● THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

interpreter

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18th-century Clothing: Searching the Records

We asked Linda Baumgarten, curator of textiles, to provide some answers to questions interpreters ask about clothing in colonial Virginia.

The clothing worn by eighteenth-century Virginians is of great interest to visitors and staff members alike. Because it was such an intimate part of daily life and something that everyone owned, clothing can tell us much about attitudes toward fashion and personal appearance.

More than one eighteenth-century visitor to the southern colonies reported that many residents here wore clothing comparable to English fashions of the day. William Eddis, who lived in Annapolis in the early 1770s, wrote back to England, "I am almost inclined to believe that a new fashion is adopted earlier by the polished and affluent American, than by many opulent persons in the great metropolis." This opinion was shared by the Reverend Jonathan Boucher, who wrote to a friend, "I assure you Mrs. James, the common Planter's Daughters here go every Day in finer Cloaths than I have seen content you for a Summer's Sunday . . . Nay, so much does their Taste run after dress that they tell me I may see in Virginia more brilliant Assemblies than I ever c'd in the North of Engl'd, and except Royal Ones, p'rhaps in any Part of it."

Clothing was obtained from a variety of sources. Some garments were made to measure in London; other items such as shoes, gloves, stays, petticoats, and stockings were imported readymade; still other pieces were made in Virginia by tailors, seamstresses, staymakers, and milliners using materials imported or woven here.

Home production of clothing was more often the norm in the isolated rural areas than it was in Williamsburg. The Reverend Devereux Jarratt wrote about his youthful years in New Kent County, "Our raiment was altogether my mother's manufacture, except for hats and shoes, the latter of which we never put on, but in the winter season."

Although contemporary accounts make it clear that some Williamsburg residents and wealthy planters kept abreast of London fashion, it is much more difficult to answer the frequently asked question, How many garments were owned by the "average" colonist? A study of York County inventories offers only limited insight into the number owned. Clothing was frequently given away or willed. Some inventories do not list any clothing; others contain the frustrating entry,

(continued, p. 2)

The Exchange

Gary Brumfield, master gunsmith, contributed these remarks about our article "What Did It Cost?":

As the basis for our winter training, we used the sentence "The wages of journeymen craftsmen in Virginia ranged from £27 to £35 per year with an average of about £30" from Mr. Gill's essay. The article in the recent *Interpreter* used a different phrase, "Another observer commented that . . . carpenters and blacksmiths earned 7 shillings 6 pence a day (about £100 a year)."

Both these figures are based on original documentation, but they are for two completely different circumstances. The former is the actual salary earned by craftsmen, while the latter is the cost of a day's work. A simple modern comparison would be the difference between an auto mechanic's wage and what the garage charges for the work.

I feel that for most cost-to-earnings comparisons we should stick to the £30 a year wage for a journeyman craftsman. Ideally, interpreters should be familiar with all the information in the essay "Prices and Wages in 1750" and be able to call upon the knowledge whenever needed.

Clothing, *continued*

"a parcel of wearing cloathes." Sometimes the widow or widower held items back when the inventory was taken. The widow of Thomas Bennet did just that in 1750; the inventory-takers noted that she held back some money, several pairs of sheets, the table linens, and all her husband's clothes.

Even more critical to our attempt to arrive at an "average" is the factor of choice. The proportion of income spent on clothing was as much a personal decision in the past as it is today. This can be illustrated by two inventories. John Parkin died in 1745, leaving an estate of £52.6.6. For one with a modest personal estate, he owned rather elegant clothing, including a damask waistcoat and a silk damask banyan (a long informal garment worn by men). He also owned 3 coats, 10 jackets, a waistcoat, 9 pairs of breeches, 11 shirts, 4 pairs of shoes, a pair of boots, 9 caps, a hat, 9 pairs of hose, a nightgown, and 3 wigs. William Brookes left an estate of comparable value, £50.0.7, yet he owned fewer and less elegant clothes. Brookes's inventory lists 3 coats, 3 waistcoats, 2 pairs of breeches, 2 shirts (one unmade), a pair of boots, a pair of stockings, 2 hats, 2 wigs, and a great coat. Some men owned only one or two suits of clothes; others, like Governor Botetourt, can only be described as "clothes horses." The Governor owned numerous suits of clothes, including 62 shirts and 152 pairs of stockings!

