

7-2012

## "The Spirit of Association": The Nelson Family and Commercial Resistance in Yorktown, Virginia 1769-1771

Eric F. Ames  
*College of William and Mary*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorsthesis>

---

### Recommended Citation

Ames, Eric F., "'The Spirit of Association': The Nelson Family and Commercial Resistance in Yorktown, Virginia 1769-1771" (2012). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 478.  
<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorsthesis/478>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@wm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@wm.edu).

“THE SPIRIT OF ASSOCIATION”: THE NELSON FAMILY AND COMMERCIAL  
RESISTANCE IN YORKTOWN, VIRGINIA 1769-1771

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in  
History from the College of William and Mary in Virginia,

by

Eric F. Ames

Accepted For \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Director

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## **Acknowledgments**

I would first like to acknowledge my adviser, Prof. Julie Richter, for her assistance and guidance on this project, and for providing feedback on the drafts of this thesis.

I would also like to thank Profs. Paul S. Davies and Scott R. Nelson for agreeing to sit on the committee that assessed this thesis.

I would like to also acknowledge my family, as well as countless other members of the Tribe who contributed their patience and support during the duration of this project.

Lastly, I should thank not just the Nelsons, but Martha Goosley, without whom both our knowledge and enjoyment of colonial Virginia history would be less than they are.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: THE VIRGINIA ASSOCIATIONS.....	1
CHAPTER I: VIRGINIA’S TOBACCO ECONOMY AND THE ORIGINS OF HIERARCHY.....	4
CHAPTER II: FREEDOM AND “SLAVERY”: BRITISH COLONIAL POLICY AND THE RISE OF COMMERCIAL RESISTANCE.....	19
CHAPTER III: ASSOCIATION SENTIMENT IN YORK COUNTY.....	35
CHAPTER IV: “AN ASSOCIATOR IN PRINCIPLE”: THE NELSON FAMILY AND THEIR CLIENTELE.....	42
CHAPTER V: YORKTOWN’S “TOPPING PEOPLE” AND THE 1770 ASSOCIATION.....	63
CHAPTER VI: “THE SPIRIT OF ASSOCIATION”: YORKTOWN’S HIERARCHY AND THE 1770 ASSOCIATION.....	73
CHAPTER VII: THE LANGUAGE OF GOODS IN YORKTOWN.....	88
CONCLUSION: THE FAILURE OF THE ASSOCIATIONS AND THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE.....	100
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	104

## INTRODUCTION: THE VIRGINIA ASSOCIATIONS

On August 8 of 1770, irritated Yorktown resident Martha Goosley wrote to London merchant John Norton to complain of the recent Townshend Duties imposed on the colonies. The colony's ruling elites decided the best way to protest Britain's new imperial taxes and their troubling debt was by forming Associations dedicated to boycotting manufactured goods from Great Britain. Goosley's patience was almost gone. She informed Norton that

Associations run high here. Is there no Probability of Making your great ones act right or will they Put us under the necessity of wearing homespun altogether? I assure the Gentlemen wear nothing else all Summer & we have made great improvements, however I cant help wishing Sincerely that all our Differences were happily made up.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately for Virginians, who like Goosley tolerated boycotting British imports for a time, the "great ones" in London refused to change course. The Associations of 1769 and 1770 to which Goosley referred were regarded then as they are now as failures. Compliance was not widespread, and the voluntary nature of the first agreement made it difficult to enforce. Nonimportation associations were active up and down the eastern seaboard, but most were ineffective. Yet surviving transactions from the store of the Yorktown Nelsons, however, tell a somewhat different story.

In Yorktown, the Association of 1769 proved to be almost as useless at reducing imports as its counterparts elsewhere in Virginia and in the British American colonies at

---

All biographical information for residents of Yorktown, unless otherwise cited, is from the York County Project Master Biographical File, Department of Training and Historical Research, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>1</sup> Frances Norton Mason, ed., 1937. *John Norton & Sons Merchants of London and Virginia Being the Papers from their Counting House for the Years 1750 to 1795*, (Richmond: The Dietz Press 1937), 143

large. The 1770 Association, which created gentry-led committees designed to inspect cargoes and shame violators, was far more effective. This paper explores why the 1770 Association seemed to work in Yorktown when it failed everywhere else in Virginia.

The first chapter starts at the very beginning of Virginia's colonial history by tracing the origins of Virginia's hierarchical social and political systems back to Virginia's beginnings as a plantation colony with a distinct political culture, and the Consumer Revolution that would affect this hierarchy. The next chapter describes the rise of British management of colonial affairs and the affects it had on Virginia's economic, social, and political life. This chapter shows how British policies interacted with Virginia's social structure and changes in the colonial marketplace, leading to the formation of the Nonimportation Associations. The third chapter details the limited written reports of the Associations in surviving correspondence. The fourth chapter describes the powerful and dynamic Nelson family, and demonstrates not only their personal power, but the effects that thus power had on the purchases of those below them in the county's social hierarchy. The fifth chapter shows how the elite gentry class that surrounded the Nelsons might have organized itself on hierarchical lines. Two following chapters show how the sentiment of nonimportation was transmitted down through the regional hierarchy, and speculates about the political language used by the leaders of such a hierarchy.

This paper argues that the Virginia Nonimportation Association of 1770, although not universally observed, was relatively successful in York County because the county's social structure was such that a powerful gentry group could dominate the social hierarchy. The Association, which rose out of a distinctly orderly and hierarchical social

system, succeeded in Yorktown while failing elsewhere because of the dominance of the Nelson family within the regional power structure. The Nelsons used this power structure to propagate a “language of goods” throughout the social and economic hierarchy as a means of motivating Yorktown society as a whole to take action against imposed taxes.

## CHAPTER I.

## VIRGINIA'S TOBACCO ECONOMY AND THE ORIGINS OF HIERARCHY

Tobacco was the lifeblood of Virginia's economy in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and had been since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This chapter explores the effects of Virginia's reliance on tobacco on the colony's social structure and political culture. Virginia society was dominated by a planter gentry class with a vested interest in their power. This status quo was disrupted by transformations in the tobacco trade, and the rise of consumerism. Developments in Virginia's economy in the late 17<sup>th</sup> through mid-18<sup>th</sup> century would thus create a set of social and economic conditions ripe for nonimportation and colonial resistance.

Tobacco was notably Virginia's leading export, and it was the primary source of credit for Virginia's planters both large and small.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, Virginians had to cope with the economic risks built into the colonial-metropolitan relationship. Until the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the predominating method of tobacco distribution was the consignment system.<sup>2</sup> Virginia planters consigned their tobacco shipments in advance to British merchants, who in turn would sell the tobacco on commission at the market price in Britain. This was risky because the planter assumed the liability for his product from the moment of harvest until it reached the docks in England.<sup>3</sup> The nature of this system, however, tended to shut smaller planters out of the consignment market. According to historian Bruce Ragsdale, "The volume required for personal service and the delay in

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Ragsdale, *A Planters Republic: The Search for Economic Independence in Revolutionary Virginia*. (Madison: Madison House, 1996), 3

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 4-5

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 5. The main risk inherent in this system was the liability involved in transportation, which could account for as much as 75% of the sale price. This coupled with the delay in a planter's receipts on his sales made consignment a risky process.



receipt of sales limited the viability of the consignment system to large producers of tobacco.”<sup>4</sup> Merchants also acted as the planters’ conduit to English manufactures, and were key agents in the planters’ social networks in England. Consignment merchants additionally took the place of bankers in an economy that did not have developed financial institutions by issuing bills of exchange and credit based on the receipts from future tobacco shipments.<sup>5</sup> Consignment merchants thus acted as the legal, economic, and social agents in England for Virginia planters. This consignment trade would have important consequences for Virginia in the long term.

This early tobacco trade helped crystallize a hierarchical society based on social rank.<sup>6</sup> The consignment trade of the third quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century coincided roughly with the stabilization of Virginia’s English population, and the replacement of indentured labor with African slaves. By this period, social rank had become linked to the productivity of a planter’s tobacco operation. Approximately 5% of Virginia’s population owned the majority of the land in the Tidewater region, and had the best access to slaves and contacts in British ports.<sup>7</sup> This upper crust formed a relatively small number of families that came to dominate Virginia’s economic, social, and political life. These were Virginia’s “topping people,” a collection of roughly twenty-one interrelated elite families, including the Nelsons, Randolphs, and Carters.<sup>8</sup> These families would form the top rank of a complex social order.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 5

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 5

<sup>6</sup> It is important to distinguish the Virginian concept of rank from Marxist or modern ideas surrounding social class. The distinction is one too complex to be fully explicated here, but the main difference is that the Virginian idea of rank was not wholly bound up with the idea of material well-being and economic interest, and was a multifaceted concept including elements of wealth, honor, and familial connection.

<sup>7</sup> Ragsdale 6

<sup>8</sup> Emory Evans, *A “Topping People:” The Rise and Decline of Virginia’s Old Political Elite, 1680-1790*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 2

Virginia's system of social order rested on deference and social obligation, which permeated every aspect of life in colonial Virginia. Not only were Virginians expected to show deference to their social betters, the topping part of society was expected to "condescend" to those below them.<sup>9</sup> This old English system adapted itself to Virginia's plantation culture in ways that fostered a culture of dependence. A planter might lend money to a middling yeoman that he might improve his own estate, or provide him with important contacts in Britain.<sup>10</sup>

Such deference was not merely social, however. Virginia's deference-based society reinforced a deference-based political system. The vestries and county governments, the two main units of the local polity in Virginia, were usually controlled by the colony's elites. Court day in a Virginia county served as a stage for the pageantry of deference and social obligation, and acted as a way of reinforcing the culture of rank and order. Virginians were expected to show the same deference to their governor and to the Burgesses as they were to the King and Parliament.<sup>11</sup> This extended to the participatory mechanisms of Virginia's government: only freeholders were allowed to vote, and, even when they were allowed to do so, a majority rarely turned out.<sup>12</sup> Elections were seen mainly as social events at which planters and some other free whites were to select the best gentlemen to represent the interests of the county rather than a modern

---

<sup>9</sup> David Hackett Fischer. *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press., 1989), 385-387. This term had a meaning in the colonial period different from its modern connotation. To condescend in the Tidewater meant for a member of the upper rank to show respect to a member of a lower social rank. Although certainly the idea in theory, this was not always the case in practice. Merchant Daniel Fisher, who tried and failed to make his way among the Virginians recorded that "there's a Vanity and Subtily in the generality of Virginians, not unobvious to persons to Common penetration who have been at all accustomed to a more generous way of acting or thinking."

<sup>10</sup> Ragsdale 7-8

<sup>11</sup> Fischer 407-410

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 409

election.<sup>13</sup> Elections in colonial Virginia were informal by modern standards, and were carried out amidst broader social gatherings.

A crucial component of this culture is that the same group of landed oligarchs dominated the Virginia polity was for much of its history. Family networks were critical. Between 1720 and 1776, about half of the leading members of the Burgesses were blood relatives.<sup>14</sup> English merchant and diarist Daniel Fisher attributed a blunt admission of this to John Randolph. Fisher recalled

John Randolph in speaking of the disposition of the Virginian, very freely cautioned us against disobliging or offending any person of note in the Colony we were going to; for says he, either by blood or marriage, we are almost all related, or so connected in our interests, that whoever of a Stranger presume to offend any one of us will infallibly find an enemy of the whole, nor right nor wrong, do we ever forsake him, till by one means or other, his ruin is accomplished.<sup>15</sup>

These local social networks would become important in during the Revolutionary period as they came to form the basis for political action against British administration.

Virginian ideas about deference and obligation did not just influence how politics was practiced. This social system would have a profound effect on how Virginians formed their ideals of freedom and order.

This became apparent in how Virginians viewed the role of government. The key component of Virginia's political culture was the idea of hegemonic liberty. In the words of David Hackett Fischer: "Virginians thought of liberty as a hegemonic condition of dominion over others and- equally important- dominion over oneself...[liberty]'s opposite was 'slavery', a degradation into which true-born Britons descended when they

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Jack Greene, "Foundations of Power in the Virginia House of Burgesses, 1720-1776," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 16 (1959): 490

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Fisher. "The Fisher History" in Louise Pecquet du Bellet ed., *Some Prominent Virginia Families*, (Lynchburg: J.P. Bell and Co., 1907)

lost their power to rule.<sup>16</sup>” Liberty was thus not a naturally endowed right, but a state of being relative to one’s place in society.

This understanding of liberty underlay what Virginia’s political class would see wrong with British colonial administration in the third quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and would lead to the earliest non-import agreements. Although Virginians sought liberty of this sort in local politics and society, developments in the structure of the British Empire beginning in the 1750s set events in motion causing this ideology to be extended to the colony as a whole. Virginia possessed hegemonic liberty as long as it could govern itself, and the loss of this liberty was seen as being on par with slavery. Virginians in the early Revolutionary period even spoke in such terms. It was not uncommon for elite Virginians to publicly express their fear that America might be reduced to a state of slavery under continued British rule. This ideology led Virginians to nonimportation, and constrained the ways in which it was carried out. Virginia’s relationship to Britain was thus shaped by underlying cultural currents that nurtured a unique sensitivity to being dependent. By the third quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Virginians greatly feared this dependence, but this fear had its roots in longer-standing British policies.

Dependency in contravention of hegemonic freedom appeared to Virginians first and most obviously in the Navigation Acts. These laws were among England’s first attempts to control colonial economies based on the doctrine of mercantilism.<sup>17</sup> Amended several times following its 1651 passage, the Navigation Acts prohibited colonial trade

---

<sup>16</sup> Fischer 411

<sup>17</sup> Mercantilism was one of the first political economic theories in the western world despite its amorphousness. Mercantilism generally proposes that the global economy is a zero-sum game in which economic gain by one nation necessarily results an economic loss by another. Mercantilists deny gains from trade, and preferred economic self-sufficiency. For colonies, this usually meant strict regulations of economic activity.

with foreign vessels, and mandated that all colonial exports be sent to London or another English outpost. No trade with another foreign power could be conducted unless the cargo had already been shipped to England, and all English colonial cargoes had to be shipped on English-built, and English-operated vessels.<sup>18</sup>

The Navigation Acts had some benefits for tobacco growers. For one, they guaranteed a domestic market in England.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, this also meant that planters' livelihoods were in the hands of the English market for tobacco; if the English price for tobacco fell, Virginians could expect far less of a return from virtually the same amount of input. English colonists tolerated the Navigation Acts so long as they benefitted from a protected domestic market and the protection of the British military.<sup>20</sup>

Following the French defeat in the Seven Years War and the expansion of the colonial economy, these imperial protections became burdens as colonial regulation was increasingly a hindrance in the minds of Britain's colonists. As their control over the tobacco trade began to slip in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Virginians began to feel a sense of dependency that would lead them to question their relationship with the British Isles.<sup>21</sup>

This sense of dependency became especially salient following changes in the tobacco trade and in British manufacturing. In the early decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, French demand for Virginia tobacco skyrocketed after French traders found it available in Scotland. Virginia tobacco suited French tastes, and was relatively affordable despite the

---

<sup>18</sup> Alan Taylor. *American Colonies*. (New York, New York: Viking, 2001), 258-259.

<sup>19</sup> Larry Sawers. "The Navigation Acts Revisited." *The Economic History Review*. 2 (1992) 273

<sup>20</sup> Robert Paul Thomas. "A Quantitative Approach to the Effects of British Imperial Policy Upon Colonial Welfare: Some Preliminary Findings." *The Journal of Economic History*. 4 (1965): 633-634

<sup>21</sup> Of all British taxes, the Navigation Acts were generally the least protested. Even during the height of colonial taxation, Americans usually rationalized their theretofore lack of complaint regarding the Acts by arguing that they objected to direct taxation rather than the regulation of trade imposed by the Navigation Acts. Their role in pushing the colonies towards independence should still not be underestimated. The degree to which they were responsible for pushing to colonies towards Revolution is still disputed.

steep import duties.<sup>22</sup> French cash payments for Virginia tobacco capitalized Scottish export firms. In turn, the capital enabled Scottish firms to set up networks of stores in the Chesapeake. The Scottish merchant houses attracted Virginia customers because they did business very differently from their English counterparts. Rather than wait for shipments of tobacco to arrive in Britain as was the practice with the consignment system, Scottish companies sent agents called factors all over Virginia to set up stores.<sup>23</sup> At these stores, factors purchased Virginia tobacco for instant payment and high prices.<sup>24</sup> Rapid payment to factors meant rapid payment to planters. By 1770, Glasgow trading houses were purchasing approximately half of Virginia's tobacco exports.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to making immediate payment for tobacco, Scottish factors also provided ready credit that planters could put towards imports.<sup>26</sup> This differed markedly from the consignment system in which Virginia consumers ordered goods from British merchants on credit. Scottish factors, particularly along the Potomac, tended to purchase a variety of tobacco called Oronoco. Factors generally bought Oronoco because it fared much better on the French market. These factors came to play a major role in the tobacco trade among smaller planters in the Piedmont, and along the James and Potomac rivers.<sup>27</sup>

The factors were hardly ever-present, however. York River plantations, much like those along the lower Rappahannock, directly exported higher-quality sweet-scented tobacco intended for British consumption, bypassing the Scottish stores.<sup>28</sup> Consignment firms were also better suited to the personal service need to properly market this crop in

---

<sup>22</sup> Ragsdale 13

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 14

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 15

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 13

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 14

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 16

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. There was only one known Scottish store operating in the York region even by 1769. The exact location of this store is not specified in the Roger Atkinson letter Ragsdale cites.

England, as well as give the York planters the generous credit they wanted.<sup>29</sup> Because this region specialized in tobacco favored by the consignment market, factors generally stayed out of both the York and lower Rappahannock naval districts.<sup>30</sup>

Both districts with few factor stores also suffered losses in tobacco exports at a time when they were increasing elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> The York Naval District, which had once provided 36% of Virginia's tobacco exports, was only responsible for 14% by 1768. This decline was not felt only in relative terms either, as the absolute number of hogsheads York exported dropped by more than half.<sup>32</sup> Ragsdale argues this decline occurred because "tobacco production in the [York River] area became almost exclusively the activity of large planters."<sup>33</sup> What role the absence of factors played in this absolute decline is not entirely clear, though Ragsdale suggests they contributed to the decrease. The influence of the factors was not limited to their role as direct traders, however. Scottish merchants also affected Virginia's social system by disrupting the balance between social ranks.

Outside of York County, factors did not just transform the way small planters relayed their crop to Europe. They also disrupted the social fabric of a genteel colonial society. Ragsdale writes

The rise of Scottish merchants became the most disturbing indication of the gentry's perceived loss of autonomy and influence over the colony's commercial life... Their system of stores further displaced the great planters as intermediaries between smaller planters and British markets.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid 30-33

<sup>30</sup> Ibid 16

<sup>31</sup> Ibid 17. How rapid this decline was is difficult to say with certainty, as export data from 1769 to 1772 appears to be missing.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid 16-17. The York River Naval District encompassed a region generally corresponding to the whole of the Lower Peninsula.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid 17. It is possible, however, that smaller planters may have sold their crops to the larger planters, who in turn would sell it as part of their consignments.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid 36, 40

Virginia society had at least in theory been built on the social ranks of gentlemen and yeomen. The Scots jarred the relationship between the gentry and their dependents by interrupting the relationship between these two social ranks. The middling rank was now dependent on a Scottish firm rather than its social betters. This was particularly problematic because the Scots gained notoriety for being themselves quite insular, and generally did not even try to fit into Virginia's rank-conscious society.<sup>35</sup> To the Scots, business was business. Although at least one Yorktown merchant, David Jameson, was of Scottish origin, there is very little evidence of any activity in York County on the part of the major Glasgow firms. Jameson, incidentally, married into the prestigious Smith family, who owned several lots in Yorktown. Jameson was thus brought into the system, and did not disrupt it. Gentry authority in and around Yorktown was therefore left relatively untouched by cantankerous Scots hawking their cheap wares. Although the York River Naval District did see a decline in tobacco exports, its elite did not have to contend with quite the same disruption of social order as did the gentry in other areas of the colony. This would become important as Virginians and the people of York began to organize against British colonial policy.

Before that time was to come, however, Virginia's economy continued to evolve in ways that would transform its social climate. The arrival of the Scots was not the only development in the tobacco trade that plagued the Virginia gentry. By 1740, London-based mercantile firms began to involve themselves in the direct trade that the Scots had

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid 38-39. Factors were known for only associating with one another, and were often instructed not to marry while they were in Virginia. There is at least one recorded case of a factor being cut off by his firm because he married a Virginia woman.



previously dominated.<sup>36</sup> By this point in time, Virginia planters could acquire ready extensions of credit from the factors because tobacco was still considered a reliable means of debt repayment.<sup>37</sup> Credit extended by Glasgow and London firms in turn led to a rapid increase in British exports to America. The beginnings of industrialization in Britain furthermore meant that manufactures were also cheaper than they had been in the past. By mid-century, Virginians of all social ranks could acquire the latest fashions from Britain while still maintaining their previous standard of living.<sup>38</sup>

Due to the availability of tobacco credit and cheap imports, Virginia's economy remained very much a colonial one. By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, tobacco accounted for 60% to 70% of Virginia's exports back to Britain. The colony continued to rely on revenue generated predominantly from this particular crop, and its economic freedom was hamstrung by the trade structure of the British Empire. The reason that the Scottish factors and the London trading houses exerted such power in the colonial marketplace was that they were the key providers of manufactured goods to colonists. Even on the eve of Revolution, Virginia had little in the way of industry save the production of pig iron, but the British government intended that iron pigs be sent to Britain as exports.<sup>39</sup> Virginians did not produce their own manufactures mainly because they did not need to do so. Any manufactured goods they could possibly need were provided to them by London merchants or Scottish factors, and at costs lower than the cost of producing the same goods in Virginia. Virginians were known to import routine household items items

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid 17

<sup>37</sup> Ibid 18

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 18-19

<sup>39</sup> Ibid 45

as seemingly mundane as nails and flooring brads.<sup>40</sup> Man hours spent producing manufactures meant fewer man hours going to the cultivation of tobacco or the management of the estate, making tobacco production more cost effective than domestic manufacturing or diversification. Given that manufactures were generally cheaper even considering the human capital and transportation costs, Virginians truly were reliant on the outside world for their manufactures.

