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The Visible Fist: The Chesapeake Tobacco Trade in War and the Purpose of Empire, 1690–1715

Douglas Bradburn

ON June 20, 1701, the administrative, political, and economic capital of Virginia was literally at sea, at anchor off Kickotan in Hampton Roads. The seat of power was the great cabin of HMS *Shoreham*, where the Virginia Council of State was meeting to finalize plans for an emergency military convoy for the tobacco fleet. Virginia had ended its embargo on shipping, yet the Council of State decided that the fleet could not sail without protection, and the *Shoreham's* replacement on station, the fourth-rate HMS *Southampton*, had not yet arrived. Though England was not at war, rumors of an imminent conflict with France circulated widely—rumors that would soon be proven true.

The tobacco ship masters, for their part, yearned to get to sea. The seasoning of the summer months and the worm that devoured their ships (*Bankia gouldi*, actually a mollusk) would prove disastrous if they lingered much longer. And for the seventy-five ships riding at anchor, the extra cost in wages and provisions consumed equaled “above one hundred pounds Charge a day.” Nevertheless the masters refused to sail in a simple convoy, huddled together for the supposed safety of numbers, with no military escort. As these men knew, such a plan was a study in the limits of virtue. Merchant ships were known for their “Independancy and Devisions.” Experience showed that if they were attacked it would be every man for himself, as “a Fleet of Merchts Ships wth out a man of warr are no Safety at all nor of any Importance to each other.” Instead they wanted the governor of Virginia to provide a man-of-war with the state’s official imprimatur, with permission to use “Power Offensive and Defensive” and authority to bind and command the fleet in “some Regular Method or ordr.”¹

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¹ H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia* (Richmond, Va., 1927), 2: 157 (“above one hundred pounds”), 158 (“Fleet of Merchts”), 163 (“Power Offensive and Defensive”).

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The solution was the creation of a special commission for the master of the largest merchant vessel in the fleet, the five-hundred-ton Virginia-built *Indian King*, owned by councillor Daniel Parke. The commission made the *Indian King's* master commodore of the convoy, with "Power and authority" to "Comand the rest of the Ships Sailing out in the fleet."² Promising to obey the orders of the *Indian King*, the masters bound themselves to the commission, signed under the seal of His Majesty's Dominion of Virginia, and went to sea. For the public good, the state's coercive power would protect and constrain the grosser instincts of these competitors. They had called on the visible fist.³

An awareness of the visible fist, the role of state coercion in the market, is crucial to understanding the character of the Chesapeake economy from the early 1690s to the 1710s, when a massive military presence proved necessary to secure the market for tobacco and set the shape of the trade. In fact the Atlantic dynamic of the trade in tobacco dramatically shifted during the long stretches of war (King William's War, 1689–97, and Queen Anne's War, 1702–13) that bracketed the turn of the eighteenth century.⁴ From a system that was relatively open, porous, promiscuous, diverse, and competitive, the Atlantic trade in tobacco became heavily constrained and controlled, rigidly scheduled, characterized by high barriers to entry, open to political manipulation, and limited to a specific size based not on the trends of supply and demand but on negotiations among the Admiralty, the Board of Trade, and the leading tobacco merchants. The Virginia planter-merchants who could get access to this politically driven market would reap great rewards for nearly twenty years. And the effects would last even longer, as the so-called first families of Virginia solidified their con-

² Ibid., 2: 163.

³ If, as Milton Friedman would have it, Adam Smith's famous "invisible hand" implies "the possibility of cooperation without coercion," the visible fist suggests the role of coercion in the possibilities of cooperation. See Milton Friedman, introd. to *I, Pencil: My Family Tree as Told to Leonard E. Read*, by Leonard E. Read (1958; repr., n.p., 1999), <http://www.econlib.org/library/Essays/rdPncl.html>.

⁴ King William's War, as it was known in the colonies, was part of the War of the League of Augsburg (1688–97), in which Louis XIV's France fought against the Duchy of Savoy, the Dutch Republic, England, the Holy Roman Empire, Spain, and Scotland. It ended with the Treaty of Ryswick, Sept. 30, 1697, which maintained colonial possessions status quo ante bellum. Queen Anne's War, as it was known in the colonies, was the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–13), fought over the crown of Spain between supporters of Philip V, which included France and Bavaria, and supporters of Archduke Charles, which included the possessions of the Austrian Hapsburgs, the Dutch Republic, Great Britain, Portugal, Prussia, and Savoy. It was resolved in favor of the Bourbon Philip V in the Treaty of Utrecht, Apr. 11, 1713, but the British gained Minorca, Gibraltar, and the *asiento* from Spain, while the French recognized Anne as the queen of Great Britain, assented to British assertions of influence over the Iroquois, acknowledged British claims to the Hudson Bay and Newfoundland, and ceded Acadia and the French half of Saint Kitts.

trol over the colony's political life. Put simply, the economic history of the Chesapeake in these years cannot be understood without reference to the extensive regulatory regime that constrained, often with violent force, the size, timing, and character of the tobacco market.

The key element in the creation and regulation of this new system of imperial governance was the extension of naval power to the Chesapeake for the purposes of convoying tobacco and guarding the capes. Though there had been an occasional convoy to the Chesapeake before the end of the seventeenth century, the English navy had never been particularly potent or effective "between the Capes."⁵ The few guard ships sent in the 1660s and 1670s failed to stop the Dutch from seizing and burning the tobacco fleet in 1667 and 1673—demoralizing failures that proved the uselessness of forts in defending the broad Chesapeake Bay.⁶ Despite the Virginia council's repeated calls for some active measures to secure "the Dominion of the Sea," their own inability to fund an effective and permanent defense left the colony open to pirates throughout the early 1680s.⁷ Though some of the king's ships finally arrived to help enforce the trade laws and defend against pirates, in the 1680s the Chesapeake saw only three small English men-of-war, sloops of no more than fifteen guns and sixty men apiece. At the outbreak of war with France after the Glorious Revolution, the only ship on station was the ancient sloop *Dumbarton*, which spent most of 1690 and 1691 laid up in a creek because it was unseaworthy.⁸

⁵ McIlwaine, *Executive Journals*, 2: 10.

⁶ On the seizure of the fleet in 1667, see the series of letters from the Virginia council to the Privy Council repr. in "Attacks by the Dutch on the Virginia Fleet in Hampton Roads in 1667," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 4, no. 3 (January 1897): 229–45. For the burning of the tobacco fleet in 1673, see a similar letter repr. in Warren M. Billings, ed., *The Old Dominion in the Seventeenth Century: A Documentary History of Virginia, 1606–1689* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1975), 319–23.

⁷ McIlwaine, *Executive Journals*, 1: 6–7 (quotation, 1: 7). The council was obsessed with the need to secure the waterways of the colony throughout the 1680s. As this typical minute shows, they believed control of the "Dominion of the Sea" would provide safety against both internal convulsions and external threats:

The Council taking it into their serious Consideration how absolute necessary it is for the peace and safty of this his Majts Country so full of great Rivers Bayes and waters that the Dominion of the Sea Should be preserved, (almost of equal concern if not superiour to any reasonable land force) wch cant possibly be done with less then a Ketch or Vessell of at least sixty Tunns, twelve Seamen with a Commander, and ten Gunns alwayes attending here the service of this place, wch small sea force if formerly allowed had in all probability prevented the late Rebellion, and is the most effectuall meanes wee can propose to prevent the like or any other disorders for the future.

Ibid., 1: 7.

⁸ On the *Dumbarton*, *ibid.*, 1: 144. The ship was ultimately cast off and its rigging, furniture, and sails sold.

These trends changed decisively in the 1690s. During the last decade of the seventeenth century and the first fifteen years of the eighteenth, the Chesapeake saw more than eighty-five English men-of-war, the majority of them fourth-rate ships of the line of forty to sixty guns and two hundred men apiece. Sixteen thousand British sailors served in the Chesapeake during these years.⁹ How can we understand the purpose and place of this unprecedented military presence?

The ships were not there to overawe the local population or the labor force, or to assert royal authority against a local oligarchy; they were there because they had been demanded by the local oligarchs of Virginia and their partners, kin, and allies in the English merchant community. From the perspective of the planters and merchants, the protection regime was necessary to secure the tobacco fleet in a time of war, and they would play a major role in its execution and design. The Admiralty needed the prodding of the merchants and planters. In the first five months of hostilities, July–November 1689, the French seized no fewer than eleven fully loaded tobacco ships. Though they pleaded their own great loss, the planters and merchants always also pointed out the public importance of the trade. As the petitioners to the king noted, “Every ship taken means a loss of from £5,000 to £10,000 to your Majesty.”¹⁰ Without a convoy the trade would cease to exist—to the great detriment of the public good. For most people living in the Chesapeake, the annual fleets that eventually were mobilized to secure the crop were the most potent symbol of empire that they ever had seen or ever would see, a source of strength and authority that marked the seasonal rhythms of the wartime tobacco market.

