

From T.H. Green

Tobacco Culture —

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CHAPTER III

PLANTERS AND MERCHANTS:
A KIND OF FRIENDSHIP

The leading planters of Tidewater Virginia shipped their tobacco to British merchants on consignment. The older gentlemen, planters like Landon Carter who was born in 1710, had witnessed major changes in the marketing of the colony's staple over their lifetime. In 1730 as much as half of Virginia's annual crop was sold on consignment. Each year, however, this figure decreased. The Scots opened stores and purchased ever larger amounts of tobacco directly from the small and medium planters. By 1776 only a quarter of the tobacco exported reached Great Britain on consignment. But this trend can be misleading. The major planters of the Tidewater had little to do with the Scottish factors. Their perceptions of the staple market reflected the consignment experience, and these views—products of a particular social and economic context—generally fit harmoniously and effectively with the central assumptions of the tobacco mentality.

The eighteenth-century gentry perceived commercial relations with British tobacco merchants in highly personal terms. Exchange, they believed, involved a planter's honor, virtue, and independence; it was a form of "friendship." These rhetorical conventions, developed largely out of face-to-face dealings with neighbors, provided the great planters with a framework—a set of idioms—that helped them to comprehend a complex marketing system centered thousands of miles across the Atlantic Ocean. Theirs was not necessarily an accurate picture of how commerce operated. Indeed, by the standards of modern economic theory, these planters may seem perversely "irrational." But the Virginians did the best they could. They construed a reality by generalizing the val-

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ues of a local culture, and for most of the century these mental categories served them well enough.

This cultural conversation between merchants and planters contained obvious contradictions. By receiving credit from British merchant houses, Virginia gentlemen did, of course, compromise their personal autonomy. For most of the century these elements of potential friction lay dormant. As long as everyone involved in the tobacco trade prospered (or thought that they were prospering), the Virginians had no reason to explore the implications of these inconsistencies. In fact, it was only when the merchants announced that they were playing by different rules that the great planters realized how much of their culture was at risk in the marketplace.

I

Virginia gentlemen dreamed of achieving complete personal independence. For the great planters, it was the ideal social condition. Such men took pride in being insulated from the demands of the outside world, of freeing themselves from obligations to people who were not members of their immediate family. In 1726, William Byrd II described the perfect environment to an English correspondent. "I have a large family of my own," the master of Westover explained, "and my doors are open to every body, yet. . . . Like one of the patriarchs, I have my flocks and my herds, my bond-men and bond-women, and every soart of trade amongst my own servants, so that I live in a kind of independence on every one, but Providence."¹ By the standards of a provincial gentry culture, Byrd was doing very well. When, as an old man, St.

¹ Byrd to Charles Boyle, Earl of Orrery, 5 July, 1726, in *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover*, ed. Marion Tinling (Charlottesville, 1977), I, 355. Also see, Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York, 1972), chapter 1; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982), 131-38; Jack Greene, "Society, Ideology, and Politics," in *Society, Freedom, and Conscience*, ed. Richard M. Jellison (New York, 1976), 52-53; Michael Zuckerman, "William Byrd's Family," *Perspectives in American History*, 12 (1979), 253-311.

George Tucker reflected upon the character of colonial Tidewater society, he insisted that “there was no such thing as *Dependence*, in the lower counties.”²

The great planters’ insistence upon their own independence—a condition that they expected other Virginians to observe—contained a striking element of territoriality. Their vast riverfront plantations were, in fact, self-contained communities run by a resident patriarch.³ The big house, the immense acreage, the scores of slaves gave dramatic outward expression to the centrality of the landowner’s personal independence in this culture. Landon Carter, the master of Sabine Hall, bragged in 1759 that he was virtually invulnerable in his “excellent little Fortress . . . built on a Rock . . . of *Independency*.”⁴ His son-in-law, Robert Beverley, shared Carter’s values. “I thank god,” Beverley declared in a letter, “I have a very fine Estate, which even with the Crop I have already made will put me in a State of Perfect Independence.”⁵ Peyton Randolph, one of revolutionary Virginia’s most prominent planters, expressed a similar view. Writing to protest the actions of several British merchants, Randolph announced, “I shall never be affected with any Reply that can be made, having an excellent little Fortress to protect me, one built on a Rock not liable to be shaken with Fears, that of *Independency*.”⁶ By the 1760s the image of the independent Virginian lodged in his plantation fortress had become something of a cliché, a self-deception that contained a good measure of defensiveness.

Daily life on a large estate reinforced the gentleman’s sense

² “Notes of St. George Tucker on Manuscript copy of William Wirt’s *Life of Patrick Henry* (September 25, 1815),” *W&MQ*, 1st ser., 22(1914), 252.

³ See Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980); Edmund S. Morgan, *Virginians at Home* (Williamsburg, 1952).

⁴ Jack P. Greene, ed., *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter*, Virginia Historical Society Documents, vol. 4 (Charlottesville, 1965), I, 19. For a description of Carter’s eighteenth-century home, Sabine Hall, see Thomas Tileston Waterman, *The Mansions of Virginia, 1706-1776* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1946), 127-36.

⁵ Robert Beverley to Samuel Athawes, 18 November 1763, Beverley Letter Book, 1761-1793, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶ *A Letter to a Gentleman in London, from Virginia* (Williamsburg, 1759), 27.



XI. Landon Carter’s “Rock . . . of *Independency*,” Sabine Hall

of personal autonomy. John Mason, son of the famous Virginia patriot George Mason, left a vivid description of the self-contained world of the great Tidewater planter. His “recollections” were of Gunston Hall, but there is no question that his powerful depiction of economic independence held for other eighteenth-century plantations as well.

It was very much the practice with gentlemen of landed and slave estates in the interior of Virginia, so to organize them as to have considerable resources within themselves. . . . Thus my father had among his slaves carpenters, coopers, sawyers, blacksmiths, tanners, curriers, shoemakers, spinners, weavers and knitters, and even a distiller. His woods furnished timber and plank for the

carpenters and coopers, and charcoal for the blacksmith; his cattle killed for his own consumption and for sale supplied skins for the tanners, curriers, and shoemakers, and his sheep gave wool and his fields produced cotton and flax for the weavers and spinners, and his orchards fruit for the distiller. His carpenters and sawyers built and kept in repair all the dwelling-houses, barns, stables, ploughs, harrows, gates &c. on the plantations and the out-houses at the home house. His coopers made the hogsheads that tobacco was prized in and the tight casks to hold the cider and other liquors. The tanners and curriers with the proper vats &c., tanned and dressed the skins as well for the upper as for lower leather to the full amount of the consumption of the estate, and the shoemakers made them into shoes for the negroes. A professed shoemaker was hired for three or four months in the year to come and make up the shoes for the white part of the family. The blacksmiths did all the iron work required by the establishment, as making and repairing ploughs, harrows, teeth chains, bolts &c., &c. The spinners, weavers, and knitters made all the coarse cloths and stockings used by the negroes, and some of finer texture worn by the white family, nearly all worn by the children of it. The distiller made every fall a good deal of apple, peach, and persimmon brandy. The art of distilling from grain was not then among us, and but few public distilleries. All these operations were carried on at the home house, and their results distributed as occasion required to the different plantations.

Even when they ventured beyond the boundaries of their own estates—to meetings of the House of Burgesses at Williamsburg, for example—the great planters stoutly maintained their personal autonomy. This obsession often made them appear prickly to outsiders. Certainly, one trespassed upon a gentleman's independence at one's peril. Andrew Burnaby, an acerbic British traveler, observed in 1760 that "the public or political character of the Virginians corresponds with their

private one: they are haughty and jealous of their liberties, impatient of restraint, and can scarcely bear the thought of being controuled by any superior power."⁷ This statement was penned before the Stamp Act crisis, and so presumably does not reflect a social persona that Virginians displayed especially for visitors from the mother country.

Personal autonomy allowed no compromise. It was an aspect of planter culture that gentlemen learned early in their childhood. In 1765, Arthur Lee, a young Virginian sent to medical school in Edinburgh, wrote to his famous older brother, Richard Henry, protesting, ". . . liberty & independence [are] to me the most valuable of all blessings, since I know not a more bitter ingredient than dependence that can enter into the cup of life."⁸ Arthur may not have inherited Stratford Hall, but his values were unquestionably those of a great Tidewater planter.

Possession of personal independence demonstrated, among other things, that a gentleman was morally sound. One could trust his judgment, especially in political matters. Independent persons, it was believed, stood above the scramble after power and wealth and thus seemed ideally suited to provide leadership for the small planters. This bundle of assumptions was a staple of Country thought, and the centrality of independence in the writings of Bolingbroke, Trenchard, and Gordon may in part explain the popularity of those authors in colonial Virginia. No doubt other gentry turned to the classical writers, especially Cicero, Horace, and Virgil, for the same reasons.

