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**“The History of Our History”: The Preservation and Development of the College of
William & Mary’s Wren Building as an Historic Site**

A thesis presented in Candidacy for Departmental Honors in History
from
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

By
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May 1, 2024

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**“The History of Our History”: The Preservation and Development of the College of
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Katie Moniz
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May 2024

INTRODUCTION

The Wren Building has been the core of the College of William & Mary for as long as it has operated. The history of the building is inseparable from that of the College. The traditions, politics, relationships, and events that make up the history of William & Mary have played out within the walls of the Wren Building—the tangible testimony of the College that has existed since the seventeenth century. For the William & Mary community, to understand the history of the Wren Building is also to understand its own identity. As such, examining the evolution of the conceptualization, preservation, and interpretation of the Wren Building as a historic site is of the utmost importance as it reflects the changing nature of the College and its place in the United States and the world. This thesis traces the birth and life of a beloved historic site that emerged from a charred ruin after the Civil War, became the cornerstone of one of the most ambitious preservation projects in American History, and was the stage on which changing notions of historic interpretation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have played out.

The cornerstone of the Wren Building was laid in 1695, just two years after founder James Blair secured the charter from William III and Mary II of England. Built from the ground up by the hands of enslaved laborers, the imposing brick structure was a significant addition to the colonial landscape and an anchor point for the construction of the rest of the city of Williamsburg. For much of its early history, the entire College was contained within the Wren Building—students and faculty alike ate, slept, went to class, and socialized within the space. Before the construction of the Brafferton building, the Indian School run by William & Mary also operated out of the Wren Building alongside the other classes. The Virginia House of Burgesses even met in the building's Great Hall for several years.

The Wren Building was on the front lines of both the Revolution and the Civil War, and it burned three times—in 1705, in 1859, and in 1862. Each time it burned, it was built back on the same foundations that have supported the building since its charter, each time making alterations and modernizations. In the 1920s, the building was restored to its eighteenth-century appearance as part of the Rockefeller Restoration that created Colonial Williamsburg as it appears today. While the interior of the building is a reproduction and the exterior has been greatly altered, the Wren Building still stands on its original seventeenth-century foundations, and it is still serving the same purpose that it was built to do.

The current iteration of the Wren Building is a three-story brick structure in the Georgian style of architecture. Originally designed to be an enclosed quadrangle, the building instead has three sides and an open courtyard facing the rest of campus. Thomas Jefferson, arguably William & Mary's most famous alumnus, did not like the design of the Wren Building, calling the College and Public Hospital buildings "rude, mis-shapen piles, which, but that they have roofs, would be taken for brick-kilns."¹ The Wren Building is flanked by two smaller buildings, the President's House and Brafferton, and together the three buildings make up the oldest intact colonial campus in the United States.

The building was not called the "Sir Christopher Wren Building" until the Restoration in the 1920s. Previously, it was known as the "Main Building," the "College Building," or simply, "The College." The current designation of the "Sir Christopher Wren Building" comes from the traditional belief that it was designed by Sir Christopher Wren, royal architect to William III and Mary II at the time of the College's charter. The only foundation for that belief is an ambiguous line by Hugh Jones, a professor at the College, in 1724. He wrote in *The Present State of Virginia*, "The [College] Building is beautiful and commodious, being first modeled by Sir

¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), 155.

Christopher Wren, adapted to the nature of the country by the gentlemen there."² Scholars have debated the "Wren Question" for decades; there is no other evidence to support that Wren worked directly on the College building, and most recent scholarship contends that Jones' comment is instead in reference to the building simply being inspired by Wren's works and designed by a local architect who was familiar with his style. James Kornwolf offers an extensive review of the debates over the Wren attribution in "*So Good a Design: The Colonial Campus of the College of William and Mary, Its History, Background, and Legacy*."³ Throughout this paper, I have attempted to refer to the building by whatever name is most appropriate to the period I am discussing in order to reflect dominant interpretations of the building.

I have divided this thesis into chapters based on turning points in the history of the interpretation of the Wren Building. Chapter 1 begins with the aftermath of the Civil War, which marks when the Wren Building first began to be conceptualized as a historic site in an attempt to gain support for a desperately struggling institution, as well as the College's pre-Restoration historical offerings. Chapter 2 centers the Wren Building as the "cornerstone" of the Rockefeller Restoration in the 1920s and examines its crucial role in the creation and early operation of Colonial Williamsburg. In Chapter 3, which covers the developments of the 1960s through the 1980s, I examine how the expansion of Colonial Williamsburg and the transition towards social history and public history were played out in the operation and interpretation of the Wren Building. The fourth and final chapter, covering the 1993 Tercentenary to the present day,

² Hugh Jones, *The Present State of Virginia: Giving a Particular and Short Account of the Indian, English and Negroe Inhabitants of That Colony: Shewing Their Religion, Manners, Government, Trade, Way of Living &c., with a Description of the Country: From Whence Is Inferred a Short View of Maryland and North Carolina*. (London: J. Clarke, 1724).

³ James D. Kornwolf, *So Good a Design: The Colonial Campus of the College of William and Mary: Its History, Background, and Legacy* (Williamsburg, Va: Muscarelle Museum of Art, 1989).

discusses how the university has sought to reckon with the more difficult parts of its own history and to offer a more complete and inclusive narrative as it continues into its fourth century.

I chose this topic because the Wren Building holds a special place in my heart. I have spent most of my college career as a member of Spotswood Society, the group of students responsible for the care and interpretation of the building. As someone who is passionate about sharing the history of the university and the Wren Building with the public, I found myself curious about how that history has been understood and shared in the past— “the history of our history.”⁴ As such, I have approached this project through the lens of both public history and historical memory.

⁴ Jackson Sasser, “Wrenewal: William and Mary Faithful are Rallying to Preserve the Immortality of the Wren Building,” *William & Mary Alumni Gazette* 64, no. 3 (May 1998).

CHAPTER 1: EMERGING HISTORICAL INTEREST IN THE WREN BUILDING

In 1867, in the wake of the Civil War, William & Mary president Benjamin Ewell wrote the following words to the Board of Visitors: “Nothing worthy of its name or history can be done until its Buildings are restored. An impression prevails to a great extent that the College is closed. This will continue to be the case so long as the main building is in ruins.”⁵ These words encapsulate the importance of the Main Building to both the survival and the historical significance of William & Mary. Though the College’s age and royal connections had long been considered significant, it was not until the late nineteenth century that the College, and in particular the Main Building, came to be understood as an historically significant site worthy of preservation. Several concurrent events catalyzed this change, but ultimately the conception of the Wren Building as a historic site was first constructed not from a pure desire to preserve and interpret the past, but rather in a desperate attempt to save a financially struggling institution.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the College of William & Mary was struggling severely. The Civil War had robbed the College of much of its student body and faculty, who had gone off to fight. This ultimately resulted in a drop from an average total of 90 undergraduate and law students between 1852 and 1861 to a complete suspension of classes until 1865.⁶ The war also effectively robbed the College of its Main Building. Following the Battle of Williamsburg, Union troops had used the building as a field hospital until it was burned by

⁵ Benjamin Ewell to Board of Visitors, July 1, 1867, quoted in wall text in Wren Building Welcome Center exhibit, Williamsburg, VA.

⁶ “Student Demographics,” Special Collections Research Center Knowledgebase, William & Mary Libraries, <https://scrc-kb.libraries.wm.edu/student-demographics>.

members of the 5th Pennsylvania Cavalry Regiment on September 9, 1862.⁷ The charred ruins of the building and the absence of students and faculty caused contemporaries to doubt that Williamsburg would ever be a college town again.⁸

But, through the efforts of the administration, staff, and supporters, the College rose again, albeit nearly crippled with financial insecurity. Benjamin Ewell, president of the College from 1854-1888, took it upon himself to “save” William & Mary by recruiting students and raising money, even during periods when classes were suspended (i.e. during the remainder of the Civil War and again from 1881 to 1888). Ewell is a complex figure in the historical record; he and his family enslaved people, and although Ewell argued against secession, he served as a senior officer in the Confederate army once Virginia seceded.⁹ In the context of William & Mary, though, Ewell is best remembered for his efforts to rebuild and reopen the College after the ravages of the Civil War and the ensuing financial struggle.

Highlighting the legacy and historical significance of the College was Ewell’s main strategy as he sought to garner support for its preservation. In the early 1870s, he made a number of appeals to both the Virginia and US governments in an effort to obtain support. In April of 1874, Ewell made an speech to the Committee of Education and Labor of the House of Representatives, which called for an “Appropriation by Congress because of Revolutionary Losses, and because of the Destruction of its Buildings and other Property by United States Troops during the late Civil War.”¹⁰ Ewell formulated his appeal by outlining the history of the

⁷ “Civil War (April 12, 1861 - May 9, 1865),” Special Collections Research Center Knowledgebase, William & Mary Libraries, <https://scrc-kb.libraries.wm.edu/civil-war-april-12-1861-may-9-1865>.

⁸ Helen C. Walker, “‘So Decayed an Institution’: Colonel Ewell’s College, 1862-1888,” in *The College of William & Mary: A History* (Williamsburg, Va: King and Queen Press, 1993), 333.

⁹ “Benjamin Stoddert Ewell (1810-1894),” Special Collections Research Center Knowledgebase, William & Mary Libraries, <https://scrc-kb.libraries.wm.edu/benjamin-stoddert-ewell-1810-1894>.

¹⁰ Benjamin Ewell, “Remarks of Benjamin S. Ewell: President of the College of William and Mary, in Virginia, before the Committee of Education and Labor, House of Representatives, in support of the

College, with a particular emphasis on its age and its prominent alumni. He also garnered sympathy by recounting the College's sufferings in both the Revolution and the Civil War. As historian Helen Walker points out, "the College was unique both in the extent of its injuries and its historical significance; no other southern institution could make such an appeal to the Congress and the nation"--and Ewell knew this.¹¹ He concluded the rousing speech by invoking George Washington, who received his surveyor's license from the College and later held the position of chancellor:

If you had injured it, you surely would have restored Mount Vernon; you had better honor Washington by restoring the living fountain of learning, whose service was the pleasure of his last years, than by any useless and empty act of worship or respect towards his sepulchre.¹²

Though Washington was certainly connected to the College, his role in its history is far smaller than that of so many other significant figures. Ewell had several reasons for this aggrandizement of Washington's legacy in regards to William & Mary. At the time of Ewell's address, Mount Vernon had been recently "rescued" by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association (MVLA) and established as a historic site, so it was thus already acknowledged to be worthy of protection and preservation. Furthermore, the nation was gearing up for the celebration of the US Centennial in 1876, which was accompanied by a newfound veneration of the founding fathers. George Washington shone as one of the most celebrated and heroic of these, as well as, significantly, among the least controversial in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Ewell took advantage of both the preservation of Mount Vernon and the Centennial to argue for the College to be considered a historic site on equal footing with other sites associated with Washington.

petition of the College for an appropriation by Congress..." April 1, 1874.
<https://digitalarchive.wm.edu/handle/10288/16406>.

¹¹ Walker, "'So Decayed an Institution,'" in *The College of William & Mary: A History*, 365.

¹² Benjamin Ewell, "Remarks..." 14.

Ultimately, Ewell's petitions to Congress attracted some national attention, but they were unsuccessful in securing a relief bill. So he tried another approach. In the few years leading up to 1876, Ewell "took advantage of the approaching celebration of the nation's centennial to advertise the College's historic connections and contributions to a broader audience."¹³ The 1876 Centennial created a newfound interest in the nation's history and historic preservation, especially in places like Virginia that have a vast number of colonial-era historic sites. Preservation was already an established art in Virginia, as seen in the establishment of the MVLA as the first national historic preservation organization in 1859, but the Centennial prompted more wealthy philanthropists to spearhead and invest in projects of historic preservation and museum creation.¹⁴ Ewell attempted to channel this new national interest into support for William & Mary.

The benefits of the centennial celebration for the College were not as tangible as Ewell would have liked—it ultimately "generated more publicity than students"¹⁵—but this publicity accompanied an increasing local perception of Williamsburg as a historic and important place, and thus was still an important development. One of the ways the College took advantage of the interest surrounding the Centennial was commissioning the publication of a written history of the College. The resulting work, entitled *History of the College of William and Mary from its foundation, 1660, to 1874*, contains the full text of the charter and other relevant documents, as well as a lengthy "Historical Sketch" attributed to the "labors and researches of the late Professor Robert J. Morrison, who was an able and zealous member of the College Faculty."¹⁶ The title

¹³ Walker, "So Decayed an Institution," in *The College of William & Mary: A History*, 363.

¹⁴ Mary Miley Theobald, "The Colonial Revival: The Past that Never Dies," *CW Journal*, Summer 2002, <https://research.colonialwilliamsburg.org/Foundation/journal/feature2.cfm#Summer02>.

¹⁵ Walker, "So Decayed an Institution," in *The College of William & Mary: A History*, 363.

¹⁶ *The History of the College of William and Mary from Its Foundation, 1660, to 1874*. Richmond: J.W. Randolph & English, 1874, p. 34.

indicates that the story begins in 1660, but the *History* reaches back even further to just after the 1607 settlement of Jamestown, when the first endowments for the purpose of a University at Henrico were appropriated. This project was interrupted in 1622 by bloody conflict between the colonists and local indigenous tribes, but it was revived in 1660 with an act of the Virginia General Assembly, hence the date of “Foundation” in the title. The College was not operational until after the 1693 charter, but by claiming the earlier foundation date, the authors of this history augment its already impressive age. This 1874 *History* was an important development for the College, as it was the first comprehensive history written of the institution.

Another written history soon followed. During the 1881-1888 closure of the school, The U.S. Bureau of Education published a new history of William & Mary, written by Johns Hopkins historian Herbert Baxter Adams. This booklet proved to be one of the most effective efforts during this time. Adams begins with a fairly detailed history of the College’s story from its founding, with a strong emphasis on Washington and Jefferson’s connections to the school, then lists all the other notable alumni, including signers of the Declaration of Independence, judges, Senators, governors, and countless high-ranking army and navy officers. Following this display of the College’s historical importance, “Adams waxed indignant that the Congress had refused to honor William and Mary’s claim, especially when the Treasury bulged with surplus funds.”¹⁷ He outlined the College’s struggles in the wake of the Civil War, lamenting that “too often the higher education in America is forced to live by begging.”¹⁸ Adams’ pamphlet made the rousing claim that “Virginia is called the mother of Presidents, but the College of William and Mary, the alma

¹⁷ Helen C. Walker, “The Great Development Campaign of 1870-93,” *Alumni Gazette of the College of William & Mary*, October 10-11, 1975.

