

## Zibby Garnett Travel Fellowship Report

Textile Conservation Placement - Madeline Hibbins-Cline

Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Virginia, USA

10<sup>th</sup> June-2<sup>nd</sup> August 2024

MPhil Textile Conservation 2023-2025, University of Glasgow



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## **Introduction:**

My name is Madeline Hibbins-Cline, and I am a 26-year-old British student currently studying on the Textile Conservation MPhil at Glasgow University. I attended this placement during the summer after my first year of studies and will graduate from the two-year program in September 2025. Previously I secured a Fine Arts BA from Edinburgh University. My practice as an art student and undergraduate dissertation focused on the history, culture and techniques of quilt making, which I developed further in combination with other textile methods after graduation.

I was awarded the Sue Belton Memorial Prize by the Quilters Guild of the British Isles in 2020. This funding enabled me to access a workshop in traditional North Country/Durham Wholecloth Quilting with Andrea Ashwell, a quilter trained via the lineage of Amy Emms MBE. This workshop kick-started a passion within me to maintain the dying craft, I enthusiastically picked up the skillset but felt that I could do more to preserve the craft by pursuing a career in conservation. A brief volunteer ship at the Quilters Guild, York, highlighted to me the need for conservators with specialised quilt knowledge. This was followed by another volunteer opportunity with the National Trust's Textile Conservation Studio in Norfolk. Gaining hands-on experience with the National Trust reassured me of my interest in textile conservation. I have always enjoyed hand-stitching and practical work, however the combination of academic historical research, material culture and science presented itself as a dynamic career suitable to my interests.

I was excited to study on the Glasgow University Textile Conservation MPhil due to the specialised nature of the program, experience and reputation of its tutors and the diverse collection of textile artefacts available to study and conserve. During the first year on the course, I was able to conserve a pair of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Engageantes (false sleeves), a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish Needlework Sampler and a 13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> Century archaeological fragment.

I have a passion for all textile heritage and a keen interest in conserving a range of artefacts from a variety of cultures, however the opportunity to conserve quilts at Colonial Williamsburg presented itself as a unique educational experience which I could not decline. America has a large contemporary and historic culture of quilting which derives from a range of sources, predominantly Europe and Africa. Resultantly American Museum's contain an expanse of quilts and visitors have a keen interest in observing historic quilt examples. This engagement requires a regular production of quilt exhibitions and thus a greater degree of quilt conservation than can be found in the UK.

Beyond my interest in gaining an education in quilt conservation, Colonial Williamsburg also presented itself as a unique placement host, since it is the world's largest living history museum which educates the public through museum engagement, historic reenactment and historic trade demonstrations. I understood the experience on placement would be public facing including conservation tours as well as opportunities for me to learn more about historic textile techniques from the Master Traders who employ reconstruction archaeology to study history and heritage.

I was first made aware of the Zibby Garnett Travel Fellowship by my textile conservation tutors and was additionally encouraged by previous students who had been able to access international placements thanks to the support of the foundation. Eligibility for such a scholarship which made my learning ambitions possible gave me the confidence to pursue a placement at Colonial Williamsburg.

### **Overview of Study Trip:**

#### **Financial Breakdown:**

The total cost of my trip to the United States came to £5028.17 including both essential and additional tourist costs.

I was fortunate enough to be awarded £3,000 from the Zibby Garnet Travel Fellowship which was instrumental to support the international placement. This scholarship supported my return flights and visa which were the most substantial costs of the trip.

I was privileged enough to also obtain £700 from the Beatrix Whistler and James McNeil Whistler Scholarship. Additionally, my program tutors kindly nominated me for the University of Glasgow Go Abroad 2023 Turing Scheme which awarded me £1051.07. The scholarship prizes in collaboration supported my travel, visa, accommodation and subsistence, empowering me to attend the placement, which would have been inaccessible to me without such support.

#### **Travel Itinerary:**

Colonial Williamsburg is located in Virginia which there are no direct flights to from the UK. The necessary layovers enabled me to recuperate from my travels, which I often find strenuous as an individual with a chronic condition, as well as presented themselves as exciting opportunities to explore the culture and museums of cities on my route to and from Colonial Williamsburg. The theme I employed on my placement was to make the most of every opportunity, since I don't know when I will next be able to visit.

