"Men of Substance and Ability of Body and Estate": Justices of the Peace and the Rise of a Creole Elite in Isle of Wight County, Virginia at the Turn of the Seventeenth Century

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“Men of Substance and Ability of Body and Estate”: Justices of the Peace and the Rise of a Creole Elite in Isle of Wight County, Virginia at the Turn of the Seventeenth Century

A thesis submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History with honors from the College of William and Mary

By

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April 20, 2010
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Acknowledgments

Before beginning, I would like to thank everyone who has helped me along the way. First and foremost, I owe my sincerest gratitude to my advisor, Professor Jim Whittenburg, for devoting his time, energy, and patience to me throughout my thesis process. Beginning my junior year as he helped me define a topic and continuing through this year as I bombarded him with questions, Professor Whittenburg has been an invaluable source of information, ideas, and reassurance. Without his calming influence, I would never have been able to complete this project. I would also like to thank Professor Julie Richter, who has gone out of her way to direct me to sources and to find answers to questions that I thought unanswerable. Next, I appreciate the willingness of the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Paul Mapp and Dr. Adam Potkay, to take the time to read and think about the final product of my research. Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their interest and encouragement, as well as for putting up with the piles of books I have left all over our house for the past year.
Introduction

Historians of the Chesapeake have long been interested in the evolution of a native social elite in the region towards the end of the seventeenth century. More so than the rest of the British North American colonies, the Chesapeake is famous for the strong aristocratic “gentry” that dominated it politically, economically, and socially throughout the colonial era. I intend to demonstrate that a discernable ruling class emerged even in a poorer, less fertile county such as Isle of Wight County, Virginia. At the same time, I will also show that the men who came to rule Isle of Wight in the early eighteenth century were not necessarily from the aristocratic, so-called “Cavalier” origins that Virginia legend usually ascribes to its glorified colonial “gentry.” In fact, while wealth and economic clout—soon strengthened through marital alliances, in the characteristic Chesapeake way—formed the basis for political power in Isle of Wight County, just as in the rest of the colony, the county’s elite also distinguished itself from “mainstream” gentry culture in that the ruling class very much reflected some of the unusual characteristics of the tidewater counties south of the James River, known as the “Southside” of Virginia.

In order to examine the character of Isle of Wight’s governing elite, I have compiled a “collective biography” for a group of the county’s justices of the peace in the 1690’s, analyzing their wealth, land and slave holdings, county offices, and family relationships. While there were, of course, gradations in the colonial social hierarchy and the upper class was by no means a closed, set group of people, I have limited my primary study here to twelve justices of the peace from the 1690’s—Henry Applewhaite, Henry Baker, James Benn, Samuel Bridger, James Day, Jeremiah Exum, Anthony Holladay, Humphrey Marshall, George Moore, John Goodrich,
Appointed by the governor, the colonial justices of the peace acted not only as judges but also essentially as county administrators and, hence, wielded considerable power and influence in their home counties. Since the men selected to be justices were generally the most prominent and respected men of the county, they also often served in the House of Burgesses and on parish vestries, thus extending their influence to nearly every aspect of county life. While my analysis will naturally exclude certain prominent families who simply were not represented on the commission of the peace in the years I have chosen, this study is intended not to be a complete and thorough history of the influential families of Isle of Wight County but to give a snapshot of the leading men of a tidewater county at the end of the seventeenth century.

The most remarkable of the region’s oddities throughout the seventeenth century was the presence from the colony’s very outset of a significant Puritan population, which later gave rise to several strong meetings of the Society of Friends, known as the Quakers. While Protestant dissenters were very much marginalized in much of Virginia, in Isle of Wight and nearby Surry and Nansemond counties, Quakers not only survived mostly unmolested but they even infiltrated the ranks of the ruling elite, garnering sympathy and, indeed, support among the most influential county officeholders. During this brief “golden age” of Quakerism in Virginia, the colony’s Quaker meetings formed an integral part of the trans-Atlantic Quaker community. Despite official policies against Quakers, missionaries traveled throughout the Southside, maintaining ties between Virginia’s Quakers and meetings in the northern colonies and in England. Although the presence of Protestant dissenters among the Southside gentry appears to

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1 These men all appeared as justices in the county court orders for 1693 through 1695, the only seventh century court orders extant for Isle of Wight County. Humphrey Marshall did not appear as a justice during those years, but he was listed as a justice in a 1698 liquor license granted by members of the court to a county resident.

2 Nansemond County no longer exists as it became part of the city of Suffolk in 1974.
have dissipated in the eighteenth century, the governing elite that presided over Isle of Wight County in the 1690’s still reflected a regional peculiarity that disappeared as the county’s elite became more and more like the rest of the Chesapeake aristocracy.

The families of that “creole” elite inherited not only their predecessors’ accumulated wealth and social status but also the county’s short but interesting history up to that point. The first English settlers arrived in the area during the tenure of the Virginia Company, establishing plantations whose names still dot the area around the river, such as Basses Choice and Lawnes Creek.3 The plantations straggled through disease and the infamous massacre of 1622, when the Powhatan Indians attacked English plantations all across the area of settlement in an attempt to drive the foreigners out of Virginia. In 1634, Warrasquoyacke, later called Isle of Wight, became one of the first eight counties founded in the new royal colony.4 While the county had been bitterly divided during Bacon’s Rebellion, any residual enmity appears to have subsided quickly and completely, for by the 1690’s, the county court accommodated participants and some of their heirs from both sides with no hint of lasting division.

On the eve of the eighteenth century, Isle of Wight County had a more settled feel and established social hierarchy than many counties. It was one of the oldest settled areas in Virginia, but because the land was less desirable for tobacco cultivation, it did not attract the fabulously wealthy and powerful planters who came to dominate the colony.5 Isle of Wight County was thus fairly well settled, but, due to its lack of desirable land, it remained predominantly a county of small planters. A closer look at the development of the aristocracy of eighteenth-century Virginia will illuminate not only the origins and characteristics of that social

3 Helen Haverty King, *Historical Notes on Isle of Wight County*, (Isle of Wight County, VA: Isle of Wight County Board of Supervisors, 1993), 2-3.
elite, but also the place of a county like Isle of Wight within the broader scope of Virginia society. Although I have focused my research on a Virginia county, I have drawn on secondary material covering the Chesapeake as a whole, for Virginia and Maryland demonstrated strikingly similar economic and social development early on and can, in general terms, be considered together. Despite some important political differences between the two colonies, throughout the colonial period they produced many of the same economic and social institutions, often with a lag of ten to twenty years to account for Maryland’s later founding.

In 1697 Henry Hartwell, James Blair, and Edward Chilton completed a report on the condition of Virginia as it stood after the tumultuous ninety-year interlude since in the founding of Jamestown. The Virginia they described in *An Account of the Present State and Government of Virginia* was one that still held promise and potential—a land that “is certainly one of the best Countries in the World” if one “considers the Wholesomeness of its Air, the Fertility of its Soil…the Plenty of its Fish, Fowl, and wild Beasts...[and] the Abundance of its Timbers, Minerals, wild Vines and Fruits.” Yet these royal officials were in no way loathe to enumerate the colony’s faults, nearly all of which they attributed to the English settlers themselves: “[I]f we enquire for well built Towns…for an industrious and thriving People, of for an happy Government…it is certainly…one of the poorest, miserablest, and worst Countries in all America.”

Hartwell, Blair, and Chilton saw in Virginia a corrupted reflection of English culture in a landscape that still awed English eyes in much the same way that it had inspired the rapturous descriptions of George Percy and John Smith in 1607.

The authors extended their criticism to the county courts, perhaps the most notable and influential institution in Virginia throughout the colonial period, which they characterized as

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“irregular.” According to *The Present State of Virginia*, the “Insufficiency” of the county courts had become more apparent in recent years due to the now-dwindling supply of the English gentlemen who had ruled Virginia in earlier years, “who having had their Education in *England*, were a great deal better accomplish’d in the Law, and Knowledge of the World, [than] their Children and Grand-children, who have been born in *Virginia*.8 These justices, whom Hartwell, Blair, and Chilton so disparaged, were at the forefront of an emerging native ruling elite that—just as the authors were writing their report—was in the process of transforming itself into the celebrated Virginia “gentry” that would give rise to the likes of Robert “King” Carter, William Byrd II, and Richard Henry Lee in the eighteenth century.

Yet while the authors of *The Present State of Virginia* looked down upon the native “creole” social and political elite of their day as poorly-educated provincial planters, the emergence of this native ruling class marked a vital turning point in the development of the Chesapeake as it moved from a land of English immigrants, rooted in English customs and culture, to a region with a homegrown population and a cultural vernacular. Research, particularly since the 1970’s, has enlarged our knowledge not only of the institutions that lent structure to life in seventeenth-century Virginia, but also of the men who rose to the top of the political and social hierarchy throughout the century. Much of the scholarship of the 20th century has supported the notion that wealthy, educated immigrants filled public office all over the Chesapeake from the earliest days of settlement. The tenuous legitimacy of colonial institutions depended to a large extent on the assumption that the men in charge could claim gentry status back in England.9 However, even if traditional members of the English aristocracy were able to

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8 Ibid., 45.
continue in positions of power in the Chesapeake, historians have also found evidence that conditions in the colony throughout the seventeenth century—among them, a high mortality rate, economic opportunity, and dispersed settlement patterns—led early immigrants to experience a great degree of social mobility that was hitherto unknown in England. Some immigrants of lower status and even former servants were able to take advantage of the relative instability in the social order to attain positions of authority, particularly in the 1620’s and 1630’s.\(^{10}\) As Bernard Bailyn put it, many of the men in power during the first half of the seventeenth century “succeeded not because of, but despite, whatever gentility they may have had.”\(^{11}\)

Nevertheless, historians have generally agreed that the Chesapeake began to attract immigrants of a higher social status after the Restoration, and thus, after 1660, a more traditional ruling class, more akin to the one described in *The Present State of Virginia*, displaced the motley group that had ascended to power in the first half the century.\(^{12}\) Furthermore, as these men took up large land patents throughout the region, particularly in the most fertile tobacco-growing counties, former servants found it increasingly difficult to obtain land and set up their own households.\(^{13}\) Whatever disagreements scholars have had on the social development of the Chesapeake, it is undeniable that the decrease in opportunities available to ex-servants in the third quarter of the seventeenth century led to severe social unrest that culminated in Virginia in 1675 with the eruption of Bacon’s Rebellion. Yet discontent and frustration among the lower classes was not the only contributing factor of the rebellion that shook Virginia. Immigrants of

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relatively high social status—like Nathaniel Bacon himself—found cause for discontent when they were unable to break into the existing power structure. Kathleen Brown recently gave a new, feminist spin on the political discontent that led to the rebellion, arguing that the political crisis was, at base, a crisis of masculinity as various voices competed to “define honors, manhood, and authority in a colonial society.” In another recent publication, Peter Thompson attributed the rebellion to a defense of common local interests transcending class boundaries against the greed and rapacity of the colony’s government. While historians will always argue about the roots of the rebellion, nevertheless, it is clear that, although the traditional ruling classes were firmly in control over Virginia’s government under Governor William Berkeley, disgruntlement and factionalism within the ranks of the gentry prevented the formation of a unified, solid ruling class for most of the seventeenth century.

However, in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the society of the Chesapeake became remarkably stable, although the reason for the diminution of social tension is not entirely clear. Bernard Bailyn suggested that by the end of the seventeenth century, the settlers of the Chesapeake had simply become accustomed to the shape of the social hierarchy as it had developed and had accepted the distribution of political power that characterized the arrangement. Another possible factor was the fact that as settlers pushed the Indians farther and farther to the west, new lands opened up for settlement on the frontier, providing a safety-valve for discontented, landless whites. Population stabilization—the widely-noted result of an evening of the sex ratio that finally led to natural increase in the colony, a decline in the number

16 Bailyn, “Politics and Social Structure,” 33.
of new immigrants to be absorbed into local society, and a decreasing mortality rate—certainly also contributed to the colony’s stabilization. The county officials that Hartwell, Blair, and Chilton saw as provincial inferiors to the English-born men they replaced were the leaders of a society that was, by the second decade of the eighteenth century, finally predominantly native-born rather than immigrant. Although historians in the past forty years have emphasized the social networks that linked even the earliest settlers, demographic stabilization not only strengthened local family and friendship networks but also led to growing localism as colonists increasingly looked inward, rather than back to England, for their cultural references.18

The most influential explanation for the increase in stability is the argument that Edmund Morgan put forth in his landmark book, American Slavery, American Freedom, that the new solidarity between the colonial elite and poor whites was the result of the psychological relief that accompanied the switch from a primarily white, indentured labor force to an increasingly black, slave labor force that occurred during the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Morgan’s theory expanded upon ideas that T.H. Breen expressed in an article just a couple of years before in which he articulated that a realignment of planters’ interests in the few decades just after Bacon’s Rebellion strengthened the unity and harmony of Virginia’s white population. Both men contended that as Chesapeake society became ever more divided along racial, rather than class, lines, small and large planters began to see their mutual interests as aligned, rather than opposed. The realignment of interests became apparent as the provincial political elite moved to court the support of lower-class whites, giving the smaller planters a voice in politics that they had denied them up until that point. Morgan saw in this transformation the beginning

of populist politics and the origins of the paradoxical love of “liberty” among the slave-holding Virginia planters who would later play such visible roles in the American Revolution.¹⁹

Even as the rise of slavery arguably lessened tensions between upper- and lower-class whites, it also helped widen the gap between social classes in the Chesapeake. Throughout the seventeenth century labor was the most important and expensive factor in the production of tobacco. By supplanting white servants with black slaves, who cost more to buy but could bring much larger profits, planters who could afford the cost and risk of buying slaves were increasingly able to distance themselves from their neighbors running smaller tobacco operations.²⁰ Thus the eighteenth century saw a sharp decrease in upward social mobility for the lower classes and the emergence of a clear social elite whose wealth clearly outstripped everyone else around them. While all classes of planters inhabited a fairly close range of wealth in the first century of settlement, wealthy Virginians began to distinguish themselves more from their social inferiors by their consumption of material goods. Whereas nearly all planters, whether rich or poor, had made do with very little in the way of creature comforts throughout the seventeenth century, in the eighteenth century there developed a greater disparity in the amount, quality, and type of material possessions that Chesapeake colonists owned.²¹ Moreover, in place of the relatively modest homes the elite planters of the seventeenth century had built for themselves, the eighteenth-century gentry began to build the mansions and estates for which they are now famous, such as Shirley, Westover, and Stratford. Nevertheless, as land was always


cheaper and more readily available in the Chesapeake than back in England, slaves, rather than land, became the most important part of a family’s property and cemented its position within the ranks of the gentry.\textsuperscript{22}

Inheritance became crucial to the preservation of a family’s gentry status. In his famous essay “Politics and Social Structure in Virginia,” Bernard Bailyn argued that the relative importance of slaves over land helped to create the tangled maze of family connections especially notable among Virginia’s elite. According to Bailyn, because multiple sons and even daughters could inherit substantial amounts of this moveable property—unlike in England, where permanent hereditary estates formed the basis of a family’s status and wealth and the custom of primogeniture hindered the fortunes of younger sons and daughters—many members of a given gentry family could rise to wealth and political power. With many children available for advantageous marriages, the elite families intermarried over and over again, until they formed a tightly-knit caste by the coming of the American Revolution.\textsuperscript{23} However, while Bailyn completely discounted the importance of entail and primogeniture as tools for maintaining the gentry’s wealth and status, Holly Brewer recently called into question this view, which has long been the standard interpretation of inheritance practices in colonial Virginia. Brewer argued that the entire notion of the unimportance of primogeniture and entail in the colonial Chesapeake has been based on a flawed analysis of wills and court records. In lieu of the conception of Chesapeake inheritance practices that predominated in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Brewer has proposed that ancient English feudal inheritance practices were not only widespread in colonial Virginia but were essential to the attempts of families at the top of the social hierarchy to secure their social status. Brewer even went so far as to suggest that, due to the success of entail in the colony,

\textsuperscript{22} Bailyn, “Politics and Social Structure,” 37.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 109-111; Kulikoff, Tobacco and Slaves, 250-253 and 273-276.
“feudalism redeveloped in a new form in Virginia.”" Her take on the subject of inheritance is, of course, very much in opposition to the vast bulk of writing on the subject. However, her argument gains credibility when one considers it within the context of a social elite for whom the preservation of economic advantages and political power was, in every other respect, entirely desirable.

For the fact remains that, while the native-born ruling class was doing its best to shape itself into something akin to the hereditary aristocracy of England, without the actual titles and privileges of the English nobility, the Chesapeake “gentry” occupied a relatively tenuous position on top of the social hierarchy, which its members sought to strengthen in various ways. T.H. Breen famously argued that high-stakes gambling and horse-racing, which figured so prominently in Chesapeake society, served as an outward expression of the cultural values that were the most important in colonial Chesapeake: individualism, materialism, and competitiveness. By engaging in such activities very openly and repeatedly, Chesapeake gentlemen demonstrated their independence and means, proving that they belonged at the top of society. Social pastimes were not, of course, the only way for gentlemen to reinforce their dominant status in society. Public office—usually as a justice of the peace or a burgess—conferred prestige and provided ample opportunity for personal gain. The advantages of public office had provided a way for the Chesapeake’s political elite to secure their privileges and property throughout the seventeenth century; however, a change in the relationship of the local power holders to the people over whom they had jurisdiction beginning in the 1690’s gave rise to the deferential politics of the eighteenth century.

