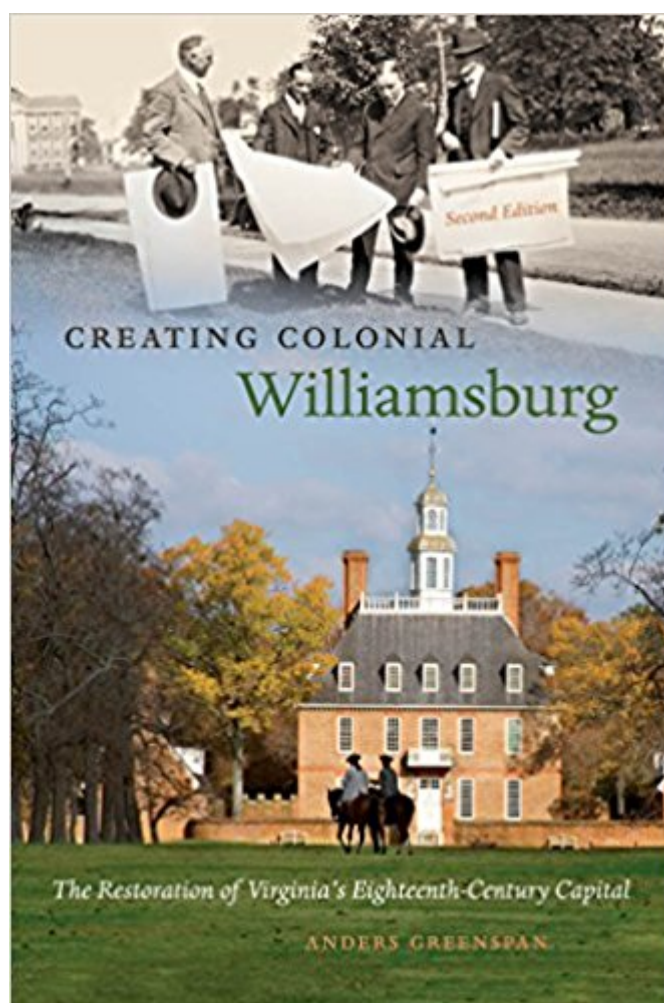


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Creating Colonial Williamsburg: The Restoration Of Virginia's Eighteenth-Century Capital



Synopsis

In *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, Anders Greenspan examines the restoration and re-creation of the structures and gardens of Virginia's colonial capital beginning in 1926. The restoration was undertaken by the Rockefeller family, whose aim was to promote a twentieth-century appreciation for eighteenth-century ideals. Ironically, those ideals, including democracy, individualism, and representative government, were often promoted at the expense of a more complete understanding of the town's true history. The meaning and purpose of Colonial Williamsburg has changed over time, along with America's changing social and political landscapes, making the study of this historic site a unique and meaningful entry point to understanding the shifting modern American character. In recent years, financial struggles and declining attendance forced a new interpretation of the town, extending the presentation into the period of the American Revolution, while adding new interpretive approaches such as street theater and a greater emphasis on technology. Over its eighty-year history, says Greenspan, Colonial Williamsburg has grown and matured, while still retaining its emphasis on the importance of eighteenth-century values and their application in the modern world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

[Greenspan] not only helps us understand, but he also encourages us to value the remarkable growth of one of modern America's most ambitious efforts to reconsider, and to re-envision its past. In so doing, he calls attention to the challenge--and the extraordinary efforts some [of] us will make--in seeking a consistent and convincing interpretation of our history.--The Public Historian

Creating Colonial Williamsburg presents a balanced critique, leavened with succinct,

thorough historical context. . . . Expertly researched and beautifully written--a sympathetic yet unapologetic examination of America's most famous historic townscape.--CRM: The Journal of Heritage StewardshipA well-written narrative of the establishment and development of arguably the nation's best-known history museum, Colonial Williamsburg. . . . By closely aligning the interests and characteristics of the various Rockefeller men who led Colonial Williamsburg with its development under those leaders, Greenspan makes a compelling case for the ability of one very wealthy family to influence the historical knowledge of entire generations of Americans.--The Journal of American History

Greenspan examines the restoration and re-creation of the structures and gardens of Virginia's colonial capital beginning in 1926 with the Rockefeller family, whose aim was to promote a 20th-century appreciation for 18th-century ideals. The meaning and purpose of Colonial Williamsburg has changed over time, along with America's changing social and political landscapes, making the study of this historic site a unique and meaningful entry point to understanding the shifting modern American character.

I was eager to read a history of Colonial Williamsburg, but am sadly disappointed in Anders Greenspan's treatment of it. He should have submitted this as a 20-page article in an academic journal, not written a 192-page book. He repeats himself over and over and over and over. He finds regrettable the Rockefellers' desire to portray traditional American values through the depiction of colonial life. Why, I can't determine. He lambasts Colonial Williamsburg for not including African Americans and women in its historical interpretations, in the 1940s-60s, at a time no one was doing this in the segregated South. Then when attempts are made to find the right balance to broaden the social history of colonial Virginia, Greenspan denigrates them as not being good enough or fast enough. His portrayal of Colonial Williamsburg as a place for the wealthy, and thus not for everyone, because there's a facility that offers a spa nearby, smacks of self-righteousness and socialism. None of his conclusions are strident, but he reads like a professor who's set out to make a name for himself at the expense of Colonial Williamsburg. The final chapter of the second edition is a weak attempt to bring the first edition up to date. All in all a complete disappointment, from someone who was eager to see how Colonial Williamsburg came to be and developed after a wonderful visit there recently. Two thumbs down.

I was quite disappointed by this book. I was hoping to read an account of how this amazing project

was accomplished on a practical level -- how did people react to suddenly learning that their street was being turned into a living museum? What was the legal mechanism? When I visited many years ago, there was still a Victorian house stuck right in the middle of the historic area -- who were the people living there, and why didn't they cooperate? How did they react to spending decades living in the middle of a museum? The book makes some references to the decision to ban traffic, but never says how the decision was made, how the residents felt about it, how it was implemented. The same for desegregation of the facilities, which are mentioned in passing but not discussed at any length. So many interesting stories have been left untold. Much of this book consists of excerpts from editorials over the years discussing the significance of Williamsburg, and there are many excerpts from letters written by visitors to the museum describing their reaction to the visit. The author also makes some wild generalizations about the museum, for example, something to the effect that Williamsburg was a major force in the Cold War, which I felt were quite unsupported. It read more like an extended term paper in a sociology class than a history of the museum.

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