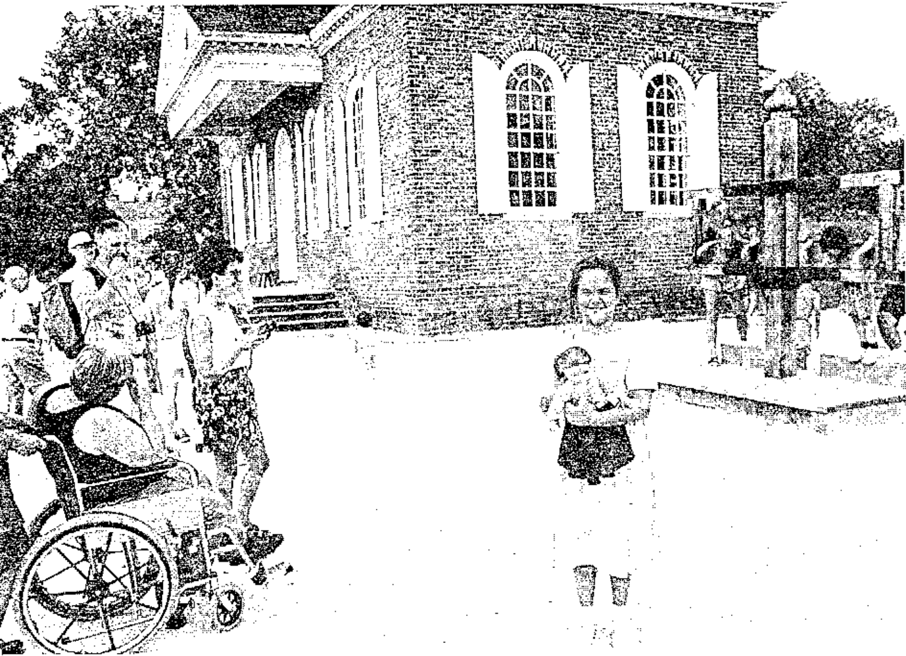


isitors at the Courthouse on the Duke of Gloucester Street.
hoto by Eric Gable)

1 ▪ *The New History in an Old Museum*

Road Apples

There is no more evocative symbol for the current state of American history museums than the horse droppings that decorate the neat streets of Colonial Williamsburg—America's premier outdoor history museum. Manure is authentic dirt, an instance and symbol of natural disorder. Museums are carefully managed realms of classification where every thing is kept in its place. If Colonial Williamsburg lets the horse chips fall where they may, and indeed wants those chips to be something every visitor notices, what does that signify?

Colonial Williamsburg is a place not ordinarily associated with a dirty past. For many years, the museum has attracted a million visitors annually, people who come to see a tidy and elegant Revolutionary-era community. They come to watch the fife-and-drum corps and the militia parade down the Duke of Gloucester Street, or to observe the many craftspeople—blacksmiths, gunsmiths, silversmiths, weavers, coopers, cooks, and many others—hard at work. On sweltering summer days, these visitors are willing to stand in long lines to enter the well-appointed homes of the colonial burghers, where they will admire the furnishings of a satisfying domesticity—the wallpaper, the draperies, the furniture, the prints, the dried flowers, the china on

which are set the simulacra of meats, pastries, and fruits. They wish to gaze at the good life, and they eagerly buy expensive reproductions or facsimilies of what they see displayed in the town's restored houses. Ultimately these visitors come, so nearly every one of them will tell you, to learn about "the past," "their past"—the collective truth about the way life "really was" back at the founding of the great American nation.

At Colonial Williamsburg, manure on otherwise clean streets signifies something about the way Americans generally think of life in "their past." Life was at once less pleasant and more organic—closer to nature. But the recent purposeful leaving of horse droppings on the streets also signifies something about a change in the way Colonial Williamsburg wishes to portray the past. The manure represents the coming of the new social history.[1]

Social history came to Colonial Williamsburg in the 1970s. It had developed, so say its acolytes, out of the turmoil of the previous decade as a new way of telling the American story. And it was brought to Colonial Williamsburg at a time of declining visitation. According to social history's proponents in the museum, the entrenched version of the American story focused too narrowly on "great men" and elites, and ignored the works and lives of the vast majority of the American population. Moreover, it was too exclusively celebratory. It privileged national consensus and ignored social conflict, thereby cleansing American history of oppression, exploitation, injustice, and struggle. That fewer Americans were coming to Colonial Williamsburg indicated that after Vietnam, Watergate, and the turmoil of the Civil Rights movement, the public was no longer willing to buy the old history of consensus and celebration. The new social history was meant to redress the balance and reclaim Colonial Williamsburg's market share. The museum would continue to celebrate American identity and American community, but it would no longer be silent about past injustices and their ramifications in the present. In short, the past that social history introduced into the museum was to be a dirtier past, both literally and metaphorically.[2]

The new social history challenged established history making in another, perhaps more profound way. It was more explicitly "constructionist" or "relativistic" than the histories it sought to supplant. Its proponents argued that historical truths are socially produced by particular people with particular interests and biases. The truths embodied in historical stories are thus not absolute or universal, but relative to the cultural context in which they are made. Other people, elsewhere, might use the same events and facts to tell different histories or, prompted by the desire to tell different stories, might

work to discover previously overlooked facts. The new social historians wanted to acquaint the public with these constructionist arguments. They wanted to encourage their audiences to think critically about the relationship of present-day politics and culture to the histories they were hearing, reading, or seeing. If history, anybody's history, had an agenda, how was one to recognize it? From this critical perspective the authoritarian objectivism of history museums had to be challenged, and the museum had to be made to teach a different theory of history.[3]