What these authors said about autonomy apparently corresponded to eighteenth-century planter experience. During the Revolution, Richard Henry Lee assumed that only persons "of independent Circumstance" could possibly become true

⁷ Andrew Burnaby, *Travels through the Middle Settlements*, in *A General Collection . . .*, ed. John Pinkerton (London, 1812), XIII, 715. Mason's "Recollections" are quoted in Morgan, *Virginians at Home*, 53-54.

⁸ Arthur Lee to [R. H. Lee], 20 March 1765, Lee Family Papers, vol. I, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

patriots.⁹ His neighbor on Virginia's Northern Neck, Landon Carter, agreed. "Independence . . .," he scribbled in his diary in 1769, was the foundation "on which Liberty can alone be protected."¹⁰ Independence of mind sometimes cost a great planter profitable offices in the colony's royal government, but such sacrifice seemed a modest price to pay for the preservation of integrity. "I have not one Quality requisite in a Sycophant or a fashionable Toad Eater," Beverley confessed, "for this Reason, I believe my most prudent Method will be to live as I have done, retired & absolutely independent in my Principles, a Situation, tho' not the most lucrative, is certainly the most satisfactory."¹¹

Without substantial property, a planter's claim to personal autonomy obviously rang hollow. Perhaps if the colony had developed a genuine titled aristocracy, a social system in which birth to a certain family automatically conferred noble status, the great planters might have been less concerned about visible material success. But, though the sons of Virginia gentlemen usually became gentlemen, there was no guarantee that every male bearing a particular surname would achieve economic or political eminence.¹² This insecurity, which seems to have grown more pronounced on the eve of the Revolution, created curious tensions within gentry culture. Maintenance of the external trappings of independence—big houses, fast horses, sumptuous finery, and the like—forced the great planters to monitor the flow of pounds and pence more closely than they would have liked. Poor management threatened a man's independence; certainly, neighbors might wonder whether the personal judgment of a man who

⁹ Cited in Pauline Maier, *The Old Revolutionaries* (New York, 1980), 182. See, William D. Liddle, "Virtue and Liberty: An Inquiry into the Role of the Agrarian Myth in the Rhetoric of the American Revolutionary Era," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 77 (1978), 15-38.

¹⁰ *Diary of Landon Carter*, ed. Greene, I, 19.

¹¹ Beverley to Samuel Athawes, 15 April 1771, Beverley Letter Book.

¹² Charles S. Sydnor, *Gentlemen Freeholders* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1952); Robert E. and B. Katherine Brown, *Virginia, 1705-1786: Democracy or Aristocracy?* (East Lansing, Mich., 1964).

had fallen on hard times was as sound as it had been when he was prosperous. At the same time, the Tidewater planter was expected to act as if he really did not care about such practical economic affairs. The men who aspired to be crop masters spent a good deal of time worrying about the tenuous relation between public appearance and private reality.

II

The great planters of eighteenth-century Virginia generally agreed that debt compromised a person's independence. Their concern—at least before the mid-1760s—was not that creditors would haul improvident gentlemen before the local magistrates. Rather, for the gentry the problem was more abstract, more internalized, more an expression of deeply held cultural values than of threatened legal proceedings. They feared that the very condition of being in debt exposed an independent planter to external pressure. It weakened the fortress. In 1761 Richard Corbin, the proud father of a new child, wrote to the colony's royal governor, "You will be pleas'd to hear of the Arrival of my Son, . . . I pray to God he may avoid the Errors of his Countrymen, & only know the Evil of being in Debt from the Experience of others."¹³

Even when a creditor said nothing about the state of an individual's accounts, the indebted man knew in his heart that he had become a dependent being, that he had lost a measure of personal liberty. The presence of so many slaves in Virginia, totally dependent beings, made the prospect of losing liberty more poignant than it might have been in the northern colonies. This psychological element made debt intolerable. The great Tidewater planters convinced themselves that being a little in debt was like being a little unfree, a condition no self-respecting gentleman could long tolerate.¹⁴

¹³ Corbin to Robert Dinwiddie, 10 July 1761, Richard Corbin Letter Book, 1758-1768, Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., Research Center, microfilm.

¹⁴ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery—American Freedom: The Ordeal of Virginia* (New York, 1975), 383-84; John Brewer, "Commercialization and Politics," in Neil McKendrick et al., *The Birth of A Consumer Society: The*

Considering their dread of personal dependence, it is not surprising that Virginia gentlemen preached against indebtedness with the same fervor that New Englanders reserved for sloth. In 1758 Corbin warned a son living in England: "Let me recommend to you this One Caution, Never to Run in debt, or exceed the bounds of your allowance, never buy any thing without Money [but] to pay for it immediately."¹⁵ Walter Jones, a young Virginian studying in Scotland, cleverly turned the traditional advice to his own advantage. In 1766 he wrote to his American brother asking for a loan. Walter argued that if one did not pay off one's creditors, "one must be somewhat dependent & a state of dependence in a place where the chief Characteristic is Pride, you will readily perceive not to be the most agreeable."¹⁶ Whether the brother honored this request is not known, but living in a society often characterized as proud, he must certainly have understood young Walter's predicament. When Robert Beverley began his long career as a tobacco planter, he vowed to avoid debt, a condition that he called in a letter to an English merchant "the general Fatality which overwhelms this wretched Country at this period." He described himself in 1765 as "a young Man just set out in Life." Even at this early stage of his development, Beverley had already "Discovered that the best Method of securing Success is to endeavour to be *perfectly independent*."¹⁷ In other words, success in colonial Virginia resulted as much from the ability to stay out of debt as from hard work.

The words "perfectly independent" provide an important key to understanding gentry attitudes toward the whole issue of credit. Only in an ideal state could a working planter avoid debt. As anyone who consigned tobacco to a British merchant soon learned—indeed, as anyone who sold tobacco to a Scot-

Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England (Bloomington, Ind., 1982), 211-15.

¹⁵ Corbin to son, 21 August 1758, Corbin Letter Book.

¹⁶ Walter Jones to brother, July 1766, Jones Papers, 1752-1787, Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., Research Center, microfilm, no. M-22-3.

¹⁷ Beverley to [Bland?], 8 May 1765, Beverley Letter Book.

tish factor learned—one could never predict what price the market would bring. A planter might require an extension of credit to tide him over until the next crop. His purchases might exceed the returns from the sale of his tobacco. These were the facts of economic life in eighteenth-century Virginia. But even though they normally accepted and gave credit, even though it was an essential part of the commercial world in which they operated, the great planters remained fundamentally suspicious of debt. Financial dependence conflicted with the imperatives of the tobacco mentality. They dealt with this potential source of strain by defining the rules of the marketplace to fit their own customs and experience, which in the Virginia context meant that indebted men still claimed personal autonomy.¹⁸

Since "perfect independence" proved so elusive, the practical solution for eighteenth-century Virginians was the establishment of what might best be termed an "etiquette of debt," a culturally sanctioned system of rules that told planters to whom they should offer credit and in what amounts. Such judgments pointed up the unusual character of the colony's staple economy. Participation in the world tobacco market simultaneously generated competition as well as cooperation. Since all planters, large and small, produced the same export crop, they were competitors. Some Virginians received higher prices than did others for their tobacco; every grower wanted to beat out his rivals.

At the same time, the staple economy fostered a spirit of cooperation among the colonial tobacco producers. Not only did these people grow the same crop, they also depended to a greater or lesser degree upon foreign merchants for their livelihood. Out of these commercial experiences they developed that spirit of mutuality that sometimes wells up among men who share a work culture. The Populist crusade of the 1890s provides many examples of this phenomenon.¹⁹ "The

¹⁸ On this point see M. Egnal and J. A. Ernst, "An Economic Interpretation," *W&MQ*, 3rd ser., 29 (1972), 25.

¹⁹ See Chapter II. On Populism, Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York, 1978); and Steven

small man was frequently a debtor," one Virginia scholar has written perceptively, "but the large man, his creditor, was likely also to be in debt, either to London merchants or to other large men. The large man might make a profit from the small man by marketing tobacco for him, but both were sellers in the end. The very fact that the large man stood to lose along with the small man in a prolonged depression of tobacco prices made him seem all the more appropriate as a spokesman for the whole country."²⁰ Cooperation and competition were two sides of the same economic culture, and, depending upon the situation in which he found himself, a planter might emphasize one aspect or the other. In other words, even in a society of competitive, autonomous, and materialistic agrarians, there was always the possibility of generating mass movement.

