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A World of Goods: The Printer's Economy in Eighteenth-Century Virginia

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A WORLD OF GOODS

THE PRINTER'S ECONOMY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY VIRGINIA

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the world of the printer in eighteenth-century Virginia and the relationship between newspaper advertising and a blossoming capitalist economy. It describes the extent and increase in newspaper advertising in *The Virginia Gazette* during the years 1736, 1755 and 1775. It examines the important role advertising played in the commercial life of the colony, linking colonists with Great Britain and with each other. Finally, it discusses the role of colonial printers in promoting commerce through use of the printed word.

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Introduction

A large, eye-catching display advertisement in a September, 1755 issue of *The Virginia Gazette* hawks a recent shipment of fine imported European textiles—including a selection of expensive cashmere and silk fabrics. In the same issue, entrepreneur Miles Taylor advertises his extensive inventory of garden seeds, which includes seeds for growing broccoli, cabbage, and a variety of lettuces. Throughout this issue of the *Gazette*, print notices announce the availability of an array of salable items including real estate, groceries, clothing, books, and livestock. Sellers call attention to their low prices, special bargains, and willingness to extend credit to buyers with the appropriate collateral.[1]

While the use of the newspaper to sell goods and services is nothing new and is likely not surprising to the reader, these particular advertisements pose questions for historians and students of material culture alike. They are not selections from the advertising pages of a recently issued American newspaper, although they well could be. All of these advertisements were published in a September, 1755 issue of *The Virginia Gazette*, nearly two hundred and fifty years ago and before the founding of this nation.

Newspaper advertising from the eighteenth century provides one method of entree into one of the critical debates that engages students of material culture, colonial history, trade, and political economy: How self-sufficient were colonists

[1] *The Virginia Gazette*, September 9, 1775

and early Americans? When did they begin purchasing consumer goods in earnest? What factors contributed to their changing lifestyles and helped a capitalist economy to grow? Until recently, many scholars were in relative accord in their answers to these and other pertinent questions. Historian T.H. Breen writes that "Before World War I, it was common to encounter in the scholarly literature the resourceful yeoman, an independent Jeffersonian figure who carved a farm out of the wilderness and managed by the sweat of his brow to feed and clothe his family."[2] Turn-of-the-century historians such as Alice Morse Earle helped to perpetuate the view of colonial Americans as resourceful, independent, thrifty, and above all, self-sufficient. In her 1901 work *Home Life in Colonial Days*, Earle includes chapters on colonial cooking, the production of textiles, and farming methods. All add emphasis to her central theme, that in the colonial era "Home-made was an adjective that might be applied to nearly every article in the house."[3]

Such a view of life in a previous era is tempting—and no doubt grounded partly in reality. By many accounts, eighteenth-century American colonists *were* a largely self-sufficient group of people, especially when they are viewed through the lens of the twentieth century. Men farmed and raised livestock and women made soap, candles, and other goods needed by the family to survive. Authors including Ruth Schwartz Cowan describe how men, women, and children worked in tandem around the colonial household, each with their separate jobs and roles, to help ensure that all of the family's needs were met.[4] Historians and students of material culture alike have been reluctant to release their grip on this mythical past, a time when American families labored to produce their daily bread and individual craftsmen made

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[2]Breen, "The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690-1776," p. 479.
[3]Morse Earle, *Home Life in Colonial Days*, p. 166.
[4]Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work For Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology From the Open Hearth to the Microwave.*

goods according to time-honored tradition. However, early newspaper advertising presents irrefutable evidence that eighteenth-century Americans *did not* produce everything they consumed in their daily lives. And as newspaper advertising is a constant throughout the eighteenth century, it only stands to reason that people were consuming the goods and services advertised, otherwise merchants would have ceased this practice.