When they were brought onboard in the mid-1970s, the new generation of social historians and administrators knew that changing Colonial Williamsburg would not be an easy task. Blocking the way, first, were the interests and attitudes of those who sponsored the patriotic ideology the institution had always purveyed. Critics of museums in general, and of Colonial Williamsburg in particular, have long pointed out that these venerable institutions represent hegemonic values, values congenial to the elites who establish, fund, and administer them. At Colonial Williamsburg, the American story had been a story celebrating the success of the colonial upper crust, and, by extension, of wealthy individuals like the Rockefellers who used philanthropy to link their genealogies to the American founding fathers. Not only did this version of the Williamsburg story celebrate these great men, it also celebrated America's greatness, asserting that every American citizen has a fair chance of achieving similar success because the American social order, based on universal democratic values, is fundamentally just. The entrenched Williamsburg story, then, affirmed the status quo. Thus it was (and is) reasonable to suppose that those who profited from the status quo—those who controlled the museum—would resist changing that story.[4]

A second obstacle to change was built into the very structure of the institution. Colonial Williamsburg was set up, in the late 1920s, as a hybrid organization, a nonprofit foundation with one "side" devoted to the general business of running the place and the other devoted to the museum's cultural and educational work. When the museum became a mass tourist destination after World War II, it developed increasingly complex organizational structures and routines for dealing with a large, paying public. Like many other large museums, it increasingly found itself operating on the border between mass entertainment and mass education.[5] The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's mission statement spoke of high educational principles, but the museum catered to an audience that was not captive, and one, moreover, that was often "on vacation." If the social historians were to change the history

that Colonial Williamsburg told, they would have to prove that a new history was what their audiences wanted, or at least that revisionism could be compatible with commercial viability.

Despite these obstacles, Colonial Williamsburg's new historians and administrators launched both initiatives, both historiographical and organizational, to remake the foundation. And certainly by the time we began extended field research there, in early 1990, the stories that were being told on the "front line"—that is, on the museum-city's streets, where museum staff members meet visitors—were rather different from those reported for earlier times. For example, it is difficult to imagine a newspaper journalist in the 1950s beginning a feature article on Colonial Williamsburg with a discussion of "road apples," but that is what we found in the Sunday paper as we were writing this chapter in the summer of 1994. The lead article in the travel section, entitled "Authenticity: Colonial Williamsburg Strives for That 18th-Century Atmosphere, Right Down to the Road Apples," began:

> Road apples.
>
> That was my mother's euphemism for horse droppings. Road apples.
>
> When I first, uh, stumbled upon them as I was strolling down the middle of Nicholson Street in Colonial Williamsburg, I was—elated!
>
> Would you find road apples littering Main Street, U.S.A., in Florida's Walt Disney World? Never!
>
> You'll find them here, though; and that fact says a lot about what Colonial Williamsburg is—and what it isn't.
>
> For years, Colonial Williamsburg was burdened with a reputation—among a somewhat cynical group of travelers who, no doubt, thought of themselves as the cognoscenti—as a too-cute, too-contrived, Disneyesque re-creation of what was once the capital of the British colony of Virginia. A historical theme park.
>
> But that is precisely what it isn't. . . .
>
> It is authenticity that the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation . . . has sought since John D. Rockefeller Jr. began funding the restoration . . . in 1926.

Having asserted that authenticity is Colonial Williamsburg's mission, the author continued by describing a sampling of the museum's offerings. Highest on his list was the Other Half Tour, which offered "an education about one of the sorrier chapters in the nation's history," teaching that "it was the large slave population that allowed this town's residents to maintain their atypically high-level colonial lifestyle." Here, in a nutshell, we found two of the key topics the social historians had worked into the revised Williamsburg story: the history of previously excluded people such as African American slaves, and the social history of consumerism, of the material culture of everyday life.

The rest of the article, however, dwelt on themes and scenes that have played at Colonial Williamsburg for half a century: the Raleigh Tavern and the Capitol, where "the first stirrings of the movement for American independence found root"; the Peyton Randolph House and the Governor's Palace, "where visitors can get the best view of how Williamsburg's 18th-century gentry lived, dressed, ate and amused themselves"; and the ubiquitous costumed colonial craftworkers. Finally, the two color photographs that dominated the article on the printed page countered the social historians' road apples with thoroughly conventional images of Colonial Williamsburg: tulips, white clapboard buildings and white picket fences, and (as the caption puts it) the "fife and drum corps deliver[ing] a splash of color as well as Revolutionary War period music."[6]

In this newspaper article, road apples and tulips, slavery and patriotism coexist in textual space as if they belong together. Assembled, they add up to a single thing—"authenticity." Yet, as we were to discover as we conducted anthropological field research in the museum-city over a period of two years, these images can also represent mutually contradictory paradigms of a collective past. To people who work at or visit Colonial Williamsburg, shit and tulips, slavery and Revolutionary-era soldiers can be seen as opposing icons representing the struggle between critical history and celebratory history, a dirty past and a Disney past, a new history and an old one.

As juxtaposed paradigms, new history and old also have come to represent opposed sides in what conservative intellectuals have managed to characterize as a "culture war." According to them, the so-called tenured radicals have infiltrated American institutions of higher learning and subverted them, waging an insurgent campaign against every foundational value—the true, the good—that makes this civilization great. Although they assert that the insurgency is widespread in the liberal arts, they emphasize that a particular point of subversion has been in the teaching of history.

Recently, conservative critics have found museum exhibits mounted by social historians to be particularly apt targets for what they envision as a counterattack against an entrenched academic radicalism. The controversies surrounding "The West as America" exhibit at the National Museum of American Art and the attempt by curators at the National Air and Space Museum to portray a revisionist history of the nuclear bombing of Hiro-

shima and Nagasaki have made public and plausible the conservative critique. In the more extreme forms of the conservative position, American history is a narrative of progress, which, however, is constantly in danger of losing its pedagogic power if it is stripped of its essential optimism. From such a perspective, there is a fine line between putting manure on the streets of an American shrine for the sake of verisimilitude and besmirching American identity by dwelling on what is dirty about the nation's collective past. The new social history is often portrayed as crossing that line and erasing virtue by rubbing Americans' noses in their collective villainy or victimhood.

