From T.H. Breen Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters On the Eve of the Revolution — Princeton UP 1985

CHAPTER II

TOBACCO MENTALITY

Late in the 1760s, Richard Henry Lee composed an essay entitled "The State of the Constitution of Virginea." Considering Lee's modern reputation as an outspoken defender of American liberties, one might assume that the manuscript dealt primarily with British corruption and parliamentary oppression. In point of fact, however, Lee focused upon another topic. After briefly describing the colony's political structure, he turned to "our staple" and explained how Virginians cultivated tobacco. Lee analyzed each step in the long agricultural routine—sowing, transplanting, weeding, topping, cutting, curing, and packing—for, in his opinion, it was important for people unfamiliar with this culture (perhaps the ministers of George III who were busy devising new ways to tax the colonists?) to understand exactly "how much labour is required on a Virginean estate & how poor the produce."[1]

Lee's preoccupation with the production of tobacco would not have surprised his neighbors on Virginia's Northern Neck (the northern peninsula of Virginia located between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers), men like Landon Carter, John Tayloe, and George Washington. After all, it is twentieth-century historians who insist on treating these people as lawyers, as statesmen, and as theorists, as almost anything in fact, except as planters.[2] This essentially political perspective

[1] Lee Family Papers, Mssl. L51, f. 378, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. The essay was not published. See, Pauline Maier's sketch of Lee's political ideas in *The Old Revolutionaries: Political Lives in the Age of Samuel Adams* (New York, 1980), 164-200.

[2] For example, the fullest account of the careers of these Virginians remains Charles S. Sydnor's *Gentlemen Freeholders: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1952). Like other historians who have written about the great planters—Douglas S. Freeman, Louis Morton, Aubrey C. Land, and Rhys Isaac represent notable exceptions—Sydnor concentrated on poli-

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distorts our understanding of the world of the eighteenth-century Virginians. Tobacco touched nearly every aspect of their existence. It was a source of the colony's prosperity, a medium for commercial transactions and payment of local taxes, and a theme of decorative art. Indeed, the majority of the planters' waking hours were spent, as they would have said, in "making a crop."[3] Almost every surviving letterbook from this period contains a detailed description of tobacco production, and even Thomas Jefferson, who never distinguished himself as a successful plantation manager, instructed a European correspondent in the mysteries of cultivating the Virginia staple.[4]

Though Virginians acknowledged the profound impact that tobacco had had upon the colony's social and economic development, they regarded the staple with a critical eye. Many planters readily admitted that the crop's effect upon their lives and the lives of their fathers had not been entirely beneficial. A case in point was the Chesapeake settlement pattern, a use of space that distinguished the people of this region from most other colonial Americans. The earliest Virginians had carved out riverfront estates often located miles from the nearest neighbor. As time passed, colonists spread west and north along the waterways in search of fresh lands on which to establish their sons and daughters. Each generation faced the same problem; each behaved much as its predecessor had done. Crown officials complained that dispersed living invited military disaster and discouraged urban development, but even those Virginians who recognized the desirability of prosperous commercial centers refused to abandon their isolated plantations.[5]

tics and paid virtually no attention to the role of tobacco in shaping Virginia culture. The crop did not even appear in Sydnor's index.

[3] For an example of tobacco employed as a theme of decorative art, see the tobacco finials on a mid-eighteenth-century Chesapeake walnut chest (G59.17.5) in the Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware.

[4] To G. K. van Hogendorp, with Papers, "On Tobacco Culture," 4 May 1784, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton, 1953), VII, 209-12.

[5] See John C. Rainbolt, "The Absence of Towns in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *Journal of Southern History*, 35(1969), 343-60; Kevin P. Kelly, " 'In

IV. Tobacco leaves on Virginia paper money

By the middle of the eighteenth century, most planters accepted that dispersed settlement was an inevitable product of a particular type of agriculture. Tobacco may not in fact have caused dispersion—the early planters might have done more to maintain the fertility of their original tracts—but contemporary Virginians nevertheless blamed their staple for scattering men and women across the countryside. In 1775, for example, the anonymous author of *American Husbandry* informed his readers of what every Virginian knew from firsthand experience: "A very considerable tract of land is necessary for a tobacco plantation." The writer estimated that planters required at least fifty acres for each field laborer, for if they possessed less land, "they will find themselves distressed for want of room."[6]

Virginia's dispersed settlement pattern had obvious cultural implications. Social relations among the colony's great planters were less frequent, less spontaneous than were those enjoyed by wealthy town-dwellers in other parts of America. Religious services, no doubt, brought people together, but churches were often inconveniently located. Inclement weather frequently kept planters at home. Militia practice occasionally broke the work routine, and it was not unusual for planters to use these gatherings as an excuse to get roaring drunk. Meetings of the county courts served a social as well as legal function.[7] But however important these events may

Dispers'd Country Plantations': Settlement Patterns in Seventeenth-Century Surry County, Virginia," in *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century: Essays on Anglo-American Society and Politics*, ed. Thad W. Tate and David L. Ammerman (New York, 1980), 183-205.

[6] *American Husbandry*, ed. Harry J. Carman (New York, 1939), 165. This anonymous book was originally published in 1775. Avery O. Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860*, University of Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences, vol. 13, no. 1 (Urbana, Ill., 1926); and Carville V. Earle, *The Evolution of a Tidewater Settlement System: All Hallow's Parish, Maryland, 1650-1783* (Chicago, 1975).

[7] An imaginative discussion of the meaning of community in the colonial Chesapeake is Lorena S. Walsh "Community Networks in the Early Chesapeake" (Paper presented at the St. Mary's Conference, St. Mary's City, Maryland, May 1984).

have been, the great majority of the planter's life was spent on his plantation in the company of family, servants, and slaves. Schooling, for those who could afford it, usually occurred at home, the responsibility of private tutors.

Some Virginians found this "solitary and unsociable" existence boring.[8] Like William Fitzhugh, Virginia's most affluent seventeenth-century planter, they relied on libraries to compensate for the absence of "society that is good and ingenious."[9] Sometimes even books must have seemed poor substitutes for regular contact with outsiders. In 1756 Edmund Pendleton, a young and promising lawyer, protested that he had failed to hear an important piece of news because he lived isolated in "a forest."[10]

In this society the cultivation of tobacco in large measure determined the planters' sense of time, their perception of appropriate behavior at particular moments throughout the year. A comparison with the production of other staples helps make the point. Each crop, be it coffee, sugar, or tobacco, possesses a distinct character—almost a personality—and thus places different demands on the people who grow it. Some staples, for example, require a great expenditure of labor over a relatively short period of time, perhaps a month or two of drudgery associated with the harvest; in sugar-making regions especially, this exhausting season can be followed by months of unemployment or underemployment. Other staples generate more balanced work rhythms. Under these conditions the tasks necessary to transform seeds into a marketable commodity are spread over the entire year, and there is no extraordinary crisis period, such as when the sugar cane is cut, which alone determines whether the enterprise will be a success.

[8] "A Letter from Mr. John Clayton Rector of Crofton at Wakefield in Yorkshire, to the Royal Society, May 12, 1688," in *Tracts and Other Papers Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America* . . . , ed. Peter Force (Washington, D.C., 1844), III, no. 12, 21.

[9] Richard Beale Davis, ed., *William Fitzhugh and His Chesapeake World, 1676-1701: The Fitzhugh Letters and Other Documents* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1963), 15.

[10] Cited in David John Mays, *Edmund Pendleton, 1721-1803: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), I, 102.

Work schedules, of course, influence the timing of other, seemingly unrelated activities. In many countries, the personality of the major crop determines when festivals are held—in other words, when the cultivators and their families have the leisure to organize such events. In the coffee-growing sections of early twentieth-century Puerto Rico, "traditional ceremonies . . . marked a sharp transition from work to nonwork."[11]

In the cultivation of other staples such as tobacco, there is no clear break between labor and leisure. As grown in eighteenth-century Virginia, the crop placed major demands upon the planter and his laborers throughout the year. From the moment they put out the seed to the time that they loaded hogsheads on British vessels, the workers were fully occupied in making a crop. Tobacco was not like wheat, a plant that colonial farmers sowed and simply waited to harvest.[12] The Virginia staple could never be taken for granted. It dictated a series of tasks, any one of which, if improperly performed, could jeopardize many months of hard work. Each step in the annual process required skill, judgment, and luck. No wonder that a French traveler reported that "the culture of tobacco is difficult, troublesome, and uncertain."[13]

By the time this man visited Virginia, the Tidewater planters had established a familiar work routine. Indeed, it did not change significantly over the entire colonial period. It became a piece of customary knowledge, passed from fathers to sons, masters to slaves, American-born blacks to newly imported Africans. As one eighteenth-century observer noted, "This process varies more or less in the different plantations, but the variations are not by any means considerable."[14] This pro-

[11] Julian H. Steward et al., *The People of Puerto Rico; a Study in Social Anthropology* (Urbana, Ill., 1956), 200.

