● THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

interpreter

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Interpreting the Black Experience at Colonial Williamsburg

Dennis O'Toole describes our goals for interpreting the lives and contributions of African-Americans during Virginia's colonial period.

We have come, I believe, to an important crossroads in our presentation and interpretation of the black experience at Colonial Williamsburg. The evidence of the great progress that has been made in this important area over the past decade can be seen and heard and read throughout Williamsburg. The Foundation's investment in research, training, programming, interpretation, acquisition of objects, and the production of written and audiovisual materials dealing with the subject is large and still growing. The support of people in the local community as well as on the staff of Colonial Williamsburg has waxed strong and broad.

But we have yet to make the story of Williamsburg's eighteenth-century black majority one of the central threads of our interpretation of the town. That is the challenge that lies immediately before us. The rich variety of day- and nighttime programs dealing with our African-American heritage that we offer visitors is not enough. I strongly believe that our goals must be to have every visitor to Colonial Williamsburg learn that half the colonial capital's residents were black, to understand at least the rudiments of the several conditions of life and labor experienced by these people, and to appreciate not just the major contribution they made to the prosperity and culture of the town and colony but, in the words of *Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg*, the nobility of their winning struggle to create "successful and supportive communities in the country of their subjugation."

This is the story that must now be brought into the mainstream of interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg. We have begun to do so. Important steps in this direction have been taken at the Benjamin Powell House, at Wetherburn's Tavern, at Carter's Grove, with a black history school outreach and site visit program, and in other ways and at other sites. Yet we will not have reached our goal until *every* site that we interpret offers at least some mention in its day-to-day interpretations of black men and women and their place in the history of the town.

This is an ambitious goal, one that requires the effort and dedication of each and every one of us involved with interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg. But we can and will reach this goal. And when we have done so, we will have written another major chapter in the story of America's finest history museum.

Education and Black History

Colonial Williamsburg Foundation is embarking on a full-scale interpretation of African-American history. Rex Ellis, assistant director for African-American interpretation, points the way and sets the pace.

Acknowledging the contribution of African-Americans to the development of American society has been a priority in the program thrust of Colonial Williamsburg for nearly a decade. Their story is inextricably tied to the development of early America.

The conceptualization of African-American history is complicated because of the varied experiences and chronology of the black contribution to the American scene. In a history museum like Colonial Williamsburg, the problem is multiplied because the focus is on a time for which little physical evidence and comparatively few documentary sources relating to the black experience exist. Most of

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what is known about blacks is obtained indirectly through wills, probate records, inventories, account books, and the like, or by observers from the period—virtually none of whom were black. The evidence, then, while being significant, has gaps that make it difficult to illustrate or interpret the dynamic interactions and complexities of life that characterized the experience of African-Americans in the colonial Chesapeake.

Few blacks wrote their own accounts of what happened. Those who did, like Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, Ayuba Suleiman, Benjamin Banneker, and Leo Africanus, are atypical representatives who tell us little about the experiences of the African-American majority. Add to these concerns the aura of controversy that still surrounds the subject of slavery, and one could make a very good argument for adopting the attitude of most history museums in the United States to exclude the subject altogether.

But this is not the course we've chosen. To date, Colonial Williamsburg is the only history museum that interprets eighteenth-century black history in any comprehensive fashion. The Foundation embarked on this controversial course around 1957, when Thad Tate's monograph *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* was published. It was not until 1979, however, that continuing programs on black history became the norm. They began with a series of theatrical monologues depicting black citizens of the town. Since then, the Foundation's educational divisions have hired staff, trained interpreters, begun archaeological research, changed exhibits to include artifacts illustrative of a black presence, inaugurated black interpretations at two exhibition sites and through a series of special programs and tours, hired a historian, underwritten a museum exhibition, consulted with a variety of specialists, and begun construction of a slave quarter at Carter's Grove.