A woman's clothing was considered the property of her husband during his lifetime and became hers only upon his death. Thus if she died before her husband, or if most of her clothing was worn out or disposed of before her death, the record of her wardrobe would be lost to us. Among the York County records only six women's inventories between 1745 and 1760 specifically enumerate clothing. Of them the number of gowns (that is, dresses) ranges from three to over a dozen, but one can hardly generalize from a sample of six! Our only record of Mrs. Peyton Randolph's clothing exists in her will in which she bequeathed all her "wearing cloths" to her niece, Elizabeth Harrison. Mary Willing Byrd of Westover likewise bequeathed to her maid "such of my wearing apparel as my children may think proper for her to have." Unfortunately, neither woman itemized the clothing mentioned in the wills.

What can we say about wearing apparel and its importance in the eighteenth century? It is probably safe to say that wardrobes were not as large as those owned by most twentieth-century Americans. In an era when fashion's silhouette changed more slowly than today, clothing was worn and skillfully mended for years, remodeled when necessary, and handed down to the next generation or to servants. Aside from personal variations, one's clothing generally reflected social status. This was indicated by the elegance of materials and trimmings more than by the cut of the costume. A woman of the upper class might own more gowns of imported silk damask, Indian cotton chintz, or the finest English printed calico; a less affluent woman might wear Virginia cotton or the cheaper grades of imported fabric — woolen, coarse calico, or linen. A man of the upper class might wear suits of silk or "superfine" broadcloth (woolen) with a shirt of fine linen; craftsmen might wear suits of coarse woolen cloth or buckskin breeches with a shirt of checks or coarse linen called "Oznaburg."

The film "Colonial Clothing, 1760–1770," screened periodically at the Information Center, answers some of our questions about clothing customs in the eighteenth century. Mildred Lanier, former curator of textiles, is preparing a book on this subject.

Textiles — Homemade and Imported

One of the realities of life in colonial Virginia was dependence upon England and the Continent for the majority of manufactured goods, especially textiles. While we may think of successful tobacco planters as self-sufficient, most couldn't manufacture profitably — despite their many slaves and servants — any significant part of the cloth needed for attire and household use. Virginia planters sent hogsheads of tobacco by the thousands to England and in return received shipload after shipload of English and European goods, among which were many bolts of textiles — fine and coarse, dear and cheap. French, German, and Dutch cloth all came to the colonies by way of English port cities.

For townspeople the situation was one of still stronger reliance on imports. We see evidence of this for Williamsburg in the small number of eighteenth-century American tex-

tiles on exhibit, as well as in surviving descriptions of clothing and interior uses of textiles by residents.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, cloth production workers in England and Europe were divided into groups performing special tasks. The division of labor brought about a degree of efficiency that meant the finished products could be sold at good prices. In this period American labor was both scarce and expensive, so excellent quality fabrics could be imported more cheaply than made at home.

Recent research has proved that textiles made up the most numerous category of stock (and the largest portion of the merchant's investment) in eighteenth-century stores that sold imported goods exclusively. This is true for Virginia, as well as for Boston and Philadelphia.

Yardgoods were valued highly enough to be given as legacies in wills. Estate inventories enumerate yard after yard of sheeting, bedticking, and other materials, including even "motheaten" and "damnify'd" pieces and small remnants.

Not until the 1760s and '70s did Virginians become proud of their local product. The importation boycotts of 1764, 1765, and 1769 made it every patriot's duty to wear cloth of American manufacture. In 1769 nearly a hundred ladies appeared at a ball at the Capitol in homespun gowns. The wearing of Virginia cloth (any textile made in the colony regardless of fiber), was applauded as "preferable . . . to foreign frippery and nonsense" and as a "Badge and Distinction of Respect, & true Patriotism."

During the French and Indian War, the English textile industry went into recession, a situation that worsened with the American boycotts. Unemployment forced skilled workers to immigrate to the colonies, sometimes as indentured servants. The arrival of significant numbers of skilled workers made American factories possible. One of them was established in Williamsburg on Capitol Landing Road on the north side of Queen's Creek. Supported by quarterly payments from such prominent citizens as Robert Carter Nicholas and John Blair, the Manufactory advertised for a manager, several weavers and spinners, at least ten apprentices, a wool comber, and flax hatcheler. The factory bought raw cotton, hemp, wool, and flax and sold finished cloth from 1776 until at least 1784.

Occurrences

Many of you have been reading Cynthia Long's sprightly and informative *Garden Journal,* which she was written and distributed for posting on sundry Historic Area bulletin boards each month since April. Cynthia, a hostess in Exhibition Buildings, surveys the gardens in the Historic Area, does her own research, writes and types the articles, and even includes graphic illustrations. Her cheery, descriptive writing style is fun to read, and it's reassuring to know that you can quote the *Garden Journal* with confidence: Cynthia has a degree in biology from San Diego State University, has taught high school biology, and is an enthusiastic amateur gardener.

