January 2006

Dear Carleton Alumni:

I am happy to join with Cary Carson, Carleton class of 1963 and Vice President for Research of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, to invite you to join us in a behind-the-scenes tour of Colonial Williamsburg in April. We will also visit Jamestown which will soon be celebrating the four hundredth anniversary of its founding in 1607.

With a staff of 3500, Colonial Williamsburg is the world’s largest outdoor living history museum. As such, it sets the standard for museums that are important interpreters of our nation’s history.

We invite you to join us not only in visiting this exceptional museum in the spring when the gardens will be starting to bloom, but also to think about the role of museums as educational institutions dedicated to interpreting America’s past. At a time when our understanding of the past has become an important authority with which either to attack or to defend contemporary political actions, historians in general and museums in particular have been criticized for what is considered the accuracy or inaccuracy of their interpretations of the past. Join with us in seeing for yourself what you think the “lessons of the past” are that are presented at Williamsburg.

For those of you who wish to get a head start in thinking about some of the issues that we will discuss, I would suggest that you google “Soldier of Liberty” Preview, which is an electronic field trip prepared by Colonial Williamsburg for high school students. Attached to it is a copy of the “National Standards of History,” Grades 5 – 12. You might also want to read Casey Nelson’s Blake’s “The Usable past, the comfortable past, and the civic past: Memory in Contemporary America,” in the journal, Cultural Anthropology, Vol. 14:3, August, 1999, pp. 423-36. For an insight into the origins of the museum, I’d suggest looking at Anders Greenspan’s Creating Colonial Williamsburg (Smithsonian Press, 2002).

We are looking forward to seeing you in Williamsburg.

Cliff Clark
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