The centralization of trade by British firms and the expansion of credit in Virginia led to what historians now call the Consumer Revolution. The Consumer Revolution of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century dramatically changed the economic relationship between all of the North American colonies and the British metropole. Virginia's colonial economy had always been such that the colony was dependent on outside exporters for its manufactured goods. Readily available credit meant that these goods could be ordered relatively easily. These manufactures took English America by storm to the point that even residents of once-isolated backcountry regions began to use goods previously considered luxuries; an English traveler in North Carolina reported that local women refused to make their own soap or to even use readily available ashes for cleaning. These women insisted on their imported Irish soap regardless of how expensive it was.<sup>41</sup> The utility attached to imported goods was such that it justified consumer choices that were not rational in purely financial terms.

---

<sup>40</sup> Mason 120; Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh. "Economic Diversification and Labor Organization." in *Work and Labor in Early America*, edited by Stephen Innes, 144-188. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg Virginia, 1988): 153, 174-175. This is not to imply that Virginians did not have the knowledge to produce items such as nails. Virginians who needed such goods would probably have purchased them from a local tradesman rather than a store. It was also often the case that imports were cheaper than domestic manufactures. Virginians had relied on manufactures since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but during the 18<sup>th</sup> came to rely on imports mainly for non-essential items.

<sup>41</sup> T.H. Breen, "'The Baubles of Britain': The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 199 (1988): 79

Colonial consumers also witnessed for the first time the standardization of the marketplace. Customers buying ceramic-ware in Charleston could expect to find many of the exact same patterns in Norfolk, Annapolis, Philadelphia, or Boston.<sup>42</sup> By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Virginians could find a wide variety of goods for sale such as those advertised by Yorktown merchant William Stevenson in 1746:

Broad cloths, Spanish Plains, Frize, Kersey, Cotton Drugget, German serge, Rugs, Blankets, Check'd Linen, Brown Linen, Indian Goods, Fustian, Bed Ticks, Worsted and Thread Stockings, Hats, Haberdashery, Men's and Women's gloves and Shoes, Cutlery, Sadler's leather, wine and beer glasses, Window Glass and Lead, Grocery, double and single refin'd sugars, Cordage of all Sizes, Powder, Shot, Corks, Yorkshire Strong Beer, large Copper brewing Kettles, Copper Stills, white and red Lead Paint, Linseed Oil, Hooes, Axes, Iron Pots, &c.<sup>43</sup>

Virginia was part of a truly global economy like never before. During the Revolutionary period, this would lead to what T.H. Breen calls a “language of goods.”<sup>44</sup> This shared language created a common vocabulary for commercial resistance and revolutionary thought. British manufactures were so widespread that when the Revolution came, goods acquired a political significance. Identification with particular goods led to an identification with a particular politics.<sup>45</sup>

The Consumer Revolution was in this respect not just revolutionary because it opened Virginia's markets to a previously inaccessible universe of goods. What made consumerism Revolutionary in the political sense was the role of manufactures as cultural and later political currency. According to Breen, “As Americans purchased the same general range of British manufactures-in other words, as they had similar consumer

---

<sup>42</sup> Breen, “The Baubles of Britain” 80-81

<sup>43</sup> Virginia Gazette (Parks) May 29, 1746. Page 3, Column 2

<sup>44</sup> Breen, “The Baubles of Britain,” 80

<sup>45</sup> Ibid 98. Breen cites a case in Boston in 1774 at a time when the Tea Act had made tea a symbol of British interference. Tea was seen as an instrument of British rule, and possessing it was to identify with tyranny.

experiences—they became increasingly Anglicized.”<sup>46</sup> During the Consumer Revolution, therefore, these manufactures took on important social characteristics beyond their practical utility. Ownership of the latest fashionable items became a marker not just of financial well-being, but of social standing because of the presumed connection of British manufactured goods with the London metropole.<sup>47</sup> Owning the most fashionable items was a way of earning social standing.

This pursuit of social standing led to high levels of spending that became the norm among Virginia’s elite planter class by the 1760s. The important component of this increased spending by the gentry was that in this new marketplace, gentlemen had to have not just more material possessions, but better and more fashionable material possessions.<sup>48</sup> This spending in turn led to considerable debt which soon became self-perpetuating. A planter who stopped patronizing a particular factor or consignment merchant was in effect announcing that he was a poor credit risk. The only way to avoid this label was to draw more credit from a different source, thus deepening the debt.<sup>49</sup> Smallholders also owed a great deal of money to gentry planters, who wanted to collect on these debts.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Breen, “The Baubles of Britain,” 84

<sup>47</sup> Ragsdale 1. Breen relates this concept with instructive anecdotal evidence. When tea became an important commodity, it was highly sought after, but colonial consumers knew nothing about it except that it was the latest English fashion. Some ate it as a porridge, and others spread it on toast as a paste. Breen also notes that American consumers in some cases preferred a British-printed edition of a book to an American copy that was otherwise the same (Breen “Baubles” 100, 85).

<sup>48</sup> Woody Holton. *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors Slaves, & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia 1999) 81. Holton points out that although there had always been differences in the material wealth of the gentry and middling farmers, they usually owned the same types of manufactures; the wealthy simply owned more of them.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid* 84. This would ultimately be why the Associations were gentry-led efforts. Because of the social risks involved with reducing consumption, stopping imports was a poor decision unless everyone agreed to do it.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid* 87

The private debt from consumer purchases created the political and economic circumstances ripe for the Nonimportation movement. The credit amassed by Virginia planters at the height of the consumer revolution became an even greater burden following House Speaker John Robinson's embezzlement of colonial funds.<sup>51</sup> Consumer debts become burdensome further after the announcement of the Proclamation of 1763. The Proclamation effectively halted revenues gained by the gentry selling western land.<sup>52</sup> The situation was made no more manageable as Scottish factors took over the tobacco trade that Virginia planters had once relied upon to finance their purchases of manufactures.<sup>53</sup> The planter gentry could not curtail their spending without appearing inhospitable and improvident. The gentry thus feared not just political dependence on Britain, but financial dependence. Because Virginia society was very much deference based, dependence of any kind was a sensitive matter for the elite.<sup>54</sup>

To be clear, middling planters were not particularly happy about their own indebtedness. The political struggles of the late 1760s through the mid-1770s were not simply the product of gentry ambition. The middling sort had their own interests to look to as well. The important distinction is that as the leaders of a hierarchical society, the gentry were uniquely threatened by the recent disruptions to the social order they sought

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid 82. The Robinson Scandal was a series of events following the death of John Robinson, who served as Speaker of the House of Burgesses from 1738 until his death in 1766. After his death, Edmund Pendleton discovered that Robinson's estate was owed 50,000 pounds in paper money intended to be taken out of circulation that Robinson had instead embezzled and lent out. The incident disrupted Virginia society for years afterward.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 80. The Proclamation of 1763 was an order issued by the British government prohibiting settlement west of a boundary roughly marking the Appalachian Mountains. Facing the increasing costs of managing a colonial empire, British administrators wanted to avoid expensive conflicts with the local Indian tribes over land disputes. Many Virginians had vested interests in land west of this line. The Proclamation effectively prohibited Virginians from staking claims to these lands.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Ibid 82

to dominate. They stood to lose control of the social hierarchy. If true debt reduction were to be accomplished, however, it would have to be a group effort.

These gentry stood atop a social and political pyramid built upon Virginia's plantation society. In this sense, the tobacco trade and the plantation society it created underlay almost every aspect of colonial Virginia's economy and politics. Virginia's elite families built their fortunes and reputations on their ability to attain wealth in the tobacco trade. These same elite planters inherited the idea of hegemonic liberty from their English forebears that would drive them towards Revolution. It was this idea that made them culturally and politically sensitive to the idea of dependence. Although the dependence imposed by the Navigation Acts had been troublesome, it was not quite as worrisome until the Consumer Revolution and the arrival of the Scots, both of which led to circumstances that threatened Virginia's sovereignty. That Virginia was at the mercy of the global tobacco market was bad enough. The mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, however, brought political challenges that heightened Virginia's sense of dependency, and would make them seriously consider Revolution.

## CHAPTER II.

FREEDOM AND “SLAVERY”: BRITISH COLONIAL POLICY AND THE RISE OF  
COMMERICAL RESISTANCE

The transformation of the Atlantic economy and the Scottish transformation of the tobacco trade were not by themselves the causes of Revolution. These developments nurtured a feeling of dependency that would only deepen in the coming decades. Changes to British colonial policy would make these issues problematic in ways they had not been before. As a colony, Virginia occupied a generally inferior position within the British Empire, and the Crown and Parliament managed policy for the benefit of residents of the British Isles rather than the entire British world. Decades of “salutary neglect” meant colonial administrators in Britain were not particularly attuned to the governing dynamics and institutions in their overseas colonies.<sup>1</sup> Dependency was nothing new to Virginians. What was new was its formalization into British statute. Following the Seven Years War, British colonial administrators imposed a series of policies that elite Virginians felt violated the principle of hegemonic freedom. Their responses to these challenges grew out of this same culture. Virginia’s gentry organized a series of nonimportation efforts that were extensions of the colony’s preexisting social hierarchy in the interests of preserving it. The failure of these nonimportation movements illustrates how Virginia’s social order had been disrupted by its dependence on tobacco and Great Britain. The failure of hierarchy to secure Virginians’ liberties would eventually lead to Revolution.

---

<sup>1</sup> Salutary neglect refers to Britain’s passive management of the American colonies in the decades preceding the Seven Years War. It first appeared in a 1775 speech delivered by Edmund Burke.

Before the moment of separation, however, relations between Virginia and Great Britain gradually became increasingly tense. The first confrontation between Great Britain and Virginia occurred in the late 1750s with the passage of the Two Penny Act.<sup>2</sup> The House of Burgesses passed this act in 1758 to control the salaries of Anglican parsons. Virginia law set the salary of ministers at 16,000 pounds of tobacco per year, but a recent bad crop drove prices upward, effectively raising ministerial salaries. The Burgesses controlled this increase by passing the Two Penny Act, which stipulated that a pound of tobacco would be payable by two pennies in cash. The law was subsequently vetoed by King George II. The ensuing controversy, referred to as the Parson's Cause, was the first major confrontation between Virginia and Great Britain before the Revolutionary period. This case exemplified the Virginia's dependent status relative to Britain. Virginia's economic and social policies were subject to the approval of a king across the water.

Although British attempts at managing the activity of Virginia's government and economy had generated controversy as early as the Parson's Cause, it was not until the mid-1760s that British interference truly became a problem. In 1763, the British successfully concluded the long and expensive Seven Years War against France and her allies. This victory seemingly secured British dominance over North America, but Britain would soon be saddled with the costs not only of paying off debts incurred fighting the war, but with the costs associated with managing such a large continental empire. Because residents of the British Isles were already heavily taxed, and because Britain's North American colonies enjoyed much of the benefit of Britain's new empire, British

---

<sup>2</sup> Billings, Warren, John E. Selby, and Thad W. Tate., *Colonial Virginia: A History* (KTO Press, White Plains: 1986), 257-259



colonial administrators believed that levying taxes on colonial commerce was an effective and fair way of covering the cost of Empire.

The first controversies began in 1764, when the British Parliament introduced two pieces of legislation at the suggestion of Prime Minister George Grenville with the intent of reining in colonial governments and economies. The Currency Act, which Britain specifically targeted at Virginia and New York, was designed to retire the paper bills being issued in some colonies and to replace them with hard specie; this bill severely limited Virginia's ability to print its own money.<sup>3</sup> This restriction on the power to print money placed severe constraints on Virginia's economy. Limitations on monetary policy increased Virginia's dependence on Britain. The Sugar Act, which did not affect Virginia as directly, was intended to draw in new revenues. It also limited the ability of American merchants to sell their products overseas.<sup>4</sup> What was worrying about the Sugar Act was one particular section that referenced the introduction of future stamp taxes.

These fears were realized with the passage of the Stamp Act, which caused the first major transatlantic confrontation of the Revolutionary period. There had been controversies over colonial administration before, but the later 1760s saw some of the most virulent public protests of British policy yet. The Stamp Act of 1765, one of the Parliament's first experiments with direct taxation in the colonies during this period, was met with virulent opposition by colonial merchants and politicians. The Stamp Act was reviled throughout the colonies because it placed a duty on all imported paper. This duty required that all paper used in Britain's colonies have an official tax stamp attached to it. Unfortunately for Virginians, the end of the war saw the collapse of tobacco prices,

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 288-289

<sup>4</sup> Ragsdale 49-50

which combined with Parliament's restriction of the money supply, meant that there was little money to pay for the empire's already large debt burden.<sup>5</sup> Although Virginia was not represented at the Stamp Act Congress in New York-Governor Fauquier refused to allow Virginia to send delegates-Virginians responded in their own ways. The battle over the Stamp Act resulted in the first commercial resistance by Virginians against Great Britain.<sup>6</sup> The stamp collector for Williamsburg, George Mercer, was famously forced to resign by an angry crowd outside Charlton's Coffee House near the Capital,<sup>7</sup> and the Virginia Resolves passed by the House of Burgesses denounced the law on May 29, 1765.<sup>8</sup> Patrick Henry delivered his famous Caesar-Brutus speech in the House of Burgesses, in which he compared George III to Charles I and Julius Caesar, and suggested that King George III deserved to be executed. The speech was received negatively among the Burgesses, but continued conflict between the colonies and Great Britain would bring more and more Virginians to Henry's side. Virginia's first foray into action against British administration was a success insofar as it achieved the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766, but Virginian attitudes were not yet in the mood for independence.

The victory over the Stamp Act would prove to be temporary, however. Although the colonies had won the battle, Parliament was determined to continue the war. Shortly after the stamp duties were repealed, Parliament passed the Declaratory Act, which asserted Parliament's authority to legislate for the colonies on all matters at all times.<sup>9</sup> Despite the rejection of the stamp duties, London was still determined to extract revenues

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 51-52

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 56-67

<sup>7</sup> John E. Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia, 1775-1783*, (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1988)

<sup>8</sup> Billings, Selby, and Tate 299

<sup>9</sup> Ragsdale 69

from her colonies, and passed the Townshend Duties in 1767, which imposed import fees on numerous commodities, including paper, lead, paint, and glass.<sup>10</sup> Although initially not as dramatic as the response to the Stamp Act, the Townshend Duties evoked similarly angry reactions in Virginia, as the British government now taxed items involved with the operation of the colony's economy such as glass, and popular consumer items such as tea. The new Townshend Duties only heightened Virginians' sense of dependency that grew out of its economic and social structure.

The Townshend Duties, like the Stamp Act and the Declaratory Act before them, created jurisdictional dependence where it had not before been so apparent. Virginians had been worrying about their commercial relationship with Britain for some time. Planter debt was spiraling out of control, middling planters could not pay the rents they owed to the gentry, and the transformation of the tobacco trade threatened to upend Virginia's treasured social order. Ragsdale relates:

A larger and more strictly regulated debt, the commercial influence of British factors resident in Virginia, and the fading advantages of the consignment trade all restricted the great planters' ability to utilize the land and labor resources that constituted the material foundation for their ascendancy.<sup>11</sup>

These policy measures only compounded the problem for Virginia's gentry. Taxes imposed not only an economic burden, but seized the gentry's hegemonic freedom as the leaders of Virginia's hierarchy. If Parliament could do anything it wanted in Virginia at any time, then Virginia, or at least Virginia's gentry, had ceased to be sovereign.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 69-70

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 41

Gentry fear of losing sovereignty, which would reduce them to a state of “slavery,” propelled Virginia towards nonimportation. In the early years of the tumultuous period leading to Revolution, political protest took the form of declaring independence from British goods. Because Parliament had placed a tax on selected goods, these items would be the target of Revolutionary ire. By targeting specific goods with the Townshend Duties, Parliament had added a unique political context to those goods. In light of such developments, argues T.H. Breen, new taxes in the context of the Consumer Revolution had the effect of adding a political dimension to consumer tastes.<sup>12</sup> The language of goods became the language of political protest. Where the Consumer Revolution added social significance to goods, Parliament added political significance. What had once been social and economic choices became political ones as well. Breen argues

In this particular colonial setting the very commodities that were everywhere beginning to transform social relations provided a language for revolution. People living in scattered parts of America began to communicate their political grievances through common imports. A shared framework of consumer experience not only allowed them to reach out to distant strangers, to perceive, however dimly, the existence of an ‘imagined community’, but also to situate a universal political discourse about rights and liberties, virtue and power, within a familiar material culture.<sup>13</sup>

Virginia consumers, thus confronted with the ever-feared “slavery,” expressed their grievances through Breen’s language of goods. In a short time, almost all British goods, and not just those enumerated by the Townshend Duties, would be politicized in the ongoing social struggle.

---

<sup>12</sup> Breen, “The Baubles of Britain,” 119

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

Virginians were now presented with three major problems: debt, taxes, and challenges to the social order, problems that demanded a solution from the colony's leadership. The first formal action came when the General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the Townsend Duties in 1769. Governor Botetourt, who grew increasingly annoyed with the Assembly's protestations of British taxes, dissolved it in the spring of 1769, prompting many of the burgesses to simply relocate down the street at the Raleigh Tavern.<sup>14</sup> This gathering represented a blatant and almost unprecedented act of defiance against British authority. Their legal assembly having been dissolved by the royal viceroy, the Burgesses reassembled themselves into an ad hoc committee that assumed the power to speak for Virginians. On May 17, 1769, this body approved a resolution agreeing to cease the import of British manufactures, and especially those subject to Townshend duties.<sup>15</sup>

The purpose of the 1769 Association can be generalized as repairing the social hierarchy. If Virginians could rid themselves of their reliance on imports, they could reclaim their sovereignty and hegemonic freedom. The 1769 associators intended to pressure British merchants into lobbying Parliament to repeal the Townshend Duties. The gentry's objectives were not, however, purely political in nature. Reclaiming hegemonic freedom required them to rid themselves of debts, and restore their power to collect debts from middling planters and smallholders indebted to factor stores.<sup>16</sup> To associators, these objectives went hand in hand. This was as obvious then as it is now in retrospect. John Page wrote to John Norton: "I like the Association because I think it will repeal the disagreeable Acts of Parliament, open the Eyes of the People with you, and

---

<sup>14</sup> Billings, Selby, and Tate 318

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 318-319

<sup>16</sup> Holton 87.

most certainly clear us of our Debts.”<sup>17</sup> To many British merchants, the 1769 Association appeared to be merely an excuse to reduce planters’ debts. James Parker, a Scottish merchant based in Norfolk, declared that most of the associators could not get a shilling’s credit in England if they tried.<sup>18</sup>

This first 1769 agreement was not, however, simply a reaction against perceived political overreach by London coupled with the self-interest of debt reduction. It was a rhetorical response to a violation of the deferential relationship between Virginians and their king. To impose taxes without the consent of the governed was, in the eyes of Virginians, a violation of their notion of hegemonic liberty. They were already burdened by debt and subject to an economy revolving entirely around exports to Britain. The British Empire then compounded their dependence by taking away still more of their economic freedom. According to colonial views of freedom and sovereignty, Virginians held neither in the face of new taxes and their massive debt burden. Facing these challenges to their native hegemonic order, Virginians responded with a combination of deference and protest. The text of the 1769 Resolution is in this respect an exemplar of the Virginian political mind. It begins with the proper deference to authority. The Resolutions were passed by “his Majesty’s most dutiful Subjects,” who swore “inviolable and unshaken Fidelity and Loyalty to our most gracious Sovereign.”<sup>19</sup> This deference is followed up by open protest, but does so using language that invoked Virginians’ value of freedom and sovereignty. The authors of the document accused the King of “reducing us from a free and happy People to a *State of Slavery* [emphasis mine].”<sup>20</sup> The original

---

<sup>17</sup> Mason 94

<sup>18</sup> Ragsdale 86

<sup>19</sup> Virginia Nonimportation Resolutions, 1769

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

subscribers to the Association clearly called upon Virginians' ideals of hegemonic liberty in order to rally them behind the banner of nonimportation, while at the same time acknowledging the importance of deference.

