

2013

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Recommended Citation

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<http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-21/1>

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SLAVERY, CONSUMPTION, AND SOCIAL CLASS:

A BIOGRAPHY OF CHIEF JUSTICE
BENJAMIN CHEW (1722-1810)

Benjamin Chew's highly visible life as a public official is critical to understanding how Philadelphia's elite families mobilized into a dominant social cohort over the last third of the eighteenth century, as well as how the distinctions between the city's rich and poor became concurrently more rigid. Chew devoted time and money to cultivating his personal appearance, frequently importing luxuries from London that were meant primarily to convey his high social status and distinguish him in public. Perhaps even more important to Chew's public image was his exploitation of enslaved laborers. Slave-owning earned Chew more than freedom from physical labor; it also bolstered his reputation as a wealthy and powerful individual. The fact that enslaved laborers kept Chew's leisure activities afloat reinforced the asymmetrical distribution of wealth and power that crystallized in Philadelphia at the end of the eighteenth century.

BRIAN
HANLEY

After moving to Philadelphia in 1754, Benjamin Chew, a Quaker-born slaveholder and shrewd legal scholar, emerged as one of the most important political figures in Pennsylvania over the next half century. Chew received his legal training from Andrew Hamilton and throughout his career communicated closely with the Penn family, George Washington, and John Adams. From 1774 to 1776, Chew served as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Province of Pennsylvania.¹ Between 1791 and 1806, he presided over Pennsylvania's first High Court of Errors and Appeals, making him, for almost twenty years, the leader of the state judiciary altogether.² The central question for this study is how did Chew, the jurist assigned significant responsibility for interpreting Pennsylvania's provincial and commonwealth constitutions, contribute to the formation of the stratified class structure that developed over the last third of the eighteenth century in Philadelphia?

Examining Chew's highly visible life is critical to understanding how Philadelphia's elites mobilized into a dominant social cohort over the last third of the eighteenth century, and how the distinctions between the city's rich and poor became concurrently more rigid. In this study, Philadelphia's elite class is defined as a segmented group consisting of well-off merchants and independently wealthy gentlemen whose collective possession of wealth constituted a more or less socially cohesive whole. As a leading public official and member of Philadelphia's elite, Chew devoted a significant amount of time and money to cultivating his personal appearance. Chew regularly imported luxuries from London that were meant solely to convey his high social status and distinguish him in public as a gentleman. Chew's mansion, Cliveden, reflected his pattern of conspicuous consumption. In the final years

of the eighteenth century, Cliveden gained dual eminence as both the site of the 1777 Battle of Germantown and the refuge that sheltered the Chews during the yellow fever epidemics of the 1790s. Perhaps even more important to Chew's public image, however, was his exploitation of enslaved laborers. The functionality of Chew's households, including Cliveden, depended largely on the work done by slaves and servants. Furthermore, Chew owned substantial plantations in Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware where enslaved people provided the workforce to produce the commercial crops undergirding Chew's extraordinary wealth. Slave owning earned more for Chew than merely freedom from physical labor; it also bolstered his reputation as a wealthy and powerful individual. Chew's patterns of exploiting enslaved laborers and consuming conspicuously reinforced the asymmetrical distribution of wealth and power that crystallized in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia.

Conspicuous consumption distinguished Philadelphia's elite class from the city's middling and lower sort in two ways: symbolically, by emphasizing lines of social demarcation; and practically, in the sense that carriages and country seats facilitated their owners' mobility in times of disease and armed conflict. In *Gentlewomen and Learned Ladies*, Sarah Fatherly attributes Philadelphia's growing class structure to the conspicuous consumption of the city's elite.³ As Philadelphia's elite families grew wealthier, Fatherly argues, they acquired larger appetites for purchasing luxury goods. Frequently importing adornments from London, their consumption became both conspicuous and competitive, as the elite strove to cohere as a class while distinguishing themselves from those of the city's middling and lower sorts.

Chew's receipt book, where he recorded annual purchases for the Chew household, reveals that from 1770 to 1809 Chew made a series of large expenditures intended to enhance his personal appearance. His receipts

number 279 pages in length, beginning with the purchase of the receipt book itself from Samuel Taylor. Unfortunately, there are clear historical gaps in Chew's receipts. Absent altogether are entries from 1780, 1781, and 1782, a period of self-imposed exile during which Chew maintained a low social and political profile in an effort to mitigate tensions spawning from the Revolution.⁴ Despite its incompleteness, Chew's receipts trace his economic interaction with various artisans, vendors, and domestic workers. The receipts confirm that Chew's pattern of conspicuous consumption emphasized the asymmetrical distribution of wealth and power that crystallized in Philadelphia over the late eighteenth century.

