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Mr Rockefeller's Other City: Background and Response to the Restoration of Williamsburg, Virginia, 1927-1939

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MR. ROCKEFELLER'S OTHER CITY:
BACKGROUND AND RESPONSE TO THE RESTORATION
OF WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA 1927-1939

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Roy Brien Varnado

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
CHAPTER I. "PROGRESS AND PRESERVATION:" THE AMERI- CAN EXPERIENCE	2
CHAPTER II. "A RETREAT SET APART:" WILLIAMSBURG BE- FORE RESTORATION	8
CHAPTER III. "BUTTERFLY UNDER GLASS:" PRELIMINARIES TO RESTORATION	18
CHAPTER IV. "A RENEWAL OF YOUTH:" RESPONSE TO THE RESTORATION, 1927-1930	28
CHAPTER V. "THEY'RE TURNING THE TOWN ALL UPSIDE DOWN:" RESPONSE TO THE RESTORATION, 1930-1939	37
BIBLIOGRAPHY	58

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to examine the historical background and influences which led to the preservation of colonial Williamsburg in Virginia and to record and interpret responses to the restoration of the city, 1927-1939.

The study traces the development of historic preservation sentiment in the United States and Williamsburg which culminated in John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s decision to restore Williamsburg. It examines the nature and extent of responses to the Restoration, as they reflected society about them, from its inception to the beginning of World War II.

The author concludes that the growth of preservationism after 1865 was primarily a reaction to industrial, technological, and cultural changes that effaced the idealized, pastoral self-image of the Country. He contends that traditional American acceptance of progress and change did not permit a backward looking preservation rationale. Consequently, an acceptable alternative was found in patriotic education. The author has identified two predominant responses to Williamsburg during the first twelve years of the Restoration: the reasonable alternative to progress and change Williamsburg offered in the midst of a deteriorating environment and quality of life, and its patriotic significance. The author believes the former represented the greater, lasting appeal of Williamsburg; the latter still represents the intellectual reason for its restoration.

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CHAPTER I

"PROGRESS AND PRESERVATION:" THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

It was customary in 1924 for men of great wealth to recognize the social responsibilities God had called them to as stewards of His bounty. The seemingly inerrant law of rewards in this life, in return for hard work and piety, could not have appeared stronger to philanthropists of the time; and it augured well for the next life to seek ways and means for at least a moderate redistribution of a portion of their monetary blessing. In 1924, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was first implored by one of God's more articulate spokesmen, Reverend W. A. R. Goodwin, to benefit all mankind by restoring the colonial capital of the Old Dominion, Williamsburg, Virginia.

John Davidson Rockefeller, Jr., scion of one of the country's wealthiest families, was born in Cleveland, Ohio, January 29, 1874. He was raised in a religious atmosphere which, according to his mother's interpretation of Baptist discipline, stressed doctrinal and moral conformity, and according to his father's, a profound belief in hard work and the self-evident virtue of success.

John D. Rockefeller, Sr.'s growing business interests with Standard Oil of Ohio necessitated a family move to New York when his son was ten. Young Rockefeller saw little of his father except for trips back to Forest Hill, the family's country estate outside Cleveland, and occasionally a vacation out West or to Europe. The elder Rockefeller genuinely enjoyed the wilderness, and his son later recalled that "he found beauty in nature; from men he expected utility and convenience."¹

Young Rockefeller, cramped somewhat by his religious upbringing and ascetic life, entered Brown University when he was nineteen. A thoroughgoing teetotaler, at first he lacked the social graces and ease of the other undergraduates. His greatest achievement at Brown, and testimony to a then otherwise nascent intellect, was his election to Phi Beta Kappa near the end of his senior year.

Following graduation, Rockefeller attracted considerable attention from the press when he went to work for his father. Shy and retiring, he did not share his father's belief that the acquisition of wealth represented the greater challenge. Although both agreed money was a trust to be accounted for before God and man, the younger Rockefeller deeply felt his responsibility and duty was to employ the family fortune for "creditable purposes." Besieged by requests for money from a host of public and private

¹Raymond B. Fosdick, John D. Rockefeller, Jr.: A Portrait (New York, 1956) 196.

concerns, Rockefeller developed a careful and methodical investigative approach to everything he undertook, which was to characterize him for the rest of his life. His self-imposed reserve was the protective response of a sensitive man who wished to be accepted for his personal worth rather than wealth. His father made a fortune; he would dispense it wisely and always in his father's name and honor.

In the years prior to the Civil War the desire to preserve historic sites was largely an indigenous response to a growing cultural maturity.² The first truly successful American preservation effort came in 1850, when the state of New York purchased the Hasbrouck House in Newburgh, one of General Washington's Revolutionary War headquarters. Appeals for legislative funds were made on the basis of patriotic pride and education, a rationale ideally suited to a pragmatic national outlook and consistent with a prevailing belief in progress. Historic preservation was to serve a relevant, useful purpose in teaching love of country.

Nineteenth-century American histories taught that the present can learn valuable patriotic lessons from the past. By looking back for guidance, Americans believed they could march resolutely into the future. One had only to step

²Charles B. Hosmer, Jr., Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States Before Williamsburg (New York, 1965), 22.

inside the Hasbrouck House and be mysteriously transformed into a better person.³

It was after the Civil War, however, that the historic preservation movement was profoundly altered by the changes taking place in American life. Rockefeller grew up in what one writer described as the "Brown Decades."⁴ The rise of great marketing and industrial centers after the war pushed the urbanization and industrialization of America along at bewildering speed. Expanding urban and business needs turned the remnants of traditional architecture upside down, destroying visual unity and order of town and countryside. Old forms gave way to considerations of cost and utility. New methods of building construction drastically cut production time, and soon offices and factories gave major cities an incredibly crude, drab, smoky look of uniformity.

As urban and industrial expansion tended to obliterate regional differences, writers and reformers increasingly began to romanticize the country's wilderness, pioneer past, and agrarian background. A national sentimental longing arose to retain and protect old things. It found expression not only in preserving historic sites, but in a tender, unqualified regard for historic architecture and antiques.

³Ibid., 36, 266.

⁴Lewis Mumford, The Brown Decades: A Study in the Arts of America, 1865-1895 (New York, 1955).

"Colonial" architecture, long forgotten, was rediscovered at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, and later in Chicago at the Columbia World's Fair of 1892. Among many exhibits in Philadelphia, the state buildings of Massachusetts and Connecticut, colonial reproductions, attracted huge crowds. They set off one of the first home builders' promotional campaigns the country had ever seen - the Queen Anne, or Georgian movement. By 1920, inelegant, clumsy copies of domestic Georgian architecture had proliferated into a national style, prompting architect Frank Lloyd Wright to grumble about "Codfish Colonial."

Interest in early American antiques also became evident about the time of the Philadelphia Exposition. It reached its zenith in the 1920's as wealthy collectors, among them Rockefeller, eagerly pursued prized furnishings.

In this period of change the problem of reconciling progress and preservation became quite clear. Destruction of cultural and natural resources in the name of progress did not square with the loss of an idealized green republic of farms and villages. Consequently the preservation movement gained a sense of unity and purpose that it would never have achieved otherwise. Preservationists continued to acknowledge the concept of progress and thereby the contributions of historic sites in promoting good citizenship, but the real emphasis of preservation, as yet unarticulated, had shifted. Whatever the immediate reasons for saving them, old buildings came to represent a better way of life,

an alternative to ugliness and anonymity.

As the preservation movement grew into the twentieth-century with notable success, reasons other than patriotic education were advanced as criteria for selecting buildings to be restored. Amateurs and professionals alike responded to considerations of local and family pride, architectural and aesthetic enjoyment, and even commercialism.⁵ William Sumner Appleton, founder of the Association for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, was among the first to call for objective architectural, aesthetic and historic environmental standards as preservation criteria.

However, beneath all of the rhetoric - patriotism, pride, and admiration of architectural style and form - lay the half-realized longing for a simpler, more harmonious style of life with comely houses surrounded by green fields and flowers, a life totally comprehensible, undivided, undefiled, unspecialized, and unchanged.

⁵Hosmer, Presence of the Past, 260.

CHAPTER II

"A RETREAT SET APART:" WILLIAMSBURG BEFORE RESTORATION

Williamsburg became the capital of colonial Virginia in 1699. The year before a fire had leveled the statehouse at Jamestown, and it was decided to move the government from the exposed and unhealthy climate there to the little settlement of Middle Plantation located on a broad ridge between the York and James Rivers.