The original nonimportation agreement was in this sense a product of Virginia's culture of deference and hierarchy. What is still more important is that this Association was not just a product of hierarchy, but also a tool of social hierarchy. The terms of the agreement, though strict indeed, were binding only on subscribers, those who assented to and signed the document. The original subscribers came from an already small group of burgesses, making the faction responsible for holding Virginians to account limited to the families and social networks powerful enough to have members in the lower house of the General Assembly. These subscribers were expected to "as by their own Example...promote and encourage Industry and Frugality, and discourage all Manner of Luxury and Extravagance."<sup>21</sup> Nonimportation was expected of all, but it was the responsibility of those at the top of the political order to see to it that the lower social ranks followed through. This was a system favored by none other than George Washington, an early proponent of nonimportation, who proposed that the gentry were to "explain matters to the people, & stimulate them to a cordial agreement to purchase none but certain innumrated articles out of any of the stores after such a period."<sup>22</sup> That the 1769 Association explicitly bound only the initial subscribers is telling indeed. Political action was to occur at the behest of and on the terms of the ruling elite. If others further down on the social ladder were to participate, it would be in the role of following the lead of their betters. Virginia's grandees were thus expected to lead the way.

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Ragsdale 74

Despite initial enthusiasm for the 1769 Association, it soon came to nothing. Although the leaders of the movement such as the Nelsons, the Lees, and George Washington took significant steps in manufacturing their own goods, this early Association was poorly organized.<sup>23</sup> Enforcement was unreliable, and easy access to factor stores made reduction in imports hard to accomplish. Virginians found themselves unable to wean themselves off of imported manufactures, and there was thus no reason for British merchants to press Parliament for repeal of the Townshend Duties. This first attempt had no mechanism for making Virginians comply with the terms of the agreement. The example of the gentry was not enough to persuade those to whom they condescended that there was sufficient reason to convert to domestic manufactures, probably because the 1769 Association lacked a strong institutional framework. This failure was also partly because the gentry themselves very often could not reduce their imports as much as they wanted. Even George Washington, one of Virginia's most preeminent associators, could not stop importing entirely.<sup>24</sup>

Unshakeable dependence was not the only factor preventing Virginians from abiding by their association. The collapse of the 1769 Association may have been spurred by the actions of Parliament. In 1770, Parliament answered many colonial demands by repealing all of the Townshend duties except for the one on tea.<sup>25</sup> This decision did not satiate the gentry, and Virginians resolved to form a new nonimportation compact on June 22 of that year. The gentry needed to ensure, however, that this new effort would succeed where the first one had failed. The first Resolution failed because it was

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 84-85

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 103

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 89-91



voluntary and unenforceable.<sup>26</sup> Merchants had only joined the initial Association when it suited their interests, so the toothless piece of paper waved in their faces by Virginia's planter-burgesses was not enough to compel nonimportation on a large scale. That the Association was not adhered to was well known on both sides of the Atlantic. British and American merchants alike swapped stories of planters ignoring the Resolution.<sup>27</sup> By the spring of 1770, there was still enough political will among the gentry to muster some support for a second try. The Virginia Nonimportation Resolution of 1770 was envisioned by George Washington and George Mason of Fairfax County as a stricter version of the previous document.

The second Association, approved in June of 1770, had provisions intended to correct the deficiencies of the first. It included a provision for the formation of local committees to keep track of commercial activity in imitation of the Maryland nonimportation movement.<sup>28</sup> Under the 1770 Association, associators in each county were to appoint committees of at least five men, and these committees to inspect the activities of merchants in their area.<sup>29</sup> Upon the mutual agreement of any three members of the committee, the names of any violators could be published in local bulletins, and fees could be leveled as penalties for disobeying the Association.<sup>30</sup> This was an attempt to multiply the force of paternalistic influence with the threat of public shame. Mason expected that "the Sense of Shame & fear of Reproach must be inculcated & enforced in the strongest manner."<sup>31</sup> In a society concerned with honor and reputation, fear of public

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 85

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 86

<sup>28</sup> Ibid 92

<sup>29</sup> Finalized Document of the Virginia Nonimportation Association, 1770

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ragsdale 91-93

disapproval was a powerful weapon indeed. These committees would thus serve social and institutional functions similar to the county courts. A.G. Roeber, in fact, argues that courts served to demonstrate “obligations [Virginians] owed to social superiors and inferiors, and what constituted the accepted norms of social conduct.<sup>32</sup>” The creation of this institutional framework within a culture of deference would compel compliance, whereas the 1769 Association had no means of doing this.

The creation of an enforcement mechanism was not the only change in the 1770 Association. The second great distinction between the first and second Resolutions was that the second expanded the responsibility for enforcement and persuasion beyond the planter elite. This second Association was to include the merchants as well the burgesses, a difference not to be underestimated, as it had a notable effect on the language of the Resolution. The first Resolution was drafted and approved by “the late Representatives of all the Freeholders of the Colony of Virginia.<sup>33</sup>” These men in turn pledged to “recommend this our Association to the serious Attention of all Gentlemen, Merchants, Traders, and other Inhabitants of this Colony.<sup>34</sup>” The act of recommendation was still called for the second Resolution, but with one key difference. Rather than limit enforcement to the gentry elite, “the Gentlemen of the House of Burgesses, and the Body of Merchants” were the ones party to the resolution.<sup>35</sup> Unlike the first Association, the second Association called for Virginia’s merchants to form a committee of their own

---

<sup>32</sup> A.G. Roeber. “Authority, Law, and Custom: The Rituals of Court Day in Tidewater, Virginia, 1720 to 1750.” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 37, no. 1 (January 1980):

<sup>33</sup> Virginia Nonimportation Resolutions, 1769

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>35</sup> Finalized Document of the Virginia Nonimportation Association, 1770

number to determine which goods might at some point be excepted from the limitations of the Resolution.<sup>36</sup>

The inclusion of the merchant class in enforcement of the Resolution ought not to be mistaken for power-sharing with the gentry. As Ragsdale points out, any successful attempt at breaking dependence required the gentry ensure “merchants residing in the colony were incorporated in the planter-dominated political culture of Virginia.”<sup>37</sup> This new structured Association, however, was designed to control the merchants rather than represent them. Virginia’s planter-gentry would not tolerate such a great disruption to their structured social system as to share too much power with the merchants. Richard Henry Lee laid out this anxiety in explicit terms by proposing that of the one hundred subscribers required to end the Association, seventy five of them had to be planters. He similarly proposed that ten of the twenty needed to call a meeting be planters as well.<sup>38</sup> It would be all too easy to over-emphasize the role of merchants in this new Association. The politics of shame and reproach still had their place in this new Association much as they did in the old one. Furthermore, it reinforced Virginia’s hierarchical and deferential politics in its transmission into the counties. A surviving printed copy of the 1770 Resolution included not just the full text, but the names of the Associators present at the Williamsburg meeting. Below the printed text was a space left blank so that local Associators could sign their names alongside those as esteemed as Peyton Randolph and George Washington.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Ragsdale 41

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 96

<sup>39</sup> Ibid 99

The planter elite did, however, make some very large concessions to the merchants to get their support. The 1770 Association raised the maximum allowable price of imported goods from the maximums imposed by the 1769 Association. Cotton, for example, could be imported at three shillings per yard in 1770, whereas it could only be imported at two shillings per yard in 1769.<sup>40</sup> Other items such as tools could also be imported. This was supposed to make it easier for smaller planters to abide by the association's terms, but had the unintended side effect of opening Virginia to the cheap goods available at Scottish stores.<sup>41</sup> There were also some mechanical changes to this Association. Whereas the 1769 Association imposed a simple September 1 cutoff on the purchase of goods, the 1770 Association prohibited sale on commission of the prohibited items. How important this distinction was in practice is unclear. Subscribers were also permitted to continue receiving imports for their own personal use, and not for sale, until December 25 of that year.<sup>42</sup> Planters thus only won the support of merchants when they agreed to minimize the damage the association would cause to their business. This concession may, in the end, have condemned the 1770 Association to its ultimate failure.

Much like its predecessor, the 1770 Association did not succeed in persuading Parliament to shift course. As Virginians set to work assembling their Associations, rumors abounded that there was to be some sort of repeal of the Association in the northern colonies. Northern merchants were being hurt badly by the cessation of trade, and wanted to resume commerce with Britain since there was no indication that the effort was working anyway. The partial repeal of the Townshend Duties in the summer of that

---

<sup>40</sup> Finalized Document of Virginia Nonimportation Association, 1770

<sup>41</sup> Ragsdale 94

<sup>42</sup> Finalized Document of the Virginia Nonimportation Association, 1770

year gave these northern colonies the political cover they needed.<sup>43</sup> When Baltimore merchants, facing competition from their rivals in Philadelphia, began to question the usefulness of the Association, its public support throughout the Chesapeake began to unravel. Support had been eroded substantially anyway due to the numerous exceptions the Association allowed, and to the ready availability of such imports from Scottish stores. Peyton Randolph called a meeting of the Associators in Williamsburg for December 1770, but he could not even assemble enough members to constitute a quorum.<sup>44</sup> By early 1771, it was unclear as to whether or not the Association was still in effect. Although the Fauquier County committee was still enforcing its regulations, there were relatively few cases in which any decisive action was taken. By June of that year, it was more or less clear to everyone that the Association could not be enforced, and a season of destructive flooding had badly damaged Virginia's tobacco crop, doing still further damage to the economy. The Associators met in Williamsburg on July 15 to dissolve the body.<sup>45</sup>

Although a minor affair in comparison to what would transpire in the coming years, these early Associations marked a significant milestone in Virginia's separation from Britain. British manufactures, which had always been symbols of Virginia's place in the British world, soon came to exemplify their resentment at being treated as subsidiary partners. By rejecting the primacy of British manufactures, some Virginians made a critical step towards independence by attacking one of the ties of dependence. Some more radical Virginians, particularly George Mason and George Washington, saw nonimportation as an opportunity to strengthen Virginia's economy. Mason argued that the capital and labor saved not exporting goods to England could be invested in the

---

<sup>43</sup> Ragsdale 99

<sup>44</sup> Ibid 100

<sup>45</sup> Ibid 102

beginnings of domestic industries.<sup>46</sup> That these associations did not succeed suggests not that they were unimportant, but that they were but one small step on the road to independence.

The 1769 and 1770 Associations intended to reduce debt and spur the repeal of the Townshend Duties were products of Virginia's hierarchical culture in both rhetoric and form. They relied on the social clout of the gentry class to mobilize the rest of Virginia society against British imports. Their failure in this endeavor suggests that the changes in Virginia's tobacco economy wrought by Scottish factors and the Consumer Revolution had taken their toll on this hierarchy. Virginia's inability to solve this problem by peaceable means was one of many reasons for Virginia's ultimate separation from the British Empire. Association was not, however, a complete failure everywhere it was tried. In one region in particular, York County, the Association appears to have been at least moderately successful. This was in large part because the region's social structure appears to have been maintained, and was dominated by a gentry faction willing to enforce the Association.

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid 80

CHAPTER III.  
ASSOCIATION SENTIMENT IN YORK COUNTY

Despite the Associations' general failure, they operated differently in various areas of the colony and among different groups of people. Of particular interest is the case of York County. Yorktown, the port for the colonial capital of Williamsburg, was for many years a major tobacco port and served as a key point of transit for goods relayed between Virginia and Great Britain. Yorktown was also a major port of entry for slaves during the height of Virginia's slave trade between 1700 and 1750. This dependence on seaborne trade made the area sensitive to developments in British economic and colonial policy. As an important regional port, Yorktown was one of the places where the dreaded taxed goods were to be unloaded. As in much of Virginia, Yorktown's otherwise loyal subjects of the King turned against Parliament, and vigorously protested British taxes. York County's economic importance aside, it also contained part of the colony's capital, giving it a unique relationship to Virginia's political power structure.<sup>1</sup> York County is a useful point of analysis because of its place within Virginia's tobacco economy. The entire region was still enmeshed in the consignment trade with the small yet lucrative London market, and was of minimal importance to the factor trade. The evidence presented here shows that the association movement, and particularly the 1770 Association, was more successful in Yorktown than might be expected. Letters in this chapter will show that residents of York County were not only aware of the associations, but that a good many of them may have supported it.

---

<sup>1</sup> The other portion of Williamsburg was in James City County.

Much like the rest of Virginia, there was considerable response to the Associations in York County. Public attitudes are difficult to measure because there was relatively little written that was specific to the Yorktown area. Correspondence from the period does nonetheless seem to indicate initial agreement to follow through with the terms of nonimportation. One of the earliest references to the 1769 Association appears in an August 1769 letter from Thomas Everard to London merchant John Norton, who was the British manager of the firm of John Norton & Son;<sup>2</sup> his son, John Hatley Norton, operated the family store in Yorktown. Everard's letter notes general public opposition to the Duties, and support for the Association. Everard wrote:

Some time ago I sent you the Resolves of our Late Assembly which occasioned their dissolution. You will herewith receive some of the *Virginia Gazettes*. By them you will see the temper of the people here and the other Colonies are in if the next Parliament should not repeal the Acts Complained of...

...The Association not to import or Purchase Goods except a few low priced necessary Articles will in a short time become very general not only in this Colony, but in Maryland and the Southern Colonies and the Persons who shall much longer hold out and refuse to Join in it will be considered no well-wishers to their country.<sup>3</sup>

He appears, however, to have been none too enthusiastic regarding the arrangement.

“Whenever any good things are Published relating to this unhappy dispute I shall be glad to have them” he later wrote. Attached to this letter was an invoice for a small number of goods, including tea, tools, paper, and clothing indicating a continuing preference for British goods.<sup>4</sup> Everard wrote this letter based on what he knew, or at least what he thought he knew, about the general sentiment in York at that time. His position among the upper ranks of Virginia society is reason to be skeptical that his opinion was

---

<sup>2</sup> Flowerdewe had died by this point, and the firm had changed its name.

<sup>3</sup> Mason 101

<sup>4</sup> Ibid



representative of the whole. Bearing his status in mind, Everard was also the clerk of the York County Court, meaning that he had regular contact with anyone who did business there. The York County Court heard cases criminal and civil between members of all classes, so it is not implausible that Everard had some idea as to what residents of York were saying regarding importation and Association.

On August 14, 1769, Mrs. Martha Jacquelin of Yorktown wrote a similar, but more forceful letter echoing many of the same sentiments as Everard. She noted

You'l see by my invoice I am an Associator that I am so I am sure will give me some Merit with Mrs. Norton; not that I doubt Mr. Norton neither; But believe me, our poor Country never stood in more need of an Effort to save her from ruin than now; not more from the taxes and want of Trayd than from our own Extravagances. The 2 shilling linen being for my own Wear, I recommend it to your choice; I expect to be dressed in Virginia cloth very soon, and as I am a little incommoded with corns, in Mockasins likewise I have given up the Article of Tea, but some are not quite so tractable; however if wee can convince the good folks on your side of the Water of their Error, wee may hope to see happier times.<sup>5</sup>

Despite her complaints regarding British policy and her determinations against extravagance, Mrs. Jacquelin enclosed an invoice for such goods as damask table cloths, ivory handled cutlery, and a china tea set.<sup>6</sup> This demonstrates firstly that the sentiment of nonimportation was not adhered to in the same ways by all people at all times; Jacquelin was clearly importing manufactures that were on the Association's embargo list. This letter also demonstrates the importance of the textile trade to colonial fears of dependence. Although the invoice does contain orders for cloth, including no fewer than 30 yards of cotton and several cheap linens, they are all sufficiently inexpensive to qualify for purchase under the terms of the Association.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 103

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

There is some indirect evidence of broader public support to be found in the writings of William Nelson. Writing in July of 1770, Nelson informed John Norton about his dismay regarding Virginians who did not partake of Association:

I believe to fear that the Spirit of Association in America will grow cool in some of the Colonies: especially in N. York, where the Dutch blood, thirsting for present Gain, seems still to flow in their Veins, & hath raised much Noise to the Northward about it, But I blush on reading what you say ab[ou]t the Virginians: that their Invoices rather encrease than diminish. I wish such people were of any other Country than of mine.<sup>7</sup>

This letter first shows that by even early in the days of the theoretically stricter second Association, there were many Virginians violating its terms. What makes this letter truly noteworthy is that Nelson appears not to have been aware of this problem prior to receiving a letter from Norton; otherwise it is unlikely he would have reason to “blush” upon reading so. Much like Nelson, Norton had clients all over Virginia, and Virginians on his account appear to have only increased their purchases. That Nelson does not mention a decline in the “Spirit of Association” in the Yorktown area is certainly not evidence that there was no such decline, but it is curious nonetheless that he wrote of no personal experience to that effect in his correspondence with Norton.<sup>8</sup>

Nelson, Everard, and Jaquelin all came from the upper rank of Virginia society, but there is some surviving documentation of attitudes among Yorktown’s middling ranks. Martha Goosley of Yorktown, who was known for having something to say about everyone and everything, seems to have been particularly interested in maintaining the Association around June 1770, but was certainly not happy about it. She wrote to Norton:

---

<sup>7</sup> Mason 138

<sup>8</sup> Another key source on the Associations, the *Virginia Gazette*, is also strangely silent on the Yorktown area. There was neither news affirming its popularity, nor tracts denouncing its violators. This *Gazette* did record such things on Association activity in other parts of Virginia.

Surely the great Men on your Side of the Water are all mad. What can they Mean? I greatly fear their rash Measures will produce fatal Consequences. Our Associates are to Meet the fifteenth when I understand we are to be tied Down to very Strick rules. Anything will I agree to for the common good.<sup>9</sup>

This letter shows clear frustration regarding taxes and trade on the part of the middling rank; Goosley's family were neither planters nor merchants, but her son was a sea captain who transported letters and goods between London and Virginia, so she likely had a greater stake in any potential outcomes. Also interesting is her acknowledgement of gentry primacy by her willingness to be "tied Down." By August 8, 1770, Goosley veiled only thinly her annoyance at the situation. Goosley wrote:

Associations run high here. Is there no Probability of Making your great ones act right or will they Put us under the necessity of wearing homespun altogether? I assure the Gentlemen wear nothing else all Summer & we have made great improvements, however I cant help wishing Sincerely that all our Differences were happily made up.<sup>10</sup>

Goosley's letters capture a sentiment that nonimportation was a political and economic necessity, but an unpleasant one. Of the two letters, the second is more important in deciphering local attitudes. Goosley first points out that popular support for at least the idea of Association was relatively strong as of that August. She evidences this by pointing out the growing popularity of homespun cloth. Goosley in particular is a useful source for gauging the opinions of the middling ranks in Yorktown because of her unique role in the community. Although she was known for being highly opinionated, particularly when it came to people she did not like, she also had an intimate knowledge of what people in her community said and did; her letters to Norton typically contained

---

<sup>9</sup> Mason 136

<sup>10</sup> Mason 143

the latest gossip around town.<sup>11</sup> It is thus not unlikely that she had at least some grasp of what people's views of politics and nonimportation were. There is yet one final letter, however, that may be of more assistance.

Because only a handful of letters even reference the Associations to begin with, it is quite difficult to establish an effective timeline. The next reference to the Associations in the Norton papers is in a letter from William Nelson in May of 1771 in which he bemoans how "The Spirit of Association hath grown very cool of late, & I believe will shortly come to nothing."<sup>12</sup> This is the last explicit reference to the second Association that appears in this collection. There is one letter from September 1771 that may refer to some of its effects, but whether this is so is hard to determine. William Reynolds, a Virginia merchant who had spent the last several years working for the Norton firm in London, returned to Virginia late that year. Writing to George Norton in London, he remarked

I believe I must determine to settle in York, Trade at present is dull throughout the Country. It would be better if I cou'd, to employ my money in selling *Trimings* in London where you are sure of your pay, I am convinced if I cou'd settle my little fortune in a good Trade in England it wou'd be more to my Advantage & Inclination for believe me the Summers here are terrible, but as I have no such prospect I must content myself.<sup>13</sup>

Because Reynolds did not reference any nonimportation sentiment in expressed terms, it is hard to say whether the lack of activity he describes is actually due to the Association, or to some externality he did not specify. It is impossible that he

---

<sup>11</sup> Virginia writer Frances Norton Mason, who compiled and edited the Norton family papers, describes here as "Manger of All Domestic Emergencies in the Town of York and General Dispenser of Gossip."

<sup>12</sup> Mason 158

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 187

could have been unaware of the Association given his contacts in Virginia. All that is in question is whether it was responsible for the lull Reynolds described.

On the whole, surviving letters appear to corroborate what historians and contemporaries have previously said with regards to nonimportation. The idea itself was initially popular, but enthusiasm and enforcement waned as time went on. In the case of York County, however, there appear to have been a significant number of people abiding by the terms of the associations. The next chapter will show how the Nelsons, one of the county's elite families, led a broad client network into following the 1770 Association.

CHAPTER IV  
 “AN ASSOCIATOR IN PRINCIPLE”: THE NELSON FAMILY AND THEIR  
 CLIENTELE

The previous chapter extrapolated from surviving letters that there were probably substantial numbers of people in York County who took the associations seriously. Using both qualitative data on the Nelson family, and the quantitative data from their store ledger, this chapter will demonstrate that even if adherence was not necessarily widespread, there was definitely a Nelson clientele that did follow the principles of the Associations. The Nelsons were but one of the great families of York County. Like gentry everywhere, these elites were the preeminent social and political force in their community. As Edward H. Riley notes, “Their leadership in all the affairs of the town was never questioned during the colonial period. This feature of the town was obvious to the visitor of the day.<sup>1</sup>” Out of all of the Yorktown elite, however, it is the Nelsons who were arguably the most important. They came to dominate the political, economic, and social scene in York County, and held much influence within the colonial government. This chapter will demonstrate how that influence resulted in a decline imports among part of the Yorktown community.

