

## **ABSTRACT**

HARDY, STEPHANIE. Shedding Light on Dark Truths: The Evolution of African American History at Tryon Palace in New Bern, NC (Under the Direction of Gerald Prokopowicz) Department of History, May 2014.

Tryon Palace was home to the first royal governors of North Carolina. Today, the site is one of the most visited historic sites in the state. But what stories are visitors hearing? The historic homes and buildings at the site display local history but African Americans have only recently penetrated the interpretation.

This thesis acknowledges the difficulties of displaying topics that are sensitive and emotional for many audiences while investigating the tremendous amount of African American history surrounding Tryon Palace. The town of New Bern, NC has always maintained a diverse population and African Americans have played a significant role in the town's history. Yet many are unfamiliar with this complex and unique story. This history both parallels and intersects with Tryon Palace in different eras.

Using various primary and secondary sources, this thesis serves as a case study on how local African American history is interpreted at historic sites and museums. Much of the changes can be attributed to the African American Research Project, which was implemented in 1999. This endeavor created programs that brought African American history to the forefront of Tryon Palace's interpretation.

**SHEDDING LIGHT ON DARK TRUTHS: THE INTERPRETATION OF AFRICAN  
AMERICAN HISTORY AT TRYON PALACE IN NEW BERN, NC**

A thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of East Carolina University in partial fulfillment of  
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Arts

By  
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## Introduction

### “The Most Beautiful Building in the Colonial Americas”<sup>1</sup>

Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens, located in New Bern, North Carolina consists of seven major buildings, three exhibit galleries, and sixteen acres of gardens. These buildings include the palace itself, historic homes, and the newly-built N.C. History Center. The site covers different historical eras. For instance, the palace represents the colonial period while the Dixon – Stevenson and Hay Houses interpret the antebellum period. The site offers living history interpretation along with museum exhibits, hands-on activities, and guided tours through the palace.<sup>2</sup> The site is operated by the North Carolina Office of Archives and History, a section of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources; it is also an accredited member of the American Association of Museums. As of 2013, the site was open 360 days per year, welcoming approximately 85,000 guests.<sup>3</sup>

The Palace, which was built between 1767 and 1770, was once the home of Royal Governors William Tryon and Josiah Martin. After Martin’s flight from the colony in 1775 and the Revolutionary War, the palace was used infrequently and fell into disrepair. In 1777, Martin’s personal furniture and library were sold at public auction as confiscated goods; new Governor Richard Caswell bought much of the furniture himself for nearly 900 pounds.<sup>4</sup> Local patriots removed some of the metalwork in 1781, a few hours before the British captured the

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<sup>1</sup> Blackwell P. Robinson, *Three Decades of Devotion* (New Bern, NC: Tryon Palace Restoration Complex, 1978), 3.

<sup>2</sup> “Tryon Palace,” Tryon Palace, accessed January 30, 2012, [www.tryonpalace.org](http://www.tryonpalace.org).

<sup>3</sup> “New Bern African American History Project,” Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens Press Release (New Bern, NC; n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> Alonzo Thomas Dill, Jr, “Tryon’s Palace: A Neglected Niche of North Carolina History,” *The North Carolina Historical Review*, No. 2 (April, 1942), 151.

town.<sup>5</sup> Even George Washington, who visited the site in April 1791, noted that it was “a good brick but now hastening to Ruins.”<sup>6</sup> The extra session of the General Assembly in July 1794 was the last official function held in the Palace; after that, its rooms were rented out for lodging, Masonic Lodge meetings, and other events. The main building burned down on February 27, 1798 with only the walls remaining. The two wing buildings did not burn; the West Wing became a warehouse, carriage house, stable, school, and an apartment house while the East Wing mysteriously disappeared from the site.

The twentieth century brought various efforts to save Tryon Palace and its buildings. In 1922, the Colonial Dames of North Carolina placed a marker at the Palace’s West Wing commemorating “The Last Home of the Colonial Governors.” Three years later, Mrs. Edwin C Gregory, state regent of the Daughters of the American Revolution, unveiled two more markers sponsored by the group: one honored James Davis, who set up the first printing press in New Bern in 1749, and the other commemorated George Washington’s 1791 visit.<sup>7</sup>

In 1944, a delegation led by Maude Moore Latham delivered a report before the NC Advisory Budget Commission asking for a \$150,000 appropriation to buy Tryon Palace. Gertrude Carraway, a member of the delegation, outlined the group’s four reasons for restoring the Palace: history, architecture, tourist trade, and the then-modern trend of rebuilding places of interest.<sup>8</sup> The General Assembly passed a bill approving the appropriation and created the Tryon Palace Commission in 1945. The Commission worked until finally, in April 1959, the newly restored Tryon Palace opened to the public.<sup>9</sup> Since its grand opening, the site has added various historic homes, buildings, and gardens while creating new programs for educating visitors. By

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<sup>5</sup> Dill, “Tryon’s Palace: A Neglected Niche of North Carolina History,” 152.

<sup>6</sup> Robinson, *Three Decades of Devotion*, 6-7.

<sup>7</sup> Robinson, *Three Decades of Devotion*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, *Three Decades of Devotion*, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, *Three Decades of Devotion*, 127.

2012, Tryon Palace generated nearly \$41 million in spending each year for eastern North Carolina.<sup>10</sup>

It is easy to assume that museums display history as it truly happened. However, it is not always this simple. Museums and historic sites are sometimes hesitant to show uglier sides of history, out of fear that visitors will not accept such presentations. African American history is no exception; there are some parts that can be unpleasant for patrons. Since 1990, many sites, Tryon Palace included, have made changes in their interpretation of African American history. They have worked hard to include the African American experience in their overall exhibits and programs. The site was visited by more than 35,000 school children from 2010 to 2012, so it is important for Tryon Palace to provide accurate historical information.<sup>11</sup>

Some patrons visiting museums and historic sites actively seek out history that relates to their backgrounds and heritage. For instance, some African American visitors look for African American history in order to feel a connection with an exhibit or historic home. Since 1990, the leadership of Tryon Palace realized that the site's interpretation needed to be diverse like its audience.

From gradual beginnings, African American history at Tryon Palace has become more prominent. Tryon Palace is an excellent case study of how interpretations at historic sites and museums change with the . But is the site a primary location for learning about African American history in North Carolina? How does the leadership at Tryon Palace utilize available information and references concerning local African American history? And how does the site's interpretation of this history compare to other, similar sites? This thesis seeks to answer these

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<sup>10</sup> Martha Quinlin, "Budget would cut state museum staff- The long-term plan would force Tryon Palace, trains museum and Manteo park to become self-supporting.-Historic sites may have to reduce hours or seek donations," *The News and Observer*, June 8, 2011, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Quinlin, "Budget would cut state museum staff," 1.

questions by exploring how the interpretation of African American history at Tryon Palace has evolved, what this interpretation now includes, and what steps the site is taking to expand it.

## Chapter One

### The Perils of Interpreting African American History

Incorporating black history into public history is no easy feat; many upsetting topics and images evoke strong reactions from audiences. Sites face the problem of attempting to educate a public that is often reluctant to address such sensitive issues. Potential problems can be a deterrent for many sites, but the absence of black history does not provide patrons with an accurate historical lesson. African Americans played a large part in the history of New Bern, so omitting their history from Tryon Palace's interpretation would be a glaring mistake.

According to James Oliver Horton, public historians must "assess and attempt to address popular ignorance of slavery's diversity, longevity, complexity, and centrality."<sup>1</sup> He writes that there are numerous popular misconceptions about the topic, stemming from stereotypes and inadequate teaching. These misconceptions have caused strong reactions from both African American and white museum visitors, many of whom think of slaveholding in simple terms. The truth is that the subject is anything but simple and museum and historic site exhibits often bear much of the criticism for attempting to convey the topic to patrons.

Due to the elevated status of museums in American culture, it is important for sites to educate patrons accurately about the past. According to research, people trust information from museums more than from high school teachers and college professors.<sup>2</sup> Patrons tend to take

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<sup>1</sup> James Oliver Horton, "Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America's Racial Story," *The Public Historian* 21, no. 4 (Fall 1999), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3379471> (accessed August 19, 2011), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Modlin, "Tales Told on the Tour: Mythic Representations of Slavery by Docents at North Carolina Plantation Museums," *Southeastern Geographer* 48, no. 3 (November 2008): 265-287. *Academic Search Complete*, Ebscohost 268.

museum displays as the truth, not understanding that what they are seeing is a carefully crafted exhibit containing specific language meant to convey the site's overall message.

Specific problems are associated with many methods of museum and historic site interpretation. For instance, first-person interpreters can be useful because they engage visitors and allow them to gain a deeper understanding by seeing historic figures as real people. However, for sites interpreting slavery, this can be a no-win situation. If the site is successful with its first-person interpreters, does that mean patrons actually see the employees as slaves? The inability to distinguish between the two can cause deep discomfort and even anger. James Oliver Horton uses the experiences of Stephanie Batiste-Bentham, an African American interpreter at Arlington House near Washington D.C., to illustrate the difficulties of explaining a complex topic. Arlington was the pre-Civil War home of the Lee-Curtis family, known for its famous member, General Robert E. Lee. Batiste-Bentham found it easier to educate visitors about slavery in the slave quarters because they expected to hear mainly about the Lee-Curtis family in the main house. She noticed that patrons were often reluctant to talk about slavery, especially when tour groups were interracial.<sup>3</sup>

Exhibits, especially those containing graphic images depicting slavery, can also cause controversy. Patrons can become uncomfortable and reluctant to view the rest of the space or even visit the site again. If the debate is intense enough, the site's leadership may succumb to pressure and remove the exhibit entirely. For instance, in 1995 John Michael Vlach designed an exhibit at the Library of Congress to accompany his book *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, featuring photos and narrative materials explaining plantation life. African American employees at the Library immediately protested Vlach's work, calling it

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<sup>3</sup> Horton, "Presenting Slavery," 29.

“offensive,” and demanded its removal before the official opening. Due to such strong reactions, the Library relented and the exhibit was dismantled within a few hours.<sup>4</sup>

Including slavery in tours can be complicated. Some sites train docents and volunteers using carefully crafted scripts containing specific language and facts that they want visitors to learn. Keeley McGill stated in her 2005 thesis regarding the presentation of slavery at George Washington’s estate at Mount Vernon, docents trivialized Washington’s ownership of slaves by using the term “servant”.<sup>5</sup> The goal is to avoid portraying the site’s main historic figure as a “good” or “bad” slave owner and to also avoid “loaded” questions regarding the owner’s treatment towards slaves. Tour guides may even dodge the topic altogether or refuse to answer questions regarding slavery. Some sites provide African American history only in spaces closely associated with the topic. For instance, if a house museum interprets slavery, visitors may only hear about the subject in the slave quarters or a slave cemetery. Colonial Williamsburg Some sites may go a step further and create a separate tour that focuses mainly on African American history; these tours may be only given during a certain time of year or only when specifically requested by patrons. This limits public exposure to the topic of slavery and fails to underscore the presence of enslaved people in the daily lives of their owners.

E. Arnold Modlin notes that many house museums, such as the ones included at Tryon Palace, possess a “frozen moment,” a specific year or time period that they represent. This approach often creates problems in interpretation because it does not provide the opportunity to go deeply into historic themes. Often a house museum tells the story of the home’s owner, usually a white male, while ignoring the enslaved who worked in the house and around the

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<sup>4</sup> James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, Ed., *Slavery and Public History* (New York: The New York Press), 2006, 59-61.

<sup>5</sup> Keeley Aurelia McGill, “The Presentation of Slavery at Mount Vernon: Power, Privilege, and Historical Truth,” MA Thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 2005, 3-4.

grounds. Some sites, including those in North Carolina, go out of their way to minimize the presence of African American slaves in their interpretation. According to his study, historic house tours deflected attention away from slavery by focusing on other topics such as architecture, décor, the Civil War, and agriculture. Presentations at the four historic homes at Tryon Palace (the Stanly House, Hay House, Dixon House, and the Palace) all mentioned slavery less than five times during docent-led tours. Docents in the Hay House did not mention slaves at all. By comparison, the top site, Somerset Place in Creswell, NC, mentioned slavery fifty-one times during docent-led tours.<sup>6</sup>

Modlin and Kimberly E. Taft both cite Jennifer Eichstedt's and Stephen Small's study of plantation museums in Virginia, Louisiana, and Georgia. In the study, the pair visited 122 sites and decided that these museums neglected or underemphasized the presence of African Americans. They deduced four strategies employed by plantation museums for representing African Americans: "symbolic annihilation/erasure," "trivialization/deflection," "segregation/marginalization," and "relative incorporation." "Symbolic annihilation" entails completely ignoring the African American presence, "trivialization" occurs when sites mention African Americans but use words and phrases to minimize their presence, "segregation" refers to cases in which African American history is discussed in separate areas or on separate tours, and "relative incorporation" involves the integration of African Americans.<sup>7</sup> Modlin and Taft both refer to these strategies when analyzing the interpretation of African American history of various North Carolina sites in their respective theses.

Modlin expanded on Eichstedt's and Small's study by touring fifty-two North Carolina historic houses built before 1865 and observing the frequency with which docents mentioned

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<sup>6</sup> E. Arnold Modlin, "Tales Told on the Tour," *Southeastern Geographer* 48 (2008): 265-275.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2002), 17

slaves. He found that forty-two of the sites at least mentioned slavery; he heard about slavery a combined six times in the historic homes at Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens.<sup>8</sup>

Kimberly Taft wrote a thesis investigating not only the lack of African American history at Somerset Place and Historic Stagville, sites in Creswell, N.C. and Durham, N.C. respectively, but also the lack of women's history. She noted that historic homes often emphasized the elite, white patriarch while diminishing the presence of women and slaves. She states that two common meta-myths emerge in North Carolina plantation museums: that "slavery did not happen here" and that "slavery was unique or more humane here."<sup>9</sup> She concluded that while sites have increased their attention to African American history, there is still an imbalance in the interpretation.

Museums and historic sites have encountered various difficulties and controversies while attempting to interpret the African American experience, and larger sites have not escaped. At Mount Vernon, visitors expect to learn about George Washington; they do not receive the full story of Washington as a slave owner. Keeley McGill in 2005 noted that docents and historic interpreters at Mount Vernon admitted to Washington's ownership of slaves, yet enforced the meta-myth that his slaves received humane treatment and emphasized that they were freed after his death, which is untrue.<sup>10</sup> The site also segregated African American history by creating a separate tour concentrating on slave life, which runs from April to October and takes visitors through the slave quarters. The presentation of the tour is not as scripted as the tour of the mansion, so visitors receive different experiences and information depending on the docent.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Modlin, "Tales Told on the Tour," 273-275.

<sup>9</sup> Kimberly E. Taft, "Silent Voices: Searching for Women and African Americans at Historic Stagville and Somerset Place Historic Sites," MA Thesis. North Carolina State University, 2010, 61.

<sup>10</sup> McGill, "The Presentation of Slavery at Mount Vernon," 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> McGill, "The Presentation of Slavery at Mount Vernon," 28-29.

A unique aspect of McGill's study is the inclusion of a self-guided audio tour of Mount Vernon. This tour, played on a rented cassette player, gives the listener information about slave life through the eyes of four Mount Vernon slaves. The female narrator, who spoke in a professional manner, dominates the tour while the slave interpreters cheerfully explain their work and lives. Overall the audio tour presents slavery as a low-status occupation rather than an oppressive social system.<sup>12</sup> By interpreting Mount Vernon slaves as cheerful and eager to please, the site reinforced the notion that slavery under George Washington was different than in other parts of America, thus avoiding controversy and maintaining his image as a Founding Father of the highest moral standard.

Colonial Williamsburg has also experienced its share of problems in attempting to interpret the African American experience for visitors. Unlike Mount Vernon, which was created as a historic site to honor George Washington, Colonial Williamsburg was preserved as a "beacon of the American past."<sup>13</sup> There was no room for displaying the other parts of colonial history so the site practiced a great deal of "symbolic annihilation." In 1979, Colonial Williamsburg hired three black actors to portray slaves and free blacks. Audience reactions ranged from shock at the realization that slavery existed to anger at the idea that the Founding Fathers owned slaves, and alarm at the fact that black men and women willingly "played slaves."<sup>14</sup> In 1994, the site decided to go a step further with its interpretation and reenact an estate auction that included slaves as property. The administration sought to demonstrate the

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<sup>12</sup> McGill, "The Presentation of Slavery at Mount Vernon," 31-33.

<sup>13</sup> Jessica Carter, "A People With No Past Have No Future": The Interpretation of Slavery at Colonial Williamsburg," MA Thesis, East Carolina University, 2004, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Christy S. Matthews, "Where Do We Go From Here? Researching and Interpreting the African-American Experience," *Historical Archaeology* 31, no. 3 (1997): 107-113, *Jstor* <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25616552>, 108.

irony that in the same area where prominent Virginians debated national liberty, they also bought and sold human beings just as if they were property.

Despite the noble intentions of the Colonial Williamsburg staff, the program had many detractors. As in the case of John Michael Vlach's exhibit at the Library of Congress, many of the protests came from the African American community, specifically the Richmond chapter of the NAACP.<sup>15</sup> The organization felt that the reenactment would be insensitive and felt "history was being used for entertainment."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Colonial Williamsburg went through with the auction and used its aftermath to refine its African American programs to include more character interpretation and show more antagonism in the slave community.<sup>17</sup>

Larger sites get more attention, so their African American programs and tours receive greater scrutiny. Colonial Williamsburg fell victim to one of the great ironies in interpreting African American history: sites are criticized not only when they completely ignore African American history, but also when they decide to attack the topic directly. The problem is two-fold: on the one hand, many African Americans shy away from museums and historic sites because they feel no connection to the history being taught. However, when confronted with "their" history, African Americans can feel great pain and anger at the sights and sounds associated with the difficult parts, so they seek to avoid them. Mount Vernon's attempts demonstrate the key problem of showing the uglier side of history at a site closely associated with a famous historical figure. Although many visitors know that George Washington owned slaves, they may not necessarily want to see evidence proving this fact. So how can Mount Vernon accurately portray history if its patrons are not receptive?

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<sup>15</sup> Carter, "A People With No Past Have No Future," 60.

<sup>16</sup> Carter, "A People With No Past Have No Future," 61.

<sup>17</sup> Carter, "A People With No Past Have No Future," 70.

In the years since the Revisionist movement of the 1970s, many museums and historic sites have taken great steps to include African American history in their exhibits and programs. This intellectual movement inspired an examination of the interpretation at public history sites. As a result, they began to address topics such as slavery and Jim Crow without fear of controversy. American history contains many topics which cause patrons discomfort so it is easy to see why sites leave these aspects out of their interpretations. In avoiding these contentious subjects, audiences are not receiving the full story. Since the public often takes the interpretations of museums and historic sites at face value, it is critical that the public actually learn history as it happened. Like Mount Vernon and Colonial Williamsburg, Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens interprets eighteenth century history, but some buildings even have a nineteenth century interpretation. African Americans played too large a role in New Bern's history in those two centuries to leave them out of Tryon Palace's story.

## Chapter Two

### A Brief Racial History of New Bern and Surrounding Areas

Why is it important for Tryon Palace to interpret African American history? In order to answer this question, one must first understand the complex racial history of New Bern and its surrounding areas. The site interprets eighteenth and nineteenth century history in historic homes and the Pepsi Family Center while the Regional History Museum includes information from the prehistory and settlement of both New Bern and North Carolina as a whole down to the twentieth century. The town's standing as a leading port and trade center in the state during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created an incredibly diverse population. This diversity gave rise to numerous positive and negative encounters between the races throughout the centuries. The lives of whites and blacks were closely intertwined in New Bern and surrounding areas. Recently this history has come to play a crucial part in Tryon Palace's tours, programs, and exhibits, because of the integral role African Americans have fulfilled in New Bern's development.

Slavery is deeply entrenched in North Carolina history and stretches all the way back to the state's settlement. The 1669 Fundamental Constitutions, which underlined Carolina's political philosophy and instructions for settlement, emphasized owners' authority over slaves; slaves were permitted freedom of religion but conversion to Christianity would not result in manumission.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1977), 2.

By 1712, North Carolina only contained about 800 blacks. This number greatly increased with the expansion of various industries, such as naval stores and rice-growing. Black taxables, defined as any slave over twelve years of age, grew from 6,000 to 39,483 between 1730 and 1767.<sup>2</sup>

During this period, New Bern's population, as well as its status in North Carolina, rose. New Bern is located in Craven County, 112 miles east of Raleigh and 87 miles northeast of Wilmington, at the confluence of the Neuse and Trent Rivers.<sup>3</sup> Native Americans first settled the land and called it "Chattoka."<sup>4</sup> Naturalist John Lawson claimed New Bern in 1705, and Baron Christopher von Graffenried, a nobleman from Bern, Switzerland, officially founded the town in 1710.

New Bern began as a site of deportation for about 100 Swiss "undesirables," consisting of Anabaptists and paupers. The Swiss government considered these paupers a drain on the economy. They were willing to seek a new life in America due to their poor circumstances. The Anabaptists did not swear oaths or serve as civil officers, but held strongly to their pacifist principles and believed in freedom of worship as well as separation of church and state.<sup>5</sup> For these reasons, these two groups became targets for deportation.

The deportations were carried out by Georg Ritter and Company, a silver-prospecting group that was also interested in colonization. Baron von Graffenried had financial interests in the company, and in 1710 joined the 100 Swiss with approximately 300 German settlers and

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<sup>2</sup> Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Lee Bettis, "Three Centuries of North Carolina Heritage," City of New Bern North Carolina, n.d. <http://www.newbern-nc.org/> (accessed March 20, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> "New Bern, North Carolina." n.d. Tryon Palace Manuscript Collection. Carraway Library. Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens.

<sup>5</sup> Fred J. Allred and Alonzo T. Dill, Ed., "The Founding of New Bern: A Footnote," *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 40(1963). 361-362.

founded the town of New Bern.<sup>6</sup> He organized the founding and the town was laid out between the Neuse and Trent Rivers “in the form of a cross, one arm extending from river to river, and the other from the point, back, indefinitely.”<sup>7</sup> The town became a convenient port for Atlantic shipping traffic due to its location near the two rivers as well as the Pamlico Sound.<sup>8</sup> The settlers prospered for the first year and a half after their settlement. Von Graffenried himself noted that “they managed to building houses and make themselves so comfortable that, they made more progress than the English inhabitants in several years...”<sup>9</sup> Disaster struck on September 22, 1711 when the Tuscarora Indians nearly wiped out the colony. With help from South Carolina, North Carolina Governor Edward Hyde organized a militia to strike back. Led by Colonel John “Tuscarora Jack” Barnwell, the forces defeated the Indians twice near New Bern and accepted a truce in order to save white prisoners held by the Tuscarora.<sup>10</sup>

During the eighteenth century, New Bern was the largest town in eastern North Carolina and became the state’s first permanent capital. In 1750, African Americans comprised nearly half of the town’s population. Shortly after his arrival in North Carolina in 1765, Governor Tryon noted the large number of blacks. He attributed the paucity of slaves in North Carolina’s backcountry to the poverty of the white inhabitants since they seldom owned more than three to ten slaves. On the other hand, coastal planters owned anywhere from fifty to 250 slaves. He wrote that “A Plantation with Seventy Slaves on it, is esteemed a good property. When a man marries his Daughters he never talks of the fortune in Money but 20, 30, 40 Slaves....”<sup>11</sup> In

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<sup>6</sup> Allred and Dill, “The Founding of New Bern: A Footnote,” 361.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Talmage Lefler and Albert Ray Newsome, *The History of A Southern State: North Carolina*, Revised Edition (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 52.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin R. Justesen, *George Henry White: An Even Chance in the Race of Life* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001) 37.

<sup>9</sup> Lefler and Newsome, *The History of A Southern State*, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Lefler and Newsome, *The History of A Southern State*, 58-59.

<sup>11</sup> Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 6-7.

1767, blacks comprised anywhere from forty-one to sixty percent of Craven County's population.<sup>12</sup>

During the colonial period, African American slaves had valuable leisure time. Sundays and sometimes Saturday afternoons were reserved for rest and relaxation. They attended dances, musical performances, and various religious services. They even attended raced horses and placed bets with their white counterparts. During a visit with John Wright Stanly in New Bern, Janet Schaw, author of the narrative *Journal of a Lady of Quality* about her travels in Europe, the West Indies, and North Carolina between 1774 and 1776, saw that "Riders were young Negroes 13 or 14 years old who generally rode bareback."<sup>13</sup>

In order to counteract this freedom, North Carolina passed its first slave code, entitled "An Act Concerning Servants and Slaves," in 1715. The act allowed whites to kill any runaway slave absent for more than two months without punishment and stated that slaves could not leave their "Plantations without a Ticket or White servant along with them..." Any slave accused of a crime was tried by three justices or the precinct court and three slave-holders. Slave executions were public affairs in order to frighten others into submission; the owners of executed slaves were compensated by the General Assembly using revenue from poll taxes collected from slave-holders.<sup>14</sup>

North Carolina lawmakers passed a more elaborate and restrictive slave code in 1741. This new law forbade whites from trading with slaves or servants unless their masters had given consent nor could slaves raise their own livestock. The act was harsh towards rebels and runaways; three or more slaves found guilty of conspiring to rebel could be executed and the

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<sup>12</sup> Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Flora J. Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: Office of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1992) 5.

tribunals were altered to include four slave-holders instead of three and two magistrates instead of three.<sup>15</sup>

The Revolutionary War inspired slave insurrections in North Carolina and Virginia where some blacks, enticed by promises of freedom, defected to the British. With their knowledge of local waterways and roads, African Americans became invaluable to the British forces. Following the Revolution, some slaves did receive their freedom, but had to leave the state; the British sent them to Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone.

In June 1775, Governor Josiah Martin, while planning a British invasion of the South beginning in North Carolina, wrote to the Earl of Dartmouth about the idea of arming slaves. He even advocated a slave revolt in the case of “the actual and declared rebellion of the King’s subjects, and the failure of all other means to maintain the King’s government.”<sup>16</sup> A month later, a slave insurrection did occur, originating in Beaufort County and spreading to Pitt and Craven Counties; on July 8, the Pitt County Safety Committee ordered patrollers to shoot resistant slaves who were armed or found off of their plantations. White guards interrupted the plot and captured about forty African Americans, who revealed the details: the slaves were to “proceed from House to House (Burning as they went) until they arrived in the Back County where they were to be received with open arms by a number of Persons there appointed and armed by Government for their Protection, and as a further reward they were to be settled in a free government of their own.”<sup>17</sup>

The aftermath of the Revolution brought more tension; the irony of newfound American freedom did not escape African Americans. Southern whites scrambled to reaffirm their dominance over the enslaved population. Numerous measures prohibiting manumission and

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<sup>15</sup> Crow, Escott, and Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 57-58.

<sup>17</sup> Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 58.

restricting free blacks emerged during the latter decades of the eighteenth century. Some even tried to re-enslave free blacks, especially those who sided with the British during the Revolution. In 1785, a ship from Nova Scotia manned by free black loyalists docked in New Bern; these African Americans had been slaves in North Carolina prior to the war. Upon learning of their status, the local legislature passed a resolution asking permission from Governor Richard Caswell to secure the ship's passengers. Governor Caswell demanded that the sheriff take the black loyalists into custody and print descriptions of them in newspapers in Virginia, New York, and North Carolina. Eventually they lost their freedom.<sup>18</sup>

North Carolina's black population grew more during the 1790s than in any other decade before the Civil War.<sup>19</sup> The rising racial tensions produced rumors of slave rebellions and attacks throughout North Carolina. A 1792 report in New Bern stated :

The negroes in this town and neighborhood, have stirred a rumor of their having in contemplation to rise against their masters and to procure themselves their liberty; the inhabitants have been alarmed and keep a strict watch to prevent their procuring arms; should it become serious, which I don't think, the worst that could befall us, would be their setting the town on fire. It is very absurd of the blacks, to suppose they could accomplish their views...<sup>20</sup>

Religion played an important role in slave lives in the years following the American Revolution. The first generations born in America faced the tough choice of retaining the practices of their ancestors or converting to religions of their masters. Among the various denominations in the South, Methodists and Baptists were the most successful in converting African Americans. The egalitarian nature of these denominations, which stressed fellowship and

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<sup>18</sup> Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 83.

<sup>19</sup> Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 82.

<sup>20</sup> Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 85.

brotherly love, appealed to the black population in the South by allowing them to participate in services and listen to sermons. They even advocated abolition during their early years.<sup>21</sup>

Methodism became especially popular in North Carolina. Between 1792 and 1790, the number of Methodists increased to over 8,000 whites and 1,800 blacks. One of the religion's pioneers, Francis Asbury, preached against slavery in New Bern in 1796 and condemned Methodist slave owners who "hire out slaves at public places to the highest bidder, to cut skin, and starve them."<sup>22</sup> By 1816, the Methodist ranks swelled to 42,500 blacks and 172,000 whites.<sup>23</sup>

Slavery greatly expanded throughout the South between 1800 and 1860. The white population sought not only to exert total control over the enslaved, but also limit the rights of free blacks as well. In 1826, North Carolina's legislature passed a law prohibiting free blacks from entering the state; nine years later, free African Americans also lost the right to vote, even if they owned property. They also lost other rights such as buying and selling liquor, attending any public school, possessing a gun without a special license, and preaching in public.<sup>24</sup>

The North Carolina General Assembly also passed laws placing more restrictions over the lives of slaves. Teaching a slave to read or write became illegal in 1830; that same year, the General Assembly also required slave owners wishing to manumit a slave to pay a bond of \$500. After obtaining freedom, the slave had to leave North Carolina within ninety days and never return.<sup>25</sup>

The apprenticeship system provided the chance for economic independence for free blacks and new methods of control for their white employers in the antebellum years. There were

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<sup>21</sup> Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> Crow, *The Black Experience in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 51.

<sup>24</sup> Crow, Escott, and Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 48.

<sup>25</sup> Crow, Escott, and Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 48-49.

nearly 2,000 apprentices in white homes during the period.<sup>26</sup> Learning a trade sometimes propelled free blacks to great financial success. For instance, John C. Stanly, the illegitimate son of New Bern landowner John Wright Stanly and an African slave, bought his freedom and became a barber and one of the town's most prominent citizens. With a net worth of more than \$40,000, he used his elevated position to train free African American children so they would not become wards of the court system or go to masters with whom they were not acquainted.<sup>27</sup>

In the ten years prior to the Civil War, slaves made up one-third of North Carolina's entire population; there were also over 30,000 free blacks in the state, but their numbers steadily decreased after 1830.<sup>28</sup> Many slaves and freemen in New Bern worked at the docks loading and unloading ships; some also helped build ships, piloted boats along the river, and caught seafood. They were also cooks, domestics, blacksmiths, builders, craftsmen, and general laborers.<sup>29</sup> The town was a rare place where slaves could receive wage-paying jobs and eventually earn their freedom. Bricklayer Donum Mumford, tailor John R. Green, and John Carruthers Stanly, a barber, were just a few prosperous free blacks who became property owners and well-respected citizens.

Free blacks in New Bern also had more autonomy than their counterparts in other North Carolina towns. The town held a number of economic and educational opportunities. For instance, Benjamin Neale, a black property owner, sold 100 acres of land on February 4, 1833; a free black owning this much land was unheard of in many other areas of the state at the time.<sup>30</sup> In addition to owning property and learning trades, free African Americans had access to education.

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<sup>26</sup> Franklin, John Hope, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1943, 130.

<sup>27</sup> Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860*, 126.

<sup>28</sup> Mark S. Mitchell, "A History of the Black Population of New Bern, North Carolina, 1862-1872," MA Thesis East Carolina University, 1980, 1, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Tryon Palace Council of Friends, *A Walk Through New Bern's African-American Heritage*, n.d.

<sup>30</sup> Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860*, 152.

By 1850, Craven County had the third highest number of free blacks in school with forty-six, behind only Wake and Robeson. The October 25, 1854 issue of the *New Bern Atlantic* newspaper claimed that it was a “notorious fact” that there were day schools set up around the town for people of color.<sup>31</sup>

The Civil War brought great changes to African Americans in New Bern. On March 14, 1862, Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside captured New Bern for the Union and soon runaway slaves began flocking into the city. A Confederate soldier estimated the value of runaway slaves to be \$1 million per week by August 1862.<sup>32</sup>

In *Shifting Loyalties: The Union Occupation of Eastern North Carolina*, Judkin Browning describes the “four pillars of empowerment” for former slaves: escape, employment, enlistment, and education.<sup>33</sup> The first pillar, and perhaps the most important, was escape, because without it, none of the other pillars mattered. The arrival of the Union Army was a beacon of hope to the enslaved African Americans and many, at great risk, fled from their masters and even attempted to rescue friends and loved ones. In December, 1862, hundreds of slaves followed the Union army back to New Bern from an expedition to Kinston.<sup>34</sup> Horace James, a chaplain and the eventual Superintendent of Negro Affairs, estimated in January 1864 that 17,419 African Americans in eastern North Carolina lived behind the Union lines; New Bern held 6,500 that year and nearly 11,000 in 1865.<sup>35</sup>

With this huge influx of African Americans came the problem of providing for and employing them. Employment, the second of Browning’s pillars of empowerment, created

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<sup>31</sup> Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860*, 168-169.

<sup>32</sup> Joe A. Mobley, *James City: A Black Community in North Carolina 1863-1900* (Research Reports from the NC Division of Archives and History, 1987) 2.

<sup>33</sup> Judkin Browning, *Shifting Loyalties: The Union Occupation of Eastern North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press: 2001) 85.

<sup>34</sup> Browning, *Shifting Loyalties*, 86.

<sup>35</sup> Browning, *Shifting Loyalties*, 88.

autonomy, especially jobs that provided the opportunity to own land. Many sought work with the Union army; a soldier noted in April 1862, one month after New Bern fell to the Union, that over seven hundred male African Americans had arrived to search for work.<sup>36</sup> Others found jobs as cooks, domestics, craftsmen, mariners, and even Union spies.

General Burnside appointed Vincent Colyer as superintendent of the poor in the Union-occupied areas of North Carolina.<sup>37</sup> Following the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, the headquarters for the Superintendent of Negro Affairs was located in New Bern. By April 1865, the black population in the city and its surrounding areas had risen to approximately 15,000.<sup>38</sup> African Americans were finally able to establish their own society, complete with churches, schools, a volunteer fire brigade, social and charitable organizations, and public celebrations for the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>39</sup>

Some former slaves even served in the armed forces. They believed that enlistment, the third pillar of empowerment, provided the “greatest opportunity to earn that equal chance with their fellow whites.” Enlisting also provided rations and money for their families. William Singleton, a former slave to a Confederate commander, fled to New Bern and joined the Union army under General Burnside. During the spring of 1862, Singleton, along with over one hundred former slaves, learned to drill and fire a weapon and awaited the day when the Union forces would allow Africans Americans to enlist.<sup>40</sup> When Gen. Edward Wild arrived in New

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<sup>36</sup> Browning, *Shifting Loyalties*, 91.

<sup>37</sup> Mobley, *James City: A Black Community in North Carolina*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Mitchell, 3, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchell, “A History of the Black Population of New Bern, North Carolina, 1862-1872”, 23.

<sup>40</sup> “Visions of Freedom and Civilization Opening before Them: African Americans Search for Autonomy during Military Occupation in North Carolina,” Judkin Browning, *North Carolinians in the Era of the Civil War and Reconstruction*, Paul D. Escott, Ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press) 83.

Bern on May 17, 1863 to recruit black men for the 1<sup>st</sup> North Carolina Colored Volunteer Regiment, within a month he had over five hundred volunteers.<sup>41</sup>

In 1864, a Confederate attack forced more African Americans into New Bern. Horace James, the Superintendent of Negro Affairs, used a plantation on the Trent River as a camp for the black refugees. By the end of the Civil War, the camp became known as James City in his honor, and by 1865 it developed into fully-functioning town, complete with homes, streets, schools, churches, a hospital, and a blacksmith shop. It had its own commerce and local government led by twelve prominent citizens.<sup>42</sup> Despite their labor, the residents did not own the land and in 1867 the property was returned to its antebellum owners thanks to President Andrew Johnson's reconstruction plan. It was sold in 1880 and the new owners imposed rent on the African Americans for their time on the land, even though they claimed that they had received titles from the Freedmen's Bureau. In 1893, the African American residents threw out county officials who served papers of possession for the white owners and on April 25, on orders from the governor, 375 militiamen marched into James City and forced the residents to obey the law. The African Americans eventually scattered and moved to neighboring areas on land that they or other blacks purchased.<sup>43</sup>

After the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, missionaries from the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church in New England ventured to New Bern in order to help the newly freed African American population organize church congregations. The first AME Zion Church in the South was established in the town. Once the Civil War ended, more congregations were set up throughout New Bern. These

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<sup>41</sup> Browning, *Shifting Loyalties*, 99.

<sup>42</sup> "A Place Called James City," 5.

<sup>43</sup> "A Place Called James City," 5-6.

churches gave African Americans platforms and allowed leaders to emerge; some were elected city aldermen, state legislators and senators, and even U.S. Representatives.

Northern missionaries also provided opportunities for newly freed African Americans to achieve the last, and most poignant, pillar of empowerment: education. Former slaves viewed illiteracy as a symbol of their bondage; therefore, upon reaching freedom behind Union lines, many African Americans enrolled in missionary schools. The regional office of the Freedmen's Bureau opened in New Bern in 1867 and helped establish the town's first permanent public schools for African American children.<sup>44</sup>

After the Civil War, blacks and whites clashed in the new post-slavery society. The former slaves sought to gain political and social equality while former slave owners fought to restore their dominance in Southern social order. Confrontations, sometimes violent, occurred often in North Carolina. One such incident took place in 1865 on the New Bern-Roanoke Island ferry. The vessel's captain allegedly shouted racial slurs at several African American soldiers in the 1<sup>st</sup> D.C. Colored Regiment after the group refused to vacate the upper deck, which was traditionally reserved for white patrons before the war. Apparently the soldiers retaliated by kidnapping the captain and his clerk, tying them to a pine tree, whipping them with a leather belt, and robbing them of their money before letting them go.<sup>45</sup> Incidents such as this highlighted the upheaval in Southern society.

During the Reconstruction era, New Bern's African American population enjoyed much political and economic success. By 1890, blacks constituted sixty-seven percent of the population. The city boasted the state's first black-owned bank, the Mutual Aid Bank, which opened in 1897, and a long-lived AME Zion newspaper, *The Star of Zion*. Blacks found jobs

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<sup>44</sup> Justesen, *George Henry White*, 45.

<sup>45</sup> David Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom: Abraham Galloway and the Slaves' Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press: 2012), 183.

throughout the area, especially with the Atlantic and North Carolina Railroads. New Bern produced an elite class of educated African Americans working as lawyers, doctors, teachers, businessmen, and clergy.

This period also saw the rise of prominent African American politicians from Craven County. After gaining the right to vote, the black population sent representatives to the North Carolina General Assembly and even to the United States Congress. Israel Braddock Abbot, a free mulatto born in New Bern in 1843, rose from modest carpenter to elected official. In 1870, he owned \$300 in real estate and \$400 in personal estate; he was elected to the state legislature in 1872 and attended both the 1880 and 1884 Republican national conventions.<sup>46</sup>

George Henry White also left his mark on North Carolina politics. Born in Bladen County, NC in 1852 and graduating from Howard University in 1877, White arrived in New Bern that same year.<sup>47</sup> After serving as the principal of the town's black Presbyterian parochial school for the next five years, he became a member of the North Carolina State Teachers' Educational Association. In 1880, he successfully ran as the Republican candidate for the Craven County seat in the North Carolina House of Representatives.<sup>48</sup> After serving a single term, he failed in his bid for the state senate; he was subsequently elected to the US Congress, representing the Eighth District, in 1885 and served on the Judiciary, Insane Asylum, and Insurance committees. White was even elected to a four-year term as district solicitor of the Second Judicial District.<sup>49</sup> After his election, he ensured that issues plaguing African Americans were given a voice in Congress.

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<sup>46</sup> Robert C. Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners: Black Economic Success in North Carolina, 1865-1915* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 89.

<sup>47</sup> Justesen, *George Henry White*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> William Z. Schenck, "George H. White," Documenting the American South, UNC-Chapel Hill, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/whitegh/bio.html> (accessed Oct. 15, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Schenck, "George H. White".

In addition to his political success, George White was also a religious and social leader in New Bern. He was a founder and elder of the Ebenezer United Presbyterian Church, served as Grand Master of the King Solomon Lodge No. 1 and the Colored Masons North Carolina.<sup>50</sup> In 1894, White moved to Tarboro, a town about eighty miles northwest of New Bern, to run for the Second Congressional District seat. Nicknamed “The Black Second,” this district consisted of nine counties in North Carolina’s coastal plain region, all of which contained large black populations.<sup>51</sup> African Americans outnumbered whites two to one in nearly all of the district’s counties in 1880, making the Republican to Democrat voter ratio nearly the same margin.<sup>52</sup> During his tenure in Congress, he ensured that there were at least twenty black postmasters appointed to his district.<sup>53</sup>

By 1898, Craven County boasted twenty-seven African American magistrates, five deputy sheriffs, and twelve school committeemen; New Bern even had five black policemen.<sup>54</sup> The city also had seventeen black-owned businesses, the most in the state, as well as one of the three Negro schools in eastern North Carolina.<sup>55</sup>

Another prominent African American political figure arose after the Civil War. Abraham Galloway, the biracial son of a slave woman and a free white man, served as a spy for the Union Army during its occupation of New Bern. His passionate nature led to a successful political career. On April 29, 1864, he led a five-man delegation of African Americans to a meeting with

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<sup>50</sup> Schenck, “George H. White”.