¹⁸ Herbert Baxter Adams, *The College of William and Mary: A Contribution to the History of Higher Education : With Suggestions for Its National Promotion*. (Washington: Govt. Print. Off., 1887), 65.

mater of statesmen, is only another name for Virginia,” a line which would be quoted in later articles and pleas for aid for the College.¹⁹

Classes resumed at the College in 1888, and an exhausted and aging Ewell decided to step down as president, ending his 34-year term. His efforts to reopen the College had created a legacy fueled by romantic myths. The most prevalent of these portrayed the Ewell faithfully ringing the College bell throughout the suspension of classes in the 1880s, when in reality, it was his now-freed Black staff that carried out the task.²⁰ One reporter describes how

The old, gray-haired President as each October comes round, goes to the college, and has the college bell rung, as a formality to still retain the charter... [The] president, with whom I talked there in these last May days, believes the bell will yet be heard.²¹

This portrait of Ewell’s perseverance illustrates the popular view of the president as a devoted servant of the College who maintained faith when all seemed lost. Though romanticized, both Ewell and the College were generally seen as somewhat pathetic at this time. The same article goes on to say:

It is a pity when one concerns the educational needs of the South, that something should not be done to perpetuate this old college, second only to Harvard in age and historical interest, both in memory of its great past and in active service of the present. Such great traditions as those of William & Mary College are themselves of the highest utility in education and ought not to be wasted.²²

Those seeking support for the College drew on its “historical interest” and “great traditions” in an effort to reach the hearts (and purses) of possible benefactors. Ultimately, saving William & Mary from ruin involved a lot more than just faith, and it required the support of more people than just Ewell.

¹⁹ Adams, *The College of William and Mary*, 27.

²⁰ “Benjamin Stoddert Ewell (1810-1894),” Special Collections Research Center Knowledgebase, William & Mary Libraries, <https://src-kb.libraries.wm.edu/benjamin-stoddert-ewell-1810-1894>.

²¹ *Boston Christian Register*, September 23, 1886. Quoted in Wilford Kale, *Hark Upon the Gale: An Illustrated History of the College of William and Mary in Virginia* (Williamsburg: Botetourt Press, 1985), 90.

²² *Boston Christian Register*, September 23, 1886. Quoted in Kale, *Hark Upon the Gale*, 90.

In 1893, the College celebrated a very important milestone: the two hundredth anniversary of the charter and the founding of the College. The bicentennial was celebrated on June 21, 1893, and it was an especially meaningful occasion as the College had only recently “risen from its ashes,” according to Ewell’s presidential successor, Lyon G. Tyler (served 1888-1919). The Alumni Association asked J. Allen Watts, an alumnus living in Roanoke, VA, to give a speech at the celebration. In his keynote address, Watts brought together both his own memories and experiences attending the College and its illustrious history and legacy. In his opening paragraph he stated: “I, even as a boy, recognized the greatness of this indebtedness, feeling in some manner the influence this old place, where the spirit of the elder day seems to have lingered, would have on my future life.”²³ Like most others writing or speaking about the College’s history at that time, Watts emphasized the alumni who became founders of the nation, saying of William & Mary that “There has never been a time when the annals of our State have not been brightened and illuminated by the work and thought of her sons. To read her catalogue is almost to call the roll of illustrious Virginians.”²⁴ Watts acknowledged in his speech the significance of the physical place and, indirectly, the importance of preserving those places for posterity. He reflected:

It is good to revisit the old scenes, to have patriotism quickened and hope renewed in this Mecca of our State; it is something to see the sunlight streaming in through the old windows; to know that the best and brightest of our forefathers once trod these grounds, and that, perhaps, on this very spot some eloquent young man, who was destined to play a large part on the world’s stage, quoted Horace to his comrades; that these old halls echoed with the laughter long ago of boys whose after life was to make half the inspiration of the world.²⁵

²³ J. Allen Watts, “Address Before the Alumni,” June 21, 1893, Box: 1, Folder: 7. E. Lockert Bemiss Papers, UA 6.033. Special Collections Research Center, 5.

²⁴ Watts, “Address Before the Alumni,” 14.

²⁵ Watts, “Address Before the Alumni,” 16.

Watt's sentiment that visiting historically significant sites will lead to "patriotism quickened and hope renewed" echoes the prevailing sentiment of early preservationists that were guided by conservatism and Americanism. The Alumni Association committee later thanked Watts for his "admirable address," and requested that he "furnish a copy of the same for publication," likely in an attempt to distribute Watts' powerful message to a wider audience and continue to gain support and publicity.

Around the same time as the College's bicentennial, the College administration decided to make another attempt at taking legal action against the federal government to seek reparations for damages against the Main Building during the Civil War. Though the Main Building had been rebuilt and student enrollment exceeded prewar numbers, finances were still tight and the administration needed to find new sources of money. In order to win the support of Congress and President Benjamin Harrison, the representatives of the College employed specific and impactful language in order to emphasize the historical significance of the campus and the necessity of preserving it. Benjamin Harrison's own great-grandfather attended William & Mary, and because of that the petition was made for "Virginia's Alma Mater so historically associated with [Harrison's] ancestry."²⁶ Unlike Ewell's previous attempts with Congress, this appeal finally worked. Harrison was moved by the cause and signed the bill on March 3, 1893, awarding William & Mary a grant of \$64,000 for "the destruction of its buildings and other property without authority by soldiers of the United States during the late war."²⁷ The passage of the act prompted a former Union soldier to reflect that it was not so much a reparation "but rather a graceful recognition of the claim of the second oldest college in the land on the generosity of the Nation," placing William & Mary next to Harvard (established 1636) in both age and historical

²⁶ Susan H. Godson, "The Tyler Era, 1888-1919," in *The College of William & Mary: A History*, 471.

²⁷ Godson, "The Tyler Era, 1888-1919," 471.

significance.²⁸ While the Act of 1893 was not explicitly for the preservation of the building as a designated historic site, the mere fact that its age and national importance rendered it worthy of rebuilding set the stage for future preservation efforts.

TOURISM AND “INTERPRETATION” ON THE EVE OF RESTORATION

At the turn of the twentieth century, Williamsburg was a “small, isolated, backwater town.”²⁹ Many of the historic buildings were still standing, but most had been repurposed and they were interspersed with modern conveniences such as motels and a gas station. The *Flat Hat*, William & Mary’s newspaper since 1911, ran an article in 1922 entitled “What to See in Williamsburg,” which points out many of these sites, including the courthouse, Powder Magazine, and Palace Green, and also includes some mentions of what used to be; for example, “on the site now occupied by Lane and Christian’s store was the old Raleigh Tavern.”³⁰

More than a third of the article is devoted to attractions on William & Mary’s campus. In addition to an overview of the three original buildings of the colonial campus, the article also specifically mentions the Chapel, pointing out, “In the vaults beneath are buried, Sir John Randolph, John Randolph the Tory, Lord Botetourt, Peyton Randolph, Bishop James Madison and wife, and others.”³¹ The article also encourages visitors to see the College library housed in Tucker Hall, which opened in 1909. This raises the important question of how the College operated as a “tourist site” before the Rockefeller Restoration of the late 1920s, a question on which historians have differing opinions. Historian Wilford Kale argues that “[by 1910,] the

²⁸ E. P. McKinney to Lyon G. Tyler, quoted in Godson, “The Tyler Era, 1888-1919,” in *The College of William & Mary: A History*, 472.

²⁹ Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia’s Eighteenth-Century Capital* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 17.

³⁰ “What to See in Williamsburg,” *Flat Hat* (Williamsburg, VA), June 16, 1922.

³¹ “What to See in Williamsburg.”

three buildings on the colonial campus attracted little attention from visitors because all had been ‘modernized.’”³² Anders Greenspan takes the opposite stance in *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, claiming that William & Mary was “the most popular tourist attraction” in Williamsburg on the eve of the Restoration.³³ It is likely that the College buildings themselves were not much of a draw (except perhaps to the most zealous architecture enthusiasts), but the College library and the antiquities it contained were considered worth seeing. For example, in 1916, then-sitting President Woodrow Wilson made a quick, impromptu visit to Williamsburg; the “chief object of the trip was a visit to the College and to Dr. and Mrs. Tyler,” according to the week’s *Flat Hat* issue.³⁴ Wilson was evidently a personal friend of President Tyler, who showed him “the points of interest at the College.”³⁵ Tyler brought Wilson to the library of the Main Building, where he showed him “items of interest.”³⁶ Though the items are not specified, we can get a good sense of what they were from the 1907 history of the College written by Tyler himself, who was widely recognized as a key Williamsburg and College historian. The final section of Tyler’s book is entitled “Objects of Interest at the College,” and it lists many objects in and around the main building, including the 1694 boundary stone, the pre-Revolution sundial, and the cannon from Fort Christanna.³⁷ Inside the building, Tyler notes that “On the walls of the chapel and library are some forty-five portraits” of presidents, benefactors, and other important figures in the history of the school.³⁸ These portraits were evidently among the College’s most prized possessions, held along with other objects such as maps, original records, medals, and scientific apparatuses.

³² Kale, *Hark Upon the Gale*, 113.

³³ Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 52.

³⁴ “President Woodrow Wilson Pays a Visit to the College,” *Flat Hat* (Williamsburg, VA), May 16, 1916.

³⁵ “President Woodrow Wilson Pays a Visit to the College.”

³⁶ Kale, *Hark Upon the Gale*, 109.

³⁷ Lyon Gardiner Tyler, *The College of William and Mary in Virginia: Its History and Work, 1693-1907* (Richmond, Va: Whittet & Shepperson, 1907) 90.

³⁸ Tyler, *The College of William and Mary in Virginia*, 92.

Tyler's summary of the College's collections describes a functional museum operating out of the main building. It appears that during this period, this collection was the primary way in which the College's history was shared with the "public," though in a limited way, as its visitors were mostly restricted to personal visitors of the president and other administrators. Paying visits to the college president, for both personal and business-related reasons, seems to have been one of the most common motives for people who came to see the College pre-Restoration. The Wren Building guest book from 1891-1912 does not list guests' reasons for visiting, but it does include visitors from all over Virginia, the eastern US, and even the world: in 1906, there was a visitor from Brazil! If Tyler's treatment of Wilson is any indication, it is likely that these other visitors would have been shown the College treasures as well.

The *Flat Hat* ran several articles in the early 1920s on historical points of interest in Williamsburg and at William & Mary. In June of 1922, the summer school edition of the *Flat Hat* (called the "Straw Hat") published a timeline of the history of the College, including such events as "1859 - Main building was accidentally destroyed by fire," "1861-1862 - Main building was used as barracks and hospital first by Confederate army and later by Federal troops," and "1862 - Main building was burned by Federal soldiers."³⁹ According to another article from that same year, William & Mary's library contained the "best collection of Colonial portraits in Virginia" —quite a distinction.⁴⁰ Among these portraits are the very same ones that Tyler considered "Objects of Interest" in his 1907 history of the College, as mentioned above.

In 1923, movie producer D. W. Griffith, best known for the white supremacist 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, visited the campus of William & Mary. He was working on a new picture entitled *America*, which was to use various locations around Williamsburg, Jamestown, and

³⁹ "The History of the College of William & Mary" [timeline], *Flat Hat* (Williamsburg, VA), June 23, 1922.

⁴⁰ "What to See in Williamsburg."

Yorktown for filming backdrops in order to tell the story of a family caught in the midst of the American Revolution. According to a 1923 Flat Hat article, “Mr. Griffith and his party were guests of [President] Dr. Chandler at luncheon at the College dining hall, and while here visited points of historical interest around Williamsburg.”⁴¹ Griffith ended up filming some scenes in front of the Brafferton Building on campus.⁴² Though the historic campus had not yet been restored to its eighteenth-century form, the Brafferton, at least, had remained relatively unchanged and thus worked well as a historic set. *America* (1924) was ultimately a flop, but it remains the first known movie filmed on the campus of William & Mary.

These instances make it clear that into the first decades of the twentieth century, William & Mary’s history was certainly a point of pride for those who belonged to the College. The main building was emerging as a museum, and the town of Williamsburg attracted some national attention for its historic significance. Still, it was not until the Restoration that the town, and with it the College, emerged as a widespread tourism draw for the average traveler.

EARLY MEMORIALIZATION AND PRESERVATION AT THE COLLEGE

The early twentieth century saw a “preservation fever” sweep the US, hitting especially hard in states like Virginia with many colonial era sites and buildings. It followed a booming interest in everything “colonial revival,” the start of which most historians date to the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. The fascination with colonial revival was, above all, about romanticizing the American past. As historian Mary Miley Theobald put it in the *CW Journal*,

Americans of the late nineteenth century had only to look back one hundred years to see an era that by comparison looked idyllic: a Golden Age of American values, when heroic

⁴¹ “Big Movie Producer Visits the College,” *Flat Hat* (Williamsburg, VA), November 9, 1923.

⁴² Kale, *Hark Upon the Gale*, 128.

pioneers sustained their families through honest labor and patriotic farmers fought for freedom beside selfless Founding Fathers.⁴³

These “idyllic” American values served as the foundation for most of the colonial-era historic sites established during this period, including Colonial Williamsburg. As seen here, the preservation efforts of the early twentieth century were fundamentally conservative—devoted to keeping sites as they were and honoring them with what preservationists thought was due veneration. These goals are summed up in the parting speech of MVLA founder and president Ann Pamela Cunningham on her retirement from the organization in 1874:

Ladies, the Home of Washington is in your charge; see to it that you keep it the Home of Washington. Let no irreverent hand change it; no vandal hands desecrate it with the fingers of progress!⁴⁴

The MVLA’s work laid the foundations for the next half century of preservation in the United States, and Cunningham’s words embodied the dominant preservation philosophy of that period.

In addition to the romanticization of the colonial “Golden Age” of America, many early preservation societies in the south were built on Lost Cause ideologies. The Lost Cause is an interpretation of the Civil War from the Confederate point of view that combines nostalgia for a romanticized “Old South,” a glorification of the Confederate war effort, and a “collective forgetting of the horrors of slavery.”⁴⁵ One such preservation society was the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA, now Preservation Virginia), the nation’s first statewide preservation association. Inspired by the work of the MVLA, the APVA was founded in Williamsburg by an elite mix of female antiquarians and their “gentlemen advisers,” a group that embodied Old South traditionalism and the Lost Cause.⁴⁶

⁴³ Theobald, “The Colonial Revival.”

⁴⁴ “Ann Pamela Cunningham,” *George Washington’s Mount Vernon*, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/ann-pamela-cunningham/>.

⁴⁵ “The Lost Cause,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/lost-cause-the/>.

⁴⁶ “Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities,” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/association-for-the-preservation-of-virginia-antiquities/>.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the APVA had acquired and worked towards preserving the “powder horn” magazine in Williamsburg and much of Jamestown Island, among other sites. Memorializing the College was a natural next step. In 1914, the APVA presented the College with a plaque of the “Priorities of the College of William and Mary.” These were thirteen “firsts” that the College boasted as points of pride, including “FIRST College in the United States in its antecedents, which go back to the College proposed at Henrico (1619), Second to Harvard University in actual operation.” and “FIRST American College to receive its charter from the Crown under the Seal of the Privy Council, 1693, hence it was known as ‘their Majesties’ Royal College of William & Mary.”⁴⁷ As was typical for this period of the College’s history, the main noteworthy points to emphasize were its age and its royal foundations. The plaque was displayed in the Main Building, where it still resides today. A transcription of the Priorities were published in a 1919 *Flat Hat* article, because, as the author jokingly writes, “while there may be many who have seen and read them, it is probable that there are a number who have neither read nor seen them, and the list is given accordingly.”⁴⁸

1919 also saw a short-lived campaign to restore the chapel of the Main Building as a memorial to alumni who served in the World War. Spearheaded by the Richmond chapter of the William & Mary Alumni Association, the stated purpose of the project was

to make it a thing of beauty, a fitting memorial to those young men who have gone from its walls to serve their country, several of whom have made the supreme sacrifice in France and elsewhere for the maintenance of those ideals of free government for which William and Mary has stood for nearly three centuries.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ “Priorities of the College of William and Mary” [plaque], Wren Building, Williamsburg, VA.

