

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“I Just Told Them Like It Was”: Performance and History at Colonial Williamsburg

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Abstract

Since its organization in the mid-twentieth century, Colonial Williamsburg (CW) has been an important site for the consolidation of powerful narratives of American exceptionalism, patriotism, and the so-called consensus history of the American Revolution. This article looks at the role that music and performance has played in this historiography, taking as its primary texts two films produced by CW: *The Story of a Patriot* (1957) and *The Music of Williamsburg* (1960). With musical contributions by Bernard Herrmann and Alan Lomax, respectively, these films offer an opportunity to analyze the relationship between history and politics in the early Cold War era. Although *The Story of a Patriot* reflects a static and essentially conservative portrayal of American exceptionalism, the more liberal inclusiveness of *The Music of Williamsburg* showcases the fraught power dynamics of attempting to showcase historical Black music making in a patriotic context.

At the intersection of Nassau and Francis streets in Colonial Williamsburg (CW) lies an empty lawn. The lawn lies just below the western edge of Duke of Gloucester street, the main thoroughfare of the famous tourist attraction, between historic Bruton Parish Church and the Merchant’s Square that today houses a Williams Sonoma. The lawn is one of many, a series of open spaces designed to serve as a pastoral barrier between CW proper and the paved roads and mundane functionality of the less “restored” areas of the city. The only distinguishing feature of this particular lawn is a plaque marking the empty spot as the former location of the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg, founded in 1776.

Briefly, in the late eighteenth century, a group of African Americans organized a Baptist congregation in Williamsburg, lead most famously by Gowan Pamphlet, an enslaved resident of the town. Several structures were built, culminating in a large church building finished in 1856. Almost exactly a century later, as the town of Williamsburg was nearing the end of its Rockefeller-funded transformation into CW, the church was purchased by the Williamsburg Holding Company, the precursor to today’s Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.¹ Proceeds from the sale were used by the congregation to construct a more modern facility on the other side of town, and First Baptist remains today a thriving congregation, proud of its history and active in civic affairs. However, because CW focuses on history before 1790, the old nineteenth-century church was demolished. The story of its founding has been integrated into CW with a reconstructed carriage house that symbolizes the congregation’s more informal beginnings, with a reenactor often playing the role of Pamphlet.

And yet, the empty lawn has other stories to tell. The lawn is on the one hand a window into the interpretation of African American history as it has developed in the postwar era. The church was demolished in the same year that Virginia Senator Harry Byrd called for “massive resistance” to

¹“Colonial Williamsburg to Close Church Deal Today,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 6, 1954; I am grateful to CW archivist Donna Cooke for her assistance. Unfortunately, records pertaining to property purchases are closed to researchers. The most complete written account of the transaction from the perspective of First Baptist can be found in Tommy Bogger, *Since 1776: The History of First Baptist Church, Williamsburg, Virginia* (Williamsburg, Va.: First Baptist Church, 2006), 77–103.

desegregation.² Although the congregation was not forced out against their will, and indeed for the transaction received new land and \$130,000—over a million dollars today, adjusted for inflation—it's not hard to imagine a mindset in the 1950s that did not always value the contributions of African Americans to Virginia history. Indeed, one might see the demolition of the historic church as a particularly blunt example of the larger erasure of African American history from the founding narrative of the United States common throughout such mythological scenes.

As contemporary debates around constitutional originalism, critical race theory, and the *1619 Project* make clear, there are few narratives more politically potent than that of the American Revolution. Furthermore, many of these contemporary debates find their roots in the consolidation of a particular historiographic narrative that emerged in the United States in 1950s, which has come to be known as “consensus history.”³ This was the proposition that the founding of the country was best framed as a widespread embrace of certain rights and principles that not only gave impetus to acts of revolution against the British, but laid the groundwork for the modern embrace of liberal democracy in the post-World War II era. This historical narrative became so pervasive as to eventually become prescriptive rather than simply descriptive; the rise of constitutional originalism later in the twentieth century can be seen as a classic example of those founding “inalienable rights” still being brought to bear (arms, as it were) 200 years later. However, even as this consensus ideology was mobilized by liberal scholars and the Cold War military–industrial complex alike, more vernacular versions such as that which occurred at CW were an equally influential component of that consolidation. Indeed, for the consensus historian Daniel Boorstin, who visited in 1958, the town was not only “a symbol of what distinguishes our American attitude to our national past from that of people in other parts of the world” but also “a more democratic kind of national monument.”⁴

However, examining the rise of consensus ideology in the context of the messy, live, community-based experiment in performance practice that was CW helps to deconstruct this ideological project from the very beginning. Thankfully, historical erasure of this sort—the rigid, ideological excision of inconvenient narratives—rarely works as intended. As scholars such as Diana Taylor, Saidiya Hartman, and Joseph Roach have long argued, official attempts to intervene in the historical record, to archive the past for the purpose of establishing new social relations in the present, struggle to contain that history.⁵ The violence holding together acts of erasure rarely survives, especially in the face of that history not held in buildings and documents, but in performance over time.

Historiographic methods have changed at CW since the 1950s, including the establishment in 1985 of an official Department of African American Interpretation and Presentation. In this essay, however, I will focus on the moment of patriotic narratographic consolidation in the 1950s. During this time, in addition to acts of demolition, preservation, and recreation of CW's physical plant, the institution produced a pair of films that articulate dueling perspectives, both on the place of African American history in the narrative of American exceptionalism, and in the role of performance in making history. *The Story of a Patriot* (1957), with a neoclassical score by Bernard Herrmann, and still used today as the site's orientation film, carefully excises Black people and Black music from its recreation of the Gunpowder Incident of 1775, driving a Cold War-era narrative of static patriotism. *The Music of Williamsburg* (1960), on the other hand, represented a liberal ethnomusicological perspective, with Alan Lomax contributing romanticized reconstructions of colonial-era music making, both Black and white. Together, these films and the

²Matthew D. Lassiter and Andrew B. Lewis, eds, *The Moderates' Dilemma: Massive Resistance to School Desegregation in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998).

³For a retrospective survey by the scholar who coined the term, see John Higham, “Changing Paradigms: The Collapse of Consensus History,” *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 2 (1989): 460–66; for an explicit historiographic connection with recent cultural politics see William Hogeland, “Against the Consensus Approach to History,” *The New Republic*, January 25, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/160995/consensus-approach-history>.

⁴Daniel J. Boorstin, “Past and Present in America: A Historian Visits Colonial Williamsburg,” *Commentary* 25 (January 1958): 1.

⁵Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

(a)



(b)



Figure 1. (a) First Baptist Church on Nassau Street, Williamsburg, Virginia, photographer unknown, circa 1900. Visual Resources, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. (b). The former site of First Baptist Church, photographed by author in 2020.

musical soundscapes provided by Herrmann and Lomax, elucidate the latent potential, sometimes regressive but sometimes radical, that comes from reenacting the past. Nevertheless, both films remain haunted by other performances that, like the lawn, disrupt their attempts to archive history. In a nation dominated by endless performances of eighteenth-century culture, this essay attempts to parse the ideological contestations of those performances, and the work they accomplish (Figure 1).

The Historiography of Colonial Williamsburg

CW is one of the most prominent public history sites in the country, if not the world, and as such its own history has been well studied.⁶ The rector of a historic Episcopal Church in Williamsburg, Reverend Dr. W. A. R. Goodwin, partnered with northern businessman John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to gradually purchase as much of the existing town as possible beginning in the 1920s. The general procedure was to remove post-eighteenth-century structures—First Baptist, for example, but more commonly gas stations and other recent buildings—restore those remaining, and reconstruct important demolished buildings, such as the Governor’s Palace and Capitol building.

