



The colonies in trouble: Colonial Williamsburg in decline

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Colonial Williamsburg, the world's largest living history museum, with costumed interpreters re-enacting 18th-century American life amid more than 600 restored or reconstructed original buildings, is now in serious financial trouble.

The city served as Virginia's capital from 1699, when nearby Jamestown burned to the ground, until 1780. It fell into disrepair but was revived in the 1920s in a restoration project financed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

The Foundation's operating losses last year totaled \$54 million, or \$148,000 every day. Colonial Williamsburg president Mitchell Reiss says that if these trends continue, the foundation would go out of business in a few years. It has been decided to outsource many commercial operations and lay off workers.

One of the reasons for Colonial Williamsburg now attracting half the visitors it did 30 years ago, in Reiss's view, is that "less American history is being taught in the schools." And he may not be far from the truth.

American history is no longer being taught in our schools. from elementary school through college, as it once was. A recent report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that only 18% of American high school students were proficient in U.S. history.

In one state, North Carolina, history is taught only from 1877 onward. A study in Perspectives on History magazine by Professor Bruce VanSledright of the University of North Carolina found that 88% of elementary school teachers considered teaching history a low priority.

He found that teachers didn't focus on it because students are not tested on it at the state level."Why teach something you can't test?" many teachers ask.

The New York Post recently quoted a Brooklyn teacher as saying, "All the pressure in lower grades is in math and English language arts because of the state tests and the weight that they carry." This fourth grade teacher reports that fourth grade is the first time students are taught about explorers, American settlers, and the American Revolution.

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In Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World,” the regime successfully waged a “campaign against the past,” by banning the teaching of history, closing museums and destroying historical monuments. Some in our contemporary American society seem interested in following this path.

They are often guilty of what the Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood called the “sin of contemporaneity,” applying today’s standards to the past, finding the past wanting, and failing to teach what has come before.

Diane Ravitch, a historian of education at Teachers College of Columbia University, notes that,

“About 30 years ago, most public high school students studied one year of world history and one year of American history, but today, many only study one year of our own. State schools in most other Western countries require the subject to be studied almost every year. In France, for example, all students follow a carefully sequenced program of history, civics, and geography every year from 7th through 12th grade.”

In Ravitch’s view,

“If our system is to remain free and democratic, citizens should know not only how to judge candidates and their competing claims but how our institutions evolved. . . Without historical perspective, voters are more likely to be swayed by emotional appeals, by stirring commercials or by little more than a candidate’s good looks and charisma.”

At one urban Minnesota university, none of the 30 students in a course on ethnic relations had ever heard of the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, which held racial segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional. Thomas Kessner, who teaches American history at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, reports that,

“My students are not stupid, but they have an abysmal background in American or any other kind of history. They never heard of Daniel Webster, don’t understand the Constitution and don’t know the difference between the Republican and Democratic parties.”

Naomi Miller, chairman of the History Department at Hunter College, says that,

“My students have no historical knowledge on which to draw when they enter college. They have no point of reference for understanding World War 1, the Treaty of Versailles and the Holocaust. They think that everything is subjective. They have plenty of attitudes and opinions, but they lack the knowledge to analyze a problem. We are in danger of bringing up a generation without historical memory. This is a dangerous situation.”

According to David R. Colburn, History Department chairman at the University of Florida, incoming students knew some names and dates but have no idea why they are important.

“They know there was a civil war,” he says, “they know when it happened, but they don’t know what the issues were that divided the nation.”

Historian David McCullough laments that,

“We’re raising young people who are, by and large, historically illiterate. I know how much these young people, even at the most esteemed institutions of higher learning, don’t know. It’s shocking.”

McCullough, who has lectured on more than 100 college campuses, tells of a young woman who came up to him after a lecture at a renowned university in the Midwest.

“Until I heard your talk this morning, I never realized that the original 13 colonies were all on the East Coast,” she said.

In his annual Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment for the Humanities several years ago, McCullough declared:

“For a free, self-governing people, something more than a vague familiarity with history is essential if we are to hold onto and sustain our freedom. But I don’t think history should ever be made to seem like some musty, unpleasant pill to be studied solely for our own civic good. History, let us agree, can be an immense source of pleasure. For almost anyone with the normal human allotment of curiosity and an interest in people, it is a field day.”

More than two-thirds of college students and administrators who participated in a recent national survey were unable to remember that freedom of religion and the press are guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. In surveys conducted at 339 colleges and universities, more than one-fourth of students and administrators did not list freedom of speech as an essential right protected by the First Amendment.

“If one thinks of the First Amendment as a foundational American Liberty,” states Prof. Allan Charles Kors, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which commissioned the survey, “the ignorance and misunderstanding of it by administrators and universities is frightening, and the general ignorance and misunderstanding of it by students is quite depressing.”

According to a report issued by the Cato Institute, voters do not know enough about the issues and the candidates to cast an informed ballot.

“An informed electorate is a prerequisite for democracy,” writes Ilya Somin, assistant professor at George Mason University Law School. “If voters do not know what is going on in politics, they cannot rationally exercise control of government policy.”

Historian Paul Johnson makes the point that,

“The study of history is a powerful antidote to contemporary arrogance. It is humbling to discover how many of our glib assumptions, which seem to us novel and plausible, have been tested before, not once but many times and in innumerable guises, and discovered to be, at great human cost, wholly false.”

Free societies are rare in history. If their history and values are not transmitted to the next generation, their survival is in serious danger. As Cicero (106-43 B.C.) understood:

“To remain ignorant of what happened before you were born is to remain a child. What is human life worth unless it is incorporated into the lives of one’s ancestors and set in a historical context?”

The decline in attendance at Colonial Williamsburg is a warning about the danger of failing to transmit our history to the next generation of Americans. It is not only Colonial Williamsburg which will lose if such trends are not reversed, but the future of our free society as well.