

Street scene. (photo by Eric Cobble)

to the Palace green with its two rows of catalpa trees, and passed by Bruton Parish Church (an early eighteenth-century Episcopal church still in use today), the George Wythe House, and the other houses along the green. Turning in front of the Governor's Palace, the tours proceeded to Nicholson Street, then cut through the green lawn of Market Square behind the Courthouse to return to the Duke of Gloucester Street. The tours then moved into the city's business district, where they ended at one of several sites. Thus, visitors who took the tour were oriented both to the residential area of the town, near the Palace and church, and, at the other end of Duke of Gloucester Street, to the political and commercial quarter, terminated by the Capitol.

Interpreters told us in private that they were free, even encouraged, to create their own tours, within certain limits. And, indeed, we noticed that there was some variation in what they emphasized—which buildings they chose to point out and what they chose to say about them. This variation also reflected what particular visitors happened to ask them. There was nonetheless a predictable consistency to all Patriot's Tours. Even visitors' questions were much the same. What follows is a synopsis of the tours we witnessed, with an emphasis on constant themes.

At the outset of most Patriot's Tours, the guide introduced one of the major themes of the social history that had been established at Colonial

3 ■ *Why History Changes, or, Two Theories of History Making*

The Patriot's Tour

During the period of our research, Colonial Williamsburg used the Patriot's Tour, a one-hour guided stroll through the city, to provide its visitors with an overview of the museum. The Patriot's Tour was free to all visitors who purchased a Patriot's Pass, Colonial Williamsburg's most expensive ticket, and the one that was said to be "the best value." The tour introduced visitors to the main historical themes they would encounter in greater detail throughout the city. In addition, the guide sketched a history of the reconstruction and described the foundation's corporate structure. The Patriot's Tour was, in short, a kinetic map to Colonial Williamsburg and its work.

This kinetic map was also an official, managed overview of what the foundation is and does. The Patriot's Tour was designed to focus the visitor's attention to make sure that newcomers, confronted by the complexity and detail of the site, saw what the foundation wanted them to see. Thus, for our purposes, a description of the tour can serve as an introduction to the way the foundation tries to imagine or fashion itself as a coherent project.

In the spring and early summer of 1990, at the outset of our field research, we took several Patriot's Tours. All followed a similar trajectory. They began at the Greenhow Lumber House on the Duke of Gloucester Street, crossed

otic message a punchline or a guiding theme for the entire tour. One, for example, concluded her tour by reiterating that what makes Colonial Williamsburg really important is that “Williamsburg, the society, the people, the culture, played a large influence in the forming of our United States government as it is today.”

Occasionally interpreters were able to use sites on the Palace green to combine the themes of social history with celebratory stories of “our” collective past. The Brush-Everard House across the green from the Wythe House was more modest, in keeping with its owner’s more plebeian station. Everard, we were told, was an orphan who had emigrated from England to the colony, where he rose through the ranks of the colonial bureaucracy. His biography was “the original Horatio Alger story.” Moreover, when the Revolutionary War broke out, “he didn’t go back to England, and he didn’t become a Tory. The neatest thing about him is that he stayed and he had made the transition from being an Englishman to being an American . . . in one person.” From orphanage to Palace green on his own initiative, *and* he had chosen to become American—Everard was the archetypical self-made American man.

As the interpreters introduced us to the layout of the colonial city, they also squeezed in brief descriptions of the structure of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and its institutional history. They pointed out, for example, that “the museum itself takes up about 173 or 4 acres, and then there are properties . . . that belong to Colonial Williamsburg.” They explained that “we have two divisions: we have the museum division which is educational, and we have hotels, restaurants, and retail sales. And those are the people that help with the bills.” The crucial points here were that the hotel side was the “money making division,” that the foundation was not subsidized by the government, and that it was a good corporate neighbor paying “tremendous” taxes to “James town, Yorktown, James City County, and Williamsburg.”

In talking about the foundation, interpreters emphasized that its work of restoration is “ongoing.” One, for example, pointed out that “every year, as funds are available, we do something new.” “Right now,” the foundation was “very much into Afro-American programs” and had “reconstructed the slave quarters at Carter’s Grove.” She went on to stress that “we’re not standing still,” that “the interpretation of history changes [and] we have to change along with it.” Another interpreter explained that “this is just a . . . great big educational institution. We’re always learning new things.”

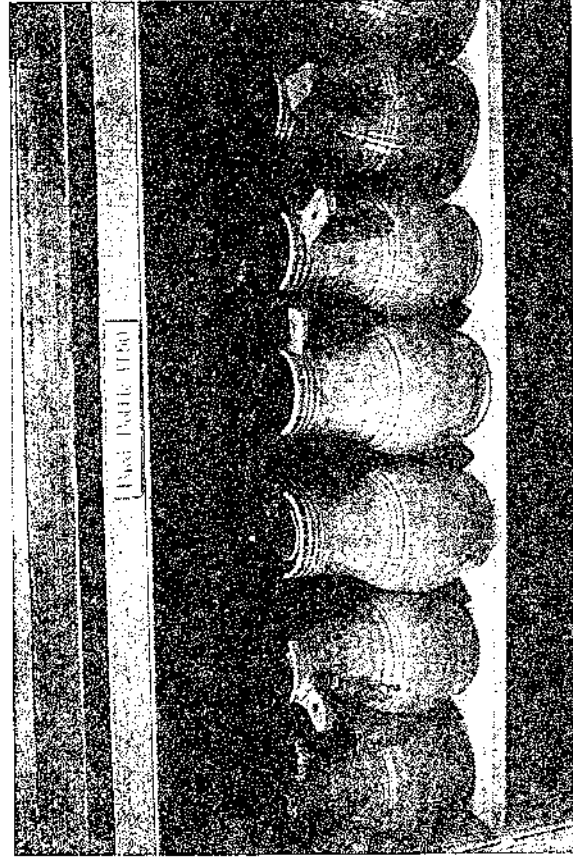
The interpreter made this last remark as we were clustered around one of

Williamsburg during the Longworth administration—the importance of class distinctions. We were told that “what you need to keep in mind as you walk through Williamsburg is that . . . ninety percent of the people in Virginia were living . . . in one room shacks with dirt floors and stuck-and-mud chimneys.” Because the houses we would see on our tours were “not typical of the general populace,” we were enjoined to think—as we strolled past the museum’s elegant edifices—“about all these people living so wretchedly.” The guides also told us that the colonial capital was a planned city; the layout of the streets created vistas to highlight the town’s public buildings with their tall cupolas—the Palace, the Capitol, the Wren Building of the College of William and Mary, and the Public Hospital.

Social historians at Colonial Williamsburg emphasize that colonial architecture was about the display of privilege and rank—about illustrating hierarchy, authority, power, and social distinctions.¹ This theme figured in the way interpreters talked about the city and its buildings. On one tour, for example, the interpreter pointed to Bruton Parish Church and explained that “this was a very class-conscious society.” By law, he said, everybody had to attend church. In the “seating arrangements” there, the whole community enacted and witnessed the social distinctions that divided it: “The governor is not going to sit with the cobbler. . . . A member of the House of Burgesses is not going to sit with the cabinet maker.” And slaves, he said, sat in balconies, among, yet removed from, the rest of the congregation.