All this has not gone unnoticed. Colonial Williamsburg has taken the lead in the interpretation of black history, and other museums are eagerly awaiting the outcome. Increasing numbers of them, such as Sleepy Hollow Restorations, the Pioneer Heritage Center, the National Museum of American History, Gunston Hall, the Valentine Museum, and the Weeksville Society, have invited staff members from the Foundation to serve as consultants for programs and exhibits they are beginning.

Educationally, then, it is important that Colonial Williamsburg maintain its vitality and dynamism by supporting and infusing its programs with standards of quality to which all its educational efforts subscribe. By improving the depth, breadth, and quality of our black history interpretation, our training, exhibits, collections, and our research, we add credibility to the black experience and put it on a par with all our other teaching efforts. Other museums will follow the trail we blaze.

Because the focus of black history interpretation is broad and includes the entire Foundation, we must establish a framework of goals and objectives that aligns with the overall educational mission of the Foundation as well as the needs of the visitor. In trying to create such a framework, a rationale stating the goals and objectives of teaching black history at Colonial Williamsburg—a charter document—is being written. Once these objectives have been defined and approved, the information used to tell the story will be gathered and reviewed. Finally, the question of how the information will be interpreted in terms of archaeology, architecture, and material culture, and spoken interpretation will be examined.

Ways of getting the message to the visitor will be discussed, including audiovisual and static exhibits as well as live interpretation. And the important task of training some 450 interpreters must also be addressed. In this way future programs can be decided upon based on their alignment with an established policy.

In short, black history cannot assume a place in such a dynamic institution as Colonial Williamsburg unless a comprehensive interpretive plan is put in place. If black history interpretation is to sustain its current energy, we must look beyond abstract programs and short-lived vignettes. We must continue as we have begun: to broaden the interpretive scope of black history with evidence that includes clothes, buildings, excavations, and, most importantly, people—black and white. It is an effort that involves all of us.

1988 will be an exciting year, one that will give increased opportunities to make black history an integral part of the Foundation's attempt to educate the public.

Giving Life to Black History

We asked Spencer Crew, curator at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution, to observe and critique Colonial Williamsburg's current interpretation of black history.

Prior to 1979 blacks did not play an important interpretative role at Colonial Williamsburg. Despite the fact that blacks comprised about 50 percent of the population in the eighteenth-century town, their contributions were largely ignored. In the spring of 1979, a new program was launched by Colonial Williamsburg that sought to fill the gap in its historical interpretations by placing greater emphasis on black Williamsburg residents. Using "living history" or actors posing as historical figures, the program introduced black characters into the story of everyday life in Williamsburg. A black minister, a young slave, a scullery maid, an apprentice cooper, a house servant, and a freeman joined the cast of characters who made their initial appearance in June of that year.

While the idea of introducing black characters was sound, it took some time to work out the unique problems faced by actors portraying black colonial life, for visitors' sense of the past didn't go much beyond prominent political figures. Visitors did not have a clear understanding of the extent of slavery in Virginia in the eighteenth century, how it had evolved, and how the characters portrayed reflected just a few of the black residents who made up half of Williamsburg's colonial population. Furthermore, many visitors were surprised by this frank interpretation of a difficult subject, and few could interact effectively and comfortably enough with first-person interpreters to get their basic questions answered. These initial problems made it clear that historical presentations offered by black character interpreters demanded careful advance planning and the flexibility to alter presentation techniques.

To force visitors to think differently, the actors decided to employ a new approach. "Breaking character" to explain the presentations helped people accept the actors and insured that they properly understood what was taking place. While breaking character proved crucial to the success of black presentations, it ran counter to prior rules governing living history presentations in Williamsburg—white actors never broke character. Black presentations differed from other living history presentations at Williamsburg in that they demanded careful observation of public responses to them and necessitated taking steps to insure the public received the proper message. Living history, then, offered an excellent device for telling the story of black Williamsburg residents who did not leave an abundance of material evidence behind them, but it had to be used with great care. Misunderstandings could occur quite easily.

