

*You're a what?*  
**Historic  
interpreter**

by Olivia Crosby



**Travel through time** to experience the past for yourself. With Mary Wiseman, it's possible.

Wiseman is a historic character interpreter at the living history museum at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. She plays Martha Washington as part of a large-scale, ongoing reenactment of the past. "I want to give people the feeling that they are in colonial times," she says, "to engage them and connect them to the past."

To prepare for her role each workday, Wiseman reads from a collection of Martha Washington's letters. "I look at what Martha wrote to family, friends, and business acquaintances to learn the details of her life," she says. "It's one of the best ways to discover her difficulties, hopes, and daily routines and her feelings for family." Wiseman seeks out feelings and situations that are applicable even to contemporary visitors. "If Martha wrote a letter about waiting anxiously for the return of her son from a trip," she says, "I can use that to start a conversation with a parent from today."

Wiseman, like all historic interpreters, fleshes out the details of her character's life in a number of ways. In addition to studying Martha Washington's written correspondence, Wiseman culls material available in an onsite research department. Its staff of historians and librarians finds answers to Wiseman's questions and reviews her ideas. Historians also tell her about events surrounding her character, including who and what Martha Washington knew and the politics and gossip of the time.

Interpreters home in on the minutiae of a life—favorite foods, beloved pets, the distance walked while doing errands—because they recognize that small details are often more important than larger dramas. For Wiseman, this means supplementing the research with her imagination to visualize everyday events in Martha

Washington's life. She uses the tactic only for character development, however. Wiseman is careful to adhere to facts when talking to the public.

Transformation into a character begins in earnest when an interpreter dons the costume. Before meeting the public, Wiseman dresses in 18<sup>th</sup> century garb: a shift, two petticoats, stays, stockings, garters, hoops, gown, cap, hat, and cape. Dressing takes at least an hour—time she uses to prepare for her role. "As I'm dressing, I'm getting into character," she says. "I become more like Martha. I even move at a more and more leisurely pace as I go."

Ensclosed in her role, Wiseman is ready for anything. She fields visitors' questions on countless subjects, including housework, politics, how she met her husbands, and the color of her wedding dresses. Wiseman says of answering, "The goal is to be seamless. It has to be natural, not rehearsed. I think in two ways at once: what information do I want to give, and how should I do it?" Wiseman tries to re-create Martha Washington's personality, too. "People don't realize from her portraits how warm Martha was," she says. "People wrote about her hospitality, and I try to let that show through."

Most of the time, Wiseman sits and talks to visitors, often for long periods, in one of the historic buildings. But sometimes, she gives outdoor tours or attends an evening ball. Depending on the character, other interpreters might work primarily outdoors or in workspaces, such as forges or stables.

Historic interpreters strive to give the public an accurate view of history, often correcting false impressions. For

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example, Wiseman says some people are surprised when she reveals little-known secrets about the complexity of running a colonial household. Others are amazed to learn of women's involvement in political discussions.

Like many interpreters, Wiseman performs a variety of tasks related to her character. She creates and stages a one-woman show at Colonial Williamsburg. She also helps to develop and maintain the interpreter program there, training new interpreters and suggesting new research topics. She serves as a consultant for historical movies and toys. And currently, she is writing a book about playing Martha Washington.

Wiseman became an interpreter, in part, because of an interest in theater. In college, she studied drama. Then, she worked part time as a tour guide in Williamsburg while raising a family. She became a full-time historic character interpreter 6 years later.

No specific formal training is required for most interpreter jobs. The ability to communicate is the most important qualification, according to Wiseman. Knowledge of history is an advantage, but historical details can be learned on the job. At Colonial Williamsburg, for example, newcomers spend several months in the classroom learning history, 18<sup>th</sup> century language and deportment, and acting skills, such as improvisation and voice control. Each year, interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg attend refresher courses to stay current in the latest historical research.

Some interpreters have practical experience related to the character they play, like a restaurant owner who takes the role of tavernkeeper. On living-history farms, agricultural experience and knowledge of environmental science is often required. And to train for the part of a historic tradesworker, such as a silversmith, people usually train on site as an apprentice.



College degrees in interpreting also are available from at least 30 schools. Most programs cover more than character interpreting. They include recreation management, museum studies, or any other subject that relates to giving historical information to the public in an interactive way. Some also teach natural history and geology to prepare students for work as interpretive guides in National Parks.

The National Association for Interpretation offers certification in historical interpretation to those who pass an exam and have experience. It offers conferences and workshops, as does the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums.

Even with training, however, finding work can be difficult because of the limited venues for interpretive work. Employers include living-history museums and farms, historic homes, travel companies, and National, State, and local parks. Some interpreters are self-employed, performing at events or serving as consultants and planners for museums. To gain experience, interpreters often begin as volunteers, seasonal workers, or tour guides.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect data on historic interpreters. But industry sources suggest that beginning earnings are often about \$8 to \$10 an hour, or \$18,000 to \$30,000 annually. Earnings increase with experience and management responsibility.

Wiseman isn't in it for the money, however. "I love history," she says, "and anything I can do to make history interesting to others is rewarding."



Illustrations based on photos courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg