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Small Gestures Make the Biggest Impact: Interpreting to Families and Children

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Every year, the arrival of the spring and summer seasons is announced by the high-pitched sounds of aspiring young musicians as they test their lung power on tin whistles on every street corner in the Historic Area. Accompanied by teachers, moms, dads, or grandparents, children

make that familiar sound, reminding us that Colonial Williamsburg's busy seasons have arrived.

In all trade shops and historic buildings and on every tour, families with young children or school groups from around the country make up a large percentage of our audience. Interpreting to the "family" audience can sometimes be a challenge. How do you pitch your interpretation in such a way to hold the attention of children without boring the other guests in your group? What do parents and their children expect and how do they define a successful experience?

Colonial Williamsburg, and in particular interpreters and trainers, has worked hard to improve families' experiences in the Historic Area. In 1993, we noticed in our mail-back surveys that we had room for improvement. Ratings on a scale of 1–10 from families with young children were 8.4, yet ratings from adults without children were 9.0.

Our first step was to conduct focus groups with parents and children after they had spent a day in the Historic Area to find out why we weren't getting higher ratings and how we could improve their experience. The research has continued, and each year we make changes to our programs and interpretive training based on findings from the research. Every year the feedback from families improves: in 1996, the overall ratings from families moved up to 9.0.

Although not all families are alike, there are some expectations that many parents and their children share and have discussed with us in our focus groups again and again over the past years. As you prepare yourself for our busy seasons, I challenge all readers to review these findings and ask yourself how you can use this information to strengthen your interpretations and in turn our guest families' experiences.

1. First impressions are critical.

The first five minutes of the family's experience are critical. During the focus group research we discovered that the families who were most negative about their experience al-

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Arts & Mysteries

The Colonial Timberyard in America

by Noel B. Poirier

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When considering the buildings that made up colonial American cities, the amount of material used to construct such attractive and resilient structures can be awe inspiring. It is a testament to the men who worked so diligently and skillfully to construct those buildings that many still stand today for thousands upon thousands to enjoy. While many people, through their visits to Colonial Williamsburg or other historic cities, have a cursory knowledge of the building trades, rarely are they aware of the work that occurred before a house carpenter ever picked up a saw or chisel. The preparation of the raw materials used to construct America's colonial cities may lack the drama of a frame raising, but without the sawyers at the colonial timberyards, the carpenters, coopers, cabinetmakers, and other tradespeople who used wood as a medium would have found it difficult to compete.

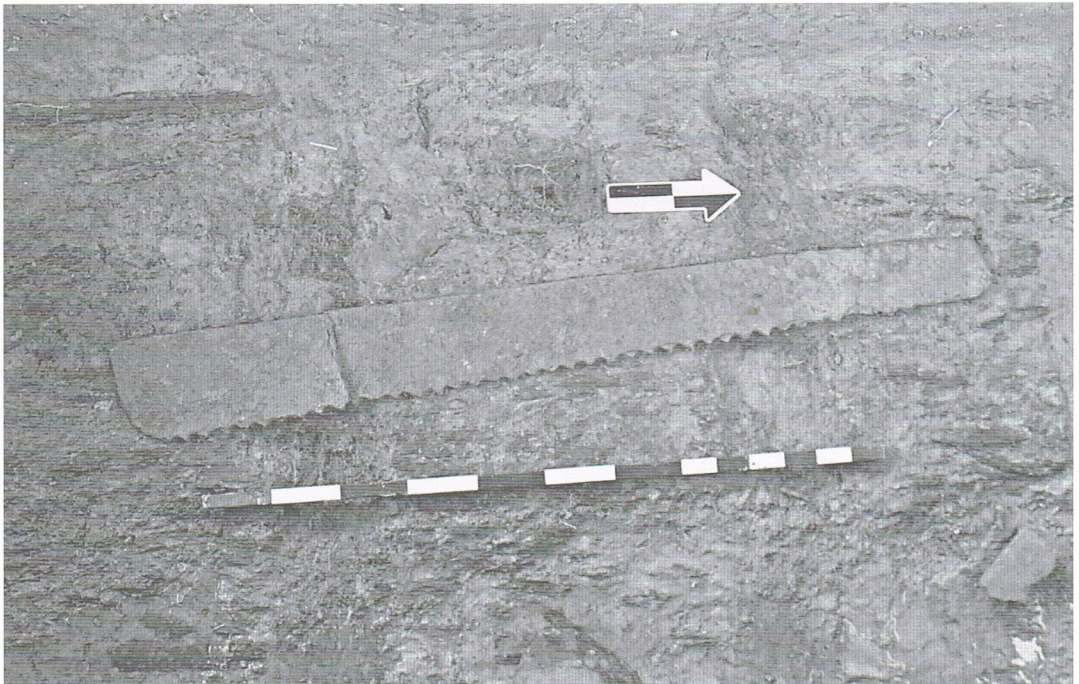
The question of timberyards in the American colonies has never been adequately addressed.