[12] See, Harold B. Gill, Jr., "Wheat Culture in Colonial Virginia," *Agricultural History*, 52(1978), 386; Douglas S. Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography* (New York, 1953), III, 195-96; and Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982), 22-30.

[13] Duc de La Rochefoucauld Liancourt, *Travels through the United States of North America* (London, 1799), II, 84.

[14] Ibid., 85. An excellent discussion of this annual process can be found in David O. Percy, *The Production of Tobacco along the Colonial Potomac*, National

duction schedule, repeated annually throughout a planter's lifetime, on plantations scattered throughout Virginia, was a powerful element in the development and persistence of the tobacco mentality. The cultivation of this staple provided planters with a stock of common experiences; indeed, it sustained a "silent" language, a vocabulary of work imprinted so deeply upon the minds of people who grew it that they were barely conscious of how many assumptions and ideas they actually shared. Richard Henry Lee was probably correct: unless one understands exactly what was at stake at every point—the dangers, the requirements, and the critical, often subtle decisions made by planters throughout the year—one cannot fully comprehend the relation of culture to agriculture or why the later switch from tobacco to wheat so upset the symbolic world of the Tidewater gentry.[15]

I

The production cycle for Virginia tobacco began in late December or early January. The commonly accepted date for planting seed in specially enriched beds was about twelve days after Christmas. The precise timing depended upon a number of variables, but according to one prosperous gentleman, "The best time for sowing the seed is as early after Christmas as the weather will permit."[16] The small seedbeds, not larger than a quarter acre, were usually treated with animal manure, although it was not uncommon for fields to be

Colonial Farm Research Report, no. 1 (Accokeek, Md., 1979). Also, Melvin Herndon, *Tobacco in Colonial Virginia: 'The Sovereign Remedy'*, Jamestown 350th Anniversary Historical Booklet, no. 20 (Williamsburg, 1957). For a modern account of tobacco production throughout the world, see B. C. Akehurst, *Tobacco* (London, 1968).

[15] See Chapter V.

[16] A man identified as Judge Parker is quoted in William Tatham, *An Historical and Practical Essay on the Culture and Commerce of Tobacco*, ed. G. Herndon (Coral Gables, Fla., 1969), 118-19. Tatham's book was published in London in 1800. See also, Curtis Carroll Davis, ed., " 'A National Property': Richard Claiborne's Tobacco Treatise for Poland," *W&MQ*, 3rd ser., 21(1964), 99-110.

fertilized with wood ash. In either case, once he had placed the seed in the ground, the planter covered the entire bed with branches in order to protect the tobacco from possible frost damage. Knowledgeable producers prepared several different "plant-beds," frequently separated by considerable distances. This practice insured that the accidental destruction of one bed by cold, disease, or pests would not deprive the planter of a good crop. But, as with all farming, there were risks. Prudent Virginians understood that the odds against a single plant's survival to maturity were exceedingly high, and during this initial stage of cultivation, "an experienced planter commonly takes care to have ten times as many plants as he can make use of."[17]

The second phase of tobacco cultivation, transplanting seedlings from the beds to the main fields, occupied the full attention of the plantation labor force for several months. The work usually commenced in late April, but, as in all stages of colonial tobacco production, the exact timing depended in large part upon the planter's judgment. He alone decided whether the tiny plants were sufficiently developed to survive movement. Even when the owner of the plantation could not be immediately present—say, at an outlying property run by an overseer—he often sent precise instruction on how to manage such affairs.[18] According to common eighteenth-century wisdom, the tobacco leaves were supposed to be "as large as a dollar." Virginians looked for additional signs of maturity—the thickness of the young leaves or the general appearance of the plants—subtle indicators that one learned to recognize through long personal experience.[19]

However skilled the planter may have been, transplanting was an anxious time for everyone. Chance played an uncom-

[17] J.F.D. Smyth, *A Tour in the United States of America* (London, 1784), II, 129. See also, Lee Family Papers, Mssl. L51, f. 378.

[18] "Instructions Given by Richard Corbin, Esq., to His Agent [James Semple] for the Management of His Plantations; Virginia, 1759," in *Plantation and Frontier Documents: 1649-1863; Illustrative of Industrial History in the Colonial and Ante-Bellum South*, ed. Ulrich B. Phillips (Cleveland, 1909), I, 112.

[19] Jefferson, "On Tobacco Culture," *Papers*, VII, 210.

fortably large role in this procedure. Success required frequent rains; soaking moisture loosened the soil and allowed the planter to pull up the seedlings without harming their roots. The work was difficult and unpleasant. Because no one could predict when the rains might fall, one had to take advantage of major downpours, termed "seasons" by colonial Virginians. "When a good shower . . . happens at this period of the year," wrote one well-informed grower, "the planter hurries to the plant bed, disregarding the teeming element, which is doomed to wet his skin."[20] Laborers rushed from the beds to the fields where small tobacco hills had already been laid out. A seedling was dropped on "every . . . hill by the negro-children; the most skillful slaves then . . . planting them."[21] Under perfect conditions, transplanting could be finished by late May, but the job often spilled over into June. William Tatham, an eighteenth-century Virginian who published a detailed description of tobacco cultivation, explained that the fields were seldom fully planted until "the *long season in May*; which (to make use of an Irishism) very frequently happens in June."[22]

As the tobacco ripened in the fields over the summer, the planter and his slaves performed a number of tedious chores. Each plant received regular, individual attention; each task was done by hand. The crop could not be ignored, not even for a week. Producers waged constant battle against weeds, and over the course of the growing season, workers hoed each tobacco hill as many as three times. Since major planters like Landon Carter cultivated more than a hundred thousand separate plants, weeding obviously took a considerable amount of time. After eight to twelve leaves had appeared on each plant—the number depended upon "the fertility of the earth"—the planter ordered his laborers to begin topping.[23]

[20] Tatham, *Historical and Practical Essay*, 15.

[21] Smyth, *Tour*, II, 130.

[22] Tatham, *Historical and Practical Essay*, 14. See also, Lee Family Papers, Mssl. L51, f. 378.

[23] Jefferson, "On Tobacco Culture," *Papers*, VII, 210. See also, Smyth, *Tour*, II, 131-37.

This operation, literally the removal of the top of the plant, prevented the tobacco from flowering and thus channeled the plant's energies into the leaves. Tobacco that had been topped put out suckers, secondary shoots that had to be removed lest they rob the developing leaves of important nutrients.

The next step, cutting the tobacco, generated considerable tension on the plantation. The timing of this decision tested the planter's competence, or at least, so he thought. Virginians knew that the operation was supposed to take place sometime in September. The difficulty came in determining the exact date on which to start. As every planter understood, even a slight miscalculation could compromise the entire crop. An early frost, for example, was capable of destroying every unprotected plant, and as the September days grew cooler, the danger of frost obviously increased. On the other hand, to cut unripe tobacco was folly. Immature leaves heavy with moisture seldom cured properly.

And yet, notwithstanding the critical importance of this moment in the production cycle, Virginians offered no precise description of what ripe tobacco actually looked like. Instead, they provided loose guidelines, folk wisdom almost certainly based on experience. When it came to cutting, each planter seems to have relied on his own judgment. He simply sensed when the tobacco was ready for cutting; it had the "right" appearance. According to Tatham, "The tobacco, when ripe, changes its colour, and looks greyish; the leaf feels thick, and if pressed between the finger and thumb will easily crack." He then added, "experience alone can enable a person to judge when tobacco is fully ripe."[24] Richard Henry Lee, a gentleman who possessed the necessary experience, advised growers to look for "spots appearing on the leaf."[25] Other planters adopted different guidelines, a mixture of local custom and informed intuition, none of which guaranteed success.

