

PIECES OF HISTORY:
RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST OF BASSETT HALL, 1650-2013

by

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This thesis will examine the history of one of the historic homes in Colonial Williamsburg, Bassett Hall. It was home to Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. while they funded the reconstruction of Williamsburg. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the history of the house prior to the Rockefellers' involvement to illustrate a common dilemma faced by public historians and museum professionals: selecting which pieces of history to display to the public in the museum. Every artifact, or in this case a house, carries several different stories of its history. In the case of Bassett Hall, the museum planners chose to display the Rockefellers' history of the house and neglect the earlier residents and their stories.

The thesis will also analyze the current museum at Bassett Hall and its failure to deliver the history of the house's earlier residents. The museum exhibits the Rockefellers' role in Williamsburg and the creation of Colonial Williamsburg. Though that story deserves to be told because Rockefeller is largely responsible for the success of Colonial Williamsburg, there should be more information about the other residents of the house. Some of the house's occupants have sparse information in the historical record, while other occupants appear more regularly. I will attempt to construct a thorough history of the house using the available records that will aid in delivering the history of the colonial city.

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RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST OF BASSETT HALL, 1650-2013

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by

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and his wife Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, beginning in the 1930s funded the restoration of Williamsburg and the creation of Colonial Williamsburg. The Rockefellers made their Williamsburg home at Bassett Hall, a house originally constructed in the seventeenth century off Francis Street, just south of the capitol. They lived at Bassett Hall during the restoration of the city for two months each year when they visited Williamsburg until the end of their lives in the mid-twentieth century.

Bassett Hall provides much information about colonial life in Williamsburg because it was built during the seventeenth century. It served as a plantation- and farmhouse during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Studying the occupants of the house and their roles in Williamsburg makes it evident that the plot of land on which Bassett Hall sits directly influenced the development of the city of Williamsburg. Bassett Hall was preserved as an historic home in Williamsburg because of its significance to the city. The house is only one of the eighty-eight historic buildings reconstructed and preserved at Colonial Williamsburg.¹ Some historic homes in Colonial Williamsburg allow visitors to imagine what life was like in an eighteenth-century city, but Bassett Hall is not one of these homes.

The planners of Colonial Williamsburg chose to exhibit the twentieth-century history of the house, while the Rockefellers lived there, rather than its earlier, colonial history. This conscious choice of the planners exhibits a dilemma faced by public historians and museum professionals. Professional historians must peel back the layers of history pertaining to a historical object and decide which layer, or story, to present to the public. In the case of Bassett

¹ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, *Legacy from the Past: A Portfolio of 88 Original Williamsburg Buildings* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1975), 33.

Hall, planners in Colonial Williamsburg chose to exhibit the twentieth-century history of the house, while simultaneously choosing to mask the rest.

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation has conducted archaeological reports that have allowed it to construct a brief, less than fifty-page house history. The archaeological reports and house history of Bassett Hall indicate that Colonial Williamsburg was aware of the earlier history of the house, but that it chose to use the home to display an element of the twentieth-century city. A pamphlet written during the 1980's described the life of the Rockefellers in the house, but no other studies of it exist.² Even this pamphlet is brief and lacks a thorough study of the Rockefellers, as it mainly emphasizes the grounds and gardens at Bassett Hall as well as the decorative style of Mrs. Rockefeller in the interior of the house. A history of the Bassett Hall deserves to be written to illuminate its influence on the city of Williamsburg and the importance of the individuals who lived there, and also to illustrate the predicament faced by public historians in determining which layer of an artifact's history deserves to be shared with the public.

² Bland Blackford, Burke Davis, and Patricia A. Hurdle, *Bassett Hall, the Williamsburg Home of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1984), 1.

Placing Bassett Hall in its Historiographical Context

Historical criticism of Bassett Hall is non-existent due to the lack of literature about the house. Fortunately, however, examination of the success of Colonial Williamsburg as a history museum illustrates the necessity for further study of Bassett Hall to illuminate the “other history” of the house and help Colonial Williamsburg better tell the story of the colonial city’s history.

Professional historians, not only those who specialize in public history, often debate the authenticity of the history presented at museums and historic sites. Colonial Williamsburg has been the topic of discussion by many historians since its opening as a living history museum in the mid-twentieth century. Historians, such as Richard Handler and Eric Gable in their book *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg*, debate the success of the site in terms of its presentation of authentic eighteenth-century life. Some historians perceive Colonial Williamsburg to be successful in presenting eighteenth-century life, while others believe the site to be inauthentic. One of the goals of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, however, is to include visitors in the history of the town, creating what public historians call “living history.” The Foundation wants visitors to “experience the life” of eighteenth-century Virginians, but some historians argue that in order to do so, Colonial Williamsburg sacrifices some historical accuracy.³

When the site opened in the 1930s, historians hardly objected to the ideas and history presented there. Rockefeller hired professional historians, or who he thought were professional historians, to ensure that an accurate history of the eighteenth century city was presented, and other historians of the day did not object or criticize. Later in the twentieth century, beginning in the 1990’s, historians began to question the accuracy of Colonial Williamsburg and suggested

³ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “Experience the Life,” Colonial Williamsburg: Be part of the story, <http://www.history.org/Almanack/life/> (accessed October 28, 2011).

that the site was inaccurate in several ways. The current scholarship of Colonial Williamsburg surfaced in the 1990's and continues to be debated today. The historiography of Colonial Williamsburg appears thematically and groups similar arguments together.

This chapter will examine the various perspectives of criticism about Colonial Williamsburg that have surfaced in the past few decades to determine that critics and historians of the organization must reach a compromise in order to move forward and continue the success of the museum. There are stories of both success and failure, accuracies and inaccuracies. The conclusion of this essay will suggest that critics and historians must accept this and begin to realize that regardless of the inaccuracies, visitors still learn about eighteenth-century life and leave knowing more about life in the eighteenth century than they did when they arrived. Bassett Hall warrants the same criticisms and attention that the larger organization does, and an examination of such criticism will allow for future improvements at Bassett Hall.

Restoration of Williamsburg

Restoration of the rest of the city, as Virginia's colonial capital, began in 1926 after Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin, the individual who first dreamed of a restored Williamsburg, persuaded Rockefeller to finance the project. During the restoration, nineteenth- and twentieth-century features, such as power lines, were removed from the historic area to present the city as it would have appeared in the eighteenth century. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation "preserves and interprets the Historic Area, operates for-profit subsidiaries, including hotels, restaurants, convention facilities, and golf courses, and sells licensed products and reproductions."⁴ The Foundation attempts to immerse visitors in the history of Williamsburg

⁴ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, "The History of Colonial Williamsburg," Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, www.history.org/Foundation/cwhistory.cfm (accessed October 11, 2011).

during the eighteenth century. Rockefeller described his hope for a legacy of the Foundation by saying,

And if, dear friends, in these critical days in which we live, we can, through a restored Williamsburg, be instrumental in rekindling in the hearts of our fellow countrymen the courage, the high purpose and the readiness unselfishly to live or die for their country which animated the great patriots who walked these streets and frequented these buildings of yore, our labors together have not been in vain.⁵

Rockefeller intended the organization to inspire pride and patriotism in the American people.

Colonial Williamsburg indeed attempts to tell the “story of a patriot,” as the introductory film to visitors is so aptly titled.⁶ If Rockefeller were to visit today, he would witness the attempt of the Foundation to preserve the story of the patriotic city of Williamsburg as he wished, and surpass his expectations as well. However, he probably would not be pleased with the current use of Bassett Hall, his former home, as it does not deliver the patriotic message as the rest of the historic district. To analyze this failure, it is imperative to understand how there can be success or failure at Bassett Hall as part of the Foundation’s mission.

Success of Colonial Williamsburg

Many historians, including Edward B. Singer, author of *Colonial Williamsburg*, and Cary Carson, author of *Becoming Americans: Our Struggle to be Both Free and Equal*, argue that the Foundation has succeeded and believe that history indeed comes alive at Colonial Williamsburg. These supporters argue that the historic district presents more than “vague impressions” of history, and that visitors truly “feel the presence” of history occurring.⁷ Many of the historians who support the success are actually affiliated with the institution; the historians either have been

⁵ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “*Our Labors Together Have Not Been in Vain*” (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2011), back page.

⁶ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “Teaching Resources for Your Classroom,” Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, <http://www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume9/may11/cwresources.cfm> (accessed October 30, 2011).

⁷ Edward B. Singer, *Colonial Williamsburg* (New York: Gallery Books, 1991), 1.

employed by Colonial Williamsburg in the past, or are currently. This could cause bias, as the historians may be afraid to speak negatively about their institution, but their arguments are supported by individuals who do not work for the organization and do not share that bias.

Colonial Williamsburg succeeds in presenting eighteenth-century life. Edward Singer explains that the use of solely authentic tools and equipment in the blacksmith shop, cabinetmaker shops, taverns and other stores there authentically present life.⁸ This point is noteworthy because, though people may criticize the authenticity of the environment presented, the use of eighteenth-century tools creates an infinitely more believable environment than twenty-first-century tools would. The tools used are not two centuries old, as those are artifacts and displayed in museums, but they are manufactured in the same way that eighteenth-century tools were. In Colonial Williamsburg, one is assured that interpreters wear clothing, shoes, wigs, and eye glasses manufactured by hand in the eighteenth-century fashion rather than by quicker twenty-first-century machinery. Coffee and tea are brewed the eighteenth-century way in the coffeehouse. The blacksmith uses only tools that were available to an eighteenth-century blacksmith in Williamsburg. Singer argues that Colonial Williamsburg tells the story of the colony of Virginia prior to the American Revolution. He tells the history of the colony in order to explain the significance of Williamsburg. Singer says that history “need not be a thing of the past,” and that at Colonial Williamsburg, history “lives anew.”⁹

Interpreters

Cary Carson argues that the living history element of Colonial Williamsburg delivers a clearer image of the past than regular museums do. The interpreters are actors, and each presents an individual’s life to visitors. Carson argues that by presenting the life of an individual and

⁸ Singer, *Colonial Williamsburg*, 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

involving visitors in his or her story, the interpreters and Colonial Williamsburg deliver smaller stories about the city's history that, when taken all together, tell the larger story of the history of Williamsburg.¹⁰ The Foundation hopes that interpreters can help deliver the larger image of Williamsburg's history.

Interpreters involve visitors in the story by speaking to them as eighteenth-century visitors or residents of Williamsburg, which enhances their experience. Interpreters, and the individual stories that they share with visitors, provide an inclusive environment. The stories presented illuminate the "many agendas, interests, and perspectives" that existed in eighteenth-century Williamsburg.¹¹ The interpreters are part of a thematic plan enacted by Colonial Williamsburg not only to deliver information to visitors but to gain the public's attention. In her article, "Becoming Americans Again: Re-Envisioning and Revising Thematic Interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg," Marie Tyler-McGraw supports the organization's interpretation plan. Tyler-McGraw, as a professional in the public history field who does not work for the organization, says that this thematic attempt is "perhaps the best American example of excellent and ground-breaking scholarship applied to an intensely competitive mass market for public attention."¹² The interpreters are helpful in delivering the history that Colonial Williamsburg attempts to illustrate to the public about the history of the colonial capital. Thus, the interpretation is defended not only by individuals who work for the organization, but also by individuals who do not.

¹⁰ Cary Carson, *Becoming Americans: Our Struggle to be Both Free and Equal* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1998), 10.

¹¹ Marie Tyler-McGraw, "Becoming Americans Again: Re-Envisioning and Revising Thematic Interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg," *The Public Historian* 20, no. 3 (1998): 54.

¹² *Ibid.*, 57.

Education

Anders Greenspan, author of *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, argues that “Colonial Williamsburg has gone through several manifestations” in efforts to deliver history to the public.¹³ Since its inception as a history museum and historic site, the organization has modified its educational endeavors several times to ensure that it presents an accurate history to visitors. Carson, working in the Research Department, supports this claim while discussing the developing educational endeavors of the Foundation. Carson argues that every development in the educational endeavors of the Foundation is an element of the Foundation’s master plan.¹⁴ Education in a museum must evolve as the visiting audience to the museum changes. The founders of Colonial Williamsburg anticipated this need for change and development in the museum’s education because they anticipated that the American culture would change in the decades since the organization’s creation. Carson states that “Rockefeller understood that changing times always demand something new and different,” and inspired the Foundation’s educational platform.¹⁵

Historians like Carson illustrate the developing educational platform by discussing the new programs that have been added to the Colonial Williamsburg agenda. Now, more attention goes to African American life in Williamsburg during the eighteenth century, as seen in many of the Revolutionary City programs that occur on a daily basis. In decades past, little recognition went to African Americans living in Williamsburg during the eighteenth century, and Colonial Williamsburg has created and altered programs to illuminate those previously overshadowed subjective histories of Williamsburg’s African American residents. Beginning in the 1980’s, the

¹³ Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 1.

¹⁴ Cary Carson, “Colonial Williamsburg and the Practice of Interpretive Planning in American History Museums,” *The Public Historian* 20, no. 3 (1998): 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

organization began to portray the “bi-racial” life of eighteenth-century Williamsburg.¹⁶ Programs about African American life in the colonial city now appear on the weekly programs. In 1994, Colonial Williamsburg hosted an estate auction, during which four African American “slaves” were “auctioned” to a wealthy “planter.”¹⁷ Inevitably, this attracted much attention, both positive and negative. The auction sparked negative media attention and even attention from civil rights activist groups, but Carson argues that the auction was an attempt to expand educational outreach, and was not a negative portrayal of the African American residents. African Americans comprised half of the population of Williamsburg during the eighteenth century, and they should be represented in Colonial Williamsburg’s programs.¹⁸

Historians also defend the diversity of Colonial Williamsburg by discussing its women’s programs. In 1981, the organization hosted a three-day conference, “Women in Early America.”¹⁹ This program is only one of many that present the life of eighteenth-century women, whose roles were more than hostesses of houses and taverns. Presenting the experiences of the city’s residents who were not white males is extremely important to ensure that visitors gain the full experience. After visiting Colonial Williamsburg, visitors should have an accurate image of Williamsburg during the eighteenth century, and this cannot be accomplished without presenting the races and genders that lived in the city. Women and African Americans were present in the city. They served key roles in the city during the eighteenth century, and that presence is exhibited in the restored colonial city.

¹⁶ Morgan, *Williamsburg*, 151.

¹⁷ Leef Smith, “Williamsburg Slave Auction Riles Va. NAACP,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 8, 1994.

¹⁸ Eric Gable, Richard Handler, and Anna Lawson, “On the Uses of Relativism: Fact, Conjecture, and Black and White Histories at Colonial Williamsburg,” *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 4 (1992): 791.

¹⁹ Morgan, *Williamsburg*, 159.

Carson explains that the programs at Colonial Williamsburg are not accidental but carefully planned, considering all reactions from visitors and the public.²⁰ Historians and educators at the Foundation are continually striving to improve their programs to ensure that they deliver history as accurately as possible. The programs hosted at Colonial Williamsburg are based upon historical records from the city's past.²¹ For example, the "Cry Witch" program, which invites visitors to serve as members of the court while a woman is tried for alleged witchcraft, is based upon actual court records from Williamsburg during the early eighteenth century. Colonial Williamsburg constructs all of its programs to exhibit historical events of the city's past. The Foundation consults records to ensure that history is accurately represented to the public so visitors feel like they have experienced events that occurred during the eighteenth century.

Architecture and Archaeology

Buildings, including their interiors and exteriors, at Colonial Williamsburg were reconstructed, furnished, and decorated to present authentic eighteenth-century artifacts. Unlike in many history museums, most of the objects and artifacts on the walls and shelves of all Williamsburg buildings are reproductions; eighteenth-century artifacts stand in cases in museums to ensure their preservation. Replicas of various eighteenth-century decorations are carefully constructed to resemble authentic decoration of the interior and exterior of buildings. This contributes to the success of Colonial Williamsburg because it ensures that every building appears much as it would have in the eighteenth century.

The archaeological influence at Colonial Williamsburg has largely contributed to the success of the site. Thomas Wertenbaker, one of the historians who supported Colonial

²⁰ Carson, "Colonial Williamsburg," 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

Williamsburg's efforts in its early days, in 1953 noted in his "The Archaeology of Colonial Williamsburg" that the archaeologists proved to be as valuable, if not more important, than the landscapers and architects employed during the reconstruction and renovation of Williamsburg.²² Henry M. Miller recently interviewed Ivor Noël Hume, a respected archaeologist who was the first lead historical archaeologist at Colonial Williamsburg in the 1940's. The interview was published in 2011 as "Ivor Noël Hume: Historical Archaeologist." Hume states in the interview that Rockefeller did not initially consult archaeologists in the excavation and reconstruction of the city, but relied on the architects' professional opinions to recreate authentic buildings.²³ Hume, a native of England, became the first historical archaeologist employed by Colonial Williamsburg to present its eighteenth-century environment more accurately. Wertenbaker's article praises the appointment of archaeologists like Noël Hume, saying that historians at the organization quickly realized the need for experienced archaeologists on staff who could recognize cultural artifacts in the excavation of the old and important building in the city. Archaeologists soon joined the staff and have played a vital role since their arrival. Wertenbaker and Noël Hume, both of whom argued for the necessity of archaeology, applauded the work of archaeologists. These supporters of archaeology do not express bias toward the organization as both of them criticize the organizations' efforts of preservation prior to consulting archaeologists.

The eighteenth-century locations and dimensions of buildings were used to depict the city as it was during the eighteenth century. The buildings were built upon the archaeological remains of the original structures, when those remains were available. Noël Hume says that many of the

²² Thomas J. Wertenbaker, "The Archaeology of Colonial Williamsburg," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 97, no. 1 (1953): 46.

²³ Ivor Noël Hume and Henry M. Miller, "Ivor Noël Hume: Historical Archaeologist," *The Public Historian* 33, no. 1 (2011): 15.

archaeological remnants of the structures' foundations actually date to the seventeenth century when Williamsburg was called Middle Plantation.²⁴ When the city became Williamsburg, the same buildings no doubt flourished through the eighteenth century as well. Though the walls, floorboards, and roofs are not originals because of the natural deterioration of wood and damage caused by natural and unnatural disasters, buildings have been reconstructed to mirror the originals so that they will continue to last for the future. Architectural foundations allow the organization to advertise its eighty-eight "original" buildings in the town, though the interiors and exteriors have been reconstructed and amended since their original construction.

Wertenbaker explained that archaeological remains also function as cultural evidence of eighteenth-century life and allow Colonial Williamsburg to exhibit authentic artifacts from the eighteenth century, as it does in several of the historic homes and museums. Authentic artifacts are typically displayed in the museums, while reproductions fill the houses. Archaeologists excavate seemingly insignificant artifacts, and with a keen eye, can reconstruct eighteenth-century utilitarian artifacts, such as china dishes, that historians and interpreters can use to display a more authentic environment to the public.²⁵ Archaeological evidence is used in virtually every aspect of Colonial Williamsburg: to create exhibits in its museums, to present the historic homes, and to use as models for items in the souvenir shops. Every building has a file in the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, the library of the Foundation, that contains a collection of all the archaeological data of the particular lot and building. Archaeological reports are essential to the depiction of an authentic environment, and these reports allow Colonial Williamsburg to successfully recreate and present that environment. These archaeological excavations and reports assure visitors that the buildings and artifacts are portrayed as accurately as possible. Visitors are

²⁴ Hume and Miller, "Historical Archaeologist, 22.

²⁵ Wertenbaker, "Archaeology of Colonial Williamsburg," 47.

very much witnessing authentic eighteenth-century artifacts when they walk through the streets and buildings of the historic district, largely thanks to the work of Noël Hume and other archaeologists.

Failure of Colonial Williamsburg

Some historians and scholars of other disciplines, such as anthropology, criticize the effectiveness and authenticity of Colonial Williamsburg and attempt to illuminate its failures. The organization's identity problem—whether it is an amusement park or a history museum--and interpreters are two of the main themes in the discussion of the failure of the site. Most of the critics are unaffiliated with the organization and are outside observers, but some critics are actually affiliated with the organization, illustrating that the Foundation is aware of some of its flaws. Some historians who, like Greenspan, criticize the site also support it in some of its other endeavors. This dual presence of support and criticism illustrates that some historians share both opinions.

Some critics note that the story of Colonial Williamsburg cannot be delivered accurately, because in order to do so, the language of the past must be used, which often results in a theme park-like environment in order to attract and engage visitors. Handler and Gable state that “we cannot recreate, reconstruct, or recapture the past. We can only tell stories about the past in a present-day language.”²⁶ In order for today's visitors to understand even a smidgeon of American colonial history, that history must be delivered to them using a modern language they can understand, such as in the form of skits, so visitors feel like they have experienced the event firsthand. The millions of visitors each year do not, for the most part, have a background in history. Most of them, likely, do not enjoy studying history and are merely tourists. The language

²⁶ Handler and Gable, *New History*, 223.

and delivery of the history at Colonial Williamsburg must be reduced to relatively simple terms in order for visitors to understand it.

In criticizing the efforts of Colonial Williamsburg, Greenspan argues that the large investment of the Rockefellers as philanthropists created an ideological, and ultimately false, image of the American past.²⁷ The Rockefellers shaped the presentation of history at Colonial Williamsburg by determining what material would be displayed and how it would be delivered. Greenspan argues that the Rockefellers' attempt to aggrandize their efforts at Colonial Williamsburg by making everything as presentable and desirable as possible was an attempt to establish a positive association with their family name.²⁸ The history presented there is not entirely accurate, but primed and polished to ensure that it attracts visitors. In turn, this gives recognition to the Rockefeller name and makes the family look like better philanthropists and benefactors, a common occurrence when wealthy benefactors are involved in the development of a museum or historic site. This is evident at Bassett Hall, as will be discussed in a later chapter.

Not only does Colonial Williamsburg inspire positive attitudes of reflection upon the Rockefeller family, it also positively displays the founders of the United States on the eve of the American Revolution.²⁹ Greenspan argues that the organization reflects Rockefeller's view of what the city "should have been like" on the eve of revolution, but that it does not necessarily reflect what the city was actually like.³⁰ The philanthropic benefactors attempted to manipulate America's perception of its past.³¹ Mike Wallace, author of *Mickey Mouse History*, supports this criticism by saying that Colonial Williamsburg has "eliminated from 'history' what [its] sponsors

²⁷ Anders Greenspan, "How Philanthropy Can Alter our View of the Past: A Look At Colonial Williamsburg," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 5, no. 2 (1994): 193.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 194.