Chew's pattern of conspicuous consumption is most evident in the wages that he allocated to domestic laborers. A laborer's wage typically reflected the degree of public visibility attached to the individual's position and the market value placed on the individual's skills. For example, Robert Burnett, Chew's gardener, occupied a highly visible position with important responsibilities and a specific skill set. It is no surprise, then, that from 1771 to 1780 Burnett led the staff in compensation, receiving a salary of £35 as well as clothing, room, and board.⁵ A well-groomed garden and a well-kept gardener were symbols of wealth and refinement and as such proved important to Chew's self-image.

Chew's extravagant carriages, like his gardens, were symbols of prestige intended to impress his friends and business associates. Chew's coachman occupied a particularly visible position in which his appearance and manners were under constant public review. Therefore, it was important that in public, Chew's coachman appeared genteel. His compensation significantly mirrored his high degree of public visibility; William Watson, Chew's coachman prior to 1772, earned £30 a year.⁶ On average, the majority of Chew's domestic servants received less than half the annual salary allocated to his

coachman.⁷ Watson's relatively large salary reflected the high cost of operating a coach and the tremendous value Chew placed on public displays of wealth and power.

No wage allocated to domestic workers matched that of John Maxfield, who, from 1770 to 1774, served as Chew's clerk in the Office of the Register General of Pennsylvania and Delaware. Maxfield's annual salary of £75⁸ was more than double that of Chew's best-paid domestic servant, gardener Robert Burnett. However, in addition to Burnett's salary, the gardener also received clothing, room, and board. These accommodations proved important to Burnett, who, as a laborer, would have typically spent around £55 annually to feed, clothe, and supply shelter for himself and his family.⁹ Presumably, Maxfield's unrivaled income of £75 can be attributed to the fact that a legal clerkship required not only skills but education as well. It is also possible that Maxfield's large income reflected the fact that as Chew's clerk, he assumed a highly visible role in the workplace.

Frequent social engagement provided the stage on which Chew and his sizable family showcased their exceptional fashion and intellectual sophistication, at times entertaining audiences of Philadelphia's wealthiest, most prestigious families, and earning, in the process, distinguished reputations as gentlemen and gentlewomen. Chew had fourteen children: thirteen girls and one boy.¹⁰ He considered himself the family's patriarch. During his 1777 house arrest, Chew found himself separated from his wife and children, who at the time resided in Delaware. Distressed by the separation, Chew wrote to a friend anxiously, "My family consists almost wholly of women and children, who, in their present situation stand in need of that protection, care, assistance and advice, which they can only receive effectually from me."¹¹ As the head of a household with multiple marriageable daughters, Chew sought to provide each with the exquisite manners and grace

that defined Philadelphia's gentlewomen.

Between 1773 and 1776, Chew hired the firm of LiBlank & Wagner to dress Mrs. Chew and his daughters. Expenditures to this firm fluctuated from £10 to £18 a year, representing presumably a portion of the total clothes purchased.¹² It is also fair to assume that Mrs. Chew allocated funds from her own accounts. In any event, Chew's purchasing records confirm his commitment to upholding a certain self-image, one that his family would emulate and high society would regard with veneration.

For Chew, proper dress served as the key index of his high social status. As a public official, he devoted a significant amount of time and money to enhancing his personal appearance. Prior to the Revolution, Chew's payments to his tailor, John Colling, vacillated between £30 and £80 a year.¹³ At a minimum, his wardrobe cost him as much as his coachman's salary (£30). At a maximum, it cost more than his clerk's (£75).

Social dancing, in private parties and public balls, presented opportunities for Chew and Philadelphia's elite families to display their fine clothes, manners, and physical

social functions and the increasing regularity with which the prominent Chew family engaged socially, it is fair to assume that all of the Chew children studied dance at some point. However, Chew's receipt book contains only one record of dancing lessons. In 1775, Chew paid Thomas Pike £3.8.0 for teaching his fifteen-year-old daughter Peggy to dance.¹⁴ In 1778, Peggy, accompanied by her stepsister, Sarah, showcased her dancing skills publicly when she attended the "Mischianza," Philadelphia's most elaborate ball during the British occupation.

