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Colonial Williamsburg

The Journal of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Spring 1987

Volume IX Number 3

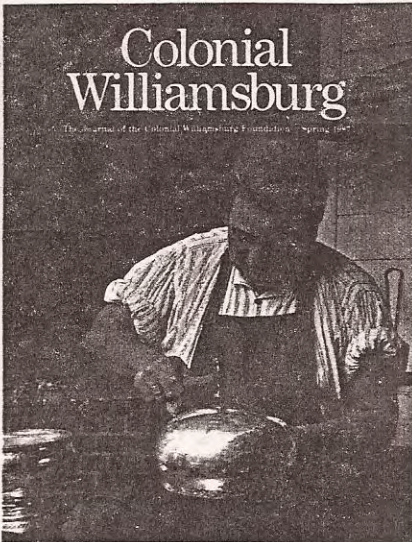

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Photo by Ron Colbroth

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Colonial Williamsburg is the quarterly journal of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the nonprofit educational organization responsible for the restoration, preservation, and interpretation of the 18th-century capital of Virginia. The journal is produced by the Media Relations Department of the Foundation, Albert O. Louer, director. The journal is available to donors of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. For information, write: Ms. Sondra Rose, Drawer C, Williamsburg, VA 23187.

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Ron Colbroth

Gunsmith George Suiter patiently shapes a flintlock plate, a task requiring many hours of filing (above). He and Blair Taylor operate the rifling machine (opposite, top), which cuts spiral grooves in the rifle's smooth barrel. In the reconstructed Anderson Blacksmith Shop Richard Guthrie, Ken Schwartz, and Peter Ross (opposite, lower, front to rear) heat and work red hot iron in three of the shop's seven forges.

cooper

rector Earl Soles, Jr. "Nobody else is even close."

Across the colonial capital and at nearby Carter's Grove plantation, in about 20 shops and assorted outdoor demonstrations, more than 100 craftsmen ply 30-odd ancient trades. Without the crafts program, Williamsburg's Historic Area would still be vast and glamorous. Its buildings would remain incomparable, and its collections fascinating. But the degree of verisimilitude would be fatally compromised. Crafts add the finishing textures of real life: noise, smell, work, banter.

"Oh, you're a troublemaker, you are," Eric Myall of the harness shop clucks to a visitor. Myall had just mentioned that 18th-century harnessmakers made their own thread, and the visitor wanted to see it done. Myall, teasing the man for putting him on the spot, expertly twisted wispy strands of hemp into thread, waxed it slick and hard, and sewed up a harness strap. The visitor was fascinated.

The genial Myall is a minority type among Williamsburg's artisans: an old-country journeyman whose skills were passed to him directly through untold generations of craftsmen. "I worked my way through. Swept the floor, packed the parcels, made the tea. Slowly and surely I began to learn how things were." He was working in a 400-year-old shop in Berkshire when he decided to come to America.

"I can relate to the New World idea," he says, pondering the days when 18th-century English craftsmen emigrated to Virginia. Myall and his family are happily, and permanently, settled in Williamsburg, but sometimes he misses England. "The main thing I miss is the people I used to know," he says. "Like my old volunteer fire brigade. And a lot of little things, like English sausage."

Only a handful of Williamsburg craftsmen share such authenticity of pedigree. The honor roll includes master cooper George Pettengell, also a Londoner, whose father and grandfathers were coopers, and who, like them, learned that exacting trade the hard way: traditional apprenticeship in a production shop. Similarly, today's master of the Anthony Hay cabinet shop, Mack Headley, comes from a family line (at least four generations) of furniture craftsmen and joiners in Virginia's Clarke County.

But most of Colonial Williamsburg's craftsmen have come to the program through other doors. Wheelwright Ron Vineyard was a fighter pilot. Dale Dippre of the print shop was a game warden. The harness shop's James Klatter was a school official, and the cooper shop's James Pettengell—who like his brother George apprenticed in England—was a film cameraman. A number of the crafts program's staff are former teachers. Other, younger beginners arrive directly from assorted campuses. Whatever their background, it is not an easy transition for a modern man or woman to learn a complex, difficult trade as it was practiced before the Industrial Revolution. To reach the coveted class of journeyman, they must complete an apprenticeship program lasting six years.