²⁹ Greenspan, "Philanthropy," 195.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

found inconvenient and unwelcome.”³² The motive behind creating a positive and patriotic environment could be that Rockefeller, like some historians and politicians during the 1930s, wanted to present a unified and strong persona of the American people during that time period. In the earlier stages of the restoration, Americans wanted to believe in the strength and unity of their country. The United States had previously fought in the first World War, with many casualties, and as Europe was on the verge of chaos and another war that could involve the United States, Americans wanted to believe in the unity of their country because it brought them comfort. Though this suggestion is not the subject of this study, it does provide understanding for the glorified appearance of the colonial city.

In attempting to beatify Virginia’s colonial capital and eighteenth-century life, the benefactors have succeeded. Hundreds of thousands of people visit the historic district each year, perhaps because of the appearance and grandeur ensured by those early philanthropists, and the happy-go-lucky environment presented there because of those efforts. At Bassett Hall, Colonial Williamsburg has eliminated pieces of its history that do not directly involve Rockefeller. The grounds indeed are beautiful and beatify the capital city, but they do not aid in accurately presenting eighteenth-century life because they ignore the eighteenth century history of the house.

Wallace further criticizes Colonial Williamsburg by describing it as a world of corporate order rather than a history museum educating the public. He explains that Rockefeller was interested in totalities; he did not like to do things half-way, and in reconstructing Williamsburg, he constructed a total environment.³³ “It is a corporate world,” he says, “planned, orderly, tidy, with no dirt, no smell, no visible signs of exploitation,” just like any modern capitalist

³² Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 141.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15.

corporation.³⁴ In Colonial Williamsburg, “Rockefeller denied that history had ever happened,” by neglecting to display any of the negative and unpleasant aspects of the city.³⁵ The organization operates like a corporation, and guidelines regulate every aspect, from the Visitor Center to the restaurants, to ensure its function and success. It is probably because of this corporate mindset that Rockefeller is honored in the current museum at Bassett Hall, since he is the individual responsible for the corporation’s creation. A homage to Rockefeller is entirely understandable, and should exist in Colonial Williamsburg. It also makes sense for Rockefeller

The Failure of Interpreters

Another flaw discussed by critics concerns the knowledge of its interpreters. Handler and Gable discuss these “front line” employees of Colonial Williamsburg, so called because they are the employees who have the most contact with visitors, are not all historians who specialize in colonial history.³⁶ Anyone can apply for a position as a costumed interpreter, as long as he or she completes the proper procedure as outlined on the Colonial Williamsburg website.³⁷ Many of the costumed interpreters are actors employed either full-time or part-time. Some may have more historical background and be knowledgeable about the city’s history and colonial life, but historical background is not a requirement for the position. In interviewing a vice president from the education sector, Handler and Gable learned that, “about the only thing you can get fired for around here [Colonial Williamsburg] is being rude to a visitor.”³⁸ If this is true, say Handler and Gable, no one is regulating the history delivered to the public by interpreters. They write, “Colonial Williamsburg is an intellectually open environment: people can say or think whatever

³⁴ Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History*, 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Handler and Gable, *New History*, 171.

³⁷ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “Careers,” Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, <http://www.history.org/foundation/careers/> (accessed November 14, 2011).

³⁸ Handler and Gable, *New History*, 170.

they want about history, as long as they remain polite in their dealings with visitors.”³⁹ Handler and Gable mention their initial hopefulness that interpreters do not invent history when talking to visitors, but are unconvinced that personal biases and ignorance of history do not surface during their interpretations.

Adornments of Buildings

Some critics argue that Colonial Williamsburg fails in its attempt to present authentic architecture. Paul Goldberger, a writer for the *New York Times*, wrote early in 1976, before the major criticism of the organization began, that the nineteenth-century adornments in and on buildings display inauthenticity.⁴⁰ Various expensive chandeliers and antique pieces appear in buildings throughout the historic district, when the residents of the houses would not have been able to afford such furnishings.⁴¹ Several buildings in the historic area also had chandeliers from the nineteenth century. An obvious anachronism is the presence of electricity in the historic buildings. The electricity is disguised in various ways, usually hidden from the public, but it is present nonetheless in the form of lighting and temperature regulation. In any museum that houses historical artifacts, which many of Colonial Williamsburg’s homes do, the temperature needs regulation to prevent the artifacts’ deterioration. Goldberger argues that in attempting to present an authentic environment, Colonial Williamsburg should not include such anachronisms in the decorations of their buildings. Nevertheless, it is necessary in the museum environment to have some of these anachronisms, such as electricity and heating and cooling, detract from the authenticity of the environment presented in the historic area.

³⁹ Handler and Gable, *New History*, 171.

⁴⁰ Paul Goldberger, “In 50th Year, Williamsburg Stands As Major Force in Preserving Past,” *New York Times*, Nov. 29, 1976.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

In the case of Bassett Hall, the architecture of the house is not entirely accurate to its eighteenth-century appearance. As will be seen in a later chapter, throughout the house's history the architectural features of the main building have been relatively well maintained, but additional wings have been added that indeed altered the original structure. Twentieth-century features indeed appear throughout the house as later owners added electricity and even plumbing to the eighteenth-century structure, though the house's owners were careful to present an eighteenth-century exterior.

The Middle Ground

The concerns raised by historians, such as Handler, Gable, Greenspan, and Young, appear mostly in article form, as few books analyzing Williamsburg besides Handler and Gable's and Greenspan's exist. Many books praise the environment presented at Colonial Williamsburg, all of which are published by the Foundation and clearly display bias toward the organization. Newspapers and journals are the most useful in gathering information about the public opinion and criticism about the organization. Some historians, like Handler, Gable, and Greenspan, recognize that at Colonial Williamsburg and illuminate its successes and failures, which is helpful in envisioning a future for the historiography of the organization.

The historiography should develop in the future to display a middle ground in the success of the presentation of authentic eighteenth-century life. The arguments for both the success and the failure of the organization are supported by many people, but historians should attempt to reach a medium between the two extremes in order to strengthen the museum and the content it delivers to visitors. The planners at Colonial Williamsburg should improve its programming to display more authentic eighteenth-century life. When history exists in a museum environment, it must be presented in ways the visitor will easily understand. This is not to say that history be

altered into inaccuracy in order to be presented to the public, but merely that the method of presenting it must not be too advanced for the general visitor, who is not typically an historian.

Colonial Williamsburg succeeds, in that visitors leave knowing more about eighteenth-century life than they did when they arrived. Visitors are not expected to arrive and critique its attempts at authenticity; visitors are lay people with little to no historical background or knowledge of eighteenth century life. Visitors are tourists: they seek enjoyment. If they leave Colonial Williamsburg with any knowledge about colonial life, they have gained from their experience and Colonial Williamsburg has succeeded. Historians should accept that Colonial Williamsburg has succeeded in reaching out to the American public, and visitors of foreign countries, to teach the history of a colonial city.

As Handler and Gable said in one of their articles analyzing Colonial Williamsburg, “history making involves all sorts of compromises,” and in order to have a successful museum or popular site, the authenticity of history presented to the public and the appearance and attraction of the museum must reach a compromise.⁴² As Thomas J. Schlereth said about the organization in his book, *Material Culture Studies in America*, “[its] quest for authenticity, while by no means always achieved, sparked renewed interest in American architectural research and historical restoration,” and has not only succeeded in delivering history to the public, but also served as a model for other museums and historic sites.⁴³ If a child watches the cooper making barrels, he has learned something about barrel-making. He is not an expert on cooperage, but he knows more than he did before visiting the cooper. Colonial Williamsburg is a success because it delivers history to the public; historians on both poles of the spectrum of argument need to meet at this middle ground and make the history that is presented more accurate. There is also a

⁴² Gable and Handler, “After Authenticity:” 573.

⁴³ Thomas J. Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture Studies in America* (New York: Altamira Press, 1999), 16.

middle ground to be met at Bassett Hall by delivering more of the history of the house prior to the Rockefellers' arrival.

Using Bassett Hall to Present Eighteenth-Century Life

Bassett Hall can aid Colonial Williamsburg in its future efforts to deliver an accurate history of the eighteenth-century city. As one of the original eighty-eight buildings still in existence at Colonial Williamsburg, Bassett Hall is a prime example of colonial architecture and colonial life, but only one historian has written about the house, and only about the life of the Rockefellers, who lived there during the early to mid-twentieth century. Since works about Bassett Hall are virtually non-existent, the Foundation is failing in its attempt to portray the city as it was in the eighteenth century.

Bassett Hall exists today “substantially as it was when [the Rockefellers] left it,” giving a remarkably accurate depiction of the tastes of Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller, Jr., but telling nothing about the house or its occupants before the Rockefellers.⁴⁴ The planners decided to use Bassett Hall to exhibit the story of the Rockefellers, but that does not mean that the Rockefellers' is the only story that deserves to be told at Bassett Hall. Several members of the House of Burgesses lived in Bassett Hall, a former Secretary of the State and Secretary of the Navy as well, but those stories are not being told. Colonial Williamsburg is not delivering the entire story of Bassett Hall. The Foundation could more accurately achieve its goal of presenting an authentic eighteenth-century environment by adapting the material that the Bassett Hall museum shares with the public to include the earlier history of the house, and by doing so could combat many of the criticisms raised about Colonial Williamsburg that were mentioned previously.

⁴⁴ Blackford, Davis, and Hurdle, 1.

Chapter 2:

Bassett Hall Through 1800

Built in the seventeenth century, Bassett Hall has witnessed the evolving history of Williamsburg. Examining Bassett Hall will provide a case study of colonial life in Virginia. A fire in the capitol during the nineteenth century destroyed the records of the local land titles in Williamsburg. Sources in other venues, such as manuscript collections and correspondence of several of the residents of Bassett Hall, provide information about the history of Bassett Hall in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Records of Bassett Hall's history are easily traced by estate records of a "debtor's struggle to meet his creditor's demands" through the eighteenth century.¹ Since Colonial Williamsburg's mission is to display eighteenth-century life in the city of Williamsburg, a history of Bassett Hall will contribute to the mission of Colonial Williamsburg in presenting eighteenth-century life.

The Bray Family: James Bray

The plot of land on which Bassett Hall sits was first occupied by James Bray and his family. James Bray was born in 1610 in Virginia. In 1658, he married a woman named Angelica, and the couple had four children: Thomas, David, James II, and Ann.² The Bray family owned a plantation on the bank of the James River called Littleton Plantation, which was not one of the larger, better known James River plantations, such as Carter's Grove. Rather, Littleton was much like its smaller neighboring plantations during the seventeenth century when the colony of Virginia was experiencing its genesis, and declined in importance and

¹ H. Bullock, *Bassett Hall Historical Data by Department of Research and Record* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1932 and 1990), 1.

² Mary A. Stephenson, *A Record of the Bray Family 1658 – ca. 1800* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1963), 1.

influence during the eighteenth century as larger plantations began to dominate the James River scene.

Littleton Plantation was a “working home plantation.”³ At Littleton, the Bray family tended apple, pear, cherry, and peach trees and other crops necessary for sustenance.⁴ Southern plantations during the seventeenth century were often not near larger towns, as towns were sparse. The nearest town to Littleton was Jamestown, due west down the James River.⁵ Jamestown was the first successful British settlement in North America, and Virginia’s first town, and the fact that Littleton existed at all during the first half of the seventeenth century is remarkably significant. Jamestown was still a small town, but several records indicate James Bray’s role in the town as one of the prominent merchants and a member of the council. Small plantations like Littleton flourished along the James River because of the ease of transporting goods via the river. James Bray was a wealthy merchant and ship owner and the location of Littleton Plantation enabled him to sustain his successful lifestyle, where he sold crops grown on his plantation.⁶

Moving inland from the James River, the next nearest town was Middle Plantation. In 1660, Bray became a resident of Middle Plantation, and he is listed in the town records.⁷ In 1671, Bray purchased 290 acres of land in Middle Plantation, becoming a landowner in the small town. Middle Plantation was not a plantation, but a town that rose in the small middle ground between

³ James P. McClure, “Littleton Plantation, 1700-1745” (master’s thesis, College of William and Mary, 1977), 21.

⁴ Lyon Gardiner Tyler, *The Cradle of the Republic: Jamestown and the James River* (Richmond, VA: Whittett & Shepperson, 1900), 149.

⁵ Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1958), 443.

⁶ Lyon Gardiner Tyler, *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography*, vol. 1. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1915), 131-132.

⁷ Lyon Gardiner Tyler, *Williamsburg: The Old Colonial Capital* (Richmond, VA: Whittett & Shepperson, 1907), 13.

surrounding plantations.⁸ In 1677, Bray built a house at Middle Plantation, and it was this house, and these 290 acres that became Bassett Hall and its grounds.⁹ The length of time James Bray lived in the house, or his travels between Jamestown and Middle Plantation, cannot be determined. Records of his descendants in Middle Plantation do exist, and these and archaeological reports will be examined to construct a profile of the home during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

James Bray in Middle Plantation

Middle Plantation was appropriately named for its midway location between the Chiskiack and James Rivers and their plantations.¹⁰ In 1632, the general assembly of Virginia encouraged the settlement of Middle Plantation in order to “secure the land in that quarter” against local Native Americans.¹¹ English settlers previously interacted with Native Americans at Jamestown, particularly with the Powhatans, and knew that other Native Americans, who may not have been as friendly as the Powhatans, inhabited inland lands. Thus, thick palisades encased the town of Middle Plantation to ensure that Native American neighbors did not appear unannounced, and to avoid possible conflict and tensions.¹²

James Bray was called “a prominent merchant and later member of the council” during his time in Middle Plantation.¹³ In 1674, he was listed as a member of the new Bruton Parish Church vestry in Middle Plantation, which was the first recorded vestry of the church of the recently formed parish.¹⁴ As a vestryman, Bray served on the governing board of Bruton Parish Church as a representative of the community. He likely voted on important church matters when

⁸ Stephenson, *A Record of the Bray Family*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Tyler, *Williamsburg*, 10.

¹¹ Tyler, *Williamsburg*, 10-11.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

necessary, such as constructing additions and new wings to the main building. It is also likely that he and his family attended Bruton Parish Church while they lived in Middle Plantation. Records also indicate that his son, James II, was a member of the vestry later in the seventeenth century and early in the eighteenth, so the family remained loyal to Bruton Parish Church. As Bruton Parish Church is an Anglican Church, it can be determined that the Brays were a practicing Anglican family, not unlike many other English settlers in Virginia during the seventeenth century.

In 1676, the year of Bacon's Rebellion, before Nathaniel Bacon orchestrated the burning of Jamestown, he held the wives of the leading councilors hostage to create a ruse and scare the inhabitants.¹⁵ One of the women held hostage was Angelica Bray, wife of James Bray. The women were released when Bacon was pleased with the ruse, and the following day, he burned the city.¹⁶ Soon after, a man called the "original cause of the rebellion," William Drummond was tried in front of Governor Berkeley in the house of James Bray at Middle Plantation, and later hanged.¹⁷ As there was no courthouse or capitol in Middle Plantation, since the capital was still Jamestown in 1677 and had been burned recently, a private home was the venue of the trial. It appears that Bray was a respected member of Middle Plantation society, since the Governor chose his house as the location for the trial of a rebel. The Bray family was one of the most prominent members of Middle Plantation society during the seventeenth century.

Bray's home was on his lot of 290 acres, which later became the Bassett Hall lot. His house was presumably in the same location as the current house. The original structure, as it stood during the seventeenth century, does not exist today. Archaeological reports of the current house at Bassett Hall indicate that the current house was built upon the foundations of a mid-

¹⁵ Tyler, *The Cradle of the Republic*, 104.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Tyler, *Williamsburg*, 14.

eighteenth-century structure, thus not the home of James Bray. The house in which Bray lived at Middle Plantation was a temporary structure, probably built of wood, because he divided his time between Littleton and Middle Plantation. It is, however, likely that the Bray house existed in the same location as the current house and that later generations built a more permanent structure upon the same site.

In 1677, a petition to the king recommended that Middle Plantation become the capital of Virginia because of its popularity and increasing population, but Jamestown remained the capital for the next two decades.¹⁸ James Bray died in 1691, and the ownership of his land at Middle Plantation passed to his son, James Bray II.¹⁹ In October 1698, the statehouse at Jamestown burned for the third time.²⁰ The capital was officially moved to Middle Plantation in 1699, with the hope that it would grow because of the popular nearby College of William and Mary.²¹ The area was renamed Williamsburg, after King William III.²² The main street, Duke of Gloucester Street, named for the King's son, followed the course of the former Middle Plantation horse path.²³ Official plans of Middle Plantation do not exist. The earliest map of the town dates to the eighteenth century, so one must infer that Middle Plantation provided the foundation for the city of Williamsburg. Williamsburg experienced a population boom during the eighteenth century. The Bray home lay adjacent to the city limits, one block southeast of the area designated to be the location of the capitol. These lots appeared on later maps of Williamsburg, and notably on the *Frenchman's Map* of 1786.

¹⁸ Tyler, *Williamsburg*, 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁰ Warren M. Billings, John E. Selby, Thad W. Tate, *Colonial Virginia: A History* (White Plains, NY: KTO Press, 1986), 156.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Tyler, *Williamsburg*, 20.

²³ *Ibid.*

James Bray II

James Bray II, son of James Bray, inherited Littletown Plantation and the house at Middle Plantation after his father's death in 1691. He appears in records as one of the first aldermen and a member of the town's council.²⁴ He served as justice of the peace for James City County and was a member of the House of Burgesses in 1688 and 1702.²⁵ It is impossible to determine James Bray II's movements between Littletown and Williamsburg because both cities burned several times and the records were destroyed. James II was recognized as a resident of Williamsburg, as he held obligations in the city, such as a member of the town council and of the House of Burgesses.

Few existing records mention the function of Bassett Hall during the time of James Bray II. It is likely that he maintained the house as it was when his father lived there, but unfortunately records do not indicate its exact uses. Likely, it functioned as a small farm for sustenance, much like Littletown. The Bray land in Williamsburg was large, consisting of several hundred acres of farmland and woodlands. It was likely used as a small farm, much like other houses in Williamsburg at the time.

James Bray II's son, Thomas Bray II, inherited the land upon his father's death in 1710. In his Last Will and Testament, James Bray II left his land in Williamsburg to his son Thomas, and left Littletown to his daughter Elizabeth. Littletown "fell into decline as a secondary property" as the eighteenth century progressed.²⁶

Col. Thomas Bray

Col. Thomas Bray owned the house and grounds at Bassett Hall from 1710 until his death in 1753. Colonel Bray likely moved to Williamsburg upon his father's death, and lived there

²⁴ Tyler, *Williamsburg*, 26.

²⁵ Tyler, *Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, 193.

²⁶ McClure, "Littletown Plantation," 21.

until his death. Since his sister was granted Littleton in their father's will and had a family of her own, Colonel Bray likely resided in Williamsburg most of the time, and visited his sister and other family at Littleton on occasion.

Colonel Bray was listed in the account book of Mr. Burwell of Williamsburg in 1743. Colonel Bray rented Mr. Burwell's wagon for two days in October, but the reason for this was not listed.²⁷ He also purchased necessities, such as flour, wood, corn, wheat, wine, and madeira, regularly from Mr. Burwell.²⁸ Colonel Bray was also listed frequently in the account book of Mr. Thomas Wharton of Williamsburg. From Mr. Wharton, he purchased other necessities, such as purging pills and purging powder, illustrating that it was necessary to purchase from various merchants in Williamsburg because there was not one individual from whom all essentials could be purchased.²⁹ These were common household items for most families in Williamsburg during the early eighteenth century. They indicate that Colonel Bray purchased essential items necessary for daily life, such flour and wheat for cooking, which were not produced on his farm from local merchants. He maintained a small farm on his land in Williamsburg, and likely raised hogs, sheep, and vegetables to sustain his family. Farms like these were typical of many of Williamsburg's residents, and necessary for maintaining family's life in the city.

Burwell recorded in 1744 that he transported goods for Colonel Bray from Littleton Plantation to Williamsburg.³⁰ The record is not descriptive, and only indicates the fee charged by Mr. Burwell. The record does indicate, however, that Colonel Bray occasionally traveled between Littleton and Williamsburg. During the time he lived in Williamsburg, Littleton was

²⁷ Burwell Account Book 1736-1746, reverse of page 52, Burwell Family Papers Oversize, Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Williamsburg, VA.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Thomas Wharton, *Account Book, 1729-1751*, page 17, Special Collections, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Williamsburg, VA.

³⁰ Burwell Account Book 1736-1746, reverse of page 62.

still producing tobacco and fruits that were not grown in Williamsburg. Colonel Bray brought various goods from Littleton to Williamsburg, and probably visited his family while he was there. Records documenting purchases by Colonel Bray appear throughout the ledger until it ends in 1746, indicating that he was a consistent customer of Burwell's. Colonel Bray resided in Williamsburg more often than his father, and possibly even his grandfather, because neither of them were listed in any Williamsburg ledger.

During the mid-eighteenth century, Colonel Bray's land at Bassett Hall was appraised and valued at £670.³¹ This land was the same 290 acres that his grandfather purchased in 1671. It is unclear why he had it appraised; he never sold any of it, and it is uncertain whether or not he intended to before his death. Colonel Bray lived in Williamsburg, at Bassett Hall, until his death. Perhaps he merely wanted to know the value of his land.

Colonel Bray lived the common life of a Williamsburg small farm owner during the first half of the eighteenth century. Colonial Williamsburg seeks to display authentic eighteenth-century life in Williamsburg, yet Col. Thomas Bray is hardly mentioned in the museum at Bassett Hall. Bassett Hall could be used to display the life of an eighteenth-century farmer by presenting information about small eighteenth-century farm life, but it is not. Though his story is not told at the Bassett Hall museum, Colonel Bray's story provides important information about Williamsburg during the eighteenth century. During the eighteenth century, many of Williamsburg's residents operated small farms like the Brays,' where the family tended gardens and small livestock for their sustenance.

³¹Burwell Account Book 1736-1746, reverse of page 138.