Unlike the curators who mounted "The West as America" exhibit or those who tried to mount the *Enola Gay* exhibit, Colonial Williamsburg's social historians have never been a prominent target of conservative critique. Yet because the new social history has been assimilated into Colonial Williamsburg's narrative of nationhood, this site is a perfect place to study how Americans who work at and visit it recognize and reconcile conflicting versions of the past in the vernacular. This book is our attempt to put into an ethnographic context what for the most part has become uncontested polemic. A guiding question for us is: To what extent have the radical messages of the new social history become common belief and practice at Colonial Williamsburg? By looking at what happens to history on the ground in a particular place, at a particular time, we will show that social history has hardly had the kind of insurgent effect its critics claim for it.

The Museum as a Social Arena

This book is an anthropological study of Colonial Williamsburg, an American history museum and a modern nonprofit corporation. Our work is part of a burgeoning new scholarship focusing on museums as arenas for the significant convergence of political and cultural forces. Intellectual developments both within and beyond the academy have made it impossible to continue to view museums as simple repositories of cultural and historical treasures. Questions about what counts as a cultural treasure—or even what counts as culture—about what history means, and about who has the power to assign value to cultural and historical productions have been too pointedly raised to allow established cultural institutions to continue business as usual.[7]

The new scholarship on museums originates in a variety of disciplines—anthropology, archaeology, art history, cultural studies, history, literature, and philosophy. Despite differing disciplinary traditions, most of this work addresses a common set of interconnected concerns. First are questions

about cultural representation: How do museums collect, classify, and display material artifacts to convey images of various human groups understood to be culturally different? And in what terms, more generally, is cultural difference evaluated in museums? Next are questions about the ideologies and interests that underpin or are reinforced by those representations of culture: Who establishes museums and who chooses their contents? What ideological propositions subtend those choices? Whose interests are served by the particular visions of cultural difference that museum displays authorize? Finally, there are questions about audiences: How do museums construct their audiences by welcoming some visitors but discouraging others? How do audiences receive—accept, resist, or reinterpret—the messages museums convey?[8]

These common questions can be pursued in a variety of ways, but most museum scholarship to date has confined itself to a rather narrow range of what anthropologists sometimes call data. Museums produce messages, or meaningful statements and actions. Scholars and critics of museums try to answer the sorts of questions mentioned above by reading, or interpreting, those messages. Due largely to disciplinary conventions, most scholars who study museums work from already produced messages—that is, they examine museum exhibits, texts about such exhibits (whether the catalogs that accompany them or the critical responses they provoke), other texts produced by museums (gift catalogs, public relations and fund-raising brochures, glossy periodicals such as *Smithsonian* and *Colonial Williamsburg*), and, for those whose topic is historical, the usual array of documents that can cast light on the values and intentions of earlier generations of museum founders, patrons, directors, and curators. A partial exception to this generalization is research on audience response, for this sort of work in a sense creates texts by interviewing or surveying museum visitors and recording their responses. Still, most audience research is conducted after the fact—after the visit has occurred—and in this sense remains a study of a completed text, a past response (although, clearly, visitors tailor their account of their responses according to the interview or survey situation in which they find themselves).[9]

As valuable as much of this research is, very little of it focuses on the museum as a social arena in which many people of differing backgrounds continuously and routinely interact to produce, exchange, and consume messages. Some scholars have attended to aspects of institutional histories and dynamics, but there has been almost no ethnographic inquiry into museums as arenas of ongoing, organized activities. As a result, *most research on museums has proceeded by ignoring much of what happens in them.* Museum scholars have

exhaustively studied what we have called already completed museum messages, but only rarely have they examined the institutional life through which museum workers and audiences create those messages.[10]

Anthropological fieldwork is a research method well suited to avoid this oversight. The basic intention of our research project was to study the production and consumption of museum messages in relation to the institutional context in which those processes occurred. How, we asked, might museum exhibits take shape and change as they pass through the various phases of their development within a large organization like Colonial Williamsburg? What do different people—curators, historians, education specialists, frontline interpreters, visitors—contribute to the making of those messages? What are the different kinds of social interactions in which museum meanings are generated?

Put more simply, our object was to study what goes on in museums, not only onstage, as it were—where visitors take in exhibits—but behind the scenes, where scores of museum employees work weeks, months, even years to produce the completed museum displays that visitors so casually consume. We were interested, we told ourselves in our most ambitious moments, in the total social life of a contemporary museum.

Such a project is hopelessly grandiose and, we gradually learned, impossible to accomplish. Yet our ambitions were informed by the research conventions of our own discipline, anthropology, and the totalizing implications of its central theoretical concept, culture. Anthropologically trained fieldworkers try to immerse themselves in a social situation without predetermining what is and isn't important in it. Of course, researchers are always swayed by unconscious prejudices, and even the most indiscriminately inquisitive ethnographers will miss much of what is going on around them. Nevertheless, we believe that we approached Colonial Williamsburg with a more open-minded attitude concerning what might be relevant to the study of a museum than is characteristic of many museum researchers. By this we mean that we treated Colonial Williamsburg as a complete social world—a reconstructed village and a nonprofit corporation—and tried to be curious about everything that went on in it, from history making to merchandising to labor relations to after-hours socializing. We tried persistently to ask how the activities that took place there—some of them apparently far removed from the foundation's publicly asserted educational mission—might nonetheless come to influence the accomplishment of that mission.

