

HISTORY NEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

THE MANY PERSPECTIVES OF LOCAL HISTORY



EVALUATION OF AN EXPERIMENTAL INTERPRETIVE PROGRAM



at Colonial Williamsburg

BY RANDI KORN, SUSAN ADES, AND CONNY C. GRAFT

INTRODUCTION: THE PROGRAM

by Conny Graft

During "Meet Mr. Speaker: A Question of Politics," John Randolph (right) portrayed by Jack Finton, tries to persuade his brother Peyton, portrayed by Wayne Moss, to take a moderate stance in the quest for independence. The program illustrated themes that related to eighteenth-century family life and politics. Photo courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg.

Anyone who has been involved in planning an interpretive program has probably experienced some frustration as different members of the team struggle to create an informative, engaging, and intellectually challenging program for visitors. Historians, curators, museum educators, trainers and interpreters all argue with passion for their perspective on the specific ideas they feel are most important, as well as the different ways these ideas should be presented to the public. Debate is always healthy and the best teams purposely include a diversity of specialties and perspectives. However, unless the audience and the interpreters who will be delivering the program are involved in the process, there is a slim chance for the program to succeed with anyone outside the museum community.

At Colonial Williamsburg the process of involving visitors and interpreters in the interpretive planning experience has been both challenging and exciting. Developing ways to involve over 350 interpreters and over one million visitors has been an experiment in itself. Since 1981, with the reinterpretation of the Governor's Palace, surveys, observations, and focus groups with visitors and interpreters have aided our decisions about what and how we interpret. It was not a difficult decision, therefore, to conduct surveys with visitors and interpreters when we began to rewrite our interpretive theme in the summer of 1994.

At Colonial Williamsburg the process of involving visitors and interpreters in

In the spring of 1994, four staff members were charged by Colonial Williamsburg President Robert C. Wilburn to draft a document describing what aspects of the Williamsburg story are most important for us to teach at Colonial Williamsburg. They responded with a document entitled "Becoming Americans: Our Struggle To Be Free and Equal." The theme tells how diverse peoples, holding conflicting personal ambitions, evolved into a society that valued both liberty and equality. This theme acknowledges that Americans cherish these values as their birthright, even when their promise remains unfulfilled. The authors selected six storylines that they felt best illustrated the theme. The storylines include: "Choosing Revolution," "Nurturing Families," "Freeing Religion," "Enslaving Virginia," "Buying Respectability" and "Taking Possession."

Our assumption, then and now, was that this theme would help tie us together as an organization; help us select priorities for research, training, and program development; and provide our visitors with a clearer understanding of not only what happened in the past but how and why it came to be that way. More importantly, we believe this theme can help reveal the significance of the Williamsburg story and make it more meaningful and relevant to our lives today.

The first draft for this theme was written and distributed to interpreters and other employees of Colonial Williamsburg in the spring of 1994. The reaction from interpreters and other members of the research departments was lively and diverse. We decided the best way to see if the ideas presented in the document were appropriate to our particular environment was to run interpretive experiments during the months of July and August 1994. An interpretive planning team composed of interpreters, curators, trainers, and interpretive supervisors came together to develop and implement interpretive programs that would teach two of the storylines: "Choosing Revolution" and "Nurturing Families." Thanks to a grant from A.T.&T. and The Phillip Morris Foundation, Randi Korn & Associates conducted a front-end and a formative evalua-

tion with visitors and interpreters before and during the experiments. Our hope was that the data from this research would help us strengthen and clarify the ideas in the draft document, understand the issues we needed to resolve with interpreters, and help us plan future interpretive training programs.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION FINDINGS by Randi Korn and Susan Ades

Formative evaluation of interpretive programs helps interpretive planners understand how visitors experience and understand a program's concepts and themes before content and presentation methods are finalized. It is an interim examination of a program, and its outcomes are presented in the context of stated goals and objectives: Do visitors' experiences and thoughts correspond with the program's goals and objectives? What are the program's successes, and what are its shortcomings? What meaning do visitors take away from their experiences? Answers to such questions guide the final phase of program development.