26 Kulikoff, Tobacco and Slaves, 289.
Historians have long pondered the precise nature and reason for the development of such a political consensus. A fairly standard argument proposes that, as the gentry and lower-class whites increasingly saw their interests as mutual, rather than opposite, local officeholders sat at the top of the local political and social hierarchy not because they fought ferociously to maintain their positions but because their constituents saw them as fit to hold public office and deferred to them as the natural local leaders. Putting his own spin on this argument, Morgan contended that the political elite also extended political advantages to poor whites at least partly as a result of their believing their own racist rhetoric that elevated any white man over his black neighbors, an expansion of his hypothesis that the switch to slave labor helped to stabilize relations between the elite planters and lower-class whites.27 Whether or not racism helped effect this change, historians have long noted that lower-class whites began to enjoy a more powerful political voice in the last decade of the seventeenth century as the planter elite courted them for support in their struggles against royal authority. As the Crown attempted to limit the political and economic power of the native colonial elite, the wealthy planters appealed to lower-class white voters, who, in exchange for votes, were able to make certain demands upon their representatives. Although family connections and wealth were still essential for holding office as a justice of the peace, a sheriff, or an elected burgess, such qualifications did not necessarily guarantee that anyone possessing those qualities would attain political power. While public office—elected or not—was a way of preserving the privileges and advantages of the gentry, to a significant degree officeholders were also reliant on their social inferiors for their consent to the arrangement.28

27 Morgan, American Slavery, American Freedom, 343-345.
Clearly, then, public life became essential to the way in which colonists defined their social hierarchy and the mutual obligations that came along with it in the Chesapeake. In a region largely devoid of towns, county courthouses were one of the primary places in which county residents gathered to conduct business, mingle with friends and acquaintances, and “see and be seen.” Although churches could also serve as centers for the life of the community, for much of the seventeenth century, very few clergy immigrated to the Chesapeake and many colonists were simply too remote to attend regular worship services. Virginia had an established Anglican Church from its earliest days as a project of the Virginia Company, but the colony’s leaders had difficulty sustaining a strong, unified religious life due to the chronic scarcity of Anglican ministers in the colony. In Maryland, the Catholic government did not give any kind of support to an organized Protestant church until the Glorious Revolution, and many Protestant Marylanders went entirely “unchurched.”29 A relatively weak Anglican Church in Virginia and a nonexistent established Protestant church in Maryland left a spiritual void into which stepped various radical Protestant groups, including Puritans in the early seventeenth century and, taking over from them after about 1660, the Society of Friends, commonly called Quakers. Such sects certainly filled the spiritual needs of many colonists, yet they could also undermine the unifying aspect of weekly church services, since many dissenters refused to participate in established religion. In light of the difficulties that the established churches faced supplying ministers to their parishes and considering the religious fragmentation that arose in many areas of the Chesapeake, court days then took on a particular importance as events bringing the whole community together. Court days thus became public spectacles in which people of all ranks

29 Horn, *Adapting to a New World*, 383-402
rubbed shoulders, thereby defining and solidifying the social hierarchy and the various obligations and privileges that accompanied it.\textsuperscript{30}

Although the justices who sat on the county courts were indeed lacking in formal legal education and presided over proceedings that were much more informal than those in England—just as Hartwell, Blair, and Chilton contemptuously alleged—they also exercised much broader authority than many of their English counterparts. Whereas the English court system had multiple courts, often with overlapping privileges and jurisdictions, the simplified system in the Chesapeake invested the county court alone with all the various functions of the English common law, chancery, and ecclesiastical courts.\textsuperscript{31} A.G. Roeber has argued that, in fact, Virginia’s justices took pride in their informal knowledge of the law and distrusted professional lawyers. He links this antagonism towards professional lawyers to a fundamentally “Country,” conservative bent among the Virginia colonists, whose worldview was framed by a more traditional conception of deference and social obligation, as opposed to a more modern, “Court,” essentially capitalist outlook. According to Roeber, the strong sense of social rank that characterized the Chesapeake also served the gentry’s self-interest because it allowed them to dispense patronage, both by aiding their social inferiors but also by requiring reciprocal duties. For the gentlemen justices, in particular, this patriarchal power was important because as the leaders of the county, they could delegate the more onerous duties of the multiple offices they so often held to their “clients.”\textsuperscript{32}

Multiple office-holding was common well into the eighteenth century, in spite of the Crown’s periodic attempts to limit the practice. Many justices also served as sheriffs and


\textsuperscript{31}Roeber, 41-44.

\textsuperscript{32}Ibid., 24-31 and 46-47.
assemblymen for their counties. Although justices could not sit on the bench at the same time they were sheriffs, a one-year stint as sheriff could yield significant economic benefits, and sheriffs were generally asked back to the bench after their term was up. In Virginia, a justice could sit on the bench and represent his county in the House of Burgesses simultaneously, thus extending his influence from his home county to the broader colonial government. In addition to these two prestigious offices, justices often filled a variety of smaller offices in the county as well, including positions as surveyors, vestrymen, and even coroners. The one office that the justices did not control was that of county clerk, whom the secretary of the colony appointed. Clerks generally trained for their position at the capital, which distanced them both from the life of the county and from the circle of men who filled every other county office. It is also worth noting that some of the wealthiest and most prestigious members of the gentry sat on the governor’s council; however, very few men ever made it onto the council, and thus many counties, particularly the poorer ones, only ever supplied one or perhaps two men to that position over the entire colonial period.

Besides holding multiple positions in the county government, many colonial justices of the peace also filled multiple economic and social roles within their home counties. One is inclined to think of all members of the gentry as gentlemen planters—indeed, according to T.H. Breen, the demanding routine of managing a tobacco plantation was an essential component of the entire worldview of the Chesapeake’s social elite. However, many historians have noted that many of the colonial justices were, in fact, primarily merchants, rather than planters. Despite arguments that Chesapeake colonists distrusted merchants, the fact remains that

merchants played an essential role in a region with no large commercial centers. Diversification into trade and other professions could also provide a measure of security against fluctuations in the price of tobacco, which were especially low in the 1690’s. Furthermore, besides being a liaison between the lower-class residents of their counties and the larger, outside economy, members of the gentry were also essential to the interior economy of the county, lending money to their “clients.” While such extra-planting activities did not necessarily benefit elite planters economically, they were often politically useful in that they helped to widen planters’ circle of acquaintances. By filling multiple roles both in society and in politics, Chesapeake gentlemen exemplified not only the role of the benevolent patriarch but also the virtues of self-sufficiency and independence, qualities they idealized and which would arguably push them to play a major role in the Revolution later on.

Although the most prosperous gentry families of the most fertile tobacco-growing counties—the Carters, Lees, Randolphins, and Beverleys—have become part of Virginia legend, the patriarchal and aristocratic ideals they strove for and embodied were also the aim of smaller, less spectacularly prosperous gentry families all over the region. While very few men approached the success of someone like Robert “King” Carter, each county, rich and poor, had its own social hierarchy at the top of which sat local elite families who fulfilled the same role as their wealthier counterparts on a more modest scale. Isle of Wight’s elites may not have been the most famous members of the Council, speakers of the House of Burgesses, or leaders of the Revolution, but they nevertheless shared in the deferential, gentry-led political and social culture that predominated in the eighteenth century.

Map of Section of Isle of Wight County Bordering the James River

Chapter One: Foundations of Power

In March 1661/2, Virginia’s Assembly restated many of the laws governing the colony, reaffirming the need for county courts for “the more due administration of justice in the several counties, and the greater ease of the people in obtaining the same...as of long time hath been accustomed.” The wording of this act was a reminder not only of the county courts’ relatively long history in the young colony, but also of their importance to settlers’ daily lives as visible, local institutions in a colony that was rapidly expanding away from its center of government at Jamestown. Since the creation of the eight original counties in 1634, the Assembly had gradually enhanced the power and scope of the authority of the “countie” courts, as it had first termed them in 1642. The need for an institution to oversee all local affairs, not merely strictly legal matters, resulted in local courts that were at once courts of law and administrative bodies, whose duties included collecting taxes, organizing the defenses of the county through the local militia, maintaining the local roads, and the care of the poor. In spite of the fact that the men of the court were officially called “ justices of the peace” after 1661, they bore a much broader range of duties both officially and unofficially, acting essentially as both judges and county supervisors. While the General Court at the capital reserved the ability to try capital criminal cases, the broad jurisdiction granted to the county courts is evidenced in the Assembly’s declaration that “all causes of what value or nature whatsoever not touching life or member may be tried att the county courts.” Furthermore, in order to reduce the caseload in the General

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1 In order to prevent confusion, I will give all dates under both the old and new systems used in England and the English colonies. From the Middle Ages until 1751, the English legal year began on March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation; since 1751, the new year has started on January 1.
Court by broadening the jurisdiction of the local courts, “noe arrest” was to be made “to the generall court in any action under the value of sixteen hundred pounds of tobacco or sixteen pounds sterling.”

The justices of the peace who sat on the court in Isle of Wight County at the end of the seventeenth century were thus members of an institution with very broad local powers. They appear throughout the court records, not only as presiding judges in the various disputes that the residents of the county brought to them, but also in their various administrative capacities. For example, Thomas Giles was assigned to take the list of tithables for his area of the county in 1694 and again in 1695, and the court appointed justices John Goodrich and Anthony Holladay to serve on an inter-county committee to resolve a boundary dispute between Isle of Wight and adjacent Surry County in 1694. In Virginia, where much of the complexity of English institutions was lost in the colonial environment, county justices of the peace also policed the morality of their neighbors, imposing sentences for bastardy, adultery, and other moral offenses that fell under the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical courts back in England. When Samuel Bridger petitioned the Governor’s Council to prosecute Richard Reynolds and other residents of Isle of Wight “for a Ryott” in 1699, he was acting in this capacity, punishing the revelry of Reynolds and his companions.

Because justices occupied such a prominent role in the day-to-day running of the county, it is no surprise that the men appointed to serve as justices of the peace were men of means and high social standing. In a manual for county justices printed in Williamsburg in 1736, George

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7 John Anderson Brayton, ed., The Court Orders of Isle of Wight County, Virginia, October 1693-May 1695 (Memphis, TN: J.A. Brayton, 1999), 11, 34, and 60. Hereafter cited as Court Orders, 1693-1695. The page numbers refer to the numbers on the original document, not the page numbers of the transcribed records.
Webb, a justice for New Kent County, cited the qualifications for an ideal justice of the peace as propounded in Michael Dalton’s famous and widely-used 1630 publication, *The countrey iustice*. Justices were to be

Men of Substance and Ability of Body and Estate; of the best Reputation, good Governance, and Courage for the Truth; Men fearing God, not seeking the Place for Honor or Conveniency, but endeavouring to serve the Peace and good Government of their County, wherein they ought to be resident; Lovers of Justice, judging the People equally and impartially at all Seasons, using Diligence in hearing and determining Causes, and not neglecting the Public Service for private Emploiment or Ease; of known Loyalty to the King, not respecting Persons, but the Cause; and they ought to be Men of competent Knowledge in the Laws of their Country, to enable them to execute their Office and Authority to the Advancement of Justice, the Benefit of the People, and without Reproach to themselves.  

Ideally, then, justices were to be not so much career lawyers or judges with extensive knowledge of the law, but *gentlemen* whose qualifications for holding public office rested more on their personal stability and moral substance.  

Webb’s reference to Dalton’s description of a county justice underlines the fact that even if colonial society was more “provincial” than English society, Virginians still retained essentially the same notions about who should hold power in the counties. Although Virginia’s leaders could not rely on ancient lineages and a long tradition of rule to undergird their authority, wealth generally served as an acceptable substitute. 

Wealth, above all else, was the key that unlocked the door to power and prestige in the Chesapeake. An examination of the qualifications of Isle of Wight County’s justices of the peace demonstrates the extent to which wealth translated into social and political power.

Not surprisingly, the men who had risen to the top of the social hierarchy in Isle of Wight County by the end of the seventeenth century were on the whole a wealthy group of men. We

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10 This enduring notion of a “gentleman justice” rather than a legal professional is what A.G. Roeber asserts was the dominant vision of the justice of the peace in Virginia through most of the colonial period.
can look at their economic assets in three different forms: monetary wealth and the value of their household goods, as taken from estate appraisals; land holdings as listed on an extant quit rent list for the county from 1704; and slave ownership as taken from wills and estate inventories. While estate appraisals and inventories can provide an interesting glimpse into disparities in the standard of living throughout the county, too few of these lists exist for the particular justices I have studied to permit extensive study and comparison. Finally, despite the crucial importance of land to the English conception of aristocracy and to one’s livelihood in an agricultural society like the Chesapeake, in Isle of Wight the mere extent of landholdings is not always the best gauge of status and prestige. As noted in the introduction, many historians of the Chesapeake have argued that land was, indeed, somewhat less important as a marker of social status throughout the Chesapeake because it was simply so much more available in the colonies than in England. Of these three components, we shall see that slave ownership appears to be the most telling indicator of social status, a finding that confirms the perennial importance of labor that historians have noted across the Chesapeake. Nevertheless, the three factors are clearly interrelated, and thus it is the combination of the three that produces the most complete picture of the basis for power among Isle of Wight County’s elite.

While estate inventories are simply not as useful in this particular context as they have been in other settings, the few available for our justices nevertheless provide a good indication of the justices’ social status relative to their neighbors in Isle of Wight. Estate inventories listed the

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11 For various legal reasons, not all estates were necessarily appraised. For example, the authors of an article on the dangers of using estate appraisals to assess wealth in colonial Virginia noted that the revision of Virginia’s laws in 1748, which included a clarification of the older laws regarding wills and estates, provided that if a testator died without debt (that is, if his assets were worth more than his liabilities) and the court believed that neither the testator nor his executors were committing fraud, then the testator could direct that the court not enter an appraisal of his estate into the public record. Thus, it is possible that in the case of the wealthiest or most un-suspect estates of Isle of Wight, no appraisal exists in the county records. Harold B. Gill, Jr. and George M. Curtis, III, “Virginia’s Colonial Probate Policies and the Preconditions for Economic History,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 87:1 (1979), 71.
possessions of the deceased, not including land, and appraisals attached value to those possessions, either in English pounds sterling or in pounds of tobacco, a common measurement in the seventeenth century. Of the three justices whose estates were appraised after their deaths, all were noticeably wealthier than most of the county’s other residents, although wealth did vary within the group. At the top of the list was James Day, whose estate was worth around £300. James Benn, on the other hand, appears only to have owned an estate worth slightly under 20000 pounds of tobacco at his death in 1696—a hefty difference. Between these two men ranked John Goodrich, whose estate was worth around 40000 pounds of tobacco. Converting pounds of tobacco to pounds sterling, the variation in wealth more obvious: John Goodrich and James Benn were worth around £167 and £80, respectively, in relation to James Day’s £300.

Although these three justices differed rather widely in terms of their personal wealth, considering that most householders in both England and the Chesapeake were worth less than £50 when they died, it is clear that none of the justices was poor by any means. For an example, all of these justices, James Benn included, were substantially wealthier than their fellow Isle of Wight resident Charles Bateman, whose estate was appraised at a mere 1171 pounds of tobacco—less than £10—upon his death in 1694. The few items Bateman possessed when he died consisted of barely enough furniture and cookware to live on, and even those small comforts he did own—including some earthenware, a bed, a couple of tables, three chairs, and one iron pot—were certainly of poor quality. Bateman’s estate was one of the smallest estates in the records, but he was by no means alone at the very bottom of the spectrum of wealth in the

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13 I made this conversion assuming an estimated Surry County tobacco price of 1 pence per pound of tobacco that Kevin Kelly used in *The Economic and Social Development of Seventeenth-Century Surry County, Virginia*, 231.
Moreover, relative to the five-year median average estate value for nearby Surry County in 1700—6649 pounds of tobacco, or approximately £28—the justices for Isle of Wight County were fairly well-to-do for their area. In general, middle- and upper-middle class householders were worth between £50 and £250, and thus John Goodrich and James Benn were both within a respectable range of wealth for colonial society, particularly in the seventeenth century when living standards were fairly poor even for the more successful planters. Goodrich’s household goods were probably not sumptuous, but he owned enough furniture, cookware, trade tools, and livestock to give him a fairly comfortable standard of living. Unlike the terse listing of Charles Bateman’s possessions, the inventory of John Goodrich’s estate described his bed, for instance, as “1 Feather bed & Bolster, 2 pillows, 1 Rug, 1 pr Blanketts, 1 pr Sheets, 1 New set of Curtains & Vallence, & bedstead all very good.”

At £300, James Day represented the top echelon of colonial society. Although he is not mentioned as a merchant in any of the county records, his estate appraisal suggests that he may have engaged in at least limited local trade. If he did not, he certainly possessed more than simply the necessities of life: Day’s estate included several pair of clothing, men’s and women’s shoes, four pair of silk laces, various trade tools, and a variety of armaments. Of course, none of these three justices was wealthy on the scale of the more famous families of the Chesapeake, but they were nevertheless far better off than most other Virginians in the 1690’s. Because the Southside counties in general did not attract the wealthiest settlers and produced poorer-quality tobacco, they also had more equal income distributions. The Southside thus lacked the striking

14 Appraisal of Charles Bateman’s Estate, 14 June 1694, Isle of Wight County Deed Book, 1688-1704 (accessed on microfilm from the Library of Virginia, Isle of Wight County Records Reel # 2), 118. Hereafter cited as Isle of Wight County Deeds, 1688-1704.
15 Kevin Kelly, The Economic and Social Development of Seventeenth-Century Surry County, Virginia, 217.
16 Appraisal of John Goodrich’s Estate, Isle of Wight County Deeds, 1688-1704, 417.
17 Appraisal of James Day’s Estate, Isle of Wight County Deeds, 1688-1704, 446-449.
18 James Horn, Adapting to a New World, 309-328.
disparities in the standard of living and the social chasms that divided many of the northern counties.\textsuperscript{19} The fact that James Day, John Goodrich, and James Benn were not markedly wealthy may also reflect this regional characteristic.