Historians who have considered the importance of British military power to the character of England’s Atlantic empire have either tended to emphasize the general impotence of the military establishment or taken the opposite tack and found “garrison government” and the crown’s executive power as a strong arm over local independence.¹¹ Yet here we have

⁹ The number of ships (and also sailors) is actually a little higher. My work on the naval vessels in the Chesapeake during these years is ongoing. I have definitive information on these eighty-five ships and spotty information on at least five more. I am also certain there were a few more ships that I have not yet tracked down. All the estimates of the size and character of the specific ships on station and in convoy have been compiled into a database based on nearly 140 master’s and captain’s logs, Admiralty records, Privy Council records, and records of the Lords (after 1696, Board) of Trade, kept at the British National Archives, Kew, Eng. For citations, see “Ships on Convoy and in the Chesapeake, 1690–1715,” <http://oieahc.wm.edu/wmq/supplement.html>.

¹⁰ Petition of several traders to Maryland and Virginia to the king, Nov. 21, 1689, Colonial Office 5/1305, fol. 21, National Archives.

¹¹ Stephen Saunders Webb, “Army and Empire: English Garrison Government in Britain and America, 1569 to 1763,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 34, no. 1 (January 1977): 1–31. The classic view of the empire as a commercial entity, with a light military presence, can be found in Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of*

something distinct. The English naval presence in the Chesapeake was not only potent and effective (in general terms) but also demanded by and ultimately beneficial to both local interest and a particular vision of imperial interest. As an agent of state power in the Chesapeake, the Royal Navy served as a deterrent and a police authority and as part of the governance of the imperial state; it represented a branch of the revenue service rather than a military expeditionary fleet.¹²

American History, vol. 4, *England's Commercial and Colonial Policy* (New Haven, Conn., 1938), chaps. 3–6. For an ineffectual late-seventeenth-century empire, see J. M. Sosin, *English America and the Revolution of 1688: Royal Administration and the Structure of Provincial Government* (Lincoln, Neb., 1982). Stephen Saunders Webb's work emphasizes the garrison government of the Stuarts and their followers. See Webb, "The Strange Career of Francis Nicholson," *WMQ* 23, no. 4 (October 1966): 513–48; Webb, "William Blathwayt, Imperial Fixer: From Popish Plot to Glorious Revolution," *WMQ* 25, no. 1 (January 1968): 3–21; Webb, "William Blathwayt, Imperial Fixer: Muddling through to Empire, 1689–1717," *WMQ* 26, no. 3 (July 1969): 373–415; Webb, *WMQ* 34: 1–31. See also Webb, *The Governors-General: The English Army and the Definition of the Empire, 1569–1681* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979); Webb, 1676: *The End of American Independence* (New York, 1984); Webb, *Lord Churchill's Coup: The Anglo-American Empire and the Glorious Revolution Reconsidered* (New York, 1995).

¹² It is true that the crown relied on the customs duties of tobacco and therefore desired the fleet's safe arrival, but my emphasis here on the demand of the merchants and planter-merchants reflects what happened. The actual operation of the system was the result of the petitions and design of the tobacco merchants in London and their Chesapeake allies, without whom the Admiralty would have been at a loss to know when and where to send their vessels. The crown was a willing ally in the convoy system, but the impetus for its construction depended on the planters and merchants. For some of the early petitioning that alerted the crown and Admiralty to the problem and the merchants' needs, see CO 5/1305, fols. 20–26. My analysis is informed by the literature on the emergence of the British fiscal-military state in the eighteenth century, most notably John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (London, 1989); Brewer and Eckhart Hellmuth, eds., *Rethinking Leviathan: The Eighteenth-Century State in Britain and Germany* (Oxford, 1999). The assumption of my work is that those studying the state must approach the topic with a capacious view—that is, rejecting the idea that the Weberian state (the centralizing, professional bureaucratic state with a monopoly on legitimate violence) is the only modern form. Drawing on the insights of Michael J. Braddick, Brewer, Joanna Innes, and others, a study of state power needs to take a broad view of all the different types of agents of the state—the amateur officials, manor lords, and justices of the peace—in addition to the formal officers of the increasingly impersonal bureaucracy, the customs office, and the Admiralty. See Braddick, *The Nerves of State: Taxation and the Financing of the English State, 1558–1714* (Manchester, Eng., 1996); Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England, c. 1550–1700* (Cambridge, 2000); Braddick, *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society: Order, Hierarchy, and Subordination in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2001). For a useful collection of Innes's essays, see Innes, *Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Policies in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2009). State formation in early modern England was characterized by the elaboration of governance, not simply the creation of institutions. At the same time, historians who have sought to broaden this conception of the state and governance more generally in England (and the British Isles) have been less interested in extending such an expansive notion of the role of power and authority to the broader British Empire—that is, in imagining both the theoretical and

The naval presence was really only one component of a tripartite system of trade protection that can be called the convoy and embargo regime. This regime, which organized the transatlantic trade during the war years of 1690–97 and 1702–1713 and shaped the character of the market in the inter-war years, included a trading fleet with a strict quota of men, which fixed the size of the trade; a rigid calendar of embargoes and sailing times, set and enforced in both the English Channel and the Chesapeake; and the naval power itself, mobilized to protect the fleet, enforce the embargoes on shipping, and police the plantation trade. This convoy and embargo regime—this aggressive and expensive effort to secure and control the transatlantic trade in tobacco—had a profound effect on the Chesapeake economy in these years, on the subsequent development of Virginia politics and society, on the articulation of merchant capitalism in England, on the development of mercantilism as a practice as much as a theory, and on the character of the eighteenth-century British Atlantic empire.

In any given year from 1690 to 1715 (though in limited form from 1698 to 1701), the system began with the setting of a quota of sailors available for the total shipping allowed to any given plantation trade, such as the West Indies (mostly sugar), Virginia and Maryland (tobacco), and Africa (slaves). In London the Lords (later Board) of Trade met and decided the quota of men allowed in the various trades, thereby perfectly limiting the size of the tobacco trade. Because getting the convoy fleet together required time and communication to a variety of moving parts, rigid rules governed who would be allowed to clear customs and when each trade would sail. These embargoes were a fact of life in the English Channel during the wars and could bottle up trade for weeks, or even a whole season.¹³

This quota fleet was a very special thing, for it was escorted across the Atlantic by at least two, and more often four, fourth-rate English ships of

the real functioning of an English (and later British) imperial state—which is something I am concerned with trying to understand.

¹³ With very few exceptions, historians have not taken the convoy system seriously in the war years or considered how it worked, and none to my knowledge have described the quota system on seamen's protections, which had the effect of limiting the size of the merchant fleets. Sailors were in demand, and protections for one's sailors were difficult to come by during nearly all major wars. Freight rates increased because of the lack of shipping available, but in some cases no amount of money could purchase shipping without the political connections to get protections for the men who labored on the ships. As all the trades were affected, either directly or indirectly, there is much need for future research on the politics and effect of these quota systems on numerous trades during these wars and others. The most extensive description of the convoy in these years is Arthur Pierce Middleton, "The Chesapeake Convoy System, 1662–1763," *WMQ* 3, no. 2 (April 1946): 182–207, but the essay has some serious limitations and never captures the political dynamic that created the convoy and embargo regime, the role of the Council of State, or the difference between a simple convoy of merchant ships and a fleet escorted by men-of-war.

the line (after 1707, by four fourth-rates and a fifth-rate) at a cost of tens of thousands of pounds annually, paid by the English treasury.¹⁴ The ships trading in this fleet gave bond that they would sail to their agreed destination and that they would religiously follow the sailing instructions of the commodore. If a merchant vessel attempted to lose the fleet to get an advantage of an early market, the ship could be seized for violating the law.

In the Chesapeake, a similar regulation and control of shipping was necessary to make the regime work. Just as the Admiralty, Privy Council, and customs officials—with the close input of the tobacco merchants—set the terms of the trade in England, the Virginia Council of State, the collectors of the customs, and the naval officers of each district dictated the circumstances of shipping along the tobacco coast. The Council of State set the timetables and rules of the merchant fleet. It dictated where and when people could sail, coordinated the supplying and refitting of the naval vessels on station and in convoy, and became the arbiter of any conflicts among civilian, naval, and commercial authorities. The effective coercion of the convoy, intended as protection and required for those purposes, meant subsuming the individual and private whims of numerous traders. As the council noted in denying the pleas of a hungry crew that had consumed its provisions waiting for the fleet to come together (and had no credit to buy more), “perticular Interests” must “submitt to the publique Good.”¹⁵ If there was a mantra for the coercive purpose of the state, that was it. The Virginia councillors and the naval officers and customs collectors who worked closely with them, inasmuch as they functioned to maintain and secure this system, were an indispensable part of the imperial state. Leviathan was built at both ends.