<sup>51</sup> Schenck, “George H. White”.

<sup>52</sup> Justesen, *George Henry White*, 47.

<sup>53</sup> Richard L. Watson, Jr, “Furnifold M. Simmons and the Politics of White Supremacy,” in *Race, Class, and Politics in Southern History*, ed. Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Charles L. Flynn, Jr, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 158.

<sup>54</sup> Crow, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 108.

<sup>55</sup> Frenise A. Logan, *The Negro in North Carolina, 1879-1894* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 144.

President Abraham Lincoln.<sup>56</sup> They presented a petition thanking the president for the Emancipation Proclamation while also demanding suffrage and political rights. After shaking hands with Lincoln, the delegation traveled across the North, campaigning for African American voting rights.

Following the war, Galloway moved to the forefront of political life in the town and became a radical voice for African Americans. During a mass meeting of black citizens in August 1865, he delivered a speech demanding education, “free suffrage”(meaning the right to vote without tests or property ownership), and social equality.<sup>57</sup>

He also led a statewide political convention for the National Equal Rights League in Raleigh. In September 1865, Galloway called to order 117 black delegates, representing forty-two of the eighty-nine North Carolina counties. The event overlapped North Carolina’s constitutional convention, where the state’s white conservative leaders discussed ways to impose the antebellum social order.<sup>58</sup> Galloway led the call for full rights of citizenship for African Americans: equal protection under law, regulation of working hours, access to public education, and abolition of discriminatory laws.<sup>59</sup>

In the spring of 1868, Abraham Galloway was elected to the North Carolina state senate, representing New Hanover and Brunswick Counties and became one of three black senators and seventeen black representatives in the General Assembly that year.<sup>60</sup> He fought against discriminatory bills, such as a two-cent tax on railroad passengers aimed at discouraging blacks from purchasing first-class tickets; he voted for the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which granted citizenship and the right to due process and equal protection of the

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<sup>56</sup>Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom*, 115.

<sup>57</sup> Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom*, 179.

<sup>58</sup> Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom*, 183.

<sup>59</sup> Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom*, 185.

<sup>60</sup> Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom*, 203-204.

law to former slaves; and he amended a proposal to segregate senate galleries by allowing a middle section where blacks and whites could voluntarily sit together.<sup>61</sup> He also introduced a bill, which ultimately failed, that limited laborers to a ten-hour work-day, and supported the founding of black labor groups.<sup>62</sup> Galloway's sudden death on September 1, 1870 occurred as the conservative resurgence began to take over North Carolina.

African American political and economic success came at a price, as white lawmakers began to use New Bern as an example. Democrats who pushed for white supremacy printed newspapers containing headlines about "Negro domination" and "Black Men Running Mad" in the eastern parts of North Carolina. After winning control of the state legislature in 1898, the party began to create legislation restricting African Americans. In 1900, the General Assembly passed the Disfranchisement Amendment, which stripped many African Americans of their voting rights by requiring black men to pass literacy tests and pay poll taxes. Jim Crow laws and regulations segregated blacks into separate neighborhoods, schools, and business districts, leading to further regression and the disappearance of job opportunities. In 1913, Clarence Poe, a North Carolina legislator and editor of the *Progressive Farmer*, launched his two-year plan to establish rural segregation throughout the South, modeled after the apartheid policies of South Africa.<sup>63</sup>

From the start of the twentieth century down to World War II, the black population in North Carolina faced segregation and oppression that harkened back to the days of slavery. This period was also marked by key demographic changes. In 1910, there were 64,456 black farmers in the state increasing to 74,849 in 1920, then decreasing to 74,636 by 1930 and 57,428 in 1940.

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<sup>61</sup> Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom*, 206-208.

<sup>62</sup> Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom*, 209.

<sup>63</sup> M. Ruth Little, "The Other Side of the Tracks: The Middle-Class Neighborhoods That Jim Crow Built in Early Twentieth-Century North Carolina," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 7(1997) 268-280, *JStor* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3514397>>, 269.

The total amount of farmland cultivated by black farmers also decreased from 3.3 million acres in 1920 to 2.7 million in 1940.<sup>64</sup> The black population itself steadily declined after 1880; whereas African Americans had comprised one-third of North Carolina's total population during the antebellum period, this percentage fell to 27.5 percent by 1940. Eighteen counties had black majorities in 1900, but only nine did in 1940.<sup>65</sup>

African Americans began migrating from rural to urban areas and then from the South to the North. By 1940, fifty-eight percent of all urban African Americans had come from other urban areas; most blacks from North Carolina moved to the Northeast, especially New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.<sup>66</sup> Despite African American optimism, few job opportunities existed outside of the farms. Low wages, poor housing conditions, and poor school districts pushed the black population to the northern states. The outbreak of World War I created a labor shortage due to the decrease in immigrants, and African Americans sought to fill these positions. During this period, a black laborer in New Bern earned between \$1.50 and \$1.90 a day while a counterpart in a Pennsylvania steel plant received thirty cents an hour and worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week; his income over a two-week period totaled between forty-eight and fifty-four dollars.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the oppression of the Jim Crow system, New Bern's African Americans did their best to build up their own community. They established numerous neighborhoods, churches, and stores, and even created their own business district which, by the 1940s, contained grocery stores, movie theaters, drug stores, funeral homes, professional offices, and other small businesses. They also opened a hospital, public library, and hotel for blacks. Despite the Great

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<sup>64</sup> Crow, Escott, and Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 119-120.

<sup>65</sup> Crow, Escott, and Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 120.

<sup>66</sup> Crow, Escott, and Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 131.

<sup>67</sup> Crow, Escott, and Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 131.

Fire of 1922, which destroyed over 1,000 homes in forty blocks of the town, New Bern's African American areas thrived. Most lived across Queen Street, behind the white cemetery, an area that was located on the edge of town before the Civil War and allowed whites and blacks to intermingle. After emancipation, large numbers of African Americans poured into the area.<sup>68</sup>

Following the Great Depression, many blacks left the area and moved north to find jobs, leaving African Americans as a minority for the first time ever in New Bern.<sup>69</sup> During the 1950s, a street widening project closed down many African American businesses and negatively affected the community.

The two World Wars during the Jim Crow era increased racial tensions. Following World War I, North Carolina blacks expressed their unhappiness with segregation. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) took hold in several cities across the state; by 1920, there were ten branches with more than 1,000 members.<sup>70</sup> The 1920s ushered in the decade of the "New Negro," generations born after Emancipation who did not possess the memory of slave life. The Second World War created more conflict between the white and black populations. African Americans were not keen on joining the war effort if they did not receive equal rights in the country they were fighting for. These tensions would finally boil over nationally and usher in the Civil Rights era.

During the Civil Rights era, New Bern's African Americans joined the fight for equal rights. They, along with some white leaders, waged war against the Jim Crow system and fought to desegregate businesses and schools. New Bern schools began the integration process in 1959 and were officially integrated in 1965. In April 1968, the desegregation process coupled with the

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<sup>68</sup> Little, "The Other Side of the Tracks," 273.

<sup>69</sup> Tryon Palace Council of Friends, *A Walk Through New Bern's African-American Heritage*, n.d.

<sup>70</sup> Crow, Escott, and Hatley, *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, 126.

assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. led to a riot that had to be suppressed by the National Guard; the disturbance damaged twenty-two buildings.<sup>71</sup>

New Bern's African Americans also sought to improve their economic status. With the formation of Coastal Progress in September 1966, state money from the North Carolina Fund was funneled into Craven, Jones, and Pamlico Counties to address poverty, unemployment, lack of health services, and poor education in the region. Local whites disapproved of the organization due to the fact that it principally served African Americans.<sup>72</sup>

New Bern's African American population also used the ballot box to institute change. Due to the passage of the Disenfranchisement Amendment, only twenty-five percent of voting-age African Americans in New Bern had registered or voted in any municipal election between 1900 and 1945.<sup>73</sup> The Civil Rights Movement galvanized local activists, like Alphonso Morris. Morris presented a petition to the New Bern Board of Aldermen in March 1968 which demanded constitutional rights for African Americans in the town as well as increased employment of blacks in city government. His actions set the tone for a more aggressive approach towards seeking civil rights.<sup>74</sup>

With the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African Americans in New Bern and across the nation gained equal access to the polls. The May 1968 primary featured an unprecedented number of African American candidates, not only in New Bern, but also across the state. Candidates from Craven County included, Leon C. Nixon, the county's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) president, attorney John H. Harmon, and Leander R.

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<sup>71</sup> Samford and Spalding, "Background Information on African American History in New Bern and North Carolina," 14.

<sup>72</sup> Karen M. Hawkins, "Rising Phoenix-Like: The African American Struggle and Mobilization for Political Rights in New Bern, North Carolina, 1968-1979," 85, no. 4 (October 2008), 389.

<sup>73</sup> Hawkins, "Rising Phoenix-Like," 379.

<sup>74</sup> Hawkins, "Rising Phoenix-Like," 388.

Morgan. Even though none of the African Americans seeking office made it past the primary that year, their campaigns and support roused North Carolina's black constituents. Between May 1967 and April 1969, the number of registered voters in New Bern's predominately black Fourth Ward rose by 500. Two factors may have contributed to this rise: year-round voter registration, which gave African Americans, who often worked long hours or were employed in seasonal occupations, more time to register, and the formation of the Craven County Voters' League (CCVL), an all-black partisan organization created by New Bern's NAACP chapter. Both events occurred in 1968 and expanded opportunities for African Americans to get involved in local politics.<sup>75</sup>

The 1971 city election yielded three black candidates, including Morgan who won the office of alderman of New Bern's Second Ward. Between 1970 and 1975, the number of black elected officials in North Carolina rose from 62 to 194.<sup>76</sup> Leander Morgan became New Bern's first black mayor in 1977. In a surprising outcome, he gathered fifty-five percent of the votes cast in New Bern's Fifth Ward, where sixty-seven percent of the voters were white.<sup>77</sup> He won re-election twice in the next decade.

African Americans played a crucial role in the history of New Bern and Craven County. Freeman like John Carruthers Stanly found ways to become successful entrepreneurs. Prominent political figures, such as George H. White and Abraham Galloway led the charge for equality in during Reconstruction. After the late 1980s, the leadership at Tryon Palace began to take notice of these stories and began to weave them into the site's interpretation

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<sup>75</sup> Hawkins, "Rising Phoenix-Like," 394.

<sup>76</sup> Hawkins, "Rising Phoenix-Like," 401.

<sup>77</sup> Hawkins, "Rising Phoenix-Like," 408.

## **Chapter Three: The African American Research Project**

### **Tryon Palace in the Twentieth Century**

Despite the significance of African American history surrounding Tryon Palace, the site's interpretation remained whitewashed from its inception until nearly the twenty-first century. The early efforts to save Tryon Palace during the 1940s stemmed from the building's association with North Carolina's colonial history and its distinct architecture, not from a desire to convey accurately the history of all of New Bern's residents. As with many historic sites at that time, presenting an accurate view of history was not a priority during Tryon Palace's early years. The "George Washington Slept Here" argument for historic preservation is relevant to Tryon Palace, since George Washington did in fact visit the site and attended a party. This particular argument justifies saving a historic building or site simply due to its connection, no matter how tenuous, to a famous historical figure. Leaders shied away from interpreting actual history during the site's inception; their main focus was simply preserving the decorative aspects of the Palace.

While the Tryon Palace Commission was organizing efforts to restore the Palace during the 1940s, the African American population in New Bern was declining. Due to the "Great Migration," blacks became a minority in the town by 1940; in ten years, African Americans went from 49.4% to 42.7% of New Bern's total population. On the other hand, the opening of the restored Tryon Palace in 1959 created a boom in the white population of the city in the form of tourists.<sup>1</sup> A decline in the African American population led to declining political power, and less political power meant that there were fewer black voices speaking out against discrimination in the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Medlin, "Reclaiming First-Class Citizenship: The African-American Struggle and Mobilization for Political Rights in New Bern, North Carolina (1948-1979)," MA Thesis, North Carolina State University, 26.

Table 1: Population of New Bern (1920-1970)<sup>2</sup>

Year	Total Population	% of African Americans in Total Population
1920	12,198	55.2%
1930	11,981	52.3%
1940	11,815	49.4%
1950	15,812	42.7%
1960	15,717	41.3%
1970	14,660	38.5%

Reconstruction of Tryon Palace began in 1951. Gertrude S. Carraway spearheaded the efforts by locating the Palace’s original blueprints, finding financial benefactors such as Maude Moore Latham, and finding artifacts and furniture. To guide patrons through the house and gardens, she hired thirty-six hostesses who learned extensively about the history of the building and its furnishings from Carraway herself.<sup>3</sup> But their lessons revolved around the appearance of the building and how the inhabitants used each room.

All around Tryon Palace, Jim Crow laws kept New Bern’s black and white populations separate. The site officially opened to the public on April 10, 1959, four years after the landmark *Brown vs. Board* decision; school integration had officially begun in Craven County two days prior on April 8, when four high schools were ordered to desegregate within the next school year.<sup>4</sup> But the Supreme Court’s order for the integration of America’s public schools did not extend to historic sites. That same year, New Bern switched to an at-large election system, which required candidates to gain the majority of votes from all five of the city’s wards instead of

<sup>2</sup> Meldin, “Reclaiming First-Class Citizenship,” 26.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Perry, “The Power of Gertrude,” *Our State* <<http://www.ourstate.com/gertrude-carraway>>.

