

A Day In The Life: Circa 1774

BY ERIC MINTON

I was about to stand in front of a live cannon and clean it out with a worm—a long pole with a twisting iron tip.

I paid money to be treated like this?

It was all part of our basic training with the Virginia Regiment, an all-volunteer army that would become part of the Continental Army in the American Colonies' war with Britain. When we signed up to participate in "A Call To Arms" at the military encampment's gate, we were 20th-century tourists at Colonial Williamsburg. The drill sergeant, authentically costumed in an 18th-century Virginia Regiment uniform, marched us unremittently into 1774.

This is just one of the many living reenactments put on by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation that lift the area's rich historicality to the level of personal experience. Among all the attributes that make Williamsburg famous—the authentic Colonial buildings, the tavern foods, the splendid inns, the variety of shopping—its costumed personnel portraying real 18th-century residents are what make the most lasting impression on the visitor.

Meticulously researched and backed by rigorous training, these characters entertain the public as tour guides, as hosts in homes and shops, as actors in shows and demonstrations, or as part of interactive exhibits. They not only educate visitors about 18th-century life, they bring that life

to life, and sometimes provide a profound interpersonal link to our ancestors.

"We can go out there and entertain," says R. Dale Smoot, military specialist for Colonial Williamsburg. "But we want people to retain things."

The Army encampment every summer, which Smoot oversees, is a perfect example. The drill sergeant didn't even introduce himself as a modern-day historian, but immediately began bellowing orders and insults. He put me at the lead of one of two columns, then marched us down to the encampment. There, he assigned us our tents, three people to each 3-by-5 pup tent, and warned us of the lice we would endure.

Next he took us to the campfire and described our paltry daily rations. Then we drilled in the use of firearms, using sticks for muskets, as the 1774 recruits did. Finally, we learned how to shoot the cannon, complete with cleaning, loading, and firing on command. Afterward, we marched back up to the gate in perfect step, inspiring astonished expressions for the next group to be subjected to the drill sergeant's scathing tongue.

Military Encampment Training (top left) offers visitors a chance to really live as it was in the 18th century, and highly trained costumed interpreters lead the tourists through the days and nights of 1774.

"It's been a very popular program," Smoot says of "A Call To Arms," which the foundation launched in 1991. "You have families come back every morning the whole time they're here. This is where children want to start their day off."

Some activities are shows, such as the pirates' and witches' trials in the Capitol, conducted in the evenings for additional charge. Most, though, are daily activities and part of the general admission price.

These include such events as the "Order In The Court" hearing in the courthouse or the militia drills on Market Square. Authenticity goes beyond characters to entail the actual events. One of the "Order In The Court" cases involves a woman named Mary Thompson, who murdered her husband with an ax while he was nap-

CONTINUED ON PAGE T16




Best Bets Each year, the readers of The Virginia Gazette vote on Greater Williamsburg's best goods and services. Here's a sampling of establishments that took top honors:

- Best Italian Food:** Sal's Italian Restaurant, (804) 220-2641, 221-0443, 229-0337
- Best Pancakes:** International House of Pancakes, (804) 229-9628
- Best Family Restaurant:** Family & Friends, (804) 253-7553
- Best Cup of Coffee, Best Sunday Brunch, Best Prime Rib & Steak, Best Soup:** Papillon, a Bistro, (804) 229-4020
- Best Oriental Restaurant:** Peking Restaurant, (804) 229-2288, 565-1212
- Best Barbecue (2nd Place):** Double D Rib House, (804) 229-3166
- Most Romantic Dining Award:** Williamsburg Inn, (804) 229-1000

Coming Attractions

- Plantations and Gardens Air Tours:** April and May. (804) 253-8185
- Jamestown Weekend:** May 13-14. (804) 898-3400
- Harbor Cruise at Waterman's Wharf, Newport News.** June 3. (804) 877-6114
- National Trails Day** June 11. (804) 596-2222
- Virginia Indian Heritage Festival** June 17. (804) 229-1607
- Children's Colonial Days Fair** July 1-2. (804) 887-1776
- Summer Breeze Concert Series** July 4-31. (804) 221-0614

What It Costs

-  **\$3**
Adult admission Guided Tour and Tasting Williamsburg Winery
-  **\$24**
Adult admission Colonial Williamsburg
-  **\$12.50**
Adult admission Harbor Cruises at Waterman's Wharf

FYI

- Colonial Williamsburg Foundation:** (804) 229-1000
- Busch Gardens Williamsburg:** (804) 253-3350
- Williamsburg Area Convention & Visitors Bureau:** (804) 253-0192 (800) 3686511; fax 229-2047
- Williamsburg Hotel/Motel Association:** (800) 446-9244

Visitors Get Caught Up Living Life As It Once Was

CONTINUED FROM PAGE T15
ping, a true 18th-century York County case.

"Divorce wasn't an option then," says Jeremy Fried, manager of character interpreters for Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. The case is especially intriguing to modern audiences because it involves insanity as a defense and probate law as authorities debate the fate of her children.

"Order In The Court" also often involves audience participation as the jury, as witnesses, and as the parties on trial. In one case, a woman was tried for singing a song "which is highly reflecting upon the king," i.e., slanderous.

"We're trying to educate people in the way they did things in the 18th century, so we go ahead and pick a husband and wife because the husband is answerable for his wife's activities."

Once the husband—the 20th-century one—became too involved. "We found her guilty, the same way they did in the 18th century, and the guy threatened to beat up the bench if we persisted in fining his wife," Fried says. This unusual response by a man who honestly thought his wife was to be fined was educational even for the costumed justices. "There hasn't been any alteration in the DNA code," Fried says.

