

COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG'S "GREAT HOPES PLANTATION"

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WILLIAMSBURG, Virginia

-- Still a work in progress, Great Hopes Plantation's eerie, breeze-swept quiet is starting to speak softly but pointedly about the slavery that built the foundations of parts of colonial America.

In its fifth year, one of Great Hopes' most telling features is this working, living plantation's proximity to the most opulent icon of Colonial Williamsburg, the Governor's Palace.



Trees and a large berm help hide from view the Duke of Gloucester Street's well-to-do homes and the palace's clipped formal gardens. They're actually just a good stone's throw from the rambling, dusty expanse of this "middling" estate's endless labor.

When Patrick Henry divided the society of colonial America into three parts -- "well-born," "middle" and "lower" -- the middling plantation owners were readily identified as the agricultural barons of small operations: about 100 acres and 10 slaves to a plantation.

Although an estate named Great Hopes did exist in the 18th century in Virginia's York County, the working farm established in 2003 by the Rockefeller-backed Colonial Williamsburg Foundation is not an original.

In fact, researchers used the inventories of several of the slave-owning planters whose farms ringed the colonial capital city to reveal this layer of history, a grittily textured contrast to traditional images of all-white Commonwealth founders in knee breeches bravely plunging the infant nation into the Revolutionary War with fiery debate.

Today, trained professional artisans and tradespeople work as authentically costumed plantation hands and interpreters here, demonstrating for guests the punishing challenges and disheartening limitations faced by slaves at the time.

It's easy to see how a monied class at the time might have thought slaves to be the perfect holdings: Unlike livestock, slaves could be made to build their own shelter, feed themselves from tiny plots of land, make their own beds stuffed with corn husks and huddle on earthen floors at night, 10 to a cabin, for warmth.



Presently, Great Hopes has a representative slave cabin, a tobacco-curing shed, a "corn house" built to keep grain as dry as possible and a free-standing kitchen almost as large as the slave cabin and raised off the ground, a token of status of the day.

The next element to be added, Robert Watson says, is a "great house," an evocation of the home that a middling plantationer would have had his slaves build for himself and his family on the best knoll of the estate's land, uphill of the rudimentary log slave cabin that squats in a gully near where pigs might have been penned.

"Day in and day out" is one of Watson's key phrases as he describes the mental tedium and physical hardships that fueled the prosperity of Williamsburg's heyday. "Dignity" is another of his most frequently referenced concepts. He talks of this working plantation's mission with forceful, blunt clarity: "We want to give these people back their dignity."

But the addition of Great Hopes Plantation to the vast restoration work at Williamsburg is its own indictment. You can't help but note that this fundamental element of the story of colonial Virginia has been added more than 70 years after the main efforts of this vast historic project were mounted.

Slavery was not avoided in Williamsburg's recreation in the past. It was mentioned, frankly, in guides' patter throughout the town, and its artifacts were preserved in the great collections amassed by archeologists in this unique capture of history.

But until now, the conditions of slavery's realities were never arrayed so explicitly as were the ways and means of the merchants and politicians, the "patriot class," if you will.

Colonial Williamsburg's famed authenticity finally has overtaken even history's shadows as well as its sunlight. And yet, far from an oppressive experience, a walk around Great Hopes Plantation is as nourishing for its peace and sweet-clover air as it is revealing about the lives that were slowly ground into its output. So much was given in these settings. Williamsburg now is stepping up to say that these gifts will not be forgotten, overlooked or denied.

"Day in and day out," Watson, his associates and the foundation now are seeing to it that Great Hopes' point is communicated: It is a human mulch that made our nation's garden grow.



Colonial Williamsburg interpreter Robert Watson is a mainstay of Great Hopes Plantation's staff.