Col. Philip Johnson

Upon the death of Col. Thomas Bray, since his son had predeceased him, the house and grounds at Bassett Hall were left to his daughter, Elizabeth Bray Johnson. Elizabeth married Col. Philip Johnson in 1743, and after Colonel Bray's death in 1753, they inherited the house and grounds at Bassett Hall. The transition of ownership to the Johnsons was not, however, easy. The owners of the neighboring lots, Benjamin Waller and Williams Prentis, disputed Colonel Johnson's ownership of the lots in between. Fortunately for Colonel Johnson and Elizabeth, the Virginia court awarded the two lots off Francis Street and the acreage to the south, numbering 950 acres, to Colonel Johnson.³² This decision increased the size of the land formerly owned by the Bray family. Colonel Johnson, being wealthy, also purchased more acres of land during his life. The house and farm were called Johnson's Plantation. It was during Colonel Johnson's ownership that construction of the house was recorded. Colonel Johnson is credited with building the original structure, the front portion of the house that is parallel with Francis Street, between 1753 and 1766.³³ He likely constructed the house in the same location as the earlier brick house, built by James Bray I, and occupied by Col. Thomas Bray and his family; there are no older archaeological remains elsewhere on the grounds.

Johnson owned many lots in Williamsburg during his residence at Bassett Hall. He owned at least thirty-four on the southern edge of the city during the eighteenth century,

³² Mary A. Stephenson, *Bassett Hall, Block 1, Lot 22* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1951, revised 1959, reprinted 1990 by Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Williamsburg, VA), 2; and William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large; Being A Collection of all the Laws of Virginia From the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*, vol. 6 (New York: R. & W. Bartow, 1823), 412-416.

³³ Marcus Whiffen, *The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg: A Study of Architecture and Building in the Colonial Capital of Virginia* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1960, revised 1984), 259.

accessible by the two lots adjoining Francis Street.³⁴ These two lots can be seen near the bottom of Figure 1 as two rectangles between the lots of Waller to the east and Semple to the west. The ownership of lots adjacent to a major road was typical in the eighteenth century, as most residents of the city operated local businesses in Williamsburg or visited the city on a regular basis. Johnson's house did not sit within the two lots adjacent Francis Street, but further south. A long driveway extended through the two-acre lawn and formed a loop in front of the main house. This loop is evident in later plats of the house and grounds drawn in the nineteenth century, such as the one displayed in Figure 1.



Figure 1: This is a detail from a plat of Bassett Hall drawn in 1869. The driveway can be seen extending through the two-acre lawn and forming a loop in front of the main house.³⁵

³⁴ John W. Reys, *Tidewater Towns: City Planning in Colonial Virginia and Maryland* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1972), 183.

³⁵ *Plat of Bassett Hall, 1869*, 1869, Manuscript Collection, Special Collections of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Williamsburg, VA.

The front lawn, between the main house and Francis Street, was two acres. The lengthy driveway created distance between Johnson's house and the main road and instilled a sense of privacy for the family, while being close enough to the city if needed.

Johnson's lots extended much farther south than the two adjoining Francis Street, as is evident in Figure 2. His name appears on a manuscript illustrating the plan of Williamsburg in approximately 1800. As seen in the detail from the illustration in Figure 2, the open space extending from the left of the two "Bassett" lots was Johnson's land and the location of his house.³⁶ Though this is in an untitled, unsigned, and undated manuscript found in a private manuscript collection, the plan of the city streets and lots appears identical to other plans of the city found in the archaeological reports and Special Collections of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library. This one is unique because Johnson's name appears on it, illustrating his land holdings.

³⁶ Reps, *Tidewater Towns*, 162.

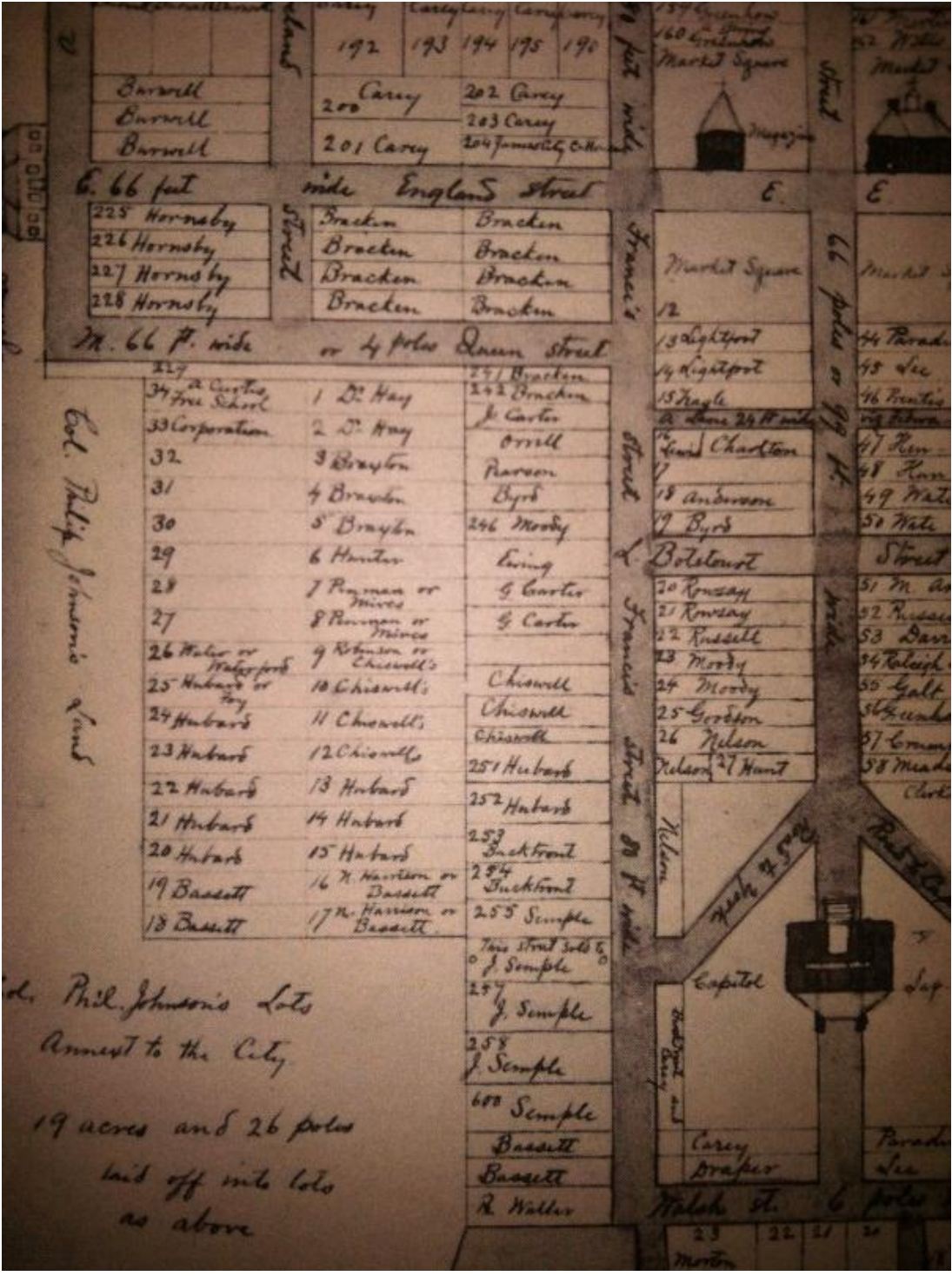


Figure 2: This is a detail from an unsigned, undated manuscript of Mary Ware Galt Kirby as cited in *Tidewater Towns*. In this detail, the land of Col. Philip Johnson is identified. The two lots adjoining Francis Street are identified as “Bassett,” signifying that the illustration was drawn approximately in 1800, when Burwell Bassett purchased those lots. The capitol appears one block northwest of these lots.³⁷

³⁷ Reys, *Tidewater Towns*, 162 (illustration) and 329 (photograph information).

Johnson's ownership of two lots off of Francis Street was typical during the eighteenth-century life of the city. The names of the owners of the lots were written into the rectangular sections of the illustration in Figure 2. The land marked as Colonel Johnson's land in Figure 2 illustrates that many acres of land extended south of Francis street behind many other residential lots outside the city limits. The ownership of land outside the city limits of Williamsburg was also typical of the wealthier residents of the city. Many of the acres owned by Johnson were wooded, extending behind the residences, but there were also several acres used as farmland.

The house and acreage used as farmland was known as Johnson Plantation. Johnson Plantation was a typical eighteenth-century Williamsburg farm house, much like Colonel Bray's farm. It was not a large plantation; the Johnsons did not want a large plantation home. The home in Williamsburg functioned as a farm house, with livestock, gardens, and some orchards for sustenance. Johnson had hogs and horses on his farm, and tended various fruit trees.

Architecture

The architecture of Colonel Johnson's house was typical of the colonial era. Timber was the primary material used to build the house, characteristic of the colonial era.³⁸ English colonists in Virginia appreciated the abundance of timber in the colony because of the shortage of timber in England since the beginning of the sixteenth century.³⁹ Sawmills, staffed by Dutch, Polish, and German workers because there were no sawmills in England until 1663, were established in Virginia in the early seventeenth century to quench the thirst for timber and make it readily available for colonists.⁴⁰ Timber was available when James Bray I built his house in Middle

³⁸ Whiffen, *The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg*, 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

Plantation, but because of records left in his will, it is safe to assume that the house was constructed of brick. The house that Colonel Bray and his family occupied in Williamsburg in the early eighteenth century was likely the same brick house of his father and grandfather. Remains of this house do not exist, and archaeological reports of Bassett Hall indicate that the earliest foundations at the site date to Col. Philip Johnson's residence in the mid-eighteenth century. Upon the death of Col. Thomas Bray, his daughter and son-in-law, Col. Philip Johnson, modified the earlier brick house to construct the house at Bassett Hall that stands today. Archaeologists and historians are unsure of the dimensions and characteristics of the original house on the Bray property.

Bassett Hall was originally constructed as the Johnsons' family home. The structure had two stories with a one-room depth. The depth being one room, upon entering the front door, the rear door was opposite the front door on the far side of the hall. On each side of the front door, there was one room to the right, and one room to the left, each entered through a doorway. The first floor rooms were the parlor and a morning room.⁴¹ The morning room was a sitting room, similar to the function of the parlor, but it probably also functioned as the dining room.

⁴¹ Whiffen, *The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg*, 71.

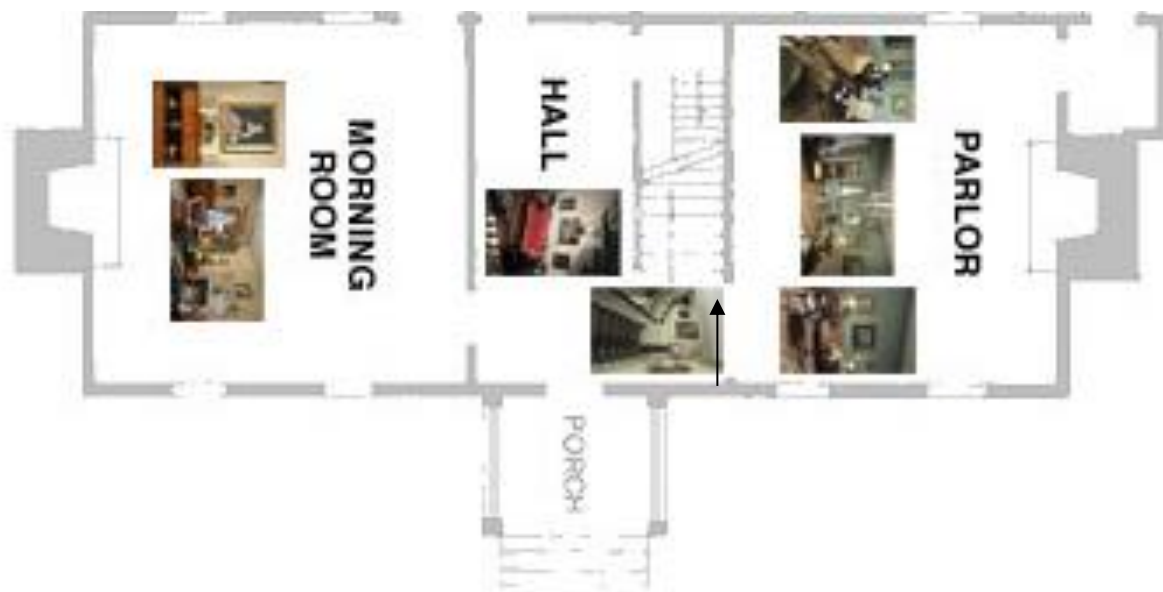


Figure 3: This is the first floor of the floor plan of Bassett Hall, as built by Colonel Johnson. The porch extends from the front of the house and faces north. The single depth of the house is evident in this floor plan.⁴²

A wooden staircase ascended on the right side of the hall to the second floor. As seen from the front door, the staircase rose against the right wall of the hall, turned left against the rear wall of the hall, and further ascended against the left wall toward the front of the house where it reached the second floor. There was a cupboard underneath the stairs on the ground floor for storage. The presence of such a staircase displayed the wealth of Colonel Johnson. The staircase was a focal point of the house, as it was seen upon entering the house. This was not the typical design of staircases during the eighteenth century in Williamsburg. The staircases of other residences were in the rear of the house or in the corner of a room, not in the center of the hall, immediately seen upon entering the front door. Colonel Johnson could afford such a rare staircase, and he likely wanted it to be noticed.

On the second floor, two rooms were exactly above those on the ground floor, one on each side of the staircase. These were the bedrooms.⁴³ This feature of the house was typical of

⁴² Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, "Bassett Hall," Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, <http://www.history.org/Almanack/places/hb/hbbass.cfm#floorplan> (accessed December 7, 2011). Some additions to the image by author.

eighteenth-century architecture in that it only had four rooms, enough for daily life and not too extravagant, though most residential buildings in Williamsburg were only one and a half stories tall. The Johnsons had seven children—James, Thomas, William, Elizabeth, Rebecca, Martha, and Anne—and they all lived in the house while Colonel Johnson lived there and owned it.⁴⁴ Records of the lives of the Johnson children do not exist, but their lives are not particularly relevant to this study. A record in *The William and Mary Quarterly* indicated that all but one of the children were still living in 1798, though none of them inherited the house in Williamsburg.⁴⁵ The children likely married and moved out of Bassett Hall.

A characteristic feature of some colonial homes in Williamsburg, and evident at Bassett Hall, was the hall. It was a rectangular room extending from the front of the house to the rear, from which the rooms on either side could be entered.⁴⁶ At Bassett Hall, the rooms on either side of the hall cannot be entered without entering the hall; there are no alternative doors for entering or exiting the house. The hall was a “space which was neither wholly interior nor exterior but a sheltered testing zone which some passed through with ease and others never went beyond.”⁴⁷ Doors separated the adjoining rooms from the hall, and visitors entered the hall upon visiting the house. If the Johnsons, or another homeowner whose house had a hall, wished, the visitor could be contained in the hall and not allowed to enter any other rooms of the house. The hall served as a barrier between the private home and the public world. When families did not want those worlds to intersect, visitors from the outside world were maintained in the hall of the house and not allowed to enter any further into the home. Not every house in Williamsburg had a hall

⁴³ Whiffen, *The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg*, 71.

⁴⁴ “Bray—Johnson,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 21, no. 4 (Apr. 1913): 263.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Whiffen, *The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg*, 66.

⁴⁷ Kenneth L. Ames, “Meaning in Artifacts: Hall Furnishings in Victorian America” in *Material Culture Studies in America*. ed. Thomas J. Schlereth (New York: Altamira Press, 1999), 221.

because it was not viewed as a necessity but as a luxury; rather, front doors of houses entered into the parlor or other front room of the house.

The Johnson home exhibited the Georgian architectural trend that was popular in England during the eighteenth century. Colonists naturally modeled their settlements and architecture after buildings in their homeland. English influence on architecture was inevitable as more and more English colonists arrived. When Williamsburg was named the capital, English architects and builders were not only consulted, but many of them immigrated to Williamsburg and took advantage of new business ventures.⁴⁸

One of the most evident Georgian features present at Bassett Hall was the symmetry. The hall divided the house directly in half from the front door to the rear door. At the end of each half is a chimney, on the far wall of each room of the house. When viewed from directly in the front of the house, the façade appeared perfectly symmetrical. The front door was in the center of the house, with two windows on each side on the ground floor, and two on each side directly above them on the second floor. On the farthest east and west wall of Bassett Hall, a brick chimney rose to mark the edges of the house. The chimney was a feature of Virginia's colonial architecture and its Georgian symmetry mimicked the English trend. Symmetry is perhaps the most noticeable characteristic of Georgian colonial architecture and was incorporated in many of the original houses in Williamsburg.

The triangular portico above the front door at Bassett Hall was also reminiscent of Georgian architecture. Porticos provided decoration on the façade of a house, rather than having the door stand alone with no ornamentation, looking like another window. Many houses in Williamsburg did not have such decoration on their facades, because it was usually limited to the

⁴⁸ Thomas Tileston Waterman and John A. Barrows, *Domestic Colonial Architecture of Tidewater Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1947), xvi.

domiciles of wealthier individuals. Colonel Johnson was one of the wealthier individuals in Williamsburg, and had the resources to place such a decoration on his home. Carter's Grove, the large plantation on the James River, also has a triangular portico above its front door. Carter Burwell was a wealthy plantation owner during the eighteenth century, so much so that he was called "King" Carter.⁴⁹ Various porticos were characteristic of homes of wealthier members of society. Porticos alluded to ancient Greek and Roman architecture, and displayed not only wealth, but knowledge of those classical times when porticos were found in temples and palaces. Porticos sometimes appeared as simple, triangular shapes above doors, such as Colonel Johnson's at his home, but sometimes were more ornate, with friezes and other decorations carved on them.

Paint was imported to Virginia during the eighteenth century. Most paint was imported in a dry, powdery form, and was mixed with oil by the purchaser or user.⁵⁰ Several residences in Williamsburg during the eighteenth century would have been unpainted because the owners either did not have the money to purchase paint or did not want to spend their money on it. Paint was another luxury item that only the wealthy could afford. Archaeologists are uncertain whether or not the house constructed by Colonel Johnson was painted.

Several outbuildings existed on the grounds of the Johnson house: the smokehouse, dairy, and kitchen. These stood south of the main house. These buildings were characteristic features of eighteenth-century farmhouses in Williamsburg, as farm owners had these outbuildings to store their goods. The kitchen was always a separate building during the eighteenth century for safety reasons, so as to not burn the main house. Less wealthy individuals may not have had multiple outbuildings, but likely would have at least had a separate kitchen. Remnants of the foundations

⁴⁹ Waterman and Barrows, *Domestic Colonial Architecture*, 99.

⁵⁰ Whiffen, *The Eighteenth-Century Houses of Williamsburg*, 23.

of these buildings remain in the garden at Bassett Hall, indicating that at some point in the house's history, the buildings were moved across the grounds to their current locations.

Richard Hunt Singleton

After the death of his wife Elizabeth in 1766, Colonel Johnson advertised the possibility of renting out his property and grounds in Williamsburg. The next occupant of Bassett Hall was Richard Hunt Singleton. He rented Bassett Hall from 1771 to 1773 from Colonel Johnson, but did reside in Williamsburg before he lived at Bassett Hall. In the register of Bruton and Middleton Parish, the parish in which Williamsburg is located, his daughter's birth and baptism was listed in January of 1753, indicating that Singleton was living in Williamsburg or its vicinity two decades prior to his time at Bassett Hall.⁵¹ During his time at Bassett Hall, he built the perpendicular wing extending southward from the house. The additional wing was one and a half stories tall. Singleton operated a tavern in the house. The ground floor of the perpendicular wing served as the main room of the tavern. The half story above likely functioned as a storage room.

The presence of several other taverns in Williamsburg may explain the failure of Singleton's tavern and its brief operation. The Raleigh Tavern was the most popular tavern in the city, and flourished during the eighteenth century as many members of the House of Burgesses and other visitors to Williamsburg provided business for the it. Unfortunately for Singleton, his endeavor as a tavern operator failed after two short years. Little else is known about Singleton other than that he rented the house of Colonel Johnson and operated a tavern in it. He likely continued to rent residences in Williamsburg throughout his life, but he was not as active in the community as the other residents of Bassett Hall, so his exact involvement and actions in Williamsburg are unknown.

⁵¹ Nancy Chappelle, ed., *Bruton and Middleton Parishes, James City County, Virginia Parish Register 1662-1797* (Washington, DC: Chappelle & Baird, 1966), 6.

Archaeological reports of the house and grounds at Bassett Hall indicate the finding of many eighteenth-century wine bottle fragments in what has been identified as a trash pit.⁵² The wine bottle fragments prove that Bassett Hall was occupied during the eighteenth century. They are either remnants of Col. Thomas Bray's trash, Col. Philip Johnson's trash, or trash discarded from Singleton's tavern during the 1770's. Regardless of which resident the trash belonged to, Bassett Hall was regularly occupied during the eighteenth century.

Bassett Hall was depicted on the well-known *Frenchman's Map*, as seen in Figures 4 and 5. This map was drawn by a French military officer present in the city during the 1780's. The mapmaker is not identified, but the date on the map is 1782. The map illustrates the plan of Williamsburg as it existed during the eighteenth century while Bassett Hall was occupied.

⁵² Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library, *Bassett Hall Archaeological Report, Block 1 Building 22* (Williamsburg, VA: 1990), 37.