The lessons learned in the early days of the black history program have continued to guide the members of the staff. Over the years several additional programs such as "Black Music," "African Traditions," "On Myne Own Time," "Behind Closed Doors," "Williamsburg in Black and White," and "The Other Half Tour" have been introduced. These programs look at different aspects of black life in Williamsburg, but each presentation is directed by a set of overarching principles. According to Rex Ellis, the assistant director of African-American interpretation, each historical presentation created by his program sought to interweave careful research, sensitivity to slave life, and clear educational objectives. The dedication of Ellis and members of the African-American programs staff to these principles is apparent in all of their interpretation. Their adherence to these precepts enables them to offer a sense of the complexity of black life under slavery and to provide special insights into the characters they portray.

One of the vignettes in the "Behind Closed Doors" series is an excellent example of the power of living history when handled carefully. A husband and wife, both slaves, are discussing their adopted son. The wife scolds her husband for his lack of patience with the boy. Her husband is much too hard on their son, she claims; he is a child, and the father expects too much. The husband, in response to her criticism, reminds his wife how important it is that the boy learn to obey his father and others who give him tasks to perform. As the conversation continues, it soon becomes clear that this is more than just a typical parental disagreement. Slavery adds greater urgency to their exchange. The father fears their child will not survive if he does not learn to respond to orders quickly and without question. The slave overseer's reaction to poorly done or unfinished work will be much

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Researching Black History at Colonial Williamsburg

Robert Birney, senior vice president/education, reviews the Foundation's research and programmatic achievements and plans to enrich our interpretation of black colonial history.

Under the leadership of Rex Ellis, we now have in place a full-bodied effort combining research, interpretive tours, resident interpretive programming, evening performances, and various outreach capabilities. Rex Ellis, Dylan Pritchett, and others are often invited to present to colleagues in the museum field what is being done here, and newspaper supplements across the country frequently feature the programming visitors now find at Colonial Williamsburg. All of this effort was more recently capped with an award from the American Telephone and Telegraph Corporation of $400,000 to support in-depth research, archaeological probes for Historic Area slave habitations, and additional programming and training. Given this level of activity, perhaps this is a good time to take a look backwards and review how far we have come and just how extensive our efforts continue to be.

The first tangible result of the decision to embark on a long-range program of research in black colonial history was marked by the conference devoted to this subject held in the spring of 1979. That conference was attended by eighteen scholars, including Dr. Edgar Toppin, who has since become a member of the Board of Trustees of Colonial Williamsburg, and Philip Morgan, who subsequently accepted a fellowship to the Institute of Early American History and Culture funded by the Foundation and who has since served as an advisor to our black history effort in a variety of ways. It seemed clear from the proceedings of that conference that the entire spectrum of subject matter would need to be researched through efforts sponsored primarily by ourselves. To say it another way, no one else was deeply and heavily engaged in the type of research that we knew would be needed to support a serious program of interpretation. Since then we have proceeded precisely along these lines, seizing on opportunities as they have arisen and constantly attempting to move ahead on as many fronts as possible.

Philip Morgan's work was devoted to Chesapeake and South Carolina slave plantation economies as they operated from the perspective of the enslaved people themselves. He expanded this to include economies based on the presence of waterways and cast his net as far south as Charleston, South Carolina. Even as his work began to illuminate the nature of the labor contract that evolved between owner and slave, the department of architectural research was setting out a research plan designed to provide solid information about the types of structures in which slave families and laborers lived and worked.