⁴⁸ “W.&M. PRIORITIES: William and Mary Has Blazed Way in Education Since the Charter Was Granted in 1693,” *Flat Hat* (Williamsburg, VA), February 5, 1919.

⁴⁹ “W&M Chapel: Richmond Alumni Have Taken The Task Upon Themselves to Improve Ancient Chapel,” *Flat Hat* (Williamsburg, VA), February 5, 1919.

The article reporting the project relates the history and significance of the chapel, pointing out that in that space “worshipped Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall, James Monroe, Winfield Scott, John Tyler and and other students of the college who afterwards distinguished themselves in the service of their state and nation.”⁵⁰ The author included several inaccurate details, including that the chapel was “erected immediately following the foundation of the college in 1693” and that it was “designed by Sir Christopher Wren, then royal architect to the British crown.”⁵¹ These inaccuracies are typical of the inclination to portray the College to be both as old and as royal as possible in order to amplify its prestige.

This elitist desire for prestige resulted in an effort to capitalize on the alleged Sir Christopher Wren connection. In the early twentieth century, the College celebrated Wren’s birthday annually with a day of celebrations and exercises. A 1923 article reporting on these festivities strongly supports the Main Building as a Wren original, claiming that “The College, founded under royal charter to prepare students for the ministry in the most English of the colonies was most likely to win Wren's favorable attention.”⁵² Some even thought the College should sponsor a memorial to Wren. In the celebration’s keynote speech, American architect Cass Gilbert

...suggested William and Mary as the one appropriate place in the United States for the erection of a memorial to the great architect. Whether that memorial be a statue, a bust or a tablet, the fact that he once gave his thought and genius to the construction of the College should be an inspiration to all who come in contact with the Institution.⁵³

⁵⁰ “W&M Chapel.”

⁵¹ “W&M Chapel.”

⁵² “Sir Christopher Wren Day to be Celebrated Tomorrow,” *Flat Hat* (Williamsburg, VA), October 19, 2023.

⁵³ “Sir Christopher Wren Day to be Celebrated Tomorrow.”

Apart from the later rechristening of the Main Building as the “Wren Building” in 1931, this plan for a monument never came to pass. Still, it demonstrates the value the William & Mary community placed on their aristocratic foundations, whether perceived or real.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the origins of an understanding of the historical significance of the College, as well as the early operation of the Main Building as a museum site: an important foundation for the coming Restoration. Initially a plea for sympathy and support, the historical significance of the College was sentimental, nostalgic, and based on contemporary ideas of a “sacred” American past. This attitude would define interpretation for many decades to come.

CHAPTER 2: THE RESTORATION OF THE WREN BUILDING

The 1920s were arguably the most important turning point in the preservation history of the Main Building, or Wren Building, as that period saw the restoration of the building to its eighteenth-century form under the direction of W. A. R. Goodwin and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Though historic interpretation was still a work in progress, the Restoration resulted in the physical space in which the College could remember and share its own history.

The preservation of the Wren Building was the cornerstone of this Restoration; it both catalyzed and was central to the creation and development of Colonial Williamsburg as an institution. Histories of Colonial Williamsburg have greatly underemphasized this importance. Handler and Gable's 1997 foundational exploration of interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg, *New History in an Old Museum*, devotes only a footnote to the College, and Greenspan's *Creating Colonial Williamsburg* only mentions it in a limited way. Louise Kale, historian and former director of Historic Campus, correctly wrote:

Just as the choice of Middle Plantation in November 1693 as the site for the colony's new college preceded the founding of Williamsburg by several years, so too did the plan to 'restore' the Wren Building precede the Rockefeller Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg.⁵⁴

In both cases, the Wren Building also symbolized the aspirations for each project: a grand and important building to anchor the two parallel births of the town, once in the seventeenth century and once in the twentieth. Both the original planners of Williamsburg and Rockefeller and Goodwin hoped that the successful creation of the Wren Building would inspire the rest of the town to grow around it.

⁵⁴ Louise Lambert Kale, "The Sir Christopher Wren Building: A Historic Reconstruction," *Interpreter* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2001).

CHANDLER, GOODWIN, AND THE IMPROVEMENT CAMPAIGN

The preservation of the historic form of the Main Building came to fruition under the presidency of Julian Alvin Carroll Chandler (1919-1934). During Chandler's presidency, William & Mary experienced "a period of unparalleled change," and he is "credited with transforming the institution from a small, struggling liberal arts college for men into a modern coeducational institution of higher learning."⁵⁵ One of Chandler's first acts as president was setting up an "Improvement Fund" in cooperation with the Society of Alumni. At a Board of Visitors meeting in January of 1920, Chandler proposed a \$1 million campaign (the equivalent of over \$15 million today) for endowment and other purposes, primarily the improvement of dormitories.⁵⁶ Three months later, the goal had been raised to \$1,440,000.⁵⁷ By May of the same year, the campaign was in full force and even began to receive some national attention. Earl B. Thomas, alumnus and publicity director of the Roosevelt Memorial Foundation, prepared a pamphlet for publication that described the campaign's purpose and solicited support. Thomas wrote in this call to action, "William and Mary, the Alma Mater of three Presidents of the United States, requires immediate assistance," urging potential donors to help "preserve properly for posterity the nation's greatest shrine to American idealism."⁵⁸ Predictably, the leaders of the College again took advantage of its historical significance in order to appeal to potential supporters. In this case, the primary audience was donors from the Society of Alumni, who felt a strong connection to their alma mater and the historical figures they could claim as fellow

⁵⁵ "Julian A. C. Chandler (1872-1934)," Special Collections Research Center Knowledgebase, William & Mary Libraries, <https://scrc-kb.libraries.wm.edu/julian-c-chandler-1872-1934>.

⁵⁶ Richard B. Sherman, "Entering the Modern World, 1919-1945," in *The College of William & Mary: A History*, 547.

⁵⁷ Sherman, "Entering the Modern World, 1919-1945," 547.

⁵⁸ Earl B. Thomas, quoted in Sherman, "Entering the Modern World, 1919-1945," 548.

alumni. Despite the efforts of Chandler's team and the contributions of many donors, in 1922 the campaign was still falling very short of its goals. In the fall of that year, Earl B. Thomas made the almost delusionally optimistic claim that "Starting with what seemed at first almost insurmountable obstacles and discouragements, we have restored William and Mary to a position of prestige both in Virginia and the Nation."⁵⁹ Thomas's claim grossly overstated the success of the campaign, but this optimism is what helped the campaign move forward.

For the purposes of this paper, the most important facet of Chandler's Improvement Campaign was his plan to restore the Main Building according to "Wren's" designs.⁶⁰ This goal was included in the initial 1920 campaign objectives, and it is the first known proposal that suggested restoring the building to its historic form rather than simply keeping it maintained and modernized. Chandler's building program, which included the preservation of the Main Building, "was prompted not only by preservationists' concern for the ancient buildings but also by disapproval of much of the construction that had occurred during the Tyler years."⁶¹ As opposed to Tyler, who was focused on utilitarianism, Chandler also cared about aesthetics. He wanted a campus that reflected the College's colonial origins and architecture, and the buildings built during his presidency (which include the majority of what is now considered "historic campus") contributed to that vision.

The brains behind the operation of the endowment campaign was William Archer Rutherford (W.A.R.) Goodwin, a name that would eventually become inseparable from the history of Colonial Williamsburg. In 1923, President Chandler hired Goodwin, who had previously served as the rector of Bruton Parish Church, to join William & Mary as a Professor

⁵⁹ Earl B. Thomas to J.A.C. Chandler, November 4, 1922, quoted in Sherman, "Julian A. Chandler and the Transformation of William and Mary," 549.

⁶⁰ Sherman, "Julian A. Chandler and the Transformation of William and Mary," 548.

⁶¹ Sherman, "Julian A. Chandler and the Transformation of William and Mary," 551.

of Biblical Literature and Religion as well as the director of the ongoing endowment campaign. Goodwin returned to Bruton Parish in 1926 but remained head of the campaign until it ended in 1934.

One of Goodwin's first tasks as endowment director was putting together a promotional booklet that detailed the College's specific monetary goals and needs.⁶² As implied by the title, *The Romance & Renaissance of the College of William & Mary in Virginia*, the booklet glorified the history of the school, emphasized the Old South, and relied heavily on appealing to the emotions of its audience of potential benefactors and their identities as patriotic Americans. Goodwin calls the college "a mecca of pilgrims" and expresses "full confidence" that

...men and women of high sentiment and patriotic devotion will lend their aid through generous gifts and endowments to enable the College to perpetuate the ancient glories of her splendid past and also to meet adequately the vital and compelling opportunities of the present.⁶³

Indeed, this "patriotic devotion" to which Goodwin appeals was the foundation for most Americans' interest in preservation, so the tactic was presumably effective. Goodwin also invokes the legacy of Ewell using similarly highly wrought language:

Could Benjamin S. Ewell return to the campus of his beloved College today, he would see how well the traditions and ideals of William and Mary have been preserved for the present generation, and for those to come. He would discover that once again she is forging to her front, building soundly on the enduring basis of her founders, breathing the spirit of her idealism into the schools of the Old Dominion, and carrying her code of honor and her staunch Americanism to the workers in the cities.⁶⁴

The booklet was not all flowery prose, though. Goodwin pragmatically lays out the needs of individual areas of campus, including specifics such as monetary goals and fundraising deadlines. For the Main Building, the "oldest academic building left standing in America,"

⁶² Sherman, "Julian A. Chandler and the Transformation of William and Mary," 549.

⁶³ W.A.R. Goodwin, *The Romance and Renaissance of the College of William & Mary* (1924), 15.

⁶⁴ Goodwin, *The Romance and Renaissance of the College of William & Mary*, 11.

Goodwin requested \$200,000 for a fireproof restoration.⁶⁵ Though the booklet includes the history of the College and a “Roll of Fame” of prominent alumni, it certainly does not shy away from its primary purpose of raising money; it even includes blank gift and bequest forms at the end. Goodwin’s *Romance and Renaissance* set out the ambitious goals of the endowment campaign moving forward. As historian Richard B. Sherman put it, “in light of William and Mary’s recent past, which was consumed with a struggle merely to exist, the scope of the 1924 campaign was nothing short of breathtaking, and it aptly symbolized the optimism” that characterized this period of the College’s history.⁶⁶

William & Mary’s endowment campaign was far from the only project on Goodwin’s plate at this time. As early as his first stint at Bruton Parish, from 1903 to 1909, he began to conceive the restoration of Williamsburg, long considered an “unhealthy backwater,” to its eighteenth-century glory.⁶⁷ Backed by the deep pockets of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Goodwin began covertly buying up Williamsburg’s historic properties, starting with the Ludwell-Paradise House in 1926. Goodwin’s original proposal was evidently for the restored buildings to be turned over to the College (along with an endowment for maintaining them) in order to use them as teaching and/or museum spaces.⁶⁸ In a 1927 press release letter, Goodwin explains his plan for acquiring properties “...with the possible view of making the College of William & Mary the owner and perpetual custodian of these investments.”⁶⁹ Chandler, along with College rector James Hardy Dillard, wanted the Main Building to be included in the Restoration. They sent to

⁶⁵ Goodwin, *The Romance and Renaissance of the College of William & Mary*, 25.

⁶⁶ Sherman, “Julian A. Chandler and the Transformation of William and Mary,” 550.

⁶⁷ “Colonial Williamsburg,” Special Collections Research Center Knowledgebase, William & Mary Libraries, <https://scrc-kb.libraries.wm.edu/colonial-williamsburg>.

⁶⁸ Sherman, “Julian A. Chandler and the Transformation of William and Mary,” 558.

⁶⁹ Goodwin to the editor of the *Daily Press*, Aug. 21, 1927, quoted in Sherman, “Julian A. Chandler and the Transformation of William and Mary,” 558.

Goodwin “earnest hope that in considering the restoration of historic Williamsburg, you will seek to interest your friends in the preservation and restoration of the Christopher Wren Building.”⁷⁰

On February 14, 1928, William & Mary’s Board of Visitors approved the tentative plans for the restoration, setting in motion an arduous, three-year long project that would culminate in the Sir Christopher Wren Building as it stands today.⁷¹

THE RESTORATION, 1928-1931

Though the College ultimately did not take custody of the entire restored historic area like Goodwin had originally intended, the restoration of the Wren Building was a central part of the foundation and early operation of Colonial Williamsburg. The Wren Building project was the first success of the Restoration, and it proved to Rockefeller and Goodwin that their ambitious idea was in fact feasible. In the early years of operation, the Wren Building was considered one of the primary public buildings that visitors were encouraged to see. It is impossible to separate the history of the Wren Building from that of Colonial Williamsburg, though many scholars have tried.

The preservation philosophy of the Restoration reflected a broader shift in attitudes towards historic preservation at this time. Historian Wilford Kale writes, ““Until this period, historic preservation dealt largely with what might better be termed renovation, making it new and not necessarily following original designs. Old buildings were being renewed without too much respect for the original design.”⁷² This characterizes the treatment of the Wren Building up to this time; it had been “preserved” in that it was an original building still in use, but modifications and modernization had rendered it almost unrecognizable.

⁷⁰ Sherman, “Julian A. Chandler and the Transformation of William and Mary,” 557-558.

⁷¹ Sherman, “Julian A. Chandler and the Transformation of William and Mary,” 558.

⁷² Wilford Kale, “The Remaking of the Wren Building,” *Alumni Gazette* (Winter 1982).

In the 1920s, however, efforts to restore the Wren Building reflected a new desire to save the historic appearance of a building, or when that appearance no longer existed, to revert it to its original form. Chandler's 1920 Improvement Campaign, calling for a restoration of the Main Building according to "Wren's" designs, characterized the philosophy of the Restoration of both the College and the rest of Williamsburg.⁷³ Goodwin's role in the broader shift of philosophy was certainly integral, but has often been exaggerated. In the forward to *Williamsburg Before and After: The Rebirth of Virginia's Colonial Capital*, Colonial Williamsburg architect Nicholas A. Pappas gives Goodwin sole credit for this change and almost beatifies him. He writes,

A true preservation hero as well as prophet, [Goodwin] was the first person in America to conceive of the restoration of an entire city and thus influence the course of American preservation. Before his time, preservation had been largely concentrated on efforts to save the homes of American patriots.⁷⁴

Goodwin was not the only person to think of restoring a historic town—the idea developed independently in several other parts of the country—but the influence of the Restoration on American preservation was certainly significant. While the early years of Colonial Williamsburg were still focused on discussing American patriots, its interpretation expanded beyond simply maintaining their homes in the way that sites like Mount Vernon were preserved.

The Restoration's commitment to maintaining historical integrity caused some disagreements among the principal actors in the process of restoring the Wren Building. Thomas Shaw, one of the lead architects on the project, recorded a conversation between himself and Chandler, William & Mary's president.

I remember one time when Dr. Chandler happened to mention the windows in the Wren Building...He said, 'I think it would be fine to drop them down. You'd get much more light, and it would be much more convenient for us.' I said, 'Well, Dr. Chandler, you

⁷³ Sherman, "Entering the Modern World," 548.

