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Purchasing Destruction in Pre-Revolution Virginia: Class and Gender in the Nonimportation Association of 1774

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PURCHASING DESTRUCTION
IN PRE-REVOLUTION VIRGINIA

Class and Gender in the
Nonimportation Association of 1774

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

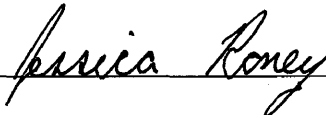
Jessica Roney

2003

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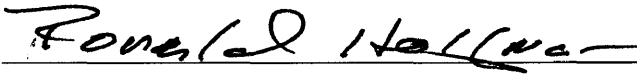
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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Master of Arts




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ABSTRACT

By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, Tidewater Virginia had a complex relationship with its hierarchical structure. The rising social pretensions of the lower classes encouraged the elite to foster a strictly regulated world of polite ritual that would exclude others. The performance of gentility was a staging point for ideological persuasion—it reinforced the hierarchical mode of Virginia society. Gender as well as rank were focal points within this public-private realm, and affected an individual's place and actions. Fundamentally, both men and women were vital to maintaining the system as it was, but they related to it and Virginia society in different ways. Elite women and men both played an important role in creating a hierarchical social system, but men were encouraged to interact with men of various social position, facilitating interchange.

In 1774 Virginians elected to form a Nonimportation Association in protest against what they saw as British incursions on their rights. The Association banned many of the items necessary to the performance of gentility so important to elite social control. Patriotic authors made use of the print media of the colony to convince citizens of the importance of nonimportation. Such authors leveled unremitting criticism against all forms of “luxury” and “dissipation,” arguing that these were totally out of place in the struggle with Parliament over American liberties. Thus, a new performative public evolved that eschewed the old rituals and instead centered on economy, self-denial and love of country. This new realm emphasized “public virtue,” defined as the common good as identified exclusively by the patriotic leadership.

Certain elements of Virginia society came in for blame for the present difficulties. Specifically, men accused women and “effeminate” men of unrestrained consumption that had sapped the virtue of the colony and reduced them to a weak position vis-a-vis Britain. Women countered such attacks warmly in the print culture, reminding men that they too were crucial if the Association was to work in the first place, as for example with their consumption choices and production of the food and staples that would be needed. Nonetheless, women continued to bear much of the blame in the print culture for the dissipation and feminization of Virginian culture that led to such extremes of consumption. At the same time, elite men took this opportunity to attack middle class consumption. The Nonimportation movement did not introduce these tensions, but provided an opportunity for the elite to give vent to their concerns and frustrations under the guise of patriotism.

The Association represented both continuity and change. It was a successful drive to maintain the leadership of elite men, who built on their earlier established networks between men of all classes to continue to guide Virginia politics. However, in the process it changed the understanding of consumption and led to a new patriotic performative public that centered on *non*-consumption. It revealed some of the underlying tensions of the society, specifically over gender (control of women, definitions of masculinity) and class (the rising pretensions of the middle and lower classes).

PURCHASING DESTRUCTION
IN PRE-REVOLUTION VIRGINIA:
Class and Gender in the Nonimportation Association of 1774

PROLOGUE

In the scorching August heat of 1774, scores of gentlemen entered the Raleigh Tavern, prominently situated on the main street of Williamsburg, a mere stone's throw from Virginia's Capitol Building. The elected representatives of the freeholders of their respective counties, this distinguished assembly—representing the apex of political, social and economic power in the colony—was nevertheless barred from the traditional meeting place of the Virginia legislature: the House of Burgesses. John Murray, fourth Earl of Dunmore and the Royal Governor of Virginia, had seen fit to dissolve the Burgesses in May for their public protest of the British decision to close the Boston Harbor in retaliation for defiance in that city to the Tea Act of 1773.

To many gathered in the Apollo Room, the private room set aside for them at the Raleigh, Lord Dunmore's decision to dissolve the Virginia legislature appeared just the latest of many worrying signs of British encroachment upon American rights. After the Seven Years War ended in 1763 the British government, in desperate need of funds, had thrice attempted to tax the colonies, provoking resistance each time. It had begun in 1765 with the passage of the Stamp Act, which required a tax on all public or legal documents. Colonial resistance had led Parliament to repeal the hated legislation in 1766, but at the same time they reasserted in the Declaratory Act their right to enact any and all legislation over the colonies. Just as American colonists could breathe a sigh of relief at this mixed victory, Parliament enacted the Townshend Duties in 1767. These duties

taxed several imported goods and drew another storm of defiance as colonists protested taxation imposed upon them without their consent. By 1770 this act too had been repealed, with the exception of a tax on tea, which was left on the books as a symbol of Parliament's predominance over the colonies. The Tea Act, passed in 1773, lowered the cost of tea for colonists but imposed a tax on it. Fearing to be tricked into acquiescence to taxation without representation, many colonists reacted with anger, refusing to drink tea until the Act was revoked. Bostonians took their resistance a step further, destroying an entire shipment of tea and earning a string of punitive legislation that closed their harbor, revoked their Charter and allowed British officials charged of crimes to be tried elsewhere.

Virginians were divided in their opinion of Boston's conduct, but regardless of its appropriateness, many agreed that the attempts at taxation combined with the drastic restrictions on the liberties of their brothers in Massachusetts signaled dire consequences for all the colonies and required action. As the delegates filed into the tavern, a heavy burden lay on their shoulders. Fauquier County's instructions to its two delegates were indicative of the sense of the colony: the representatives were to work with the general assembly to decide upon measures that would ensure "the security of our liberty, the improvement of our manufactures, and to procure a redress of American grievances."¹ The freeholders of Fauquier County recognized the interrelatedness of moral, political and economic concerns in this instance, and advocated a course that would at once procure their natural rights, economic self-sufficiency, and political sovereignty.

¹ "Resolutions and Instructions of Fauquier County" in Van Schreeven, William J., comp. *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road To Independence, Volume I*. (USA: University of Virginia Press, 1973), 135.

In addition to the lofty instructions of their constituents, the delegates had more personal concerns. As the ruling elite of the colony, they knew that any major upheaval of the status quo with the mother country could provoke a challenge to their own position. Thus, any action they took had to be fine-tuned to answer their ideological indignation with Britain, yet practically grounded so that their own leadership would not be undermined by the Pandora's Box they opened when they used such words as "liberty" and "equality," or "thrift," and "industry."

The outcome of that August assembly, the Nonimportation Association of 1774, was their attempt to find this balance. At once predicated on and constrained by the existing structure of Virginia society, the Association undermined one basis of elite control—namely, conspicuous consumption—at the same time that it sought to reassert the uncontested leadership of the gentry class.

CHAPTER ONE
“the People of fortune who are the pattern of all behaviour here”²

Eighteenth-century Virginia was a society obsessed with rank and hierarchy. This was made evident everywhere in the landscape and the architecture, material possessions, clothing, speech, and demeanor of its inhabitants. Philip Vickers Fithian, a tutor in Robert Carter’s household from 1773 to 1774, observed close to the end of his service in one of the most prosperous households of the colony that, among the elite

property, no matter how deep it is involved, blows up the owners to an imagination, which is visible to all, but in various degrees according to their respective virtue, that they are exalted as much above other Men in worth & precedency, as blind stupid fortune has made a difference in their property, excepting always the value they put upon posts of honour, & mental acquirements³

Contrasting Virginia society to the New Jersey of his recent college years, Fithian found a greater degree of deference moving up the pyramid toward the elite planters at its peak than he had ever seen in his previous experience. While personal acquirements, such as his own distinguished education, brought cultural capital—for example, Fithian valued a Princeton degree as the equivalent of 10,000 pounds—“blind, stupid fortune” did the most to set Virginians apart from each other, allowing a tiny fraction political, economic and social predominance through no right other than the luck of their birth into families of privilege⁴.

² Hunter Dickinson Farish, ed. *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor in the Old Dominion*. (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1957), 27.

³ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 161.

⁴ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 161.

Hierarchy: Stability and Stress

The hierarchy Fithian observed operated on two levels. On a practical level, by the third quarter of eighteenth century the upper echelons of Tidewater Virginia society appeared relatively closed and this tended toward stratification. Substantial barriers hindered lower classes from entering the established circle of elite families on the Virginia seaboard, though a degree of opportunity might await them if they migrated west.⁵ In the Tidewater region the scarcity of land foreclosed the opportunity of extensive property ownership except through inheritance.⁶ At the same time, the practice of entailing estates limited the ability of planters to break up estates among their children and tended to reinforce the trend of concentrating property in a few hands.⁷ An agricultural society that depended on land for wealth, Virginia thus appeared locked into a hierarchical mode with the elite planters at its apex, followed by smaller planters and craftsmen, tenant farmers, and slaves.

While this explains the make-up of the hierarchy, it does nothing to convey the extreme preoccupation Virginians had over status, nor explain the reasons behind this fixation. Degrees of “quality” were of extreme importance in Tidewater society and permeated every aspect of behavior. One window on eighteenth-century manners, the *Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation*, written out by a youthful George Washington for his own improvement in 1744, instructs on the proper time to doff one’s hat depending on the relative status of the passer-by, when to stand or

⁵ See Richard B. Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry: A Case Study of Lunenburg County, Virginia, 1746-1832* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1994).

⁶ Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 46-47.

⁷ See Holly Brewer, “Entailing Aristocracy in Colonial Virginia: ‘Ancient Feudal Restraints’ and Revolutionary Reform” in *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd. ser. Vol LIV No. 2, April 1997

give way to those of higher or lower status, how to speak, stand, cough and even dispose of fleas when in the presence of esteemed company.⁸ Washington copied his rules from an English courtesy book, which had derived its ideas from earlier French and Italian works.⁹ Thus Washington and other colonial Virginians' perceptions of proper behavior stemmed from traditions originating in England and Europe.¹⁰ In this sense, it appears odd that a colonial society with no aristocracy would emulate norms established in the courts of Europe. However, it was precisely *because* they had no titled nobility that Virginians, especially elite Virginians, put such stress on hierarchy. They cultivated a ranked order in their housing, clothing, and "genteel" accomplishments partly as an attempt to shed the provinciality of their colonial status in relation to England and thereby gain acceptance with the mother country.¹¹

Thus the preoccupation with status and the public manifestation of wealth and culture was in part an elite dialogue with England, a continual jockeying for the esteem of the metropolitan heart of the empire. Such esteem could bring individual benefits through lucrative business deals, intermarriage and political posts. More generally, it brought respectability to colonial society, and a sense of connection with the mother country that was important for both cultural and political reasons. Still, no matter how much the Virginia provincial primped himself in the latest fashions from London, his most immediate audience lay not across the ocean but next door. The elite preoccupation

⁸ Charles Moore, ed. *George Washington's Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation* (Mount Vernon: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 1989).

⁹ Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 31-32.

¹⁰ Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 32-33.

¹¹ Kenneth Lockridge, "Colonial Self-Fashioning: Paradoxes and Pathologies in the Construction of Genteel Identity in Eighteenth-Century America" in Ronald Hoffman, Mechel Sobel, and Frerika J. Teute eds. *Through A Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 300.

with status was an important dialogue the Virginia gentry had with others on the same rung as themselves and with those beneath them on the social ladder. On this second more esoteric level, the hierarchy was much less stable.

In Virginia, the absence of a titled, hereditary elite left open the question of who should serve to govern the colony. The colonial elite carefully separated themselves from the masses through a lifestyle made possible through their wealth. Gordon Wood argues that the distinction was so clear that to many, “the two groups represented different orders of being.”¹² This blurs the anxiety felt by the ruling elite. Far from being permanently removed from the masses beneath them, the gentry were in fact in a delicate position vis-à-vis their supposed inferiors. While nobility was seen to be inherent, gentility was predicated upon wealth, which set off the gentleman and lady from the rest of society. As such there were two intrinsic problems: a gentleman might lose his fortune, and a laborer might earn one. In order to forestall such a reversal, the elite crafted a complicated and difficult code of “polite” or “fashionable” behavior that could only be truly mastered if learned and practiced from birth. The stress on hierarchy, then, relied on wealth in addition to the less quantifiable traits of “civility,” and stemmed largely from a desire on the part of the elite to protect its dominant position in colonial society.