Pinpointing details of the day-to-day lives of those who lived more than two hundred years ago is a difficult task. Many who have attempted it in recent years emerge with a picture that is both complex and varied. Jeanne Boydston, author of *Home & Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic,* describes eighteenth- and nineteenth-century changes in the way both men and women provided for their families. She describes the complex web of choices that both women and men faced—decisions about the value of their time and labor. The women in Boydston's narrative often embody many of the virtues of the self-sufficient producers Alice Morse Earle describes. They churn butter, collect eggs, make yarn from wool and weave it into cloth, and raise livestock—but there is a difference. Women sometimes concentrate their resources by producing extra yarn or food for the market and earn small amounts of cash. This cash, in turn, may be used to purchase goods to augment their family's lifestyle in a particular area.[5] In *Home & Work,* Boydston convincingly describes the transition in the Northeast region of the country from a land-based, patriarchal society to one in which men adopted the role of "breadwinner," performing labor exclusively in exchange for cash instead of simply for the subsistence of their families. As early as the middle of the eighteenth century, Boydston argues, both men and women were keeping apace with an economy beginning to be infiltrated by the idea of labor performed for cash.

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[5] Boydston, *Home & Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic,* p. 53.

Boydston's picture of life in early America cautions against over-simplification. Her work, along with that of other scholars, seems to indicate that early Americans adopted a lifestyle in which both household manufacture and purchase of goods existed side-by-side. Breen too warns against overly romanticized notions about self-sufficiency, cautioning that such narrow views have only served to prevent scholars from understanding the true nature of the American past. Scholars such as Ann Smart Martin, who writes in "Makers, Buyers and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework," challenge the premise of a romantic American past. Martin argues that early American craftsmen were not lone artisans as they are sometimes portrayed. Instead, they "sought efficiencies of labor by hiring out specific tasks and stockpiling parts."[6] Similarly, colonial American families, another arm in this system of blossoming capitalism and entrepreneurship, were actively involved in the buying and selling of goods to their best advantage.

Historians have long used newspapers, many of which survive from even the early days of the colonies, as a tool for exploring history. Newspapers provide important clues about the events, literature, style, and values that distinguish a given culture. Historian Billy Smith, who has studied early newspaper advertisements for runaway slaves, writes that the medium allows ". . . readers to chew primary sources themselves and, thus, to taste more fully the varied flavors of eighteenth-century American slavery and those who fled it."[7] C.Y. Ferdinand relies on newspaper advertising in his study "Selling it to the Provinces: News and Commerce Round Eighteenth-Century Salisbury" because they are a quantifiable source of information about buying and selling trends during past times. Ferdinand argues that eighteenth-

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[6]Martin, "Makers, Buyers, and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework, p. 147.
[7]Smith, *Blacks Who Stole Themselves*, p. 1.

century newspaper advertising reveals the contemporary perception that the medium was a useful one for buying and selling goods.[8]

Newspapers provide a context for a society's use of material goods—information about what was for sale, how it could be acquired, and at what price. Eighteenth-century newspaper advertising from *The Virginia Gazette* reveals a world of goods and services available for purchase, a budding capitalist economy that seems to contradict the myth of self-sufficiency in colonial America—in eighteenth-century Virginia, at least. But its value goes even deeper. Early *Gazette* advertising raises questions about the role of print culture in an expanding consumer economy and the role of the colonial printers themselves in helping to mediate this economy. In this thesis, I will examine advertising in *The Virginia Gazette* during three eras: in 1736, the first year of publication under William Parks; in 1755, under the direction of William Hunter, Sr. and in 1775, when the *Gazette* was published by John Dixon and William Hunter, Jr. I will examine several categories of advertising to explore how they coexisted during the course of the century. Finally, I will use the advertisements themselves to examine the role of print culture and the printer in an early consumer economy.

