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Scenes from Williamsburg's 19th Century

By Terry Meyers | September 8, 2022

When the capital of Virginia shifted from Williamsburg to Richmond in 1780, Williamsburg's history shifted too, but did not end—three little known accounts of the town offer glimpses of life into the nineteenth century.

One account is of a visit here in 1804, by the Irish poet Thomas Moore. Moore has long been supposed to have written a poem, "To The Firefly," at Bassett Hall, but his own explanation makes it clear he wrote the poem to a particular firefly he saw on the hat of a travelling companion, a fat Quaker, someplace between Williamsburg and Fredericksburg. In the stage coach too were the Quaker's toothless niece and an arrogant student from William and Mary.

Moore might, of course, have been first impressed by fireflies when he saw them at Bassett Hall, but his doggerel "Fragments from a Journal" recounts the accident that interrupted his composition of a sonnet, curtailed at ten lines:

two lines more had just completed it;
But, at the moment I repeated it,
Our stage,
(Which good Brissot, with brains so critical
And sage,
Calleth the true 'machine political')
With all its load of uncles, scholars, nieces,
Together jumbled,
Tumbled
Into a rut and fell to pieces!

Moore had thought the W&M student undeservedly proud of his learning:

There was a student of the college too,
Who said
Much more about the riches of his head,
Than, if there were an income-tax on brains,
His head could venture to acknowledge to.

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And Moore had not been impressed by William and Mary itself, disapproving of its rabidly republican character under its president, Bishop James Madison:

> This college, the only one in the state of Virginia, and the first which I saw in America, gave me but a melancholy idea of republican seats of learning. That contempt for the elegancies of education, which the American democrats affect, is no where more grossly conspicuous than in Virginia: the young men, who look for advancement, study rather to be demagogues than politicians; and as every thing that distinguishes from the multitude is supposed to be invidious and unpopular, the levelling system is applied to education, and has had all the effect which its partisans could desire, by producing a most extensive equality of ignorance. The Abbe Raynal, in his prophetic admonitions to the Americans, directing their attention very strongly to learned establishments, says 'When the youth of a country are seen depraved, the nation is on the decline.' I know not what the Abbe Raynal would pronounce of this nation now, were he alive to know the morals of the young students at Williamsburgh! But when he wrote, his countrymen had not yet introduced the "doctrinam deos spernentem" ["the doctrine of ridiculing gods," from Livy] into America.

Bishop Madison taught democratic doctrines and even such skeptical philosophers as Hume so powerfully that W&M students were noted for the political liberalism, Deism, and even atheism that Moore seems to comment on.

Nor was Moore not much taken with Williamsburg, condemning it in another poem both for the slavery exposed here and for the revolutions, both American and French, it fomented:

> But, while I thus, my friend, in flowerless song,
> So feebly paint, what yet I feel so strong,
> The ills, the vices of the land, where first
> Those rebel fiends, that rack the world, were nurst,
> Where treason's arm by royalty was nerved,

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And Frenchmen learned to crush the throne they served….

Another glimpse of Williamsburg, this one from antebellum years, appears in a reminiscence by Edward Henley Lively in the Virginia Gazette, January 2, 1904. Lively recalls a race track and cock and dog fighting sites in a field owned by Benjamin Wolfe not far from where the First Baptist Church is located today—"long reaches of two story buildings made of wood with porches and galleries or two story piazzas." The races and fights were much frequented by "the gentry of the town," even, Lively suggests, back to the early 18th century.

Lively evokes too local markets thronged by free and enslaved Blacks bringing to town carts and wagons loaded with "eggs, butter, vegetables, cantaloupe, melons, chickens etc." Saturdays especially were busy as they bought food in anticipation of "the demands for the Sunday preaching with the big baptizing thrown in."

The scene, says Lively, was a joyful one, reminding him of Spanish feast days; the women would walk to town with "a basket on each arm and one on their head, shoes and stockings off and their gown tucked up."

In the middle of Richmond Road, just east of where Blow Hall is today, stood the "dressing trees," four large oaks in a row (ultimately cut down by Union troops). When the women would reach this "entrance" to town, "they all halted in the deep shade of the trees, brushing their linen, adjusting their toilet generally," before going on to the market.

Lively suggests all this was accompanied by what he thought a nonsense song (but possibly a variant of "Cindy," a North Carolina folk song): "India cotton petti-coat, india cotton gown. / Shoes and stockings in her hand, and feet upon the ground." The singing was further "accompanied with a 'fidango' dance" or something akin to a "'Highland fling.'"

Finally, in a memoir of the College in the 1870's published in the William and Mary Quarterly in 1933, Robert M. Hughes recalls a Williamsburg still reeling from the Civil War. Leaving Richmond by boat at 6 a.m. on a day in late October 1871, Hughes landed at the Kings Mill wharf about 2 p.m. and rode four miles into town in a "covered spring wagon" driven by Jesse Maupin and drawn by two horses.

He came into Williamsburg along Woodpecker Street, registered at a hotel opposite the Courthouse, and found a town where everything "betokened poverty and

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paralysis," houses "unpainted and dilapidated" still showing holes from cannon fire, streets unlighted, sidewalks and streets unpaved—the only lights at night were from "the numerous bar rooms which lined Duke of Gloucester Street," "the only enterprises in the town that prospered." Traffic was limited to carts drawn by steers and a few buggies or spring wagons. The only jobs were at the Asylum. Race relations, Hughes reports, were strained, though not violent. The town had a black mayor named Tucker (a fact recorded nowhere else).

Amusements came from "private theatricals, and especially minstrel shows," and the students frequently serenaded the town's belles. More humorous occasions called forth "an improvised band" featuring combs with thin paper over them, tomato cans with a hole and heavily resined strings, and even, played with a rod, "a large goods box, with a few strings stretched across and well resined"—that instrument gave "quite a variety of notes."

As for dates with the town girls, there were Sunday night church services and, at the Asylum, Friday night dances, though getting to either was complicated by dark streets, mud holes, and cows sleeping on the paths. "Chocolate stews and taffy pullings" were popular, as were dances at private homes, with violins played by the Camm brothers. And the end of the school year was always marked by a "Final ball." The girls refused "round dances" (probably as too intimate), but allowed quadrilles and cotillions. One girl was so popular with the students that a path was worn from the churchyard across Palace Green" "to the corner of the Tucker lot."

Hughes expresses admiration for the citizens of Williamsburg as they coped with the results of the War—"they neither concealed nor paraded their poverty…. asked no sympathy and indulged in no whining, but set their hands and hearts to the work of solving their problems as best they could." It was not easy—having been cosseted by those they enslaved, they now "had to do their own work." But "they did not give way to despair" and welcomed students "to their homes with all the heartiness of olden times."

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