Tobacco ships cleared out of each river were forced to collect at the mouth of the James, off Kickotan and near Point Comfort (the present-day site of Fort Monroe), until the fleet was ready to sail. Maryland was informed of its projected departure time, and close surveillance was put in place to keep ships from trying to slip out of the capes. Tobacco ships were usually not allowed to leave the bay from early March until the convoy sailed in late June or July. Once it sailed, shipping from the bay would again be halted until several weeks had passed to limit the chance of the enemy’s getting vital intelligence on the fleet’s composition, date of departure, and disposition. Often another, smaller convoy left the Chesapeake in the fall, again creating the need for an embargo on shipping.

The numbers of men available for the Chesapeake trade, though set by the Lords of Trade, were divided up by the customs commissioners, based

¹⁴ The convoy became more systematic with time. By 1707 a regular scheme was in place that would last until the end of the war in 1713.

¹⁵ McIlwaine, *Executive Journals*, 1: 165.

on which merchants paid the most customs. If the merchants of London did not like the proportioning of the quota, they used their influence to change the list and stop unknown traders from gaining access to the trade. As the tobacco merchants in London and the great men on the Virginia Council of State knew all too well, the trick was getting one's own particular interests equated with the public good.¹⁶

To understand the system in action, consider the pace of events in the fall of 1691 as the convoy prepared to sail. By October the London merchants trading to Virginia and Maryland had succeeded in getting their quota of men increased from eight hundred to one thousand men. As the customs house put together the lists of ships cleared for the tobacco trade, a group of fifteen angry men—"the Principall merchants of this Port concerned in the Virginia & Maryland trade"—led by John Jeffries, Peter Paggen, and Micajah Perry, the largest traders, descended on the commissioners of customs and demanded that a number of ships that had been cleared for the colony, and therefore marked against the quota, be disallowed. Responding to requirements that the complaints be put in writing for the rapid consideration of the Lords of Trade, Perry scrawled out his objections to "some ships in the list of ships pretended to be entered for Virginia & Maryland." First, there was the problem of destination: three ships on the list, Perry noted, were intended not for Virginia or Maryland but for Pennsylvania, so they should not be counted against the quota for the Chesapeake, and their exclusion would result in an extra twenty-three men. Second, one of the ships, fully seventy men, traded out of Bristol, not London, and so should be counted against Bristol's quota. Another ship, the *Loyalty* (John Price, master), was "wholly unknowne" to the London merchants trading to Maryland and Virginia and therefore "disown'd" by them.¹⁷ The merchants argued that such ships should not be cleared for

¹⁶ This discussion of the convoy and embargo regime is based on extensive reading in state papers now housed in the British National Archives, the British Museum, and the Blathwayt Papers at Colonial Williamsburg's John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, including Admiralty records, Colonial Office records, and correspondence. Some of these documents are available in published form, most particularly McIlwaine, *Executive Journals*, William Byrd's letters in his capacity as auditor of the colony, and part of the *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series*. Rather than list the hundreds of citations for this summary and overview of the convoy and embargo regime, I will cite only specific quotations or direct references. Some of the more important collections include the letters and instructions of the Lords of the Admiralty, 1698–1716, Admiralty (ADM) 2/25–48, National Archives; "Admiralty–Miscellanea, Memorials and Reports from the Admiralty to the Privy Council," from the early 1690s to 1715, ADM 7/333–38; the correspondence between Virginia and the Board of Trade, including most of the extant petitions, in CO 5/1305–13; and the numerous master's and captain's logs listed in "Ships on Convoy and in the Chesapeake, 1690–1715," <http://oieahc.wm.edu/wmq/supplement.html>.

¹⁷ Secretary of Customs to William Blathwayt, Custom House, Oct. 12, 1691, CO 1/68, nos. 82, 82L–LLL.

the plantations and should not be counted against the quota—another fifty men. Finally, Perry demanded that all the ships on the list should be counted at only three-quarters of the number of men listed, a principle that he believed had been established as the rule in an earlier negotiation with the Admiralty.¹⁸

The commissioners of customs sent the merchants' complaints to William Blathwayt, longtime clerk of the Lords of Trade and auditor of plantation accounts. Blathwayt was also on the payroll of the Virginia Council of State for one hundred pounds sterling a year as "an able and discrete person" to aid Virginia quietly "near the Court."¹⁹ With Blathwayt's encouragement, the merchants went en masse to directly petition Queen Mary II, who gave them an audience later that day. Three days after that meeting, the Privy Council ordered that the merchants alone would make the final decisions on how to best divide the one thousand men allotted for the trade. The merchants in turn chose four men to represent their interest—Samuel Groome, Paggen, Perry, and Thomas Taylor—who struck 231 men off the list and redistributed the remainder. These four men claimed 29 percent of the sailors allotted for the trade. Two weeks later their final adjustments were made to the list of ships, just in time for the convoy to sail at the beginning of November.²⁰

So the open and competitive trading of the promiscuous peacetime economy, which was only controlled by the regulations of the Navigation Acts, changed during wartime into a heavily regulated, contained, and policed system. Though supply and demand could move the fortunes of the trade with relative freedom during times of peace, supply was strictly limited during the war within a disrupted Continental market. For almost every year from 1690 to 1713, the visible fist made the market. But what effect did it have?

When considering the impact of this restrictive regime of tobacco marketing, which funneled the crop into channels marked out by the imperial state, a few points become clear. The quota system and the convoy and embargo regime became the mechanism for the transformation of scale identified by Jacob M. Price and Paul G. E. Clemens more than twenty years ago. As they pointed out, in the 1680s tobacco came into London in

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ McIlwaine, *Executive Journals*, 1: 8.

²⁰ Secretary of Customs to William Blathwayt, Custom House, Oct. 12, 1691, CO 1/68, nos. 82, 82L–LLL; Secretary of Customs to Blathwayt, Custom House, Oct. 24, 1691, CO 1/68, nos. 89, 89L. Out of a total of 1,004 men, 289, or 29 percent, were claimed by those four merchants. After the distribution of sailors, the three largest merchant houses controlled 22 percent of the tonnage in the trade, including the outports. A total of thirty-two merchants were allotted men for the trade both in London and the outports, only one of whom was a mere merchant, a man who was also master of his ship. Fourteen of the merchants (44 percent) had only one ship in the trade, and they controlled 20 percent of all the men.

a variety of ways. Though a little more than 50 percent of the market was dominated by about fifteen large importers who tended to act as consignees and brokers of planters' crops, almost half the crop was still brought in by an array of smaller dealers and even adventurers, who often possessed diverse trading interests and for whom tobacco importation represented only one aspect of a broader, eclectic approach to Atlantic trade. By 1718 the trade had been completely transformed. It was now dominated by large merchant houses who had become specialists in the Chesapeake trade. They imported tobacco from the Chesapeake; that was all they did, and they were the only ones left who did it. The smaller merchants, the adventurers, had been squeezed out of the system.²¹

The politics behind the distribution of the quota of seamen during the wars ensured that only the large traders would survive. Those large traders, who imported the most and generated the most in customs, were given control over the scarce numbers of men allotted for the trade in 1690. As we have seen, they approved every ship allowed to go to the Chesapeake, eager to grab as many of the limited number of available seamen as possible. The smaller operators, the occasional traders, and the adventurers lacked the political skills needed to negotiate this system; Chesapeake specialists could mobilize supporters, kin, and clients in the colonies themselves to protect and perpetuate their advantages. By 1699 the trade in bulk tobacco had been made illegal (something the large traders in London had been trying to accomplish since at least the late 1680s), and so these fewer firms and their Virginia planting partners commanded the field.²²

In the Chesapeake the convoy and embargo regime significantly affected the character of economic growth and numerous aspects of social and political development. The "stagnation" in tobacco production, which many historians of the Chesapeake have emphasized in interpretations of the character of the society and economy in these years and which has almost uniformly been described as a "depression," "the locust years," or an outright disaster, needs significant revision.²³ The twenty years of

²¹ Jacob M. Price and Paul G. E. Clemens, "A Revolution of Scale in Overseas Trade: British Firms in the Chesapeake Trade, 1675–1775," *Journal of Economic History* 47, no. 1 (March 1987): 1–43.