Chew's April 20, 1772, payment of £51.10.0 to James Reynolds corresponds to a pair of ornate looking glasses that still stands at Cliveden,¹⁵ an expenditure largely consistent with Chew's pattern of conspicuous consumption. Reynolds produced the highest-quality looking glasses and picture frames in pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia.¹⁶ Many of the city's most affluent families commissioned his work. It is not surprising that Chew employed the city's most talented gilder. Nor is it unusual that Chew allocated as much money for a pair of looking glasses (£51.10.0) as he did

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grace. To master the complexities of dance, an individual needed to dedicate time and painstaking practice to the art form. Given the fundamental role that dancing played in

for his extravagant wardrobe (between £30 and £80 annually). His intent in adorning his home and his attire was one and the same. Chew strove to consume conspicu-

ously, cultivating a sophisticated appearance both for himself and for his family. At the core of his efforts to appear refined was the unyielding desire to impress the distinguished members of his high social circle.

As a result of his fastidiousness, Chew left historians a receipt book incredibly rich in content. In detailing major as well as minor purchases, Chew's receipts trace decades of financial spending patterns. Historians can observe these patterns to draw inferences. It is reasonable to suppose, for example, that Chew valued the appearance of his wardrobe at least as much as that of his garden. Otherwise, he would not have paid more annually to his tailor (£30 to £80) than to his gardener (£35). Of course, it is presumptuous to assume that Chew's purchases directly correlated with his values. Nonetheless, his spending habits offer important insights into the goods and services that he deemed most important.

Chew's impressive country estate, Cliveden, also reflected this pattern of conspicuous consumption. In *Meeting House and Counting House*, Frederick B. Tolles explains that by mid-century, Quaker merchants dominated the largest proportion of Philadelphia's wealth, social prestige, and political power.¹⁷ In *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, Thomas M. Doerflinger agrees that Philadelphia's distribution of wealth became increasingly unequal in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁸ One indication of the rising inequality, as Billy G. Smith argues in *The "Lower Sort,"* was residential segregation.¹⁹ The lines of demarcation between the homes of the rich and poor grew increasingly distinct as the revolution loomed near. During the summer months, for instance, when disease beleaguered inhabitants of urban Philadelphia, Chew and his elite counterparts had the immense advantage of escaping to country estates.

In the summer of 1762, yellow fever outbreaks plagued residents of urban Philadelphia. Dr. Benjamin Rush estimated that the disease killed approximately one-sixth

of the city's population during the months of August, September, October, November, and December.²⁰ Benjamin Chew at the time resided in one of the city's most fashionable sections, in a town house on South Third Street. The epidemic proportions of the 1762 disease provoked Chew, the following year, to search for a summer home outside of the city, where yellow fever persisted. The 1762 epidemic gave birth to countless real estate advertisements that festooned the headlines of Philadelphia's newspapers. One advertisement in particular, featured in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (April 7, 1763), enticed Benjamin Chew: "TO BE SOLD. A Piece of Land at the upper end of Germantown, with two small Tenements thereon, containing eleven Acres; it is pleasantly situated for a Country Seat; and there is a good Orchard, Garden, and Nursery on the same, in which are a great Variety of Fruit Trees, of all Kinds....For Terms of Sale, enquire of EDWARD PENINGTON." Chew purchased the property in Germantown, Pennsylvania and soon began to build the Georgian style mansion that he later named Cliveden. Construction lasted from 1763 until 1767.²¹ The final cost of Chew's countryseat was a staggering £4718.12.3 including about £1000 for the land.²²

By carriage, Cliveden was about a two hour commute from Chew's Third Street townhouse. That two-hour journey, however, proved tiresome, often prolonged by unpredictable travelling conditions, including "clouds and whirlwinds [of dust]"²³ as Mrs. Chew solemnly described in a letter to her husband. Suffice it to say, Cliveden served its purpose effectively as the Chew's countryseat, providing safety and comfort for the family in the summer months while simultaneously teaching visitors a thing or two about architectural taste. Cliveden never ceased to impress influxes of Chew's visitors. One of his friends from England once dubbed the mansion "your Enchanted Castle . . . one of the finest houses in the Province."²⁴ To this day, Chew's home continues to amaze

a sea of visitors, perpetuating its reputation as one of the most stupendous examples of Philadelphia Georgian architecture.

When, in 1768, Chew signed the non-importation agreement (see Image 1), he publicly declared his sympathy for the American colonies. During the politically volatile decade that followed 1768, Chew regularly fraternized with prominent patriots such as George Washington and John Adams, men who rose as leaders of the new American government. It became clear that Chew occupied an unusual position in the transformative political culture of the 1770s. As Chief Justice of the Province of Pennsylvania, he represented the proprietary government. While trusted and revered by many notable patriots, Chew's political position and longstanding connections to England rendered his allegiance to the American colonies inexorably precarious.