A word of caution first: just as this thesis attempts to answer questions, it creates new ones for future scholars to address. For instance, more research is needed about the circulation of *The Virginia Gazette* and other eighteenth-century newspapers. By all indications, typical readers—those with the ability to read and the shilling to purchase a paper — were from the top and middle classes of society. However, a detailed examination of who a "typical" reader might have been in terms of social class, level of education, and financial resources, and perhaps, even an assessment of how far down the social ladder the paper's circulation reached, would

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[8]Ferdinand, "Selling it to the Provinces: News and Commerce Round Eighteenth-Century Salisbury," p. 347.

have been helpful to this study. Similarly, an examination of the editorial content of the newspaper for information about commercial exchange and markets in eighteenth-century Virginia is needed.

The Colonial Printers of *The Virginia Gazette*

Archival copies of colonial newspapers suggest that advertising was an important part of newspaper publishing from its inception. William Parks, colonial printer of Virginia and the founder of *The Virginia Gazette*, began publication of the newspaper in 1736. In one of the first issues he printed, that of September 3, 1736, the printer included three advertisements—one for a parcel of land for sale, one advertising a book he had printed and was offering for sale, and a third public notice addressed to "all those who wish to go to the new settlement of Georgia." A notable figure in Virginia history, Parks was the first to hold the title of "public printer." In his dissertation "Guardians of Their Own Liberty: A Contextual History of Print Culture in Virginia Society, 1750 to 1820," David A. Rawson writes that Parks was lured to Williamsburg from Maryland by government officials who offered him the post and its accompanying salary of 200 pounds (in 1736) in exchange for printing all of the "documents, forms, and reports that they and the Governor required."[9] As public printer, it was implicit that Parks place a premium on his official duties, but he was allowed to print a newspaper, books, and various ephemera as time permitted.

Given his relatively secure financial standing, the zeal with which Parks pursued other business opportunities, including the publication of a newspaper, is surprising. Colonial American Benjamin Franklin made eighteenth-century printing a high-profile business, but it was also a risky one. Newspaper publication was a business that many

[9]Rawson, "Guardians of Their Own Liberty: A Contextual History of Print Culture in Virginia Society, 1750 to 1820." p. 80.

attempted, but at which relatively few succeeded. In his survey of printing in early America, *The Colonial Printer*, Laurence C. Wroth provides data about the prevalence of publications in early America. Between 1694 and 1820, 1,934 different newspapers were published in thirty states. Approximately 586 of those papers died out at or before the close of one year of business, nearly a thirty percent failure rate.[10] Wroth writes that although "the establishment of a weekly journal with its subscription list and advertisements forming a regular source of income" was the ambition of every progressive printer, newspaper publication was often a "precarious venture." To succeed in an uncertain business meant convincing contemporaries of the worth of a particular publication. And the colonial printer needed to sell more than the editorial copy of his newspaper alone. He was faced with the task of convincing local entrepreneurs and citizens that his publication had an important place in the business of buying and selling of goods and services.

As the first printer of Virginia, Parks appears to have made the success of his newspaper an important goal. Very early in his Williamsburg career as public printer, he seemed to realize the potential inherent in an emerging market economy and the possibilities for a publication to support itself, at least partially, with advertising revenue. Parks published advertisements, paid notices for a variety of services, as well as both locally-made and imported products, in almost every issue of *The Virginia Gazette* published between September 1736 and September 1737. Subscribers could count on finding them in the back of the newspaper, in a neat section with the simple heading "Advertisements." Advertisements were set apart from the editorial copy with white space, but printed in the same typeface used to print the rest of the paper.

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[10]Wroth, *The Colonial Printer*, p. 232.

During the newspaper's first year of publication, an average of 5.45 advertisements appeared in each issue (see Figure One).[11]

William Parks died of the pleurisy in the spring of 1750 while en route to England; however, his practice of running paid advertisements in *The Virginia Gazette* continued.[12] A string of successive printers published the newspaper under the same name after his death. In all, a total of thirteen proprietors published a newspaper called *The Virginia Gazette* between 1736 and 1780, when the publication moved to Richmond.[13] Three of these printers will be discussed here.