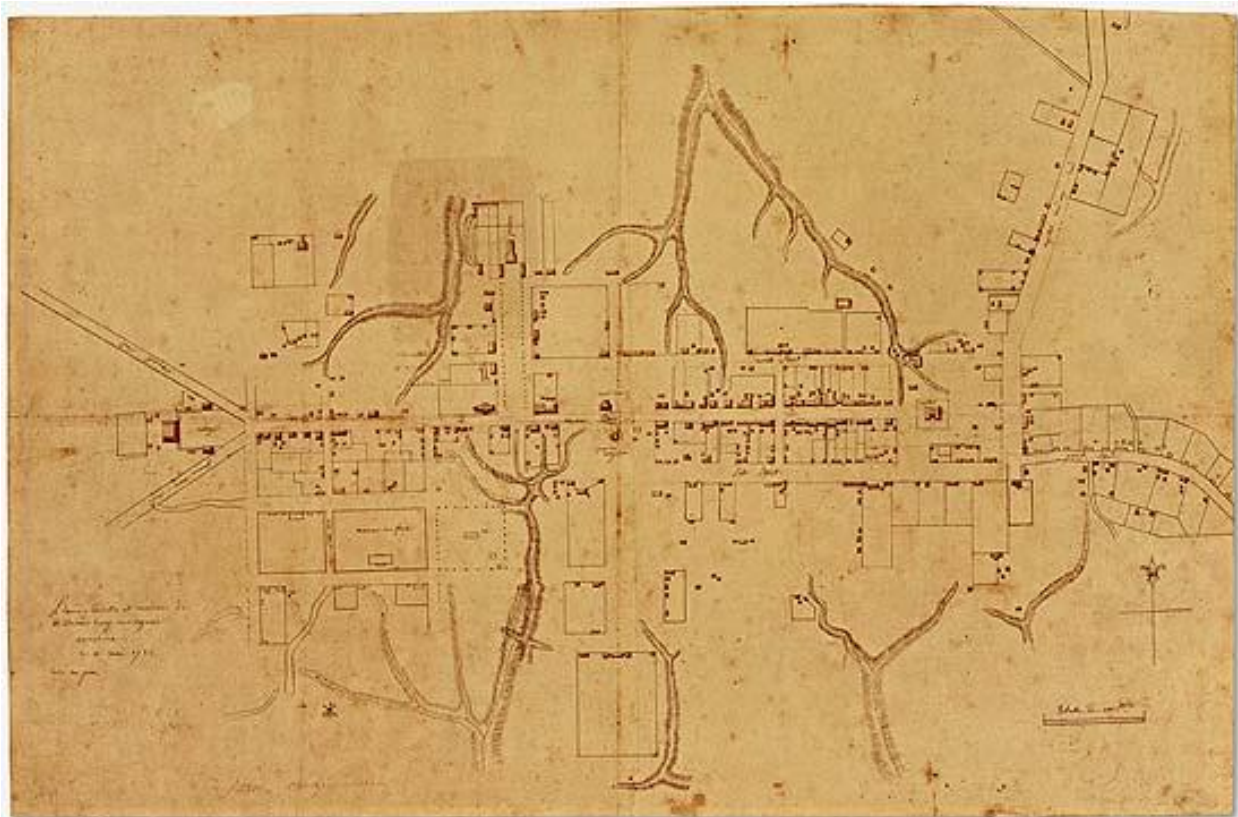


Figure 4: The *Frenchman's Map*, 1782.⁵³

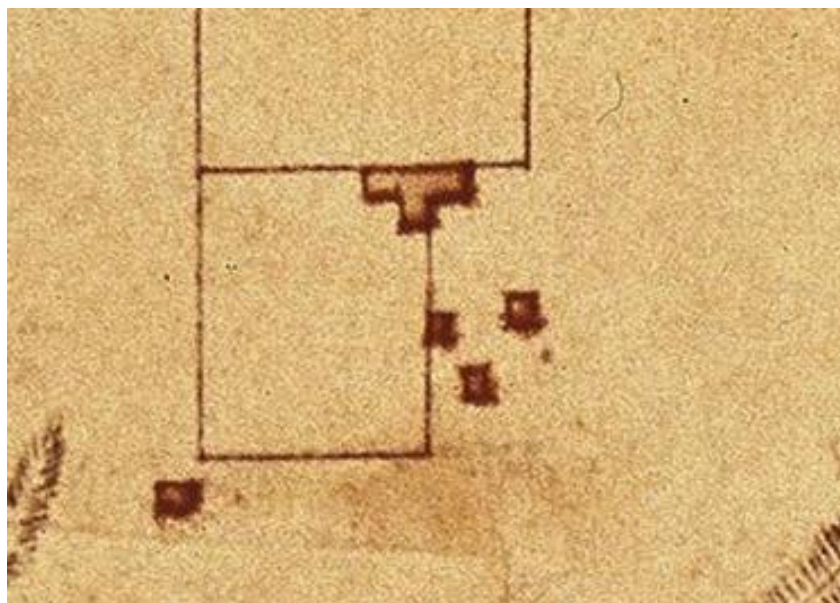


Figure 5: Detail of Bassett Hall from *The Frenchman's Map*.⁵⁴ On the map, Bassett Hall can be seen about two-thirds of the way down near the right edge.

⁵³ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, "In Search of the Frenchman's Map," Colonial Williamsburg, <http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/autumn07/map.cfm> (accessed December 3, 2011).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, (accessed December 3, 2011). The zoomable map is provided by the Special Collections Research Center at the Swem Library of the College of William and Mary.

The *Frenchman's Map* was the first map that depicted the plan of the city of Williamsburg. Its creation in 1782 and the presence of Bassett Hall on the map indicates that Bassett Hall existed in its current location in 1782, between the residences of Mr. Singleton and Mr. Corbin. The “T”-shaped image in Figure 3 is Bassett Hall, and the base of the “T” is the perpendicular wing in which Singleton operated his tavern in the 1770’s.

Richard Corbin

The next resident of Bassett Hall was Richard Corbin. He lived there from approximately 1793 to 1796, twenty years after Singleton. Corbin appears in the ledger of William Nelson, of Williamsburg on July 17, 1775.⁵⁵ This entry in Nelson’s ledger illustrates that Corbin was living in Williamsburg before he resided at Bassett Hall. He also appears in Nelson’s account book on April 3, 1798, having purchased a bottle of snuff from Mr. Nelson.⁵⁶ During the time of this appearance, Corbin lived at Bassett Hall.

Richard Corbin was a prominent individual in eighteenth-century Virginia. Though not a native of Williamsburg, Corbin attended the College of William and Mary. He served as justice of the peace in Middlesex County and represented Middlesex County in the House of Burgesses in 1751.⁵⁷ He was appointed receiver general of Virginia, and thus gained the title of Colonel. Corbin likely visited Williamsburg many times because of his various obligations, and it is likely that he lived in the city even before he lived at Bassett Hall. Many records in the Richard Corbin papers depict Corbin’s activities, purchases, and associations. It appears that he kept ample records of his debts and debtors, records of crop yields, and communication with prominent

⁵⁵ William Nelson Ledger, part 2, July 17, 1775, page 94r, Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Williamsburg, VA.

⁵⁶ William Nelson Ledger, part 3, page 21v, Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Williamsburg, VA.

⁵⁷ Tyler, *Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, 158.

members of Williamsburg's society. The records do not, however, include the receipt for the purchase of Bassett Hall and its grounds, or describe Bassett Hall at all. The receipt of Corbin's tax paid on 325 acres of land in James City County in 1794 establishes that he owned the house that year.⁵⁸

Corbin's influence on Bassett Hall was minimal, as he only lived there for three years. At that time, Bassett Hall consisted of the main house, built by Colonel Johnson, and the perpendicular wing used as Singleton's tavern. It is unclear who, if anyone, lived at Bassett Hall during the twenty years between Singleton and Corbin. Records do not describe residents of the house. Presumably, it was rented numerous times during this period. Records from Colonial Williamsburg and numerous manuscript papers do not indicate the names of these renters. The twenty-year gap is a deterrent to tracing the history of Bassett Hall between Singleton and Corbin, but no data indicates that the house was used for anything other than a rental property. The property was maintained, however, and attracted its next occupant near the turn of the century.

⁵⁸ *Richard Corbin Papers, 1746-1825*, Manuscript DMS 1971.5, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Williamsburg, VA, folder 13, item 2.

Chapter 3:

Bassett Hall during the Nineteenth Century

Burwell Bassett and Bassett Hall

The next resident of Bassett Hall, the one for whom it was named, was Burwell Bassett. He was born in 1764 in New Kent County, which is adjacent to the west of James City County, in which Williamsburg lies.¹ Bassett was a prominent Virginian who lived at Bassett Hall for more than forty years, making him the resident who lived the longest in the house off Francis Street. During the time he lived at Bassett Hall, the city of Williamsburg grew rapidly, as did the population of other Tidewater Virginia cities. Bassett obviously made an impression on the citizens of Williamsburg, causing the house to be forever known after his death as Bassett Hall. For these reasons, he deserves a lengthier discussion than the other residents of the house.

A brief explanation of his heritage is necessary to illustrate Bassett's stature in society. Bassett belonged to one of the first Virginia families that established residence in Virginia soon after it became a colony. His ancestor William Bassett was born in England and traveled to Virginia in the 1660s. In 1665, he was involved in constructing the fort at Jamestown, and acquired large amounts of land in Virginia after that. It was from his lineage that the Burwell Bassett of Bassett Hall descended.² He was named after his father, Col. Burwell Bassett, who was the brother of Martha Washington. The Bassett of Bassett Hall was thus the nephew of the wife of the first President of the United States. Members of the extended Bassett family, aunts and uncles of the Burwell Bassett of Bassett Hall, appear frequently throughout the Vestry Book and Register of New Kent County during the eighteenth century, illustrating that there were

¹ Tyler, *Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, 98.

² Stella Pickett Hardy, *Colonial Families of the Southern States of America: A History and Genealogy of Colonial Families Who Settled in the Colonies Prior to the Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Southern Book Company, 1958, reprint Baltimore, MD: Clearfield Company, 2007), 43.

Bassetts residing in the Williamsburg area. In 1759, Colonel Bassett was listed as a church warden and signed as a witness the indenture of a young mulatto boy to a James Pride in the parish register.³ Though Colonel Bassett appears only once in the vestry book, his appearance and those of other Bassett relatives indicates that the Bassett family resided in New Kent County prior to the birth of the Burwell Bassett of Bassett Hall.

Col. Burwell Bassett was also listed in the ledger of William Nelson, of Williamsburg, on June 28, 1769. He was listed as being from New Kent, and having purchased three pence worth of ducks from Mr. Nelson.⁴ The entry demonstrates that the Bassett family had ties to, and possibly resided in, Williamsburg prior to the younger Bassett's purchase of Bassett Hall in 1796. In August of 1774, Colonel Bassett received several letters in Williamsburg, establishing that he resided in the city before his son purchased the land at Bassett Hall.⁵ His son probably lived in Williamsburg at this time as well, but does not appear in any historical records because of his young age. The records indicate that Colonel Bassett did not own Bassett Hall, but resided in a different house that is not relevant to this thesis.

Burwell Bassett, the younger, attended the College of William and Mary during the late 1780s. Records of his time as a student have not been preserved, but he is listed as a former student visitor in several of the pamphlets from programs held at the college during the 1830s. He married Elizabeth McCarthy, listed as a "spinster" in the marriage record, on January 10,

³ C. G. Chamberlayne, ed., *The Vestry Book and Register of St. Peter's Parish: New Kent and James City Counties, Virginia 1684-1786* (Richmond, VA: The Library Board, 1937), 681.

⁴ William Nelson Ledger, part 1, June 28, 1769, page 14v, Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Williamsburg, VA.

⁵ Letter to Col. Burwell Bassett in Williamsburg, August 1774, Miscellaneous Manuscript in the Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Williamsburg, VA and Robert Carter Nicholas: *Robert Carter Nicholas to Col. Burwell Bassett- Letter: 20 August 1774*, Miscellaneous Manuscript Collection, Special Collections of the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Williamsburg, VA.

1788.⁶ Little is known about Elizabeth, because unfortunately she was not mentioned in the records, like many other women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Bassett remarried in 1800 to Anne Claiborne, and it was she who lived with him at Bassett Hall. It is uncertain whether Elizabeth died before Bassett married Anne, or if the two were divorced. Unfortunately records detailing the relationship between Bassett and his wives or the activities of his wives do not exist.

Bassett was listed in the James City County census of 1830, illustrating that he was living in the county during the time he owned Bassett Hall.⁷ He was a delegate from New Kent County in 1789 to the Virginia House of Burgesses and was a member of the State Senate from 1798 to -1799 and from 1802 to -1803.⁸ He was elected to Congress as a representative from Virginia in 1805.⁹ Bassett spent quite a bit of time in Williamsburg for these reasons, and discovered the convenience of owning property in the city.

He was listed in the account book of Frances Bassett Washington Lear, his sister, on February 19, 1793 as bringing purchased items to Lear from Richmond.¹⁰ Lear recorded the debts she owed, such as a reminder to repay her brother, rather than the individuals who owed her, that is the common way account books and ledgers are written. Bassett was also listed repeatedly in the account book that runs through July 1795, so it becomes clear he was a frequent lender to Lear, and lent large amounts of money to her, as was common behavior among siblings. On one occasion, Lear recorded that she repaid the £10 sum she owed to Bassett for

⁶ Elizabeth Petty Bentley, ed., *Virginia Marriage Records: From the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, the William and Mary College Quarterly, and Tyler's Quarterly* (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1982), 588, and Dorothy Ford Wulfeck, ed., *Marriages of Some Virginia Residents 1607-1800*, vol. 1 (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1986), 81.

⁷ U. S. Government, *1830 United States Federal Census* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration), microfilm M19, roll 192.

⁸ Tyler, *Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, 98.

⁹ "Virginia Members of Congress," *Pennsylvania Correspondent*, May 21, 1805.

¹⁰ Frances Bassett Washington Lear, *Account Book*, Photocopy PH 48, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2.

“accounts left unsettled.”¹¹ Bassett’s frequent appearance in Lear’s account book illustrates that Bassett was frequently in Williamsburg, if not a resident of the city, prior to his purchase of Bassett Hall in 1796. During the time he spent in Williamsburg, Bassett became familiar with the city and chose to purchase land there, and was likely familiar enough with the various homes in the city to develop a preference.

In 1796, Bassett purchased his first portion of Bassett Hall grounds, the two lots adjacent to Francis Street that can be seen in Figure 2, in the previous chapter. In a letter dated October 24, 1795, Bassett wrote to Corbin that he had “made up [his] mind” and agreed to purchase Corbin’s land in Williamsburg.¹² The context of the letter implies that Corbin had previously suggested the sale to Bassett and that Bassett was debating whether or not to purchase the property. A letter initiating the sale process from Corbin to Bassett does not exist, and property records for Williamsburg from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are few and far between because the city burned several times, destroying important records that could aid in illustrating the ownership of the house. Bassett’s reply to Corbin seems to fill the gap in the historical record of the house between at least these two owners. On January 1, 1796, Bassett purchased “all the houses and lands in and near the said city [Williamsburg] formerly the property of...Corbin.”¹³ The purchase was witnessed and receipted by Thomas Dawson, of Williamsburg, initiating the reign of Bassett Hall’s namesake on the property.

Bassett was first listed in the James City County tax books in 1799, three years after purchasing the grounds from Corbin, as owning 355 acres of land, and since the acreage is not mentioned in the deed from Corbin to Bassett, it is safe to assume that these 355 acres were what

¹¹ Lear, *Account Book*.

¹² Richard Corbin Papers, 1746-1825, Manuscript DMS 1971.5, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, folder 15, item 5. Herein after cited as Richard Corbin Papers.

¹³ *Ibid.*, item 9.

Bassett purchased from Corbin in the form of two lots in 1796.¹⁴ Beginning in 1802, however, Bassett was listed in the tax books as owning only 335 acres in James City county, indicating that he had sold a portion of his land. Records do not indicate the reason, or what he did with the twenty acres he had previously owned. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, Bassett purchased additional land adjacent to his property at Bassett Hall until the amount of land he owned totaled 585 acres, although it was not all in James City County. Bassett's land included the land formerly owned by Colonel Johnson, which extended farther south and west behind the residential lots of Francis Street. The majority of Bassett's land, except for the two lots directly adjacent to Francis Street, was outside Williamsburg's city limits. It is possible that the land Bassett owned extended into neighboring York county, explaining why he paid James City county taxes on only a portion of the land he owned. Unfortunately, the York County land tax records do not exist, due to the destruction of records in the fire that destroyed the Williamsburg courthouse.

Bassett was one of Williamsburg's wealthier residents during the nineteenth century. An account receipt from 1802-1803 lists that Bassett purchased "black velvet" and "fine Indian cotton," suggesting that he and his family did not want for anything.¹⁵ Bassett was probably accustomed to having such luxury items, because he was raised in an affluent household. His father was a colonel (the sources do not indicate whether in the militia or the Continental Army) and a representative to the House of Burgesses and had enough money to furnish his home and family with goods that were called "luxury" and available only to affluent individuals.

¹⁴ Jean E. Blackmon, transcr., *James City County, Va. Land Tax Records, 1782-1813* (Jean Epting Blackmon, 1991), 182.

¹⁵ Bassett Family Papers, 1728-1923, New Kent, Hanover, and Spotsylvania Counties, Virginia, Brandeis University (Waltham, MA), microfilm, section 6. Herein after cited as Bassett Family Papers.

In addition to maintaining his own household in the city and property in New Kent that he still owned, Bassett was the administrator of the estate of Leonard Henley and guardian of Bartholomew Dandridge Henley, John Dandridge Henley, Robert Henley, Samuel Henley, and William Dandridge Henley.¹⁶ Leonard Henley died in 1798, and Bassett took responsibility for paying his debt and providing for his children. Numerous receipts illustrate that Bassett purchased material for clothing, hats, shoes, powder, and other necessities for the Henley children. Bassett even paid the tuition bill for Henley's children to attend the College of William and Mary in 1804.¹⁷ Caring for multiple wards cost Bassett a hefty sum, but he obliged, evidence that the cost was not a problem.

Bassett also administered the Williamsburg estate of William Langborn, who was the brother-in-law of his wife, Anne.¹⁸ Langborn died in the early 1800s, leaving no heirs. His son had preceded him in death, and his daughter married into another family. Upon Langborn's death, Bassett, being one of his closest relatives, was appointed administrator of Langborn's estate. The estate in question was in London, and on Langborn's death, William Murdoch, the manager of the estate, was responsible for locating its administrator, who was Bassett.¹⁹ Bassett obliged in the administration of the estate, and in 1820 received a note of thanks from Murdoch.²⁰ Bassett had to employ Murdoch's services as he could not regularly travel to London to administer the estate. Murdoch was like a modern-day real estate agent who cared for the estate that Bassett administered from a distant location. Bassett purchased necessities and essentials for the estate, such as cloth and linen to furnish the house. He paid Langborn's debts,

¹⁶ Bassett Family Papers, section 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Affidavit of Burwell Bassett, 25 April 1837, William Langborn Papers, 1783-1837, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary. Herein after cited as William Langborn Papers.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ William Murdoch to Burwell Bassett, December 14, 1820, William Langborn Papers, folder 1.

illustrating again that Bassett had enough money to pay someone else's bills. Bassett also accepted payment from individuals who owed money to Langborn, because as he was administrator of the estate, he had incurred all of Langborn's debts as well. Later in 1820, however, Murdoch wrote to Bassett suggesting that he could no longer serve as the agent overseeing Langborn's land. Murdoch did not explicitly list the reason he wished to distance himself from the property, but he suggested that Bassett find another agent if he wished to sell the property or to continue administration of the estate from overseas.²¹ Murdoch may have become distressed in attempting to follow the instructions of the estate administrator who was so far away, and likely advised Bassett to sell the property to avoid such difficulties in administering a distant account. Bassett also collected debts that were due to Langborn, illustrating that Langdon owed Bassett for his generosity, so individuals who owed Langborn could repay him by paying directly to Bassett.²²

This illustrates not only an act of charity by providing for the children of a deceased individual in Williamsburg, but also that Bassett had emerged in society as someone responsible and able enough to pay off accounts for those who could not. Individuals who struggled in managing their debts often sought the help of individuals who could pay them off. The wealthier individual would pay the debt so that the other individual was not pestered and harassed by bill collectors. Bassett was the wealthier individual, as a variety of records indicate, and frequently bailed others out of difficult situations. This type of generous behavior by Bassett suggests that he either owed personal favors to each of the individuals and families he assisted, or was genuinely a charitable person. There are few receipts that indicate repayment to Bassett, and no records indicate whether he expected repayment with interest. By assisting individuals who

²¹ William Murdoch to Burwell Bassett, December 14, 1820, William Langborn Papers.

²² Receipt from John Dixon to Burwell Bassett, October 20, 1828, William Langborn Papers.

needed it, he maintained the loyalty of his constituents. After all, Bassett was a member of Congress, so he surely wanted to maintain the loyalty of the people in his district.

Bassett served as a Congressional Representative for the state of Virginia for several terms. He was a well-known representative and comfortable in the position. In 1814, Bassett contested the election of Thomas M. Bayly. Bassett argued that Bayly unfairly won the election because of illegal votes collected on the second and third day of the election in 1814.²³ The Committee determined that votes had indeed been illegally collected in the county of Accomack because the polling stations were opened for a second and third day of voting, when in fact they should not have been, and Bassett was “entitled to his seat.”²⁴ The petition raised by Bassett illustrates that he was fond of his position as a state representative.

During his time as a congressman, Bassett also wrote several letters to Henry Clay, Speaker of the House of Representatives. The two discussed the national education system. Bassett referenced Socrates and Plato in discussing the importance of simplicity in the education system so that children would be more prone to absorb and retain the information.²⁵ Bassett clearly valued education and thought that educating the American people would build national character. He also thought that it was the role of the government, and individuals in positions of power, to provide access to education for the American people. The letters he exchanged with Henry Clay illustrate his opinion of the education system and the direction of change it needed.

²³ U. S. Congress, House, Committee of Elections, *Report of the Committee of Elections on the Petition of Burwell Bassett, Contesting the Election of Thomas M. Bayly, Returned to Serve as a Representative for the State of Virginia in the Thirteenth Congress*, 13th Congress, Washington, DC: Roger C. Weightman, February 2, 1814, 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵ Joseph Lancaster, *Letters on National Subjects, Auxiliary to Universal Education and Scientific Knowledge: Addressed to Burwell Bassett, Late Member of the House of Representatives, Henry Clay, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and James Monroe, President of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Jacob Gideon, Junior, 1820), 18.

Bassett exchanged many letters with Elizabeth J. Galt in Williamsburg.²⁶ He often wrote inquiring about her health and sending well-wishes. Many of these letters are available for research, but they do not aid the purposes of this thesis as they do not illuminate Bassett's role in Williamsburg or mention Bassett Hall.

