



BEAMING EAGLES

Jamestown caps off storybook regular season with a win to remain undefeated, **Page 1B**

THE VIRGINIA GAZETTE

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Interpreter takes Jefferson ‘home’



ROB OSTERMAIER/STAFF FILE

Colonial Williamsburg interpreter Bill Barker fields a lot of questions about what Thomas Jefferson would think of the current political battles the country finds itself in.

Thomas Jefferson interpreter Bill Barker reflects on 26 years of service at Colonial Williamsburg before leaving to continue role at Monticello

By JACK JACOBS | Staff writer

Thomas Jefferson has been more than a role for Colonial Williamsburg actor-interpreter Bill Barker. The Founding Father has been a lifelong passion and source of inspiration.

Williamsburg looms large in the third president’s life: it was here he studied at the College of William and Mary and served as the state’s governor before the capital moved to Richmond during his administration.

The city also looms large in Barker’s life: it’s here that he has devoted himself to educating others as Jefferson for 26 years. His tenure ends in June, when he will move on to portray Jefferson at Monticello.

“I’ve felt very much at home here since the very beginning,” Barker said in a recent interview.

“As you read him, you’re pulled into him,” Barker said of his lifelong interest in Jefferson. “He’s extremely receptive, conversational in writing, provocative, throwing out things that

make you think.”

As a historical actor-interpreter at Colonial Williamsburg, Barker interacts with guests at the living-history museum to bring one of America’s most prominent leaders to life.

His work combines scholarship with theater performance, and explores the relationship between the modern world and Jefferson’s world. As Jefferson, Barker has performed at the White House, Palace of Versailles and in nearly every state. He has been featured in “People,”



COURTESY OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

As Jefferson, Barker has performed at the White House, France’s Palace of Versailles and in nearly every state.

“Time” and “Southern Living,” as well as on ABC, CNN and PBS, according to a Colonial Williamsburg news release.

See *Jefferson*, page 7A

Regional plane crashes increase

27 wrecks recorded in area since 1995

By STEVE ROBERTS JR
Staff writer

WILLIAMSBURG — Almost 25 years after 12 people lost their lives in a plane crash in King and Queen County, there has been an increase in the number of airplane crashes from the rural shores of the Mattaponi River in King and Queen County to the water’s edge in Hampton. That bucks the national trend of fewer aviation accidents.

In the years after the 1995 plane crash, six more people have died and a dozen have been injured in 27 plane crashes in the cities of Williamsburg, Newport News and Hampton, and in James City, York, King William, New Kent and King and Queen counties, according to National Transportation Safety Board data.

While airplane crashes are generally rare, they’ve become more common in the region. An analysis of the data shows that the 11 crashes that have occurred from 2015 to May 10, 2019 is an all-time high for any five-year period of time since the NTSB began to use its current tracking system in 1982.

The analysis excludes data on crashes that occurred before 1982, as the format and type of information was substantially different than in later crash reports. The analysis includes all other crashes investigated by the NTSB.

The NTSB tracks and investigates crashes of all civil aircraft ranging from helicopters to flying sport trikes and Cessnas. The increase in crashes comes despite a national decrease in general aviation crashes, according to the Federal Aviation Administration. Nationwide, there has been a 41% decrease in the number of crashes in 2016 compared to a baseline period of 2001-2006.

See *Crashes*, page 7A

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Jefferson

Continued from 1A

Becoming Jefferson

The seeds of Barker’s story were planted when he was young, thanks to his parents’ love of history.

“I was just fortunate to have parents who were fascinated and innately interested in history and shared that with their children,” he said.

Barker was born in Philadelphia, which, like Williamsburg, has deep historical roots in America’s founding. That environment, as well as frequent trips to the circa-1760s farm his father grew up on in North Carolina, meant history was a constant in Barker’s life. Bouncing between the two areas meant frequent stops at Williamsburg and Monticello.

In college, Barker was passionate about two subjects — theater and history, particularly Jefferson.

Jefferson got Barker fired once. Barker recalled an incident where his inability to keep his nose out of a biography about Jefferson earned him a pink slip while working as a store clerk during his college years.