Colonial Virginians did not refer to the September cutting

[24] Tatham, *Historical and Practical Essay*, 124-25.

[25] Lee Family Papers, Mssl. L51, f. 378.

as a "harvest." The term was inappropriate, for it would have suggested finality, the completion of the annual agricultural cycle. But for the tobacco planter, cutting led immediately to another arduous task, curing, and if he failed at this stage, it did not much matter how skillfully the transplanting or cutting had been performed. There was no time for either festival or thanksgiving. One English visitor who closely studied the cultivation of tobacco claimed that proper curing represented the planter's most difficult challenge, "and, for want of knowledge and care, there are every year many hogs-heads spoiled, and worth nothing." He insisted, in fact, that "the curing of tobacco is an art." Another man termed it "an art most difficult of attainment."[26]

Again, the crucial factor was personal judgment. Slaves hung the cut tobacco in special curing barns—one can still see such structures in the South—where it was dried. The trick was to produce a leaf neither too dry nor too moist. Excess moisture would almost certainly cause the tobacco to rot during shipment across the Atlantic. But leaves that were allowed to dry too long became brittle and sometimes disintegrated before reaching Great Britain.

Experienced planters naturally tried to terminate the curing process at the moment that the tobacco became dry without being brittle, pliable without being moist, a time that Virginians called "case." This point, Tatham explained, "can only be judged of safely by long experience." The problem was that the condition of the tobacco could change radically from hour to hour, moving in and out of "case" depending on the humidity. Wet days supposedly gave the cured tobacco leaves greater flexibility and thus made them easier for packers to handle. "This condition," observed Tatham, "can only be distinguished by diligent attention, and frequent handling; for it often changes this quality with the change of the weather in

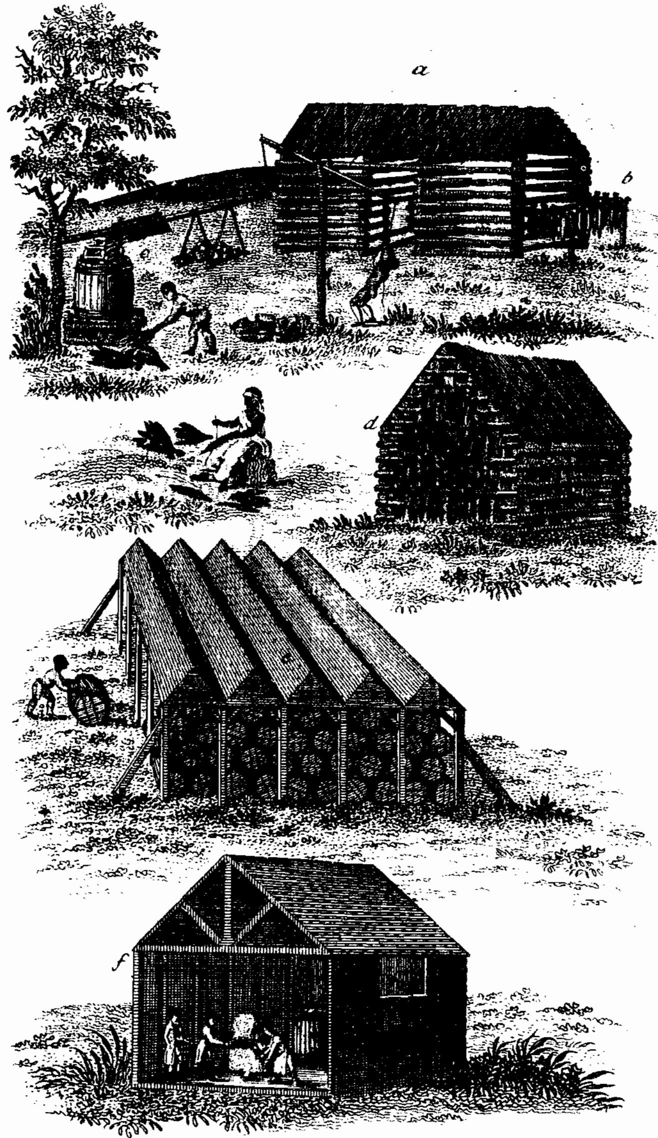
[26] Richard Parkinson, *A Tour in America, in 1798, 1799, and 1800* (London, 1805), II, 418, 423; N. F. Cabell, "Some Fragments of an Intended Report on the Post Revolutionary History of Agriculture in Virginia," *W&MQ*, 1st ser., 26(1918), 155.

a very short space of time."[27] If the colony experienced a particularly rainy fall, however, the planter was sometimes forced to light fires in the curing barn. Though the heat assisted the drying process, it could introduce unwanted problems. As Jefferson reported, "great care is necessary as it [the tobacco] is very inflammable, and if it takes fire, the whole, with the house, consumes as quickly as straw would."[28]

Following curing, several tedious operations remained before the tobacco was deemed marketable. When the leaves reached "case," slaves quickly "stripped" them from the stalks on which they had hung in the drying barn. Those planters who obtained the highest returns for their tobacco also "stemmed" the leaves. This was a boring job. Plantation laborers, men as well as women, removed "the largest stem or fibers from the web of the leaf," leaving a handsome product that could be easily packed. The speed with which stemming was accomplished depended upon the slaves' "expertness." One had to learn the necessary skills, and "those unaccustomed to it find it difficult to stem a single plant."[29] Regardless of the workers' training or disposition, these operations required considerable amounts of time, and during the autumn months it was not unusual for the slaves to labor long into the night over the individual leaves.

Only after these tasks had been completed could the planter begin "prizing." Workers placed layer after layer of leaves in hogsheads manufactured by plantation coopers. Men employing a hand press then "prized" the tobacco until they had compressed it into a nearly solid mass. More leaves were then added, and the process was repeated until the hogshead eventually weighed about a thousand pounds. Sometimes the pressure on the tobacco cracked the staves, bursting the hogshead. Since freight rates were determined by the individual hogshead rather than by total weight, the planter usually elected to take his chances with breakage. No wonder that Tatham

[27] Tatham, *Historical and Practical Essay*, 37.
[28] Jefferson, "On Tobacco Culture," *Papers*, VII, 211.
[29] Tatham, *Historical and Practical Essay*, 40-41.



V. Production of tobacco in eighteenth-century Virginia

concluded that prizing "requires the combination of judgment and experience."[30] These hogsheads were obviously difficult to handle. Virginians generally relied on gravity, rolling the tobacco down to the riverfront. One still encounters eighteenth-century "rolling roads" throughout the Tidewater region. The one that the Lee family used at Stratford, for example, can be traced from the fields down to the place on the Potomac where once a small warehouse stood.

These jobs—stripping, stemming, and prizing—continued throughout the fall. A prosperous Virginia planter, Richard Corbin, advised his plantation manager that with careful planning of the work routine, "the tobacco will be all prised before Christmas, weigh well, and at least one hhd [hogshead] in Ten gained by finishing the Tobo thus early."[31] But Corbin counselled perfection. Often the hogsheads were not ready for shipment to the public warehouses and inspection until well after the New Year.

Not until the following spring, a full fifteen months after the sowing of the tobacco seed, did the planter send loaded hogsheads to the European market. By that time, of course, another crop was in the ground, and he faced a new round of agricultural decisions. The schedule contained few slack periods, no time during which the grower could be completely free of anxieties about the state of his crop. Richard Corbin explained the tobacco cycle to an inexperienced assistant. Sounding suspiciously like a New England Puritan, Corbin observed that "To employ the Fall & Winter well is the foundation of a successful Crop in the Summer: You will therefore Animate the overseers to great diligence that their work may be in proper forwardness and not have that to do in the Spring that ought to be done in the Winter: there is Business sufficient for every Season of the year."[32] And when Richard Parkinson, an Englishman, first arrived in Virginia, planters told him that it required a "year's work to go through the

[30] Ibid., 43.

[31] "Instructions Given by Richard Corbin," in *Plantation and Frontier*, I, 112.

[32] Ibid., 111.