"When the apprentice graduates to journeyman level, a diploma is presented to recognize the achievement," says Earl Soles. "They've earned it. With modern technology, we are rediscovering and preserving lost trades."

The motives impelling would-be craftsmen are complex. Michael R. Kipps, ex-master of the print shop and now assistant director of the crafts program, names several. "The degree of personal accomplishment, of individual satisfaction, is very high," he says. For those who are attracted by the idea of skilled hand work, Kipps explains, there is the security of being self-supporting as one does his own thing in a pleasant, picturesque environment of other craftsmen. "And that provides peer pressure, encouraging proficiency. It's good to be recognized by fellow craftsmen." Kipps likens the craftsmen of Williamsburg to a community of artists. "The main difference is that we focus on one point in time. That's probably our only restraint."

The skills of today's Williamsburg craftsman are generally comparable to his counterpart of centuries past, and what is more, the artisan of 1987 is almost certainly a better student of the trade. It is unlikely that even the most enlightened blacksmith of 1770 Williamsburg could match Peter Ross, today's master blacksmith, in scholarly knowledge of Vulcan's millennia-long career. It is difficult to imagine a Revolutionary-era cooper diving on an ancient shipwreck to study, among its cargo, the containers of a former time. But that is a research technique of

A Cooper's Tale

Watching a colonial scene change from settlement to revolution, we see a few people emerge as spokesmen and leaders. The prominent features of these few are recorded in paintings and biographies. However, the bulk of the 18th-century faces are masked, and their individual features are hidden from apparent view. Yet, it is this mass of people who are the true warriors in colonial life.

Ordinary folk were engaged in activities of an agricultural-based economy. Seasonal chores of building and repairing dwellings or barns and common activities of construction or husbandry occupied their days. The waterfronts and dock areas teemed with human life. Ships were loaded with Virginia produce while ship masters were tabulating and registering cargo for ocean-bound voyages. Casks of tobacco, beef, pork, pitch, turpentine, and other produce were counted. Perishables and nonperishables were hoisted aboard. The brain and brawn of humanity had worked for the colonial welfare since the first settlers came ashore at Jamestown.

There were no sideline observers as the colony floundered in uncertainty and confusion. Each person played an active part in history, either grabbing for fame and fortune or grubbing for sheer survival. The romantic among us see only leaders when interpreting the historical past. But it was the hardy laborer, who, by making the soil productive, settled the colony. These people are not remembered with lofty praise but rather from a registration of birth or from a county court record—a statistic of the past.

Consider the importance of blacksmiths, carpenters, shipwrights, and coopers. Though these trades were of consequence, they were often humdrum and routine. However, this was a time of adventure and exploration. The shrinking horizons and expanding economy set the scenario for excitement.

A prominent laboring skill in the colonial period was coopering. The wooden barrel had been a supreme hauling container for many centuries in Europe. The classic design of vertical and horizontal curves bulging to an even-belly shape were its major features. The strength and mobility of this design made the container a logical choice for shipping most colonial produce. It had a handling utility of efficiency in movement. A colonial tobacco hogshead was designed that way.

Tobacco was the salvation of the Virginia economy. To stay abreast of the rapid and sustained tobacco growth, coopers were making a staggering 70,000 to 80,000 hogsheads annually. No other produce from Virginia was as profitable as tobacco. Twenty thousand pounds of tobacco had been sent as a speculation crop in 1618. By the late colonial period, the European market literally sucked in, chewed, or sniffed 70,000,000 pounds. Tobacco had generated a wealth of power and arrogance to a few people while enslaving most to unremittant labor. The escalation of the tobacco crop elevated coopering to one of the major hand skills in the colonial period.