This part of the article presents excerpts from a formative evaluation of the "Becoming Americans" interpretive program. The program was evaluated from two perspectives: visitors and interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg. First, excerpts from the visitor portion of the formative evaluation are presented, followed by excerpts from the interpreter section.

FINDINGS FROM VISITORS TO COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

Visitors were queried about, among other topics, their experiences with one of the interpretive storylines within the "Becoming Americans" theme—"Choosing Revolution." "Choosing Revolution" stresses the idea that the American Revolution was not inevitable. The issue of revolution forced "everyday" people at Williamsburg to make difficult decisions and choose sides between England and Virginia.

The goals for the interpretive program were that visitors would:

- meet and learn about the lives of individuals from the past;
- identify the "Choosing Revolution" storyline;

- make connections among sites and the people associated with them, rather than experiencing the sites as isolated entities;
- discuss the African American (slave) experience;
- discuss how interpreters present the past.

The research design included two recruited samples of visitors: the experimental group consisting of twenty-three randomly selected visitors (nine years and older) who were given a map and asked to visit at least five sites from those circled on it—sites at which the experimental interpretations were scheduled that day; and the control group consisting of twenty-one randomly selected visitors (nine years and older) who were also given a map but were free to visit any site they wished. All participating visitors agreed to be interviewed about their visit at an appointed time. An interview guide encouraged visitors to talk about their experiences in terms of "historic people" they met and the ideas interpreters discussed.

IDENTIFYING INTERPRETIVE STORYLINES

During the interviews, when visitors were asked to talk about the difficult issues of the day from the perspective of the eighteenth century, very few focused on the traumatic decision of choosing sides. The sites visited, the interpretive program at the time, a specific interpreter, and the personal traits of the visitor (background knowledge, attitudes, social situation, and personal agenda), culminate in the visitor experience—cognitively and emotionally. Visitors who participated in the evaluation and were asked to discuss their experience were grappling with a multitude of sensory inputs. The interview instrument gave visitors ample opportunity to express a variety of experiences and thoughts—which they did. If visitors' responses in the formative evaluation were solely focused on "Choosing Revolution"—to the exclusion of all else one can absorb during the course of a visit to Colonial Williamsburg—the visitor experience would seem warped. One would have hoped, however, that "Choosing Revolution" would have been more prominent in visitors' minds.

The interpretive planning experience has been both challenging and exciting.

We suggested to Colonial Williamsburg that saturating the historic area with "Choosing Revolution" would reinforce this interpretive theme. "Choosing Revolution" is already an interpretive focus at several designated sites, but at some of those sites it needs to be emphasized and reinforced. For example, formative evaluation visitors enjoyed interpretation at the trade shops, but a few noticed that the impending Revolution was not included in the information being conveyed.

In addition, by beginning interpretive programs with an orientation to the storyline and finishing with a discussion and synthesis of important issues, visitors can see a complete picture of the theme. Engaging the audience through a variety of interpretive strategies can effectively communicate "Choosing Revolution." For example, in one interpretation, "Susannah Beverly Randolph: A Daughter's Dilemma," a contextualist interpreter sets the scene and then visitors listen to Susannah and a friend talk about the heart-wrenching decision Susannah must make. After visitors observe this conversation, the contextualist reiterates the essence of their discussion and poses thought-provoking questions to visitors. Contextualists are important in setting the scene, orienting visitors, providing closure, and softening the interaction with character interpreters for those visitors intimidated by that kind of experience.

First-person interpretations also make strong impressions on visitors. There is a correlation between those people deemed "most memorable" by visitors and the figures who were portrayed through first-person interpretation. More

first-person interpretation, as well as visitors' being able to see character interpreters around town, will reinforce these historic people and the storyline in visitors' minds.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SITES AND PEOPLE

Some visitors did see Colonial Williamsburg as a community. However, their descriptions did not include people—the social fabric that knit the town together.