Whether you have the opportunity to share your newly acquired horticultural information with guests, or simply enjoy your walks more because you like to know something about the plant life you see, Cynthia has made it easier and more fun with the *Garden Journal.* If the *Garden Journal* does not appear on bulletin boards near you, give Barb Beaman a call (extension 2387) and she'll see that you get copies.

Have you been by the Print Shop and Book Bindery lately? Interesting things are happening there. Paste paper, a common means (unlike marbleing) of putting decorative designs into paper is being experimented with at the bindery. Mark Howell did the initial research on this project. New editions of the *Virginia Gazette* are being printed in the press room now, and some books, such as *Every Man His Own Doctor, or, The Poor Planter's Physician,* will go to press in early December. Mike Kipps and his colleagues want interpreters to give them a call and arrange to see a demonstration of the paste paper process as fresh copies of the *Virginia Gazette* or some popular eighteenth-century title come off the press.

November 8–11 should be memorable days in Williamsburg. Our first Colonial Fair Days will be held then on and about Market Square. The Craft Shops Department and the Company of Colonial Performers are preparing four busy days of craft goods retailing, games, competitions, entertainment, and other happenings. They aim to recreate the busy and festive atmosphere fairs had in colonial Williamsburg. It will be a full schedule of events that visitors, townspeople — and you — won't want to miss.

The Other Half:

A book review by Kevin Kelly

The study of women in history is a fairly recent event, yet a standard interpretation has already evolved. It holds that the industrialization of the nineteenth century robbed women of their economic importance within households, causing a decline in their status. Such an interpretation tends to cast the eighteenth century as a "golden age" for women. It is just this notion that Mary Beth Norton challenges in *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston, 1980). Instead of sexual equality within the household, she argues that eighteenth-century women were thought inferior to men, and that women shared this low opinion of their own worth. Only the Revolution changed this situation.

To prove her point, Norton first examines the major roles — household mistress, wife, and mother — that defined women's positions in the mid-eighteenth century. She finds that housekeeping was universally disliked. Marriage marked a great change for most eighteenth-century women, but Norton believes it was simply a move from one dependency to another.

If housework was unsatisfying and marriage only a little less so, most eighteenth-century women gained greater pleasure from motherhood. Nevertheless, it is Norton's conclusion that only when an eighteenth-century woman became a widow did she realize any real autonomy.

According to Norton, the Revolution worked three important changes for women. First, it politicized domestic activities. Second, the long absences of husbands, away in the army or at congress, forced both sexes to accept women's financial decisionmaking. Finally, the growing cult of republicanism stressed the mother's role as educator. This led directly to the improvement of education of women.

Mary Beth Norton dispels the romantic notion that women experienced a golden age in the eighteenth century. But this book does not completely disprove the negative impact industrialization had on women. On balance, this is a valuable and important work. It clearly recognizes regional as well as racial differences upon the experiences of women. But more importantly, the author allows eighteenth-century women to speak for themselves.

Questions & Answers

What did the term "tithable" mean in the eighteenth century?

It was a noun applied to those people who were subject to the payment of taxes to county, parish, or colony. All income producers — males sixteen and older and females of the same age except white women — were tithables.

Did all women wear hoops in the eighteenth century?

The fashion for hoops ebbed and flowed during the eighteenth century as subtle changes occurred in the fashionable silhouette. It is possible to see in the same painting a lady wearing side hoops next to one without them. Exceptionally wide, exaggerated hoops were worn at various times for very dressy occasions and for court wear, which was more conservative and traditional. Women who did physical labor would not wear hoops while working, although they might own a gown that called for some kind of hoops for dressy occasions. Not all women wore hoops all the time; whether they were worn depended on fashion, economics, the occasion, and personal choice.

The King's English

Broadcloth — a woolen fabric fulled after weaving to shrink it. Then it was napped and shorn to produce a velvety surface and used for fine men's suits and so forth.

Calash — a large folding lady's hat. It was built with arches of cane covered with silk. (This is the kind of hat John Fry bought in Williamsburg for his wife in *The Story of a Patriot.)*

Castor — a hat made of beaver felt.

Cudgel — a crude, heavy walking stick.

Three-cornered hat — a turned up or "cock" hat. The term "tricorne" wasn't used before 1800.

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Editor: Barbara Beaman
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