Although we fell short of our goal to study all of Colonial Williamsburg (for reasons we will discuss), the beneficial results of our attempt to do so are

threefold. First, in our research we have been able to consider a wider range of museum messages than that considered in most museum scholarship; second, we have been able to study some of the social processes of message making that such scholarship largely ignores; and, third, our approach makes it possible to complicate the triadic model of cultural producer–cultural product–cultural consumer that has become the norm for the critical interpretation of cultural representations (like museum displays) in mass societies.

With regard to our first point, examining a wide range of museum messages, we noted above that most students of museums focus on already completed messages—exhibits, catalogs, reviews, and visitor surveys. We noted also that those messages result from only a small fraction of all the communicative events that occur within museums. It is obvious that the museum's publicly foregrounded messages are influenced by other messages and communicative processes not normally open to public inspection—messages and processes that contribute to the final, public, product. Studying backstage messages, then, should lead to new interpretive insights about the kinds of museum exhibits and discourses to which most critical analysis has heretofore confined itself.*

To illustrate: during our fieldwork we gradually came to understand that internal audiences are at least as important as the visitors who are conventionally thought to be the museum's audience. This became clear when we attended a three-week training session for a group of new interpreters and saw historians, curators, and educators teaching frontline personnel how they were to teach the public. In other words, in this scenario, museum professionals rehearsed for other museum professionals selected episodes of the Colonial Williamsburg story. The teachers did not in any simple sense tell their trainees what to say. Rather, they outlined the themes (politics, family life, religion) the museum had decided to emphasize, the stories appropriate to each, the artifacts available to convey those stories, the historical documents underpinning both the stories and the artifacts, the particular interpretive difficulties that various artifacts and buildings posed, and the questions visitors were likely to ask.

*At Colonial Williamsburg, and at many other museums, onstage versus backstage is more than a simple dichotomy due to the pervasive front-staging of backstage scenes during which visitors, assigned temporary VIP status for one reason or another, are taken behind the scenes to see how the museum "really" works. Needless to say, these backstage scenes are themselves carefully staged, and the preparation and planning that go into them are not available to public scrutiny. As ethnographers, we gained some access to back stages from which most visitors are excluded; but even those back stages were prepared, we presume, in ways beyond our ken.

During our research we were able to compare the stories told during such training sessions with the stories interpreters delivered to visitors on the front line. We could also look at planning documents and research reports produced before the time of our research by the foundation's researchers and administrators; those guiding documents could then be compared with the messages disseminated in training sessions. And we were able to interview people involved in every stage of a museum message's passage from the drawing board to the public. This meant that we could ask Colonial Williamsburg insiders why such-and-such a story was told in this setting, why or how it had changed from setting to setting, and whether they thought the storytellers' intentions were served or thwarted by the final versions that reached the public. None of the answers we received to such questions were definitive; nor, indeed, could they be, since the messages we were studying were multiply authored and beyond the control of any one person, no matter how highly or strategically placed within the institution. Still, the differing commentaries of the foundation's many storytellers challenged our evolving interpretations of history making in the museum.

As museum messages are translated through the institution, they change. This brings us to the second point mentioned above, the social production of museum messages. To study how historical research is transformed into educational programs to be impressed on frontline interpreters who in turn tell stories (based on those programs) to the public is to study not only changes in meaning but the social factors that influence such changes. To take an example that we will develop later in the book, the museum historians' notions of what a critical social history should include developed in dialogue with the research and ideas of their colleagues in the academy. In its initial stages, the revised Colonial Williamsburg story was significantly informed by this audience of professional historians. Not only did (and do) the foundation's historians interact at professional meetings and through professional publications with their academic colleagues, their relationships to those colleagues were (and are) influenced by the institutional relationships of museums to universities (relationships marked by vexing assessments of relative scholarly prestige).

Now, to develop this example one step further: as this academically informed version of the Colonial Williamsburg story is translated into stories for a broader public, a second group of interlocutors, the visitors, plays a role in its production. This is a complicated business that we will examine later in some detail; for now, suffice it to say that museum professionals have definite ideas about what audiences will tolerate, and that "what" entails not only the content of museum stories but the manner of their presentation. In brief, teaching history to the public is a social encounter with rules of its own, some of which are imposed on the situation by the museum (its values and expectations), and some by what the visitors bring to it. The result is that the history told on the front line at Colonial Williamsburg is in some respects different from the history that appears on the printed pages of foundation planning documents. This is hardly surprising, but neither should it be overlooked in the study of museum messages.

Focusing on the social production of museum messages caused us to rethink the dominant model of cultural production that guides research in museum studies and cultural studies. Scholars working in these fields typically pursue three interrelated sorts of questions. As we suggested above, they ask about the ideological meanings contained in cultural representations, about the relationship of those ideological meanings to the interests and intentions of the producers of cultural products, and about the ways consumers interpret the products they receive, either reproducing or resisting the meanings intended by cultural producers.

This model too neatly delineates producers and consumers of messages, in effect reifying them as isolable agents and neglecting the complex ways in which the parties to communicative exchanges are mutually constituted in the very process of exchange. At Colonial Williamsburg, for example, are the internal audiences—the frontline employees—producers or consumers of museum messages? They are, of course, both. At the very least, then, an analysis of their role in the production of Colonial Williamsburg's messages will have to consider the separate moments in which they receive, or consume, a version of those messages and then reauthor them vis-à-vis the visiting public.