Bill Weldon portrays eighteenth-century patriot and orator Patrick Henry, during the "Choosing Revolution" tour at the Capitol at Colonial Williamsburg. Visitors watched and listened as Henry delivered a rousing soliloquy on the need for independence. Photo courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg.

er. These visitors described the physical site, acknowledged that Williamsburg included people from many classes and backgrounds, and saw that the layout was like many towns. Visitors will not be able to see connections among the people and places in the town until they see people as a meaningful part of the physical layout. Conveying the idea that the people in

Colonial Williamsburg are like the people in any town and that they form an interesting social fabric will help visitors recognize Colonial Williamsburg as an interactive community. By continually being exposed to the lives of the people who lived in Colonial Williamsburg in the eighteenth century, visitors will come to see the historic area as a living town with a rich social life. Third-person interpreters can convey this idea to visitors (in a very concrete and literal way), but first-person interpreters can illustrate those words.

AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

In our interviews, no white visitor talked specifically about the irony of colonists fighting for their freedom while supporting the institution of slavery. A few, however, acknowledged the unfairness and difficulty of a slave's life. Some African American visitors did not agree with how slaves and blacks were portrayed and said they were not prominent enough in the interpretation. Others would have preferred that free blacks and the contributions that slaves and blacks made to the Williamsburg community be mentioned.

Increasing the number of programming hours dedicated to the stories of slaves at individual sites and increasing the number of sites at which they are presented will provide visitors with more exposure to the African American interpretive program. Seeing and hearing the stories of Lydia, Gowen, Will, or Mary—the enslaved people of Williamsburg—is unforgettable. Visitors need to be offered a more detailed view of African American history in the eighteenth century.

THE BENEFITS OF A STRUCTURED VISIT

By looking at some of the differences between the experiences of experimental group (those who were asked to visit specific sites) and control group visitors (those who visited sites of their own choosing), it is possible to identify benefits of a structured-visit approach. Three main differences between the experimental and control group emerged:

- African American issues: More experimental group visitors witnessed the slave experience and heard about

slaves than did control group visitors. Experimental group visitors had three times as many comments about slaves as did control group visitors.

- "Choosing Revolution" storyline: More experimental group than control group visitors were on the verge of grasping the "Choosing Revolution" theme. These visitors mentioned issues and events that preceded the Revolution, such as the issue of "Taxation without Representation" and the Stamp Act. They did not, however, discuss how these issues and events factored into the larger issue of choosing sides.
- Connections between sites and people: Twenty-five percent of experimental group and only nine percent of control group visitors saw meaningful connections among sites in the historic area. While twenty-five percent is not a notable outcome, it is nearly three times the outcome of the control group. These differences suggest that a struc-

tured visit can affect visitors' hearing and understanding the themes that are of greatest importance. Providing visitors with an option to experience the site within a predetermined conceptual framework may increase the educational potential. For those visitors who need and prefer to have some direction when visiting a large historic site, the option to follow a structured visit will be appreciated and utilized, as noted by some experimental group visitors during informal conversations that took place after concluding the interviews. These visitors reported being relieved about not having to choose among the daunting number of sites and welcomed being told where to go. For example, one visitor stated, "We looked at [the map] and said 'Okay, what do we want to do?' But you know what? This whole thing was great. It got us to go to certain places. We said, 'This is perfect.' It was, it really was."

An array of potential experiences is

available to visitors as they tour Colonial Williamsburg. Exhibition evaluators have shown that visitors who are provided concepts and storylines at the beginning of their visit are more likely to recognize and realize the educational goals of the exhibition. The same likely holds true for visitors to historic sites. For visitors to embrace a storyline, they must be made aware of its presence. Using multiple avenues to introduce the storylines and conceptual framework will increase the chances of visitors' receiving the intended message.

For visitors, less becomes more, so highlighting one storyline within a structured, thematic option may also help visitors grasp the essence of the storyline. At Colonial Williamsburg, for example, "Choosing Revolution" is a rich storyline within which many ideas and issues can be presented. Evaluation research suggests visitors respond best to ideas that are focused, isolated, and presented within a consistent framework. Experimental group visitors support this finding. Multiple stories may very well weaken the visitor experience because visitors may be unable to distinguish and decipher one storyline from another—not through any fault of their own.