Of Tea and Technique

As the eighteenth century progressed, just at the same time that the Tidewater elite seemed most securely in control through its oligarchic control of land and governmental position, a new trend placed a severe strain on the hierarchical organization

¹² Gordon S. Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 27.

of society: the Consumer Revolution. This revolution was not recognized as such at the time, but has been identified by historians as a trend beginning in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, in which both the demand and availability of non-essential goods exploded at an unprecedented rate. The mechanisms of this revolution are still much in debate, but whether it was demand or supply-driven, the fact remains that consumer goods increased both in quantity and diversity throughout the eighteenth century, catering to a wide range of tastes and pocketbooks. This trend began in Europe, the location of most of the major centers of production, but the Americans were not far behind: imports to the colonies increased 120 percent between 1750 and 1773.¹³

The Consumer Revolution affected the Virginia gentry and hierarchical structure in two important ways. It had the tendency to blur class lines somewhat as non-gentry families began to purchase the goods that had previously been the exclusive domain of the elite. Consumption of luxury goods increased across class lines throughout the Tidewater region through the seventeenth- and especially the eighteenth-century. Though the poorest elements consumed luxury goods only in token amounts, the middle class represented a significant market.¹⁴ Those members excluded from the elite demanded and received products like those they saw in the great houses of the planters. The problem for the elite was that this emulation undermined the class distinction that their luxury consumption was meant to emphasize in the first place.¹⁵ The Virginia elite

¹³ T.H. Breen, “‘Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century” in Stanley N. Katz, John M. Murrin and Douglas Greenberg ed. *Colonial America: Essays in Politics and Social Development* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2001), 473.

¹⁴ Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, “Changing Lifestyles and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake” in Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, Peter Albert ed. *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 111.

¹⁵ In this eighteenth-century version of the rat-race “families at various levels were using artifacts... to create social distance from those below them and to bridge the gap separating them from those above.” Carr and Walsh, , “Changing Lifestyles and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake” 132.

turned to greater consumption, purchasing beyond their means and, as a class, involving themselves in increasing debt in order to keep up appearances. At the same time, they laid even more stress on the polite mannerisms restricted to their own class and not for sale in the marketplace.

Of all the products, the dramatic rise of ceramics associated with tea drinking represented one of the most remarkable trends across class lines in the eighteenth-century Tidewater region.¹⁶ This is no coincidence; through the eighteenth century, tea became the favorite “social beverage” of the colonies and satisfied palates across class and gender lines.¹⁷ Once the exclusive province of the elite because of its expense, by the mid-eighteenth century, tea had become much more commonplace, and by the last quarter of the century it was nearly ubiquitous.¹⁸ Throughout the eighteenth century, even before the Tea Act of 1773 politicized it, this beverage played a key role in Virginian society and illustrates some of the contradictions within its hierarchical structure.

Tea was a part of the cultural vocabulary of eighteenth-century Virginians; it provided a common frame of reference and connected them to their counterparts in England and other colonies, as well as to each other.¹⁹ In this sense, tea was a democratic force that erased class lines—the poor tenant, the grand planter and even the humble slave could indulge in an infusion of caffeine and sugar with some regularity. However similar the effect of the hot beverage on the stomachs of three such individuals, the way that each one actually drank his tea underscored the divisions between them.

¹⁶ Carr and Walsh, , “Changing Lifestyles and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake” 131.

¹⁷ Rodris Roth, “Tea Drinking in Eighteenth Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage” in Robert Blair St. George, ed., *Material Life in America, 1600-1800*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988) 439.

¹⁸ Rodris Roth, “Tea Drinking in Eighteenth Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage,” 439, 442.

¹⁹ Cary Carson identifies this as “style,” a force that “uses a restricted vocabulary of words, forms, and actions” to cohere a group or community. Cary Carson, “The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?” in Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, Peter Albert ed. *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 503.

Consider, first, the cup out of which he drank. While the lower classes might use a mug, which was multi-functional, the elite favored teacups, a specialized vessel that was an indication in and of itself of wealth, partially because it wasn't meant to be used for any other purpose than to drink tea. The materials of the teawares further showed class distinctions. Porcelain, the most rare and expensive ware, set the owner apart as a member of the elite. The Consumer Revolution, however, made this distinction more problematic. Porcelain continued to be the most prized of ceramics, but the ceramics industry developed and mass-marketed new, cheaper wares that not only mimicked porcelain, but were fashionable in and of themselves.²⁰ By the 1770s, the elite no longer had exclusive access to elegant teawares.

If the quality of tea services no longer served as an automatic indication of class, the etiquette of drinking tea separated the elite from the middling and lower sorts.²¹ For those with the means, an elaborate tea ritual occurred twice a day. Guided by unspoken convention, participants could encounter difficulties if not versed in the custom, as the Prince de Broglie discovered in 1782 when he toured the United States. This unfortunate gentleman took twelve cups of tea in one sitting before another guest finally informed him that laying the spoon across the tea cup would signal the hostess not to refill his cup any longer.²² This emphasis on such coded rituals excluded those without the means or the education to participate in polite society; it served to divide members of society into their separate spheres.²³

²⁰ Perhaps the most brilliant example is the targeted marketing campaign of Josiah Wedgwood's "Queensware" that connected the ceramic-type to royalty and high fashion.

²¹ Carson, "The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?" 503.

²² Roth, "Tea Drinking in Eighteenth Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage," 446.

²³ Carson "The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?", 503, 522, 675-76.

The stakes of these elite performances were high—cultural power translated into political influence and economic opportunity in a world where the three intertwined tightly. Gordon Wood has pointed out that genteel status “had to rest on reputation, on opinion, on having one's claim to gentility *accepted by the world* [my italics].”²⁴ Thus, elite power continually hinged on widespread recognition of status, a recognition gained largely through interactions with neighbors. Virginians felt the importance of presenting themselves to advantage at all times in order to manifest and secure their position in relationship to others within the elite circle and to those beneath them in the hierarchy. Rhys Isaac has suggested a dramaturgical approach to explain this process.²⁵ The gentlemen and ladies of the elite were at once performers and critical audience in a continuing drama with precise technique staged from Great House to parish church to court house to ball room to fish feast and beyond.

The Performative Public

For this reason, there was no clear dichotomy of public and private as the words are understood today in eighteenth-century Virginia. In the most intimate sanctuaries of great planters' homes as well as in public, the elite played out carefully orchestrated roles in an on-going performance. This was because even in their private spaces, the planter's family was not alone. The Tidewater gentry was constantly in motion, visiting each other, often for stays that extended over many days or even months. In his journal, Philip Vickers Fithian recorded in December of 1773 over twenty-eight visits from males, and ten from female visitors to Nomoni Hall, the residence of Robert Carter, his employer. This came in addition to thirteen visits paid by men in the household and ten visits by the

²⁴ Gordon S. Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 38.

²⁵ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1982) xxvi.

female Carters.²⁶ In the entire month, there were only eight days with no recorded visitors. Even this fails to capture the constant flurry of visiting and return visits that constantly preoccupied the Carter family because it fails to precisely track the movements of Robert Carter, the head of the family, who elsewhere is mentioned as a constant guest at the surrounding plantations.²⁷ Nomoni Hall, at once constructed as a place to entertain through such polite amusements as conversation, games, and dancing, and engineered to see to the accommodation of dozens of people at once, can hardly be considered private in the sense of personal or hidden from public view. With elements of the salon and the hotel, it was not a place of solitude or repose, but a bustling way-station—one among many such homes in the Northern Neck of Virginia—for elite families to see and be seen.

The scrutiny went beyond the elegant company in the parlor. The gentry were also under the perpetual observation of the people who made their way of life possible: namely everyone below them on the social and economic ladder—the tradesmen who provided them with the accoutrements of refinement, the tenant farmers who tilled their land, and, most especially, the bondsmen and women who filled every possible occupation needed to maintain a plantation, from cook to blacksmith to foreman to plowman.

In some respects this observation was deferential—there was a strong respect in the eighteenth century for “quality,” and lingering vestiges of the feudal, monarchic European legacy.²⁸ But the majority of Virginians who made up “the lower sort” were not passive spectators—they were critical participants in a two-way dialogue, and not all

²⁶ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 25-44.

²⁷ In May of 1774 as the political crisis with England began to heat up, Fithian observed, “Last Night, & this evening the Colonel [Carter] sup’d with us, which is more than he has done before since I have been in the Family,” in Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 111.

²⁸ Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 25.

of them chose deference. The coming conflict with Britain would bring proto-class tensions to the surface, but they were evident long before the outbreak of overt hostilities. In the mid-eighteenth-century the Baptist religion fired the passion of many Virginians who flocked to the new church. Though doctrinal issues played a part, Rhys Isaac argues that, “the social world of the Baptists seems so striking a negative image of gentry-dominated milieus that it must be considered to have been shaped to a large extent in reaction to the dominant culture.”²⁹ At the same time, settlers moving west were unable to re-create the hierarchy of the Tidewater for many reasons. Among those reasons was the fact that although an economic elite emerged, they were never able to force an acceptance of their gentility or social superiority, and this hindered them from consolidating political power.³⁰ Even slaves, the lowest members in the Virginia hierarchy, were active critics of the performance of the elite. With access to the innermost personal spaces of their masters, houseslaves especially had what can only be considered inside information about their performance of genteel rituals. There is evidence that slaves not only understood the nuances of polite social interactions, they undertook to instruct their masters how to negotiate them.³¹ Furthermore, gossip spread by house servants could have a far-reaching consequence on the reputation of family whom they served.³²

In a state of constant performance and under perpetual scrutiny—both by peers and subordinates—the Virginia gentry lived their lives with gradations of public

²⁹ Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 164.

³⁰ Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry*, 95

³¹ Lorena S. Walsh, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 124.

³² See for example Kathleen M. Brown, “‘A P[ar]cell of Murdereing Bitches’: Female Relationships in an Eighteenth-Century Slaveholding Household” in Susan Frye and Karen Robertson ed. *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 87-97

attention. Though there were clearly some aspects of elite life that were meant to be in the public eye and others meant to be more sheltered, little in their lives could be purely private. In this gray realm between the self-consciously public arena—a largely male-dominated world that included the House of Burgesses, church vestry-board, court house, and militia muster—and the privacy of solitude lay a public-private arena: a private space in which words and actions had public ramifications, reaching both horizontally and hierarchically through society.

Looking at seventeenth-century Virginia and Massachusetts, Mary Beth Norton has proposed the concept of an “informal public” that paralleled the institutions of the more “formal” public, comprised of state and church institutions. In the informal public, community members monitored and, to a certain extent, controlled each other through gossip and general opinion. Whereas men almost exclusively dominated the formal public, both genders participated in the informal public, and through it could have considerable influence on the decisions made in the formal public.³³ The elite of eighteenth-century Virginia lived in a similar world where community opinion carried great weight. However it was far from “informal.” Behavior was regulated by an established code, written and unwritten. As we have seen, certain strictures were well enough recognized that George Washington could write a set of rules to guide his behavior when in polite company. Other elements of the code, equally important and adhered to, functioned on a more subconscious level. Together, these rules of interaction comprised the foundation for what may be considered a performative public.³⁴ Like Norton’s informal public, the performative public was a mechanism to facilitate and

³³ Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers & Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 19-20.

³⁴ I derive these ideas from the work of Mary Beth Norton, Rhys Isaac, and David Shields.

control social interactions, but in contrast to her concept, the performative public was ranked. Status determined how individuals interacted with peers and with others above or below them in the hierarchy; at the same time it largely determined the expectations placed upon them. This is not to suggest that the informal public or its mechanisms no longer existed in the eighteenth century. The performative public overlapped the informal public, but it relied on formalized ritual and language, and in its behavior and influence depended on rank. Power was not equally distributed, going disproportionately to the tiny fraction of the population that qualified as “the gentry,” though this power was far from absolute.

Those at the top of the hierarchy relied on continual performance to create and maintain connections with other elite families. This was the crucial ground upon which business deals were made, politics influenced, and marriages (a time-honored and eminent route to wealth) negotiated. In this last, women—both the would-be bride and her female relatives—had direct participation, but they were players in many other aspects of the performative public as well, a subject that will be dealt with in more depth later. The performative public was also fundamental to relationships up and down the social hierarchy. The visual and performative cues projected by the gentry provided a framework for social interactions that went a long way to sustaining the status quo. In this last, material possessions and polite mannerisms played a pivotal role. Critical elements of the performative public, they were tools for a subtle “ideological persuasion” that sustained a hierarchical society with the elite planters and their families at the top and the great mass of the population below them.³⁵ Three examples—housing, clothing,

³⁵ Dell Upton, “White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia” in Robert Blair St. George ed. *Material Life in America, 1600-1800*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 368.

and dancing—are representative of the importance of material and cultural accoutrements to facilitating the Virginia social hierarchy.

