The Seed from which Virginia Grew

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An Address Delivered by MR. GEORGE ARENTS *at the Charter Day Convocation, February* 8, 1939, *in Phi Beta Kappa Hall*

Shortly after your President asked me to address you, he sent me a copy of the Charter of the College, dated 1693. Two things in it struck me particularly. The first related to the officers of the College and in it occurs the statement that "one eminent and discreet person" shall be elected as Chancellor. No mention is made of the qualifications of the President, but were that Charter to be written today, it would say that, in addition to being "eminent and discreet," the President must be a person of great understanding and knowledge, sympathetic to the problems of young people, a man of vision and tolerance. Who then, would be better qualified to fill these requirements than your President—John Stewart Bryan!

When Mr. Bryan asked me to talk to you, and suggested as a subject—the place tobacco has held in Virginia—he probably did so because he knew that I had devoted many years to forming a library about tobacco.

You may be interested to know why I formed this collection. Many members of my family lived in Richmond. My great uncle, Lewis Ginter, was a manufacturer of tobacco there. As a boy, I frequently visited Richmond and felt it was my second

home. On one of my many visits, Major Ginter gave me some advice which I have never forgotten. It has added greatly to my happiness, and I think, may be of value to many of you here. He said, "'When you are young, have many hobbies, but let your business or profession come first. As you grow older you will have to abandon some of them, the more you have the less you will miss those you must give up."

I took his advice and became a hobbyist. His prediction was true, for I did have to give up some of my pet interests, but one hobby that I began then, I have never abandoned. What could be more natural for me, with the background of tobacco in my family, than to specialize on books relating to "the divine herb." I was seventeen when I started this collection; I am now sixty-three. So for nearly half a century I have been adding books and manuscripts to this library.

In order to understand clearly this story, we have to go back a few centuries. Columbus was the first European to see the plant. He records in his Journal the fact, that on October 15th, 1492, an Indian in a canoe offered him some dried leaves. About a month later, two of his sailors, exploring Cuba or Haiti, first saw natives smoking. The Spaniards who settled in the West Indies, adopted the habit of puffing a cigar. Sailors, upon returning to Spain, introduced the custom of smoking and thus a demand for tobacco spread in the mother country. Tobacco, indeed, was to become the most generous gift of the New World to the Old. It was to bring great happiness to many people and eventually prove to be of more value then all the gold found in the Americas.

The small native plantations in the Spanish colonies soon became insufficient to meet the growing demand for tobacco. Before 1535, therefore, Spanish planters transferred the seeds of the cultivated variety growing in Yucatan to Santo Domingo. They quickly learned the correct method of cultivation and became expert in developing seed-beds, transplanting, and removing the suckers. Through various experiments, they eventually developed a beautiful, fragrant leaf, and by 1575 or thereabouts, the Spaniards were in practical control of the rapidly growing European market. When I tell you that Spanish tobacco in London at the end of the Sixteenth Century brought from 35 shillings to 4 pounds 10 shillings the pound, which is equivalent in purchasing power, to from $50. to $125. today, you will understand not only how expensive but how desirable this kind was. These high prices were due to excessive duties; spoilage in transit, which left only a small quantity to sell; and many exorbitant charges which I will not go into here.

As you will remember, there was an English colony at Roanoke Island. This was abandoned in 1586, at which time Drake brought