What did the operation look like? What was sold in these timberyards? Who worked there? These questions need to be answered to discover what the colonial timberyard offered the eighteenth-century woodworker. Those who worked the pitsaw played as vital a role in the construction of colonial cities, furniture, and wheels as any carpenter, cabinetmaker, or wheelwright. Also, all tradespeople who work in wood should be aware of the historic source of their medium, how it was shaped, and what it took to get it into their hands.

One way to illuminate colonial timberyards is to examine the timber business throughout Britain and her colonies. The many physical descriptions of sawing operations found in British dockyards and timberyards might mirror the situation in the American colonies. These sources paint a picture of what colonial American timberyards looked like at the height of their operation. The many runaway advertisements and court records that speak to us about the types of men who labored in the yards help determine who staffed them. Another valuable source on those laborers are descriptions by writers and diarists of sawyers. These descriptions include not only the sawyers' methods but, in many cases, their personalities. Studies of the use of enslaved labor in the wood trades add to this knowledge and clarify the role that people of African descent played in colonial American timberyards.

Without exception, the most important part of any eighteenth-century timberyard was its sawpits. These were areas where teams of

Four-and-a-half-foot section of a pitsaw recovered from the saw house within the James Wray site in Williamsburg.



sawyers worked to saw out the various timbers to their finished dimensions. The appearance of these sawpits can be gleaned from a variety of sources. In 1737, Blaise Ollivier, master shipwright to the king of France, toured the dockyards of Britain and Holland in an effort to improve French shipbuilding techniques. He made some observations about the sawpits found in those shipyards:

They have at their dockyards sawpits which are 22 to 25 feet long, 3 feet wide, and 6 feet deep, situated 3 to 4 feet one from the other. . . . The walls of these sawpits are lined with brick, with two or three small lodging places cut into the walls where the sawyers keep their tools. When they wish to saw up a timber they place it on rollers over one of the pits; the rollers are blocked with wedges; one of the sawyers descends into the pit, the other stands on top of the timber, and after they have sawn the full length afforded by the pit they slide the timber easily on its rollers with no need of a device other than a crow.¹

Ollivier was impressed enough by the sawing methods that he composed a sketch of the pits. Such sawpits can also be found in the British colony of Antigua, where His Majesty's ships were often refitted or repaired.²

George Sturt, a turn-of-the-century British wheelwright, described the local sawpits of his youth as an enclosed pit, "five or six feet" deep, with brick sides. The sides of the pit contained open spaces where the pitman could stash small pots of oil and wedges. Sturt remembered the sawpit fondly, saying that it provided him with "a sense of great peace." An English chairmaker, Thomas Hudson, described a sawpit as being a "rectangular hole dug in the ground with . . . a few boards wedged in the ends to keep the earth from falling in" and that the pit was "damp and dark." In his book *The Village Carpenter*, Walter Rose provides a photograph of an old, English sawpit that probably resembled those found on colonial plantations and in timberyards.³