Debt should be interpreted, therefore, within a complex social structure, at once cohesive and yet subject to constant strain. Within this particular context, credit provided important personal links between the great planters and others who lived in their neighborhood. Indeed, beyond the members of one's own immediate family, credit offered a recognized means of structuring social relationships within the white community. Almost all of the colony's freemen were involved in this vast, largely informal network of giving and receiving credit.²¹

The rules governing these exchanges—really cultural conversations—varied according to the borrower's standing within the planter community. The difficulty with this mechanism of ordering society was that no one knew exactly where another person stood in the ranking. No outside agency—

Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York, 1983).

²⁰ Morgan, *American Slavery—American Freedom*, 366. Also Peter J. Coleman, *Debtors and Creditors in America: Insolvency, Imprisonment for Debt, and Bankruptcy, 1607-1900* (Madison, 1974), 198.

²¹ A. Land, "Economic Behavior," *Journal of Southern History*, 30 (1967), 479. See B. A. Holderness, "Credit in a Rural Community, 1660-1800: Some Neglected Aspects of Probate Inventories," *Midland History*, 3 (1975), 94-115.

there were no banks in the colony—provided credit ratings, and as many Virginians had learned to their regret at one time or another, external appearances could be deceiving. The problem of sorting out debtors was just as acute in the mother country as it was in colonial Virginia. "The greatest weakness of private credit and debt," one English historian explained, "was that the rules and conventions that governed their use were insufficiently clearly defined, and that the mechanisms that did exist for their regulation frequently exacerbated financial uncertainties rather than relieved them."²² Personal judgments, therefore, formed the basis of the colony's elaborate culture of debt.

However imprecise the rules of etiquette may have been, there is no question that Virginians shared certain basic assumptions about credit. These were local understandings developed within specific neighborhoods. Unless a person led a notoriously scandalous life, his chances of receiving financial assistance from one of the great planters were fairly good. These were usually oral agreements, expressions of trust probably sealed with a handshake. The great planter entered the sum into an account book—sometimes he did not even bother to do that—in expectation that the debtor would eventually repay his obligation. The overwhelming majority of these debts were small, no more than a few pounds.²³ When such sums were involved, a gentleman rarely demanded interest. In fact, a spirit of friendship—albeit between unequal parties—appears to have governed these transactions.²⁴ On this local level, credit represented a personal favor, a kind of patronage that great planters were expected to provide to worthy neighbors whom they encountered at church, the county courthouse, or militia training.

An obvious, though incomplete explanation why eighteenth-century Virginians developed such an elaborate system of local credit readily springs to mind. Quite simply, they did

²² Brewer, "Commercialization and Politics," 203.

²³ Coleman, *Debtors and Creditors*, 198.

²⁴ See Leslie A. Clarkson, *The Pre-Industrial Economy in England, 1500-1750* (London, 1971), 148-50.

not possess enough cash to pay for everything they purchased. Most of the specie they received, even the smallest silver coin, flowed quickly to the mother country, and while the colonial government printed paper currency (the Currency Act passed by Parliament in 1764 placed these emissions under severe restrictions), Virginians never enjoyed an adequate money supply. The operation of the local economy, therefore, depended upon the informal credit networks. Without them, the planters would have had no way to conduct normal business, or when the crops were poor, to pay off their most pressing obligations.²⁵

To see these credit arrangements simply as a function of an inadequate supply of specie, however, obscures the workings of planter culture. Within a Virginia county community, debt was an expression of what historian Harold Perkin aptly calls the "mesh of continuing loyalties." Though the great planters occasionally pressed local debtors, they were usually willing to carry these accounts for years. As in other agrarian societies throughout the world, both then and now, a small debt could symbolize an enduring friendship between patron and client.²⁶

Sometimes, of course, a creditor threatened to sue a delinquent debtor, and the records of the county courts contain thousands of cases involving small sums. To take a neighbor before the local magistrates hardly seems an expression of enduring friendship. A closer look at these actions, however, reveals a curious phenomenon. Usually the plaintiff would present his claim to the county court and then request "judgment by petition." In response, the defendant informed the

²⁵ James H. Soltow provides a good discussion of the currency problems in *The Economic Role of Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, 1965), 107-112. Also, Joseph A. Ernst, "Genesis of the Currency Act of 1764: Virginia Paper Money and the Protection of British Investments," *W&MQ*, 3rd ser., 22 (1965), 33-74; Ernst, *Money and Politics in America, 1755-1775; A Study of the Currency Act of 1764 and the Political Economy of Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1973).

²⁶ Harold J. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880* (London, 1972), 49; Raymond Firth, ed., *Themes in Economic Anthropology* (London, 1967); Conrad Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman* (1937; rpt. Garden City, N.Y., 1968).

judges that he needed time "to imparl," to prepare his argument. But debt cases almost never proceeded beyond that point. The parties settled the matter privately. In fact, the courts may have served as a means of officially recording a debt. Whatever may have been involved, the majority of these cases were simply dismissed. Far from upsetting the web of informal relationships in eighteenth-century Virginia, the law helped planters to work out their private differences with mutual forbearance. No one was publicly humiliated. The courts reinforced the conventions of the tobacco culture.²⁷

Since historians have not systematically explored these local credit networks—a task that among other things would require the analysis of thousands of wills—how they operated remains a puzzle.²⁸ Some planters, however, provided clues. In 1771 William Lee, a Virginian who had moved to London, was eager to settle the estate of Philip Ludwell, a member of a prominent Tidewater family, and in his correspondence with Robert Carter Nicholas, Lee inquired why one individual had not paid the seventeen pounds "due ever since the 15th of May 1754." An extension of credit over so many years seemed generous even by Virginia standards. But Lee well understood that each account raised questions of personal judgement. Such was the case of William Hubbard. This man had received two loans from Ludwell, "so that it appears that Mr. Hubbard is on the whole indebted £21 sterling for five years past, however as you say [he] is poor, if you think him really an object of bounty as far as I am concern'd I leave it entirely to you to release him from my share of his debt."²⁹ Hubbard was obviously a person of good character, and neither Lee nor Nicholas saw any reason to press him.

George Washington provided a particularly good example of the way that the etiquette of debt operated between men of unequal social standing. His neighbor on the Potomac,

²⁷ A. G. Roeber, *Faithful Magistrates and Republican Lawyers* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1981), 84-86.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁹ William Lee to Robert Carter Nicholas, 23 May 1771, Lee Family Papers, Mss. L.51, f. 414.

Capt. John Posey, had served with Washington during the French and Indian War, and between 1755 and 1772 his friend was a constant fixture at Mount Vernon. However brave a soldier Posey may have been, it is difficult to imagine a more unworthy object of charity. Largely as the result of self-indulgence, his finances were in a perpetual state of crisis. He drank too much and spent most of his many free moments chasing foxes across the Virginia countryside. In fact, Posey appeared to have possessed none of the personal attributes that accounted for Washington's own eventual success: diligence, foresight, and self-control. Nevertheless, Washington treated Posey as a friend. In the mid-1750s Posey began asking Washington for money. By 1767 he owed him at least £700, an extraordinary sum since Posey already seemed destined for insolvency.³⁰

What is so striking about this curious friendship is that Posey showed no shame. He kept returning to Mount Vernon seeking additional loans. However poor a plantation manager Posey may have been, he played the patron-client relationship like an expert. In June 1767 he requested another £500, an advance that would have increased his indebtedness to Washington to well over £1,200. By all rights, Washington should have thrown Posey out by the seat of his pants.

This is not what occurred. After upbraiding Posey for his irresponsibility, Washington apologized because he could not raise the sum of money that his neighbor required. "I find it next to impossible," Washington explained, "to extract any part of the money which is due to me [and] . . . I have struggled to the utmost of my powr for two years past unsuccessfully to raise 4 or £500 to lend to *a very particular friend of mine*, who I know must sell part of his estate without it. . . ."³¹ As a gentleman, Washington wanted to take care of his friends. It was his social responsibility, and even when

³⁰ Douglas S. Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography* (New York, 1951), III, 99-101, 184, 232-34.

³¹ Washington to Captain Posey, 24 June 1767, in *Writings of Washington*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C., 1931), II, 457-60 (emphasis added).



XII. George Washington: Proud Virginian, determined planter

confronted by the likes of Posey, Washington found it difficult to say "no."