The new capital was laid out in gridiron plan by the Royal Governor, Francis Nicholson. The act and later amendments establishing the town provided for half-acre lots and a pleasing regularity by requiring that each house on the principal street, named for the Duke of Gloucester, should front alike and be built six feet from the roadway. Unlike other colonial towns, the main street, 99 feet wide and just under a mile in length, was terminated on either end by two dominant public buildings: the "Capitol" on the east and the College of William and Mary on the west. Later the Royal Governor's residence or "Palace" was constructed at the end of a secondary street at right angles to the Duke of Gloucester almost halfway between the Capitol and College.

In Williamsburg, as elsewhere in the colony, English

architectural forms and traditions were adapted to a new world setting. There were few trained architects anywhere in the colonies. Buildings were usually "undertaken" by talented master builders and craftsmen who worked from architectural handbooks. Discipline imposed by the well-ordered Williamsburg town plan resulted in an awareness of space, generous scale, and lot development as part of the house or building.⁶ Geometrical systems of proportions produced a pleasing architectural homogeneity and form that real estate salesmen over two hundred years later enthusiastically referred to as the "Williamsburg Style."

As the political, social, and cultural center of the predominantly tobacco planting colony, Williamsburg maintained an influence far out of proportion to its size. The Royal Governor resided in the city and set a style of refinement and grace eagerly imitated by wealthy planters. The elected assembly known as the House of Burgesses and the Council, which served as an upper house and General Court, convened in the Capitol. Still, Williamsburg was a "greene country town" whose population never got much above 1800 in colonial days,⁷ except twice a year when the Burgesses and General Court sat and great crowds came at "Publick Times" for several boisterous weeks of trading,

⁶Marcus Whiffen, The Eighteenth Century Houses of Williamsburg (Williamsburg, Virginia, 1960), viii, 59.

⁷Marcus Whiffen, The Public Buildings of Williamsburg (Williamsburg, Virginia, 1958), 12.

dancing, horse racing, and drinking.

In 1724, Hugh Jones, former rector of the Jamestown Church and later professor of mathematics at the College, declared the buildings of Williamsburg "are justly reputed the best in all the English America, and are exceeded by few of their kind in England."⁸ He went on to describe the inhabitants as dwelling "comfortably, genteely, pleasantly, and plentifully in this delightful, healthful, and . . . thriving city."⁹ One dyspeptic visitor, however, described it as "a most wretched contriv'd Affair."¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson castigated the architectural qualities of the town by describing the College, among other buildings, as a "rude misshapen pile" which except for a roof would be mistaken for a common brick kiln.¹¹

In the midst of the Revolutionary War the capital was permanently moved from Williamsburg to Richmond in 1780. For a time the city was occupied in 1781 by British troops under General Cornwallis and later the same year by Washington and his French ally, General Rochambeau, in the campaign that led to the final British surrender at Yorktown.

⁸Hugh Jones, The Present State of Virginia, Richard L. Morton, ed., as quoted in Jane Carson, We Were There, Descriptions of Williamsburg, 1699-1859 (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1965), 10.

⁹Ibid., 11.

¹⁰William and Mary Quarterly, First Series, XV (1907), 143-159, 215-224, as quoted in Ibid., 14.

¹¹Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, William Peden, ed., (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1955), as quoted in Ibid., 61.

With the capital gone and the war ended, Williamsburg mellowed and began to decay as fire and lack of money for repairs took their toll of the old buildings. The city fell into a "philosophical Serenity - which some mistook for Slumber."¹²

From time to time writers and other travelers came to reminisce, usually combining their visits with excursions to Yorktown and Jamestown. Their descriptions of Williamsburg before the Civil War typify a nostalgic concern for "departed grandeur." This passive sentiment, common to Europe and America, both antedated and was reinforced by the reaction to urban and industrial development. It is one of the root emotional responses to preservationism.

William Taylor Barry, a law student at William and Mary, contrasted Williamsburg in 1804 with the city in better times:

The ravages of the rude hand of time meet the eye in every quarter of the town. . . . I never walk the streets without experiencing the most gloomy sensations; but it is a kind of pleasing melancholy, that the mind rather courts than despises. It is a dignified pleasure that is always excited in the mind when viewing the vestiges of departed grandeur. ¹³

A self-described "itinerant" historian, Charles

¹²Rutherford Goodwin, A Brief and True Report Concerning Williamsburg in Virginia (Richmond, 1935), 117.

¹³William Taylor Barry, "Letters of William Taylor Barry," William and Mary Quarterly, First Series, XIII (October, 1904), 107-116, as quoted in Carson, We Were There, 94.

Campbell, stopped in Williamsburg long enough to record that the walls of the burned out second Capitol were still standing "which once resounded with the accents of the 'forest-born Demosthenes, whose thunder shook the Philip of the seas'."¹⁴ Continuing his journey to Yorktown, he lamented, "Alas, there is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous - Cornwallis's cave is converted into a hog-pen."¹⁵

During the Civil War, Williamsburg figured prominently in the Peninsula Campaign of 1862. At the close of hostilities it lay in a semi-desolate state. Many buildings had disappeared or were in ruins. The prosperity which accompanied the rise of manufacturing and commerce in the victorious North for a time eluded Virginia and Williamsburg.

In 1881, the centennial of the British surrender at Yorktown aroused Williamsburg. The same year the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad built a line through the city connecting Norfolk and Richmond, replacing the stagecoach and riverboat. Partly in response to the relative poverty of the inhabitants and also to the stimulus of the Yorktown centennial, a growing sense of pride in Williamsburg's long history began to manifest itself in efforts

¹⁴Charles Campbell, "Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Yorktown," Southern Literary Messenger, as quoted in William and Mary Quarterly, First Series, XXI (October, 1912), 136-138.

¹⁵Ibid. Cornwallis is said to have taken refuge in a cave along the banks of the York River in order to escape the American and French bombardment of Yorktown in 1781.

to repair and paint some of the old buildings.

Perhaps more significantly, the conception of Williamsburg held by residents and visitors alike began to change. Nostalgic reminiscences heretofore passive in nature began to harden. Increasingly, Williamsburg came to be looked upon as a counterpose to industrial and urban ugliness. Never again would the city be thought of solely as a relic of national and regional inheritance; rather it became a retreat, set apart, from the world.

In February 1884, Mrs. Cynthia Beverly Tucker Coleman of Williamsburg organized the Catherine Memorial Society in honor of her young daughter who had died a few months before. Composed of children who were Catherine's playmates, the group dedicated itself to "charitable works."¹⁶ In 1886, the society donated money for the repair of Bruton Parish Church. The following year members were granted permission by the vestry to restore the church cemetery wall and some of the monuments "as their means would justify."¹⁷ A desire to widen the scope of an apparent growing interest in preservation led Mrs. Coleman and Miss Mary J. Galt of Norfolk to call a meeting in Williamsburg in 1888 to discuss an organization devoted to "preserve just

¹⁶Jeannette S. Kelly, The First Restoration in Williamsburg: A Brief Review of the Origin of the Catherine Memorial Society and Early Activities of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (Richmond, 1933), 7.

¹⁷W. A. R. Goodwin, Historical Sketch of Bruton Church, Williamsburg, Virginia (Petersburg, 1903), 62.

such records of the past as are attracting the interest and attention elsewhere."¹⁸ The meeting marked the beginning of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. The APVA subsequently acquired and marked historic buildings and areas in Williamsburg.

The tercentennial celebration in 1907 of the landing at Jamestown caused much excitement in Williamsburg as the townspeople went about sprucing up for the overflow crowd. One appreciative visitor, upon seeing such activity, said that the little "village city" has a "five-fold interest in its unique character and atmosphere, its age, quaint architecture, historic associations, and romantic lustre."¹⁹

The main celebration was held April 26 - November 30, at Hampton Roads on the south side of the James River where the Norfolk Naval Base would later be established. Among the official buildings representing the states, enthusiastic Virginians privately constructed a nondescript replica of the second colonial Capitol at Williamsburg. Large signs painted on it enticed visitors to see "A Faithful and Dramatic Reproduction of Colonial Virginia and the Burning of Jamestown - A Colonial Ball at the Capitol."²⁰ On Jamestown Island, the Tercentenary Monument erected by

¹⁸Kelly, The First Restoration in Williamsburg, 10-11.

¹⁹Mary L. Foster, Colonial Capitals of the Dominion of Virginia (Lynchburg, 1906), 43.

