

Colonial Williamsburg from World Peace to World War

by K.L.H. Wells

University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee



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Opening its first building to the public in 1932, Colonial Williamsburg was a monumental immersive environment that restored the small town of Williamsburg, Virginia to its appearance during the eighteenth century. The project was spearheaded by William A. R. Goodwin, an Episcopalian minister in Williamsburg, and funded by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who eventually spent over \$60 million on the restoration.¹ Goodwin recruited Rockefeller to fund the project by pointing out the unique opportunity that Williamsburg provided to restore an entire colonial town of historical importance. Williamsburg was the home of one of the country's oldest universities, the College of William and Mary, was frequented by such Virginians as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry, and had served as the capital of the Virginia colony from 1699 to 1780. But after this period, the town experienced relative isolation and a lack of economic development that left many of its colonial buildings extant, while all of its central properties could be acquired for comparatively little expense.

Rockefeller's interest in historic preservation began in France, where he contributed to the restorations of the Palace of Versailles, the Château de Fontainebleau, and the Reims Cathedral. Part of Goodwin's motivation in restoring Williamsburg was to demonstrate its cultural sophistication during the eighteenth century and its close ties to England and France. From almost the beginning of the project, its participants felt that the restoration of Williamsburg could improve American ties to Europe and help promote world peace. Warrington Dawson, author of *Les Français morts pour l'indépendance Américaine de septembre 1781 à août 1782 et la Reconstruction historique de Williamsburg* (Paris: Éditions de l'Œuvre latine, 1931), wrote to Rockefeller in 1931 that "it is a very great task that you have undertaken not only for America, but our relations with Europe." He continued:

I have found that my little communiqués, issued to the French press, and announcing the discovery of new documents, have done

and are doing a great deal to encourage friendly sentiment on the part of the French for the United States. The French had already been profoundly touched by what you are doing for them at Fontainebleau, Versailles, and Rheims. Your present work in Williamsburg makes perhaps an even wider appeal to the French nation at large, since it is not exclusively historical and artistic but means the perpetuation of sacred Franco-American memories. Feelers I have thrown out in Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, and only this week in Poland, seeking to follow up definite clues, have evoked a somewhat similar response in those countries and, as I recently told Colonel Woods, I believe that a campaign in England, if very carefully managed on lines devised specially to meet the tastes of the British public while evoking the constructive effect of the Colonial tie between England and America, would accomplish wonders for Anglo-American relations. I would then feel easier in my mind about the entire problem of World Peace. As surely as there is a sun in the sky, we are rushing towards another World War unless the quality of kindly feeling among the people of the various nations is promoted. Nothing else will attain the desired effect and it is for that that you are working.²

If Colonial Williamsburg began as an instrument of world peace, however, by the 1940s, it was being used to mobilize servicemen and civilians for world war. During World War II, troops from the nearby military bases of Camp Peary and Fort Eustis visited Colonial Williamsburg as part of their basic training, and Colonial Williamsburg produced radio shows and films that made direct links between the historical events of the American Revolution and the present conflict. Officers and their families were encouraged to stay at Colonial Williamsburg's hotels, and the large increase in wartime visitors meant that for the first time in its history, the restoration did not operate at a loss. War proved to be big business for Colonial Williamsburg.

This function of Colonial Williamsburg as a major tourist attraction for the promotion of American patriotism developed in fits and starts. At the beginning, Rockefeller's advisers, such as Colonel Arthur Woods and Charles O. Heydt, treated the endeavor primarily as a real estate venture. While Goodwin touted Williamsburg as a shrine to the nation's founding fathers, Heydt doubted that the site would ever become such a "mecca," because it was too far from large population centers "for enough people to really make it worthwhile."³ Instead,