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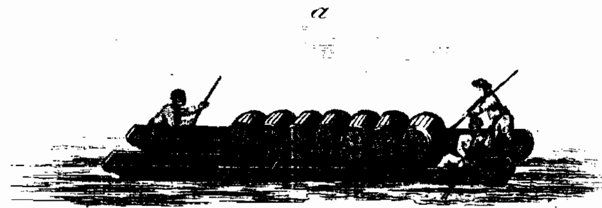

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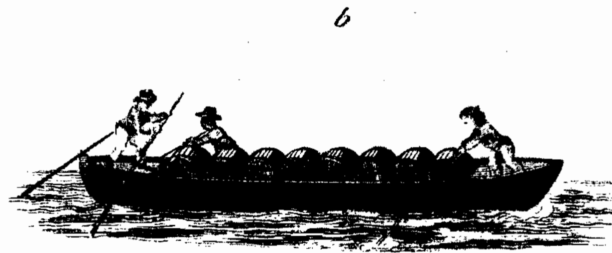

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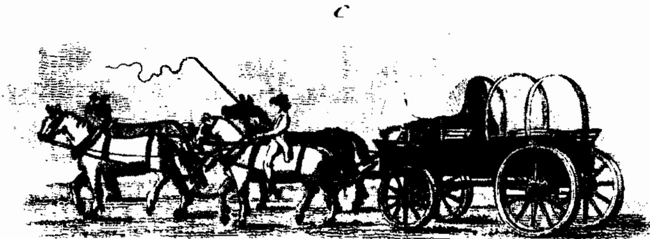

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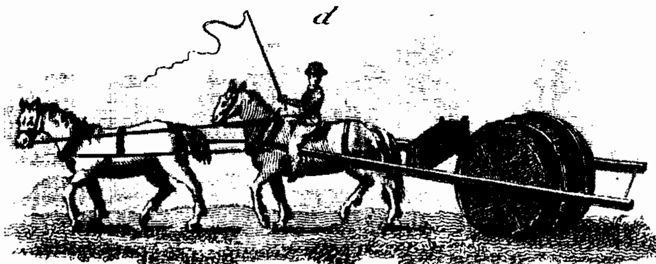


VI. Transporting hogsheads of tobacco to the public warehouses

process" of cultivating tobacco, to which Parkinson later exclaimed, "so it is"! He ticked off a full calendar, each month corresponding to some specific task.[33] This demanding routine barely left time to clear fresh land for future plantings or to cut wood for fences and fuel.

This work cycle affected eighteenth-century planter culture in several significant ways. First, the staple became an arbiter of time, of work and of play. The production schedule contained no clear culmination, no point at which the grower could relax and enjoy the fruits of his labor.[34] As we have seen, even cutting tobacco could not be termed a genuine harvest, for curing followed hard upon the cutting. One task was as important as any other.

Recreational and business activities had to be scheduled around the cultivation of tobacco, fit somehow into the established work routine. The planters resented being called to sessions of the county courts. During the third quarter of the eighteenth-century, these meetings sometimes lasted three to five days and were regarded as an unnecessary waste of time. Even the justices frequently slipped away before the county court had cleared its agenda.[35] And perhaps the rowdy drunkenness that accompanied public gatherings—militia practice, elections, and weddings, for example—can be explained, at least in part, by the participants' awareness that such communal activities were rare and that much work in the fields and barns remained undone.[36] Even personal pleasures revolved around tobacco time. After George Washington dropped the cultivation of tobacco for that of wheat, he discovered that he had more time for fox-hunting, his favorite form of relaxation. As his biographer observes, wheat altered the pace of Washington's life, for in cereal agriculture, "The

[33] Parkinson, *Tour in America*, II, 415-16. See also, Freeman, *Washington*, III, 194-96.

[34] For an analysis of a different agricultural work routine, see Steward et al., *People of Puerto Rico*, 199-200.

[35] A. G. Roeber, *Faithful Magistrates and Republican Lawyers: Creators of Virginia Legal Culture, 1680-1810* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1981), chapter 3.

[36] D. and A. Rutman, *A Place in Time: Middlesex County, Virginia, 1650-1750* (New York, 1984), 138-42; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 107-110.

ground was plowed; the grain was planted; after that, nothing need be done or could be done, except keep livestock away, until harvest."[37]

Second, the production of tobacco promoted social cohesion. This claim appears paradoxical, for it seems unlikely that a crop that restricted communal activities, that dispersed the population across the landscape, that heightened the planter's awareness of his own autonomy, could have generated a sense of common identity and purpose. The solution to this puzzle lies in a shared work process. The production of tobacco provided highly individualistic planters with a body of common rules and assumptions that helped bind them together. As one man labored in the fields, whatever the time of year, he knew that other people on other plantations were engaged in similar tasks. A planter did not actually have to see other men at work to know what they were doing. He took such things for granted.

This shared framework of labor experience, a kind of social knowledge, made distant, often unrelated planters appear less alien than they might have been had they been urban artisans or cultivators of other crops. The schedule of tobacco production became a kind of secular litany, and at the drop of a hat, planters recited the steps necessary to transform seeds into marketable leaves. The fabric of rules tied an individual not only to his neighbors but also to an historical continuum of planters who had worked this land. Since time out of mind—or so it must have seemed—Virginians had followed the same calendar, and thus the very process of cultivating tobacco placed a man within a tradition as old as the colony itself. Tatham provided an example of this turn of mind. While conducting research in seventeenth-century documents related to the tobacco trade, he was suddenly overwhelmed by an awareness of the centrality of tobacco in the colony's development. "We learn from these laws," he declared, "how much the subject of this staple was interwoven in the spirit of the times; and how nearly the history of the tobacco plant is allied to the chronology of an extensive and flourishing country,

[37] Freeman, *Washington*, III, 196.

whose measures contribute greatly . . . to give a tone to the affairs of the American union."[38] Predictably, one visitor to Virginia discovered that "the planters never go out of the beaten road, but do just as their fathers did."[39]

By the middle of the eighteenth century, many people both in the colonies and the mother country had come to regard Virginia and tobacco as synonymous. To be sure, the planters grew other crops, such as corn, but these plants never acquired tobacco's prominence. According to one Frenchman who visited Virginia in 1765, "the produce of the Soil is hemp, Indian Corn, flax, silk, Cotton and a great quantity of wild grapes, but tobacco is *the* staple Commodity of Virginia."[40] The evidence in support of this observation seemed overwhelming. One encountered tobacco on the small farms scattered along the colony's back roads, on the vast fields of the great riverfront plantations, on the wharves near the public warehouses. It dominated conversation in Williamsburg and Fredericksburg. No wonder an English traveler labeled tobacco "the grand staple of Virginia."[41] Robert Beverley, a Tidewater planter who generally avoided such extravagant language, called tobacco simply "our staple."[42]

[38] Tatham, *Historical and Practical Essay*, 184. The persistence of a distinctive culture also impressed the marquis de Chastellux, one of many well-to-do Frenchmen drawn to America during the revolutionary period. During a visit to Virginia, Chastellux noted, "The Virginians differ essentially from the inhabitants to the north and eastward . . . not only in the nature of their climate, that of their soil, and the objects of cultivation peculiar to it, but in that indelible character which is imprinted on every nation at the moment of its origins, and which by perpetuating itself from generation to generation justifies the following great principle, that *everything which is, partakes of that which has been*." *Travels in North America, 1780-1782* (Dublin, 1787), II, 174-75.

[39] *American Husbandry*, ed. Carman, 160. For an interesting discussion of the culture of agriculture in the contemporary United States, see, Mark Kramer, *Three Farms: Making Milk, Meat and Money from the American Soil* (Boston, 1980), 3-107.

[40] "Journal of a French Traveller in the Colonies, 1765," pt. 1, *American Historical Review*, 26(1920-21), 743 (emphasis added).

[41] Smyth, *Tour*, I, 32-33.

