

Introduction

It is plain that music played an integral role in the lives of the inhabitants of all classes in colonial and post-Revolutionary Virginia. Moreover, Williamsburg and its surrounding area remained one of the most vibrant cultural and political centers in Colonial America. Archaeological excavations have for years revealed insightful clues as to the material culture and the nature of daily life during the era. However, archaeological data on musical instruments remains sparse. This is largely due to the fact that many instruments are made of wood and therefore are not preserved in the ground. In addition, most instruments were considered prized valuables, symbols of social and intellectual status, and would not have been discarded. Archaeological examples of musical instruments are generally inexpensive, common instruments such as jaw harps and harmonicas that are made of metal and would have survived two or three hundred years in the ground. However, rare examples of more valuable examples exist that survived due to preservation in water and were either discarded after being broken or were destroyed intentionally or by accident. The archaeologist may also conclude that examples of instruments and instrument parts may be uncovered in the future and so they must therefore have a working knowledge of types of instruments, their historical setting, and the distinction between their wooden and metal parts.

Music and Musical Instruments in 18th Century Williamsburg

Music played many different roles in the culture and daily life of 18th century Williamsburg society. Away from the more northern Puritan and Quaker restrictions on both secular and religious musics, Southern plantation holders were free to pursue more hedonistic and luxurious artistic enjoyment.¹ Balls were frequently held in town or in local plantations, such as a 1774 ball at Lee Hall, where the “Ladies and Gentlemen begun to dance in the Ball Room—first Minuets one Round; Second Giggs; third Reels; And last of All Country-Dances; tho’ they struck several Marches occasionally.” The instruments playing were a French horn and two violins.² Wealthy plantation holders often paid professional musicians to provide music for such gatherings and social events.³ In addition, concerts were commonplace among the wealthy. They were held in such places as the Governor’s Palace.⁴ Townspeople also used music to celebrate various social events. For example, public competitions also characterized musical life. A 1737 advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* announced various musical competitions to be held at a fair. It stipulated that “a violin be played for by 20 fiddlers, and to be given

¹Keller, Kate van Winkle. “Secular Music to 1800.” *The Cambridge History of American Music*. Ed. David Nichols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. p. 55.

²Fithian, Philip Vickers. *Journal & Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*. Ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1957. p. 57.

³Torpey, Dorothy M. *Hallowed Heritage: The Life of Virginia*. Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1961. p. 188.

to him that shall be adjudged to play the best: No person to have the Liberty of playing unless he brings a Fiddle with him" and that "Drums, Trumpets, Hautboys [oboes], &c. will be provided, to play at the said Entertainment."⁵ It must be noted that each fiddler had to provide his own instrument, indicating that it was commonplace to own one.

Music was also used to mark various political and military functions. Upon the death of William III and the accession of Queen Anne to the British throne in 1702, the entire town gathered to first mourn and then to celebrate. After the funeral sermon, "the bugles, violins and oboes struck up lively airs, and Queen Anne was proclaimed with artillery salutes, and the rattle of musquetry." A similar demonstration, albeit more somber, was repeated in 1714 when Queen Anne died and George I acceded to the throne.⁶ On the eve of the Revolutionary War, military musicians were in high demand in order to bolster the morale and confidence of the militiamen. An advertisement in the *Gazette* announces the need for musicians in a battalion of minute-men from the lower end of the Northern Neck: "Wanted, a DRUMMER and FIFER, who can teach others the duty, to act as drum and fife-majors."⁷

Music also played an extremely important role in the family lives of upper and middle class society; it was considered to be of primary importance in shaping the

⁴Goodwin, Mary R. M. *Musical Instruments in 18th Century Virginia*. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1953. p. 3.

⁵Parks, ed. *Virginia Gazette*. 7 Oct. 1737.