The use of sawpits is also well documented in America. In February 1760, George Washington inscribed in his diary that "Mike and Tom sawed 122 feet of oak" in the sawpit at Mount Vernon. Thomas Jefferson had a sawpit built on Mulberry Row at Monticello, adding a structure for wood storage and drying adjoining it.⁴

In some cases sawpits were enclosed in houses to protect the sawyers and the pits from the weather. Sometimes, in the mild English summers, the sawyers would work in sawpits in the woods, which often had no covering at all. In the winter months, the sawyers preferred to work in

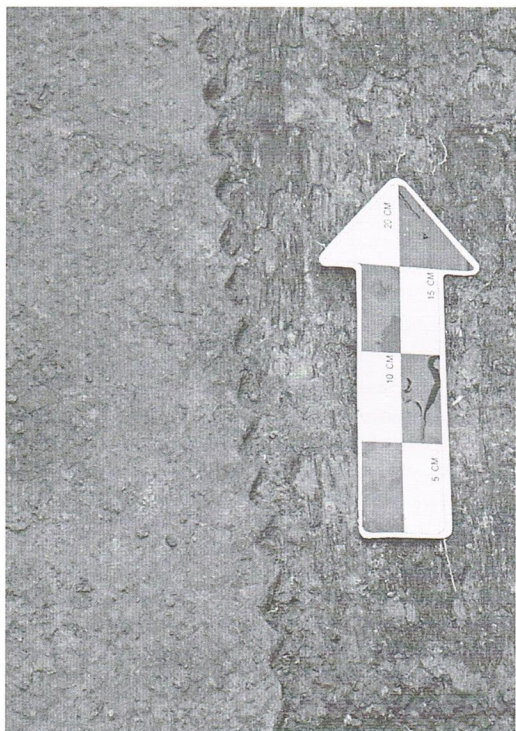
the shelter of a saw house. In March 1768, a Warwick County, Virginia, landowner advertised that he had a "saw-house for three pairs of sawyers." The sawpits in Antigua were covered by a simple post building with a gable roof and open sides. In the far larger and more industrial dockyards of Britain, the sawpits were often entirely enclosed in large brick buildings.⁵

At these timberyards were found many different species of wood stacked up in great piles, some still in log form, others squared and ready for the saw. In the case of whole logs, the oak timbers may have been simply piled up and allowed to remain out in the weather, uncovered, to season. Meanwhile, "pitch pine" (American longleaf yellow pine) timbers were buried in the ground or left to soak in man-made pools in an effort to keep the resin, or "pitch," in the heartwood from drying out.⁶ These two methods of storing pine were in use in British shipyards during the eighteenth century. There were also alternatives to leaving the material outdoors to season. In 1754, an immigrant sawyer, who had begun a business in New York City, advertised that he had "a good house for keeping timber out of the weather."⁷ As noted above, Thomas Jefferson constructed a storage building at Monticello for the stockpiling of his building materials.

Once the material had been sawn out, it needed to be stacked and sorted so that it could dry properly. Often sawn plank was stored by laying down a bed of cinders, then stacking the plank in such a way that air flowed freely between the boards, thus drying them sufficiently. This was commonly referred to as "stickering" the plank. There are illustrations of this practice in Diderot's *Encyclopedia* showing the top set of planking tilted at an angle to allow the rain to flow off the boards easily. A circa 1810 watercolor of a London dockside, *The Adelphi Terrace and Coal Wharf*, clearly shows a timberyard in the background with its inventory stacked in tall, "stickered" piles and covered with angled boards to shed rainwater and shield the wood from the sun.⁸

Timber was also stacked in what was called a "timber-perch," two vertically placed forked posts with a pole running between them, with the sawn timbers resting diagonally on the horizontal pole for storage. This type of storage method can be found in a woodcut in Thomas Bewick's *Vignettes* and in Thomas Malton's 1765 watercolor painting, *The Royal Crescent in the Course of Construction*. English carpenter William Rose remembered that the perches provided alcoves that "were lofty and cool, even in the hottest weather."⁹

Timberyards in the British Isles contained in-



Close up of James Wray pitsaw.

indigenous woods like oak, ash, elm, sycamore, and beech. In the large, urban dockyards, woods, primarily firs and pines, also were imported from Europe and North America. As in Britain, colonial timberyards dealt primarily with indigenous woods of their specific region. In 1774, a King William County, Virginia, timberyard contained quantities of white oak, black walnut, sweet gum, ash, poplar, birch, longleaf yellow pine, and cheaper slash pine. Material including walnut, cedar, and white pine was also exported from the British colonies to the mother country during the eighteenth century.¹⁰

It was not until the early half of the nineteenth century that Great Britain saw the value in American longleaf (or "pitch") yellow pine for shipbuilding. After 1804, the British Navy lost its prejudice against the wood and realized its qualities as a shipbuilding material.¹¹ In general, the British market favored its native woods over those of the colonies. Lloyds of London, in considering a wood's use in shipbuilding, consistently rated American woods lower than their British or European counterparts.

A woodworker wishing to purchase material from a colonial timberyard could select from a variety of sizes and products. In Britain and America, material was available in timber form as plank, deal, board, and scantling. To a British woodworker, *timber* was the term applied to material that was larger than 8 inches in thickness. The term *plank* usually referred to material that

was sawn from 2 to 8 inches in thickness. If a piece was thinner than 2 inches, it was often referred to as *deal*. In colonial America the words *board* and *scantling* appear in the record of timberyard material. In Burlington, New Jersey, a timber merchant referred to pine and cedar pieces $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick as *boards*. Forty years later, a Charleston timber merchant used the term *board* to describe material that was $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches thick as well. The word *scantling* was used by this same merchant to describe material that was anywhere from 3 inches by 3 inches to 4 inches by 10 inches and larger. As both *scantling* and *plank* could be anywhere from 12 to 30 feet in length, the length of the material seemed not to affect the term applied to it. Advertisements for timberyards in South Carolina, New York, Virginia, and New Jersey all include the above terms in their descriptions of their available products.¹²

It is likely that most colonial timberyards fell somewhere between the large sawing operations found in British dockyards and the smaller sawhouses found on Virginia plantations. Using the descriptions above, one can piece together a picture of how most colonial timberyards probably looked and the materials they offered, but who brought these colonial American timberyards to life? Who were the men handling the tiller and box of the pit saw?

Again, a great deal of information about the men who worked in colonial timberyards can be gleaned from an examination of their British brethren. The use of the pit saw required that men work in teams of two: one to handle the upstroke, the other to pull down on the saw to make the cut. Sometimes the more skilled man would stand on the top of the log guiding the saw, only referring to his pitman by the title "donkey," "marrow," or simply "man." On occasion the top-sawyer was also the owner of the saw and would "swear down at the man sweating in the saw-pit" if he failed to perform to expectations. However, being a sawyer required a great deal of cooperation, and the two men had to get along. If not, disagreement could lead to one man "adjourning to the public-house," thus spoiling the day's work.¹³

While the majority of sawing in Britain was done by the large, semiskilled population of sawyers, a great deal of labor involved in the timbering process in colonial America was done by the large, unskilled enslaved population. Very few in-depth studies of the role of African Americans in the building trades have been written. However, the ones that have, offer insights into the amount of enslaved labor used in timber preparation.

In the period from 1760 to 1800, there were more than 796 references to slave sawyers operating in the Charleston, South Carolina, area alone. These men often worked not only as sawyers but as carpenters, coopers, and shingle makers as well.

There are also many Williamsburg references to enslaved men laboring in the timber business. In 1763, Williamsburg leatherworker Alexander Craig paid Thomas Cowles £4 for the hire of two enslaved sawyers. In 1780, Allen Chapmen claimed that he had lost a twenty-five-year-old slave sawyer to the British army. He received £125 in compensation for his loss. The location of Jefferson's sawpit on Mulberry Row indicates that slaves were doing the majority of sawing at Monticello. This fact is borne out by Jefferson's hiring, at £40 a year, two enslaved sawyers.