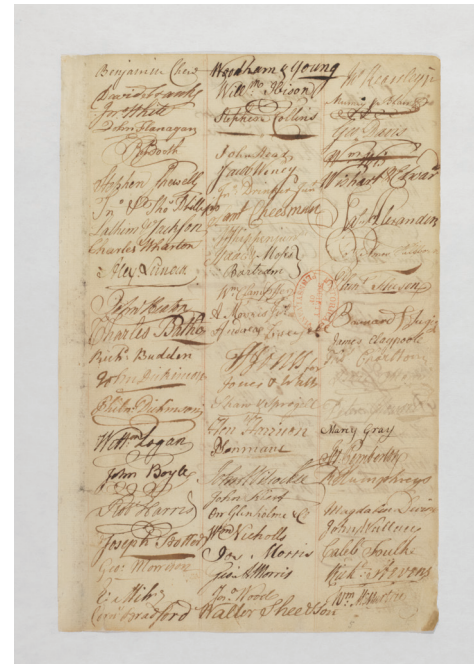


Image 1. Committee of Guardians Minute Book, 1790-1797, p. 17, Papers of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, microfilm edition, Reel 6, HSP. Used with permission of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania

The British occupation of Philadelphia in the summer of 1777 compelled the Executive Council to defuse Chew's political authority, which the colonial government deemed a threat to public safety. On August 4, the Executive Council filed a warrant for Chew's arrest.²⁵ Upon reviewing the warrant, Chew demanded to know by what authority and for what reason he was charged.²⁶ The warrant, Chew quickly learned, was issued on grounds of protecting the public safety. Later, Chew remarked in his notes that the unlawful arrest undermined his rights as a free man and "struck at the liberties of everyone in the community and [he believed] it was his duty to oppose it and check it, if possible, in its infancy."²⁷

By mid-August 1777, the colonial government ordered Chew and Governor John Penn to Union Forge, New Jersey, where the two men served an extensive house arrest. Chew and Penn remained in isolation until June of the following year, when British troops officially withdrew from Philadelphia. This detachment proved to be a time of great agony for Chew, a man accustomed to free will and the comforts of liberty. With the war intensifying, Chew became particularly anxious about the wellbeing of his family and his property at Cliveden. A September 15 letter from his only son, Benjamin Chew Jr., presumably exacerbated Chew's mounting discomfort:

"As our Army are in the Neighborhood of Germantown, Tenny Tilghman [Washington's aide-de-camp Tench Tilghman] has kindly sent to my Mother acquainting her that he will procure an officer of rank to take possession of Cliveden though I should not imagine that any of the private soldiery would be quartered there as my Mother has procured [*sic*] a Protection for the House and Place from the Board of War."²⁸

On October 4, Cliveden experienced everything but protection. Early that foggy morning, a barrage of musket shells and

cannon balls swept ferociously across Cliveden's front lawn, creating at once a harmony of murderous assault and retreat. Aligned in four columns, the colonial army bombarded British troops, who, under the command of Colonel Thomas Musgrave, were stationed in and around Chew's mansion.²⁹ In 1899, more than a century after the musket smoke had faded, Chew's great-great-grandson William Brooks Rawle colorfully recounted the battle of Cliveden:

"At the period of the battle the family was away, but 'Cliveden' was left in the charge

she refused to do. They were standing at the head of the stairway to the cellar, quarreling, when a cannon ball came in through one of the windows, crashed through some plaster and woodwork, causing a great commotion; whereupon the gardener, without further argument, gave the dairy maid a push, sending her tumbling down the stairs, and then lock[ed] the door upon her. There she had to remain, during the entire battle, in safety, though without the attentions of her [red] coated admirers. What became of the gardener, and where he hid, as he probably did, is not related."³⁰



Image 2. *The Battle of Germantown*, painted by Edward Lamson Henry, 1874, Courtesy of Cliveden, a National Trust Historic Site, Philadelphia, PA.

of the gardener. At least one other person (if not more) was left there- a dairy maid, who of course with her pink cheeks and other fascinations was a beauty, as all such are. When the red coats took possession of the house, the dairy maid was much pleased and did not resent the tender familiarities of the soldiers. Seeing this the gardener, who also admired her, remonstrated with her, but without effect and a 'tiff' was the result. When the musketry fire began, he said to her that the safest place for her was the cellar and told her to go there; but this

The damage Cliveden incurred received sufficient attention in the aftermath of the battle (see Images 2 and 3). Observer John Fanning Watson reported that "Chew's house was so battered that it took five carpenters a whole winter to repair and replace the fractures. The front door which was replaced was filled with shot holes"³¹ At the time, Benjamin Jr., his sisters, and their mother resided in a Third Street townhouse. In October 1777, Benjamin Jr. wrote to his father, reassuring Chew that the wreckage described by many observers was largely

overstated: "I have gathered strength enough to ride to Cliveden the damage of which will be no doubt exaggerated to you by the several reports you may hear of the late action."³²



Image 3. Battle-Scarred Front Door of Cliveden, Chew Papers, Unidentified Subjects, Box 825, Folder 5. HSP, Philadelphia, PA.