Heydt focused on trying to get profitable tenants into the colonial houses once they were restored, and he complained vociferously that too many of the buildings were being provided rent free to Colonial Williamsburg employees.⁴ Some properties were also provided rent free under a system of life tenures, which induced longtime residents of Williamsburg to sell their properties to the restoration without having to move. As scholars such as Linda Rowe have shown, however, only the white residents of Williamsburg were granted this privilege. Black property owners, of which there had been many in the center of Williamsburg, were displaced to the edges of the historic area and effectively segregated from their former white neighbors.⁵ Goodwin argued for the need to “clean up” the black-owned properties in the historic center, and developing a separate African-American neighborhood was one of the earliest concerns of the restoration team.⁶ Heydt’s correspondence also makes clear that there were considerable regional tensions between the northern members of Rockefeller’s New York office and southerners working in Williamsburg. Goodwin repeatedly tried to get Rockefeller to hire local or at least southern employees to work on various aspects of the endeavor, from interior decorating to insurance.⁷ Meanwhile, Heydt complained to one of the restoration architects about how slow it was to deal with “these Southern people.”⁸

After the war in Europe began in 1939, however, Colonial Williamsburg began to focus more on museum education. The non-profit corporation sought to professionalize its educational efforts and steer them towards more patriotic ends. Its first step was commissioning a report from John Marshall, an officer of both the Rockefeller Foundation and the General Education Board, on “Some Educational Possibilities of the Restoration.” Marshall argued:

How to make the Williamsburg restoration ‘educational’ seems essentially a question of making it live for others as it now lives for those who best know all that it stands for. [...] the basic aim is to give the people exposed to the restoration a knowledge of and a feeling for the life of that period. Failing to get that, they will see in the restoration little more than a monument—impressive in itself but only commemorating something to them distant and dead. If the restoration is to be more than that, they must be helped to see in it direct ties to what they commonly know and feel.⁹

This emphasis on feeling would be reiterated by Raymond T. Rich, a public relations consultant that Colonial Williamsburg hired in 1941. At a meeting of the newly formed Committee on Education, Rich presented,

a suggested program which he called an Over All Program of Interpretation, which he presented in the form of a statement of what he believed should be the basic endeavor or fundamental philosophy of the Restoration in the field of education. He stated that whereas emphasis had heretofore been placed by the Restoration on things to see, such as the architecture, the gardens, and the costumes, he believed that emphasis should now be placed on things to feel, which might be termed the spiritual side of the Restoration. This might be accomplished by placing a greater stress on the colonial history of Williamsburg. He pointed out that the economic, political and domestic factors making up its history had all been involved in the achievement of liberty. To illustrate further the approach he had in mind, he read an extract from the Virginia Bill of Rights.¹⁰

This shift from “things to see” to “things to feel” is especially interesting for my larger research project, which examines how the makers of Colonial Williamsburg and other major colonial revival projects from this period promoted an affective aesthetic response, a sense that viewers should suspend critical thinking in order to truly feel themselves to be within the past. While the officers and staff of Colonial Williamsburg were beginning to see the potential of the monumental, immersive environment they had created to generate such feelings of historical embodiment, they were also interested in translating the experience of visiting Colonial Williamsburg to a national audience through the media of radio, photography, and film. Rich went on to outline how a series of dramatic radio shows could promote two key “educational messages” of Colonial Williamsburg:

(1) Outstanding qualities in people: Those who created colonial Williamsburg (and who through and beyond Williamsburg contributed so much to the establishment of our country) evidenced, to an unusual degree, sterling qualities of individual self-reliance, initiative, judgment and courage. May we have more of these in operation today, during a similarly difficult period! (2) An historic result: They used these qualities to create a philosophy of self-government for the people and to establish a nation embodying

that philosophy. [...] such dramatizations encourage audience participation through self-identification with the dramatic characters. If these characters evidence their thoughts and actions, during difficult times, individual self-reliance, initiative, judgment and courage, the lesson is obvious and the example inspiring.¹¹

Colonial Williamsburg went on to produce this series of radio dramas, hoping to encourage Americans at large to identify with the historical figures of eighteenth-century Williamsburg, to feel like they, too, were living through those historical events. They also produced photobooks of Colonial Williamsburg and shot films there, all to similar effect.¹²