²⁰William H. Lee, Glimpses of the Jamestown Exposition and Picturesque Virginia (Chicago, 1907), n.p.

Congress was dedicated with fitting ceremony.

Following the Tercentennial festivities, the tourist trade picked up a little in Williamsburg as visitors came to admire the antiques and old buildings. Residents recalled:

. . . there were all kinds: school teachers collecting local color with which to gild future dry lessons in history; blatant Philistines who pointed the finger of scorn at a place which had made so little progress in so many years; and the enthusiastic who praised the beautiful way in which we had 'preserved the atmosphere of the past.' 21

"Philosophical Serenity" was not much disturbed in Williamsburg during the years before World War I. In 1912, city officials forgot to open the polls on time on election day. The Richmond Times-Dispatch warned the world to "tread lightly on your path by Williamsburg, lest the drums and tramlings of your conquests weave, in the golden texture of her dreams, some darkling strand from off the sleeve of care."²²

The following year, the city council decided there was not enough money in the budget to have the clock in Bruton Parish Church cleaned and wound. "Now," chortled the Times-Dispatch, "the Lotus-burgers have come upon a way of solving all their problems. . . . They have seized on eternity and bound it captive; they have won immortality

²¹The Williamsburg Garden Club, A Williamsburg Scrap Book (Richmond, 1950), 15-16.

²²Richmond (Virginia) Times-Dispatch, June 26, 1912.

for all their dreaming. In short they have decided to let the clocks stop."²³

The usual response to Williamsburg from visitors in pre - World War I years centered around descriptions of an undisturbed village life with beautiful "colonial" houses, a church, college, trees, and open green spaces. The city combined all the classic elements of the Currier and Ives village ideal. Williamsburg was pictured as a completely integrated society in a pastoral landscape, set off from a chaotic world of progress and change. One visitor fondly remembered offering a little prayer of thanks that Williamsburg voters had defeated a proposed trolley on Duke of Gloucester Street. "Let it rest," she said.²⁴

During World War I, the village ideal suffered. The Penniman munitions plant was constructed near Williamsburg, and a make-shift town of the same name, with nearly 15,000 people, sprang up almost overnight. Great changes took place in Williamsburg as the city felt the hand of progress. "Cows on the Palace Green. A riot of buttercups around the Courthouse. The Duke of Gloucester Street just a dusty track. Many sweet old cottages still left along Nicholson and Francis Street. And then," remembered long-time resident

²³Ibid., May 14, 1913.

²⁴Hildegarde Hawthorne, Williamsburg Old and New (New York, 1941), 40. Other nostalgic and pastoral descriptions of Williamsburg before World War I include Robert A. Lancaster, Jr., Historic Virginia Homes and Churches (Philadelphia, 1915), 103; Ernest Peixotto, A Revolutionary Pilgrimage (New York, 1917), 318-319.

Mrs. George Coleman, "before we knew it, we had a concrete highway right down the Duke of Gloucester, hideous garages, false front stores, telephone poles."²⁵ Although some "Lotus-burgers" tried to resist, the war nevertheless left Williamsburg standing "upon the Brink of a poor Success in a World of vast accomplishment."²⁶

²⁵Beverly M. Bowie, "Williamsburg: Its College and Its Cinderella City," The National Geographic Magazine, CVI, 4 (October, 1954), 439-486.

²⁶Rutherford Goodwin, A Brief and True Report . . ., 126.

CHAPTER III

"BUTTERFLY UNDER GLASS:" PRELIMINARIES TO RESTORATION

William Archer Rutherford Goodwin, a native of Richmond, Virginia, was almost twenty-four years old in 1893 when ordained to the diaconate of the Episcopal Church. He took priestly Orders the following year and became Rector of St. John's Church in Petersburg. In 1903, answering an invitation from the vestry, and with consent of the Bishop of Southern Virginia, he assumed the rectorate of Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, one of the oldest active Episcopal Churches in America. A house of worship had stood in the vicinity since 1683; the present church dated from 1715.

Goodwin was thoroughly imbued with the romantic history of Virginia, the South, and the Nation. Almost immediately upon his arrival in Williamsburg, he decided that the old church, which had been altered inside with gothic trimmings, ought to be restored "to tell its story of the days that are gone to the days that may yet be."²⁷ Restoration was begun

²⁷W. A. R. Goodwin, Historical Sketch of Bruton Church, 9. In 1895, Lyon G. Tyler, son of John Tyler, tenth President of the United States, distinguished jurist, former President of the College of William and Mary, editor and founder of the William and Mary Quarterly, called for the preservation of Bruton Parish by the state of Virginia. "The old church honored our past," he wrote, "the present should honor it." Lyon G. Tyler, Bruton Church (Richmond, 1895), 13.

in 1905 to return the interior to its eighteenth-century appearance. The work was inaugurated by a sermon preached by Reverend Beverly D. Tucker, Rector of St. Paul's, Norfolk. He began with the observation that a growing reverence for the past was one of the characteristics of the time; and as such, it was an acknowledgement of the dependence of the present upon the past. Warming to his subject, he went straight to the philosophical problem of reconciling progress and preservation:

We realize there must be progress . . .
but in order that progress should be
real, there must be candid recognition
of the work which has been already done.
. . . Changes are sometimes trying, but
the changes which you propose to make
do not tend to break with the past, but
to bind you more closely to it. 28

When the restoration was completed in 1907, Goodwin roundly castigated "change." He wrote that the church stood in a historic environment created by the past. The spirit of long ago which "haunts and hallows the ancient city" should lead its inheritors to "resist the spirit of ruthless innovation which threatens to rob the city of its unique distinction and its charm."²⁹

In 1908 Goodwin moved to St. Paul's in Rochester, New York. When he returned in 1923 to become Chairman of the Biblical Literature and Religious Education Department

²⁸W. A. R. Goodwin, Bruton Parish Church Restored and its Historic Environment (Petersburg, 1907), 149-154.

²⁹Ibid., 33.

of the College, he did not find Williamsburg as he left it. The effects of World War I and "ruthless innovation" had changed the city greatly. Goodwin had been away almost fifteen years. Like a man returning home for the first time since childhood and finding it changed and foreign, he was appalled. Immediately he set out to raise money in cooperation with the APVA to restore the colonial Powder Magazine. Next he solicited funds to restore the home of George Wythe, teacher and friend of Thomas Jefferson, professor of law at the College, and signer of the Declaration of Independence. Indefatigable, he helped obtain donations to renovate still another colonial church, Grace Episcopal in Yorktown. As Goodwin worked feverishly to restore the pieces of Williamsburg, he first conceived the idea to restore the whole.

Corrugated iron buildings, filling stations, shacks, stores, cheap modern restaurants "held no lure for ghosts, and broke the harmony of dreams as the noise of sledgehammer blows would mar the music of a Beethoven symphony."³⁰ Goodwin's secretary for many years, Elizabeth Hayes, remembered that visitors to Williamsburg in 1924 who wished to recall the past "had need for large and active imaginations."³¹

³⁰Elizabeth Hayes, "The Background and Beginnings of the Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia," 1933, 14, MS, Archives, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

³¹Ibid., 9.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s love of nature and solitude, which he shared with his father, played a large part in his adult life. He and his family were frequent visitors and donors of land and money to the National Parks.

Rockefeller's biographer observed that while he "had his father's appreciation of nature, he went far beyond his father in his feeling for beauty."³² Rockefeller responded to his aesthetic sense emotionally rather than intellectually. He found little that pleased him in his wife's love of modern art. However, he was taken with dynastic Chinese porcelain in which he saw "none of the 'self-expression' which he found so objectionable in modern art. Instead there were the conformity and restraint of a civilization."³³

In 1923, almost a year before he met the energetic Dr. Goodwin, Rockefeller toured Europe. In France he stopped at the crumbling Palace of Versailles. Once the brilliant world of Louis XIV, the great halls were deserted and in near ruin. Continuing his journey to the gothic

³²Fosdick, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 327.

³³Ibid., 333. After the restoration of Williamsburg was well underway, William Graves Perry, the architect first retained by Goodwin, remarked that where Rockefeller was concerned, it was fortunate the Revolutionary part of American history was enacted in the Georgian scene. Said Perry, "It is reasonably certain that Mr. Rockefeller would not have felt the interest which led him to include 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." William G. Perry, "Notes on the Architecture," The Architectural Record, LXXVII, 6 (December, 1935), 359.

cathedrals at Fontainebleau and Rheims, Rockefeller found the same visible decay traced by water-streaked walls and broken windows. He was reminded of a trip to Peking in 1921, where he sadly observed deteriorating ancient temples and palaces. "Great beauty was being destroyed," he wrote, "and it depressed me."³⁴ For Rockefeller, great buildings fallen on hard times were more than simply architectural humus of the past. His regard for them was both aesthetic and anthropomorphic.