I flew out to New York on the 28<sup>th</sup> of May, visited historic landmarks such as Grand Central Station and The Statue of Liberty. I was also able to visit the National Museum of American Indians and The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 'Sleeping Beauties

Exhibition'. Such museum visits gave me an introduction to American museum culture, which developed throughout my placement. The Sleeping Beauties exhibition was a distinctly inspiring experience, as the exhibition so clearly conveyed the voices and concerns of conservators. The inventive techniques of display provided food for thought regarding continued public access to greatly decayed artefacts, as well as methodologies which can be employed to educate the public on textile degradation and historic manufacturing of textiles.

I arrived in Colonial Williamsburg on the 30<sup>th</sup> May and enthusiastically met the conservation team on the 1<sup>st</sup> June ahead of my placement start date on the 10<sup>th</sup> June I spent the run up to the placement preparing resources, becoming acquainted with the town and exploring the historic area. My accommodation was on site at the Bruton Heights Education Centre, which allowed me 24-hour access to the Rockefeller library and meant my morning commute was just a few steps to the DeWitt Wallace Collection and Conservation Building.



Figure 1. Author outside accommodation at Bruton Heights Education Centre Campus.

My placement at Colonial Williamsburg was 8 weeks. On the 5th August I flew up to Boston where I was able to attend two conservation lab visits, one with Meredith Montague, Head Textile Conservator at MFA Boston and Anna Rose Keefe textile conservator at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. I also visited the Harvard Campus including the Ware Collection of Blaschka Glass Flowers at the Harvard Museum of Natural History. My international flight back landed me in the UK on the 10<sup>th</sup> August.

### **Intended Learning Outcomes:**

To focus my learning during placement and help access experiences I developed three learning goals to develop my professional attributes, practical skills and personal ambitions. My hosts at Colonial Williamsburg were particularly generous with their allocation of conservation objects, time and resources to help me achieve these learning goals.

- **Personal:**

Whilst in America I would like to make the most of this opportunity to network and meet a range of conservators practicing at Colonial Williamsburg and across the east of the US. I believe engaging with conservators from different specialisms and institutions will help me gain a better understanding of the wider conservation field. I intend to learn more about how American conservators engage with the American Institute for Conservation. This wider understanding of American conservation will help me contextualize and reflect on my own practice and education within the UK.

- **Practical:**

Whilst on placement I intend to experience working with a large-scale composite artefact. Such an experience will require consultation from different conservation specialists and further consultation from the textile conservators regarding the management of a large-scale object. I intend to investigate the

different ageing properties of these materials and their effect on treatment parameters to identify a suitable conservation treatment, display and storage solution suitable for the artefact.

- **Professional:**

Incorporate engagement with the public as part of my conservation role, implemented through lab tours and social media. Necessary to present as a well-informed intern will be an immersion in Colonial Williamsburg's ethos, standards, collection and historic area.

**Context:**

Colonial Williamsburg is located in the USA, in the state of Virginia. It's eastern position, not far from the sea front made it suitable for early American Colonisers to trade with Europe.