Elite housing was a domestic domain but a public statement. The “Great Houses” of Virginia literally dominated the landscape. A reflection of the planter and his family’s power and importance in the community, the houses were designed to impress peers and cow subordinates. Situated on high ground and multiple stories high, they proclaimed the authority of their owners at the same time that a carefully crafted setting with tree-lined avenues, terraces, gardens and a host of supporting out-buildings created an intentionally hierarchical approach to the Great House. The visitor had to pass through a series of boundaries to enter the privileged and intimate interior; the number of boundaries crossed reflected the status of the visitor.³⁶ Any passer-by could see and evaluate such housing and make corresponding assumptions about the owner. The Great Houses were a forceful statement to outsiders of the rank of the family within, while those admitted inside further witnessed the wealth of the owner through the possessions on display.

When the elite planter and his family received visitors or went out in the world, their clothing served a similar role. Though clearly private in that dress was and is a reflection of individual taste and preference, clothing also functioned as a public declaration of economic and social status. This was true throughout the British empire, but Virginians were known to have a special enthusiasm for elegant and expensive clothing. Reverend Jonathan Boucher, an English tutor in Virginia, observed that, “so much does their Taste run after dress that they tell me I may see in Virginia more brilliant Assemblies than I ever c’d in the North of England, except Royal Ones, p’rhaps in any Part of it.” The result was that even in his finest satin waistcoat, Reverend Boucher’s was

³⁶ Upton, “White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” 362-363.

“nothing among you Lace and Lac'd fellow that are here.”³⁷ The Customs and Excise Ledgers support Boucher’s statement: Virginians placed more orders for imported clothing than any other colony.³⁸

More prone to variations of fashion than the more permanent housing, clothing reflected the cosmopolitanism of the wearer as he or she kept up with the latest decrees of style from Europe. Though fancy clothing could and did involve a substantial amount of money, the cost paled in comparison to housing, which meant that the middle and lower classes could more easily participate in this venue for display. Karin Calvert argues that the elite, faced with increasingly lavish clothing among the lower classes, chose not to respond with even greater extravagance in their own clothing. Rather they did an about-face and made their own clothing more plain and simple. Understatement, not excess in dress, along with grace and refinement that could only come from genteel upbringing, marked the gentleman in ways clothing could never do. While this argument does not address the trends in women’s clothing, which do not show a similar simplification over time, it underscores the importance of clothing and demeanor together in establishing one’s place in society.³⁹ Indeed, other clothing historians point out the crucial role of the garments themselves in helping the wearer achieve the graceful movements considered so necessary to refinement.⁴⁰

Dressed in their finest clothes, and assembled in public spaces or often in private homes, the ladies and gentlemen came together in one of the most difficult and most

³⁷ Quoted in Diana De Marly, *Dress in North America, Vol I: The New World, 1492-1800*, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1990), 100.

³⁸ De Marly, *Dress in North America, Vol I*, 197.

³⁹ See Linda Baumgarten, *Eighteenth-Century Clothing at Williamsburg*, (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1986).

⁴⁰ Alicia M. Annas, “The Elegant Art of Movement” in Edward Maeder, ed. *An Elegant Art: Fashion and Fantasy in the Eighteenth Century*, (New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1983), 45.

popular rituals of Virginia: dance. Considered “a necessary qualification for a person to appear even decent in Company,” dancing formed an important part of a young Virginian’s education.⁴¹ It required great skill—smooth movements (to prevent embarrassing clouds of powder from their elaborate hair arrangements or wigs), exact timing, and an air of effortless grace. In the intricate motions of the minuet, the gentry class of Virginia exposed themselves most openly to the criticism of observers. Captain Grigg, the captain of an English vessel, attempted the ritual at a ball in the Northern Neck, but “he hobbled most dolefully, & ... the whole Assembly laughed!”⁴² Philip Vickers Fithian, the New Jersey tutor, often lamented that his own education had not included instruction in dance because it impeded his ability to mingle freely in Virginian society.⁴³ Returning home from the same ball where the hapless Captain Grigg had so embarrassed himself, Fithian breathed a sigh of relief, “In my Room by half after twelve; & exceeding happy that I could break away with my Reputation.”⁴⁴

Through their performance of gentility, male and female members of the Tidewater elite garnered social currency with each other and with their subordinates. The performative public in which they operated encompassed individuals as well as the landscape they created and the objects they used. It mediated real power and social control, but at the price of adherence to an elaborate code of conduct and constant scrutiny by others. And, as we have seen, the lower and middle classes were not always accepting of the gentry’s position or influence. The growing conflicts with Britain would bring the chinks in this façade into relief, but through much of the eighteenth century, the

⁴¹ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 33.

⁴² Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 52.

⁴³ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 33, 42, 161.

⁴⁴ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 57.

performative public remained a strong element in retaining a stable world with the gentry at the top of the hierarchy.

Though the elite maintained their place at the top, the hierarchies of eighteenth-century Virginia were not static. Rather, they were ever-shifting and constantly negotiated performances. Dell Upton argues that in order to understand this society, we must see this quality of movement and renegotiation:

the continual dissolutions and reformulations of social groups that occurred as many planters moved from one place to another within the public landscape of which the great plantation was a part. A planter moved from being planter-among-his-family-and-slaves, for instance, to being the planter-among-his-peers doing business in the churchyard before Sunday service. The group dissolved again, and filed into the church, each to find his own pew, and thus regrouped as the planter-in-his-ranked-community. Or planters traveled to the courthouse village, gathered in the yard or the recessed loggia, and then went into court, where some were arrayed on the bench as the planter-among-his-fellow-magistrates.... Each social grouping had a specific character and a particular manifestation that was integrated within the articulated processional landscape.⁴⁵

Such an analysis imaginatively captures the importance of motion and the perpetual shifts in the social dynamic of the elite. However, it completely overlooks women and their place in the hierarchy. They too traversed the physical and social landscape, though in ways different from their male counterparts.

The Souls of Women

At dinner one spring day in 1774, the Carter family of Nomoni Hall fell into debate over women. Mrs. Carter said she had heard women lacked souls, to which her oldest daughter, Priscilla, responded with indignation: “if I thought so I would not have spent all this morning in Reading; nor would Women, (Said the well discerning Miss) be

⁴⁵ Upton, “White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” 364.

careful to avoid any Shameful, or Sinful Action.”⁴⁶ Miss Carter’s retort is revealing. In it she distinguished shameful from sinful conduct, underscoring the fact that sin has a religious context, while shame is assigned by no higher power than one’s community. Both were equally important however when fifteen-year-old Priscilla considered her soul and self-improvement, along with the third central element she mentions: reading.

Education was fundamental to an elite young woman’s performative persona. At a basic level, it helped her to understand how to discriminate what might be considered sinful or shameful, but more broadly it was crucial to her ability to participate in polite society and run a household. Reading extensively (yet within a certain range of acceptable texts) gave women the foundation for the witty banter of polite conversation that gained her approval among her peers. Priscilla Carter may have hoped to follow in the footsteps of her mother, Frances Tasker Carter, a woman who admitted to a love of conversation and who her own husband considered much better read than the parson of their parish.⁴⁷ “No panegyrick on the Gentleman,” as Fithian observed dryly, but a tribute to the education and diligence of Mrs. Carter.⁴⁸ Evidently, the Carters sought to raise their daughters with a similar love of learning. The girls were educated in Williamsburg, and upon their return to Nomoni Hall, their father engaged a tutor to oversee their continued education.⁴⁹ Books did not make up the whole of a young woman’s formal education, however. In addition she needed to know how to dance and play music, and here the young Carter women benefited from two additional tutors to impart these very skills.

⁴⁶ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 83.

⁴⁷ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 37, 66.

⁴⁸ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 66.

⁴⁹ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 36.

Apart from impressing their acquaintances and attracting potential mates by displaying their refined acquirements, elite women needed an education in order to maintain their households. Overseeing all the domestic aspects of a plantation was difficult and long work. Late in the evening, Fithian returned to Nomoni Hall to find “Mrs Carter in the yard seeing to the Roosting of her Poultry; and the Colonel [her husband] in the Parlour tuning his Guitar.”⁵⁰ Frances Carter was an exacting mistress, who personally oversaw many aspects of her housekeeping and directed the operations of the Great House, kitchen, bake house, dairy, and storehouse.⁵¹ She had a precise knowledge of her livestock and garden plants, and could quote to Fithian the exact amount of foodstuffs consumed by the plantation population in a year.⁵² Indeed, she admitted that, “to live in the Country, and take no pleasure at all in Groves, Fields, or Meadows; nor in Cattle, Horses, & domestic Poultry, would be a manner of life too tedious to endure.”⁵³ With oversight over the maintenance of all the members her family, not to mention the slaves who worked the plantation and the many guests who constantly visited, an elite woman had a full life.

As a hostess, she played a prominent role in society. Like everyone else, she was an actor and a spectator in the performative public, but as hostess she was also stage manager. She set up the arena in which her family’s possessions and persons could be set to advantage and oversaw the interactions of her guests. Here she could earn public acclaim (or censure) on her own account and assist her family members to appear with credit. Indeed, Cynthia A. Kierner argues that as hostesses elite women were crucial to

⁵⁰ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 45.

⁵¹ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 81.

⁵² Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 32, 43-44, 75.

⁵³ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 32.

their husbands' influence in the community.⁵⁴ Her efforts facilitated cohesion within the elite circle and underpinned the hierarchical structure of society. This was because the rituals of hospitality for which Virginia was so renowned were grounded upon "a hierarchy among host and guests based on property."⁵⁵ Equals participated on par with one another, but where status differed, the lower-status guest fell under obligation and might be denied access to more intimate rooms and functions. Through their role as hostess, women were key players in establishing and maintaining the hierarchy.

Many women held a large amount of power within this hierarchy through their marital choices. Since marriage was a key route to wealth and to position, a suitor faced an important challenge to convince the right woman to accept him. As Kenneth Lockridge has shown, rejection demoralized many of the gentlemen of Virginia to the point that they were thrown into a "patriarchal rage" against women.⁵⁶

Thus far, I have discussed women in a heterosocial performative public. When they gathered together without men, women's interactions took on a different set of conventions. In this gender-segregated atmosphere, women held two of their most potent weapons in the performative public: conversation and gossip. Through conversation, they passed on information about style and the latest fashions, which enabled elite women to dictate in large part the standards of elegant living. They enforced adherence to their standards and influenced individual's actions through the regulatory power of gossip. For example, in the spring of 1774, Sally Panton came from England to be a

⁵⁴ Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 5, 40, 44.

⁵⁵ David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America*, (Chapel Hill: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 301.

⁵⁶ See Kenneth Lockridge, "Colonial Self-Fashioning," and *Sources of Patriarchal Rage*, (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

governess to the Turburville family. Young Fithian found her attractive, but “the common voice seems to be against me as to her being Handsome,” because her clothing was “entirely contrary to the liking of Virginia Ladies, these I apprehend make her in their Eyes less personable, than to any one wholly unprejudiced.”⁵⁷ A few days later, Fithian overheard continuing conversation and disapproval of Miss Panton’s clothing.⁵⁸ No one else would be following her lead in fashion.

More cutting was the gossip over scandals. Martha Goosely wrote to John Norton about the marriage of elderly Mr. Camms to a fifteen-year old girl. The marriage “has made a great Noise here,” but Goosely seemed inclined to reserve judgment: “Pray why may not an old Man afflicted with the Gout have the Pleasure of a fine hand to rub his feet and warm his flannells comfortable amusement you will say for a Girl of fifteen but she is to have a Charriot and there is to be no Padlock but upon her Mind.”⁵⁹ Women were just as concerned to make advantageous marriages as men, and young Mrs. Camms now had wealth and freedom at her disposal. Not everyone came off so easily in common opinion as it circulated around the tea tables, and loss of reputation could be devastating. An article in the Virginia Gazette warned of the damage caused by defamation, and urged a halt to the practice. With rising drama this author asserted that, “the meanest and most cowardly cruelty is to stab a woman's reputation. A woman's honour, like her sex, is soft-complexioned; the very breath sullies it; a touch dashes it in pieces; wounds given by the tongue to her character, like bites from crocodiles, are beyond the healing virtue of balsam and the power of surgery; nay, an indiscreet word,

⁵⁷ Farish, Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774, 90.