<sup>4</sup> Medlin, “Reclaiming First-Class Citizenship,” 35.

simply the majority of votes within the ward where he or she resided. Since African Americans constituted a minority of the voting population, this measure made it difficult for them to elect their preferred candidates.<sup>5</sup>

Despite attempts to curb their influence, African Americans continued to press for equality in 1959. The Reverend G.J. Hill, one of the chief leaders of the New Bern chapter of the NAACP, ran for a position on the Board of Alderman in the 1959 municipal election. His campaign symbolized the growing bitterness among the African American population of New Bern and their efforts to elect someone who sympathized with their interests. In June of that year, the state granted the upper and middle-class white residents permission to establish the town of Trent Woods; this new suburban development was indicative of the resistance of whites to the impending integration.<sup>6</sup>

The white population may have had to relinquish political power, but they could still control the history being interpreted at Tryon Palace. With all of the social and political changes happening around the Palace, the site remained a bastion of solitude for white Americans. There, they could escape the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement and immerse themselves in an idealized past. Whether intentional or not, the Tryon Palace Commission created a representation that built upon the prevailing myth of the South as “genteel, beautiful, romantic, marked by honor and nobility, and filled with chaste white women and generally upstanding, brave white men.”<sup>7</sup> For example, professors and local historians conducted oral history interviews for various projects concerning New Bern. One interview, conducted by Dr. Joseph Patterson in September 1992 for the “Memories of New Bern” project, contains numerous references to Tryon Palace. The interviewee, Dr. Dale T. Millns, was born in Ohio but moved to New Bern to work as a

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<sup>5</sup> Medlin, “Reclaiming First-Class Citizenship,” 37.

<sup>6</sup> Medlin, “Reclaiming First-Class Citizenship,” 42.

<sup>7</sup> Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 9.

physician at a local hospital during the 1950s. He served as alderman from 1957 to 1961, then as mayor from 1961 to 1963.<sup>8</sup> During this interview, Dr. Millns describes his interest in Tryon Palace and his involvement with the Commission during the early days of the organization. He stated that he could “remember the grumbling in those days.” People in New Bern were not very supportive of the Palace’s restoration and thought that the money could be put to better use. He believed that in 1992, the year that the interview was conducted, Tryon Palace was appreciated and had a “far reaching influence” in the area.<sup>9</sup>

As mayor of New Bern, Dr. Millns served as an ex-officio member of the Tryon Palace Commission. Members of the Commission were not paid and did not gain anything financially by serving; in fact, being on the Commission cost money. Dr. Millns praised the generosity of the board by describing the lavish banquets and parties they hosted at the Governor Tryon Hotel.<sup>10</sup> Although he makes no mention of the race of the Commission members, it is safe to assume that there were no African American members.

Dr. Millns stated that Tryon Palace had a far reaching influence on the community. By contrast, African Americans interviewed during the “Memories of New Bern” project barely discussed Tryon Palace. If they mentioned the site at all, it was only in passing as they discussed their employment at the site. One can infer from these interviews that New Bern’s white population placed more value on the site than its black residents.

The main purposes behind the efforts to preserve the site related to its association with the colonial past and for the architectural history. The Tryon Palace Commission viewed the structure as a patriotic symbol and one of the most beautiful examples of Georgian architecture

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<sup>8</sup> Dr. Dale T. Millns, interview by Dr. Joseph Patterson, “Memories of New Bern Oral History Project,” September 8, 1992, transcript, New Bern-Craven County Public Library, <<http://newbern.cpclib.org/research/monb.html>>, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Dale T. Millns, interview by Dr. Joseph Patterson.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Dale T. Milns, intewview by Dr. Joseph Patterson.

in America. Maude Moore Latham stated that “the restored palace may become the loveliest shrine of its period anywhere in America.”<sup>11</sup> While visiting the Tryon Palace Commission in 1956, Dr. Edward P. Alexander, who was serving as Vice President and Director of Interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg, said that the purpose of restoring historic houses was to “recreate the past in order that the future learn from it.”<sup>12</sup> But this past was filled with white, upper-class men. This style of interpretation praises and preserves the lives of “Super Patriots,” a generic term meaning any rich, white male historical figure during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

During the Civil Rights era, Williamsburg received criticism for ignoring the historical presence of African Americans at the site. A *New York Times* reporter even wrote a disparaging article calling Williamsburg a “historical parlor game.”<sup>13</sup> The site also received numerous letters complaining about the “serious gap...in historical reality” during this time period. As a result, the directors added social historians to the staff during the mid-1970s to revamp the overall interpretation and programs.<sup>14</sup> They intended to create a new overall theme that would incorporate ignored groups, such as minorities, lower classes, and women, into Williamsburg’s story.

The immense social changes in America during the 1960s and 1970s inspired numerous critiques of historical interpretations that focused mainly on upper class white men. Due to its high status as a tourist destination, Colonial Williamsburg faced more scrutiny than its more obscure counterparts. While the leadership at Tryon Palace did not receive much criticism, they knew that they could not deny the existence of African Americans in colonial New Bern forever.

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<sup>11</sup> Barnes, Jeanne L., “Deconstructing Tryon Palace: Exploring the Colonial Revival in Twentieth Century New Bern, North Carolina,” MA Thesis, University of North Carolina-Wilmington, 2005, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Barnes, “Deconstructing Tryon Palace,” 57.

<sup>13</sup> Carter, “A People With No Past Have No Future,” 31.

<sup>14</sup> Carter, “A People With No Past Have No Future,” 35.

The site began to move toward a more inclusive interpretation. Slowly, but surely, small details began to emerge at Tryon Palace during the early 1990s.

Prior to the 1990s, Tryon Palace had a whitewashed interpretation. The site mostly escaped the Revisionist firestorm that engulfed larger museums and historic sites, such as Colonial Williamsburg. After years of glorifying the “Super Patriot,” Tryon Palace began gradually to incorporate African American history into the site’s overall interpretation in the later part of the twentieth century. Although the fires of the Civil Rights Movement had slowly died down, race relations remained a sensitive topic and Tryon Palace maintained a predominantly white interpretation. The year 1983 proved to be monumental, for both New Bern and Tryon Palace. That year, the unfair at-large election system in New Bern was abolished for not being in accord with the Voting Rights Act. African Americans finally had an equal chance to elect their candidates and by the end of the decade, New Bern had a black mayor.<sup>15</sup>

That same year, at Tryon Palace, a significant turning point came with the hiring of Kay Williams as director. She had big shoes to fill as the first director since Gertrude Carraway’s retirement ten years prior. Instead of a leader who served as a financial backer and who focused on decorative arts and aesthetics, Tryon Palace gained a director who concentrated more on the historical aspect of the site.

Kay Williams had studied for two years at Women’s College in Greensboro (later the University of North Carolina-Greensboro) before transferring to the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and graduating with a degree in English and a minor in art in 1965. Her interest in economic development led Williams to work with the Swiss Bear Downtown

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<sup>15</sup> Medlin, “Reclaiming First-Class Citizenship,” 125.

Development and Preservation and Historical Society in New Bern. Her goal was to link Tryon Palace and the downtown community.<sup>16</sup>

As director of Tryon Palace, Williams focused on creating a more accurate historical interpretation while generating excitement about the site. She added new objects to the collection “so people wouldn’t say ‘I’ve been there’ and not come again” and acquired more period specific decorations instead of utilizing donated items.<sup>17</sup> Under her leadership, the staff began to recognize the vast contributions of African Americans to New Bern’s history; she also had the benefit of a newly integrated society. African Americans had made huge political and social gains by the mid-1980s and it was time to address their story in public history.

Tryon Palace’s leaders gradually began to change the tour scripts for the site’s historic houses to include details about African Americans. Tour scripts are an important resource for museum and historic sites. They contain the information that the leadership of the site wants guests to learn. Some museums allow the guides freedom to deviate from the script or disregard certain pieces of information due to time constraints; other sites train docents to relay all of the information explicitly without changing or adding details. Scripts are crucial to a museum’s overall interpretation, and Tryon Palace’s scripts indicate that the site was slowly moving toward incorporating African American history.

A visit to the site during the early 1990s would yield scattered bits of information about African Americans. Tour scripts from the period reveal small facts inserted into the tours mentioning slaves and free blacks in the historic houses and buildings. A 1990 exhibit in the New Bern Academy mentioned free blacks and runaway slaves who fled to Union-occupied New Bern during the Civil War. In 1992, Tryon Palace began including extensive information about

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<sup>16</sup> Sue Book, “Forward-looking Kay Williams reflected,” *Sun Journal*, October 17, 2012  
<http://www.newbernsj.com/news/local/forward-looking-kay-williams-reflected-1.31332>

<sup>17</sup> Book, “Forward-looking Kay Williams reflected.”

John Carruthers Stanly, the illegitimate, half African son of John Wright Stanly, in the Stanly House. The script also contains information about the relationship between John Carruthers Stanly and his white half-brother John Stanly Jr. It does not shy away from the difficulties of being a free black in eighteenth and nineteenth century New Bern.<sup>18</sup>

The script for the Dixon-Stevenson House, written in 1989 and revised in 1996, openly states that George Dixon owned slaves. It includes 1830 census data which reveals that a black apprentice and five female slaves were living in the house at the time. The script also tells of three slaves, Sarah, Lydia, and Andrew, who were listed in George Dixon's 1835 and 1836 mortgages. It is unclear if Sarah and Lydia were among the five slaves listed in the 1830 census.<sup>19</sup> The script also mentions that George Dixon, a tailor, taught apprentices the trade; these apprentices did include free and enslaved African Americans.

Despite these small steps, most of the buildings did not address the contributions of African Americans. Early scripts for the palace did not contain any information about slaves; this script was revised twice in 1992 and again in 1993. Another script written in 1999 advises docents to mention the duties of steward, butler, lady's maid, and other servants in the palace, but makes no mention of their race.

According to Sharon Bryant, who began working as African American Outreach Coordinator in 2002, there were few African American interpreters prior to 2000. White interpreters worked in the Kitchen Office at the Palace, and visitors only heard about the type of work slaves performed at the Stanly House.<sup>20</sup> Often, the information provided on the tour

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<sup>18</sup> "John Wright Stanly House Interpretation," tour script, Tryon Palace Archives, Carraway Library, Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens (Sept. 1992).

<sup>19</sup> "Dixon-Stevenson House Interpretation," tour script, Tryon Palace Archives, Carraway Library, Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens (1989, rev. 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Sharon Bryant, interview by Stephanie Hardy, Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens, Feb. 21, 2012.

depended on the diversity in the tour group. For instance, if a group was all white, the docents would not include information on African American history.<sup>21</sup>

Tryon Palace's education department published a newsletter aimed at elementary students and teachers called *The Living History Classroom*. The publication, printed twice each school year, included articles, activities, and discussion questions on North Carolina history and culture. A February 1993 edition focused on black history at Tryon Palace and the New Bern area. It discussed African Americans in North Carolina and New Bern and also taught students how to talk about difficult subjects, such as slavery. The newsletter also mentioned real African Americans who lived at the palace and around New Bern.

These efforts, while small, demonstrated that Tryon Palace was attempting to change into a site that displayed a more inclusive history. These changes did not, however, bring African American history to the public; tour guides were provided the information but did not always share it with visitors. If a docent had an all-white tour group, he or she would often leave out information regarding African Americans; conversely, if the group contains black visitors or white patrons who inquired about slaves, then docents would include the facts from their scripts.<sup>22</sup> Despite the efforts of the staff, the site still did not become a destination for tourists seeking African American history.

### **The African American Research Project: Concept and Creation**

The year 1999 marked a major turning point in Tryon Palace's interpretation of African Americans. That year, the site began the African American Research Project from which many recent programs and lectures on black history have since developed. Originally the brainchild of

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<sup>21</sup> Sharon Bryant interview.

<sup>22</sup> Sharon Bryant interview.

director Kay Williams, this three-year initiative began as an effort to “research, document, and publicize the rich history of African Americans in New Bern and the surrounding Neuse Basin.”<sup>23</sup> The project was a solution for Tryon Palace’s shortcomings in interpreting African American history. Williams referred to the initiative as one of the “real” major contributions she made to the site.<sup>24</sup>

Site leaders made the research and documentation of local African American history a priority in order to provide its visitors with a more diverse history. The project inspired a new slogan for the site: “Many Stories, One History.” This new philosophy was meant to be inclusive for all visitors and to show Tryon Palace’s new commitment to diversity. To meet the projected cost of \$421,800, Tryon Palace received various grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, the Kellenberger Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and other organizations. The Tryon Palace Council of Friends, the site’s main membership and fundraising organization, provided most of the project’s start up costs.

The need for such a project stemmed from the area’s diverse racial history. Tryon Palace’s leaders believed that many of its patrons had little knowledge regarding the contribution of African Americans to the development of New Bern and the lower Neuse region, so they initiated the project in order to provide visitors with “a more balanced and inclusive story of the region’s past.”<sup>25</sup> The project utilized the expertise of each member of its advisory committee and also archaeological evidence and material culture.

The main objectives of the project were to promote public awareness of the contributions of African Americans to the area’s history, develop scholarly publications and other materials for

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<sup>23</sup> “New African American Research Project Begins at Tryon Palace,” Carraway Library, Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens press release (New Bern, NC, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Book, “Forward-looking Kay Williams reflected.”

<sup>25</sup> New African American Research Project Begins at Tryon Palace” Carraway Library.

fourth- and eighth-grade students, and create new programs and exhibits for black history. The project required an advisory board of six leading scholars: Dr. David Cecelski of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; Dr. Jeffrey Crow, who was serving as a director of the NC Division of Archives and History; Dr. David Dennard of East Carolina University; Dr. Glenda Gilmore of Yale University; Dr. John Haley from the University of North Carolina-Wilmington; and Dr. Freddie Parker from North Carolina Central University. Patricia Samford, an archaeologist and former Tryon Palace staff member, and architectural historian Peter Sandbeck also provided part-time project direction.<sup>26</sup>

The committee's main role was researching African American history relevant to the area, advising programs to guarantee accurate interpretations, and ensuring that Tryon Palace's administration and programs aligned with the site's new inclusive message. In 2000, the site created the new position of African American Outreach Coordinator. Following the first three years, the African American Research Project became an ongoing component of the site's interpretation.