The first Nelson in Virginia was Thomas Nelson the Immigrant, sometimes known by the moniker “Scotch Tom.” He arrived in Virginia from Cumbria, England in 1705.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other “topping people,” Nelson did not put his primary focus into the cultivation and export of tobacco. Scotch Tom made his name operating the Nelson

---

<sup>1</sup> Riley 109

<sup>2</sup> Evans, *A “Topping People,”* 97

family store, one of several such stores in the York County region. He also supplemented his mercantile enterprise with tobacco grown on his rural properties. Their success as traders made the family one of the most prominent in eastern Virginia. The most relevant Nelsons for purposes of this story, however, are Scotch Tom's oldest son, William Nelson, who managed the store until his death in 1772, and Thomas Nelson, Jr.<sup>3</sup> As merchant-planters, the Nelsons played not only the relatively simple role of relaying goods from one side of the Atlantic to the other, but the more complex one of relaying tastes across the ocean. It was the merchants who were responsible for knowing consumer demand, and supplying the needs of that demand. The years of colonial taxation and the Virginia Associations were a period during which demand for products took on not just an economic and social demand, but a political one. The Nelsons also intermingled and intermarried with some of the most important families in Virginia, so the characteristics of their client base may say something about the attitudes of some of Yorktown's important social groups.

In addition to playing a crucial mercantile role, the Nelsons also had much at stake in the colony's politics. Because of their stature as merchants and prominent members of their community, members of the family worked their way into the colony's political and thus social hierarchy. Both William Nelson, referred to as President Nelson, and his son Thomas Nelson, Jr. had served as members of the House of Burgesses, a role which necessitated the support of key members of the community, and which required

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 114. There are a total of three individuals named Thomas Nelson who were active in Yorktown during the colonial period. The first, the one termed Scotch Tom (1677-1747), was already deceased by the time of the Revolution. The second (1715-1786), Scotch Tom's son, is often referred to both in contemporary accounts and in subsequent historical literature as Secretary Nelson after his position as Secretary of the Colony. The one most important to this study is Scotch Tom's grandson and William's son (1738-1789), and is referred to either as Thomas Nelson, Jr., or General Nelson.

them to be in touch with local attitudes and interests.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, President Nelson was later appointed to a position on the prestigious Governor's Council, which functioned both as the upper chamber of the colonial legislature, and as the court of final appeal.<sup>5</sup> The Council also advised the governor. Appointment to the council generally meant that an individual was highly esteemed, established, and very wealthy.<sup>6</sup> William Nelson rose to such prestige that he was later made President of the Council, the highest position on the council, which eventually required him to assume the post of acting governor following Governor Botetourt's death. President Nelson's younger brother Thomas, the uncle of Thomas Nelson, Jr., was Secretary of the Colony and a member of the Council from 1749.<sup>7</sup>

President Nelson and Secretary Nelson both exercised considerable power through their posts in the colony's government. As Secretary of the Colony, Thomas had the authority to appoint the clerks of all of the county courts.<sup>8</sup> In their positions as Councilors, the brothers had significant effects on colonial politics. When the Crown vetoed several General Assembly bills in 1752, the Nelson brothers forced the issuance of a formal protest to the British government over the objections of many of their legislative colleagues.<sup>9</sup> Such was their influence that they could overpower John Blair, the President of the Council. Blair was known not to make important decisions without first consulting the Nelsons. It was even widely suspected that the Nelson brothers engineered Blair's retirement from the post following the death of Governor Botetourt in 1770, after which

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 92

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 109

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 90-91

<sup>7</sup> Evans, *Thomas Nelson of Yorktown*, 10-11

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 10

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 11



William became acting governor.<sup>10</sup> The Nelsons thus exercised not just the institutional power afforded them through their government appointments, but power they attained from their social standing and political skill. Such was their influence that the mere mention of William Nelson's name could persuade an English merchant to extend generous credit.<sup>11</sup> This power would manifest itself not just at the colony-wide level, but at the local level as well.

Contemporary accounts provide ample and clear evidence that the Nelsons exercised considerable power in York County. York was much like the rest of Virginia to the extent that family and social relations were important currency in establishing an individual's prosperity. The Nelsons made this plain to the aforementioned Daniel Fisher, who returned to Virginia from England in 1750 after an earlier stay in the 1720s. After disembarking at Yorktown, where he had previously been Deputy Clerk of the County Court, Fisher sought to introduce himself to President William Nelson. Fisher appears to have been considered an irritant by the Nelsons, as he was received rather coldly the first few times he called upon them.<sup>12</sup> More telling, however, is his encounter with other residents; Fisher recorded what he considered inconsistent treatment by the locals:

When I brought my family on shore, there stood upon the wharf an ancient grey gentleman who called me by my name, took me by the hand, welcomed me into the country again. Told me he remembered me perfectly when I was Clerk in the office of Mr. Lightfoot; tho' I could not so well recollect him, I acknowledged his civility. This Person wears the name of Captain Gooding.

Given this warm welcome, Fisher was puzzled by the treatment given him by the same Captain Gooding in a different social setting. Fisher recalled:

---

<sup>10</sup>Ibid 12

<sup>11</sup>Ibid 13

<sup>12</sup> Fisher 768

...as I was attending Mr. Nelson's store till he was at leisure to be spoke to, this same Captain G. happening to be there assumed quite a different behaviour to what he had manifested by the water side, for with a malicious sneer he began thus: I remember you Mr. Fisher ever since Coln. S paid you the Ten Pounds that you recovered against him for his striking you. The widow and sons of the Coln. Smith (S.) being now living attached to and intimate with, if not allied to the Nelsons family, I was extremely confounded to be thus accosted.<sup>13</sup>

Fisher did not know what transpired between these two encounters with Captain Gooding. It is hardly unreasonable to suppose given his behavior, however, that Gooding did want those close to the Nelsons to believe he approved of Fisher. Fisher's experience trying to reestablish himself in Virginia illustrates just how important the right social connections could be, and just how difficult trying to make do without them was. Fisher's account is an apt demonstration not just of the importance of social relations in Virginia, but of the importance of the Nelsons relative to the community.

Given the status they held in Yorktown and York County, the Nelsons were important political figures in the early Revolutionary struggles of the late 1760s and early 1770s. These struggles brought them down on the side of those who favored limiting colonial imports, and they became vocal supporters of the Association. Thomas Nelson, Jr. was himself a member of the House of Burgesses, a key supporter of the Association, and was a signatory to both the 1769 and 1770 Resolutions as well. William Nelson, however, did not openly sign on to the Association, but described himself as "an Associator in principle" in a November 1769 letter to John Norton.<sup>14</sup> It is plausible that his position as Council President caused him to take a tone somewhat more subdued than that of the burgesses. President Nelson did, however, boast in a January 1770 letter to

---

<sup>13</sup> Fisher 765-766

<sup>14</sup> Mason 113

Norton that he made sure as much of his clothing was made in Virginia as he could manage.<sup>15</sup>

The Nelsons on the whole typically came down on the Whig side of Virginia politics. Though known for being somewhat more moderate than his son, the Whig gentleman President Nelson demonstrated a fascination with the struggle of freedom-fighter Pasquale Paoli, the leader of the Corsican Republic.<sup>16</sup> President and Secretary Nelson had also been early advocates of greater autonomy for Virginia as early as 1752 when they lodged a protest against the royal veto of several General Assembly bills. Although not particularly radical, Thomas Jr. was part of a new generation of Virginia leaders that included Thomas Jefferson, George Mason, and Patrick Henry. These men were younger and of a more fiery temperament than Virginians or their governors were accustomed. It was this generation that had irked Governor Fauquier during the Stamp Act Crisis, and would be a thorn in the side of Virginia's last royal governors.<sup>17</sup>

Thomas Jr.'s generation of Virginia Whigs took action in the months following the enactment of the Townshend Duties. It was at this time that the Nelsons began to engage themselves more thoroughly in the Revolutionary movement. William Nelson vocally opposed the duties, and Thomas Jr. involved himself more fully in the House of Burgesses by accepting assignments to new committees.<sup>18</sup> The Nelson family was also disheartened that the Association did not seem to be taking hold; enthusiasm among Virginians had died down by 1770, leading to the Association's dissolution by July 18 of 1771. Curiously enough, merchant John Norton, whose family did business both in

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 122

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 105

<sup>17</sup> Evans, *Thomas Nelson of Yorktown*, 31

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 32. This is more significant than it might seem today, as there were periods during which many burgesses held no committee appointments at all.

Yorktown and in London, and had many clients throughout Virginia, reported in 1770 that Virginians' invoices were increasing rather than decreasing, although William Nelson would in the same year decrease his imports by half.<sup>19</sup> It remains unclear, therefore, what exactly happened in terms of commercial decision-making in terms of foreign imports. Being accomplished merchants also meant the Nelsons had clients who were exposed to the rhetoric of nonimportation during this period. An investigation into the behavior of their Yorktown customers can provide a more quantitative measurement of support for nonimportation among a particular section of the population.

Because the Nelsons were one of the colony's leading mercantile families, and because they had significant social and political clout, their customer base is a valuable tool in describing the nonimportation movement in York County. That they supported the associations makes it plausible that their opposition to British imports may have influenced the actions of others. The ledger used for the project is actually one of several, but is the only one known to have survived. Designated the "J Ledger," entries in this book document store transactions from roughly 1766 to 1784. The book is the ledger for the Yorktown store, though it does contain a small personal expense account for William Nelson.

This project employed only entries from the years 1769-1771 listed alongside customers whose records indicated they were from "York" or "Yorktown." Purchase records from other parts of York County were not included firstly to improve the efficiency of the data collecting process, and secondly to more accurately capture the buying trends of those in the area immediately surrounding the town of Yorktown itself.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 32. This probably refers to President Nelson's personal imports rather than the imports of his commercial enterprise.

The universe of analysis seems to roughly correspond to individuals who lived in the boundaries of Yorkhampton Parish, although some may have been residents of Charles Parish.<sup>20</sup>

In the ledger, the clerk listed store transactions by customer, but arranged sales chronologically within the entry for each customer rather than chronologically within the book itself. The clerk may have used the accompanying day book to keep rough account of day-to-day activity. The ledger allows an observer to see how the preferences of individual customers changed over time. The main utility of the book is that answers the who, what, and when questions of nonimportation. The ledger can help determine to what extent consumer choices were political expressions, or merely economic ones. The document also contains information on the consumer choices of some of York County's most prominent families, particularly not just the Nelsons, but the Diggeses, the Amblers, and the Smiths. Some of the area's less prominent residents are also noted, including the Nortons, the Goosleys,<sup>21</sup> and the physician Matthew Pope. This can create some idea of class difference in consumer choice. As the Nelsons had to be sensitive to the demands of their customers to remain in business, their notes can provide some insight into how strictly Virginians adhered to the Virginia Association, and how they interpreted it.<sup>21</sup>

Although the ledger contains much valuable information, it cannot reveal everything. The Ledger is not without its limitations. One of these is that the physical document itself is quite old, and has been very badly damaged. Numerous pages have

---

<sup>20</sup> This is based on the fact that one of the Nelson's customers, Thomas Chisman, was a churchwarden of this parish. Charles Parish corresponds to the region of old York County that is now the City of Poquoson.

<sup>21</sup> This ledger is unfortunately one of few indicators available as far as information on nonimportation in York County is concerned. If York's Association kept records, they no longer exist, and surviving editions of the Williamsburg newspapers do not make reference to nonimportation in York prior to the second round of associations in 1774.

sustained sufficient wear and tear to make the names and residences of customers, pieces of information contained at the margins of pages, inaccessible. This means that there is much information that had to be disregarded because a crucial detail such as date or customer has been forever lost. Very often the month or year in which a transaction was conducted is obscured or completely destroyed, virtually eliminating any relevance such transactions might have to a study of nonimportation. There are many records for which the name of the customer and the items purchased are listed clearly, but there are no useable dates of reference. This means that a significant number of customers are underrepresented. In certain cases, a timeline of purchases can be reconstructed if multiple dates of reference survive, but this is not always possible. Sometimes the precise identity of the customer is not clear either. Virginia families tended to use the same personal names across generations, so it was not uncommon for there to be multiple people with the same personal and surnames alive at the same time. This poses problems when establishing the identity of customers using court records. The ledger might list the personal name and surname of a given customer, but if there is more than one person with a particular name, the customer's precise identity is unclear.<sup>22</sup>

Eighteenth-century terminology can also leave some information ambiguous; even the most cursory perusal of the Ledger will reveal that most customers at various times purchase "sundrys," which presumably refers to a collection of fairly small wares too insignificant or numerous to be worth listing individually. This makes it harder to

---

<sup>22</sup> Somewhat more unusual are cases in which court records cannot clearly delineate which records refer to which members of the same family. There were at least two people in Yorktown named Joseph Stroud, but they have not yet been identified individually in the official record. This is particularly difficult when birth records do not survive. The best example is Joseph Mountfort. The few documents of assistance in establishing his identity are will documents designating him guardian to Thomas and Wade Mountfort, but his date of birth, marriage, and date of death are unknown. This project assumes, given that no birth record for a Joseph Mountfort after the date of the will, that all such records refer to the same person.

determine exactly what customers were buying. Entries in the ledger also do not usually designate which wares were domestically produced, and which were imported. That most of the items listed were imports is a fairly safe assumption given the nature of Virginia's role in the global economy, but a few items, notably meat, were probably of domestic origin.<sup>23</sup> Despite these limitations, data in the ledger can still reconstruct some sense of how much the Nelsons' customers purchased during nonimportation.

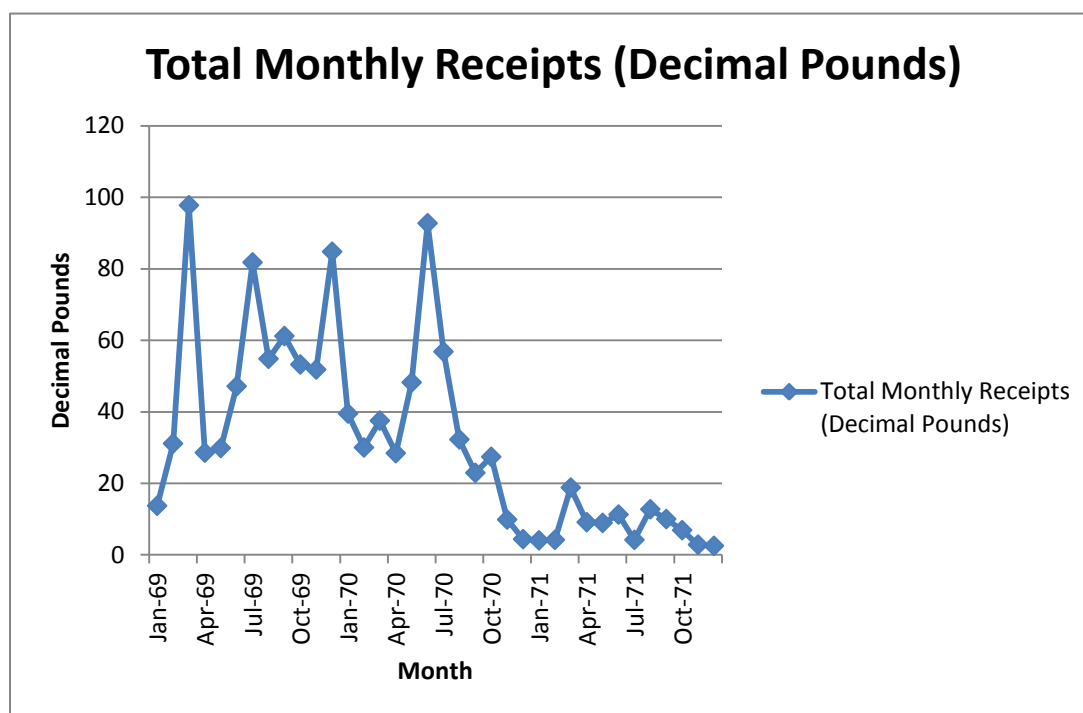


Figure 1<sup>24</sup>

Figure 1 above shows the monetary value of store transactions in Virginia Pounds for the years 1769-1771.<sup>25</sup> This dataset includes 81 distinct customers at the store. The

<sup>23</sup>Lorena S. Walsh, Ann Smart Martin, and Joanne Bowen. "Provisioning Early American Towns. The Chesapeake: A Multidisciplinary Case Study, Final Performance Report." National Endowment for the Humanities Grant RO-22643-93, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1997., 177

<sup>24</sup> The Pound prior to 1771 was subdivided as 20 shillings or 240 pence. The numbers used to generate this figure are based on a decimalized version of the original numbers. Some numbers were rounded, meaning the data as presented may not be precise relative to the raw data. Please also note that of the customers presented here, Thomas Chisman died sometime between March and June of 1770, Philip Dedman died in August 1770, and William Dudley, Jr. died in April 1771.

trend shown above (Fig. 1) is not consistent with the behavior of consumers in Virginia at large, who generally increased their imports during this period. The Associations are usually seen as failures, with imports being either unaffected or increased.<sup>26</sup> The figure above shows the value of goods purchased in Virginia Pounds. This data set measures the monetary value of transactions at the store rather than number goods sold.

The first notable aspect of the data in Fig. 1 is that there is no clear trend among transactions for the year 1769. The passage of the Association in May 1769 appears to have had little in the way of effect on the purchase of imports. This is consistent with conceptions of commerce current during the Association period: demand for British manufactures did not meaningfully decrease in spite of the agreement. There is also no clear connection between the Association and the September 1 deadline to stop purchasing specific items. The £61.19 spent at the Nelson Store in September was actually higher than the £29.89 spent in May, the month in which the former burgesses announced the 1769 Association. Expenditures dropped in the Autumn, but reached £84.78 in December, the highest since March.

This spike may also plausibly be due to conscious consumer choices made in the wake of the Association's formation. In a letter to John Norton, Martha Jacquelin indicated her solidarity with the Association, but simultaneously included an invoice for

---

<sup>25</sup> There are several transactions in the ledger that were not transferred into this dataset. Fig. 1 was generated using only transactions that went to products likely to be imports. This was presumed to be everything except meat, tobacco, corn, and sugar. Other transactions and accounting procedures ascribed monetary value in the ledger such as payments on lines of credit, cash withdrawals, and transfers of numbers into a different ledger were excluded.

<sup>26</sup> An important note with regards to longitudinal analysis is that the clerk did not record transactions in real time. The clerk only recorded the name of the customer, the date the item was purchased, and how much the customer paid. The date recorded is the date the item was purchased, not the date the item was ordered. It does not take into account the amount of time needed for orders to cross the Atlantic, the time between the procurement of the product in England and its shipment to the relevant factor, or the time needed to cross the Atlantic. Anywhere between nine months to two years could pass between placing an order and receiving it. This was at least the case with the consignment merchants who dealt with George Washington (Ragsdale 35).



several British manufactures. There is no explicit documentation of Associators deliberately exploiting this possibility, but it is hardly implausible. Virginians may have consciously chosen to increase their imports in mid-1769 to grandfather in a few last items to take advantage of the deadlines in the Association's language.<sup>27</sup>

Sales again dropped off after December of 1769, but figures from the early months of the following year are comparable to pre-Association figures from 1769. The 1770 Association enacted in June appears to have been interpreted differently by the Nelsons' customers. Despite the sharp spike in sales in June of that year, business at the store rapidly plummeted. Trade with Britain appears to have collapsed in early to mid-1770 as the second Association took effect. Note that unlike the first Association, the second version was not purely voluntary, and contained an enforcement device. It is possible that the inclusion of such a mechanism may have been enough to curtail the importation of British manufactures. A fine would be bad enough, but the public shaming that came with being revealed as one who violated the Association would have been quite bad. Subsequent to the 1770 Association, the value of the goods sold dropped by more than half from approximately £92.74 in June 1770 to £32.28 in August. This provides some quantitative evidence that the 1770 Association was at least somewhat effective in Yorktown.

Even quantitative data, however, is subject to potential error. Although error on the part of the clerk would make analysis difficult, there is little reason to suppose the ledger is rife with errors. A key weakness of the ledger mentioned above, however, could pose problems. Many of the pages in the ledger were badly damaged over the centuries,

---

<sup>27</sup> It is also not out of the question that the trend in the graph above shows patterns in seasonal shipping cycles. January and February of both 1769 and 1770, for example, both show levels of activity much lower than in later months.

and much data, particularly time data, is now lost. As such, the figures analyzed here are only those for which the date of the transaction could be retrieved. Whole pages were left unanalyzed. It is therefore plausible that purchases following the dates of the Nonimportation Resolutions may have been disproportionately represented on pages that were destroyed or badly damaged.

