

Living History



When PBS's *Frontier House* premiered last spring, one of my students remained unimpressed by the privations of the program's would-be Montana homesteaders. Forget the rigors of life on the plains in 1883, she said. "They had patent medicines. They had telegraphs. They had *railroads*. Let people try to make it in the *1680s*: scrofula, Indian captivity, witch trials, slavery, famine. I wanna see *Colonial House*, baby."

Great minds must indeed think alike. For what seemed a wish that only a history graduate student could harbor is about to come true—and not once, but twice. In 2004, PBS viewers will be treated to an eight-part series dubbed *Colonial House*, co-produced by WNET and Wall to Wall Television, the same team that collaborated on public TV's earlier attempts at mixing the genres of historical documentary and "reality" programming: *1900 House* (1999) and *Frontier House* (2002). In 2005, WGBH, Boston's public television station, will try to outdo them with a NOVA series whose working title is the "Mayflower Project." Prospective "colonists" should act quickly: applications to endure a season in the *Colonial House* closed in February (four thousand received and counting), but you still have time to secure an all-expenses-paid berth on the hundred-foot ship that NOVA insiders sometimes call the *Mayflower III*. Priscilla Mullins and John Alden: follow their footsteps if you dare.



Fig. 1. Colonial House Web page. Copyright © 2003 Educational Broadcasting Corporation.

The historical "fear factor" is one of the many things the two series hold in common. "No one will pretend it's going to be easy," notes the *Colonial House* [Website](#), which dwells heavily on the "challenges" and "rigors" of this

"harsh" way of life. "No TV. No phone. No electricity. No computers. No experience necessary," runs the program's slogan. Both shows will ratchet up the level of difficulty contestants—er, colonists—face by plunging them into the remote depths of the colonial past, one-upping my graduate student by sending people back to the 1620s rather than the 1680s. Though the precise location of *Colonial House* is available on an eyes-only, top-secret, need-to-know basis—producer Beth Hoppe would confirm only that the colony would be "on the East Coast"—both series are set, presumably, in New England. In fact, both seem to borrow quite heavily from the early experiences of Plymouth colony, and experts at Plimoth Plantation are serving as consultants to the 'NET and the 'GBH programs.

But despite—or is it because of—the fact that these are public television efforts, the most important common thread binding *Colonial House* to the "Mayflower Project" may be the money trail. Both series are spurred generally by the reality-television juggernaut, and particularly by the phenomenal success of *Frontier House*, an out-and-out blockbuster by PBS standards. Its twenty-five million total viewers made it the network's most watched series of the last half decade, earning *Frontier House* a star in the public television firmament of Ken Burns's *Civil War*. And in the TV world, it goes without saying, viewers mean dollars—not advertising dollars of course, but fat corporate sponsorships that can look curiously *like* ads to the untrained eye. Viewers bring sponsors and sponsors bring big budgets—about \$11 million in the case of the "Mayflower Project." *Colonial House* won't disclose their working budget, but there's enough money flowing into the series to make it possible for producers to replace the "colonists'" lost wages during the five-month period of filming.

It's easy for academic historians to take potshots at the reality-television impulse driving *Colonial House* and the "Mayflower Project." "They should set it in Jamestown," one colleague mused. "Then all the colonists would be young and male, and we'd see them resort to cannibalism before they all gave up and died in the season finale." There's something to his cynicism. Both efforts rely not only on a high level of sensationalism, but on situations that create the chance for spectacular failure—sort of like watching a seventeenth-century version of auto racing. *Frontier House* even had the occasional whiff of jiggle television about it—ah, to watch those Klune girls chop wood.

But to dismiss these efforts as *Gilligan's Island* meets Providence Island would be a mistake on two counts. First, to do so would underestimate the producers of these shows, serious folks who are making every effort to do their homework. *Colonial House's* Hoppe, for example, offers a very thoughtful explanation of the relationship between indentured servitude (which the show will feature) and slavery (which its 1620s "location" largely renders moot). While she recognizes that the series will necessarily "explore and understand . . . colonial life in thematic broadstrokes," she's seeking a more meaningful kind of accuracy than the attention to bows and buttons typically found in Hollywood history. "We want to dispel myths," she notes, to make the past vital

and complicated as well as entertaining.

The second reason that those who are serious about the colonial past should not simply shrug off these efforts is less direct, but perhaps more profound. Public and private money spent amusing the millions with past-based reality television represents money *not* spent on other kinds of public-history experiments. Off screen, living-history museums across the country are contending with sagging crowds, flagging government support, and lagging visitor attention spans. Can it be mere coincidence that the *Mayflower III* is awash in a sea of dollars while the “real” [Plimoth Plantation](#) and related organizations struggle to stay afloat?

Think of the costs. Where PBS producers call in a roundtable of historians for a few hours of inspired chat, Colonial Williamsburg, Old Sturbridge Village (OSV), and the like train their interpreters intensively. At Plimoth Plantation, interpreters learn their craft—and their colonial history—during a sixteen-month apprenticeship that includes a program of primary-source reading, hands-on experience with period agriculture and technology, dialect coaching, and mentoring by senior staff members. Sure, *Colonial House* will maintain its “colony” for five months, and *Mayflower III* will face the costly challenge of building and sailing its replica ship. But Sturbridge maintains forty historic buildings in New England’s harsh climate year in, year out—at a cost of \$11 million annually. Think of the economies of scale. Public funding supplies about one percent of OSV’s budget, or \$110,000. The rest comes—as the PBS slogan goes—from viewers like you: private contributions, and sky-high ticket prices of \$20 for adults and half that for children, adding up to \$100 for a family of four. (Prices at Plimoth are nearly identical to those at OSV, while a day in Colonial Williamsburg costs a whopping \$37 per adult.) Which means that OSV needs something on the order of half a million visitors annually just to break even.

What do those visitors get for their hundred bucks? Without question, they buy a much deeper, more nuanced, and more genuinely *interactive* version of the American past than they’ll get sitting on their barka loungers watching TV colonists engage in contests of strength on *Colonial House*. But they have to work for it, too: to drive, to pay, to question as well as listen. And, even more, those who do their time traveling at the best of the nation’s living-history museums are forced to wrestle with the untranslatableability of the past: to glimpse not only unfamiliar technologies and clothing, but strange and unsettling cultures as well. Faced with a grim economy and a perpetual time crunch, many American families will choose instead to plant their bottoms in front of the TV, or to put down their hard-earned cash at Disneyworld, where the bill of fare costs more but asks less.

As someone who considers Plimoth Plantation utterly transporting, I fear the success of *Frontier House* and its spawn. Such programs surely will not *cause* the death of the living-history museum, but they remind us of the fragility and, perhaps, the evanescence of such costly and demanding ventures.

Perhaps the *Mayflower III* and the *Colonial House* will find ways to share their profits—and their audiences—with some of the poorer, dowdier sisters that make their glitzy success possible.

This article originally appeared in issue 3.3 (April, 2003).