⁵⁸ Farish, Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774, 93.

⁵⁹ Frances Norton Mason ed. John Norton & Son., Merchants of London and Virginia: Being the Papers from their Counting House for the Years 1750 to 1795, (Richmond: The Dietz Press, 1937), 102.

bolted out at random without malice, without design, often stabs the reputation of a woman, and the wound proves mortal.”⁶⁰ This author may have stressed the delicacy of women’s reputation, but in fact, most men were united in their fear of the power of women’s talk.⁶¹ A female network permeated the performative public, and as much as it enforced and reinforced the hierarchy, it was also a subversive tool against male privilege that worried them deeply.

Women held considerable power in the performative public through many avenues, among them marriage negotiations, tea-time gossip, adherence to the latest London fashions, and assisting their family members achieve gentility. In turn, women’s place in the performative public influenced the course of the formal public that was much more the domain of men.

The Spirits of Men

White men coexisted with women in the performative public, where they too had power—as fathers over their children, husbands over wives, and through many of the routes that women gained power. Still, many aspects of the performative public were seen to be especially a woman’s domain. It was equally important that elite males present themselves well in the performative public—they too were concerned with the fashion of their clothing, the preparation of their hair, having a mastery of the minuet, and the latest gossip—but they also had other outlets for their energies, whereas women had much more time to focus exclusively on the performative public. With access to the formal public and business, men had a number of avenues to power in the community.

⁶⁰ Virginia Gazette (Rind) – August 19, 1773, page 1, column 1.

⁶¹ Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Discourse*, 106.

Still, like women, their position was contingent upon successful self-presentation and the approval of peers and subordinates.

As Dell Upton pointed out, elite white men traversed the Virginia landscape with considerable freedom. Elite women also traveled frequently, but usually to visit other plantations and often in the company of men to protect or assist them. They did interact with laboring women, most intimately with their African slaves, but not at social gatherings. Men were not only able to pass through the physical geography with more freedom than women, they were expected to navigate the differences in social class. Charles S. Sydnor argued that Virginia politics in the eighteenth century represented a mixture of democracy and aristocracy.⁶² The road to power required elite status, but the planter had to cultivate the support of common men in order to be elected.

This meant that men engaged in rituals that did not mask social differences, but allowed them to share a cultural language and occasionally subvert the hierarchical order through tests of strength or skill, which did not favor wealth. Such contests provided a “ritualized outlet for competition” that eased class tension without resorting to armed violence.⁶³ Cockfights, horse races, court days, elections, and taverns formed the basis of a shared culture for men of disparate community standing, and allowed them to interact with each other in a social setting. Elkanah Watson, a Northerner visiting Virginia, observed at a cockfight “many genteel people, promiscuously mingled with the vulgar and debased.”⁶⁴ Despite Watson’s evident disdain for elite planters rubbing elbows with tenant farmers and slaves, Rhys Isaac argues that class was not forgotten in such arenas:

⁶² Charles S. Sydnor. *American Revolutionaries in the Making: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia* (New York: The Free Press, 1952), 60.

⁶³ Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, & Anxious Patriarchs*. (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 277.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 102.

“the congested intimacy of collective engagement only served to confirm social ranking. In this respect the operations of a face-to-face, rank-structured society differ radically from those of an impersonal ‘class’ society, where such mingling is distasteful partly because it does introduce confusion of relationship.”⁶⁵

The boundaries might be temporarily overlooked, but they were never entirely subsumed in male socializing. A central component of cockfights and taverns served to smooth barriers, whether between peers or among members of ranked hierarchy. If tea was the beverage that facilitated elite women’s homosocial interactions, alcoholic spirits was the equivalent in primarily masculine functions. “When we had dined,” Fithian recorded in his diary, “the Ladies retired, leaving us a Bottle of Wine & a Bowl of Toddy for companions.”⁶⁶ Alcohol was extremely present in the masculine domain—this included the formal public, especially the political machinery of Virginia. In June of 1774, after a “respectable Meeting of Freeholders and other Inhabitants of the County of Westmoreland,” to discuss non-importation of British goods, those present “repaired to the Tavern” and along with the quantities of alcohol consumed with their dinner, drank no less than twelve toasts to everyone from King George III to the Bishop of St. Asaph.⁶⁷ The quest for election-day votes was boosted by quantities of alcohol served by the planters in enormous ceramic pitchers made especially for this purpose. This custom was so popular and ubiquitous that planters eschewed it at their peril. Young James Madison lost his seat in April of 1777 because he refused to buy alcohol for election-day. Madison commented, “It was found that the old habits were too deeply rooted to be

⁶⁵ Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 104.

⁶⁶ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 42.

⁶⁷ Van Schreeven, *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road to Independence, Volume I: Forming Thunderclouds and the First Convention, 1763-1774*, (USA: University Press of Virginia, 1973), 163, 165.

suddenly reformed.... My reserve was imputed to want of respect for them.”⁶⁸ Ironically, such a remark indicates that ultimately elite planters had to listen to the concerns of the small-holders if they wanted to gain election, however much an alcohol-induced enthusiasm might have affected last-minute election-day decisions.⁶⁹ Sydnor argued this shows the democratic nature of Virginian politics and served as an effective vehicle for the lower classes to be heard, while Woody Holton shows how small-holders, through elections and other means, pressured the elite into radical changes.⁷⁰

In these largely homosocial spaces, men were able to shed some of the polite mannerisms necessary in front of women. The dictates of the heterosocial performative public could be extremely demanding and embarrassing because elite men needed to keep up a refined veneer at all times and felt particularly chagrined to trip up in front of women. Philip Vickers Fithian watched a dancing lesson given by Mr. Christian, a dancing master, to a group of the neighboring planters' children. Dissatisfied with the conduct of one young man, Mr. Christian rebuked him strongly, leading Fithian to comment, “I thought this a sharp reproof to a young Gentleman of seventeen, before a large number of Ladies!”⁷¹ Fithian had himself been embarrassed earlier that same day when Mr. Carter asked him embarrassing questions about his health in front of a large group of mixed company.⁷² In front of a crowd that included women, men felt the need to maintain correct conversation and perform the rituals of gentility flawlessly. Amongst themselves and far from the eye of elite women, the planters had another code of conduct

⁶⁸ Quoted in Irving Brant, *James Madison: The Virginia Revolutionist*, (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1941), 306.

⁶⁹ Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, & Anxious Patriarchs*, 364-65.

⁷⁰ Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*. (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999)

⁷¹ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 34.

⁷² Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 33.

that was more permissive. In the mixed class atmosphere of the cockfight, “gambling, drinking and joking prevailed. Horse races and fish fries were lesser sites of male revelry because women could and did attend both.”⁷³

Over the course of the eighteenth century, women broke into many of these male atmospheres. Taverns, once considered the “rendezvous of the ‘Dreggs of the people,’” installed private rooms where ladies and gentlemen could convene, and many balls were held in such venues.⁷⁴ Horse-racing came to include gambling by elite male and female spectators. Even election-day festivities grew to include dances thrown for ladies and gentlemen in the evening. Still, elite women were significantly curtailed in their access to the world of male ritual, and generally did not intrude on it without the presence of a male protector.

Neither women nor men moved in separate spheres. Like the shifting landscape that Upton discusses, they moved in various groupings, reconstituting themselves in different hierarchies and gender dynamics. In homosocial gatherings or in mixed company, among peers or stressing the ranked structure of society, the code of the performative public and the material possessions associated with it were crucial elements in eighteenth-century Virginia.

By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, Tidewater Virginia had a complex relationship with its hierarchical structure. Elite control seemed secure in terms of land and political power. However, the rising social and economic wherewithal of the lower classes, as demonstrated through increased luxury consumption, provided an unspoken

⁷³ Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Discourse*, 302.

⁷⁴ Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 185.

challenge as it expanded and therefore undermined the definition of gentility. This at once led the elite into deeper spending and the stress on a difficult code of “polite” conduct, which was an exclusive language that served to divide them from the rest of Virginia society. Such a life demanded a constant state of performance for three critical audiences: distantly for London—the metropolitan heart of the empire—to acquire cultural respectability; more immediately elite planters and their families performed for each other and for their subordinates. The performative public was a staging point for ideological persuasion—it quietly reinforced the hierarchical mode of Virginia society. Gender as well as rank were focal points within this public-private realm, and affected an individual’s place and actions. Fundamentally, both men and women had access to power through their ability to manifest the rituals and language of gentility, and both were vital to maintaining the system as it was.

Thus, before the increasing political upheaval of the 1770s the Virginia elite had developed multiple ways of interacting with society at large. On one hand, a circle of gentility, closed to all without the economic ability and education to participate in its prescribed rituals, divided colonial society. Elite women and men played an important role in creating this sphere and maintaining the continual one-upmanship that changed fashions and barred the less-affluent from attaining a foothold in polite society.⁷⁵ In contrast, a largely male network of social interactions brought men of different rank into contact with each other and facilitated interchange between them, albeit within the framework of a deferential hierarchy. Thus historians are right to identify the elite’s

⁷⁵ Cary Carson argues that the purpose of fashion was to serve as “an effective means to differentiate and mark off one group from another.... [C]hanging fashions and arcane rules of etiquette” excluded the lower classes from elite ritual and acted as “a dreadful instrument of social control.”, Carson, “The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?” 675.

“two-sided relationship to plebeian culture,” but this contrast must take into account the important role of gender.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Barbara Clark Smith. “Social Visions of the American Resistance Movement” in Ronald Hoffman et al, eds, *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: reconsidering the American Revolution as a social movement*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996) 37.

CHAPTER TWO
**“the greatest Sacrifice of private Interests
and the most vigorous Exertions of public Virtue”⁷⁷**

In the scorching August heat of 1774, over one hundred gentlemen entered the Raleigh Tavern, prominently situated on the main street of Williamsburg, a mere stone’s throw from Virginia’s Capitol Building.⁷⁸ The elected representatives of the freeholders of their respective counties, this distinguished assembly—representing the apex of political, social and economic power in the colony—was nevertheless barred from the traditional meeting place of the Virginia legislature: the House of Burgesses. John Murray, fourth Earl of Dunmore and the Royal Governor of Virginia, had seen fit to dissolve the Burgesses in May for their public protest of the British decision to close the Boston Harbor in retaliation for defiance in that city to the Tea Act of 1773.

To many gathered in the Apollo Room, the private room set aside for them at the Raleigh, Lord Dunmore’s decision to dissolve the Virginia legislature appeared just the latest of many worrying signs of British encroachment upon American rights. After the Seven Years War ended in 1763 the British government, in desperate need of funds, had thrice attempted to tax the colonies, provoking resistance each time. It had begun in 1765 with the passage of the Stamp Act, which required a tax on all public or legal documents. Colonial resistance had led Britain to repeal the hated legislation in 1766, but at the same

⁷⁷ Robert Carter Nicholas (attributed), “Considerations on the Present State of Virginia Examined” in William J. Van Schreeven comp. *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road To Independence, Volume I*. (USA: University of Virginia Press, 1973), 278.

⁷⁸ Virginia Gazette or Norfolk Intelligencer (William Duncan and Co.), August 4, 1774 in William J Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 226.

time Parliament reasserted in the Declaratory Act their right to enact any and all legislation over the colonies. Just as American colonists could breathe a sigh of relief at this mixed victory, Parliament enacted the Townshend Duties in 1767. These duties taxed several imported goods and drew another storm of defiance as colonists protested taxation imposed upon them without their consent. By 1770 this act too had been repealed, with the exception of a tax on tea, which was left on the books as a symbol of Parliament's predominance over the colonies. The Tea Act, passed in 1773, lowered the cost of tea for colonists but imposed a tax on it. Fearing to be tricked into acquiescence to taxation without representation, many colonists reacted with anger, refusing to drink tea until the Act was revoked. Bostonians took their resistance a step further, destroying an entire shipment of tea and earning a string of punitive legislation that closed their harbor, revoked their Charter and allowed British officials charged of crimes to be tried elsewhere.