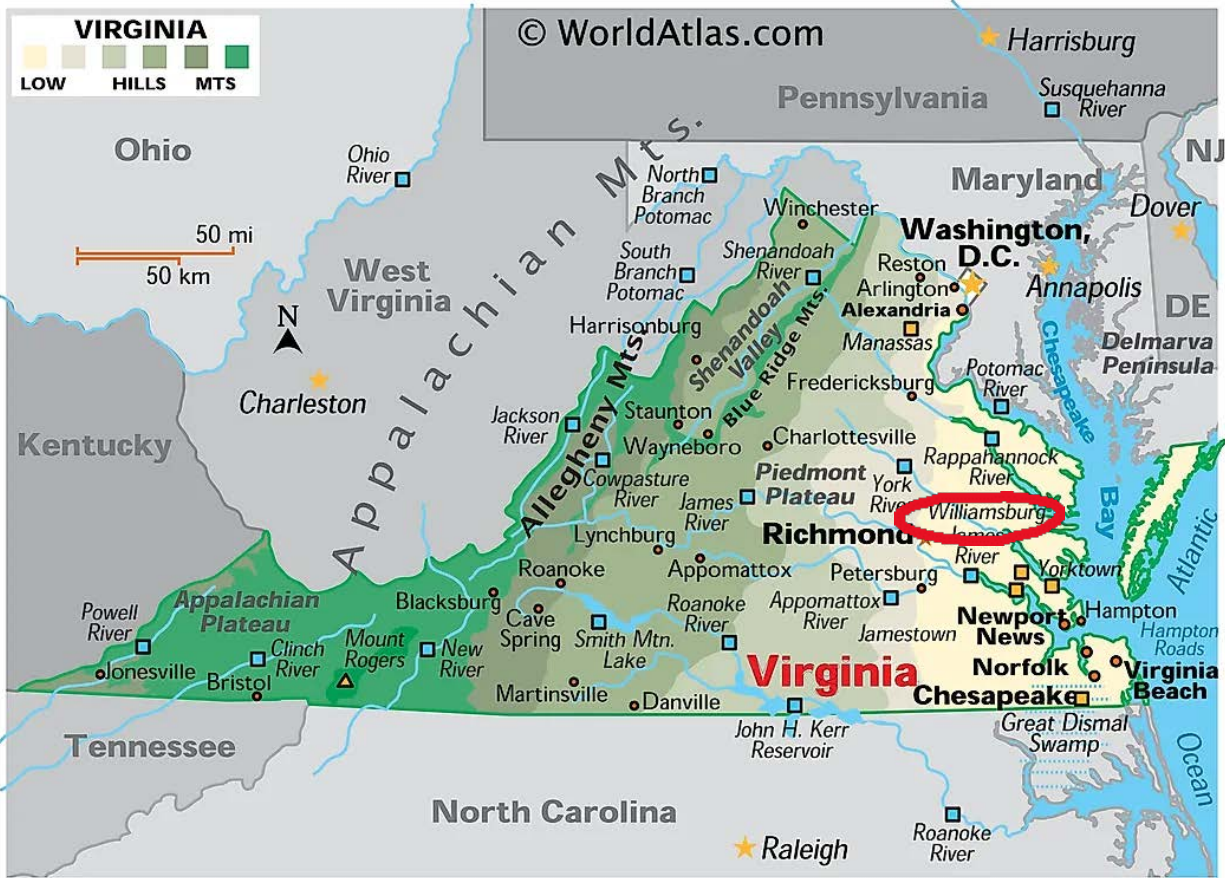


Figure 2. Map of Virginia with Williamsburg circled in red.

### History of Williamsburg

Williamsburg was established in 1699 as the capital of the colony of Virginia. Colonial leaders petitioned to relocate the Jamestown capitol (first permanent English settlement in the New World) inland by five miles. This new site was named Williamsburg after England's reigning monarch, King William the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

An establishment of beautiful buildings, a capitol building, church and palace became home to the oldest legislative assembly in America. The city soon developed into the political, religious, social and economic centre of Virginia. The capitol building is the site at which Virginian luminaries such as Thomas Jefferson debated revolutionary ideas and amended laws. Williamsburg's most famous chapter in history was during

the prelude to American independence, this is the period which Colonial Williamsburg, the world's largest living history museum focuses upon.

Founded in 1926 by Dr Goodman and John D. Rockefeller the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation consists of two bodies; an open-air historic town and large Art Galleries. As you can see from the map below, the site is extensive spanning 300 acres and 600 buildings.



Figure 3: Map of Colonial Williamsburg, illustrating how large the historic town is.

### About Colonial Williamsburg

The historic town includes 88 original 18th Century buildings, and the rest are reconstructions based on historic research and archeological excavation of the Old Capital. Within the historic area employees educate the public on historic events

through reenactment as well as live demonstrations of 29 traditional trades. This reconstruction archaeology works to preserve the intangible aspects of historic craftsmanship and contribute to scholarship.



Figure 4. Left: Dyer and Weaver demonstrating spinning, Colonial Williamsburg.

Figure 5. Right: Mantua maker discussing garment styles in 18<sup>th</sup> century, Colonial Williamsburg.

Colonial Williamsburg has a collection of over 70,000 objects of decorative, fine, mechanical and folk art which are displayed predominantly at the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum and the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, as well as throughout the historic area.