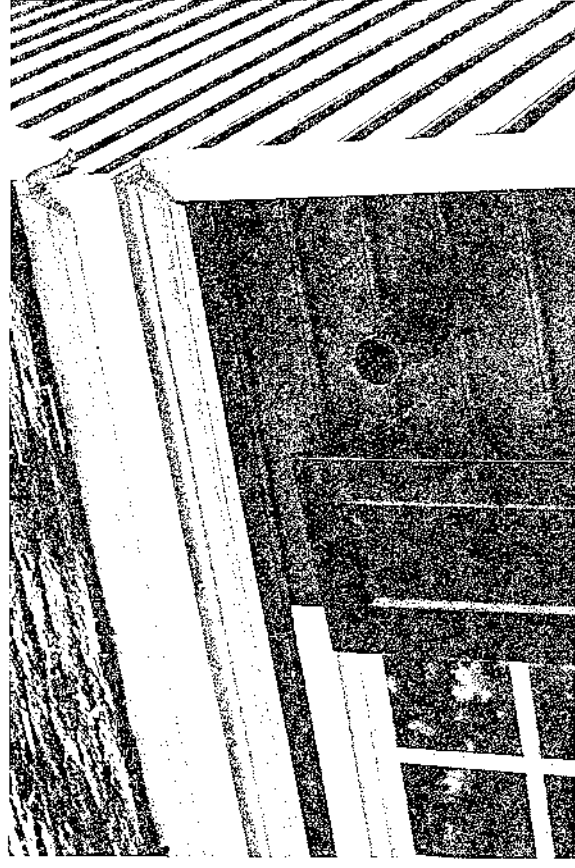
Another interpreter used the Wythe House next to the church (and “one of the most copied houses in America”) to make much the same point. She noted that “in the eighteenth century an individual who was important would like a person to be able to see his house and know how important he is. It is also important for people walking down the street to know where the important people lived. . . . It’s not just a matter of keeping up with the Joneses and bragging about things. . . . It’s the conventions of the time.” She called our attention to the symmetry of the stately facade, then pointed out the brick outbuildings several feet from the main house. One, she explained, was the kitchen; it was built separate from the main house not only to buffer heat but because “you also have then a separate space for slaves because they’re the ones who are doing the work.”

Some interpreters used the Wythe House to introduce themes from Colonial Williamsburg’s patriotic history. The Wythe House, they explained, was not only “one of the finest examples of colonial architecture,” it was also the residence of the first Virginian to sign the Declaration of Independence, a man who was Thomas Jefferson’s mentor. Other interpreters made the patri-



Bird bottles for sale in the Greenbow Store. (photo by Molly Handlert)

the small clapboard outbuildings behind the Brush-Everard House. She had just told us that in an earlier era in the museum's history, all the clapboard outbuildings had been kept freshly painted and the woodwork had been of the highest quality. At that time, she explained, "we assumed that every building on the property would be as neat as every other." But now researchers knew better: "Only the front's important, that's your first impression, so buildings out back are going to be rougher." As a result, she continued, outbuildings at locales elsewhere in the museum-city were being painted less frequently and allowed to wear unevenly. As we looked at the crisp, white clapboard in front of us and imagined more shabbily painted outbuildings elsewhere, a visitor asked about an oddly shaped ceramic jug protruding from under the eaves. The interpreter answered, "Those are called bird bottles" and explained that they had been a puzzling artifact until only recently. Archaeologists found them and everybody wondered "why would you build a bottle with a hole in the bottom? It just didn't make sense." But after much research, "textual evidence" was found verifying that they were ceramic birdhouses. When another visitor asked why they'd have been mounted on the houses—for by now we had noticed several more—she explained that because the birds are bugs, their presence was desirable in a mosquito-ridden place like Williamsburg. Not surprisingly, on nearly every



Bird bottle mounted on a Duke of Gloucester Street building. (photo by Molly Handlert)

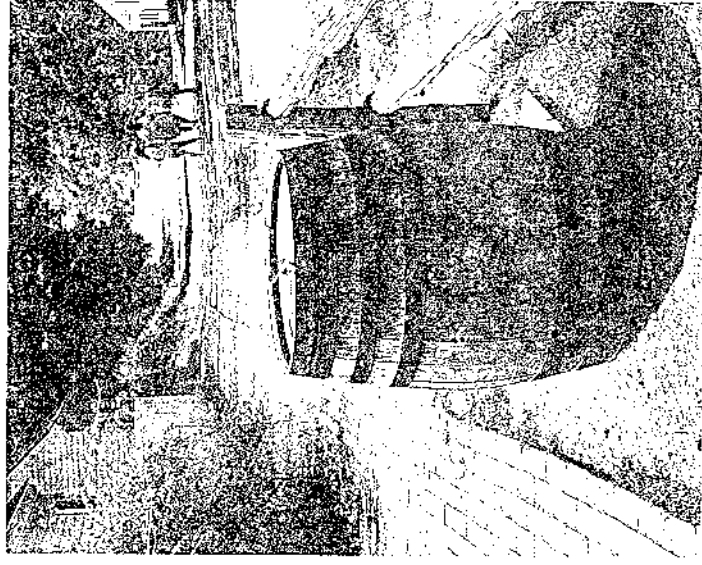
tour, the bird bottles prompted a spontaneous question and a similarly spontaneous answer about mysteries to be solved and painstaking research. It was after she told us the story of the bird bottle ("they're now available in our gift shops") that our guide explained that Colonial Williamsburg was a "great big educational institution. We're always learning new things."

When the interpreters talked about bird bottles and clapboard siding, an implicit theme was that the restoration required careful attention to details—to getting the pieces of the puzzle, the facts, exactly right. This ethos was evinced in what came across to us as a kind of excessive honesty on the part of the interpreters. As they talked, they'd occasionally slip up—a slip we, the collective "we" of the tour group, would probably not catch—and correct themselves in mid-sentence. One interpreter, for example, remarked of the Carters, whose house faced the Palace green, that "in the course of their marriage [they] had something like nineteen children." But she immediately amended her statement: "No, seventeen, I'm sorry, I exaggerated." The land area covered by the restoration was never described in approximate terms—as a bit less than 200 acres, for example—but always in exact numbers—"173 or 4 acres" or "176 acres"—although those numbers varied. Likewise, there were always exactly "eighty-eight original buildings," no more, no fewer, no round numbers.

Interpreters were also excessively honest in distinguishing original buildings that had been “restored” from those that had been “reconstructed” from scratch (a restored house, for example, might be accompanied by reconstructed outbuildings that appeared to be the same age). Or they’d call our attention to an anachronistic original in order to distinguish it from an original that suited the time period. On one tour, our gaze was directed to a severely elegant brick building near the courthouse and we were told that because it was an original nineteenth century structure, “we let it stay.” On another tour, we passed one of the Historic Area’s handful of houses that was not owned by the foundation and was still lived in by descendants of its eighteenth century occupants. This fact excited several people on our tour, and our guide remarked that while the foundation covets the building for its originality, “it’s going to be hard to ever interpret that building” because “we’re interpreting a time level of . . . 1770 and that house was built in 1788.” A few minutes later we passed through a garden that contained the “oldest boxwood” in town—a tall, thick trunked wall of foliage that “dates back to 1790.” The guide was careful to explain that in colonial times, the single wall would have been two rows, with a path (now overgrown and therefore invisible to us) between them.