⁶Stoutamire, Albert. *Music of the Old South: Colony to Confederacy*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1972. pp. 15-16.

education and breeding of both ladies and gentlemen, and it was an important pastime. Many families passed the evening "playing and group singing with instrumental accompaniment: catches, duets, sonatas, concertos, and selections from the classics."⁸ Most families owned at least one instrument, commonly a keyboard instrument such as a harpsichord or pianoforte, and also possibly a smaller instrument such as a violin, flute, or oboe. York County probate inventory records indicate the existence of these instruments, such as a violin in the estate of Henry Bowcock,⁹ a bass viol in that of Anne Digges,¹⁰ and a harpsichord in the Armistead family.¹¹ In addition, records indicate that keyboard instruments were present in families such as the Curtises,¹² the Lees,¹³ and the Carters.¹⁴ In most families, musical proficiency was considered essential as part of one's education. Councillor Carter supervised the musical education of his daughters, arranging piano and harpsichord lessons and teaching them himself how to play the

⁷ Pinkey, ed. *Virginia Gazette*. 28 Sept. 1775.

⁸ Moon, John C. *A Study of Common Music in the Early Colony of Virginia*. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library Research Report Series, 1994.

⁹ "Inventory of Estate of Henry Bowcock 1779 July 19." *Colonial Williamsburg Digital Archive*. 15 April 2003. <http://pastportal.com/cwdl_new/Archive/Probates/Html/PI0084.htm>

¹⁰ "Inventory of Estate of Anne Digges 1776 August 19." *Colonial Williamsburg Digital Archive*. 15 April 2003. <http://pastportal.com/cwdl_new/Archive/Probates/Html/PI0067.htm>

¹¹ "Inventory of Estate of Armistead Lightfoot 1772 November 16." *Colonial Williamsburg Digital Archive*. 15 April 2003. <http://pastportal.com/cwdl_new/Archive/Probates/Html/PI0084.htm>

¹² Norcutt, Tracy. "Re: Attn. Tracy Norcutt." E-mail to author. 14 April 2003.

¹³ Fithian, p. 57.

¹⁴ Stoutamire, p. 35.

guitar.¹⁵ In general, ladies played keyboard instruments such as spinets, harpsichords, and pianofortes, and gentlemen played stringed and wind instruments such as flutes, violins, and horns.¹⁶ Gentlemen evidently preferred stringed instruments over woodwinds because the latter would cause the gentleman to “puff out the face in a vulgar fashion.”¹⁷

Although not as many records survive of life for the lower classes and slaves, music also played an important role in their lives. Jaw harps, or Jew’s harps, were advertised as for sale in Gloucester,¹⁸ and were popular with children, the lower classes, and soldiers.¹⁹ In addition, advertisements for flutes, guitars,²⁰ and hand organs²¹ in shops or for sale upon arrival from England indicate that these instruments were somewhat accessible to the lower classes, even if they were not of the highest quality. The lower classes also amused themselves with harmonicas and homemade flutes or fiddles.²² In addition, slaves had their own musical subculture. Carrying rhythmic and melodic characteristics from Africa, their culture was transplanted to the plantations. Slaves often made banjos out of gourds, and they fashioned percussion sticks out of

¹⁵Spruill, Julia Cherry. *Women’s Live and Work in the Southern Colonies*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1972. p. 195.

¹⁶*Ibid*, p. 107.

¹⁷Wright, Louis B. *The First Gentlemen of Virginia: Intellectual Qualities of the Early Colonial Ruling Class*. San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1940. p. 10.

¹⁸Purdie, ed. Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*. 16 Aug. 1776

¹⁹Heymann, Mme. Alfred. “The Jew’s Harp.” *The Jew’s Harp*. Ed. Leonard Fox. Toronto: Bucknell University Press, 1988. pp. 45, 48.

²⁰Purdie & Dixon, eds. *Virginia Gazette*. 17 Sept. 1767.

²¹Dixon & Hunter, eds. *Virginia Gazette*. 14 Nov. 1777.

cattle rib or shin bones.²³ Slaves also played Western instruments, especially the fiddle, to entertain their masters. Fithian describes a waiting man playing as the ladies dance,²⁴ and many ads in the *Gazette* detail runaway slaves who play various instruments. For example, one named Stepney “plays a little on the Fiddle, [and] is a Shoemaker by Trade.”²⁵ Although music in the lives of the upper classes is more well-documented, musical activity including instruments spanned all classes and races.