During his later life, Bassett frequently exchanged letters with his nephew, George Washington Bassett, whose name alludes to the distant relative who was the first President of the United States. The two Bassetts were separated by thirty years in age, but some of their letters have survived, illustrating a close and caring relationship despite the age difference. At the end of each letter, Burwell Bassett includes terms of endearment and regards to the family of George, such as, "love to all."²⁷ Their relationship, though friendly, also appears to have been a relationship between Bassett and another of his wards to whom he regularly sent money. In a letter dated April 11, 1829, Bassett confirms sending one thousand dollars to his nephew upon request. Though he states he is "too old to be engaging in such things [lending such large sums of money]," and that "it must be the last," he obliges because he cares for his nephew's well-being.²⁸ It is possible that Burwell felt obliged to send money to his nephew because George's father, John, died in 1826. Burwell's relationship with George was much like that of a father sending money to his son, and the kind letters and words of endearment continued.

From the letters of the 1830s, it is evident that Bassett felt his age and did not think it wise to travel far from home. He was invited to attend the laying of the cornerstone of the monument to the mother of George Washington, but he declined because he was "subject of late

²⁶ Galt Family Papers (I), 1745-1892, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

²⁷ Bassett Family Papers, section 5.

²⁸ Burwell Bassett to George Washington Bassett, April 11, 1829, Bassett Family Papers, section 5.

to attacks of a gravely character.”²⁹ Bassett was invited to visit his nephew in Fredericksburg and to attend a convention in Richmond, but he declined because of his health and age.³⁰ Bassett wrote in 1834 that “books and the society of friends are my only resource,” indicating that he was not well enough to travel or visit people and places at such an old age in his life.³¹ He also mentioned the reasons he must remain home, including managing the house and estate that takes much effort.

Bassett’s allusion to the Society of Friends aids in explaining the reason his name cannot be found in the parish registers of New Kent or James City counties: he might not have been a practicing Anglican. The Society of Friends, also known as the Quakers, did have a presence in Virginia during the nineteenth century. Bassett’s regular communication and association with the Society of Friends explains his lack of participation in and absence from the parish churches of Williamsburg. That Bassett was a Quaker during the time he lived at Bassett Hall is logical, and explains why neither he nor his immediate family members were mentioned in any of the parish registers of the area.

Records from the meetings of the Society of Friends during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for several counties in Virginia are available for research, but unfortunately no records remain from Williamsburg, James City County, or the vicinity. Most Quaker migration in Virginia, meaning the direction in which the Quakers traveled before establishing permanent residences, was toward the southwestern part of the state.³² Southeastern Virginia, the region in which Williamsburg is located, experienced an “out-migration” of Quakers during the late

²⁹ Burwell Bassett to George Washington Bassett, April 23, 1833, Bassett Family Papers, section 5

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Larry Dale Gragg, *Migration in Early America: The Virginia Quaker Experience*, dissert., (Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri-Columbia, 1978), microfilm, University Microfilms International, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1979, 36.

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, during which Quakers left the southeastern part of the state for another region.³³ In 1808, the Society of Friends meeting houses in Henrico County, the closest one to Williamsburg that has surviving records of meetings, was no longer being used because of the out-migration taking place within the state.³⁴

Bassett wrote each of the letters to his nephew from his home in Williamsburg, as indicated by the word “Williamsburg” next to the date on each letter. He was writing from Bassett Hall. In his old age, he and his wife were content with remaining at Bassett Hall. It was comfortable, they had ample space in the house and grounds, and they were familiar with the area. Bassett does mention having good crops on his property, indicating that the land was prosperous and well-tended. During the latter part of his life, the late 1830s, Bassett pleaded with his nephew to come visit him in Williamsburg. He wanted to see George one last time, and knew that he was not going to be alive much longer. George obliged, and visited his uncle in late 1837.

Even toward the end of his life, however, Bassett was paying off the debts of his family members. In a letter dated March 1838, Bassett wrote to his nephew that the marshall of the town was calling on him to pay George’s sister’s debt, amounting to \$2,177.21.³⁵ Bassett explained that he would handle the matter “as soon as it is convenient,” suggesting that he was frustrated in having to handle it at all.³⁶ In 1838, however, Bassett was about 84 years old, so it is possible that his curmudgeonly behavior was due to his age. He likely was not really bothered by doing something that was so common to him, lending money and paying off debts. Bassett continued to

³³ Gragg, *Migration in Early America*, 49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Burwell Bassett to George Washington Bassett, March 8, 1838, Bassett Family Papers, section 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

work until the end of his life. He served as an esquire, or witness, for a variety of documents in Williamsburg until his death in 1841.³⁷

When Bassett died, he left his property and grounds in Williamsburg to his favored nephew, George Washington Bassett. The transfer of ownership of the property to its next owner is not described in the historical records, but it is believed that George Washington Bassett did not reside at Bassett Hall, but sold the property to its next owner soon upon his receipt of it.

Abel Parker Upshur

Abel Parker Upshur, the next resident of Bassett Hall, lived there from 1840 to 1843. He acquired the property after Burwell Bassett died. Upshur was born June 17, 1790. The Upshur family traditionally lived in Northampton County on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, and it is likely that Abel purchased land inland because of his ties to the city of Williamsburg, which will be discussed later in more detail. He was a lawyer, and when the judicial system was reorganized in the 1840s, he practiced in Williamsburg. During that short time, he lived at Bassett Hall.³⁸ Though Upshur only lived at Bassett Hall for a short time, discussion of his past is essential in illustrating his time spent at Bassett Hall.

Raised on an affluent plantation in Northampton County, Upshur was educated by tutors who lived with the family.³⁹ Often, other local children from surrounding plantations received tutelage from the Upshur tutors. Perhaps the most influential one was Gideon Tomlinson, who received his Bachelor of Arts from Yale University.⁴⁰ Under Tomlinson's tutelage, Upshur honed his skills in a variety of subjects, including Latin, Greek, New Testament, and

³⁷ Bassett Family Papers, section 7.

³⁸ Ralph T. Whitelaw, *Virginia's Eastern Shore: A History of Northampton and Accomack Counties*, vol. 1 (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968), 416-417.

³⁹ Claude H. Hall, *Abel Parker Upshur: Conservative Virginian 1790-1844* (Madison, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1964), 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

arithmetic.⁴¹ His tutor and his parents encouraged Upshur to attend Yale, and he did, beginning his study at age fifteen. Upshur soon transferred to Princeton University, because he was not enjoying Yale as much as he thought he should be. At Princeton, he found more enjoyment, and a bit of trouble as well while associating himself with a rowdy group of young men. After being involved in a riot, during which the rioters damaged campus property and insulted at least one faculty member, Upshur refused to apologize for his actions and was expelled from the university.⁴² Upshur never graduated from university, but sought an apprenticeship with a lawyer in Richmond, Virginia. The apprenticeship was successful, and he practiced in Baltimore briefly before returning to Richmond. He was elected Commonwealth Attorney for Richmond in 1816, and established his legal career while simultaneously hypothesizing the ways he could become involved in politics. A short while later, he returned to his home in Northampton County, where he found the opportunity to begin that involvement.

Upshur inherited family property in Northampton County, but he lived and practiced law in Richmond. He owned about 550 acres of land in Northampton County that traditionally had belonged to his family since 1760.⁴³ In 1817, Upshur married Elizabeth Dennis. She travelled with him to Richmond when he had to attend to his legal practice, but when she became pregnant the travel was no longer an option. Upshur was in Richmond for much of the time his wife was pregnant, and found it difficult to be away from his practice and clients. Elizabeth and the baby died during childbirth. Upshur barely returned in time from Richmond to witness their deaths.⁴⁴ Afterwards, Upshur returned to Richmond to continue his business career, and likely to distract

⁴¹ Hall, *Abel Parker Upshur*, 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 10-13.

⁴³ Whitelaw, *Virginia's Eastern Shore*, 417.

⁴⁴ Hall, *Abel Parker Upshur*, 23.

himself from the loss of wife and child. He proved to be a successful lawyer, opening two offices and generating a comfortable income.

In 1823, Upshur entered the national political race for the first time. His opponent was none other than Burwell Bassett. Both were candidates for a seat in the House of Representatives. Bassett was a Republican, and had strong support, as he had already served six terms in the House of Representatives. Upshur was not well known, and the majority of votes he received came from Northampton and Accomack counties, Northampton being his home, and Accomack being the neighboring county, from people who likely knew him or his family name. He received few votes from other counties in the district, and zero votes from James City County.⁴⁵ To signal Bassett's impending win further, Upshur could not successfully counter Bassett's "devotion to the principles of Jefferson and Madison," because Upshur shared that devotion, and he lost the election.⁴⁶ The defeat inspired Upshur's future political ambitions, however, encouraging him to become better known throughout the state. In May of 1823 he resigned as Commonwealth Attorney, and in July announced his retirement from law practice, with the intention of returning to Northampton County and establishing his permanent home at Vaucleuse.⁴⁷ There, he married his second cousin, Elizabeth Ann Brown Upshur.

Shortly thereafter, Upshur became bored with the life of a planter and missed his business career, so he decided to run for one of the Northampton County seats in the Virginia House of Delegates. His peers elected him to represent Northampton County in 1824, and he served as a representative for several terms. Upshur assumed the role of the conservative Virginian from the eastern shore, advocating for slavery and anti-abolition as well as states' rights. He was a strong opponent of reform and, like many other conservatives, he did not want the society in which he

⁴⁵ Hall, *Abel Parker Upshur*, 27.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

lived to change. In 1830, Upshur was elected General Court Judge of the Third Circuit in Virginia, which included the eastern counties of Northampton and Accomack, but also the mainland counties of Charles City, James City, York, Warwick, and Elizabeth City.⁴⁸ The city of Williamsburg lay within Upshur's circuit. Upshur was once again practicing law, this time with more authority. He also valued the fact that he was elected by the people, and felt a sense of responsibility in representing them. Upshur evidently had a future in politics.

His role as General Court Judge of the circuit court prevented Upshur from maintaining his position as a delegate, meaning that he could not participate in the debates about slavery and abolition. This he deeply disliked, though he enjoyed his position as judge, and he tried to remain involved with the politics of Northampton County as often as possible. As late as 1835, he attended meetings for the residents of Northampton County to participate in discussion and community-wide votes.⁴⁹ The purpose of the 1835 meeting was to discuss the course of action and effect of the anti-slavery societies present in the vicinity, an issue about which Upshur had a firm opinion. The committee, with Upshur as chairman, that was appointed to discuss the matter and determine the opinion of Northampton County residents came to the conclusion that the anti-slavery societies were detrimental to the livelihood of Northampton County, and for that matter, southern slaveholders.⁵⁰ Upshur and the conservatives vehemently objected to the efforts of abolitionists who raised arguments against slavery. He believed that slavery in Northampton County should be strictly controlled, so that if the federal government were to lean toward the objectives of abolitionists, residents of Northampton County would have a plan to continue their pro-slavery society. Upshur was a prominent spokesperson for Northampton County and maintained his position while serving as circuit court judge.

⁴⁸ Hall, *Abel Parker Upshur*, 64.

⁴⁹ Meeting in Northampton County, *Richmond Enquirer*, September 18, 1835.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Upshur continued his involvement with politics, and ascended the hierarchy of bureaucracy. In May of 1841, he traveled to Washington, D.C. in an attempt to prevent what he thought would be a catastrophe as Congress was called into session. On the docket was the issue of the Bank of the United States, over which the cabinet disagreed, and ultimately so did the states. Having been old friends with President John Tyler, a school friend from Princeton, Upshur maneuvered his involvement into a Presidential veto of the bill that called for a national bank.⁵¹ Upshur's dedication to his political beliefs was clear, and after the President's cabinet resigned in September of that year, President Tyler named Upshur Secretary of the Navy in his new cabinet. On October 11, Upshur notified the governor of Virginia of his intention to embark on a new career, as Secretary of the Navy and a member of the President's cabinet.⁵²

As Secretary of the Navy, Upshur fulfilled important duties, such as appointing naval officers at posts throughout the country. He exchanged numerous letters with Commodore James Barron, who was appointed by Upshur to be the Governor of the Naval Asylum in Germantown, Pennsylvania.⁵³ Barron was required to provide lists of all the individuals living and working at the Asylum to the Department of the Navy, including behavioral problems, the pension records, and an inventory of the supplies at the asylum. As Secretary of the Navy, Upshur was responsible for gathering this information from various naval posts. Barron wrote to ask Upshur to provide boats for the "pensioners," the retired sailors, explaining that they could spend their time more productively if they were given the task of fishing.⁵⁴ Barron explained that the residents had nets and tackle, but they were lacking any boats, so they could not fish. As the Secretary of the Navy, part of Upshur's job was to decide what provisions were given to the

⁵¹ Hall, *Abel Parker Upshur*, 115-116.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵³ A. P. Upshur to James Barron, March 31, 1842, James Barron Papers (I), 1766-1899, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary. Herein after cited as James Barron Papers.

⁵⁴ James Barron to A. P. Upshur, May 10, 1842, James Barron Papers.

Naval Asylum. Upshur wrote that some of Barron's decisions, such as expelling several drunkards, were too harsh and that Barron was not to make any decision about the enrollment status of the residents without consulting the Department of the Navy, namely Upshur, before enacting the discipline.⁵⁵ The letters between Upshur and Barron illustrate only a few of Upshur's duties as Secretary of the Navy in overseeing the direction of the Naval Asylum in Pennsylvania; Upshur likely had a similar relationship with other commanding officers at other naval posts.

As Secretary of the Navy, Upshur performed various duties for the government of the United States. He of course served as a member of the cabinet, and his friendship with President Tyler continued to flourish. He was highly involved in discussion of the activities in Texas between Americans and Mexicans, which would later prove to be precursors to the Mexican-American War. He also worked on naval reform and expansion, which he considered "essential to the nation's welfare."⁵⁶

In June 1843, President Tyler appointed Upshur interim Secretary of State, following the sudden death of the current Secretary.⁵⁷ Thus, Upshur temporarily served as both Secretary of the Navy and Secretary of State. A month later, he officially accepted the commission as Secretary of State.⁵⁸ As Secretary of the State, Upshur fulfilled important duties as well, such as discussion of annexing Texas, that had just won its independence from Mexico. He also received reports of labor conditions in territories of the United States. In one case, Upshur requested and received a report of Jamaica from Robert Monroe Harrison, who was the American Consul at Kingston, Jamaica. Jamaica was a British colony, but Upshur wanted a report on the colony to compare it to comparable American production. The nearly fifty-page report describes the conditions in

⁵⁵ A. P. Upshur to James Barron, October 1, 1842, James Barron Papers.

⁵⁶ Hall, *Abel Parker Upshur*, 191.

⁵⁷ Hall, *Abel Parker Upshur*, 191.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Jamaica, including the environment, crop yields, and activities of Baptist missionaries in the area.⁵⁹ As detailed as Harrison's report is, it was only one of the documents sent to Upshur during his service as Secretary of State that warranted his attention.

In Northampton County, Upshur lived in the family home, "Vaucluse," which he continued to maintain during the time he served as Secretary of the Navy and Secretary of State. During his service, he was absent for extended periods when he was travelling to Washington for various obligations, but his wife and family remained at Vaucluse. The home is "L"-shaped, and is believed to have originally been built by Upshur's father in 1784.⁶⁰ Upshur did not intend to be a permanent resident at Bassett Hall. He invested time and money into improving his home in Northampton County and intended to live there the rest of his life. Bassett Hall was smaller than Vaucluse, but similar in its function: to provide sustainable farmland for the family. Upshur did not want to invest in another property similar to the one he already owned, but his wife and daughter persuaded him to do so.⁶¹ In 1840, Upshur obliged to their request because of the social scene in Williamsburg and his familiarity with the area, after having served as the circuit court judge for the city.

For the three years he lived at Bassett Hall, Upshur was influential in Williamsburg. He was already somewhat familiar with the city, but in the late 1830s he also became guardian of two nephews who were attending The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg.⁶² He surely visited the city during the time he cared for his nephews and became familiar with the area. While he was in the city, he may have been reintroduced to Burwell Bassett, his former

⁵⁹ Robert Monroe Harrison to Abel Upshur, October 11, 1848, Single Item, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

⁶⁰ Whitelaw, *Virginia's Eastern Shore*, 419.

⁶¹ Hall, *Abel Parker Upshur*, 108.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 109.

opponent for the House of Representatives, and inquired about his property. Such an elderly man surely would not need his property so near the courthouse for much longer.

Unfortunately, Upshur's service as Secretary of the State and as a resident of Bassett Hall was cut tragically short. Upshur died on February 28, 1844. He was on board the U.S.S. *Princeton*, a gunboat, for the official trial of its cannon.⁶³ The trial of the cannon was a grand affair, with spectators including the President and his Cabinet aboard the vessel as it sailed down the Potomac. When the cannon discharged a second time, it exploded, killing him and former Secretary of the Navy Thomas Gilmer. In an announcement to both Houses of Congress of February 29, 1844, President John Tyler expressed his condolences at the loss of both Upshur and Gilmer. Tyler stated that he was grief stricken and that the two men had been invaluable resources to him whose services were of great importance.⁶⁴

The details of the transfer of the Bassett Hall property from Bassett to Upshur do not exist in the historical record, nor do records of what became of the property after Upshur's death. Research indicates that the next resident of Bassett Hall was John Coke.

John Coke

Coke lived at Bassett Hall from 1843 to 1845. He was listed in the 1840 Census of James City County, Virginia, indicating that he had lived in Williamsburg before he moved to Bassett Hall.⁶⁵

In 1839, Coke purchased land in Williamsburg from John Smith, but the land was not Bassett Hall. Coke wrote a letter to Smith in April of that year inquiring as to why Smith had not

⁶³ Whitelaw, *Virginia's Eastern Shore*, 417.

⁶⁴ U. S. Congress, House, *Death of Secretaries Upshur and Gilmer, Message from the President of the United States, announcing the death of Secretaries Upshur and Gilmer, February 29, 1844. Read, and laid upon the table*, John Tyler, H. Doc. 158, 28th Cong., 1st sess., 1844.

⁶⁵ June Banks Evans, transcr., *Census of 1840, James City County, Virginia* (New Orleans: Bryn Ffyliaid Publications, 1988), 3.

presented Coke with a deed for the purchase.⁶⁶ The name John Coke appears in census records from James City County during the nineteenth century, but those records do not indicate the exact location of the property he owned. It is thus difficult to determine where Coke lived during his time in Williamsburg.

There is a property in Williamsburg known as the Coke House, and this property sheds a little bit of light on the history of John Coke in Williamsburg. The John Coke relevant to this study was the third of that name, of the same family, to reside in Williamsburg. The Coke family arrived in Williamsburg in the eighteenth century, though they did not always reside in the property that is now known as the Coke House.⁶⁷ Little is known about the Coke family and the residents of the Coke House, and it is impossible to determine whether or not the John Coke who lived at Bassett Hall was the namesake of the Coke House. It is likely that the Coke House was named for an eighteenth-century resident named John Coke, who was a goldsmith. This house supports the mission of Colonial Williamsburg to present the colonial history of the city. The John Coke of Bassett Hall was not the same colonial individual who lived in the Coke house during the eighteenth century, but a grandson or even great-grandson.

Little else is known of the John Coke who lived at Bassett Hall. It is as if John Coke floated around the city of Williamsburg, holding no position in the community.

⁶⁶ John Coke to John Smith, April 23, 1839, Southall Papers, 1807-1904, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary, folder 21.

⁶⁷ Lawrence A. Kocher and Howard B. Dearstyne, *John Coke House Architectural Report, Block 9 Building 27* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1951, reprint, Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library, 1990), 2.

Col. Goodrich Durfey

The next owner and resident of Bassett Hall was Col. Goodrich Durfey. He lived there for about twenty-four years, from 1845 to 1869. Colonel Durfey appears in the 1840 Census of James City County.⁶⁸ He also appears in the 1850 Census of James City County, which provides information about the Durfey family in Williamsburg. Durfey is listed as a farmer, who was born in Virginia, and his property value is listed as \$15,000.⁶⁹ His two children are listed, as well as two laborers belonging to the household. The census illustrates that Durfey was wealthy; that amount of money could provide for a more than comfortable life in Williamsburg during the nineteenth century.

As early as 1853, Durfey appeared in the ledger and daybook of Richard Bucktrout in Williamsburg. Durfey purchased a variety of expensive hardware from Bucktrout. Durfey purchased brass locks for doors and four sets of cornish hooks for his home.⁷⁰ As of January 1854, Durfey had paid his account in full to Bucktrout, totaling \$4.50.⁷¹ Durfey's wife was also a frequent customer of Bucktrout. On the ledger of December 8, 1862, Bucktrout listed sealing a metallic coffin to bury Mrs. Durfey and digging her grave, so it is evident that Colonel Durfey called upon Bucktrout for even such solemn matters of his wife's burial.⁷² In total for the burial expenses, Colonel Durfey paid Bucktrout \$220, indicating that he wanted the best available equipment for the burial of his wife. Colonel Durfey lived the rest of his life without his wife, at Bassett Hall.

⁶⁸ June Banks Evans, trans., *Census of 1840, James City County*, 9: U. S. Government, *1840 United States Federal Census* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration), microfilm M704, roll 564, page 34, image 119.

⁶⁹ U. S. Government, *1850 United States Federal Census*, Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, Microfilm M432, roll 953, page 274B, image 180.

⁷⁰ Bucktrout Collection, Digital Archives, Special Collections Research Center, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA, 57. Herein after cited as Bucktrout Collection.

⁷¹ Bucktrout Collection, 62.

⁷² Bucktrout Collection, 270.

Unfortunately, the military records of Colonel Durfey are impossible to trace, but it is evident that he was living at Bassett Hall during the Battle of Williamsburg in 1862. Whether Durfey was an active officer during the battle is uncertain, but regardless of his role as an officer, as a resident of the city he was affected by the battle. Records describing the city of Williamsburg during the Battle of Williamsburg provide insight as to the involvement.

The Battle of Williamsburg was not lengthy, but is still notable because of Durfey's use of Bassett Hall at the time. Colonel Durfey was sympathetic to the Confederate army that fought at Williamsburg, as the city was Confederate in its loyalties. An occupying Union officer, to encourage the "good behavior" of his fellow townspeople in Williamsburg, arrested Durfey.⁷³ He was not held for long, and was soon able to return to his home. Colonel Durfey, like several other residents of Williamsburg during the Civil War, sheltered the occasional Federal officer. He also housed John F. Hays of the 5th North Carolina and John Lea, as well as wounded troops of both the Union and the Confederacy.⁷⁴ As was common during times of war, some good Samaritans cared for as many wounded as they could, regardless of which side they pledged their allegiance. Wounded individuals deserved treatment and care, and the Durfey family attempted to provide that care as they brought many wounded to their home at Bassett Hall.

