

Building a Better Colonial Williamsburg

By [Jennifer Schuessler](#)

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Virginia's reconstructed colonial capital, long criticized as presenting an idealized image of the American Revolution, brings its history into the 21st century.



A fife and drum band at Colonial Williamsburg, in Virginia, which describes itself as the world's largest living history museum. Credit...Matt Eich for The New York Times

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. — Those who come to Colonial Williamsburg on a nostalgia trip will find some of what they are looking for.

The fife-and-drum corps can still be found marching down Duke of Gloucester Street, whose storefronts are full of costumed interpreters making 18th-century wigs, or re-enacting the [political debates](#) that helped birth the American Revolution.

But approach the stocks and pillories in front of the courthouse to recreate a goofy photo from a long-ago school trip, and you will find the headpieces bolted shut.

They were closed up in the spring of 2020, as a Covid-related measure. And they have remained that way, as Colonial Williamsburg — the world’s largest “living history” museum — [rethinks the messages](#) behind a favorite Instagram moment.

“These are friendly stocks,” Matt Webster, the director for architectural preservation, explained on a recent tour (during which he also pointed out the less-than-friendly whipping post nearby).

And not particularly accurate ones, at that. The 18th-century stocks would have been higher, smaller and more uncomfortable. “They were meant,” Webster said, “to humiliate.”

The modified stocks are an apt metaphor for today’s Colonial Williamsburg, a 301-acre complex consisting of more than 600 restored or reconstructed 18th-century buildings, 30 gardens, five hotels, three theaters, two art museums and a long, tangled history of grappling with questions of authenticity, national identity and what it means to get the past “right.”



In the 18th-century, Virginia law required all courthouses to have a stock and pillory outside. In 2020, Colonial Williamsburg bolted the headpiece shut, to discourage what had been a popular photo opportunity. Credit...Matt Eich for The New York Times

After decades of declining attendance and [financial instability](#), the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the private entity that owns and operates the site, is rethinking not just some of its structures, but also the stories it tells, adding or expanding offerings relating to Black, Native American and L.G.B.T.Q. history.

And it's doing so amid a fierce partisan battle over American history, when the date "1776" — emblazoned on souvenir baseball hats on sale here — has become a [partisan rallying cry](#).

Some [conservative activists](#) have accused Colonial Williamsburg of going "[woke](#)," a charge [also lobbed](#) against Monticello and Montpelier, James Madison's home. But [Cliff Fleet](#), a former tobacco executive who took over as the foundation's president and CEO in early 2020, firmly rejects it.



Cliff Fleet, Colonial Williamsburg's CEO and president, has leaned into the mission of "fact-based history." "Everything is going to be what actually happened," he said. "That's who we are." Credit...Matt Eich for The New York Times

Fleet describes his approach as leaning into Colonial Williamsburg's longtime mission of presenting "fact-based history," grounded in rigorous research.

“That’s true to our brand,” he said. “Everything is going to be what actually happened. That’s who we are.”

Recounting “what actually happened” is no simple matter, as any historian will tell you. But when it comes to the state of contemporary Colonial Williamsburg, some facts speak powerfully.

In 2021, the foundation raised a [record-breaking](#) \$102 million, up 42 percent from the previous high in 2019. To date, it has collected more than \$6 million for the excavation and reconstruction of the First Baptist Church, home to one of the earliest Black congregations in the United States (founded in 1776), and more than \$8 million for the restoration of the Bray School, which educated free and enslaved Black children in the 1760s and ’70s.

Those projects have won support across the political spectrum, including from Gov. Glenn Youngkin. In February, the governor — a Republican who on his first day in office signed an [executive order](#) banning the teaching of critical race theory and other “inherently divisive concepts” in public schools — spoke at an event for the Bray School, citing the need “to teach all of our history, all of it, [the good and the bad](#).”

For some longtime Williamsburg-watchers, the institution’s leadership has deftly steered through today’s choppy political waters by staying true to the past.

“It’s a remarkable shift, but in some ways a return to C.W.’s original mission,” said Karin Wulf, a historian and the former executive director of the [Omohundro Institute](#), an independent research group at the College of William & Mary.

“The scholarship of decades has shown us this fuller, richer picture of Early America,” Wulf said. “It’s diverse, it’s complex, it’s violent. But it’s the real thing.”

A Patriotic Shrine

Colonial Williamsburg has its own complicated founding story. In the 1920s, a [local minister](#) persuaded John D. Rockefeller Jr. to quietly buy most of the historic area, with the goal of recreating Virginia’s 18th-century colonial capital, down to each historically correct brick and nail.

Hundreds of post-1800 structures were dismantled or moved. More than 80 surviving 18th-century buildings were restored, while the foundations of more than 500 others were excavated so that painstakingly researched replica structures could be built on top of them.



More than 60 pre-1800 buildings have been restored, with hundreds more rebuilt on their excavated foundations. Here, the foundations of the Governors Palace in 1930. Credit... Visual Resources, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; Photo by Thomas Layton

After World War II, Colonial Williamsburg became a patriotic shrine and “symbol of democracy in the troubled world,” as a top executive put it. The Bicentennial brought a new boom, with annual paid attendance peaking in the mid-1980s at 1.1 million visitors, many of whom bedded down in [period-style](#) inns (or snapped up authorized colonial-style [home products](#)).

But not everyone appreciated the tastefully spic-and-span aesthetic. Writing in *The New York Times* in 1963, the architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable [called it](#) a “superbly executed vacuum,” which fostered “an unforgivable fuzziness between the values of the real and the imitation.”

The carefully tended history also stirred criticism, particularly as social history, with its emphasis on ordinary people and marginalized groups, surged in the academy.



A street in Colonial Williamsburg, where the Grand Union flag indicates a building is open. Credit...Matt Eich for The New York Times



The site preserves more than 20 historic trades, including bookbinding. Credit...Matt Eich for The New York Times



Products made in the blacksmith shop include nails used in the town's restored and reconstructed 18th-century buildings. Credit...Matt Eich for The New York Times



A costumed interpreter portraying President George Washington. Interpreters are encouraged to break character to explain the research their portrayal draws on. Credit...Matt Eich for The New York Times

In the 1770s, [more than half](#) of the town's 1,800 residents were Black, though visitors to the modern-day recreation would not always have known it.

[“Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot,”](#) the rousing orientation film that started running in the visitors center in 1957, included few Black faces. Even into the 1980s, Black employees in the historic area generally worked as (costumed) custodians, coachmen or cooks — seen but little heard.

“It was a very subservient role,” Ron Hurst, the senior vice president for education and historic resources, said. “Consciously or unconsciously, that’s how it was.”

A shift began in 1979, when the foundation introduced “first-person” costumed interpreters portraying ordinary people, white and Black. In 1984, it created a dedicated African American history unit, led by [Rex Ellis](#), who in 2001 became the foundation’s first Black vice president.

But the unit’s work sometimes coexisted uneasily with more traditional presentations. In their 1997 book [“The New History in an Old Museum,”](#) the anthropologists Richard Handler and Eric Gable described how Black interpreters would raise the fraught subject of interracial relationships, which some white interpreters shied away from as not based on [“documented facts.”](#)

Some programs did put the brutal realities of slavery front and center. In 1994, the Black history department organized [re-enactment of a slave auction](#), which drew protests from the N.A.A.C.P. and other civil rights groups. And in 1999, as part of a yearlong project called [Enslaving Virginia](#), one performance featured costumed interpreters portraying slave leaders and slave owners, while visitors (who were overwhelmingly white) were cast in the role of the enslaved.

Christy Coleman, a former interpreter who is now executive director of the [Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation](#), organized and performed in the 1994 auction. At the time, she said, “there was a lot of mistrust around what Williamsburg was doing with Black history.” The backlash, she said, “took an emotional toll.”

Coleman said she was impressed by Fleet — whose four degrees from William & Mary include a master’s in history — and his commitment to telling a fuller story.