²²Keller, p. 49.

²³Libin, Lawrence. *American Musical Instruments*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985. pp. 36-37.

²⁴Fithian, p. 120.

²⁵Purdie & Dixon, eds. Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*. 22 July 1773.

18th Century Musical Instruments and Their Construction

Although musical instruments are rare in archaeological record, it is useful for the archaeologist to be familiar with the instruments used in the period as well as have a basic knowledge of their parts and construction. Metal parts should be pointed out, as they are the most likely to survive in the ground. The most notable metal instruments are the folk harmonicas and jaw harps. The former contain a copper or iron alloy plate with rivets, while the latter are made of either brass or iron, with a steel spring that typically does not survive in the ground.²⁶ Other folk instruments, such as the banjo, were typically made of homemade or organic materials, such as gourds, so their parts would either not survive or would not readily be associated with musical instruments.

Various woodwind instruments were also popular among the lower classes as well as the upper classes. The most common were by far the hautboy (oboe) and the flute. Both were long, hollow wooden tubes with holes and a few wooden keys. The flute was played transversely, while the oboe was played through a double reed extending downwards from the performer's mouth. Each typically had three joints.²⁷ The bassoon, another commonly played musical instrument, is a much larger version of

²⁶Pittman, William. Personal Interview. 15 April 2003.

²⁷Schlesinger, Kathleen. *Instruments of the Modern Orchestra and Early Records of the Precursors of the Violin Family*. London: William Reeves Bookseller Ltd., 1969. pp. 4, 11.

the oboe. However, there is one vital difference: the reed, instead of being directly attached to the body of the instrument, was instead attached to a curved metal tube measuring approximately 12 inches, called a bocal or a crook.²⁸ Since these tubes were interchangeable on instruments and were frequently removed, especially for storage of the instrument, they are a much more likely archaeological find. In addition, all three instruments often were made of ivory rather than wood or contained ivory parts and may have had silver or brass keys towards the end of the century.²⁹ These parts would be by far the most likely to encounter in an excavation.

Keyboard instruments made up the most important part of instrumental music life in the 18th century. However, their small number of metal parts and their high value make them a rare archaeological find. Most likely, if any instruments were abandoned, it would be because they were broken beyond repair or were destroyed by fire, and in both cases metal parts would remain. Metal parts from plucked stringed instruments such as virginals, spinets, clavichords, and harpsichords include jacks, pins, and strings. Jacks were the mechanism by which the pressing of a key would mechanically pluck the string for the corresponding note, producing sound.³⁰ Jacks were typically made of different types of metal and were attached to wooden bars that then in turn attached to

²⁸Schlesinger, pp. 20-21.

²⁹Bragnard, Roger and Ferdinand J. de Hen. *Musical Instruments in Art and History*. Trans. Bill Hopkins. New York: The Viking Press, 1967. p. 149.

³⁰Russell, Raymond. *The Harpsichord and Clavichord*. New York: October House, 1965. p. 14.

the corresponding key.³¹ Strings for these instruments were made of steel, iron, or brass.³² The harpsichord, the more modern of the four, used two strings per note, while the others used only one.³³ Encased in elaborately decorated wooden boxes, these plucked stringed instruments would often bear ornamentation made of non-wooden materials such as ivory that may survive underground.³⁴

Similar to the older plucked keyboard instruments, the pianoforte was a modern version invented around the turn of the 18th century that allowed the performer to play both loudly and softly through the use of hammers striking the strings rather than the jacks plucking them.³⁵ These hammers contain no metal parts. In both hammered and plucked keyboard instruments, pins made of brass inserted into a wooden board at the far side of the box attach the strings to the instrument. The string is wrapped around each pin, and these pins may be turned in order to tune the instrument.³⁶ Although made of metal, these pins, after undergoing centuries of decay, would likely be indistinguishable from common nails that are corroded or rusted. Similar to the

³¹Galpin, Francis W. *Old English Instruments of Music: Their History and Character*. London: Methuen & Co., 1965. p. 89.

