

Daily Life on a Colonial Plantation, 1709-11

He wrote his diary in a secret code - an archaic form of shorthand known only to the most educated of his day. Because it was encoded, he was confident that no one would ever read his revealing portrait of the world he lived in. He was wrong. It took over 300 years, but in 1939 his code was cracked and the observations of William Byrd II became known to all. Because he never intended it to be read by others, his diary gives us an unvarnished view of life on a colonial plantation in the early 18th century.

William Byrd II was born in Virginia in 1674 but was soon taken to England where he was educated. He remained there until his father's death in 1704. He returned to the colony and took over the management of Westover, the family plantation on the James River. He became an influential member of the Virginia aristocracy and was appointed to the colony's Council of State in 1708. He owned vast amounts of land (approximately 179,000 acres) and numerous plantations. He founded two cities - Richmond and Appomattox - on his land. He died in 1744.

Plantation Life

Byrd kept a daily journal throughout most of his life. In the following entries he reveals the routine of his daily life:

1709

February 8

I rose at 5 o'clock this morning and read a chapter in Hebrew and 200 verses in Homer's Odyssey. I ate milk for breakfast. I said my prayers. Jenny and Eugene [two house slaves] were whipped. I danced my dance [physical exercises]. I read law in the morning and Italian in the afternoon. I ate tough chicken for dinner. The boat came from Appomattox [another plantation] and was cut in the evening I walked about the plantation. I said my prayers. I had good thoughts, good health, and good humor this day, thanks be to God Almighty".

June 2

"I was out of humor with my wife for trusting Anaka [a house slave] with rum to steal when she was so given to drinking, but it was soon over".

September 3

"My wife was indisposed again but not to much purpose. In the afternoon I beat Jenny [a house slave] for throwing water on the couch".

September 5

"My wife was much out of order and had frequent return of her pains. ...in the evening I took a walk about the plantation and when I returned I found my wife very bad. I sent for Mrs. Hamlin and my cousin Harrison about 9 o'clock and I said my

prayers heartily for my wife's happy delivery...I went to bed about 10 o'clock and left the women full of expectation with my wife”.

September 6

“About one o'clock this morning my wife was happily delivered of a son, thanks be to God Almighty. I was awake in a blink and rose and my cousin Harrison met me on the stairs and told me it was a boy. We drank some French wine and went to bed again and rose at 7 o'clock”.

October 6

“I rose at 6 o'clock and said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. Then I proceeded to Williamsburg, where I found all well. I went to the capitol where I sent for the wench to clean my room and when she came I kissed her and felt her, for which God forgive me.

Then I went to see the President, whom I found indisposed in his ears. I dined with him on beef. Then we went to his house and played at piquet [a card game for two players] where Mr. Clayton came to us. We had much to do to get a bottle of French wine.

About 10 o'clock I went to my lodgings. I had good health but wicked thoughts. God forgive me”.

Disease Strikes the Children - One Lives, One Dies

In the spring of 1710 Byrd's son - Parke - was 8 months old, his daughter - Evelyn - 2 1/2 years old. We rejoin his diary as he arrives at his manor and discovers his infant son suffering from a fever:

1710

May 12

“It was very hot this day, and the first day of summer...my wife and I took a walk about the plantation; when we returned we found our son very sick of a fever and he began to break out terribly. We gave him some treacle water [a medicinal compound used as an antidote for poison]”.

May 17

“My son was a little worse, which made me send for Mr. Anderson [the parish minister]. My express met him on the road and he came about 10 o'clock. He advised some oil of juniper which did some good”.

May 21

“The child continued indisposed. In the evening we walked home and found Evie in great fever and to increase it [they] had given her milk”.

May 22

“In the evening the children were a little better”.

May 24

"I sent for my cousin Harrison to let Evie blood who was ill. When she came back she took about four ounces. We put on blisters and gave her a glister [an enema] which worked very well. Her blood was extremely thick, which is common in distemper of this constitution. About 12 o'clock she began to sweat of herself, which we prompted by tincture of saffron and sage and snakeroot. This made her sweat extremely, in which she continued little or more all night".

May 25

"Evie was much better, thank God Almighty, and lost her fever. The boy was likewise but was restless".

May 26

"Evie was better but the boy was worse, with a cold and fever for which we gave him a sweat which worked very well and continued all day".