“I remember I was reading (“Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History”). I presided over summer furniture and there was no business,” Barker said. “I was told ‘cut it out, get busy.’ The third time was the charm. They caught me and said ‘get out of here.’”

He was also an actor. “I could not stay off the stage from the earliest time. I was just fascinated with theater and I was in several shows a year all through college,” he said.

Those two passions would come together when a friend of Barker’s, a fourth-grade history teacher, noted Barker’s resemblance to Jefferson. Between his looks, skills and knowledge of Jefferson, he would make a good fit for an open position at Independence Hall for a Jefferson re-enactor for photo-ops and celebrations.

Barker began working at



JONATHON GRUENKE/STAFF

Colonial Williamsburg interpreters Ron Carnegie, left, who portrays George Washington, and Bill Barker, who portrays Thomas Jefferson, discuss past presidents’ inaugurations.

Independence Hall as Jefferson in 1984. He also made an appearance in character for his friend’s students.

Colonial Williamsburg

In 1993, Barker joined Colonial Williamsburg as a Jefferson historical-interpreter to take part in summer programming. That position turned into a full-time gig. Since then, Barker has seen plenty of change on the streets where Jefferson once walked, both in terms of his own work and the work of the museum itself.

Over the years, interpreting Jefferson has become more nuanced and integrated with the stories of others during the Colonial era, such as enslaved blacks.

“It’s evolved more into the meat of the matter. More into his words and his context, which is so beautifully fulfilled with the environment. Walking the same streets, looking at these same buildings,” he said. “The amount of letters he provides us in his early life, during the 20 years he was here, brings Williamsburg alive.”

Barker’s ascension to full-time Founding Father heralded a new era for Colonial Williamsburg. Gone were the days of special appearances of noteworthy historical figures to commemorate anniversaries or celebra-

tions. Instead, Colonial Williamsburg began to introduce actors dedicated to historically significant figures.

Colonial Williamsburg now has a cohort of experienced actor-interpreters in the Nation Builder program, which is comprised of individuals who portray historical figures connected to 18th-century Williamsburg and who made important contributions to American history.

Many of the significant players in early America were upper-class men who owned slaves. A more concentrated effort to incorporate the black experience into programming started in 1979, which paved the way for a more nuanced look at men such as the slave-owning Jefferson, as Barker interacted with colleagues who portrayed enslaved people.

“The conversation became a lot more engaging, provocative and profound. We found this was what people wanted to hear,” Barker said.

Barker has been pleased to watch archaeology become a more prominent part of how Colonial Williamsburg not only learns about the past, but teaches it, specifically in regards to children-oriented dig activities. No doubt, Jefferson, himself an archeologist and proponent of education, would

find some pleasure in that as well.

Successive presidential elections have also been a highlight of Barker’s time at Colonial Williamsburg. There’s a steady rhythm to the questions guests pose. So much so that Barker can close his eyes, hear the questions and determine whether its an election year or not.

The questions that challenge Americans today — issues such as balance of power between executive and legislative branches of federal government and the power and influence of the press — also challenged Americans in the country’s earliest days.

Division is also a long-standing part of American political life. The only difference is that instead of Federalists and anti-Federalists, there are Democrats and Republicans.

“Colonial Williamsburg helps all of us understand that this has always been a part of who we are,” he said.

Return to Monticello

Barker will continue to portray Jefferson at Colonial Williamsburg through June 7; he will make his first public appearance at the Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello June 14.

“Bill’s knowledge, experience and passion for his

subject are unparalleled. We are proud that he will bring Thomas Jefferson home to enliven and deepen the experience of our visitors with Jefferson’s immense contributions to the new nation,” Monticello President Leslie Greene Bowman said in a news release.

“He will also assist us in conveying an honest, complicated and inclusive history of freedom and slavery at Monticello.”

In some ways, the move to Monticello mirrors Jefferson’s own trajectory. After finishing his presidency in 1809, Jefferson returned to Monticello ready to continue his work in education and Enlightenment thinking, Barker said.

“He’s entering, essentially as I am, the last third of his life and he’s not quitting,” Barker said.

It’s a fitting move for a man dedicated to one of the giants of American history. Barker’s own work will consist of furthering our understanding of a complex and vital member of the Revolutionary generation.