Rockefeller and Goodwin’s initial aesthetic was that of the Colonial Revival, an ideal that emphasized the eighteenth-century past as a time of gracious, elegant living, especially among the upper class. Although the two men came from different backgrounds—the patrician Virginian and the industrious New Yorker—the Colonial Revival was a much larger national phenomenon that dominated domestic art and architecture for much of the early twentieth century.⁷ As an aesthetic, the style allowed for a sense of aspirational aristocracy that was rooted in American (*né* Georgian) history, rather than the more exuberant Victorian styles of the nineteenth century. The emphasis on conservative simplicity also accorded well with the general sense of cultural retrenchment that overtook the United States in the 1930s. For much of this period, tourism to the town was at a small scale and generally elite. There were very few hotels, and most visitors were accommodated by staying with local families, with women often serving as tour guides. Under the guiding influence of Rockefeller, tours tended to focus on architectural details and more elevated crafts such as furniture making and gardening.

This quasi-aristocratic approach is worlds removed from the town experienced by visitors today, in which over a million annual visitors flood CW as part of a vacation that often includes nearby Busch Gardens. In their important 1997 ethnographic study, *The New History in an Old Museum*, Richard Handler and Eric Gable offer an explanation for how CW slowly transformed itself, especially in its relationship to performing history. As anthropologists, Handler and Gable were concerned not so much with the historical truth of the town’s craft, but rather with diagnosing its own sense of such questions.⁸ As they explain, most of those professionally associated with CW offered two different and competing versions of how history changes. The first is what they term a “constructionist” approach, in which fairly self-evident ideological interests inflect the telling of history. Rockefeller and Goodwin’s interest in the aesthetics of the colonial revival was the first such ideology. It was closely followed after World War II with an explicit interest in a more patriotic and politicized historical vision clearly related to the ongoing Cold War. In the late 1960s, the organization made a conscious shift away from this more patriotic approach and began to professionalize and systemize the educational aspect of the town, a period known as the “Six Appeals” after a series of organizational changes made to the institution. Finally, in the 1980s, the influence of social historians and the efforts of activists began to be felt more clearly, including in the creation of a new Department of African American Interpretation.

⁶Unless otherwise noted, the following general history is drawn especially from Anders Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration of Virginia’s Eighteenth-Century Capital*, 2nd edn (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). See also Anna Logan Lawson, “The Other Half: Making African American History at Colonial Williamsburg” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1995); Cary Carson, “Colonial Williamsburg and the Practice of Interpretive Planning in American History Museums,” *The Public Historian* 20, no. 3 (1998): 11–51.

⁷Karal Ann Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876–1986* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁸Handler and Gable, *The New History in an Old Museum*, 50–77.

In contrast to this vision of historiographic change driven by ideology, the competing and perhaps more dominant explanation for changes at CW is what Handler and Gable call “progressive realism.” The sense here is that history changes because of a slow accumulation of newly discovered facts, and more accurate interpretation and contextualization of those facts. History, then, gets progressively better, aspiring to a “mimetic accuracy” in which the past is portrayed as literally correct as possible. It is thus presented somewhat cautiously, in a piecemeal approach, where until the absolute facticity of an object or interpretation can be proven beyond a reasonable doubt, it should not be included. Indeed, one of the surefire signs of the mimetic ideal, as Handler and Gable point out, is that “facts” are almost always given along with the “myths” they have replaced. There is a constant drumbeat informing the public that while once there might have been a more ideologically driven urge to present false myths, now we, in the present tense, have done the proper research.

Scholarship on these historical performances and their ideological role in public memory has tended to align around a series of binary oppositions not so dissimilar from those of Handler and Gable. David Lowenthal’s essential division between “heritage” and “history” remains the basic structure of many of these analyses, often described as the difference between recording the past, versus celebrating the past.⁹ John Bodnar, for example, observes a distinction between “official” and “vernacular” approaches to public memory; as he puts it, it is an opposition between authority figures maintaining a “loyalty to the status quo” that restates reality “in ideal rather than complex or ambiguous terms,” versus “an array of specialized interests that are grounded in parts of the whole,” changing and sometimes clashing.¹⁰ Similarly, in his study of twenty-first-century relationships with the American Revolution, Andrew Schocket coined a distinction between what he calls “essentialist” and “organicist” relationships with the past.¹¹ Essentialist relationships, inherently conservative, portray history as a single text with one meaning. With organic relationships, there are “many pasts that may share elements but no fixed truth.”¹²

John Butt’s historicization of historically informed performance (HIP) in the field of music draws heavily upon these categories of analysis, especially that of Lowenthal. In his 2002 book *Playing With History*, he synthesizes an intellectual divide around the emergence of HIP in the 1950s, between Adorno’s critique of historicism, and that of working musicians drawing upon very specific claims of historical authenticity—the equivalent of Handler and Gable’s progressive realism. Historicizing this divide, Butt points to a wave of “heritage industry” after World War II, and compares CW with the European model of “distressed” restoration common in the early historically informed performance practice movement; for example, the Harnoncourt/Leonhardt Bach cantatas, which “seemed to restore the wear and tear of history.”¹³ More recent sensitive analyses have shown how the divide reproduces itself in particular performance communities. Elizabeth Upton, for example, has shown how performances of medieval music in the 1960s drew upon notions of authenticity found in the popular folk song revival of the same era: “An authenticity not of historicism but rather of resonance with listeners’ tastes and expectations.”¹⁴ Moreover, Elissa Harbert has demonstrated how self-consciously “historical” performances, especially in mixed media such as musical theater and film, has to juggle obvious historical musical artifacts—for example, a famous eighteenth-century tune—with a desire for contemporary emotional resonance only capable of being produced with contemporary musical techniques.¹⁵

⁹David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁰John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 13–14.

¹¹Andrew M. Schocket, *Fighting over the Founders: How We Remember the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 4–5.

¹²Schocket, *Fighting over the Founders*, 5.

¹³John Butt, *Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 193.

¹⁴Elizabeth Upton, “Concepts of Authenticity in Early Music and Popular Music Communities,” *Ethnomusicology Review* 17 (2012), <https://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/journal/volume/17/piece/591>.

¹⁵Elissa Harbert, “Remembering the Revolution: Music in Stage and Screen Representations of Early America during the Bicentennial Years” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2013); see also Elissa Harbert, “Ever to the Right? The Political Life of 1776 in the Nixon Era,” *American Music* 35, no. 2 (2017): 237–70.

The tendency of these historiographic narratives to condense into binary oppositions is understandable, but there are further possibilities. The drive to perform historical texts—writ large, encompassing not only constitutional documents and musical scores but also material remains—sometimes comes into tension with desires to reconstruct performances. That is to say, there is a distinction between twentieth-century performances of eighteenth-century texts and twentieth-century performances of eighteenth-century performances. In the Cold War era, CW, while still heavily reliant on ontologically stable objects such as original buildings and artifacts, began to transform its relationship with performance. Crucially, both the drive for mimetic realism and the desire for a more patriotic narrative helped inspire CW's famous approach to public history: Immersive "living history" relying heavily upon theatrical reenactment. The two following analyses will partially focus on the tension between ideological and mimetic forms of history making that has drawn in so many scholars of historical performance. However, they will also foreground the oddities that begin to pile up in these twice-restored performances: The haunting emerging from a historical narrative that denies their facticity, and from the ideological work that finds them inconvenient.

The Story of a Patriot

In the wake of World War II, CW became determined to rebrand itself as a more middle-class, rather than elite, tourist attraction. The motivation was partly economic—capital was rushing into the expanding suburban middle class—and partly political, with a sense that the CW Foundation should more directly engage with the wave of patriotism engendered by war. The question, however, was how to combine elegant pastoral aesthetics with a new mass market approach.

CW's quintessentially American solution was to build a highway and make a movie. Both projects were designed to reframe CW for a much larger audience. The Colonial Parkway had been part of the philosophy of the site since its beginning. Rockefeller had close ties to the National Park Service, and that agency took the lead in planning a Colonial National Historic Park, with a central highway that would link Williamsburg, Jamestown, and the battlefield at Yorktown into a "single coherent reservation."¹⁶ Although drawing upon early motorways such as the Bronx River Parkway, the innovative road was designed to immerse the driver in as natural a landscape as possible, with no views of modern development, and a roadway paved in a kind of beige color without any striping. Funding was not always forthcoming, and it was not until 1955 that the Parkway was completed, including a tunnel under the historic district in Williamsburg. Together with Interstate 64, constructed in the 1960s, the highway system allowed for a large new influx of visitors.