[42] Robert Beverley to John Bland, 1764, Beverley Letter Book, 1761-1793, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

By mid-eighteenth century, therefore, tobacco had acquired considerable symbolic significance in this society.[43] It came to represent not only a particular agrarian work experience, but also the people themselves, a collectivity of producers. On this emblematic level, tobacco linked the planters, large and small, those who traded on consignment with the merchant houses of London and those who sold their crop to the local Scottish factor. To be sure, the great planters owned more land and slaves, but there do not seem to have been important economies of scale in eighteenth-century tobacco cultivation. In other words, the great planter—a Carter or Corbin—produced more tobacco because he possessed more laborers, not because bigness in itself offered special advantages. The small planter who owned only a few slaves (or none at all) merely grew the staple on a smaller scale. The techniques he employed were the same as those used on the major plantations. He faced essentially the same problems as did his more affluent neighbor. He observed the same general work calendar. And so in some sense, he was just a smaller version of the great planter. If tobacco came in some quarters to symbolize a wealthy gentry culture, a society of fast-riding, fox-hunting gentlemen who frightened the likes of poor James Ireland into silence, it could also evoke images for the small man of *becoming* wealthy, of acquiring slaves and an imposing brick house. Tobacco symbolized economic possibilities and thereby promoted social cohesion.

II

In colonial Virginia, tobacco also acquired a psychological dimension. The staple provided a medium within which the planter negotiated a public reputation, a sense of self-worth as an agricultural producer. In part, the deep personal ties

[43] Rev. Andrew Burnaby, *Travels through the Middle Settlements in North America, in the Years 1759 and 1760; with Observations upon the State of the Colonies*, in *A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in All Parts of the World* . . . , ed. John Pinkerton (London, 1812), XIII, 717.

between the Virginia planter and the staple—the expression of ego through a crop—resulted from the peculiar characteristics of tobacco. As we have seen, its cultivation required continuous personal attention; at every stage the planter made crucial judgments about the crop's development. His attention throughout the year was focused not upon whole fields or even upon specific plants but upon individual leaves. According to Fernando Ortiz, a modern Cuban anthropologist, "This is why tobacco-raising is such a meticulous affair, in contrast to [sugar] cane, which demands little attention. The tobacco-grower has to tend his tobacco . . . leaf by leaf. . . . The ideal of the tobacco man . . . is distinction, for his product to be in a class by itself, the best."[44] The Virginia planters did their best to be present at every step of the process, and however boring life on the isolated plantations may sometimes have seemed, they were seldom in a position to become absentee owners, to delegate fully the responsibilities of agricultural management. Growing tobacco in this society was a personal challenge.

Of course, Tidewater planters recognized that their presence did not in itself guarantee success. Many aspects of tobacco cultivation were beyond their personal control. Regardless of his skills, the planter still had to reckon with luck, with chance factors like pests and weather that undermined the best-laid plans. Such "accidents," as Virginians sometimes called them, were an inescapable part of raising tobacco. In 1768 Henry Fitzhugh, a wealthy planter of northern Virginia, encountered a series of misfortunes in making a crop. In words that other Virginians might just as well have written, he recounted his reverses. "We have had so cold & dry a Summer," Fitzhugh explained, "that nothing could grow, & abt the midle of Augt we had a very violent Rain which drowned a great deal of tobo on low grounds, & caused that on the high land to spot very much." An early frost, "de-

[44] Fernando Ortiz Fernandez, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York, 1947), 24.

stroyed a great deal of tobo in the Backwoods."[45] In such situations the planter could obviously do very little. Landon Carter bore natural adversity with a certain stoicism, as if he thought he deserved better of nature. In 1771 he predicted that he would bring in a fine crop. But then came a "terrible dry spell," and the soil on his plantation baked "into a mere solid Mass." Carter responded to these conditions as best he could, but his efforts proved ineffectual. Fortuna had won. "Had I not been honestly sensible that no care had been wanting nor diligence neglected," Carter confided in his diary, "I should be uneasy more than I am; but as I have nothing of this sort to accuse myself with, I must and do submit."[46]

In fact, however, Carter and his contemporaries were rarely willing to submit. Fatalism was foreign to their outlook. Instead, they believed in the existence of an agricultural *virtù*, a set of personal attributes that ultimately determined the quality of a man's crop. In 1766 the Rev. John Camm, a person whose clumsy efforts to strengthen the Episcopal hierarchy in Virginia had angered the gentry, reported to an English correspondent: "These honest discontented gentry, I am afraid, secretly murmur at the wise Disposer of events, and sometimes seem to give shrewd hints that his affairs would be better managed if they might be entrusted with the direction of them."[47]

This sense of power—and, of course, responsibility—is the major reason why colonial planters came to regard their tobacco as an extension of self. To be sure, "accidents" might ruin a crop or two, but over the long haul there was no explanation other than incompetence why an individual could

[45] Henry Fitzhugh to Steuart and Campbell, 28 June and 20 October 1768, Henry Fitzhugh Papers, Manuscript Division, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. Permission to quote from this collection was granted by the Perkins Library, Duke University.

[46] Entry of 16 August 1771, in *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778*, ed. Jack P. Greene, Virginia Historical Society Documents, vol. 4 (Charlottesville, 1965), II, 614.

[47] Rev. John Camm to Mrs. McClurg, 24 July 1766, *W&MQ*, 1st ser., 2(1894), 238.

not produce good tobacco. William Nelson responded almost arrogantly to an English merchant who suggested in 1770 that the soil of Virginia was too exhausted to make a fine export leaf. "You make me smile," Nelson lectured, "when you talk of the Lands being too much worn & impoverish'd to bring good Tobo. . . . I know that a skillful Planter can make it fine from any Land, it being his Part & Interest to improve any that he finds worn or wearing out."[48]

Landon Carter shared Nelson's assumptions about excellent tobacco. When a young man in his neighborhood—an overseer, no less—announced that *only* the "accidents of the rains" could account for Carter's handsome tobacco crop, Carter lost this temper (judging from his diary, a not infrequent occurrence at Sabine Hall). It was personal management, not luck, that had made the difference. He expressed gratitude for "the assistance of heaven" but nevertheless insisted that his superior skills as a planter explained success. "This I assert," Carter fumed, "if our July had not been so drye and hot . . . My *management* would have appeared more conspicuous than that of others; for I dare bet anything that none of the Tobacco tended as they have done can be [as] thick as mine."[49]

The highest praise one could bestow on an eighteenth-century planter was to call him "crop master," a public recognition of agricultural acumen. Many apparently aspired to this rank, but achievement proved elusive. One contemporary observed that growing tobacco was "an art, that every planter thinks he is proficient in, but which few rightly understand." Tatham defined the personal qualities that he, at least, expected of a grower who held this title. A master cultivated his own "estate." An absentee could never acquire the requisite knowledge; the demands of the work schedule were too heavy. According to Tatham, the crop master "understands the whole process of the culture, and gives instructions concerning the various operations, though perhaps he does not

[48] William Nelson to Samuel Athawes, 26 July 1770, Nelson Letter Book, Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., Research Center, microfilm.

[49] Entry of 8 September 1770, in *Diary of Landon Carter*, ed. Greene, I, 482 (emphasis added).

attend personally to their execution." A crop master demonstrated an ability to make quick, accurate judgments about each stage of production. Possession of these attributes transformed the ordinary planter into a "lord of the soil."[50]

Tatham knew what he was writing about. Eighteenth-century planters worked hard at being—or at least appearing to be—proficient tobacco managers. Richard Corbin, for example, instructed an assistant on one of his outlying plantations, "Let me be acquainted with every incident that happens & Let me have timely notice of everything that is wanted, that it may be provided."[51] If nothing else, the person who received these orders could assume that his employer was a would-be crop master, in other words, a demanding boss.

Competition among the great planters for reputation as superior growers became more intense when, in 1730, the House of Burgesses passed the Tobacco Act. The purpose of this legislation was most definitely not certification of crop masters. Rather, the goal was to raise prices by removing "bad and trash tobacco" from the export market. The lower house designated some forty public warehouses to be located on major streams and rivers throughout Virginia. No tobacco could be exported from the colony, used in settlement of private debts, or offered in payment of taxes unless it had been officially inspected at one of these warehouses. The inspectors opened the hogsheads, graded the leaves, and destroyed the trash. They then issued receipts on all tobacco passed and stored at the warehouses. These certificates provided Virginians with a kind of paper currency. The receipts often changed hands several times before someone finally exported the tobacco to Great Britain.[52]

Passage of the Tobacco Act raised a storm of protest. The small planters complained of the inconvenience of carrying

[50] Tatham, *Historical and Practical Essay*, 100; *American Museum* (June 1789), 537.

[51] "Instructions Given by Richard Corbin," in *Plantation and Frontier*, I, 111.