To mitigate this possibility, a control group of York County customers was assembled. This smaller group is a subset of the names used to generate the above figures. The control group was selected from only among those customers who made purchases in all three years.<sup>28</sup>

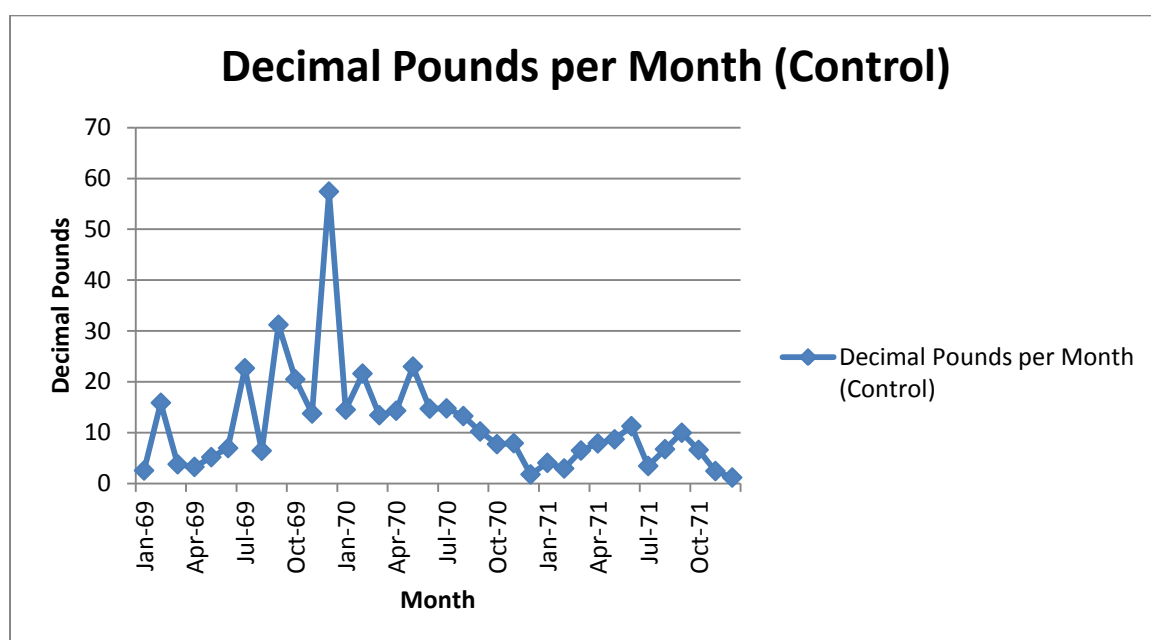


Figure 2

The trend displayed here is clearly different from the one above, yet it does not invalidate it. The graph in Fig. 2 does not show the same dramatic drop in sales in the summer of 1770 as shown in Fig. 1. Even still, there is a noticeable decrease towards the end of that

<sup>28</sup> This control group is included here simply for comparative purchases. Unless stated otherwise, all references to the data refer to the information referenced in Figure 1.

year. The increase at the beginning of 1771 that is not present in Fig. 1 is potential evidence of the weakness of the 1770 Association. As noted above, many colonists were not certain by the beginning of the year as to whether or not the Association was still in effect. Nonetheless, the overall value of goods sold in 1771 was less than that of both preceding years. The £71.71 sold in 1771 is less than half of the £189.90 in 1769, and the £157.27 in 1770. Unlike the aggregate time series data, this dataset shows no dramatic increase in imports in either 1770 or 1771. This provides evidence that the association movement did manage to control the rate of importation in Yorktown. There were also, however, structural components to the area's economy and society that could have influenced this pattern as well. This dataset is still, however, at least somewhat consistent with what a community trying to reduce imports would do.

There are certainly many variables affecting the purchasing trend in both Figs. 1 and 2. The trends shown in Figs. 1 and 2 may be due to logistical constraints inherent in coordinated mass resistance. Yorktown was also better suited to an organized nonimportation effort than other parts of Virginia. Because Virginia had relatively few dense settlements, it was difficult to arrange an organized effort to limit imports. Port towns such as Yorktown, however, were large, dense population centers relative to the areas around them, making political organization more effective.<sup>29</sup> Yorktown was also close to the capital at Williamsburg, meaning that residents were probably more aware than others elsewhere of the political climate, though this did not stop many Williamsburg merchants from breaking the rules either. Yorktown was a very small slice

---

<sup>29</sup> Ragsdale 57. This was why commercial resistance was easier to organize in northern colonies, where importation was not mostly conducted by individual planters off their own private wharves. Virginia's coastal and riparian geography often made it more efficient for ships to sail upriver to individual plantations rather than take on their cargoes at a major port city.

of a very large community, meaning it is not implausible that its trade patterns might be different from those elsewhere. Bearing Yorktown's distinctiveness in mind, this was just as true in 1769 as it was in 1770. It is therefore plausible that there was some force at work in 1770 not at work in 1769, either internal or external. Such a force was most likely the charismatic influence of the Nelsons, the gentry, and their allies within York County's social hierarchy. They apparently extended this influence throughout the county's social hierarchy, and influenced at a least a particular subset of the population. This point is important because these figures cannot be assumed to necessarily represent the entire population.

The data presented in Figs. 1 and 2 are not necessarily representative of Yorktown as a whole. There were more stores in Yorktown in addition to the Nelson store, and there is no good reason to assume that characteristics of one clientele would be the same as the next. Stores were just as much social networks as they were commercial outlets, meaning that the social characteristics of different client bases were not necessarily the same. The political views of one particular social group or client base could have been significantly different from those of another, distinctions which could manifest themselves in varied purchasing trends. As these social characteristics are not necessarily representative of those of a broader population, it is not unreasonable to suppose that they may have political views different from those of the broader population. It is not reasonable to assume a broad trend about Yorktown or Virginia from the activities of people who may or may not have been simply members of a particular social network.

Even if these figures do represent the behavior of the Nelsons' clients, it would also be hasty to dismiss the possibility that customers simply took their business

elsewhere, but how likely this was is difficult to determine with certainty. Those who normally relied on the Nelsons were unlikely to take their business to a store run by one of the Glasgow firms. As noted above, there was only one known Scottish store in the York River region, and given the less wealthy nature of these stores' middling clients, it is not likely that middling planters from York County would go too far from home for merchandise. Far more plausible is that people from Yorktown made the journey to nearby Williamsburg, where the 1770 Association was violated at least once.<sup>30</sup> The likelihood that residents of Yorktown would have made the trip to the capital to purchase goods banned by the Association is not particularly high. Firstly, it was not impossible to get goods banned by the Association from the Nelsons. There are a few instances in which "non-importables" were sold after September 1, 1770, but not many. It is also more likely that anyone wanting an item theoretically unavailable from the Nelsons might take their business to a different store in Yorktown. It is not impossible that Nelson customers could have shifted their attention elsewhere, but it does not seem the most plausible answer. There were other variables potentially at work in Virginia's tobacco economy.

One such variable was the price of tobacco. A change in tobacco prices has been convincingly linked to the success of the 1774 Association by both Holton and Ragsdale, yet it is less likely to have been the case here. Measuring precise tobacco prices is difficult because of the nature of the colonial tobacco market. There was no uniform commodity price for tobacco in any sense during the colonial period. Although the Tobacco Inspection Act of 1730 greatly increased the efficiency of the tobacco market,

---

<sup>30</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Rind) July 18, 1771, page 3

there was still no consistent standard for the pricing of a consignment of tobacco.<sup>31</sup> The price still could still vary depending on the planter and the quality of his crop, which would be judged either by the local store keeper for the direct trade, or by the consignment merchant in Britain. Tobacco crops were assigned prices based on their relative quality, but in ways nowhere near as systematic as the commodity exchanges of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Despite this encumbrance, there is some data available on tobacco prices over time. The Nelsons themselves purchased substantial quantities of tobacco, and their accounts show that the average price of tobacco measured in pounds per hogshead had not meaningfully changed by 1770. The average price per hogshead decreased from £11.81 in 1769 to £11.80 in 1770.<sup>32</sup> This price had decreased further to £10.26 per hogshead by 1771, but the change in price could not have affected the purchasing trend for the year 1770. The change between 1770 and 1771 may have changed purchasing habits during 1771 as local planters earned fewer returns to their crops, but the strong evidence for political and social externalities casts some doubt on this hypothesis. The price figures from the Nelson account do not necessarily imply the sale price in London, but they do suggest an only small relative change.

Even assuming that the price the Nelsons paid for hogsheads of tobacco cannot be representative of British market prices, it is still unlikely that the sale price of tobacco played a large role in the decline in imports. The price of Virginia tobacco on both the Philadelphia and Amsterdam markets changed very little between 1732 and the end of the

---

<sup>31</sup> The Tobacco Inspection Act was passed under Governor Gooch to mitigate irregularities in the quality of tobacco consignments. This Act required tobacco to be sent to public warehouses where it would be inspected prior to shipping.

<sup>32</sup> This figure excludes one purchase of a hogshead at £2.74 in March of 1769 as an outlier.

colonial period.<sup>33</sup> Although not necessarily indicative of the value on the London market, these two prices may be useful proxies for interpreting market value.

The aggregate data on imports also make it unlikely that tobacco prices affected imports. Time series data on British exports to the American colonies show a dramatic increase during this timeframe. American imports of British manufactures shot up in 1770, and 1771 saw record imports in every colony. The two colonies that saw the greatest increase in imports, even in light of the Associations, were Virginia and Maryland, the same two colonies that, more than any others, were dependent on tobacco.<sup>34</sup> This increase was at least in part due to a dramatic expansion of credit by British merchants. If importation decreased anywhere in Virginia, it was certainly not for want of credit.<sup>35</sup>

This colony-wide spike in imports was also due largely to the influence of the factors, who were scarce in York County, and were unlikely to have affected commerce in that area. Furthermore, consignments of the tobacco grown in the York River region were known to sell up to five times, and rarely below, the price of bulk tobacco. Somewhat more likely, but hard to prove, is that the ever increasing transaction costs in the consignment trade reduced returns from tobacco.<sup>36</sup> If key economic variables cannot convincingly be linked to a decline in imports, it is quite likely there were social and political forces at work. The Associations, though failures in political terms, had a level of success in York County that demands explanation.

---

<sup>33</sup> Peter Bergstrom, *Markets and Merchants: Economic Diversification in Colonial Virginia 1700-1775*. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985), 134. Although the price seems to have changed little, whether the quantity of tobacco exported from York had any effect on imports is unclear because there is no surviving export data from the York River Naval District after 1768.

<sup>34</sup> Jacob M. Price, "New Time Series for Scotland's and Britain's Trade with the Thirteen Colonies and States, 1740 to 1791." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 32 (1975): 318-325.

<sup>35</sup> Ragsdale 105

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid* 32-33

Soon after the failure of the Associations, Virginians began to warn of the dangers of the power of merchant interests, and blamed British traders.<sup>37</sup> The available evidence, however, lends credence to the idea that the success or failure of the Association depended on the interaction of key social groups. Out of all eighty-one Nelson store customers from the Yorktown area, very few had purchases that saw a net increase from 1769 to 1771. Court records from York County furthermore indicate that many Nelson customers associated with the same social circle as the Nelsons. At the very least, they interacted with the Nelsons with relative frequency. Although the Nelsons' prominence meant that it was unlikely anyone in Yorktown could have not dealt with them, some had more interactions with them than others. It is also noteworthy that even President Nelson, who described himself as "an Associator in principle," did not completely free himself of his dependence on British imports. According to Emory Evans, Nelson reduced his imports by half rather than eliminate them completely.<sup>38</sup> Why this was the case is not clear; Nelson quite simply may not have been able to keep himself from completely doing without British imports. It is also difficult to determine exactly how much William Nelson actually imported for his own use.

Evans based his estimate of William Nelson's imports on a series of letters written by Nelson to John Norton, other Virginia planters, and the Earl of Hillsborough. These letters, although evidence of Nelson's identification with the Association, do not provide clear insight into exactly how much the Nelsons actually imported. William's son, Thomas Jr., for example, purchased over £93 worth of goods in 1769 and 1770. Much of this sum was spent on foreign imports, including such goods as silk, glass panes, and

---

<sup>37</sup> T.H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of the Revolution*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 196-197

<sup>38</sup> Evans, *Thomas Nelson of Yorktown*, 32



Holland linen. As Thomas Jr. was a signatory to the Association, and William supported the effort, it seems implausible that Thomas Jr. would have been able to make these orders without William knowing about it. Even excluding Thomas Jr.'s purchases, it was impossible for anyone to place orders through the Nelson store without the family knowing about it and giving their consent. Some goods, therefore, may have been more socially permissible than others. It also appears that the Association placed responsibility both in the hands of the importer and the customer. President Nelson could quite simply have refused to send any more orders for prohibited manufactures, but that they did not would suggest a mainly social relationship between the store and the customer.<sup>39</sup> Refusal to cease imports on behalf of others indicates that Virginians were expected to trust one another in terms of adhering to the Associations. The Nelsons simply trusted that their clients would follow through on their obligations rather than compel them to do so. This is evidenced by a letter from William Nelson to John Norton from September of 1769.<sup>40</sup> In this letter, Nelson requests pieces of furniture on Stephen Mitchell's behalf despite knowing full well that such items had been banned by the Associators. Nelson is not known to have officially announced support for the 1769 Association until two months after the date of this letter, but he still could not have been unaware of the restrictions under which he was expected to operate.

Judging from the available evidence, the level of enthusiasm for Association in York County was high relative to the behavior of most Virginians. Whether this

---

<sup>39</sup> This is in stark contrast to the mid-1770s when mere possession of British goods was associated with Loyalism. In 1774, Thomas Nelson, Jr. helped board the ship *Virginia*, and seize a cargo of tea sent by the firm of John Norton & Son. This tea was then dumped overboard into the York River. That even those as vociferously opposed to taxation and in favor of Association as the Nelsons would allow importation of barred merchandise into Virginia would suggest that broader social forces were at play in determining who abided by the terms of the Association and who did not.

<sup>40</sup> Mason 105

enthusiasm translated into action was quite another matter. Although the 1769 Association appears not to have worked any more effectively in Yorktown than it did anywhere else, the 1770 Association seems to have had a role in the reduction in imports observed in the summer of that year. This was at least true of those who conducted their business with the Nelson family. Their clout within the community was such that they could influence their peers and those below them in the county's hierarchy to join the nonimportation effort. The quantitative data seem to show that those who purchased from the Nelsons did generally decrease their purchases, or at the very least curtailed the increase of their purchases. The figures above, however, only show what happened in aggregate. They do not illumine the complex set of social and economic relationships that gave rise to the nonimportation sentiment observed. The next chapter demonstrates how the Nelson family and their gentry allies led the local 1770 Nonimportation Association from atop York County's complex social hierarchy by acting through a set of preexisting social relationships across and between social ranks.

## CHAPTER V

## YORKTOWN'S "TOPPING PEOPLE" AND THE 1770 ASSOCIATION

The quantitative data in the previous chapter show that the section of York County society connected to the Nelsons decreased imports following the beginning of the 1770 Association. This decrease in imports was largely the result of a political and social project by the Nelsons and the other elites of York County. A core group of associators from the gentry class and the upper ranks of the merchant class exploited social and economic relationships with their neighbors to further the cause of nonimportation. This chapter will illustrate how nonimportation in York County was a product of the area's social hierarchy, and demonstrate how the gentry, the social group most in favor of nonimportation, and the merchants nearest them conducted this sentiment to the social ranks below them. Crucial to this setup was the political and social influence of the Nelsons. Demonstrating the relationships needed for this to work, however, requires the examination of a wide variety of documents.

Surviving documents from the third quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century support the idea that the "Spirit of Association" in Yorktown hinged on the social network of the Nelson family. This assertion is based on the relationships among elites who patronized the Nelsons' store, and had other known relationships with family members. The most reliable document in establishing identification with the 1770 Association itself, however, is the Resolution document. The names attached to the original document are by no means exhaustive, and can only provide evidence for the general opinion at that particular Williamsburg meeting. This list is also only evidence of those who were willing to

explicitly identify themselves with the Association; there certainly were others who, like President Nelson, were “Associators in principle” and abided by its terms, but were not specifically linked to it on paper. The most important names regarding Yorktown are Thomas Nelson, Jr., son of William Nelson, and David Jameson; Nelson was a partner of the Yorktown store, and Jameson appears to have been relatively close to the family, as he was listed as a witness to the will of William Nelson.<sup>1</sup> Other names relevant to Virginia and the rest of York County such as Peyton Randolph appear as well. More important are the names of those who were not among the “topping people.” The 1770 Association specifically invited merchants to join the cause, as the gentry blamed lack of merchant participation for the failure of the first attempt. Two Yorktown merchants, John Hatley Norton and George Riddell, put their names to the agreement, as did the Williamsburg merchants William Holt, John Greenhow, and John Prentis. This broadened the core of nonimportation in Yorktown beyond the immediate sphere of the Nelson family itself. The main group of the Association in Yorktown probably extended outside this group, however.

This core group was almost without a doubt dominated by the presence of the Nelsons, particularly President and Secretary Nelson. As noted in the previous chapter, the Nelson brothers were the single most powerful force on the Governor’s Council. Most important decisions were not made without their approval. It is likely that other councilors such as York County’s John Blair, who was Council President until the Nelsons effectively had him removed, could have been brought into the movement, but there is little evidence to substantiate this.<sup>2</sup> Given that the Nelsons had enough influence

---

<sup>1</sup> Wills and Inventories (22) 132-136

<sup>2</sup> H. R. McIlwaine, et al., eds. *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia*. 6 vols. Richmond:

to attain appointment to the Council, and that President Nelson in particular had the political skill to dominate it, it would seem likely that the Nelson family sat family at the center of the nonimportation effort. It is hard to imagine that President Nelson could be involved with a political project and not have a great deal of influence in it. President Nelson's son, Thomas Jr., was also a signer of both the 1769 and 1770 Associations, putting him at the center of the movement. All would be for naught, however, if the Nelsons had no allies among the gentry or other high-ranking merchants. Men from such classes would, in addition to the Nelsons, would form the core group of the Association in York County.

Determining who else was in this core group, however, can be difficult to say with certainty. The greatest stumbling block to gauging support for nonimportation in York County is that extant sources record very little about the York County Association. No list of the membership of the York County Association survives in the *Virginia Gazette*, and no other documents determining its membership or activity have survived. Were it not for the radical colonial politics of the early 1770s, there would be very little reason little reason to suppose that an Association was ever formed. Goosley's letter to Norton is actually the only evidence that such a body existed in York County prior to the Continental Association of 1774, though it is possible that she was referring to activity in nearby Williamsburg. Because there is no clear evidence that any York County Committee was even formed, it is not particularly useful to winnow down the list of county residents to those who could have served on it. It is both far more feasible and far more useful to speculate about which persons formed the core group of nonimportation, and who likely could have been members of such a committee, assuming it existed. To go

beyond the names listed on the 1770 Resolution signed in Williamsburg requires an exploration of the public lives of York County's residents. Available documents strongly suggest that the core group of associators came from mainly from the leaders of the community.

Determining the makeup of this core group requires some knowledge as to who would have been best placed to lead the movement. The single most important characteristic of the composition of the Association Committees in other counties is that they did not meaningfully differ from that of the local and colonial governments. Of the sixteen county committees that reported to the *Gazette*, eleven had as members both of their burgesses, and only one had no burgesses at all. Half of the committees were composed entirely of justices of the peace.<sup>3</sup> This provides ample evidence that the structure of the local Associations was guided by the same hierarchical principles underlying Virginia's broader political and social culture. This is because the only evidence that there was an election process comes from Spotsylvania and Culpeper Counties, so election to these committees was probably an aberration. This would indicate that social standing was the key component of association leadership rather than popularity.

Given the York County names that appear consistently in colonial and local government, it is highly likely that social standing was an important part of association leadership in York County as well. York County's burgesses at the time of the 1770 Association were Thomas Nelson, Jr., and Dudley Digges, who were the only two men

---

<sup>3</sup> Ragsdale 96-97

from York County serve in the burgesses from 1765 to 1772.<sup>4</sup> Their dominance of their legislative seats suggests long-term political and social establishment. They both also served as justices of the peace for York County alongside Peyton Randolph, merchant Robert Sheild, merchant Jaquelin Ambler, William Digges Jr., merchant Augustine Moore, merchant John Prentis, merchant David Jameson, and William Nelson, Jr.<sup>5</sup> Any of these men could plausibly have been part of the core of nonimportation sentiment in York County. These were the same men who supervised the courts of oyer and terminer.<sup>6</sup> Oyer and terminer courts were of particular significance because of their unique utility to Virginia's class system. Oyer and terminer courts in Virginia were specially convened tribunals assembled to try felonies committed by slaves. Anyone selected to sit as a judge at one of these courts was essentially assigned the unique task of preserving the racial and social order of a plantation society.<sup>7</sup>

The same men who sat the oyer and terminer courts were always the same ones who became justices of the peace because one could not sit at these courts if he was not already on the commission of the peace. The names listed above, however, are only those who were on the commission at the time of the 1770 Association. There were other former members who were still living and could have formed part of the core of the movement, as people sometimes rotated in and out of important government offices. These included such figures as William Stevenson, Thomas Chisman, and Dudley Digges.<sup>8</sup> All served as gentlemen justices alongside Peyton Randolph, who was Speaker

---

<sup>4</sup> H.R. McIlwaine et al eds., *Legislative Journals of the House of Burgesses*, 1761-1765: 314, 1765-1769: 4, 80, 136, 182, 1770-1772: 4, 114, 144

<sup>5</sup> Judgments and Orders (2) 1770-1772, 1

<sup>6</sup> "Oyer and terminer" is a medieval French term meaning "to hear and determine."