the impoverished settlers back. There were two kinds of tobacco in Drake's cargo: the Spanish which he had seized in raids in the West Indies, and the "Virginian," which Ralph Lane had brought back for Raleigh. Raleigh was one of the few Englishmen who liked this "Virginian" tobacco—practically no one else would, or could, smoke it. When the English colonists began their second settlement, this time at Jamestown, they continued the habit of smoking, which they had acquired at home, but the tobacco they found here was not the famed Spanish leaf. I hesitate to be technical, but I must say this—botanists call the native tobacco of Virginia, *Nicotiana rustica,* while that grown by the Spaniards was called *Nicotiana Tabacum.* You will understand me when I say that the same difference in taste exists between these two species, as between a crab apple and an Albemarle pippin. Indeed the first recorder of "Virginia," William Strachey, wrote of it: "It is not of the best kind, it is poor and weak and of a biting taste, growing not fully a yard above the ground . . . " and other similar comments occur in the literature of the period. On the other hand there was nothing but words of praise for the Spanish leaf. Although the colonists were aware of the profitable market for tobacco in England and on the Continent, the struggle for existence in their new home delayed any commercial cultivation of the plant in Virginia for three years. When they finally sent their first shipment over, the factors in London would have little or none of this bitter tobacco and it remained a drug on the market. The colony was in despair; indeed, there was talk of abandoning it and returning to England. But a thoughtful young man was conducting an experiment which was to have tremendous consequences—so tremendous indeed, that it was responsible for the salvation of the colony. That man was John Rolfe. He knew that the Virginians could never hope to compete with the Spaniards if they continued to grow the bitter tobacco native to Virginia. About 1611, he persuaded a shipmaster to bring back with him some seeds of the tobacco grown on the Island of Trinidad, then famous for the quality of its leaf, and also some seeds from Caracas (Venezuela). By 1612, tobacco from imported seeds was being cultivated along the banks of the James. By 1613, Rolfe was satisfied, and the first experimental shipment went to England. Think of the prayers and hopes that went with that shipment; the fears of Rolfe and the colonists, when a ship from England finally returned! And then the good news: the new Virginia tobacco was so good that at first the London merchants thought they were being deceived with a new and especially palatable kind of Spanish tobacco. So fragrant was the leaf that it almost at once began to

be known as "Sweet-scented." England's colony was saved! They could go to work now and London would buy all of the new variety the settlers could produce. Philip Bruce, the historian of Virginia, remarks: "By far the most momentous fact in the history of Virginia in the 17th Century was the discovery, through Rolfe's experiment . . . that the soil of the colony was adapted . . . " to the imported seeds.

The Virginia tobacco of today is not native to this soil, nor, in fact, is any now grown on this continent north of Mexico. It took a man of shrewd vision—our first captain of industry—to bring about the means of developing our famous Virginia tobacco. Production was slow at first, for only twenty-three hundred pounds were sent to London in 1615-16, while fifty thousand pounds were sent by the Spanish in the period. In less than five years, about half a million pounds were shipped from Virginia. Naturally, everyone turned to planting tobacco and continued to do so, despite the bitter opposition of James I, of the Virginia Company and of Captain John Smith. In one of his reports, Smith gives an indication of how the tobacco fever had taken hold of Jamestown, for in 1617, there were "found but five or six houses, the Church down, the palisade broken, the bridge in pieces, the well of fresh water spoiled . . . the storehouse they used for the church, the savages as frequent in their houses as themselves (because) the colony was dispersed all about, planting tobacco . . . ." In an effort to correct this intensive concentration on one commodity and to diversify their agriculture, various laws came into existence, so that at one time only nine leaves were permitted to remain on a plant and each colonist permitted only a thousand plants. These orders were rescinded and replaced by others, so that in 1629, we find the crop of each individual limited to three thousand plants, and these restrictive measures continued through a large part of the early colonial period.

As tobacco became the staple of Virginia, it naturally permeated the social and legislative life of the colony to so great a degree that it controlled its economic existence. Thus we find that the first cargo of Negro slaves which was deposited in Virginia by the Dutch in 1619 was paid for with tobacco, as were succeeding cargoes. In 1621 a more precious importation came in, in the shape of some young women who were sent to the colonists to become wives. Each colonist who married one of these young women had first to pay 120 pounds of "best leaf tobacco" for transportation charges. Chalmers, the historian, remarked that "the price of a wife shall have precedence of all other debts . . . because this merchandise . . . was deemed the most desirable."

Everything at that time could be paid for in tobacco, including the wages of soldiers and the salaries of ministers. After the colony was well established the ministers received sixteen thousand pounds a year, with deductions for sorting, casking, and so forth. The parishes where the tobacco crops were distinguished for quality were naturally preferred by the clergy. There were more marriages to be performed in such communities. Two hundred pounds of tobacco was the fee fixed by law for a marriage service, twice that amount for a funeral sermon—I do not know what was the fee for a baptism! "We perceive in this law," wrote Tatham, "That the custom of passing tobacco current in payments had so far obtained ground, that the parson made no scruple of receiving this luxurious article for preaching; or the clerk for bawling out —Amen! And that the military officer thought it no way dishonourable to his profession to draw his pay in this specific article of traffic." As a matter of fact, when the crop failed in 1758, the Assembly ordered that ministers be paid in money instead of tobacco. The clergy remonstrated against this and sent an agent over to England, whereupon the law was repealed.