Within the museum there are three main galleries devoted to textiles with an emphasis on historic dress, quilts and needlework as well as galleries which combine artefacts of different mediums. These galleries alongside loans are the focus of the textile conservators. There are two permanent members of textile conservation staff: Head

Conservator Gretchen Guidess and Assistance Conservator Jackie Peterson-Grace. During my placement there was also a graduate fellow, Michelle Leung.

Conservation is undertaken in the DeWitt Wallace Collection and Conservation Building, which is just outside of the historic area. The building was purpose built to suit the storage needs of the collection, house top grade conservation facilities and streamline communication between registrars, conservators and curators who are all based there. There are nine conservation departments: Furniture, Upholstery, Objects, Archaeology, Painting, Paper, Preventive, Textiles and Material Analysis. I benefitted from this central hub of conservation activity and was able to access consultations across different conservation disciplines to broaden my understanding of material ageing and conservation approaches. Quick visits along the conservation hallways also allowed me to look in on treatments being carried out by different disciplines at Colonial Williamsburg and observe their development throughout my placement. This insight into alternative discipline practice and approaches was supplemented by the lecture I attended at Colonial Williamsburg's about their conservation projects.



Figure 6. Colonial Williamsburg Textile Conservation Lab, DeWitt Wallace Collections and Conservation Building.

## **Group Projects**

Group projects are a necessary aspect of textile conservation at Colonial Williamsburg, they also functioned to help incorporate me within the team and introduce me to the nuances of their studios protocol, facilities etc.

## **Preparing Artefacts for Museum Rotations**

Colonial Williamsburg has a distinct preventive Conservation team, which in collaboration with the Textile Conservation and Paper Conservation department has successfully reduced their sensitive object rotation times down to 12 months. Shorter object rotation times mean a greater workload for conservators in preparing artefacts, however they benefit the objects by reducing exposure time and usage of an object's light lifespan.

Three large scale artefacts were chosen to rotate in as backdrops in the Spaythe and Wilson Galleries. Included in preparing the artefacts for rotation were condition assessments, photographic documentation, surface cleaning, any due treatment and spectrophotometry readings.



Figure 7. The Textile Conservation Studio's photography set up with a hand winch especially for large scale textiles.

One of the objects included was a Turkish Rug, the aged conservation lining which had been applied had begun to cause the rug to curl in on itself, where vertical stitches were affecting the tension. It was deemed disruptive to the artefact, and so I was allocated the task of removing this previous conservation treatment. This was my first time 'undoing' the work of another conservator. The experience was a humbling reminder of how quickly the knowledge of the profession changes, as well as the necessity of reversibility, should the treatments which we apply with good intentions age poorly. The rug also had some warp loss in the outer border, I thoroughly enjoyed putting my recently acquired tapestry conservation knowledge to use and approached the structural repair by re-warping.



Figure 8. Removal of previous conservation lining from the Turkish rug, collecting threads and lining for future reference.

The textile conservators at Colonial Williamsburg have made it a priority to take spectrophotometry readings of each textile artefact which goes out onto display. Readings are taken in locations of sensitive colours and stains to monitor any change. This data is taken before and after display and collated to communicate across disciplines of museum staff the effects of prolonged light exposure on a variety of sensitive textiles. I was delighted to observe the success of its application in advocating for shorter rotation times.



Figure 9. Spectrophotometry of the Turkish rug, stencil mylar templates to facilitate finding the same location twice for accurate readings.

Figure 10. Michelle Leung, Textile Conservation Graduate Fellow taking light monitor readings of the installed wool coverlet to ensure the exposure is at a suitable level for the artefact.

I had the pleasure of attending the rotation of these artefacts alongside museum staff, preventive staff, the textile curator and textile conservation staff. This exercise in teamwork helped reveal to me the responsibility of the conservator at leading handling procedure and ensuring light levels were accurately measured and appropriately altered for the safety of the artefact.



## **Wet Cleaning a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Trapunto Whitework Quilt**

I had the pleasure of working closely with Gretchen Guidess, to prepare a treatment plan for a 19<sup>th</sup> Century double bed Whitework Trapunto Quilt made in Alexandria Virginia by Rebecca Marie Lawrence Taylor. The quilt was in good structural condition; however, its aesthetic appreciation was impeded by a large tideline across the proper left side and yellow discolouration from cellulose degradation. The quilt was due to go on display the following month for the McCarl Gallery quilt rotation, so a treatment plan which could reduce the disfigurement was necessarily sought after. Wet cleaning was considered an appropriate solution as the artefact was structurally sound enough to undergo invasive treatment. Spot testing proved optimistic, with the aged tideline stain lifting onto the blotting paper best with Orvus as a surfactant in deionized water which was modified to a pH 8 with sodium hydroxide.

The quilt was prepared for wet cleaning by sandwiching the three fringe edges in nylon net and applying Cyclododecane over two ink stamps with the use of a *Kistka*. The drying equipment was set up and a procedure for transporting the wet quilt onto the drying screen discussed as a team beforehand. Wet cleaning took multiple hours and coworkers from across conservation departments came to visit the procedure. This was my first experience wet cleaning a large-scale artefact, from which I learnt that clear communication and multiple hands were necessary to achieve an efficient and safe cleaning protocol. Most interesting to me was the drying method of using a 'drying cloth', a distinctly North American technique used frequently on flat and large-scale textiles. The technique utilises the capillary action of cloth to lift away and transfer staining onto the sheet as the object dries.



Figure 11. Author and Michelle Leung wet cleaning Trapunto Whitework Quilt.

The cellulose degradation washed away in wet cleaning, resulting in a brighter and whiter quilt. Although the tideline was still visible after wet cleaning, there was clearly a visible reduction which was proven with before and after spectrophotometry readings.

I thoroughly enjoyed taking on this project with the textile conservation team; and feel they have given me the knowledge and confidence to enthusiastically approach another large-scale wet cleaning. It was a pleasure to experience the nuances of wet cleaning a quilt; this quilt being all white, allowed for a degree of transparency to the cotton batting below where we were able to observe cotton seeds still intact from the 18th Century that had not been removed as customary for batting. Such details make objects unique and are a privilege for conservators to discover.

## **Conservation of a 20<sup>th</sup> Century Tobacco Pouch Quilt Top**

I was allocated one main personal project for my placement which facilitated in my development of project planning and organization skills. The object was a 20<sup>th</sup> Century large-scale composite quilt top made of R.J. Reynolds tobacco pouches. The object was unfinished and each of the tobacco pouches had never been washed meaning there was a buildup of evidential soiling from use and extensive staining from the aged adhesive applied to attach the federal paper tax stamps. The tax stamps were loosely adhered, crumpled and delaminating, it soon became clear that this conservation project would predominantly involve consolidating the paper stamps back onto the cotton pouch surfaces.