Despite such generosity—or perhaps because of it—Posey's financial affairs went from bad to worse. Hardship, however, failed to diminish his pride or, for that matter, his gall. When Washington asked him for security on several personal loans, Posey accused Washington of "acting as a Money Lender," clearly very ungentlemanly behavior in this culture. To this

outrageous charge Washington protested, "in truth the prospect of gain and advantage to myself was not the motive that led me to advance you this money; 'Twas done to serve your family and if possible to save your Estate from dispersion." To suggest that a great planter would attempt to profit from a friend's adversity—or incompetence—was an insult. After Washington cooled down, he offered Posey some long-overdue advice: avoid getting so far in debt that your creditors sue and thereby cause your "honour" to "suffer." Washington's choice of vocabulary provides unexpected illumination into the core values of the tobacco culture. He assumed that Posey's *honor* was at stake, and that if others learned that the horses and the hounds and the house—indeed, everything that the man possessed—were in fact mortgaged, if they discovered that the appearance of prosperity was just that, appearance, then he would *suffer* the humiliation of exposure. It was something Washington himself could not have endured. The master of Mount Vernon counselled his neighbor about the importance of diligence, a homily followed amazingly by a promise to serve as Posey's security for yet another £300.³²

The relation between these two Virginians came to a tragicomic conclusion in 1771. Posey, as always down on his luck, begged Washington for £12. On this occasion, however, he provided a new excuse; Washington's loans would save Posey from the clutches of an unattractive woman. "I could [have] been able to [have] Satisfied all my old Arrears, Some months AGoe," Posey explained, "by marrying [an] old widow woman in this County. She has Large soms [of] cash by her, and Prittey good Est[ate]—She is as thick, as she is high—And gits drunk at Least three or foure [times] a weak—which is Disagreeable to me—has Viliant [violent] Sperrit when Drunk—its been [a] Great Dispute in my mind what to Doe." How Washington responded to this desperate appeal is not

³² Washington to Posey, 24 September 1767, in *ibid.*, 474-75. See also, Washington's correspondence with Robert Stewart, another old friend, in *ibid.*, 397-98.

known. Posey moved to Maryland and apparently ended his days in debtor's prison.³³

Washington treated his friend with compassion. Though other great planters might have lost patience with Posey, they do not appear to have taken advantage of their poorer neighbors. In this respect the Tidewater gentlemen were quite different from the aristocrats of London and Paris who ran up large debts with the local tradesmen and then ignored appeals for payment. Such arrogance enraged European shopkeepers, and in the late eighteenth century, they demanded social and economic reform. It was people of this class who supported John Wilkes and the London mob.³⁴ Perhaps if more artisans had lived in the Chesapeake, the great planters would have exploited them. But, in fact, much labor that was done in Great Britain by freemen was delegated in Virginia to slaves. Moreover, the small planters and scattered shopkeepers in the colony would not have tolerated such behavior. These were the men, after all, who voted in local elections. By abusing credit within the local community, the planter elite would have undermined a source of political power.

When both parties to a credit agreement were great planters—in other words, social peers—debt posed an even more delicate problem. For members of this elite group, paying a debt to another gentleman was a matter of personal honor. Even to require financial assistance from another Virginian was an embarrassment, a lessening of one's independence, but once an agreement had been reached, great planters could not endure the thought of tarnishing their reputations with peers by failing to meet an obligation. At least, that is what they claimed. George Washington, who developed a keen sense of his own honor, once informed another Virginian, "To tell a man who had been disappointed from time to time, and at

³³ Posey to Washington, 25 May 1771, in *Letters to Washington*, ed. S. M. Hamilton (New York, 1901), IV, 66. Also Freeman, *George Washington*, III, 293-94.

³⁴ John Brewer, "English Radicalism in the Age of George III," in *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Princeton, 1980), 348.

last had waited in confidence of receiving his money from me, that I was unprovided with the means of satisfying his demand, would be galling to me, unjust to him, and what I can no means think of practicing."³⁵

Indeed, a central element in what Douglas Southall Freeman, Washington's biographer, labeled "the code of gentlemen's credit," was a willingness to help a deserving planter retrieve his financial standing, to restore his personal honor, even if that act placed one's own finances in jeopardy.³⁶ Providing a loan, cosigning a note, or posting security for a bill of exchange represented in this agrarian economy an expression of friendship. In a letter written early in 1768, George Mercer candidly reminded his son of the relationship between friendship and money. "Colo. Tayloe's furnishing you," the elder Mercer observed, "in the *genteel manner* you mention, with a letter of credit, was a proof that you have one friend in Virginia, for generally cash is the truest proof of friendship."³⁷

Mercer's remark to his son reveals a key aspect of Virginia gentry culture. Col. John Tayloe, the gentleman who had provided the letter of credit, had dealt with the hard-pressed young planter in a "genteel manner," that is, he acted *as if* Mercer still possessed full independence. It was a fiction, of course, but one that was absolutely essential to the maintenance of harmony among the colony's proud and sensitive gentlemen. This was the message that Washington attempted to communicate to Posey: do not get yourself so far in debt that we can no longer pretend that you possess honor. In 1762 Tayloe himself required a substantial sum to settle an account in Great Britain. He turned to his close friend and neighbor, Landon Carter. "I am in great want of money at present to buy some bills [of exchange]," he explained in a short note,

³⁵ Washington to Posey, in *Writings of Washington*, II, 457-58. On this point see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982), 327-61.

³⁶ Freeman, *George Washington*, III, 90.

³⁷ Lois Mulkearn, ed., *George Mercer Papers Relating to the Ohio Company of Virginia* (Pittsburgh, 1954), 205.

"& should be particularly obliged if you would lend it [to] me only for one Month which [I] am persuaded would not be of any disadvantage to you." Tayloe's tone is respectful, though informal. There is no indication that his own honor is at stake, no offer of interest. "If you have it & will spare it," Tayloe concluded matter-of-factly, "I will send my Gardiner early in the Morning for it."³⁸ Carter provided a "favour" that no true Virginia gentleman could rightly refuse.

To be forced to set these social conventions aside, whatever the reasons, made gentlemen extremely uneasy. In 1758, for example, Richard Corbin found himself in such an uncomfortable situation. Benjamin Harrison, one of Virginia's more prominent planters, owed him money. Even though the two men were social equals, Corbin chose his words with considerable tact. He sounded almost obsequious. One must always be solicitous, Corbin declared, "of Honor of Family and of Fortune." Indeed, if he had not been "importunately urged to bring this business to a Conclusion," he confessed he probably would have let the matter slide. Corbin understood the code. He had no intention of dunning Harrison. Corbin even reminded the other great planter that "I always observed that regard that is due to a Gentleman of your Character."³⁹ However annoying Harrison's business practices may have been, Corbin studiously avoided the suggestion that either Harrison's behavior or his own had been dishonorable. In relations between great Tidewater planters, it was the creditor, not the borrower, who made excuses.

The most serious government scandal in eighteenth-century Virginia turned on precisely such cultural considerations. John Robinson, a jovial planter whom contemporaries thought quite wealthy, served not only as the Speaker of the House of Burgesses but also as the colony's treasurer. He held these offices from 1738 to 1768, and in political affairs he was the most powerful man in Virginia, royal governors not ex-

³⁸ John Tayloe to Landon Carter, 17 September 1762, Carter Family Papers, 1659-1797, Sabine Hall Collection, University of Virginia, Manuscripts Department, Alderman Library, Charlottesville, Virginia, microfilm, reel I.

³⁹ Corbin to Benjamin Harrison, [1758], Corbin Letter Book.

cluded. One of Robinson's tasks was destroying old Virginia currency that had been accepted in payment of local taxes. Colony law mandated that a certain percentage of Virginia paper be retired each year, and since most assemblymen assumed that Robinson was doing his job, they regularly voted to print new money.

But Robinson was not doing his job. After the tax money had been delivered to Williamsburg, he secretly redistributed the currency to great planters such as William Byrd III, Carter Braxton, and Lewis Burwell, men who in the early 1760s were having difficulty making ends meet. Robinson's actions were quite illegal, but his generosity with public funds resulted neither from personal greed nor from political obligation. The leader of the House of Burgesses foolishly misapplied the code of gentlemen's credit. He helped his "friends" preserve honor, to maintain the fiction of personal autonomy when in fact they were on the edge of bankruptcy.