May 26

"Evie took a purge which worked but a little and my son had a little fever. I went about 11 o'clock to Colonel Randolph's to visit him because he was sick...and took my leave about 5 o'clock and got home about 7 where I found the boy in his fever but Evie was better, thank God Almighty".

May 29

"The boy continued very ill of the fever".

June 3

"I rose a 6 o'clock and as soon as I came out news was brought that the child was very ill. We went out and found him just ready to die and he died about 8 o'clock in the morning. God gives and God takes away; blessed be the name of God. ...My wife was much afflicted but I submitted to His judgment better, notwithstanding I was very sensible of my loss, but God's will be done".

June 6

"About 2 o'clock we went with the corpse to the churchyard and as soon as the service was begun it rained very hard so that we were forced to leave the parson and go into the church porch but Mr Anderson stayed till the service was finished. About 3 o'clock we went to dinner. The company stayed till the evening and then went away. Mr. Custis and I took a walk about the plantation. Two of the new negroes were taken sick and I gave each of them a vomit which worked well."

The Threat of War

Rumors of an invasion by the French spread through the colony in the summer of 1711. The invasion threat never materialized but the Tuscarora Indians attacked settlements in North Carolina and threatened the same in Virginia. In response, a local militia was raised with Byrd as its commander. Byrd describes an expedition in October that was intended as a show of force calculated to intimidate the Tuscarora's into submission:

1710

Oct 4.

"I rose at 7 o'clock and my wife shaved me with a dull razor...About 11 o'clock we went to the militia court... We fined all the Quakers and several others [for their refusal to take up arms]... I spoke gently to the Quakers which gave them a good opinion of me and several of them seemed doubtful whether they would be arrested or not for the future. I told them they would certainly be fined five times in a year if they did not do as their fellow subjects did".

Oct. 8

"I rose about 7 o'clock and read nothing because I prepared myself to ride to Major Harrison's...About 10 o'clock I got over the river and proceeded on my journey but went a little out of my way. However I got there about one o'clock and found the Governor, Colonel Harrison, and Colonel Ludwell, which last had been sick...

About 2 o'clock we went to dinner and I ate boiled beef for my part. After dinner we sat in council concerning the Indians and some of the Tributaries came before us who promised to be very faithful to us. It was agreed to send Peter Poythress to the Tuscaroras to treat them and to demand the Baron Graffenriedt who was prisoner among the Indians".

Oct. 19

"I rose about 6 o'clock and found it cold. We drank chocolate with the Governor and about 9 o'clock got on our horses and waited on the Governor to see him put the foot in order.

...About 3 o'clock the Tuscarora Indians came with their guard and Mr. Poythress with them. He told the Governor that the Baron was alive and would be released but that Mr. Lawson was killed because he had been so foolish as to threaten the Indian that had taken him.

About 6 o'clock we went to dinner and I ate some mutton. At night some of my troop went with me into town to see the girls and kissed them without proceeding any further, and we had like to be kept out by the captain of the guard. However, at last they let us in and we went to bed about 2 o'clock in the morning".

Oct. 20

"I rose about 6 o'clock and drank tea with the Governor, who made use of this opportunity to make the Indians send some of their great men to the College, and the Nansemonds sent two, the Nottoways two, and the Meherrins two. He also demanded one from every town belonging to the Tuscaroras.

...Then we went and saw the Indian boys shoot and the Indian girls run for a prize. We had likewise a war dance by the men and a love dance by the women, which sports lasted till it grew dark. Then we went to supper and I ate chicken with a good stomach.

We sat with the Governor until about 11 o'clock and then we went to Major Harrison's to supper again... Jenny, an Indian girl, had got drunk and made us good

sport. I neglected to say my prayers and had good health, good thoughts, good humor, thank God Almighty”.

Oct 21

“We drank chocolate with the Governor and about 10 o'clock we took leave of the Nottoway town and the Indian boys went away with us that were designed for the College. The Governor made three proposals to the Tuscaroras: that they would join with the English to pursue those Indians who had killed the people of Carolina, that they should have 40 shillings for every head they brought in of those guilty Indians and be paid the price of a slave for all they brought in alive, and that they should send one of the chief men's sons out of every town to the College.

About 4 we dined and I ate some boiled beef. My man's horse was lame for which we drew blood. At night I asked a negro girl to kiss me, and when I went to bed I was very cold because I pulled off my clothes after lying in them so long.”