⁷⁴ Nicholas A. Pappas, "Foreword," in Yetter, *Williamsburg Before and After: The Rebirth of Virginia's Colonial Capital* (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1988).

know there's an old daguerreotype of this building. Of course you're familiar with it.' 'Oh yes,' he said, 'I've seen it.' I said, 'You know it's so good that you can actually count the brick courses and you can see just where the old windows were, and to us that's a valuable document.' He just laughed and said, 'Well Mr. Shaw, what are a few brick courses between friends?'⁷⁵

Clearly, Chandler appreciated historical accuracy, but he liked aesthetics more.

The daguerreotype that Shaw references is the earliest known photograph of the Wren Building, dating to 1856, and it is the only known photograph of the building's second form (1705-1859), the form that the restoration sought to rebuild. In addition to this daguerreotype, there were several other important visual sources that helped the architects reconstruct the building as accurately as possible, including a detailed contemporary watercolor painting by John Millington, ca. 1840. The sources that date to the eighteenth century include a floor plan by Thomas Jefferson, which was discovered and turned over to the College in 1928. Jefferson's plan proposed doubling the size of the building according to the original quadrangle design. While this plan never came to fruition, his floor plan of the original part of the building allowed the architects to confidently determine the eighteenth-century location of the building's rooms, halls, and stairways.⁷⁶ A less technical but still useful source was a sketch of the building done by a young girl who labeled the classrooms and the boys she knew who lived in each dorm. A 1937 *Washington Post* article that mentions this scrapbook drawing says, "It was from such scattered sources and by dint of patient perseverance in all directions that so much material was brought to light."⁷⁷

Another significant source for the Restoration, and one that was discovered with incredibly opportune timing, was the Bodleian Plate. This copperplate, ca. 1740, was discovered

⁷⁵ Yetter, *Williamsburg Before and After*, 61.

⁷⁶ "Historic College's Record Is Restored: William and Mary Library Given Copy of Jefferson Enlargement Plan," *Washington Post*, Aug. 22, 1928.

⁷⁷ "Short Trip to Williamsburg Pays Big Dividend in History," *Washington Post*, July 18, 1937.

at the Bodleian Library in 1929 by CW researcher Mary Goodwin.⁷⁸ Recognizing the public buildings of Williamsburg, including William & Mary's historic campus, Goodwin sent a radiofacsimile of the plate to the architects on the Wren project (one of the earliest uses of that new technology), along with a frantic message for them to stop work and revise the design for the rear of the building before they progressed any further.⁷⁹ The plate is significant because it is the only known depiction of the west and south elevations of the eighteenth-century form of the building. The architects revised their plans accordingly. Rockefeller himself recognized the importance of the Bodleian Plate, calling it the "foundation upon which we have based the restoration of the Wren Building and the reconstruction of the Governor's Palace and the Capitol. Without it, we would have been acting in the dark; with it, we have gone forward with absolute certainty and conviction." Certainly, the west side of the Wren Building would have been far more conjectural if not for the discovery of the Bodleian Plate.

The Restoration garnered significant media attention both while it was in progress and after, including a front page story in the January 8, 1928 issue of the *New York Times*. That article emphasizes the ambitious nature of the project, claiming that it is "believed to be more extensive than any of the kind ever undertaken in this country."⁸⁰ There are several allusions to discussion and speculation on both the extent of the project and the identity of the mysterious financier, rumored to be either the Rockefellers or the Fords. The Wren Building itself "is suggested in many quarters as a possible addition to the project at a later date, with some of the other collegiate buildings."⁸¹ The Wren Building, of course, was in fact a foundational goal of the project, and plans were already well underway by this point. Though it is unclear exactly what

⁷⁸ Interactive touch table, in exhibit "Promoting America: Maps of the Colonies and the New Republic," DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, Williamsburg, Va.

⁷⁹ Yetter, *Williamsburg Before and After*, 66.

⁸⁰ "PLAN TO REPRODUCE COLONIAL CAPITAL," *New York Times*, Jan. 8, 1928.

⁸¹ "PLAN TO REPRODUCE COLONIAL CAPITAL," *New York Times*, Jan. 8, 1928.

circles were discussing this so fervently, the Restoration, and specifically the College's role in it, seem to have been a topic of great cultural interest at the time. In 1937, *National Geographic* published a 40-page cover story on the Restoration with full-color images. Like most other contemporary sources, the *National Geographic* story centralizes the importance of the College in this process. Written in part by W.A.R. Goodwin himself, the article says, "The College of William and Mary was destined to play a dominating part in the history of Virginia, in the establishment of Williamsburg as the second capital of colonial Virginia, and in the culmination of the thought of the restoration of Williamsburg."⁸² The article also emphasizes the Sir Christopher Wren connection, reporting that "bringing this structure, identified as the work of the creator of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, back into its colonial appearance was one of the first major projects of the Williamsburg restoration."⁸³ Unlike later histories of Colonial Williamsburg that gloss over or omit the College altogether, these articles surrounding the Restoration recognize its importance in the process.

Closer to home, local newspapers took an interest in the specifics surrounding the Restoration and what it would mean for Williamsburg and the surrounding community. Around the same time as the New York Times article, *The Flat Hat* also published a front page story, which focused more specifically on the Wren Building and the College's relationship with CW—a natural focus for William & Mary's student newspaper. The article makes some bold claims about the building, including that "It is the only building in America known from historical records to have been designed by [Sir Christopher Wren]. It is the oldest historic building in Williamsburg, and is the oldest standing academic building in America."⁸⁴ While the

⁸² W.A.R. Goodwin, "The Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg," *National Geographic*, April 1937, 405.

⁸³ "The Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg," 424.

⁸⁴ "Will Spend \$400,000 in Restoring Sir Christopher Wren Building This Summer," *Flat Hat*, Mar. 30, 1928.

Wren designation remains doubtful, the other points are true. Either way, it is clear that the College took pride in the history of their campus and was pleased with the Restoration. It was mutually beneficial; the article also reports that “the announcement of the restoration proposal will alleviate the anxiety on the part of the Administration in regard to the precarious condition that the building has been in for the past several years.”⁸⁵ The College was to receive a restored building, and CW was to receive a significant public building to interpret.

The restored Wren Building was dedicated in September of 1931, marked with ceremonies including an academic procession and speeches. The program, as reported in the *Washington Post*, was to “mark the official transfer of the building from the Williamsburg Holding Corporation, representatives of John D. Rockefeller, who restored the building, to the College.”⁸⁶ In a speech given at the dedication, William Graves Perry, the lead architect on the project, declared: “Where facts have been ascertained, they have been followed; those that have not yet been ascertained are of slight importance. Action upon them has been guided by the known precedent and usage of the time as applied to the locality.”⁸⁷ This statement sums up the preservation philosophy of the restoration: a combination of primary source evidence and educated guesses in order to create something as close to the original structure as possible.

An article in the *Flat Hat* issue that followed the dedication called the Wren Building the College’s “chief glory” and reflected on what the Restoration would mean for the student body:

If a man, not an alumnus of William and Mary, was sufficiently interested in the Wren Building to provide for its restoration, should not we who are students here now show our appreciation by making it something of an inspiration to us in our work? It seems to us that this and the maintenance of the building in as perfect condition as possible are two

⁸⁵ “Will Spend \$400,000 in Restoring Sir Christopher Wren Building This Summer,”

⁸⁶ “Oldest Academy Building Restored: William and Mary College Structure of 1693 Re-opens Today,” *Washington Post*, Sep. 16, 1931)

⁸⁷ Will Molineaux, “Architect of Colonial Williamsburg: William Graves Perry,” *CW Journal* (Autumn 2004).

ways in which each student can show his thanks for the restoration of the Sir Christopher Wren Building.”⁸⁸

This author’s sentiments and commitment to history are admirable, though somewhat undermined by their grossly mistaken reference earlier in the article to the Wren Building as the “oldest building in America.” But, if one can assume that this author spoke for the general student body, the restoration of the Wren Building, if not the Restoration as a whole, was ultimately seen by most as a positive thing. Unlike the Restoration of the main historic area, the Wren restoration did not demolish any buildings nor displace any families. Instead, it resulted in a multipurpose space that served to educate in more ways than one. Not until later did the two purposes of the Wren Building come into conflict.

THE WREN BUILDING IN THE EARLY YEARS OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

Figuring out what the interpretation of restored Williamsburg would actually look like was a slow process for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Soon after it opened in the 1930s, World War II struck the United States and derailed the Foundation’s plans. During the war, CW hosted servicemen for a tour meant to indoctrinate them with patriotism and Americanist values.⁸⁹ Each major building was used to talk about a different facet of early American history and how it related to the contemporary values of the nation. The stop at the Wren Building discussed eighteenth-century education and championed the American value of pursuing knowledge and truth.⁹⁰

An extensive 1954 *National Geographic* feature entitled “Williamsburg: Its College and Cinderella City” offers insight into postwar attitudes towards Colonial Williamsburg. Written in

⁸⁸ “Reopening of the Wren Building,” *Flat Hat*, Sep. 23, 1931.

⁸⁹ Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia’s Eighteenth-Century Capital*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 61.

⁹⁰ Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 68.

rambling first-person narration, the author describes his experiences visiting Williamsburg during the holiday season. He writes, “I was glad to have discarded, even for a few hours, some 200 years of troubled history and to have lived a while under the innocent spell of Christmas Past.”⁹¹ The idea of time travel and magically escaping the strife of the present day was attractive to early visitors, and it was a novelty that CW itself peddled. The article also glorifies Rockefeller almost as the “savior” of the city. Appropriating an eighteenth-century writing style in a kitschy attempt at historicity, the caption of one of the article’s maps reads: “Restored now by Grace of its great Benefactor, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, and still as comely as in its Hey-day, *Colonial Williamsburg* covers two hundred and twenty Acres.”⁹² This description of events makes Rockefeller out to be almost Christlike—the man who came and “saved” the backwater town and created a restored city out of his benevolent generosity.

EARLY INTERPRETATION AT THE WREN BUILDING

President Chandler’s successor, John Stewart Bryan (1934-1942), sought to develop a close working relationship with Colonial Williamsburg during his presidency. He initially suggested a joint “Institute of American Life” that would manage restored properties, direct Restoration researchers, manage collections, and fund social sciences instruction at the College.⁹³ This proposal was ultimately dropped, but it demonstrates the goals of mutual cooperation between the College and CW. The two institutions later established the jointly sponsored Institute of Early American History and Culture, now the Omohundro Institute, in 1944.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Donald McBain, Beverley M. Bowie, and B. Anthony Stewart, “Williamsburg: Its College and Its Cinderella City,” *National Geographic* 106, no. 4 (1954).

⁹² McBain, et. al., “Williamsburg: Its College and Its Cinderella City.”

⁹³ Richard B. Sherman, “Entering the Modern World, 1919-1945,” in *The College of William & Mary: A History*, 654.

⁹⁴ Richard B. Sherman, “Entering the Modern World, 1919-1945,” in *The College of William & Mary: A History*, 712.

Cooperation manifested itself in more practical ways through both CW's upkeep of William & Mary's historic campus and the use of student employees in CW. The maintenance arrangement involved the College paying CW an annual fee (\$3,000 in 1959) for their preservation experts to maintain the restored buildings of historic campus.⁹⁵ Students got involved through an abundance of employment opportunities available through the rapidly growing Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. A 1954 article about Williamsburg reports that "students find part-time jobs in almost every phase of the Restoration's work, from serving at the King's Arms Tavern to pumping the bellows at Deane Forge."⁹⁶ In fact, income from CW jobs made up nearly half of the \$135,000 that undergraduates collectively earned in 1953.⁹⁷ Furthermore, William & Mary contributed talented students for CW music, dance, and theater programs.

The Restoration of the Wren Building and a general revival of colonial history in Williamsburg led the College to reestablish old traditions and instate new ones. Under President Bryan, William & Mary held its first holiday Yule Log ceremony (1934) and the first Charter Day celebration (1937).⁹⁸ Both of these traditions were closely tied to the Wren Building, especially Yule Log, which involved Bryan dressed in eighteenth-century attire portraying the "Lord of the Manor" and leading the procession of students carrying the log into the Great Hall.⁹⁹

The Wren Building was undoubtedly a part of Colonial Williamsburg, and guidebooks and other books about Williamsburg from this period spent a considerable amount of time talking about the College. The book *Behold Williamsburg: A Pictorial Tour of Virginia's Colonial*

⁹⁵ Susan H. Godson, "The Modern College, 1945-1985," in *The College of William & Mary: A History*, 786.

⁹⁶ McBain, et. al., "Williamsburg: Its College and Its Cinderella City."

⁹⁷ McBain, et. al., "Williamsburg: Its College and Its Cinderella City."

⁹⁸ Sherman, "Entering the Modern World, 1919-1945," 643.

⁹⁹ "Yule Log Ceremony," Special Collections Research Center Knowledgebase, William & Mary Libraries, <https://scrc-kb.libraries.wm.edu/yule-log-ceremony>.

Capital (1947) guides armchair travelers through the city, with none other than the Wren Building as its starting point. The author points out that “Williamsburg has grown up in front of the Wren Building, and there is no better place to begin this tour than in the sheltered grounds of the College of William and Mary, the second oldest institution of higher learning in America.”¹⁰⁰ Clearly, William & Mary and the Wren Building were considered an anchor of historic Williamsburg and an important part of its story.

Guidebooks are one of the most useful sources for determining the state of interpretation at the Wren Building during this period. The 1955 edition of CW’s *Official Guidebook and Map* describes that

The visitor enters the Wren Building by the main (east) door flanked by two howitzers captured from Cornwallis at Yorktown. Passing through the central corridor he comes out onto the ‘Piazza,’ overlooking the west courtyard and the modern sunken garden. ... When the College is in session, guides are on hand to conduct visitors through the building.¹⁰¹

These guides seem to have been the same costumed “hostesses” that interpreted all of Williamsburg’s public buildings.¹⁰² A later source, describing this period of the college’s history, explained that “arrangements for tours were informal. If visitors stopped at the Brafferton, a guide was provided. If not, they were free to tour on their own.”¹⁰³ It is possible that the formal and informal tours were offered at different times of the year based on the academic calendar.

There is little known record of the usage of the building’s public-oriented interior at this time. The initial plan was evidently that “the entire lower floor, with the exception of the Chapel in the North East Wing, will be set apart for a memorial hall for portraits and tablets to

¹⁰⁰ Samuel Chamberlain, *Behold Williamsburg, a Pictorial Tour of Virginia’s Colonial Capital* (New York: Hastings House, 1947), 3.

¹⁰¹ *Colonial Williamsburg Official Guidebook: Containing a Brief History of the City and Descriptions of More than One Hundred Dwelling-Houses, Shops & Publick Buildings, Fully Illustrated: Also a Large Guide-Map*. (Williamsburg, Va: Colonial Williamsburg, 1955).

¹⁰² “Historic Wren Building Has Guided Tour,” *Virginian-Pilot*, Jun. 3, 1957.