²² Bulk tobacco was tobacco that was not packed in hogsheads but rather bagged loose and therefore highly susceptible to small-scale smuggling. It could be unloaded out of sight of customs agents or added to a cargo by sailors on their own account. It also escaped proper measurement for the colonial export duty. For some examples of efforts to end the shipping of bulk tobacco, see the Lord President to William Blathwayt, Sept. 22, 1690, CO 1/68, no. 13; McIlwaine, *Executive Journals*, 1: 511, 513, 2: 6, 25, 328.

²³ For a critique of the literature on the Chesapeake economy in this period, particularly the supposed effects of the stagnation of the tobacco industry from 1680 to 1710 or so, see Douglas M. Bradburn and John C. Coombs, "Smoke and Mirrors: Reinterpreting the Society and Economy of the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake," *Atlantic Studies* 3, no. 2 (October 2006): 131–57 ("stagnation," 133, "locust years," 134).

stasis in the amount of tobacco entering English ports had nothing to do with a stagnation of tobacco production resulting from a “self-contained price-and-production cycle” and everything to do with the fact that the amount of shipping allowed in the trade was capped by the convoy and embargo regime.²⁴ In fact the war years reflect a time when the momentum of “boom and bust” was seriously disrupted by an absolute limit on the amount of tobacco that could reach Europe and by the opportunities for rent seeking granted by a system run not by the free market but by politics on both sides of the Atlantic.²⁵

Significantly, this cap on the supply of shipping and the resulting ceiling on the amount of the tobacco crop allowed to get to market in these years affected the different regions of the Chesapeake in distinct ways. As Lorena S. Walsh has shown, at least three clear divisions can be discerned in the Chesapeake’s economic geography by the 1680s: the so-called sweet-scented counties, on the great rivers of Virginia, which produced a strain of tobacco that was largely consumed by buyers in England; the Oronoco regions, which produced a different variety of tobacco and whose market was mainly on the Continent; and the mixed agricultural provisioning regions, which produced pork, beef, corn, flour, and grains for both a local and a West Indian market.²⁶ The convoy and embargo regime affected all

²⁴ Russell R. Menard, “The Tobacco Industry in the Chesapeake Colonies, 1617–1730: An Interpretation,” *Research in Economic History* 5 (1980): 109–77 (quotation, 127). The cap on exports from the Chesapeake in these years, vaguely associated with the disruptions of war but never tied to the convoy and embargo regime, was sensed as early as 1914 by Margaret Shove Morriss: “Neither the amount exported to England nor that sent to the other plantations increased in the years between 1689 and 1715.” See Morriss, “Colonial Trade of Maryland, 1689–1715” (Ph.D. diss., Bryn Mawr College, 1914), 35–37 (quotation, 36).

²⁵ Bradburn and Coombs, *Atlantic Studies* 3: 132.

²⁶ See Figure I, in John C. Coombs, “The Phases of Conversion: A New Chronology for the Rise of Slavery in Early Virginia,” *WMQ* 68, no. 3 (July 2011): 332–60, esp. 337. For a description of the different regions of the Chesapeake economy, see Lorena S. Walsh, “Summing the Parts: Implications for Estimating Chesapeake Output and Income Subregionally,” *WMQ* 56, no. 1 (January 1999): 53–94. For evidence that West Indian provisioning was extremely important to the lower counties of the James River by the 1680s, see Bradburn and Coombs, *Atlantic Studies* 3: 139–42. The impact of the convoy and embargo regime on these provisioning areas is extremely interesting but beyond the scope of this article. But if I had space I would emphasize the amount of provisioning necessary to sustain the eighty or so warships that participated in convoy and on station in Virginia throughout this period, not to mention the merchant fleet itself. Evidence from the logs of the men-of-war in the Chesapeake suggests that the naval demand for provisioning goods—pork, beef, bread, wheat, cornmeal, and peas—was clearly adequate to cover any aggregate losses from a Caribbean trade disrupted by war. A typical fourth-rate ship of the line, such as the HMS *Foresight*, which helped protect the tobacco fleet in 1693, had a complement of 226 men and an average capacity of about six hundred tons. With limited space for provisions, these ships needed to begin restocking after six months at sea. The *Foresight* spent approximately six months in Virginia, a typical cruise, escorting the merchant fleet, guarding the capes, and waiting

these regions significantly and in different ways, but concentrating on the sweet-scented tobacco region best reveals the transformations that would most shape Virginia's future.

For the sweet-scented growing regions, the limits on the size of the tobacco crop imposed by the convoy and embargo regime furnished an extraordinary opportunity. Here, finally, was something that various groups in the colony had been calling for since the Navigation Acts were first imposed: aggressive measures by the state to limit the size of the crop. In effect the limit on the tobacco supply caused by the quota regime created levels of high prices in England that Virginia planters had been hoping to stimulate through numerous ineffective crop limitation schemes in the 1660s, 1670s, and 1680s. Laws governing when tobacco could be planted, calls for voluntary limits on acreage planted, attempts to create an embargo on shipping, efforts to coordinate a planting cessation with Maryland, and even the desperate crop cutting in the mid-1680s had all failed to substantially increase the prices in England.²⁷ Even better, the limits on the crop's size imposed by the war years were subsidized by the English treasury and protected by the English navy in the name of the public good, the wealth of the nation, and the balance of trade. After years of resisting the Navigation Act system and all that it implied, Virginia's leading planters came to recognize that they needed and could take advantage of imperial power; as they demanded assistance from the imperial state, they were able to capitalize on the limits placed on their economic freedom. Particular interests, especially the interests of Virginia sweet-scented planters, were favored in the name of the common good.

The evidence from the extant commodity price currents in London points to a historically wide split between the price of sweet-scented tobacco in the colony and the price offered in London through these years. Where they can be reconstructed (they are notoriously difficult to find), prices on the London market for sweet-scented tobacco clearly tended to be much higher than they had typically been, at least since the late 1650s (Table I, Figure I). Some of these prices represent the price given on only one transaction and therefore cannot be extended to stand for the market

for the export fleet to assemble. During that time it consumed large quantities of food. From September 1693 to February 1694, the ship purchased more than ten thousand pounds of pork, nine thousand pounds of beef, five thousand pounds of peas, eleven thousand pounds of bread, and nearly two thousand gallons of beer. See Captain's Log, HMS *Foresight*, ADM 51/364; Master's Log, HMS *Foresight*, ADM 52/35.

²⁷ As early as 1662, Virginians had tried to limit the time allowed for trading tobacco in a petition to the Privy Council that was dismissed out of hand. See "Order of the Privy Council on petition of the planters and traders to Virginia . . .," CO 1/16, no. 65. For failed efforts to coordinate cessation with Maryland, see "Lord Baltimore's answer to the representation delivered to his Majesty in Council on the 16th Oct. 1667, from the Governor and Council of Virginia," CO 1/21, no. 133; Report, CO 1/21, no. 140. For later rejections from the customs house, with their reasons, see Custom House, Jan. 10, 1681, CO 1/46, no. 84.

TABLE I
SWEET-SCENTED TOBACCO PRICES IN LONDON AND VIRGINIA, 1659–1720
(STERLING PENCE PER POUND)

	<i>London</i>			<i>Virginia</i>
	<i>Single transactions</i>	<i>Prices current</i>		<i>Mean price</i>
		<i>Mean low</i>	<i>Mean high</i>	
1659	6.00	—	—	2.0
1668	—	2.00	5.00	2.1
1669	—	2.10	5.00	1.8
1674	—	6.00	7.00	1.2
1676	—	—	5.00	1.2
1677	—	—	5.25	1.2
1682	3.90	—	—	1.2
1683	—	3.00	5.50	1.3
1691 ^a	6.90	—	—	1.1
1692 ^a	7.25	—	—	1.1
1693 ^a	7.25	7.50	10.00	1.2
1694 ^a	—	—	10.00	1.1
1697 ^a	—	11.50	12.10	1.1
1698	—	10.50	10.50	1.2
1701	—	9.25	9.50	1.3
1702 ^a	—	9.50	10.50	1.4
1705 ^a	—	10.33	11.33	1.5
1720	—	10.50	11.00	1.8

Sources: London prices are taken from *Prices of Merchandise in London* (London, 1668–69; N=20); *Prices of Merchandise in London* (London, 1674; N=1); *Prices of Merchandise in London* (London, 1683; N=1); *Whiston's Merchants Weekly Remembrancer* (London, 1693; N=1); *Whiston's Merchants Weekly Remembrancer* (London, 1694; N=1); *Proctor's Price Current* (London, 1697–98) and *Whiston's Merchants Weekly Remembrancer* (London, 1697) (N=97). Other prices come from individual observations, transactions in the county court records, and planter correspondence. Virginia prices are from John J. McCusker, "Wholesale Tobacco Prices in Virginia and Maryland, by Region: 1647–1820 [Virginia Currency]," table Eg275–284, in Susan B. Carter et al., eds., *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present*, millennial ed. (New York, 2006). I have converted these local prices from Virginia current money to English sterling at 110/100 as per McCusker, "Rates of Exchange on London, by Colony or State: 1649–1790 [Local Colonial Currencies]," table Eg315–324, *ibid.*

^aWar year.

