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Description

A re-enactment in Colonial Williamsburg portrays life in the 18th century and the impact that slavery had on the town's inhabitants.

Keywords

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Citation

MLA
Re-Enactment of Slavery at Colonial Williamsburg

CAMPBELL BROWN (anchor): A visit to Colonial Williamsburg is a trip back in time. It’s a place that truly brings history to life. But visitors this year are being confronted with the past in a way they never expected.

Re-enactor 1: We’ve had children crying, we’ve had adults crying.

BROWN: Williamsburg’s interpreters recreate the Revolutionary period, showing tourists how people in the 18th century lived and worked, playing out historical events that bear remembering, and one in particular that Americans would like to forget.

Re-enactor 2: By joining his Majesty’s troops…

Re-enactor 3: You can’t take our slaves!

Re-enactor 2: As soon as may be.

BROWN: A new program here, called “Enslaving Virginia,” is telling what’s turned out to be a very controversial story. With tourists looking on, actors portraying slaves play out a scene where they consider joining the British Army in exchange for their freedom. But the gathering is discovered by a slave patrol, and the result is a violent confrontation. And it’s a confrontation more intense than this audience is prepared for. Colonial Williamsburg has been welcoming visitors for 67 years, but there has always been one complaint: Where are the African-Americans? In the late 1770s, 52 percent of Williamsburg was African-American, yet today, little here reflects that. This program is an attempt to tell the real story.

CHRISTY MATTHEWS (Programming Director): We should be in the business of not just celebrating who we are, but, oh goodness, we should be in the business of provoking people to think about and feel who we are.

BROWN: And that’s just what they’re achieving with this performance. So powerful, it’s having an impact, not just on the audience, but also the actors. Given how provocative, and surprisingly so, this has
been, how’s it made you feel personally?
Re-enactor 1: When we portray these roles, it’s like, it’s like a feeling that I’ve never felt. It’s like you’re that person.
Re-enactor 5: If I can get a reaction out of the folks that are there, if I can see ‘em with their jaws set and their eyes burning a hole through me, then I know that they’re listening to what it is we have to say, they’re getting another perspective on the subject, and if we can get ‘em to care about their history, then we’ve done our job.
BROWN: And by experiencing history’s most powerful moments, they are also learning its most important lessons. Campbell Brown, NBC News, Williamsburg, Virginia.