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REVOLUTIONARY HAIRSTYLIST

CNU ALUM THRIVES AS COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG'S MASTER WIGMAKER

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | August 8, 2025

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How Debbie Turpin Turned Her CNU History Degree ...



When “George Mason” paid a visit to Debbie Turpin recently in the Historic Area of Colonial Williamsburg, it was not for anything political.

Rather, it was for a more hairy set of circumstances, so to speak.

Mason, or rather the historical interpreter doubling as the Founding Father who authored the Virginia Declaration of Rights, was merely stopping by Turpin’s shop to pick up his handcrafted wig, a common accessory for lawmakers in the 18th century. For Mason, that meant a brown hairpiece with two side curls - called buckles- and a clubbed

queue. Turpin knew exactly the style he preferred.

That's because Turpin, '99 [History](#), is the master wigmaker for Colonial Williamsburg and makes it her work to know the coifs of history. She spends her days living in a historical bubble where the past is alive and well. Her client list reads like a who's who of Colonial times, including Mason, the Marquis de Lafayette, Thomas Jefferson, Martha Washington and Patrick Henry.

She ensures all interpreters have the proper dos to fit their historical roles. In plain terms, Turpin is hairdresser to the nation builders. She fills a special occupational niche, as she is only the second master in the shop's history and the third to complete the full apprenticeship program. She is also one of a handful of wigmakers employed by a living history museum.

"I love what I do very much," she said. "This trade is so unique."

History has always been Turpin's passion, inspired by her fondness for historical romance novels. When she was a Captain, she knew she wanted to major in history, but expected to teach when she graduated. She never anticipated working in a setting that every day throws her back to Revolutionary times.

Talking to Turpin as she minds the wig shop is like being in a time machine. Donning period appropriate clothing and a cap, she chats about her duties, making note of the intricate work she does by hand and the nature of interactions she has had with her clients, many of whom helped to change the country's political landscape. The conversation reflects a simpler time - one devoid of technology and distractions.

Turpin credits her CNU education for helping her find the confidence and knowledge to launch her career. Her years at Christopher Newport proved transformative. After all, it was where she developed a love of American history and was encouraged to discover her voice and come out of her shell.

"I really enjoyed my time at CNU. I loved all of my classes," said Turpin, who grew up in Newport News. "It was a great experience. It had a hometown feel. It was great because I could live at home but still go off to college."

Shortly after graduating, a friend told about an ad she saw for a job with The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation as a historical interpreter. Turpin was all in, as she was hoping to use her penchant for education and history in a way that did not involve a classroom. She got the job, starting as a group leader giving school groups tours of Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area and then worked her way up to apprentice and journeyman in the Wig Shop before taking it over.

The master wigmaker plays a critical role, as many of the Colonial Williamsburg interpreters and tradespeople require hairpieces. To bring authenticity to the living museum, the wigs must be accurate in design and appearance.

Turpin manages the shop as wigmakers did back then. She answers multitudes of questions from visitors daily and between conversations, she handcrafts wigs out of human, horse and goat hair, true to how they were created in the 18th century. Each strand of hair is woven into the wefts that are then stitched by hand.

"It's very important that we don't use anything today that was not used in the 18th century," she said.

As a history enthusiast, Turpin has discovered her calling. She delights in educating people about how life used to be in Williamsburg, the capital of the Virginia Colony from 1699 to 1780 and a crucial center of political and cultural life in the 18th century.

The Wig Shop maintains an inventory of about 600 wigs used for Colonial Williamsburg performances and special events.

The one Founding Father who is not a customer? George Washington. Turpin says unbeknownst to many, Washington was one of the few who sported his own hair in public.

For Turpin, it is both an honor and privilege to bring to life a world many only know through history textbooks and historical movies and plays.

"It's so much fun to answer guest's questions," she said. "People always want to know what they are looking at when they come in here. I tell them everything and it blows their mind."