The agricultural outbuildings project has for several years carried the researchers to the far corners of Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas. Many a weekend has been spent on the road by the team as they have tracked down yet another clutch of surviving buildings. Today the department has the largest collection of surveyed structures (some of which have disappeared since they were measured by the architects and historians) of any repository in the world. The consequences of this research are vitally important to us and have been dovetailed with the increased effort to identify and locate urban slave quarters in Williamsburg. Two major archaeological efforts have been under way at the Peyton Randolph House and the Brush-Everard House. In the case of the latter, we went looking for what we were sure would prove to be evidence of slave quarters based on the reliable record from the Frenchman's Map. To our disappointment, it appears that no such evidence will be forthcoming following this summer's recent excavation. According to Patricia Samford of the department of archaeological excavation, all traces of eighteenth-century soil strata at the most promising site on the Brush-Everard property had been destroyed by an early twentieth-century house and utility lines. One unexpected discovery was a large trash-filled ravine bisecting the property northeast to southeast along its northernmost edge. The ravine held an unusually rich deposit of domestic debris including ceramics and glass as well as egg shell fragments and the larger animal bones common in such contexts. These artifacts will be valuable for obtaining information about the diet of Everard's family and his slaves and will shed light on the material possessions of the occupants.

Next summer the team will excavate an area south of the office, where a map reference exists for a structure labeled "Home of Colored Mammy and her husband, circa

1800." A 1967 excavation conducted at the Brush-Everard property by Ivor Noël Hume revealed a hearth foundation thought to correspond with this building. Continued excavation in the ravine will provide additional faunal material needed for the dietary analysis.

Somewhat unexpectedly, however, the work done in the Peyton Randolph yard now seems assuredly to point to both a slave quarter building as well as a sizable two-story kitchen structure that would have been required to house the large slave force recorded for the property in 1776 at the time of Peyton Randolph's death. Finally, early archaeology done at Carter's Grove had identified a site that at first seemed not to involve a slave quarter but which, when combined with subsequent work done at Kingsmill and Monticello, led to the conclusion that the ground was telling us where some of the Carter's Grove slave cabins must have been. It is this finding that has led to the slave quarter project at Carter's Grove. (See illustration.)

An accompanying research project was carried out by Linda Rowe who worked with members of the First Baptist Church on the topic of the eighteenth-century origins of this important black congregation.

Currently Rex Ellis and an advisory group of black employees are producing an exciting series of three public programs devoted to the restoration, pursuit of black genealogy, and an evening of performance in celebration of Black History Month. The month ends with the Learning Weekend devoted to black artists and craftsmen, featuring an exhibition of the works of Joshua Johnson, a free black artist who lived and worked in Baltimore early in the nineteenth century.

As for reconstruction and refurnishing, in yet another effort led by Rex Ellis, a small group consisting of Ed Chappell, Jay Gaynor, and Kevin Kelly met to comb the records for hints as to where house slaves lived in town. These efforts led Jay Gaynor eventually to the procurement of reproduced artifacts and the designation of certain places as suitable for presenting the physical evidence of black life. One of Betty Leviner's most recent applications is the newly refurnished room in the southwest corner of the second floor of the