Early in 1924, Goodwin spoke to a Phi Beta Kappa gathering in New York City to urge construction of a proposed national memorial hall at the College of William and Mary. The society was founded at the College in 1776 and remained the seat of Alpha Chapter. Appropriately, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was chairman of the fund-raising committee and attended the meeting.

Goodwin and Rockefeller were very nearly opposites in personality and temperament. The often garrulous priest ran the great risk of alienating Rockefeller, whose taciturn reserve was reinforced by his Calvinist upbringing and considerable experience in dealing with glib favor-seekers. They shared few common interests, representing disparate

³⁴Ibid., 349. Rockefeller donated huge sums for the restoration of ruins and historic buildings throughout his life. Following his visit to France, he gave the French government nearly \$3,000,000 to restore Versailles, Fontainebleau, and Rheims. Both cathedrals were heavily damaged during World War I.

cultures: one from the predominantly rural South where racial segregation was still a way of life; the other, an inheritor of strong abolitionist sentiment from the urban, industrialized Northeast. Yet they struck a warm friendship that over the years was evidenced by their mutual concern for the significance of the work undertaken at Williamsburg and by their love of the little town.

Later the same year Goodwin returned to New York and attempted to see Rockefeller to explain his ideas for restoring Williamsburg. Goodwin got no farther than the reception room and had to be content with communicating his dream to a secretary who promised to bring the matter to "Mr. Junior's" attention.

Upon his return to Williamsburg Goodwin was disappointed but not surprised to hear that Rockefeller was not interested in the project. Goodwin, however, was not easily put off. In an impetuous letter to Henry Ford and his brother William, Goodwin challenged them to help restore Williamsburg in retribution for indirectly disfiguring the historic city with gasoline stations to service Ford autos.³⁵ The letter was mysteriously leaked to the Detroit Free Press. The Baltimore Sun picked up the story and declared, tongue-in-cheek, that "the spectacle of the Old Dominion huckstering off her ancient capital to an outsider in order to get a flivver imitation of departed glory, would bring a blush

³⁵Fosdick, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 262.

of shame to the pale cheeks of her mighty shades."³⁶ The "mighty shades," replied Goodwin in the next mail, would welcome a row of crepe myrtles on Duke of Gloucester Street in place of the "horrible" green telephone poles and wires.³⁷

In March 1926, after visiting Hampton Institute, a black college in Hampton, Virginia, Rockefeller and his family decided to motor up the peninsula to Williamsburg. Dr. J. A. C. Chandler, President of the College of William and Mary, got wind of the visit and offered the services of Goodwin to the Rockefellers as a guide. Goodwin was at his eloquent best touring the family around Williamsburg, Jamestown, and Yorktown. Rockefeller was impressed with the area and its long history. Near the end of their visit, he asked an incredulous Goodwin if any plans had been made to preserve the old buildings in Williamsburg. Goodwin exercised unusual control and replied that although he had given the matter some thought, the time was not yet right.

In November 1926, Rockefeller again visited Williamsburg for the dedication of the Phi Beta Kappa Memorial Hall. Goodwin borrowed a limousine and chauffeur and invited his guests to take another ride. Together they visited the Wythe House and explored the city at length. Later the same evening at the dedication banquet, Rockefeller told Goodwin he would be willing to finance sketches of Goodwin's plans

³⁶Baltimore (Maryland) Sun, November 4, 1924.

³⁷Ibid., November 11, 1924.

to restore some of the historic buildings.

The following month, Goodwin learned that the Ludwell-Paradise home, a prominent eighteenth-century brick house on Duke of Gloucester Street, was for sale. Insisting upon strict anonymity, Rockefeller authorized Goodwin to make the first purchase of the Restoration in a cryptic telegram signed "David's Father."

By mid-year 1927, Goodwin was given permission to begin buying selected historic properties. A priest of limited means purchasing real property in Williamsburg soon attracted attention and speculation among townfolk and outsiders. Rumors flew.

Barely able to contain his excitement as the buying progressed over the next few months, Goodwin decided it was time to give his congregation a preview of what was in store for Williamsburg. Without divulging his backer or the exact nature of his plans, Goodwin's sermon on November 13 dealt with the spiritual significance of a plan to restore the city. It might be possible, he said, to restore Williamsburg to its eighteenth-century appearance and to make it a great teaching center of beauty, history, and order. He left his amazed parishioners with a quotation from Theodore H. Price ringing in their ears: "Next to Religion, the greatest teaching power in the world today is the force of noble tradition."³⁸

³⁸Hayes, "The Background and Beginnings of the Restoration . . .," 116.

On November 21, Goodwin and his architect, William Graves Perry of the Boston firm of Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn, met in New York to review the master plan. For a time Perry was kept in the dark about the identity of Goodwin's benefactor. The next day Rockefeller agreed that the physical dimensions and modern intrusions upon historic Williamsburg made it virtually impossible to restrict the restoration to a single district. He approved Perry's expanded plan urged on him by Goodwin.

Goodwin returned to Williamsburg and continued the massive job of buying property. Publicity and conjecture about his feverish activity reached new heights in the spring of 1928. Local citizens and the wire services named such wealthy philanthropists as George Eastman, Henry Ford, J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and Otto Kahn as possible contributors.

With Rockefeller's approval, Goodwin finally called a mass meeting of Williamsburg townspeople on Tuesday, June 12, 1928, in the old high school on Palace Green. The purpose of the meeting was to announce the city's benefactor, plans for restoration, and to obtain approval of property owners to transfer certain properties to the newly formed Williamsburg Holding Corporation.

Goodwin spoke first of the spiritual and economic blessings that the Rockefellers' generosity would shower upon the town. He said that Rockefeller planned to spend

\$5,000,000 on the work. "There will be windows built here," he concluded, "through which men may look down the vistas of the past."³⁹

Only one person got up to oppose the plan, Major S. D. Freeman. He began by reminding the people that the city would no longer belong to them. Then he continued:

Will you feel the same pride in it that you now feel as you walk across the Greens, or down the broad streets? Have you all been hypnotized by five million dollars dangled before your eyes? Is this a philanthropic enterprise? Is it altruistic? We will reap dollars, but will we own our town? Will you not be in the position of a butterfly pinned to a card in a glass cabinet . . . ? 40

Goodwin easily carried the day.

³⁹Ibid., 218.

⁴⁰Ibid., 220.

CHAPTER IV

"A RENEWAL OF YOUTH:" RESPONSE TO THE RESTORATION, 1927-1930

Significant changes had taken place in American life and thought by 1927. Henry Ford introduced the Model T in 1908, an inexpensive, rugged, all-purpose automobile. By the time the Model A was brought out in 1927, more than 15,000,000 "flivvers" had been sold, and Americans would never quite be the same again. The automobile and increased industrial mechanization arrived together; and together they provided new leisure and the means to enjoy it previously unknown. Vacation habits changed. People began using the family car to go farther and stay longer. In the late 1920's the tourist industry boomed as the automobile homogenized the city, suburbs, and countryside. A massive highway chain of curio shops, antique stores, and gas stations all sprang up to service the trade.

Following World War I, many writers fled to Europe in despair of the shallow sterility of life in the United States. Those who remained questioned almost every institution. H. L. Mencken snorted at the "booboisie," while outstanding novelists and playwrights such as Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote

sadly of the country's cultural bankruptcy. Progress for them was no longer automatic, rather something elusive and relative.

Republicans swept the presidential election of 1920 by a decisive majority and ushered in twelve years of "normalcy" under Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. For a time business enjoyed unparalleled growth and profits. Progress, of sorts, could be seen by most people everywhere in technology, medical science, educational opportunities, a rising standard of living; in unplanned urban and industrial growth; in smoke, congestion, routine, boredom, and competitive tension.

The revival of colonial architecture, begun at the Philadelphia Exposition in 1876, reached all-time popularity by 1927. It rapidly spread to the new suburbs as contractors purchased and used standardized home plans. "What we call a revival," said Lewis Mumford, a dynamic social and architectural critic, "is really a second burial."⁴¹ In 1924, the American wing of the Metropolitan Museum in New York opened for the first time. Visitors found a dazzling collection of colonial decorative arts. The renewed interest in antiques that followed was just in time to help buyers furnish their Queen Anne houses. Currier and Ives prints were sold at handsome prices.