[52] Richard L. Morton, *Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1960), II, 511-13.

James River, N° 271
Shoccoes Warehouse, the 30th Day of July
THIS shall oblige us, the Subscribers, our, and each of our Executors a[...]ministrators, to pay, upon Demand, to Saml Allen or hi[...]
at the above-mentioned Warehouse, five hundred sixty o[...]
Pounds of good merchantable Arro Tobacco, acco[...]
the Directions of the Act of Assembly, *For amending the Staple of Tobacco, [...]venting Frauds in His Majesty's Customs*; it being for the like Quantity receiv[...]
Witness our Hands, 561
Robt. Bu[...]
Pleas. C[...]

VII. Virginia tobacco note issued at a public warehouse

their tobacco to the warehouses. They also feared that thei[r] leaves—perhaps grown on poorer soils with less individua[l] attention—would be more frequently condemned than woul[d] the crops of the larger plantations. The great planters, how[-]ever, supported the legislation of 1730. During the early dec[-]ades of the eighteenth century, they had seldom expresse[d] much concern about producing a superior leaf. Like the smal[l] planters, they seem to have been interested in quantity no[t] quality. They sold their tobacco to merchants who sent ves[-]sels directly to their private wharves. At no point did othe[r] Virginians review the condition of the crop. But the Tobacc[o] Act dramatically changed the rules. The inspectors were t[o] bacco judges, arbiters of excellence. It is perhaps not surpri[s]ing that self-conscious statements about excellence postdat[e] this legislation, suggesting of course that certification pro[-]vided a powerful new incentive for these gentlemen to be[st] their rivals, to establish bragging rights. By mid-century pub[-]lic inspection had become an annual ritual reinforcing the to[-]bacco mentality.

By whatever means, Virginians learned which planters pos[-]sessed superior judgment, and at critical points in the produc[-]tion process they turned to these crop masters for advice. Cu[t-]ting the tobacco was such a task. Writers like Tatha[m] provided inexperienced planters with general descriptions [...]

ripe leaves and changes in color and thickness, but somehow books never conveyed adequate information. In frustration, Tatham declared that ripening is "easier to understand than to express." "It is a point," he concluded, "on which I would not trust my own experience without consulting some able crop-master in the neighborhood."[53]

It was certainly wiser to call on a local expert than to trust one's luck. Carter preached this lesson to anyone who bothered to listen. In 1770 John Purcell, "master of the Patrol in this neck," chased a runaway slave into a curing barn belonging to one of Carter's neighbors and discovered, among other things, that the planter's tobacco was "dung" rotten. When Carter heard this story, he immediately ascribed the condition of the crop to poor personal management. The plants had been "cut down not half ripe and of course too thin to stand the sweat of the house. Thus is 9/10 of the tobacco spoilt every year."[54] The planter stood twice condemned. He not only was an incompetent producer but also had failed to consult a crop master.

Even the names given to the various kinds of tobacco testified to the close personal relation between the planter and his crop. People unfamiliar with the cultivation of this staple assumed that colonial Virginians grew only two varieties, Oronoco and sweet-scented. Though this information may have been technically correct, Virginians recognized finer, more personal distinctions. "Question a planter on the subject," one man explained, "and he will tell you that he cultivates such or such a kind: as, for example 'Colonel Carter's sort,' or some other leading crop master."[55] Sometimes visitors reported finding different "species . . . with names peculiar to the situation, settlement, and neighborhoods, wherein they are produced," but on closer inspection one usually discovered that an excellent local tobacco was identified with a specific planter.[56]

[53] Tatham, *Historical and Practical Essay*, 23-24.

[54] Entry of 11 September 1770, in *Diary of Landon Carter*, ed. Greene, I, 487.

[55] Tatham, *Historical and Practical Essay*, 4-5.

[56] Smyth, *Tour*, II, 130. Rutman and Rutman, *A Place in Time*, 40.

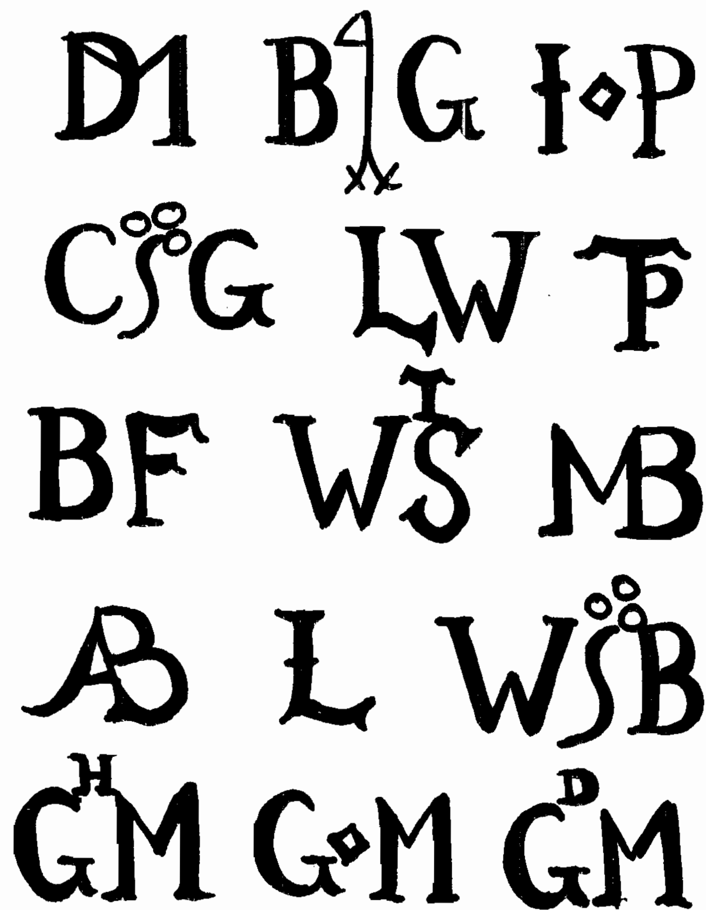
Such eponymous practice was certainly prevalent along the lower York River. The planters in this area claimed that they produced the best leaf in the entire Chesapeake region. But according to Andrew Burnaby, an English traveller, the very best York crops came from the fields of Col. Edward Digges. Indeed, Digges enjoyed a reputation for consistent quality that French wine-makers would have envied. Like their products, his tobacco went to market bearing his personal stamp.[57] Digges's tobacco, Burnaby noted, "is in such high estimation that . . . [he] puts upon every hogshead in which it is packed, the initials of his name; and it is from thence called the E.D. tobacco, and sells for a proportionally higher price."[58] As late as 1811, long after Digges had died, Virginians still talked of the extraordinary sweet-scented tobacco "E. Dees" that had made Digges's York plantation famous in the mother country. When the land was sold off early in the nineteenth century, a newspaper advertisement announced, "1,000 acres in York county, the only estate where the famous E.D. tobacco was raised, which never failed to bring in England one shilling on the pound, when other tobacco would not bring three pence."[59]

The centrality of tobacco in the lives of these men spawned a curious system of social ranking, one strikingly different from that normally associated with modern industrial societies. The planter's self-esteem depended—in part, at least—upon the quality of his tobacco. This measure, of course, was highly subjective. It left him vulnerable, especially after passage of the Tobacco Act, to the opinion of other Virginians. However excellent a person regarded his own crop as being, a sharp-eyed rival could always spot flaws. The great Tidewater planters worried about these negative judgments and, as we shall see, took them quite personally. Indeed, the planters seem to have cultivated tobacco as much to gain the respect of merchants and neighbors—in other words, of people with whom they maintained regular contacts—as to please the

[57] See Leo A. Loubère, *The Red and the White: A History of Wine in France and Italy in the Nineteenth Century* (Albany, N.Y., 1978).

[58] Burnaby, *Travels*, 706-707; "Journal of a French Traveller," 743.

[59] *W&MQ*, 1st ser., 15(1906), 38.