Because the estate inventories do not include landholdings, it is important to examine the amount of land each justice owned as well, for in a society reliant on a cash crop, land, in terms of both the absolute amount and its location, was essential to anyone’s economic well-being. While it is virtually impossible to determine the full extent of anyone’s landholdings from his will, a 1704 quitrent list for Isle of Wight County, one of the only early quitrent lists to survive for the county, can give us a rough idea of how much land the county’s justices had in relation to their neighbors in the previous decade.\textsuperscript{20} For justices who died prior to 1704, the landholdings of their heirs can provide an estimation of how much land they held when they died, especially since many of those justices entailed their land upon certain children. Assuming that the courts enforced the entailments, at least for one generation, we can expect the 1704 landholdings of the children to be very similar to what they inherited from their fathers, since it would have been very difficult to sell a piece of land once it had been entailed. Moreover, most of the desirable land in older counties like Isle of Wight had already been claimed by about 1680, so we can assume that the heirs did not add any significant land patents to their holdings. It is possible, of course, that the heirs could have purchased land in the county. However, if they had already inherited large amounts of land and the price of the land around them was rising, it is unlikely that they immediately purchased more land.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, 199.
\textsuperscript{20} Most wills name indeterminate amounts of land, such as “the plantation I now live on,” or “my land at the head of the creek.”
\textsuperscript{21} In a chapter on land in the Chesapeake in \textit{Adapting to a New World}, James Horn explained that most of the best land in the tidewater was taken up by 1680, and, due to the tobacco depression, settlers did not press into new areas of settlement to patent new land until later in the eighteenth century, when prices rose again. Rather than moving towards the frontiers of the tidewater, settlers tended to leave Virginia and Maryland altogether, moving to new
While the absence of a list of tithables for the county to accompany the quitrent roll means that we can only know the amounts of land that landowners possessed and not how many freedmen were in the county altogether, the relative numbers of freedmen and freeholders for adjacent Surry County in 1704 can put the numbers for Isle of Wight County in perspective.\textsuperscript{22} As Surry and Isle of Wight were very similar economically and had approximately the same number of freeholders in 1704—Surry was home to 266 freeholders, while Isle of Wight had 262—we can reasonably assume that freeholders as a percentage of the entire population of freedmen was also similar in the two counties. Like Surry County, where fifty-seven percent of all freedmen owned land in 1704, probably fifty to sixty percent of householders in Isle of Wight County owned land at the turn of the eighteenth century. Thus, simply by virtue of being on the quitrent list, each justice who appeared on the list was automatically ahead of forty to fifty percent of the other householders in the county. Of course, one would expect justices to be included in the landowning, wealthier portion of the county’s population, yet it is useful to bear in mind the fact that approximately half of the county’s residents probably owned no land whatsoever and were forced to live as tenants on other men’s land.

The justices’ landholdings varied widely. At one end of the spectrum, Samuel Bridger and his brother William jointly owned nearly 12,900 acres, which represented nearly nine percent of the total land owned in the county. By comparison, the only justice even to approach the Bridgers in acreage was Arthur Smith, whose heir, Arthur Smith, Jr., held 3600 acres, presumably the land his father had entailed upon him when he died in 1696. While Arthur Smith, Sr. appears to have given the most substantial part of his land to his son Arthur, he also

\textsuperscript{22} The numbers for Surry County are in Kevin Kelly’s book, \textit{Seventeenth-Century Surry County, Virginia}, 110.
willed smaller portions of land to many members of his family, including his daughters and their offspring. Although the descent of Arthur Smith, Sr.’s landholdings became very complicated and difficult to track after his death, it is clear that he controlled a sizeable amount of land during his lifetime. Most of the other justices owned substantial, but by no means extraordinary, amounts of land ranging from Henry Applewhaite’s 1500 acres to George Moore’s 400 acres. Clearly, just as with the estate appraisals, landholdings among the twelve justices varied widely. Out of all the justices studied, Jeremiah Exum appears to have owned the smallest amount of land—a mere 300 acres by 1704, which was barely more than the county mean of 290 acres.

Table 1: Landholdings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Justice</th>
<th>Landholding (1704 List)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Henry Applewhaite</td>
<td>1500 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Baker</td>
<td>750 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Benn</td>
<td>Unknown (heir does not appear on quit rent lists)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Bridger</td>
<td>12900 acres (held jointly with brother William)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Day</td>
<td>1300 acres (held by heir, James Day, Jr. in 1714)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremiah Exum</td>
<td>300 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Giles</td>
<td>880 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Goodrich</td>
<td>Unknown (heir does not appear on quit rent lists)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Holladay</td>
<td>860 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humphrey Marshall</td>
<td>600 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Moore</td>
<td>400 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur Smith</td>
<td>3607 acres (held by heir, Arthur Smith, Jr.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is not surprising that some of the justices for Isle of Wight were among the county’s largest landholders. The Bridgers, of course, owned far more land than anyone else in the county, having inherited the famously vast tracts of land that Colonel Joseph Bridger had patented in the mid-seventeenth century, including his home at Whitemarsh Plantation and land at “Currawaugh,” located along the Nansemond River. As one of Governor Berkeley’s cronies and a member of the Council, Colonel Bridger was certainly able to use his position to acquire well-situated land in Isle of Wight. Arthur Smith’s family had patented their land even earlier than Colonel Bridger. In 1637 Arthur Smith, the father of the justice of the 1690’s, had patented 1450 acres in Isle of Wight County at Pagan Creek, one of the first areas settled in the county when Captain Lawne and Captain Basse established their plantations near there in 1619.\(^{23}\) Due to their early land patents in the county, the Smiths thus benefited not only from acquiring large amounts of land but also from having the fortune to own land located along a prime waterway.

As the best land was taken up over the course of the seventeenth century, landholdings like the Bridgers’ and the Smiths’ certainly increased in value and thus augmented the families’ economic and social standings. In order to preserve such advantages, both Colonel Bridger and Arthur Smith entailed their estates upon their heirs.\(^{24}\) Bridger provided that his land should descend through the male line, stipulating, for instance, that his 850 acres from “Captain Upton” and his 300 acres from “Mr. Seward” were to go to “my Sonne Samuell Bridger, dureinge his Naturall life and after his decease to the heyres Male of his Body lawfully begotten.” If Samuel died without a male heir—which appears to have been the case—his land was to revert back to

\(^{23}\) I took the figures for the 1704 and 1714 quitrent rolls from Microsoft Excel spreadsheets that Professor Julie Richter was kind enough to pass along to me. The original quitrent lists are in the Public Records Office in London. The information on the land grants and patents came from Nell Marion Nugent, ed., *Cavaliers and Pioneers: Abstracts of Virginia Land Patents and Grants, 1623-1800*, vol. 1 (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1999), 82.

\(^{24}\) For information on the technical aspects of entail, I have relied heavily on Holly Brewer’s article, “Entailing Aristocracy in Colonial Virginia,” which contains a very clear explanation of the institution’s origins and how it worked.
William’s line, and, indeed, after Samuel’s death in 1713, William is listed as the sole owner of over 10,000 acres in 1714 where he and Samuel had been listed as joint owners in 1704. Smith made his will more complicated, leaving most of his land to his sons in tail male, but if his sons died without male heirs, the land was then to descend to the sons’ female heirs, all “lawfully begotten,” of course. In order to ensure completely the security of his land within the Smith family, Smith then made a further provision that if all his sons died with no legitimate heirs whatsoever, the land was to descend to Smith’s three daughters and their male heirs “For ever.”

Whether entail was or was not rigorously enforced in Virginia as it was in England (historians have argued both ways), Bridger and Smith both undeniably intended for their land to pass down according to the practice. In leaving land very purposefully entailed—especially when one considers Smith, who went to a great deal of trouble to outline the various paths his property could take through his descendants—Colonel Bridger and Arthur Smith clearly expressed the desire to preserve both their land and their families’ social status. Moreover, evidence from later in the eighteenth century indicates that these entailments were, indeed, enforced according to their originators’ desires. In 1754 a later Joseph Bridger had to petition the Assembly in Williamsburg to allow him to dock the entail on his lands at Currawaugh in order to sell them; the Assembly accepted the petition on the condition that Bridger use the proceeds from the sale of the land to buy slaves to be added to the entail at old Colonel Bridger’s home plantation of Whitemarsh. Arthur Smith IV also had to petition the legislature and agree to compensate his heirs by adding a water mill to their entailment when he wanted to dock the entail on part of his land in 1752 so that he could sell it to the county in order to build what

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would become the town of Smithfield.\(^{28}\) Although in both cases the Assembly permitted the petitioners to dock their entails without too much of a struggle, the legislature ensured that they compensated their heirs for the lost part of the estate, even when the entail was being broken in order to found a town for the benefit of the entire county. Thus the “dead hand” (mortmain) of entails created by the early elite of Isle of Wight in the late seventeenth century continued to direct the affairs of the county’s land and inhabitants throughout the colonial period.

While Bridger and Smith left very large estates entailed, justices with less land still hoped to protect the family estates they had carved out when they passed them along to their children. Henry Applewhaite divided his 1500 acres between his four sons and a grandson when he died in 1704, entailing all of the land, much of which was located along the Blackwater River, a desirable frontier area for most of the seventeenth century that later became the dividing line between Isle of Wight and the newly-created Southampton County in 1749.\(^{29}\) Although James Day died before 1700 and did not list any determinate acreages in his will, he entailed his entire estate upon his eldest son, also James Day, who appears on the quitrent list of 1714 as the possessor of 1300 acres, from which we may infer that James Day, Sr. owned about the same amount of land. Day’s will indicates that all of his children were very young when he died; thus James Day, Jr. most likely did not acquire any significant amounts of land between his father’s death and 1714.\(^{30}\) Like Applewhaite, Day was clearly not among the very largest landholders in Isle of Wight, but he nevertheless possessed a very respectable estate and sought to use that estate to preserve his family’s status. When considered in light of so many entailed estates, the rise of a clear native-born ruling class appears to be the result not only of increased demographic

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 99.
\(^{29}\) Will of Henry Applewhaite, 9 May 1704, Will and Deed Book II, 462-463; King, Historical Notes on Isle of Wight County, 302.
\(^{30}\) Will of James Day, 10 August 1700, Will and Deed Book II, 428-430.
stability but also of a conscious effort on the part of the politically-powerful, propertied men of the late seventeenth century.

Interestingly, whereas most of the justices who created entails allotted at least a parcel of land to each of their sons and often even to their daughters, Day entailed his entire estate upon his eldest son. By adhering to the ancient English practice of primogeniture, Day left his younger sons, Thomas and William, to inherit land only if James, Jr.—and, in William’s case’s, James and Thomas—died without a male heir. Yet Day’s will stands in stark contrast to the wills of most of the other leading men of Isle of Wight, who were more generous towards their other children. Perhaps because Day’s estate was not as large as that of someone like Colonel Bridger, he hoped to preserve intact what land he did possess by leaving all of it to his eldest son. It is also possible that Day simply did not like his younger sons or thought that they would mismanage the estate, although this explanation is somewhat implausible since Day’s children appear to have been fairly young, and it is difficult to imagine what filial trespasses could cause a father to disinherit a child of twelve or thirteen. Nevertheless, whatever the reason for Day’s decision, it probably lessened his younger sons’ chances of reaching the same prominence as their father or elder brother.

Yet while the amount of land men like Samuel Bridger and Arthur Smith owned was surely tied up with their prominence in the county, what is interesting is that land does not appear to have been the ultimate determinant of social status. The justices of the peace did not simply constitute a list of the twelve largest landowners in the county. In fact, justices like George Moore and Jeremiah Exum possessed very modest parcels of land relative to some of their colleagues. Even Thomas Giles, who owned 880 acres of land, trailed nearly forty other men in the county in landownership. Of course, Giles, Anthony Holladay, and Henry Baker all
possessed more than 700 acres, the average amount of land owned by justices between 1660 and 1720 in Charles and St. Mary’s Counties in Maryland, where the connection between wealth and appointment to the county courts was very similar to that seen in Virginia.\(^{31}\) At the same time, however, the fact that not all of the largest landowners in the county were appointed to the commission of the peace indicates that landownership was merely one aspect in a more complex mix of factors that shaped Isle of Wight’s social hierarchy. Although some men, like Arthur Allen and Lewis Burwell, were absentee landowners whose primary residences were in other counties, many of the substantial landowners in Isle of Wight did, in fact, live in the county and were active in county life as jurymen and estate appraisers and in various other duties that were small but necessary to the daily functioning of the county. However, many of these men never attained a position on the commission of the peace. For example, George Williamson, who was the sixth largest landowner in Isle of Wight County in 1704 with 2735 acres, was a jury foreman in 1694 and even became a surveyor for the county in 1699.\(^{32}\) These positions, however, appear to be as far as Williamson ever got on the ladder of public offices. When one compares Williamson to Jeremiah Exum, it is clear that land, although an undeniably crucial component of wealth in the Chesapeake, was not the sole determinant of its owner’s social status.

Although it is impossible to say exactly why one man was appointed as a justice of the peace over another, there are several plausible explanations for why some justices whose landholdings were seemingly rather small still managed to ascend the county’s social ladder. For someone like Henry Baker, who appears over and over again in the county records as a “merchant,” agriculture and hence land would not have been as important since his commercial activities may even have been his primary source of income. Nevertheless, with his 750 acres,

\(^{31}\) Alan Kulikoff quotes these figures in *Tobacco and Slaves*, 268-269.

Baker was probably not solely a merchant but a merchant-planter, a hybrid common in the colonial Chesapeake, particularly in the seventeenth century before the large English and Scottish trading firms came to dominate the region in the eighteenth century. Baker may have been very much like Tobias Mickleburrough, the small merchant-planter of Middlesex County whose business Darrett and Anita Rutman characterize as “conducted anywhere and everywhere—in the hall of his house, while standing in the entry, at church during the time before and after service devoted to ‘strolling around.’” Catering to the needs of his neighbors, Baker most likely gained both profit and valuable personal relationships with other planters in Isle of Wight. As a merchant, Baker’s economic success and political rise almost certainly went hand-in-hand.

Another factor to bear in mind when examining the landholdings of the justices is the fact that some of the justices probably held land in other nearby counties, just as Arthur Allen of adjacent Surry County held substantial amounts of land in Isle of Wight. In his will, James Day made provision for the education of his children by arranging to have his agents in London sell off his property there. In Day’s case, then, his property holdings were not only in Isle of Wight County but even as far away as England. Henry Baker probably represents a more typical case, however, as his landholdings outside the county were still nearby. Baker appears to have rented land in Lawnes Creek Parish in Surry County, and in 1694 he sold 100 acres of land in Nansemond County to Thomas Wickins. The fact that Baker’s son, also Henry, is noted as “Henry Baker of Nansemond” in a deed selling off slaves from his father’s estate suggests that

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33 Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 265.
34 *A Place in Time*, 205.
the family retained its ties to Nansemond as well as to Isle of Wight. Thus the acreages listed
on the Isle of Wight quit rent list may not reflect the full extent of any man’s landholdings. A
more complete picture of landownership among the justices would require an investigation into
all possible landholdings in other counties and perhaps even in other colonies.

While some justices appear to have owned land outside of Isle of Wight, other justices
who appear to have owned relatively little land in 1704 had, in fact, patented larger tracts of land
in the county earlier in the seventeenth century from which they had presumably given or sold
off parts over the years. George Moore, for instance, deeded part of his 1669 patent of 1400
acres to his daughter Magdlen as part of her dowry, from which she, in turn, deeded 200 acres to
her son George. Although fathers usually held onto their land until they died often as a way to
maintain paternal control over their children even as adults, it was not unheard of for fathers to
give land to their children during their lifetimes. As Moore does not appear to have had any
sons and he deeded land to his daughter, perhaps he was not concerned with maintaining control
since Magdlen, as a married woman, owed her obedience to her husband. Besides giving some
of his land away to his daughter, Moore also sold an additional 100 acres of this patent to
Thomas Ward of Surry in 1709, and he most likely sold other parts of his patent over time in a
similar fashion. As the older areas of settlement became more densely populated towards the
end of the seventeenth century, the large tracts of land that men like Moore had snatched up
earlier in the century increased in value and could provide a convenient source of income when
sold off, particularly for men who did not need all of the land to which they had laid claim.

37 Deed of Henry Baker, 24 February 1712/13, Isle of Wight County Deed Book, 1704-1715, (accessed on microfilm
from the Library of Virginia, Isle of Wight County Records, Reel #2), 234. Hereafter cited as Isle of Wight County
Deeds, 1704-1715.
38 Deed of Thomas and Magdlen Carter to George Carter, 18 February 1700, Isle of Wight County Deeds, 1688-
1704, 324.
39 Kulikoff, Tobacco and Slaves, 187.
40 Deed of George and Jane Moore to Thomas Ward, 22 February 1709, Isle of Wight County Deeds, 1704-1715,
145-146.
Finally, because the “Southside” counties like Isle of Wight were not the most fertile land for growing tobacco, they did not attract as many wealthy settlers, and social divisions within the counties were less notable than in some of the richer counties such as Gloucester along the York River. The Southside counties tended to have more smallholders and fewer tobacco barons.\textsuperscript{41} Even the Bridgers, Isle of Wight’s largest landowners, simply could not compare to the likes of Charles Carter, who inherited about 120,000 acres as the eldest son of Robert “King” Carter’s eldest son. Charles Carter’s holdings included his grandfather’s plantation at Corotoman in Lancaster County overlooking the Rappahannock, prime real estate compared with the relatively poor soil of Isle of Wight.\textsuperscript{42} When one compares the Bridgers’ 13,000 acres with Charles Carter’s 120,000, it is understandable that Isle of Wight’s county elite simply were not in the same league with gentry landowners in other parts of Virginia.