The excessive honesty even extended to pointing out the purposeful at tifice of the place. People lived in the Historic Area. No building, as one interpreter emphasized, went unused, no “building is just sitting around vacant” as a mere artifact. Some were inhabited by life tenants such as the elderly widow who lived in the original yet anachronistic Kucker House; others were rented to employees, the more commodious and luxurious going, of course, to the foundation’s president, vice presidents, and senior administrators; and the refurbished outbuildings being occupied by employees at other levels of the corporate hierarchy. In all such residences, twentieth-century elements had to be “disguised.” “The rules say you can’t show anything twentieth century,” one interpreter explained. “No anachronisms! That means no television antennas . . . no Christmas lights.” Other interpreters told us that garages were made to look like stables, central air-conditioning was allowed because it did not have to be visible, and garbage cans could be hidden behind hedges.

When we came across these artfully disguised elements, they were duly pointed out to us. As we paused on one occasion to marvel at two-hundred-year-old boxwoods, we were reminded that “we also have wonderful things like fire hydrants, trash cans, and soda machines that we try to hide.” As we continued our stroll beneath building, trees, our guide added, “If you look up



Drinking fountain in a barrel.
(photo by Molly Handler)

in trees this time of year you see things that look like an upside-down bucket, and it’s a light. You don’t find them in the summer because of the leaves.” On another occasion, our guide asked us to gather around what appeared to be an oversized but barely visible manhole cover. “Listen,” she said, tilting her head and cupping her ear as if holding a seashell. We tilted our heads and heard a distant rush. “Traffic,” she exclaimed, and told us about Goodwin’s and Rockefeller’s efforts to convince the United States government to construct a highway *under* Colonial Williamsburg so as not to disturb its historic appearance.³

Because every interpreter spent so much time calling our attention to what the foundation was effectively disguising—to anachronisms we might not have noticed on our own—we nicknamed the Patriot’s Tour the “invisible landscape tour.” For us, this attention to the invisible landscape took on the kind of rapid masking, unmasking, remarking juxtapositioning of surface and substance (is it real or is it Memorex, or does it matter?) that is associated with the postmodern. We wondered what the visitors made of it all. And we wondered how this way of “seeing” Williamsburg reflected the way the foundation saw its work.

We arrived at two provisional explanations for the guides' emphasis on the invisible landscape. First, it could be explained as an extension of the foundation's ongoing concern with absolute authenticity. Colonial Williamsburg is about, among other things, the incremental re-creation of the real past, but the foundation knows that such an endeavor can be partial at best, never complete. It advertises this fact, or educates the visitor about it, by calling attention to the otherwise invisible distinctions between the "original," the "reconstructed," and the anachronistic. But to call attention to the invisible landscape is also, as we suggested at the end of the last chapter, to anticipate a prevailing and enduring critique of Colonial Williamsburg's project—that it is fake, a mask, a disguise, not real, not the past.

Recall that every Patriot's Tour began on the Duke of Gloucester Street near the Palace green. This street is a beautiful avenue. Like the other streets in the Historic Area, it is shaded by tall and stately oaks and other deciduous trees. Inevitably, interpreters would call our attention to those beautiful and obviously old trees and remark that they would not have been there in the colonial era. They would go on to explain that the foundation, despite its commitment to accuracy, would never cut down those trees because it had also to consider visitor comfort. Without the shady trees, the streets in the summertime ("when most of our visitors come") would be unbearable. In pointing to the trees, our guide on one occasion enjoined us to "keep in mind that many changes have been made to the town itself, things we have done to make it basically more comfortable for . . . twentieth-century people." As on many tours, he advised us to look past, or through, such anachronisms in order to imagine the real past. It was as if the Patriot's Tour was trying to orient the visitor's appreciation of the landscape in such a way as to confirm that, yes, the town is artificial, but Colonial Williamsburg could not be as accurate as it wished to be because we, the visitors, and our needs precluded it.

This second explanation, to us, was the key to why the interpreters called attention to the invisible landscape. It was a form of damage control, of impression management, that dovetailed neatly with their other discussions of the work of history at Colonial Williamsburg. The Patriot's Tour was a kinetic map of the reconstruction and the foundation's efforts to create a true, if approximate, past. That re-created past, like the museum itself with its dozens of exhibition buildings as well as institutional departments with differing agendas—was a kind of collage, not a single focused image. In 1990 the Patriot's Tour was designed to orient the visitor to a social history of the town. The guides emphasized that history—that is, the story the foundation tells—"changes," and implied that such changes both depended on de-

liberate choice—"right now" the foundation was "very much into Afro-American programs" and were part of an incremental and ongoing process. In that process, the fragmentary mysteries or puzzles of the past were taken as problems to be solved, a task requiring meticulous research. The Patriot's Tour averred that this process was hardly complete and, indeed, never quite could be, but claimed that Colonial Williamsburg was nevertheless doing the best it could to fulfill its mimetic mission and was being open and honest about its present shortcomings and past mistakes.

Two Theories of Why History Changes

The Patriot's Tour, with its curious concern for an invisible landscape, was typical of the way Colonial Williamsburg's staff interpreted the built environment. It sometimes seemed to us that people were less interested in describing the past than in talking about why the foundation's depiction of the past was constantly changing. As a result, one of the questions we asked our interviewees was why, in their view, history changes.

They usually gave one of two answers. The commonest response was that history changes because new facts are found, new information comes to light. Another explanation, less frequently offered but still common, was that history changes depending on the outlooks and interests of the people who write it. These two explanations went beyond the history of Colonial Williamsburg's history. We came to understand them as the reflections of two opposing philosophies of history that coexisted, even as they competed, in all the work of history making that we studied. At all levels of the institution, people deployed these theories rhetorically to buttress their positions on particular questions of interpretive and institutional policy. To understand Colonial Williamsburg as an institution that makes history for the public, then, one must first understand these two theories and the ways people use them.

The first theory, which we call constructionist, stresses that history is more than the sum of the available facts; the construction of history depends on the viewpoint of historians, on the messages or meanings that historians choose (perhaps unconsciously) to convey. History, in short, is a story with a moral, with a meaning that cannot be adduced from the facts alone. The story that Colonial Williamsburg tells changes, in this perspective, either because new historians and educators come to the museum with new ideas about what the history the museum teaches should mean, or because the foundation reacts to collective pressure from its audiences, whose needs and interests have changed. Historians, in short, are part of a contemporary

culture, and the history they construct reflects the present in which they live. One of the foundation's historians told us, "We could tell ten thousand stories about the past, but we only tell one hundred." It is such choices—to tell particular stories about a potentially infinite past—that account for the changing of history at Colonial Williamsburg. And change is not gradual but abrupt, the result of what philosophers of science sometimes call a paradigm shift.

The opposing theory of why history changes, which we call realism or objectivism, stresses not abrupt shifts in chosen meanings but the steady discovery and organization of facts. In this account, history making is a progressive process; that is, it comes ever closer to an objectively truthful account of the past. The work of historians is to discover more and better facts in order to render the histories they write ever more faithful to the total reality of the past. And those histories depend not on historians' ideological biases or personal interests—although these may be admitted to play a role—but on the accumulated weight of the evidence.

During our research, we learned that the issue of changing history was a crucial one for many Colonial Williamsburg insiders. They talked about it frequently, and they drew on both of the theories of history making we have just sketched when they told stories about the history of Colonial Williamsburg's history. One way to tell that history is to trace the successive paradigms that have shaped the museum's message in different eras.

