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Design and Deception at Colonial Williamsburg

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The study of Colonial Williamsburg,¹ which celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in December 2001, is a useful means of approaching the discussion of the ways interior decoration and garden design can be used as a means to promote political ideology. While the political role of these two areas of creative expression may not be immediately apparent in a visit to Colonial Williamsburg, they played an instrumental role in the restoration of the eighteenth-century town. They were also part of the original plan of the restoration's founders to promote in twentieth-century Americans a strong national pride and love of country. At the same time, the restoration's founders sought to downplay the importance of the town's less prominent residents, including white laborers and slaves. The result was an intentional deception that used interior decoration and garden design to foster an image of life in colonial Williamsburg that accentuated fine furniture, wallpaper, and draperies, as well as attractive gardens, while failing to represent the lives of the majority of the town's population and masking the inequalities of life in eighteenth-century Virginia. For the restoration's early visitors, this deception fostered a sense of the beauty and charm of the eighteenth century, without a discussion of the lives of approximately half of the town's colonial residents who were enslaved. For contemporary visitors from an Honors class at Long Island University, Colonial Williamsburg was an ideal site for studying not just colonial America but the historical contexts, goals, and agendas of a major restoration project.

The restoration of Colonial Williamsburg began in 1926 with the purchase of the Ludwell-Paradise House by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (JDR Jr.), the only son of oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller, and it has expanded over the last seventy-five years to include approximately 400 buildings, eighty-eight of which are from the colonial period. The other buildings, most prominently the Capitol, Governor's Palace and the Raleigh Tavern, are reconstructions of eighteenth-century structures. JDR Jr. was lured to Williamsburg by Rev. W.A.R. Goodwin, the rector of Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg. In the early 1900s, Goodwin worked to restore Bruton Parish Church to its eighteenth-century appearance in order to enhance the church's attractiveness and highlight its role in colonial history. Goodwin had the dream of recreating the whole eighteenth-century town of Williamsburg and imbuing the modern age with a respect for the values of yesteryear.

¹ The term Colonial Williamsburg refers to the properties owned by the modern-day Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, a non-profit educational foundation geared to the presentation of eighteenth-century life. This is different from the term "colonial Williamsburg," which denotes the town of the 1700s

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Among these values was a belief in individualism, democracy, and representative government. Through the recreation of the colonial village, Goodwin hoped to instill these ideals in a modern generation that, he thought, had lost sight of these beliefs. Goodwin needed the assistance of a major philanthropist and finally settled on the son of the wealthiest man in America. JDR Jr. was the perfect choice to finance this endeavor as he shared Goodwin's vision about Williamsburg, and he also had a love of the charm, beauty and quaintness of the eighteenth century. In recreating the buildings of the past, the founders of Colonial Williamsburg sought to promote the town's relationship with individualism, democracy and representative government in order to enliven a sense of nationalism in the American public in the years of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War (Lindgren, 226-233; Kammen, 359-370).

I used the example of Colonial Williamsburg in an honors class that I taught at the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University in 1998. Entitled "Perceptions of the Past," this class strove to educate honors students in the ways that the past could be used to promote modern political agendas. One of the most important ingredients in this class was the use of Colonial Williamsburg to understand the ways in which the past can be presented to encourage specific beliefs. In this way, students would gain a better appreciation of the ways a major philanthropist such as John D. Rockefeller, Jr. could use his extraordinary wealth to promote his belief in the importance of eighteenth-century life, culture, and values. Such a study would also demonstrate that there are other means to promote ideological agendas aside from direct participation in the political process.

Before the class visited the restoration, they traveled to historic sites in the New York area, including Theodore Roosevelt's home at Sagamore Hill and the Tenement Museum in the lower east side of Manhattan. I asked them to complete short reaction papers for these sites which were to explain how they were affected by what they saw. I also asked them to note any inconsistencies or errors they noticed in the presentation of these sites. Before leaving for Virginia, the students read the sections on Colonial Williamsburg in Michael Kammen's book *Mystic Chords of Memory* and viewed the film *Williamsburg – The Story of a Patriot*, the 1957 production that still serves as the introductory film for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. This background gave the students an introduction into the political origins of the restoration and its ideological goals. As a result, they were probably better able to analyze the flaws and inconsistencies of the restoration than the average visitor would be. Upon arriving in Williamsburg, I encouraged them to seek out anything that struck them as out of place. My goal was to hone their analytical skills and to challenge them to examine the ways in which historical restorations misrepresent the past.