Among the goals of the African American History Research Project was to develop publications for both scholars and the general public. The committee especially wanted to focus on fourth- and eighth-graders due to the emphasis of North Carolina history in their respective curricula. These publications included books, brochures, educational handouts, and even a special section of the Tryon Palace website for publishing research findings.<sup>27</sup> A new brochure detailing the new Christmas festival called *Jonkunnu* appeared in the early 2000s. Catherine Bishir, an architectural historian and curator of architectural records at NC State University Libraries, began writing a book on African American artisans in New Bern from 1770 to 1900,

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<sup>26</sup>“New African American Research Project Begins at Tryon Palace”

<sup>27</sup> “New African American Research Project Begins at Tryon Palace”

which was published in October of 2013.<sup>28</sup>The program also aided in the development of the African American perspective to the exhibits in the new North Carolina History Center.

In a culmination of its efforts, the leadership at Tryon Palace adopted the slogan “One History, Many Stories” to describe its more-inclusive interpretation during the early 2000s. The brochures distributed with this slogan described Tryon Palace as a place that tells North Carolina history using many narratives: enslaved and free, craftsmen and apprentices, men, women, and children, and white, black, and Native American. As of 2012, the African American Advisory Board continued to meet to discuss current programs and plan for new ones. The leadership at Tryon Palace took care to advertise programs and events pertaining to African American history in order to show that the site made great strides in diversifying its interpretation.

### **Jonkunnu**

The first accomplishment of the African American Research Project was the creation of a Christmas program called *Jonkunnu* in 2000. Tryon Palace received a financial award from the North Carolina Humanities Council to develop and reenact the African America festival. Pronounced “John Canoe,” this celebration dates back to colonial-era Jamaica and has African roots. Historians have found evidence of a similar custom in Nigeria called “Ikunle,” which involved participants wearing wooden masks and singing through the streets in order to honor ancestors.<sup>29</sup> In the Caribbean and South American, blacks even wore white masks and white

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<sup>28</sup> Laura Oleniacz, “Book to explore lives of black artisans in New Bern,” *Sun Journal* (December 29, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Jermaine O. Archer, *Antebellum Slave Narratives: Cultural and Political Expressions of Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 65.

gloves, throwing the plantation societies into chaos for a day by mirroring their owners with this “racial inversion.”<sup>30</sup>

The custom made its first appearance in North Carolina sometime before 1824 and was observed mainly on plantations along the coast. *Jonkonnu* appears in records from Edenton and Creswell, both situated in the northeast part of the state, near the Albemarle Sound, as well as Wilmington in the south. There are also instances of the custom being performed as far west as Hillsborough and Durham in the piedmont. During the celebration, the slaves would dress up in costumes and sing and dance up to their owner’s house. Led by the “rag-man,” dressed in an outfit decorated in brightly colored rags, and the “fancy man” who wore a top hat and tails, the slaves would perform in front of the “great house.”<sup>31</sup> They played banjoes and beat African-style drums call “gumba boxes.” The celebration would end once the inhabitants of the house paid a coin.

The most unusual part of the celebration occurred at the end of each performance: the lead dancer would shake hands with the (usually white) owner of the house. Not only was *Jonkunnu* a way for slaves to celebrate their African heritage, but it also allowed them, if only for one night, to be equal to their masters. This small gesture provided slaves with pride and a way to celebrate their heritage. As early as the 1850s, *Jonkonnu* began to disappear from North Carolina and was all but eradicated by the turn of the century.<sup>32</sup>

Somerset Place, a historic plantation located in Creswell, NC, approximately two hours northeast of New Bern, hosted a similar festival in 1988 as part of a high-profile “homecoming”

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth A. Fenn, “‘A Perfect Equality Seemed to Reign’: Slave Society and Jonkunnu.” *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 65, no. 2 (April 1988) 136.

<sup>31</sup> Fenn, “A Perfect Inequality Seemed to Reign,” 133.

<sup>32</sup> Fenn, “A Perfect Inequality Seemed to Reign,” 133-134.

event which brought together descendants of the enslaved population at the plantation.<sup>33</sup> This program became a model for Tryon Palace as the site's leadership searched for ways to add a prominent African American living history program to the interpretation. Simon Spalding, who was hired at Tryon Palace's Living History Programs Manager in 1998, spearheaded the research and planning for the event. His supervisor, archaeologist Patricia Samford, oversaw the project as Director.<sup>34</sup> Spalding was a professional musician who also received exposure to the field of ethnomusicology and historical interpretation during his time at the University of California at Berkeley in the late 1970s.<sup>35</sup> Spalding hired two professional musicians for the project: Sierra Leonean drummer Braima Moiwei and Obakunle Akinlana, an African American who was trained in Yoruba musical and spiritual traditions during his travels to Nigeria.<sup>36</sup> The three men chose appropriate songs and recruited performers from the community.

The leadership at Tryon Palace utilized many avenues to market the *Jonkunnu* celebration. They organized two question and answer sessions about the festival in mid-September and late November 2000, and they also launched a huge print and air campaign. Tryon Palace's Council of Friends printed and distributed 40,000 brochures and 5,000 copies of its magazine to promote *Jonkunnu* while placing ads in the December 2000 editions of *New Bern Magazine* and *The Sun Journal*. A local television station, an ABC affiliate, held a live show at Tryon Palace on December 8, 2000 and filmed a preview performance.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Kenneth Bilby, "Conjuring the Ghost of John Canoe: Re-Imagining a 'Slave Festival' in the New South," Paper prepared for seminar on the theme of "Religion and Festive Culture" at the Center for Research in Festive Culture, Newberry Library: Chicago, November 21, 2008, Provided by Simon Spalding, August 19, 2013, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Bilby, "Conjuring the Ghost of John Canoe," 8.

<sup>35</sup> Bilby, "Conjuring the Ghost of John Canoe," 8-9.

<sup>36</sup> Bilby, "Conjuring the Ghost of John Canoe," 12.

<sup>37</sup> Jonkunnu marketing, African American Research folder, Tryon Palace Manuscripts, Carraway Library, Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens (New Bern, NC).

The staff at Tryon Palace heavily promoted *Jonkunnu* as an African American celebration and used it as the flagship program of its new diverse interpretation. They did not avoid *Jonkunnu*'s connections to the slave trade; publication materials openly stated that the celebration gave African Americans some form of resistance against the horrors of slavery. Brochures for the festival explained its origins and meanings, and suggested topics and activities for teachers. Simon Spalding strove to encourage active involvement from New Bern's African American community as well as to create a sense of cultural ownership among the African American performers. He held open meetings during which he explained the historical background of *Jonkunnu* and stated that his responsibility as a historic interpreter was to tell the whole story of New Bern's holiday celebrations, not just the partial story displayed during the site's colonial candlelight celebrations.<sup>38</sup>

African American residents in New Bern had many questions, as well as some suspicions. They wanted to know what exactly *Jonkunnu* was and why Tryon Palace was reaching out to them. Many asked Spalding why he, a white man from California, was so interested in recreating an African American slave tradition. They expressed concern that the program would be "minstrelsy" or inaccurate. Spalding reassured his audiences that he and the leadership at Tryon Palace desired to celebrate the traditions and that they had nothing but good intentions.<sup>39</sup>

*Jonkunnu* finally debuted during the 2000 holiday season and quickly became a great source of pride for the site. The local television station returned and filmed a December 15, 2000 evening performance which aired during the six o'clock and eleven o'clock broadcasts the following evening.

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<sup>38</sup> Bilby, "Conjuring the Ghost of John Canoe," 16.

<sup>39</sup> Bilby, "Conjuring the Ghost of John Canoe," 17.

The show became so popular that it began traveling. It was performed on January 6, 2001 at the gubernatorial parade in Raleigh and at Trent Park Elementary School on December 10, 2001. The leaders of Tryon Palace were so proud of their reenactments of the celebration that they even included an exhibit about it in the Regional History Museum inside the new NC History Center. Visitors can view a video about *Jokunnu* that includes its history, songs, dances, and testimonies from some of the participants. The Wells Fargo Foundation also provided a grant to Tryon Palace to fund a coloring book about *Jonkunnu*. The popularity of the celebration also reached other parts of the state; the staff of Bellamy Mansion, an antebellum mansion built by slave and free black artisans, developed their own *Jonkunnu* program in December 2007.<sup>40</sup>

### **Other Projects and Events**

A research component of the African American Research Project was “An Uneasy Freedom: The Free Black Community in North Carolina’s Lower Neuse River Basin, 1790-1860.” This initiative, which also began in 1999, sought to analyze the characteristics of the free black population during the antebellum period, such as its social and economic stratification, its interaction with the larger society, and the differences between urban and rural free blacks. The researchers wanted to focus on the following themes: identity, gender, economics, and the decrease in political and social rights of free African Americans during the nineteenth century.<sup>41</sup>

This research project grew out of Tryon Palace’s interests in documenting the lives of African Americans in an area that supported a large free black and slave population, as well as the site’s desire to grow as a research organization. “An Uneasy Freedom” was also meant to add

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<sup>40</sup> Angela Mack, “‘Community gathering’ marks holiday tradition,” *StarNews Online*, Dec. 28, 2007 < <http://www.starnewsonline.com/article/20071228/NEWS/712280363>>.

<sup>41</sup> An Uneasy Freedom: The Free Black Community in North Carolina’s Lower Neuse River Basin, 1790-1860, report manuscript, September 1, 2000 Carraway Library, Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens (New Bern, NC).

to the site's interpretive program by providing more information about local African American history, provide an accurate interpretation for patrons, and increase public outreach.

The researchers on the project were scholars who had already examined and published information about African American history in the region. These scholars included: Robert Scull, history instructor at Craven Community College and author of *Free Blacks in Craven County in 1850*; Dr. Julie Richter, a consultant from Colonial Williamsburg who specialized in African American history; Howard University doctoral candidate Habib I. Warmack; and independent researchers Cynthia Satterfield and Nancy Van Dolsen. The directors were Dr. Patricia Samford, an archaeologist and author of *Power Runs in Many Channels: Subfloor Pits and West African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colonial Virginia*, and Tryon Palace's African American research coordinator, Holly Fisher.<sup>42</sup>

A major goal of the African American Research Project was to engage the public and scholars in black history. The site's African American Outreach Coordinator began to look to the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) for inspiration. This organization, which was founded in 1915 by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, works to research, promote, and preserve black culture.<sup>43</sup> In 1999, Fisher began attending the Association's events to gain ideas. She borrowed their concept of holding series of lectures following one broad theme. She even recruited speakers from the ASALH to begin the lecture series.<sup>44</sup>

Tryon Palace held one lecture every other month with speakers ranging from professional historians to actors playing African American historical figures. While the overarching theme of the lectures was African American history, they had various topics and methods. Some lectures

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<sup>42</sup> Patricia Samford, *Power Runs in Many Channels: Subfloor Pits and West African-based Spiritual Traditions in Colonial Virginia* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC: 2000).

<sup>43</sup> "About ASALH," Association for the Study of African American Life and History, last modified November 10, 2011, <http://www.asalh.org/aboutasalhmain.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Sharon Bryant interview.

consisted of a historian or author simply presenting information while others featured performances, such as plays or concerts.

In April 2000, the African American Advisory Board met to discuss the condition and reception of the programs stemming from the Research Project, including the African American Lecture Series. The Board loved the program. They were pleased with the warm reception not only from the black community, but also from the education community to the lecture series. The Board also appreciated the involvement of local black churches, fraternities and sororities, the local chapter of the NAACP, and various historians and educators.<sup>45</sup>

Due to the popularity of the African American Lecture Series, it continued even after the main research phase of the African American Research Project ended in 2002. The African American Advisory Board continued to meet each April and October to discuss the Lecture Series' condition and future ideas. In 2012, the theme of the lectures related to the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. Topics have included slavery and African American troops on both sides of the war. As of 2014, the tour became self-guided and run through he

The African American Lecture Series is also an example of Eichstedt and Small's theory of "segregation/marginalization." The lectures were a separate program and visitors had to attend these lectures specifically to hear special information pertaining to local African American history. However, since lecture series were organized by theme, like Civil War and garden lectures, it made sense to have the African American Lecture Series as a separate entity.

Another major step for Tryon Palace was a trip to Ghana in November 2010. Site leaders wanted to explore New Bern's racial history further. Many slaves who arrived in the area had ties to West Africa. So the Tryon Palace Commission partnered with the African American Civil

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<sup>45</sup> Sharon Bryant interview.

War Committee to sponsor the excursion.<sup>46</sup> The trip was meant to celebrate African and African American contributions to the area by understanding their roots. The trip coincided with New Bern's 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary and was called "Voyage of Discovery to Ghana, West Africa." The expedition included twenty-one adults and nine local students.<sup>47</sup>

The group sought to learn more about the slave trade and the relationship between the culture of West Africa and eastern North Carolina. The travelers saw the slave castle at Elmina. This castle, used by the Portuguese from 1491 to the seventeenth century, was the last stop for captured Africans before being put onto ships and transported across the Atlantic. The tour of the castle evoked painful emotions, especially from the African Americans in the group. By traveling to Ghana, the group hoped to tie together the African American and West African traditions.

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<sup>46</sup> "Heritage trip planned to West African nation of Ghana," *Sun Journal* (September 10, 2011) <http://www.newbernsj.com/articles/african-90521-trip-west.html> (accessed June 13, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> *The Voyage of Discovery to Ghana*, DVD, directed by UNC-TV, (2011; directed by UNC-TV, Raleigh, NC).

### **The African American Heritage Walking Tour**

In 2001, Holly Fisher developed a new tour for Tryon Palace called the African American Walking Tour, also known as the African American Heritage Tour. She noticed that all-white tour groups would not hear information about African American history unless someone asked. She also recognized the wealth of information concerning African Americans in New Bern and sought to capitalize on the area's rich history. She gathered extensive information and used it to train docents in explaining African American history.

With thirty-two stops spanning sixteen blocks and information spanning over three hundred years, the tour was an excellent way to convey black history to visitors. It was available between March and June, then again from September to November.