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The Historical Society of Pennsylvania*

By Spring 1778, with the focus of war shifting away from the middle colonies, Chew appealed to the colonial government to be discharged from house arrest. Possessing absolutely no evidence that Chew ever supported the British cause, the American government had no choice but to satisfy the lawyer's request. Chew's demand for release was shortly granted, and in June 1778 he returned to Philadelphia. Attempting to avoid future conflict with the law, the astute Chew sought to limit his political presence until the wartime tensions subsided. Consequently, in 1779, he sold his Third Street townhouse to Spanish Ambassador Don Juan de Miralles and relocated his family to Whitehall, the family's plantation near Do-

ver, Delaware. That same year, Chew sold Cliveden to Blair McClenachan for £2500, not including a mortgage of £3400.³³ The sale of Cliveden marked for Chew the beginning of a period of self-imposed political exile that lasted for much of the 1780s.

By 1790, however, Chew's house arrest seemed a distant memory. Now in his late 60s, he returned to Philadelphia and at once resumed his legal career. Chew's remarkably keen legal judgment proved as useful to the new federal government in the aftermath of the war as it had to the British government prior to conflict. In 1790, the new government appointed Chew President of the High Court of Errors and Appeals of Pennsylvania. Chew honorably held that office until his retirement in 1806.

In the summer of 1793, yellow fever returned to Philadelphia and appeared more lethal than it had in 1762 when the epidemic inspired Cliveden's construction. Recognizing the severity of the epidemics, Chew searched for available countryseats to provide shelter for his family. There is little record of how or when negotiations between Chew and McClenachan occurred. Nevertheless, a letter from Chew to Benjamin Jr. dated April 15, 1797 reads: "Mr. McClenachan having proposed the making of an allowance of £100 for the deficiency of 1-3/4 acres, I closed with him yesterday. Humphreys is now preparing the Deeds and they will be executed this afternoon or on Monday."³⁴

Sometime around April 1797, Chew repurchased Cliveden from McClenachan for a whopping price of £8376.13.10.³⁵ With what seem like mixed emotions, Chew wrote to his brother-in-law Edward Tilghman, Sr., "I have bought back Cliveden, but it is in such dilapidated condition that it will take a small fortune to restore it."³⁶ Despite the money required to reclaim and restore Chew's mansion, Cliveden proved critical to the Chew family's survival during the yellow fever epidemics of the 1790s. Throughout the course of that decade, the Chews took

shelter at Cliveden from early June to late October to avoid the terrible sickness that spawned in the city in the heart of summer.

In a letter dated April 15, 1797, Katherine Banning Chew wrote to her husband, Benjamin Jr., celebrating Cliveden's tremendous health benefits:

"With respect to Cliveden your Father writes all desired arrangements wait your return. If we make it a permanent residence I know that certain inconvenience will arise. All that may occur to myself I shall make light of so delightful will be its advantages, viz: Health, Peace & Competence! The first year no doubt may to you I fear bring some fatigue. Ever after I hope all will be made easy."³⁷

In a November 1, 1798 letter, Benjamin Jr. joyfully informed his friends in England that the Chews were happy and well:

"Happily all my family are safe, having repurchased to the family a favorite seat built by my Father most healthily situated a little more than 7 miles from the City and sold by him 20 years ago. I have occupied it since the Spring of last year and it has fortunately proved an asylum for my Father, Mother, sisters, and ourselves making up the daily roll call to our different tables of 27 in number besides our visiting friends and occasional hirelings. No complaint has occurred among us but the keenness of appetite after our usual hour of meals was transgressed... The dear partner of my life is with me and that besides three glorious boys I am in daily expectation of the presentation of another. My Father, Mother, and my four unmarried sisters under my roof and in health, I now find abundant cause to call forth all my gratitude for the blessings I enjoy. They are manifold."³⁸