If land does not tell the whole story of what determined wealth and social status in late seventeenth-century Isle of Wight County, then we must consider slave ownership, as many historians have focused on labor, rather than land, as being the scarcer and more valuable component in the production of tobacco throughout the seventeenth century. Virginians were completing the switch from white servant labor to black slave labor right at the turn of the eighteenth century, a development that manifests itself in the gradual but nevertheless persistent increase in the number of slaves mentioned in wills and estate inventories in Isle of Wight County from 1690 to 1709. Although it is difficult to measure the full extent of slave ownership in the county because of the lack of tithable lists, it is possible to get a rough idea of the pattern of slave ownership through an examination of wills and estate inventories. This approach has many weaknesses, of course. The data on slaves is generally sparse and spread out, and any

\textsuperscript{41} Horn, \textit{Adapting to a New World}, 199.
\textsuperscript{42} Brewer, “Entailing Aristocracy,” 330.
slaves not explicitly listed in wills or inventories are not counted. Arthur Smith, for instance, made a vague mention of his slaves in his will, but he did not leave any indication of how many he owned. While estate inventories generally give a more complete picture of how many slaves an individual owned because they often list the slaves by name and even describe them, inventories simply do not exist for every person who died between 1690 and 1709. The information gleaned from these sources, then, can only provide a general picture of slave ownership in the county at the turn of the eighteenth century, yet even this rough profile reveals many intriguing patterns in slave ownership both in the county as a whole and among the justices of the peace.43

To begin, based on the fairly small number of wills and inventories that list slaves between 1690 and 1719, it is clear that slaveholding became more prevalent in the county over time. While the vast majority of people who died during those years made no indication that they owned any slaves, there is a steady increase in the number of slave owners, from eight percent of the wills and inventories between 1690 and 1699, to nineteen percent between 1700 and 1709, and, finally to twenty-nine percent between 1710 and 1719. While some large-scale slave-owning is apparent in these three decades, the number of small slaveholders, people owning between one and three slaves, accounts for both the majority of slave owners in Isle of Wight County and for the fastest-growing segment of the slave-owning population. To compare Isle of Wight and Surry again, the much more complete data that Kelly was able to obtain for

43 I took the data for slave ownership only from wills and inventories dated between 1690 and 1709 from Will and Deed Book II. While slaves may appear in wills and inventories that appear in other deed and will books for that era for the county, Will and Deed Book II is the primary source of wills and inventories for the county from the mid-seventeenth century through the first two decades of the eighteenth century, so I restricted my examination to this concentrated source of data.
Surry County also reveal increasingly broad slave ownership towards the turn of the eighteenth century with a marked propensity towards small-scale ownership.\textsuperscript{44}

Table 2: Slave Ownership in Isle of Wight County by Decade, 1690-1719

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Households owning slaves, 1690-1699</th>
<th>Households owning slaves, 1700-1709</th>
<th>Households owning slaves, 1710-1719</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-3 slaves</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6 slaves</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7+ slaves</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall percentage of slave owners in the county based on wills</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the evidence necessary to form a complete picture of slave ownership among Isle of Wight’s justices is simply not available, the wills and inventories that do exist indicate that the county’s justices owned more slaves than most people in the county, which suggests that slave ownership was a very important factor in determining social status and prestige. Whether this prestige derived simply from the fact that slaves represented an economic investment that demonstrated substantial financial bottom or from the fact that, as James Horn argues, a large slave labor force symbolized the owner’s independence from his white neighbors by eliminating his need for the “casual labor” that poorer whites could provide, slave ownership appears to have played an central role in denoting social status in Isle of Wight County.\textsuperscript{45} Of the twelve justices studied, six justices either mentioned slaves in their wills or had them listed in their estate inventories. While small-scale slaveholders clearly predominated in Isle of Wight County, the

\textsuperscript{44} Kelly, \textit{Seventeenth-Century Surry County, Virginia}, 122-123.

\textsuperscript{45} Horn, \textit{Adapting to a New World}, 249.
justices stand out as some of the largest slaveholders in the county: James Day owned four slaves, Humphrey Marshall at least nine, Samuel Bridger eighteen, and Henry Baker at least twenty-six. Jeremiah Exum explicitly allotted seven of his slaves to various family members in his will, although the wording of the will indicates that he may have owned more. While Arthur Smith referred to slaves in his will, it is impossible to tell how many he owned because he did not make any mention of how many slaves he owned or to whom they were supposed to go after his death. In spite of the incompleteness of these figures on slave ownership, they do indicate that a significant number of the justices stood out from their neighbors due to their control over a large slave labor force. As slaveholding began to create more visible distinctions between the layers of Virginia society, men like Samuel Bridger and Henry Baker were demonstrating for everyone around them where they fell in the social order.

Thus slaveholding, more than any other individual factor, stands out as a prominent characteristic of the men in charge of Isle of Wight County as Virginia moved past the tumult of the seventeenth century and entered what many historians have thought of as the “Golden Age” of colonial Virginia, and, in particular, of the gentry. Isle of Wight County’s justices were clearly men of substance who stood out from the other residents of the county in terms of wealth. Nevertheless, while these justices may have worked their way to the top of society in their own county, none of them reached the ranks of the “cosmopolitan gentry,” as the Rutmans term the social elite who rose not only to the top of local society but also to the top of Virginia society as a whole. Even the justices who clearly commanded a great deal of respect in the county, such as

Arthur Smith and Samuel Bridger, could not approach the prestige of someone like William Byrd II of Charles City County or Ralph Wormeley of Middlesex County. In fact, throughout the whole colonial period the only member of Isle of Wight’s ruling class to reach the very top circle of the colony’s political hierarchy was Samuel Bridger’s father, Colonel Joseph Bridger. Colonel Bridger’s political career and wealth dwarf those of essentially all of the county’s leading men before and after him, including those of his own sons.

As one of Isle of Wight County’s only members of the Governor’s Council, whose estate was worth over £1000 when he died in 1686, Colonel Bridger was obviously a member of Virginia’s “cosmopolitan elite.”

His material wealth surpassed that of anyone else active in the county and even dwarfed that of the other men sitting on the county court. He patented thousands of acres in the 1660’s, and the appraisal of his estate indicates that he was a merchant in addition to all his other activities. With his extensive land patents, various economic enterprises, and political involvement, Bridger was no doubt like the other wealthy men whom Governor Berkeley permitted to acquire vast landholdings and other economic advantages through dubiously legal means. The list of grievances that residents of the county presented to the English commissioners sent to investigate the situation in Virginia immediately after Bacon’s Rebellion lends further credence to the negative impression of Colonel Bridger as one of Governor Berkeley’s power-abusing cronies: the angry petitioners accused Colonel Bridger of having dipped into the money taken in fines for absence from the militia, which was supposed to

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48 The appraisal of his estate lists pages and pages of everyday items “in the store,” in addition to all the items listed in his two houses.
49 Percy Scott Flippin, The Royal Government in Virginia, 1624-1775 (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1919), 215-223. In his chapter on land policy, Flippin describes the ways in which wealthy men were able to abuse the headright and escheat systems to accumulate vast landholdings, which then often lay unplanted.
be set aside for “a publique good.” Bridger’s power as a member of the governor’s inner circle clearly allowed him to gain wealth at the expense of his neighbors.

Bridger, however, was Isle of Wight’s last “cosmopolitan” power holder. In relation to Bridger, the vast majority of Isle of Wight’s justices throughout the colonial period were much more “county-oriented,” unable to contend with the William Byrds and Robert Beverleys at the capital, as Colonel Bridger was. Yet because they were less concerned with colony-wide matters than a man like Bridger, the county justices were probably much more involved with the affairs of their own county. The fact that the men who held power in Isle of Wight at the turn of the eighteenth century were not as fabulously wealthy as the storied men of Virginia’s early native elite may have kept them out of the most influential and glamorous circles in Jamestown or Williamsburg, but it also meant that they were probably more tied to their home county. It was thus their involvement in Isle of Wight County that contributed to their membership in the local social elite.

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Chapter Two: Family, Friends, and Neighbors

While wealth was clearly the foundation of social and political power in Isle of Wight County, wealth alone did not confer the prestige and social capital necessary to build a cohesive ruling class upon that foundation. Personal connections—reciprocal relationships formed between the elite and their social inferiors and familial ties formed by marriage between members of the elite—strengthened the social ladder after it was first established. Justices displayed their power within the community as they executed their role as magistrates, and holding multiple offices within the county strengthened their political connections and economic standing. As county officials, justices of the peace were part of an organization for which the efforts of men of all social classes were essential to its day-to-day functioning. Yet while most land-owning men in the county had to fulfill some duty in order to keep the county running—the local government called upon various county residents to appraise estates, sit on juries, and repair roads—the men who oversaw these duties as justices of the peace also filled most of the other prestigious offices as well. The dense kinship network that formed among the families of the governing elite further strengthened their grip on the reins of political power within the county. As early as the 1690’s, most justices were related by blood or marriage to most of their colleagues, an association that might seem ethically problematic to a modern observer. Yet this web of family and political connections was essential to the centralization of power among the Chesapeake gentry through the Revolution.

Isle of Wight’s justices of the peace amassed an impressive collection of offices and titles that reinforced their social prominence. Most of the justices, for instance, were also leaders in the local militia. As the need for a militia for protection against Indian attacks and the prospect of foreign invasion dissipated, particularly in the older counties such as Isle of Wight, Virginia’s
local militias lost much of their bite and increasingly developed into “an English-style ‘bourgeois militia,’” essentially exclusive organizations for the men in each county who could afford the arms and other supplies requisite for “service” in the militia. Thus by the 1690’s, Virginia’s militias were no longer the rough but effective fighting groups that had defended the colony against various threats in the earlier, more tenuous years of the colony’s existence. Instead, they had become more of a plaything of the county elites, who often bought decorated weapons, silk flags, and ornamental trumpets and drums to display on parade.¹ Most of the justices at the turn of the eighteenth century bore the titles that revealed their leadership in this “bourgeois militia.” Throughout the county records, John Goodrich, Henry Applewhaite, and James Benn were all distinguished as “Captain.” Not surprisingly, the Governor’s Council appointed Samuel Bridger “Lieutenant Colonel” and “Comander in Cheif” of the Isle of Wight militia in 1699, a post that his father had also held.² He probably succeeded Arthur Smith in this role, for Smith is noted as either “Colonel” or “Lieutenant Colonel” in the county records from as early as May 1677.³ Henry Baker probably succeeded Samuel Bridger as commander of the county militia: in 1706, “Lieutenant Colonel Henry Baker” bought 400 acres of land in the Upper Parish of Isle of Wight.⁴ After he became a justice of the peace, “Mr. Henry Baker” seems to have gone from being simply a “merchant” to a “Lieutenant Colonel,” a descriptor that signified not simply his profession or economic role in the county but his status as a leading player in county society.

In addition to their largely honorary commands in the militia, however, many of the justices also attained more financially lucrative positions during their time in public life. The office of county sheriff was particularly attractive because it carried with it a schedule of fees the

³ *Will and Deed Book II*, 143.
sheriff was entitled to collect for the various duties he had to perform. Some of these fees included ten pounds of tobacco for an arrest or for serving a subpoena and twelve pounds for impaneling a jury. Even simply summoning someone to court merited five pounds of tobacco.⁵ Although a justice had to step down from his position on the bench to serve as sheriff, sheriffs served only one-year terms, after which they were generally back on the bench with their fellow justices again.⁶ Five of the justices studied served terms as sheriff, although it is quite probable that many of the others did as well. Arthur Smith had served at least one term as sheriff as a younger man, in 1680.⁷ George Moore passed his office on to Henry Baker in the spring of 1694, and when Baker’s term was up the next year, he, in his turn, passed the office along to Henry Applewhaite.⁸ By 1699, it was Anthony Holladay’s turn to be sheriff of Isle of Wight.⁹ The fact that the offices of justice of the peace and sheriff were so closely tied was due largely to the fact that the Assembly decreed that sheriffs should be chosen from the county’s commission of the peace “as the commissioners of the county courts are by the laws of this country answerable for the levies and estreatments of each county of which the sheriff is usually collector.”¹⁰ Thus since the sheriff enforced the decisions of the justices, the Assembly thought it natural that the sheriff should be one from the justices’ own ranks. Yet by linking the court and the office of sheriff, the Assembly contributed to the control that the already large amount of control the justices exercised over their counties. Here we see no separation of powers, but rather a centralization of powers under one group of men.

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⁶ Ibid., 78.
⁷ Will and Deed Book II, 207.
⁸ Court Orders, 1693-1695, 34 and 87-88.
¹⁰ Hening, Statutes at Large, vol. 2, 78.
In addition to serving as both judges and law enforcement in the county, the group of men selected to be on the commission of the peace were also often elected to represent Isle of Wight in the House of Burgesses. Henry Baker, Thomas Giles, Anthony Holladay, James Benn, John Goodrich, and Samuel Bridger all represented the county at least once in the Assembly, although both James Benn and John Goodrich died before they could complete their terms.11 Unlike the office of sheriff, a man could sit on the bench and in the House of Burgesses simultaneously, and, in fact, all of the men elected as burgesses for Isle of Wight in the 1690’s were sitting justices, with the exception of John Giles, a lawyer from the county. Not only did election to the House of Burgesses confer upon a justice the distinction of having the support of his county’s voters, but it also brought with it financial benefits, similar to the office of sheriff. The authors of The Present State of Virginia noted that the law allowed each burgess 120 pounds of tobacco per day while the Assembly was in session, as well as the cost of a servant and of transportation to and from the capital.12 Each county footed the bill for its burgesses, which could run as much as 5000 pounds of tobacco per burgess for a month-long session of the Assembly. By comparison, representatives in New England received the equivalent of 20 to 30 pounds of tobacco per day, not including any other expenses.13 Thus men elected to the legislature were able to play their own role in Virginia, not simply local, politics and rub shoulders with many of the colony’s most eminent men in the capital, all while receiving an allowance that would have permitted them to live very well while away from their home plantations.

With so much of the authority in the county vested in a fairly small, select group of men, it must come as no surprise that justices sometimes overstepped their bounds or abused their

12 Hartwell, Blair, and Chilton, The Present State of Virginia, 42.
13 Morgan quotes these figures in American Slavery, American Freedom, 208.
power. Although, ideally, justices were to strive “to serve the Peace and good Government of their County,” it is inescapable that public office brought with it many opportunities for self-enrichment. George Moore, in particular, seems to have been especially aggressive and overzealous in the performance of his duties upon occasion. In 1704 Susanna Skelton, a poor widow of Isle of Wight, petitioned the Governor’s Council for the return of a boat that Moore had taken from her property when she had refused to pay him for the jury required for the inquest into the deaths of her husband and son, who had drowned together. The law permitted justices to serve as coroners and to collect the accompanying fee in the event that the county lacked a coroner, and thus Moore was, perhaps, legally within his rights to seize the boat. However, in this instance, the Council sided with the widow Skelton, declaring that “it is the opinion of the board that the same [boat] be given to the Petitioner in consideration of her Poverty.”\(^\text{14}\) Even if Moore had the right to take the widow’s property, the Council made it clear that he had overreached himself in doing so and had violated his duty to promote the welfare of his county by extracting payment from an impoverished widow. The fact that Moore had faced a similar complaint a decade earlier during his tenure as sheriff—John Pitt and Nicholas Fulgham sued him for seizing property from the estate of Philip Maccodin, for whose estate the two men were overseers—suggests that such rapacity could become habit.\(^\text{15}\) Of course, it is quite likely that Moore was an unusually aggressive justice, and clearly not all of his fellow members of the commission were so outwardly greedy. Nevertheless, the fact that Moore served in various


\(^{15}\) \textit{Court Orders}, 1693-1695, 34.
public offices for at least three decades suggests that his behavior was not singular enough to eliminate him from his position of authority.16

While abuse of power as egregious as Moore’s was probably the exception, rather than the norm, many of the justices seem to have neglected their offices from time to time, perhaps not an offense against any one individual but a violation of the notion that justices should not desert “the Public Service for private Emploment or Ease.” Court attendance among the justices varied substantially from man to man, ranging from Anthony Holladay’s dismal rate of attendance—he only attended thirty-eight percent of the sessions recorded in the Court Orders of 1693 to 1695—to the conscientious attendance record of Thomas Giles, who attended ninety percent of the court sessions in that same time period.17 Interestingly, the biggest shirkers appear to be the county’s wealthiest men: Samuel Bridger only attended court forty-three percent of the time between 1693 and 1695, and Henry Baker only attended court forty-four percent of the time before he left the bench to serve his turn as sheriff.

Although the attendance records for the justices over the very short period covered in the court orders may not be representative of their behavior over the course of all their time in public office, for Samuel Bridger, at least, such neglect of duty seems to have become a habit. When he was a burgess for the county for the 1705-1706 session of the Virginia Assembly, Bridger requested “Leave to go into the Countrey, upon extraordinary occasions” several times in that relatively short period of time.18 It is entirely possible that Bridger experienced some kind of personal or family trouble that required him to leave Williamsburg frequently during his time in

16 Moore first appeared as a justice for Isle of Wight County in 1680 (Will and Deed Book II, 207) and appears to have played an active role in county life until his death around 1710 (Will of George Moore, Will and Deed Book II, 586).
17 These attendance calculations exclude James Day’s one hundred percent attendance record, since he was only appointed to the court in the spring of 1695 and attended all three sessions that were recorded after he joined the court.
the House of Burgesses; the fact that many of his absences were close together suggests that perhaps his wife or some other family member was ill. Nevertheless, Bridger served only that one term as a burgess, and whether he decided not to stand for reelection or whether he was defeated by another candidate, offices that required frequent attendance do not seem to have suited him. Bridger was not the only burgess to distinguish himself by his failure to attend to his duty in the Assembly, however. The House of Burgesses fined both Henry Applewhaite and Thomas Giles, along with the representatives from many other counties, for their absence during the 1701 session of the Assembly.\(^{19}\) Yet in spite of absences from the court and the Assembly, the justices of Isle of Wight County do not appear to have experienced any consequent drop in influence or social status.

Despite the fact that the justices were not always conscientious in fulfilling the duties of the major county offices, they did serve the county in many smaller ways, both official and unofficial, that touched nearly every aspect of county life. As feoffees in trust for the town of Newport, also known as Patesfield, which the county leaders established under a law of 1680 requiring each county to purchase 50 acres for a town, Henry Applewhaite and George Moore were in charge of selling the half-acre lots, as the law mandated.\(^{20}\) Applewhaite also oversaw the collection of the proceeds from the goods “bought at an outcry” from John Goodrich’s estate after his untimely death in 1695.\(^{21}\) In both these capacities, the justices acted in the administrative capacity of Virginia’s justices of the peace that distinguished them from mere court judges.

Outside of such official duties, however, the justices also performed services for their social inferiors in the county that helped to form and strengthen the “ladder of dependence”

\(^{19}\) September 1701, *Journals of the House of Burgesses*, vol. 3, 276-277.