¹⁰³ “Academic Robes Adorn Wren Building Guides,” *Flat Hat*, Nov. 2, 1973.

commemorate historic associations of the building,” according to a 1928 Flat Hat article.¹⁰⁴

Many of these same tablets and portraits are still on display inside the Wren Building, both inside various rooms and lining the piazza. A 1957 *Virginian-Pilot* article describes a few of the stops on the hostess-led tours, including the Great Hall, where there are portraits of “early Williamsburg families” and the Blue Room.¹⁰⁵

Though descriptions of visitor experience at the Wren Building during this period are less detailed than those about later years, we can speculate based on the wider goals for history-based tourism in the early to mid-twentieth century. Most visitors were motivated by feelings of patriotism and nationalism, and they sought out “shrines” to Americanist ideals. Many of these visits were forms of fan pilgrimage for devotees of the founding fathers. Thus, we can deduce that the interpretation was largely conservative and “great man” focused, prioritizing the narratives of the distinguished alumni of the College over the lesser-known people that existed in the space.

The 1920s through the 1950s were a period of significant change in Williamsburg and at William & Mary, but they were also marked by a slow process of “figuring things out.” The Restoration of the Wren Building, largely the result of the joint efforts of Chandler, Goodwin, and Rockefeller, was a major step towards the operation of the building as a historic site. Ultimately, though, it was not until the later half of the century that the College and CW began to systematically take advantage of the educational potential of the space.

¹⁰⁴ “Will Spend \$400,000 in Restoring Sir Christopher Wren Building This Summer,” *Flat Hat*, Mar. 30, 1928.

¹⁰⁵ “Historic Wren Building Has Guided Tour,” *Virginian-Pilot*, Jun. 3, 1957.

CHAPTER 3: THE WREN BUILDING IN THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG ERA

“Between the 1860s and the 1960s, the college wore its nostalgia like an old tweed coat. And it kept warm.” These were the words of Edwin A. Roberts Jr., an alumnus of William & Mary and journalist for the *National Observer* in 1969.¹⁰⁶ The 1960s and 1970s marked a turning point at which the Wren Building began to function as a site of modern, professionalized public history. Its designation as a protected historic property set the precedent for future preservation of the building, and the increased involvement of Colonial Williamsburg in the day-to-day operation of the space systematized interpretation. Up until this period, the interpretation of the College (like many other sites, including CW), had leaned on nostalgia and American nationalism. The professionalization of historic preservation and interpretation, along with the rise of public history in the 1970s, marked the beginning of a shift towards representing histories as accurately and holistically as possible, making space for narratives that had previously been overlooked.

NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION AT THE WREN BUILDING

Historic preservation in the United States had been federally sanctioned since the Historic Sites Act of 1935, which gave the National Park Service the authority to acquire, research, preserve and manage historic sites of national significance.¹⁰⁷ In the 1960s, however, a host of new legislation instituted more protections, regulations, and guidelines for historic properties. A

¹⁰⁶ Edwin A. Roberts, Jr., “Not Even in Jefferson’s Day Were Prospects so Bright,” *National Observer*, 3 February 1969.

¹⁰⁷ “Historic Sites Act of 1935,” National Park Service, 17 May 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/archeology/historic-sites-act.htm#:~:text=The%20Historic%20Sites%20Act%20established,people%20of%20the%20United%20States.%E2%80%9D>

watershed development in the history of American preservation was the establishment of the National Historic Landmark (NHL) program in 1960 and the National Register of Historic Places in 1966. The programs were designed to “Recognize and endorse the preservation and protection of structures and sites now administered by the States, other public agencies, or historical societies and to encourage private owners of historic landmarks to maintain such properties.”¹⁰⁸ According to former Secretary of the Interior Frederick A. Seaton, the program would fulfill “a long-felt need for the Federal Government to give moral support and recognition to organizations now concerned with the preservation of archaeological and historic properties.”¹⁰⁹ The increased involvement of the federal government formalized preservation and provided more resources for historic properties.

The United States currently has over 2,600 NHLs, each of which “represents an outstanding aspect of American history and culture.”¹¹⁰ The Wren Building was in the inaugural class of properties designated in 1960, marking the site’s important place in American history. As one of the first NHLs, the Wren Building helped set the standard for future designations. The NHL designation form for the Wren Building lists its areas of significance as including archeology (historic), architecture, community planning, and education. It also claimed the building’s centrality to the CW Restoration, asserting that “the work at the College of William and Mary had enormous impact on how the American public perceived historic preservation and the process of restoration.”¹¹¹ The document explains further:

¹⁰⁸ Department of the Interior Information Service, "SECRETARY SEATON ANNOUNCES PLAN TO REGISTER NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES," press release, 9 OCTOBER 1960.

¹⁰⁹ "SECRETARY SEATON ANNOUNCES PLAN TO REGISTER NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES."

¹¹⁰ “National Historic Landmark Program,” National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1582/index.htm>.

¹¹¹ US Department of the Interior, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form” for Wren Building, College of William & Mary, 13.

Colonial Williamsburg promulgated, with the buildings at the college as their first example, restoration based on thorough historical research, on investigation of historical fabric including archaeology, and on knowledge of local practices. Because of the resources of the Rockefellers and the wide publicity the Williamsburg projects generated, these premises became embedded in public consciousness and became the basis of future restoration work in the United States.¹¹²

The document provides a lengthy history of the College and the Wren Building, tracing its significance to American history from its founding to the time of writing.

There were three main conditions for a property to operate as an NHL: it had to preserve the historical integrity of the space, use it only for purposes compatible with its historical character, and permit an annual visit from a National Park Service representative.¹¹³ The reports from these annual visits offer valuable insight into how the building functioned during these years. In 1964, Charles E. Hatch, Chief Park Historian reported that “the visiting public has ready access to the building, and in summer there are organized tours at frequent intervals. Visitation is common all year and especially high in summer.”¹¹⁴ Interpretation was divided between CW during the summer and the College during the academic year, “with the use of college girls.”¹¹⁵ This is corroborated by a later source, which explains that “since 1963, this organization [CW] has provided guide service of a limited nature during the summer months, and various student groups have conducted unscheduled tours during the regular sessions of the College for the past several years.”¹¹⁶ The agreement between the College and CW went beyond just interpretation. The College allowed CW to interpret the building in return for restoration, refurbishment, and maintenance at the expense of the Foundation.¹¹⁷

¹¹² US Department of the Interior, “Nomination Form,” 13-14.

¹¹³ A.D. Chandler (William & Mary Chancellor) to Conrad L. Worth (Director of National Park Service), 7 March 1961.

¹¹⁴ Charles E. Hatch, Jr., “Registry of National Historic Landmarks Biennial Visit Report,” 3 November 1964.

¹¹⁵ Hatch, “Registry of National Historic Landmarks Biennial Visit Report.”

¹¹⁶ John Sours, “Wren’s New Role,” *William & Mary Alumni Gazette* 35, no. 4 (May 1968).

¹¹⁷ Godson, “The Modern College, 1945-1895,” 822.

The dual nature of the building as both an academic building and an interpretive site seems to have been perceived positively. In the 1964 National Park Service report, Hatch wrote: “The present student and faculty use seems to be of the very best type and the atmosphere which this generated was mentioned at several points as being just the kind of thing needed to make the Wren Building live.”¹¹⁸ The idea of the Wren Building as simultaneously “living” and a preserved historic site is an important part of its identity, and that dual role first truly emerged in the 1960s. For the first time, the operation of the Wren Building began to take the shape that it has today.

THE “WREN-OVATION” AND ITS AFTERMATH

By 1967, the colonial buildings of the so-called “ancient” campus needed serious repair. President Davis Young Paschall (served 1960-1971) felt strongly about expanding the campus; he oversaw the midcentury boom of construction that makes up much of what is now considered “New Campus.” In addition to the new construction, he also cared about the preservation of the historic buildings and “always considered the ancient Wren Building as his Camelot”---the representation of all that William & Mary stood for and a symbol of history living on in the present.¹¹⁹

With the help of funds and expertise from CW, William & Mary began what was termed a “Wren-ovation” of the building that modernized the building in many ways, including the installation of air conditioning. Though work on the building made interpretation more difficult, it did not stop it altogether. The 1967 NPS report notes that “installation of an air conditioning system is impeding visitor use this travel season, but Colonial Williamsburg is providing one

¹¹⁸ Hatch, “Registry of National Historic Landmarks Biennial Visit Report.”

¹¹⁹ Godson, “The Modern College, 1945-1895,” 831.

costumed interpreter daily to help visitors the best he can.”¹²⁰ The Wren-ovation also involved the restoration of several of the interior spaces to their eighteenth-century appearance, “so that visitors, while listening to the guides’ explanations, may more accurately visualize the manner in which classes were then conducted.”¹²¹ This reflected CW’s intent in restoring the historic area—giving visitors an opportunity to connect with history through physical spaces. The newly restored spaces included the Grammar School Room and the Moral Philosophy Room (both classrooms), as well as the Chapel.¹²² These additions were another step towards centralizing the interpretive role of the building and placing it at least on par with its academic use.

CW’s loose interpretation of the building was formalized in 1968, with the simultaneous opening of four major sites—the Restoration’s largest expansion since its formal opening in 1934.¹²³ These sites included the Randolph House, the Geddy House, Wetherburn's Tavern, and the Wren Building. The goal of these properties was to offer valuable new insights into eighteenth-century life in Williamsburg, as well as (more practically) to alleviate crowding during peak seasons.¹²⁴

A CW press release stated that the Wren Building “will receive more significant interpretation through cooperative efforts of the College of William & Mary and Colonial Williamsburg.”¹²⁵ These particular cooperative efforts, which had long existed in some form, changed in nature when CW approached the College to propose year-round interpretation. The

¹²⁰ Lawrence C. Hadley and F. A. Gould, “Registry of National Historic Landmarks Biennial Visit Report,” 24 August 1967.

¹²¹ Sours, “Wren’s New Role.”

¹²² *Colonial Williamsburg Official Guidebook: Containing a Brief History of the City and Descriptions of More than One Hundred Dwelling-Houses, Shops & Publick Buildings, Fully Illustrated: Also a Large Guide-Map* (Williamsburg, Va: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1972) 55.

¹²³ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “FOUR ORIGINAL BUILDINGS OPENED AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG,” press release, 1968.

¹²⁴ Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 137.

¹²⁵ Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, “June 1st and Thereafter,” press release, 1968.

College agreed, under a series of conditions. The College was to retain exclusive use of several spaces, including the entire third floor; College events superseded CW use (with appropriate notice); building security was a joint responsibility, while the costs of restoration, furnishing, and maintenance were entirely CW's; the College would not be liable for any issues that occurred in the public spaces; and the president would annually review and approve interpretive scripts.¹²⁶

Paschall, the president at the time, cared deeply about the history and interpretation of the building, and there is a surviving copy of his notes giving specific feedback and suggestions on one version of the script. Two of the changes he suggested were to emphasize the NHL status of the building, which “brings a further historic authenticity to bear upon the significance of the building,” and to remove the reference to the pirate’s booty that helped fund the early College.¹²⁷

His rationale for the latter reflects the contemporary political climate; he notes,

In a day when crime and violence is being justified for various and sundry reasons, there will be many visitors who will regard this reference to the use of pirate’s loot as historic precedent for ‘crime does pay’ when some of its spoils can be used for a worthy cause—in this, the College of William and Mary.¹²⁸

The script was prepared by the College, which ultimately retained authority over all the operations onsite. The Board of Visitors also retained the right to terminate the program at any point.¹²⁹

The guide service at the Wren Building, which had previously been informal and largely student-run during the year, gave way to “specially-trained costumed hosts and hostesses” that could “present to the general public the full-scale historical commentary the building deserves.”¹³⁰ Though there was still no charge to tour the Wren Building, it began to be listed on

¹²⁶ Ann Clark, “Paschall Clarifies Wren Issue,” *The Flat Hat*, 21 October 1966.

¹²⁷ Davis Young Paschall, notes on Wren interpretive script, 21 June 1968.

¹²⁸ Davis Young Paschall, notes on Wren interpretive script, 21 June 1968.

¹²⁹ Clark, “Paschall Clarifies Wren Issue.”

¹³⁰ Sours, “Wren’s New Role.”

CW's "combination ticket," which allowed visitors a choice of sites to see. This placement of the Wren Building alongside the other major sites of the Restoration spoke to its importance and generated publicity and awareness about the site. And it worked—the Wren Building saw a huge increase in visitation numbers from 1967 to 1968. Total visitation for the months of July and August 1967 was 17,731, while the same months the following year saw 76,469 visitors (more than 300% increase).¹³¹

Despite the seeming success of the new program, not everyone was happy with the development, to say the least. Starting in 1966, the campus began to buzz with "...current rumors of a Wren Building 'sell-out' to Colonial Williamsburg," prompting President Paschall to publish a clarifying letter in the *Flat Hat* assuring the William & Mary community that "the College will retain both full possession and full use of all the building's facilities."¹³² The following week's issue published an article entitled "W&M Faculty Applauds Wren-ovation," subtitled "Prof's Affirm Trust in President, CW."¹³³ The glowing responses from the twelve professors that were chosen seem to have been handpicked to support the administrative decision to work with CW, raising questions about how much of the communications from the university were propagandic.

Rumors and suspicions had apparently spiraled out of control, as students and faculty alike jumped to conclusions upon learning of CW's proposed new role in the operation of the Wren Building. One *Flat Hat* writer sought to defend CW,

The horrors envisaged by the skeptics have seemed to unnecessarily defame the intentions of Colonial Williamsburg. One must bear in mind that a multi-million dollar organization of the stature of CW is highly conscious of its public image and cannot tolerate blatantly obvious expansionary colonialism. (No pun intended.)¹³⁴

¹³¹ "Wren Building First of CW Restorations," *Virginia Gazette*, 20 September 1968.

¹³² Clark, "Paschall Clarifies Wren Issue."

¹³³ "W&M Faculty Applauds Wren-ovation," *The Flat Hat*, 28 October 1966.

¹³⁴ "On the 'Interpretation' of Wren: Hasty Conclusions," *The Flat Hat*, 21 October 1966.

The writer ends the article by advising their fellow students, “A wise man does not look a gift horse in the mouth, particularly such a splendid one as this.” Other articles called for students to recognize the benefits of the development:

Although the realization appears to escape many students, Colonial Williamsburg offers William and Mary a unique opportunity to end its isolation from the world outside the campus. The colonial town actually provides students of the College many chances to widen their horizons, rather than restricting them in an archaic eighteenth-century atmosphere.¹³⁵

The reference to the “archaic eighteenth-century atmosphere” of William & Mary provides some hint as to why the College may have been resistant to change. Students feared that CW would impose upon the emerging progressivism of the College and perpetuate outdated worldviews.

Beyond the ideological indignation toward the new interpretation, students and faculty faced a more concrete inconvenience: an influx of tourists into their space of learning. As cited above, visitation quadrupled in the span of one year. The goal was for the new interpretation to minimize disruption as much as possible; the *Alumni Gazette* assures its audience that “the presentations will be conducted in such a manner as to prevent interference with the regular use of the Wren Building as a center of learning, thus maintaining its traditional role”¹³⁶ Still, the sheer numbers of people moving in and around the building were impossible to ignore. Furthermore, while most guests were respectful, many were reported to be wandering to other areas besides the designated exhibition spaces, including the third floor. A *Flat Hat* writer sardonically related one such encounter: “As the reporter was reading this, he was practically run over by an old woman who HAD to have a picture of the College Priorities. Incidents such as these will, hopefully, be confined to non-academic areas.”¹³⁷ Another *Flat Hat* article features a cartoon of a boisterous-looking tourist woman (with a bawling, tricorn-hatted child in tow)

¹³⁵ “CW and the College: An Objective Look,” *The Flat Hat*, 19 February 1965.