⁴¹ Lewis Mumford, Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization (New York, 1924).

Wagon wheels became ceiling fixtures, cauldrons hung in fireplaces, and primitive art hung on the walls of all sorts of houses, old and new.⁴²

Dissatisfaction with certain aspects of progress and prosperity intensified in the 1920's. Frederick Lewis Allen pointed out that the city might be the source of wealth, but to spend their money, Americans longed to escape "into the free sunshine of the remembered countryside, into the easygoing life and beauty of the European past, into some never-never land."⁴³ Suburbanites fled the city looking for an "autonomous and democratic village life;" however, "they found the autonomy expensive and the democracy elusive."⁴⁴

Response to the restoration of Williamsburg, 1927-1939, was incredibly broad. Starting slowly at first in the late 1920's, there was an avalanche in the following depression decade of feature news stories, magazine articles, travelogs, editorials, and advertisements - even historical novels with Williamsburg settings. The former colonial capital of Virginia, which before only rated a brief mention in history texts, assumed its place along-

⁴²Russel Lynes, The Tastemakers (New York, 1954), 239.

⁴³Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's (New York, 1964), 228.

⁴⁴John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History (Boston, 1966), 240.

side Philadelphia, Boston, and New York as the scene of momentous events in the Revolutionary War. The Restoration spurred the renewed interest in colonial history and early decorative arts. Furniture manufacturers, home builders, and home furnishings companies rushed to copy the Williamsburg "style." Within ten years following the first building restored, some unenthusiastic architects were expressing concern that "Williamsburg architecture" and interiors were becoming institutionalized across America.

For the most part, there were two kinds of broad, often overlapping responses to the work going on in Williamsburg during the first twelve years of the Restoration: the past as restored in Williamsburg was a viable alternative to unremitting progress and change, and Williamsburg served to inspire patriotism and a greater appreciation of American colonial and Revolutionary history. The first of these represented the emotional significance and greater appeal of Williamsburg. The second answered the intellectual demand of meaningful purpose in a pragmatic society that still clung to a belief in progress. Interestingly, in this period little substantive intellectual criticism of Williamsburg reached print.

Among the earliest public reactions to Goodwin's still secretive real estate transactions in 1927, the Newport News Daily Press declared that the buildings

saved otherwise would have been doomed to decay or to the "iconoclasm of progress."⁴⁵ The Richmond Times-Dispatch editorialized that a restoration of Williamsburg would mean more to mankind than the industrial development of the James River.⁴⁶

A few commentators early raised the question whether or not the conjectured restoration of Williamsburg could, or even should, attempt to turn back the clock. One New York paper observed that while it was impossible to replace life within the shell of an ancient culture, historic restorations can preserve a little of the outward beauty and charm of the past. Paradoxically, the editorial continued, all of the men rumored to be behind the project were closely identified with the contemporary industrial forces which destroyed the culture that built Williamsburg. Historical landmarks such as the "lovely old Virginia town" should be preserved to serve as a visual reminder "that civilization does not necessarily follow the machine."⁴⁷

A North Carolina editor believed that the reported extraordinary proposal to restore Williamsburg would seize the public imagination "for the very reason that it goes counter to the universal American ambition and seeks to turn the clock back instead of forward."⁴⁸

⁴⁵Newport News (Virginia) Daily Press, August 23, 1927.

⁴⁶Richmond (Virginia) Times-Dispatch, December 10, 1927.

⁴⁷New York Herald Tribune, January 8, 1928.

⁴⁸Asheville North Carolina Citizen, January 17, 1928.

The emotional appeal of Williamsburg perhaps was never more clearly stated than in an editorial titled "A Renewal of Youth" appearing in the Providence Journal. Although it reflected nostalgia for an idyllic past, it went beyond to observe that something had gone fundamentally awry in American civilization. "It may prove," said the Journal, "that the promoters of the project have invented a time cure for the nerve-racked men and women of the twentieth century to which they can come and be healed. Or it may prove that, once here, they will be unwilling to go anywhere, but will gladly forsake all the so-called gains of civilization for the quietude of this alluring retreat."⁴⁹

Visitors who actually came to Williamsburg in the late 1920's were struck by the city's "charm." It was so unique no one could wish to return to their "crass and tasteless environments with their former sense of satisfaction."⁵⁰ Aesthetic delight in Williamsburg added another dimension to its emotional appeal and prompted visitors to search for its uniqueness in the greens, broad lawns, and well-proportioned buildings. It was possible, they believed, to translate the physical characteristics of "charm" to their own homes, neighborhoods, and cities.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Providence (Rhode Island) Journal, April 10, 1928.

⁵⁰ Ibid., June 17, 1928.

⁵¹ An early attempt to define the "charm" of Williamsburg in terms of its physical characteristics may be found in Paul Wilstach, Tidewater Virginia (New York, 1929), 184. Wilstach was intrigued by the city's "expansive effect" as reflected in "repetitious greens, broad lawns, and profligate chimneys."

Such reactions largely reflected an urban environmental and social crisis in America. Everywhere the quality of life seemed to erode. What people saw in the restoration of Williamsburg, more important than its patriotic and educational value, was an alternative to ugliness, pollution, colorless repetition, and anonymity.

One aspect of the response to the beauty of Williamsburg restored was the phenomenon identified by Professor Leo Marx as popular and sentimental pastoralism.⁵² The once dominant image of a quiet green republic with forests, villages, and farms was defiled by machines "invading the peace of an enclosed space, a world set apart, or an area somehow made to evoke a feeling of encircled felicity."⁵³ Even before the turn of the century, historic buildings and areas, including Williamsburg, were looked upon as enclaves to be defended from progress and change, the principal agent of which was industrial technology.

Were it not for the fact that George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry walked the streets of Williamsburg, Rockefeller would not have restored the town. In 1927, historical and patriotic associations provided well-established criteria for determining which old buildings would be saved. History textbooks still stressed a

⁵²Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal (New York, 1967), 5.

⁵³Ibid., 29.

moralistic brand of patriotism that served a teaching function for the present and future. For the layman, the study of history was not a sterile academic exercise. The past taught great lessons which good citizens ignored at their peril. History was a beacon to steer by as the country marched into the future and greatness, a reference to consult when occasionally the way was unclear.

Few preservationists would attempt a rational justification for spending time and money in restoring buildings simply because they were beautiful and peaceful. In patriotic education, however, they had a ready-made, useful purpose for their work. Even so, plans to restore Williamsburg raised a number of eyebrows among disciples of progress who were not certain that patriotism itself was a solid enough reason to spend \$5,000,000. "Not so long ago," reported a New York paper, "restoring an entire village would not have been altogether possible. Philanthropists' money would have been directed to more utilitarian ends. . . . Our millionaires are apparently beginning to play with their money."⁵⁴

Even before the full extent of the plans for Williamsburg were announced, Goodwin spoke of the patriotic significance of restoring its memorials: "They should be preserved that the future may be strengthened and enriched by the ideas which they recall and by the ancient sacrifices of

⁵⁴New York Evening Post, June 14, 1928.

which they speak."⁵⁵ Newspaper articles that followed stressed the inspirational experience of actually seeing the historic places in Williamsburg where immortal words were said and immortal documents were signed.⁵⁶ A visit to Williamsburg would provide visitors with a new conception of the principles of the Founding Fathers.⁵⁷

"That the Future May Learn From the Past" very soon became the motto of the Restoration.

⁵⁵Newport News (Virginia) Daily Press, August 23, 1927.

⁵⁶Washington (D. C.) News, July 27, 1928.

⁵⁷Roanoke (Virginia) News, July 28, 1928.

CHAPTER V

"THEY'RE TURNING THE TOWN ALL UPSIDE DOWN:" RESPONSE TO THE RESTORATION, 1930-1939

On October 24, 1929, over twelve million shares of stock were traded on the exchanges, and the economy fell apart. The Restoration had barely gotten underway in Williamsburg as businesses closed their doors, factories shut down, banks declared insolvency, and millions of unemployed walked the streets. The "Great Depression" had begun. In 1930, the Democrats captured Congress, and in 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President. When he assumed office in March of the following year, the country was on the verge of collapse.