In seeking to recreate the exteriors and interiors of the town that served as the capital of Virginia from 1699 to 1780, the founders of Colonial Williamsburg envisioned a museum that would present the very best values of the eighteenth century. Integral to the recreation of life in this era was a presentation of the interiors of the major sites in the town, such as the Capitol and the home of the royal governor, as well as the homes of the town's wealthier residents. While the exteriors of many of the town's buildings could be found in the historical records, the interiors were usually a mystery. It was in the interiors of these buildings, then, that the restoration's designers strove to demonstrate what they believed to be the glorious and dignified aspects of the eighteenth century. This

work entailed the recreation of the wallpaper, paints, draperies, and furnishings that were part of colonial life. This task required research into the materials that were available in the eighteenth century, along with an understanding of the use of decorating materials to create interiors for the various buildings that the restoration sought to present (Wright, 41, 45-56).

Indeed, the initial desire of the restoration's designers to create an ornate interior for the Governor's Palace later caused problems when an inventory of the palace's eighteenth-century contents was discovered. This revelation prompted an expensive redesign of the building's interior in the early 1980s in order to mirror the palace's colonial appearance. The result, which can be seen today, is far less ornate and more closely representative of the building's original interior. Here is a good example of an earlier perception of the past that was inaccurate. The assumption of early designers fit the common preconception that the eighteenth century was one of ornate grandeur and opulence. But later research on the Governor's Palace and other parts of the town revealed this earlier notion to be inaccurate (Fiske, X, 15).

Another instance of an error in interior design that was present when my students and I visited the restoration in 1998 was the portrait of George Washington hanging inside the Capitol in the same room as the portraits of the King and Queen of Great Britain. Clearly, in the middle of the eighteenth century there would not have been a portrait of George Washington in the Capitol in Williamsburg. My students noticed this obvious mistake and noted as well the failure of the restoration, even at that late date, to attempt to present a building interior that was more consonant with what might have realistically been present in the colonial era. The presence of Washington's portrait in the Capitol was clearly more ideological than historical. This example was further evidence of the restoration's desire to ensure that visitors associate Washington with Colonial Williamsburg, especially since he has traditionally been associated with the type of ideals that the restoration wished to foster.

The promotion of political ideology through interior design was not confined strictly to buildings on the restoration site, however. Colonial Williamsburg manufactured many of the same products that were used at the restoration for purchase by its visitors. In this way, millions of Americans could bring a part of the restoration into their own living space. Magazine articles in the 1930s highlighted the efforts of the restoration to commercialize its products to attract income as well as to promote an ideological perspective of the past. Restoration officials hoped that, as Americans brought these colonial items into their homes, they would feel a stronger relationship to the era and the values that Colonial Williamsburg was trying to perpetuate in the twentieth century. The belief promoted by the restoration was that, if Americans purchased these items, it would promote a stronger love of country and Americans would be less likely to embrace communism (Brown, "Restoring Historic Williamsburg . . .," 74-5; Brown, "The Restoration of Colonial Virginia," 70-71).

As millions of Americans struggled through the Great Depression and World War II, Colonial Williamsburg presented itself as a stable and comforting place where traditional American beliefs and values were alive and well. During the Cold War, the promotion of Williamsburg products again surged as suburbanization increased and more

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Americans were painting, wallpapering and furnishing their newly-bought homes ("Fresh Antiques," 58).

One of the most important properties owned by Colonial Williamsburg which illustrates the ideological implications of interior design is the house at the Carter's Grove plantation. Built in the middle part of the eighteenth century by Robert "King" Carter, the house was one of the largest Virginia mansions constructed in the colonial period. The home was purchased and furnished in the colonial-revival style by Archibald and Mary McCrea in the 1930s. Carter's Grove is a representation of the aims that Williamsburg sought to foster in home design in the middle decades of the twentieth century. The patriotic decor at Carter's Grove, which includes a wide variety of colonial antiques as well as a part of the house painted in red, white and blue by a prior occupant, may appear by modern standards to be a bit overdone. But the open promotion of one's love of country and the belief in American institutions were often seen as virtues during the first half of the twentieth century. Through the examination of sites like Carter's Grove, students can gain a better appreciation of the ways in which people in the earlier decades of the twentieth century expressed patriotic feelings in a creative fashion and, in so doing, encouraged other Americans to follow suit and demonstrate their love of country through their own interior designs (Boulton, 82-89).