But even making this adjustment leaves intact the model of discrete producers and consumers of messages; frontline employees may play both roles, but this sort of analysis does not question the distinctiveness of the roles themselves. We found, however, that producers of messages at Colonial Williamsburg held certain distinctive ideas about their audience that profoundly affected their communicative work. Museum professionals have become increasingly concerned with "visitor response." At Colonial Williamsburg, they were constantly trying to monitor their audience—to discover how visitors were consuming historical products—and to use that information to modify those products according to the needs and desires of their consumers, as the institution defined them. Every new program they instituted, every shift in interpretive focus they argued for, arose at least in part,

they claimed, out of visitor needs and desires. In short, the producers of history at Colonial Williamsburg portrayed themselves as responding to an audience—one, to be sure, whose interests were often hard to fathom, but one whose interests were nonetheless salient.[11]

More generally, Colonial Williamsburg's producers operated with the same three-part model of producer-product-consumer that museum analysts presuppose. This means that the theoretical schema that guides much museum research is itself part of the field of study. The cultural representations generated at Colonial Williamsburg were full of self-conscious talk about the producers' intentions; and moreover, intent itself was always entangled in a "native" version of a dialogical relationship between producer and consumer. Because of this, we have eschewed the producer-product-consumer schema as an organizational framework within which to present the results of our research. As explained above, we, too, are interested in the production and consumption of cultural representations, but in our fieldwork we found that we could not neatly dissociate the moment of production from the moment of consumption, or producers from consumers.

To recapitulate: the questions that informed our work at Colonial Williamsburg did not differ fundamentally from those asked by other scholars of museums. We wanted to learn about the meanings conveyed in the history told at Colonial Williamsburg and about the cultural and ideological motivations of its producers and consumers. As anthropological fieldworkers, however, we considered more aspects of museum life than most museum scholars consider. And this, we feel, adds significantly to what we have to say about Colonial Williamsburg and, more generally, about the cultural politics of history museums.

Serendipity and Structure in Field Research

We began field research in January 1990. Almost every week, accompanied by Anna Lawson, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology, we traveled 120 miles from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville to Williamsburg, returning home after a stay of one or two (or, during the summers, three or four) days. We continued this sustained field research through the summer of 1991, after which our visits to Williamsburg tapered off.

In Williamsburg, we interviewed people employed by the foundation, from vice presidents to department managers to frontline interpreters to backstage "support" personnel (secretaries, researchers, seamstresses, gardeners, etc.). We repeatedly toured all the museum's buildings and attended

as many special programs and events as we could. We tape-recorded (and then transcribed) almost all interviews, tours, and programs, and tried to return copies of transcripts to interviewees to provide them with a record of their remarks as well as to pursue further interviews. We presented occasional workshops to staff interested in our developing research. And we worked regularly in the foundation's byzantine archives, sorting through administrative documents to track changing policies and attitudes as well as to glean statistics on visitors, ticket sales, and budgets.

We gradually learned that our plan to study the entire foundation was infeasible, even for three researchers. Colonial Williamsburg is, as Kenneth Hudson puts it in *Museums of Influence,* "the site museum to end all site museums."[12] Its core is the restored portion of the city of Williamsburg, which runs for about a mile along the broad Duke of Gloucester Street. The 173-acre Historic Area, as this district is called, included at the time of our research "over one hundred gardens and greens" and eighty-eight "original" buildings, plus "an additional fifty major buildings and a large number of smaller structures" that had been reconstructed from the ground up "on their original sites."[13] In all, the reconstructed and restored capital had more than five hundred buildings, of which three dozen or so were open to the public. They included impressive public edifices like the Governor's Palace and the Capitol (both reconstructed); several places of business (taverns, stores, and craftshops); elegant private homes; and the outbuildings, or "dependencies," including a few used to depict the living and work quarters of black slaves, who made up half the population of the eighteenth-century city.

Just beyond the Historic Area is Bassett Hall, an eighteenth-century house that served as the Williamsburg residence of John D. Rockefeller Jr. and his wife, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. This, too, was open to the public during the period of our research, as was Carter's Grove, a James River plantation which, though eight miles from the center of Williamsburg, is "owned and operated" by the foundation. In addition to a mansion house, Carter's Grove includes a reconstructed slave quarter, the "partially rebuilt structures of Wolstenholme Towne, one of the earliest English settlements in the New World," and (opened to the public at the end of our fieldwork) the Winthrop Rockefeller Archaeology Museum. The Abby Aldridge Rockefeller Folk Art Center and the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Gallery are museums immediately adjacent to the Historic Area. So large, then, is this site museum, Colonial Williamsburg, that it contains other large museums.[14]

The educational work of the foundation is carried out by a large and varied staff. Frontline interpreters, most of whom are costumed in eighteenth-

century clothing, talk to the public about American history and colonial life. The categories of interpreters are constantly changing at Colonial Williamsburg, but during the time of our field research the most important were the following. "Historic interpreters" led groups of visitors through particular buildings or on outdoor walking tours focused thematically on such topics as Colonial Williamsburg's gardens or women's history. "Character interpreters" were "living history" performers who spoke to the public in the "first person" (as opposed to the "third person" employed by the historic interpreters), that is, as eighteenth-century people. (Since these characters were "living" in 1770, they feigned ignorance when anachronistic questions were posed to them—about, for example, the American Revolution. The dozen or so members of the all-black Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation (AAIP) employed both first- and third-person techniques to teach black history. They also created an array of programs—musical and dramatic presentations, storytelling sessions, and videos—to get their messages across. Craftspersons simultaneously practiced their "historic trades" (about three dozen different ones at the time of our research) and "interpreted" them to the public, as did the workers who tended to the museum's livestock—oxen, horses, cattle, sheep, and poultry. "Visitor aides" took tickets, monitored crowds, and answered the questions, both practical and historical, of passers-by. Costumed "sales interpreters" staffed the cash registers in the shops selling period merchandise to the public and were expected to be able to provide historical information about the wares on display.

The frontline personnel are "supported" by a large complement of specialists and "trained" by still others. Curators, historians, archaeologists, archivists, and librarians work backstage to provide the information, stories, and programs the museum conveys to its public. Many of these specialists deliver lectures and presentations to specialized audiences (like groups of donors) or to the general public concerning both eighteenth-century topics and the work they do to learn about them. Education specialists train the museum's frontline employees and also work with elementary and high school teachers to devise special programs for the many student groups that visit Colonial Williamsburg every year.

So much for the education, or museum, side of the foundation. There is also the business side. From its inception, the project known to the public as Colonial Williamsburg was established as two corporations, as explained in *Colonial Williamsburg: The First Twenty-five Years* (1952): "Colonial Williamsburg, Incorporated, was formed to serve the historical and educational purposes of the organization, and holds title to properties within the designated historic areas. Williamsburg Restoration, Incorporated, is a business organization and holds title to properties which have been purchased for business uses. The term 'Colonial Williamsburg' has been adopted as the institutional name to define the entire project and includes both corporations."[15] Over the years the legal relationship between the two corporate entities has been changed several times with an eye to efficiency, the maximization of income, and in response to changing federal tax codes. In 1970, the two corporations mentioned above were merged to become the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. In 1983, the foundation's board approved "the formation of a new hotel subsidiary . . . Colonial Williamsburg Hotel Properties, Incorporated," which was to operate "on a budget separate from the parent corporation."[16] This was the legal relationship of the foundation's two sides at the time of our research.

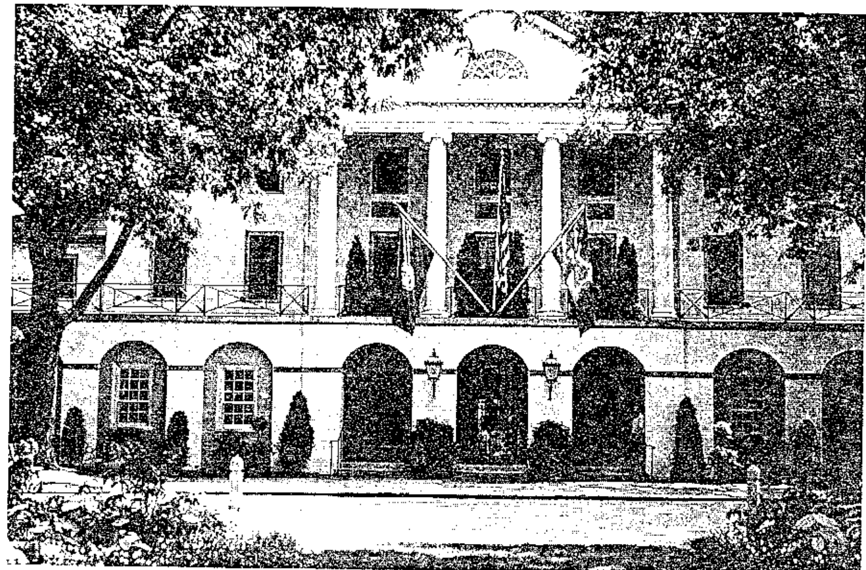
More important, for our purposes, than the formal corporate structure of the foundation is the fact that so much of what goes on there occurs in organizational units devoted to business and administration. There are divisions or departments for advertising and marketing, for the foundation's four hotels and seven restaurants, for facilities and property management, for products (from expensive reproduction furniture to trifling souvenirs), for corporate planning and finance, and for personnel, or "human resources." As is the case with most large, bureaucratic institutions, the specifics of corporate organization change continually, and it is beyond the purpose of this book to attempt to chart them. What is crucial is to recognize that in addition to the highly visible historically costumed employees, the vast majority of the backstage staff who work at Colonial Williamsburg are not historians and curators but waiters and waitresses, maids and bellhops, janitors and laundresses, secretaries and computer specialists, gardeners and construction workers, bus drivers and security officers, and the scores of supervisors and managers who oversee those workers' routines.

And then, of course, there are the visitors—since the early 1970s, a million paying visitors each year, give or take a hundred thousand. Colonial Williamsburg published marketing research data profiling the museum's visitors during the period of our fieldwork. "Most of our visitors come from within a 500-mile radius, primarily from the Northeast states," the marketers announced. The "top markets" (in order of importance) were New York City, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Norfolk, Harrisburg,

Street scene. (photo by Eric Gable)

Cleveland, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. Important markets not from the eastern half of the United States included Los Angeles (eleventh), Canada (thirteenth), San Francisco (fourteenth), and Dallas (nineteenth). Typical visitors, according to these data, "are between the ages of 35 and 64," "are married," "have gone to college," "earn $30,000 or more per year," "travel primarily in pairs or with children," and "have visited before."[17] From our own observations, we would add that visitors to Colonial Williamsburg are predominantly white, except for urban school groups. Families with children are prominent among the museum's visitors, but although the foundation nurtures an image of itself as family oriented, its survey data indicate that families are in the minority; the commonest social unit visiting Colonial Williamsburg is the couple. We should also note that the composition of the visiting public varies with the seasons: families with children are most common in the summer, school groups tour in the late spring and early summer, and retired people tend to come in the autumn and winter.[18]

We have said that the size and complexity of Colonial Williamsburg thwarted our ambition to study the place in its totality. Our academic expertise had prepared us to study the business of history making but not the business of business. Yet the business aspects of Colonial Williamsburg were both central to its daily life and a frequent topic of conversation among



The Williamsburg Inn. (photo by Molly Handler)

employees, even (perhaps especially, as we will discuss below) those on the museum side. Thus, in our ambition to study *everything* that was going on around us, we inquired about business operations as well as history making.

We gradually learned, however, that we would never have enough time to make a detailed ethnographic study of each administrative unit or functional specialty within the foundation. In part this was due to the ethnographer's predilection to focus closely on what we might call the microsociology of human interaction and, in the process, to try to learn something of the life histories and motivations of the participants. In doing so we came to know more than casually perhaps two dozen people at Colonial Williamsburg. We also conducted more than two hundred interviews with individual employees at various levels of the foundation and more than fifty interviews with visitors (these lasted anywhere from less than an hour to seven hours and ultimately yielded many hundreds of typed pages of transcripts). But what one gains in depth one loses in breadth; inevitably, we learned more about some people and some aspects of the foundation than about others.