Williamsburg, however, was a financial oasis in an economic desert. In November, 1930, Rockefeller decided to spend an additional \$1,000,000 on the restoration work in order to alleviate unemployment in the area. Two years later, amid rumors of a shut down, residents were again happy to hear that, on the contrary, Rockefeller wished to speed up the work in order to employ as many as possible. There were "no hard times in Williamsburg."⁵⁸ The Christian Science

⁵⁸Williamsburg The Virginia Gazette, April 22, 1932.

Monitor observed: "It is a happy thing that the depression has left a few millionaires thus able to contribute to public education."⁵⁹ Henry Robinson Luce, however, found it interesting that in the middle of the depression Rockefeller did not seem to mind that Williamsburg by no means grossed enough to balance the millions "sunk" in the project.⁶⁰ Rockefeller personally received his share of criticism, but in Williamsburg most was forgiven.⁶¹

Generally, what people wrote about Williamsburg in the troubled years of the depression carried a new sense of urgency. Many Williamsburg watchers felt the country had been betrayed by materialistic progress and change. An upstate New York paper editorialized that England and the United States share a feeling for the past that is reflected

⁵⁹Boston (Massachusetts) Christian Science Monitor, April 3, 1933.

⁶⁰"Mr. Rockefeller's \$14,000,000 Idyl," Fortune Magazine, XII, 1 (July, 1935), 69-73.

⁶¹The little Johnson City (Texas) Courier declared that Williamsburg was Rockefeller's compensation for the "horror" of Radio City in Rockefeller Plaza. The difference between the two was that Williamsburg has "history and tradition." Johnson City (Texas) Courier, September, 1933. In 1938, the Pasadena (California) Star News carried a review of William Oliver Stevens, Old Williamsburg and Her Neighbors (New York, 1938). The reviewer was willing to overlook Rockefeller's political shortcomings: "Whatever may be charged against Mr. Rockefeller as a practitioner of the individualism of his age, his foresight in planning the restoration of Old Williamsburg will be commended, and . . . will be his greatest monument long after his own generation and its laissez-faire [sic] philosophy will have been but subjects for historians." Pasadena (California) Star News, April 30, 1938.

in both countries' dislike of having relics of earlier ages buried beneath modern changes.⁶²

Magazines aimed primarily at homemakers characteristically pictured the quality of life in eighteenth-century Williamsburg as an alternative to the present. Better Homes and Gardens found reason to be optimistic in a care-ridden world because the family dwellings in Williamsburg radiated their well-being; one felt so buoyant and cheerful in the little town that he wished to hurry back.⁶³

In November, 1937, House and Garden published a remarkable "Williamsburg Issue."⁶⁴ Replete with advertisements for "colonial" homes and furnishings, article after article spoke of living traditions enhanced by the Restoration and their relevance to a tottering contemporary life. A Pittsburgh furniture manufacturer took a full page to advise readers that "our decorators can create for your home the authentic Williamsburg atmosphere."⁶⁵ The lead feature contrasted the past and present in a litany of good and bad:

From that slowly moving culture of Williamsburg a vast distance extends before we reach our own turbulent, geometrical and chaotic civilization. It is all the long distance between

⁶²Canandaigua (New York) Messenger, March 10, 1932.

⁶³Hiram J. Herbert, "Williamsburg, the Ideal Home Town," Better Homes and Gardens, XIV, 11 (July, 1936), 75.

⁶⁴House and Garden, LXXI, 5 (November, 1937).

⁶⁵Ibid., 25.

people who worked with their hands and people who are becoming enslaved by machines. Between merriment when commonfolk lighted bonfires on a village green and set candles in their windows - and flashy modern towns floodlighting their streets and tall buildings. Between men and women who rode in limbering coaches behind horses and us who ride swiftly in motor-driven vehicles. Between us who fly and wash and cool the air we breathe indoors and cook by electricity - and a people who walked and didn't mind the dust. Between classical architecture nobly conceived and richly endowed with beauty - and a functional architecture that would eliminate inspiration from the past. 66

"The future can and should learn from the past," concluded the article. "House and Garden . . . believes that both the spirit of ancient Williamsburg and the actuality of its splendid public buildings and homes now restored have a definite, necessary, and vital message for our times."⁶⁷ Williamsburg appeared to demonstrate that the best of the past could be accommodated to the demands of everyday life in 1937.

"Now people are going home," declared the Elbridge Courier, in a direct frontal attack on "progress." A sharp recession in the fall of 1937 halted the remarkable economic recovery of the previous summer. The reaction which followed was often bitter and despairing. The familiar guage of progress, bigger and better, was seen as a sham. Small towns and villages, among them Williamsburg,

⁶⁶Richardson Wright, "Williamsburg," Ibid., 41.

⁶⁷Ibid.

had largely contributed to the cultural greatness of the United States; it was time, thought many, to return to the national womb:

Travail has strengthened the conviction that the village has its own special gift for the world's advancement. The gift is an odd, intangible one; something compounded of snugness, not smugness; and stability, simplicity and quietness. A perfect gift because it is for all the year and forever, and something men have found that they cannot do without very well. 68

One of the first popular histories of Williamsburg after the restoration began touched upon the impact of technology in daily life. Among other similar responses, it reflected a sense of frustration that machines performed almost every task: "While science and invention have brought us many laborsaving devices and perhaps an easier way of performing manual labor, yet the lure of the open fire, the tallow candle and the feather bed will always harken us back to what is termed by many, 'the good old days.'"⁶⁹ Life, past and present, in Williamsburg was by implication totally comprehensible and satisfying. Work

⁶⁸Elbridge (New York) Courier, December 24, 1937.

⁶⁹J. A. Osborne, Williamsburg in Colonial Times: Incidents in the Lives of the English Colonists in Virginia during the 17th and 18th Centuries as Revealed in the Old Documents and Files of The Virginia Gazette (Richmond, 1935), viii.

was done by hand, not with mysterious "devices."⁷⁰

The apparent contradiction of incorporating twentieth-century technology and conveniences in the restoration of eighteenth-century Williamsburg was not lost on some visitors. They observed that the natives were not disposed to return altogether to the life of their forebears, just for the sake of authenticity:

The lawyers and doctors do not want to give up stenographers and typewriters, X-rays and anesthetics; the merchants object to being denied their adding machines and motor delivery wagons; the grocers would have empty shelves if the modern staple foods, fiendish invention by which the science of chemistry insidiously wrecks the human digestion, were done away, and the old-fashioned commodities put in their place; the housekeepers refuse to give up their telephones and electric cookers and percolators, and the thousand labor-saving devices which permit them to play bridge when their great-great-great-grandmothers were busy spinning and weaving and tailoring and preserving; oh, no; Old Williamsburg will keep its bathtubs and plumbing and running water, its electric carpet-sweepers, radios, moving picture places and automobiles! ⁷¹

The Ladies Home Journal advised its readers that buildings necessary for the modern life of Williamsburg were to be built in the Georgian manner; but an otherwise

⁷⁰In 1936, the Williamsburg restoration management inaugurated what proved to be an immensely popular program of colonial handicrafts demonstrations.

⁷¹Marietta M. Andrews, George Washington's Country (New York, 1930), 202.

faithful restoration soon runs into problems:

Red gasoline pumps are hard to harmonize with the coach-and-six days, and electric lights and paved streets are not quite authentic; but when the past and present attempt to merge, there must be necessary compromises. The one can never completely be the other, for progress will not be denied. 72

One purist believed there was already too much modern technology in Williamsburg. He thought it would have been a vast improvement to bar all motor traffic in the historic area and replace concrete streets with dirt roads; it was difficult to imagine oneself in the ancient city when constantly assaulted by the roar of buses and honking horns. 73

However, the attraction of Williamsburg for most visitors, in spite of misgivings about progress, lay not in a face-off with modern technology, rather in the pleasing way in which such technology was integrated and sublimated in the total life of the city. A visitor wrote

72 Chesla C. Sherlock, "The New-Old Charm of Williamsburg: The Colonial Capital of Virginia Revives its Historic Atmosphere," Ladies Home Journal, 48 (October, 1931), 181.

