

Colonial Williamsburg

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
P.O. Box 1776
Williamsburg, Va. 23187-1776
www.colonialwilliamsburg.com

Colonial Williamsburg Commemorates 40 Years of African-American Interpretation throughout 2019

Spotlighted programming, a conversation series and a special exhibition at the historic Raleigh Tavern mark four decades of African-American interpretation to coincide with the 400th anniversary of Africans' first arrival in English America.



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WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (Dec. 17, 2018) – Throughout 2019 the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation commemorates 40 years of African-American historical interpretation, inviting guests and the community to experience spotlighted programming, a series of community conversations on the past, present and future of the Foundation's work, and a special exhibition in remembrance of the African-American men and women of Williamsburg who helped forge the nation.

“At Colonial Williamsburg we leave behind the din of the modern world to engage face-to-face with the men and women, enslaved and free, who lived amid the contradiction and promise of our nation’s founding,” said Beth Kelly, vice president of education, research and historical interpretation. “Our shared history is told more completely through the courage and commitment of our world-leading interpretive staff, and in 2019 we invite guests to hear their stories.”

Following its establishment in 1926 and the opening of its first public site in 1932, Colonial Williamsburg grew to become the world’s largest living history museum, interpreting Virginia’s capital on the cusp of the American Revolution – a period when more than half the city’s population consisted of African-Americans, nearly all of them enslaved. Over the decades, African-American employees worked increasingly in costume but almost exclusively portrayed anonymous servants. Interpretation avoided aspects of their lives that risked pain or even discomfort for employees, guests and members of the community, regardless of race.

That changed in 1979, when the foundation engaged a group of students at nearby Hampton University about recruitment to work as first-person interpreters and engage guests in-character as African-American men and women known to have lived, worked and ministered in Williamsburg during the late 1700s. There was no textbook, no script. Yet a small group accepted the challenge and stepped onto the streets of the Historic Area to face an uncertain reception from guests, neighbors and colleagues. Their legacy is reflected today in the nation’s museums, historic sites, and popular culture, and in the work of Colonial Williamsburg’s interpreters and through groundbreaking dramatic interpretive programs such as “Journey to Redemption,” and “Resolved, An American Experiment.”

“A forward-looking group of individuals wanted to tell the story of all who lived in Williamsburg in the 18th century, and they saw where the future of interpretation would take us,” said Colonial Williamsburg Actor-interpreter Stephen Seals, program manager for the 40th anniversary commemoration. “We stand on the shoulders of these giants each time we share a portion of our shared history with the understanding that people did not look at themselves as what society labeled them, but who they were as people. This history belongs to each and every one of us, regardless of race, and this country is made just a little bit better each time we help our guests understand that.”

The 40th anniversary of African-American interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg coincides with commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the first arrival of Africans in English America at Point Comfort on modern-day Fort Monroe in Hampton.

The winter 2019 issue of “Trend & Tradition: The Magazine of Colonial Williamsburg,” features [special coverage](#) of the 40th anniversary commemoration, including interviews with early members of the African-American interpretive unit and their current counterparts.

In January Colonial Williamsburg and All Together Williamsburg will cohost a film screening and discussion series examining the ongoing impacts of slavery at the Lane Auditorium in Colonial Williamsburg’s Bruton Heights School. Programs begin at 2:30 p.m. and feature a screenings of the documentaries “Traces of the Trade” on Jan. 6, “13th” on Jan. 13, and a panel discussion on Jan. 20.

In 2019 as it does each year, during February Colonial Williamsburg celebrates Black History Month by showcasing the best of its year-round African-American interpretive programming all

month, including “My Story: My Voice,” “Joy in the Morning,” “Freedom’s Paradox,” and “Music was My Refuge.”

Also beginning in February, Colonial Williamsburg will present a special exhibition at the Raleigh Tavern titled “Revealing the Priceless: Colonial Williamsburg – 40 years of African-American Interpretation.” The exhibit will memorialize, by name, each of the African-American men and women known to have lived in the city during the period that the foundation interprets, from 1763 to 1785, and will offer a retrospective of foundation African-American interpretation.

Later in the year, three special community conversation events at the Hennage Auditorium at the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg, which remain open throughout their \$41.7-million expansion funded entirely by donors, will examine the past, present and future of African-American historical interpretation at 5:30 p.m. May 10, July 5 and Oct. 18, respectively.

Interpretive programming, historic sites and events are open to guests with Colonial Williamsburg admission or special program tickets. Event and schedule information is subject to change. Tickets and additional information are available at colonialwilliamsburg.com/1979, or by calling 855-296-6627. Additional information is available via the free Colonial Williamsburg Explorer app, which can be downloaded from the Apple App Store and Google Play, and by following Colonial Williamsburg on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/colonialwmsburg) and [@colonialwmsburg](https://twitter.com/colonialwmsburg) on [Twitter](https://www.instagram.com/colonialwmsburg) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/colonialwmsburg).

High-resolution images and video footage are available upon request.

About the 40th Anniversary logo: The sankofa bird symbol originated with the Akan people of West Africa in what is modern-day Ghana. In the region’s Twi dialect, “sankofa” means “return and get it.” The sankofa bird, looking back at its own tail, represents the African diaspora’s recovery of its shared past in order to secure its future.

Media contacts:

Joe Straw
757-220-7287
jstraw@cwf.org

Anna Cordle
757-220-7571
acordle@cwf.org

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation preserves, restores and operates Virginia’s 18th-century capital of Williamsburg. Innovative and interactive experiences highlight the relevance of the American Revolution to contemporary life and the importance of an informed, active citizenry. The Colonial Williamsburg experience includes more than 400 restored or reconstructed original buildings, renowned museums of decorative arts and folk art, extensive educational outreach programs for students and teachers, lodging, culinary options from historic taverns to casual or elegant dining, the Golden Horseshoe Golf Club featuring 45 holes designed by Robert Trent Jones and his son Rees Jones, a full-service spa and fitness center, pools, retail stores and gardens. Philanthropic support and revenue from admissions, products and hospitality operations sustain Colonial Williamsburg’s educational programs and preservation initiatives.