Crucially, however, these visitors were almost entirely white. CW was a deeply segregated tourist attraction. Unlike other southern tourist attractions, racial segregation was not actually in the technical policy of CW, largely due to the influence of the Rockefellers. Segregated in practice it was, however, with an unofficial policy of avoiding any public discussion of the issue. In 1946, for example, large tour groups with inter-racial membership—Greenspan notes the examples of the Federal Council of Churches in Christ and the American Association of Adult Education—were simply told that the town was unable to accommodate their size.¹⁷ Just visiting was difficult; Nora Knight has noticed that by 1956 there was only one facility recognized by the *Negro Traveler's Green Book*, a small boarding house.¹⁸ When individual Black tourists managed to visit, the approach of the foundation was to spirit them away as delicately as possible, often escorting them into secluded corners of dining facilities before any white tourists noticed.¹⁹

¹⁶"Colonial Parkway," accessed January 26, 2015, <http://www.nps.gov/colo/parkway.htm>; for more context on tourism leading up to this, see Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2001).

¹⁷Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 74.

¹⁸Nora Ann Knight, "Disreputable Houses of Some Very Reputable Negroes': Paternalism and Segregation of Colonial Williamsburg" (Senior project, Bard College, 2016), 73.

¹⁹Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 90.

The Parkway thus safely transported certain tourists to the town, along the way shedding at least some of their contemporary baggage. Upon arrival at the next circle of the eighteenth century, the Visitor's Center, visitors could leave their cars, and prepare for full immersion. It was not enough, however, to immediately plunge them into an authentic, or even reconstructed, historical site. Instead, the most modern of technology was mobilized for the transformation. A pair of special "Patriot's Theaters" were built, enabled with six-channel surround sound and equipped to project VistaVision, the widescreen high-resolution format recently developed by Paramount Pictures. All this to present a half-hour movie that still today serves as the official orientation presentation for the attraction, *The Story of a Patriot* (1957).

With special funding provided by Rockefeller, no expense was spared. George Seaton, of *Miracle on 34th Street* fame, was secured as the director, and given free rein to make use of CW and several nearby plantation sites. The film tells the story of a fictional Virginia aristocrat—played by Jack Lord, later of *Hawaii Five-O* fame—who is elected to serve in Virginia's House of Burgesses. Leaving his plantation behind, and accompanied by his son who is to attend the College of William & Mary, he marvels at the hustle and bustle of the town, and at the constant political intrigue. Although an instinctively conservative man, he is slowly drawn into the revolutionary spirit, with a particularly vivid depiction of the famous Gunpowder Incident of 1775 in which the British tried to confiscate colonial military supplies. By the end of the film, as a Tory friend leaves in disgust for home back in England, Fry is able to intone, in stirring terms, "I *am* home."²⁰

Staging the Gunpowder Incident was no accident, as this specific conflict is one of the major connections between Williamsburg and the American Revolution, and, in some respects, was responsible for the efforts to recreate CW in the first place. The original 1715 building, which had housed the powder magazine, stood throughout the nineteenth century, but its deteriorating condition led to the founding of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities in 1889, long before Rockefeller involvement. CW's official materials quote a visitor from 1848: "While leaning against the ancient wall of the old Magazine, and in the shadow of its roof, contemplating the events which cluster that locality with glorious associations, I almost lost cognizance of the present, and beheld in reverie the whole pageantry of the past march in review."²¹ CW later took over maintenance and further restoration of the magazine, and ever since it has played a prominent role in reenactment dramas, with costumed militia men facing off against an imperious Lord Dunsmore. Today, these reenactments are professionalized affairs, with tightly scripted dialogue and speeches often amplified with electronic sound.

The transformation of the powder magazine from material preservation to theatrical reenactment is part of a larger story of public history in the twentieth century. As Seth Bruggeman has shown, historical reenactments in service of national identity have been performed as long as the country itself, with George Washington's own adopted grandson theatrically recreating scenes from his childhood at his purpose-built house in Arlington, a site later co-opted for other kinds of memory work as part of a national cemetery.²² CW's famous deployment of living history had its roots in the earliest days of tourist development, even before Rockefeller. Rev. Goodwin's original Williamsburg had included mid-night "ghost walks" to commune with famous historical figures, and in the prewar period when boarding facilities were scarce, visitors would frequently stay with local women who were trained as "hostesses," sometimes in period costume. Eventually, these interpretive activities, with costumed reenactors inhabiting an eighteenth-century persona and interacting with tourists, became fully professionalized, and deeply influential on the larger world of public history.²³

²⁰*Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot* (1957; Paramount Studios for Colonial Williamsburg, 2004), DVD. The unrestored film can be viewed online at <https://archive.org/details/williamsburgstoryofapatriot>.

²¹John Lossing Benson, *Pictorial Fieldbook of the Revolution, Or, Illustrations, by Pen and Pencil, of the History, Biography, Scenery, Relics, and Traditions of the War for Independence*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Bros., 1852), 470.

²²Seth C. Bruggeman, "'More Than Ordinary Patriotism': Living History in the Memory Work of George Washington Parke Custis," in *Remembering the Revolution: Memory, History, and Nation Making from Independence to the Civil War*, eds. Michael A. McDonnell et al. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 127–43.

²³Carson, "Colonial Williamsburg and the Practice of Interpretive Planning"; Jay Anderson, *Time Machines: The World of Living History* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State & Local History, 1984).

In his book-length study of living history museums such as Williamsburg, Scott Magelssen considers at length the theatricality of historic reenactment. At Williamsburg and elsewhere, there is a typical distinction between first-person and third-person interpreters. The former are characters presented fully in role, often under a fictional or historical name. They often interact with tourists, but stay in character, never admitting to modern developments or history ahead of their time. As Handler and Roth similarly noted, it requires a “just the facts” approach, in which the interpreters constrain themselves to a set array of approved materials. First-person interpretation in this manner has long been at the center of the CW experience, part of a larger aesthetic of total naturalism and realism.

Most of the interpreters and other staff members Magelssen interviewed reject the notion that their craft might be considered theater. There is no script, for example, and their improvised interactions with visitors depart from their fairly traditional definitions of theater. Moreover, he points out, the absence of a proscenium arch does not preclude theater. Living history museums, he writes, “seek to direct the visitor’s gaze and condition it with singular narratives, imposed meaning, and scientific contracts.”²⁴ The commitment to “realism”—understood in this case as only those historical facts that can be clearly documented—serves as its own sort of proscenium arch, commanding the audience to ignore a multitude of other historical possibilities. Magelssen intriguingly offers that a more expansive notion of theater in a living history environment could bring with it a more productive historiography as well. Third-person interpretation, for example, in which interpreters might wear historical costume but do not actually inhabit a persona and acknowledge the current temporality, is a well-established mode of modern theater, and also allows for a multiplicity of historical narratives. As an illustrative contrast, Magelssen gives the example of the George Wythe house, in which first-person interpreters have often struggled to give answers to tourists asking questions about Lydia Broadnax, an enslaved Black woman with whom Wythe had a child. Eighteenth-century documents provide few answers, and there is a limit to what a fictional character from the period can respond to concerning a contemporary visitor’s questions about power, violence, and sexual politics. CW has, however, also offered what it called a “Other Half” tour, staffed by Black interpreters performing from a third-person perspective. Freed from mimetic realism, they are able to engage with contemporary values and speculations in a much more productive manner.²⁵

To these limitations and possibilities of living history reenactments, however, we might add another, harder-to-contain dimension. The performance theorist Rebecca Schneider has extensively theorized historical reenactment, focusing especially on Civil War reenactors. As we have seen, the heightened expectation of realism that comes with the specific sort of performance that is historical reenactment can be traced both to the desire for historical mimesis—the spectator can only truly encounter the past if he or she is fully immersed within it—but also the ideological machinations of the Cold War, where patriotic fervor might better be aroused in the spectator by means of theater than simply observing old buildings. Crucially for Schneider, this specter of realism offers the opportunity for productive slippage. The mimetic errors and contemporary commentary of reenactment are impossible to avoid, in a way that the static nature of archives and traditional museums often elide. As she writes, “Is a ‘maniacally charged present’ not punctuated by, syncopated with, indeed charged by other moments, other times? That is, is the present really so temporally straightforward or pure—devoid of a basic delay or deferral if not multiplicity and flexibility?”²⁶

In the case of CW, it is not hard to find such temporal slippage. As Alena Pirok has argued, in fact, the founding metaphor of the tourist attraction was a distinctly irrational and antihistorical one: Ghosts.²⁷ The Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin, rector of Bruton Parish Church and the man who charmed Rockefeller into adopting the town, conceived of the project as an exercise in encouraging visitors to commune with ghosts and specters who still haunted the town. More scholarly interventions, as well as the ideological

²⁴Scott Magelssen, *Living History Museums: Undoing History through Performance* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 105.