When a full accounting of the treasury in 1766 exposed a shortfall of almost £100,000, the local gentry seemed shocked. Some concluded that unscrupulous Virginians must have taken advantage of Robinson's magnanimity. At the time of the treasurer's death, William Nelson wrote, "It hath griev'd Me to think that so good a Man as he was in private Life, should be prevail'd upon by a set of men he was connected with, & who pretended to be his Friends, to do anything to stain a Character otherwise so amiable." But, as Nelson confessed, Robinson "never could resist an Application to him for money."⁴⁰ And "Philautos," writing in the *Virginia Gazette*, described Robinson as a "good old Gentleman"—a good ol'boy in modern southern politics—whose timely assistance "immediately relieved many worthy families from ruin and

⁴⁰ Nelson to Edward and Samuel Athawes, 13 November 1766, Nelson Letter Book, Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., Research Center, microfilm. Also, David John Mays, *Edmund Pendleton, A Biography, 1721-1803* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), I, 181-83; Joseph A. Ernst, "The Robinson Scandal Redivivus: Money, Debts, and Politics in Revolutionary Virginia," *VMHB*, 77 (1969), 146-73.

indigence."⁴¹ Here was another great planter who could not turn down a friend.

The Robinson scandal revealed tensions within the tobacco culture of which the great planters themselves were only partially aware. They were willing—indeed, obliged—to assist worthy friends, but they were no fools. Supporting notorious spendthrifts made no sense and, in any case, would have soon exhausted their limited financial resources. The problem was to distinguish between the diligent gentleman fallen temporarily on hard times and the irresponsible rogue, between the appearance of prosperity and the reality of insolvency. In reaching this decision, one had to rely almost completely on external cues, on a person's dress, his horses and carriage, his outward estate. In this materialistic environment, a man's *visible* estate became an index to his virtue, to his moral standing in the community of planters.

The desire to keep up appearances helped fuel an infernal economic spiral. The planter who wanted to preserve his credit in Virginia, his honor, his claim to personal autonomy, found himself under immense pressure to *seem* prosperous. When John Bartram, one of America's first botanists, set off in 1737 to visit two of Virginia's most influential planters, a London friend advised him to purchase a new set of clothes, "for though I should not esteem thee less, to come to me in what dress thou will,—yet these Virginians are a very gentle, well-dressed people—and look, perhaps, more at a man's outside than his inside." As the anonymous author of *American Husbandry* reported with surprise on the eve of the Revolution, "In most articles of life, a great Virginia planter makes a greater show and lives more luxuriously than a country gentleman in England, on an estate of three or four thousand pounds a year."⁴² Andrew Burnaby, another English visitor, claimed that the great planters revealed their true character "in acts of extravagance, ostentation, and a disregard of oe-

⁴¹ *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), 25 July 1766.

⁴² Peter Collinson to John Bartram, 17 February 1737, *W&MQ*, 2nd ser., 6 (1926), 304; *American Husbandry*, ed. Harry J. Carman (New York, 1939), 174.

economy; it is not extraordinary, therefore, that the Virginians over-run their incomes."⁴³

These commentators did not fully appreciate the driving force behind such extravagance. The great planter's situation demanded not only that he spend a large percentage of his annual income on conspicuous goods and finery, but also that he hide the true state of his finances even from his friends, the people with whom he dealt on the county court or in the House of Burgesses. John Wayles, a tough individual who collected overdue bills in Virginia for British merchants, noted, "no man of any Account makes a Mortgage here but 'tis soon known his Credit is at an end and it affects him like an Act of Bankruptcy."⁴⁴ Wayles understood that credit in Virginia had a public face, and to expose the lie behind the mask by pressing a great planter too hard was viewed—in the Tidewater at least—as a betrayal of friendship. One effect of relying upon British merchants for credit was that it freed the great planter from the prying eyes of their neighbors. No one except the gentleman himself knew exactly how his balance stood. Of course, maintaining the show of wealth was expensive, and in his increasingly frenetic efforts to secure honor, many a planter brought himself ever more deeply into debt.

III

Spring in Tidewater Virginia marked a period of intense activity. There was a burst of energy not only in the fields where the slaves were setting out the tobacco plants, but also along the colony's famed waterways. Ships dispatched by the British tobacco merchants arrived, their holds filled with various items that the great Tidewater planters had ordered over a year earlier. Entire families rushed excitedly to the plantation wharves to watch the unpacking of crates.

This dramatic moment linked the provincial planter to the

⁴³ Burnaby, *Travels*, 715.

⁴⁴ John M. Hemphill II, "John Wayles Rates His Neighbors," *VMHB*, 66 (1958), 304.

culture of the mother country. The boxes and barrels contained crystal and wine, colorful china and silver plate, a beautiful dress cut to the latest London fashion for the mistress of the plantation. The vessels might carry a handsome carriage or even a well-bred racehorse.⁴⁵ Sometimes they brought bitter disappointment. In 1740 William Byrd II shot off an angry letter to John Hanbury, the merchant to whom he consigned his tobacco, complaining, "I never saw any thing so demolisht as every parcel that belong'd to me was[,] which was partly owing to the careless way of packing, and partly to your masters [Hanbury's ship captain] tumbling them ashoar at Hampton, and tossing them into a warehouse." Byrd's experience was by no means unique. Many a planter had looked forward to a shipment of European goods only to discover that "Every thing that would break of mine was shattered to pieces, and what would not break, was damaged."⁴⁶

The captains of these vessels, usually acting as agents for the British merchants, also brought letters addressed to specific planters explaining why certain goods had not appeared, discussing the quality of the previous season's crop, and lamenting the low prices that the leaf had fetched on the European market. This was a time when a gentleman learned whether he had made a profit or had slipped further into debt. After responding to the merchant's inquiries, a great planter listed items he wished to have purchased on his account. The captain then visited a public warehouse where he picked up the hogsheads that had been consigned to his employer, and within weeks of its arrival, the tobacco fleet departed for home. This brief, unusually busy period represented the great planter's only personal contact with the firms that merchandised his crop. In fact, his well-being depended upon the enterprise of unseen merchants located three thousand miles

⁴⁵ See, for example, John Syme's order sent to the firm of Farrell and Jones, 18 June 1761, United States Circuit Court, Virginia District, *Ended Cases* (1797), Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., Research Center, microfilm.

⁴⁶ Byrd II to [Hanbury], 10 July 1740, in *Correspondence of the Three William Byrds*, ed. Tinling, II, 550-52.

away, invisible men who sold the consignment, who provided credit to cover the difference between the profits from the tobacco and the cost of the goods just ordered.

These were intense relationships—at least for the Virginians—and it is probably not surprising that the great planters projected local meanings onto their transactions with the merchants of Great Britain. Within their own, largely self-contained mental world, Virginians found it nearly impossible to perceive the sale of their tobacco as anything but a kind of personal, face-to-face exchange. They generalized assumptions that had evolved out of the peculiarities of a local agrarian experience to an international marketplace. The tidewater planters simply recreated the British merchants in their own image, and in the process, they transformed them into men who understood the meaning of honor and independence, who appreciated that trade was a kind of friendship, and who would do a favor even if that meant sacrificing profit. This was a cognitive process. The planters of mid-eighteenth-century Virginia attempted to tame the unknown by labeling it in terms drawn from their own tobacco culture.

Virginians lectured British correspondents about the code of friendship. If they had enjoyed direct, personal contact with the merchants, they would perhaps have felt no need to spell out the details of the local commercial etiquette. Since the Tidewater gentlemen lived so far from the mother country, however, they took no chances on being misunderstood, and the letters they sent to Great Britain often smacked of didacticism. “I know there is something that may not improperly be called a *Commercial Friendship*,” Richard Corbin explained in 1758, “because I feel it glowing in my own breast, which takes its rise from a long Correspondence and is established by a Punctual and Steady Integrity on both Sides.”⁴⁷ If the merchant agreed to accept a planter’s tobacco on consignment, he thereby entered into a reciprocal relationship with the Virginian, a bond of trust.

Other Virginians employed different metaphors to describe

⁴⁷ Corbin to [?], 13 June 1758, Corbin Letter Book (emphasis added).



XIII. What an English artist imagined a Virginia tobacco wharf looked like at mid-century

the consignment trade, as a gift of the planter to a deserving merchant or as a kind of courtship, but whatever the language they used, the colonists stressed the mutual obligations created by commerce. In 1738, for example, John Custis explained to an English acquaintance why he could not send a few choice hogsheads to John Hanbury. “I believe when you hear my reasons;” Custis wrote, “you will pardon my not complying with your request.” The Virginian had previously established a correspondence with another merchant. This man “has allways treated me with the greatest respect and best of usage; and I should be guilty of one of the greatest offenses (viz.) ingratitude; if I should alter my consignmts . . .

it has ever bin my principle to bee steadfast to my old friends."⁴⁸ Custis obviously invested a great deal of himself in this commercial tie. A merchant who showed the planter "respect" deserved gratitude; profits mattered, of course, but only within the context of an ongoing friendship.