Chew and his family were among a minority of fortunate individuals to possess both the means of transportation and the adequate refuge to escape yellow fever's reach. Chew's 1797 repurchase of Clive-

den marked one of his most strategic and sensible expenditures. When, on July 23, yellow fever returned to Philadelphia, Cliveden proved enormously useful as a safe haven for the family. In September 1797 or 1798 at Cliveden—year not given—Harriet Chew wrote to her sister, Sarah Chew Galloway, at Tulip Hill, eloquently encapsulating the moroseness of the time: “The mortality in our city increases in so dreadful a degree that we hear and shudder at the account every succeeding evening brings of the extreme losses of the day, and no one can tell where it will stop or what remedies can be effectually adopted. Our principal hopes of relief rest in the blessing of a change in the weather and an early frost.”³⁹

In *Philadelphia and Its People in Maps: The 1790s*, Billy G. Smith and Paul Sivitz illustrate Philadelphia’s residential patterns by socioeconomic class. In Image 4, the map’s green dots represent the city’s merchants and red dots represent the city’s laborers. The former, wealthier group tended to settle on Market Street and along the wharves of the Delaware River, where commercial trade proved the most fruitful. The latter and larger occupational group of laborers often established homes in the northern, southern, and western parts of the city. Laborers typically rented small, inexpensive quarters, which they shared with their families. The city’s poorest individuals were likely condensed in Hell Town, an area notorious for its high concentration of fugitive slaves, servants, prostitutes, homeless, and the mentally insane.⁴⁰

Unsurprisingly, when yellow fever epidemics erupted in 1793, 1797, 1798, and 1799, affliction was class specific. The disease struck hardest where the city’s poorest people lived, especially near the northern wharves and in Hell Town. Philadelphia’s penurious neighborhoods provided ideal spawning places for the *Aedes aegypti*, the type of mosquitoes that transmitted yellow fever. Chew and his elite counterparts were fortunate enough to possess both ve-



Image 4. Billy G. Smith and Paul Sivitz, “Philadelphia and Its People in Maps: The 1790s, *Residential Patterns by Class*” *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, 2012, <<http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/philadelphia-and-its-people-in-maps-the-1790s/>>. © 2012, Paul Sivitz and Billy G. Smith
Used with permission of Paul Sivitz and Billy G. Smith

hicles that mobilized them and countryseats to which they sought shelter. In 1794, publisher Mathew Carey wrote, “For some weeks, carts, wagons, coaches and chairs were almost constantly transporting families and furniture to the country in every direction.”⁴¹ Yellow fever, Carey continued, “had been dreadfully destructive among the poor. It is very probable that at least seven eighths of the number of the dead, was of that class.”⁴² Such was the case that as Philadelphia’s elite evacuated to their summer estates, the city’s laborers, homeless, handicapped, and mentally ill too often found themselves stranded in a muggy and



Image 5. Billy G. Smith and Paul Sivitz, “Philadelphia and Its People in Maps: The 1790s, *Yellow Fever Epidemic, 1793*” *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, 2012, <<http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/philadelphia-and-its-people-in-maps-the-1790s/>>. © 2012, Paul Sivitz and Billy G. Smith
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morbidly urban jungle. The map featured in Image 5 illustrates the class-specific nature of yellow fever in dramatic clarity.

II. Advancement through Exploitation

Combined with his pattern of conspicuous consumption, Chew’s economic vitality, which resulted directly from his exploitation of enslaved laborers, reinforced his dominant position in Philadelphia’s high society. Chew profited enormously from owning numerous plantations in Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware, where enslaved people provided the workforce to cultivate commercial crops. Chew also used slaves as domestic laborers in his various homes in Pennsylvania. Prior to the passage of the Gradual Abolition Act in 1780, numerous elite families in Philadelphia owned slaves and servants. Chew, however, superseded his slaveholding neighbors both in the number of slaves whom he owned and in the length of time that he maintained ownership. As late as 1806, *The Testament and Last Will of Benjamin Chew*, written on April 1, listed “my negroes”: George, Jesse, Harry, Sarah, with her children, and a boy, David, who was to be freed at twenty-eight years of age.⁴³ Chew owned slaves from the

time of his birth to the time of his death, and in that sense, the peculiar institution defined both his professional and personal life.

Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, wrote in the first sentence of his autobiography: "I was born in the year of our Lord 1760, on February 14th, a slave to Benjamin Chew, of Philadelphia."⁴⁴ Allen then describes the sale of his family—mother, father, and three siblings—"into Delaware state, near Dover," declaring that he was one of "Stoke-

len's manumission papers provide conclusive evidence that Stokeley Sturgis was his master.⁴⁷ It is unsurprising that Chew sold Allen to Sturgis in 1768. Sturgis lived no more than a mile from Whitehall, Chew's 1,000-acre plantation in Kent County, Delaware. When Sturgis encountered financial trouble in the 1770s and 1780s, Chew loaned large sums money to his neighbor.⁴⁸ And although Sturgis purchased his farm in 1754, the same year that Chew moved to Philadelphia,⁴⁹ the two men presumably

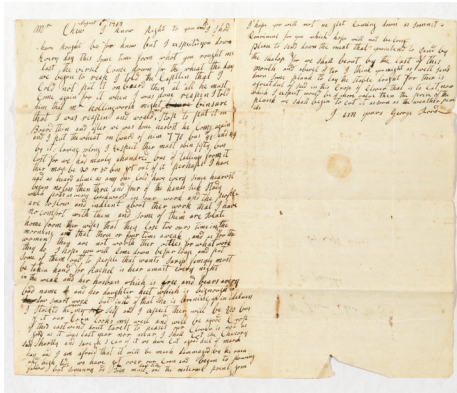


Image 7. George Ford to Benjamin Chew, Kent County, August 3, 1796, in HSP, Chew Papers, Series 2, Correspondence. (DAMS 6071, image 7)

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The Historical Society of Pennsylvania*

at Whitehall was rather limited. In many cases, Ford complained to Chew about a rapidly deteriorating work environment at the plantation. For example, in a letter dated April 26, 1795, he wrote to Chew requesting additional supplies for the slaves: "The Boys are so naked I Cant git much work out of them."⁵² Then, in a letter dated August 3, 1797 (see Image 7), Ford disparaged the slaves' growing indolence: "The people are so slow and indlent about ther work that I have no comfort with them and some of them are solate home from ther wives that they lose two ours time in the morning and that three or four times a weak and as for the women they are not worth ther vitles for what work they do. Rachel is hear amust every night in the weak and her husban which is free and bears avery bad name."⁵³

Despite Chew's lack of direct involvement at Whitehall, financially, he was as entangled as ever with the slave trade. Chew extracted enormous profits from the commercial crops that enslaved laborers produced at Whitehall. Chew's younger brother, Samuel, kept inventories from his Maryland plantations attesting to the tremendous capital that substantial plantations yielded. Registered in 1812, Samuel

CHEW PROFITED ENORMOUSLY FROM OWNING NUMEROUS PLANTATIONS IN VIRGINIA, MARYLAND, AND DELAWARE, WHERE ENSLAVED PEOPLE PROVIDED THE WORKFORCE TO CULTIVATE COMMERCIAL CROPS.

ley's Negroes."⁴⁵ Records confirm that Chew sold Allen to Stokeley Sturgis, a struggling planter whose two hundred acre farm sat about six miles northeast of Dover.⁴⁶ Al-

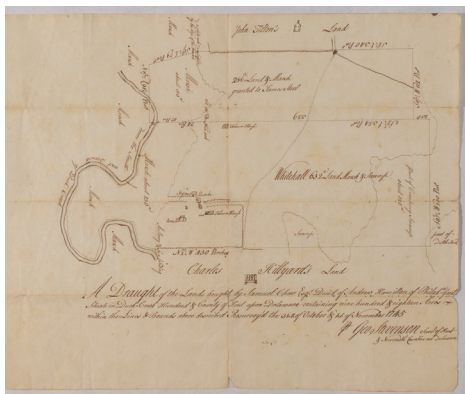


Image 6. Illustration of Whitehall Plantation in Delaware, in HSP, Chew Papers, Series 22, Delaware Land Papers. (DAMS 6259, image 1)

*Used with permission of
The Historical Society of Pennsylvania*

stayed in relatively close contact. Recognized in Kent County as one of the region's most powerful planters, Chew continued to visit Whitehall for years, transporting slaves whom he bought and sold between his various homes.⁵⁰ Sarah Chew's April 22, 1786 letter to her husband, John Galloway, captures the casualness with which her father regularly exchanged human property: "one, two or three valuable negro men that he [Benjamin Chew] would wish to give if the laws of Maryland will admit of it."⁵¹

Chew took ownership of the Whitehall plantation in 1760. Image 8 illustrates a survey of Whitehall's 918 acres detailing the locations of the tobacco houses and "negro quarters." From 1789-1797, Benjamin Chew employed George Ford as Whitehall's overseer. Letters from Ford to Chew suggest that at least in the last decade of the eighteenth century, Chew's involvement

Chew's records further reveal the inhumanity with which slaveholders handled their human property. Each slave represented an item of property worth a specific monetary value that depended on the slave's age and physical ability. Samuel's inventories