The tour began at the Tryon Palace Visitor Center, where patrons heard about the complex racial history of New Bern during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Then, the docent led the group through downtown New Bern and explained the significance of each site to African American history. The script for this tour was extensive, containing many points and dates for each location and a large amount of background information on blacks in New Bern. The language of the tour script did not shy away from mentioning slaves or the struggles of African Americans. It even discussed the fact that some blacks owned many slaves themselves during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By 2014, the tour became self-guided and the town of New Bern offered maps to interested visitors.

The African American Walking Tour is a complicated subject. While it provided patrons with a great deal of black history around New Bern and Tryon Palace, one can argue that it was shining example of the "segregation" strategy from Eichstedt's and Small's study. Visitors had to

take this specific tour to learn about African Americans instead of hearing the information during the main tours at Tryon Palace. The large number of facts and figures would however have greatly lengthened tours through the Palace and historic homes, causing some visitors to lose interest. Therefore, this tour may have been the best option for educating patrons about New Bern's racial history.

The African American Heritage Tour showcased information about local black history and asserted Tryon Palace's connection to the community. It strove to celebrate the city's rich African American history by offering information that museum visitors did not receive on the site's main tours through the historic buildings. As the project moved forward, Tryon Palace began gradually to become a destination for seekers of African American history.

### **2010-2011 Tour Experiences**

If a guest visited the historic buildings at Tryon Palace in the fall of 2011, he or she would not hear an extensive amount of information about African Americans. Guided tours through the Governor's Palace began every thirty minutes. Although the docents dressed in colonial costumes, they were not first-person interpreters. While walking through the house, they explained the architecture and purpose of the various rooms. They even explained how the governor's family dressed and the food that they ate. When it came to explaining the servants, the tours were vague. Docents described the duties of the steward and the housekeeper, and visitors saw their living quarters, but they did not hear about the race of these servants. There was also a mentioning of lady's maids and cooks. Despite naming the types of servants, the docents did not say anything at all about slaves and only used the word "servant."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I experienced a tour of the Governor's Palace in September of 2011. Of course, I can only comment on my personal experience during the tour and cannot speak on what other visitors may see or hear.

Visitors could tour the Kitchen Office, Blacksmith Shop, and Stable Office at their leisure. There were costumed third-person interpreters in each of these areas. The Kitchen Office utilized African American interpreters who educated guests about eighteenth century dining and food preparation. The Blacksmith shop and Stable Office, where patrons learned about eighteenth century trades and see demonstrations, employed a similar strategy.

In the Hay House, first-person interpreters acted as Robert Hay and his family members. The house contained furniture reproductions that visitors are allowed, and even encouraged, to touch. Although census records showed that Robert Hay had young men, most likely apprentices, living in his home, no one mentioned if any were African American. Perhaps this was due to incomplete evidence. Sometimes, there were slave interpreters in the basement kitchen of the Hay House who explained what slaves ate and how the kitchen operated.<sup>2</sup> African American employees, however, were not always available to play these roles.

Tours through the John Wright Stanly and Dixon houses were self-guided with attendants present to answer questions and describe the house's architecture and ownership history. The names and ages of three slaves (Lydia, Sarah, and Andrew) appeared on George Dixon's 1835 and 1836 mortgages. Guests, however, mostly heard about George Dixon's financial hardships and the history of the house's ownership. Information about John Carruthers Stanly, John Wright Stanly's half-African son, was readily available throughout Tryon Palace, especially in the Regional History Museum, but was not provided to guests in the Stanly House.

Tryon Palace is an excellent example of what Eichstedt and Smalls refer to as "in-between"; this type of institution is actively making an attempt at relative incorporation but still lapses into trivialization or symbolic annihilation. Other examples of this type of museum include the houses of Founding Fathers: Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home in Charlottesville,

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<sup>2</sup> There were no African American interpreters present during any of my visits.

Virginia; Montpelier, James Madison's house at Orange, Virginia; and George Washington's home Mount Vernon in Virginia. Each of these historic house museums interprets a similar time period as the Palace itself and have begun to incorporate African American history in its tours and programs.

In *Voices from the Back Stairs: Interpreting Servants' Lives at Historic House Museums*, Jennifer Pustz writes that during the late 1980s and early 1990s, guides at Monticello referred to the enslaved people as "servants," spoke about them in the passive voice, and made no mention of the possibility that Jefferson had fathered the children of Sally Hemings.<sup>3</sup> During visits in 2003 and 2005, Pustz learned much information about Jefferson's enslaved workforce, including specific details about several slaves; Monticello also offered plantation tours of "Mulberry Row" between April and October which provided even more details about the life of the enslaved population. Despite the "relative incorporation" in the guided tours, the self-guided brochures include some examples of "symbolic annihilation" by calling the slaves "household servants" and using passive voice to describe their work.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, Tryon Palace did not include any African American history in the main tour of the Governor's Palace but offered a separate tour specifically concerning African Americans in New Bern. Mount Vernon functioned in a similar manner by offering a seasonal, separate tour which focused solely on slavery at the site. This allowed docents to focus on George Washington's accomplishments and contributions without highlighting the fact that he was a slave owner. Instead, visitors heard about Washington's slaves in the context of their living quarters. Docents explained the lives of slaves by focusing on what made George Washington different from other slave owners. For instance, a docent stated that Washington was

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Pustz, *Voices from the Back Stair: Interpreting Servants' Lives at Historic House Museums*, Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Pustz, *Voices from the Back Stairs*, 29.

“demanding, but he was humane” and discussed how he privately condemned slavery in his letters.<sup>5</sup>

Colonial Williamsburg offered “Other Half” tours and tours of slave quarters at Carter’s Grove, the site’s secondary location. While on the “Other Half” tours, visitors learned general information about slavery and African Americans during the colonial American period as well as class differences not only between the black and white populations, but also within the races.

All of these sites have evolved from tourist destinations that functioned as nothing more than historic buildings devoted to a particular person or time period, to hallmark institutions for public history. Staff at these sites began to use available information to transform their respective interpretations. As with any other historic site, Tryon Palace’s interpretation was a work in progress and incorporating the large amount of available information into it would take time. Since the main buildings at Tryon Palace, including the palace itself and the other historic homes that make up the site, represent colonial and antebellum history, slavery existed in their context. There is enough information available on the African Americans who lived and worked at each house that the case for “symbolic annihilation” due to the lack of historical evidence does not hold up.

There is documentation of only two of Governor Tryon’s slaves: Tom and Surry. The governor apparently purchased Tom from James Murray in 1766 before the palace was built; the last mention of him dates back to 1773 when a fire destroyed the Tryons’ home in Fort George, New York. Surry is listed as a runaway slave in a 1777 advertisement. He is described as “about

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<sup>5</sup> Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 176-177.

5 Feet 6 Inches high, about 30 Years of Age, well made.”<sup>6</sup> He was also listed in the ad as a “new Negro,” meaning that he was born in Africa.<sup>7</sup>

George W. Dixon, a tailor and owner of the Dixon House, fell deeply into debt so he used his slaves Lydia, Sarah, and Andrew as part of a mortgage in 1830. They were listed as property along with his house and furniture.<sup>8</sup> There is also mention of a free black person in the house, most likely an apprentice or free laborer. An 1830 census recorded only two slaves in the Hay house, a middle-aged female and a young child, under the age of ten.<sup>9</sup>

The wealthy master of the Stanly House, John Wright Stanly, owned sixty slaves. Much is known about one particular slave, John Carruthers Stanly. He gained his freedom in 1795 at the age of 21 and became a successful barber, earning the nickname “Barber Jack.” He was also the illegitimate son of John Wright Stanly himself and an African slave. John C. Stanly became a prosperous freeman in New Bern and was able to buy his wife, children, and brother-in-law out of slavery; in a twist of irony, he also became one of the largest slave owners in the state of North Carolina, since he needed hands to work his farms and businesses.<sup>10</sup> He was so prosperous that he could afford to educate his children. His son ran a respected school for free blacks and his granddaughter, Sara Stanly, attended Oberlin College in Ohio, becoming one of the first African Americans to obtain a college degree.<sup>11</sup>

With such a vast and complex racial history, Tryon Palace has the opportunity to create more interest in the stories of local African Americans. Providing bits of information here and there does not allow visitors to grasp the whole story of a person’s life. African Americans

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<sup>6</sup> “Searching for lost history: Slavery at Tryon Palace.” *The Living History Classroom*. (Fall 2005), 1.

<sup>7</sup> “Searching for lost history,” 1.

<sup>8</sup> “Searching for lost history,”

<sup>9</sup> “Searching for lost history,”

<sup>10</sup> “Searching for lost history,” 10.

<sup>11</sup> “Searching for Lost History: Slavery at Tryon Palace,” 8.

played a crucial role in the political, social, and economic history of New Bern. Therefore, they should play a similar role in Tryon Palace's interpretation.

The African American Research Project opened the floodgates for the inclusion of black history in the site's tours, events, and programs and allowed researchers the opportunity to present a diverse interpretation to visitors.

## Chapter Four

### The North Carolina History Center

The African American Research Project not only transformed Tryon Palace's tours and programs, it also contributed to the exhibits and activities in the new NC History Center. The second phase of the project included planning and implementing new exhibits on African Americans in the History Center.<sup>1</sup> This state-of-the-art, 60,000 square foot building, which opened in 2010, houses the Regional History Museum, the Pepsi Family Center, and the Duffy Exhibit Gallery. It also contains Cullman Performance Hall, where many lectures and special programs are held. With its advanced technology and expansive square footage, the NC History Center, allowed Tryon Palace to build a diverse interpretation from the ground up.

The idea for the NC History Center arose from the negative connotations surrounding historic house museums during the 1990s. Tryon Palace took notice of the creation of contemporary visitor centers at other sites, such as Mount Vernon and Monticello. Soon, the leadership at Tryon Palace began the plans for a similar building in New Bern.<sup>2</sup> According to Kay Williams, the director of Tryon Palace from 1983 to 2012, fewer and fewer Americans were visiting, forcing museums to change their methods of interpreting history.<sup>3</sup> She sought to change the visitor experience by offering more than artifacts in cases; she wanted to immerse visitors into the story by blending history and technology.

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<sup>1</sup> "New African American Research Project Begins at Tryon Palace."

<sup>2</sup> Rothstein, "History As Viewed From Below."

<sup>3</sup> Edward Rothstein, "History As Viewed From Below," *The New York Times*, August 5, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/06/arts/design/north-carolina-history-center-at-tryon-palace.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed June 8, 2012).

As she began the research for the History Center, Kay Williams stated: “We have to keep telling the whole history, the history of our founders, our laborers, simply working hard to make this country work, the history of the people in bondage who found their way to freedom.”<sup>4</sup> Williams was adamant about adding a more diverse interpretation, the NC History Center represented the chance to build this interpretation from the ground up.

Fundraising efforts for the NC History Center began in the early 1990s. The state purchased the six acres of land adjacent to the Palace grounds in 1997; the site was once Barbour Boat Works, a construction company that once received military contracts to build vessels during World War II. The company closed in 1998 and the NC Department of Cultural Resources acquired the land. In 1999, the Tryon Palace board hired Raleigh-based architectural firm BJAC to draw up a master plan for the land. The contractors broke ground in 2008 and the NC History Center finally opened in October 2010, just in time for New Bern’s 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary activities.<sup>5</sup>

According to the biennial report of the North Carolina Office of Archives and History, the staff in the Collections Department at Tryon Palace reviewed over 3,500 pages of content for the panels in the Regional History Museum’s exhibits between 2008 and 2010. They also finalized the selection of artifacts for the glass cases in the exhibition and wrote the case and object labels. The staff also completed research for the objects, furniture, and accessories in the Pepsi Family Center in order to provide historically accurate models and reproductions. They reviewed the drafts of scripts for the “virtual docents” in the different interactive areas and provided comments and suggestions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Book, “Forward-looking Kay Williams reflected.”

<sup>5</sup> Bea Quirk, “Tryon Palace History Center: A Model of Sustainable Practices,” *The North Carolina Construction News*, (July/August 2010): 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> North Carolina Office of Archives and History, *Fifty-Third Biennial Report of North Carolina Office of Archives and History July 1, 2008 through June 30, 2010* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2011) [http://www.history.ncdcr.gov/biennial-report\\_2008-2010.pdf](http://www.history.ncdcr.gov/biennial-report_2008-2010.pdf), (accessed June 8, 2012), 25.

## **The Regional History Museum**

The Regional History Museum includes exhibits which illustrate the relations between the people of eastern North Carolina and their relationship with the environment. Before its establishment, there were few actual exhibits at Tryon Palace. Museum patrons mostly relied on tours and special events to learn information. The Regional History Museum highlights the history of whites, blacks, Native Americans, and women in the development of eastern North Carolina's social and economic development. The exhibits include artifacts, reproductions, interactive kiosks, and videos. The topics are color coded: exhibits concerning geological and environmental history are marked by green panels, the "Peopling of North Carolina" section contains red panels, "Family Life" has purple, "Community" is marked by blue panels, and "Work" contains brown. Most of the research and information regarding African Americans in New Bern was utilized in the Regional History Museum.

Once inside the Regional History Museum, visitors can preview the topics and perspectives by pressing buttons to watch short films about various social and environmental topics concerning eastern North Carolina. These topics range from enslaved people to hurricanes. This area also contains botanical and ecological information about the region as described by the first European explorers, such as John Lawson.

The next area, called "Peopling of North Carolina," contains information about the different ethnic groups of the Inner Banks, such as Native Americans, European settlers, and enslaved Africans brought to the area. This particular section, focusing on Africans and African-Americans, contains pictures of slave auctions and advertisements. It also has a panel called

“The Peculiar Institution,” which explains the complexities of the American slave system, and another highlighting free African Americans.

After viewing the histories of the different ethnic groups in eastern North Carolina, museum patrons can move into a section called “Family Life.” Most of the panels contain side-by-side images of black and white families. The exhibit does not shy away from difficult subjects, such as the fact that slave families were often torn apart and the differences between black and white families.