Around this same time, Colonial Williamsburg sought a new director of education to manage these efforts. The Rockefellers enlisted the help of Emery T. Filbey, Vice President of the University of Chicago, who solicited memoranda and letters from various experts about what the educational program of Colonial Williamsburg should be, and who should be put in charge of it. This correspondence shows how novel the position of a museum educator was, how little consensus there was about what kinds of qualifications such a person should have, and how debatable the educational possibilities of Colonial Williamsburg actually were. Louis Wirth, for example, noted that “Williamsburg rather represents the aristocratic strain in American colonial civilization,” and “was not characterized in its government by that instrument of early American democracy, namely, the town meeting. It would therefore not lend itself very well to dramatizing the democratic theme.”¹³ Others agreed that Colonial Williamsburg did have potential for promoting democracy, but differed on how to achieve it. Newton Edwards, a professor of education, argued that “restored Williamsburg needs to be viewed against the background of social history, a history which would depict as fully and as accurately as possible the whole complex of the culture—the workings of political, social, and economic arrangements,” which could not be conveyed merely by writing the social history of Virginia, but could “probably” be achieved “through a museum with a competent lecture staff.”¹⁴ William T. Hutchinson did place emphasis on producing new written histories, by suggesting that Colonial Williamsburg establish a residential fellowship program for history scholars, which “should not destroy its ‘atmosphere’.”¹⁵ One anonymous

memorandum emphasized instead that the target audience for these educational efforts should not be scholars but average citizens and civic leaders:

The restored community produces an emotional effect upon the visitor equivalent to the impressive dignity of some of the historical places in Europe. [...] A project which would have greater education implications would be the utilization of the dignity and emotional effectiveness of the restoration buildings to stimulate study and reflection not by scholars but by average citizens of the meaning of democracy, of the kinds of freedom that our forefathers sought in coming to America, or the value of this human democratic heritage which they have given us. This would provide a very strong motivation for the kind of intelligent effort required of the citizen of a democratic state and in many cases it would probably lead him to rededicate himself to constructive service as a citizen in behalf of freedom, liberty, and democracy. [...] Psychological studies have shown that brief lessons of this sort, when conducted under a highly charged emotional atmosphere, will have force and will be retained much longer than ideas which are considered under normal, humdrum conditions. The Williamsburg atmosphere might thus provide short intensive lessons for the many visitors who now come there.¹⁶

It went on to suggest that Colonial Williamsburg invite local politicians from across the country to spend week-long retreats in the restored town, so that they could experience its affective atmosphere first hand and bring a more enlightened viewpoint back to their home communities.

The entry of the United States into World War II led Colonial Williamsburg to coordinate its educational efforts with the federal government. Harold Lasswell, from the Experimental Division for the Study of War Time Communication at the Library of Congress, argued that “Williamsburg offers many opportunities to dramatize the Four Freedoms stated by the President—Freedom to Live, Work, Speak, Worship.”¹⁷ While Colonial Williamsburg continued to target a national audience through radio, photography, and film, it also began addressing a newly enlarged local audience of service members stationed at nearby military bases such as Camp Peary and Fort Eustis. In its “Training Program for Soldiers,” Colonial Williamsburg outlined how servicemen would be trucked in daily, 300 at a time, and march in formation from building to building in order to gain “a

clearer understanding and appreciation of why we are in this war and what we are fighting to preserve.”¹⁸ The archive preserves numerous letters that servicemen wrote to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to thank him for this experience. One such letter, from a Private R. Friedberg, spoke so eloquently of the success of Colonial Williamsburg’s patriotic educational efforts that it was reprinted in *The Sky-Watch*, the local paper for Fort Eustis. Friedberg wrote:

I want to thank you especially for the unique and wonderful way in which this visit made me realize the heritage and rich gifts of our country. Of all the sights I have seen, and the books I have read, and the speeches I have heard, none ever made me see the greatness of this country with more force and clearness than when I saw Williamsburg slumbering peacefully on its old foundations. It was a rare pleasure indeed to be in the same church where Washington prayed; to be in the same chamber where Patrick Henry shouted ‘if this be treason, make the most of it’; to be in the same classroom where Thomas Jefferson studied law, and in the same tavern where he danced with his fair Belinda. Never before or after in history have so many great men lived together at one time, and all their lives and works seemed to be mirrored in Williamsburg. As a soldier in the United States Army, I am proud to have set foot on such grand old soil. More than ever it has made me live in the daily hope that by facing the future together, we shall all survive it together, both as a united nation and as free men.¹⁹