<sup>7</sup> Anne Willis, "The Masters' Mercy: Slave Prosecutions and Punishments in York County, Virginia 1700 to 1780," (MA thesis., College of William and Mary, 1995), 36

<sup>8</sup> Judgments and Orders (2) 1770-1772, 1

of the House of Burgesses, and uncle to Lucy Grymes, who was married to Thomas Nelson, Jr. The York County oyer and terminer court was consistently dominated throughout the 1760s by a select group of the county's elite. Dudley Digges, David Jameson, and Thomas Nelson, Jr. were the dominant justices on the court in the late 1760s.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that the court system was at multiple levels controlled by a relatively consistent class of people.<sup>10</sup> Because the courts were comprised of men from the most important social groups, it is from these names that the core of the York County Association can be reconstructed.

One of the most important of these names is that of Peyton Randolph. Randolph was also the Moderator of the Association, making it indisputable that he was at the core of the movement. Although he spent much of his time in Williamsburg due to his position as Speaker of the House of Burgesses, and because he lived there, Randolph continued to serve as a justice of the peace even while he was Speaker. Randolph was also an important figure on the county's oyer and terminer court throughout the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> Randolph's letters to John Norton, however, reveal that he made sure to abide by the terms of the Association. He was quite particular in his demands of the Norton firm in late September 1770:

I must get the favour of you to send in the spring the few articles mention'd below, and to take notice, that the table Cloths are to be Irish linen and I shall be glad you'd be particularly careful to do every thing that is requisite to shew they are of that Manufacture, as no other sort can be receiv'd.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 44. Randolph is not included in the quantitative data because his residence was not listed in York or Yorktown.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid 35. An important characteristic of colonial courts is that they were very different from modern judicial panels. Legal training and experience were not considered terribly important as qualifications to sit at the bench. The gentleman justices on these courts relied instead on their own sense of justice rather than an established legal standard.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 42

<sup>12</sup> Mason 147



Randolph at least made every effort he could to make sure his purchases were acceptable to other associators by instructing his contacts in London to send him only Irish fabrics, which were permissible under the 1770 Association. Despite his stature, the York County court records document relatively little relevant to his relationships to any of the Nelsons' clients. Randolph was obviously an important member of the cause, but it is difficult to say how closely connected he was to day-to-day operation of the movement in Yorktown.

Among those who may have been involved with such day-to-day activity, a more likely candidate would be York County burgess, Dudley Digges. Digges was a supporter of nonimportation by 1774, and was among the burgesses who formed the Virginia Convention later that year.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Thomas Nelson, Jr., Digges signed neither the 1769 Resolution nor the 1770 Resolution. Digges came from an elite merchant family, and his position not just as burgess but as a justice of the peace put him near the top of the colony's social hierarchy. Digges also had a close personal connection with the Nelsons. Dudley's father Cole died in 1744, and he and his brother William passed to the care of Thomas Nelson the Immigrant.<sup>14</sup> Digges's lack of initial explicit support for the Resolutions was not in itself troubling to Virginians. President Nelson did not put his signature to it, yet he was known as one of the most prominent Associators in Virginia. Digges's close personal ties the Nelsons, as well as his position as one of the dominant justices on the county court, made him a likely member of the Association's core. There were also key members of the Association who were not born into York County's elite gentry families.

---

<sup>13</sup> Convention of 1774: The Association

<sup>14</sup> Evans *A "Topping People"* 115; Orders and Wills (19), 414

David Jameson is also likely to have been near the activity of Association. A merchant of Scottish extraction, Jameson himself was a signer of the 1770 Resolution, a fairly obvious indication of support. He was also one of the dominant members of theoyer and terminer court. Jameson had attached himself to the gentry by marrying into the Smith family. His wife's family owned property in Yorktown and a plantation adjoining the town. A court record from 1772 after William Nelson's death shows Jameson as a witness to his will alongside Dudley Digges.<sup>15</sup> One of the most important men in the colony presumably would not ask just anybody to witness his will. Jameson would also serve as Lieutenant Governor of Virginia under Thomas Nelson, Jr. from 1781 to 1782.<sup>16</sup> Court records thus demonstrate that Jameson was very close to, if not a member of, the county's elite. His close professional and personal ties to the gentry in addition to his public support for the 1770 Association place him within the county's core group of associators. Jameson was not, however, the only prominent merchant to be at the center of the Association.

That merchant John Hatley Norton was even at the Williamsburg meeting and signed his name to the document suggests that he was at the core of the movement in York County. Norton is a harder case to work with because of the often unclear distinction between gentry and non-gentry. He had, however, married Sally Nicholas, the daughter of Robert Carter Nicholas, placing him close to the county's elites. The Norton family had not established itself in Virginia for quite long enough to be considered gentry.

---

<sup>15</sup> Wills and Inventories (19) 1740-1746

<sup>16</sup> Mason 510

Norton's father, however, who managed the family business from London, had known the Nelsons while in Virginia, and was respected as a former burgess for York County.<sup>17</sup>

Another of the important merchants close to the core of the nonimportation effort was Dr. George Riddell. Both a merchant and a physician, Riddell was also among the more prominent of the York County merchants, and his signature on the Resolution is good evidence of his place near the center of nonimportation activity. A well-connected merchant, Riddell had been a tenant of William Nelson's cousin, also named William Nelson, until 1755, when the two lots on which he lived were offered up for sale.<sup>18</sup>

Although this connection back to the Nelsons is weaker than those of others, the insularity of Virginia families should not be underestimated. Even though Riddell cannot be connected back to the Nelsons and their immediate circle as cleanly as some other Yorktown merchants, that Riddell was a signatory of the 1770 Resolution is significant beyond the Resolution's importance as a political document. The purpose of the Resolution was not just to insure adherence to the Association, but obedience to the gentry. By signing the Resolution, Riddell made known his support for and cooperation with the gentry, making his web of social and debt connections crucial in carrying Association sentiment to the lower ranks. As a merchant, Riddell would be a critical connection to the middle rank of society when it came time to propagate Association sentiment.

Riddell was but one of the Associators who would have to carry the middling rank into the effort to reclaim hegemonic freedom. He and other high ranking merchants, joined a clique of men including President Nelson, his most immediate relations, and

---

<sup>17</sup> Edward M. Riley, "The Founding and Development of Yorktown, Virginia 1691-1781," (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1942) 109 n 94

<sup>18</sup> *Virginia Gazette*, Hunter, October 10, 1755

Dudley Digges.<sup>19</sup> Court records evidence that a fairly consistent group of men controlled the county courts, indicating that they were the lead men of society. A handful of topping people, however, would not make the 1770 Association successful. A truly successful nonimportation campaign would require not just the power of the gentry, but the cooperation of the merchants and the middling ranks below them. Tracing the “Spirit of Association” below the elite is rather more difficult than determining who was at its core. Demonstrating relationships further down the social chain is hard mostly because there is little in the way of definitive information on the social lives of individual Virginians. Diarists such as William Byrd II and Robert “King” Carter appear to have been the exception rather than the rule. To determine which Virginians knew which other Virginians requires exploration of the historical record beyond what they said about themselves, and into official documents cataloging their public lives. The “Spirit of Association” was clearly demonstrated by the elite, and it was they who maneuvered the rest of society into the associations. The following chapter explores the middling rank of society, and how the gentry took advantage of York County’s hierarchical society to take the 1770 Association to the people.

---

<sup>19</sup> As a member of the gentry and as a Justice of the Peace, it is not implausible that Jaquelin Ambler was also part of this core, but court records tell very little about him, and there is relatively little to indicate what his true inclinations were.

CHAPTER VI  
“THE SPIRIT OF ASSOCIATION”: YORKTOWN’S HIERARCHY AND THE 1770  
ASSOCIATION

Yorktown’s gentry could not make their associations succeed unless they had the cooperation of the social ranks below them. The town’s elite residents derived their authority in the local area both from their institutional power within the formal instruments of colonial governance, and from their authority as the leaders of the community. Their authority most clearly manifested itself on the county courts, which were dominated by the elite members of society. The justices’ rulings in reality carried authority in large part because of the social clout of the men on the bench. Anne Willis argues: “The courts were therefore relatively independent institutions where the gentlemen justices governed all free and enslaved persons in a paternalistic fashion.”<sup>1</sup> The paternalistic ruling style of Virginia’s elite was not derived only from mere ideological abstractions. This paternalism was but one component of a very real culture of deference and obligation that pervaded every level of Virginia society. It was precisely this culture that carried the Spirit of Association from the gentry downward to the merchants, sea captains, and others in York County. This chapter employs surviving court records and correspondence alongside subsequent scholarly literature to reconstruct the hierarchical relationships among the Nelson store customers that allowed the 1770 Association to operate such as it did.

In order to establish that there were, in fact, such hierarchical relationships, relative social standing of the customers represented in the Nelson ledger have to be

---

<sup>1</sup> Willis 35

determined. As is so often the case with colonial Virginia, the best way of going about this is by consulting court records. Court records are useful because much of the information documented can imply the social status of the persons recorded. Documents relating to the occupations or social relationships of the people described can reveal much about their social standing.

Just as consistent patterns in social and economic behavior emerge among the elite, similar trends appear among the middling ranks. Middle rank citizens who were ordinary keepers,<sup>2</sup> smaller planters, craftsmen, or less successful merchants were often assigned secondary roles in the affairs of county government. In a study of middling planters in York County, historian Kevin Kelly notes:

These middling planters were the workhorses of county government. By their appointment to such positions as petit and grand jurors, constables, and surveyors of the highway, they helped ensure the execution of justice and upheld the administrative structure of the county... The offices [frequently held by middling planters] were petit and grand jurors, constable, surveyor of the highway, tobacco inspector, churchwarden, undersheriff, militia officer, and estate appraiser.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the appointments Kelly notes appear with relative frequency in the court records relevant to Nelson customers. Ordinary keeper James Mitchell, for example, was designated Keeper of the Public Ferry to Gloucester Point, a post of economic significance, but not significant enough to merit gentry attention.<sup>4</sup> Mitchell had also served as Surveyor of Public Streets in Yorktown and Public Crier of Goods.<sup>5</sup> Another member of the Mitchell family, William Mitchell, was appointed undersheriff by Sheriff

---

<sup>2</sup> “Ordinary” is a now antiquated term used in the colonial Chesapeake to refer to a tavern.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Kelly. “A Portrait of York County Middling Planters and their Slaves.” In *Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter* Vol. 24 No. 2 (2003), accessed through [research.history.org](http://research.history.org)

<sup>4</sup> Judgments and Orders (1) 1746-1752, 221. The tasks associated with actually operating the ferry would incidentally be devolved upon Mitchell’s slaves.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* 260.

Anthony Robinson.<sup>6</sup> Thomas Gibbs was appointed Surveyor of Public Streets in 1760, and William Moody served on the Grand Jury along with many others.<sup>7</sup> Another customer, planter John Goodwin, was a Lieutenant in the militia serving under planter Thomas Chisman.<sup>8</sup> Another Nelson customer, Philip Dedman, served at one point as a tobacco inspector.<sup>9</sup> Tradesmen and lower-ranking merchants were thus those who were connected enough to attain status in minor civic positions such as ferry keeper or road surveyor, but not quite enough to go much higher. The precise economic prosperity of men in the middle rank is often difficult to determine because their occupations were rarely written down in the records. One exception is customer Thomas Stroud, who was recorded as a bricklayer in 1762.<sup>10</sup> Although such records only detail so much, there are still other court documents that can provide clues regarding relative prosperity.

Among the court documents useful in determining prosperity are contracts for apprenticeship. Any individual who was party one or more these contracts was typically somewhat higher in the social hierarchy than most others. Apprenticeship contracts also place Thomas Stroud, William Mitchell, and Stephen Mitchell at a social rank below that of the gentry, but above that of a common laborer.<sup>11</sup> This is not implied simply by the social position of holding someone else's labor in bond. Unlike other servants, apprentices were trained in the practices of a particular skilled trade. Typically, but not always, holding an apprenticeship contract meant that the individual in possession of the contract was a craftsmen of merchant of some sort. As craftsmen were usually closer to

---

<sup>6</sup> Order Book, 1765-1768, 145.

<sup>7</sup> Judgments and Orders (3) 1759-1763, 186; Judgments and Orders (2) 1752-1754, 207

<sup>8</sup> Order Book, 1765-1768, 330.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 145.

<sup>10</sup> Deeds (6) 1755-1763, 394

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 394; Order Book 1765-1768, 145; Judgments and Orders (1) 1768-1770, 497; Judgments and Orders (4) 1763-1765, 450

the bottom of the middle social rung, possession of apprenticeship contracts can approximately place specific individuals nearer the middle of the social hierarchy. It was men such as these who had to be brought into the associations to make them effective. There is much evidence linking these men back to the Nelsons and their gentry allies suggesting that the relative success of the 1770 Association in York County was attributable to their ability to exploit the hierarchical nature of Virginia society through a complex web of social and economic relationships. These relationships are documented in extant court records.

Information gathered from court records and other surviving documents that have been preserved and cataloged by the York County Records Project provide strong evidence relating the nonimportation in Yorktown to the influence of the Nelson family. Many Nelson customers appear in the official records, and still others had close relatives who appear as well. Court records preserve not just lawsuits, but which individuals were presented as co-defendants, co-plaintiffs, or witnesses. This provides some clues regarding personal association or even familial relation.<sup>12</sup> Other documents provide names of who acted as legal witness, security, or assignee for whom. Records of debt cases also provide evidence of social obligation. Still more important are documents relating formal titles, particularly those listing who sat as a justice on the local court, or who served as sheriff. These documents, while hardly conclusive, can piece together a sketch of the public and private relationships of the people of York County. From these

---

<sup>12</sup> It is also easy to overanalyze these documents. For purposes here, the greatest weight was assigned to the names of plaintiffs and defendants in debt cases. Who one's co-plaintiffs or co-defendants were is not always a reliable indicator as to whether a given person belonged to a given faction. There are, for example, instances in which people filed suit against their own relatives.



connections between and across social ranks, a clearer image of the nonimportation movement in York County begins to emerge.

An important aspect of this image is the relative social standing of individuals in Yorktown. Court records provide insight insofar as they document interactions between people. One such interaction was the settlement of debts, and the York County Court preserved many records of debt settlement cases between Nelson customers. Debt cases are useful because they can provide a rough sense of who stood higher in the social hierarchy relative to someone else. Virginians likely did not borrow money from those too far below them in social rank.<sup>13</sup> A useful note of caution is that debt cases are only of utility to the extent they record when a creditor filed suit against a debtor. The court did not record when debtors made payments on schedule, as there would be no need to bring the matter to court. It can thus be safely inferred that the extent of real indebtedness in York County was greater than the court records reveal.

This project analyzed court cases only from 1765 to 1772. Although this includes cases predating the material in the ledger, information from these years can still help establish preexisting social relationships. What these cases reveal is that there was a web of private debt that connected Nelson customers to one another and directly back to President Nelson and his immediate family. Nelson himself was known to have held much in the way of outstanding debt obligations, obligations which his son, Thomas Jr., would try to collect. Most of these debts, however, do not appear in the court records, indicating that the debts were either paid in a timely manner, or that Nelson's debtors

---

<sup>13</sup> A major exception to this would be planter credit with merchants. Extravagant planters were known to amass credit with multiple merchants, but this is not quite equivalent to instances in which individuals borrowed money from others.

were rarely taken to court.<sup>14</sup> Many of the Nelsons' customers and clients, however, owed and were owed money by their neighbors.

These debts are but one clue as to the composition of Yorktown's social order. Court documents show how the gentry conducted the Spirit of Association down towards the middling rank. Available evidence shows the existence of a subset of the middling sort who interacted closely with the gentry despite never rising to their clout. This would make John Hatley Norton one of the key links in the social network that allowed whatever nonimportation sentiment there was to survive. Unfortunately for the historian, John Hatley Norton makes only the occasional appearance in the York County Court records, meaning speculation about his connections difficult. His letters to his father also gravitate heavily towards matters of business, making John Hatley Norton a dead end as far as exploring the downward conduction of Association is concerned, though he is known to have had numerous contacts throughout town, and doubtless would have influenced the movement. Although Norton's record in court documents is scant, the same cannot be said of other Yorktown residents. Others can be linked to Nelsons and the gentry through court records.

Only a few individuals below the gentry rank can be tied directly back to the Nelsons, but those who can help create an image of what the Nelsons' social network looked like. One of the very small number of people conclusively linked to the Nelsons was Joseph Mountfort. Very little was recorded about Mountfort, but a record of an indenture of mortgage between Mountfort and President Nelson from March of 1769 has

---

<sup>14</sup> There are only two recorded cases in which William Nelson took a customer to court during this period. In each of these cases, he was suing the executors of estates which had owed him money.

survived.<sup>15</sup> The details of this contract show that Mountfort mortgaged some of his slaves and livestock to Nelson. As slaves and livestock were property, this shows a relationship of trust between the Gentleman William Nelson, and Mountfort, who stood somewhere below him. Nelson also signed business contracts with store clerk Augustine Moore and merchant Captain John Thompson.<sup>16</sup> These few documents establish at least a small circle of people outside the gentry who fell in the Nelsons' sphere of influence.

Within this sphere of influence fell the families some of Yorktown's merchants, tradesmen, and ordinary keepers. President Nelson's August 15, 1769 letter to the Norton firm shows some degree of familiarity with the Goosleys: "Mrs. Goosley pressed Me to assist her son in his Engagement to put 200 hds in this Ship."<sup>17</sup> This establishes at least some degree of patron-client relationship. Martha Goosley was apparently socially placed that she could petition Nelson for assistance in her family's affairs. The only recorded case of a nature similar to this is James Mitchell's petition on behalf of his son Stephen detailed above. There is also some evidence that Nelson formed even more of these patron-client relationships. A July 1770 letter to John Norton from Anne Matthews, widow of the town butcher, notes that Nelson assisted her son-in-law James Moir with money and goods.<sup>18</sup> The scant information on President Nelson's personal dealings reveal direct connections to only a small handful of people, but these connections would be important, as they helped conduct the Spirit of Association throughout Yorktown and its environs.

---

<sup>15</sup> Deeds (7) 1763-1769, 465. Indenture in this context simply refers to a contract, and is unrelated to indentured servitude, which was far less common by this period.

<sup>16</sup> Deeds (8) 1769-1777, 29-30; Judgments and Orders (1) 1768-1770, 260

<sup>17</sup> Mason 104

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 139

Even if not everyone can be tied specifically back to the Nelsons, there are many who can be traced to others who were themselves close to the Nelsons. There are some individuals who can be tied to the 1770 Association's core through David Jameson. Jameson was owed money by Nelson customer Dr. George Riddell on at least one occasion based on a suit filed in November 1768.<sup>19</sup> Jameson was also a defendant in a September 1765 court case alongside William Stevenson.<sup>20</sup> Stevenson would also witness contracts for Jameson at least until 1768, and served with him as a court-appointed arbiter alongside Thomas Nelson, Jr. in March 1769.<sup>21</sup> Stevenson himself was not without important connections. Although he does not appear as a justice of the peace for 1769 or 1770, he does appear in the records of the oyer and terminer court of 1765.<sup>22</sup> This placed him alongside Randolph, Digges, Nelson, and Chisman. Even if Stevenson did not hold this post at the time of the Associations, he was still esteemed enough to have held the post at some point. He also served as a court appointed arbiter alongside Jaquelin Ambler, a member of another of York County's elite families, and another mercantile family.<sup>23</sup> Though a merchant, Stevenson's position close to the elite made him one point of contact between them and the middling rank whose compliance they needed.

One man who probably played an important role obtaining that compliance was Dr. George Riddell. Riddell, noted above as a core associator, was connected to the Nelsons as a former tenant of President Nelson. Far more important than Riddell's connection to the Nelsons were his debt obligations that extended outside of the county's merchants. His debt case with David Jameson shows that the two had dealt with one

---

<sup>19</sup> Judgments and Orders (1) 1768-1770, 124

<sup>20</sup> Order Book 1765-1768, 5

<sup>21</sup> Judgments and Orders (1) 1768-1770,

<sup>22</sup> Order Book 1765-1768, 22

<sup>23</sup> Judgments and Orders (1) 1768-1770, 487

another on at least one occasion. In addition to William Stevenson, Riddell held debts from Stephen Mitchell, William Mitchell, Thomas Gibbs, Joseph Mountfort, Matthew Hubbard, Hansford Hill, Katherine Hansford, and Seymour Powell.<sup>24</sup> Another man, merchant John Thompson, was in such dire straits that he mortgaged some of his property to Riddell in July of 1770.<sup>25</sup> Excepting Hansford Hill and Katherine Hansford about whom little is known, all of these debtors were among York's merchants, tavern keepers, and shipmasters. These were the sort of people the gentry needed to cooperate. Riddell's status close to the gentry and as a major creditor made him an effective conduit for the Spirit of Association downward to the middling ranks. His creditor status shows that he was considered higher up on the economic and social ladder than most, and would have been well-positioned to exercise influence over debtors in a deference-based society.

Riddell's debt obligations were not the only fact of life tying these merchants and seamen together. These men met not just to do business but to socialize. It is impossible to know for sure who socialized with whom and at what time and place, but surviving documents can provide clues. One type of legal document in the court record useful in this regard is the ordinary license. In order to operate an ordinary, a county resident had to apply for a license, an application that was not always granted. These ordinaries were places where people from different social ranks could interact.<sup>26</sup> Court documents show that many of the Nelsons' customers kept ordinaries in addition to their other vocations and responsibilities.