William Hunter, who had served as Parks' foreman, and possibly, his apprentice, assumed the role of public printer and editor of *The Virginia Gazette* after Parks' death. Hunter was editor of the *Gazette* in 1755, one of the years I will focus on in this study. Like his predecessor William Parks, Hunter seems to have been held in esteem by his contemporaries. In addition to serving as printer of Williamsburg, Hunter held the post of Deputy Postmaster-General.[14]

In regards to advertising, Hunter seems to have continued in much the same manner as Parks had. During his term as editor, advertisements continued to occupy the same space at the back of the paper, where they were set apart from the editorial copy with a heading and white space. Even the price remained constant at three

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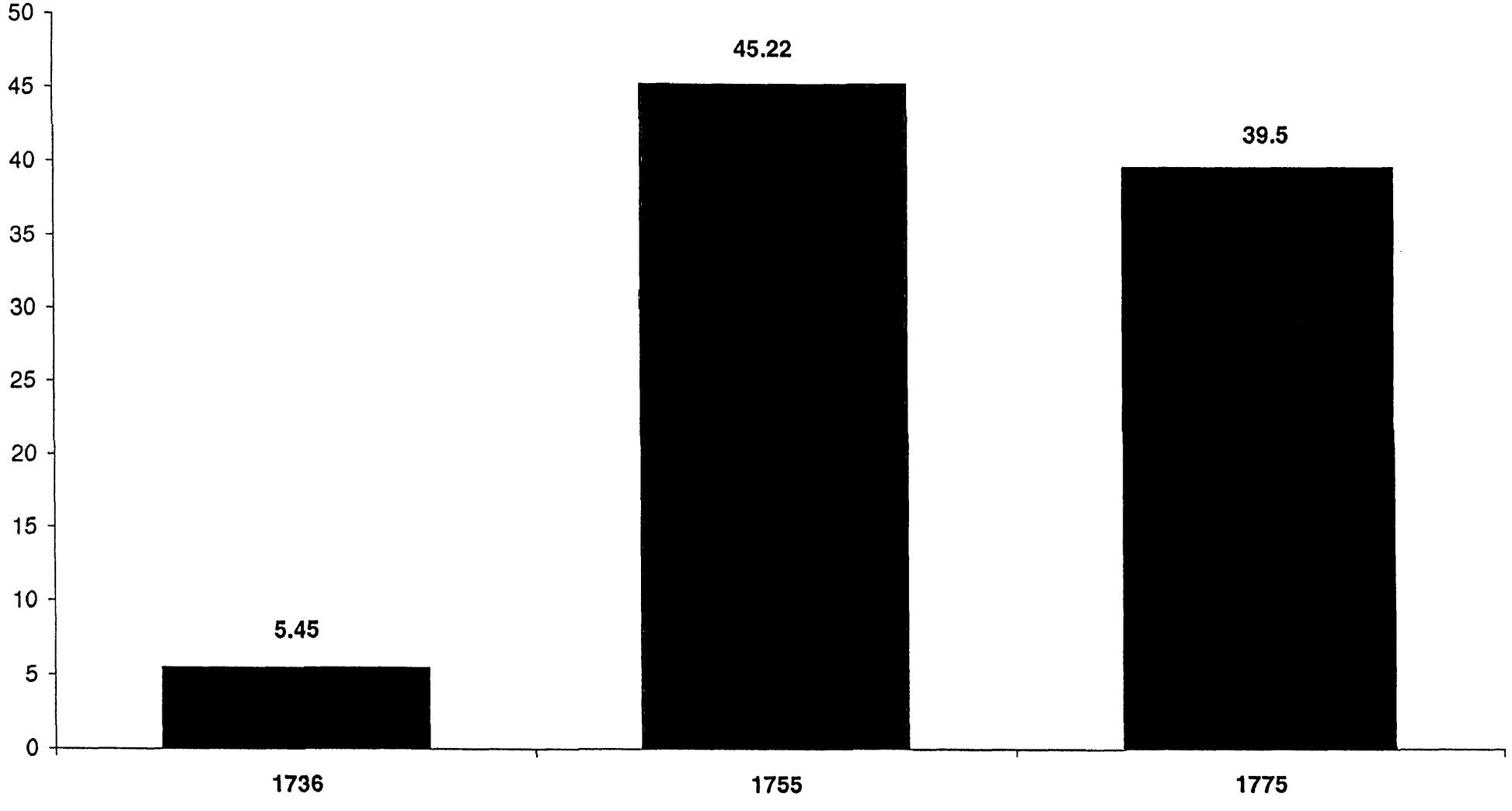
[11] In order to prepare figures one through four, I examined all available issues of *The Virginia Gazette* for the years 1736, 1755, and 1775. I placed all printed advertisements into one of nine categories and tallied the sum. I used the total number of advertisements printed in all available issues to calculate the averages in Figure One. For the year 1755, as with most other years during the 1750s, many issues are missing or damaged. In addition, there were often large gaps in publication during this decade. As a result, the total number of issues examined for 1755 was lower than for the other two years. In hindsight, as a more complete set of issues is available for the years 1751 and 1752, an examination of either of these volumes would have been more complete. However, I wished to stick to my schedule of examining the *Gazette* in roughly 20-year intervals.