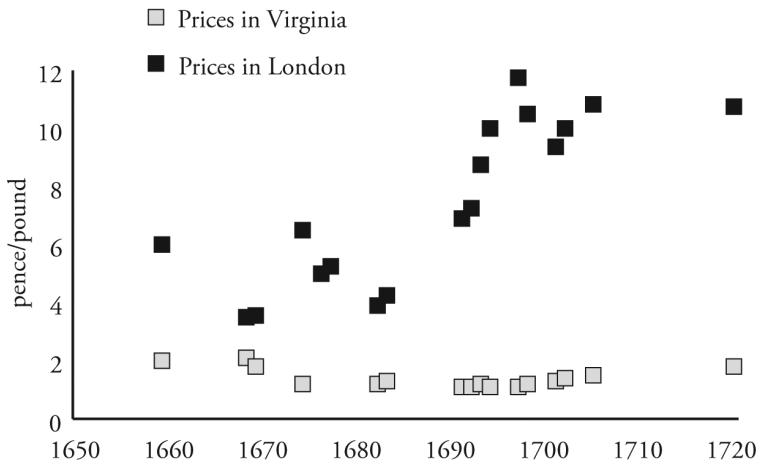


FIGURE I

Graphic representation of the price spread between averages of prices for sweet-scented tobacco in London and Virginia, 1650–1720. Source: Table I.

price without caution, yet the evidence gathered from the price currents suggests an extremely stable price in any given season. The prices available for sweet-scented tobacco during the 1690s were higher than they had been for more than thirty years. The mean low price of sweet-scented tobacco offered in London in 1697, the last year of King William's War, was more than five times the mean low of 1668–69 (two pence) and more than twice the mean high of those years (five pence). The highest high, of fifteen pence per pound, given at London for York River leaf from April 15, 1697, to June 17, 1697, commanded three times the highest price listed on the 1660s price currents.²⁸

²⁸ Historians of the Chesapeake economy have concentrated their efforts on local prices, as if these could stand in for the value of the crop in Europe. In a completely open and free market, such attention to local markets and the accompanying assumption of a convergence, or at least a parallel trend, of colonial and London prices might work as a measure of the wealth-generating capacity of the economy, but such a use of local prices completely collapses during the period of the convoy and embargo regime (about 1690–1715), when access to participation in the trade was regulated strictly and closed to entry in ways that it had never been and would not be again until the 1740s. For the high price given from Apr. 15 to June 17, 1697, see *Proctor's Price Current* (London, 1697), April–June. For an extensive discussion of the commodity price currents, their limited survival, and their purpose, see John J. McCusker and Cora Gravesteijn, *The Beginnings of Commercial and Financial Journalism: The Commodity Price Currents, Exchange Rate Currents, and Money Currents of Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1991). The only other use of the price currents (that I am aware of) in the inves-

But to understand possible net returns, we need to know the impact of freight costs. Freight represented the largest drag on a planter's net proceeds for any given sale, outside of customs duties, so we cannot assume that higher prices in London meant higher net proceeds. Again the data is scarce, but the evidence suggests that the high prices for sweet-scented tobacco offset the freight costs of consigners, costs that decreased as the convoy and embargo regime went into effect. By using a small number of extant transactions, we can construct an estimate of the expense per pound in any given transaction, taking into account the changing customs duties, freight costs, commission fees, cooperage, warehousing, port fees, and other transport charges (Tables II–III).

Though the prices found in the court records of actual transactions at the very beginning of the war could not offset the extremely high freight costs of the first few years of conflict, by the mid-1690s prices available in London would have allowed historic returns per sale as the effects of the scarcity of sweet-scented tobacco caused by the quota system began to be felt. Clearly, if the price was high enough, the problem of freight costs could be overcome. In fact the prices available for sweet-scented tobacco by the mid-1690s allowed for a higher net return per pound than in the late 1650s, before the Navigation Acts went into effect, even when that return is calculated using an inflated expense-per-pound ratio based on an extremely high freight cost of fourteen pounds per ton. What is also clear is that the high freight costs, though a product of both tight supply and risk, dropped steadily as risk fell. Freight costs spiked at the beginning of the wars but fell rapidly in response to the functioning of the convoy and embargo regime, while quantities exported from the colonies remained steady (Figure II).²⁹ By 1697 freight costs had reached peacetime levels, though the price in London remained very high. Within a few years, the convoy system had greatly diminished the risk of long-distance trading.

Anecdotal evidence also shows that some sweet-scented tobacco planters expected extremely large returns by the mid- to late 1690s. William Fitzhugh, for instance, noted in July 1698 that he had ceased to produce Oronoco tobacco for market and that his sweet-scented leaf received prices as good as the best “York sweet price.” Celebrating the excellence of his crop, Fitzhugh pointed out to London merchant John Cooper that

tigation of the tobacco trade can be found in Jacob M. Price, *Perry of London: A Family and a Firm on the Seaborne Frontier, 1615–1753* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 50–51, table 2. Price pulls four prices, from 1676, 1677, 1697, and 1713, from these lists.

²⁹ Note that the freight rates of 1692 had declined 22 percent by the first convoy (the spring) of 1693 (see Table II). Freight rates come from John J. McCusker, “Freight Rates for Tobacco from Maryland and Virginia to Great Britain: 1675–1775,” table Eg686–687, in Susan B. Carter et al., eds., *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present*, millennial ed. (New York, 2006).

TABLE II
ACTUAL NET RETURNS ON TRANSACTIONS WITH FREIGHT COSTS, 1659–93
(STERLING PENCE PER POUND)

	<i>Price</i>	<i>Freight cost (£/ton)</i>	<i>Expense</i>	<i>Net return</i>
1659	6.00	7	3.4	2.60
1682	3.85	7	3.1	0.75
1691 ^a	6.85	17	7.2	-0.35
1692 ^a	7.25	18	7.2	0.05
1693 ^a	7.25	14	6.8	0.45

Notes: These numbers represent actual transactions as detailed in the county order books. The formula is simple. Take the total cost of the transaction and divide it by the pounds of tobacco for sale in that particular transaction. This yields an expense per pound, which, when subtracted from the price per pound, provides a net return per pound. In looking at these transactions over time, they are clearly compatible, as the fees for portage, warehousing, commission, etc., represent an extremely small portion of the transaction and are all included here in the total expense, with the customs and the freight being the most variable.

Sources: The 1659 transaction comes from York County Deeds, Orders, Wills, Etc. 3 (1657–1662), fols. 115–16, 159, microfilm, Library of Virginia, Richmond; the one from 1682, York County, Deeds, Orders, Wills, Etc. 6 (1677–1684), fol. 442, *ibid.*; the ones from 1691 to 1693, Elizabeth City County, Records (transcript) (1684–1699), pp. 394–96, *ibid.*

^aWar year.

his cargo of the previous year received fully twenty-three pounds sterling a hogshead “clear.”³⁰ Given that Fitzhugh thought his hogsheads were heavy, such a return would be the equivalent of between 6.9 and 9 pence per pound, a number roughly consistent with the estimates in Table III.³¹ Robert “King” Carter, whose wealth would grow to extraordinary levels through these years and into the 1720s, wrote in 1702 that “tobacco hath held up its head for sevell. years together,” implying that the “seven Last Years gettings in Virginia” were uncharacteristically high and warning that the young Wormeley brothers—whose estate he was managing, and who were known for their high lifestyle—should not expect the next seven to be equivalent.³² Of course Carter could not know that favorable wartime conditions for sweet-scented tobacco would in fact persist for at least another fourteen years.

³⁰ William Fitzhugh to John Cooper, June 30, 1698, in Richard Beale Davis, ed., *William Fitzhugh and His Chesapeake World: The Fitzhugh Letters and Other Documents* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1963), 356–58 (quotations, 358).

³¹ Estimated for hogsheads between six hundred and eight hundred pounds, which seems about right considering that William Fitzhugh thought the “weights were considerable.” *Ibid.*, 358.