Visitors are capable of dealing with multiple ideas, but informal learning environments are not necessarily conducive to comprehending complicated, multiple concepts. During a visit, as visitors encounter and sift through important ideas, they simultaneously experience stimuli irrelevant to the ideas at hand, have social experiences, and deal with young children, among other things. One storyline that is well-conceived can encompass many important ideas and is likely to be more compatible with the kind of learning that is possible to achieve in an informal learning environment such as Colonial Williamsburg.

FINDINGS FROM INTERPRETERS AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

This section of the article focuses on the interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg. Early in the process of planning the evaluation of the "Becoming Americans" program, staff members decided that input from interpreters would be critical to the success of the

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project. Three goals were articulated for this phase of the evaluation. They are to:

- Solicit interpreters' responses to integrating two storylines—"Choosing Revolution" and "Nurturing Families"—into their interpretations and making linkages among sites in the historic area;
- Identify interpreters' thoughts about the team process by which the "Becoming Americans" program was developed and determine if interpreters felt they were part of the "Becoming Americans" team;
- Find out what improvements Colonial Williamsburg can make to help interpreters in their work.

Twenty-two randomly selected interpreters, from all departments at Colonial Williamsburg, were interviewed for the study. An open-ended interview guide was used to structure conversations with interpreters. Interpreters were encouraged to be as candid as possible in the interviews. Interpreters discussed their experiences interpreting two storylines: "Choosing Revolution" and "Nurturing Families." "Nurturing Families" is a storyline that describes a shift in the basic nature of families. In the eighteenth century, the older paternalistic family ideal began giving way to a newer, more openly affectionate family.

STORYLINES AND LINKAGES AMONG SITES

The interviews with interpreters uncovered a variety of perspectives relating to "Choosing Revolution" and "Nurturing Families." One of the most significant is the degree to which interpreters disagreed with issues of content. Almost seventy-five percent of interpreters questioned the accuracy of some aspect of the storylines' content or raised issues of forcing or stretching historical research to make those storylines fit their sites. This is a significant finding. It indicates that interpreters are thinking in depth about their interpretations, are concerned about the scholarship of their work, and want their work to live up to Colonial Williamsburg's reputation.

"Choosing Revolution" is a relatively straightforward storyline, and interpreters seemed comfortable with incor-

porating the theme into their interpretations. "Nurturing Families," on the other hand, is much more problematic. Some interpreters expressed confusion about the meaning of this storyline. Either because they did not have adequate time to prepare for the new interpretations, did not read materials provided to them by the staff, or found those materials unclear, these interpreters were unsure what was expected of them regarding this storyline.

Very few interpreters described the content of "Nurturing Families" in the same way that it was defined originally by the "Becoming Americans" team. Most considered "Nurturing Families" to mean talking about families in the historic area and providing visitors with details from individual family members' lives.

Linkages among sites in the historic area seemed spotty. While some interpreters found it easy to make linkages, others found it uncomfortable or said it depended

on the site. Some people and places were easy to connect to each other, while others were more difficult. Interpreters also had various understandings of linkages, with some thinking that name-dropping was sufficient and others attempting more complex linkages of themes and interpretations. Clearly, communication between "Becoming Americans" team members and front-line interpreters could have been stronger regarding the "Nurturing Families" storyline.

TEAM PROCESS

Most of the interpreters supported the team process by which the "Becoming Americans" program was developed. Although several people felt they had no outlet through which to express their opinions, most seemed fairly comfortable with existing channels of communication. There was significant dissatisfaction with the team process in the composition of the team. Numerous interpreters,

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This tension between order and freedom is not new.

whether they held positive or negative views, thought more front-line interpreters should have been represented on it. It was a common opinion that those "on the ground" could better represent the visitor experience than those who worked strictly in offices.

It was suggested that Colonial Williamsburg may want to include more front-line staff on planning teams. Interpreters with significant experience facing the public should have contributions to make to the shaping of new programs and interpretive directions. The people who will have to implement new interpretations deserve a role in their development.