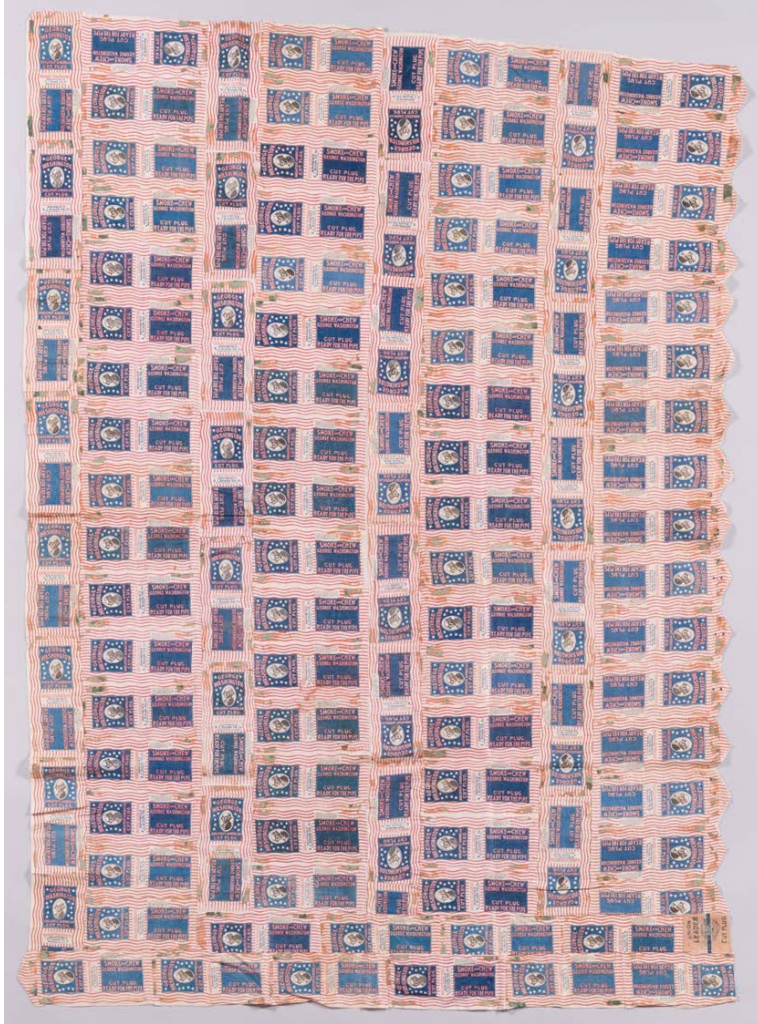


Figure 12. Quilt Top Pieced from Tobacco pouches, 1920s, unknown maker.

The textile lab has an incredible relationship with their curator, Neal Hurst, who I benefited in consulting to determine treatment goals and artefact significance. Consultations with the curator helped me understand their methods of working, communicate artefact needs to another department and determine priorities for object interpretation. Despite objects being displayed in the Art Museum, the treatments are not beholden to aesthetics, and an emphasis on maintaining historic information for scholars and visitors is paramount. Through consistent communication with the curator I was able to share my research revelations to achieve a treatment plan which supported the longevity of the artefact whilst promoting its legibility for a public audience.

In my conservation studies I had not yet worked with adhesives and minimally with paper, I was therefore opportunistic in seeking out consultation from Material Analysis and utilising their cutting-edge technology to decipher the components of the adhesive staining and paper stamps.

I was eager to advance my understanding of paper's production, colouring, ageing and the process of its printing. Regular consultations with Perrine Lesaux, the paper conservator, provided me with this education and enabled me to employ paper conservation techniques; such as consolidating the paper stamps by reactivating the aged adhesive. Such consultations benefited my professional development, as I have gained an insight into different conservation specialisms, acquired transferable skills and was able to decode the complex ways in which a composite artefact ages.



Figure 13. Author consulting with paper conservators Perrine Lesaux.

Having a natural affinity for textiles and quilts as well as such a unique artefact to discuss helped me express my enthusiasm for the conservation treatment to visitors.

The labs host frequent tours to funders, teachers and members of the public, such practice helped me develop professional public engagement skills which are necessary attributes to conservators working in Colonial Williamsburg's labs, which are so public facing.

There were multiple moments of revelation regarding this artefact, which certainly kept me on my toes. I am so grateful for the education I received surrounding this quilt top and how it has prepared me to manage composite artefacts in the future. The greatest lesson I learnt was to be flexible and open to altering your treatment plan, as with each new revelation new accommodations and parameters were imposed. I am honored to have worked on such an unusual quilt-top and hope to return to the research again to assess the success of my treatment after ageing and further the understanding of the artefact.

### **Site Visits**

The textile conservation team were incredible at helping me immerse myself within Colonial Williamsburg culture, inviting me to events, lectures and meetings, however they were also extremely generous in facilitating exhibition and conservation lab visits across Virginia, D.C. and Boston.

I had the pleasure of attending a mixture of textile, paper, objects and painting conservation lab tours as well as observing the differences between private and institutional practice.

- The lab tours I attended in D.C. Washington were: The National Museum of African American History and Culture, The George Washington Textile Museum, Caring for Textiles: Julia Brennan Practice.
- Lab and Exhibition tours attended in Virginia: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Afro-Futurism in Costume Design, Jamestown.

- Lab tours in Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

Site visits across the east of America enabled me to gain a greater understanding of how the role and approach of a conservator is influenced by their institution's needs and previous education. Networking facilitated the sharing of ideas, techniques and tools to increase one's own professional autonomy. I was surprised to discover how variable a textile conservator's daily tasks and responsibilities could be between institutions.

As an emerging professional these insights into institutional and private practice enabled me to consider the influences of my own education, my desired career portfolio and compatibility with varying types of institutions.



Figure 14. George Washington Textile Museum, D.C.

Washington.

Figure 15. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

### **Leisure Time:**

Having made it a mission to immerse myself in American culture, my leisure time was quickly allocated to a variety of American pastimes.