---

<sup>24</sup> Judgments and Orders (2) 1770-1772, 436; Ibid 17; Order Book 1765-1768, 19; Judgments and Orders (1) 1768-1770, 265; Judgments and Orders (2) 1770-1772, 108, Ibid 471; Judgments and Orders (1) 1768-1770, 412; Judgments and Orders (2) 1770-1772, 17

<sup>25</sup> Judgments and Orders (1) 1768-1770,

<sup>26</sup> This depended on the exact case. As is much the case today, different colonial ordinaries catered to different clienteles. Christiana Campbell's ordinary in Williamsburg, for example, tended to cater to a more elite customer base.

Among the ordinary keepers in the ledger are Augustine Moore, James Mitchell, the father and son team of Thomas and Abraham Archer,<sup>27</sup> and John Gibbons.<sup>28</sup> The most important of these are Mitchell and Gibbons. Mitchell operated the Swan Tavern in Yorktown owned by the Nelsons, and Gibbons, who was co-ferry keeper with Mitchell, operated the ordinary next door. This shared responsibility likely placed Mitchell and Gibbons in the same social setting much of the time. Of the two, Mitchell is of the most importance because his ordinary sat on land owned by the Nelson family, making him one of their tenants in addition to being one of their clients as detailed above.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the Swan was situated directly across from the county courthouse, making it more than likely that it was full of customers when court day came around.<sup>30</sup> Men from all walks of life would interact on Nelson real estate on what was likely to be the most politically charged day of each month. It was on court day that, as both Willis and Roeber have pointed out, that the social obligations that made Virginia society work were reinforced in full public view.

The Swan was also the favored stopping point for *Virginia Gazette* post-riders, who delivered the colony's newspapers from the capital. Post-riders brought not just broadsheets with the latest political news, but the most recent correspondence. These post-riders travelled not just from Williamsburg to Yorktown, but to many other locales throughout Virginia. Because post-riders conversed with many people in many places within a relatively short period of time, they were highly sought after as sources of information when they arrived at the Swan. The Swan was also where the London papers

---

<sup>27</sup> Riley 149 n 70 The York County clerk recorded both men as having licenses, and it is thus unclear as to whether they operated the same ordinary, or managed competing enterprises.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid 142; Order Book 1765-1768, 25

<sup>29</sup> Riley 152

<sup>30</sup> Ibid 149-150

and bulletins from the northern colonies were circulated in Yorktown.<sup>31</sup> When the 1770 Association came into effect, it was no doubt made known at the Swan, where it was mulled over and discussed by the town's merchants. Merchants and sea captains who owed money to Associator George Riddell would thus gather in a tavern located across from the courthouse—a physical symbol of gentry power—and that was operated by tenants of the Nelsons, who were the most powerful Associators in town. It was at this ordinary that the paternalistic authority held by the leaders of the county's social hierarchy meshed with the web of social obligations that connected Yorktown's residents to one another. This created the energy necessary for a relatively successful effort at limiting British imports. For this reason, the purchasing behavior of the gentry was very similar to that of the middle group below them. To demonstrate this, individual purchasers were selected out of the whole to represent the consumption characteristics of the elite and middle ranks.

Given that the gentry had important connections below them on the social ladder, and that they had both paternalistic authority and influence among the middling rank, it is no accident that their buying behavior had much in common with their social inferiors.

---

<sup>31</sup> Clyde Trudell, *Colonial Yorktown*, (Old Greenwich: The Chatham Press, Inc., 1971), 102-103

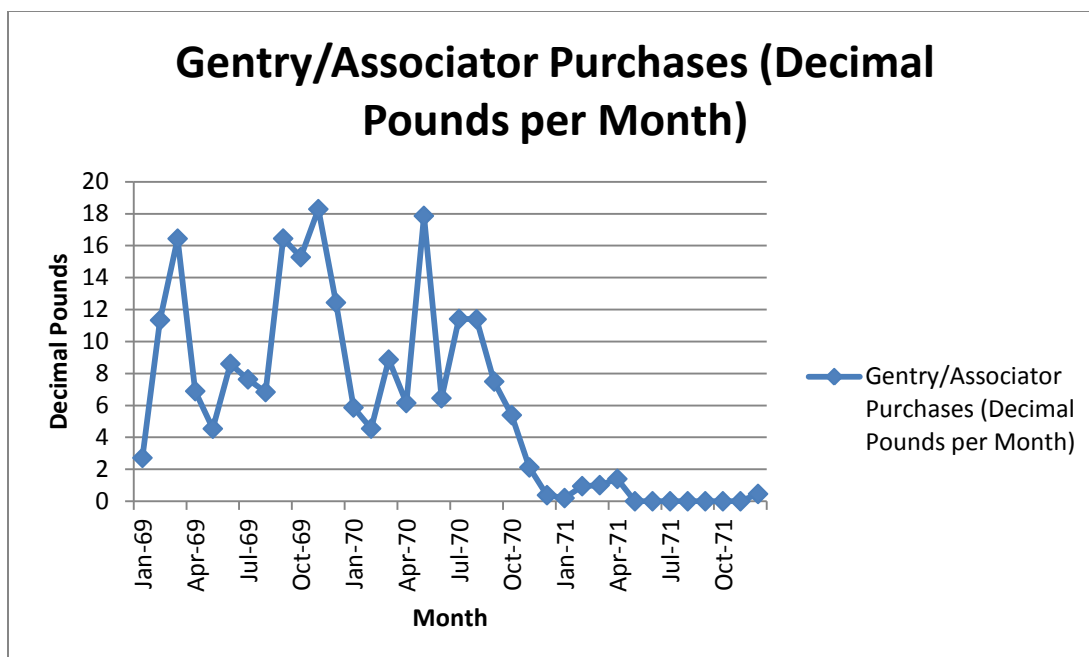


Figure 3

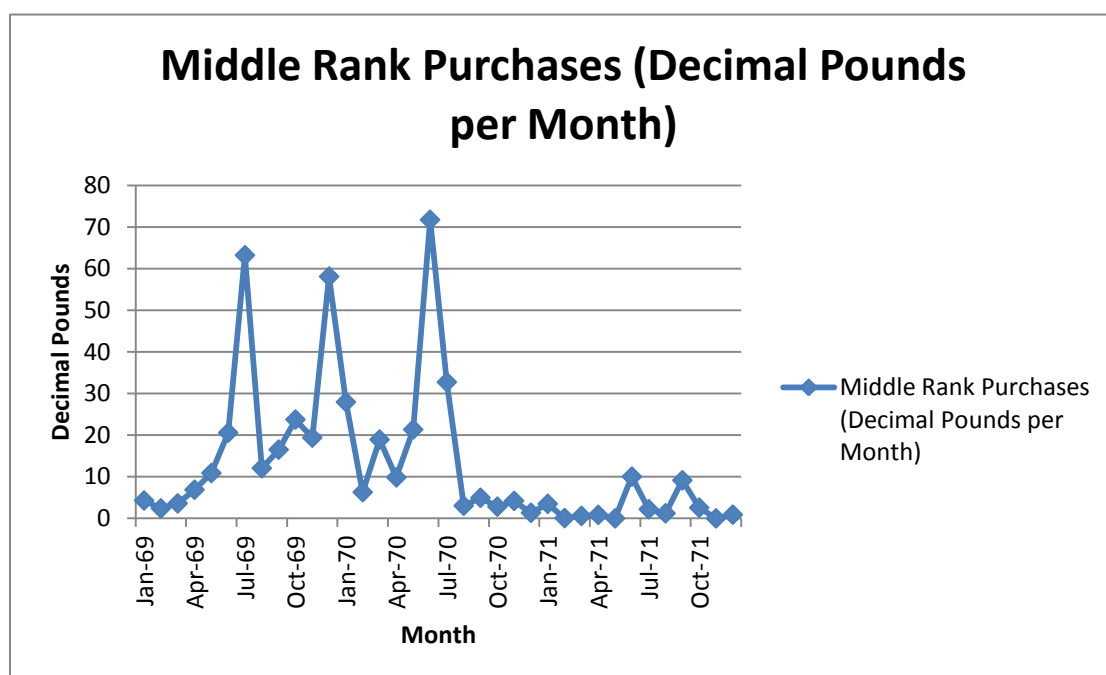
Judging from their smaller number, the gentry and the immediate Associates made up a smaller proportion of the store's customers, but they were responsible for a great number of purchases.<sup>32</sup> The interesting characteristic of the gentry purchasing trend is that there is little in the way of a clear pattern in terms of any definite decrease. Purchases dropped from £127.46 in 1769 to £87.95 in 1770. Purchases would drop again to a mere £4.01 in 1771. The truly dramatic drop in sales appears to have occurred after August of 1770, however. September 1770 saw £7.50 worth of goods purchased, with a continuous decline following thereafter. No transactions among this subset were recorded from May to November. This finding at the very least is consistent with what previous observers have noted regarding observance of the Association. It was the gentry, those who were the most likely to be importing in the first place, who were also the most likely to put effort into controlling their imports. Although Yorktown's gentry appear to have

<sup>32</sup> This subsample includes both General and Secretary Nelson, Dudley Digges, Anne Digges, David Jameson, Thomas Jameson, George Ridell, John Hatley Norton, Jacquelin Ambler, Martha Jacquelin, and an unspecified member of the Burwell family. It is not an exhaustive list of the community's lead members.



made much effort at reducing imports, all would be for naught without the support of the middle rank. Perhaps to the satisfaction of some of the more zealous associators, many among the middle rank appear to have followed through, as the gentry appear to have successfully navigated the county's hierarchy.

It was hardly an accident that nonimportation did as well as it did in Yorktown given that its primary proponents sat atop a social network they could work to their own advantage. The social and economic setting of York County, a region where the cheap credit of factor stores was almost unavailable, made the gentry's task much easier than in the Piedmont or the Upper James. The general decrease in imports observed in Figs. 1, 2, and 3 hold even when the data set is filtered for merchants, ordinary keepers, and ship captains, as shown below in Figure 4.<sup>33</sup>



<sup>33</sup> This subset is composed of a selection of ordinary keepers, merchants, sea captains, those personally associated with them, and those owing money to George Riddell: Martha Goosley, Charles Hansford, Matthew Hubbard, Matthew Pope, Seymour Powell, Thomas Gibbs, William Mitchell, James Mitchell, Stephen Mitchell, Joseph Mountfort, William Stevenson, William Moody, Abraham Archer, Thomas

#### Figure 4

The above figure is noteworthy simply because it was very frequently those in the middle of society who had ignored the 1769 Association. The data represented here are the purchases of those who would have been likely to frequent the Swan, where they would have been influenced by the more powerful merchants and associators. Among these middling men, the decline in imports was no less dramatic than it was among any other group. The level of trade conducted by middling merchants, tradesmen, and ordinary keepers decreased significantly in 1770 and 1771. Extremely high values of purchases relatively early and late in the year 1769 were primarily the result of purchases of tobacco and very large quantities of sundries. Middle rank purchases for the year 1769 were for the most part unremarkable, and totaled £241.30

In contrast, trade quantity in 1770 totaled £205.17, peaked in June at £71.73, and never really recovered. Much like the gentry, the middling sort had a purchasing boom in the early and mid-summer of 1770, and stopped buying shortly after the announcement of the 1770 Association in June. Their purchases would drop again to £31.44 in 1771. Yorktown's middle rank also appears to have made many of the same purchases as those above them, albeit in smaller quantities. There is little unique to be said regarding their purchases, but the decline observed is very similar to the one observed among the Gentry/Associator subset. This decline is likely due to social influence of the core associators described in the preceding chapter.

It is no accident that the upper and middling ranks of Yorktown society experienced similar changes in purchasing behavior during the months of the 1770

---

Archer, Thomas Stroud, Joseph Stroud, Benjamin Moss, James Moss, and John Moss. It is not an exhaustive list of the entire middle rank as represented in the ledger.

Association. The Nelsons and their immediate circle already had significant influence as the leaders of the county's instruments of governance. The lead associators in Yorktown exploited their paternal authority as gentry oligarchs to apply pressure to the upper members of the middling rank in the hopes that the Spirit of Association would trickle down. This influence often took the form of patron-client relationships, business relationships, and creditor-debtor relationships. This was probably easier in Yorktown than in other regions of Virginia based on the makeup of the local elite. Yorktown had little in the way of a clear demarcation between a distinct gentry class and a distinct merchant class. The greater commonality between the gentry and the middling merchants and sea captains may have made the 1770 Association easier to enforce. These person to person relationships were not, however, the only way in which the gentry exercised influence over those below them.

Gentry influence over the populace could also be more abstract as in the case of the Swan Tavern and court day, in which the town's preeminent gentry family owned one of the most important public venues in the area. This was in addition to their social group dominating the court, which was arguably the single most important public venue. It is this aspect of the spread of association that was perhaps the most important in the relative success of the movement. The 1770 Association succeeded not just because of the statesmanship and political skill of a handful of powerful gentry. Political discourse occurs among not just among individuals, but within and between communities that share not only a common political heritage, but a common political language. The seventh and final chapter will illuminate how such a language, a language of goods and a language of shared sacrifice, came to influence Yorktown in during the years of the early associations.

CHAPTER VII.  
THE LANGUAGE OF GOODS IN YORKTOWN

The last few chapters have demonstrated the importance of deference and hierarchy were critical to the performance of the association movement. York's hierarchy functioned as the medium through which the local elite conducted nonimportation sentiment. In order for this to work however, the gentry and the middling rank had to share a common political language. The Consumer Revolution that helped bring on the political struggle in which Virginians were now enmeshed had also made the gentry and those below them common consumers of the same goods. As dependence on these imported goods increased, their status as consumers of the same British imports would create a sense of political solidarity. This appeared in Yorktown most obviously in the ways in which the populace bought and used textiles. This final chapter will explore how the language of common goods motivated the people of York County to reduce their imports through the Associations. The evidence presented suggests the beginnings of a language of goods. The politicization of British goods, it seems, would have to wait for the Continental Association of 1774.

Tracing the origin of a language of goods unique to York County is almost impossible. The most that can be said is that it was likely similar to the language used in the rest of Virginia, and given that the same goods were sold over the colonies, this should not be surprising. Holton characterizes the period's political language in terms of sacrifice:

Where once gentlemen and gentlewomen had demonstrated affection by showering each other with gifts and hospitality, the new language of

community was shared sacrifice. Nonimportation provided its own replacement for the thrill that normally greeted members of the gentry when they broke open packages containing the latest London fashions. New china and clothes were exciting, but so was the sense of patriotism that the boycott awakened.<sup>1</sup>

Virginians generally sacrificed finery, but what they usually targeted was imported textiles generally. Surviving accounts from the Association period document a preoccupation with the wearing of homespun instead of imports. Recall Martha Jacquelin's letter to John Norton from August 14, 1769:

I expect to be dressed in Virginia cloth very soon, and as I am a little incommoded with corns, in Mockasins likewise I have given up the Article of Tea.<sup>2</sup>

Jacquelin was not alone in this sentiment. President Nelson wrote to Norton on January 24, 1770:

They have already taught us to know that We can make many things for ourselves, & that We can do very well without many other things we used to indulge in. I now wear a good suit of Cloth of my Son's wool, manufactured, as well as my shirts in Albemarl & Augusta Counties, my Shoes, Hose Buckles, Wigg, & Hat etca of our own Country, and in these We improve every year.<sup>3</sup>

Recall also Martha Goosley's remark from August 8, 1770 regarding the use of homespun cloth:

[W]ill they Put us under the necessity of wearing homespun altogether? I assure the Gentlemen wear nothing else all Summer & we have made great improvements.<sup>4</sup>

Goosley's June 13, 1770 letter also employs the "language of shared sacrifice" noted by Holton:

---

<sup>1</sup> Holton 86

<sup>2</sup> Mason 103

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 122

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 143

I understand we are to be tied Down to very Strick rules. Any thing will I agree to for the common good.<sup>5</sup>

All four letters evince a clear interest with Virginia's condition. Nelson's and Jaquelin's both express pride at their Virginia cloth, and Goosley's states unequivocally that she was willing to make sacrifices, though she appears to have been unhappy about it. Notably, all three writers reference textiles. Unlike the luxury goods prized by the gentry, clothing was a product everyone needed. This created a rhetorical link between the gentry and middling sort; they could all join together in solidarity by rejecting dependence on British textile imports. The same fabrics that had Anglicized them would politicize them.

Textiles had also been important in Virginia society even before the association period. As Fischer notes, clothing was a crucial way for Virginians to distinguish one another in terms of social rank; gentlemen wore finer fabrics, common men wore much simpler textiles.<sup>6</sup> When imports were politicized by the Townshend Duties, the social importance of textiles changed. Fabrics that had once been outward indicators of social standing had become symbols of who was willing to stand up for Virginia liberties by rejecting dependence on imported cloth.

The most clear utterance of Virginia's language of goods came in the form of the aforementioned homespun cloth. Just how much York County managed to free itself of this dependence remains unclear. The prevalence of homespun is hard to determine in large part because it was made for home use, and there are few records of its purchase. Homespun also incurred a great economic burden on those who produced it. Very little

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 136

<sup>6</sup> Fischer 358-359

labor from Virginia's plantation economy could be spared to produce cheap cloth; slave women had responsibilities within households from which their owners would not excuse them, and male slaves were required in the fields to produce cash crops.<sup>7</sup> There is also anecdotal evidence slave women would resist orders to produce homespun cloth, and that planters' wives sometimes supported these choices.<sup>8</sup> Households that could afford to utilize large quantities of homespun were typically either gentry households such as the Nelsons, who had whole plantations they could convert to the production of cloth, or smaller plantations outside the tobacco export market.<sup>9</sup> The "Gentlemen" Goosley referenced represented the former case of those with enough resources to produce their own homespun, though her use of the plural "us" suggests that Virginia cloth was somewhat more widespread. As for the smaller households, it is much more difficult to say. As noted above, the tobacco trade in the York River Naval District was dominated by large planters. Few small planters were exporting from this district, making it more plausible they were producing their own cloth. This means the probability that any given planter in York County produced homespun was somewhat greater than it would have been elsewhere, thus explaining the ubiquity implied by Goosley's letter.

. The above letters of William Nelson and Martha Jacquelin reveal the pride associated with wearing clothing made from fabric produced in Virginia rather than in England. This was quite likely the reason for the decline in the import of certain types of textiles. Although the trend in the total value of transactions is overall a downward one,

---

<sup>7</sup> Holton 92

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. The only specifically documented case of this is at Mount Vernon, where Martha Washington refused to hold her personal slaves to the production quotas set by George.

<sup>9</sup> Ragsdale 104-105

sales of individual fabrics do demonstrate their own patterns.

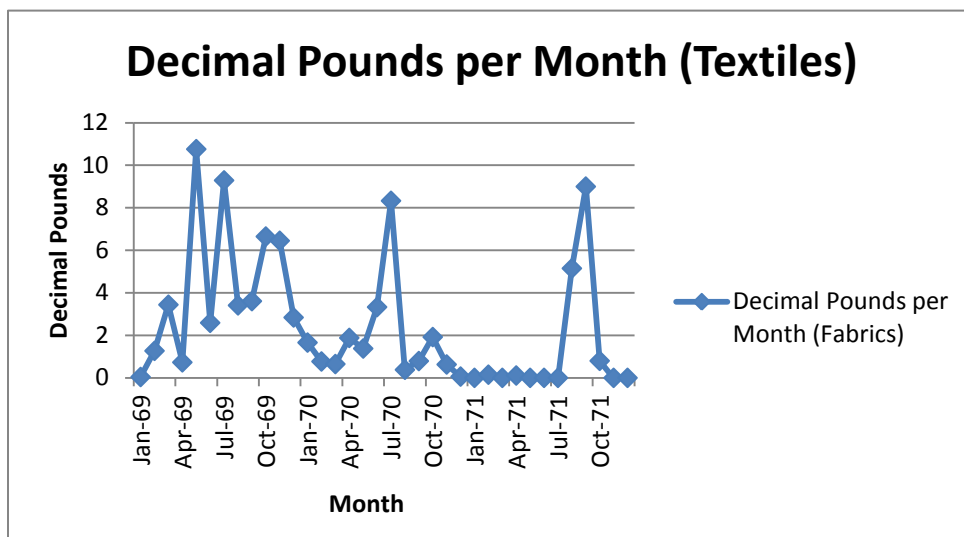


Figure 5

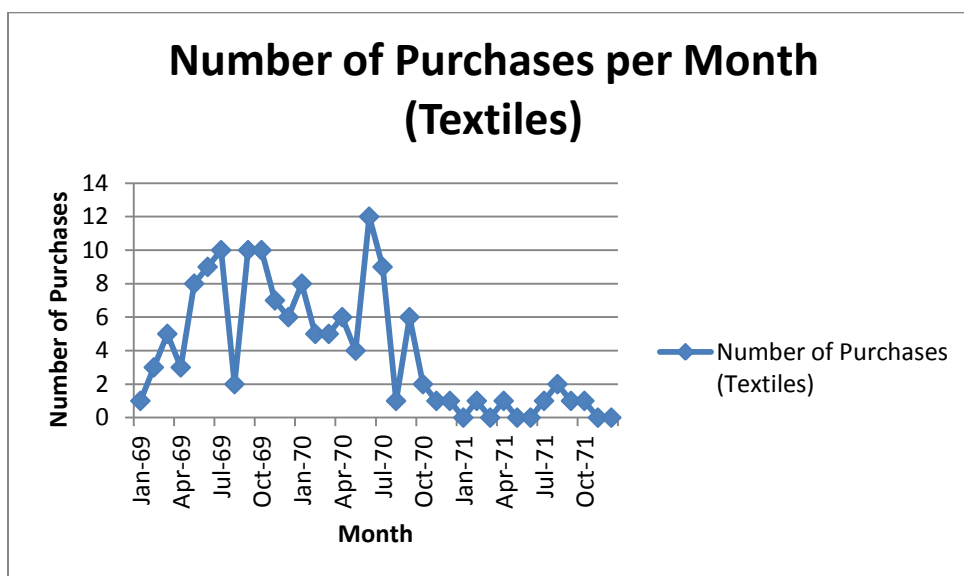


Figure 6

Figure 5 shows the monetary value of textile goods purchased, and Figure 6 above shows the total number of purchases of textiles. Both of these figures are included to distinguish between expensive fabrics and the cheaper fabrics permissible under the Associations.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The data in Figure 5 provide only a crude measurement of the actual quantity of textiles because it assigns all purchases the same weight. A purchase of 1 silk handkerchief is assigned the same weight as a



These two graphs roughly show that decline in the total sales of textiles were not necessarily due to a decrease in the actual quantity of textiles imported. Quantity and cost seem to, however generally appear to be related.