73 A. Hyatt Verrill, Romantic and Historic Virginia (New York, 1935), 88. Williamsburg architect, William G. Perry, anticipated this kind of objection and attempted a common sense answer. He reasoned that if the spirit of the city derives from the life and activity within it, then such life should be encouraged with accepted modern conveniences. William G. Perry, "Notes on the Architecture," The Architectural Record, LXXVIII, 6 (December, 1935), 363. Occasionally it was pointed out that were it not for the skill and ingenuity of twentieth-century technology, the restoration of Williamsburg could not have been undertaken. See "The City that Grew Backwards," Popular Mechanics, LXIV (July, 1935), 119A; also, Hiram J. Herbert, "Williamsburg, the Ideal Home Town," Better Homes and Gardens (July, 1936), 74.

that the new and restored buildings were done with sympathetic understanding of the old, but also in a manner that showed regard for the present. The buildings "are an organic part of the living whole, fitted into a pattern of community life as it existed yesterday and as it can to some extent be duplicated today."⁷⁴

To the residents of Williamsburg, the very act of restoring the town to its eighteenth-century appearance represented a paradox of progress and change. A few expressed a feeling of loss, rather than opposition, as the familiar face of Williamsburg was lifted. In 1931, a local resident, J. Luther Kibler, wrote a remarkable little guide book.⁷⁵ He urged visitors to come before the restoration was complete and see the landmarks in their pristine antiquity, undisturbed by the "hammer of progress." The strange atmosphere of the old architecture could be felt, not seen. When he ran out of prose, Kibler concluded his appeal with an epic poem, "They're Turning the Town All Upside Down:"

Now the 'old' will become 'new'; and the 'new' will
become 'old',
As colonial aura and lingering charm the architects
mold
Into many forms new as pristine types they unfold
That treasures from vistas of Time's dark Future may
hold -
The treasure trove of a Restoration -
The sacred shrines of Virginia - Nation -

⁷⁴Ethel B. Power, "Colonial Stage Reset for Action," House Beautiful, LXXVI, 1 (July, 1934), 68.

⁷⁵J. Luther Kibler, Seeing Old Williamsburg Under Restoration (Williamsburg, 1931).

A climax Rockefeller creation -
 No grander work for Time's probation.
 Historic shrines and monuments great will thus
 keep well,
 For man unborn, their quaint atmosphere and their
 Antique spell.
 This is why they are turning the town upside down
 and around,
 And echoes of 'Restoration' the entire world
 surround . . . 76

Mayor George P. Coleman was asked to speak at the opening of the reconstructed Raleigh Tavern, September 16, 1932. Williamsburg, which once had been a pleasant, drowsy place with a lingering colonial flavor, had become a construction camp. Life was utterly disrupted by a devastating, alien army of researchers and restoration workers. The mayor reflected upon the philosophical implications of obliterating the present and recreating the past in order to provide Williamsburg with a future:

Williamsburg on a summer day! The straggling street, ankle deep in dust, grateful only to chickens, ruffling their feathers in perfect safety from any traffic danger. The cows taking refuge from the heat of the sun, under elms along the sidewalk. Our city fathers, assembled in friendly leisure, following the shade of the old Court House around the clock, sipping cool drinks, and discussing the glories of our past. Almost always our past! . . . But it was not a mental diet which modern science would call 'properly regulated'. We needed what all growing spirits need, a future as well as a

⁷⁶Ibid., 25.

present and a past! And see what a splendid anomaly this is! Mr. Rockefeller and his associates in their wonderful appreciation of our heritage . . ., in their unprecedented reconstruction of the scenes in which the proudest acts of our past took place . . ., have given us the greater gift of a future! 77

Response to the beauty of Williamsburg in the 1930's was largely on a comparative basis. Williamsburg was innately pleasing; back home was often not. Physical qualities of the Restoration in architecture, landscaping, and interior design were admired and copied (usually with scant success) in houses, neighborhoods, and cities all over the country. Enthusiasts tried, but failed to learn what made the Restoration aesthetically unique. The whole appeared to be greater than the sum of the parts.

At first glance the "partly new" historic architecture appeared to dominate the scene, and many visitors believed it to be the secret to Williamsburg's appeal. Efforts of contemporary architects to make their profession relevant to modern demands of urban, commercial, and industrial growth, more often than not provoked charges from the laity of self-gratifying innovation. Old architectural forms were inadequate for new factories and office buildings. The irony was that new solutions to building problems generally

⁷⁷Colonial Williamsburg, Proceedings at the Opening of Raleigh Tavern as an Exhibition Building in the Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg (Williamsburg, 1932), 10-15.

were not accepted by Americans who still gave at least tacit acceptance to notions of progress.

In 1916, the well-known American architect, Talbot F. Hamlin, attempted to explain why "we choose some streets to walk on and shun others."⁷⁸ The reason, he thought, was because of the deep pleasure of anything beautiful; however, such feelings are difficult to analyze because they deal with questions of psychology. In architecture, said Hamlin, an immense category of intellectual thoughts and emotions touch the educated man through a sensuous appeal. Irrespective of styles, architectural pleasure may be found in rhythm, balance, and form: "It comes from the perception of anything which fulfills certain innate laws of beauty that are well nigh universal . . .; anything which fulfills certain requirements of form for which the mind is constantly athirst."⁷⁹

William G. Perry believed that Georgian and post-Georgian historic buildings in Williamsburg derived their

⁷⁸Talbot F. Hamlin, The Enjoyment of Architecture (New York, 1916), 6.

⁷⁹Ibid., 8-9. A contemporary of Hamlin, Geoffrey Scott, examined the classical tradition as reflected in the architecture of renaissance and baroque Italy. His distaste for architecture of later periods, particularly "modern," led him to postulate that we unconsciously transcribe our physical selves into terms of architecture and architecture into terms of our physical selves. An ill-proportioned structure stirs our physical memory of "actual experiences of weakness, of thwarted effort or incipient collapse." Geoffrey Scott, The Architecture of Humanism: A Study in the History of Taste (New York, 1969), 159.

vitality from a generous and dignified scale. Most visitors, however, were unable fully to articulate their delight with the architecture. It was "beautifully simple!" A total harmony of all parts. One writer asserted that the primary value of the Restoration for present-day Americans is colonial architecture. "It is so right! Never a fad or craze."⁸⁰ Goodwin reported that artists were flocking to Williamsburg in an effort to interpret the "interlaced sunshine and shadows which give tone and depth to the architectural symmetry of the Colonial buildings."⁸¹

The "Williamsburg" issue of House and Garden stated that Williamsburg architecture has relevance to contemporary life, both in its beauty and the lessons it teaches. In architecture, as in other matters, man seeks short cuts to progress by putting aside the past. Sooner or later, however, the need to go back and pick up indispensable traditions asserts itself. Williamsburg architecture "will ultimately become the national idiom."⁸² The editors backed their claim by commissioning Restoration architects, Perry, Shaw, and Hepburn, to design three model homes in the Williamsburg tradition. "Planned in accordance with the requirements of modern living," blueprints could be

⁸⁰Barbara Trigg Brown, "Restoring Historic Williamsburg," Good Housekeeping, XCIX (July, 1934), 152.

⁸¹W. A. R. Goodwin, "Introduction," J. A. Osborne, Williamsburg in Colonial Times, xiv.

⁸²"What Williamsburg Means to Architecture," House and Garden (November, 1937), 46.

purchased for a modest fee.⁸³

Little intellectual or professional criticism of the restoration of Williamsburg developed until the 1930's; even then it was inconsistent and scattered. Frank Lloyd Wright occasionally ridiculed sentimentalism of "Williamsburg Wigs." Architect Walter Gropius went so far as to question whether or not Rockefeller's investment in Williamsburg was justified in view of the dire social needs of the American people.⁸⁴ Wallace Nutting, one of the country's first professional preservationists, believed that restoration efforts in Virginia, including Williamsburg, had destroyed rather than restored or added much that never existed.⁸⁵

Some Virginians were also unhappy, but for different reasons. A few "moss-backs" feared they had exchanged one kind of progress for another. They saw no reason to "tear their shirts" in order to bring a million or two visitors into the state every year, or to clutter the landscape with "noisy and boisterous tourists who go honking up and down the highways."⁸⁶

⁸³"Our Williamsburg Homes," Ibid., 69.

⁸⁴Burchard and Bush-Brown, The Architecture of America, 392.

⁸⁵Wallace Nutting, Virginia Beautiful (New York, 1930), 21.

⁸⁶Virginus Dabney, Editorial Correspondence to the New York Times, July 6, 1930.

Patriotic responses to Williamsburg in the 1930's were supercharged. The depression and what to do about it sharply divided political opinion. At the same time newspaper headlines forebodingly heralded the rise of European fascism. With domestic and foreign crises seemingly everywhere, many turned to the past for reassurance and guidance.