“In many ways, these are things that are 30 years old, but were never given real legs, and never given financial support by the foundation,” she said.

The current direction also has strong board support, according to Carly Fiorina, the business executive and former Republican presidential candidate, who

became the chair in December 2020. A few donors, Fiorina said, were initially “a little concerned” about the [L.G.B.T.Q. history](#) programs, which were announced in 2019. But they are grounded in evidence, Fiorina emphasized.



A view down Duke of Gloucester Street, from the reconstructed Capitol Building, one of more than 500 18th-century buildings that have been rebuilt on their excavated foundations. Credit...Matt Eich for The New York Times

Thomas Jefferson, she said, is “still here.” But now, “you’re going to hear more of the story,” she said. “And you’re going to hear more of the story because it’s true.”

You Intentionally Covered It Up’

“True” is a word heard often at Williamsburg, where interpreters — including one portraying [Oconostota](#), an 18th-century Cherokee diplomat who came to Williamsburg in 1777 — regularly break character to explain the evidence behind their stories.

The foundation’s audience research, Fleet said, indicates that showing your work helps built trust.

“One of the most important things to do, particularly in this age of polarization, is to let them know how you know,” he said.



Kody Grant, who has worked at Colonial Williamsburg since 2015, recently began portraying Oconostota, a Cherokee leader who came to Williamsburg in 1777 on a diplomatic mission. Credit...Matt Eich for The New York Times

‘The [First Baptist Church](#) project exemplifies how Colonial Williamsburg’s storytelling is literally built from the ground up, and rooted in discoveries — and rediscoveries — on site.

In 1953, the foundation bought the church’s mid-19th-century building from the congregation (which constructed a new building across town) [and demolished it](#), as was customary with post-1800 buildings. In 1965, the site was paved over and used as a parking lot.

In 1998, James Ingram, a church member working at Colonial Williamsburg, began portraying [Gowan Pamphlet](#), an enslaved man who was among the congregation’s first ministers. But the demolished church remained a point of contention.



Fleet said he decided to move forward with the excavation and reconstruction in early March 2020, after a meeting with Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of the church’s [Let Freedom Ring Foundation](#).

Harshaw was blunt. “I said, ‘You intentionally covered it up, you should intentionally uncover it,’” she recalled.

James Ingram (wearing period-correct glasses) portrays Gowan Pamphlet, a minister at the First Baptist Church, one of the earliest Black congregations in the United States. Credit...Matt Eich for The New York Timesimage

On a recent tour, Jack Gary, the director of archaeology, described the artifacts excavated so far, including coins, buttons, doll fragments and, near the entrance to the original structure, some 160 straight pins — likely dropped by congregants removing hats and shawls. “Here, it’s the women who are visible,” Gary said.



Excavations at the site of the First Baptist Church, former home to one of the first Black congregations in the United States. The original church building is set to be rebuilt by 2026. Credit...Matt Eich for The New York Times

Last month, at a private meeting, researchers presented DNA testing on remains from some of the roughly 60 gravesites [uncovered](#) so far. The whole project, Fleet said, is “descendant-driven,” with permission sought every step of the way.

The Bray School project, a collaboration with William & Mary, is similarly community-driven. Over the decades, Coleman said, Black interpreters regularly talked about the school and its students. But no one knew for sure what had happened to the building. Image



A wall of the Bray School, a building recently rediscovered. It had been incorporated into an early-20th-century structure at the College of William & Mary. Some 400 Black children attended Bray in the 1760s and '70s. Credit...Matt Eich for The New York Times

In 2021, a hunch that it had been moved to the William & Mary campus and incorporated into another building was [confirmed](#). The structure was extracted, and in February it was moved to a site next to the church, in [a grand ceremonial occasion](#).

There were speeches by Governor Youngkin and other dignitaries and, as the modest two-story building rolled back home, a group of schoolchildren [holding signs](#) with the names of some of the nearly 400 Black children, free and enslaved, who had studied there.

“It was one of the single most powerful examples of how you can do history like this, in a way that brings people together,” Fleet said.