One of Durfey's houseguests during the War was Gen. George Armstrong Custer. Durfey invited Custer to spend the night at Bassett Hall during his time in Williamsburg.⁷⁵ Custer reportedly enjoyed his time at Bassett Hall, and was actually invited to attend the wedding of Colonel Durfey's daughter, Margaret, to Captain John Lea, who was treated at the Durfey home after being wounded. At one point during the battle, "Bassett Hall's yard was the main

⁷³ Carol Kettenburg Dubbs, *Defend This Old Town: Williamsburg During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 264.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁷⁵ Dubbs, *Defend This Old Town*, 266.

skirmishing ground and rifle balls perforat[ed] the house a dozen times a day,” causing the Durfeys to reside with another Williamsburg resident during the battle.⁷⁶ Fortunately for the future residents of Bassett Hall, no major structural damage was done to the house during the Battle of Williamsburg, and the house remained intact and suitable for residence.

During the Civil War, Williamsburg was like any other city affected by war. Many residents of the city fought for the Confederacy, and many families were separated because of the fighting, and sometimes deaths of family members. Like Durfey, many residents opened their homes to the wounded and allowed their homes to serve as hospitals during and soon after the war. Though Colonel Durfey was not actively involved in the military engagements of the Battle of Williamsburg, he and his family, as well as other residents of Williamsburg, were directly affected by the battle.

Colonel Durfey transferred the ownership of Bassett Hall to his adult son Zachary in about 1868, due to the colonel’s old age and likely deteriorating health. Also in 1868, a map illustrating the property was drawn and labeled “Col. Durfey’s house tract,” on the scale of “one inch equals five chains to the inch.”⁷⁷ This map of the grounds is significant because it was the first drawn of the Bassett Hall plot of land. In this map, a circular driveway that leads from Francis Street to the house is visible, as seen in Figure 6.

⁷⁶ Dubbs, *Defend This Old Town*, 297.

⁷⁷ J. W. Morrisett, Plat, Bassett Hall, 1868, Manuscript MS 1927.1.2 2X, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

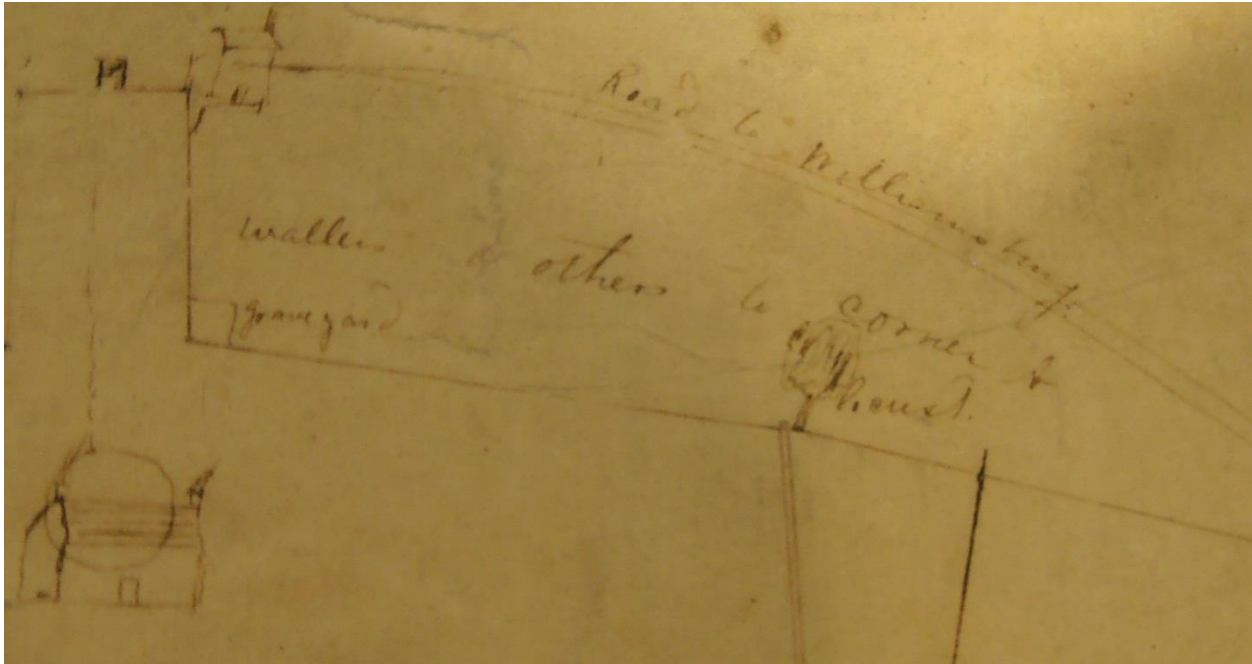


Figure 6: A portion of the first map of Bassett Hall and grounds, drawn in 1868. Illustrates the long driveway leading from Francis Street and the circular loop it forms in front of the house.⁷⁸

The section shown here is only a small portion of the map, because the house itself only sits on a small portion of the property. Extending away from the house are many more acres of farmland and gardens.

During Durfey's residency, Bassett Hall experienced much. It witnessed and survived the Civil War, and served as a hospital for many individuals who were wounded during the Battle of Williamsburg. Durfey was also the first resident to have a formal map of his grounds drawn, illustrating approximately the number of acres he owned and several features of the property. Durfey was an important resident of Bassett Hall, and it is probably due to his presence that the house and grounds made it through the Civil War and remained habitable.

⁷⁸ J. W. Morrisett, Plat, Bassett Hall, 1868, Manuscript MS 1927.1.2 2X, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Israel Smith

Israel Smith lived at Bassett Hall from 1869 to 1879. Census records indicate that he was born in about 1823 in New York, was a farmer who started his family in New Jersey, where his children were born, and later moved south to Virginia.⁷⁹ He purchased land in Williamsburg for his wife and family.

In 1868, Zachary Durfey, the son of Colonel Durfey, deeded the house and grounds of Bassett Hall to Smith following the death of Durfey's father. Upon the writing and signing of the deed of ownership, a map of the house and grounds was drawn to illustrate the property ownership. On the reverse of the map is written, "This is the plot referred to in the deed from Z. G. Durfey to Israel Smith, executed 15th December 1868," establishing that these were the exact grounds sold by Durfey to Smith.⁸⁰ The map also indicates significant features of the property.

Smith was listed in the 1870 Census of Williamsburg, in James City County, as owning land in Williamsburg valued at \$8,500 and having additional personal property valued at \$2,000.⁸¹ This indicates that he was a successful farmer, owning enough land in Williamsburg to live a comfortable life in the city for the ten years he lived there. He definitely could afford Bassett Hall. Smith maintained a successful farm at Bassett Hall.

Little else in the historical record documents Smith's time spent at Bassett Hall. After his death in 1880, the property at Bassett Hall was left to his heirs, including his wife and surviving children.⁸² In 1896, one of the Smith daughters, Margaret Willard, was married at Bassett Hall. A

⁷⁹ U. S. Government, *1870 United States Federal Census Inhabitants* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration), Microfilm M593, roll 1657, page 355B, image 294.

⁸⁰ J. W. Morrisett, Plat, Bassett Hall, 1868, Manuscript MS 1927.1.2 2X, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, reverse.

⁸¹ U. S. Government, *1870 United States Federal Census*, page 355B, image 294.

⁸² U. S. Government, *1880 United States Federal Census* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration), microfilm t9, roll 1373, page 351b.

wedding invitation, listing Bassett Hall as the location of the ceremony, was sent to another Williamsburg resident.⁸³ The invitation confirms that after Israel Smith's death, his heirs continued to reside on the property. Margaret, the daughter who was married at Bassett Hall, was the youngest of Smith's four daughters, yet she is the only one who appears to have gotten married. She likely moved to a different property with her new husband, and her sisters remained at Bassett Hall. It is unclear why the older Smith sisters never married. Few records depict the activity of the Smith heirs in Williamsburg, but it is evident through census records that the widowed Mrs. Smith and two of her daughters, Edith and Alice, maintained the property and grounds at Bassett Hall. Edith Smith, one of the daughters, was listed on the Williamsburg census records of 1940, and it is likely that she was still living at Bassett Hall at that time.⁸⁴

The Smith heirs were the last family to occupy Bassett Hall prior to Colonial Williamsburg's interest and involvement in the property. They were granted life tenancy, and inhabited the property until they died, at which point Colonial Williamsburg began to intervene with the property. This subject will comprise the next chapter of this thesis.

⁸³ Wedding invitation of Margaret Willard Smith and Hugh Stockdell Bird, Taliaferro Family Papers, 1846-1895, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

⁸⁴ U. S. Government, *1940 United States Federal Census* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration), microfilm T627, roll T627_4330, page 2A.

Chapter 4:

The Twentieth Century

Bassett Hall did not experience a great change of residents during the twentieth century. The Smith heirs lived in the house until they died, and following their deaths the Rockefellers lived in the house. It was under the Rockefellers that Williamsburg was restored, and later in the twentieth century Bassett Hall became a museum. This chapter will examine a few of the important individuals involved in the restoration of Williamsburg, who all have a connection to Bassett Hall. This chapter, thus, is different from the preceding chapters in that it does not present mini histories of the residents, but rather will examine the individuals at Bassett Hall as it became part of the Colonial Williamsburg project. If it appears that this chapter is homage to the Rockefellers, it echoes the subject matter present in the current museum that is entirely devoted to the Rockefellers and presents such material. This chapter displays the twentieth-century history of the house, which indeed revolved around the Rockefellers.

The house remained mostly unchanged during the twentieth century and was known for its beauty. It was commonly recognized as an important house, as few other homes in the city retained the name of a former owner for over a century. In a letter to a chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (D. A. R.), Lilla Wheeler, of Portville, New York mentioned her visit to the house during her trip to Williamsburg. Mrs. Wheeler reminisced that Bassett Hall was the “old house in which Lafayette was entertained.”¹ She also mentioned that during her visit, Reverend Goodwin was already eager to preserve the Bruton Parish Church, but does not mention his interest in Bassett Hall. It can thus be inferred that he had not yet become interested

¹ Lilla C. Wheeler, *Lilla Wheeler Letter Describing Williamsburg in 1907 for the D.A.R.*, Special Collections, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Williamsburg, VA. That assertion is not documented in the historical record, hence why the Marquis de Lafayette was not discussed in a previous chapter of this thesis, but many people believe to be the truth.

in the preservation of Bassett Hall. Even before Williamsburg became the living history museum that it did during the mid-twentieth century, visitors to the city were encouraged to visit Bassett Hall. Mrs. Wheeler encouraged the members of the D.A.R. to visit the city.

Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin

Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin was the first to “dream of a restored Williamsburg.”² He also played a major role in preserving Bassett Hall. He was the rector of Bruton Parish Church, in Williamsburg, during the first decade of the twentieth century. It was under his influence and direction that the church was restored, which was necessary because the original building was built in the early eighteenth century, about 1715. After restoring the church, Goodwin hoped that the restoration of the rest of the city would follow. He vehemently declared that “to see beautiful and historic places and buildings disintegrating caused me very real distress,” and wanted the city to be restored.³ He appreciated the historical significance of the city, but found little support for his endeavors beyond Bruton Parish church. In 1908, Goodwin left Williamsburg for Rochester, New York where he served as rector for fifteen years.⁴

Goodwin returned to Williamsburg in 1923, upon invitation to serve as Professor of Sacred Literature and Social Ethics and as Director of the College Endowment Plan at the College of William and Mary.⁵ He was happy to return to Williamsburg, as it was always his dream to see the city restored. Being back in the city, and having such an influential position at the College, allowed him once again to focus his attention on restoration projects.

Not only did Goodwin wish to restore historic buildings for their beauty, but he also thought that restoration offered “greater value” to society as it “teaches of the patriotism, high

² W. A. R. Goodwin, “The Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg,” *National Geographic Magazine* 71, no. 4 (April 1937): 401.

³ *Ibid.*, 401.

⁴ Raymond B. Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.: A Portrait* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 273.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 273.

purpose, and unselfish devotion of our forefathers to the common good.”⁶ The concept of patriotism delivered through the restored colonial city was one of the fundamental reasons that Goodwin embarked on such a grand endeavor. He thought that the restoration of Williamsburg would “develop a more highly educated and consequently a more devoted spirit of patriotism.”⁷ He thought that the restoration would be not just beautification, but beneficial to the progress of the community and of the country.

Goodwin contemplated asking a number of America’s millionaire tycoons, such as Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan, to finance the restoration. None of them was particularly receptive to Goodwin’s opinion of the ways they should spend their fortunes. In the end, the millionaire who shared Goodwin’s passion for restoration and preservation of history was John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

The Rockefellers: John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

In February 1924, Reverend Goodwin met Rockefeller in New York City. The two were attending a banquet organized by Phi Beta Kappa, an organization that had been influential at the College of William and Mary.⁸ Reverend Goodwin knew that Rockefeller gave millions of dollars annually to conservation projects throughout the United States, including Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, and hoped that he might be willing to fund the restoration of Williamsburg.⁹ Bruton Parish Church had been renovated, and Goodwin hoped to find someone to help him with the rest of the reconstruction he desired. It is uncertain whether the two discussed the project of Williamsburg at this meeting, as no transcript of their conversation

⁶ Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 273.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 402.

⁸ Carlisle H. Humelsine, *Recollections of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in Williamsburg 1926-1960* (Williamsburg, VA: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1985), 3.

⁹ Donald J. Gonzales, *The Rockefellers at Williamsburg: Backstage with the Founders, Restorers and World-Renowned Guests* (McLean, VA: EPM Publications, 1991), 26.

exists, but it is safe to assume that Goodwin planted the seed of the idea of a restoration into Rockefeller's thoughts.



Figure 7: Reverend Goodwin and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. observe the George Wythe house in 1926, in the early stages of their discussion of the restoration project.¹⁰

On November 27, 1926, the two met again, this time in Williamsburg, as verified by Figure 7. They both attended the dedication of the Phi Beta Kappa Memorial Hall at the College of William and Mary. Following the ceremony, Goodwin led Rockefeller on a tour of Williamsburg, during which Rockefeller inquired about the history of several buildings.¹¹ The most significant moment of the tour, for the purposes of this thesis, was when Rockefeller perused the grounds of Bassett Hall. It is believed that during this peaceful walk around the grounds of the old farm, through the gardens and under the giant oak tree, Rockefeller decided that the restoration of Williamsburg was a project he wanted to initiate and complete. Later that

¹⁰ “W. A. R. Goodwin and John D. Rockefeller, Jr.” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities (Charlottesville, VA), http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/media_player?mets_filename=evm00000982mets.xml.

¹¹ Humelsine, *Recollections of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in Williamsburg*, 4.

evening at a banquet, Rockefeller authorized Goodwin to have preliminary sketches made of the proposed reconstruction of one of the buildings on campus.¹² Discussion and correspondence between the two continued.

In a telegram sent to Goodwin dated December 7, 1926, Rockefeller, using the alias “David’s Father,” authorized the purchase of historic property in Williamsburg for the purpose of restoration.¹³

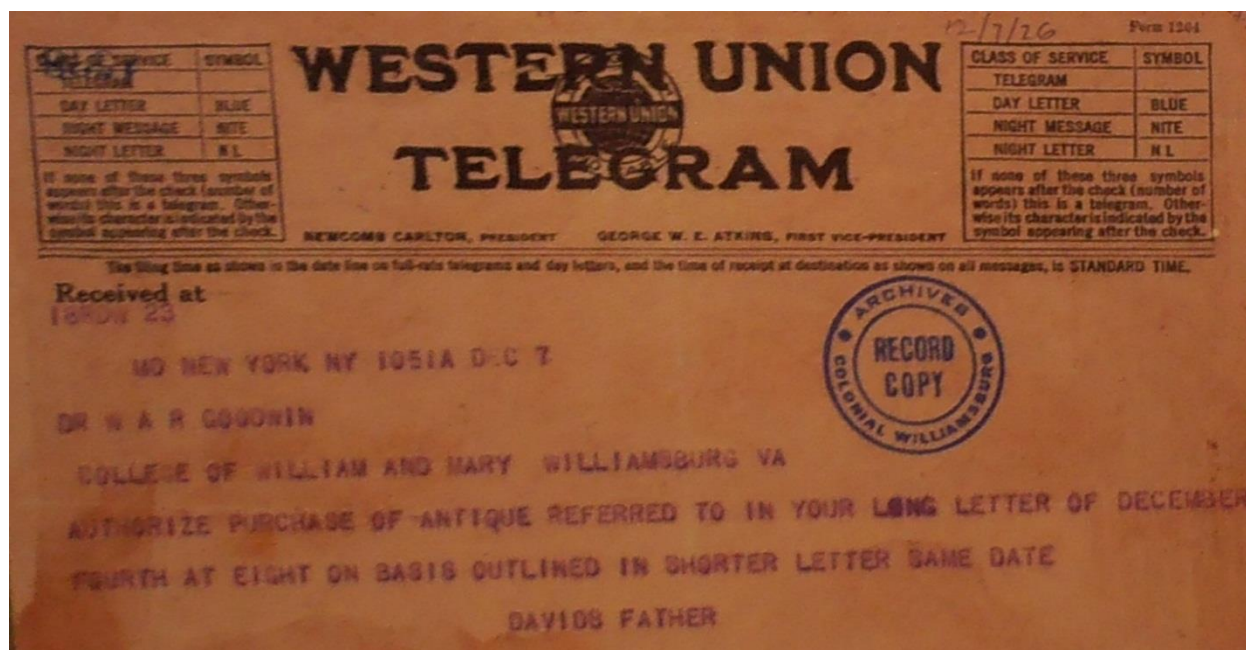


Figure 8: The Western Union telegram, on display in the museum at Bassett Hall, sent by Rockefeller to Goodwin on December 7, 1926 authorizing the purchase of an “antique.” This was the first purchase by Rockefeller of land in Williamsburg. As seen above, Rockefeller signed it “Davids Father,” to keep his identity a secret. Photo by author.

Rockefeller had officially expressed his interest in the restoration project, and Colonial Williamsburg was on the horizon. During the early stages of the restoration, Rockefeller requested photographs and measurements of all the houses and buildings that Goodwin suggested be included in the restoration. In order not to arouse the townspeople before

¹² Humelsine, *Recollections of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in Williamsburg*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Rockefeller officially made known his intentions, Goodwin photographed buildings at night.¹⁴ The photographs and worksheets were then mailed to Rockefeller for his examination and analysis. In May 1927, still not having publically announced the project, Rockefeller and his wife travelled to Williamsburg to examine the blueprints, photographs, and historical data that Goodwin had compiled.¹⁵

In July, Rockefeller began silently purchasing lots of land in Williamsburg, but he stressed to Goodwin the importance of keeping their project out of the public eye.¹⁶ In many cases, Rockefeller and Goodwin purchased vacant lots and houses. Those were, quite often, the lots and houses that needed the most improvement to enhance the appearance of the city. In some cases, however, occupied homes and lots were purchased because of their desirable location within the restoration plans. In these situations, the tenants were granted life tenancy, under which the houses and land were sold to the organization (which would soon become Colonial Williamsburg), and the tenants were not required to pay rent, taxes, or insurance on the property for the rest of their lives.¹⁷ This concept meant that tenants could continue to live in their homes literally free of charge as long as the deeds were signed over to Rockefeller and Colonial Williamsburg.

The Smith heirs who lived at Bassett Hall during the early twentieth century were granted life tenancy. They were allowed to live at Bassett Hall until they died, while Colonial Williamsburg maintained the property in keeping with the restoration project. In 1936, after the end of the Smith line, the Rockefellers purchased Bassett Hall as their Williamsburg home.¹⁸ On the urging of Reverend Goodwin, Rockefeller agreed that he should have a home in in

¹⁴ Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 283-284.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 289.

¹⁸ Gonzales, *The Rockefellers at Williamsburg*, 43.

Williamsburg in order to be close to the project, and he was drawn to Bassett Hall as it was one of the first homes he visited with Goodwin several years prior. Rockefeller lived at Bassett Hall during his time in Williamsburg, about two months each year, usually April and October. He enjoyed spending time in Williamsburg, and was happy there. He was comfortable in the city, and felt that he “really belong[ed]” there.¹⁹ He wrote to his father that he “hate[d] to interrupt” his stay in Williamsburg after he was called to New York in the middle of his vacation to attend a meeting of the Rockefeller Foundation.²⁰ He treasured his time in Williamsburg, as it relieved him of the hustle and bustle of his New York life.

Rockefeller did not embark on the restoration solely because he felt like being philanthropic. He was genuinely interested and believed that such a project would benefit the community and, he hoped, the entire country. He thought that a restored Williamsburg could be educational, and could teach Americans about the country’s history and its founders. Rockefeller noticed that, “Americans knew well what they were against—Nazism, communism, any totalitarian system—but were not so good at understanding what they were *for*.”²¹ He believed that a restored Williamsburg could remind Americans about their nation’s history and the ideals that it stood for—freedom and democracy.²² Rockefeller intended to convey the messages of freedom and democracy at Williamsburg, and that those ideals, which he thought had been forgotten or pushed onto the back burner, would be instilled in the current and future generations of Americans.

¹⁹ Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 429.

²⁰ Joseph W. Ernst, ed., “Dear Father” / “Dear Son:” *Correspondence of John D. Rockefeller and John D. Rockefeller, Jr.* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 206.

²¹ John Ensor Harr and Peter J. Johnson, *The Rockefeller Conscience: An American Family in Public and in Private* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1991), 24. Emphasis by Rockefeller, as quoted by Harr and Johnson.