My onsite accommodation enabled me to easily attend events and reenactments in the Historic Area of Colonial Williamsburg, such as a witch trial and the 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks. I visited almost all of the 29 different disciplines of tradespeople and engaged in conversations about the skillsets of their trade, what they have learnt from being a historic reenactor and made comparisons with my own knowledge of British trades of the same 18<sup>th</sup> Century period.

Emerging Professionals in the area were introduced through Virginia Conservation Associations' ECPN liaison Michelle Leung. I attended two of their events, both instances helped me meet emerging professionals from different backgrounds and disciplines, giving me a greater insight into educational programs across the US. The "Second Sunday Market" which we attended together as a group, was a fantastic way to enjoy the hot weather and try local sweets such as pound cakes, molasses cookies and peanut brittle.

Graduate fellows and interns at Colonial Williamsburg were exceptional at helping immerse me in the local culture and explore nearby towns and cities. It was a meaningful and informative experience attending exhibitions with these colleagues at the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of African American History and Culture in D.C. Washington. When touring the exhibitions as a group we shared fruitful conversations about display mount methods we perceived as well as discussing the successes of the different curatorial approaches we observed.



Figure 16. Colonial Williamsburg Conservation Fellows and Interns outside the National Museum of the American Indian, D.C. Washington.

Additional work events took place during my placement such as an outing to watch Richmond's Minor League Baseball Team: The Flying Squirrels. This was my first experience engaging with baseball, trying cracker jacks and witnessing the American national anthem be sung live.



Figure 17. Richmond vs Binghamton Minor League Baseball Game, The Flying Squirrels playing the Rumble Ponies.

## **Conclusion:**

The summer placement at Colonial Williamsburg transformed my understanding of a conservator's role and enriched my passion for the career path. I was able to build upon the skills I had gained in the first year of my studies and acquire new skills ahead of the second year, such as practical experience with a range of adhesives, composite and large-scale artefacts, FTIR and spectrophotometry analysis. Practicing for a large institution has helped me gain a greater understanding of a conservator's role as well as identify areas for further professional development. Lab visits were joyous excursions but also such integral opportunities to exchange ideas, tips and build lasting connections with individuals from different backgrounds and specialisms.

The localised positioning of alternative conservation disciplines facilitated familiarity with staff and encouraged cross-discipline learning which I greatly valued throughout the treatment of the composite Tobacco Pouch Quilt Top. As well as helping me achieve my practical learning goal, the interdisciplinary consultation highlighted to me the great potential of information to be learnt from conservation approaches outside of the textile discipline.

The learning goals set out in advance of the placement helped my hosts assign tasks appropriate for my student skillset and professional interests. The textile conservation department were dedicated to helping me achieve my goals; creating networking opportunities and encouraging me to develop my public engagement skills by assisting with visitor tours around the department, contributing to social media posts and consulting other departments. The learning goals that were set out as foundational goals were achieved and will continue to be developed and refined throughout my career. I am incredibly proud to have accomplished all that I did on placement with the Colonial Williamsburg team.

I am indebted to the textile conservators for helping me access my first quilt conservation treatments. The specialised knowledge they shared with me will be treasured throughout my career and I hope to look to them as mentors and friends for many years to come. Their enthusiasm and open-hearted nature fostered a warm and healthy work environment which supported my development and motivated my curious mind. I was enchanted by the uniqueness of Colonial Williamsburg and captivated by the frankness of American culture; it was incredible to feel so at ease in a place thousands of miles from home.



Figure 18. Colonial Williamsburg Textile Conservation Team and Curator. From left to right: Neal Hurst, Gretchen Guidess, author, Jackie Peterson-Grace, Michelle Leung.

### **Acknowledgements:**

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Thank you to the staff at Colonial Williamsburg, who made me feel so welcome and whose energy and willingness to share knowledge made the placement such a delightful and enthralling learning experience. Thank you also to Joanne Hackett, my placement tutor, who supported and guided me throughout the process.

## **Image Credits:**

Front cover: Author conserving Tobacco Pouch Quilt Top. Credit: Jackie Peterson Grace, with permission from Colonial Williamsburg.

Figure 1. Author outside Bruton Heights Cottage. Credit: Mark Groves-Gidney.

Figure 2. Map of Virginia with Williamsburg circled. Credits: World Atlas

<https://www.worldatlas.com/maps/united-states/virginia> accessed 2024.

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<https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/map/>

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