Mr Chew August 26 1796
 I Reciev'd your letter by mail and should
 have sent you a letter by him but I was doing the
 Creek with Mr Samuel Chew that was
 along below from our landing and went across
 to the horses I expect for we did not come across them
 the wheat that was left in the barn I sold
 for two dollars a bus much hay we have got
 about 90 stacks the season has bin very much a
 gainst us or we could have got more our corn
 is very good the back birds has bin very bad on
 it this dull weather we ready for seeding if I
 could get good day to get out our seed wheat
 but I expect to be saving yadaw next week
 and sowing wheat to my wife has come
 to her 100 greatly the family are all well
 at present
 I am yours George Ford

Image 8. George Ford to Benjamin Chew, Kent County, August 26, 1796, in HSP, Chew Papers, Series 2, Correspondence. (DAMS 6071, image 32)
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list by name the price of each slave who belonged to his estate. Included among the slaves were several other types of property such as sugar, meat, and fabric, items apparently considered to be on a par with human lives. Samuel's records suggest both the heartlessness with which slaveholders regarded their human property and the vastness of the profits that slave labor generated. In one inventory, the total value of Samuel's estate is listed as \$42,800.10,⁵⁴ a sum that today is larger than \$750,000.

On August 26, 1796, overseer Ford again contacted Chew, apologizing for not writing to him earlier (see Image 8). A troublesome situation sent Ford chasing “down the Creek after Mr Samuel Chew negors that runaway from him.”⁵⁵ A lifelong slaveholder, Chew was accustomed to handling slave runaways and the paper trails that subsequently followed. On January 19, 1778, Benjamin Chew Jr. wrote to his father, updating Chew about a runaway slave named Will:

“Ned arrived here...in Search of Mr. Bennet Chew's Negroes. he came up by Permission from Col. Duff...he obtained most of the Negroes [and] has sent some of them to their Plantation, His Fortune was not single, your Man Aaron that went off from my Uncle Samls Tired of his Frolick came voluntarily [and] solicited for his Return to his Master—he was immediately upon my Application discharged from the Service in which he was employed and ordered into my possession, he now waits an Opportunity of going down—Will, I fear has made his Escape to some other Country but the Hardships he must experience from a different Way of living than that in your Employ, will sufficiently punish his Ingratitude.”⁵⁶

Benjamin Chew Jr. explicitly stated that he believed the slave, Will, would experience greater hardships from the outside world than as a slave of Chew. La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt's description of the elder Benjamin suggests that his racial attitude was less than tolerant. “He [Benjamin Chew] rather seems to me to have some of the prejudices common to owners of slaves.”⁵⁷ This image of Chew contrasts starkly to that drawn of him in Joseph Dennie's 1811 edition of *The Port Folio*, which considers Chew “a decided enemy of oppression in every form, and actuated by an unconquerable love of freedom.”⁵⁸

Chew Jr. presumably learned from his father that when dealing with the fragility of human property, it is often advantageous

to detach from all emotional involvement. Chew Jr. and his father shared the prejudices common to slaveholders. They conceived of slaves, not as people, but as property, inferior to and unworthy of the human status. They kept lists the slaves at Whitehall, their foot measurements, and corresponding shoe sizes.⁵⁹ It is not surprising that Chew Jr. itemized his slaves as if quantifying his food supply. Chew Jr. was raised behind a lens of institutionalized prejudice, in an environment economically dependent on slavery. In such an environment, slavery appeared to be a natural and even necessary component of life for both the younger and elder Chew.

On the evening of January 20, 1810, Benjamin Chew died peacefully at his beloved countryside, Cliveden. His tombstone stands erect at St. Peter's Churchyard commemorating in a succinct epitaph the legacy of an extraordinary individual. During his professional life, Chew was honored to interpret Pennsylvania's provincial and commonwealth constitutions. He made fundamental contributions to the political culture that materialized both before and after the American Revolution. His tremendous wealth, which derived from the exploitation of enslaved labor, enabled his habit of conspicuous consumption. Throughout his life, Chew expressed a lust for power through the direct ownership of both human and non-human property. He regularly imported adornments from England intended to enhance his physical appearance and frequently purchased enslaved laborers meant to facilitate his household functionality and cultivate his commercial crops. Over the last third of the eighteenth century, Chew, in accordance with Philadelphia's elite families, accumulated a disproportional amount of the city's wealth. As Chew and his elite counterparts bolstered their wealth and augmented their economic power, they simultaneously worked to accentuate class differences and stratify the socioeconomic structure that came to define post-revolutionary Philadelphia.