

# Extending Our Vision

America finds itself at the confluence of conflicting opinions about its national identity — and Colonial Williamsburg must join the conversation

BY THURSTON R. MOORE, CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

The world is full of memorials and shrines — sacred stakes in the ground to remind us of what was. So Colonial Williamsburg began, as the vision of the Rev. Dr. W.A.R. Goodwin for “a shrine that would bear witness to the faith and the devotion and the sacrifice of the nation builders.”

It was not long, however, before Goodwin and his collaborators began to realize that their goal was as limited as it was honorable. Consciously or not, by embarking on the momentous task of restoring Williamsburg’s colonial grandeur, they had accepted an even higher calling. For living within the city’s ancient bricks and mortar was the very story of *America* — of who we came to be, who we are as Americans, and the promise of what we could still be.

The clergyman’s growing concern about this calling moved him to appeal in 1935 to Colonial Williamsburg’s original benefactor, John D. Rockefeller Jr., to expand their vision for the town. Through his beneficence, Goodwin assured him at the time, Rockefeller had created a magnifi-

cent symbol — a “sacrament” for the nation, even. But to fulfill its potential they must give voice to the lives, struggles, courage and ideals of this founding generation. “They should be recaptured and made more fully to live in the present and through the future,” Goodwin wrote. “A living message should be given that will speak to the souls of pilgrims to this place.”

Colonial Williamsburg’s “program of interpretation” transformed the city yet again. To this day, not only preserving but also investigating, interpreting and, above all, *sharing* this enduring story remains this Foundation’s highest and best work — as Rockefeller himself put it, “That the future may learn from the past.” The Board of Trustees of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation is honored to be the custodian of this legacy. We take seriously our programmatic and financial responsibility for this national treasure as we steward and build upon our mission for the future.

It is a mission that has indeed evolved with the ages, guiding and galvanizing our ▶

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nation in wartime and in peace, through cultural and technological revolution, in times of national grief and eras of great prosperity. “I wish sincerely that every single man, woman and child that has the proud privilege of calling himself an American, could stand here . . . and thus regain faith to solve the problems of our day,” President Dwight D. Eisenhower observed during a visit to the House of Burgesses in Williamsburg in 1953, during the Korean War’s dark finale.

Today, this mission only grows more urgent — demanding not only our commitment and energies but our willingness to extend our vision for Colonial Williamsburg yet again.

Today we see an America conflicted about its identity, even ambivalent about its role in the world. Fueled by the speed of our technology and communications, the priority of immediacy has eclipsed that of understanding. Loss of context blurs the very ideals that once guided our actions and steeled our resolve in governing and in our daily lives. No matter one’s politics, religion or social predilections — it is impossible to ignore the chaos growing across our national landscape, obscuring our collective hindsight and our vision for the future as well.

America’s story is the beacon that can guide us through the storm. More than a chronology of names and events, wars won and lost, ours is a story of revolutionary *principles* that propelled an unlikely nation into being and a diverse people down the unending path toward fulfilling the promise of those ideals.

“We are not a nation in the usual sense



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of the term,” historian Gordon Wood, a former trustee of this Foundation, once remarked in an interview. “To be an American is not to be somebody, but to believe in something. And that something is the ideals and values that came out of the Revolution and the framing of the Constitution.”

No wonder then, as historians like Wood have noted, we still turn to our original Founders for counsel in our most confounding times and difficult situations. To our disappointment, however, they offer few simple answers because America was complicated from the start. What seems now like an inevitable system of shared beliefs — in freedom and equality, liberty and democracy — emerged from a crucible of explosive politics, both royal and revolutionary; profound inequality extending ▶

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If we expect much from our democracy, what should our democracy expect of us as citizens?

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across racial, ethnic and gender lines; and clashes over religion that challenged even the most ardent supporters of liberty.

For 93 years, Colonial Williamsburg has devoted itself to illuminating the complex experiences of our forebears in whose triumphs, suffering and ambitions we may each find ourselves, regardless of when our familial ancestors entered the national narrative. This sacred context remains our key to understanding our national character today, and to gleaning wisdom from its original architects as we tackle the most confounding issues of our times. How does personal liberty weigh in the balance against the demands of public health or public security? In this age of technological dependence, where does our right to privacy end? How far does our government intervene to uphold the principle of equality? What does it mean to be an immigrant nation? If we expect much from our democracy, what should our democracy expect of us as citizens?

There are no simple answers to any of these questions, of course, all of which deserve greater understanding. It is time for Colonial Williamsburg to enter the fray.

At this critical time in our history, the leaders of our Foundation are deliberating about new ways in which to amplify Colo-

nia Williamsburg's voice in the national conversation so as to further the critical perspective of history. This city, as we know, has always been a place of dialogue and fierce debate. We hope now to build on this legacy by creating here a unique forum in which present-day citizens and leaders can engage more critically, and perhaps more creatively, with America's story. From initiating difficult conversations about our evolving democracy to advocating for the cause of history education, we seek a more robust role for Colonial Williamsburg in the American discourse.

In so doing, we build on this colonial capital's legacy as an incubator of ideas — about what has passed and that promise of what can still be. Like those original patriots who stirred the cauldron of revolution in this revolutionary capital city, we can likewise take part in a movement to bring our founding principles, and other lessons of our past, to bear on our most crucial decisions today.

As Patrick Henry said in my own hometown of Richmond, at St. John's Church in 1775: "I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging of the future but by the past."

So it should remain, for all of us. Colonial Williamsburg will always keep America's lamp of experience burning bright.

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*Thurston R. Moore was elected to The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Board of Trustees in 2008. He became chairman in 2018.*