In addition, those who developed the eighteenth-century look for Williamsburg in the 1930s and 40s believed that issues of creativity and style extended to areas outside of the home. Thus, the gardens of Colonial Williamsburg represented an artistic attempt to create the quaintness and beauty of a forgotten past. As with the building interiors, however, little hard evidence was available to the designers as to what the gardens in much of the town actually looked like. The English landscape architects who were hired by the restoration created a series of ornate designs that would likely have been out of place in what would have been considered a backwater for eighteenth-century Europeans. More than likely, many of the town's original gardens would have served primarily a utilitarian purpose, providing food and a pleasing addition to the home's exterior (Wright, 51).

Gardens also helped to represent the goal of the restoration's founders to promote the beauty of the eighteenth century. In fact, JDR Jr. was often more concerned with aesthetics than with historical accuracy when it came to exterior design. In one instance, for example, he suggested placing a bench in a particularly attractive spot so that visitors could admire the view. He was told, however, that the likelihood that such a bench existed there in colonial times was very small. If the desire for accuracy won out over appearance in this instance, the search for a proud aesthetic was always present in the minds of those who founded and designed much of Colonial Williamsburg (Kendrew, 613-14).

The disregard for historical accuracy is certainly evident in the streets and sidewalks of the restored village. While in colonial times these would have been dirt, or often mud mixed with animal droppings, the sidewalks of Colonial Williamsburg are brick, and the main streets are paved. This obvious inaccuracy was quickly noticed by students, as were the small green fire hydrants which the restoration had attempted to hide from view with varying degrees of success. Certainly, these additions were needed to permit the approximately one million visitors a year to see the town in greater safety. Yet they do serve to distract from the verisimilitude of the restoration and its attempt to transport its visitors back to the eighteenth century.

By providing interesting presentations both inside and outside their restored and rebuilt buildings, restoration officials hoped that visitors would be lured back to the ideals of the eighteenth century by the beauty of Williamsburg. Restoration officials also hoped that visitors would sense the importance of the political ideals of the restoration and that they would implement them in their daily lives. If they were successful, the restoration would be able to promote these traditional American ideas for years to come through the use of Williamsburg paints, furniture reproductions, and gardening books.

While the modern presentation of Colonial Williamsburg has sought to rectify its earlier failure to present an accurate portrayal of the past through its social history programs, many visitors probably still take away with them the emphasis on the town's gardens and building interiors. Many books are still published on the gardens of Colonial Williamsburg, and restoration-produced paints and furniture reproductions are still available for sale. These aesthetic elements of the restoration overshadow the less accurate historical and social components of the site. While there were African American interpreters at the restoration, for instance, my students noticed that they were far from being 50 percent of the interpretive staff. Thus, Colonial Williamsburg was still misrepresenting this part of its presentation.

Exposing students to the inherent contradictions at Colonial Williamsburg was beneficial for them and for myself. It demonstrated to me the ways that students use to examine the past. They enjoyed the challenge of seeking out the town's inconsistencies and discussing their cause. In doing so, they were quick to spot misrepresentations and disparities which plague all attempts to recreate the past. These exercises developed their analytical abilities as well as their powers of observation. They helped my students to think critically about historical presentations and not to immediately accept what they were offered at Colonial Williamsburg. Nevertheless, many of them still experienced an increase in patriotism and a sense of the beauty and grandeur of eighteenth-century life—ideals which the restoration was trying to portray. In the end, then, the restoration was clearly successful in achieving its goal of luring modern Americans back to its idealized version of the eighteenth century, even those who had been forewarned to look out for Colonial Williamsburg's obvious deceptions.

A successful Honors course should lead students into an exploration of why they are attracted to comforting representations of their country's history even when they know—and have discovered for themselves—the inaccuracies of these representations. In this way they can better understand not only history but the lenses through which they see it.

Further details of the author's work on Colonial Williamsburg may be found in: Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002.

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