The overall value of textile imports in Yorktown decreased from £52.50 in 1769 to just £25.46 in 1770. The value of imported textiles dropped to £15.21 in 1771.<sup>11</sup> Based on crude measurements of the quantity of goods imported, there were 74 purchases in 1769 compared to 60 in 1770, and seven in 1771. Note that the drop in the value of sales was much greater than the drop in the number of sales. This is because the Nelsons' customers shifted their imports rather than abandon them.

The best evidence for this is the changes in sales of linen over time. The value of imported linens changed only negligibly between 1769 and 1770, from £26.71 to £20.85. The number of purchases of linen cloth, however, increased from 30 in 1769 to 41 in the following year. Only three purchases were recorded in 1771 at a total value of £5.03. The notable pattern in linen sales is that the linens being imported in 1770 were by and large cheaper than those imported in 1769. This is partially because the 1770 Association imposed a maximum value of two shillings per yard for any linen brought into Virginia. Most linen imported after September 1, 1769 sold at or below this value. Only three purchases of linen were recorded after September 1, 1770, one in December 1770, and two more in mid-1771. Yorktown consumers were generally buying cheaper varieties of linen than they had in the past. Although they had bought large quantities of cheap linens such as Irish linen and drill in both years, after 1769 more expensive linens such as cambric and printed linen became less common.

---

purchase of two. Because not all textiles were shipped or sold in the same consistent units, there is no other consistent way of comparing the actual quantity of imported fabric over time.

<sup>11</sup> £14.15 of this value came from only two purchases of silk products.

Changes in linen purchases were somewhat consistent across rank lines. The Gentry/Associator subset spent £2.66 on linen in 1769, £2.32 in 1770, and nothing at all in 1771. This change was quite small indeed. Even smaller was the change for purchasers in the Middle Rank subset. The change in linen purchases among the Middle Rank was miniscule. In both 1769 and 1770, Middle Rank purchasers bought approximately £10.49 worth of linen cloth. Only £0.75 was spent in 1771. The Gentry/Associator group also ceased importing linen after September 24, 1770. The Middle Rank stopped at around the same time- October 4, 1770- though there is one recorded purchase in March 1771, by which point the association was on the decline. The only other meaningful changes were in the types of linen imported. Imports of osnaburg dropped among both ranks, as did imports of Holland. The only real difference across ranks was that the Gentry/Associator purchasers brought in more drill, and the Middle Rank brought in more Irish linen. Linen sales were thus broadly consistent with those observed in the rest of Virginia insofar as the types of fabric being imported. What is interesting is that these two subgroups both stopped importing even cheap linens they were allowed to buy. Unless there is a good deal of missing data, it would appear that the language of goods was more than empty rhetoric.

The language of goods did not just affect cheaper cloth. Silk goods exhibited a similar, yet distinct trend. Imports of silk goods were reduced dramatically during the Association period. Sales of silk declined from £9.38 in 1769 to £1.03 in 1770. Only two of the 1770 purchases occurred after September 1, one by Stephen Mitchell and the other by Dudley Digges. The only two silk purchases in 1771 were made by William Stevenson and Thomas Archer, and totaled £9.55. The decline in silk sales is a better

measurement of support for Association and the prevalence of a language of goods, than sales of linen. Linen could still be imported under a fairly broad set of conditions, but the conditions under which silk could be imported were much stricter.

Only silk for sewing and a small number of other purposes were allowed. From December 1769 to September 1770, the only types of silk mentioned in the ledger were sold small quantities worth 10 pence.<sup>12</sup> They were not sold in yard length quantities. Before December of 1769, purchases in yardage of specific types of silk do appear, but no such measurements appear again until Dudley Digges purchased silk lace in December of 1770. Stevenson's and Archer's purchases were also measured in yardage. Rejection of silk yardage suggests that the language of goods employed by the associators successfully stigmatized silk cloth. That silk consumption could be significantly reduced suggests that at least for the few months between the passage of the 1770 Association and the end of that year, there was significant public will behind nonimportation.

Decline in silk consumption also occurred across rank lines. Customers in the Gentry/Associator subset used in Figure 2 made fourteen purchases of silk worth a total of £8.24 in 1769, nine purchases totaling £0.8 in 1770, and none in 1771. Customers in the Middle Rank subset in Figure 3 made five purchases totaling £0.33 in 1769, four purchases totaling £0.23 in 1770, and two purchases totaling £9.55 in 1771.<sup>13</sup> Note that the decrease among the middling rank is much shallower than for the gentry. This could be for any number of reasons. The most likely is that the gentry were both those who were already buying the most as it was, and, as those who sat atop the hierarchy, had the

---

<sup>12</sup> The fairly consistent price 10 pence for silk handkerchiefs reduces the need to balance the prices of silk goods against the quantity purchased.

<sup>13</sup> This sharp increase is due to an unusually large purchase of 18 yds of an expensive silk by William Stevenson worth £9.00.

most interest in decreasing imports. Silk was clearly part of any language of goods employed by the nonimportation movement. It had less significance among merchants and ship captains, who typically had less interest in purchasing it, and thus less interest in reducing their purchases.

For other types of textiles there is little in the way of a clear trend. There was very little in the way of wool importation, and what little there was had ceased by February of 1770. No further woolen goods appear until Augustine Moore, Jr. purchased shalloon cloth in October 1771. There is perhaps a much clearer trend in the importation of cotton. Despite the importation of £12.01 worth of cotton in 1769, there were a total of only two purchases of cotton in the following two years, one in February 1770, and one in October 1771. The decline in wool sales and the near disappearance of cotton suggests that among those in the market for these products, nonimportation had gained significant traction.

The quantitative data corroborate information from letters of the period. The language of goods built around textiles was no mere chatter. York County residents drastically reduced their imports of luxury cloth. If they did import, they opted cloth of a much plainer variety.

It is also plausible that the language of goods affected sales of products other than textiles. This is hard to determine, as save Martha Jaquelin's reference to tea, there are no references in the letters examined to the politicization of any goods but textiles. The goods most likely incorporated into this language would be the other main targets of the Association: goods taxed by the Townshend Duties. The 1770 Association appears to have been the most effective at blocking those goods explicitly taxed by the Townshend Duties. There are no records of glass purchases recorded after Secretary Nelson's

purchase in December 1769 until 1771, when tavern keeper John Gibbons imported wine glasses. This is in stark contrast to the twelve purchases of glass products that are recorded for 1769. White lead, a compound found in imported paint products, appears to have been purchased only occasionally prior to Association, and was not purchased after Augustine Moore, Jr. bought some in April 1770.<sup>14</sup> There are no white lead purchases listed before November 1769. Tea as well was more or less successfully blocked. Nelson customers purchased £2.21 worth of tea in 1769 compared to a small reduction to £1.56 in 1770. Imports of tea dropped off suddenly after May of 1770, after which only three purchases were recorded by John Moss, William Wright, and Henry Lee.

Other common manufactures such as hats and shoes appeared less and less frequently as well. The difference in monetary values of hat purchases between 1769 and 1770 was quite small. Purchases decreased from £6.8 to £6.1. More importantly, very few hats were purchased after July of 1770. Only one hat was purchased after September 1, 1770. Dudley Digges bought one in April of the following year. Nelson customers purchased £7.93 worth of shoes in 1769 as compared to £4.65 in 1770. Only £0.89 was sold in 1771. Only seven of these purchases occurred after the September 1, 1770 cutoff. Of these seven only three occurred in 1771, though five of them were above the five shilling price maximum.<sup>15</sup> Purchases for shoes and hats remained consistent even across rank lines. No member of the Gentry/Associator subset purchased a hat after June 1770 until the Digges purchase in 1771, and no customer from the Middle Rank subset purchased one after April 1770. The Gentry/Associator and Middle Rank subsets stopped

---

<sup>14</sup> This excludes one purchase in September 1771 debited to the account of York County.

<sup>15</sup> Although hats and shoes could be produced domestically, they were the sorts of goods more likely to be purchased directly from the producer were they made in Virginia. Any hats or shoes recorded in the ledger are more likely to be of foreign manufacture.

buying shoes after July and August 1770 respectively, though gentry group would resume buying in February 1771. Many goods Virginians perceived as hostile to their liberties saw a decline in imports, but so did some goods that were relatively common.

Many goods that could be classified as household necessities and not subject to Association declined also.<sup>16</sup> One of the most imported goods before the Resolutions, nails, appears only twice after this date. This is as compared to 42 purchases before the 1770 Resolution, 33 of which occurred in 1769. Flooring brads too declined rapidly in the purchase record. Brads were purchased 15 times in 1769 and 1770, and not once beyond the September 1 enforcement date. Of the 22 times that cordage was purchased, only three of them were after the enforcement date. Sales of paper, which were allowed provided the paper cost less than eight shillings per ream,<sup>17</sup> fell dramatically after 1769. Cheap paper was purchased only twice after that year, once in 1770, and once in 1771. It is thus plausible that a revolutionary language of goods that first affected textiles and the goods taxed by the Townshend Duties soon came to influence purchases of other imports as well. There was also one final aspect of the association that may have been relevant to this language of goods

There is some good evidence that nonimportation and Revolution itself were transmitted via such a language of goods. Letters from contemporary York County residents plainly show that the consumption of imported cloth had become politicized, and that the wearing of homespun materials was itself a political statement. The wearing

---

<sup>16</sup> Mason 120; An order placed with the Norton firm by Mann Page shows orders for these items; Carr and Walsh. 153, 174-175. This is not to imply that Virginians did not have the knowledge to produce items such as nails. Virginians who needed such goods would probably have purchased them from a local tradesman rather than a store. It was also often the case that imports were cheaper than domestic manufactures. Virginians had relied on manufactures since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but during the 18<sup>th</sup> came to rely on imports mainly for non-essential items.

<sup>17</sup> Virginia Nonimportation Resolutions of 1769

of homespun said, in the language of goods, that the wearer identified with free Virginians. It was such a language that the core associators might have used to transmit the Spirit of Association throughout the population of Yorktown. As the quantitative data demonstrate that Virginians made good on their rhetoric through textile purchases, it is not difficult to imagine how this language could spread to broader discussions about imports. Men who met at the Swan Tavern and at the courthouse could communicate in terms of a common struggle against dependence on similar goods. Although there is little in the written record to demonstrate this, the quantitative data, when put alongside the rhetoric and purchase records relevant to textiles, become more suggestive. This language of goods and shared sacrifice was quite possibly what brought Virginians from across the social hierarchy to resist dependence on British imports. Although both associations were ultimately failures, there is evidence to suggest that the revolutionary language goods that came to dominate political discourse in the mid-1770s was already starting to take shape.

## CONCLUSION:

### THE FAILURE OF THE ASSOCIATIONS AND THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

It was during the late 1760s that Virginians came to realize just how dependent they were on Britain's economy and government, and came to resent it. This resentment, this anxiety about the future of Virginia's sovereignty, was deeply rooted in Virginia's traditionally hierarchical political and social systems. The case study of Yorktown demonstrates that at least in York County, the charismatic force of a Whig faction among the gentry, and their allies among the merchants, managed to hold the 1770 Association together until the spring of 1771. That the 1769 and 1770 Associations failed was recognized both at the time and by historians since. What deserves more recognition is that the earliest Revolutionary exercises by Britain's colonies were driven in large part by the political and social influence of a handful of Whig leaders in key regions of the colony. Through their power in the colonial and local governments, and through their influence in the social and economic lives of Yorktown's gentry and merchant classes, the Nelson family held together what was elsewhere a disastrous and only nascent attempt at colonial resistance.

That the Nelsons were able to do this may be a testament to their own abilities as patrons and statesmen. It is also quite likely that the social structure of the area around Yorktown was different than in areas where Association was a near failure. York, as it happened, was one the regions left almost untouched by the Scottish trading firms. The York River was a region in which the large planters still held sway, and the old consignment trade continued. Scottish factors did not have the same socially disruptive



influence as creditors that they had in the Piedmont and the James River region. The Scots generally stayed away from York, and this meant that the Nelsons and their associates had little in the way of competition from the direct trade. Virginia's hierarchical social order that had been so threatened by the Scots in the Piedmont, remained intact in Yorktown because the Scots' business model prevented them from entering the trade. The Nelsons could thus continue to dominate the region because the social structure they relied on had not been compromised by Scottish interlopers.

Despite their best efforts, the Nelsons did not succeed in conducting the Spirit of Association throughout York County society. The figures presented in this paper were at the very least representative of a particular client base, but even this client base could not always be relied upon to follow the rules. The 1770 Association did not succeed in creating the amount of domestic manufacturing that its proponents thought would free them of commercial dependence on their ancestral homeland. The greatest failure of the Association movement, however, was that even its most zealous supporters could not bring themselves to cease their importation of British manufactures and luxuries. Much like George Washington, even the Nelsons could not completely restrain their imports, even when it came to making a political statement. Yorktown merchants and gentry succeeded in reducing their imports, but could not rid themselves of British commercial power.

Even though they failed to accomplish its political objective of forcing Parliament to rescind all of the Townshend Duties, and that they were overshadowed by more successful events to come, the Virginia Nonimportation Associations were nonetheless an important way station on Virginia's road to independence. These Associations, however,

were not the mere passing fancy of Whig gentlemen flexing their social muscle for the sake of exercising leverage over the merchants and the middling planters. Whatever the other motivations the gentry had for initiating the drive for nonimportation, the Association movement was a good faith effort to limit Virginia imports as a means of reclaiming hegemonic liberty and restoring the previous sovereign order.

The conditions that gave rise to the Associations, however, would be their downfall. Colonists only had influence over Parliament if British merchants had a stake in whether or not Virginians were purchasing their products. If Virginians had, as the colony's lead Associators had planned, created a sturdy domestic manufacturing sector, there would be no need for the merchants to push for repeal. Virginians could expect repeal only so long as they were dependent. The purposes of their Association—to end unjust taxes, spur the growth of domestic manufacturing, and reduce debt—could not work together effectively. Even the later Associations of 1774, which observers generally recognized as more successful than their predecessors at least as far as participation was concerned, could not meet all of these ends. These Associations gained greater adherence throughout the colonies, but were ultimately rendered moot by the outbreak of war in the spring of 1775. It was the failure of these movements that demonstrated to Tidewater planters the necessity of independence.

The Nelsons would again come to the forefront of the Revolutionary cause in 1774 when the second round of nonimportation efforts went into effect, this time with great effectiveness. The early 1769-1770 Association movement and its 1774 counterpart are significant not just because they were important steps in resisting dependence on British imports. The Association period also marked some of the last attempts at

reconciliation with Britain. Some Virginians would go no further, and were Tories during the war. The Nelsons, however, stayed true to the cause through the end of the war. They would never have as much prestige as they had before the war, however. Thomas Nelson, Jr., who was already heavily in debt before the war, spent a great deal of his personal wealth financing the war effort. Demonstrating leadership both before and during the war, the Nelsons saw Yorktown through the Revolution from its rocky beginning until the very end.

### Bibliographic Note

This project relied heavily on the work of the late Emory Evans, who was one of few scholars to devote significant attention to the Nelsons. All other information on the Nelsons had to be gleaned from the letters of the Norton Firm edited by Frances Norton Mason. Save the Nelson Letter Book preserved in the Library of Virginia, this is one of few surviving sources with letters actually written by any of the Nelsons. All transaction data came from the Nelson Ledger and Daybook. There is, unfortunately, remarkably little literature on the 1769 and 1770 Associations. This paper cites much of what there is in addition to the association documents themselves. All court records were accessed through the York County Records Project managed by the Department of Training and Historical Research of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

## Secondary Sources

- Bergstrom, Peter. *Markets and Merchants: Economic Diversification in Colonial Virginia 1700-1775*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985.
- Billings, Warren M., John E. Selby, and Thad. W. Tate. *Colonial Virginia—A History*. White Plains, New York: KTO Press, 1986.
- Breen, T. H. “‘The Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” in *Past & Present* 119, (May, 1988): 73-104.
- Breen, T.H. *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Carr, Lois Green and Lorena S. Walsh. “Economic Diversification and Labor Organization in the Chesapeake, 1650-1820,” in *Work and Labor in Early America*, edited by Stephen Innes, 144-188. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg Virginia, 1988.
- Evans, Emory. *A “Topping People.”* Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009.
- Evans, Emory. *Thomas Nelson of Yorktown: Revolutionary Virginian*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1975.
- Fischer, David Hackett. *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Greene, Jack P. “Foundations of Political Power in the Virginia House of Burgesses, 1720-1776,” in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series 16 no.4 (October 1959), p.485-506.
- Holton, Woody. *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves & the Making of the American Revolution Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg Virginia, 1999.
- Kelly, Kevin. “A Portrait of York County Middling Planters and Their Slaves, 1760-1775.” *Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter* 24 (2003).
- Montgomery, Florence M. *Textiles in America, 1650-1870: a dictionary based on original documents: prints and paintings, commercial records, American merchants’ papers, shopkeepers’ advertisements, and pattern books with original swatches of cloth*. New York, New York: Norton, 1984.
- Price, Jacob M. “New Time Series for Scotland’s and Britain’s Trade with the Thirteen

- Colonies and States, 1740 to 1791." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 32 (1975), 307-325.
- Ragsdale, Bruce. *A Planters' Republic: The Search for Economic Independence in Revolutionary Virginia*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.
- Riley, Edward M. "The Founding and Development of Yorktown, Virginia 1691-1781." PhD. diss., University of Southern California, 1942.
- Roeber, A.G. "Authority, Law, and Custom: The Rituals of Court Day in Tidewater Virginia, 1720 to 1750." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 37, no. 1 (January 1980): 29-52.
- Rosenblatt, Samuel M. "The Significance of Credit in the Tobacco Consignment Trade: A Study of John Norton and Sons, 1769-1775." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3 (1962), 393-392.
- Selby, John. *Revolution in Virginia, 1775-1783*. Williamsburg, Virginia: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1989.
- Taylor, Alan. *American Colonies*. New York, New York: Viking, 2001.
- Trudell, Clyde. *Colonial Yorktown*. Old Greenwich, Connecticut: The Chatham Press, Inc., 1971.
- Walsh, Lorena S., Ann Smart Martin, and Joanne Bowen. "Provisioning Early American Towns. The Chesapeake: A Multidisciplinary Case Study, Final Performance Report." National Endowment for the Humanities Grant RO-22643-93, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1997.
- Willis, Anne R. "Masters' Mercy: Slave Prosecutions and Punishments in York County, Virginia 1700 to 1780." MA thesis, College of William and Mary, 1995.

#### Primary Sources

Convention of 1774: The Association

Finalized Document of the Virginia Nonimportation Association

Fisher, Daniel. "The Fisher History," in Louise Pecquet du Bellet, ed., *Some Prominent Virginia Families*. 2 vols. Lynchburg, Virginia: J. P. Bell and Co., 1907.

Mason, Frances Norton, ed. *John Norton & Sons Merchants of London and Virginia: Being the Papers from their Counting House for the Years 1750 to 1795*. Richmond: Dietz Press, 1937.

McIlwaine, H. R., et al., eds. *Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia*. 6 vols. Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1925-66.

McIlwaine, H. R., et al., eds. *Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1619-1776*. 13 vols. Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1905-15.

Nelson, William. *Letterbook*

*Virginia Gazette*. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Virginia Nonimportation Resolutions, 1769

William Nelson Ledger and Daybook, 1767-1784

York County Court Records

Wills and Inventories (19) 1740-1746  
includes Wills, Inventories, Orders, and Estate Settlements

Wills and Inventories (20) 1745-1759  
includes Wills, Inventories, and Estate Settlements

Wills and Inventories (21) 1760-1771  
includes Wills, Inventories, and Estate Settlements

Wills and Inventories (22) 1771-1783  
includes Wills, Inventories, and Estate Settlements

Deeds and Bonds (5) 1741-1754

Deeds (6) 1755-1763

Deeds (7) 1763-1769

Deeds (8) 1769-1777

Judgments and Orders (1) 1746-1752

Judgments and Orders (4) 1763-1765

Order Book 1765-1768

Judgments and Orders (1) 1768-1770

Judgments and Orders (2) 1770-1772

Judgments and Orders (3) 1772-1774