Robert Beverley also perceived commerce in these highly personal terms. This young planter expected a British merchant with whom he had established a correspondence to stick with him through financial adversity, to do so, in addition, without showing the slightest hesitation. Expression of doubt, Beverley thought, revealed a lack of trust; it reminded the planter that he was not as independent as he liked to pretend. In fact, this Virginian's letter is remarkably like those that John Posey must have written to George Washington. When John Bland, the merchant, balked in 1763 at advancing a large sum to Beverley—he was already £1,200 in arrears—the planter protested. "When you are in for so many thousands [of pounds] with People, whom you know not, & who care not one Farthing for you farther than to gratify their own Ends; you have an indisputable Right to Act as you Please." But Beverley was a special friend. Had the Englishman forgotten that "in the Course of Business [,] Obligations were reciprocal"? Beverley admitted that Bland had "very frequently conferred Civilities upon me," and the Virginian insisted that he was fully prepared "to acquit myself in the Most gentle Manner for such services[.] But I am of too delicate a sentiment to accept of any Kindness, when I discover any Doubt or Backwardness in him who confers it; with me the Least diffidence amounts to an absolute deniall."⁴⁹

The more he thought about Bland's insulting behavior, the angrier Beverley became. The Englishman seemed utterly out of touch with the basic assumptions of the tobacco culture. "I

⁴⁸ E. G. Swem, ed., "Brothers of the Spade: Correspondence of Peter Colinson, of London, and of John Custis, of Williamsburg, Virginia, 1734-1746," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 58 (1948), 68, also 79-80. See, Byrd II to John Hanbury, 22 July 1736 in *Correspondence of Three William Byrds*, ed. Tinling, II, 494-96.

⁴⁹ Beverley to John Bland, 17 December 1763, Beverley Letter Book.

am determin'd never to ship largely to any man," the Virginian warned, "who will not willingly advance £1,000 for me as soon as I ask [for] it [,] not that I shall ever want it unless to make some Purchases, which may occur, & which I do not at present Dream of." Again, it is instructive to compare this letter with the note that John Tayloe sent to Landon Carter. If his neighbor had the amount of money that Tayloe needed, then there was no excuse for not lending it to a friend.⁵⁰ Why did Bland fail to see that this was the way credit worked between social equals? Beverley was willing to give the merchant another chance. If Bland mended his ways, if he played the role of the trustworthy commercial friend, Beverley assured him he "shall discover in every Transaction of mine that Justice, Honor & integrity, which were Dayly inculcated into me in the progress of a good Education."⁵¹

Like Beverley, other Tidewater planters expected their British "friends" to carry them through hard times. A merchant, they insisted, must do nothing *publicly* to call a planter's credit into question. To write privately reminding a gentleman that he owed money was bad enough, but that approach at least allowed the Virginian to save face. When a merchant openly challenged a planter's note, however, the results could be embarrassing. Such actions called a man's credit into question and with it, his honor and independence. Gentlemen did their best to guard against such public exposure. In 1760, for example, George Washington informed a British correspondent that he might have occasion to draw upon the merchant, using an eighteenth-century system of credit that worked much like a modern checking account with an overdraft provision. "Yet," Washington added anxiously, "if at any time a prospect of Advantage should lead me beyond this a little [,] I hope there will be no danger of my Bills returning." Washington thought it quite unlikely that he should ever find himself in such an awkward financial situation—a comment designed to calm the merchant's fears—"for

⁵⁰ See above, pp. 102-103.

⁵¹ Beverley to Bland, 17 December 1763, Beverley Letter Book.

my own aversion to running in Debt will always secure me against a Step of this Nature."⁵²

Another leading planter, Henry Fitzhugh, took similar precautions to protect his public reputation. He had drawn heavily upon James Buchanan to cover the cost of new slaves, and the Virginian literally begged the Scotsman not to challenge this action, "as I have never yet had the discredit of a protested bill." Planters like Fitzhugh apparently reasoned that if the merchant knew that the money had been well spent, he would show more enthusiasm in preserving a gentleman's credit. The Virginians were only asking their distant friends to observe a local code of debt. Fitzhugh, for example, believed that James Russell, an English correspondent, would loan him £100 "when I assure you that the debt was not contracted for extravagant living &c. (which is now generally the case) but to purchase negroes . . . [and therefore] I am in hopes you will not protest my Bill but will advance me whatever the proceeds of my tobacco falls short. . . ."⁵³ There is a certain irony about these letters. In their effort to maintain independence before their colonial peers—and presumably before other merchants as well—the great planters revealed just how deeply dependent they actually were.

Tidewater planters insisted that they upheld their side of these reciprocal commercial friendships. They thought of trade itself as a kind of personal favor, in the sense that a successful doctor or lawyer might say to a younger colleague, "I'll throw a little business your way."⁵⁴ The planters assumed that any merchant would be more than happy to receive their annual consignment of tobacco, and so, by

⁵² *Writings of Washington*, ed. Fitzpatrick, II, 349.

⁵³ Fitzhugh to James Buchanan, [n.d.]; Fitzhugh to James Russell, 2 August 1757, Henry Fitzhugh Papers, Manuscript Division, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. Also, John Baylor to Norton and Sons, 16 September 1760, in *John Norton and Sons Merchants of London and Virginia . . .*, ed. Francis Norton Mason (Richmond, Va., 1937), 10.

⁵⁴ Marcel Mauss provides some provocative suggestions on this type of exchange in his *The Gift* (New York, 1969; originally published in French in 1925).

selecting one correspondent over another, the Virginian demonstrated friendship. In 1762 Beverley told a newly established British merchant, John Jordan, that "you may depend upon my Remembrance of you in one of your vessels." The remembrance, of course, was a few hogsheads of choice tobacco, and considering the cultural significance of this staple in Virginia, it was a gift to which the planter obviously attached some importance. On another occasion, Beverley explained that he could not bring himself to drop a merchant because the planter "imagined myself in gratitude obliged for many Civilities to direct the Bulk of my Consignments through his hands."⁵⁵ George Braxton, another Tidewater planter, assured a correspondent that his "genteel Behavior shall always meet with due acknowledgements & the most grateful Returns."⁵⁶ As usual Landon Carter took the logic of friendship a step further, at least, rhetorically. He boasted that even if a certain merchant failed to show him proper "reciprocation," Carter would fulfill their original agreement, which, after all, had been established "upon principles of honour."⁵⁷

Exactly what "reciprocation" meant posed a problem for all parties involved. The merchants certainly provided services to the Virginians that strict business practice would not have required. The correspondents placed the planters' children in schools, checked on their progress from time to time, and settled minor legal matters associated with probate or transfer of property. On their side, the Virginians not only sent their best tobacco, but also tried to defend the merchant's interests in other less obvious ways. The planter gained particular satisfaction if he took the initiative, thus showing that he looked out for the merchant's colonial affairs even though not specifically charged to do so. In 1761 Beverley accidentally discovered at a meeting of the General Court in Williamsburg that

⁵⁵ Beverley to John Jordan, 3 March 1762; Beverley to John Bland, 11 August 1765, Beverley Letter Book.

⁵⁶ Cited in Frederick Horner, *The History of the Blair, Banister, and Braxton Families Before and After the Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1898), 145.

⁵⁷ *Diary of Landon Carter*, ed. Greene, I, 375.

a certain Anthony Steward was about to attach some of John Bland's American property. Beverley immediately spoke up in defense of his English correspondent. "I instantly agreed to become your Bail . . .," Beverley reported, "rather than your Interest should suffer from your Correspondents in this Country."⁵⁸

Robert Carter Nicholas constantly did favors for his English friend, John Norton. On one occasion Nicholas purchased some excellent tobacco for Norton, a transaction that cost the Virginian both money and time. When he reported what he had done, Nicholas observed, "I never expected to make any Money by these Adventures; if I could Save myself [by fulfilling Norton's expectations for a large shipment of tobacco] and serve my Friend by them, it was all I expected."⁵⁹ It probably comforted the Tidewater planters to think that if they behaved so honorably, their commercial friends must be doing the same for them in the mother country.

The planters' letterbooks reveal the Tidewater Virginians were so busy personalizing commerce, so intent on making relations with distant British merchants conform to assumptions derived from a local tobacco culture, that they did not take time to learn how the international tobacco trade actually worked. "The Virginians are content if they can but live from day to day; they confine themselves almost entirely to the cultivation of tobacco," an English visitor observed, "and if they have but enough of this to pay their merchants in London, and to provide for their pleasures, they are satisfied, and desire nothing more."⁶⁰ Though this outsider may have exaggerated the Virginians' contentment, he recognized that concentration on the production of a single staple had limited their mental horizons.