\(^{21}\) *Isle of Wight County Deeds, 1688-1704*, 292-295.
linking Isle of Wight society from the wealthy and influential justices at the top to the poor, the widowed, and the orphaned at the bottom. For example, Anthony Holladay inventoried the estate of the deceased Thomas Abbington in 1693, and he later agreed to serve as guardian for a “poor orphan” named Sarah Abbington, presumably Thomas’s daughter. It is unclear whether Holladay and the Abbingtons had some kind of relationship before Thomas’s death; perhaps they were neighbors. Whatever the link between Holladay and Abbington, it seems clear that Holladay was stepping in to aid a poor family that perhaps had no one to turn to except one of the prominent men in the area. In what may have been a similar case, Thomas Giles agreed to take on Thomas Lewis “in Tuition” until the age of nineteen after his father Richard’s death, and Giles was also to teach Thomas to read and write. There is no way of knowing whether Giles actually fulfilled his duty with regard to young Thomas, and, certainly, the records of colonial Virginia are replete with instances in which guardians failed to see through on their obligations to orphans, particularly regarding education. However, the fact that Giles left 400 acres to Newport Parish for use as a glebe in his will in 1715 suggests that he may have felt compelled to support the public good. In performing such services within the county outside of their official duties as justices of the peace, the justices not only showed themselves to be charitable, but they also formed links in the network that tied the county together, from the justices at the top of the order to the poorest tenants at the bottom.

This worked both ways, of course. Arthur Smith witnessed the nuncupative will of the widow Katherine Bathe and testified as to her wishes in court when she died in 1687, and

22 A.G. Roeber quotes this phrase from a passage in Henry Fielding’s novel, Joseph Andrews in Faithful Magistrate, 4-5.
23 Court Orders, 1693-1695, 10.
24 For information on orphans in colonial Virginia, see Darrett B. and Anita H. Rutman, “‘Now-wives and Sons-in-Law’: Parental Death in Colonial Virginia” in The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century, ed. Thad W. Tate and David L. Ammerman.
25 Will of Thomas Giles, 2 April 1715, Will and Deed Book II, 597-598.
similarly, Smith and his son Arthur Smith, Jr. together witnessed a deed of gift from the widow Ann Williams to her children in 1694.\textsuperscript{26} Yet just as frequently, the lower orders stepped forward to assist their social superiors. For example, just as the Smiths witnessed the widow Bathe’s will, Henry Bules, one of James Benn’s tenants, witnessed Benn’s will in February 1696.\textsuperscript{27} Since Benn seems to have died very suddenly, it is possible that he was forced to send for his closest neighbors to ensure that his will was valid, and as one of his tenants, Bules may have lived very close indeed to Benn. Although the justices could enhance their prestige within the community by performing services for their social inferiors, it was only when the relationship worked both ways, as in the case of James Benn’s will, that the links on the chain of social deference were complete.

Whether the justices derived deferential status from their service to the county or whether they rose to places of such authority by virtue of the fact that their neighbors already respected them and viewed them as competent leaders is not entirely clear. In the case of Samuel Bridger, who joined the commission of the peace at a young age—probably in his late twenties, and no later than the age of thirty—inherited wealth and family reputation certainly played a large role in his rapid rise to prominence in Isle of Wight.\textsuperscript{28} While many historians have focused on the economic and social benefits that the elite reaped from holding public office, it is important to note that the conferral of status could also work the other way. In their detailed study of Middlesex County, Virginia, Darrett and Anita Rutman observe that, for the most prosperous residents of their county, sitting on the court or the church vestry was not a way for them to gain


\textsuperscript{27} Will of James Benn, 6 February 1696, \textit{Will and Deed Book II}, 311-312.

\textsuperscript{28} Colonel Joseph Bridger’s will, dated August 1683, refers to his sons Samuel and William as being under the age of twenty-one. Even if we assume that Samuel was twenty-years-old in 1683, the oldest he could be in 1693, the first time he is known to have been a justice, is thirty. Thus he was most likely appointed to the bench in his late twenties or around the age of thirty, but no later. For Col. Bridger’s will, see \textit{Will and Deed Book II}, 250-251.
status for themselves as much as it was a way of “imparting...[the] status necessary to these bodies if they were to do the work of administering and adjudicating within a status-minded society.” At the same time, however, the Rutmans rightly warn against accepting the traditional view—one that has become part of Virginia mythology—that an awe-inspiring oligarchy of powerful planters ruled a relatively subservient and undifferentiated lower class beneath them. Instead, they depict a complex layering of classes below the very most elite, composed of men who actually oversaw the day-to-day business of the county and, while respectful towards the county’s grandees, commanded power and respect within the community in their own right and were not simply in awe of their “betters.”

These men from the middle layers of provincial society did take status at least in part from their role within the county; one can often chart a man’s rise—or fall—in society through the succession of county offices he held. Thus, public office could hold different meanings for men of different circumstances within a given county. While someone like Samuel Bridger probably expected an appointment to the commission of the peace based on his own wealth and his father’s status before him, for someone like Jeremiah Exum or Thomas Giles, such an appointment may have had more to do with their having demonstrated over time that they were competent and respectable.

Holding multiple public offices allowed justices to solidify themselves politically and economically, and their role in public life in both official and unofficial capacities was vital to maintaining the chain of deference that linked county society together. Yet while the reciprocal relationships that formed between justices and their social inferiors were important to holding county society together as a whole, it was the family relationships among the elite that welded Isle of Wight’s prominent families into a cohesive group—into a true social elite. By the turn of

29 Rutman and Rutman, A Place in Time, 161-163.
30 Ibid., 146-152.
the eighteenth century, in the period studied, most of the justices were already linked in some way to the complicated net of family relationships that was entering its second generation of development. The family trees of Isle of Wight’s leading families were not yet as complex and interwoven in the 1690’s as the storied lineages of the Carters, Burwells, and Custises became by the middle of the eighteenth century, and the ranks of the social elite were by no means closed to new families in the 1690’s. New names would continue to enter—and disappear from—the rolls of the justices and other high officeholders over the next few decades. At the same time, however, by the 1690’s a striking number of Isle of Wight’s justices were related by blood or marriage. When we extend our examination to the justices who succeeded them in the early eighteenth century, the emerging web of sons, cousins, and sons-in-law becomes even more apparent, having developed one generation more.

Aside from the numerous family connections that bolstered the strength and dominance of the upper layer of county society, bequests and provisions in wills bespeak neighborly and friendly affection between justices, whose relationships clearly went beyond those of mere colleagues on the bench. The aggregation of various personal ties among the justices of the peace, particularly as the county moved out of the tumult of the seventeenth century into the more placid eighteenth century, meant that economic and political power became centered in an increasingly unified social elite. It is important to remember, however, that such relationships were not only a practical path to ensuring one’s social status through “social networking,” but they also formed the basis for a sense of solidarity and a common culture among the families who reached the top of the county’s social hierarchy.
One of the oldest and most prominent families in Isle of Wight was the Arthur Smith family.\textsuperscript{31} Having settled in the county as early as the 1630’s, the Smiths had had ample time to form myriad social connections by the end of the century, both through marriage and through the friendships developed after many years of residence and active involvement in the county. Arthur Smith II’s relationship with his son-in-law, James Benn, one of his fellow justices, seems to have been particularly close, as evidenced, for instance, by the fact that Benn and his wife Jane named one of their sons Arthur, presumably after the boy’s grandfather. The Smiths and the Benns may have been close even before they were linked by marriage; Smith lived at Pagan Creek, where his father had first patented land in 1637, and Benn had inherited his own father’s land at Pagan Creek in 1659. Thus Jane Smith and James Benn were most likely neighbors and family friends before they married. In any case, Arthur Smith’s proximity to his daughter and her husband must have made him very close to the family. When Smith died in 1696, he made his sons Arthur and George executors of his will and named Benn as the overseer of his estate. It is worth noting that Smith mentioned other married daughters but said nothing of his other sons-in-law in his will; Smith thus appears to have enjoyed an especially close relationship with Benn. Unfortunately, Benn followed his father-in-law to the grave in very short order, dying just a few months after Smith wrote his will. Benn, in his turn, appointed as overseer of his own will George Smith, perhaps his wife’s uncle but more likely her brother. In the case of the Smith and Benn families, what appears in the relatively cold and laconic record of land patents and legacies

\textsuperscript{31} Not to be confused with Nicholas Smyth, an earlier justice of the peace, who does not appear to have been related to the Arthur Smiths. Throughout this paper I refer to Arthur Smith II (d. 1696) simply as “Arthur Smith,” while I differentiate the other Arthur Smiths by their number.
reveals what was probably, in reality, a very warm tie between two of the families that had settled in the county and risen to local prominence early in the county’s history.  

Like Arthur Smith and James Benn, Humphrey Marshall, a member of another of Isle of Wight’s older families, served on the bench alongside close family members: Henry Applewhaite, Sr., the father of Marshall’s son-in-law also named Henry, and later Henry Applewhaite, Jr., the son-in-law himself. While Smith, Benn, and Marshall served as justices with their in-laws, many justices were also indirectly connected to one another through prominent Isle of Wight families who were not necessarily represented on the commission of the peace in the period studied. Members of the Pitt family had previously served the county as county clerks and justices, and they would again throughout the eighteenth century; of the justices included in this study, the Pitts were related to Samuel Bridger through his mother, Hester Pitt, and to Arthur Smith through his daughter Mary, who had married a Pitt. When Samuel drew up his will in 1704, he had one of his Pitt cousins witness it. 

Historians have long noted that a high mortality rate in the Chesapeake contributed to the complex family arrangements for which the region was famous as widows and widowers married and remarried. Remarriage also helped consolidate wealth and land among the elite. Isle of Wight was no different from the rest of the Chesapeake in this respect, and some of the justices acquired substantial wealth—and family baggage—through such marriages to the widows of


34 A John Pitt served as the county clerk from the late 1670’s into the early 1690’s, and his signature is at the bottom of most of the county records for that period. The proceedings of an orphans’ court held 1 May 1675 lists a Mr. Thomas Pitt among the justices of the court (Will and Deed Book II, 130). Robert Pitt, a merchant, left some furniture to his daughter Hester Bridger in his will. Will of Robert Bridger, 6 June 1674, Will and Deed Book II, 128. Arthur Smith left land to his daughter, Mary Pitt, in his will. Will of Arthur Smith, 2 December 1696, Will and Deed Book II, 377-380; Will of Samuel Bridger, 22 April 1704, Will and Deed Book II, 564.

35 The most famous study of this phenomenon is Darrett and Anita Rutman’s article, “‘Now-wives and Sons-in-Law.’”
previously prominent men. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon in the records is that of Samuel Bridger, who, when he married Elizabeth Woory, the relict of former sheriff Joseph Woory, probably benefited from Woory’s sizeable estate and eight slaves, but also saddled himself with the task of settling all of Woory’s unfinished legal business, which takes up a significant portion of the court record from 1693 to 1695. On two separate occasions the court even had to reprimand Bridger, one of their own, for failing to produce an inventory for Woory’s estate.36

Similarly, Anthony Holladay married Ann Brewer, the widow of John Brewer, who had been a burgess for the county in 1657 and whose father had been a member of the Governor’s Council in the 1630’s.37 Through this alliance to the widow of one of the colony’s oldest families, Holladay managed to become the step-grandfather of Mary Brewer, who, in 1699, was supposedly the object of a bizarre plot by the “papists” who had somehow obtained guardianship over her to take her away to Maryland and marry her to another Catholic. Presumably appalled by the prospect of having a granddaughter married to a papist, Holladay and his wife appealed to the Governor’s Council to obtain guardianship over young Mary. The Council duly obliged the Holladays, thereby preventing Mary’s corruption by the dark forces of Roman Catholicism.38 In a slight twist on the trend of justices marrying wealthy widows, James Day’s widow remarried twice after Day’s death: first she married a man named John Johnson, who died shortly thereafter, whereupon Mary Day-Johnson joined herself in holy matrimony yet again, this time to a man named Gledhill. By the time Mary Day-Johnson-Gledhill died in 1712, she left her

36 The court proceedings on October 9, 1693 mention Samuel’s recent marriage to Elizabeth Woory. Court Orders, 1693-1695, 4. The court called upon Bridger to produce an inventory of Woory’s estate on April 9, 1694 and again in May 1695. Court Orders, 1693-1695, 27 and 87
family not only her worldly goods but also the task of dealing with the estates of Johnson and Day, for each husband had named her as his executor.\textsuperscript{39} Thus Mary Gledhill’s son James Day and son-in-law Nathaniel Ridley found themselves in charge of settling the estates of their mother’s previous husbands.\textsuperscript{40}

Another singular aspect of Chesapeake society that many historians have pointed out is the fact that, particularly in the eighteenth century, the office of justice of the peace often seemed to pass through families from father to son. Although George Lewis Chumbley vigorously opposes the notion that the commissions of the peace were self-perpetuating groups of men—the conclusion one might be inclined to draw from this observation—it is nonetheless true that men whose fathers had been justices were very likely to serve as justices in their own turn.\textsuperscript{41} Even by the end of the seventeenth century in Isle of Wight, this trend had already begun to appear. However, the tendency of sons to take up their fathers’ places on the court is especially striking in the generation of men who formed the court in the first decade of the eighteenth century: by 1714, Henry Applewhaite, Jr., Arthur Smith, Jr., and James Day, Jr. were all members of the court like their fathers before them.\textsuperscript{42} Nathaniel Ridley, who had married the older Captain James Day’s daughter Elizabeth, was also on the county’s commission of the peace serving as sheriff in 1714. Samuel Bridger was, of course, the son of a justice of the peace, and although he

\textsuperscript{39} Will of Mary Gledhill, 30 December 1712, \textit{Will and Deed Book II}, 543-544.

\textsuperscript{40} Mary Gledhill’s will mentions Ridley as her “son,” but the fact that he was actually her son-in-law is confirmed in John Frederick Dorman, ed., \textit{Adventurers of Purse and Person: Virginia 1607-1624/5}, Fourth edition, Vol. 1, (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 2004), 232-233.

\textsuperscript{41} Chumbley denied what he considered to be the traditional belief that the justices of the colonial county courts had essentially selected their own membership in his study of the colonial justice system, \textit{Colonial Justice in Virginia}, 81-83. Kulikoff, however, cites many studies that reveal undeniable family dominance of the county courts, such as one done by T.E. Campbell for Caroline County, Virginia, in which he found that three families provided more than a fifth of the justices for the county from the county’s founding in 1728 to the end of the American Revolution. \textit{Tobacco and Slaves}, 271-274.

\textsuperscript{42} All three sons appeared as justices in a list of the officials for all Virginia counties drawn up for the government in London in 1714, although they may have been on the court before then. Correspondence Received by the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations from the Lieutenant Governor for Virginia, Reel #40, Colonial Records Project microfilm, Public Record Office Class C.O. 5/1317.
did not have a male heir, the Bridgers and their extended family continued to be well-represented on the court throughout the eighteenth century. In 1710, Samuel’s brother William Bridger was sworn in as justice of the peace, and their nephew Joseph Godwin, the son of Colonel Thomas Godwin and Martha Bridger, served Isle of Wight as a justice and a burgess from the early 1700’s through the 1730’s. William Bridger and Joseph Godwin thus represent a third generation of the Bridger clan on the Isle of Wight court, and the fact that they were both elected to the House of Burgesses for their county several times throughout the 1710’s and 1720’s attests to the continuing preeminence of the family in the county.

One could, of course, go on forever untangling the daunting web of family connections between the county justices and other officeholders—who married whose widow, who was whose father-in-law, who was the second cousin by marriage of someone’s stepson. Such queries are best left to genealogists, which is fortunate, since tracing the tortuous paths that Chesapeake family trees wound into and around one another can be maddeningly difficult, particularly given the fact that families tended to favor perhaps three or four names that they then proceeded to bestow upon their children in every generation, over and over again, until it is nearly impossible to know whether the justice Joseph Bridger from the 1750’s is William or Joseph’s son Joseph, and nevermind trying to determine whether he is the grandson of William or Joseph. Family ties were so important in the Chesapeake, however, that by the mid-eighteenth century many families began giving their children middle names to reflect the plurality of their impressive lineages. Thus one can distinguish between James Bridger and James Allen Bridger

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of the 1770’s because the latter’s name reflects his descent from not one but two of the most prominent Southside gentry families.45

The case of Captain John Goodrich provides an especially bizarre example of the tendency of Chesapeake families to name children after their parents. From the county records, it appears that the justice John Goodrich, thankfully distinguished by the title of “Captain,” had both a father and a son also named John Goodrich. While a son named after his father is certainly not unusual, what makes the Goodrich family so problematic is the fact that the will of a John Goodrich, Sr.—probably the same man who deposed in 1697/8 that he was eighty years old—mentioned not only his grandson John Goodrich, whom he named as the son of Captain John Goodrich, but also his son John Goodrich who appears to have been a young child, as in his will John Goodrich Sr. instructed his wife to “put [the boy] to school” and to take care of him until he was old enough to assume control over his own property. Presumably, the John Goodrich who had been a justice of the peace and a burgess for his county before his sudden death in 1695 was no longer in need of an education.46 Did a geriatric John Goodrich, Sr., perhaps fearing that the name “John Goodrich” was not absolutely assured of survival, despite the existence of both a son and a grandson bearing the same name, father yet another John Goodrich, perhaps on a much younger wife? Unfortunately for curious modern researchers stumbling into the minimal seventeenth-century documentation on this particular subject, the solution to this mystery will have to remain unsolved. One could spend days pondering the

45 Helen Haverty King lists James Bridger and James Allen Bridger as justices in 1772 (Historical Notes on Isle of Wight County, 33).
46 The heart of the Goodrich puzzle lies in two wills, one simply for a John Goodrich and the other for a John Goodrich, Senior, and in two depositions, one from 1689 in which a John Goodrich swore that he was thirty-seven and the from 1697/8 in which a John Goodrich, Senior swore that he was eighty. The quandary is made all the more complicated by the fact that the two John Goodrichs appear to have died one right after the other. Will of John Goodrich, 13 January 1695, Will and Deed Book II, 369-370; Will of John Goodrich, Sr., 1695, Will and Deed Book II, 389-390; Deposition of John Goodrich, April 1689, Will and Deed Book II, 292; Deposition of John Goodrich, Sr., March 1697/8, Isle of Wight County Deeds, 1688-1704, 269.
mysteries of the family lineages of the colonial Chesapeake, but odd situations such as this one will always linger on.