²² *Ibid.*

The motives behind Rockefeller's large donation to the Colonial Williamsburg project, as opposed to other projects he undertook across the country, are not entirely evident today, though one can draw some conclusions based on his behavior. He had inherited quite a large fortune from his father, and indeed had excess money to contribute to philanthropic efforts, but he also probably enjoyed the historical aspect of Williamsburg. Another suggested explanation of his generosity is Rockefeller's Protestant belief that God had given him so much money so he could give it away.²³ Rockefeller was raised in a Protestant household by parents who encouraged Christian morals. He believed that with wealth came certain social responsibilities, and that wealth "is an instrument not for selfish gratification but for public service."²⁴ He did not feel entitled to keep his wealth to himself, but was obliged to spread it among the community and, in the case of Colonial Williamsburg, create something beneficial for the public. He felt a sense of duty to do so. This justifies why residents of Williamsburg described Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller as kind and friendly people, who did not believe themselves to be superior to anyone else just because of their money. In Williamsburg, Rockefeller attempted to spread his wealth and give it away on many occasions. He was said to have, on more than one occasion, placed large bills in the offering plates of several of Williamsburg's churches.

Rockefeller was involved in every aspect of the restoration process. Nothing was done without his permission, and buildings were not restored without his consent.²⁵ He encouraged historical accuracy in the restoration, and strove to develop a competent staff that could deliver accuracy.²⁶ Goodwin later remarked that the generosity of Rockefeller will "wed truth and beauty here [in Colonial Williamsburg] to be the interpreters of the past to the present and the

²³ Albert F. Schenkel, *The Rich Man and the Kingdom: John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and the Protestant Establishment* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 1.

²⁴ Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 432.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 300.

²⁶ Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 301.

future,” which was indeed one of Rockefeller’s main goals in embarking on the project of the restoration of Williamsburg.²⁷ Rockefeller also remarked to his father that he believed the restoration in Williamsburg would be “a real contribution to the development of a growing appreciation of the founders of this country,” expressing his faith in the endeavor.²⁸

Rockefeller was also a modest man. He did not, however, like to be publicly recognized for his generosity. He did not like plaques describing him as the benefactor, and ensured that these were not displayed at Colonial Williamsburg. This modesty reverts to the fact that he believed in doing good for the sake of doing good, not to receive recognition for it. Even after one of the “gatherings” in Williamsburg announcing the restoration project to the public, Rockefeller was publicly thanked for his generosity, but later wrote to his father that it was him who should receive the thanks.²⁹ Rockefeller only inherited the wealth that his father had worked hard to acquire, and he did not think he deserved thanks for something that was inherited. He did not want public recognition, he just wanted to benefit the public.

The museum at Bassett Hall indeed pays homage to Rockefeller for his benefaction, while ignoring other histories, which is the reason he was discussed in such a positive manner in the preceding pages. The reason for such attention is probably the fact that he lived at Bassett Hall and financed the restoration, but the rest of the house’s history is unfairly ignored. It is also worth mentioning, however, the controversy surrounding Rockefeller’s efforts in Colonial Williamsburg. Many historians criticize Rockefeller for not employing or consulting professional historians at the beginning of the restoration, but only architects. He only consulted architects, presumably, because he was more interested in the architecture of the houses and buildings, or maybe even because he did not know that it was an option to consult other individuals.

²⁷ Goodwin, “The Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg,” 443.

²⁸ Ernst, “*Dear Father*” / “*Dear Son*,” 206.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

Restoration and historic preservation was not popular or widely practiced at the time. He is heralded for doing such a good job of the restoration by some, but other people say that he did a poor job of maintaining historical accuracy. This controversy is evident at Bassett Hall, which is just one example of the historical inaccuracies at Colonial Williamsburg.

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller

One woman in particular was influential to Colonial Williamsburg and Bassett Hall during the early stages of the restoration. From the early stages of conversation with Goodwin about the restoration project, Rockefeller involved his wife.³⁰ Rockefeller discussed the plan, in extreme detail, with his wife, and together they examined and hypothesized about the project. Mrs. Rockefeller was highly involved in much of the restoration process, as a companion with whom Rockefeller could receive feedback about different ideas before embarking in official discussion with Goodwin and other individuals. Mrs. Rockefeller was probably the only individual who completely knew and understood her husband's goals in the restoration project because of the pair's constant discussion of it in their private lives.³¹ Mrs. Rockefeller was also involved throughout the restoration in the decoration of the houses and buildings in Williamsburg, as she enjoyed decorating houses, including Bassett Hall.³²

Fortunately, many of Mrs. Rockefeller's letters to her sister, Lucy, were preserved. The pair exchanged several letters per year, from the 1920s to 1948, the year Mrs. Rockefeller died. The later ones describe many of her thoughts about Bassett Hall and Colonial Williamsburg. In 1931, she first mentioned the "Colonial Exhibition" to her sister, briefly asking what she thought

³⁰ Bernice Kert, *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller: the Woman in the Family* (New York: Random House, 1993), 231.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 390.

³² *Ibid.*

of it.³³ Other than this mention in the letter, Mrs. Rockefeller did not tell her sister about the proposed restoration project, which by this date had begun. Rather, most of their conversations were about gossip and social and family affairs. In 1933, Mrs. Rockefeller first wrote to her sister of an upcoming visit to Williamsburg. She wrote that the family would be visiting Williamsburg in June of that year, but still did not mention any details of the visit or anything about the restoration.³⁴

A few years later, in May of 1937, Mrs. Rockefeller asked her sister for assistance in locating an embroidered carpet for the Rockefeller home in Williamsburg. Mrs. Rockefeller said she would “be delighted” if her sister could find an eighteenth- or early nineteenth- century carpet that Mrs. Rockefeller could put in the drawing room of the house.³⁵

The house mentioned in the letter was Bassett Hall. By this date, the Rockefellers owned it. Mrs. Rockefeller did not mention the purchase or ownership of Bassett Hall to her sister, but she did mention the peaceful environment at the house and that the family went to Williamsburg for rest.³⁶ The failure to mention the purchase of a permanent home in Williamsburg to her sister seems odd, particularly because in another letter Mrs. Rockefeller scolds her sister for not mentioning that she purchased a home in England. Regardless, the Rockefellers now owned Bassett Hall and Mrs. Rockefeller desired to furnish it to her liking.

In June of 1937, Mrs. Rockefeller finally mentioned Bassett Hall to her sister. She wrote that it was the fifth house owned by the family, and that she was fond of the house and thought her husband would be too.³⁷ She said that the house wanted for nothing, except for the rug in the

³³ Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and Lucy Aldrich, *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's Letters to Her Sister Lucy* (New York: John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 1957), 170.

³⁴ Rockefeller and Aldrich, *Letters*, 193.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 241.

³⁶ Rockefeller and Aldrich, *Letters*, 241.

³⁷ Rockefeller and Aldrich, *Letters*, 243.

drawing room that she was “counting on [her sister] to provide.”³⁸ Mrs. Rockefeller obviously trusted her sister’s taste. She also tasked her sister with finding a good set of silver while she was in Scotland, as the silver at Bassett Hall was “not very good.”³⁹

Mrs. Rockefeller enjoyed her trips to Williamsburg and to Bassett Hall. In her opinion, the trips were times of “quiet and peace” that she often anticipated when she was in New York.⁴⁰ She enjoyed spending time in the garden, planting flowers, and strolling the grounds.⁴¹ She could relax at Bassett Hall, and cherished the time she spent there. Beginning in 1941, Mrs. Rockefeller’s letters were more frequently written from Bassett Hall in Williamsburg than from any of the family’s other homes. She still did not mention details of the restoration project, but mentioned several individuals involved in it, such as several of the architects and other residents of Williamsburg who were interested in history, while writing about the parties hosted at her home.

Throughout her letters to her sister, Mrs. Rockefeller mentions her involvement and interest in museums, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Providence Museum. She mentions trips to several museums in the United States and in Europe, and discusses the difficulty in raising funds for the Museum of Modern Art (that she referred to as the “Modern Museum”) she was working on creating in New York during the early 1930s. The concluding chapter will discuss the her influence in Colonial Williamsburg’s presentation of Bassett Hall as a museum.

Mrs. Rockefeller chose to exhibit her art collection in Bassett Hall. She had an eclectic collection and found a variety of artworks interesting and appealing. The pieces in her collection

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁴¹ Mary Ellen Chase, *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950), 157.

included Chinese reverse glass paintings, in which the image was painted on the reverse side of the glass before it was framed, cross-stitching and needle-work, and a collection of paintings of scenes from George Washington's life. Other genres in the collection are oil paintings, pastels, water color paintings, paintings on velvet, and wood and metal sculptures. The subject matter varied as much as the method of production. Her interests were so vast, and her collection grew so large, that it could not fit in the house. It eventually generated the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center and its collections, which had to be housed in a location separate from Bassett Hall.⁴²

Mrs. Rockefeller collected many types of art that did not interest many other people of the upper class. Rather than collecting the finest, rarest, most expensive pieces of art, she collected pieces because she admired the technique or difficulty of creating them. Visitors will find neither grandiose portraits of the Rockefellers at Bassett Hall, nor fine sets of sterling silver service trays, but more unusual pieces. The Rockefellers enjoyed having company over for dinner. They often invited local residents of the town to dinner or a movie, and did not want to demonstrate pretension or arrogance. Mrs. Rockefeller's decorating style does not flaunt her wealth. Many pieces in the house, such as the weather vane above the fireplace in the dining room, are conversation starters, and the Rockefellers loved to converse with other residents in Williamsburg.

⁴² Gonzales, *The Rockefellers at Williamsburg*, 43.



Figure 9: One of the oil paintings in the Abby Aldrich Folk Art Collection, “Wallowa Lake,” by Steve Harley, 1927-1928. Photo by author.

Mr. Rockefeller was probably pleased at the creation of the Folk Art Center, because he actually disliked much of the artwork his wife collected. He found modern art to be “unlifelike, ugly, and disturbing,” and did not like to see it in his home, and he encouraged Mrs. Rockefeller to display other works of art in rooms of the house that he frequented.⁴³ For example, the bedroom that was built above the dining room, on the second floor, was one of Mr. Rockefeller’s private rooms where he would often rest and nap. This room was decorated with a collection of paintings of George Washington, because these were the only paintings in Mrs. Rockefeller’s collection that her husband liked.

Mrs. Rockefeller did not intend to compile a collection of folk art, but that name has been given to her collection because of the eclectic nature of the contents. “Folk” is a descriptive term for her collection, which encompasses so many different genres of art created by common people

⁴³ Rockefeller, *Memoirs*, 24.

rather than well-known artists. Folk art is often an eclectic mixture of artistic techniques and styles, but the genre itself is difficult, if not impossible, to define. Hence, Mrs. Rockefeller's collection is called folk art today, but was not called folk art while she was collecting.

Bassett Hall

During the twentieth century, Bassett Hall was home to only two families: the Smiths and the Rockefellers, who luckily cared enough about the house to preserve it. During the Smith residency, the house remained unchanged and retained its T-shaped structure of the nineteenth century. The Rockefellers strictly intended for it not to become an “imposing mansion.”⁴⁴ They made few changes to the structural features of the house, so as not to detract from its colonial charm. During their time at Bassett Hall, the Rockefellers added the rear wing, which can be seen on the left side of Figure 9, onto the back of the house.



Figure 10: First floor of the floor plan of Bassett Hall. The wing labeled as “kitchen” was added during the Rockefeller’s residency.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Kert, *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller*, 393.

⁴⁵ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “Bassett Hall,” Colonial Williamsburg, <http://www.history.org/Almanack/places/hb/hbbass.cfm> (accessed December 1, 2011).

The addition is parallel to the front façade of the house and perpendicular to the wing added by Singleton that served as a tavern, with a small extension off the central wing. The addition was two stories high, like the rest of the house. The section of the addition that connects with the central wing, labeled “dining room,” served as the butler’s pantry. It is where dishes and other kitchen items were stored. The kitchen, in which the Rockefellers had modern appliances and plumbing added to the house, extends off of the pantry. The servants’ quarters were also included in the addition. Their bedrooms were on the second floor, above the kitchen and servants’ living and dining room. Above the dining room, the central wing added by Singleton, an additional bedroom and bathroom were added to the second floor. The Rockefellers modernized the home and added modern bathrooms and plumbing. Renovations to the interior included new paint and wallpaper, but the decoration was done entirely according to the wishes and taste of Mrs. Rockefeller. Her eclectic collection of art decorated the walls and furnished the rooms of the house. On the outside, Bassett Hall retained its colonial appearance, while the inside was caught in the midst of a whirlwind of art styles and trends.



Figure 11: Photograph of Bassett Hall from the garden in the rear of the house. The kitchen wing, added by the Rockefellers, is on the right. The wing added by Singleton is in the middle, and the main/original building is the furthest left in the picture. Photo by author.

As seen in Figure 11, the Rockefellers retained the colonial appearance of the house as they designed the kitchen wing. The paint colors matched the rest of the house, and the wing could not be seen from the front of the house. From the front, Bassett Hall still appeared to be the two-story, single-depth house built during the eighteenth century. One only needed to enter the house or walk around the side to see the Rockefellers' expansion. From the rear of the house, especially from the angle in Figure 11, the additions are evident and the size of the house appears much larger.

One major addition to the property, done during the Rockefellers' residency, was a three-car garage next to the house. The garage was likely built detached from the house to avoid the

appearance of a mansion, and was painted in the same color scheme as the house to match its colonial charm. The garage, like the addition to the rear of the house, is not visible when the house is approached from the front, descending the lengthy driveway from Francis Street. The addition and the garage, built in such a manner as not to detract from the original house, are perfect examples of Colonial Williamsburg's attempt during the twentieth century to accommodate modern conveniences in homes and buildings while still striving to maintain the colonial appearance and charm on the exterior. The Rockefellers indeed enjoyed modern conveniences, and their kitchen was fully equipped with the best tools of the day, but from outside the house one cannot know such modern amenities exist inside such a pristine colonial setting.

In 1948, the year Mrs. Rockefeller died, Rockefeller transferred the deed of ownership of his Williamsburg home to his eldest son, John D. Rockefeller, III. Mrs. Rockefeller specified in her will that the furnishings were to be left to their eldest son, and Rockefeller figured that Rockefeller III should have the property as well. The deed, however, specified that Rockefeller II maintained the rights to live in and visit the house for the rest of his life.⁴⁶ He continued his semi-annual trips to Bassett Hall until he died. The only difference was that his son was the official owner. Bassett Hall was so important to the Rockefellers that after Rockefeller II's death in 1960, his memorial service was held in the grounds of Bassett Hall. The service took place under the great oak, the same oak under which, in 1926 he decided to embark on the restoration of Williamsburg. About three thousand people attended the service, including costumed workers from Colonial Williamsburg and members of the community.⁴⁷ The service location of Bassett

⁴⁶ John Ensor Harr and Peter J. Johnson, *The Rockefeller Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), 491.

⁴⁷ Humelsine, *Recollections of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in Williamsburg*, 15.

Hall illustrates the importance of the property to the Rockefeller family. After all, it was one of their favorite homes for several decades.

From 1960 to 1980, Bassett Hall sat practically vacant. Rockefeller III chose not to reside in Williamsburg, and visited the house no more than once a year for short periods. He had little interest in the property that had so pleased his father, and the only signs of life in the house were the two servants hired by Rockefeller to maintain the house and grounds. They cleaned the interior of the house and ensured that it was presentable, in case Rockefeller III or any of his relatives were to decide to visit.

In 1980, Rockefeller III signed the deed of ownership over to Colonial Williamsburg. The organization now had the authority to decide what to do with the house. It was to decide whether the house would be just another residential house in the historic area, or if it would be used in the educational programming of Colonial Williamsburg. Bassett Hall, as one of Colonial Williamsburg's museums, will be discussed in the next and final chapter of this thesis.

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Colonial Williamsburg, Incorporated was founded in 1928 along with the Williamsburg Holding Corporation by Rockefeller and his legal advisers. The purpose of Colonial Williamsburg, Inc. was to serve as a nonprofit educational corporation delivering the history of Colonial Williamsburg, while the Williamsburg Holding Corporation handled the business operations of the endeavor.⁴⁸ In the decades since the foundation of these two corporations, many changes and improvements have been made to the facilitation of the Colonial Williamsburg project, but their fundamental purposes remain the same. One corporation is nonprofit and promotes the educational environment at Colonial Williamsburg, while the other handles the

⁴⁸ Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 290.

business and generates profit so the project can sustain itself. The logistics of the operations of Colonial Williamsburg will not be discussed here.

John D. Rockefeller III, initially was chosen by his father to lead the Colonial Williamsburg Board of Trustees. There was disagreement between the Rockefeller heirs about the future of Colonial Williamsburg, and it seems that the future of Bassett Hall was undecided for a brief time as well. Rockefeller III resigned as chairman of the Board of Trustees in 1952 after a further dispute with his brother, Winthrop, about the future of Colonial Williamsburg. Winthrop Rockefeller, one of the younger Rockefeller siblings, then became chairman and held the reigns of Colonial Williamsburg's future.⁴⁹ Winthrop maintained his father's opinion that Colonial Williamsburg should serve as a teaching resource for American citizens.

Though the Rockefeller family invested what is estimated to have been more than a hundred million dollars in Colonial Williamsburg (the exact number cannot be determined because the family did not keep records of their donations), upon the deaths of the Rockefellers, it was necessary to locate another source of funding. The issue of funding Colonial Williamsburg had hardly been discussed, as the Rockefellers were such loyal contributors. People wondered if it was even possible to fund the project without the Rockefellers. In 1976, the search for funds that were not associated with the Rockefeller family officially began as Carlisle Humelsine, President of Colonial Williamsburg, initiated a fundraising program so as to establish an agenda for the future that was not solely based on Rockefeller funds.⁵⁰ Humelsine's initiatives were extremely successful, and after conversing with many benefactors and establishing relationships with renowned advertising agencies, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation developed into the large organization that it is today.

⁴⁹ Gonzales, *The Rockefellers at Williamsburg*, 52.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

The educational programming at Colonial Williamsburg has been continually debated since Rockefeller's undertaking of the restoration, and has probably received just as much attention as the funding of the organization. He wanted Colonial Williamsburg to serve as an educational tool for the public, and he encouraged educational programming. After Rockefeller's influence in the leadership at Colonial Williamsburg, the foundation still strove to ensure that the educational programming matched and exceeded Rockefeller's hopes. The directors and staff members at Colonial Williamsburg have striven to provide the proper education to visitors at Colonial Williamsburg, as was discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis. The educational programming of the entire Foundation is only relevant to this study as it pertains to Bassett Hall. The use of Bassett Hall as an educational tool will be discussed in the final chapter.

Chapter 5:

The Current Museum at Bassett Hall

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the current state of Bassett Hall as a museum. As the concluding chapter, it will also raise suggestions for the future direction of educational programming at Bassett Hall.

Within Colonial Williamsburg, there are several museums: the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum (housed in the same building as the DeWitt Wallace Mueum), and Bassett Hall.¹ Thus, Bassett Hall is only one of the museums at Colonial Williamsburg. The current function of Bassett Hall as a museum is to exhibit Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s time spent in Williamsburg during the reconstruction project in the early to mid-twentieth century, not to display the eighteenth century history of the city.

Bassett Hall is part of and operated by Colonial Williamsburg, like the other buildings in the historic area. Unlike most of the other buildings in the historic district, however, Colonial Williamsburg did not own Bassett Hall and its grounds until long after reconstruction began, in the later twentieth century. The Rockefeller family privately owned Bassett Hall until 1979, when it was gifted to the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.² Bassett Hall has a unique history, which is not uncommon for historic homes. Every residential home in Colonial Williamsburg has its own story about the history of Williamsburg, and most present their eighteenth-century history to visitors in keeping with the mission of Colonial Williamsburg. Bassett Hall differs

¹ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, "Art, Antiques, and Artifacts," Colonial Williamsburg, <http://www.history.org/history/museums/> (accessed October 31, 2011).

² Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, "Bassett Hall," Colonial Williamsburg, <http://www.history.org/Almanack/places/hb/hbbass.cfm> (accessed December 1, 2011).

from other houses in Williamsburg in this respect; it does not present the house's eighteenth-century history, but its twentieth-century history.

In 1980, Bassett Hall opened to the public as a museum as the ownership was granted to Colonial Williamsburg. A general admission ticket provided access to the museum.³ The museum presented the house as it was when the Rockefellers lived there; the rooms were virtually frozen in time. In 2000, Colonial Williamsburg embarked on a massive two-year renovation of Bassett Hall and its grounds, funded by Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller, Jr.'s granddaughter, in order to display a more accurate, and updated, museum environment to the public.⁴ Colonial Williamsburg was pleased with the result of the renovation, which created the Bassett Hall museum as it exists today.

Bassett Hall is located on the south side of Francis Street at the far eastern end of the city near the capitol. The house faces north, in the direction of the capitol, but sits at the end of a long gravel driveway that forms a loop around the front of the house. Figure 12 shows the house as visitors approach from the driveway extending through the two-acre front lawn.

³ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, "Bassett Hall," Colonial Williamsburg, <http://www.history.org/Almanack/places/hb/hbbass.cfm> (accessed December 1, 2011).

⁴ *Ibid.*



Figure 12: Photograph of Bassett Hall, as seen approaching the house from the driveway. Photo by author.

One of the deterrents to visitation at Bassett Hall is its location. It is located on the southern edge of Colonial Williamsburg on the far boundary of the historic sector. Francis Street is one block south of Duke of Gloucester street, the main thoroughfare. Most traffic in the historic area of Colonial Williamsburg is located around Duke of Gloucester Street and Merchants' Square. Many visitors do wander from the main road to stroll the surrounding streets and visit such sites as the Governor's Palace and the DeWitt Wallace museum, but many do not stray far enough to visit Bassett Hall, or know to look for it. Should visitors spot the sign in Figure 13, they are close to Bassett Hall, but many do not get that close.



Figure 13: A sign off Francis Street marking the entrance to Bassett Hall and its open hours. Photo by author.

The sign in Figure 13 is easily missed. It stands off Francis street, but is not very large or noticeable. The dark paint color does not catch the eye's attention, so one really needs to be examining the trees and the fence to notice the sign standing nearby. The white fence on the right side of the photograph is the fence that encloses Bassett Hall's lawn and driveway. The driveway is strictly for pedestrians, as vehicles have a separate entrance two hundred yards east, as indicated in Figure 13.

The house is somewhat isolated from the rest of the colonial city, as its front lawn is so large and surrounded by tall trees. It is difficult to see Bassett Hall from Francis Street, and the house and grounds are not easily stumbled upon. The location of the house was probably appreciated by the earlier residents of the house, as they had their privacy and seclusion from the main street, but it likely decreases the visitation to the current museum. There is a placard at the

end of the driveway marking the home, and as traditional in Colonial Williamsburg, a Union Jack flag stands to announce that the building is open to visitors. If one happens to be strolling down the eastern end of Francis Street, the placard and the flag would attract attention, but more often than not, visitors pass Bassett Hall without even knowing it is there.