An uncritical interpretation of colonial and Revolutionary history has usually provided a neutral, common ground upon which divided citizens have met. The institutionalized American Revolution stands above contemporary faction. It is traditionally supportive of diverse opinions and relevant to all times and circumstances. Responses to the patriotic benefits of Williamsburg in the 1930's were largely consistent with a belief in national political and social progress and moral purpose. Implicit was the sentiment that such virtues were born as a result of the colonial and Revolutionary experience and were still evolving for the betterment of mankind. Individuals of widely different persuasions used Williamsburg as a benchmark for their beliefs.

One of the first official publications of the Williamsburg Holding Corporation dealt with the patriotic aspect of the Restoration. Besides providing a physical record of colonial Virginia for students of architecture and decorative arts, the Restoration was pictured as "a shrine where great events of early American history and

the lives of many of the men who made it may be visualized in their proper setting."⁸⁷

Addressing a joint session of the Virginia Assembly, which had convened in the reconstructed first Capitol for dedication ceremonies, Rockefeller departed from his prepared speech to reflect on the patriotic associations of the site:

What a temptation to sit in silence and let the past speak to us of those great patriots whose voices once resounded in these halls and whose far-seeing wisdom, high courage and unselfish devotion to the common good will ever be an inspiration to noble living. ⁸⁸

The delegate from Williamsburg, Ashton Dovell, observed that the real meaning of the Restoration will be its conspicuous role in stimulating a better appreciation of the enduring human qualities of the early patriots. Williamsburg, he believed, would serve to quicken the imagination and inspire new vision.⁸⁹

In October 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited the city to dedicate Duke of Gloucester Street, which he called "the most historic avenue in all America."⁹⁰

⁸⁷Williamsburg Holding Corporation, The Williamsburg Restoration: A Brief Review of the Plan, Purpose and Policy of the Williamsburg Restoration . . . (Williamsburg, 1931), 10.

⁸⁸New York Times, February 25, 1934.

⁸⁹Ashton Dovell, "Tangible Traditions . . .," State Government, VII, 5 (May, 1934), 90.

⁹⁰New York Times, October 21, 1934.



Speaking at the College, from which he received the honorary Doctor of Laws degree, Roosevelt interpreted the significance of Williamsburg and the College based upon his political philosophy. He stressed the need in modern times as well as in the past for broad and liberal thinking. The noble list of graduates from William and Mary, he said, was principally distinguished because "they came to know and to understand the needs of their nation as a whole. They thought and acted - not in terms of a locality but rather in the broad sense of national needs."⁹¹

A few laissez-faire advocates and American nativist spokesmen saw in Williamsburg a teaching example of all that had once been good and true in the Country, but was fast eroding. For them "free enterprise" and patriotic education were inseparable. The Daughters of the American Revolution urged pilgrimages to Williamsburg where Americans could absorb "the glorious pioneer spirit" of their forefathers for guidance and inspiration in meeting the challenges of the present.⁹²

The National Geographic devoted a large part of its April 1937 number to Williamsburg. Articles by Rockefeller and Goodwin were notable because both men expressed the two predominant responses to the Restoration characteristic of its first twelve years: progress and patriotism. Neither

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²New York Times, February 25, 1937.

interpreted the historic and contemporary significance of Williamsburg differently than the visitors. Rockefeller expressed his emotional commitment to Williamsburg which accounted for his decision to finance the work. His thoughts subjectively touched many levels of the widespread concern with progress and resultant change which had encroached upon or destroyed visual order and beauty: "The restoration of colonial Williamsburg enlisted my interest and support because to see beautiful and historic places and buildings disintegrating had long caused me very real distress."⁹³ It was precisely this feeling, he continued, that moved him to aid in the restoration of French cathedrals. Unlike some buildings whose surrounding environments had changed, Williamsburg offered him an opportunity "to restore a complete area and free it entirely from alien or inharmonious surroundings as well as to preserve the beauty and charm of the old buildings and gardens of the city and its historic significance. Thus it made a unique and irresistible appeal."⁹⁴ Rockefeller could not stop. He, like others, was caught in what Mayor George P. Coleman had described as a "splendid anomaly." If Williamsburg's past was indeed to be its future, how could Rockefeller justify spending millions, much of it in depression years, simply to make the

⁹³John D. Rockefeller, Jr., "The Genesis of the Williamsburg Restoration," The National Geographic Magazine, LXXI, 4 (April, 1937), 401.

⁹⁴Ibid.

town beautiful and pleasant? He believed in evolutionary progress in all its classic nineteenth-century forms. Still he acknowledged the senseless destruction of cities and countryside in the name of progress. Such beliefs, however ambivalent, nevertheless demanded a purpose for the Restoration. "As the work has progressed," continued Rockefeller, "I have come to feel that perhaps an even greater value is the lesson that it teaches of the patriotism, high purpose, and unselfish devotion of our forefathers to the common good. If this proves to be true any expenditure made there will be amply justified."⁹⁵

Goodwin's article began with the observation that the idea of restoring colonial Williamsburg grew from the thought and purpose of the Revolutionary patriots. If the significance of the Restoration was to be understood, Goodwin believed it necessary to appraise the educational and social values inherent in the city's background. By making America more conscious of its heritage, Williamsburg "will help to develop a more highly educated and consequently a more devoted spirit of patriotism."⁹⁶ Having paid homage to the intellectual demands of history, Goodwin next turned to the "compelling reasons" that Williamsburg was restored. Fortunately, the city was built when life was simple. "History here is symbolized by homes and

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶W. A. R. Goodwin, "The Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg," Ibid., 402.

venerable public buildings of harmonious and beautiful design;" however, the real impetus for the Restoration lay "in the historic background of the city, and in the intrinsic simplicity and alluring beauty of its architectural form."⁹⁷

As the decade of the 30's ended, the Country was perilously close to entering the Second World War. Englishmen who visited the United States and Williamsburg in an effort to obtain the good will and support of the American people spoke of a common heritage and institutions.⁹⁸ The struggle with fascism and long-standing national anxiety over communism had profound ideological implications. During the war years and after, the democratic nature of the American Revolution, as interpreted in Williamsburg, was closely reexamined and affirmed.

The first careful and relatively sustained criticism of the Restoration began in the 1950's and continued into the following decades. Revisionist historians questioned the traditional patriotic interpretation of the Revolution and pointed out the contradiction of eulogizing an aristocratic Williamsburg culture which was incompatible with

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸See Geoffrey Harmsworth, I Like America (London, 1939).

true democracy. Social critics condemned the Rockefellers for spending untold sums on the Restoration while ignorance, poverty, and disease were still alive and well in the United States. Some preservationists and architects expressed doubts about the authenticity and accuracy of the physical restoration. Many considered it fanciful, contrived, and artificial.⁹⁹

Williamsburg observers were still puzzled about the real nature and meaning of change. "Even when we go in for pickling our past . . .," wrote one historian, "there manages to be an aura of advance about the movement; anyone who has visited Colonial Williamsburg will have to admit that it is the damnedest, most up-to-date restoration of the past he ever saw. In the very act of combating change, we glorify it."¹⁰⁰ However, the emotional appeal of Williamsburg as a demonstrated and potentially workable alternative to a destructive, hectic life of indiscriminate progress and change continued as before the most significant of all responses. For most people, the restoration of Williamsburg was not an excuse to express nostalgic

⁹⁹For examples of preservationist and architectural criticism of Williamsburg see Carroll L. V. Meeks, "Lynx and Phoenix: Litchfield and Williamsburg," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, X, 4 (December, 1951), 18-23; Mr. Harper, "After Hours," Harper's Magazine, CCIV, 1220 (January, 1952), 90-91; Burchard and Bush-Brown, The Architecture of America, 17; Ada Louise Huxtable, "Dissent at Colonial Williamsburg," New York Times, September 22, 1963; "About Williamsburg," New York Times, October 13, 1963.

¹⁰⁰John Brooks, The Great Leap (New York, 1966), 13.

sentiments with overtones of political and social reaction behind a veneer of patriotism. It largely reflected a genuine attempt, however unrealistic at times, to distinguish between progress and change, to accommodate the quality of life to the blunders and realities of the twentieth century. H. I. Brock, columnist for the New York Times, said as much in 1939:

An old town has been revived and a community re-created, not around an industrial plant turning out motor cars or shoes but around an institution devoted to extracting from America's past America's half-forgotten secret of the more abundant life, measured not by quantity but by quality. 101

¹⁰¹ H. I. Brock, "Gateway to Colonial America," New York Times, June 18, 1939.

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