In all, roughly 21 percent of the 302 known African-American building tradesmen in Virginia were trained as sawyers.¹⁴ Notwithstanding the large number of enslaved sawyers, the evidence demonstrates that white and black labor was called upon to toil together in colonial Virginia's timberyards.

Sawyers, Anglo American or African American, either learned their work on the job or served a more traditional formal apprenticeship. While the trade of sawing was typically viewed as unskilled, there are a few references to young orphans in Virginia who were apprenticed to learn the trade of sawing. One example, from Lancaster County, Virginia, stated that Francis Hattaway (age 5) was apprenticed to John Davis to "learn the trade of a sawyer." Another young man in Princess Anne County was apprenticed to be a sawyer.¹⁵

Sawing required some specialized skills. George Sturt described the process as being "full of skill" and thought sawyers were "specialists of no mean order." While Sturt admitted that the sawyers may have looked "stupid," he argued that their skill was "an organic thing, very different from the organised effects of commerce." Walter Rose described the sawyers of his community as having "considerable skill and intelligence" in spite of their apparent "dumb mentality." Simply sharpening the saw was "no mean act of skill" and required years of practice, being handed down from one generation of sawyers to the next.¹⁶

References to sawyers are also found in the records of a number of colonial Virginians. In 1748, John Mercer paid Peter Murphy over £16 for four months of sawing. If Murphy worked at sawing year-round, his annual income could have been as much as £64! As mentioned earlier, Alexander Craig paid a person named Cowles £4

for the hire of two sawyers. Richard Henry Lee paid a sawyer £3, plus provisions, for twenty-six days of work on his plantation in Westmoreland County. Even though Jefferson employed many slave sawyers at Monticello, he also hired white sawyers when needed. In October 1795, Jefferson hired two men to come to Monticello and "saw for me." The men were paid by the piece and, as in Lee's case, provided with "provisions."¹⁷

The most interesting aspect of studying the eighteenth-century timberyard is the descriptions of the sawyers and their personalities. The most common thread among observers of these men is that of the drunken sawyer. George Sturt, describing the sawyers he knew, commented that one of the pair might "drift off to a public-house" for four days, thus preventing any work from occurring. Sturt observed that, when need be, the sawyers would determine to drink nothing but tea so as to meet the demands of their employers and to repent for their past absenteeism.

Walter Rose, an English carpenter, observed that "a sawyer's faith in beer was absolute" and they often found "relaxation at the pub." Wheelwright Percy Wilson noted that the sawyers "lost a lot of sweat" and that they replaced it with beer because they believed it "was safer than water." Was alcohol the "provision" that Richard Henry Lee and Thomas Jefferson supplied their sawyers? While it is true that Jefferson opposed dispensing hard liquor to his workmen, one gets the impression that alcohol and sawing went together.¹⁸

The colonial American timberyard resembled, in many ways, the modern lumberyard. The customer could select from a broad spectrum of products and materials, sawn to specific and reasonably standard dimensions. The material was sitting out, probably under some sort of shelter or covered with angled planks. The wood, of all species, would be stacked up in large, stickered piles or perched on end pointing toward the sky. A customer could buy anything from a whole log to a thin plank and could select the type of wood best suited to his needs.

In the background were the sawpits, along with the colorful men occupying them. The size and number of sawpits were determined by the ability of the timber merchant to acquire material and employ sawyers. In the South, it is probable that many sawyers were enslaved individuals while in the northern colonies there was a majority of free men. The buyer could inspect the material, making sure it was of the quality, size, and length needed. The air would be filled with the faint smell of wood, damp sawdust, sweat, and alcohol. In the background, instead of hear-

ing the whirl of the power saw, the customers heard the sounds of the pitsaw and the oaths of the sawyer as they fell upon his unfortunate "donkey."