“I’m looking forward to fleshing it out even more. I’m looking forward to engaging the mindset of an individual after 40 years of public service, saying ‘I’m not done yet.’”

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Crashes

Continued from 1A

Across the region, there has been an increase in the number of general aviation accidents, according to the NTSB data. The region has seen an all-time high in the number of accidents since 2015 with 11 incidents.

At its safest, the region had just two aircraft accidents from 2000 to 2004, according to the NTSB data.

As recently as Jan. 26, a plane crashed and suffered substantial damage after a Yorktown man inadvertently crashed while on approach to a runway at the Williamsburg Jamestown Airport. There were no injuries.

The pilot’s approach to the runway was too high and both he and his plane landed in an embankment off the runway, Virginia State Police spokeswoman Sgt. Michelle Anaya said at the time.

The incident remains under investigation by NTSB.

While more than half of all plane and helicopter crashes result in no injuries, just more than a quarter result in a fatality or serious injury.

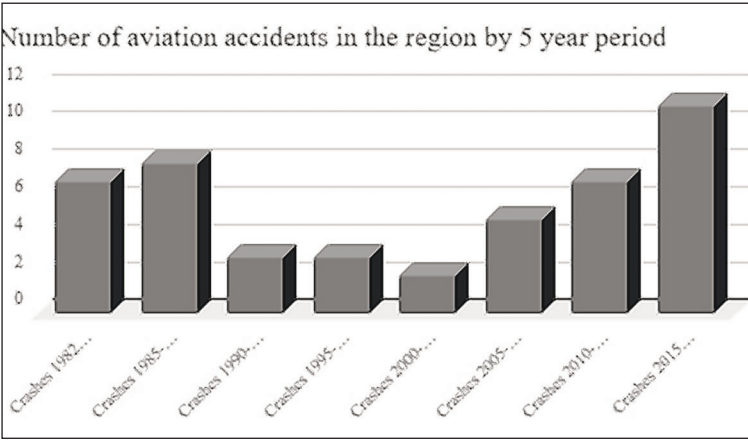
In crashes that result in death or injury, pilot error is a contributing factor to the crash about 70% of the time, according to the data.

Errors run the gamut from losing control of the plane — the most common reason for a crash — to knowingly flying in bad weather, according to the data and the FAA.



ROB OSTERMAIER/STAFF FILE

Fire personnel work on extracting the passengers of a Cessna that crashed in the Williamsburg Landing retirement community on April 19, 2013. Two people died.



STEVE ROBERTS JR./STAFF

In at least one case, the pilot couldn’t be blamed for a death that occurred on the plane.

In 2009, a skydiving in-

structor was killed in West Point when a student pulled the cord on the instructor’s parachute, according to the NTSB accident report. The

instructor died when his head hit part of the wing of the plane.

When a plane crashes and the pilot isn’t to blame, the incident report tells the tale of the person’s last moments.

“The flight had been airborne for (approximately) 38 minutes when the pilot began experiencing communication problems,” one report of a fatal crash in Newport News from 1984 states. “Nine minutes later the pilot reported ‘instrument problems’ ... 15 minutes later she declared an emergency and said her (magnetic) compass and directional (gyroscope) had malfunctioned. Twenty-five

seconds later she said ‘I’m, I’m starting to spin.’”

“No further transmissions were received. The aircraft impacted (approximately) 3 miles west of the intended landing airport.”

For aviation safety expert and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Professor William Waldock, reducing the number of crashes would likely come at a cost to pilots in the form of regulations.

“You could say it’s safer than it ever has been, but it’s really been kind of stagnant since 2005,” Waldock said. “We’ve kind of reached a level of acceptable risk. We’re willing to tolerate a certain number of accidents because to go much further to get the accident rate down you either get into some harsh regulations or some Herculean types of safety approaches.”

Waldock previously served in the Coast Guard in Yorktown and spent considerable time in the Williamsburg area.

He said he could think of no reason or obstacle — turbulent winds or mountains — that could trip up pilots to cause them to crash in the region. Alaska routinely has the highest rate of crashes, Waldock said.

“I see why you’re perplexed,” Waldock said. “I’d be kind of perplexed, too.”

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