²⁵Magelssen, *Living History Museums*, 125; see also Lawson, “The Other Half,” 76. As Magelssen and Lawson both point out, this tour was often marginalized, with infrequent offerings and limited staffing.

²⁶Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 92.

²⁷Alena Pirok, “Goodwin’s Ghosts: Colonial Williamsburg’s Uncanny Legacy,” *The Public Historian* 41, no. 3 (2019): 9–30.

motivations of Cold War patriotism and, later, social history, soon excised this uncanny discourse from the official presentation of the attraction, but until the full professionalization of the historical reenactors in the 1970s, ghostly specters were never fully out of sight. If the genteel, costumed “hostesses” of the 1930s represented the Rockefeller aesthetic of a patrician past full of beautiful houses and gardens, the more immersive world of living history has a spectral, irrational debt to Goodwin’s vision. Intriguingly, Pirok argues that the mediating performance between these two worlds was none other than *The Story of a Patriot*. As she writes, “the film inspired guests to envision people from the past as ghosts haunting the actual buildings, rooms, and objects they saw in the film and on their tours.”²⁸

The 1957 filmic reenactment of the Gunpowder Incident thus brings together a multitude of perspectives on relationships to history. It is a historic reenactment with a commitment to mimetic realism, and yet also an explicitly theatrical performance that acknowledges its contemporary audience’s desire for emotional identification, all in the service of both an overtly political ideology and an attempt to bridge the fantastical and the real. It is a heavy burden for a short film to bear, and one might argue that the tissue connecting all of these desires together is an element not available to typical living history reenactments, or ghost tours, or indeed to archives and scholarship: A soundtrack. In *The Story of a Patriot*, the nighttime maneuvers of the British marines are not accompanied by the fife and drum, but by an orchestral score written by none other than Bernard Herrmann. Herrmann was the perfect choice to score this rather uneasy political tension. As his biographer later put, Herrmann idolized the elegance and order of Georgian England, and in fact was a collector of eighteenth-century furniture. Indeed, the composer supposedly refused any payment for doing *The Story of Patriot*, except asking that CW craftsmen repair a broken glass pane in one of his antiques.²⁹

Reenactment with a soundtrack puts a different spin on historic reenactment. In her discussion of a later filmed reenactment of the eighteenth century, the television miniseries *John Adams*, Elissa Harbert has usefully outlined the tools available for the filmic soundscape, constructing an early United States as “both a foreign country and a living memory that shapes current American identity.”³⁰ As she points out, this is accomplished by blending historical “authenticity” and emotional realism. In terms of the music, the former is often accomplished by way of diegetic performances of early American music, such as “Yankee Doodle Dandy” or “Chester.” These easily recognizable tunes signal to the audience the presence of historical facts. Such music, however, does not trigger emotional identification in audiences beyond recognition of its status of as “old” music of the foreign past. Emotional identification requires the particular expressive resources of more contemporary music, the nondiegetic underscore that leaves behind the eighteenth century.

Herrmann’s score for *The Story of a Patriot* makes this same negotiation between past and present. In this case, there are three distinct musical languages: Actual eighteenth-century music presented diegetically, an occasional underscore written more in keeping with Herrmann’s typical modernist style, and, most notably, a newly composed underscore written to evoke the eighteenth century. The first language is easy enough to interpret, with a prominent example being a rousing rendition of “Yankee Doodle Dandy” as the newly empowered colonial troops march off at the end of the film. The arrangement is much more lush than the musical forces seen on screen—two drums and two fifes magically sound as a large wind ensemble—but nevertheless triggers the mimetic sensibility of CW. Herrmann’s modern underscore is also easily intelligible, with typical pastoralisms present during scenes in the country, and in his most modern moment, a propulsive string ostinato as the British marines begin stealing gunpowder under cover of night.

Both diegetic insertions and the original music map onto the various pairs of historiographic binaries outlined earlier. As immediately recognizable and well-documented historical fact, “Yankee Doodle Dandy” in *The Story of a Patriot* could be described by Schocket as Essentialist,

²⁸Pirok, “Goodwin’s Ghosts,” 22.

²⁹Steven C. Smith, *A Heart at Fire’s Center: The Life and Music of Bernard Herrmann* (University of California Press, 2002), 211. This anecdote is only loosely sourced.

³⁰Harbert, “Remembering the Revolution,” 399.

by Lowenthal as Historical, by Bodnar as Official, or by Butt as Historicist. Although perhaps elements of performance practice could run afoul of questions of historical authenticity—not to mention its mediated presence on a film soundtrack—within that context it does the cultural work of unquestioned historical fact.³¹ However, the other sides of these binaries are more convoluted. The underscore certainly serves to present the spirit of the past using contemporary means, in a sense that might sympathize with Butt's notion of a progressive historical sentiment. Its rejection of eighteenth-century materials marks that music's association with a more typical modernist approach to the past, implicitly rejecting the notion that history could speak to the actual present in any sort of unmediated way. The two occasionally combine, as in the climax of the gunpowder theft when he turns "Yankee Doodle Dandy" into a set of discordant variations that Kevin Scott has rightfully described as Ivesian.³²

The rest of the weight of historiographic work is borne by Herrmann's self-consciously historical underscore, which might be seen as an example of Lowenthal's Heritage. The composer's central contribution, first heard over the opening credits, is a simple hornpipe melody. We can read this melody as a fairly straightforward first-person historical reenactment: Imagine it as a twentieth-century actor wearing a scratchy woolen uniform of the past. However to use Magelssen's terminology, is it first-person or third-person? That is to ask, does the tune acknowledge the contemporary world, or does it feign ignorance? Herrmann's compositional style is frequently described as having, in Royal Brown's words, an "anti-'tune' tendency."³³ This was certainly true of his scores for other films in 1956, which included two Hitchcock films (*The Man Who Knew Too Much* and *The Wrong Man*) as well as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Interestingly, however, for several projects that centered U.S. American nationalism, such as his 1955 score for *The Kentuckian*, Herrmann embraced a more notably lyrical style that featured self-consciously Coplandesque melodies and harmonies. In other words, Herrmann as a composer possessed a fairly wide palate of recognizable musical Americanisms in advance of this film: Historical song, Ivesian discord, and Coplandesque lyricism. However, the historical style of *The Story of a Patriot* is extremely tune based, but not nearly so lyrical or developmental.

Most notable is the overture, over which the opening and closing credits play and which recurs in scenes of general civic life in Williamsburg. Rather than lyrical or developmental, the tune is in fact extremely static. The eight-bar melody is repeated initially in an AABA pattern, and then repeated mildly decorated in pairs of strings and horns alternating with woodwinds. There is no melodic subtlety, the harmonic movement remains extremely basic, and its repetition, while catchy, is essentially monotonous.