Virginians were divided in their opinion of Boston's conduct, but regardless of its appropriateness, many agreed that the attempts at taxation combined with the drastic restrictions on the liberties of their brothers in Massachusetts signaled dire consequences for all the colonies and required action. As the delegates filed into the tavern, a heavy burden lay on their shoulders. Fauquier County's instructions to its two delegates were indicative of the sense of the colony: the representatives were to work with the general assembly to decide upon measures that would ensure "the security of our liberty, the improvement of our manufactures, and to procure a redress of American grievances."⁷⁹ The freeholders of Fauquier County recognized the interrelatedness of moral, political

⁷⁹ "Resolutions and Instructions of Fauquier County," in William J Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 135.

and economic concerns in this instance, and advocated a course that would at once procure their natural rights, economic self-sufficiency, and political sovereignty.

In addition to the lofty instructions of their constituents, the delegates had more personal concerns. As the ruling elite of the colony, they knew that any major upheaval of the status quo with the mother country could provoke a challenge to their own position. Thus, any action they took had to be fine-tuned to answer their ideological indignation with Britain, yet practically grounded so that their own leadership would not be undermined by the Pandora's Box they opened when they used such words as "liberty" and "equality," or "thrift," and "industry."

The outcome of that August assembly, the Nonimportation Association of 1774, was their attempt to find this balance. At once predicated on and constrained by the existing structure of Virginia society, the Association undermined one basis of elite control—namely, conspicuous consumption—at the same time that it sought to reassert the uncontested leadership of the gentry class.

"One of the fundamental Privileges of loyal and free subjects"⁸⁰

The crux of the problem was property. The Essex County Resolves, published in the *Virginia Gazette* in July 1774, asserted the sanctity of personal property as Virginians understood it:

the People of this Colony in particular, and of America in general, have a clear and absolute Right to dispose of their Property by their own Consent... and any Attempt to tax, or take their Money from them, in any other Manner... is an Exertion of Power,

⁸⁰ "Resolutions and Instructions of Essex County," in William J Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 125.

contrary to natural Justice, subversive of the English Constitution, destructive of our Charter, and oppressive.⁸¹

The growing dispute between the colonists and Britain revolved around taxes—colonists objected to giving up their personal property without their consent or that of their duly elected representatives while Britain asserted her authority to impose duties on trade items such as tea and demanded obedience. To Virginians, as to their neighbors in the other twelve colonies, this undermined one of their most fundamental rights: the right to property. This much was relatively clear, but the proper response was more complicated.

Boston's radical reaction to the Tea Act, for example, caused consternation among many elite Virginians. Residents of Middlesex County decried the "Disorder, Outrages, and Tumults," perpetrated by the Boston crowd that had thrown over the tea on that fateful December day. The mob action had targeted private property and led Middlesex freeholders to disapprove of it: "notwithstanding the Tax on Tea must be esteemed a violent Infringement of one of the fundamental Privileges of loyal and free Subjects, yet we apprehend Violence cannot justify Violence. Reason and Policy declaim against it."⁸² These gentlemen grasped the potential threat that could come from countering a state challenge to private property with popular resistance led by the working classes that destroyed private property. What if the property targeted was one day that of the gentry class?

Others were not so worried. Some took a different extreme and publicly lauded the Bostonians' initiative. In this analysis, the true culprits against property were not the residents of Boston, but the East India Company, foisting its unwanted tea on the public

⁸¹ "Resolutions and Instructions of Essex County," in William J Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 125.

⁸² "Resolutions and Instructions of Middlesex County," in William J Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 144.

in the hopes of seducing colonists to pay the duty on it. “The cause of Boston is the common cause of all America,” the freeholders of Gloucester declared.⁸³ Essex residents went further: “the spirited Conduct of the Town of Boston hath been serviceable to the Cause of Freedom, all other Methods having failed.” Moreover, no one could censure Boston for its conduct, “without allowing to them the Motives of Resistance upon the Principles of publick Virtue and Necessity.” The actions Boston had taken had been a last resort against tyranny imposed upon them by pernicious British Ministers and the complicit East India Company. In this light, the destruction of the tea was an act of patriotism in defense of the “publick Virtue,” a loaded term that will be discussed in more depth later. Thus Essex County freeholders, despite a cogent defense of private property (when it happened to be colonial) against taxation, saw no reason to repay the Britain-based East India Company for damages, “unless it be the express Condition on which all our Grievances shall be removed.” As this was unlikely to occur, Essex in effect proposed that the East India Company swallow its losses for the company would get no sympathy from the colonists it attempted to dupe.⁸⁴

Between the two extremes of disapproval and praise, many Virginians charted a middle course. Some, such as the freeholders of Fairfax, conceded that the damage to private property was indeed troubling and volunteered to help reimburse the East India Company, despite what they saw as its obvious culpability in the incident. “We Consider the said Company, as the Tools and Instruments of Oppression in the hands of Government, and the cause of our present distress,” and therefore resolved to boycott all

⁸³ “Resolutions and Instructions of Gloucester County,” in William J Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 137.

⁸⁴ “Resolutions and Instructions of Essex County,” in William J Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 126.

its goods. Even the guilt-ridden East India Company had a right to have its property respected. Indeed, the Fairfax freeholders were cautious about any destruction of property – they proposed to buy any and all tea in the area and then burn it.⁸⁵

Without necessarily agreeing entirely with the actions Boston had chosen to take, the majority decried Britain's harsh measures against the port city and saw in them an omen of what was to come for all the colonies if resistance were not stiff and immediate. The positions espoused by the eligible voters of Middlesex, Essex and Fairfax Counties give insight to the centrality of property in this growing conflict with Britain. All three counties agreed that they must respond somehow, but their conflicting stances on the private property of their adversaries highlight the difficulty in deciding what next to do. Thus while many Virginians agreed that taxation on their property was a problem and needed to be countered, the best mode of protesting it was more difficult to determine.

As Virginians cast about them for a weapon to counter British incursions, the best they could find—an economic boycott of British luxuries—was a double-edged sword. Cutting British mercantile profits and thereby (hopefully) influencing political decisions, the blade also had the potential to graze a local elite that relied on the symbols of conspicuous consumption to maintain their position in a society where political, economic and social status twisted together to determine rank and power. An attack on luxury at once implicated the elite, which engaged most visibly in the purchase of expensive British goods, and undermined one of the marks of their social standing. And, again, it targeted property.

⁸⁵ “Resolutions and Instructions of Fairfax County,” in William J Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 130.

*“In a tumult”*⁸⁶

Many of the most prominent political leaders of Virginia agreed that the best mechanism to protest the Tea Act and so-called Coercive Acts against Boston would be to form a Nonimportation Association. The intention was to put economic pressure on England and eventually force a political settlement. Twenty-five former Burgesses met on May 31, 1774, days after Lord Dunmore had dissolved the Burgesses. This group, including Peyton Randolph, George Washington, Robert Carter Nicholas, and Thomas Jefferson, were united in a wish to boycott British goods but understood that there were too few of them to make changes to the standing nonimportation agreement that had last been revised in 1770. In addition, they were painfully aware that the existing agreement, first drafted in 1769 in response to the Townshend Duties, was all but dead and had never been particularly successful in halting, or even delaying, imports from England. They would need a larger quorum to meaningfully discuss the possibility of associating against British goods, and a much broader base of support to make it work. Accordingly, they issued a summons to a general assembly to meet on August 1 in Williamsburg. The intervening months were to be used by the sixty-one counties of Virginia to elect two delegates each and hold conventions to ascertain the wishes of the freeholders.⁸⁷ The summons were in a fair way to be taken seriously: from his vantage point of Northern Neck society, Philip Vickers Fithian observed that “Politicks were the topic—and indeed the Gentlemen seemed warm,” while, “the lower Class of People here are in a tumult on the account of Reports from Boston.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Hunter Dickinson Farish, ed. *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor in the Old Dominion*. (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1957), 111.

⁸⁷ “The Summons,” in Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 101-102.

⁸⁸ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 110, 111.

The moment seemed propitious for action, but it fell at a time of disorder—Native Americans were attacking the western borders of the colony at the same time that the Fee Bill, which enabled the governor to call up the militia, ran out.⁸⁹ This also closed the courts and prevented the normal workings of business, so that creditors could not collect money owed them, and legal documents such as deeds, titles and wills could not be processed.⁹⁰ At the same time, the weather conspired against a good harvest. Unseasonably cold weather damaged agricultural prospects, the most dramatic episode being a terrible frost in early May which destroyed garden produce and ruined the wheat crop so that it was mowed down for animal fodder, and a drought that severely damaged the tobacco.⁹¹

Ironically, the disorder provided some impetus for a stronger Nonimportation Association than had ever before been possible. The poor weather and its detrimental effect on crops hurt the planters deeply because it prevented them from making payments on the goods they ordered. Debt loomed over many free Virginians.

This had been an increasing problem for the past three decades. In order to keep up with the fashions demanded of them in the performative public, Virginians found themselves increasingly in debt. Twice a year they sent invoices to merchants in Britain requesting all the imported goods they would need for the year, everything from cheap Osnaburg cloth for slaves' clothing to expensive calamanco shoes, from tobacco hoes to entire matching tea sets. A number of factors kept the planters from being able to pay at once for their large orders: tobacco harvests depleted the soil, lowering the quality of the

⁸⁹ The Burgesses had intended to renew the Fee Bill in the session that was cut short by Lord Dunmore's decision to dissolve it. Nothing more could be done till a new legislature was convened, which would not happen until June 1, 1775.

⁹⁰ Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia*, Volume I, 105.

⁹¹ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 112, 142.

harvests and consequently decreasing its sale price. At the same time, tobacco flooded the market, which also detracted from its value. Finally, whenever European economic conditions worsened, non-essential goods like tobacco were some of the first to be given up. With rising consumer demands and decreasing ability to pay for them, Virginians relied on credit to pay for the goods, which put them increasingly in debt.

This process of indebtedness had evolved slowly. Earlier in the eighteenth century, elite planters had personally controlled much of the finance and credit of the colony, but through the century British merchants supplanted them in extending credit in the colonies. Though this had the short-term effect of aiding the elite, in the long run it involved them and most other Virginians in extensive debt to British merchants and creditors. Through the middle decades of the eighteenth century, this was an omnipresent problem, but the proverbial wolf was not yet at the door. All that changed in 1772.⁹²

In that year, Virginia began to feel a drop in tobacco prices and the effects of contraction of credit. As Britain struggled through economic difficulties resulting from perpetual involvement in European wars, the price of tobacco plummeted in response to hard times and a glut in the tobacco market. In order to stave off ruin, British businesses called in all debts and severely restricted credit. The Virginia planters were hard hit by the simultaneous tightening of credit and poor returns on their crops. Unable to pay their annual expenses and short of credit or ready cash, big, middling and small planters shared in the depression conditions. The elite had been increasingly concerned about the debt problem, but the so-called credit crisis of 1772 threatened a broader spectrum of interests.

⁹² For an in-depth analysis of the rising debt problem, see Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*. (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999) and Bruce Ragsdale, "Nonimportation and the Search for Economic Independence in Virginia, 1765-1775," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia) 1985.

Small-holders were hurt by falling tobacco prices and almost all planters and merchants suffered from the lack of ready money or credit.

“Collecting the Sense of their respective Counties”⁹³

These were the conditions under which the freeholders of the various Virginia counties gathered through June and July to elect representatives to the August assembly and give them their instructions, many of which were published in one of the two competing editions of the *Virginia Gazette*. The Summons that had proposed the colony-wide congress specifically requested the input of the freeholders through these instructions in order to more accurately reflect the wishes of their constituents and therefore ensure greater compliance than earlier boycotts had achieved. These were strange times and called for nontraditional measures—the freeholders of Henrico County recognized the novelty of the situation when they begged the pardon of their representatives for thus publicly voicing their sentiments.⁹⁴ In fact, this process simply formalized the more fluid system that had previously existed when planters interacted with their subordinates in social situations to get the sense of their wishes. Still, it was a concession on the part of the political elite to the power of the rank and file of Virginia. The gentry knew that in order to forcefully oppose British incursions and maintain their position in society despite a boycott of many of the goods consumed primarily by their class, they needed the support of middling and lower class Virginians.

In their instructions, the freeholders of the towns and counties of Virginia demonstrated great latitude of opinion. As we have seen, their opinion of the conduct of

⁹³ “The Summons,” in Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 102.

⁹⁴ “Resolutions and Instructions of Henrico County,” in William J Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 141.

