.** Feasting in the taverns and other restaurants is scheduled this holiday. All exhibition buildings and most craft shops will be open Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of this weekend. Evening programs include "A Capitol Evening" and Palace concerts Thursday night, an eighteenth-century dinner and play and Capitol concerts Friday night, and "A Night at the Palace" Saturday night. The traditional Thanksgiving militia review takes place Saturday at 10:00 A.M.

**Monday, December 8—A week of Christmas Previews,** a new holiday series, begins this day with the start of decorating the interiors of exhibition homes, shops, and public buildings, the opening of AARFAC's Christmas exhibit, the opening of Carter's Grove for the season, a workshop on Christmas tree decorations (another will be held Friday), and a nighttime rehearsal performance of Handel's "Messiah" at Bruton Parish Church. *Tuesday* will feature "Preparing Feasts," a chance to tour the commissary and sample some of its goodies (Thursday and Saturday, too). *Wednesday* has a Christmas decorations lecture and demonstration (repeated Saturday). *Thursday* decorating the exteriors of the town's buildings begins, and visitors get a chance to help trim the tree and deck the halls at Carter's Grove. *Saturday* Tricorn Hat tours begin.

**Sunday, December 14—Grand Illumination.** The Christmas season at Colonial Williamsburg swings into high gear with a fireworks display, singing and merry-making around bonfires, and hot cider swilling this night. Then follows two and a half weeks of special programs in the hotels, restaurants, and historic area. All exhibition buildings and most shops will be open Christmas week, December 26–December 31.

Get ready to make the most of it. Who knows, it might even snow!

**Questions, continued**

was the teacher; the school was administered by local trustees of Dr. Bray's Associates. Upon Mrs. Wager's death the school closed. (See Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*, for details.)

# Literacy in Colonial Virginia

One of our most difficult interpretive questions to answer concerns literacy in eighteenth-century Virginia. None of the surviving colonial documents directly addresses the question, but a look at several different kinds of evidence will give us a hint, at least.

Harold Gill, historian in the Research Department, examined witnesses' signatures and marks in York County deed and inventory books from the middle of the eighteenth century. Mr. Gill believes witnesses are a somewhat more representative sample of the population than, say, persons conveying property. Land ownership implies affluence and the possibility of educational advantages. Working with what he admits is a "simple minded" definition of literacy—the ability to write one's own name—Mr. Gill found that the overwhelming majority, 89.3 percent (93.8 percent of males and 53.9 percent of females), of his almost 400 witnesses wrote their names, only a few (10.7 percent) using a mark.

Letters, newspapers, account books, and the like tell us of private tutors employed on Virginia plantations and of the several schoolmasters who operated schools and advertised their services. Matty's Free School opened in Williamsburg in 1705 with an endowment from the Whaley family to educate poor children. The Indian School at the College, an effort to teach Indian boys reading and religion, was supported by the estate of English physicist Robert Boyle. Mrs. Anne Wager taught in the Negro school established by Dr. Bray's Associates from 1760 until 1774, but each student's opportunity to attend her classes was limited to just a few years.

County and parish officials were responsible for the literary and vocational education of orphans from 1705, and later legislation attempted to provide the same benefits to poor, neglected, and illegitimate children. The laws were aimed at taking care of children and insuring that they would be productive and literate adults.

Primers often appear in colonial store accounts, orders to London agents, and store and shop advertisements. First readers were inexpensive and readily available in eighteenth-century Virginia. Williamsburg supported newspapers, and books were printed here. The *Virginia Gazette* had a wide circulation, and we assume the papers were passed among friends and neighbors. Books such as *The Art of Cookery or the Accomplished Gentlewo-*

*man's Companion, The Whole Duty of Man*, and the *Virginia Almanacks* were printed in town, and many other titles were sold at the printing office. Bibles weren't printed here, but Mike Kipps, master printer, says it appears that they were repaired and rebound more than any other title according to Print Shop records.

How should we respond to guests who ask if pictures on our shop signs indicate that the colonists were largely illiterate? Sign boards and symbols on shops and stores in the eighteenth century were probably for advertising as well as identification, just as they are today in our age of "logos."

Considering the educational opportunities available and the history of the business of printing, Mr. Gill's figures on literacy shouldn't surprise us. People with at least basic educations were probably not from all walks of life—not all women, not all servants, and probably few slaves could read—but chances are most tradesmen, farmers, and of course the gentry were literate.

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## The King's English

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**Fortnight**—fourteen nights or two weeks.

**Fowling piece**—a smooth-bore long gun that shoots shot; usually used to hunt fowl or birds.

**Gesso**—a preparation of glue and inert white powder such as gypsum or chalk used as a priming or grounding material onto which either paint or metal leaf was applied.

**Japanning**—the art of decorating wood or metal with a variety of coatings intended to imitate Oriental designs. Metal pieces may have a dark brown-black color produced by baking and hardening in ovens. On wood, a plasterlike material called gesso could be used to produce a raised design which was then gilded. Both techniques produced objects with a highly polished appearance, often in bright colors.

**Public vendue**—auction.

**Sempstress**—seamstress.

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Editor: Barbara Beaman

Assistant Editor and Feature Writer: Lou Powers

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