¹³⁶ Sours, “Wren’s New Role.”

¹³⁷ Larry Diehl, “Wren Classes Fight Invasion of Tourists,” *The Flat Hat*, 13 October 1970.

approaching an alarmed student reading at a desk, with the caption, ““No Ma’am I don’t think Thomas Jefferson carved his initials on this desk.””¹³⁸ This comical encounter is something that every William & Mary student can relate to, even fifty years later. But the cartoon, published in anticipation of the CW expansion, expressed very real concerns surrounding the shared use of the building. In order for the cooperation to be successful, it was necessary for the students to be aware of the historical significance of the space as well as the academic significance, while “the visitors are aware of the historic significance but must be made aware of the academic importance as well,” according to J.W. Lambert, Vice President for Student Affairs in 1970.¹³⁹ The conflicts that necessarily arise from a university town that doubles as a tourist town persist today.

At times, the involvement of CW brought the College into the theatrical, “make-believe” air of illusion that pervaded the Restoration. One member of the class of 1978 recalled the following anecdote from his time as a student:

One particular day I was rushing across the Wren courtyard and up the steps on my way to class, dressed in normal student attire— jeans and a sweatshirt —when I was stopped by an elderly couple, obviously tourists from CW. They began asking me questions about the building, which I tried to answer to the best of my ability, but then apologized and said that I was running late for class. The woman chuckled, and said that I was “certainly playing my part well.” “Pardon me?,” I replied. “Well, you actors certainly do look like real college students, it really lends atmosphere to this part of Williamsburg!”¹⁴⁰

While comical, this encounter also demonstrates how little tourists understood the true function of the College and its relationship to CW. For them, the entire College served the same purpose as the rest of the restored historic area: a quasi-theme park that allowed them to step into the past

¹³⁸ “On the ‘Interpretation’ of Wren: Hasty Conclusions,” *The Flat Hat*, 21 October 1966.

¹³⁹ Diehl, “Wren Classes Fight Invasion of Tourists.”

¹⁴⁰ Jackson Sasser, “Wrenewal: William and Mary Faithful are Rallying to Preserve the Immortality of the Wren Building,” *William & Mary Alumni Gazette* 64, no. 3 (May 1998).

and escape the realities of life. This was not a luxury afforded to William & Mary students, for whom the space was just another academic building.

A NEW INTERPRETATIVE ERA

The 1960s and 1970s saw the beginning of a shift from Americanist nostalgia to new social history, which meant that historic sites began to include (if not yet prioritize) narratives that departed from the mainstream elite white male stories. The national attitude of the 1960s was one of cynicism, and events like Watergate and the Vietnam war led Americans to question the nation's institutions, values, and traditions.¹⁴¹ The Civil Rights movement also sparked a more widespread interest in African American histories and inspired a call for more inclusive narratives. These cultural phenomena opened the door for significant changes in the field of history, which eventually began to show themselves in the ideology and operation of Colonial Williamsburg. What had been a pilgrimage site that promoted nostalgia and a glorified version of the colonial past now took shaky steps towards portraying those ordinary people whose lives had received less scholarly attention.

Despite this change, interpretation at CW in this period, and at the Wren Building specifically, still remained rooted in the stories of the white “founding fathers.” A national article explaining the new expanded interpretation of Wren begins, “In the 1760s a red-haired, freckle-faced youth enrolled at the school, a youth who would rank—probably forever—as William and Mary’s greatest alumnus.”¹⁴² The current moment of the College was being compared in significance to “Jefferson’s day”--- widely regarded to be the “glory days” during which the College peaked.

¹⁴¹ Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 121, 147.

¹⁴² “Not Even in Jefferson’s Day Were Prospects so Bright,” *National Observer*; 3 February 1969.

An existing interpretive script for the Wren Building, dating from between 1963 and 1968, demonstrates which facts and stories were prioritized and which were excluded in the 45-minute tours of the Wren Building.¹⁴³ It comes as no surprise that discussions of William & Mary's famous alumni made up a significant part of the interpretation of the Wren Building, with a particular emphasis on Thomas Jefferson. The Alumni Gazette reports that in the new interpretation, "a great deal of emphasis will be placed upon the role of the Wren building as a center of learning in colonial America, an academic progenitor of the accomplishments of the early College's many famous students."¹⁴⁴ The script rattles off a list of prominent statesmen and government officials that graduated from William & Mary, proudly claiming that "the long honor roll of 18th century alumni and their accomplishments is practically a roster of the founding fathers of the United States."¹⁴⁵ This is almost identical to some of the language used in the early rhetoric about the historical significance of the College from more than fifty years earlier.

One of the most glaring exclusions in the 1960s interpretive script is the complete lack of mention of the enslaved population that existed at the College (including those owned by both the institution itself and the students and faculty). The only reference is that there were "cooking facilities and servants' rooms in the basement."¹⁴⁶ The omission is likely for two reasons: firstly, the university wanted to portray itself in as positive a light as possible. Secondly, this script was used squarely in the middle of the Civil Rights era, and racial tensions were high, especially at a southern school like William & Mary. The university was still in the process of admitting the first Black students (there were no Black residential students on campus until 1967), and conversations about the school's history with enslavement were avoided at all cost. In contrast,

¹⁴³ Sours, "Wren's New Role."

¹⁴⁴ Sours, "Wren's New Role."

¹⁴⁵ "Sir Christopher Wren Building Interpretive Paper," pre-1968, in Rockefeller Library Special Collections, 10.

¹⁴⁶ "Sir Christopher Wren Building Interpretive Paper," 2.

there are several mentions of the co-educational integration of the College in 1918 and the inclusion of white women as a point of pride.

The interpretive script does devote a lot of time to talking about the Brafferton Indian School, but the language used and the attitudes with which it was approached is troublesome. This interpretation of the Brafferton makes it sound like it was a privilege to attend—a special opportunity afforded to these young indigenous boys, who are then portrayed as rather ungrateful. The script includes quotes from William Byrd on the “failure” of the Indian School: “Yet after they return'd home, instead of civilizing and converting the rest, they have immediately Relapst into Infidelity and Barbarism themselves. . . .” and “In short, all the Pains he had undertaken among the Infidels had no other Effect but to make them something cleanlier than other Indians are.”¹⁴⁷ This problematic interpretation perpetuated long-standing racism and stereotypes toward Indigenous communities.

The quotes included in the script narrative also perpetuate vestiges of the romantic “Old South” rhetoric that characterized the school’s approach to its history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When discussing the President’s House, guides were expected to share the following quote from President Paschall, then-current resident of the house:

At times I seem to awaken during the late hours of the night and hear the faint creak of stairs under the light tread of gracious ladies of by-gone years who have arrived from the plantation homes on the James, buoyant and gay in their anticipation of the hospitality of this place, while from the drawing room below comes the aroma of the pipe, and the hearty laughter of men who love life and reflect the finest manners, wit, and culture of the day.¹⁴⁸

This oddly sentimental break in the tour narrative feels out of place; it doesn’t align with the tone of the rest of the information, which mostly reflects the commitment to historical accuracy and

¹⁴⁷ “Sir Christopher Wren Building Interpretive Paper,” 6-7.

¹⁴⁸ “Sir Christopher Wren Building Interpretive Paper,” 7.

factual information (however limited) that was beginning to characterize CW's interpretive philosophy at this time.

The inclusion of several long quotes such as these in the script also raises questions about how guides were expected to interact with the provided information. The script was rather long and written in narrative form—were they expected to memorize every word? Did they read off the document while giving a tour? Or was this just a sample of what to say, leaving individual guides the freedom to customize their interpretation of the space? Whether or not these were the exact words that visitors in the 1960s would have heard, they demonstrate the core interpretive goals of the College and CW. Namely, an understanding of how education worked in the eighteenth century, but above all an awestruck appreciation for the significance of William & Mary to American history, especially through its impressive roster of graduates who shaped the nation. At this point, rhetorics of nostalgia and white supremacy still ruled the day.

The reopening of the Wren Building under CW in 1968 opened up space for a broader base of interpretation that tied the Wren Building into the wider Williamsburg story as interpreted by CW. Interpreters took into account the interests of their audience, adapting their stories to address frequent inquiry. For example, many visitors evidently asked about specifics of the educational structure of the eighteenth-century College (manner of instruction, course content, books and materials), so the interpretation expanded to include more details of this sort.¹⁴⁹ Guides played a dual role of both educating visitors about the College's past and relaying its continuing role throughout the twentieth-century.¹⁵⁰

Beginning in October of 1973, CW restructured the Wren Building staff to include a senior host or hostess overseeing a staff of William & Mary undergraduate students who led the

¹⁴⁹ Sours, "Wren's New Role."

¹⁵⁰ "Wren Building First of CW Restorations," *Virginia Gazette*, 20 September 1968.

tours.¹⁵¹ Unlike the “amateur” student guides of the early 60s, these students were employed by CW and went through the same rigorous training that all Foundation interpreters received. The new Wren Building staff was not to be in historic costume, but rather required to don academic gowns over their regular clothing, making an interesting, if slightly confusing, statement about the blending of past and present at the College.¹⁵² The program was seemingly a success; student guides were reported to approach their task seriously and with enthusiasm, and even expressed interest in participating in additional training sessions that were voluntary and uncompensated.¹⁵³

The national celebration of the United States Bicentennial in 1976 generated a newfound interest in American history. Museums and historic sites prepared themselves for record-breaking visitation numbers. Places like CW that dealt with early American history had particularly high expectations. The year was doubly significant for CW, because it also marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Restoration. Foundation officials estimated a staggering 300,000 visitors expected to tour the Wren Building alone in 1976.¹⁵⁴ Ultimately, despite special programming and high hopes, 1976 attendance was lower than expected. The lasting legacy of the Bicentennial at the Wren Building, however, was the establishment of the Information Center, which was an important step towards the operation of the building as a proper historic site. The Information Center was intended to be

a reference point for Bicentennial visitors who want current information about the College, including its size, curriculum, entrance requirements and extracurricular activities... [as well as] genealogy, furnishings, and architecture of the Wren Building and the College’s history since 1693. Visitors often request help in locating students and alumni, professors’ offices, and other points of interest to them on campus.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ J. Douglas Smith to Department of Exhibitions Buildings, 16 October 1973.

¹⁵² “Academic Robes Adorn Wren Building Guides,” *The Flat Hat*, 2 November 1973.

¹⁵³ Richard H. Carter to J. Douglas Smith, “Re: Further Classes for Student Wren Interpreters.”

¹⁵⁴ “Historic Room Aids Visitors,” *William & Mary Alumni Gazette* 43, no. 8 (Feb 1976)

¹⁵⁵ “Historic Room Aids Visitors.”

This space was, and remains, not only the center for learning about the history of the College and Wren Building, but also the “front desk” of the College for many visitors, including prospective students. Information Center staff were no longer just interpreters, they were also almost marketing agents representing the school. This complex role of the Information Center epitomizes the similar joint purpose of the Wren Building as an academic and an interpretive space, as well as a public-facing front for university admissions.

The “failure” of the Bicentennial spurred CW to make some changes in its approach to history. 1979 marked an important turning point in the history of Colonial Williamsburg: the formal introduction of African-American histories, including those of slavery, into CW interpretation.¹⁵⁶ Around this same time, the Wren Building also first began to explicitly discuss slavery as part of its interpretation of the College’s history. A document in the Rockefeller Library archives, which was evidently meant to supplement a Wren tour script, provides a substantial paragraph on the College’s history of enslavement to be interpreted in the “Long Passage” (the second floor space now called the Leadership Gallery).¹⁵⁷ Despite the now-outdated language (ex. “Negro”), the paragraph clearly explains the nature of enslavement at the College, even referencing the school for Black children, now known as the Bray School, that the College endorsed. Still, the information attempts to absolve some of its responsibility, emphasizing the “good moral example” set by instructing and baptizing those enslaved at the College and opening Chapel services to enslaved community members. The author also admits that “slavery was recognized as an evil, but the institution so entrapped colonial society that leading churchmen and citizens...found the problem impossible to resolve,” seemingly excusing them for their complicity.¹⁵⁸ The information in the document cites a single source, Thad Tate’s

¹⁵⁶ Ywone Edwards-Ingram, “Before 1979,” *The Public historian* 36, no. 1 (2014).

¹⁵⁷ “Wren Building – Long Passage,” in Rockefeller Library Special Collections.

¹⁵⁸ “Wren Building – Long Passage.”

groundbreaking 1965 publication *The Negro in Eighteenth Century Williamsburg*. Tate's research, as put forth in this book, set the stage for CW's incorporation of African-American stories through a social history approach.

In 1985, the publication *Teaching History at Colonial Williamsburg*, prepared by CW's Director of Research Cary Carson, set forth a new interpretive plan that came to be known as the "Becoming Americans" theme. This new storyline, which focused on the social history of Williamsburg, was designed to accompany and supplement the traditional political history narrative.¹⁵⁹ The plan encouraged CW to broaden interpretation "to include the many eighteenth-century residents of the town whose lives and contributions had been insufficiently acknowledged in earlier tellings," specifically teaching "a history of early Virginia that describes and celebrates the diverse backgrounds of Indians, slaves, and settlers."¹⁶⁰ The goal was to create a shared "We the People" experience in an era of increasing national diversity, and to represent the story of Williamsburg as a miniature version of the story of the nation.¹⁶¹

This new interpretive plan was rigorously implemented across the Foundation. The 1985 Interpretive Planning document for the Wren Building is structured around this social history approach to the history of the College. The document lists the "Historical Cast of Characters" that make up the College's story as "President, professors, grammar school master, master of the Indian school, ushers or 'servitors,' male college students (aged 16 and up), grammar school boys (aged about 12 to 16), Indian boys (aged 7 to 12), college employees such as housekeeper, gardeners, and black slaves."¹⁶² The social relationships among these groups make up a key part

¹⁵⁹ Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 149.

¹⁶⁰ Cary Carson, et. al., *Becoming Americans: Our Struggle to Be Both Free and Equal: A Plan of Thematic Interpretation* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1998) 4.

¹⁶¹ Carson, *Becoming Americans*, 4, 9.

¹⁶² "Interpretive Planning Team Charter Document," 15 June 1985, in Rockefeller Library Special Collections, 2.

of the interpretation, as well as their “town-gown” relationships with the wider Williamsburg community. The following example of interpretation from the planning document characterizes the storytelling approach:

English academic traditions and the social hierarchy of the College community can be conveniently illustrated in the Great Hall used primarily as the dining room. The head table was occupied by the President, professors, and the classical grammar school master. In descending order of status at other tables were the lesser faculty, white students, and at the lowest table, Indian boys, watched over by their master. Other College personnel too far down the social scale to be seated here at all were the housekeeper, gardeners, and slaves.¹⁶³

Today, many interpreters at the Wren Building still use this same illustration in the Great Hall when discussing the social structure. The interpretive plan also offers a much more nuanced and complex discussion of the Brafferton than previous scripts. The new script bluntly states: “Meant as an expression of concern and benevolence, early efforts to Christianize native Americans failed because the settlers were remarkably poor anthropologists who practiced cultural imperialism” —a far cry from the white savior rhetoric of the 1960s script.¹⁶⁴ Above all, CW continued to reinforce the importance of accuracy in interpretation.