³² Robert Carter to Francis Lee, July 15, 1702, in Edmund Berkeley Jr., ed., *The Diary, Correspondence and Papers of Robert “King” Carter of Virginia, 1701–1732*, <http://etext.virginia.edu/users/berkeley/public/indexltrs.html>.

TABLE III
HYPOTHETICAL EXPECTED AND CONSERVATIVE NET RETURNS, 1697–1702
(STERLING PENCE PER POUND)

	<i>Assumed price</i>	<i>Freight cost (£/ton)</i>	<i>Estimated expense</i>	<i>Expected net return</i>	<i>Conservative expense</i>	<i>Conservative net return</i>
1697	11.50 ^a	8	5.0	6.50	6.8	4.70
1697	12.10 ^b	8	5.0	7.10	6.8	5.30
1698	10.50	7	4.5	6.00	6.8	3.70
1701	9.25 ^a	6	4.0	5.25	6.8	2.45
1701	9.50 ^b	6	4.0	5.50	6.8	2.70
1702	9.50 ^a	6	4.0	5.50	6.8	2.70
1702	10.50 ^b	6	4.0	6.50	6.8	3.70

Notes: Two sets of returns are presented here. Conservative net returns are based on the unlikely and conservative estimate that the expense per pound of tobacco for 1697–1702 remained the same as the expense per pound reported in the 1693 sale listed in Table II, which reflected a freight cost of £14/ton. But as Table III shows, freight rates for the years 1697–1702 (taken from John J. McCusker, “Freight Rates for Tobacco from Maryland and Virginia to Great Britain: 1675–1775,” table Eg686–687, in Susan B. Carter et al., eds., *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present*, millennial ed. [New York, 2006]) were much lower than £14/ton. Therefore I have calculated expected net returns based on a lower estimated expense per pound due to falling freight costs. Either way, substantial—in fact, historic—returns were possible in sweet-scented tobacco in the mid- to late 1690s through 1702 and, I would argue, through Queen Anne’s War, although the prices are not available. Jacob M. Price, *Perry of London: A Family and a Firm on the Seaborne Frontier, 1615–1753* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 50, table 2, estimates some returns as averages of a whole tobacco crop (not only sweet-scented), which tends to deflate possible returns, and yet for 1697 he has an estimate of 4.1 pence/pound, in line with my conservative hypothetical estimate. Price’s 1697 estimate is too low, I would argue, because he guesses that the wartime freight cost was double the peacetime cost, or approximately £12–13/ton, whereas the evidence suggests that freight was only about 20 percent higher by 1697.

Sources: Assumed prices are taken from Table I. Freight rates come from John J. McCusker, “Freight Rates for Tobacco from Maryland and Virginia to Great Britain: 1675–1775,” table Eg686–687, in Carter et al., *Historical Statistics*.

^aPrice based on the London mean low price as shown in Table I.

^bPrice based on the London mean high price as shown in Table I.

During the war, then, there were opportunities for net returns at historically high levels in this market for merchants and planter-merchants who dealt in sweet-scented tobacco, who bought low and could sell high, and who could get their crops included in the shipments. Many millions of pounds of sweet-scented tobacco were making it to London, where they were being sold at historically high prices. Yet not all Virginia tobacco growers could get their crops into the fleet. Anecdotal evidence clearly suggests that thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of hogsheads of tobacco were left out.



FIGURE II

Average freight rates for shipping Chesapeake tobacco to Great Britain, 1684–1715. From John J. McCusker, “Freight Rates for Tobacco from Maryland and Virginia to Great Britain: 1675–1775,” table Eg686–687, in Susan B. Carter et al., *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present*, millennial ed. (New York, 2006). The spike in 1708 was no doubt related to the 1707 capture of the outgoing (England to the Chesapeake) tobacco fleet, including the escorts, numerous merchant ships, and the governor of Virginia.

Who then had the best opportunity to ensure that their tobacco, either grown or purchased, would actually become part of the crop sold in London? The most obvious answer is those planters who consigned their tobacco to the men in London who controlled the quota system—the planters with kinship ties, political relationships, and long histories with the merchants who were able to dominate the trade after the convoy and embargo regime went into effect. We know who these men were.

In Virginia the people best poised to take advantage of these wartime conditions were the so-called great planters and their clients and families who had begun to separate themselves from the merely successful local planters by the 1680s. The opportunity created by the market in the war years accelerated the general trend, allowing the consolidation of power in the hands of forty or so families that would famously become known as “the first families of Virginia.” Emory G. Evans recently published a study of what he calls Virginia’s “twenty-one leading families,” who dominated

the Council of State in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³³ Putting Evans's map of family seats onto Walsh's map of the economic subregions of the Chesapeake reveals clearly that these families were located in the heart of the sweet-scented subregion, where they dominated the local offices, owned the most land, often operated stores, and commanded the most labor (Figure III).

These families were well placed to take advantage of the tightly regulated and closed market of the war years because they were the most connected to the great merchants who controlled a majority of the tobacco trade by the mid-1680s. They consigned their tobacco, accepting the risk but getting the reward, and they were able to amass tobacco for sale not only because they grew large amounts on multiple plantation quarters but also because they received tobacco as fees for the offices they dominated, operated storehouses, owned a stake in shipping, speculated on land, or sold slaves to their neighbors. At the very top, the greatest of the great men, such as Lewis Burwell, William Byrd I, Robert "King" Carter, Benjamin Harrison, Edmund Jennings, Philip Ludwell, Daniel Parke, William Randolph, and some others, did all these things. Byrd, for example, grew no more than one hundred hogsheads of tobacco on his own land in these years, but by the mid-1690s he was able to send more than nine hundred to England on his account. From the 1690s the great planters were able to exploit their control of all these trends, in land, in the increasingly available supplies of enslaved labor, and in access to the English tobacco market, which created the social, economic, and political dynamic that enabled their dominance during Virginia's so-called golden age in the early eighteenth century. Put simply, from 1690 to 1720 the leading families of the colony were able to consolidate their grip on the social and political order as a direct result of the wealth-generating opportunities created by the convoy and embargo regime—unique opportunities that Virginia would not see again.³⁴

³³ Emory G. Evans, *A "Topping People": The Rise and Decline of Virginia's Old Political Elite, 1680–1790* (Charlottesville, Va., 2009), [xii].

³⁴ On the economic activities of the early founders of the leading families of Virginia, see Evans, "Topping People," 5–22. For William Byrd I's economic activity, *ibid.*, 13–14. Though the great planters were poised to take advantage of the unique constraints on the supply of tobacco to the English market, it would be foolish to assume that they were therefore able to simply lord it over everyone else. Firstly, the evidence suggests that while Virginia's great planters could mobilize a united Virginia interest in London with the aid of their sympathetic merchant allies, they were often deeply divided themselves by personal politics, by the competition for offices and honors, and by the struggle to improve their position at the top of the pile. They were an ambitious, jealous lot. This competition supplied and spurred an internal economy that could be exploited by smaller planters, who were increasingly drawn into the orbits of these greater planters as part of their interest. Byrd captures the dynamic well in many letters to Micajah Perry in the 1680s, making clear that the local planter-merchants were in competition for the tobacco of other interests. In a typical letter to

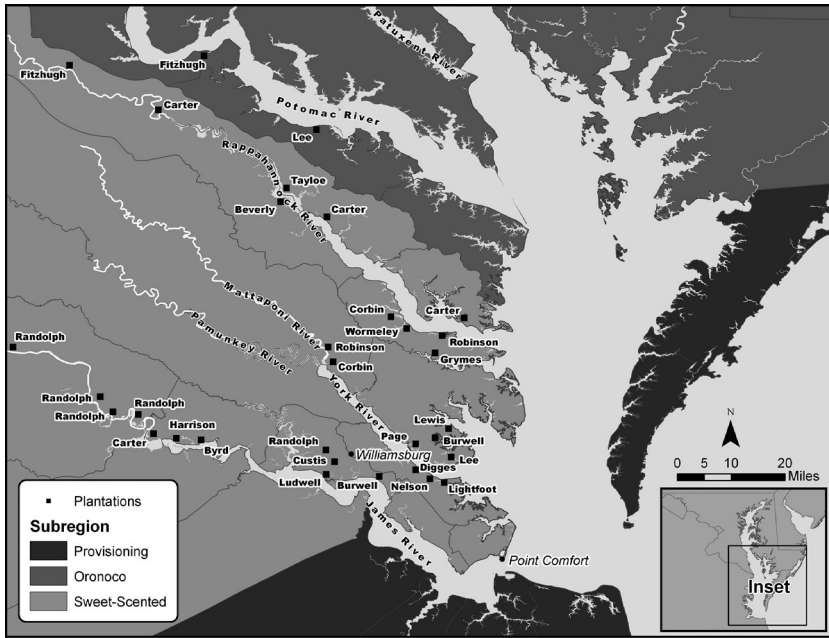


FIGURE III

Locations of Virginia's twenty-one leading families and economic subregions. Subregions drawn from Lorena S. Walsh, "Summing the Parts: Implications for Estimating Chesapeake Output and Income Subregionally," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 56, no. 1 (January 1999): 53–94, esp. 54. See also Figure I, in John C. Coombs, "The Phases of Conversion: A New Chronology for the Rise of Slavery in Early Virginia," *WMQ* 68, no. 3 (July 2011): 332–60, esp. 337. Locations of plantations from Emory G. Evans, *A "Topping People": The Rise and Decline of Virginia's Old Political Elite, 1680–1790* (Charlottesville, Va., 2009), [xii]. Map produced by Kevin Heard, GISP, GIS Core Facility, Binghamton University.