Why History Changes

The Constructionist Version

In the second year of our fieldwork, Gary Carson, Colonial Williamsburg's vice president for research, published an essay in celebration of history museums and local historical societies. In it, he argued that an important part of Colonial Williamsburg's ameliorative work is to "dispel the popular notion that students of history merely add up incontrovertible facts to arrive at the true sum of their meaning." Carson emphasized that historians' ideologies "influence their choice of research topics and the conclusions they reached." Carson's views were echoed by other researchers in key positions in the organization, like architectural historian Edward Chappell, who wrote that "historians and curators who suggest that their responsibility is the simple and objective presentation of facts often use that position to reinforce traditional views of reality. This is conservatism, not objectivity."³

The new social history advocated by Carson, Chappell, and their colleagues was a story, and explicitly a story, designed to replace past versions of "the Williamsburg story" that the museum had told its audience. The social historians promulgated this view about what history is and why it changes in a 1985 document entitled *Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg*, a fifty-two-page booklet intended to be a public charter for the history the museum was to teach over the next ten years. In the first pages of *Teaching History*, the social historians explained the idea that history is a theme-driven construct by contrasting such a view to a naive objectivism: "Colonial Williamsburg has few rivals as a history teacher today [because of] . . . its completeness, the human scale of its buildings, gardens, streets, and lanes, its many pleasing sights, sounds, and smells. . . . This particularity of detail, this rich offering of objects and information, is not, however, sufficient by itself to make the past comprehensible." The "facts," they continued, are essentially inert, meaningless. Objective facts "need a plot, the history a conceptual framework." This conceptual framework would be the assumptions of social history itself, a new paradigm supplying a new theme. "A theme," they emphasized, "helps educational planners write coherent storylines, set priorities, and select sites and programs. . . . [It] helps interpreters choose what to say and what to leave out. . . . A common theme also gives direction to research. It sets the agenda of questions to be asked and helps historians select appropriate methods to be employed in answering them."⁴

To say that history needs a theme that "sets the agenda" is to recognize that history is more than just the facts. In this view, themes and agendas—paradigms, conceptual frameworks—guide historians to choose particular facts and to use them in particular ways. Themes and agendas also make it possible for historians to be unconcerned with facts that have no bearing on the issues that excite them, or even to overlook them altogether.

When people at Colonial Williamsburg drew on this constructionist model, they identified four major paradigms that have guided the museum's work from its inception to the present. People recognized the "Colonial Revival" paradigm of the 1930s, the "Cold War" or "Patriotic" paradigm of the 1950s, the "Six Appeals" theme of the 1960s, and the "Social History" of the 1980s. Though they tended to associate these paradigms or themes with particular decades, they also recognized that the themes overlapped: the symbolisms, rhetoric, and stories associated primarily with any one of them often preceded the decade of that particular paradigm's greatest prominence and may well have endured long after its demise had been officially or informally recognized. Moreover, people rarely told the history of Colonial Wil-

Williamsburg's history as a single narrative of neatly successive paradigms; rather, they tended to invoke particular paradigms to explain particular features of the museum; as, for example, one interpreter leading a tour of the gardens did: "These gardens have since been termed colonial revival gardens. . . . [T]hey are . . . essentially a 1930s interpretation of what a colonial garden looked like."⁴

Today, foundation employees see the first phase of the institution's history as a period driven by an overblown aesthetic they call, following common practice among scholars of the decorative arts, "the colonial revival." Documents written at that time can easily be read to support this appraisal. The emphasis is on "style" and "beauty," and on saving style and beauty from "destruction and neglect." At the end of 1933, the foundation could announce the successful completion of the project "as to form, although it will continue as to detail."⁵ It had reproduced gardens and grand buildings, like the Palace and the Capitol, that had long since been "razed to the ground" or "denatured." The reconstructed buildings were "milestones in the history of American style." The Palace garden was perhaps "the most beautiful in America."⁶

From the perspective of those who managed the restoration during the colonial revival era, it ultimately mattered less that Williamsburg was one of America's cradles of revolution than that it was a lost artistic masterpiece. It was a cultural capital, and it was this culture in danger of being "denatured" by neglect and time's entropy that motivated the restoration. By saving "culture" the restoration would also restore a built environment that reflected the Revolution, but this was, in a sense, a secondary benefit. As William Graves Perry, one of the chief architects of the project, put it in a 1933 report: "The fortunate thing is that American history (the revolutionary part of it) was enacted in the Georgian scene. It is reasonably certain that Mr. Rockefeller would not have felt the interest which led him to include the

Restoration of Williamsburg among his many educational philanthropies, had not the important events of our history taken place in Williamsburg during the premierships of Pitt, Fox and North rather than during those of Disraeli and Gladstone."⁷

Reproducing a culture (of a particularly pleasing era) was the strongest motivating force in the 1930s. And this culture, this era (the Georgian), was pleasing in large part because it was a preindustrial one. Thus, working craftsmen were introduced into the museum in that period in an effort to guarantee, as Winthrop Rockefeller later wrote, "that fundamental techniques, drawn from the spirit of the American past, will not disappear in the rugged modern competition with assembly lines and mass production."⁸ The Revolutionary-era culture in Williamsburg was also, perhaps, a culture unpolluted in a broader sense, for "nowhere in the English colonies did the transplanted cutting from the mother tree . . . flourish more vigorously than in Virginia."⁹ It was a Virginia of two hundred-year-old boxwoods, Chelsea porcelain, and Hepplewhite furniture. In sum, the early reconstruction era reflected (as it later was explained) the personal tastes of a very rich man who was also a product of a particular time and sensibility.

Colonial Williamsburg began to focus more explicitly on its patriotic message during the Second World War, when the Rockefellers hosted the visits of some 100,000 service personnel from nearby military bases. The message the foundation hoped to convey is captured in a story that President Chopley frequently told: "He was a GI . . . a soldier from Fort Eustis . . . who'd come up with the rest of his unit to tour Williamsburg. Part of our wartime program. I saw this boy in the Clerk's office at the Capitol. He'd become separated from his buddies, and he was standing all alone in front of that Peale portrait of Washington. Suddenly I heard him mutter, 'You got it for us General. And, by God, we're going to keep it.' And he saluted. . . . You know, I told that story to Mr. Rockefeller a few weeks later. When I'd finished, he looked up at me, and there were tears in his eyes, and he said quietly, 'Then it was all worth while.'"¹⁰

After the war, the leaders of Colonial Williamsburg perceived that the United States faced a new peril, and the cold war message of the museum took shape. According to the report of the 1977 Curriculum Committee, chaired by Cary Carson, "Colonial Williamsburg hammered out the terms of its first and only comprehensive definition of purpose in 1945-46" in a series of letters exchanged between John D. Rockefeller Jr., John Rockefeller III (chairman of Colonial Williamsburg's board at the time), President Kenneth Chorley, and "members of the staff." These people "agreed that it was the

⁴A summary account of names and dates drawn from Colonial Williamsburg's institutional history may help the reader to follow the discussions below. The first president, Colonel Arthur Woods, managed the emerging Rockefeller enterprise from before the time of its public incorporation, in 1928, to 1935; he was almost never mentioned in the stories people told. The name of Kenneth Chorley, president from 1933 to 1938, was well known, but we heard few stories about him. Long term employees spoke frequently of Carlisle Humelsine, president from 1938 to 1979; his administration constituted the "past" by reference to which many insiders defined the museum's present, under Charles Longworth. Longworth came to the foundation in 1977 and succeeded Humelsine in 1979. Longworth was succeeded in 1992 by Robert Wilburn, but we have not studied the museum under his administration.

