

Welcome to American Mosaic from VOA Learning English. I'm Katherine Cole.

Claude Moore Colonial Farm is a US national park just outside Washington, DC. It is a place where time seems to have stopped in the 1770s. Workers at the park recreate and reenact the world of typical tenant farmers of the late 18th century.

The park is in McLean, Virginia and the imagined year is 1771. Most Virginians at that time grew tobacco for a living. Tenant farmers did not own the land they farmed but they lived on the property in exchange for some of the tobacco.

The United States Park Service created the farm in 1976. It opened just before the 200th anniversary of the founding of the United States. However, now, a private company operates Claude Moore, unlike any other US national park.

Facilities Manager John Engle explains.

“In 1980 the park service decided that they could not keep the park going and the people who worked here and the group of volunteers who loved the place so much got together with the local congressman and worked out an arrangement with the Park Service.”

Visitors to Claude Moore step back in time as soon as they enter the park. America is under British colonial rule. The imaginary Thorton family farms the land.

Park employees arrive in the morning to get ready to represent members of the Thorton family. They change into clothing similar to that worn in 1771. Then, they start their day.

Each reenactor has a duty. The women go into the kitchen garden where they plant for the coming season.

“Right now my girls are working in the kitchen garden. We got Martha the eldest and Sally the youngest and we’re planting our fall crops. So things like peas, spinach and lettuce, all sorts of greens, radishes, cabbage that sort of thing. That’s what we’re planting right now.”

That is park employee Heather Bodin playing Lydia Bradley, the sister of tenant farmer James Thorton. Ms. Bodin says the farm offers an unusual experience for visitors, especially young ones.

“One of my favorite stories was of a young man – a little boy – who realized for the first time that the chicken that you eat was actually from the animal chicken. He had only seen chickens in the styrofoam package in the grocery stores. He realized there’s a moment where there’s a light bulb off his head and you could see him saying chicken is chicken.”

The farm family gathers around the old wooden table for lunch. After lunch the farmer and some of the children go back to the tobacco field.

The story is that James Thorton provides about 230 kilograms of tobacco a year to the landowner. This pays for his use of the land.

“I must pay 500 pounds of tobacco to my landlord and that’s not a percentage and that’s a set amount, 500 pounds. So, if I grow 600 pounds, I only have 100 pounds for me. If I grow 1100 pounds, I’ve 600 pounds left over. So that would be a good year and I could buy my wife a new dress and so forth. But tobacco must be inspected, it must be weighed, it’s very strictly controlled.”

Claude Moore Colonial Farm brings history alive for hundreds of visitors each year. The farm is now closed for the winter months. It will reopen April 1st.

I’m Katherine Cole.