The choices that ethnographers make as research unfolds (at times it seemed to unravel!) are prompted both by serendipity and by a developing understanding of what is important. Serendipity comes in the form of personal relationships that engage or satisfy both researcher and "native con-

sultant"—as opposed to those that fail; the kinds of access the researcher is granted to files, to closed meetings, and to backstage programs and facilities; the kinds of events that one happens on, from after-hours parties to once-only presentations of special programs—including such "historic" events as the picketing of Colonial Williamsburg by the foundation's unionized hotel and restaurant workers early in 1991; and the particular collection of mostly public, but sometimes strictly internal, documents the researcher happens to amass.

An anecdote is in order here. While working in the archives, we learned of a class of documents that we thought might be useful but were not available to us without special permission. We raised the matter with the appropriate corporate vice president, who, after some consideration, denied us access on the grounds that the documents in question might refer to delicate personnel matters. When we mentioned this casually to another vice president, he immediately gave us a stack (several years' worth) of the documents in question—which, though they circulated only among administrative officers, were apparently little read by them. He would eventually, he told us, discard his copies anyway, and he let us keep them. We found that they contained few delicate personnel matters, and in any case we have not drawn on them for such material.

In the end, we focused most of our attention on five aspects of museum life. First was the museum's public educational programs. We toured every building that was open during the time of our research at least once, usually several times; for each, we taped and transcribed at least one example of a complete tour and often several examples using different interpreters and audiences. We also attended (and usually taped) at least one version of most of the special programs (plays, lectures, and backstage demonstrations) that occurred regularly during our research. And we conducted extensive interviews with frontline personnel and visitors.

Second, we conducted a series of interviews with the staff members who worked with objects and artifacts. This included both museum-side personnel in the Department of Collections and business-side personnel responsible for developing and marketing products, as well as archaeologists and architectural historians.

Third, we paid close attention to the hotel and restaurant workers' union during early 1991, when its members picketed Colonial Williamsburg during a contract dispute.

Fourth, we tried to be systematic in studying the foundation's corporate culture by interviewing most of the seventeen or so vice presidents as well as many department heads, managers, and supervisors. We also collected and studied the endless public relations literature that Colonial Williamsburg addresses to a range of audiences, both internal and external.*

Fifth, we realized quickly that African American history was the linchpin of historical revisionism at the foundation, and so our associate, Anna Lawson, agreed to focus her research on the Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation.[19]

These five areas of concentration were decided in part by serendipitous factors that led us in some directions rather than others, but the trajectory of our research probably owed more to our developing sense of what was significant and to the questions we brought with us. We explained above the kinds of questions that recent museum scholarship has raised. Those questions—about the meaning of history, how that meaning changes, and whose interests particular historical meanings serve—were profoundly engaging to Colonial Williamsburg insiders, who, after all, work in a world that is shaped in important ways by the critical literature on museums. As we explained at the outset, the arrival of social history and, more generally, the changing Colonial Williamsburg story were major concerns for most of the museum-side staff, as they were for us.

A second "native" concern that came to preoccupy us was the tension or contradiction between the foundation's two sides. This was epitomized, during the first year of our research, by the many conversations we heard about a nine-million-dollar golf course the foundation was planning to build. Some employees, especially frontline personnel, thought that the addition of a third (!) golf course indicated excessive commercialization at the expense of educational integrity. Others accepted management's contention that the facility was necessary to help Colonial Williamsburg compete in the lucrative conference business, which accounts for a significant portion of the hotels' and restaurants' revenues. Internal criticisms moved in the opposite direction, too. Some business-side personnel worried that the museum was moving too far in the direction of social history, at the expense of the great men—

*Colonial Williamsburg generates an amazing variety of printed material, both for internal consumption and for various audiences beyond the foundation. We cite these sources fully in the notes, but as an aid to the reader we mention here the publications we used most frequently: the foundation's annual reports, the *Colonial Williamsburg News* (an in-house newspaper that has been published biweekly or monthly since 1948), *Colonial Williamsburg* (a glossy quarterly publication sent to donors), the *Visitor's Companion* (an eight-page newspaper-style list of events given to visitors during the period of our research), and various editions of the official Colonial Williamsburg guidebook.

Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Patrick Henry, Peyton Randolph, George Wythe—about whom visitors were (it was presumed) most curious. They wondered whether audiences are willing to be exposed to the harsh conditions of slavery, or whether a pleasant past is the only history that is marketable. In short, the Colonial Williamsburg we came to know was pervaded by a pervasive institutional identity crisis. Was it a "Republican Disneyland" or a "living history museum," a "megaresort" or a "serious educational institution"?—to ask the question with phrases that insiders used repeatedly. Or, to ask it another way, but still sticking to terms used by the natives, what is the ideal balance between "education" and "entertainment" at Colonial Williamsburg?

Questions such as these are certainly not absent from the literature on museums,[20] perhaps because they are closely related to questions about historical revisionism. In any event, our research took shape in response to both sorts of questions. We wanted to understand the relationship between critical social history and celebratory patriotic history at Colonial Williamsburg. We also wanted to understand the relationship of business and education within the foundation, and the relationship between that duality, on the one hand, and the duality of critical and celebratory history, on the other.