The 1985-1986 training plan for William & Mary student guides recognizes that each interpreter has “a unique style and manner of presenting the material,” but reasserts that “the overriding goal of each interpretation is to tell the story describing life in the Colonial Capital as factually and accurately as possible.”¹⁶⁵ Interpreters were not to take their task lightly.

In addition to student guides, there were also sometimes character interpreters in the Wren Building. Beginning in March of 1986, a first person interpreter portraying Reverend Samuel Henley, professor of Moral Philosophy at the College from 1770 to 1775. His job was to

¹⁶³ “Interpretive Planning Team Charter Document,” 2-3.

¹⁶⁴ “Interpretive Planning Team Charter Document,” 3.

¹⁶⁵ “Training plan for William and Mary Students to Interpret the Wren Building,” 1985-1986, in Rockefeller Library Special Collections.

discuss life at the College, his fellow faculty members, and his perspective on the events of 1770.¹⁶⁶ Mary Wiseman, manager of character interpretation, also proposed the use of junior interpreters in the building. She wanted to “develop a small group of gentlemen scholars using some of our present corps of music and dance students,” which she believed “could add much ‘life on the scene’ at the Wren!”¹⁶⁷ Suggestions for character-based programs included a new student getting advice from an older student, a lesson conducted in the grammar school room, and a student being sent upstairs to be disciplined for mischief. I was unable to find any records determining if these programs were actually implemented, but their proposal reflects the importance CW placed on experiential learning and a personal connection to the past fostered through conversation with “real” people from history.

Eventually, CW became less involved in the interpretation of the Wren Building in the early 1990s. The change was not sudden, but rather resulted from a combination of budget concerns, new leadership, and different interpretive priorities. CW continued to use the space for some costumed programming, but it was far less frequent. As CW involvement lessened, William & Mary students were once again the main source of interpretation. Under the direction of new college organizations such as the Office of Historic Campus and the Spotswood Society, both established in the 1990s, the College approached the twenty-first century with a renewed authority over the telling of its own history.

¹⁶⁶ “Wren Interpretive Plan,” 18 February 1986, in Rockefeller Library Special Collections.

¹⁶⁷ Conny Graft to Wren Interpretive Planning Team, 7 January 1986, in Rockefeller Library Special Collections.

CHAPTER 4

THE WREN BUILDING IN ITS FOURTH CENTURY

William & Mary entered its fourth century with much fanfare and a renewed interest in the history and origins of the College. 1993 marked the Tercentenary year— three hundred years after the school was chartered on February 8, 1693. This milestone was a watershed moment in understandings of campus history. The William & Mary community both looked back and looked forward, and as a result considered anew how they wanted their history to be told.

The core Tercentenary events were centered around Charter Week—the week surrounding the February 8 anniversary of the charter. The main event was the Charter Day Convocation, which featured a keynote speech from Charles III, then Prince of Wales. The choice of speaker reaffirmed the royal connections that had been a point of pride for the College since its founding. Clearly, the College still based much of its identity on its royal roots, and wanted to celebrate that on its Tercentenary. On the actual anniversary of the charter, February 8, 1993, the William & Mary community gathered in the courtyard of the Wren Building to “commemorate the historic birthday of the College in 1693.”¹⁶⁸ The opening remarks grounded the celebration in the historic space. The speaker, an alumnus of the class of 1961, opened his speech as follows: “When we first file past the cannon which symbolically guards America’s oldest classroom, we bind ourselves, one by one, to the uncommon vision of William & Mary... The birthrights of the mind and those of man are, behind the cannon, made safe.”¹⁶⁹ The Fort Christanna cannon was placed in the Wren Yard around 1900 and was a beloved William & Mary artifact and symbol of the College’s history until it was removed for conservation. The

¹⁶⁸ “Historic Charter Week, February 8-13,” *William & Mary Alumni Gazette* 60, vol. 4 (Dec 1992) .

¹⁶⁹ Jerry Van Voorheis, “To Ring Our Age [Charter Day remarks],” 8 February 1993, in Swem Library Special Collections.

Wren Building also offered a new self-guided walking tour called “Tercentenary Historic Tour of the College of William & Mary in Virginia” to educate visitors on the historic campus as they walked around. And as always, information center volunteers were on hand to assist with information regarding the history of the school as well as Tercentenary events. In addition to the human face of interpretation, a new exhibit of five lightbox interpretive panels was installed off the center hall of the building. These lightboxes, which narrated the first three hundred years of the College’s history, assisted visitors who chose to take a self-guided walk through the building.

Two years later, riding in the wake of the Tercentenary, was the 300th anniversary of the beginning of construction on the Wren Building (the cornerstone was laid in 1695). The 1995 Convocation also served as a birthday celebration for the Wren Building, with around 3,000 people in attendance. The keynote speaker was Pulitzer Prize-winning popular historian David McCullough, who “took a special tour of the Wren Building—complete with character interpreters playing Thomas Jefferson and James Blair, the first president of William & Mary—before delivering his speech.”¹⁷⁰ The speeches of the day tied the physical space of the Wren Building to the history of the university, Colonial Williamsburg, and the United States as a whole. McCullough spoke to the historic significance of the Wren Building, saying, “We gather where history affected the state, the country, the human spirit then and down the years ever since. What happened here in this town in this very building changed the world,” later compared the Wren Building to other national sites such as the Washington, D.C. Capitol, the Brooklyn Bridge, the St. Louis Arch, and the historic campus of the University of Virginia.¹⁷¹ Timothy Sullivan, then-president of William & Mary,

¹⁷⁰ “A Birthday Bash for Wren,” *Daily Press*, 25 August 1995.

¹⁷¹ David McCullough, Convocation Keynote Address, 25 August 1995, in Swem Library Special Collections.

Try as we might—and we do try mightily sometimes—we cannot quite capture that lost world of the late 17th century—or the values, the virtues, the ambitions of those who made it. But we do share with them the glory of this building. We know the Great Hall, the Chapel, the long corridor upstairs lined with portraits of prior presidents... And I know that when the women and men of William and Mary leave here to live their lives in distant places—I know that when they remember the College—strong and affecting images of the Wren are never—never—far from mind.¹⁷²

To Sullivan, the Wren Building was the physical bridge between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries—a sentiment felt by many.

The 1990s saw not only significant milestones in the College's history, but also yet another shift in the operation of the Wren Building as a historic site. The establishment of the Office of Historic Campus in 1995 placed Louise Lambert Kale in charge of the interpretation of the building as Executive Director. One of the Office's first acts, in a joint effort between Kale and President Sullivan, was to establish the Spotswood Society in an effort to increase student involvement in the Wren Building and make it "lively [and] relevant to the college and the visitors."¹⁷³ The Spotswood Society was designed as an organization of students who were trained to present the history of the Wren Building and the College as a whole to visitors. In a 1996 press release on the establishment of the society, President Sullivan said,

I envision these students as ambassadors for William and Mary... In many respects, the Wren Building and the historic campus are the College's front door, and this is a fitting place to have a strong student presence to share the unique history and traditions of which we are so proud with the thousands of people who visit the campus every year.¹⁷⁴

He later commented that the creation of Spotswood Society "confirms our commitment to the past in a fashion that enlivens the present and provides for the future."¹⁷⁵ The first batch of Spotswood Society members ("Spotswoods") numbered around twelve or thirteen, and this small crew of students staffed the building seven days a week during opening hours under the capable

¹⁷² Timothy Sullivan, Convocation Address, 25 August 1995, in Swem Library Special Collections.

¹⁷³ Conversation with Timothy Sullivan, 16 April 2024.

¹⁷⁴ College of William & Mary, Press Release, 1996.

¹⁷⁵ Sasser, "Wrenewal."

direction of Louise Kale. In addition to their daily duties, Spotswoods had additional special opportunities, such as decorating the Christmas tree in the President's House and participating in a "crypt crawl" through the normally restricted historic tomb. One of the early Spotswoods recalls that while there were no longer CW costumed interpreters assigned to the Wren Building, they would regularly pop in and converse with visitors. One such frequent visitor was Thomas Jefferson, portrayed by legendary interpreter Bill Barker.¹⁷⁶ Many Spotswoods recall working with Bernard Bowman, longtime special events supervisor for the Wren Building, as one of the highlights of their experience.¹⁷⁷ Affectionately called the "Keeper of the Wren," Bowman oversaw the logistics and security that allowed the building to function smoothly and balance its many roles. Bowman served the school for 36 years until his retirement in 2018.¹⁷⁸ The Spotswood Society, boasting nearly fifty members in 2024, is still the primary mode of interpretation at the Wren Building and the "front line" that greets visitors as they arrive.

Despite fresh new interpreters, the Wren Building itself was looking worse for the wear. Forty years since its last renovation, it was time for a new project. Dubbed the "Wrenewal," the ambitious project of 1999-2000 rivaled the scope of the 1960s renovation work. This time, though, the effects of the work were primarily behind-the-scenes rather than changing the look of the space. The preservation philosophy of the Wrenewal, as put forth by Louise Kale, reflects this. She wrote, "The College family, which includes generations of students who have attended classes and special events in the Wren Building, does not want the appearance of the building to change. The hand of the project architect should be all but invisible."¹⁷⁹ Even the language of

¹⁷⁶ Conversation with Jenny Call, 10 April 2024.

¹⁷⁷ Conversation with Jackson Sasser, 15 April 2024.

¹⁷⁸ Katherine Rowe, "Remembering Bernard Bowman, Sr.," *W&M News*, 10 August 2023, <https://magazine.wm.edu/online-exclusives/remembering-bernard-bowman.php>.

¹⁷⁹ Louise Kale, "Introduction," in *Behind the Construction Fence: Images from the Renewal of the Sir Christopher Wren Building*.

“renewal” rather than “renovation” was carefully chosen to reinforce the fact that the project would not involve any aesthetic changes to the building.¹⁸⁰ The major changes that did occur, in addition to general preservation work and refurbishment, fell into the following areas: updated mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems; repair of water damage and prevention of future moisture-related issues; and the addition of safety and security features, including much-needed smoke detectors to help prevent a fourth fire. The project cost \$4 million, along with an accompanying \$1 million endowment towards the future maintenance and preservation of the building. Like the previous restoration work on the Wren Building, CW provided its support, primarily in the form of skilled labor. Louise Kale reports, “Every time we asked for assistance during the renewal, we received it.”¹⁸¹ Though the Foundation was no longer directly operating the Wren Building, the management of the space was still a joint effort.

The \$4 million project brought the building into the twenty-first century, making it a modern and usable space without compromising its historical integrity. The unique needs of the building, serving as both an academic building and an exhibition space, largely shaped the philosophy and rhetoric surrounding the project. Unlike the earliest calls for preservation, this campaign relied less on William & Mary’s imposing roll of alumni, focusing more on the importance of the Wren Building to the college community. The project proposal outlines the building’s significance as follows:

As an architectural, historical, and educational landmark, the Wren is an irreplaceable treasure: at the same time, it is not a monument or a museum, but a vital center of activity in the contemporary life of a modern university. Hundreds of students take classes in the building, faculty have offices, many of the College’s most important ceremonial occasions take place within, and thousands of visitors pass through its halls while visiting Colonial Williamsburg.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Sasser, “Wrenewal.”

¹⁸¹ Melissa V. Pinard, “Wren Renewed,” *William & Mary Alumni Gazette* 66, no 4 (Summer 2001).

¹⁸² “‘So Good a Design:’ A Proposal for the Renovation of the Sir Christopher Wren Building,” April 1996, in Swem Library Special Collections.

The proposal addresses the “wear and tear of three centuries of service” that had taken its toll on “this much-loved and well-used building.” This time around, the Wren Building was depicted almost as a beloved old friend in desperate need of some TLC. Still, no appeal for support William & Mary can escape the presence of the “founding fathers.” The proposal later argues that, “Just as students and professors such as Jefferson, John Tyler, George Wythe, and James Blair walked the corridors of the Wren together during the early years, so too should current and future generations have the singular experience of teaching and learning within the College’s first and most celebrated building.”¹⁸³ This vision of historical camaraderie is charming, if not for the fact that those men represent over a century of involvement with the College and almost none of them were there at the same time. Ultimately, though, the Wrenewal project was successful and contributed greatly to the everyday useability of the building, as well as its effectiveness as an exhibition space.

William & Mary expanded its role as a site of tourism in 2011 with the creation of a Tourism Task Force. This group acknowledged the attractions, both historical and recreational, that the College contributed to the Williamsburg tourism scene, including the historic Wren Building. The Task Force developed a Tourism Plan for William & Mary, making it the first college to have one. The goals set forth by the group sought to define the target audience of visitors, increase tourism-related revenue, and better integrate William & Mary into the broader network of regional tourism networks.¹⁸⁴ Also in 2011, the task force implemented the Collegiate Pass program, which allows William & Mary students free admission to all CW sites and events.

¹⁸³ “‘So Good a Design:’ A Proposal for the Renovation of the Sir Christopher Wren Building,” April 1996, in Swem Library Special Collections.

¹⁸⁴ “Tourism Task Force Tackles W&M’s Role in Tourism,” *W&M News*, 24 June 2011, <https://www.wm.edu/news/stories/2011/task-force-tackles-wms-role-in-tourism-123.php>.

With this program, CW and the College further cemented their cooperative and reciprocal relationship.

The developments of the past three decades are defined by the College taking an active and authoritative role in the telling of its own history. It marks a coming of age of the Wren Building as an historic site in its own right—one that is largely self-sustained with internal organization, planning, and staff.

CONTROVERSY AND INCLUSION

Like any museum or historic site in recent years, the Wren Building has been the site of debates over the roles of race and religion in historical interpretation, as well as conversations about accessibility and other forms of inclusion. Changes at the Wren Building in the last twenty years have reflected outside pressures, changing political and cultural climates, and new scholarship.

One of the most publicized controversies the school dealt with pertained to the cross in the Wren Chapel. In 2006, William & Mary President Gene Nichol (served 2005-2008) decided to remove the bronze cross from permanent display on the altar in the Chapel, instead allowing it to be placed there upon request by any group using the space. His rationale, as related in an email to the student body, was that

The display of a Christian cross...sends an unmistakable message that the chapel belongs more fully to some of us than to others. That there are, at the college, insiders and outsiders. Those for whom our most revered place is meant to be keenly welcoming, and those for whom presence is only tolerated. That distinction I believe to be contrary to the best values of the college.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ K Bailey Thomson, "The Crux of the Matter: the Intersection of Deliberative Traditions in the Wren Cross Controversy" (2010), *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. William & Mary. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/698>

Many supported the spirit of inclusion that accompanied this decision, while others championed for the cross to be returned to the altar, using both historical and religious arguments and citing the College's foundations within the Anglican church. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* published a pair of op-eds that put forth the main arguments on each side of the debate. The anti-Nichol side was represented by the founder of the Save the Wren Cross initiative, who argued that it was a "dramatic erosion of [William & Mary's] core historic identity" and that the decision signified a "new tolerance for the intolerant."¹⁸⁶ The pro-Nichol side was represented by the Wesleyan campus minister, who pointed out that William & Mary is no longer religiously affiliated, and the Chapel is used by people of all faiths, not just Protestant Christians. He reproved those blowing up the affair by saying, "Perhaps Jesus cares less about the cross in Wren than how we respond to the hungry, homeless, imprisoned, sick, and forgotten in the surrounding community."¹⁸⁷

The physical location of the cross was an important issue for many people, but many others objected not so much to the decision, but rather to the method in which it was made. The decision was rather clandestine, with no input from the W&M community, and no announcement was released to the public until it leaked and media pressure required a response from the president.¹⁸⁸ One author claimed that "the secretive way the policy change was made is an embarrassment to the ideals of this college," and that "the complete dismissal of community opinion is disrespectful to our traditions and ideals, and it has stirred up a deep well of resentment." Ultimately, Nichol's decision stood, and the cross remains in a case at the side of the Chapel, and is frequently moved to the altar for various groups to use. The cross controversy demonstrates the front line role that museums and historic sites play in debates about church and

¹⁸⁶ "William & Mary Displays New Intolerance," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 20 November 2006.