VIII. Personal tobacco marks of the leading planters of Fairfax County

anonymous chewers, smokers, and snuffers who ultimately purchased the staple in Europe. In 1737, for example, William Beverley consigned a shipment of tobacco to a leading London merchant accompanied with this request: "I hope it will come to a good market and as it is famous here among

the merchants for fine tobacco, I beg that you will sell it by itself without joining with any other that it may obtain a good name and become famous as Mr. Burwell's tobacco."[60]

Even Virginians whose crops were not so renowned as those of Edward Digges took pride in making outstanding tobacco. In fact, the planter's self-respect was so tightly bound up with the quality of his tobacco that it was sometimes difficult to discern whether a man's reputation or his tobacco was being shipped to market. Henry Fitzhugh staked his honor on twelve hogsheads of sweet-scented tobacco. "It was made on the plantation [where I] live," he informed a British merchant, "& therefore as I saw to the whole man[age]ment of it my self, [I] can with authority recom[m]end it to be exceeding good."[61] Philip Ludwell Lee, Richard Henry's brother, modestly called the crop produced at Stratford in 1771 "as fine as ever was made."[62] William Nelson wrote a sharp note in 1766 to a merchant who seemed unappreciative of having received some of "*my* Hanovers stem'd Tobo."[63] The emphasis was on the planter's skill and judgment, on his personal involvement with production. In 1772 Robert Beverley predicted that his plantation would not produce a large crop, but he consoled himself with the thought "that the Quality is remarkably fine."[64]

If the planters of eighteenth-century Virginia had been less personally involved in production, if like the great sugar lords of the Caribbean they had been absentee investors, they might not have been so sensitive to what other men obtained in the marketplace or so worried about comparisons made by neighbors riding past their fields. But this was not the case.

[60] William Beverley to Micajah Perry, 12 July 1737, *W&MQ*, 1st ser., 3(1894), 223. William Beverley was the father of Robert, a planter whose financial affairs are discussed in detail in Chapter IV.

[61] Henry Fitzhugh to James Buchanan, n.d., Henry Fitzhugh Papers.

[62] Philip Ludwell Lee to William Lee, 25 July 1771, Lee Family Papers, Mssl. L51, f. 252.

[63] William Nelson to James Gildart, 26 July 1766, Nelson Letter Book (emphasis added).

[64] Robert Beverley to [?], 27 December 1762, Beverley Letter Book.

IX. An English advertisement for high-quality Virginia tobacco

Within this particular agrarian culture, planters calculated not only their own standing but also that of their competitors by the appearance of fully cured tobacco leaves. "I know in this neighbourhood," Carter declared, "people are very fond of speaking meanly of their neighbor's Crops and I am certain mine has been so characterised." Fortunately for Carter's own self-respect, as he rode about Virginia's Northern Neck gratuitously rating other men's tobacco, he did not "see any so good [as mine]," and he even ventured "a wager with the best of them both as to quantity and quality."[65] In this tobacco culture, Carter's good management publicly demonstrated his private virtue.

Robert Beverley, Carter's son-in-law, also kept an eye on his neighbors and in 1774 was able to recommend one of them to a British correspondent because "he is thought to make very good Tobacco."[66] Note the passive construction of Beverley's statement. A collective judgment had been made about this person's crop. No doubt, Beverley had overheard conversations at a public warehouse or at the county court, places

[65] *Diary of Landon Carter*, ed. Greene, I, 474.
[66] Robert Beverley to Samuel Athawes, 1774, Beverley Letter Book.

where planters congregated and where reputations were established. In this agrarian society, Richard Mason did not fare well. According to George Mason, the colony's famed constitutional theorist, "Dick's" failure as a planter called into question his moral character. After all, he "handled his Tobacco in so careless & slovenly a Manner that more than half of it was rotten, & even the best of it . . . will run some Risque at the Warehouse."[67]

Even popular religious persuasion may have been connected to the tobacco mentality. It is possible, for example, that a crop such as tobacco heightened the producer's confidence in his ability to control nature. Leading Virginia planters in the Revolutionry period spoke of themselves as managers, as crop masters, as persons capable, in other words, of making decisions affecting the quality of the finished leaf. One had to know when to top and worm the plants, when to cut the tobacco, how long to let it cure. As little as possible in this work routine was left to chance. Failure, therefore, resulted from personal dereliction, and by the same token, success implied integrity. It is not surprising that members of the Virginia gentry generally subscribed to a calm, reasonable, low-church Anglicanism, a theology that did not challenge their rather inflated notions of human capabilities. How different the experiences of the wheat farmer. He found himself dependent upon natural elements beyond his direct control. The vulnerability of the cultivator, his enforced passivity during much of the growing season, may have convinced him of God's terrible omnipotence.

The most influential evangelical preacher of the eighteenth century, George Whitefield, certainly suspected that there was a relation between forms of agricultural production and a people's receptivity to the "new light." He loved the prosperous cereal farmers of Pennsylvania. "Their oxen are strong to labour," he recorded in his journal, "and there seems to be no complaining in their streets. What is best of all, I believe they

[67] Robert A. Rutland, ed., *The Papers of George Mason, 1725-1792* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1970), I, 57.

have the Lord for their God. . . . The Constitution is far from being arbitrary; the soil is good, the land exceedingly fruitful, and there is a greater equality between the poor and rich than perhaps can be found in any other place of the known world." How different Tidewater Virginia appeared to Whitefield! The dispersed tobacco planters had neglected building towns of consequence; there were few churches. When Sunday services were held, farmers offered lame excuses why they could not possibly attend. Tidewater society, so full of "wicked men," discouraged even the indomitable Whitefield. "The greatest probability of doing good in Virginia," he concluded, "is among the Scots-Irish, who have lately settled in the mountainous parts of that province. They raise little or no tobacco, but things that are useful for common life."[68]

Not surprisingly, the price they received for their tobacco obsessed colonial planters. The sources of this preoccupation were cultural as well as economic. There is no question that men like Carter and Lee strove to maintain a favorable balance with the British merchant houses. As we shall see, they hated debt. Nevertheless, they were also concerned with the judgment of other planters. Price provided a reasonably unambiguous measure of the worth of a man's tobacco, its quality; and in this sense a high return validated a person's claim as a crop master. Historians who describe these Virginians solely as agricultural capitalists eager to maximize income miss a crucial aspect of the tobacco mentality. These planters competed not only for pounds and pence but also for honor and reputation.

This point should not be misunderstood. It would be foolish to claim that the planters were indifferent to profits or that they were incapable of responding to economic incentives. In some of their commercial correspondence they sound like hard-nosed businessmen, the kind of calculating entrepreneurs whom agricultural economists tell us inhabit rural

[68] George Whitefield, *Journals (1737-1741)*, intro. William V. Davis (Gainesville, Fla., 1969), 384, 386-87. The two preceding paragraphs originally appeared in "Back to Sweat and Toil: Suggestions for the Study of Agricultural Work in Early America," *Pennsylvania History*, 49(1982), 241-58 and are reproduced here with express consent of the editor.

America. But while recognizing the desire to maximize returns, one should appreciate other considerations that strongly influenced planter behavior in this society. The mental process of these Virginians was not unlike that of the Balinese peasants whom Clifford Geertz observed placing bets on fighting cocks. "This [symbolic analysis]," Geertz explained, "I must stress immediately, is *not* to say that money does not matter, or that the Balinese is no more concerned about losing five hundred ringgits than fifteen. Such a conclusion would be absurd. It is because money *does*, in this hardly unmaterialistic society, matter and matter very much that the more of it one risks, the more of a lot of other things, such as one's pride, one's poise, one's dispassion, one's masculinity, one also risks, again only momentarily but again very publicly as well."[69] And it was precisely because tobacco mattered in Virginia society so very much that it became in the eye of the major producers a measure of self, a source of meaningful social identity, as well as a means to maintain a high standard of living.

Whatever the source of their curiosity may have been, the planters paid close attention to news of price. Rumors spread rapidly. Whenever Virginians congregated, they traded information about the local market, and though each planter conducted his business in private, everyone seemed to know exactly how much money he had received. These gatherings filled Virginians with considerable anxiety. They wanted to discover how well other producers had done, to establish an index by which they could measure their own performance. To learn that one had settled for a lower price than that offered to competing planters in the area was galling. It amounted to a public loss of face. Robert ("King") Carter, Landon's father and the wealthiest Virginian of his generation, could not bear the thought of losing out to his neighbors. "In discourse with Colonel Byrd, Mr. Armistead, and a great many others," Carter lectured an English merchant, "I un-

[69] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 433-34.

derstand you had sold their tobacco . . . at good rates. I cannot allow myself to come behind any of these gentlemen in the planter's trade."[70] Carter assumed not only that the news of his sales circulated widely but also that lower returns compromised his standing within the community of planters.