If one does stumble upon the house, on either a Wednesday, Thursday, or Saturday, it is quite a treat. After increasing anticipation from walking the long scenic driveway, the visitor's first stop is the carriage house (the chimney of which is visible to the left of the main house in Figure 12), which is the three-car garage built by the Rockefellers that was mentioned in the last chapter. The carriage house lies east of the main house, clearly marked to attract the first-time visitor. In it are the Bassett Hall museum exhibits. Visitors can browse the exhibits at their own pace, in the style of a self-guided tour. Staff members are available for questions. The exhibits are an essential stopping point because though the house itself is accurately representative of the Rockefellers' lives, the earlier history of the house and the families who lived there is absent from the house tour. The exhibits display various aspects of the house's history, though only pieces of it, leaving loopholes in the narrative. Only one placard provides a brief timeline of the ownership of the house and its original construction.

The exhibits in the museum are interesting and engaging for the visitor. The majority of exhibit boards display the history of the Rockefellers' involvement at Bassett Hall and in Colonial Williamsburg. It is obvious that the central theme of the museum at Bassett Hall is to illustrate the importance of Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller in the reconstruction and preservation of Williamsburg. Correspondence between Reverend Goodwin and Mr. Rockefeller is displayed in the museum, including the telegram in which Mr. Rockefeller instructed the Reverend to purchase Bassett Hall on Rockefeller's behalf since he was not in Williamsburg at the time. An

introductory film is also available for viewing in the gallery. The film, like the exhibits, displays the Rockefellers' involvement in Colonial Williamsburg by presenting the story of Reverend Goodwin's attempt to find a benefactor to fund the preservation he so desired for the city he loved. The exhibits in the museum display the process of Goodwin's seeking a benefactor, and once he found one, the involvement of Rockefeller in the preservation of the city, all of which were discussed in detail in the last chapter.

One of the subjects discussed in Bassett Hall's gallery is the influence of the Great Oak, under which Rockefeller supposedly decided to embark on the restoration of Williamsburg. A plaque bearing a picture of the Great Oak displays its significance, as shown in Figure 14. It is fitting that in a museum that honors the individuals who funded the restoration, such an inspiring tree should be mentioned in the exhibits. The Great Oak was severely damaged during a storm during the late twentieth century and no longer graces the property. There are several other oak trees on the property, but none as old or large as the Great Oak was. It appears that because of the Rockefellers' generosity, Colonial Williamsburg chose to use Bassett Hall to exhibit their importance to Colonial Williamsburg, rather than to help deliver the story of the colonial city.



Figure 14: A plaque that hangs in Bassett Hall commemorating the Great Oak and its significance. Photo by author.

After exploring the exhibits in the carriage house at a leisurely pace, the visitor's next step is to take a guided tour of the house. Tour guides lead visitors on tours of the house once every hour, from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm, so there are many opportunities throughout the day to participate in a tour of the house. The guided tour begins outside the carriage house on the east side of the main house, and the tour guides announce to visitors in the carriage house when a tour will soon begin. The tour guides begin by giving a brief history of the house before the Rockefellers lived there, in which they mention the various owners throughout the centuries. Next, the tour guide leads the group inside the house. The group gathers in the hall as the guide explains the function of the two rooms on the ground floor of the front wing, before heading upstairs to discuss the rooms above. Partitions of Plexiglas stand approximately six feet inside

the doorways of each room, allowing visitors to enter partially into the room and see the decoration, yet not too far inside. Visitors are not permitted to touch any of the decorations or furniture pieces, as they are genuine artifacts of the Rockefellers,' many from Mrs. Rockefeller's folk art collection. The tour guide then heads back down the stairs and leads the group through the perpendicular wing extending from the south side of the house, the addition by Singleton during the eighteenth century. This room served as the dining room while the Rockefellers lived at Bassett Hall, and is interpreted to appear as if they are returning for dinner. Artificial food is "served" on the table, to illustrate the use of the room by the Rockefellers.



Figures 15 (left) and 16 (right): The central wing of the house, interpreted to be the dining room and complete with a set table, and a detail of the place setting showing the embroidered napkin and plated false foods. Photos by author.

Next, the group walks through the pantry, where there is a plant room for watering houseplants, and where Mr. Rockefeller's china collection is stored. Mr. Rockefeller, rather than his wife, oddly, was an avid collector of china tea sets. The kitchen is at the rear of the house, equipped with early-twentieth-century appliances that were state-of-the-art while the Rockefellers lived at Bassett Hall. Artificial food is also plated throughout the kitchen. Also in the rear of the house is another sitting room, used by the servants of the Rockefellers. Visitors are not permitted on the second floor of the rear wing, above the kitchen, because that area is used for storage today, but

that portion of the house was the servants' quarters while the Rockefellers lived there, and is used for storage now.

Bassett Hall and its grounds appear as they were during the 1940's, when the Rockefellers visited for two months each year. The interior, exterior, and gardens surrounding the house are maintained as they appeared during the Rockefellers' residence. If visitors visit during October or April, they can see the house and grounds exactly as the Rockefellers did.

According to the employees at Bassett Hall, Mrs. Rockefeller placed art first while decorating, and afterward chose the furniture and decoration.⁵ This is an interesting process—most people place furniture first, at least, because of its size and dominance of a room, before they place artwork to enhance the room's design. By decorating in the reverse way, Mrs. Rockefeller selected the artworks, such as paintings, that she wanted to feature in the rooms, and then accented the colors within the painting in the selection of furniture pieces. Each room in Bassett Hall has a distinctive color scheme based on the art works featured in the rooms, not the furniture pieces. The two sitting rooms on the ground floor display notable color schemes: one has a pink and coral color scheme, while the other has a turquoise theme. The bedrooms also have distinct color schemes, one blue and yellow, and the other pink, that are pulled together by the art pieces in each room. An interesting thing to note is that there are many different fabric patterns and odd color combinations that would not seem to fit well together, but because of Mrs. Rockefeller's selection of artwork, the rooms come together. Mrs. Rockefeller definitely had unique taste, but the pieces she selected make the room come together.⁶

The gardens of Bassett Hall have been restored to their 1940's appearance. In the 1940's, and today, the gardens lay south of the house, and many acres of woodland lay beyond. Bassett

⁵ Jayce Griffin, conversation with author, Williamsburg, VA, Nov. 12, 2011.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Hall consists of 585 acres of land; many acres are wooded. Some are still used as farmland, and still some are gardens. The gardens can be viewed from the kitchen in the rear of the house. The view out the kitchen window is of ivy and mums, with woods beyond.

The garden is accurate to the 1940's garden, even down to the color of the mums, and Colonial Williamsburg has taken care to interpret the gardens accurately. Archaeological digs were conducted to ensure accuracy in the placement of plants and types of plants, as the digs determined where on the property the various plants were located during the 1940s, and thorough records were kept to maintain accuracy. Various hiking and walking trails weave through the woods behind Bassett Hall, but they are lengthy and not recommended to daily visitors as they take several hours to complete. Avid hikers should inquire at Bassett Hall, or search online, to learn about the various trails surrounding the house and the city, which are sure to provide many hours of entertainment. Garden tours are held in October and April, the months when the Rockefellers lived at Bassett Hall, on Wednesdays and Thursdays once a day. On these tours, visitors can learn a great deal more about the gardens than on the house tour, which merely mentions that the gardens were planned and enjoyed by Mrs. Rockefeller.

The staffing of Bassett Hall is different from most public museums, as it operates under the large umbrella of Colonial Williamsburg. Since it is owned and operated by Colonial Williamsburg, vacancies at Bassett Hall are posted in the Colonial Williamsburg job bank online and specify the position at Bassett Hall. One may apply to work at Bassett Hall by completing the online application and submitting the required materials. About seven employees work at Bassett Hall on a regular basis, approximately half of whom are full-time, and the other half part-time. Retired staff members also return on a casual, volunteer basis to work with visitors at Bassett Hall. The majority of staff members are tour guides and assist visitors in the exhibit

gallery. Employees at Bassett Hall are given copies of a manual when they begin their employment, in which a brief history of the house is provided, but the bulk of the manual emphasizes the lives of the Rockefellers at Bassett Hall. The manual also describes the various types of art in the house and descriptions of each room. Presumably, knowledge of or interest in history is desirable in selecting staff members when a vacancy is posted. The director of Bassett Hall assuredly has more experience and credentials than tour guides, having worked with Colonial Williamsburg for much longer than other staff members, but the general tour guides and other staff members at Bassett Hall are only given a handbook to learn about the house and grounds.

Bassett Hall is only open to the public three days each week: Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday, as seen in Figure 13. The full-time employees have obligations and duties on the other days of the week, while the part-time employees work as tour guides on days the house is open. The Director of Bassett Hall, Cynthia Nothstine, is also the director of the Everard House and Weatherburn's Tavern in Colonial Williamsburg. Bassett Hall is operated under the same umbrella as these two other buildings in the historic area and managed by the same director who works for Colonial Williamsburg.⁷ When Bassett Hall is not open, Ms. Nothstine works with the other two buildings.

As Bassett Hall is owned and operated by Colonial Williamsburg, the organization pays the bills to maintain the museum. Bassett Hall does not have its own budget, separate from the large pool of Colonial Williamsburg's resources, that pays for necessary expenses; rather, expenses for Bassett Hall come out of the Colonial Williamsburg bank account. The organization funds the maintenance of the house and grounds, and pays the salaries of the employees. It also funds all cleaning of the house, painting, lighting and heating, and lawn maintenance. The staff

⁷ Jayce Griffin, conversation with author, Williamsburg, VA, Nov. 12, 2011.

members at Bassett Hall have daily cleaning duties, like dusting and vacuuming the exhibit area, but when larger items need to be cleaned, such as furniture in the house, Colonial Williamsburg pays professionals to do so. In keeping up the appearance at Bassett Hall, conservators are often called in to clean particular artifacts within the house because they may be damaged if cleaned by someone untrained in handling antiques. Lawn maintenance at Bassett Hall is surely quite pricey because of the size of the grounds, but Colonial Williamsburg pays that bill as well and cares for the grounds and maintains their beautiful appearance. The grass is always trimmed to a proper height, and the grounds are always beautifully landscaped.

In addition to maintaining the grounds, Colonial Williamsburg provides the funds for the climatized interior of the house. Museums that display artifacts must ensure that the climate is controlled, by maintaining the proper temperature and humidity, to prevent deterioration of the artifacts. Bassett Hall is full of authentic artifacts. Unlike other museums in Colonial Williamsburg, Bassett Hall also presents twentieth-century artifacts brought or purchased by the Rockefellers, such as the paintings and sculptures that furnish the house. This being the case, though the objects Bassett Hall are not eighteenth-century pieces as those in different buildings, they are still artifacts and must be contained in a climatized environment. Bassett Hall maintains the interior at about seventy degrees Fahrenheit. Being owned by Colonial Williamsburg ensures that Bassett Hall will have the funds for its maintenance for the rest of its existence, or at least for the next few decades.

It was probably a financial decision that determined that Bassett Hall would only be open three days a week. Staff members are unsure of any particular reason why that is the case, when the rest of Colonial Williamsburg is open seven days a week, 363 days a year (every day with the

exception of Thanksgiving and Christmas day).⁸ Colonial Williamsburg has had to reduce its expenses, and decided that closing Bassett Hall four days each week would save money.

Museums across the United States are experiencing such reductions in funding and have to save money in any ways possible. Even though one gains admission to Bassett Hall by purchasing a general admission ticket to Colonial Williamsburg, one must be sure to visit Bassett Hall on one of the three days it is open. Perhaps in the future planners at Bassett Hall will strive to open the museum for more days each week.

Bassett Hall hosts a children's program during the summer, but never any adult programs. The children's program introduces children to nature by using the gardens and the woods beyond, desirable for local summer camps scouting troops. The employees at Bassett Hall are encouraged to develop more children's programs, but these are recent endeavors and many are still in the planning stage. Bassett Hall does not host any other special events or programs, oddly, because such a beautiful location would be ideal for weddings and special events. The gardens are picturesque and would be an ideal location for an outdoor wedding, reception, or luncheon, but Colonial Williamsburg does not offer any rental services of Bassett Hall's grounds. Bassett Hall and Colonial Williamsburg staff should consider the opportunity for hosting special events.

Colonial Williamsburg has initiated a new series of reenactments and performances called "Revolutionary City" that attempt to display the city of Williamsburg during the days of the American Revolution. Williamsburg indeed played a role in the Revolution, when Bassett Hall functioned as a tavern. Colonial Williamsburg could initiate an element of the Revolutionary City program to incorporate Bassett Hall in various ways and still maintain the appearance of the Rockefellers' home. This is a missed opportunity to attract visitors, make

⁸ Jayce Griffin, conversation with author, Williamsburg, VA, Nov. 12, 2011.

money, and display the beauty of Bassett Hall. Any form of special programming would bring more attention and visitors to the museum.

Another aspect of Bassett Hall's function as a museum that deserves mention is its accessibility to disabled individuals. Handicapped entrances are clearly marked, and staff members are willing to accommodate and assist individuals with disabilities. A resource available to visitors of Colonial Williamsburg is a printable map of the entire historic district illustrating which buildings are handicapped accessible. Bassett Hall is one of these buildings, yet it is only accessible on the ground floor. There is no elevator inside the house, so as to not compromise the original architecture. Another deterrent to the handicapped visitor is the necessity of traveling over gravel in order to reach Bassett Hall from Francis Street. For reasons of appearance, the driveway is not paved, and many wheelchairs cannot safely navigate through gravel. Like all museums, Bassett Hall and Colonial Williamsburg must consider accessibility when planning their exhibits. Since Colonial Williamsburg is predominantly privately funded, not by the public sector, it is not a requirement for all of its buildings to be accessible to the disabled. This is a flaw of Colonial Williamsburg and Bassett Hall; the needs of all visitors must be considered to increase the amount of visitation to the museum each year.

One of the interesting features of Bassett Hall's operation as a museum is that one may experience a visit to the home without physically visiting Colonial Williamsburg. The disabled, and other people who cannot visit, may access the website and view the rooms on the second floor. Like many other museums today, Bassett Hall has a website, on which a floor plan of the home is displayed (Figure 17). When the viewer scrolls over the images of the floor plan on the Colonial Williamsburg website, the small images expand to display photographs of the interior rooms available to visitors at Bassett Hall.

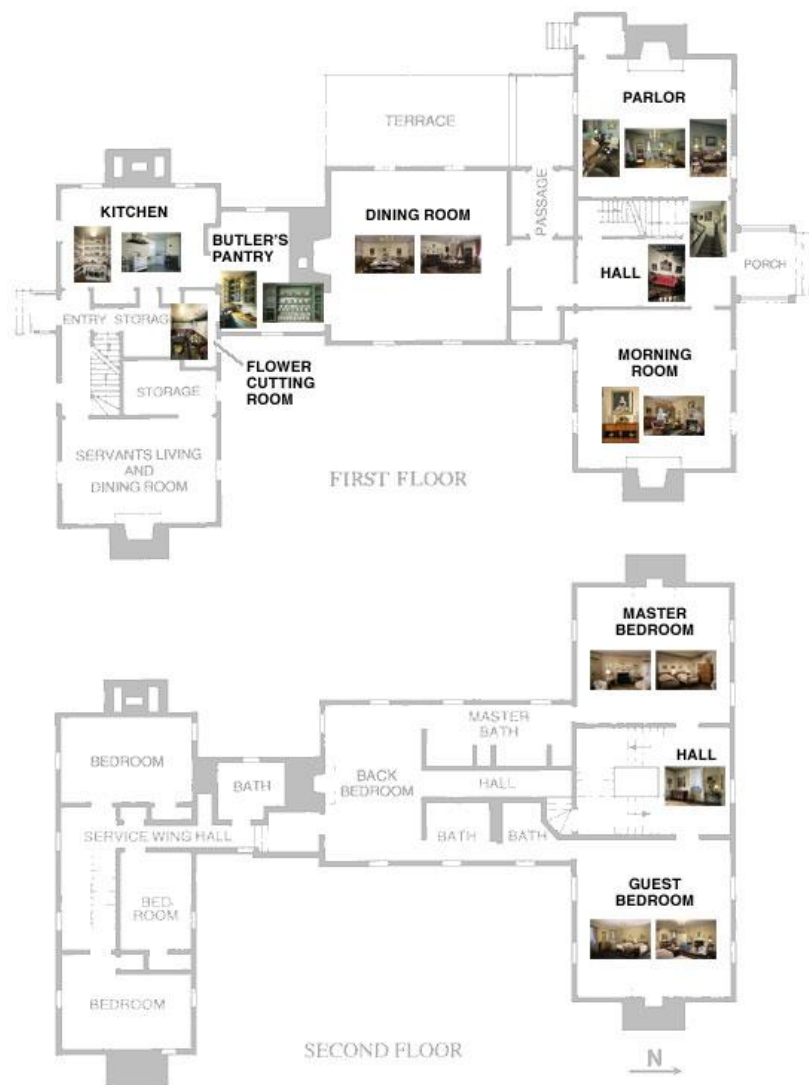


Figure 17: The current floorplan of Bassett Hall. The rightmost wing is the original structure, built approximately 1750, that faces Francis Street and the capitol. The perpendicular wing was used as a tavern during the Revolutionary War, and the right, rear, wing was added by the Rockefellers in the 1940's. The rooms on the floorplan with thumbnail images depict the rooms that are visited during the tour of Bassett Hall that are accessible to the public.⁹

To witness the sheer beauty of the grounds at Bassett Hall, one must visit Colonial Williamsburg. One also cannot truly grasp the design style of Mrs. Rockefeller by viewing the small, screen-size images of the interior rooms of the house; one must visit and actually gaze upon the rooms and their decorative elements at Bassett Hall.

⁹ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, "Bassett Hall," Colonial Williamsburg, <http://www.history.org/Almanack/places/hb/hbbass.cfm> (accessed December 1, 2011).

Visitors to Bassett Hall purchase their entrance tickets from Colonial Williamsburg at either the main visitor's center or one of the ticket booths in the historic area. There are several different ticket options for visiting Colonial Williamsburg and Bassett Hall. A single-day ticket for Colonial Williamsburg, including all of its grounds and museums, costs \$37.95.¹⁰ Multi-day tickets are perhaps a better investment for visitors who plan to visit more than once per year, as they cost only \$45.96.¹¹ For visitors particularly interested in history, or who perhaps thoroughly enjoy Colonial Williamsburg, an annual pass is available for purchase as well for approximately \$58. The annual pass is a particularly good investment because annual pass holders can visit Colonial Williamsburg, and all of its museums an unlimited number of times per year, and the cost of an annual pass costs less than two single day tickets. Visitors who do not wish to peruse the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg, or have access to its many other buildings, can purchase a single-day museum ticket for \$9.95, or a museum annual pass for \$19.95.¹² The museum passes give visitors exclusive access to the museums at Colonial Williamsburg, including the DeWitt Wallace museum and Bassett Hall, and is ideal for visitors not interested in exploring the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg.

Bassett Hall is worth visiting, though the museum could be improved. Visitors can learn much about the Rockefellers' relationship with the city of Williamsburg, which is warranted, but little about the colonial history of the city. The museum could be improved by incorporating more of the house's history, prior to the Rockefellers, into the exhibits. As discussed in the preceding chapters of this thesis, many other important individuals lived at Bassett Hall, yet they are barely mentioned in the museum. Presentation of the those earlier stories would only enhance

¹⁰ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, "Admission," Colonial Williamsburg, <http://www.colonialwilliamsburg.com/visit/planYourVisit/ticketPlans/index.cfm> (accessed October 31, 2011).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, "Colonial Williamsburg Museum Admission," Colonial Williamsburg, <http://www.history.org/history/museums/tickets.cfm> (accessed October 31, 2011).

Colonial Williamsburg's delivery of its mission to educate visitors about colonial life and American democracy. Many short narratives could be written about the earlier inhabitants of the house, and each of them tell a story about the city of Williamsburg. How better to tell the story of a colonial city than to present the story of James Bray, whose wife was held captive by Nathaniel Bacon prior to Bacon's Rebellion? Should not the museum tell of the life of Burwell Bassett, nephew of George Washington and member of the House of Burgesses who lived in the house? A Secretary of the Navy prior to the Civil War lived in the house, yet his story is not present either. Several stories of the individuals who lived at Bassett Hall could be used to further Colonial Williamsburg's mission to educate visitors about the city's colonial past.

The story of the millionaire benefactor who funded Colonial Williamsburg should be told, and it seems proper to tell that story at Bassett Hall. However, it seems clear that he would not have wanted the attention and recognition. As mentioned earlier, Rockefeller, Jr. did not want to be recognized as a hero for funding the restoration. He did not want his name on plaques, and he probably would not want his home to be presented as an homage to his works in Williamsburg. He made known his objective that Colonial Williamsburg should serve as a tool to teach about American citizenship. Given his wishes, the museum at Bassett Hall should be changed to deliver some of this history to the public. Additional exhibits could tell the stories of the house's previous residents and their ties to the colonial city. The addition of such exhibits would not detract from the objective to display the Rockefellers' generosity to the city, and would enhance the museum's overall delivery of Colonial Williamsburg's mission. The museum is capable of delivering the history that is neglected, and there is no excuse for its failure to do so. I do not believe that Rockefeller would be pleased with the museum's current function.

A dilemma common to public historians and museum professionals is evident at Bassett Hall. This dilemma is sorting through layers of history to choose elements to display in a museum environment. The museum professionals at Colonial Williamsburg chose which aspects of the house's history to exhibit at Bassett Hall, and which aspects and stories to neglect from the exhibits in the museum. The pieces of history that were chosen to exhibit relate to Rockefeller's influence in Williamsburg, and he owned the house, so the presence of such exhibits is understandable. Also, given that the history of Williamsburg is roughly four hundred years long, it would be ridiculous to expect that the museum at Bassett Hall could tell that whole story. Yet the museum could deliver more history about the individuals who lived there and more history about life in the colonial city than it currently does. It is, after all, because of them that the house existed for Rockefeller to enjoy during the twentieth century.

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