Perry and Lane of London, Byrd complains of competition from "Paggen's concerne" and reminds the London merchants that "without servants or slaves, no great crop is now to bee purchased." Byrd to [Perry & Lane?], Mar. 29, 1685, in Marion Tinling, ed., *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia, 1684–1776* (Charlottesville, Va., 1977), 1: 30–31 (quotations, 1: 31). Secondly, the ability of the great men to patent large amounts of land from the early 1690s allowed them to sell to land-hungry men who began developing the last lands available up to the fall line in the 1690s and moving into the Piedmont after 1700. That story, which John C. Coombs and I have begun examining on a small scale in King William County, looks like a story of symbiotic interests coming together. The migrant attempting to build a farm and the planter-merchant and erstwhile land speculator attempting to secure a crop and get a return on his land had a shared interest—each needed the other to succeed. See Bradburn and Coombs, *Atlantic Studies* 3: 150.

The trends are evident. The only close community study of a sweet-scented region during this period, Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman's analysis of Middlesex County, described it from the mid-1690s through the 1710s as experiencing a "surge of prosperity"—which they could not reconcile with the community studies of Oronoco counties in these years—marked by rising indices of wealth, possession of luxury items, and living standards throughout the county. They also perceived a "dramatic building surge underway" in the county, with new houses, new additions on houses, new churches, and a state-of-the-art courthouse being built in these years.³⁵ But the Rutmans also described an accelerating gap between the richest families and all the rest. Though the periodizations in their analysis do not match up perfectly with the period described here, it is clear that from 1700 to 1719 the wealthiest were pulling away rapidly in Middlesex, an outcome that makes no sense if the current orthodoxy about the character of the Virginia economy in those years is to be believed (Figure IV).³⁶

Among the gentry and officeholders in Virginia, it was everywhere evident that many men were not just standing pat or struggling to maintain their standard of living but were amassing great wealth through the 1690s and early 1700s. Fitzhugh, for instance, already a large landholder and planter at the end of the 1680s, doubled his holdings in land and slaves by the end of the 1690s. In 1690 Carter already owned approximately six thousand acres and one hundred slaves—putting him in the elite ranks of wealth—but by 1720 he owned more than a hundred thousand acres of land and upwards of four hundred slaves on numerous plantations throughout the colony.

One of the remarkable transformations of Virginia in these years, of course, was the growing number of slaves as a percentage of the overall labor force. As John C. Coombs has shown, though the gentry had always invested in slaves, the percentage of slave ownership by all planters in the sweet-scented region grew very quickly during the quarter century after 1690. From approximately 50 percent in the 1680s, fully 96 percent of the total labor force in the sweet-scented region was enslaved by 1720. Without an awareness of the peculiar wartime conditions of the sweet-scented tobacco market, earlier historians have struggled to understand these trends. How, Gloria L. Main asked famously in 1977, were planters able to invest so much money in slaves at a time of declining tobacco prices and general depression?³⁷ Within the sweet-scented areas, the answer should be clear.

³⁵ Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman, *A Place in Time: Middlesex County, Virginia, 1650–1750* (New York, 1984), 188 ("surge of prosperity"), 190 ("dramatic building surge").

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 189; Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman, *A Place in Time: Explicatus* (New York, 1984).

³⁷ Gloria L. Main, "Maryland and the Chesapeake Economy, 1670–1720," in *Law, Society, and Politics in Early Maryland*, ed. Aubrey C. Land, Lois Green Carr, and Edward C. Papenfuss (Baltimore, 1977), 134–52.

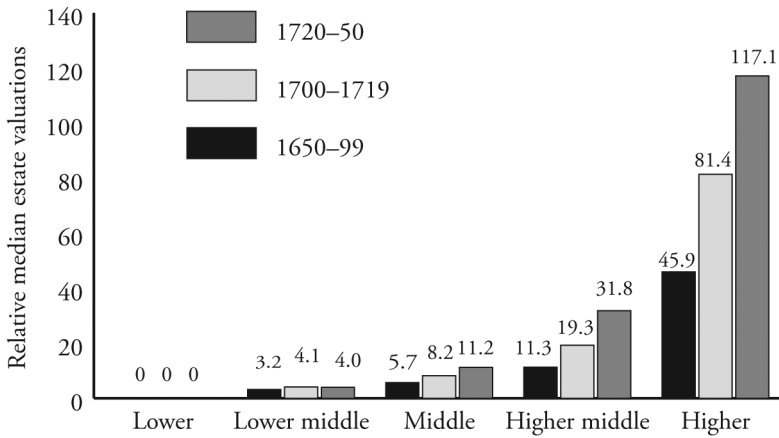


FIGURE IV

The changing distance between the poorest in Middlesex County and those above them. The towers represent the median estate evaluation of each group divided by the median of the lowest. Thus, in the period 1650-99, the median of the highest wealth group was forty-six times that of the lowest. See Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman, "Wealth," in *A Place in Time: Explicatus* (New York, 1984), 117-32, for a description of the sample and wealth groups. See also Rutman and Rutman, *A Place in Time: Middlesex County, Virginia, 1650-1750* (New York, 1984), 189.

There was no paradox. It was not a depression in Virginia, and the slaves were bought and sold by war profiteers in the name of the public good. The so-called Virginia golden age was forged in the crucible of war.

But it also should be clear that in this constrained system the growers of Oronoco tobacco, the bulk of Maryland planters, were not served well. Since sweet-scented tobacco was largely consumed in England, the problems of getting the tobacco to market during the war years stopped once the convoy reached England, and the risk of disaster diminished with the articulation of the convoy system. But Oronoco tobacco was sold on the Continent, and the double risk of getting a crop to a European market during the war meant that, despite the limits imposed by the quota of shipping and the high prices available in Europe, it was extremely difficult for producers to offset the problem of freight costs. Efforts by traders in Oronoco to get direct access to the Spanish market or find an outlet for the crop in Russia at the turn of the century speak to the desperation and crisis in the international market for Oronoco tobacco. Europeans began growing their own versions of the cheap leaf in response. The market for Oronoco only rebounded after the war with a decrease in the British duties on reexported

tobacco and the subsequent growth of French importation beginning in the 1720s.³⁸ Finally, since the Virginia Council of State ruled the capes of the bay, Marylanders played a small role in the articulation of the Chesapeake side of the system. They received their orders on sailing times and embargoes from the Virginia council like everyone else. Robert Quarry, who famously criticized the operation of the convoy system in 1704 for having “done more damage to trade . . . than all that were concern’d in it were worth” and “lower’d the price of tobacco both at home and at all forreign marketts almost to nothing,” made a specific point of noting, “I mean the Aronoco tobacco.”³⁹ So the successes of the tobacco lobby in these years had an impact most directly on the sweet-scented regions of Virginia. Whereas Virginia planters in those regions were able to purchase slaves from the rising supply in the 1700s and 1710s, planters in the Oronoco regions lagged behind. Maryland would not see broad slave ownership—on a par with sweet-scented counties—until well into the 1720s, when the price of Oronoco recovered.