¹ Blaise Ollivier, *18th-Century Shipbuilding: Remarks on the Navies of the English and Dutch from Observations Made at Their Dockyards in 1737*, ed. and trans. David H. Roberts (East Sussex, England: Jean Boudriot Publications, 1992), 75.

² Jonathan G. Coad, *The Royal Dockyards, 1690–1850: Architecture and Engineering Works of the Sailing Navy* (Aldershot, Hants., England, and Brookfield, Vt.: Scholar Press, 1989), 359.

³ George Sturt, *The Wheelwright's Shop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993 reprint edition), 57–58; Elizabeth Seager, ed., *The Countryman Book of Village Trades and Crafts* (London: David and Charles, 1978), 103–104; Walter Rose, *The Village Carpenter* (New York: New Amsterdam, 1987), 29.

⁴ Donald Jackson, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington*, vol. 1 (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 239; Jack McLaughlin, *Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988), 85.

⁵ Sturt, 29; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), 7 March 1768, p. 3, col. 1; Coad, 359.

⁶ Robert Albion, *Forests and Seapower: The Timber Problem of the Royal Navy, 1652–1862* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1926), 70–71.

⁷ *New-York Gazette, or, The Weekly Post-Boy*, 6 June 1754, cited in Social History Database, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

⁸ Albion, 70; Charles Gillispie, ed., *A Diderot Pictorial Encyclopedia of Trades and Industry*, vol. 2 (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), plate 292; Celina Fox, *Londoners* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 173.

⁹ Rose, 3; Thomas Bewick, *Vignettes: Being Tail-Pieces Engraved Principally for His "General History of Quadrupeds" and "History of British Birds,"* ed. Iain Bain (London: The Scholar Press, 1978), 64; James Ayres, *The Building of an*

18th-Century City: Bath Spa (Bath, England: Bath Preservation Trust, 1991), 3.

¹⁰ Rose, 1–3, 16; Albion, 3–38; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), 7 April 1774, p. 3, col. 1; *Ibid.* (Rind), 25 December 1766, p. 2, col. 1; *Ibid.*, p. 2, col. 2; Albion, 31.

¹¹ Albion, 325, 36–38.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8–10; *New-York Gazette, or, The Weekly Post-Boy*, 3 June 1754, p. 3, col. 1 and 23 September 1751, p. 3, col. 1; *South-Carolina State-Gazette & Timothy & Mason's Daily Advertiser*, 1 December 1797, p. 3, col. 3; *The South-Carolina Gazette*, 25 September 1736, p. 3, col. 1; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), 7 April 1774, p. 3, col. 1.

¹³ Donald Woodward, *Men at Work: Labourers and Building Craftsmen in the Towns of Northern England, 1450–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19; Sturt, 39.

¹⁴ Mary Allison Carll, *The Role of the Black Artisan in the Building Trades and the Decorative Arts in South Carolina's Charleston District, 1760–1800* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1982), 112–120; Alexander Craig Account Book, 29 June 1763, cited in Social History Database, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, M-153-3; York County Claims for Losses, 1780, cited in Social History Database, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, M-1.45, 8; McLaughlin, 85, 429n.; Vanessa E. Patrick, "as good a joiner as any in Virginia": African-Americans in Eighteenth-Century Building Trades" (Colonial Williamsburg Research Report, 1995.) This work offers the most comprehensive examination of African Americans in Virginia building trades to date and deserves attention.

¹⁵ Lancaster County Order Book 1729–1743, 14 July 1738, cited in Social History Database, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 209; Princess Anne County Order Book, 1728–1738, 4 December 1728, as cited in Social History Database, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 6.

¹⁶ Sturt, 32, 33; Rose, 32, 6.

¹⁷ John Mercer Ledger G 1741–1750, 1748, cited in Social History Database, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; Richard Henry Lee Memorandum Book, 1776–1794, 7 February 1786, 116; McLaughlin, 427n.

¹⁸ Sturt, 39; Rose, 33; George Ewart Evans, *Tools of Their Trades: An Oral History of Men at Work*, c. 1900 (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1971), 31; McLaughlin, 235.