Men who strove to become crop masters, who spent hours

⁵⁸ Beverley to John Bland, 16 November 1761, Beverley Letter Book.

⁵⁹ Cited in Samuel M. Rosenblatt, "Merchant-Planter Relations in the Tobacco Consignment Trade: John Norton and Robert Carter Nicholas," *VMHB*, 72(1964), 458.

⁶⁰ Burnaby, *Travels*, 717.

in the fields overseeing the details of cultivation, seem almost naive in their dealings with merchants, as if the trust they invested in their "commercial friends" was sufficient to guarantee a profit. In an extraordinarily frank letter to his son written in 1768, John Mercer touched on this problem. Mercer reflected on his long experience as a planter. "I have lost many thousand pounds by it, but as my [law] practice so wholly engrossed me, I never cou'd attend to consider the matter thoroughly till I quited [the law]," the father explained. But having retired from the practice of law, "I am now convinced that every man, who will not carefully attend his own business [planting] . . . will lose by it. Few people keep regular accounts & therefore don't know what their crops stand them in, & they often imagine them clear gains, after the overseer's share [is] deducted, when if everything else that ought as properly to be deducted was so, they wou'd find, they did not amount to the interest of their money."⁶¹

The planters wanted to believe in their commercial friends, to create, in fact, a harmonious, trusting relationship. Beverley, for example, thought challenging his correspondent's judgment a distasteful experience, "not only because I frequently find arguments not convincing, but because I really wish to preserve the utmost Harmony in our future Correspondence." It was Beverley's hope—one shared by other great planters as well—that merchants and planters "for the future . . . determine invariably to put the most favorable Construction upon each others words."⁶²

The planters' apparent ineptitude in handling their business affairs surprises the modern reader. A few economic historians have even felt compelled to defend the Virginians, arguing that despite occasional lapses the planters were "rational" in calculating return on capital. That may be so. The Tidewater gentlemen did purchase new land and slaves when the opportunity arose; they saw the relationship between these investments and expanded production. These men were

⁶¹ Mulkearn, ed., *George Mercer Papers*, 212-13.

⁶² Beverley to Samuel Athawes, 15 April 1771, Beverley Letter Book.

clearly not fools.⁶³ The problem may lie in the word "rational," at least in the way that twentieth-century economists seem to use that term. By their own lights, the great planters behaved in a perfectly rational manner. They took the assumptions of a particular social environment, a world in which a handshake was sufficient to seal a deal, in which no one paid close attention to record-keeping, in which even small loans were thought to involve personal honor, in which people strove at all costs to preserve their independence, and projected this bundle of values and understandings onto an international market. This was what was going on when London Carter lectured a merchant about "principles of honour."

IV

British consignment merchants who loomed so large in the Virginia economy were middling sorts by the standards of the eighteenth-century business community. None possessed fabulous wealth, and when compared to the grandees who controlled the West Indian sugar trade, the operations of the tobacco merchants seem quite modest. Tobacco sold on consignment usually flowed to London or Bristol rather than to Glasgow or Liverpool. The so-called "southern" consignment merchants specialized in superior grades of tobacco, the types preferred by English and Irish smokers.⁶⁴ The bulk of

⁶³ Jacob M. Price, *Capital and Credit in British Overseas Trade: The View from the Chesapeake, 1700-1776* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 16. The fullest analysis of the workings of the international tobacco market in the mid-eighteenth century is Price, *France and the Chesapeake; A History of the French Tobacco Monopoly, 1674-1791, and of Its Relationship to the British and American Tobacco Trades* (Ann Arbor, 1973).

⁶⁴ Jacob M. Price, "Capital and Credit in the British-Chesapeake Trade, 1750-1775," in *Of Mother Country and Plantations: Proceedings of the Twenty-Seventh Conference in Early American History*, ed. Virginia Bever Platt and David Curtis Skaggs (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1971), 7-36. Price's carefully researched studies of the Chesapeake trade provide invaluable insights into the structure of British commerce. In addition to *France and the Chesapeake* and *Capital and Credit*, one should also examine Price, ed., *Joshua Johnson's Letterbook, 1771-1774: Letters from a Merchant in London to His Partners in Maryland*, London Record Society (London, 1979); "The Rise of Glasgow in the Chesapeake Tobacco Trade, 1707-1775," *W&MQ*, 3rd ser., 11(1954), 179-

the lesser tobaccos—that grown by Virginia's small planters—was transhipped through Scotland to the Continent.

The major London houses of the mid-eighteenth century can be divided into four distinct groups: those owned by wealthy Quakers like John Hanbury; the "old English firms" run by men such as John Bland, Lyonel Lynde, Samuel Athawes, and John Norton; the "Scots" like John Buchanan and James Russell; and newly established American houses which in this period did not amount to much.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, though we know a good deal about the tobacco trade in aggregate—how many pounds were sold in a certain year, for instance—we possess little information about specific merchants. Of their vast Virginia correspondence, little survives.

However disappointing the merchants' surviving personal papers may be, there is good reason to suspect that these men did not view credit and debt in the ways that Virginia planters did. They employed the same commercial vocabulary, but British businessmen of the mid-eighteenth century attached different meanings to these common terms. Their perceptions grew out of their participation in a rapidly expanding, extremely volatile economy. To be sure, they were not creatures of a fully industrialized society, but the financial world in which they operated was vastly more complex than anything a Virginian would have directly experienced. Successful merchants, even middling ones, had to master impersonal credit arrangements, new forms of investment, and sophisticated banking procedures.⁶⁶ The very volume of their daily trans-

99; and "Who Was John Norton? A Note on the Historical Character of Some Eighteenth-Century London Virginia Firms," *ibid.*, 19 (1961), 400-407.

⁶⁵ Price, "Capital and Credit," 7-12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-24; B. L. Anderson, "Money and the Structure of Credit in the Eighteenth Century," *Business History*, 12(1970), 85-101; Anderson, "Provincial Aspects of the Financial Revolution of the Eighteenth Century," *ibid.*, 11(1969), 16-22; Peter Earle, *The World of Defoe* (London, 1976); P.G.M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: A Study in the Development of Public Credit, 1688-1756* (London, 1967); J.H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England; 1675-1725* (London, 1967); Leslie W. Pressnell, *Country Banking in the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford, 1956).

clearly not fools.⁶³ The problem may lie in the word “rational,” at least in the way that twentieth-century economists seem to use that term. By their own lights, the great planters behaved in a perfectly rational manner. They took the assumptions of a particular social environment, a world in which a handshake was sufficient to seal a deal, in which no one paid close attention to record-keeping, in which even small loans were thought to involve personal honor, in which people strove at all costs to preserve their independence, and projected this bundle of values and understandings onto an international market. This was what was going on when London Carter lectured a merchant about “principles of honour.”

IV

British consignment merchants who loomed so large in the Virginia economy were middling sorts by the standards of the eighteenth-century business community. None possessed fabulous wealth, and when compared to the grandees who controlled the West Indian sugar trade, the operations of the tobacco merchants seem quite modest. Tobacco sold on consignment usually flowed to London or Bristol rather than to Glasgow or Liverpool. The so-called “southern” consignment merchants specialized in superior grades of tobacco, the types preferred by English and Irish smokers.⁶⁴ The bulk of

⁶³ Jacob M. Price, *Capital and Credit in British Overseas Trade: The View from the Chesapeake, 1700-1776* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 16. The fullest analysis of the workings of the international tobacco market in the mid-eighteenth century is Price, *France and the Chesapeake: A History of the French Tobacco Monopoly, 1674-1791, and of Its Relationship to the British and American Tobacco Trades* (Ann Arbor, 1973).

⁶⁴ Jacob M. Price, “Capital and Credit in the British-Chesapeake Trade, 1750-1775,” in *Of Mother Country and Plantations: Proceedings of the Twenty-Seventh Conference in Early American History*, ed. Virginia Bever Platt and David Curtis Skaggs (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1971), 7-36. Price’s carefully researched studies of the Chesapeake trade provide invaluable insights into the structure of British commerce. In addition to *France and the Chesapeake* and *Capital and Credit*, one should also examine Price, ed., *Joshua Johnson’s Letterbook, 1771-1774: Letters from a Merchant in London to His Partners in Maryland*, London Record Society (London, 1979); “The Rise of Glasgow in the Chesapeake Tobacco Trade, 1707-1775,” *W&MQ*, 3rd ser., 11(1954), 179-

the lesser tobaccos—that grown by Virginia’s small planters—was transshipped through Scotland to the Continent.