During this period, there were various export taxes on tobacco shipped from Virginia and Maryland. From 1673 a tax of a penny a pound was assessed on all tobacco shipped, with the exception of that going to England. Your Charter contains a provision that from 1693 this penny the pound was to be paid to the trustees of the newly-founded College of William and Mary to be used for "building and adorning the edifices and other necessaries for the said college." But King William was Dutch—a thrifty race—and a clause in this Charter provided that, while the penny the pound was to go to the college, it was not to get the whole penny, for the salaries of the collectors were first to be deducted. So the tax on tobacco was one of the earliest sources of income for this great college.

As may well be imagined, the continuous concentration upon tobacco brought about over-production with its consequent miseries. Desperate efforts were made to overcome the stress caused through natural economic laws, and Virginia had a series of depressions beginning about 1650. Efforts were made to prohibit planting in both Virginia and Maryland, but mutual jealousies and suspicions made it impossible for this measure to be put into practical operation. When I tell you that in 1667, a storm of unrivaled severity, which destroyed at least two-thirds of the crop of Virginia, together with the destruction by the Dutch of twenty vessels freighted with tobacco were looked upon as God's blessing, you will understand the desperate straits of the colonists. Soldiers refused to ac-

cept pay in tobacco, and this condition continued for some time, with the price fluctuating between ha' penny and three pence the pound. In 1680 Virginia was once more in the throes of its periodic crisis, owing to its hugely overstocked tobacco market. In that year the Governor of Virginia, Lord Culpepper, predicted the speedy ruin of the colony. He wrote: "The market is overstocked and every crop overstocks it more. It is commonly said that there is tobacco enough now in London to last all England for five years; too much plenty would make gold itself a drug. Our thriving is our undoing, and our purchase of negroes, by increasing the supply of tobacco, has greatly contributed thereto."

At least, driven to despair, the more aggressive planters in several counties proceeded to trample down their own growing crops and then destroyed those of their neighbors who had refused to join them. A considerable quantity was destroyed before the militia put down the "cutting riots," and in 1684, the Assembly made the act of destroying tobacco a treasonable offence punishable by death.

Virginia was peculiarly sensitive to the economic conditions in Europe. When, for instance, the prohibitions against smoking in Russia were rescinded, the trade in Virginia tobacco was helped considerably because of the shipments made to Russia via London. Furthermore, smoking and snuffing were growing among Europeans. I merely mention these things to give you some idea of how closely Virginia was linked with Europe through its staple trade. The fact that in the European wars of the Austrian succession (1740-48) and the Seven Years' War (1756-63) England and France, though belligerents, informally arranged to exempt the vessels freighted with tobacco from seizure, will also indicate the great importance of this commodity to all European nations. France was a large purchaser of Virginia tobacco, and it became a distributing center for western Europe and the East. Another interesting fact, not generally known, is that tobacco helped to finance the American War for Independence. I have in my library the original manuscript of William Ellery's "Minutes . . . of foreign letters . . . to Congress" from 1777-79. This shows that Franklin and Deane had arranged with the French tobacco monopolists for the purchase of two million livres' worth of tobacco (five million pounds). A million livres was advanced to Franklin to be used in the purchase of material and to establish credits for the American cause.

From the very inception of tobacco cultivation in Virginia, the concentration upon this commodity had some far-reaching social, economic and political consequences. As there were no

other exports of commercial importance from the English colonies, the carrying trade was almost entirely concerned with this commodity. Its production, therefore, gave tremendous impetus to the English Merchant Marine, which, when later supported by the Navigation Acts, became the most powerful in Europe. Owing to lack of proper fertilizers, the small Virginia planter became an agricultural spendthrift. For many generations he followed the old one-crop system which soon rendered his plantation sterile. But by the mere process of clearing timber the settler was able to move to the west, the south and the southwest. Thus, the extension of English boundaries in this part of North America was to a degree dictated by the general occupation of tobacco growing. But in tidewater Virginia, estates of five thousand to thirty-seven thousand acres existed. Therefore, there was a large and scattered settler class and a series of great self-sustaining estates. It was the nature of Virginian agriculture which determined that it should have a representative type of government rather than the form familiar in New England colonies, where everybody gathered around a central meeting house.

I have now taken you along some of the main routes and some of the bypaths of history in order to tell you the story of "The Seed from which Virginia Grew" and of the man who brought it to us. When next you light a cigarette or a pipe and the fragrant smoke begins to curl, remember this story and say a benediction for the man who should be called the patron saint of tobacco—John Rolfe —first successful planter of Virginia.