IMPROVEMENTS TO THE PROCESS

A significant issue raised by a number of interpreters centered around the timing of the experimental program—the difficulty of trying out new interpretations with summer audiences—as well as the lack of time to prepare for those interpretations. Some interpreters spoke painfully of burnout, while others were frustrated at not being able to polish their presentations to satisfaction. Many interpreters saw summer's visitation as dramatically different from that of other seasons, and suggested that the experiment might have been more successful if tested any other time of the year. This issue of summer and summer visitors arose numerous times and in numerous contexts.

Randi Korn & Associates suggested that summer is not the best time to test new interpretive programs and that Colonial Williamsburg may want to utilize other periods of high visitation for these kinds of pilot programs. In summer, interpreters had neither the time to prepare for their new interpretations nor the time with visitors to explore concepts in depth. This combination of factors, which caused a great deal of stress in some interpreters, seems avoidable with additional planning. Staff may want to offer interpreters longer lead times when introducing new programs and ensure that they have ample research opportunities before they have to face the public.

Most interpreters were satisfied with the amount of content training they received. Content courses generally

scored high marks, although several interpreters were not pleased with the lecture-style of the courses. Many interpreters, though, saw a pressing need for more interpretive training. Specific areas of interpretive training they asked for included how to interpret to multi-generational groups, how to interpret in a more interactive style, and how to utilize eighteenth-century body language in interpretations.

We suggested that Colonial Williamsburg offer more courses in interpretive techniques. Although interpreters asked for different types of interpretive training, a common thread running throughout the requests was communication—how to connect better with audiences. As noted by some interpreters, trainers may want to vary the techniques used in their classes and not rely solely on lectures, particularly when teaching interpretive and interactive communication.

Finally, more than half of the interpreters described a need for additional interpreters. This need is likely linked to the summer issue and the great pressure interpreters feel when visitation, particularly family visitation, increases. Some interpreters spoke of the need for more first-person interpretation, indicating that this interpretive technique is both popular and effective in teaching history to contemporary audiences.

AFTERWARD: THE PLAN

by Conny Graft

Since the experiments and evaluation, six interpretive planning teams and a steering committee have been hard at work involving more interpreters and support staff in the shaping of the storylines and the overall theme. Each team used the findings in Randi Korn & Associates' report to guide their decisions. A revised draft has now been completed and given to all interpreters and support staff. Discussion sessions with interested employees were held in August and September 1995, and the ideas and issues raised in those sessions will augment the document which will be presented to the Board of Trustees in November. In the spring of 1996 we will be conducting another study with visitors and interpreters which will help us gauge the level of success we are reaching each year as we begin to introduce the theme in our

interpretations. Periodic assessments over the course of the next four years will continue to guide our decisions about the way we train interpreters and how we present our ideas to different segments of our audience. Lest I leave you thinking this has been a smooth and easy process, let me assure you that in addition to many staff enthusiasts, there are also interpreters and support staff still wondering whether we can really pull it off. Despite the skepticism, there are definitely more interpreters and support staff involved in the process and enthusiastic about the possibilities the theme presents than there were a year ago. And, in recent focus groups with families about their experiences in the historic area, aspects of the "Becoming Americans" theme actually came out in the discussion when group members were asked what they had learned!

The single most difficult challenge for many of us involved in the planning process has been to develop an interpretive theme for the historic area that simultaneously gives everyone some parameters and direction, but also allows staff and visitors freedom and creativity to discover the past on their own terms. This tension between order and freedom is not new and is one that Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry were familiar with. Just as our forefathers dared to experiment with new ways of balancing individual freedoms with order, we too will continue to experiment with providing our staff and visitors with a balance of order and freedom as they discover the aspects of the Williamsburg story that are meaningful to them. Key to our efforts to achieve this balance will be ongoing assessments of staff and visitors' reactions as we gain new insights about the eighteenth century and about the best ways to reveal those insights to our twentieth-century audiences. →

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