Example 1. Overture to *The Story of a Patriot*

We can hear the frozen, static quality of this tune perhaps as an attempt to "sound" historical, to lasso the essentialist quality of "Yankee Doodle Dandy" or "Chester." However, form and instrumentation without a recognizable tune fails to provide that historical work, while also failing to provide contemporary emotional identification. Instead, the Overture aligns itself, if perhaps not intentionally,

³¹For a provocative reappraisal of the historical meanings of this song, see Henry Abelove, "Yankee Doodle Dandy," *The Massachusetts Review* 49, no. 1/2 (2008): 13–21.

³²Kevin Scott, program notes for Bernard Herrmann, *The Kentuckian/Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot*, cond. William Stromberg and the Moscow Symphony Orchestra, Tribute Film Classics 1004, 2008.

³³Royal S. Brown, "Herrmann, Hitchcock, and the Music of the Irrational," *Cinema Journal* 21, no. 2 (1982): 23.

with more “objective” modernist reconstructions of the eighteenth century, Stravinskian neoclassicism. *The Story of a Patriot* Overture in fact bears a remarkable similarity to the Overture to *Pulcinella* (1920), and, more contemporaneously, to the instrumental writing of *The Rake’s Progress* (1952). Although Herrmann is famously associated with bringing the expressive side of Stravinsky to Hollywood scores, *The Story of a Patriot* is a rare example for Herrmann of such strict, antiexpressive neoclassicism.³⁴

In fact, one might be tempted to read the politics of neoclassicism throughout much of this discourse. Richard Taruskin’s influential observations on those politics could easily be brought to bear here: “The immediate concern may have been the preservation of a precious heritage at a time of perceived crisis, but it was a heritage dogmatically viewed as supreme, and its supremacy was part and parcel of what had to be preserved.”³⁵ If Taruskin’s analysis of the ideology of neoclassicism in the context of European classical music has come under pressure from Tamara Levitz and others, Herrmann’s score for *The Story of a Patriot*, with its explicit nationalism and circulation within a context of historical restoration, offers a much less complicated version of this phenomenon than a Stravinsky ballet.³⁶ An important addition to Taruskin’s insight, however, is that preservation is not simply a matter of keeping something. Preservation also must inherently involve destruction. Just as a butterfly is preserved pinned to a blank surface, removed from the original natural environment that would wither and die around the specimen, preservation is only possible if the accrued history around it is forcibly removed. In addition to the empty lawn in CW, consider the specter of Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the precious 1753 building surrounded today by blocks of empty land produced by the demolition of nineteenth-century structures beginning in 1952.³⁷ Neoclassical modernism, as so rigidly practiced by Herrmann, might be defined as much by what it excises as by what it contains.

In the case of a musical score, rather than a city block, we might ask what musical heritage is being ideologically excised? The astringent, tuneful-but-not-lyrical neoclassicism of Herrmann’s score might exist in such a frozen manner because it indeed cannot draw upon any other tropes of U.S. American music for the simple reason that to do so would require acknowledging the presence of Black music. For, of course, there is an absence in this preceding account of a film that is, according to its promotional materials, the longest-running continuously screened motion picture in history. It will perhaps not be surprising that African Americans are largely inaudible in *The Story of Patriot*. The most sustained dialogue spoken by Black Virginians comes at the very opening. As chirping birds and quiet lilting strings introduce the pastoral setting of Fry’s plantation, the frame gradually reveals a bucolic meadow of grazing horses and a small boy, presumably enslaved. An example, perhaps, of what Esther Terry has described as “displacing the northern urban impulse for rural retreat onto enslaved African Americans.”³⁸ The boy is looking for “Master Fry,” and his father points him toward the main house. This is the largest extent of dialogue spoken by African Americans in the film, and for the remaining duration Black actors stand silently in the background, a mute presence barely acknowledged by the camera (Figure 2).

In the end, the musical score of *The Story of a Patriot* is just one of many factors that give the film a deeply reactionary politics. Although perhaps far removed from Herrmann’s own intentions, his Overture is an example of a historiographic performance that resonates with politics of both the 1950s and today. The messy multiplicity of voices in the late eighteenth-century is excised in favor of one simple, static text that resists subversive readings. Over time, this vision of consensus history shared by Cold War liberals and conservatives alike in the post-war era became the particular narrative of patriotism explicitly favored on the right today, of great white southern men making timeless

³⁴The other major exception was Herrmann’s score for a 1960 Ray Harryhausen film, *The Three Worlds of Gulliver*, which similarly draws upon the sound world of *Pulcinella*.

³⁵Richard Taruskin, “Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology,” *19th-Century Music* 16, no. 3 (1993): 299.

³⁶Tamara Levitz, *Modernist Mysteries: Persephone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17–27.

³⁷George L. Clafien Jr., “Framing Independence Hall,” *Places* 13, no. 3 (2000): 60–69.

³⁸Esther J. Terry, “Rural as Racialized Plantation vs Rural as Modern Reconnection: Blackness and Agency in Disney’s ‘Song of the South’ and ‘The Princess and the Frog.’” *Journal of African American Studies* 14, no. 4 (2010): 472.



Figure 2. Black actors in *The Story of a Patriot*.

choices. For white liberalism, the question would be how to transform the narrative of American exceptionalism into one that could assimilate the demands of the Civil Rights Movement. For that to happen, CW would need some new music.

The Music of Williamsburg

A competing vision of the place of enslaved African Americans in CW was offered by *The Music of Williamsburg*. Released by the CW Foundation just 3 years after *The Story of a Patriot*, the project was an attempt to capitalize on the perceived success of the earlier film in a short format that could possibly be distributed on television.³⁹ *The Music of Williamsburg* begins with a pastoral gesture that seems to directly parallel the opening of *The Story of a Patriot*. Set on “on a fine spring day in 1768,” a sailor is making his way into town on foot, singing a sea shanty as he walks along a dirt road beside Virginian fields that could very well be the same ones from which emerged an enslaved young boy in *The Story of a Patriot*. Immediately this film raises the stakes, however. The sailor steps aside to let a cart pass by. Driven by a white overseer, a group of enslaved men, women, and children sing “Moses, Moses” as the cart rolls along. For a fraction of a second, the eyes of a young Black girl stare directly into the camera, challenging the viewer.⁴⁰

The Music of Williamsburg, although not nearly as widely seen as *The Story of a Patriot*, marked a watershed moment in the historiographical practices of CW, pointing the way toward more modern scholarly perspectives that attempted to center social history above the great man narrative. Although it would be almost another two decades before African American history became structurally included in the institutional CW, the film provided an influential template. That template might be thought of as a white liberal vision of racialized history in the United States during the 1950s, with the ambivalent promise that implies.

The Music of Williamsburg has already undergone scholarly scrutiny, thanks to musicologist Carol Oja and an undergraduate seminar she taught at the College of William & Mary in 2003. Drawing upon local archival materials and interviews with surviving members of the cast and crew, Oja and her students provide a sophisticated analysis of the political context that informed the film’s creation.⁴¹ As they relate, Stanley Croner, of CW’s Audio-Visual Department, conceived of a project that while rather straightforward in nature—the musical life of the colonial capital—would, unlike *The Story of a Patriot*, give Black musicians substantial screen time. The slow expansion of Black tourism and the growing influence of the Civil Rights Movement had given some impetus for the Foundation to consider, however unevenly and tentatively, questions of slavery. By 1959, their resident historian Thad Tate had completed research for a project later published as *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (1965), and Tate would serve as the historical advisor for this film.⁴² The filmmakers attempted to provide, as screenwriter Stanley Croner later told Oja’s students, a “political undertone that is not immediately obvious,” and publicity materials for the film advertised its attempt to “portray the important contributions of the Negro race to the nation’s heritage.”⁴³ To be sure, it was a political undertone mediated both by white liberalism and local circumstances; CW staff also made it known that they wished for slavery not to be shown in an “unnecessarily oppressive form.”⁴⁴ As segregationists in Virginia fought tooth and nail against policies in the wake of *Brown v Board of Education*

³⁹Peggy Finley Aarliien, “The Alan Lomax Photographs and the Music of Williamsburg (1959–1960)” (MA thesis, College of William & Mary, 2010), 14.

⁴⁰I was unfortunately unable to discover the name of the young actor portraying this girl. Only the adult members of the group were officially credited, but three unnamed children, paid fifteen dollars each, were included as part of the contract that brought the Spiritual Singers to Williamsburg. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, quoted in Vitoria Swoap, Oja Seminar Research Notes, January 28, 2003.

⁴¹Carol Oja et al., “Music of Williamsburg Unsung: Remixing Southern Musicians, Alan Lomax, and Historical Film” (College of William & Mary, 2003); Carol Oja, “Filming the Music of Williamsburg with Alan Lomax,” *Institute for Studies in American Music Newsletter* XXXIII, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 1–2; 12; Aarliien, “The Alan Lomax Photographs and the Music of Williamsburg (1959–1960).” I am extremely grateful for Professor Oja’s generosity in sharing with me other unpublished materials from the class: Carol Oja, Seminar Notes for MUSC 465: “Alan Lomax and ‘The Music of Williamsburg’: Exploring the Construction of History. College of William & Mary, Spring, 2003.

⁴²Thad W. Tate, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg, 1965). Tate had also served as the historical advisor for *The Story of a Patriot*.

⁴³Oja, “Filming the Music of Williamsburg with Alan Lomax,” 12.

⁴⁴Audio-Visual Committee, Report on Planning Session, November 20–24, 1959, quoted in Erin Gordon, Oja Seminar Research Notes, January 27, 2003.

(1954), Croner and his collaborators felt that they couldn't make a direct political statement, but that taking Black music more seriously might be a step in the right direction.⁴⁵

The musical reenactments in the film exhibit the classic tension between what Diana Taylor calls "the archive and the repertoire."⁴⁶ Some historical reconstructions are able to draw upon more amply documented historical records, and involve performance traditions more closely tied to text-based practices rather than the oral tradition. For example, a scene showing students at the College of William & Mary lining out psalms could easily be filmed in the chapel of the College's Wren building, using clearly notated psalmody tunes. Although the building had been altered numerous times since its first iteration in 1695, it had been one of the first targets of Rockefeller restoration. By the time *The Music of Williamsburg* began to be filmed, the physical features of the building and its furnishings painstakingly mimicked the well-documented 1716 iteration of the building that was the appropriate setting for the film's timeline. Similarly, a featured performance of *The Beggar's Opera* in the film was able to take as inspiration a very specific performance of that opera by the touring Virginia Company of Players in 1768, at a theater then located on Waller Street. The theater building was no longer extant, but with substantial archival knowledge of colonial theaters and archaeological research on its physical remnants, an exacting replica was built in the College's modern Phi Beta Kappa theater.⁴⁷ *The Beggar's Opera* score itself, especially when only produced in brief excerpts, is even more clearly documented.⁴⁸

The more difficult challenge for *The Music of Williamsburg* was representing the music of enslaved residents of the town, music whose "unarchived" nature has been one of the central preoccupations of research in American music.⁴⁹ Unlike the performances of white European music, which relied heavily upon notated scores, archaeologically informed reconstructions, the professional direction of a New York City conductor, and the approval of "such authorities as Carleton Sprague Smith and Gilbert Chase,"⁵⁰ performances of Black music would need to rely upon more speculative research. For the white filmmakers, the obvious choice to coordinate this music was the folklorist Alan Lomax. The director of CW's Audio-Visual Department, Arthur Smith, made clear the political aesthetic behind the choice of Lomax: "Native, untrained, traditional performance is so greatly to be preferred to modern stylized Negro performances....belief he can locate the talent is based on his reputation in the field."⁵¹ Contracts noted "Negroes were selected one at a time, in an area from Virginia all the way to Florida, by Alan Lomax, noted folk musicologist and consultant...all were farmers or fishermen, none professional."⁵²

Lomax, in keeping with the historiographic tradition of CW, was concerned with mimetic realism while also ideologically predisposed to American exceptionalism. However, at a time when CW was still in thrall to a Cold War-era patriotism, Lomax subscribed to a different sort. Allied with the white left-wing tradition of folksong preservation and performance, Lomax's goal was to search for African musical "survivals" of the sort later described by scholars such as Samuel Floyd: "...the

⁴⁵Oja et al., "Music of Williamsburg Unsung" 3.

⁴⁶Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

⁴⁷Alice Sicrom, "Scene from Early Theater Recreated for Movie Here," *Virginia Gazette*, June 3, 1960, p. 5. Quoted by Sarah Reeder in Oja Seminar Research Notes, January 25, 2003.

⁴⁸Even in this case, however, the absence of any physical reconstruction of one of Williamsburg's original theaters shows the slippage of performance. Sterling Murray has pointed out that despite extensive documentation, Colonial Williamsburg has long resisted engaging with its legacy as a center of opera in England's colonial empire. Perhaps this is due to an unwillingness to subject contemporary tourists to eighteenth-century audience tradition, or perhaps opera, even rough comic opera, does not fit in with narratives of American exceptionalism. Sterling E. Murray, "The Williamsburg Performance of Arne's Pasticcio Comic Opera *Love in a Village*," Unpublished paper, 2007.

⁴⁹The contemporary political stakes of the legacy of this scholarship is explored in the published epistolary conversation of Samuel A. Floyd and Ronald Radano, "Interpreting the African-American Musical Past: A Dialogue," *Black Music Research Journal* 29, no. 1 (2009): 1-10. I am grateful to Matthew D. Morrison for drawing my attention to this dialogue.

⁵⁰Oja, "Filming the Music of Williamsburg with Alan Lomax," 1.

⁵¹Arthur Smith, undated 1960 note, quoted in Erin Krutko, Oja Seminar Research Notes, January 24, 2003.

⁵²Notes about Music of Williamsburg, Film Logs, Colonial Williamsburg Archives, quoted in Erin Gordon, Oja Seminar Research Notes, January 27, 2003.

musical *tendencies*, the mythological beliefs and assumptions, and the interpretive strategies of African Americans are the same as those that underlie the music of the African homeland...these tendencies and beliefs continue to exist as African cultural memory.”⁵³ For Lomax, this meant a combination of archival research, but also a reliance upon Taylor’s “expressive, embodied culture” that can’t easily be reduced to texts and narrative.⁵⁴

Practically speaking, as the CW staff hoped he would, Lomax relied heavily upon seeking out musicians whose own cultural memory could fill in archival gaps, and to find those musicians, he drew upon his own lifetime of research and relationships. In the fall of 1959, just prior to signing up for the Williamsburg project, Lomax had taken what he called a “field trip” to the south in order to document folk traditions, using, for the first time, a portable machine capable of stereo recording. Together with his partner, folksinger Shirley Collins, Lomax’s famous “Southern Journey” lasted two and a half months, and encompassed an enormous range of musicians and genres, many of whom Lomax had known from previous trips.⁵⁵ In Salem, Virginia, for example, the couple recorded singer Texas Gladden and her brothers Hobart and Preston Smith, whom Lomax had promoted, and would continue to do so, for decades. Toward the end of his trip, Lomax returned to St. Simon’s Island, where he had visited with Zora Neale Hurston many years before, and hosted a celebratory party at which he met a singer who had recently moved to the Island, Mary Elizabeth “Bessie” Jones.

Both Hobart Smith and Bessie Jones would assume prominent roles in *The Music of Williamsburg*, joined by others newer to Lomax: The fife player Ed Young, whom Alan Lomax had met on his 1958 trip in Como, Mississippi, and Nat Rahmings, a drummer originally from the Bahamas and then residing in Miami. The common thread of most of these musicians was their roots in, or at least mastery of, performance traditions Lomax believed had been largely unaffected by modernity and the contemporary commercial music industry. To be clear, this was a heavily romanticized notion of authenticity; in the words of Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov, an “appealing but static and nostalgic portrait of black Southern America.”⁵⁶ Or as Ross Cole has more recently pointed out, the Lomax project was after “the sound of racial purity—a seemingly untainted expression requiring conditions of effective segregation and isolation that allowed a mythic folk essence to emerge.”⁵⁷ Coming in on the heels of the mainstream music industry’s embrace of rock and roll, Lomax’s various projects rejected, at least superficially, the often violent or at least exploitive appropriation of inter-racial musical styles seen as so embedded in the mass cultural industry. As we will see, however, the replacement of commercial concerns with scholarly and liberal–political concerns often simply substituted new forms of appropriation.