Tobacco hogsheads, like other aspects of coopering, were subjected to colonial legislation. Laws pertaining to cask size, type of timber used, thickness and seasoning of staves were enacted. These controls are clearly expressed in the Hening's *Statutes* of October 1705:

> *that every tobacco hogshead, in which tobacco shall be packed, laid away, or put to sale, shall be made of dry and well-seasoned timber, and which hath been hewed three months at least before the setting up; and shall be sett up in strong and substancial hoops, and at least one third of an inch in thickness on the thinnest side thereof. The size of the head on the inside shall be thirty inches in diameter, and no more.*

Casks were never made better than the contents they were to contain. A commodity like tobacco seems to have required the most fundamental level of workmanship. This rudimentary-made container caused William Tatham to say, "The cooperage in respect to tobacco hogsheads is not a professional performance as in other branches of the coopering trade. Carpenters, coopers, and persons with sufficient ingenuity took up this trade."

This was an acceptable piece of workmanship and not the exceptional work for tight cooperage. The tight liquid casks had more demanding and broader parameters of hand skills to accomplish the level and standard required by law.

In retrospect, we should not equate the skill level of coopers who were making tight liquid casks to the tobacco hogshead cooper. Neither should we compare colonial coopers to their counterparts in England. English craftsmen were working under the judicious eye of a guild fraternity or parliament. America was different. Logically and with moral reasoning, the tobacco hogshead did not warrant or justify expertise in construction. It was a nonreturnable, one-way container. Crudely made and then subjected to a goliath prising machine to compress the tobacco, the hogshead would be packed with approximately one thousand pounds of good clean tobacco. Cask and tobacco were welded together in a column that sea water could not penetrate and destroy.

Those who have plowed their energy into a laboring skill have been credited to every nation's success story. There would be little evidence of the Egyptian civilization without its magnificient pyramids. The awesome columns of Stonehenge were engineered with the collective efforts of human bodies.

Skilled laborers, indentured servants, and slaves three and four centuries ago in Virginia did not leave such dramatic and monumental examples to demonstrate their efforts. But, they were made of the same tough stuff—the same human fiber. The linchpin to the eventual separation from colonial rule came from the concerted efforts of people like these.

—George Pettengell

looked and acted.

Harold Gill, a researcher who has spent most of his career at Colonial Williamsburg studying craftsmen and merchants, has led the way in making use of the new technology. One computer program he developed analyzed some 340 runaway slaves and servants, and now will answer 43 different questions about them. If anyone cares to know how many 18th-century runaways wore beards, the answer is six percent; wore leather breeches: 16 percent. Soon researchers will begin computer-analyzing the fashions of the middle and upper classes. Out of it, says Mike Kipps, will come "a transformation of our ideas about how people looked." One day, when researchers have learned enough about the product, a tailor shop will stitch today's Williamsburg even closer to the 18th century. But many other additions and improvements are on the crafts department's planning horizon.

"We're proposing a new stable complex," says Earl Soles. That pleases Richard Nicoll, head of Colonial Williamsburg's coaching and riding operations, who presently must shelter his charges in an incongruous modern building screened off from the restored area. One of the nation's leading experts in driving horse-drawn vehicles, the English-born Nicoll would have found his 18th-century counterpart as head of coaches at the Governor's Palace. He'd like to expand the already-popular coaching program for visitors: "We want to make it grand." In addition to assorted coaches, wagons, and 21 horses, he is responsible for a menagerie of oxen, sheep, cattle, and chickens. Some are rare breeds, like the "Milking Devon" cattle, dear to Nicoll's heart. "The genetic pool is dwindling for those old breeds," he says. "There's great public interest in rare domestic animals as modern agriculture tends to get more uniform."

One long-planned crafts program upgrading was completed last year. After almost 50 years of operation at the Deane Forge, the restoration's blacksmiths moved to a new location behind the Duke of Gloucester Street house of James Anderson, a prominent Revolutionary-era smith. Reconstruction of the big Anderson shop on its original site was itself a craft demonstration, as costumed housewrights and carpenters showed the public a full range of archaic skills and building techniques. The seven-forge shop now demonstrates a degree of specialization found in some crafts before the Industrial Revolution.