Foundation's fundamental duty to teach the principles of liberty, the ideals of democratic government, and the contribution of colonial Virginians to American culture."¹⁰

Mass tourism and the family vacation took off after the war, and Colonial Williamsburg strove to provide its growing audience with programs that would both attract and educate them. In 1948 President Chotley, announcing a "new public relations program," asserted that Colonial Williamsburg "must be more than a bricks-and mortar physical reconstruction" and "more than one of America's outstanding travel attractions." Chotley proclaimed that the museum would become "a symbol of democracy in the troubled world today."¹¹ Accordingly, in 1951, a new *Guidebook* was issued containing an explicit statement (lacking in earlier guidebooks) of the values that Colonial Williamsburg stood for: "the integrity of the individual," "responsible leadership," "self government," "individual liberties," and "opportunity."¹²

The foundation tried to convey those values to the public through a range of programs that both reflected and spoke to cold war sensibilities. The *Powder Magazine* was opened to the public in 1949, and the Fifes and Drums, a Revolutionary War-era marching band, was formed in the mid-1950s. In 1957 Colonial Williamsburg began showing its famous orientation film, *Williamsburg—The Story of a Patriot*, a color film that dramatized the Revolution in terms of the individual choices made by Williamsburg patriots. In 1952 the foundation inaugurated "Prelude to Independence," a program that ran from mid-May to the Fourth of July with special events to commemorate the Declaration of Independence. Included in the 1952 festivities was "a graphic exhibit depicting man's struggle for individual liberty," which featured "artifacts ranging from jurors' ballots used in ancient Greece to a ballot box used in 1951 in the first general elections in India." Also included as part of the 1952 "Prelude" was the staging of the Williamsburg Declaration, in which fifty "exiled leaders" of central European countries pledged "the restoration of human rights and political liberties when the Communist governments of these lands are overthrown." The Williamsburg Declaration, "signed into history here on June 12," as the *Colonial Williamsburg News* put it, was promptly put on exhibit among the other artifacts and documents depicting liberty "from the fourth century B.C. to the present day."¹³

That President Chotley unveiled a major interpretive thrust as part of a new public relations program testifies to the intertwining of business and education at Colonial Williamsburg—or perhaps to the ingenuousness with which their interconnection was accepted at that time. Several people explained to us that the creation of new programs served not only to sharpen

the educational focus of the museum but also to boost attendance, especially during slack seasons.¹⁴ The annual Garden Symposium, begun in 1947, and the Antiques Forum, begun in 1949, continue to this day to attract visitors with a taste for Colonial Williamsburg's version of colonial American aesthetics and culture. Two long-running though now defunct annual programs were the International Assembly, begun in 1957, and the Student Burgesses, begun in 1958, which brought students together to discuss problems of democracy. Programs such as these brought to life the patriotic and cultural ideals of the museum's two most prominent founders, Rockefeller and Goodwin. They were also popular. Patriotism and the colonial aesthetic sold well during the 1950s, and continue to sell today.

Nonetheless, at least according to insiders' accounts about the museum's turn to social history, Colonial Williamsburg's cold war message began to wear thin by the middle 1960s. The record of the foundation's programs at that time indicates timid efforts to adapt patriotic programs to speak to the rising tide of social protest in the United States. Thus, for example, the 1966 meeting of the Student Burgesses convened under the theme "Protest: A Right and Responsibility" to discuss "civil rights, the draft, Vietnam, the Peace Corps and other current controversial topics." Noam Chomsky spoke at the 1968 International Assembly. Perhaps as a balance, William E. Buckley was the keynote speaker the next year, when the theme was "Order and Disorder in American Society."¹⁵ The *Colonial Williamsburg News* continued to publish patriotic letters from visitors (including those stationed in Vietnam or related to service personnel there), but foundation literature of the time suggests that the museum was losing its patriotic focus.¹⁶

It was in this context that Colonial Williamsburg began to take its own organizational structure as the content of its message, which became known as "the six appeals." We can trace the emergence of this theme in the foundation's annual reports. The report for 1958, the first one written by Carlisle Humelsine and his staff, differed markedly in style from the previous reports produced under Kenneth Chorley (1951–57), who tended to dwell on the patriotic significance of Williamsburg. Humelsine, by contrast, used annual reports to present "behind-the-scenes" descriptions of various aspects and departments of Colonial Williamsburg, such as archaeology, architecture, or the taverns of Williamsburg.¹⁷

The culmination of this strategy was the President's Report for 1964, which picked out the word "appeal" from Rockefeller's most famous statement about his motives for restoring the town. In 1937, Rockefeller had written: "The restoration of Williamsburg . . . offered an opportunity to

restore a complete area and free it entirely from alien and inharmonious surroundings. . . . Thus, it made a unique and irresistible appeal."¹⁸ In his 1964 report, President Humelsine elaborated on Williamsburg's multifaceted "many things to many people" appeal. He listed (though without enumerating) "architecture . . . and town plan," "collections of English and American furniture," "gardens," "archaeology," "our handicraft program," and "the events of the Revolutionary era so important in the birth of our nation." Within two years, "the six appeals" was standard public relations fare, though the precise description of each category was subject to change—archaeology could be more broadly termed "preservation/restoration" or "preservation research," and the sixth appeal, history, could be termed "historic heritage."¹⁹

These topics corresponded, roughly speaking, to important divisions within Colonial Williamsburg's organizational structure, and "the six appeals" can be read as a kind of shorthand description of institutional fiefdoms struggling to assert their relative importance. As the Curriculum Committee of 1977 described it, "Each of the 'Six Appeals' . . . has acquired its own staff, programs, budget, friends and benefactors, and consequently its own self-justification," resulting in "a bureaucracy whose very organization . . . colors the history we teach." The six appeals were symptomatic of what the committee called the "aimlessness" and "malaise" that, as they saw it, characterized the museum in the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁰ From their perspective, Colonial Williamsburg had become educationally moribund, and it was the committee's job to revitalize it.

The social historians who came to Colonial Williamsburg during the Longworth regime envisioned a new history for the institution, one explicitly different from both the six appeals and cold war patriotism. Like their predecessors of the 1940s and 1950s, they saw the museum as an ameliorative institution whose effectiveness depended on the coherence of its message. But they differed from their predecessors in the content of the message they advocated and in the historical personages they wanted to bring to life. For the young Turks, Colonial Williamsburg's new history needed to go beyond political history to consider the social and economic context of the events of the Revolutionary period. They envisioned a museum that would be explicit about the structure of society, especially about relations of authority and power, and inclusive of all members of the society.

"This new story was to be explicitly "democratic" and "egalitarian." It would reject, as Carson was to put it, "the traditional notion that rulers are more important than ruled, that might confers the right to be remembered,

or that money does all the talking; historians need listen to."²¹ The new social history would no longer focus exclusively on the "silk-panis patriots" with their refined tastes, but would now include the "other half" (African Americans, both slave and free) and the "middling sort." The new history, social historians believed, would teach visitors to become social critics. Carson stated the intent clearly in a published interview: "I want [the public] to go away disturbed. I see this museum as a device to make Americans look at aspects of both the past and the present that they may not want to see."²²

Carson and his colleagues also envisioned a new didactic orientation for the museum: the reconstructed environment of Colonial Williamsburg was to be treated as a "laboratory" in which to examine social relationships rather than "as a storehouse of moral precepts." In short, social science was to replace ideology as the ameliorative motor of the museum.²³

The Curriculum Committee of 1977 recommended that the new Williamsburg story be organized in terms of three themes: "Choosing Revolution," "Becoming Americans," and "The New Consumers." "Choosing Revolution" would revise the museum's version of the American Revolution to emphasize the economic reasons that pushed the colonists to choose independence from England. According to the committee, the earlier history, as represented in the 1957 film *Williamsburg—The Story of a Patriot*, focused on individuals and their choice "to support the American cause." In doing so, it emphasized the timelessness of the principles of that cause and thereby encouraged visitors to rededicate themselves to those principles.