³²Hubbard, Frank. *Three Centuries of Harpsichord Making*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967. p. 205.

³³Spillane, Daniel. *History of the American Pianoforte: Its Technical Development, and the Trade*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1969. p. 15.

³⁴Shortridge, John D. *Italian Harpsichord Building in the 16th and 17th Centuries*. *Contributions from the Museum of History and Technology*, paper 15. Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1960. p. 98.

³⁵Spillane, p. 19.

³⁶Shortridge, p. 98.

plucked keyboard instrument in principle, the harp also bears metal parts; along the top crest of the frame, metal plates or gears would commonly hold the strings in place.³⁷

Musical Instruments in Archaeological Record

Despite the improbability of finding archaeological evidence of musical instruments, a number of rare examples do exist. In 1545, the English ship *Mary Rose* sank off the Portsmouth Harbor. Because she was prepared for battle and not for a long voyage, many articles belonging to the crew were left in their usual places. In addition, she lay on her side encased in mud, which in effect sealed the interior, preserving what she held inside. When excavation began in 1969, marine archaeologists discovered fragments of several musical instruments, although conservation and analysis were still underway as of the publication date of the report. The instruments discovered included a shawm (a predecessor of the oboe), three pipe fragments, remains of two fiddles, and many fragments of Bosun's pipes, which were associated with gunnery.³⁸

³⁷Bonanni, Filippo. *Antique Musical Instruments and Their Players: 152 Plates from Bonanni's 18th Century "Gabinetto Armonico"*. Captions by Frank Ll. Harrison and Joan Rimmer. New York: Dover Publications, 1964. p. 107.

³⁸Palmer, Frances. "Musical Instruments from the *Mary Rose*: A Report on a Work in Progress." *Early Music*. Jan. 1983: 53-59.

Another remarkable example of musical instruments in archaeological record is the discovery of an oboe fragment in a streambed in Colonial Williamsburg. Because the artifact was in a streambed, it was able to be preserved. The fragment probably comes from the third joint in the instrument, and is made of boxwood with two brass-covered stops or keys.³⁹



³⁹Pittman, 15 April 2003.

The oboe was recovered at the Anthony Hay cabinet shop in Williamsburg, where it is speculated that musical instrument repair took place. In the same layer were also found furniture parts and scrap wood.⁴⁰ An advertisement in the *Gazette* seems to match the instrument repair theory, as it states that "Mr. Anthony Hay having lately removed to the Rawleigh tavern, the subscriber has taken his shop" and advertises for "spinets and harpsichords made and repaired."⁴¹

A rather more unusual find was made in a well in Colonial Williamsburg when archaeologists uncovered a military fife made from an iron alloy gun barrel. Again, the preservation of the artifact was possible due to the fact that it was in water. The find of such an item sparks many questions.... for instance, why would anyone make a fife out of a gun barrel?⁴²



⁴⁰Watson, John. "Re: Archaeological Musical Instruments." E-mail to author. 10 April 2003.

⁴¹Purdie & Dixon, eds. Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*. 8 Jan. 1767.

⁴²Pittman, 15 April 2003.

Certainly the most common archaeological discoveries of musical instruments are those of inexpensive, commonplace instruments made in whole or in part of metal, namely harmonicas and jaw harps. In Colonial Williamsburg, a harmonica made of copper alloy was located at the Armistead residence.⁴³



Jaw harps are extremely numerous in archaeological record; in addition to Colonial Williamsburg, many have also been unearthed in Jamestown.⁴⁴ Typically, jaw harps are made of brass or iron and were commonly used by children, the lower classes, and soldiers. Many of the jaw harps from Williamsburg were excavated at the site of the Governor's Palace, which was used as a hospital in the Revolutionary War before it burned down. The locations at which the jaw harps are recovered are very diverse,

⁴³Pittman, 15 April 2003.