Although knowledge of precise family relationships is important and useful to a point, what is more important to the broader history of the development of a creole society in the Chesapeake is the sense that wealth and power in the region centered very noticeably on a fairly small number of families that formed themselves into a cohesive social and political elite that grew stronger and more defined from the early eighteenth century until the Revolution. The development of an aristocratic “gentry” is, of course, most famous at the level of families like the Carters, Byrds, and Wormeleys of Virginia. However, even in poorer, backwater counties like Isle of Wight, the local wealthy and notable families took their positions of power in the local social hierarchy and gave rise to a “gentry” of their own. The most famous families of Virginia and Maryland existed, then, as a kind of “super gentry” over a patchwork of other “gentries” throughout the region. While wealth and political influence were the foundation for social position of the gentry families, the personal connections formed through marriage and long family histories of serving in the various offices of the county were the basis for a common culture that bound the group who dominated the county’s political and economic affairs into a cohesive social aristocracy.

Familial relationships are perhaps the most obvious link between members of the social elite, but the evident friendships that formed between justices over the years appear to have been just as affectionate and important to the camaraderie of the gentry as ties by blood and marriage. Although the proof is not absolutely concrete, we can infer friendships between justices and other members of the county elite from the legacies left and the language used in wills, many of which are striking due to the attention paid to the people outside the family, whom we can
assume to have been close companions of the deceased. Henry Baker appears to have had many strong connections outside of his own family, perhaps a consequence of his involvement in trade. In 1692/3 Colonel James Powell, a former justice for Isle of Wight, left £10 sterling to Baker and made him one of the overseers of his will. Moreover, Powell left a mare to his godson, Baker’s son James; given the relationship evident between Powell and Baker, perhaps Baker named his son James after his friend.47

Baker must have been popular in the elite circle of Isle of Wight society, for, in addition to overseeing Colonel Powell’s estate, in 1706/7 he became the sole executor for the estate of Silvestra Hill, the widow of Major Nicholas Hill, another former county justice.48 Silvestra herself was also quite notable, being the daughter of Edward Bennett, a prominent and wealthy Puritan who was one of the first settlers in the area in the 1620’s.49 Not only did the widow Hill make Baker her executor, however, she also left what appears to be the bulk of her estate to various members of the Baker family. Baker’s wife Mary inherited the plantation Hill was living on when she died, and Baker’s daughter Mary, Hill’s goddaughter, received land and a slave girl as well. At the end of the will, after listing all the legacies she intended to give to various people, Hill provided for Henry Baker to receive “the rest of [her] estate.”50 The fact that Silvestra Hill left such an impressive legacy to the Baker family demonstrates the closeness of the friendship between Hill and the Bakers and the potential power of personal connections between members of the elite outside of the usual family ties.

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48 Major Nicholas Hill appeared as a justice for the county in a document dated 3 May 1669, *Will and Deed Book II*, 68.
50 Will of Silvestra Hill, 7 October 1706, *Will and Deed Book II*, 476.
While the generous legacies left to Henry Baker and his family in the wills of James Powell and Silvestra Hill are especially remarkable and indicate a particularly close relationship between the families, smaller remembrances, often in the form of mourning rings or small amounts of money, appear more frequently in wills of the era. James Day, for instance, left twenty shillings apiece to buy funeral rings for several of his friends and relations, including his aunt, Silvestra Hill, his “Brother & Sister” Swan, Henry Baker, John and Isabell Haveild, and Major Arthur Allen. Such legacies, though small, are testimony not only to Day’s ties within Isle of Wight—Silvestra Hill and Henry Baker—but also to his connections outside the county. Arthur Allen was one of the most prominent local men just across the county line in Surry County, and “Brother & Sister Swan” were probably the Swans who were notable in the area as well, while the Haveilds were prominent in Nansemond County.\(^{51}\) Clearly, Day consorted not only with the social elite of his own county, but with the upper classes of the surrounding counties as well.

Just as legacies attest to friendships, so also do the positions of responsibility designated in wills in many cases. A substantial number of justices had their fellow justices or relatives of justices witness their wills, and many even asked such friends to be overseers or executors for their wills, which attests to the trust they must have held for people outside their own families. Arthur Smith, Sr. had his fellow justice Henry Applewhaite witness his will, and Thomas Giles later had Smith’s son Arthur Smith, Jr. witness his will long after Arthur Smith, Sr. had died and his son had assumed his father’s place in the county. Even George Moore, who appears to have had fewer ties to Isle of Wight’s social elite than many of the other justices, had Henry Baker, Jr.

\(^{51}\) Will of James Day, 10 August 1700, *Will and Deed Book II*, 428-430. Thomas Swann of Surry County was a burgess and a councilor from the 1640’s through his death in 1680. His sons, Captain Thomas Swann and Colonel Samuel Swann, were burgesses and public officials for Surry County in the late seventeenth century. Tyler, ed., *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography*, vol. 1, 125 and 334.
and his brother Lawrence witness his will in 1710; the fact that he had two Bakers witness his will may indicate that they were neighbors.

While a wide variety of people witnessed wills—friends, neighbors, tenants—making someone outside of the family an executor or overseer obviously meant a great deal more in terms of the closeness of a particular relationship. Humphrey Marshall not only had his long-time fellow justice Anthony Holladay witness his will in 1711, but he also appointed his son-in-law and member of the court Henry Applewhaite, Jr. and Samuel Bridger as the executors of his will. The fact that he appointed these men his executors is interesting because testators usually named their wives executors of their estates in the colonial Chesapeake. Colonel Joseph Bridger made his wife the executor of his estate when he died in 1686, but he also asked Arthur Smith to oversee the management of his estate, together with his other executors who were close Pitt relatives of his wife. Being designated an overseer of Bridger’s estate was no trivial task for Smith, however, since Bridger possessed what must have been the largest estate in the county in the seventeenth century. Many historians have observed that settlers in the Chesapeake in the seventeenth century relied at least as much on friends as on family members, and while the justices of Isle of Wight clearly depended upon strong family ties, they also reinforced the fabric of county society—and, in particular, the strength of their emerging ruling elite—as much with ties of friendship as with bonds of marriage and kinship.

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52 For the practice of appointing wives as executors in England and the Chesapeake, see Horn, *Adapting to a New World*, 225-231.
While ties to family and friends helped to foster the creation of a cohesive ruling class in Isle of Wight County as it did throughout the Chesapeake, justices who did not or were not able to integrate themselves fully into that social web could lose their influential status in local society. Thus simply holding a prominent position or even acquiring substantial wealth did not assure any man of passing his status along to his children. As is evident in Isle of Wight, joining the social “club” of the elite was an essential part of obtaining political power. Although Chesapeake society generally became more stable at very end of the seventeenth century, Isle of Wight’s social hierarchy was by no means fixed in the 1690’s. Chesapeake society was still very much in the process of forming during the last decade of the seventeenth century, and the ranks of the nascent gentry continued to be relatively fluid into the mid-eighteenth century. Many familiar names appeared among the justices and other high officeholders of Isle of Wight County through the end of the Revolution—Bridgers, Applewhaites, Smiths, and Bakers all continued to play a prominent role in county affairs. Yet names apparently new to the county appeared as well: Simmons, Grays, and Taylors worked their way into the mixture in the 1730’s and 1740’s.

Conversely, some names disappeared after the early eighteenth century, due, in some cases, to a lack of male heirs, but also due to a decline in influence in certain families. After George Moore’s death, for instance, no more Moores appeared on the commission of the peace. Moore seems to have had only daughters; the only references to his children in the county records are to his daughters Magdlen Carter and Jane White, and all of the legacies to family members in his will were either to those daughters or to Carter, White, and Williams grandchildren. The Moore surname clearly seems to have died out, but one of Moore’s grandsons was named Moore Thomas White, reflecting a naming trend that became very notable in colonial Virginia society as family names became increasingly important. Nevertheless, the
Moore name did not appear in the ranks of the justices even in this form after Moore’s death. What is more, Carters, Whites, and Williamses also appear to have been largely absent from the county’s positions of authority. While George Moore himself served as justice and sheriff for years and years, it seems that he did not establish his family among the county’s social elite, and it is even possible that they eventually left the county, as many in the older counties like Isle of Wight did, for some of the western counties or even for North Carolina, a popular destination for families moving out of Southside Virginia. George Moore may be an example, then, of the men who rose to positions of power and prominence in the seventeenth century but failed to pass the social status they acquired in the colony along to their progeny, a widely-noted trend in the development of a creole society in the Chesapeake.

Despite the increasing solidity of the authority of Isle of Wight’s elite at the end of the turbulent seventeenth century, nevertheless they still faced challenges to their unity and authority, both from within the ranks of the social elite and from their social inferiors. For the most part, the rifts among Isle of Wight’s leading families at the turn of the eighteenth century were not, ultimately, much of an obstacle to their consolidation into a dominant force in county society, yet the existence of divisions warns against the perception that the families who rose to the top of the social hierarchy in the Chesapeake formed an impenetrable “caste” in which every member marched in lockstep. Moreover, the fact that “deference” did not necessarily immunize the gentry from any challenge to their authority tempers the notion that the gentry constituted an all-powerful force lording over a submissive flock.

55 Deed of Magdlen and Thomas Carter to George Carter, 18 February 1700, Isle of Wight County Deeds, 1688-1704, 324; Will of George Moore, 30 November 1710, Will and Deed Book II, 586.
56 Many historians of the Chesapeake have found that the men who formed the political and social elite of the seventeenth century generally did not pass their social status along to their children, particularly men who had risen from being servants to being prosperous planters and officeholders. Menard, “From Servant to Freeholder,” and Kulikoff, Tobacco and Slaves, Chapter One: “From Outpost to Slave Society.”
Although Bacon’s Rebellion does not appear to have left any lasting scars or divisions in Isle of Wight society, the fact remains that less than two decades before the 1690’s—very much in recent memory, even for the younger justices—there were staunch supporters of both Governor Berkeley and the rebel Nathaniel Bacon among the elite of Isle of Wight. In his massive history of the county, John Bennett Boddie mentions Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Smith and his brother George as Baconians; Arthur Smith apparently even took the public oath of loyalty to the king with Bacon when he visited Isle of Wight County. When the tide turned against the rebels, however, George Smith, at least, must have changed his tune very quickly. He signed a petition against an earlier petition of grievances that John Marshall and some of the county’s other diehard rebels had submitted to Governor Berkeley. Marshall, who was probably the father of the Humphrey Marshall who was a justice of the peace in the 1690’s, was one of Bacon’s chief supporters in the county, and he and a few others submitted several petitions to the governor for the redress of grievances and in support of William West, a man from the county sentenced to death for his role in the rebellion.57

Marshall was one of the prime instigators of the petition of the grievances “of the poor yet his majesty’s most loyal subjects of Isle of Wight County,” which contained, among other complaints, objections to alleged abuse and extortion on the part of Colonel Joseph Bridger—Berkeley’s staunchest supporter in the county and one of his cronies on the Council. Contemporaries wrote that Colonel Bridger suffered extensive damage to his plantations and property during the rebellion due to the rebels’ plundering and pillaging.58 Threats from the rebels actually forced Colonel Bridger to flee to Maryland for a time, but he soon returned and

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helped the governor quash the remaining resistance in the Southside.  When it was all said and
done, however, it was the rebels, and John Marshall chief among them, who had to submit to the
governor. Marshall was forced to retract his petitions “in all humility” in the county court and
“begg pardon for ye same [offenses] on my knees as I have done before his Maiestys honorable
Commission.”

Despite the fact that Colonel Bridger and Governor Berkeley’s other supporters in the
county were victorious in the end, the fact that the rebels stubbornly held their ground for so long
and counted among them a rather prominent man in John Marshall, demonstrates broad
dissatisfaction with elements of the county’s ruling class. Furthermore, such animosity towards
Bridger and men like him most likely did not dissipate as soon as men like John Marshall were
forced to apologize publicly for their intractability. Nevertheless, it is interesting that less than
two decades after the rebellion, the sons of two of Isle of Wight’s primary opponents during the
rebellion were serving as justices of the peace together. Moreover, as noted previously,
Humphrey Marshall even went so far as to name Samuel Bridger one of his executors. Yet while
the two justices do not appear to have inherited the enmity between their fathers, they must have
retained some unpleasant memories—the plundering of Colonel Bridger’s property and John
Marshall’s public humiliation—at the back of their minds. Virginia’s native ruling elite
overcame most of their differences and formed a united governing class by the early eighteenth
century, but a mere two decades before, the members of the colony’s social elite were bitterly
divided as they worked out the structure and distribution of power.

Yet while no major divisions erupted among the elite after Bacon’s Rebellion, quarrels
within the complicated family structure at the top of the social hierarchy could spawn enough

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animosity to leave lasting scars on what appeared so often to be the very united face of the local 
elite. Not surprisingly, most of these family arguments seem to have centered on money and 
inheritances. Some disputes could be settled easily and happily. In the case of the suit between 
Humphrey and John Marshall that made it into court in 1694, both parties agreed to postpone 
judgment on the matter at hand to “make a friendly decision between themselves.”61 Other 
arguments, however, developed into bitter, prolonged struggles. The best and most dramatic 
instance of such a family conflict in Isle of Wight concerned the Bridger family; one has to 
assume that the Bridgers’ family conflict, which often played out in the public courthouse, 
became fodder for county gossip, possibly diminishing the family’s prestige and certainly 
undermining their familial solidarity. Only two months after writing his will in August 1683, 
Colonel Joseph Bridger added a codicil in which he completely disinherited his son, Joseph, as 
well as Joseph’s family, giving as his reason only that Joseph “fly out into divers desolate 
courses of life and is growen very disobedient to me.” Because of this unexplained disobedience 
on Joseph Jr.’s part, his father cut him off from the substantial family resources: “[T]hat I may 
not be guilty of giveinge him an Estate & Encouragement to continue for the future in his wicked 
way of liveinge I doe hereby therefore revoke and disanull all and Every part of the legacies 
given to him.”62 Colonel Bridger then went on to give the bulk of his vast estate to his two 
younger sons and their heirs—effectively cutting not only Joseph, but also his descendants—out 
of the family picture for good.

The bitterness of Joseph, Jr.’s disinheritance did not end with his father’s death in 1686. 
The Bridger brothers and their mother seem to have taken their family troubles into the public

61 It is impossible to tell exactly what relation Humphrey and John bore to one another, but both names ran in the 
Marshall family throughout the colonial period, which indicates very strongly that the two were, in fact, related. 9 
August 1694, Court Orders, 1693-1695, 45.
62 Codicil to Will of Colonel Joseph Bridger, 18 October 1683, Will and Deed Book II, 257.
arena, for in 1698, Hester Bridger appointed her son Joseph as her attorney in order to deal with a lawsuit that her other two sons had brought against her.\textsuperscript{63} It is very probable that the brothers were disputing their mother’s execution of Colonel Bridger’s estate, although no details of the suit have come down in the records. The protracted legal struggle over the estate of someone as wealthy and influential as Colonel Bridger is not surprising, given the fact that he disinherited one of his sons in dramatic fashion; such a battle, however, clearly did not enhance the family’s prestige.

Moreover, years of legal proceedings may also have distracted the brothers from being as visible and influential in county and colony politics as their father had been. Perhaps Samuel Bridger’s frequent absences from the House of Burgesses during his one term as a burgess were due to his legal troubles. Moreover, as the eldest son of one of the most prominent men in Virginia, Joseph Bridger, Jr. is notably absent from local records as holding any kind of authority. It is, of course, possible that he moved to another county, perhaps farther west, or that there were other circumstances that kept him away from the public life of his home county. Yet while it is difficult to say whether his dramatic disinheritance was the direct cause of his absence from public life in Isle of Wight, the fact remains that his younger brothers successfully carried on the Bridger legacy in the county as justices, burgesses, and vestrymen while Joseph did not.\textsuperscript{64} Although wealth and family connections were the primary ties binding the elite, in the Bridgers’ case, they became a burden. Interestingly, in Colonel Bridger’s attempt to exercise strong patriarchal authority over his household in disinheriting Joseph and his heirs, he appears to have diminished his legacy in the long run for a display of dominance in the short run. Many

\begin{footnotes}
\item[63] 9 December 1698, \textit{Isle of Wight County Deeds, 1688-1704}, 276.
\item[64] Helen Haverty King writes in her history of the county that Joseph was successfully able to wrest most of his inheritance away from his brothers in court after his father’s death, but as she failed to cite any sources for this intriguing lead on Joseph, Jr.’s fate, I have not been able to follow up on her assertion.
\end{footnotes}
historians have argued that the rise of domestic patriarchy was crucial in the formation of gentry culture in the first half of the eighteenth century, yet in the case of the Bridgers, Colonel Bridger’s exercise of such authority apparently led to family disorder—the opposite of the well-ordered household idealized as a component of a well-ordered society.\textsuperscript{65}

Aside from the squabbles among the gentry, resistance from the bottom could also shake the stability of the “ladder of dependence.” Although such resistance was not usually a serious threat to the men in power, it was a reminder that the gentry’s dominance of the social hierarchy was never as secure as that of the titled aristocrats of Britain and Europe. The position of the elite became more secure in the eighteenth century, but at the end of the seventeenth century, the gentry’s hold on authority was not always firm, the lingering effect of the class conflict that had marked the tumultuous middle of the century. Tensions never again resulted in an armed uprising like Bacon’s Rebellion in the 1670’s, but verbal abuse and insults towards justices do not appear to have been terribly uncommon. In the early 1690’s, Henry Applewhaite found himself in an argument with Robert Sturdy in which Applewhaite “bid Robt Sturdy hold his tongue.” After further exchange, Applewhaite turned to leave, and “as ye Capt was going Robt Sturdy followed him out and told him yt He valued no more than a fart of his ass.”\textsuperscript{66} In the deposition the disparity between the positions of Applewhaite and Sturdy on the “ladder of dependence” became quite clear when the man recounting the incident added at the end of his deposition that Sturdy’s wife, whom he calls “Goody Sturdy,” became involved in the dispute. “Goodman” and “Goodwife” referred to members of a low social order, whereas titles such as

\textsuperscript{65} Kathleen Brown argues that men in colonial Virginia, particularly among the elite, derived much of their sense of honor from their ability to control their household, which included not only their biological family but also their servants and slaves and essentially any other dependents. In Brown’s interpretation, domestic patriarchy and order brought a sense of security to men who felt that their social status was not entirely secure. (\textit{Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs}).