Boston in regard to property diverged considerably. The Summons had requested that the counties consider the feasibility of nonimportation and nonexportation, which again invited reflection on property and ownership. The proposition of nonimportation was a delicate subject, since the vast majority of manufactured goods in the colonies came from trade with England. If that trade were entirely given up, not only would Virginians have to forego such luxuries as tea or expensive clothing, but basic necessities would have to be given up as well, such as the ubiquitous coarse cloth used for most clothing of laborers (slave and free), tools, and medicine—not to mention slaves imported from Africa. Furthermore, with such a burden of debt, nonexportation appeared to some a dangerous path, which would at once hurt planters and their creditors in England who would turn against them. Others argued that with its corollary, nonimportation, nonexportation would be a powerful tool to convince Britain to come to terms with the colonies.

Many counties advocated an outright boycott of all British imports or deferred to the decisions of the approaching Assembly. Others wanted a restricted nonimportation agreement that would allow the continued importation of certain goods. Gunpowder, saltpeter (a crucial ingredient of gunpowder), and medicine were some of the most commonly excepted items. Many counties also considered it crucial to allow the continued importation of cheap cloth, tools and paper. Middlesex County rejected a general nonimportation agreement as, “impracticable, and... irreconcilable with every Principle of Justice and Honesty, injurious to the Commerce and fatal to the Credit, of this Colony.”⁹⁵ Though they were willing to limit “luxuries” and most East India products, they drew the line at anything further. Nonexportation was even more hotly

⁹⁵ “Resolutions and Instructions of Middlesex County,” in William J Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 144-145.

contested by some and drew limited support from many of the counties who feared the effect such a move would have on their creditors.⁹⁶ Still, many counties were willing to engage in nonexportation, though most wanted to postpone it at least one year.

Opponents or doubters of nonexportation centered their criticism on fears of what might become of the massive debt Virginians owed to British creditors. In this period, two theories vied to explain the colony's debt problems. One focused on factors outside the colony, maintaining that British merchants manipulated mercantilist restrictions on the colonies and took advantage of the closed markets, both in terms of their exclusive exportation of consumer goods to the colonies and importation of staple crops. The other major theory pinpointed the source of the problem within Virginia itself, arguing that declining virtue and extravagant spending had precipitated the debt and credit crisis.⁹⁷ Proponents of this theory had but to look around them to see ground for their assertions: imports to the colonies had increased 120 percent between 1750 and 1773.⁹⁸

The first explanation shifted blame from the colonists themselves and laid it on the doorsteps of British ministers. If one believed this, the colonists need not feel much guilt in delaying repayment of their debt—it had arisen out of conditions beyond their control. However, the second explanation, which seemed to hold greater currency among many colonists, would necessitate radical changes in the lifestyle of most Virginians, particularly elite Virginians. Several counties addressed this in their resolutions. Fairfax County called for an end to “all manner of Luxury and extravagance... as totally inconsistent, with the threatenng [sic], and gloomy prospect before us... it is the

⁹⁶ See “Resolutions and Instructions of Henrico County,” and “Resolutions and Instructions of Middlesex County,” in William J Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*.

⁹⁷ Bruce Ragsdale. “Nonimportation and the Search for Economic Independence in Virginia, 1765-1775” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia) 1985, 77.

⁹⁸ Breen, “‘Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century” 473.

Indispensable duty of all Gentlemen & men of fortune to set [the] example of temperance, fortitude, frugality and Industry.”⁹⁹

Condemnation of luxury was nothing new—it had existed in Western culture since Biblical times—but for the gentry of Virginia to question it undercut one of the foundations of their power and influence in the community: the performative public. Predicated on leisure and conspicuous consumption of fashionable imported goods, not to mention a calculated emulation and adaptation of courtly mannerisms, the performative public relied on the imports now to be boycotted and the luxury now denigrated.¹⁰⁰ What would this mean for the gentry class?

Public Virtue

The answer lay embedded in the Fairfax County Resolutions’ denunciation of luxury itself. Though it identified “Luxury and extravagance” as unacceptable amidst the growing tensions with Britain, it called on “all Gentlemen & men of fortune” to set the example for the rest—indeed it was their duty. This was no condemnation of the elite planters, but a call for them to lead in a new way. The performative public was not dead; the rules simply had to change. Conspicuous consumption must give way to conspicuous *non*-consumption. Leisure must yield to industry. Indeed, the gentry had a large responsibility to mobilize their economic weight on behalf of the greatest interest of the community. Many counties called for an increase in local manufactures to fill the void

⁹⁹ “Resolutions and Instructions of Fairfax County,” in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume I*, 130-131

¹⁰⁰ Cary Carson argues that leisure was, “an indispensable condition of gentility. Many of the new social activities by which ladies and gentlemen earned their reputations were forms of entertainment and play devised to keep them busy without actually working.” Cary Carson, “The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?” in Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, Peter Albert ed. *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 638.

that would inevitably come from nonimportation. Fairfax County gave the gentry a central role, stressing that the elite must forward “the Improvement of Arts & Manufactures in America” by outright funding and by selling sheep to their neighbors at moderate rates in order to increase the amount of wool available for homespun cloth.¹⁰¹

Such actions were not without personal interest on the part of the elite planters. They themselves had long struggled to keep up with the display of the performative elite, and, as we have seen, strained under a crippling burden of debt. In this sense, the nonimportation association was a godsend. Rather than signaling financial trouble by curtailing consumption, planters’ frugality became a patriotic action.¹⁰² Ideology was not absent from decisions to associate against British imports in 1774, but neither was it the sole factor. Financial difficulties exacerbated by the credit crisis of 1772 advanced the union of political conviction and economic self-interest to make the Association of 1774 more effective than any previous boycott in the colony.

The gentry were still looked to as the social and political leaders, but now in order to assert their position within society, they must bow to the common good and behave differently in the performative public—with men of a lower class by espousing political views compatible to their wishes, and among others—both of an equal footing in society or below them—by engaging in new rituals that advertised their sympathy with the “patriotic” cause. Philip Vickers Fithian noted the continual use of coffee in the Carter

¹⁰¹ “Resolutions and Instructions of Fairfax County,” in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia, Volume 1*, 131.

¹⁰² Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*, 85, 99.

family—“they are now too patriotic to use tea”—despite Robert Carter’s apparent ambivalence to the movement in general.¹⁰³

This change of affairs troubled at least one observer, John Randolph, the Attorney General for the colony and brother to Peyton Randolph. He pointed out the potential difficulties poised to the elite by increasing the influence of the lower classes and joining with them in a boycott in an anonymous pamphlet, *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia*, released the summer of 1774. The unjustified destruction of private property in Boston by the mob worried him greatly, and he feared the consequences of following the lead of the class that had perpetrated such an atrocity. He labeled the gentlemen who involved themselves in building a nonimportation association, “the most abject Slaves in Politicks. They have no Opinion of their Own, but are the Echo of the People. Propriety and Wisdom are often abandoned, in Order to pursue the Wills of their noisy Constituents.”¹⁰⁴ Randolph argued that nonimportation, in fact any discord with Britain, exposed the colonies to attack from Indians and foreign powers and would dramatically upset the balance of economic power within the colony as creditors went unpaid and debtors got off scot-free. The gentry class stood to lose a great deal through nonimportation. In his opinion, so-called “patriots” who supported this course thought they were leading the masses, but in fact were taken in by, “Men who can be no great Losers in the general Wreck of the Constitution and Confusion of Laws.”¹⁰⁵ Randolph feared the participation of the common people and trembled at the prospect of Virginia’s

¹⁰³ Farish, *Journals and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774*, 110; Robert Carter would not allow his family to observe the June 1 Fast Day declared by the House of Burgesses in sympathy with Boston and Fithian at least considered his political allegiances the way of the “courtier,” Farish, 111.

¹⁰⁴ John Randolph (attr.) *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia* in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia*, Volume I, 207.

¹⁰⁵ Randolph, *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia* in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia*, Volume I, 218.

future without Britain's aid. In place of the nonimportation association, which he satirized and discounted, he proposed that the "best Association will be to unite Virtue, I mean publick Virtue. This consists in a strict Observance of the Laws of our Country, and a steady Adherence to the Principles of our Constitution."¹⁰⁶

Embedded in his pamphlet, Randolph included several personal attacks on the Treasurer of the House of Burgesses, Robert Carter Nicholas, the eminent representative who had proposed the Fast in sympathy with Boston that had caused Lord Dunmore to dissolve the legislature in May. Nicholas rose to the challenge and replied in an anonymous pamphlet of his own, *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia Examined*.

He took up the cause of the Bostonians. Though he, like Randolph abhorred wanton destruction of others' property, he concluded that, "an Act of Oppression... will justify a Sufferer in the Execution of every Means necessary for his Security."¹⁰⁷ Nicholas agreed that property was sacred and that a man must be able to do what he wanted with his own capital, but not so as to "prejudice what belongs to another," which was exactly what the British had done in attempting to force their tea and its "odious" tax on the colonists.¹⁰⁸ He argued that a community was "materially interested in preserving the *Virtue* of its different Members," and protecting its constituents from their own baser instincts. The Bostonians had thrown the tea into the Harbor to prevent the temptation of tea at half-price, which, to Nicholas seemed an appropriate action: "why should we

¹⁰⁶ Randolph, *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia* in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia*, Volume I, 216.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Carter Nicholas (attr), *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia Examined* in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia*, Volume I, 261.

¹⁰⁸ Nicholas, *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia Examined* in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia*, Volume I, 266, 262.

expect to find a larger Portion of public Virtue amongst these People, than in other Countries?”¹⁰⁹ Nicholas implied the existence of an identifiable public good that superceded the right of an individual or minority to nonconformity. Those who might have bought the tea would have undermined the collective virtue of the community and had to be guarded against. Under such dire circumstances, those Bostonians who had destroyed the tea had been right to do so in defense of the “public virtue.”

In like manner, the other colonies now had to rise to Boston’s defense and stamp out discord. Nicholas saw overwhelming evidence of a systematic attack on the rights of the colonies that required united protest by all.¹¹⁰ He recognized the gravity of halting payments to British creditors, but such an action was justifiable in “Cases of the extremest Necessity.... If... the Safety of a Community depends upon its being done, the *Salus Populi* [security of the people] then becomes *suprema Lex* [supreme law].”¹¹¹ Through this lens Nicholas gave the patriotic rituals (boycotting British goods, drinking coffee or herbal tea, wearing homespun cloth) that must now characterize the performative public the inviolability of natural right. Having identified an overwhelming assault on the community (though some, such as John Randolph, might have disagreed), the course that the patriotic leadership determined was the one, the only way—it encompassed what was best for the community and became the supreme law, overriding Lord Dunmore, the defunct House of Burgesses, even the Parliament of Britain. It

¹⁰⁹ Nicholas, *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia Examined* in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia*, Volume I, 266.

¹¹⁰ Nicholas, *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia Examined* in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia*, Volume I, 271.

¹¹¹ Nicholas, *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia Examined* in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia*, Volume I, 277.

became the right of the community to ensure its safety, in essence, by any means necessary.

However, Nicholas meant this to be taken only so far. His polemic contradicted itself. He derided Randolph's call for an association of public virtue by demonstrating that public virtue must spring from private virtue.¹¹² Indeed, he stressed the association "must require the greatest Sacrifice of private Interests and the most vigorous Exertions of public Virtue."¹¹³ But there was only one common good, one public virtue. All "Diversities of Opinions and Differences of Interest," must give way to that single definition of what was best for the community; it would be enforced against non-adherents.¹¹⁴ Nicholas discounted anyone who did not agree with the patriotic version of the common good.

Public virtue stemmed from compliance with a certain definition of the public good. This conformity came either from an honest belief in the cause (private virtue), or from one part of the community imposing its beliefs on the whole, as the Boston mob had done when it threw over the tea to prevent those without virtue from drinking it. Thus, any means became justified in defense of the public good, but only as it was defined by Robert Carter Nicholas and his fellow delegates to the August assembly. In this manner, the Virginia elite asserted its leadership to direct the movement and define the parameters of patriotism and assaults on private property. By demonstrating their private virtue in the performative public, they shielded themselves and their property from assault.

¹¹² Nicholas, *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia Examined* in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia*, Volume I, 281.

¹¹³ *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia Examined* in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia*, Volume I, 278.

¹¹⁴ Nicholas, *Considerations on the Present State of Virginia Examined* in William J. Van Schreeven, comp. *Revolutionary Virginia*, Volume I, 279.