This letter speaks to how effectively Colonial Williamsburg was able to promote belief in American exceptionalism through its affective environment. Friedberg identifies with the charismatic leaders of the past by recognizing them as everymen much like himself, who pray, study, and dance with beautiful women. The experience of visiting Colonial Williamsburg has made him proud, somewhat nostalgic for the past, but more importantly optimistic for the future. What the archive shows us, however, is that this was not a natural or inherent reaction to Colonial Williamsburg. Rather, this affective, patriotic response had to be carefully orchestrated through the efforts of numerous officers and staff members, conditioned through other media such as radio, photography, and film, and developed over many years and through the input of numerous competing experts. The archive thus shows us the constructedness of Colonial

Williamsburg's patriotic ideology, as it navigated a changing landscape from world peace to world war.

¹ A newspaper clipping of 11 May 1958 notes that Rockefeller had provided \$62 million to date. Box 150, Folder 1318, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Cultural Interests - Series E, Cultural Area: Colonial Williamsburg (hereafter Colonial Williamsburg Papers), Rockefeller Archive Center.

² Warrington Dawson to John D. Rockefeller Jr., 29 July 1931. Box 144, Folder 1260, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

³ Charles O. Heydt to E. L. Ballard, 16 Apr 1932. Box 144, Folder 1251, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁴ See correspondence in Box 155, Folder 1350, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁵ Linda Rowe, "African Americans in Williamsburg, 1865-1945," in *Williamsburg Virginia: A City Before the State, 1699-1999*, ed. Robert P. Maccubbin (Williamsburg: City of Williamsburg, 2000), 127.

⁶ See note from A. Adams reporting on a call from Goodwin to Charles O. Heydt, 20 Aug 1927. Box 143, Folder 1250; and Charles O. Heydt to Colonel Arthur Woods, 23 Jan 1928. Box 170, Folder 1484; both Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁷ See, for example, Charles O. Heydt to Colonel Arthur Woods, 26 Apr 1929. Folder 1251,

⁸ Charles O. Heydt to William G. Perry, 26 Oct 1929. Box 158, Folder 1380, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁹ John Marshall, *Some Educational Possibilities of the Restoration*, 18 Oct 1939. Box 1, Folder 18, John Marshall Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁰ Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Committee on Education of Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 10 Jan 1941. Box 152, Folder 1328, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹¹ Raymond T. Rich, *Radio and Williamsburg*, 8 Feb 1941. Box 152, Folder 1328, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹² See, for example, *Williamsburg Virginia, A Brief Study in Photographs*, 1942. Box 160, Folder 1390; and *Discussion Guide for Eighteenth Century Life in Williamsburg, VA*, Eastman Kodak Company, Informational Films, Division, Rochester NY, 1944. Box 152, Folder 1329; both Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹³ Louis Wirth to Emery T. Filbey, 13 Nov 1940. Box 152, Folder 1328, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁴ Newton Edwards to Emery Filbey, 14 Nov 1940. Box 150, Folder 1316, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁵ William T. Hutchinson to Emery Filbey, 13 Nov 1940. Box 150, Folder 1316, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁶ "Memorandum on the educational possibilities of the restoration of Williamsburg, Virginia," 13 Nov 1940. Box 150, Folder 1316, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁷ Harold D. Lasswell to John D. Rockefeller 3rd, 26 Mar 1942. Box 152, Folder 1329, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁸ Memorandum on "Training Program for Soldiers," 7 May 1942. Box 145, Folder 1276, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁹ Private R. Friedberg to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 18 Aug 1942, as reprinted in *The Sky-Watch*, Fort Eustis, VA, 9 Oct 1942. Box 145, Folder 1276, Colonial Williamsburg Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.