¹⁸⁷ "Chapel Can Now Truly Be a Place for All People," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, 20 November 2006.

¹⁸⁸ "Staff Editorial: Nichol botched handling of cross," *The Flat Hat*, 8 December 2006.

state. The placement of the cross makes a statement about the College's relationship with its own history: past identities do not have to be erased, but as identities change, the way we talk about and represent them must change as well. As such, the cross is an important part of the broader interpretation of the building.

The College dealt with the removal of another object from the Wren Building in 2015. A 1914 plaque honoring those from William & Mary that fought for the Confederacy was taken down and moved to special collections along with other artifacts related to the history of the university.¹⁸⁹ The action was part of the process of diminishing Confederate imagery at William & Mary, which was very prevalent given the long ties of the college to the Old South and the Lost Cause. Jody Allen, professor and director of the Lemon Project, said of the plaque: "It was a very negative symbol... You don't want anyone walking through the Wren Building, seeing that, and getting the idea that they won't be welcome."¹⁹⁰ Then-president W. Taylor Reveley hoped that the change would make the school more "overtly inclusive."¹⁹¹ In 2017, under the direction of Susan Kern, Director of Historic Campus, the plaque was replaced with a new bronze tablet that lists the names of all 390 students, alumni, and faculty of William & Mary who were involved in the Civil War on both sides.¹⁹² The new tablet, displayed in the Information Center rather than the center hall, was accompanied by four interpretive panels that discuss the historical role of slavery at the College. As Kern explained, "We decided that anything that had to do with the Civil War in our current climate needed to be in a larger historical context."¹⁹³ The discussion about the panel came on the heels of the 2015 anti-Black mass shooting in Charleston and the

¹⁸⁹ "W&M to Remove Confederate Emblem, Plaque," *Virginian-Pilot*, 15 August 2015.

¹⁹⁰ William Allen, "New Civil War memorial installed in Wren Building replaces Confederate iconography," *The Flat Hat*, 27 November 2018.

¹⁹¹ "Week's End Wrap Up," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 22 August 2015.

¹⁹² Wall Text, "Bronze Tablet," Wren Building Welcome Center, Williamsburg, VA.

¹⁹³ Allen, "New Civil War memorial installed in Wren Building replaces Confederate iconography."

2017 white supremacist marches in Charlottesville, among other similar events.

Contextualization was the goal, and as Kern pointed out, it was crucial to signal to people that they were in a museum space.

The new interpretive panels placed in the Information Center were sponsored primarily by the Lemon Project: A Journey of Reconciliation. This project is a joint effort between faculty and students to “rectify wrongs perpetrated against African Americans by William & Mary through action or inaction,” through scholarship, programming, symposia, and community outreach efforts.¹⁹⁴ It began in 2009 after students and faculty called for an examination of the university’s history and the Board of Visitors issued an acknowledgement that the university had “owned and exploited slave labor from its founding to the Civil War; and that it had failed to take a stand against segregation during the Jim Crow Era.”¹⁹⁵ The research generated by the Lemon Project has directly manifested in the interpretation of the Wren Building in an effort to rectify the pro-slavery, white supremacist narratives that for so long influenced understandings of William & Mary’s history. In addition to several interpretive panels, all Spotswood Society guides are trained to discuss slavery with visitors as part of their tours.

Guides also encourage visitors to see Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved, situated on Historic Campus directly adjacent to the Wren Building. The memorial, dedicated in 2022, was developed as a result of the work done by the Lemon Project, and the design was community-sourced through an open call for submissions. W&M President Katherine Rowe strongly supported the project, saying that “a physical memorial to the enslaved will be a critical addition to our campus landscape. It will allow us to continue to learn of their contributions and

¹⁹⁴ “The Lemon Project,” *William & Mary*, <https://www.wm.edu/sites/lemonproject/>.

¹⁹⁵ “The Lemon Project,” *William & Mary*, <https://www.wm.edu/sites/lemonproject/>.

remember them — for all time coming.”¹⁹⁶ One of the most significant things about the memorial is that it is constantly changing: the memorial features bricks engraved with the names of individuals known to have been enslaved at William & Mary, and as new names are discovered, they are added to the memorial. Hearth is a tangible reminder of the university’s involvement with slavery. Its placement next to the Wren Building, which was built by the hands of the very enslaved people whose names are displayed on the memorial, offers a poignant juxtaposition and encourages people to consider the more difficult side of the school’s history.

The university has also sought to reckon with the operation of its Brafferton Indian School during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 2010, the university formed a Brafferton Legacy Group made up of individuals who were both alumni of William & Mary and citizens of Native tribes associated with the historic Brafferton.¹⁹⁷ The group advised William & Mary and Colonial Williamsburg on the archaeology and renovations done on the Brafferton building between 2011 and 2013, which was the first large-scale archaeological project that focused on Native American presence in eighteenth-century Williamsburg.¹⁹⁸ The excavations yielded information that contributed to a better understanding of the use of the Wren Yard and Historic Campus during this period. Through this work, the university has sought to build relationships with the descendant communities of the Brafferton school. In 2020, the university also worked with Virginia tribal leaders to write a land acknowledgement statement to formally acknowledge the original inhabitants of the land on which the campus was built. The statement reads:

¹⁹⁶ Leonor Grave, "College to honor legacy of enslaved African-Americans through memorial" The Flat Hat, 5 September 2018.

¹⁹⁷ "The Brafferton Legacy Group & Community Engagement," *William & Mary*, <https://www.wm.edu/sites/braffertonproject/archaeology/braffertonlegacygroup/>.

¹⁹⁸ Mark Kostro, "Town and Gown Archaeology in Eighteenth-century Williamsburg," in *Historical Archaeology in the Twenty-First Century : Lessons from Colonial Williamsburg* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2021), 37.

William & Mary acknowledges the Indigenous peoples who are the original inhabitants of the lands our campus is on today – the Cheroenhaka (Nottoway), Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy, Mattaponi, Monacan, Nansemond, Nottoway, Pamunkey, Patowomeck, Upper Mattaponi, and Rappahannock tribes – and pay our respect to their tribal members past and present.

A plaque with the land acknowledgement was placed on the Wren Building piazza in the Spring of 2023. Spotswood guides either point out the plaque or give the land acknowledgement when giving tours. The topic of the Brafferton was central to interpretation in 2023 especially, as it was the 300th anniversary of the construction of the Brafferton Building in 1723. The building itself is not open to the public, so its interpretation is included in the interpretation of the Wren Building.

The university has dealt with issues of inclusion in a very physical way through questions about accessibility. In 1995, a wheelchair lift was installed in the Wren Courtyard to allow those with mobility issues to access the piazza. The project, which cost about \$85,000, was executed in consultation with Colonial Williamsburg on accessibility that is compatible with a historic building.¹⁹⁹ In 2015, largely because of maintenance costs, the lift was replaced with a ramp on the south side of the building.²⁰⁰ While the ramp and lift made the main floor of the building accessible, the second and third floors remain accessible by stairs only. This is a serious issue not only for visitors who cannot fully experience the building (people with mobility issues are given a first-floor only tour), but also for the students who use the space every day. One wheelchair-bound student commented that she cannot participate in the campus tradition of taking a class in the Wren Building because she cannot access any of the classrooms, which are all either on the upper floors or in the basement, not to mention the entire religious studies

¹⁹⁹ Richard Stradling, “Handicapped Get a Lift: Elevator Reaches Wren Building’s 1st-Floor Portico,” *Daily Press*, 10 May 1995.

²⁰⁰ Sarah Ruiz, “Wren: The College’s Cornerstone,” *The Flat Hat*, 21 September 2015.

department which is contained on the third floor.²⁰¹ Historic properties are not exempted from ADA accessibility requirements, but they are subject to a different standard.²⁰² Making a historic building, especially one like the Wren Building that is a National Historic Landmark and a National Register listing, compatible with modern accessibility standards is difficult primarily for budgetary reasons. The Wren Building has made strides in the twenty-first century toward accessibility and inclusion, both through interpretive content, physical space, and iconography. Still, it is only the beginning of a long process toward making the Wren Building a welcoming and convenient place for all who desire to visit.

THE PRESENT STATE OF THE WREN BUILDING

Writing about the present day as a historian is a difficult task. Historian Thad Tate wrote of William & Mary, “Living institutions possess, of course, a history that has not yet ended, but continues to unfold, often in unpredictable directions.”²⁰³ Not only is the history ever evolving, the historian does not have the benefit of a broader context of hindsight in which to situate the information. This difficulty is multiplied when writing from the “inside” like I am—but I have made my best effort at a sketch of the current state of the Wren Building as I know it.

The Wren Building is currently open daily and staffed by a rotation of volunteer Spotswood tour guides and employed building proctors, all of whom are students. Spotswood Society operates under the direction of Charles Fulcher, the building’s Director of Operations and Events, which falls within the Office of the President. Spotswoods undergo rigorous training,

²⁰¹ Peerawat Ruangawadi and Clare Gifford, “F*ck the Stairs movement strives to increase accessibility awareness on campus,” *The Flat Hat*, 2 May 2023.

²⁰² “Understanding How the ADA Applies to Historic Properties,” *DREDF*, 19 September 2023, <https://dredf.org/web-log/2023/09/19/understanding-how-the-ada-applies-to-historic-properties/>.

²⁰³ Thad W. Tate, “Epilogue: Towards the Fourth Century,” in *The College of William & Mary: A History* (Williamsburg, Va: King and Queen Press, 1993), 924.

which includes learning the history of the campus and university as well as engaging with the public and addressing difficult conversations. While all Spotswoods receive the same general training, the flow and script of tours are left up to each individual member, and are often tailored to the interests and needs of the visitors. The Spotswood handbook and training manual is frequently updated to reflect new scholarship related to the Wren Building and William & Mary. The current version was revised in June 2023. Student guides also often work into their interpretation new information that they learn in class or come across in their own research, making each tour a dynamic and unique experience. The inclusion of technology into the exhibition spaces at Wren is reflective of the current trends in public history towards interactive experiences. Currently, a kiosk in the Leadership Gallery allows visitors to read more information about the portraits on display and those off view, object labels are accompanied by QR codes, and forthcoming interactive panels in the Welcome Center will provide both current and historic information about the university.

Though there is no longer Colonial Williamsburg interpretation in the space, there is still a working cooperative relationship between the two institutions. A 2022 Memorandum of Understanding states CW's commitment to support W&M's historic preservation efforts, provide maintenance services, and consult on other preservation-related facilities work.²⁰⁴ The goal of this agreement is "to ensure that W&M maintains the robust usability of its 18th-century buildings in the life of the W&M campus for all time coming."²⁰⁵ The first step towards "all time

²⁰⁴ "Memorandum of Understanding between The College of William & Mary and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation," 16 February 2022.

²⁰⁵ "Memorandum of Understanding between The College of William & Mary and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation," 16 February 2022.

coming” is the next 100 years, which is the goal of the upcoming preservation project on the Wren Building and President’s House.²⁰⁶

The multifaceted role of the building as a historic site and interpretive space, an event space, and an academic building continues to hold the same tensions that the William & Mary community has experienced for decades. One student fondly remembers being frequently stopped by tourists during his time at William & Mary, recalling some of his favorite “misinformed” questions that he was asked:

‘Isn't this a girls' school?’ ‘When did this stop being a Catholic college?’ ‘Isn't this a seminary?’ ‘Do you have to wear Colonial costumes to class?’ And my all time favorite: ‘How many students are here?’ I replied, ‘Oh, around five thousand.’ Tourist's aghast response: ‘But how do you all fit in this one building?’²⁰⁷

At times enjoyable or inconvenient, the presence of tourists is a unique experience that binds students, faculty, and staff together. Religious Studies professor Alexander Angelov, who teaches in the Wren Building, says,

“Every so often...you are sort of lecturing and all of a sudden a door opens and there is a tourist coming in. I just find that to be sort of inspiring ... sometimes they will even ask you to sit in [on] the class and so then your class opens up to this larger community.”²⁰⁸

Ultimately, the Wren Building holds an emotional, personal connection for generations of people that few other historic sites can boast. As former director of Historic Campus Louise Kale said, “The Wren is the heart and soul of the College in bricks and mortar. It’s our most tangible connection to our history, not just the founding but the full span of the College’s history.”²⁰⁹

Other artifacts exist from the founding of the College, such as the boundary stone and the charter document, but they are no longer actively in daily use like the Wren Building is.

²⁰⁶ “W&M’s Historic Campus preservation project moves forward,” *W&M News*, 8 August 2023, <https://news.wm.edu/2023/08/08/wms-historic-campus-preservation-project-moves-forward/>.

²⁰⁷ Memories of Daniel Gibbs ‘91, in Sasser, “Wrenewal.”

²⁰⁸ Ruiz, “Wren: The College’s Cornerstone.”

²⁰⁹ Pinard, “Wren Renewed.”

The Wren Building connects the present not only to the beginning of the College's history, but to every single year and moment in the 331 years since. During this time, there has never been a time when people did not have some sort of relationship with the Wren Building. And no two people have ever had the exact same relationship with the building. For many, it is the site of some of the most significant days of their lives, including graduations and weddings, not to mention the countless campus traditions historically tied to the space. For others, like Jefferson, it is an ugly place representative of hard years of study. In the past 150 years, the Wren Building has grown from representing a romanticized understanding of Virginia history to a more inclusive, public history-informed narrative. The building's history has been mythologized through ghost stories and rumors about the crypt under the Chapel. It has been marketed through profusions of university merchandise depicting the campus icon. It has been interpreted, with varying degrees of accuracy, for more than 150 years. But above all, the building has *existed*. For many who encounter it, the endurance and longevity of the Wren Building is a source of comfort. In 1966, an alumnus wrote to the *Flat Hat* about the changes he noticed upon returning to campus. The exception was "the Wren Building, which is of course going to survive to the end of the world!"²¹⁰ In many ways, it is a mundane place where people go about their everyday lives, attending class and work. But the narratives surrounding the Wren Building have constructed it to be ancient, sacred, and eternal. The Wren Building has symbolized William & Mary's identity for centuries, and to echo the words of the 1693 charter, will continue to do so for "all time coming."²¹¹

²¹⁰ Hugh Moore, Letter to the Editor: "Forgive Us This Nostalgia," *The Flat Hat*, 21 October 1966.

²¹¹ "Royal Charter," *Special Collections Knowledgebase*, <https://src-kb.libraries.wm.edu/royal-charter>.