The pursuit of such questions led us to engage current debates in cultural studies and museum scholarship. We believe that the analysis presented in this book both follows and complicates the notions of hegemony and resistance that dominate those discussions. As we explained at the outset, the work of the social historians seeking to revise the Colonial Williamsburg story had to overcome (or at least work around) an entrenched social elite and a hegemonic ideology. They knew this as well as any of the institution's critics. Elite self-interest, middlebrow values, commercial zeal, and the exigencies of the mass-leisure market are all social facts with which revisionist history makers had to contend as they tried to change Colonial Williamsburg. Yet because these social facts figured in the stories that Colonial Williamsburg insiders told about themselves, they must be treated not simply as forces impinging on museum professionals from the outside, but as elements these people have to a large extent internalized. Or, to put it another way, the insiders' habitual talk about those social facts is a social fact in its own right, and a crucial one, for their decisions and actions are influenced by the way they anticipate the impingements of class conservatism and commercialization. This sociological self-consciousness on the part of the natives must be reflected in the anthropologist's account of the fate of social history at Colonial Williamsburg. Indeed, as we will argue, the significance of those social facts derives as much from the natives' belief in them as from their independent efficacy. Those disembodied abstractions "commercialization," "middlebrow taste," even "the public" itself are like the ghosts and ancestor spirits of classical ethnographies. The anthropologist need not pronounce on the ultimate reality of such concepts, for the natives, by believing in them and by talking for them even when they are otherwise silent, make them socially real.

The upshot is that the workings of hegemony prove to be more complicated than any simple model of cause and effect suggests. Like many critics of museums, when we first considered the question of hegemony in the museum, our initial position was that Colonial Williamsburg's social historians had been co-opted by the combination of conservative political and business values that seemed to dominate the museum. Such a position was informed as much by our place, as intellectuals, in American society as it was by the results of our research: it was easy for us to reproduce, rather uncritically, the ideas (heard frequently at Colonial Williamsburg) that business corrupts education and that patriotism sells better than a dirty past. But as anthropologists, our method was to listen to the natives, as David Schneider suggests in an important book about American culture.[21] And as we listened to the foundation's educators and business people, we began to think that their relationship entailed more than the mere domination of one set of values by another. We began to discern something like a mutual blurring of responsibilities, wherein each of the foundation's "sides" talked about its goals in the language of the other. There was, in other words, no simple way to know whose values were dominant at Colonial Williamsburg, or whose interests were served by them.

Our attempts to find a neat answer to questions such as these have frustrated us—we have not been able to reduce our account of social history at Colonial Williamsburg to a single-stranded narrative. The chapters that follow, then, are ethnographic explorations of aspects of the institution which, we believe, impinge crucially on the making of social history in this American museum and nonprofit corporation. Chapter 2 examines some prevailing images of Colonial Williamsburg and the ways the foundation's messages are constantly inflected by attempts to enhance images that are considered positive and to parry those deemed negative.

There follow three chapters concerning history making proper. Chapter 3 looks at theories of history making at Colonial Williamsburg; that is, at historiography. Chapter 4 concerns what we might call epistemological poli-

tics; that is, the relationship between historiography and internal struggles over interpretive choices. Chapter 5 presents an ethnographic account of the social history programming that was being presented in 1990 and 1991.

The next three chapters examine other factors that affect the production of social history at Colonial Williamsburg. Chapter 6 sketches some of the central values of the foundation's corporate culture. Chapter 7 is an ethnographic account of the front line, where the museum's history is delivered to the public who consume it. Chapter 8 looks at labor relations at the foundation, focusing on a struggle between management and the hotel and restaurant workers' union. Whether the conclusion, chapter 9, succeeds in tying these strands together in a useful way we must leave for the reader to decide.

On the Use of Quoted Material

Our analysis relies heavily on what people at Colonial Williamsburg told us, often in formal interviews, and on what employees told the public during guided tours, staged demonstrations, and the like. We tape-recorded most interviews and most of the public events we attended; in all such cases, we asked the permission of those whom we wished to tape before doing so. Furthermore, when taping, we promised that we would not quote people by name in any publications resulting from our work. Thus, most of the quoted material from people at Colonial Williamsburg is not attributed to named individuals, except when we draw on the published (and therefore publicly available) writings of the foundation's scholars and administrators.

By disciplinary convention, anthropologists quote informants or consultants anonymously or pseudonomously. This is not without problems. For example, as James Clifford points out, placing quotations in the mouths of generic tribesmen implies that all members of a group think alike.[22] It will be clear from the following that all Colonial Williamsburg insiders do not think alike—there is no generic "Colonial Williamsburger." But we have stuck to the convention of anonymity because much of what people at Colonial Williamsburg told us concerned the politics of the place, and many people would have been reluctant to talk if they thought their "backstage" ideas would become publicly available in a form that identified them personally. Furthermore, we have by and large not been concerned to relate people's arguments to their personal lives and backgrounds. It was their place within the corporate structure, not their individual personalities, which, we thought, was most salient in shaping the conversations we had with them. Therefore,

although we do not quote people by name, we consistently identify speakers by their position at the foundation (e.g., "as one vice president told us").

Such solutions or the use of pseudonyms are not without problems. In *Plainville Fifteen Years Later,* anthropologist Art Gallaher tells of conducting a restudy of an American small town and finding in the local library a well-worn copy of his predecessor's book, *Plainville, U.S.A.* In the margins people had written in the real names of the people to whom the first anthropologist had given pseudonyms.[23] Not surprisingly, ethnographies arouse the curiosity (and often the ire) of their subjects. Colonial Williamsburg is a large enough local community that the speakers we identify in this book by structural position (vice president, frontline interpreter, etc.) cannot be personally identified with certainty. In any case, it was not our intention to name individuals. Our ethnography is an analysis of the culture of a corporate world, not a story about individuals within that world.

Quotations from people at Colonial Williamsburg are taken verbatim either from our notes or, in most cases, from transcripts of taped interviews or tours. We use quotation marks to introduce terms and phrases routinely used at Colonial Williamsburg or more generally in the museum world (e.g., "interpreter"), but after the first use, such terms are no longer placed within quotation marks.