The “Community” area is the largest section of the Regional History Museum. It is a broad topic covering social customs, religion, and education. A large section covers clothing; panels explain that most African Americans could not dress in fine clothing due to their low social status or fear of offending their white neighbors. There is a touch-screen kiosk with a video called “Undressing History,” which also includes information about slave clothing.

The “Community” section of the Regional History Museum also covers African American celebrations, such as *Jonkunnu* and reactions to the Emancipation Proclamation. Patrons can watch a short video about *Jonkunnu* and read an accompanying panel containing specific more information about the festival.

After reading about African American celebrations, visitors can also learn about the educational opportunities provided to African Americans, from emancipation to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision. The panels display the efforts of the Freedmen’s Bureau under Horace James and Chaplain Vincent Colyer; one even explains why slaves held reading in such high regard. The “Community” area also highlights the effects of the Baptist and Methodist churches on African Americans following emancipation as well as their quest to achieve the right to vote.

The last section of the Regional History Museum concerns “Work.” This area contains information about the agricultural and industrial aspects of eastern North Carolina. It also displays information contrasting enslaved and indentured workers. There is a panel highlighting African American artisans and another discussing the work of John C. Stanly as a barber. Visitors can also read about black watermen and fishermen.

A remarkable part of the “Work” section of the Regional History Museum discusses runaway slaves. It includes a case of handwritten documents, such as letters and advertisements, concerning runaways. There is also a touch-screen kiosk with videos and more ads.

The Regional History Museum presents a highly diverse interpretation of the history of eastern North Carolina. Visitors can learn not only about various aspects of Inner Banks culture, but also about the different races and ethnicities contributing to the region’s social and environmental history. The extensive amount of information on African Americans in the museum is a valuable tool for anyone seeking to learn more about local black history.

Although the Regional History Museum employs Eichstedt and Small’s theory of “relative incorporation,” since the exhibits readily display African American history throughout the space, there could be an argument for “segregation/marginalization”; African American history is present in the exhibits, but the information is often in a separate part of each section instead of integrated with the rest of the panels and kiosks.

The goal behind the Regional History Museum was to convey information to visitors who are unfamiliar with New Bern’s history. Providing them with a large amount of in-depth information can be overwhelming and expensive. To reach total “relative incorporation,” Tryon Palace could create exhibits around individuals, such as John C. Stanly, to tell the complex racial history of the region. Instead of simply having plaques here and there commemorating the efforts

and achievements of local African Americans, their stories could be used to tell the larger story of blacks in New Bern and Craven County.

### **The Pepsi Family Center**

While visitors receive a multicultural yet typical museum experience in the Regional History Museum, they encounter something rather different in the Pepsi Family Center. This area provides a unique opportunity for patrons to experience rural life in 1835. Designed and installed by New York-based ESI Design, this state-of-the-art, interactive space contains different sections, each depicting various occupations and settings in a nineteenth century village. There is a ship, turpentine distillery, general store, kitchen, quilting area, and newspaper press. The activities in each area are collaborative to encourage students and adult visitors to work together.

Visitors begin the experience by receiving and activating an electronic card (blue, green, yellow, or red). Then they step into a “time machine,” which consists of a circular room where the passing decades are projected onto the walls. After stepping out, the visitors are greeted by a clock tower with a video screen; on this screen, the “mayor” of the village instructs patrons to pick an area and learn how to perform the tasks in each. Visitors take on the roles in the ship and turpentine areas by swiping their colored cards on the screen; the other areas do not require these cards.

In the interactive areas, visitors listen to instructions given by a character on a video screen, such as the general store’s owner or the kitchen’s cook. The characters are portrayed by real people and are not animated. Visitors are asked to assist these characters with finding objects or performing duties. Objects are depicted on screens or on shelves around the area and patrons must press the corresponding button next to an object once prompted by the character.

The kitchen and turpentine areas contain African American characters. In the kitchen, an elderly African American woman leads visitors through recipes. She asks for specific ingredients and asks visitors to find them around the kitchen. After patrons find all of the ingredients required for the dish, they can actually see the recipe and watch hands prepare it on a large screen in the middle of the room.

The turpentine still area is different from the kitchen because visitors actually perform tasks instead of finding materials. Each person must swipe his or her card to begin at the station matching the color of the electronic card. On the video screen, an African American man instructs each visitor to perform his or her job in order to produce the turpentine.

In the Pepsi Family Center, visitors see African American characters in historically accurate occupations for an 1835 village. The space successfully employs the “relative incorporation” strategy described by Eichstedt and Small. African Americans are integrated throughout the exhibits and activities.

The technology of the Pepsi Family Center offers visitors the chance to learn history through fun, hands-on activities. Even though the area’s methods differ from those of Regional History Museum, the commitment to diversity remains the same.

### **History Navigator Tour**

The opening of the new NC History Center in 2010 brought a new tour experience to Tryon Palace: the History Navigator. Visitors can rent one of these devices for four dollars at the ticket counter. This handheld gadget offers six tour experiences with additional information that enhances the basic tours given by guides. Four of the “experiences” deal with social topics, while the other two are “expert” tours, providing architectural and art history. Visitors simply select

from the touch-screen menu and listen to background information about their specific topics. Once the background video is complete, a map of Tryon Palace's sites appears, with orange numbers denoting each stop relevant to the main topic. As patrons visit each building, they can touch the stop on their History Navigator and, using headphones, listen to the information. The tour is also available for smart phones, providing visitors with the same experience without the device itself.

The History Navigator provides information on African American history at Tryon Palace and other historic buildings on site. There are eight stops relevant to this tour, each with a video lasting approximately one minute; some stops also contain additional videos with broader topics relating to the building or site. These stops include the Palace, its kitchen office, the Kitchen Garden, the Hay House, the Dixon House, the Urban Slave Community, the Blacksmith Shop, and the Stanly House. The tour begins with a video of a modern African American woman explaining the importance of African Americans at Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens. She serves as narrator for the duration of the tour.

At the Palace, the narrator discusses the slaves of two Royal Governors. She explicitly states that the governors did own slaves, but does not offer any judgment on the matter. She discusses Tom and Surry, two slaves owned by Governor Tryon. In the kitchen office, the narrator introduces the visitor to Betsy, a slave of Governor Josiah Martin and the Palace's main cook. The narrator explains that Betsy was a slave, she makes a point of stating that Betsy's status as cook provided her with influence over the kitchen. Most of the information offered about the Kitchen Garden is in the form of assumptions. The narrator says "likely" or "most likely" when discussing slave meals.

The History Navigator also provides information on slaves in the other historic homes, mostly using census data. The narrator explains that five female slaves and one free black, most likely an apprentice, lived in the Dixon house. The narrator then offers more information about apprentices. The Blacksmith Shop also includes information about black craftsmen and apprentices. Touching the Stanly House brings up information about John Carruthers Stanly and his relationship with his white father, John Stanly, and his white half-brother. The narrator also quotes census information about the Hay House; she states that Robert Hay owned two female slaves, most likely mother and daughter, who probably worked as cook and domestic in the household. As she does in the Kitchen Garden at the Palace, the narrator makes inferences about the slaves in the Hay House.

The Urban Slave Community, an outpost west of New Bern where both blacks and whites owned homes, has fascinating information about the freedom of slaves living in the city. The narrator states that the Urban Slave Community allowed slaves to live away from their masters and even hire themselves out. They were paid for this extra work and were actually able to keep a portion of their pay. She asserts that this area provided blacks with more autonomy and pride than their counterparts living on rural farms and plantations.

Besides the historic homes and buildings, the History Navigator offers short vignettes about other topics relating to African American history. These subjects include slave resistance, the breaking up of slave families, legal rights of free blacks, African American apprentices, and *Jonkunnu*. Some of the videos even include additional information about specific people such as John C. Stanly, Amelia Green, and Governor Josiah Martin's cook. Others discuss the general topic of slavery in North Carolina.

The History Navigator, like the Regional History Museum, is an example of “relative incorporation” based on Eichstedt’s and Small’s theory. Information on African Americans is completely integrated. The device includes as much African American history as it does architectural and women’s history. It aids visitors who value a multicultural experience and desire more information.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Reflections and Conclusions**

In the years after World War II, Tryon Palace transformed from a simple monument honoring the beauty of the past into a living history museum with a diverse interpretation. What started out as a mission to preserve the home of North Carolina's royal governors evolved into a place dedicated to presenting local history to its patrons. The site has had to deal with the problem of straddling the line between historic site and tourist destination. Why display the truth if it will turn visitors away? After all, to museums and historic sites, history is a business. No visitors mean no funding, and no funding leads to staffing cuts, exhibit closures, and finally, the closure of the entire site. Luckily, Tryon Palace did not experience controversies concerning its interpretation, or lack thereof, of African American history.

African American history is extremely complicated to interpret; it has many ugly aspects that are difficult to understand and even more difficult to face in a museum exhibit. Some criticism even comes from the black community itself. It is a precarious situation: is interpreting African American history worth all of the controversy that comes with it? Museums and historic sites across the country have faced the problems in bringing the history of slavery to the public and Tryon Palace is no exception. The site still has room to improve and expand its tours and experiences to provide more information on African Americans.

The histories of blacks and whites in New Bern are extremely entangled and this connection should be further studied. The large population of free blacks during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could be an interesting concept to explore in future exhibits and historic

home tours. Extensive information about African Americans in New Bern and Craven County was extensive and readily available but only a fraction of it could be seen and heard at Tryon Palace.

As Tryon Palace opened its doors in the years after World War II, the Civil Rights Movement swirled around New Bern. African Americans across the country protested and marched for social and political equality. The Palace presented itself as a reflection of the colonial past but this reflection was based on a highly white-washed, romanticized past. The Tryon Palace Commission, whether intentional or not, created a shrine to the fictional Super Patriot and ignored the controversial history surrounding the area. The Commission focused more on decorative arts, architectural history, and patriotism rather than historical accuracy.

This idealized interpretation prevailed at Tryon Palace down through the civil rights era and into the 1980s. Race relations in America remained an extremely sensitive topic even after the Civil Rights Movement. But the hiring of Kay Williams as director proved to be a crucial turning point. Taking over ten years after the retirement of the formidable Gertrude Carraway, Williams sought to redefine and revolutionize Tryon Palace. Her ideas led not only to acknowledging the presence of African American history at the site, but also to ensuring that it was interpreted in an accurate and respectful manner. She spearheaded the African American Research Project and the creation of the NC History Center.

The advent of the African American Research Project in 1999 showed Tryon Palace's commitment to providing visitors with a diverse interpretation. In prior years, this site either ignored the subject completely or softly treaded around it even while African Americans fought for civil rights during the 1950s and 1960s. The project produced tangible results in the form of new programs and lecture series that expanded Tryon Palace's interpretation of African

American history and allowed the local black community to participate and provide feedback. Special events and research projects such as the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary trip to Ghana and the African American Lecture Series show that the leadership of Tryon Palace is dedicated to truly exploring black history at the site.

*Jonkunnu* remained Tryon Palace's greatest source of pride from the African American Research Project and has become one of the community's biggest events. The site did not shy away from the topic of slavery while promoting *Jonkunnu*; Tryon Palace marketed the event as a African American celebration and explained how it lifted the morale of slaves during the eighteenth century.

Other outcomes from the African American Research Project proved to be valuable education tools. The African American Walking Tour and Lecture Series allowed visitors the chance to learn specifically about local African American history. When they visited Ghana, the leaders of Tryon Palace learned more about the connections between New Bern and West Africa.

With the addition of the NC History Center in 2010, visitors could experience history in more interactive ways. The Regional History Museum, while containing the usual exhibits and panels, boasted plenty of touch-screen kiosks, videos, and sound bytes that brought the site's topics to life. The building diverged from the "Super Patriot" atmosphere in the Governor's Palace and allowed patrons to see local North Carolina history through the eyes of African Americans, Native Americans, women, and the lower classes. The Pepsi Family Center transformed history into a game; visitors learned, using hands-on, interactive activities, how to perform various nineteenth century tasks. The space also included African American characters in order to accurately portray an 1835 kitchen and turpentine still.

The History Navigator was a very useful device, especially for those who visited Tryon Palace to learn a specific topic, whether it be African American history, architectural history, or women's history. It provided visitors with different perspectives that enhance the tour experience.

In 2012, Tryon Palace fell into financial troubles. Cuts in state funding hit the site hard, forcing the leadership to rely mostly on donors and admission fees. They also reduced the site's staff and program offerings.<sup>170</sup> The death of Kay Williams in October of that year was also a huge blow. The site experienced a thirty-six percent cut in state funding in 2012, possibly fifty-seven percent in 2013, and perhaps a loss of all state funding by 2014. Although admission costs went up to twenty dollars and attendance rose forty percent with the addition of the NC History Center, budget cuts would certainly mean the closure of some of the buildings.<sup>171</sup> And closing buildings will surely mean that tourists will lose some aspects of African American history at Tryon Palace.

Tryon Palace has endured great changes. The increase in its diversity in the last twenty years is noticeable and African American history is accessible to the public. Through the efforts of the site's leadership and researchers, Tryon Palace not only showcased the presence of African Americans, but it also celebrated the heritage and achievements of blacks to the history and development of New Bern.

There is something for everyone at Tryon Palace: architectural history, women's history, Native American history, and, of course, African American history. From simple exhibits comprised of panels and cases to cutting-edge technology that truly brings the past to life, Tryon Palace has it all. The site has evolved from a single building into an entire complex; its purpose

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<sup>170</sup> Quinlin, "Budget would cut state museum staff," 1.

<sup>171</sup> Quinlin, "Budget would cut museum staff," 3.

has also changed from allowing visitors simply to see where the royal governors lived to actively educating patrons about life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But it has also evolved into something more substantial: a historic site that interprets history. The social changes of the mid-twentieth century had a ripple effect on museums and historic sites. A visit to the site during the early 1990s would provide fleeting mentions of African Americans while a guest arriving in twenty years later would have access to programs and events dedicated to telling the stories of African Americans in the area. As opposed to its origins as a simply a pretty building showcasing an idealized past, Tryon Palace now immerses visitors in many stories, while reminding them that there is one history

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