The great men of Virginia, who conspired with their merchant allies in London and elsewhere through the wars to influence the shape of policy, had some telling successes. They successfully stopped the importation of bulk tobacco. They joined the wide mercantile assault that broke the monopoly of the Royal African Company and encouraged the expansion of the “free” trade in enslaved labor.⁴⁰ Most clearly, they succeeded in creating the functioning convoy and embargo regime, the logistics of which consumed an

³⁸ Jacob M. Price, “The Rise of Glasgow in the Chesapeake Tobacco Trade, 1707–1775,” *WMQ* 11, no. 2 (April 1954): 179–99; Price, “The Tobacco Adventure to Russia: Enterprise, Politics, and Diplomacy in the Quest for a Northern Market for English Colonial Tobacco, 1676–1722,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, new ser., 51, no. 1 (March 1961): 1–119; Price, “The Economic Growth of the Chesapeake and the European Market, 1697–1775,” *Journal of Economic History* 24, no. 4 (December 1964): 496–511; 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*, 2 vols. (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1973); Price, “New Time Series for Scotland’s and Britain’s Trade with the Thirteen Colonies and States, 1740 to 1791,” *WMQ* 32, no. 2 (April 1975): 307–25. Good examples of the Dutch replacement of Oronoco tobacco in these years can be found in Wim Klooser and Victor Enthoven, “The Rise and Fall of the Virginia-Dutch Connection in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Early Modern Virginia: Reconsidering the Old Dominion*, ed. Douglas Bradburn and John C. Coombs (Charlottesville, Va., 2011), 90–127. See also Price, *France and the Chesapeake*, 1: 509–30.

³⁹ Cecil Headlam et al., eds., *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series: America and West Indies* (London, 1916), 22: 139–46 (item no. 353; quotations, 142). Too many historians have applied these quotations to the operation of the convoy system throughout the war years and to both sweet-scented and Oronoco regions. See for instance Middleton, *WMQ* 3: 189–90.

⁴⁰ William A. Pettigrew, “Free to Enslave: Politics and the Escalation of Britain’s Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1688–1714,” *WMQ* 64, no. 1 (January 2007): 3–38. See also Pettigrew, “Transatlantic Politics and the Africanization of Virginia’s Labor Force, 1688–1712,” in Bradburn and Coombs, *Early Modern Virginia*, 279–99.

enormous amount of their time and without which they could not have survived, let alone thrived, during the long stretches of war.

Wartime royal governors, in this political dynamic, were often out of place, particularly if they attempted anything that distracted from the convoy and embargo regime. Gubernatorial interest existed almost completely outside the leading concern of the great businessmen, planters, and merchants of Virginia. The governors' imperial ambitions, their efforts to increase the power of their offices or themselves, had little to do with the real purpose of empire as it was understood by the many planters and farmers that surrounded them, which was to secure their families' security through the pursuit of economic advantage, social prestige, and political power in Virginia. A good example of the divergence in the visions of empire of the Virginia Council of State and a royal governor in these war years can be seen in the experience of Governor Francis Nicholson. A career jobber in the nascent imperial bureaucracy, Nicholson, by the time he began his tenure as governor of Virginia at the end of the 1690s, had already been assistant to the governor of New England, lieutenant governor and later governor of New York, lieutenant governor of Virginia, and, most recently, governor of Maryland. His plans, as war erupted in the early 1690s and again in the early 1700s, always stressed the need for a broad imperial perspective. Virginia should guard its frontiers, help develop a post office, reorganize its militia establishment, prepare a ranging service, catalog and collect its arms, help build and maintain roads to the neighboring colonies, and send money and supplies to New York to fight the French in North America. Nicholson developed plans for a colonial union, called for colonial cooperation in the prosecution of the war and the conquest of Canada, and promoted the reorganization of the empire. But, with the exception of their support for the College of William and Mary, Nicholson found only foot dragging and hostility among the members of his Council of State. Frustrated at every turn, Nicholson began to understand all his problems as part of an inherently provincial mindset among the Virginia elite. Complaining about Virginians, he noted, "The Country consists now most of Natives, few of which either have read much or been abroad in the world," who could not be "made sensible of the necessity of assisting his Majesty's Province of New York."⁴¹ They were, he noted in a complaint to the Board of Trade, perfect "Creoles."⁴²

Though he was wrong about the relative worldliness of some of his critics, Nicholson was right to understand that these Virginia oligarchs were concerned first and foremost with Virginia's trade and saw the empire not with a broad lens but with a narrow view oriented through the capes

⁴¹ Headlam et al., *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series*, 19: 631 (item no. 1040).

⁴² Francis Nicholson to the Board of Trade, Aug. 1, 1700, CO 5/1312, no. 1.

of the Chesapeake Bay. As he pointed out, Virginians had little interest in the affairs of New York, “tho’ in point of Trade and of Plantation Affairs they are generally very knowing.”⁴³ They obviously understood politics in Whitehall, since they eventually forced Nicholson out of office. They were creoles whose perspective of the empire was rooted in Virginia by the late seventeenth century. And it was from that vantage point that they had succeeded in making the empire work for them.

But if these were victories for an emerging Virginia interest and for the great families that dominated Virginia more securely than ever by 1715, they came with a price. By emphasizing their dependence, neediness, and weakness and demanding the protection of the navy, the Virginia lobby had adopted a vision of their place and purpose in the empire that would make them not the fifth dominion of His Majesty’s crown but subordinates, dependent on British protection, British capital, and British manufactured goods. In the 1660s, 1670s, and 1680s, the colony still bid defiance to the Navigation Act system, smuggled openly with the Dutch and the Irish, and asked numerous times for a new relationship. By 1715 things had changed. Britain was developing a modern financial system and beginning the extraordinary transformation into “a polite and commercial people,” while Virginia remained as it had been, without financial institutions and at the service of mercantilism.⁴⁴ Virginia existed to produce tobacco, to supply revenue for the crown, and to consume British manufactures, nothing else. The eldest son, Virginia, and the abused stepson, Maryland, were children, never to grow up. They would remain underdeveloped and, increasingly, politically impotent in London because their best friends in the 1690s and early 1700s, those great tobacco importers who could demand that the Admiralty serve their particular interest, were more naturally the planters’ enemies, which would become clearer as the eighteenth century progressed.

As we have seen, by 1715 tobacco merchants in London tended to be Chesapeake tobacco merchants and little else—the diversity of trading interests that characterized the tobacco sellers before the 1690s was gone. The more specialized the merchants, the more the mercantilist system served them and the more they became dependent on its shape. London merchants did not want to compete with Europeans in the brokerage of tobacco—they could barely stomach competing with the Scots—and so their concern was always the maintenance of their special access to tobacco grown in the Chesapeake and the continued underdevelopment of the Chesapeake economy. It was the tobacco merchants who led the assault on any plantation attempt to stimulate manufacturing or diversification, who defeated the proposed reform of the customs in the 1730s, and who

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989).

demanding passage of the 1732 debt act, which put Chesapeake planters' real estate at risk for book debts established by the oath of a British merchant, though English property was never so endangered.⁴⁵ Lamenting the news of the debt act, Carter wrote to his old ally Perry of the "tyranny of the merchants" who seemed to be "daily encreasing their Oppressions upon us." Remembering the "old Adagy that Oppressions make a wise man mad," he wondered "what our Madness will produce."⁴⁶

True to form, London merchants' special access to the Chesapeake and their particular interest in keeping colonial plantations functioning to the merchants' benefit were justified by appeals to the balance of trade, the wealth of the nation, and the public good. John Cary, the famous political economist, a common participant in the politics of imperial design in the 1690s, and one of the major tobacco merchants in this period (he was present at the 1691 merchant audience with Queen Mary), knew that colonies existed to play a specific role. As he noted, "the health of the Commonwealth" of England was always to be preferred to "any part" of the plantations when they "set up an interest alone." The restrictions on trade were "Severe against such" plantation interests, and needed to be, because the rules ultimately were intended not to aid the colonial planters but "to promote the happiness of our constitution." The same "respect was due" from the plantations, he continued, "as from a Tenant to a landlord."⁴⁷

In the wars Virginia had become a colony, a status that became more and more apparent as the unique benefits of the market in wartime disappeared. Virginia had lain down with the lion, and the colony would find it exceedingly difficult to get up again.

⁴⁵ Price and Clemens, *Journal of Economic History* 47: 1–43. The Excise Crisis was a well-known episode in Robert Walpole's administration (1721–42). Steve Pincus argues that Walpole's efforts to lower the land tax in England with an expansion of taxes on consumption were seen by his Whig allies as a rejection of traditional Whig political economy in favor of a Tory emphasis on the importance of land. See Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven, Conn., 2009), 399. For the Virginia opposition to the debt act and failed attempt to create an excise tax to replace the customs, see John M. Hemphill II, *Virginia and the English Commercial System, 1689–1733* (New York, 1985), 149–287.

⁴⁶ Robert Carter to [Micajah] Perry, July 10, 1732, in Berkeley, *Papers of Robert "King" Carter*.

⁴⁷ John Cary to Edmund Bohun, Jan. 31, 1696, British Library, London, Additional Manuscripts 5540, fol. 61. See also Cary, *An Essay on the State of England, In Relation to its Trade, Its Poor, and its Taxes, For carrying on the present War against France* (Bristol, Eng., 1695).