⁴⁴Stoutamire, 16.

ranging from taverns and blacksmith shops to upper-class mansions and even the printing office for the *Virginia Gazette*.⁴⁵



⁴⁵Pittman, 15 April 2003.



Bibliography

- Bonanni, Filippo. *Antique Musical Instruments and Their Players: 152 Plates from Bonanni's 18th Century "Gabinetto Armonico"*. Captions by Frank L.J. Harrison and Joan Rimmer. New York: Dover Publications, 1964.
- Bagnard, Roger and Ferdinand J. de Hen. *Musical Instruments in Art and History*. Trans. Bill Hopkins. New York: The Viking Press, 1967.
- Dixon & Hunter, eds. Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*. 14 Nov. 1777.
- Fithian, Philip Vickers. *Journal & Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*. Ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1957.
- Galpin, Francis W. *Old English Instruments of Music: Their History and Character*. London: Methuen & Co., 1965.
- Goodwin, Mary R. M. *Musical Instruments in 18th Century Virginia*. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1953.
- Heymann, Mme. Alfred. "The Jew's Harp." *The Jew's Harp*. Ed. Leonard Fox. Toronto: Bucknell University Press, 1988.
- Hubbard, Frank. *Three Centuries of Harpsichord Making*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- "Inventory of Estate of Anne Digges 1776 August 19." *Colonial Williamsburg Digital Archive*. 15 April 2003. <http://pastportal.com/cwdl_new/Archive/Probates/Html/PI0067.htm>
- "Inventory of Estate of Armistead Lightfoot 1772 November 16." *Colonial Williamsburg Digital Archive*. 15 April 2003. <http://pastportal.com/cwdl_new/Archive/Probates/Html/PI0084.htm>
- "Inventory of Estate of Henry Bowcock 1779 July 19." *Colonial Williamsburg Digital Archive*. 15 April 2003. <http://pastportal.com/cwdl_new/Archive/Probates/Html/PI0084.htm>

- Keller, Kate van Winkle. "Secular Music to 1800." *The Cambridge History of American Music*. Ed. David Nichols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Libin, Lawrence. *American Musical Instruments*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985.
- Moon, John C. *A Study of Common Music in the Early Colony of Virginia*. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library Research Report Series, 1994.
- Norcutt, Tracy. "Re: Attn. Tracy Norcutt." E-mail to author. 14 April 2003.
- Palmer, Frances. "Musical Instruments from the *Mary Rose*: A Report on a Work in Progress." *Early Music*. Jan. 1983: 53-59.
- Parks, ed. Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*. 7 Oct. 1737.
- Pinkey, ed. Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*. 28 Sept. 1775.
- Pittman, William. Personal Interview. 15 April 2003.
- Purdie, ed. Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*. 16 Aug. 1776.
- Purdie & Dixon, eds. Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*. 8 Jan. 1767.
- Purdie & Dixon, eds. Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*. 17 Sept. 1767.
- Purdie & Dixon, eds. Advertisement in *Virginia Gazette*. 22 July 1773.
- Russell, Raymond. *The Harpsichord and Clavichord*. New York: October House, 1965.
- Schlesinger, Kathleen. *Instruments of the Modern Orchestra and Early Records of the Precursors of the Violin Family*. London: William Reeves Bookseller Ltd., 1969.
- Shortridge, John D. *Italian Harpsichord Building in the 16th and 17th Centuries*. Contributions from the Museum of History and Technology, paper 15. Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1960.
- Spillane, Daniel. *History of the American Pianoforte: Its Technical Development, and the Trade*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1969.

Spruill, Julia Cherry. *Women's Live and Work in the Southern Colonies*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1972.

Stoutamire, Albert. *Music of the Old South: Colony to Confederacy*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1972.

Torpey, Dorothy M. *Hallowed Heritage: The Life of Virginia*. Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1961.

Watson, John. "Re: Archaeological Musical Instruments." E-mail to author. 10 April 2003.

Wright, Louis B. *The First Gentlemen of Virginia: Intellectual Qualities of the Early Colonial Ruling Class*. San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1940.