\textsuperscript{66} Deposition of Thomas Harris, 26 December 1692, \textit{Isle of Wight County Deeds}, 1688-1704, 52.
“Captain,” “Gentleman,” and “Esquire” indicated a much higher status. This incident provides very graphic proof that the elite—even those who held dignified public offices such as justice of the peace—were not immune to the scorn and earthy insults of the lower classes.

Yet despite incidents such as Henry Applewhaite’s confrontation with Robert Sturdy, the county’s elite encountered relatively few obstacles to their supremacy in county politics and society by the end of the seventeenth century. The fact that, between 1685 and 1720, all but one of the burgesses for Isle of Wight County were also justices provides compelling evidence that the men who presided over the county as justices of the peace were acceptable both to the governor who appointed them to the commission of the peace and to the county’s voting population that elected them to the House of Burgesses. Moreover, whatever challenges did confront the elite, either from within their own ranks or from poorer residents of the county, they faced an increasingly strong counterbalance in the growing solidarity of the elite. Relationships—both vertical “patron-client” connections between the elite and their social inferiors and horizontal kin and friendship ties among the members of the elite—reinforced Chesapeake society and solidified the social hierarchy initially established by economic positions within the county.
Chapter Three: “The Friendly Virginians”

In most respects the governing elite of Isle of Wight County was very much typical of the Chesapeake gentry, yet with one intriguing difference: in an otherwise thoroughly Anglican colony, Quaker sympathizers popped up among the leading men of Isle of Wight and some of its neighboring counties in the second half of the seventeenth century. While the exigencies of public office and Virginia law forbade these men from openly proclaiming membership in the Society of Friends, in many cases the wives of these local leaders were confirmed, devout Friends who often rose to prominence in their own right as leaders within their new religious community. The Southside had been home to pockets of religious radicalism throughout the seventeenth century, and as late as the early eighteenth century, it was not unusual to find Puritans and even Quakers at the top of county society.

The presence of Protestant dissenters dated all the way back to the time of the Virginia Company: in 1619 Christopher Lawne, a former Brownist, founded a plantation at what is now Lawnes Creek. Shortly thereafter a wealthy London merchant and prominent Puritan, Edward Bennett—James Day’s grandfather—established a Puritan settlement at Warraskoyack. A recent study indicates that Nonconformists were not only tolerated very early on in Virginia but even thrived until the arrival of Governor Berkeley in 1641. As religious and political troubles in England disintegrated into civil war, Berkeley strived to enforced religious conformity in Virginia, taking a hard line against Virginia’s Puritans even after Parliament assumed control of the government in England and made most of his actions illegal. After the 1650’s, many Nonconformists, plagued by Governor Berkeley’s vehement suppression of opposition to the established Anglican Church, migrated to Maryland, where, for political reasons, its ruling
Catholic minority was more tolerant of religious dissent.\(^1\) Many of the Protestant dissenters who remained in pockets throughout the Southside and along the Eastern Shore turned to Quakerism in the 1650’s and 1660’s. Indeed, in spite of numerous official policies in Virginia against Quakers throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Southside, including Isle of Wight County, had many thriving Quaker meetings, including those at Chuckatuck, Pagan Creek, and Surry.\(^2\)

Although Quakerism certainly flourished in those places in Virginia where Puritans had settled earlier, the Puritans themselves were not necessarily the agents of the religious change. Rather Quakerism entered Virginia through various missionaries from England, the northern colonies, and Maryland. Missionaries from Barbados, which was frequently a stopping point for Quakers traveling from England to the North American colonies and had a strong Quaker population resident on the island, also played a prominent role in bringing Quakerism to Virginia and later to other southern American colonies.\(^3\) The Quaker missionary William Robinson, later one of the four Quaker martyrs hanged in Boston in 1659, was working in Virginia as early as 1658.\(^4\) The movement got its big push in Virginia, however, in the 1660’s and 1670’s as a result of the missionary efforts of “the big three”: John Burnyeat, who arrived in Virginia from Maryland in 1666 after traveling through Barbados; William Edmondson, who spent some time organizing Virginia’s Quakers into more disciplined groups before moving on to North Carolina; and George Fox, the founder of Quakerism himself, who visited Quaker meetings throughout the

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Chesapeake in the early 1670’s and was particularly active in Southside Virginia. Traveling preachers, known as “public Friends,” played a vital role in uniting Quaker communities and sustaining the movement throughout England and the colonies. As a result of such missionary activities, seventeenth-century Virginia had a thriving Quaker community, organized into both local monthly meetings, such as those at Chuckatuck and Pagan Creek, as well as a larger yearly meeting. Despite its reputation as a bastion of dry Anglicanism devoid of the spiritual angst that gripped England and New England, Virginia was thus very much a part of the religious developments unrolling throughout the broader English world in the seventeenth century.

Moreover, just as they did in most other places, Quakers experienced intense official harassment, legal restrictions, and even physical punishments in Virginia. Although the governments of the southern colonies generally did not execute Quakers as they did in Puritan New England, they did impose hefty fines, prevented them from voting, and threatened them with imprisonment and exile. While the New England Puritans saw in Quakerism a threat to the spiritual and social foundation of their society, Virginia’s colonial government viewed the movement primarily as a political menace because they believed that Quakers undermined public order with their mass, unsanctioned meetings and refusal to pay tithes to the Anglican Church. In a 1660 “Act for Suppressing Quakers,” the Assembly characterized Quakers as “an unreasonable and turbulent sort of people” who gathered and preached in order to “destroy religion, lawes, communities, and all bonds of civil socitie.” By disturbing the public order, Quakers, the Assembly believed, threatened the legal institutions that underpinned the colony, “leaving it arbitrarie to every vaine and vitious person whether men shall be safe, laws

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established, offenders punished, and Governors rule, hereby disturbing the publique peace and just interest.”

Thus in the eyes of Virginia’s ruling class, the primary threat that Quakers posed was to established political authority rather than to the Anglican Church. Inasmuch as Quakers menaced the religious orthodoxy of the Anglican Church, Virginia’s colonial leaders viewed their opposition more as political resistance to one of the “pillars of the state” rather than as an assault on the spiritual purity of the colony.

Not only did Quakers suffer the wrath of the government, but they also often refused to swear oaths, an essential part of the legal system in the colonies, particularly in Virginia. Refusal to swear oaths barred Quakers from holding public office and even from protecting their own interests in court in many instances. In 1705 the House of Burgesses finally passed a law allowing Quakers to affirm, rather than to swear, oaths when giving evidence in court, but justices of the peace still had to swear their oaths of office. Yet while refusal to swear oaths became a hallmark of Quakerism over time, research on Quakers in Maryland has suggested that the practice was not universal among Quakers in the earliest years of American Quakerism. Quakers found a much more accepting environment in Catholic Maryland and even served as justices of the peace and burgesses throughout the third quarter of the seventeenth century; minutes from Quaker meetings do not indicate that Maryland Quakers had any serious objections to holding office or swearing oaths until the latter part of the seventeenth century.

Nevertheless, any Quakers in Virginia who refused to swear oaths did encounter a significant obstacle to holding any kind of office in the Oath of Supremacy, which the House of Burgesses used as a test for religious orthodoxy beginning in 1663 at the trial of John Porter, a

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8 “An Act for Suppressing Quakers,” 1660, as quoted in Rufus Jones, Quakers in the American Colonies, 270.
9 James Horn, Adapting to a New World, 383.
10 Hening, Statutes at Large, Vol. 3, 298.
justice of the peace and burgess for Lower Norfolk County. Whether out of religious fervor or the desire to pocket half of the fine due to him as an informer, John Hill, the sheriff of Lower Norfolk, alerted the House of Burgesses to its member’s Quaker beliefs. The House expelled Porter after he refused to swear the Oath of Supremacy. Although there are very few other mentions of cases like Porter’s, committed Quakers in Virginia most likely did not attempt to hold office as a result of the forbidding precedent that the colonial government established at the advent of the new sect. The need to swear oaths as a public official probably dissuaded the most serious Friends from seeking public positions, but the problem did not necessarily affect men who were merely “sympathetic” to Quakerism without fully buying into all of the most rigorous Quaker tenets.

Although Quakers later came to be characterized by a general withdrawal from the outside world and radical pacifist and anti-slavery movements, earlier Quakers did not agree on all the beliefs that later became Quaker orthodoxy. For example, many southern Quakers owned slaves well into the eighteenth century. Despite the fact that some Quakers questioned the morality of owning slaves very early on, anti-slavery sentiments did not catch on among southern Quakers until closer to the Revolution. Moreover, southern Quakers were generally not at the forefront of Quaker theological developments. While Quakerism certainly had its appeal for many colonists in Maryland, Virginia, and later North Carolina, southern Quakers did not “produce many great interpreters of the fundamental Quaker idea...[and] added very little to the prophetic literature of the movement.” Thus while southern Quakers were by no means unorthodox in their Quaker views, what evolved into Quaker orthodoxy sometimes took longer to reach them than it did Friends at the forefront of Quakerism in places such as England and

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Pennsylvania. At the same time, however, the records of Quaker meetings in the Chesapeake and other southern colonies attest to their vibrant religious and community life, in spite of their overall lack of contribution to major developments within the movement.¹⁴

In Virginia the Society of Friends attracted a diverse array of settlers, from prominent county leaders and their wives to the upright smallholders and lesser county officials of the middle classes all the way down to the less respectable characters at the bottom of county society. James Horn concludes that, for the most part, Virginia Quakers differed demographically from their Anglican neighbors only in that the Quakers lived in the areas where the Puritans had settled decades earlier. Because Virginia was chronically short of ministers in the colonial period, Quakerism held a special attraction for its colonists because its emphasis on the “priesthood of all believers” was very well-suited to a society with so few ordained ministers. Furthermore, Quakerism also stressed the value of religious community, a social construction that geographically-isolated settlers found particularly attractive.¹⁵ The Society of Friends offered the spiritual dynamism and excitement that was often lacking in Virginia’s early Anglican Church, if for no other reason than because of its absence from most colonists’ lives.

In spite of the intolerant attitude that Virginia’s colonial government held towards Quakers, the Southside counties retained a significant number of Quakers, and their community included many prominent families and large landholders. The positive visibility and absence of severe punishments against Quakers in the Southside suggests that they were a less marginal group in Isle of Wight and other nearby counties than they were in other parts of Virginia. In 1700/1 the Chuckatuck meeting for Nansemond and Isle of Wight wrote to the Society of Friends back in England that “We Injoy our Meetings Quiet and Peaceably at present and the

¹⁵ *Adapting to a New World*, 396-398.
Rulers, magistrates are very tender and loving to us at present.” Such lenience towards the Society of Friends in the Southside counties may have been at least partly the result of some of the county magistrates harboring Quaker sympathies themselves. Quaker records from the Chuckatuck meeting in Isle of Wight and Nansemond mention very explicitly two justices of the peace as witnesses to a wedding in 1678, which suggests that the Southside elite were not always covert about their Quaker sympathies, in spite of the governor’s personal distaste for the dissenters.

Several justices from Isle of Wight were closely connected with the Society of Friends in the seventeenth century, including Jeremiah Exum, whose name appears in the Quaker records as the father of the bride in a Quaker wedding between Jacob Rickesis and Mary Exum “propounded…before A meeting of men & women freinds at [the] Publick meeting house in Chuckatuck” in Nansemond County in 1699. Exum also witnessed another Quaker wedding in 1707. The fact that Exum served on the commission of the peace intermittently in the late seventeenth century indicates that he himself was probably a Quaker sympathizer rather than a full member of the Society of Friends. Nevertheless, his children appear to have been heavily involved in the Quaker community. Exum’s son Richard was also a witness to his sister Mary’s wedding, and Mary’s marriage linked her to a very prominent Quaker family. Her father-in-law, Isaac Rickesis, possessed a substantial 700 acres of land in Isle of Wight in 1704 and was one of

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18 Name also appears as Ricks.
19 Miles White, Jr., ed., *Early Quaker Records in Virginia*, 18 and 29.
two signers of a 1700/1 letter to the London meeting on behalf of the Chuckatuck meeting, which indicates that he was probably a leading figure among the Quakers of the area.\textsuperscript{20}

While Exum was the only one of the twelve justices included in this study known to have been affiliated with the Quakers, he was by no means the only Isle of Wight justice to have had Quaker sympathies. Major Thomas Taberer, a justice and burgess for the county from the 1660’s until his death in the early 1690’s, was married to a convinced Quaker. Thomas and Margaret Taberer hosted William Edmondson at their house at Basse’s Choice when Edmondson traveled to Virginia in the 1660’s, and Edmondson’s journal reports that the Taberers attended the Chuckatuck meeting together.\textsuperscript{21} Their names appear throughout the meeting’s records, and some of their children are listed in the Quaker birth register: Christian, born in 1661, and Elizabeth, born in 1663.\textsuperscript{22} Christian made at least two Quaker marriages, first to William Oudeland in 1678, and then in 1678 to Robert Jordan, a member of one of the largest and most notable Quaker families in the Southside.\textsuperscript{23} Major Taberer also left something to Elizabeth Williams and her children in his will; the Elizabeth mentioned was probably his daughter, Elizabeth, listed in the Quaker birth register in 1663. The county court records note Elizabeth and her children as the family of John Williams, most likely the same John Williams who was convicted of “endeavoring to subvert ye very Principles of Our Religion & utterly to seduce & withdraw ye affections of the People from the true worship of God” by spreading Quakerism in

\textsuperscript{20} Land figure taken from the 1704 Quit Rent list. Letter found in M. Ethel Crashaw, ed., “Letters from Virginia Quakers,” 93.
\textsuperscript{22} Miles White, Jr., ed., \textit{Early Quaker Records}, 37-38.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 46-47 and 7-8.
Isle of Wight in December 1694. Thus Taberer seems to have had not one but at least two daughters heavily involved in the Quaker community.

Perhaps the most surprising Quaker connection in the county is that of Colonel Joseph Bridger and his family. As one of Governor Berkeley’s staunchest supporters and a church vestryman, it would seem natural for Colonel Bridger to be an unflagging supporter of the Anglican establishment in Virginia. Nevertheless, while Bridger was clearly never an outright convinced Quaker, Jay Worrall argues that he was a “friend of the Friends.” He contends that the existence of six Quaker meetings south of the James, which met regularly and openly after 1672 despite Governor Berkeley’s attempts to close them down, attests to the laxness of the local authorities in carrying out the governor’s orders. Moreover, the Chuckatuck Quakers appear to have felt secure enough to build their own meeting house in 1675, although the building itself was short-lived and the Friends reverted to meeting in individual homes for meetings and weddings. Worrall thus finds that Colonel Bridger himself must have been reluctant to persecute the Quakers, given the fact that Southside Quakers continued to flourish in spite of the governor’s orders, which called specifically on Colonel Bridger to lead the charge against the dissenters.

To add further credence to the argument that Colonel Bridger favored the Friends, it is useful to note that both Samuel and William Bridger married Quakers. Samuel Bridger’s wife Elizabeth, the widow of another justice of the peace, Joseph Woory, was a devoted Quaker. Woory, who came from Barbados, may have picked up his Quaker sympathies in Barbados before he immigrated to Virginia, but regardless of where he acquired his religious beliefs, he was clearly in tune with the Society of Friends, even if his status as a county official suggests

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24 Notice of legacies of Thomas Taberer, 18 September 1696, Isle of Wight County Deeds, 1688-1704, 223. Court Orders, 1693-1695, 61 and 64.
that he was not a full member of the Society. He and Elizabeth attended local meetings together and witnessed several Quaker marriages in the 1680’s. 26 Interestingly, Woory was not only very wealthy—he possessed an estate valued at £347.07.01, including eight slaves, when he died—but he was also a member of the commission of the peace, a merchant, and a burgess for Isle of Wight County. 27 The Barbados Quaker community was particularly wealthy, and Woory’s wealth probably reflects his West Indian origins. Nevertheless, his prominence contradicts any notion that all Quakers were religious fanatics and societal nonconformists. Elizabeth herself came from a well-established Quaker family in Nansemond County, the Godwins. Her parents, Colonel Thomas and Elizabeth Godwin, came to hear George Fox speak in 1672 and later joined the Chuckatuck meeting. Interestingly, as deputy sheriff for Nansemond in the 1660’s, Colonel Godwin had helped collect fines from Quakers for holding unlawful meetings. 28 His conversion, then, demonstrates the invigorating effect that the traveling missionaries had on Quaker communities in the Virginia. William Bridger, who was a vestryman like his father, also married a Quaker, and he even hosted a Quaker theological debate at his house near Chuckatuck in 1705. 29

Although justices like John Porter who became ardent Quakers sacrificed their public positions to their religious beliefs, the fact that so many members of the Southside gentry “sympathized” with the Society of Friends rather than taking the full plunge like Porter does not necessarily mean that they were insufficiently enthusiastic in their newfound religious beliefs. It is clear from the fact that many justices attended meetings with their wives—and even

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entertained important visiting Friends, as in Major Taberer’s case—that officeholders could enjoy many of the benefits of Quakerism while taking the requisite steps to remain in public office. Justices did not have to refuse oaths and give up their offices in order to partake in the strong aspect of religious community that was arguably one of the most alluring features of Quakerism for the scattered colonists of seventeenth-century Virginia. Swearing oaths may have been simply a matter of practicality for the gentlemen justices if it allowed them to remain in office. That so many justices’ wives were devout Quakers probably reflects not only the unusually significant role women played in Quakerism but also their inability to hold public offices that required a certain degree of conformity. With appointment to the commission of the peace and election to the House of Burgesses completely out of the question, women like Elizabeth Godwin-Woory-Bridger and Margaret Taberer were essentially free to espouse whatever religious beliefs they desired. Their husbands, on the other hand, had to walk a fine line between idealism and practicality.