The major London houses of the mid-eighteenth century can be divided into four distinct groups: those owned by wealthy Quakers like John Hanbury; the “old English firms” run by men such as John Bland, Lyonel Lynde, Samuel Athawes, and John Norton; the “Scots” like John Buchanan and James Russell; and newly established American houses which in this period did not amount to much.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, though we know a good deal about the tobacco trade in aggregate—how many pounds were sold in a certain year, for instance—we possess little information about specific merchants. Of their vast Virginia correspondence, little survives.

However disappointing the merchants’ surviving personal papers may be, there is good reason to suspect that these men did not view credit and debt in the ways that Virginia planters did. They employed the same commercial vocabulary, but British businessmen of the mid-eighteenth century attached different meanings to these common terms. Their perceptions grew out of their participation in a rapidly expanding, extremely volatile economy. To be sure, they were not creatures of a fully industrialized society, but the financial world in which they operated was vastly more complex than anything a Virginian would have directly experienced. Successful merchants, even middling ones, had to master impersonal credit arrangements, new forms of investment, and sophisticated banking procedures.⁶⁶ The very volume of their daily trans-

99; and “Who Was John Norton? A Note on the Historical Character of Some Eighteenth-Century London Virginia Firms,” *ibid.*, 19 (1961), 400-407.

⁶⁵ Price, “Capital and Credit,” 7-12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-24; B. L. Anderson, “Money and the Structure of Credit in the Eighteenth Century,” *Business History*, 12(1970), 85-101; Anderson, “Provincial Aspects of the Financial Revolution of the Eighteenth Century,” *ibid.*, 11(1969), 16-22; Peter Earle, *The World of Defoe* (London, 1976); P.G.M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: A Study in the Development of Public Credit, 1688-1756* (London, 1967); J.H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1675-1725* (London, 1967); Leslie W. Pressnell, *Country Banking in the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford, 1956).

actions would have staggered those Virginians who wrote of "something . . . called a Commercial Friendship."

The tobacco merchants, in fact, found themselves at the center of a far-reaching social change that historians label the "Consumer Revolution." At mid-century the population of the mother country began to expand at an accelerating rate. And it did so without adversely affecting the country's standard of living. Average working folk discovered that they could purchase items that within their fathers' memories had been luxury goods. There was a sudden popular demand for American imports, especially for sugar and tobacco, as well as for English manufactures. This was the society that produced a Josiah Wedgwood, mass advertising, and consumer fads. To keep up with this unprecedented market, English financiers, manufacturers, and merchants developed an elaborate system of credit, a financial structure that for the first time in the country's history wove isolated hamlets and scattered farms into a recognizable national economy. In London bills of exchange that had originated in outlying cities and counties were bought and sold, traded and discounted, processed as expeditiously as possible so that people living in distant parts of England—people who were complete strangers—could take part in the growing swirl of commerce.⁶⁷

But, as merchants of all varieties learned, opportunities to make large profits also brought tremendous risks.⁶⁸ At any given moment, much of a merchant's operating capital was tied up in book debts, really a form of credit that allowed customers to pay for goods over six or twelve months at a small interest charge. Without such devices commercial expansion in this period would have been impossible. During the eighteenth century, the British government never minted sufficient specie to meet the needs of the business community,

⁶⁷ E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); D. C. Coleman, *The Economy of England, 1450-1750* (Oxford, 1977); Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society*; McKendrick et al., *Birth of a Consumer Society*; B. L. Anderson, "Provincial Aspects of the Financial Revolution."

⁶⁸ Brewer, "Commercialization and Politics," 209-10.

and in the absence of an adequate money supply, private credit instruments, particularly bills of exchange, circulated as a sort of unofficial currency.

The system worked well enough so long as the merchant did not have to cover large, unanticipated demands for cash. He and his partners possessed little margin for error. A solid house might suddenly fall into bankruptcy simply because it did not have sufficient funds on hand to make good on a particular bill of exchange. It did not matter that the firm had built up impressive paper assets. The problem was liquidity. British merchants constantly worried lest the failure of a major house in London, Amsterdam, or Paris set off panic, a crisis of confidence over which they exercised no control, destroying smaller merchant houses along the entire financial chain.⁶⁹

For tobacco merchants, therefore, the price of providing Virginians with credit was chronic insecurity. It was a risk that they were obviously willing to take. The profits in the tobacco trade were considerable. Nevertheless, the liquidity problems that these merchants faced were more serious than those of houses engaged solely in domestic trade. A large amount of their working capital was tied up with customers who lived on the other side of the Atlantic, and even in the best of times (when Britain was at peace and ships avoided major storms), correspondence with a Virginia planter took at least six months. Despite these drawbacks, however, tobacco houses aggressively sought new American business, especially when the European demand for the crop kept prices high. They even pushed credit upon compliant Virginians. In 1768 William Cunninghame and Company of Scotland, for example, instructed its factors in Virginia to offer easy credit as a way of beating commercial rivals, for "such advances will assist toward enabling you not only to retain the former customers but also to engross the whole business."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ T. S. Ashton, *Economic Fluctuations in England, 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1959), 108-10.

⁷⁰ Cited in T. M. Devine, *The Tobacco Lords: A Study of the Tobacco Merchants of Glasgow and Their Trading Activities, c. 1740-90* (Edinburgh, 1975), 60.

When the price of tobacco fell or panic ran through the British financial community, many merchants sorely regretted their generosity. In 1773 one London trader cautioned a business associate living in Virginia, John Hatley Norton, "against what has been the ruin of so many in this country, viz. launching out into new trades or stretching your old ones to an extent beyond what your capital will bear. I speak this because I know a little how things are carried on in the commercial world & I know that a man may drive a considerable & prosperous trade, may carry annually £1,500 to the credit of profit & loss, and yet, if his seeming profits are in outstanding debts in a distant country, he may be obliged to stop & find all his golden dreams come to nought." The Englishman added poignantly that Norton's own father, a respected tobacco merchant, "sometimes hardly knows which way to turn himself for money to make good his payments."⁷¹ That same year an equally successful merchant, Samuel Athawes, informed his Virginia agent "of the terrible Crash which happened last Summer in England & lately a great House in Holland has given way which has pulled down many here likewise." Even a man of Athawes's standing was desperate. "Those who carry on extensive Business without a proportionable Capital," he counselled, "must expect [,] if they think at all [,] confusion will be the consequence [,] for in the Lottery of enterprising I have always thought the Blanks [non-winning slips] were too numerous for a Prudent or Sensible man to venture in it."⁷²

V

Within Virginia society a highly personal culture of debt had evolved well before the Stamp Act crisis. The planters' understanding of credit grew out of their own experiences, ac-

⁷¹ John Frere to John Hatley Norton, 23 March 1773, John Norton and Sons Papers, 1750-1902, Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., Research Center.

⁷² Samuel Athawes to William Allason, 19 February 1773, in "The Letters of William Allason," ed. D. R. Anderson, *Richmond College Historical Papers*, 2(1917), 149.

tual exchanges that had taken place in their neighborhoods. These dealings were heavily laden with moral judgments and even the smallest transaction could raise far-reaching questions about one's honor and independence. These perceptions and the rhetorical conventions that accompanied them were products of a distinct social environment.

This system of cultural meanings functioned well enough in prosperous, or even moderately prosperous times. But it could easily short-circuit. Indeed, as some contemporaries recognized, the structure of the tobacco trade could generate severe tensions between growers and sellers. In his book *The History of the British Plantations*, published in 1738, William Keith explained that though merchants and planters "cannot subsist without the other's Aid" and though "we suppose them to deal honestly and fairly by each other," the commerce could produce suspicion and hostility. "When a covetous Desire to over-reach and to grasp at an immoderate Gain, happens to appear on one Side or the other," this former customs official and governor of Pennsylvania observed, "it gives such Discouragement to the Losers, as in some measure affects the whole Trade."⁷³

In the normal conduct of eighteenth-century business, the Tidewater planters were often the "Losers," though their sloppy bookkeeping sometimes disguised the fact. As long as the merchants held out the possibility of easy credit, as long as they sustained the fiction of the planters' economic autonomy, the Virginians were reasonably content. During the 1760s and 1770s, however, the character of this commercial conversation changed dramatically. When hard-pressed British merchants began to call insolvent Tidewater gentlemen to account, the planters acted like "friends" betrayed. It was during this period of unprecedented economic strain that the Virginians discovered that the local meanings that they had developed to make sense out of credit relations were just that—*local* meanings.

⁷³ William Keith, *The History of British Plantations in America* (London, 1723), 180.