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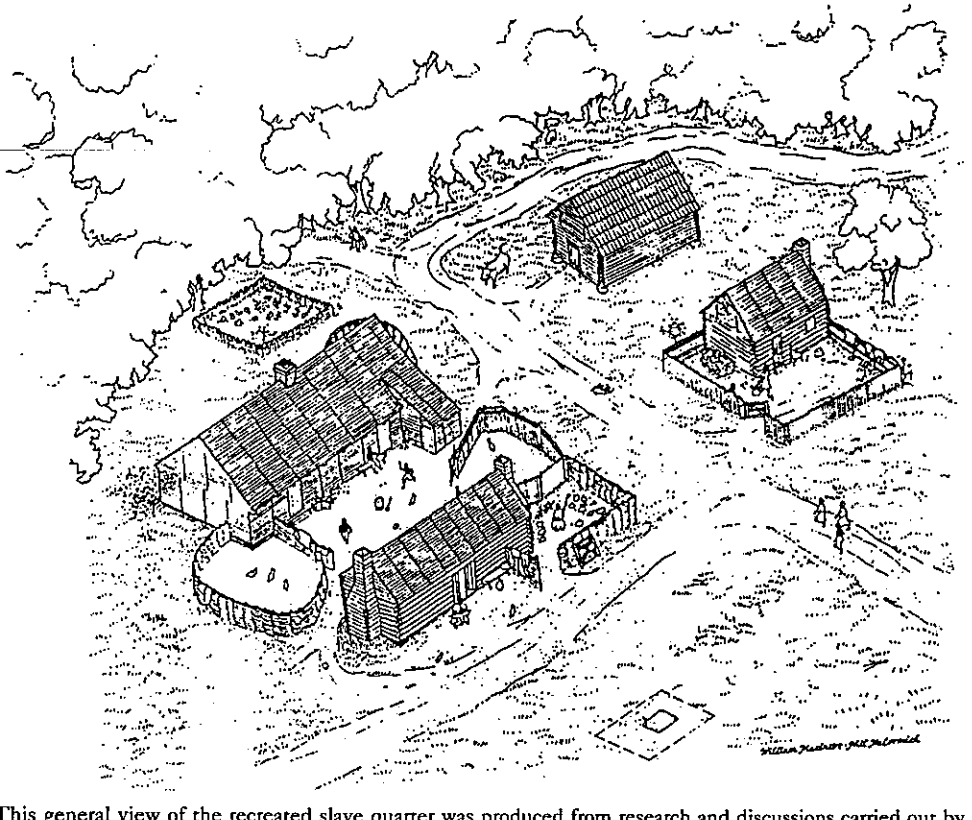

This general view of the recreated slave quarter was produced from research and discussions carried out by the design group in the architectural research department. It includes two multi-family houses, single-family house, corncrib, and animal and garden enclosures.

Researching Black History, *continued*

Wythe House. The room is set up to display quiltworking and shows a small cot, which is interpreted as provided for a house slave who, we conjecture, worked with Mrs. Wythe on such projects. Throughout the Historic Area this type of suggestive refurnishing is proceeding as well.

Reconstructed quarters, furnishings, and in-depth knowledge of the slave economy are all supportive bodies of knowledge that eventually lead to and help us create direct interpretation of black colonial life through character interpretation.

I am sure most of the *Interpreter's* readers are rather well versed in the manner in which this type of interpretation has developed over the past nine years. Starting with a small handful of character interpretations researched and composed by Shomer Zwelling, Harvey Credle, and the actors themselves, we have seen the appearance of the Powell family program and the Wetherburn's Tavern program, where portrayals of black life are an important and integral part of site interpretation. Once the slave quarters are completed at Carter's Grove, we will have for the very first time a plantation setting, which then can be periodically used for similar portrayals of agricultural life under slavery. A good deal of research has already been done on this general subject by Lorena Walsh and other scholars outside Colonial Williamsburg. These economic studies of Carter's Grove, including perusal of the account books, will put us in a position to calculate the nature of the plantation activities that took place there and the importance of slave workers in the plantation economy. This will become an important segment of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century story to be told at Carter's Grove.

It is important to separate from the chronicling of black colonial life the extraordinary contributions that the enslaved segment of American society made to what would become the culture we now know. For that reason the performing arts are also being carefully studied in an effort to learn more about how early African forms of storytelling, song, and dance slowly but surely made their way into American life.

Finally the Joshua Johnson folk art exhibit will establish for the first time the manner in which black Americans were developing an important culture that subsequent nineteenth-century events disguised. This important project will go a long way toward demonstrating the value and importance of reinterpreting the record in an effort to locate lost black achievements.