Moreover, while the justices obviously guarded their own social status by swearing oaths, they also protected the Quaker community in their area, whether intentionally or not, because sympathetic justices certainly contributed to the seemingly lax enforcement of official decrees against the Quakers in the Southside counties. Aside from John Williams’s conviction for spreading Quakerism and a few scattered orders against “people called Quakers” in the county records of the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-centuries, Isle of Wight society does not appear to have reacted against the Friends in the same way that the colony’s leaders did. In 1690 Governor Francis Nicholson and the Council issued an order against the Quakers, warning county officials that they were not to be trusted in the event of a conflict with the French or Indians and requiring that “all their Maytyyes Subjects within this Collony especially Justices of
ye Peace, sheriffs and other Maytyes officers whatsoever” ensure that the Quakers followed all restrictions on their meetings and movements.\textsuperscript{30} The irony of this proclamation in the context of Isle of Wight, of course, is the fact that the justices of the peace appear to have included more than one Quaker-sympathizer.

The strong anti-Quaker reaction emanating from Jamestown and later from Williamsburg thus did not necessarily reflect the sentiments of Virginia’s gentry as a whole. Because Quakers suffered so much official persecution in Virginia and are generally known for distancing themselves from the rest of colonial society, it would seem that the presence of Friends in Isle of Wight County, particularly in the ranks of the county’s leading men, could lead to division and animosity within the county’s social fabric. Quakerism did not split Isle of Wight, however—indeed, it seems to have functioned as a unifying force. That even someone like Colonel Bridger, a crony of Governor Berkeley, could differ from the “official line” on the Quaker issue demonstrates the extent to which the Society of Friends had broad appeal among colonists of all backgrounds and classes in the Southside. Although Isle of Wight’s gentry was very much like the ruling elite throughout the colony at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the leading men of the county retained a degree of personal and regional independence. Virginia’s early social elite then was not a monolithic entity but rather one whose members shared many common traits while also maintaining regional interests.

Quakerism declined quickly in Virginia as the movement lost momentum and its followers either fell away from the Friends or moved in search of new land and opportunities. A group of Virginia Quakers traveling westward under the guidance of Charles Lynch established the town of Lynchburg in the mid-eighteenth century, and other Friends went to western Pennsylvania. Many Southside Quakers also moved to North Carolina, where they flourished

\textsuperscript{30} “Order Against the Quakers,” \textit{The William and Mary Quarterly} 27:2 (1918), 130-131. Emphasis added.
under the liberal policies of the proprietary government there in the early eighteenth century. Hoping to attract immigrants to the newly-established colony, North Carolina’s founders allowed Quakers the freedom of conscience that Virginia would not permit them until later in the eighteenth century. As Friends left Virginia to take advantage of the toleration accorded them elsewhere, they gradually disappeared among the Southside gentry as well. By the mid-eighteenth century Quakers were no longer among Isle of Wight’s governing elite, and the county gentry settled into Anglican orthodoxy. Nevertheless, the fascinating, if brief, flash of Quakerism south of the James not only demonstrates the variability of Virginia’s early governing class but also the extent to which Virginia, though isolated from England in so many ways, still shared in the broad social developments within Anglo-Saxon culture in the seventeenth century.

Conclusion

Although often overlooked as a period of strange calm between the turmoil of Bacon’s Rebellion and the “Golden Age” of the Chesapeake’s planter aristocracy in the 1730’s and 1740’s, the turn of the eighteenth century was, in fact, a time of essential, though subtle, change as the region settled into societal stability and adjusted to a regional vernacular. By the time of the Chesapeake’s pre-Revolutionary “Golden Age,” the simultaneous development of social stability and of a sense of localism had created a distinctive provincial culture in the Chesapeake. Politically, this transformation contributed to the rise of deferential politics and to the stiff, unified resistance royal governors so often encountered. Culturally, stability produced a greater interest in local institutions and allowed the development of Chesapeake-style versions of English customs like court days. Visually, the Chesapeake’s shift in character manifested itself in the peculiarly “Virginia” and “Maryland” forms of architecture that still color the region today in the plantation mansions along the James and the courthouses that were once centers of local power, commerce, and sociability in the Chesapeake. Yet all of these well-documented aspects of the Chesapeake had their roots in the relatively quiet but vital transitional period in the last decade of the seventeenth century and the first decade of the eighteenth.

The variety of men serving on Isle of Wight’s commission of the peace in the 1690’s demonstrates the direction of the changes transfiguring the entire Chesapeake. The commission of the peace in the 1690’s contained a mixture of generations. Many of the older justices, like George Moore, had immigrated to the colony at mid-century and had forged their own way, patenting land and accumulating wealth. Yet these older adventurers were gradually ceding their places on the commission to younger men who were often the direct sons and heirs of a previous generation of county notables. Samuel Bridger and Humphrey Marshall both rose to prominence
in their fathers’ wake, Bridger acceding to his father’s fortune and political legacy, Marshall rising to a conventional political career after his father’s courageous but futile attempt to resist Governor Berkeley. Despite their different backgrounds, the two men exemplify the shift towards a native-born ruling class—not to mention overall population—that was the crucial precursor for the colony’s subsequent social and political development.

Historians have rightly characterized the end of the seventeenth century as a time of demographic transition in which a critical mass of native-born gentry leaders finally overtook the fading remnants of the waves of English immigrant adventurers who had dominated the colony’s government since its creation. Yet that is not to say that native-born leaders were nonexistent in the seventeenth century. Indeed, in Isle of Wight many of the most prominent families throughout the colonial era and even into the nineteenth century continued to be those families that had arrived in the county almost as soon as it was founded, such as Arthur Smith’s family, which had already passed the family name and legacy on to a third Arthur Smith by the end of the 17th century. James Day’s roots in the area were even older than the Smiths’, as he was part of the Bennett family that was heavily involved in Virginia even in the waning years of the Virginia Company.¹ Because Isle of Wight was one of the first areas settled in the entire colony, it is not surprising that its elite included families that had been movers and shakers in the colony when it was still a private venture.

Nevertheless, there is a subtle, yet discernable demographic shift around 1700 that marks the end of the English adventure and the beginning of the Chesapeake experience as English immigration slowed and the Chesapeake was finally able to sustain its white population through natural increase. Later arrivals, such as Colonel Joseph Bridger, continued to rise to prominence as they were able to jump into the relatively fluid social order and to take advantage of the

opportunities for self-aggrandizement that still abounded in the young colony. Thus early arrival did not necessarily translate into political dominance in the seventeenth century, and as noted previously, historians have found that later arrivals often eclipsed the earlier power holders in both Virginia and Maryland. Yet the political and marital unions between older families and newer arrivals finally produced a more rigid, more European-style social hierarchy in the Chesapeake by the turn of the eighteenth century. In Isle of Wight the proliferation of names such as Smith, Bridger, Applewhaite, and Goodrich attests to the ability of these families to maintain their local power and prestige for generations. The solidification of the social order did not preclude the entrance of some new families into the county social structure, particularly because Isle of Wight’s borders continued to shift until 1749 and some families married outside the county. At the same time, however, it is remarkable how many of the names one sees among the county officeholders at the time of the American Revolution are so familiar: in 1772 the commission of the peace included Arthur Smith, Goodrich Wilson, James Allen Bridger, Brewer Godwin, and James Bridger.²

The younger generation inherited from its predecessors not only land and wealth, but social status as well. Although positions on the court were not technically hereditary, they increasingly functioned as such. In Isle of Wight, for example, the commission of the peace for 1714 included Arthur Smith, Henry Applewhaite, and James Day—all of them the sons of the original justices bearing those names—as well as Samuel Bridger’s younger brother William. As justices, members of the social elite dominated the running of the county, serving not only on the commission of the peace but also as burgesses, militia officers, and even, in George Moore’s case, as coroner. As one would expect, the families that dominated the county socially and politically were also wealthy, although a poorer county like Isle of Wight did not have the same

² King, *Historical Notes on Isle of Wight County*, 33.
spectacular wealth and economic inequality that many other tidewater counties did. Much of this wealth was in the form of slaves, as justices quickly hopped on the trend of replacing white servants with black slaves. Yet aside from cold statistics on wealth and political office, a more imaginative view of the county records suggests that the leading men of Isle of Wight and their families developed very strong personal ties through marriage and friendship that transformed them from simply an economic and political force into a social aristocracy. From the early eighteenth century until the Revolution, the preservation of power within this “creole,” American-born ruling class created what many romantics like to picture as essentially a hereditary aristocracy, much like in England, although it is important to remember that the New-World gentry’s dominance and authority were by no means as secure as those of titled aristocrats in Europe.

Isle of Wight’s elite families strengthened their position in society through marriage in the same way that the rest of the Chesapeake’s gentry did, quickly producing impressively complex family trees. As the Chesapeake began to see greater demographic stability, land and wealth were harder to come by, and thus inheritance and established family connections became an issue of prime importance for the gentry families of the region. Marriages between gentry families played an important role in conserving and centralizing the wealth that families had accumulated in the 17th century and the social status that it brought with it. James Benn’s marriage to Jane Smith, Henry Applewhaite, Jr.’s marriage to Ann Marshall, and William Bridger’s marriage to Elizabeth Allen of Surry County forged important links between wealth and power in the region that reinforced the primacy of the families already in positions of authority. Such marriages combined and recombined the wealth and land that many of the families had garnered in the 17th century when land was much more plentiful and the government
was doling out generous land grants to men like Colonel Joseph Bridger and the first Arthur Smith. Isle of Wight’s justices thus served on the bench with their fathers-in-law, brothers, cousins, and nephews, which surely created a strong sense of solidarity among the county’s power holders. Yet while Isle of Wight’s elite were quickly forming a dense web of cousins and in-laws through intermarriage with other prominent families in Isle of Wight on the eve of the 18th century, they were by no means cutting themselves off from the broader Virginia gentry. Although most of Isle of Wight’s justices were by no means in the same league as the most famous colonial gentry families, they frequently married into the gentry of the surrounding counties, like the Allens and Godwins. Such marriages linked Isle of Wight’s elite to the rest of the colony and thus enlarged their sphere of influence.

Nevertheless, it was marriage within Isle of Wight that allowed the elite to form a fairly distinct class and culture within county society. The fact that so many justices left legacies to fellow justices and named them as overseers and executors of their wills attests to the degree of camaraderie that existed between the prominent families of Isle of Wight County. Not only does this amity between members of the social elite appear to signify the development of a common culture among the county gentry, but it also demonstrates the extent to which the divisions that had existed between the leading men of the county during the turbulent 1670’s and Bacon’s Rebellion had dissipated. By the 1690’s the justices of the peace were thus part of a county ruling elite that had developed a more united front. As the social hierarchy solidified, family names increasingly conferred membership in a club. Familial relations were not always harmonious or supportive, of course. The Bridgers provide a particularly spectacular example of the nasty turn a family quarrel could take, and yet even the Bridger situation attests to the general
placidity of inter- and intra-family relations among the gentry because to a large extent, the
dramatic nature of the Bridgers’ family conflict arises from its singularity.

Yet while Isle of Wight’s turn-of-the-century ruling elite confirms historians’
observations on the ruling elite throughout the Chesapeake in most respects, what ultimately is
interesting and important about the county’s gentry is that it incorporated, at least for a time, a
unique and seemingly problematic regional characteristic—Quakerism—into a ruling class that
was otherwise very much like the rest of the Virginia gentry. In spite of all the official
proclamations against Quaker meetings and the prosecutions of individual Quakers that persisted
into the 18th century, at the end of the 17th century, multiple members of Isle of Wight’s social
elite—Jeremiah Exum, Elizabeth Woory-Bridger, and Joseph Woory—were clearly very
involved with the Society of Friends. Moreover, many other members of the local gentry had
supported the Friends even if they were not full members of the community. The undeniable
infiltration of Quaker sympathies into the most powerful rank of society complicates not only our
accustomed view of Quakers as persecuted dissenters who tended to withdraw from the rest of
Virginia society, but also our conception of Virginia’s gentry as staunch Anglican “Cavaliers.”

Many of the elite Quakers of the 17th century mostly appear to have been English
immigrants to Virginia and thus were not all truly “native-born.” Perhaps the emergence of a
native elite and a self-sustaining native population even contributed to the demise of the Friends’
popularity in the eighteenth century. Over time, members of many Quaker families left the
Quaker church, finding it too marginalized, and Quakers disappeared from the ruling elite as it
became more “gentrified,” more typical of generalized views of the Chesapeake aristocracy.
Moreover, as the population stabilized and local institutions improved after a full century of
English settlement, the communal aspect of the Society of Friends may have lost some of its
draw as an alternative to the absentee Anglican Church and sparse settlement of the seventeenth century. Given the lingering restrictions on Quakers, even in an area like the Southside that was more tolerant towards them, Quakerism probably presented more problems than it solved once the Chesapeake developed more viable organic institutions and communities. Ultimately, Quakerism as a whole lost momentum throughout the southern colonies in the 18th century as later generations of Quakers found it difficult to maintain the initial ecstatic, spiritual drive, a development that is common in evangelical movements.\(^3\) Despite the brief existence of the Society of Friends in the area, however, its mark on the history of Isle of Wight County and the surrounding region is significant in that it demonstrates the existence local cultural variations that existed even in the earliest years of settlement in the Chesapeake. Economic disparities among counties in the Chesapeake are usually the most obvious characteristics that differentiate counties, as physical attributes such as the quality of the soil and the location of the county played an enormous role in its subsequent economic development. The rise of Quakerism in the Southside and—most importantly—the support it received from many of the region’s governing elites reveal the emergence of local culture and ways of doing things. Although historians of the Chesapeake have not explicitly denied such early local variations, Quakerism in the Southside and its appeal to the region’s gentry add an important level of nuance to the conventional conception of the early Chesapeake in relatively homogenous, general terms.

While the old colonial social order, like Quakerism, disappeared long ago in Isle of Wight County, vestiges of the colonial past linger on in the county’s place-names and countryside. Although the male line of the Arthur Smith family gave out after Arthur Smith V, who served as a United States Congressman in the 1820’s, the county’s most famous town, Smithfield, built upon the Smith family land at Pagan Creek and known world-wide for its

\(^3\) Kenneth Carroll, *Quakerism on the Eastern Shore*, 104.
distinctive hams, retains their name.⁴ Many other landmarks, place names, and roads keep the colonial family names alive: Day’s Point, a piece of land at the union of the James and Pagan rivers named for James Day; Benn’s Church, a Methodist church bearing the name of George Benn, a descendant of James Benn; and Brewer’s Creek, carrying the name of the same Brewer whose widow who went on to marry Anthony Holladay.⁵ Colonel Joseph Bridger’s body and tombstone were moved from his original resting place on his home at Whitemarsh. He now lies buried in one of Virginia’s oldest surviving churches, traditionally called the Old Brick Church but now also known as St. Luke’s. The church is no longer used for regular services, but the not-for-profit organization that restored the gothic-style building in the 1950’s keeps it open to the public. Inside, visitors can see the tablet bearing Colonel Bridger’s epitaph in the chancel. Bearing a grandiose inscription recalling Colonel Bridger’s temporal prestige, the tablet is at once somewhat comical to modern tastes and a poignant reminder of the aspirations of the men who sought to establish themselves and their families as a New-World aristocracy, hoping to recreate part of what they had known back in England:

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Does nature silent mourn & can dumb stone
Make his true worth to future Ages knowne
Excess expression Marble sure will keep
His mem’ry best yt. Ever o’er his grave shall weep
Here lies ye late great Minister of State
That Royal virtues had & Royal fate
To Charles his Councels did such honrs bring
His own express fetched to attend ye King
His soul yt. Evr did with vigour move
Nimbly took wing soard like it selfe above
But ye bright stars ne’er laysily decline
But in an instant shoot yt. cease to shine.⁶
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⁴ King, *Historical Notes on Isle of Wight County*, 584 and 44.
While the “Royal virtues” and “Royal fate” of the “great Minister of State” sound particularly out-of-place in an American church, the inscription is a testimony to the extent to which Virginia’s first English emigrants were not imbued with a passion for equality or democracy, as they are sometimes painted by idealists looking for “the genesis of the United States.” Yet despite the relative minuteness of Isle of Wight County’s history at the dawn of the eighteenth century in the broader history of the United States, its local peculiarities and development nevertheless form an integral part of our past, however alien the customs, concerns, and aspirations of its seventeenth-century inhabitants may appear to modern Americans looking back at them through the quaint scrawls of their county records and the distinctly ancient architectural style of their enduring brick church.
Appendix: Methods and Sources

In this project I drew on a variety of sources that I would like to explain briefly. First, unless I noted explicitly that articles came from books or collections of articles, all secondary source articles came from JSTOR. Second, for the bulk of my primary research I used Isle of Wight County’s extant seventeenth- and eighteenth-century records. These records are not entirely complete, with some very desirable records missing; I initially chose to focus on the 1690’s because the court orders for October 1693-May 1695 are the only court orders that exist for the county for the entire seventeenth century. In fact, the next earliest set of court orders begins in 1746, and thus the 1693-1695 court orders are the only ones left to document the earliest period of Isle of Wight’s development. The county does still have a relatively complete collection of wills and deeds from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and thus most of my information came from these sources.

I obtained the county records on microfilm from the Library of Virginia, and with the help of William Lindsay Hopkins’s abstracts, I was able to read through the microfilm copies of the original books of deeds for 1688-1704 and 1704-1715. I was able to find transcribed copies of many of the county records, however, and so after checking the accuracy of the transcription against the microfilm records, I used some of these transcribed records in lieu of microfilm. This approach was particularly important for the county’s main book of wills and deeds for the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as the Library of Virginia’s copy of the microfilm was damaged and unreadable.

As I noted in a footnote, Professor Richter kindly sent me spreadsheets she had made of the 1704 and 1714 quit rent lists for the county, and those files proved invaluable for me in my research and in calculating the numbers that I cited in the sections on land ownership. All of the
calculations on slave ownership came from numbers that I myself pulled from the county’s wills and deeds.
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