A New Performative Public

This protection was ensconced in the Association of 1774, formed by the Assembly. The elected delegates met for the first six days of August. On the sixth day they unanimously agreed to the Association, which the members signed and sent to the printer to be published forthwith. With conflicting instructions from their various counties, the delegates had sidestepped the problem of a binding resolution for all Virginians by pledging only their individual commitment to the Association and urging others to follow their example.¹¹⁵ This had the effect of underscoring their own personal leadership over the movement and set them up as exemplars of patriotism and virtue.

The language of the Association reflected many of the county resolutions and the concerns addressed by the freeholders of the colony, a significant departure from earlier boycotts and an indication of the importance of the small-holders' concerns. Signers agreed to stop importing anything from Britain except medicine, and, if Britain didn't relent in its treatment of Boston and revoke the duty on tea by August 10, 1775, they would halt all exports as well and stop planting tobacco. The Association called on gentlemen to set an example for the rest of the community. To ensure compliance, Virginians would be asked to sign the Association, swearing to adhere to its dictates. Those who did not would be monitored by county committees and, in the case of merchants, boycotted. The Association closed the courts until the boycott ended, a move that precluded action against debtors, and protected small and big planters alike. Since

¹¹⁵ Van Schreeven, William J., comp. *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road To Independence, Volume I*. (USA: University of Virginia Press, 1973), 230.

the Association called for a halt to exportation, closing the courts was a practical step in a society where most income came directly or indirectly from the trade in staple crops.¹¹⁶

This decision obviously helped a population struggling with debt and protected the gentry from embarrassing payments they could not afford to make. At the same time, it ushered in a new, “patriotic” performative public. Having identified a communal good and determined the actions that comprised “public virtue,” the elite leadership had chosen a course of action that effectively blocked many of the crucial institutions of the formal public: the legislature, the courts, and legal military action.¹¹⁷ The formal public no longer had jurisdiction over people’s behavior in Virginia, at least from a “patriot’s” perspective.

The new mechanism to monitor behavior became the Association. With mechanisms that paralleled those of the formal public, such as county committees and publicly signed and advertised documents, this body was however limited in its formal powers to compel obedience. A much more powerful tool, and one immediately called into action, was the informal public. Public opinion was extremely potent as an encouragement to conformity to the new standards of public virtue. This gave the informal and performative public great weight in influencing actions that were political as well as social and economic.

It also changed access to the performative public. Previously the elite had set the tone for the fashionable behavior in this realm. Now, though the elite still sought to

¹¹⁶ Convention Association, Van Schreeven, William J., comp. *Revolutionary Virginia: The Road To Independence*, Volume I. (USA: University of Virginia Press, 1973), 230-235; Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*, 103.

¹¹⁷ The state supported Anglican Church was not directly affected by the actions of the Association, but had faced growing critiques from many corners that undermined its influence. See Rhys Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*.

influence the extent of patriotic behavior, stopping it short of a critique of them or their wealth, many could participate in both creating and maintaining the new rituals. Indeed mass participation was necessary by definition in order to make nonimportation work. This meant that the elite had to “embrace broader identities” and bring free, white Virginians together.¹¹⁸ Barbara Clark Smith argues that “nonimportation, nonconsumption movements placed both relationships with the market and, less obviously, interactions between genteel and common, on a new footing.”¹¹⁹ This shift in social relationships was a crucial element in the success of the Virginian Association of August 1774, which would serve as a model for the Continental Association drafted in November of that year.

Across class lines, consumers could engage in a common political act when they chose to abandon “the disgraceful practice of tea-drinking”.¹²⁰ This was one major ritual of the new performative public that self-consciously crossed class boundaries. It was also one of the areas where elite women had once dominated in the performative public. The removal of tea rituals was just one signal of significant changes for women in this realm.

Gender and the Patriotic Performative Public

Only once, in the third article of the Association, did the delegates venture to speak for others. Declaring it, “the detestable Instrument which laid the Foundation of the present Sufferings,” the signers promised “we will not from this Day, either import Tea of any Kind whatever, nor will we use, or suffer even such of it as is now on Hand to be

¹¹⁸ Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*, 213.

¹¹⁹ Smith, “Social Visions of the American Resistance Movement” 38

¹²⁰ *Virginia Gazette (Rind)* – December 16, 1775 – page 3, column 3

used, in any of our Families.”¹²¹ Here the venerable delegates tacitly recognized the crucial involvement of persons not allowed to participate in the drafting of the Association, but without whose collusion it would fail: their wives.

Women were crucial to the boycott, and many rushed to register their support of it. “A Lady's Adieu to her TEA TABLE,” written from a woman’s standpoint and published in the *Virginia Gazette* in January of 1774—months before the new Association had even been put together—declared a rejection of the old ritual. In verse form, the writer discussed giving up her tea board with its “gaudy Equipage,” an indication that the writer had some degree of wealth to be able to afford such luxuries. She recognized the change in her social world that this must entail—“ Full many a joyous Moment have I sat by ye, /Hearing the Girls’ Tattle, the Old Maids talk Scandal, /And the spruce Coxcombs laugh at—may be—Nothing,” but she declared she would give it up entirely for, “I’m taught (and I believe it true) / Its Use will fasten slavish Chains upon my Country.”¹²² Not only were women being educated about the cause and versed in the rhetoric of “rights” and “liberty,” many of them were ready to voluntarily give up tea, though it saddened at least the author of this piece to do so.

Women recognized the important role they played. In an open letter to their sisters in Philadelphia, the women of Williamsburg declared that, “Much, very much depends o[n the] virtue the ladies will exert at this critical juncture.” Exhorting their fellow countrywomen to the cause, the Williamsburg ladies asserted they did “nothing more than their indispensable duty, in the sacrifices they have made, and are further

¹²¹ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon) – August 11, 1774, page 1, columns 1-2.

¹²² “A Lady's Adieu to her TEA TABLE,” *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon) - January 20, 1774 – page 2, column 3.

willing to make.”¹²³ The new patriotic performative public provided a new way for women to participate. Like elite men, they were examples before the community, and, as “the Seeds of every Virtue in Men,” they were central to the new rituals of the performative public.¹²⁴ The cause gave them a duty and a power. Part of their duty and power stemmed from their ability to enforce the new Association through their own adherence and by encouraging others to carry it out. Women could be brutal in their opinions of men who did not take up the patriotic cause. One self-effacing author, referring to herself as a “giddy trifling Girl,” wrote a poem rejecting any “Man, however pretty, / However Riches round him flow, / However wise, or great, or witty, / That’s to his Country’s Rights a Foe.” She concluded that, “To scorn them is each Female’s Duty,” for clearly such individuals had no right to any of the “social Joys of Life.”¹²⁵ Women had held significant power in the performative public before, and now, as that realm took on a more central role, they self-consciously asserted their power within it.

Despite a chorus of female voices in the mainstream print culture showing their support of the cause, significant space was devoted to an attack on women. Part of the patriotic performative public involved a rejection of the exclusive rituals and extravagant display that had relied on British imports. Put another way, the new performative public must distance itself from the old in order to be credible. Both genders had negotiated the old performative public and gained power through it, but it was a world particularly associated with women, and this stood to benefit elite men trying to cultivate a new way to lead society outside of the formal institutions they had once dominated. In essence elite men deflected potential criticism by pointing toward women and their role in

¹²³ “To the Ladies of Pennsylvania,” *Virginia Gazette (Rind)* – September 15, 1774 – page 1, column 3.

¹²⁴ “An Essay on WOMEN,” *Virginia Gazette (Purdie And Dixon)* March 4, 1773 – page 2, column 1.

¹²⁵ *Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon)* – June 2, 1774 – page 4, column 1.

gentility and consumption. This left their own hands clean as they prepared to assume the mantle of leadership through the Association.

Print culture depicted women as especially susceptible to the corrupting influences of consumption. “The Devil's in Woman, expensive and fair!” declared a humorous poem in the *Virginia Gazette* in February 1774.¹²⁶ Indeed, some laid the blame for Virginia's indebtedness to women's costly tastes. In 1772, in the midst of the credit crisis, one writer warned against the dangers of debt and luxury. The author hoped that the contraction of credit might help “dissuade a weak vain Woman, and oblige her to put a Restraint on her Desires,” thereby fulfilling her duties as wife and mother that were neglected because of her “frequent Excursions abroad.”¹²⁷ In this author's view, women's consumption not only stemmed from a lack of self-restraint or virtue, it undermined the patriarchal order as women left their homes and responsibilities for what he saw as frivolous pursuits. The author did not recognize the important contributions of elite women to their family's standing through presentation of self and home. Rather, the author implied that women were an important factor in the credit difficulties that many planters faced.

For this reason, when the public discourse warned against “Unbounded extravagance and dissipation,” these charges were intimately connected with femininity. Through the medium of the *Virginia Gazette*, “An Old Fellow” lamented the decline of manners in Britain and the imminent replication of this fall in the colonies. The author reminded his readers that, “Virtue is always connected with Plainness and Simplicity,

¹²⁶ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon) - February 17, 1774, page 4, column 1.

¹²⁷ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon) - March 5, 1772, page 1, column 2.

Effeminacy always with luxurious Refinement.”¹²⁸ Virginians had to stand against the forces of moral decline, represented by luxury and indolence, if they would stave off the death of civilization.¹²⁹

The stylish dress that women worked so hard to appear in suddenly became the butt of reproving observers. One writer mocked the pretensions of women following the current fashions: “Her Head is metamorphised into a Pyramid of *Wool, Flowers* and *Grease*, and all the rest of her delicate Frame made *showy* as a *Peacock*.”¹³⁰ Dress, an important distinguishing symbol of status for both men and women, was associated with vain women and caricatured. Men were not exempt from such attacks on personal appearance; the print culture denigrated “Macaronis,” effeminate men concerned primarily with fashion and expensive, leisured pursuits.

The womanish, foppish Macaroni was less than a man. These individuals had surrendered their very masculinity and stood condemned for effeminacy and weakness. The Macaroni was the product of the luxuries of modern society: “Every Circumstance of modern Use conspires to soothe him into the Excess of Effeminacy; warm Carpets are spread under his Feet, warm Hangings surround him, Doors and Windows nicely jointed prevent the least rude Encroachments of the external Air.”¹³¹ Living their lives “With women’s hearts, and manly features,” these men were seen to be of the “Middle sex” or “neuter gender” and inherently in contradiction to the patriotism of the hour.¹³² Macaronis were stylized exaggerations. They took consumption to the same extremes

¹²⁸ Virginia Gazette (Purdie And Dixon) – December 29, 1774, page 1, column 2

¹²⁹ Gordon S. Wood. *Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 51-53, Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon) Mar 17, 1774, page 1, columns 2-3.

¹³⁰ Virginia Gazette (Purdie And Dixon) - November 24, 1774, page 1, column 1.

¹³¹ Virginia Gazette (Purdie And Dixon) - January 21, 1773, page 1, columns 1-3

¹³² Virginia Gazette (Rind)-- August 11, 1774, page 1, column 2

that women were accused of in the public discourse. However, few if any of the men of the Virginia elite went to the outermost limits defined by these fops, so the symbol of the Macaroni also served to demarcate an extreme that protected mainstream men from assaults on their masculinity. Only effeminate men were condemned for their consumption habits; the habits of the manly planter, on the other hand, were free from examination or blame.

As the imperial conflict became more heated, elite men sought to distance themselves from association with the dissipated habits of luxury, which many theorists argued corrupted their society. By focusing criticism on women and effeminate Macaronis, elite men positioned themselves to lead the condemnation of elite culture, defining its parameters and limiting the radicalism of the attack. By focusing resentment on women as a group, elite men deflected specific criticism of themselves and their position in society. Further, as long as their wives refrained from the excesses of debauchery described in the print media, individual planters' wives were protected.¹³³

Still, women balked at the representation of their sex as uninterested in the cause. Virginian women urged men not to underrate their commitment or ability. The ladies of Bedford formed their own Association and cautioned men not to,

cast Reflections on our Sex,
Because the weaker Sort we be;
We'll work our Fingers to the Bone,
Before we'll lose our Liberty.
Our honest Hearts abound with Zeal,
We'll fight it out with Courage free;
And bid adieu to India Stuff,

¹³³ Richard Bushman argues that once the Revolution was over, the elite employed satire, which protected their class in general by giving them "ample space... short of these limits" in which to operate without over-stepping the bounds of republicanism. *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*, 197.