Certainly the award of the major grant from the AT&T Foundation has been invaluable in supporting many of the activities described above. But there can be no question that this is just the first of a series of such funded efforts, and that these monies are especially well spent. In a variety of areas and in many ways we continue to emphasize basic research with the arrival of Professor Michael Nicholls who, over a two-year period, will focus on black urban life. We will continue to develop special programming for group visits, tours, and evening programs but will place special emphasis on bringing the African-American story into the interpretive mainstream. And we will continue to learn more about the material culture and the performing arts as they flourished in black colonial communities. We are confident that we have seen only a fraction of the documentation that can be found if we are persistent. This is a long-range effort that will be seriously pursued by the Foundation just as it pursues its other topical areas. Clearly, after nine years the work of Rex Ellis, his associates, and their many interpretive colleagues shows that we are off to a good start.

Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South

by Deborah Gray White

A book review by Cathy Hellier

Though scholars in recent years have produced many studies illuminating the nature of North American slavery, Deborah Gray White's book *Ar'n't I a Woman?* is the first to give exclusive attention to slave women. Through the use of such sources as plantation records, travelers' accounts, newspapers, letters and diaries of slave owners, slave narratives, and ex-slave interviews, White examines the life experiences of slave women on southern plantations and asserts that they differed markedly from the life experiences of both white women and slave men.

To begin to capture a clearer picture of the nature of female slavery, White challenges the antebellum perceptions of black womanhood,

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more severe than the reprimands the boy receives from his father. The mother, on the other hand, realizes the boy needs to know how much his father loves him and the refuge the family can offer from the outside world. Both ideas are important concepts for the child to learn if he is to survive slavery.

This presentation is extremely powerful and has a tremendous impact upon audiences. It offers a means of understand the struggles confronting blacks striving to maintain their dignity and spirit in a system that placed their physical fate in others' hands. The vignette also illustrates the ability of living history to introduce concepts that are not easily described in an exhibition label or by a tour guide. Through this form of historical explication the psychological, physical, and emotional struggles of people living in a different era under circumstances unfamiliar to modern audiences are given a context. It also presents the information in an easily comprehended format. When living history is used in this manner, it becomes a very powerful educational tool that forces audiences to consider our ancestors in a different way.

It is readily apparent that the successes of these presentations are the result of the hard work of the African-American educational program staff. A great deal of time and effort goes into carefully developing their living history presentations. Along with extensive historical research into the lives of blacks who lived and worked in eighteenth-century Williamsburg, substantial thought is given to how best to portray the characters. It is important not to reinforce inaccurate stereotypical views visitors might have of slavery and black people. One should not leave thinking that slavery was a benign institution in which slaves were restricted but fared relatively well. On the other hand, it is important to provide an accurate portrayal of all aspects of slave life. Slaves did find ways to ameliorate the harshness of slavery through their families, their music, and other devices that lessened the institution's control over their daily lives. Walking this fine line means creating the presentations with an awareness of how the audience may react to the characters as well as having a deep commitment to depicting the complexities and contradictions that were also part of black life. A singing slave is not necessarily a happy slave, but the singing may indeed help her finish her work more quickly and efficiently. Concepts like this are not easy to present properly, but it is a task that Rex Ellis, Dylan Pritchett, and the African-American programs staff confront and consistently handle well.

If there is a weakness to the program, it is its heavy reliance upon living history presentations as the primary mode for discussing black life. Living history programs are only one part of a larger array of interpretative activities at Colonial Williamsburg, and interpretation of black history should include more options such as increased third-person presentations, static exhibits, and audiovisual programs.