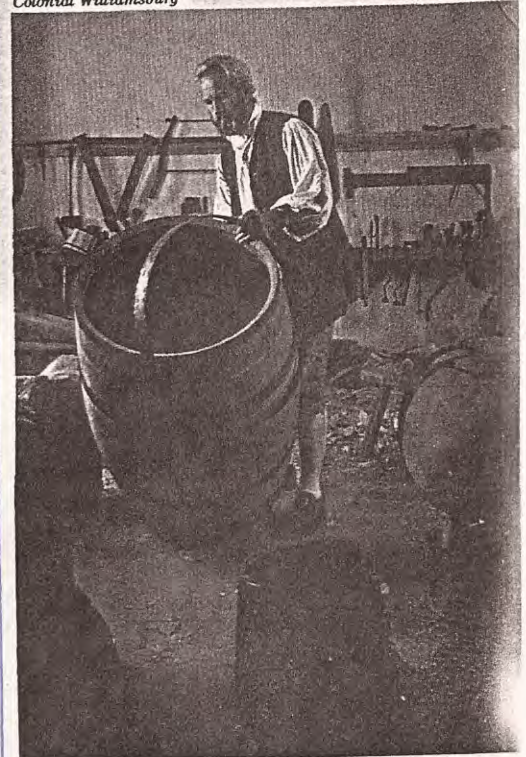
Other, less dramatic, changes mark the crafts program's widening exploration of the past. Silversmith James Curtis has rediscovered techniques of 18th-century forge work and, according to Earl Soles, "brought us lots of progress and a more complete demonstration. We'd been behind in silversmithing." The new master of the bookbindery, Bruce Plumley, studied that arcane trade at a collegiate level for seven years in England, and was managing director of an English bookbindery. "He has brought the bookbinding craft here to a level we never had," Soles reports. At the musical instrument maker's shop, Marcus Hansen succeeded long-time master George Wilson, now working behind the scenes to develop a period tool-and instrument-making capability. Garland Wood now directs the carpenter's yard, freeing master housewright Roy Underhill for special projects.

Other trades and alignments remain reassuringly familiar under such masters as printer Willie Parker, bootmaker Eugene Brown, gunsmith Gary Brumfield, Dan Berg of the Geddy Foundry, the harness shop's Irvin Diehl, wheelwright Dan Stebbins, and Cornelius Black at the windmill. Veteran basketweaver Roy Black still beguiles visitors at the Wythe House. Dennis Cotner, long the popular chief cook at the Raleigh Tavern kitchen, still confects his masterpieces, but in more elegant surroundings: he bakes for the Governor's Palace now. The wig shop under Joyce Hedgepeth, the millinery shop under Janea Whitacre, the apothecary shop under Robin Kipps, and the Wythe Kitchen under Bernetta Wake all remain essential to any understanding of Williamsburg's Golden Age. Textile demonstrations, supervised by Marilyn Wetton, complete the broad picture of life two centuries ago. "They're living artifacts," says Mike Kipps of his amazing peers, "the keepers of special knowledge and skill."

In the last half of the 18th century the Industrial Revolution was stirring, and the traditional bench craftsman entered an era of golden sunset. An age facing its final curtain may summon forth the very best of its legacy, and even as the infant factory system was born, old-line craftsmen at the benches of Britain and America scaled new heights of skill and style. The aristocrat among artisans was the man who could make the best product in the least time. Today's product may equal the early work in quality and character, but production speed is not a factor, for the Colonial Williamsburg craftsman is forever a teacher as well as a builder. He must stop to explain. Only a few of his products reach eager cash customers in the period stores of Duke of Gloucester Street. Whether plain as a barrel or elegant as a silver coffeepot, each one—in small, barely noticeable ways—is different from all the rest, because it was made by a particular pair of human hands.

"By the work one knows the workman," said Jean de La Fontaine. And by the workman, we know the past.

Colonial Williamsburg



Cooper George Pettengell fits an iron ring onto a barrel. His essay, opposite, gives a craftsman's perspective of his trade.

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