A distinction, however, might be made, in that the film was a moment in Lomax’s career where the artifice of authenticity was much more explicit. After all, unlike the vast majority of Lomax’s output, the goal here was a portrait of something that was, at least in some literal sense, dead: There was no true documentary claim when it came to a fictional film set two centuries prior. The move from documentary to fiction freed Lomax to engage in ever more speculative practices. The mere act of purposeful assemblage of musicians from disparate geographic areas was one such speculation, as was his commissioning of new instruments, including a replica of an eighteenth-century banjo. Recalling Magelssen’s discussion of living history museum’s theatricalized reenactments, in this case, Lomax’s embrace of overt theatricality allowed him to depart from the ideal of mimetic realism. Moreover, Lomax had the freedom and power to bend the social relations of both past and present to achieve his imaginary colonial sound.

⁵³Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5.

⁵⁴Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 16.

⁵⁵John F. Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2010), 315–19; Tom Piazza, *The Southern Journey of Alan Lomax: Words, Photographs, and Music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).

⁵⁶Robert Gordon and Bruce Nemerov, eds., *Lost Delta Found: Rediscovering the Fisk University-Library of Congress Coahoma County Study, 1941–1942* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), 25. Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2000), 47.

⁵⁷Ross Cole, *The Folk: Music, Modernity, and the Political Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2021), 108. I’m grateful to Cole for providing me with a pre-publication version of his book.

In addition to the brief opening scene with the cart, two other scenes with Black musicians were staged by Lomax. Early on, the men, women, and children from the cart make a longer appearance hoeing a hot, dry, dusty field, watched closely by the white overseer. Performed by the Spiritual Singers of Coastal Georgia, the group sings the work song “Emma, you’s my Darlin.”⁵⁸ The camera then pans to the nearby river, where another group of presumably enslaved Black men are rowing a boat while one of them casts a fishing net, together singing “Row de Boat Child.”⁵⁹

The centerpiece of Lomax’s contribution to *The Music of Williamsburg* was a “slave frolic,” which is juxtaposed in the film against a parlor demonstration of Benjamin Franklin’s glass harmonica and a scene from *The Beggar’s Opera*, a portrait of dueling worlds of night music. The roughly two-minute scene begins with five seated musicians, playing banjo, jawbone, fife, and two drums, with the unseen voices of the Spiritual Singers singing the game song, “Reg’lar, Reg’lar, Rollin’ Under.”⁶⁰ The fife player, Ed Young, and one of the drummers, Nat Rahmings, rise up to dance in the center of the crowd, which has gathered into a ring. Musicians and singers take turns dancing in the middle of the circle, including, briefly, Bessie Jones. As with most of the musical scenes in the film, there is no particular narrative, although a well-dressed coachman, shown earlier driving an aristocratic man past Bruton Parish Church, makes an appearance to dance as well, his collar loosened.

As with *The Story of a Patriot*, the film medium allowed Lomax and the other producers to create a historical reenactment more tightly controlled and contextualized than possible in a live scenario. Crucially, it was a multilayered fantasy of both past and present. During a time when visual and sonic depictions of musical miscegenation were extremely fraught, some of the core musical performances were provided by a white musician, Hobart Smith, collaborating with Young, Rahmings, and the Coastal Singers. Playing on the replica instrument commissioned by Lomax, Smith provided invisible accompaniment to the Black performers. Having learned earlier in his life to play the banjo from Black musicians, he was able to meld seamlessly into the larger musical performance. The film, however, could not so easily efface his presence. In the film, therefore, the banjo is strummed by a Black actor, reenacting the performance of a white musician, imagining the performance of a Black musician. In this regard, Smith might be thought of as the folk-liberal inverse of Elvis: A white performer who could sound Black, but whose whiteness was masked for what Benjamin Filene has called Lomax’s “cult of authenticity”⁶¹ (Figures 3 and 4).

The frolic allowed for a situation in which an artistic director could create scenes of collaboration aimed toward an overall aesthetic goal of one particular form of authenticity.⁶² As with any performance of early music, that particular aesthetic is imbued with the tastes and ideology of the present, and in this case, the white liberalism of Lomax and the producers. The fantasy could only go so far; Oja and her students show that the white performers for the film were given individual contracts and housed in hotels; the Black performers were hired as a group and had to rely upon more informal housing. Even more fraught was the relationship between Lomax and the Spiritual Singers of Coastal Georgia, a relationship that would go on to span decades. From the outside, this group was a paragon of traditional authenticity. As the film’s accompanying teacher’s manual explains, the Singers “provided a pocket of Negro culture that has remained relatively isolated and undisturbed (until recently) since the Revolution”⁶³ (Figure 5).

Many later album releases and performances organized by Lomax capitalized on this, especially the landmark 1977 album release of *Georgia Sea Island Songs*, featuring recordings from the Williamsburg film as well as from Lomax’s “Southern Journey,” with the group now rebranded as

⁵⁸Oja et al., “Music of Williamsburg Unsong,” 35.

⁵⁹Oja et al., “Music of Williamsburg Unsong,” 38.

⁶⁰Oja et al., “Music of Williamsburg Unsong,” 41. Years later, Lomax would release this same recording as part of his 1977 album, *Georgia Sea Island Songs*.

⁶¹Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 47.

⁶²A useful gloss on transhistorical collaboration in the context of early music revivals is Jonathan Shull, “Locating the Past in the Present: Living Traditions and the Performance of Early Music,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 15, no. 1 (2006): 87–111.

⁶³Oja, “Filming the Music of Williamsburg with Alan Lomax,” 12.



Figure 3. Ed Young and Hobart Smith. From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity.



Figure 4. “Slave Frolic” from *The Music of Williamsburg*.

the Georgia Sea Island Singers. In an early review of the disc, Pearl Williams-Jones pointed out that the album—featuring recordings then already four decades old—was in some ways self-consciously historical, presenting “the close of a specific musical tradition,” rather than claiming contemporary,



Figure 5. Spiritual Singers of Coastal Georgia in Williamsburg, April 1960. From the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity.

ahistorical life for the repertoire.⁶⁴ However, Lomax's sense of entitlement as a white savior of folk traditions would also have financial ramifications. One of the recordings Lomax made at his initial meeting with Jones, in 1959 just prior to filming for *The Music of Williamsburg*, was of the children's song "Sometime," which was later released on Lomax's *American Folk Songs for Children* (1973).⁶⁵ Decades later, the electronic pop musician Moby would sample Jones's recording as the central riff for the hit song, "Honey," on his wildly successful 1999 album *Play*. David Hesmondhalgh points out that the combination of current copyright law and Lomax's lax attention to cultural ownership means the Jones estate did not share in the deserved riches of "Honey."⁶⁶ Copyright law famously overvalued published songwriting over performance, meaning that Bessie Jones's singing of a traditional children's song, so crucial to Moby's track, is accorded very little financial value. The Lomax archive did retrospectively track down Bessie Jones's heirs to be able to distribute those royalties, but the fact that it took the massive success of *Play* for this to occur is testament to the racist structures of capitalism that tend to override even the best intentions.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, if she could not control copyright law or the eventual ramifications of Lomax's recording projects, Jones retained a great deal of control, and in some ways was able to exploit Lomax's cult of authenticity as a marketing strategy. An anecdote from the partnership later flagged by Bernice Johnson

⁶⁴Pearl Williams-Jones, "Review of Georgia Sea Island Songs; Afro-American Folk Music from Tate and Panola Counties, Mississippi," *Ethnomusicology* 24, no. 2 (1980): 343.

⁶⁵The Lomax recording was released much later on the album *American Folk Songs for Children* (1973) Jones's own account of the song can be found in Bessie Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes, *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

⁶⁶David Hesmondhalgh, "Digital Sampling and Cultural Inequality," *Social & Legal Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006): 70; see also more recently Matthew D. Morrison, to whom questions of copyright are fundamental to his notion of blacksound. "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (December 1, 2019): 781–823.

⁶⁷Lomax was concerned with these, strategizing in a 1960 memo about how best to protect copyrights from "vultures." See Erin Krutko, Oja Seminar Research Notes, January 24, 2003.

Reagon is telling of her sense of agency: “I usually speak for the group, you know, but Mr. Lomax has been so nice in bring us here that we let him introduce us.”⁶⁸ In the case of *The Music of Williamsburg*, Jones was at least once able to intervene powerfully in Lomax’s liberal fantasy. Jones was not herself originally from the Georgia Sea Islands, having married into the community. This was not a mystery to Lomax, even if it was sometimes elided as an inconvenient historical fact in the portrait of an untouched folk tradition. Oja and her students found a stark reminder of this history from Bessie Jones’s collection of autobiographical stories *For the Ancestors*. Unbeknownst to Lomax, the family of Bessie Jones was originally from Williamsburg, and her grandfather had been enslaved there. During production of *The Music of Williamsburg*, Jones was invited to a local party, a birthday celebration for a white baby. Asked at one point to sing a lullaby for the child, Jones instead stood and told the assorted attendees—presumably white, presumably liberal—about her grandfather’s experiences as an enslaved man in Williamsburg. “Wasn’t a soul saying a word but me, and I just told them like it was.”⁶⁹ The next day, Jones was given a tour of sights in the town related to her grandfather:

There are big books in there that done got brown-looking. And he turned the leaves and he showed me the history of the whole crew from the time they came over here. And that was great to me. Then he took me to the jailhouse and showed me that they had the same slant table there that Pa and them used to talk about, where they used to buckle you down by your hands and feet and beat you. And in that book they had the history of many of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers, if only we knew which one to ask for.⁷⁰

As Oja implies in her telling of this story, Jones steps into the vacancies of racism indulged even by the most sympathetic white liberals of Williamsburg, and provided a powerful history lesson that superseded the fictional narrative of Lomax and his collaborators.

Jones’s intervention falls into a powerful category of historiographic work. Although the notion of “speaking truth to power” is foundationally a prophetic gesture, it also counts within the tradition of progressive realism Handler and Roth described as the overall ideology of CW. That is to say, “history” improves over time, as newly discovered facts fill in old gaps and discount myths. Today, the notion that “more” knowledge of “better” history will lead to contemporary social change is taken as self-evident. To take as one example, a 2006 essay collection, *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, is full of passionate calls for public history institutions—like CW—to not keep uncomfortable and violent truths from the public. David W. Blight, for example, in considering the relationship between history and memory, ultimately calls for “broader public education and learning about slavery.”⁷¹ In an essay on “Four Struggles to Tell the Truth,” Joanne Melish analyzes several contemporary attempts at what she calls historical reparations: “attempts to repair and restore the effaced or distorted histories of people of color in bondage and in freedom.”⁷² Lois E. Horton describes the poor interpretation at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello as “avoiding history.”⁷³ Although not discussed in the volume, the book’s cover is a photo of a famous attempt to not shy away from hard truths in history: The 1994 slave auction reenactment at CW. Indeed, although beyond the scope of this essay, of course the historiography of African American narratives at CW has grown in leaps and bounds since both *The Story of a Patriot* and *The Music of Williamsburg*. Despite the reputation of the town as a “Republican Disneyland,” staff trained in the professionalized discipline of public history have worked hard to place questions of social justice within the larger tourist framework.

⁶⁸Bernice Johnson Reagon, “African Diaspora Women: The Making of Cultural Workers,” *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 1 (1986): 84.

⁶⁹Bessie Jones and John Stewart, *For the Ancestors: Autobiographical Memories* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 52; partially quoted in Oja, “Filming the Music of Williamsburg with Alan Lomax,” 12.

⁷⁰Jones and Stewart, *For the Ancestors*, 52.

⁷¹James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 32.

⁷²Horton and Horton, *Slavery and Public History*, 133.

⁷³Horton and Horton, *Slavery and Public History*, 145.

More broadly, the commitment to progressive realism lies at the heart of contemporary liberal reaction to conservative attempts at banning critical race theory in schools, or sanctioning *The 1619 Project*. The internet is rife with think pieces and memes portraying that conservative activism as preaching literal ignorance of history, with frequent comparisons to Nazi book banning or the Vatican condemnation of Galileo. To which one must respond: Of course. In these and in decades of attempts to distort the historical narrative around slavery, of course historians must fight to correct the record and reveal the truths, much as Bessie Jones did for her private audience in Williamsburg.

Meanwhile, the physical church of First Baptist is gone, but the people remain. The congregation remains relatively thriving for a mainline Black congregation. One church member confirmed for me the general feeling of the congregation that the move to a modern building had ultimately been for the best; the old church had been in bad shape and in a less desirable location.⁷⁴ The old church bell, originally installed in 1886, has recently been restored thanks to some financial assistance from CW. Known as the “Freedom Bell,” it was brought to Washington, D.C. in 2016 to be rung for the opening of the new National Museum of African American History and Culture. First Baptist’s current pastor, Dr. Reginald Davis, accompanied the bell, and was joined by another pastor, none other than a reenactor playing the role of Gowan Pamphlet, the church’s eighteenth-century founder.⁷⁵ Recently, CW has begun a new partnership with First Baptist to begin an archaeological excavation of the empty lawn, which has already unearthed remnants of buildings even older than the demolished 1856 church.

James Ingraham, himself an actual ordained pastor, is the longtime reenactor of the role of Gowan Pamphlet. He takes pride in performing his character as an eloquent, well-dressed man. These clothes, he told one interviewer, allow him to present an alternative vision of slavery, where the dignity of one particular man was able to shine through the average tourist’s limited sense of slavery of an institution:

Telling the story of enslaved people allows me to not only tell the story of my own past, but a story of America. But it is also giving a voice to those that didn’t have a voice. We have a real high mission here, this mission to tell this story, because it wasn’t a story that they were able to tell. Many of these people did not have an opportunity to write their story down. And so it’s my duty and my mission, every single day, to get up, to go out, to prove to people that this story was a part of the American story.⁷⁶

The challenge, however, is what to do with that truth. It does not always appear that better education in better history always leads to the social change liberalism assumes it will. In the case of CW and its relationship with slavery, it is impossible to ignore the basic fact that the project of nationalism is so powerful, on both the right and left, and that the foundational myths of the United States are burdened by more powerful contestations than what might be “true.” One recalls the opposing influential historical reenactments from the Obama era: The Tea Party Movement and the musical *Hamilton*. Neither claimed mimetic accuracy, and instead both made explicit claims for a more fundamental political truth of the eighteenth century that ought to still govern today. As such, both show that the spirit of Cold War consensus history is alive and well: An endless number of historians can testify that, say, Justice Scalia’s knowledge of history, as displayed in his opinion for the second amendment case *DC v Heller* (2008), is factually wrong, but historic reenactments such as his are a cloak for other forms of political power. History is no match.

Acknowledgments. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the conference “The Past, the Present, and the Future of Public Musicology,” organized by Eric Hung at Westminster Choir College, and at a Society for American Music seminar session on “Music and Cultural Memory” lead by Elissa Harbert and Tom Kernan. I’m very grateful for the generosity of Carol Oja in sharing her seminar materials with me, as well as some important suggestions from Elizabeth Morgan, Eric Hung, and Gayle Murchison, and to my student Benjamin McGonagle for his assistance with transcriptions.

⁷⁴Opelene L. Davis, email message to author, January 24, 2018.

⁷⁵Erin Blakemore, “Historic Bell Helps Ring in New African American History Museum,” *Smithsonian*, September 21, 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/historic-bell-helps-ring-new-african-american-history-museum-180960545/>.

⁷⁶Pravina Shukla, *Costume: Performing Identities through Dress* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 180.

Competing Interest. The author declares none.

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