Furthermore, historic sites within the complex are at the heart of the majority of the programming that takes place at Colonial Williamsburg. Printers working in their shops, a druggist working in the town apothecary, or the jailor describing the workings of the jail house all offer their presentations in a historic site, which increases the historical accuracy and authenticity of their presentations. African-American presenters do not have a similar site in Williamsburg. They are found in the places where they work, but not where they live and relax—out of the spotlight of the master's scrutiny. It is just as important to depict black life in a variety of historic settings as it is to illustrate the variety of experiences of other residents. In order for the African-American educational program to reach parity with other activities at Colonial Williamsburg, it must have a historic site at the center of its operation. Given the size of the eighteenth-century black presence in Williamsburg, it is difficult to believe that no data exists to help locate or recreate the site of a black structure. Greater emphasis has to be placed on developing an appropriate site without which the program operates under a severe handicap. A start has been made in the right direction with the acquisition of a grant from the AT&T Foundation to enhance black interpretation at the Brush-Everard site. Part of the plan for developing this site is an archaeological dig to locate slave quarters located in the area. If this excavation is successful, it will represent a major step forward for Colonial Williamsburg.

Having a physical structure in which to center their activities will add to the authenticity and strength of the activities run by the African-American educational program. It will provide tangible evidence of a black presence in Williamsburg and a structure people can

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Giving Black History Life, *continued*

enter, visually examine, and about which they can ask questions. Rather than asking their audiences to imagine what black life was like away from the workplace, members of the staff can refer to a site that will serve as a three-dimensional illustration of black home life. In this setting visitors can compare and contrast the way blacks lived with the lifestyles of their white counterparts. While the African-American educational program has done a splendid job using living history performances as its primary teaching tool, to continue to grow it must have additional options.

There are not many historic places in the country that include interpretations of eighteenth-century black life as part of their programming. Most sites either downplay or overlook black residents. Because of its African-American educational program, Colonial Williamsburg is far ahead of many other historic sites with respect to interpreting black life, and it is important that these activities continue to grow. It is already one of the leading programs in the country, and the creation of a site for additional interpretation and educational activities will facilitate new programming and experimentation.

Maintaining the vision and quality of black historical interpretations that set Colonial Williamsburg apart from other historic sites will depend upon a continued commitment to excellence on the part of the African-American educational staff and key administrators at Colonial Williamsburg. This is not an easy task, but both black and white visitors to Williamsburg will have a richer experience as a result of a continued comitment to interpret the history of all the residents of the town in the best possible manner.

Book Review, *continued*

particularly the images of the black woman as Jezebel or as Mammy. White demonstrates that neither was an accurate representation of black womanhood under slavery. She then shows that the experiences of female slaves differed significantly from those of male slaves, even from the early colonial period, when the demand for male slave labor created an imbalanced sex ratio. This meant that most black women could marry, but many men could not. As the sex ratio evened out, from approximately 1730 to 1750, slave owners realized the value of the reproductive abilities of the female. For the next hundred-odd years, slave women were pressured to have children. Childbearing and childrearing both enhanced and circumscribed the life of the slave woman, and the woman's dual roles of laborer and mother were central to the major differences between male and female slavery.

In tracing the life cycle of the female slave from childhood through old age, White asserts that female slaves, unlike white females, grew up believing that boys and girls were equal, since black children were not segregated by sex but engaged in essentially the same work and play. Early socialization stressed racial rather than sexual differences. Similarly, White asserts that slave marriages differed from white marriages in that spouses maintained a significant degree of autonomy, and that slave marriages were unusually egalitarian.

White shows that while men and women sometimes did the same work on the plantation, much of the work was segregated along sexual lines, giving rise to the important female network among slaves, from which women derived a sense of their womanhood, cooperation in meeting needs, support in time of crisis, and a measure of status.

While White's study is a groundbreaking one, it has certain shortcomings. Though she does discuss the imbalanced sex ratio during the colonial period, for the most part she treats conditions of slavery over two centuries as essentially unchanging. She admits that she makes no attempt to differentiate between variables such as region, plantation size, crops, and idiosyncracies of individual slave owners. In addition, her attempt in the epilogue to discuss victimization of black women from emancipation into the twentieth century is too brief to do justice to the issues. Nonetheless, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* is a pioneer work giving unprecedented insight into the lives of slave women of the plantation South. Interpreters will find it valuable reading.

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