Isaac Giberne understood such thinking. Although this Anglican parson was not a typical Tidewater planter, he was very much involved in the local tobacco culture. In 1773 he wrote to William Lee, a former neighbor who was then trying to establish himself as a London tobacco merchant. "In yours of 25th Jany. last," Giberne observed, "you say you can only promise me *Neighbour's Fare* for my Tobaccos last year." That agreement Giberne accepted, but he warned, "Pray remember my good Friend, that as Colo. Frans. Lee is literally and almost my next door neighbour, that my sales do not fall short of his; otherwise your promise fails, as I shall be content in *the Equity* of *his* price, let it be what it will."[71] Again, the basis of Giberne's expectations was not a finely calibrated accounting of return on investment, or even on some vague sense of what tobacco was selling for in Europe, but on what his immediate peers might receive. At stake was Giberne's honor, and, as William Lee well knew, planters kept few secrets about tobacco prices.

Criticism of a man's tobacco, however tactfully phrased, set off frenzied self-examination. Whenever planters received a low price, for example, they assumed that somehow they must be at fault. Their reaction was almost reflexive. The problem, they reasoned, must have been in production, in the management of the labor force—in other words, in themselves—and they usually accepted responsibility for the poor showing of their tobacco in the British market. In 1766 the London firm of Steuart and Campbell notified Henry Fitzhugh that some sixty hogsheads of his "own Crop sold much lower" than had the "rent" tobacco made by Fitzhugh's tenants. This was extremely embarrassing for one who had pretensions of being a crop master. The questionable hogsheads displayed his personal seal, "HF," and he had expected they would "all have sold . . . at a very high price." The problem was in the curing. "You say," Fitzhugh declared, "the tobo was very good, & neatly handled but many hhds very much affected with Smoke." This malodorous quality could not have been avoided, the planter argued, since without fires in the unusually moist curing barns, the entire crop would have been rotted. Nevertheless, Fitzhugh promised to do better next time.[72] Robert Beverley received so many complaints about his early crops that he began to doubt whether he would ever become a master grower. Each year he tried to improve the quality of his leaves, until in 1765 he wrote to England in frustration, "I don't think it necessary for a Man to serve his whole life an apprenticeship."[73]

In a sense, the planters were too involved in an endless cycle of production, too caught up in the tobacco mentality to become fully successful capitalists. Their personal judgments reflected the assumptions of a staple mentality. There seems no other plausible explanation for their naiveté about international market procedures.[74] One experienced Virginia

[70] Louis B. Wright, ed., *Letters of Robert Carter, 1720-1727: The Commercial Interests of a Virginia Gentleman* (San Marino, Ca., 1940), 93-94.

[71] Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Letters of William Lee* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1891), I, 74. In another part of the same letter (8 July 1773), Giberne declared, "I must say I expected something more than my proceeds for the Tobaccos . . . which went in Walker. Mr. Russell far exceeded those sales. Nor can I understand the difference you mention of the north side of Rappahannock Tobacco. My overseers at Home and at the Glebe, are reckon'd neat Planters, and it is *generally* allow'd our Tobaccos are the more valuable than the Potomack; and yet we get no better prices, or scarcely so good" (I, 73).

[72] Henry Fitzhugh to Steuart and Campbell, 18 February 1766, Henry Fitzhugh Papers.

[73] Robert Beverley to Edward and Samuel Athawes, 21 September 1765, Beverley Letter Book.

[74] Economic historians discovered—with evident surprise—that eighteenth-century Tidewater planters actually knew very little about the subtleties of the British tobacco market. Aubrey C. Land wrote, for example, "Small producers or great, all were bound to the tobacco market, whose workings *few understood and almost none perfectly*. Many honest planters regarded the marketing mechanism with suspicion and professed to see tobacco production as a kind of bondage to a shadowy, somewhat sinister group of merchants across the water" (Land, "Economic Behavior in a Planting Society: The

merchant complained that the planters held "wild & chimerical notions" about price-setting mechanisms.[75] Indeed, men who exercised the closest scrutiny over cutting and curing seem to have been mystified about what happened to their tobacco once it left America. In 1774, for example, Fitzhugh

Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake," *Journal of Southern History*, 30(1967), 474, [emphasis added]). In support of this generalization, Land cites Samuel M. Rosenblatt's fine essay on the London consignment firm of John Norton and Sons. As Rosenblatt explains, tobacco merchants regularly received a "drawback," or return, on certain customs duties paid on tobacco reexported from Great Britain. Some of this money should have been credited to the planters against whom all duties and fees were charged, but most Virginians apparently possessed only the vaguest comprehension of these procedures. In this case, what they did not know *did* hurt them, for the drawbacks generated fairly large sums. "The situation as it related to ready cash, discount, and interest, was very involved," Rosenblatt declares. "While there can be little question of the merchants' awareness of the profit that came to them when they had ready money . . . the great body of planters were not so alert. Some of those who knew of this advantage did not realize its magnitude." Even such successful planter-merchants in Virginia as Nathaniel Littleton Savage and William Nelson seemed uncertain how the system operated, and, as Rosenblatt concludes, "If William Nelson, a leading mercantile and political figure in the colony, was so poorly informed about the complexities of English customs procedures, it stands to reason that other less business-oriented Virginians were even more uninformed" (Rosenblatt, "The Significance of Credit in the Tobacco Consignment Trade: A Study of John Norton & Sons, 1768-1775," *W&MQ*, 3rd ser., 19[1962], 390-94). Since so many of the colony's great planters had studied in the mother country, one cannot convincingly argue that they lacked an opportunity to learn more about the drawbacks. The planters' perceptions of merchants and credit are treated more fully in Chapters III and IV.

[75] Francis Jerdone to Alexander Speirs and Hugh Brown, 11 June 1759, Francis Jerdone Papers, College of William and Mary Library, Williamsburg, Virginia. William Nelson expressed amazement at the high prices that Scottish traders gave for Virginia tobacco. He could not understand how they carried on their business and suspected that they knew something about the mysteries of commerce that even the English merchants did not comprehend. He explained to Edward and Samuel Athawes, two experienced London merchants, "Depend upon [it], my Friend, they [the Scots] have some secrets in the Tobo. Trade, that you & I are unacquainted with, or they could not give such prices here & carry all before as they do" (12 August 1767, Nelson Letter Book). See also entry of 20 May 1774, in *Diary of Landon Carter*, ed. Greene, II, 813.

confessed to an English merchant with whom he had dealt for more than a decade, "I really do not understand your manner of keeping my Interest Act [Account]."[76] Virginians speculated about factors of supply and demand, but about commercial practices that ate into their profits, they remained ignorant.

III

Two Virginians, Landon Carter and George Washington, left particularly vivid insights into the psychological dimensions of the tobacco mentality, especially into the producer's pursuit of honor and reputation through his crops. Like Washington, Carter kept a diary. The master of Sabine Hall, a large plantation overlooking the Rappahannock River, took considerable pride in his ability to grow quality tobacco. In late September, after most of his plants had been cut and carried to the curing barns, he congratulated himself. "By being careful and early in topping, worming and suckering," Carter wrote, ". . . I have produced I believe as to goodness as fine tobacco as ever was seen [,] And as to quantity very large."[77]

Contemporaries learned to play upon Carter's pride. One clever associate who came to Sabine Hall looking for scarce planking took care to accompany his request with the observation that Carter's tobacco was "by far the thickest he had ever seen."[78] Such comment obviously pleased Carter, for he reproduced every fulsome word in his diary. He could hardly contain his satisfaction when "some Gentlemen" who sat on the county court with him expressed admiration for Carter's fine crop. "One of them," Carter noted, "ignorantly was going to separate the leaf imagining it had been double."[79] Inci-

[76] Henry Fitzhugh to Steuart and Campbell, 29 September 1766; Fitzhugh to Campbell, 5 December 1774, Henry Fitzhugh Papers.

[77] Entry of 23 September 1770, in *Diary of Landon Carter*, ed. Greene, I, 501.

[78] Entry of 8 September 1770, in ibid., 482.

[79] Entry of 6 September 1770, in ibid., 480.