"Their DNA was the same as ours. We're products of our society, but we are also products of the human condition."

Such "human conditions" lend a certain spontaneity to the characters as they go about their daily tasks in 18th-century Williamsburg before their 20th-century guests. On one hot June day, the militia captain marched his puzzled unit off the Market Square, where they were scheduled to drill, down the street trailed by equally puzzled tourists to the tree-lined Palace Green. "With the heat, I thought we would drill in the shade today," he told his wool-suited troops. "Thank you," they replied.

TROUBLE IN THE RANKS

The militias drill from the 1764 Manual of Arms, Smoot says. In the 18th century, commanders interpreted the manual differently, creating problems when regiments got together for mass drills. "We have that same problem today," Smoot says of the staff who serve as militia captains. "Those moments can stick in (the visitors') mind and be enlightening, but sometimes arguments over the manual can flare up and be a deterrent to the event."

All of the characters portrayed were real people in Colonial

Williamsburg. Fried plays James Hubbard, a lawyer who was clerk in the merchant's meeting and proctor in the Court of Vice Admiralty. Modern-day visitors may encounter this man around town, much as Hubbard's 18th-century neighbors would. He sometimes opens his office to the public for two hours in the morning to chat with passersby. In the afternoon he serves in the Courthouse sessions; in the evening he attends social events.

"If you come to an assembly—a dance in Colonial Williamsburg—you might see my character, whom you had seen in the courtroom that day," Fried says. "We try to show these aspects of these peoples' lives as fully as we can. Our approach to living history here is not only to give people a photographic opportunity to stand next to someone in [authentic] costumes, we also try to approach with dignity and truth who these people were, and represent that for modern audiences."

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation has a staff of about 14 researchers in its Department of Historical Research, says senior researcher Robert C. Watson. A history professor for 18 years at Washington University in St. Louis, Watson was amazed at the depth of the foundation's collective knowledge when he

joined its Department of African-American Interpretation.

Williamsburg has between 350 and 400 interpreters working in the historic area, Watson said. All must go through initial interpretive training lasting a couple of weeks before apprenticing with experienced interpreters for several months. Then they get two years of intensive, specialized training in their chosen area of interest.

LESSONS IN HISTORY

"That's the structured training," Watson says. "In addition to the structured classes, people are always doing their own individual research, and they can weave that information into their character."

Interpreters try to stay in character as much as possible. When they are hosting visitors to their homes, as Misses Powell and Greenhow do, they discuss the local politics and gossip and invite questions from their guests without ever leaving their 18th-century personae. Cate, a slave at the Powell House, gives a tour illustrating the house slave's life, a presentation she makes in a most surly tone. She even answers questions from white visitors with disdainful stares.

"We get a lot of comments about her because it makes people so uncomfortable, it's so real," says Watson, who was director of

the Department of African-American Interpretation for three years. "People can't believe a slave would really act that way, but some did." Cate is played by Christy Matthew, who succeeded Watson as department director.

Because the characters were real people, interpreters must rely on available documentation. "For a man like [Royalist] John Randolph, it's an easy thing to do," says Fried. "The man is documented up one side and down the other. He wrote a pamphlet against revolution in 1774 in reaction to cousin Thomas Jefferson's tract.

"As you go lower in the social hierarchy, the documentation gets thinner and thinner. A lot of times you make rational interpolations, doing your best to put the skin and muscle on these skeletons."

Williamsburg is gradually trying to expand its interpretive roles to represent more classes of people, including free blacks, indentured servants, Native Americans, and slaves. The latter has led to some controversy, namely in the slave auction Williamsburg staged last fall. "When you begin to focus on something like a slave auction, you bring up a part of the past that a lot of people, both white and black, don't want to deal with," Watson says. "But it is a historical reality."

Carter's Grove Plantation has standing slave quarters where interpreters do daily presentations of rural slavery at the actual site where slaves lived in the 18th century. This is a highly popular attraction, Watson says, in part because visitors learn that about 90 percent of the entire Colonial population lived in such conditions, not in the fine houses lining Williamsburg's Palace Green. "The big difference was that whites had a choice, blacks did not," Watson says.

Another popular tour in Williamsburg proper is "The Other Half," given by a slave who takes visitors through the streets and fine houses around the Palace Green offering the slave's perspective. Beyond the educational value, Watson has noted a more profound result of this tour, thanks to the interpreter's personable, realistic portrayal. "When people see this person in costume, it allays their (discomfort) because they're able to, for the first time, talk with a person whose personae existed at one time. You'd be drawn back to that point of time."

This is living history.

Williamsburg's Fort Magruder Inn... where quality, service and location add up to a historic tour.



Fort Magruder Inn is a contemporary resort hotel set in a beautiful wooded area, landscaped around an original Civil War redoubt, and boasts 303 luxurious rooms, most with private patio or balcony. Located just 1/2 mile from Historic Colonial Williamsburg and only minutes from Busch Gardens, Jamestown and Yorktown, the Fort Magruder Inn is the ideal location for your next tour group.

- Concierge ▪ Gift Shop ▪ Cable TV/HBO ▪
- Veranda Dining Room ▪ Golf Privileges ▪ Saunas
- General JB's Lounge (entertainment nightly) ▪
- In-Room Refreshment Centers ▪ Game Room
- ADA/TDD Devices Available ▪ Fitness Center ▪
- Indoor/Outdoor Pools ▪ Lighted Tennis Courts



& CONFERENCE CENTER
Your Special Place In History.

Rt. 60 E • PO Box KE • Williamsburg, VA 23187
Call Jenny for special group tour rates & reservations
800-331-5204 or 800-225-1533 (in VA)