By contrast, the 1977 Curriculum Committee proposed a new story showing that economic self-interest had motivated Virginia's colonial elites to choose revolution, that they had "turned to rebellion as the only solution to repeated economic crises that were undermining their financial and political independence." Told in this way, the story would teach the public how people in particular historical and cultural circumstances rationalized their world; by analyzing rather than celebrating past choices, the museum would help visitors to be better citizens of the modern world: "Understanding how patriots and loyalists reached their different points of view has greater educational value than approving or disapproving of the decisions they made. Learning to make informed, reasoned judgments in matters concerning public policy has become, in our view, more important to a sane, planned future than merely reaffirming our assent to the principles of self-government."²⁴

The museum as a laboratory, then, would teach social scientific analysis rather than ideology. Moreover, it would do so through analogies, not anach-

ronisms. Visitors would not be asked “to extort from the eighteenth century ill-fitting parallels to twentieth-century situations.” Rather, they would be taught “a framework of ideas and the analytical skills they need to ask how any community works.”²⁵

The second theme, “Becoming Americans,” would use the social scientific concept of a working community to address the issue of the diversity of the American experience and its portrayal in history museums. The committee pointed out that Colonial Williamsburg had been striving to become more inclusive for some time, to extend its representations beyond the elites to consider “Williamsburg’s invisible majority. . . . As a result, guests today . . . find slaves, women, children, and just plain ordinary people more conspicuous than they used to be in the Williamsburg story.” But adding “multiplicity,” the committee argued, was not enough: “Professional historians understand social history in another sense. To them it means the history of society: the groups that form its parts, their organization, and the ways and reasons that that organization and those relationships have changed over time. . . . To make sense of Chesapeake society is to explain how two immigrant cultures—one European, the other African—became indigenous cultures, separate and highly unequal to be sure, but both decidedly American by 1750.”²⁶

As in the rationale for the first theme, the emphasis would be on teaching visitors to understand the workings of society itself—in particular, the structured inequality of relationships between blacks and whites. The committee envisioned a museum that would show how “the rich got richer”; that is, it would make clear that the elite which Colonial Williamsburg had traditionally enshrined depended for its existence on the coerced labor of African slaves. The future museum would also re-create the mechanisms of authority that allowed this social system to perpetuate itself: “Authority was exercised . . . in an elaborate system of face-to-face exchanges, which an outdoor history museum can reenact to dramatize a way of life that modern Americans know nothing of. Militia musters, elections, court proceedings, cock fights, quarter horse races, and general bell-ringing typical of tavern life were all community ceremonies that served as formal and informal institutions of social control. Some of them, if presented in the manner of the Fifes and Drums, but with more thought given to making their social implications explicit, could greatly enliven our interpretation of the magazine, the courthouse, and the taverns.”²⁷

The proposal to use the Fifes and Drums, a beloved emblem of Colonial Williamsburg the patriotic shrine, to teach about social inequality suggests

the radical possibilities of social history. The family, too, was to be presented in terms of the structure of the social relationships it entailed: “Family life was the playing out of roles between various members of a household—parents, children, in-laws, servants, and slaves.” Moreover, presenting family life would further the trend toward a more inclusive museum, for “subjects such as child rearing, education, work routines . . . [and] caring for the elderly” would bring onto the stage women as well as men, the young and the elderly as well as adults, and—given that slaves, too, were members of the “household”—blacks as well as whites.²⁸

The “Becoming Americans” theme would make a significant place for African Americans at Colonial Williamsburg. First, it would show that they, like their Euro-American counterparts, developed an indigenous American culture: “An initial population of African-born male immigrants gradually became a homogeneous, Afro-American people.” Second, it would present “a positive interpretation of the Black experience” by acknowledging “the contribution that all slaves made by their labor.” The committee suggested that a portrayal of the work that African Americans did, and the social organization of that work, would teach visitors about “the inner workings of society itself.”²⁹ This argument returns us to the social scientific analysis of economic and political arrangements. We should note that such an analysis has the potential to lead beyond a “positive interpretation” of slavery to a negative one—that is, to an explicit critique of the oppression and exploitation fundamental to a slave-based labor system. Significantly, such an elaboration of the “Becoming Americans” theme is left implicit in the 1977 document (we return to this issue in the next two chapters).

Just as “Choosing Revolution” proposed a social scientific analysis of ideologies, so the final theme, “The New Consumers,” recommenced a new twist on one of the museum’s traditional appeals: the collection and display of antiques. *Teaching History* argued that Colonial Williamsburg’s objects and furnishings could be used to explore the emergence of consumer capitalism, a revolutionary social transformation that occurred in the time period, broadly construed, that the museum depicts. The objects in which Goodwin and Rockefeller saw the elegant, dignified cultural sensibilities of the colonial elite were now to teach about conspicuous consumption, that is, about the uses of material objects to signify social status. Moreover, because social historians argued that emergent capitalism made more and more goods available more and more cheaply, “The New Consumers,” like “Becoming Americans,” would allow Colonial Williamsburg to be more inclusive: “Despite the fact that Chesapeake society was highly stratified, most of the ‘widdling sort’

and even many poorer folks participated in the new consumer culture so far as their assets allowed." Moreover, the committee argued, portraying the "portentous frenzy" of eighteenth-century consumption would allow visitors to think critically about the materialism of their own world.³⁰

As we noted above, the advocated replacement of patriotic ideology by social science is a striking feature of the 1977 document. But social science—or science in general—can itself be considered an ideology, as much recent scholarship argues. And social science as an ideology, with its rhetoric of laboratories, experiments, and the progress of research, fit easily into an ethos that had been part of Colonial Williamsburg's culture from the beginning: a faith that ongoing historical research would uncover more and more facts, and make possible an ever more complete and accurate re-creation of the past.

Progressive Realism, or Mimicry

According to the second theory explaining history making at Colonial Williamsburg, history changes because new facts are found, that is, because historians continually gain new knowledge that allows them to write histories better than those that were written before—"better" in the sense of more accurate, closer to the truth of the past as it really was. This was the more commonly stated view, especially when interpreters talked to visitors about why and how the history Colonial Williamsburg tells had changed over time.

Early in our research, we began to use the term *mimesis* to refer to such realist or objectivist approaches to history making at Colonial Williamsburg. For us, *mimesis* refers to Colonial Williamsburg's avowed mission to re-create a colonial American city as it existed in the mid-eighteenth century. Starting with as many "original" buildings and objects as can be obtained, the goal is to produce and "bring to life" a literal or completely realistic re-creation of that time and place—a facsimile of it. Colonial Williamsburg insiders did not use the term *mimesis*, but they spoke routinely of authenticity and accuracy, of faithful or truthful restoration.³¹

When it is told as the progress of mimetic realism, the history of Colonial Williamsburg's history making relies on two extended metaphors. In the first, the past is seen as a shattered object whose surviving pieces must be put back together like a puzzle. To put the puzzle of the past back together requires the problem-solving skills of a detective searching out mysteries and hunting through minutiae for clues. A puzzle can also be envisioned in two-dimensional terms as a fragmented picture. To put back together such a

puzzle one starts with the surviving fragments and fills in the gaps between them in order to re-create a complete portrait of Williamsburg in the eighteenth century.³²

The second extended metaphor is "to make the past come alive." As important as they are, the colonial buildings by themselves are lifeless, an empty shell or stage setting that must be animated by living people or by stories that suggest them. From the perspective of mimetic realism, the history of the restoration after the initial phases of physical reconstruction is a story of ongoing research into every facet of life in colonial Virginia. Such research, it is thought, will enable Colonial Williamsburg to add the details and activities that will re-create a complete facsimile of the past and bring it to life.