Before we'll lose our Liberty ¹³⁴

The language of the Bedford women is indicative on many levels. In addition to understanding the importance of the Association, these women were quite willing to do without imported luxuries, and to work their fingers to the bone to make up the shortages that would ensue from a boycott of British goods. One of the most important imports to Virginia was cloth, the vast majority of which came from Britain. The drafters of the Association recognized this problem when they advocated increased wool production, but in the end it would be women to process, spin, and weave it into cloth. Homespun cloth was a symbol of the central role of female labor to the growing patriotic movement.

Would-be Patriarchs

The crucial role women played was exactly part of the problem. Currents deeper than the recently introduced imperial crisis influenced the print dialogue about public virtue, luxury, gender, and class. The critique of female consumption revealed deep tensions over gender and domination. In a patriarchal culture that valued independence for men and control of all subordinates—including women, children, slaves, and less wealthy white men—elite male colonists felt pressure to assert their authority at all times. Widows and women who pushed the bounds of what men considered acceptable behavior undermined male authority. Men became frustrated with their peripheral status in the empire and by women who did not fit into the categories assigned to them (submissive daughter, sister or wife), and this frustration manifested itself in “patriarchal rage” against

¹³⁴ “Verses addressed by the Ladies of Bedford, at their Meeting to resolve against TEA, to the Gentlemen of that Place,” *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon) March 17, 1774 – page 2, column 2.

women, sometimes overt, sometimes unconscious.¹³⁵ By 1772 elite men had good cause to be uneasy about their position as patriarchs, a status that assumed independence. Indebtedness, particularly by the sudden contraction of credit in 1772, undermined any pretensions of autonomy. By passing the blame for excessive consumption to women, would-be patriarchs avoided introspection into the causes of their economic problems that might diminish their understanding of their own manhood.

The fact was that elite men remained vulnerable to questioning about their independence, masculinity and consumption habits, though this was generally passed over in the print culture. If women were the root of the problem behind consumption, the implicit question arose: where were the men who were supposed to control these women? There were only two possible conclusions: either elite men were actually in collusion with female consumption habits, or women ultimately were *not* under the control of their male relatives. Either conclusion presented problems for elite male leadership. The former, probably closer to the truth in most cases, undermined their position in the nonconsumption Association, while the latter emasculated their role as patriarchs and weakened the hierarchy. Few writers touched this subject. One exception was an author writing in 1772 against the evils of credit: “Where is the Man who can refuse to a Wife whom he loves, or perhaps fears...?” The author concluded that blame could not be assigned to such men, but that the only solution to the problem would be to make credit illegal by an act of legislature, thereby protecting men from their own vulnerabilities—be it overindulgence or intimidation—in relation to “the weaker sex.”¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Kenneth Lockridge, *Sources of Patriarchal Rage*, (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

¹³⁶ Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon) - March 5, 1772, page 1, column 2

Women underscored male insecurities about their status as patriarchs and as members of the British Empire. Kenneth Lockridge argues that elite Virginian men struggled constantly with their identity, which hinged between two worlds. Desperate to be taken seriously by the metropolitan centers of the empire, they engaged in “genteel display,” but their pretensions were “doomed to failure, because the very intensity and visibility of their efforts... mark[ed] them as imitations.”¹³⁷ Furthermore, as a slave society, colonial Virginia was inherently distanced from metropolitan, urbane culture that increasingly undertook to disassociate violence from legitimate civil society. The brutality of bondage precluded re-creation of the very social world that the profits of slavery sought to emulate.¹³⁸

Elite men seethed at their unsuccessful self-constructions in the empire and unconsciously vented their rage on women. Indeed, Lockridge suggests that women had surpassed men in their adoption of genteel norms, forcing men to “counterattack” by embracing the rational ideals of the Enlightenment. Thus, “‘civilization’ may have become the battleground, above all, of gender.”¹³⁹

Equally worrisome to elite men were the rising pretensions of the middle and lower classes. In a world where material possessions connoted status, the gentry

¹³⁷ Kenneth Lockridge, “Colonial Self-Fashioning: Paradoxes and Pathologies in the Construction of Genteel Identity in Eighteenth-Century America” in Ronald Hoffman et al, ed., *Through A Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 300

¹³⁸ Rhys Isaac. “Stories and Constructions of Identity: Folk Tellings and Diary Inscriptions in Revolutionary Virginia,” in Ronald Hoffman, Mechel Sobel, and Frerika J. Teute ed., *Through A Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 227-228.

¹³⁹ Lockridge, “Colonial Self-Fashioning: Paradoxes and Pathologies in the Construction of Genteel Identity in Eighteenth-Century America” 294; Richard Bushman notes that through the eighteenth century, elite women grew to be distinguished as having a special connection with refinement. They were “more naturally delicate and sensitive and so more open to refining influences,” though this also led them to be vulnerable to being characterized as vain, shallow and snobbish. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*. 190.

cultivated a separate sphere of refinement to set itself apart from the rest of society. These symbols asserted the dominance of the gentry over the rest of society, a reflection of the English hierarchy of nobility. However, unlike the nobility, the gentry had no hereditary title to justify or ensure their social position. If they lost their wealth, they lost their position. Conversely, as others attained material wealth, they could climb the social ladder and usurp power. Gentility, in important respects, was thus for sale. The elite had long been concerned about the rising consumption of the middle class, as it tended to challenge the very exclusivity that symbolized their elite status in the first place. The elite took advantage of the nonconsumption fervor and attacks on luxury and effeminacy to criticize middle-class consumption.

One writer observed that, “as the Taste of Pleasure has reached not only the middling, but also the lower Class of People, we cannot wonder at the Number of Bankrupts of the former, or the frequent Executions of the latter. It leads insensibly to Ruin.” The author warned, “we purchase Destruction,” and cautioned that all classes should restrict their spending, the upper classes setting the example for those lower in the hierarchy.¹⁴⁰ This had the effect of continuing to emphasize the elite’s leadership role while condemning the middle class for emulating the gentry’s consumption habits.

Other writers satirized the pretensions of the lower classes’ aspirations and social mobility. One author wrote about a shopkeeper who was economically successful and suddenly forgot his status, so that “he bids adieu to Humility, and apprehends he is a consummate *wise Fellow*, and a complete *Gentleman*. He forgets what he *has been*, and thinks only of what he is and what he *may be*.” With his riches, the shopkeeper “sets up his *one-Horse Chaise*, smokes a *Pipe* and *drinks* a Pint every Night extra, and sincerely

¹⁴⁰ Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon) - January 20, 1774, page 2, column 1

believes he is quite the Man of *Fashion, Pleasure and Understanding.*” But this can never be. Addressing the shopkeeper, the author explains, “Deluded Fool! thy Attempt to appear fashionable only exposes thy Ignorance! Thou makest thyself a precious Blockhead by trying to become a Man of Pleasure, and thy Understanding presents itself in its natural shallow State to every Observer.” The author concludes that the situation can only be remedied by “reversing thy Behaviour, and laying aside thy Affectation!”¹⁴¹

Such tirades show the sensitivity of the elite to the expanded consumption of the lower classes. Asserting that simply buying the accoutrements of gentility does not automatically confer that status on the owner, this author emphasizes the importance of understanding the rituals and codes of the performative public. As much as the unfortunate shopkeeper may acquire material possessions, he can never truly participate in gentility because of his shallow “Understanding.” By aping the upper class, the shopkeeper only exposes himself to ridicule. The only solution is for the shopkeeper to give up his luxuries and pretensions and to renounce his sham gentility. This conclusion was comforting to the elite because it emphasized that they led by virtue of more than just their material wealth. However, the very fact that such articles increasingly appeared in the *Gazette* suggests a rising fear that this might not be the case and that the hierarchical social dynamic cultivated through the eighteenth century might be shifting.

In the end, such concerns turned out to be justified. Change was in the air. The Association of 1774 failed to force Britain to redress colonial grievances. Two short years after the various counties of Virginia met to draft their instructions, a congress of representatives from the thirteen colonies agreed to sever not only commercial relations

¹⁴¹ Virginia Gazette (Purdie And Dixon) - November 24, 1774, page 1, column 1 (italics in original)

with the mother country, but indeed all ties. A Virginian, Thomas Jefferson, wrote the document that would proclaim the colonies' independence from Britain, using language he had first developed during the Association crisis.¹⁴² This was fitting, for the nonimportation movement had been formative for many of the Revolutionary generation. It highlighted many of the concerns of the elite about what would happen when they dissolved ties and governmental structure with Britain. At the same time, the Association foreshadowed many of the strategies the elite would use.

In reaction to what many Virginians saw as Parliamentary incursions on their freedom, manifested most recently through the Tea Act, the Virginia male elite had gathered to consider the appropriate response. Recognizing that they could not act alone and given a degree of cohesion by the common problems of debt, poor harvests and concerns about the western border, they carefully gathered the opinions of the freeholders at the county level. These fora revealed important divisions about the best course of action to take. On the one hand, there seemed to be an almost unanimous sense of the sacrality of private property. However, there was no consensus over the conduct of the Boston mob that destroyed a shipment of tea or of the East India Company that had brought the tea, and still less agreement about what to do next. Some feared the consequences of angering Britain or alienating creditors through nonimportation, others pointed out the dangers of agitation from the lower ranks of Virginians. Still others felt confident that a boycott would answer all Virginia's needs, compelling Britain to take their demands seriously without seriously threatening the stability of Virginia society and

¹⁴² Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 34-36.

governance. Ultimately this last group prevailed, and in August of 1774 the delegates of the counties unanimously signed the Nonimportation Agreement.

One of the major differences of this Association from the two previous attempts was a much stronger attempt at enforcing compliance. This can be seen in the stricter measures for oversight built into the Association, but also through the campaign to convince citizens of the importance of nonimportation. A dialogue in the print culture leveled unremitting criticism against all forms of “luxury” and “dissipation,” arguing that these were totally out of place in the struggle with Parliament over American liberties. Many of the articles and rituals attacked in print culture were associated precisely with the performative public that was so important to the Virginia elite. The performative public thus evolved to incorporate new rituals centered on economy, self-denial and love of country; it became a patriotic performative public. This new realm emphasized “public virtue,” which had a single definition as the common good as identified by the patriotic leadership.

One part of this new performative patriotism involved distancing one’s self from luxury and the old consumption patterns—this had partially to do with old problems with debt, but also entailed a gendered attack. Specifically, men accused women and “effeminate” men of bringing on this problem through their unrestrained consumption and vain pretensions. Women countered such attacks warmly in the print culture, reminding men that they too were crucial if the Association was to work in the first place, as for example with their consumption choices and production of the food and staples (especially cloth) that would be needed. Nonetheless, women continued to bear much of

the blame in the print culture for the dissipation and feminization of Virginian culture that led to such extremes of consumption.

At the same time, elite men took this opportunity to attack middle class consumption. Such attacks underscored the insecurity of the elite, knowing that their predominance in the old performative public couldn't withstand the rising pretensions of those below them – the barrier separating them would fall by the wayside as the middling sort purchased the goods that had formerly been a symbol of high status. The Nonimportation movement did not introduce these tensions, but provided an opportunity for the elite to give vent to their concerns and frustrations under the guise of patriotism.

The Association represented both continuity and change. It was a successful drive to maintain the leadership of elite men, who continued to guide Virginia politics. However, in the process it changed the understanding of consumption and led to a new patriotic performative public that centered on *non*-consumption. It revealed some of the underlying tensions of the society, specifically over gender (control of women, definitions of masculinity) and class (the rising pretensions of the middle and lower classes). This new performative public of self-denial did not outlive the Revolution; as soon as the conflict ended and normalized trade relations returned, Virginians and their neighbors in the newly-constituted United States practically fell over themselves to get at the goods that became available.¹⁴³ Over time, the ever-expanding market for consumer goods went a long way toward blurring the class lines that consumption had at one time tried to demarcate.¹⁴⁴ However the ideas of the patriotic public, emphasized in the print dialogue about nonconsumption, persisted. No longer centered on non-consumption, a

¹⁴³ Carson, "The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?" in Carson, Hoffman, Albert ed. *Of Consuming Interest: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, 691.

¹⁴⁴ See Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*

dialogue about virtue and a specifically American patriotism nonetheless lived on. Thus the Nonimportation Association itself had little impact on consumption over the long run, but it exposed tensions over patriarchy, gender, class, and the meaning of consumption that had yet to be resolved.

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