

# Colonial Williamsburg

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## Leaders in African-American Public History Return to Colonial Williamsburg May 10

*“African-American Interpretation: Past” panelists include former Colonial Williamsburg interpreters Rex Ellis of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, and Christy Coleman, named one of TIME magazine’s “31 People Changing the South”*



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WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (May 2, 2019) – Throughout 2019 the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation commemorates 40 years of comprehensive African-American historical interpretation, and at 5:30 p.m. May 10 invites the community to the Hennage Auditorium at the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg for the first of three free conversations examining the past, present and future of public history interpreting the African-American experience.

“African American Interpretation: Past” panelists represent the team that established Colonial Williamsburg’s interpretation of African-American history and remain leaders in their

field: **Rex Ellis**, associate director emeritus for curatorial affairs at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture and former Colonial Williamsburg vice president of historical interpretation; **Christy Coleman**, CEO of the American Civil War Museum, named in 2018 by TIME magazine as one of "31 People Changing the South;" **Dylan Pritchett**, storyteller extraordinaire; and event moderator **Richard Josey**, founder of Collective Journeys.

Colonial Williamsburg actor-interpreter Stephen Seals, program manager for the 40th anniversary commemoration, said the panel will examine the development, rollout and reception of programming that presented complex, often painful aspects of history.

"Rex, Christy, Dylan, Richard and their peers wanted to tell the story of all who lived in Williamsburg in the 18th century, and they saw where the future of interpretation would take us," Seals said. "Their foresight and courage cannot be overstated, and we stand on their shoulders each time we present our shared American story."

The "African American Interpretation" series is possible thanks to a generous grant from the Ford Foundation.

The series continues July 5 with "African American Interpretation: Present" and concludes Oct. 18 with "African American Interpretation: Future." All programs are in the Hennage Auditorium. The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg remain open throughout their \$41.7-million expansion, funded entirely by donors.

A special yearlong exhibition at the Raleigh Tavern titled "Revealing the Priceless: Colonial Williamsburg – 40 years of African-American Interpretation" memorializes, by name, each of the African-American men and women known to have lived in the city during the period that the foundation interprets, from 1763 to 1785, and offers a retrospective of foundation African-American interpretation. The exhibition is open daily to guests with Colonial Williamsburg admission.

The 40th anniversary of African-American interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg coincides with commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the first arrival of Africans in English America at Point Comfort on modern-day Fort Monroe.

Following its establishment in 1926 and the opening of its first public site in 1932, Colonial Williamsburg grew to become the world's largest living history museum, interpreting Virginia's capital on the cusp of the American Revolution – a period when more than half the city's population consisted of African-Americans, nearly all of them enslaved. Over the decades, African-American employees worked increasingly in costume but almost exclusively portrayed anonymous servants. Interpretation avoided aspects of their lives that risked pain or even discomfort for employees, guests and members of the community, regardless of race.

That changed in 1979, when the foundation engaged a group of students at nearby Hampton University about recruitment to work as first-person interpreters and engage guests in-character as African-American men and women known to have lived, worked and ministered in Williamsburg during the late 1700s. There was no textbook, no script. Yet a small group accepted the challenge and stepped onto the streets of the Historic Area to face an uncertain reception from guests, neighbors and colleagues. Their legacy is reflected today in the nation's museums, historic sites, and popular culture, and in the work of Colonial Williamsburg's

interpreters and through groundbreaking dramatic interpretive programs such as “Journey to Redemption,” and “Resolved, An American Experiment.”

Other year-round interpretive programming, historic sites and events are open to guests with Colonial Williamsburg admission or special program tickets. Event and schedule information is subject to change. Tickets and additional information are available at [colonialwilliamsburg.com/1979](http://colonialwilliamsburg.com/1979), or by calling 855-296-6627. Additional information is available via the free Colonial Williamsburg Explorer app, which can be downloaded from the Apple App Store and Google Play, and by following Colonial Williamsburg on [Facebook](#) and [@colonialwmsburg](#) on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

About the 40th Anniversary logo: The sankofa bird symbol originated with the Akan people of West Africa in what is modern-day Ghana. In the region’s Twi dialect, “sankofa” means “return and get it.” The sankofa bird, looking back at its own tail, represents the African diaspora’s recovery of its shared past in order to secure its future.

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*The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation preserves, restores and operates Virginia’s 18th-century capital of Williamsburg. Innovative and interactive experiences highlight the relevance of the American Revolution to contemporary life and the importance of an informed, active citizenry. The Colonial Williamsburg experience includes more than 600 restored or reconstructed original buildings, renowned museums of decorative arts and folk art, extensive educational outreach programs for students and teachers, lodging, culinary options from historic taverns to casual or elegant dining, the Golden Horseshoe Golf Club featuring 45 holes designed by Robert Trent Jones and his son Rees Jones, a full-service spa and fitness center, pools, retail stores and gardens. Philanthropic support and revenue from admissions, products and hospitality operations sustain Colonial Williamsburg’s educational programs and preservation initiatives.*

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