Both extended metaphors have been used by foundation staff since the beginning of the restoration. When architect Petry introduced Colonial Williamsburg to an important audience in the pages of the *Architectural Record* in 1935, he wrote that "the persistent pilgrim" would reach "the goal of authenticity" through painstaking research that would solve the problems posed by an incompletely known past. For Petry, those pilgrims were also "detectives" . . . to whom superimposed foundations, fragmentary corners, heterogeneous brick sizes and bonds, varying mortars and manners of workmanship, areas of complete destruction of previous work, became only more puzzles to be measured, weighed, compared."³³ Or, as President Chorley put it, describing the foundation's ongoing restoration sixteen years later, "No Sherlock Holmes seeking to deduce the character of a man from a cigar ash ever pursued more thoroughly and relentlessly all of the evidences which would reveal the character of the restored and reconstructed area of Colonial Williamsburg. From the foundations of the restored area, archaeologists sifted over a hundred tons of artifacts giving indications of the life and customs of the 18th-century inhabitants of Williamsburg. From many sources in this country and abroad information was assembled by researchers digging through archives and libraries, and probing old deeds and letters, old wills and inventories, and old insurance policies."³⁴

The social historians who arrived at the beginning of the Longworth administration also resorted to the puzzle-solving metaphor to explain their program to Colonial Williamsburg's donors: "If a Jackson Pollack puzzle is your idea of an ultimate brain teaser, consider this. Imagine a puzzle 900,000 pieces large. Thousands more are missing. The rest are jumbled together in one enormous barrel. You, the puzzle solver, have as your assignment to pick through the barrel one piece at a time until you fit together enough of them

to guess the subject of a picture that can never be completed.” This seemingly impossible task, this search for “precious puzzle pieces,” was, according to the article, what historians at Williamsburg did every day.³⁵

The puzzle metaphor, which recurs in foundation rhetoric from the 1930s to the present day, is enshrined in the exhibition buildings themselves. For instance, a permanent archaeological exhibit in the Anderson House on the Duke of Gloucester Street contains glass cases of fragmented artifacts in conjunction with photographs of whole objects—a pottery shard, a plate. And these glass cases are juxtaposed to a reconstructed tableau—a room with a table, bed, plates, bottles, candles, and so forth. The exhibit bears an explanatory label: “The purpose of archaeology in Williamsburg is to assist in reconstructing the environment in which both the great and small events of Virginia history took place. Excavated artifacts are pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of the past. Here eighty eight objects removed from the earth of Williamsburg provide precedents for virtually everything seen in this recreated colonial bedroom.”

The display is a compact argument for and explanation of the work the foundation imagines itself to be doing. Fragments of a real past, like pieces of a broken jug, clay pipe, or plate, are glued together, and these restored but nonetheless “real” objects become precedents for spruced-up or re-created copies that in turn are assembled into tableaus like the “recreated colonial bedroom.” Note that to make such a display out of “eighty eight objects” (no more, no fewer) is to echo or allude to a similar process ostensibly occurring, if on a vastly grander scale, in the reconstruction of the entire Historic Area. Recall that on the Patriot’s Tour interpreters emphasized that there are eighty-eight original buildings on the site. In the foundation’s descriptions of its work, “original” buildings provide a framework or anchor for buildings that are “reconstructed.” Like the shattered plate on display, some of the pieces of the original (Williamsburg the eighteenth-century city) are missing, and a wholly new piece (but, in the scheme of things, a small piece) must be created to link together the original fragments, thereby restoring their obvious coherence, their original totality. Putting together a puzzle may be a tedious process. But the pieces—88 or 900,000—are nevertheless empirically given, not the result of a historian’s imagination.

The metaphor of bringing the Historic Area to life is as venerable as the puzzle-solving imagery. While the first two decades of restoration work at Colonial Williamsburg (until about 1950) were primarily devoted to reconstructing buildings and their grounds, the foundation was concerned from the beginning, as the minutes of architects’ meetings show, with making the

site a “living breathing picture.” Because “animals would enliven the general appearance of the town,” it was decided that there “would be horses and horse drawn vehicles and farm animals such as cows and sheep pastured wherever possible and in view.” More important, people would be encouraged to use the buildings because “part of the spirit of the city is derived from the activity resulting from the life in it.”³⁶

Colonial Williamsburg populated the Historic Area in a variety of ways. Some of the houses in the Historic Area continued to be homes for the families who had always lived in them, the foundation having hit on a policy of life tenancy by which residents could remain in their homes after they had been decided to the restoration.³⁷ Other buildings, not intended to be open to the public, were used for offices; still others became residences for foundation staff.

More important to the question of mimetic accuracy, Colonial Williamsburg experimented almost from the outset with ways to people the Historic Area with presences representing its eighteenth-century inhabitants. Costumed “hostesses” were introduced in 1935. Kopper’s celebratory history of Colonial Williamsburg credits that program to Rutherford Goodwin, son of Dr. Goodwin and one of the restoration’s early specialists in interpretive programming: “It was Rutherford who hit upon the idea of recruiting hostesses from among the region’s gentlewomen and training them in matters of history and Restoration philosophy. He also had them dress in colonial clothes so that they could be identified by (and distinguished from) the visitors who started arriving in ever greater numbers once the Raleigh Tavern opened in 1932.” An interpreter whom we interviewed in 1991 told a somewhat different story: “My understanding is that Mrs. Rockefeller decided that it would be nice for people to dress up, and it was . . . let’s give the southern people some nice clothes so they’ll look good in these nice buildings my husband is building.”³⁸

Despite their differences, both accounts suggest that the recruitment of

³⁵In explicating the metaphor of bringing the museum to life, it is important to realize that the foundation depopulated the Historic Area in order to create the museum, which it then wanted to animate. Andrea Foster (1993: 179–187) has described how race and class affected the treatment of various Williamsburg residents who were bought out by the restoration: “Whites, more frequently than African Americans, received new housing, were assisted in finding a residence, or were resettled in newly restored houses. Life tenure agreements were granted mostly for whites.” An apparently intended effect of the expropriation process was to remove African Americans from the area, resulting in a city much more highly segregated after the restoration than before. As is to be expected, Kopper’s account (1986: 164) is more benign.

hostesses from among the local people was an early strategy to breathe something of the native life of the region into the newly restored buildings. If the regional accents and manners of the first hostesses seemed quaint and authentic to the Yankee administrators who managed Colonial Williamsburg, consuming those ladies was intended to further the impression of historical realism. The craft program was another effort to re-create the living past in Colonial Williamsburg's buildings. The first worker, a blacksmith, was installed in the Historic Area in 1936; the program was rationalized and enlarged following World War II.

