

Colonial Williamsburg

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
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Free Event Oct. 18 Examines the Future of African-American Historical Interpretation

Participants include Tony-award winner and 2019 Colonial Williamsburg Revolutionary in Residence Anika Noni Rose, James Beard Award-winning author Michael Twitty and American Civil War Museum CEO Christy Coleman



WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (Oct. 7, 2019) – Leaders in African-American public history convene Oct. 18 for the last of three free community conversations examining the past, present and future of African-American historical interpretation, part of Colonial Williamsburg’s commemoration of 40 years of comprehensive, character-based African-American interpretive programming.

“40 Years of African-American Interpretation: Future” begins at 5:30 p.m. at the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg’s Hennage Auditorium and features panelists:

- **Christy Coleman**, CEO of the American Civil War Museum and former Colonial Williamsburg director of program development
- **Deirdre Jones**, Colonial Williamsburg programming lead and lead actor-interpreter

- **Anika Noni Rose**, Tony-award winner, NAACP Image Award nominee, the voice of Princess Tiana in Disney's "The Princess and the Frog" and 2019 Colonial Williamsburg Revolutionary in Residence
- **Stephen Seals**, Colonial Williamsburg actor-interpreter and program manager for the 40th anniversary of African-American interpretation (moderator)
- **Michael Twitty**, culinary historian and author of "The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South," recipient of the 2018 James Beard Foundation Book Award for Writing and Book of the Year
- **Robert C. Watson**, assistant professor of history at Hampton University and former Colonial Williamsburg director of African-American programming

"We look forward to a day when all Americans see themselves in the telling of our shared story: when African-American history becomes simply American history," Seals said. "This is a year of reflection on that journey, and we invite the community to join this important conversation about the future of our craft."

A special exhibition at the Raleigh Tavern titled "Revealing the Priceless: 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 the foundation's establishment and leadership of African-American interpretation. The exhibition is open daily to guests with Colonial Williamsburg admission through Feb. 29, 2020.

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 North America at Point Comfort on modern-day Fort Monroe.

The "40 Years of African-American Interpretation" series is possible thanks to a generous grant from the Ford Foundation.

The series began May 10 with a talk featuring members of the team that established Colonial Williamsburg's interpretation of African-American history, including Coleman and 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.

A July 5 program examined the present day with Colonial Williamsburg interpreters including Adam Canaday, Janice Canaday, Erikka Clarke, Edwin Cooke, Dara King and Linwood Tyson, Hope Wright and Willie Wright and Journeyman Silversmith Preston Jones.

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."

The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg remain open throughout their \$41.7-million, donor-funded expansion. They are accessible via the Public Hospital of 1773 at the intersection of Francis Street West and S. Henry Street.

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 or by calling 855-296-6627. Additional information is available 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.