As Colonial Williamsburg's interpretive programs developed and diversified in the 1950s and 1960s, there was an effort to introduce more "life-on-the-scene" into the museum: sheep, oxen, scarecrows, beehives, and crafts demonstrations were all intended to make the Historic Area "come alive." A typical newspaper item of the time explained, "Additional woodpiles . . . are appearing in the Historic Area as spring approaches. It's not that colder weather is anticipated. . . . [It's] just another attempt to give the area a more 'lived in' appearance."³⁸

Visitors, too, wanted the site to be more lifelike and made their desires known to the foundation. For example, a 1981 letter to the president of Colonial Williamsburg from a Florida man advised the museum to "create olfactory [sic] detail. In the palace, for instance, sprinkle liquid smoke . . . in the smoke house so that when people lean in to see the hams, etc., they can actually smell them. The same could be done in the cellar. Empty beer on the floor of the beer cask room and wine into the packing of the wine storage room. (The stables smell is taking care of things naturally!)" To which a museum vice president responded understandingly: "We have recently introduced actual wood smoking in the smokehouses with the hope that the smell would linger, and we have had some improvement in that presentation. We achieve an aroma in the wine cellar by placing a few apples in a concealed bucket. They add a fermented cider smell that has been quite effective."³⁹

At the end of the 1970s, "life on the scene" was absorbed into a more comprehensive strategy called "living history," one to which more and more American museums have turned.⁴⁰ Living history means different things in different museums, but at Colonial Williamsburg the term refers particularly to first-person "character interpreters," as they were called during the period of our research. Character interpreters wore period costume, as did other interpreters, but they "stayed in the first person," that is, they impersonated or played the role of eighteenth-century inhabitants of Williamsburg. During our research, programs involving character interpreters were often prefaced

by an announcement that the actors based their roles on meticulous research into the details of daily life. Consider the following explanation from the back cover of an issue of the *Visitor's Companion*: "With the assistance of the Colonial Williamsburg Research Department, character interpreters study the personalities and life histories of the eighteenth-century people they will become. They also acquire a vast amount of knowledge about the eighteenth century as it relates to their reconstructed characters." Circumvented in this sort of "knowledge," the life that character interpreters brought to the scene was meant to be faithful to the past. Indeed, some people claimed that character interpreters were able to *become* people of the past, or at least to express themselves as their prototypes would have done. The *Visitor's Companion* explanation continued: "Character interpreters are not actors; they have no script. Every character is prepared to converse freely on a variety of topics from politics to childbearing. A visit with these character interpreters provides the opportunity to learn about the past from the personal viewpoints of the people who lived it. It is a way for the visitor to talk with the past."⁴¹ With the museum thus brought to life, visitors were said to be able to experience the past as it really was, and Colonial Williamsburg as a whole was seen as taking one more step toward total authenticity.

In general, even in the earliest discussions of craftworkers, costumed interpreters, and animals we find people accepting the idea that the goal of authenticity required that the complete life of the past be re-created in the Historic Area. To bring their city to life, Colonial Williamsburg planners have relied on animals, myriad "lifelike touches," and a growing force of costumed employees who engage, to varying degrees, in eighteenth-century activities. They have also relied on persistent and ongoing research into every facet, however obscure, of the life of eighteenth-century Williamsburg. It is worth noting that the goal of total authenticity merges easily with the desire of the social historians of the Longworth years to make the museum inclusive of all levels of colonial society. Though the ideological and cultural agenda of the first generations of administrators differed from those who came later, all have agreed that accuracy demands the representation of society in toto.⁴²

Ultimately, the quest for mimetic realism is imagined or portrayed as a kind of historical progress. Lifelike touches are added, the town is peopled, and the result is an ever more accurate and complete picture of the past. In this view, the museum city was first populated with what now are referred to somewhat disparagingly as the silk-pants patriots. Next came the craftspeople. By 1968 there were more than a hundred workers practicing more than forty trades in the Historic Area. As the President's Report for 1951 put it,

their presence ensured “that society may be seen as not only the gifted, the articulate, the famous, but as men and women who lived useful daily lives, who scolded their children, who knew illness and good fun, toil, ambition and sorrow.”²¹³

To many employed by the foundation at the time of our research, the new social history was the culmination in the ever progressing work of repopulating the restored city. Social history had added to the living portrait by finding a place in the Historic Area for the “other half”—the roughly 50 percent of Williamsburg’s population who were not silk-janus patriots, nor even “middle sort” shopkeepers and craftspeople, but black slaves. Just as the historians of other eras had filled in the gaps of the city by restoring or reconstructing buildings like the Powder Magazine and sites for the practice of handskills, so did social history add structures like the Carter’s Grove slave quarter to Colonial Williamsburg’s built environment.

In general, the quest for mimetic accuracy privileges a piecemeal accumulation of the accurate and a piecemeal discarding of the inaccurate or inauthentic. Ironically, to say that history changes because new facts are found or because the museum is becoming ever more authentic is profoundly ahistorical, for in this history of history, progress is a constant, historians’ motivations are unchanging, and only one significant event—the discovery of new evidence—occurs again and again. A frontline employee at the Wylie House kitchen explained that “they’re constantly doing research. And in fact a lot of things that we thought were true last summer, have been proven different—not wrong, but just, you know, we found more information on it.” She pointed out that they used to think that sweetbreads were “the brain,” but a careful perusal of documents had revealed that sweetbreads were “actually a gland.” Her description of why and how history changes typified the interpretive practice of many employees, who tended to focus on the changing of particular details rather than on changes in the overall configuration of the museum: “The fence you see, the split-rail fence, we used to have it only three rails high, but our research showed that it was actually five to six rails.”

What is also ironic, but perhaps not surprising, is that the rhetoric of mimetic realism meshes well with a description of the erroneous histories of the past (or of histories written by other people) as being paradigm driven. In other words, when they look back, present-day staff can identify the paradigm as said to have prevailed in the past, or those (usually characterized as “preconceptions” or “myths”) said to continue to prevail in the present among a public the foundation desires to educate. In this scenario, the mis-

leading paradigms of earlier generations of historians or of a distant “they”—the public—are opposed to the strict adherence to fact that is taken to characterize present-day work. We heard many staff members explain Colonial Williamsburg’s changing history in terms of the limitations, errors, and ideological biases of others’ interpretations; but they almost always presented the foundation’s current research as nonideological, non-paradigm driven, based solely on known facts and concern for accuracy. To return to the example taken from the Garden Tour in which the interpreter explained that many Williamsburg gardens are “colonial revival,” not colonial: “You have a lot more formal gardens in Williamsburg than [there] would have been 200 years ago. . . . So what we’re doing is research. And when we come across how a site was actually used, we will change the garden accordingly, and interpret the other gardens as colonial revival gardens.” In this example, so punctilious is the foundation with respect to accuracy that even recognized errors will not be corrected until hard facts (“how a site was actually used”) guarantee that any changes will lead to greater veracity.

Not surprisingly, this rhetorical strategy was already in place at the foundation’s beginning and became an integral part of the way it portrayed its work to the public. The 1935 architects’ report, for example, explained that the restoration had to struggle against “the visitor’s preconception” of how the town should look—for example, “erroneous” notions “of long avenues heavily shaded against a hot sun.” Another such preconception was “the log cabin myth,” which the foundation’s landscape architect wrote a book to demolish. Like Colonial Williamsburg staff members today, those architectural historians—“who spent during the first three years of the Restoration every available hour in exploration, measurement and photography”—portrayed themselves as researching the facts in order to counter past and prevailing misconceptions about colonial America. It was only later generations of researchers who would see the work of those architects as misconceived, as “colonial revival.”²¹⁴

The coupling of a past-tense paradigm driven history and a present-tense factual history reinforces one of the principal implications of mimetic realism—the notion of history making as a progressive process. Errors are relegated to the past, beyond which we who make history in the present can be said to have progressed, precisely through the ongoing work of discovering new facts. In a sense, then, mimetic realism has built into it an assertion of its superiority, as a theory of why history changes, over constructionist versions of history making. But that is only part of the story, as the next chapter shows.