[12] In *The Colonial Printer*, Laurence C. Wroth writes that William Parks came down with the pleurisy while on a voyage to England. He died April 1, 1750.

[13] Introduction to the microfilm edition of *The Virginia Gazette*, Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1950.

[14] John Edgar Molnar provides brief sketches of all the eighteenth-century editors of *The Virginia Gazette* in his Ph.D. dissertation, "Publication and Retail Book Advertisements in *The Virginia Gazette*."

Figure One: Advertisement Numbers By Year (Ave. Total Per Week)



shillings per ad with a discounted price of two shillings for each subsequent week of placement. But if the sheer number of ad placements is taken as an indication, the importance of advertising increased significantly between the time of Parks and Hunter (see Figure One). While the newspaper began its first year of publication with an average of 5.45 advertisements per week, twenty years later that number had increased almost tenfold, to an average of 45.22. This advertising boom provides a concrete illustration of economic and social changes that accelerated in the colonies during mid-century. These changes will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

Colonial printer William Hunter suffered poor health and constant illness, going so far as to leave the colonies in an effort to regain his physical well-being. He died in August 1761, bequeathing his printing operation to his son William Jr., who ran the press with a partner named John Dixon. Hunter and Dixon published from 1774 to 1778, but they were not the only Williamsburg printers jostling for a share of the pie during this time period. Between the years 1766 to 1780, three competing presses issued their own versions of a newspaper called *The Virginia Gazette*. In this thesis, I have chosen to focus on the version issued by Dixon and Hunter in my data for the year 1775 because this partnership retained control of the original press.

Under John Dixon and William Hunter, Jr., the *Gazette*'s advertising format again remained relatively constant. The price of an ad stayed steady at three shillings for the first notice and two shillings for each subsequent notice, a discount made possible by the fact that it was easy and convenient for the colonial printer to keep lines of type together from one week to the next.[15] For the most part, ads appeared in the back of the paper—in the same position they had occupied under the tenures of William Parks and William Hunter, Sr. respectively. Still, some subtle changes are evident in the *Gazette*'s advertising for the year 1775.

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[15]Ferdinand, p. 397.

Throughout the 1775 editions, an ad or two occasionally strays out of position from its space in the block in the back. Advertisements for both medicinal potions and cures, particularly John Norton's advertisements for Maredant's Antiscorbutic Drops, and notices about the availability of books printed by Dixon and Hunter, occasionally appear in the first column of the front page. This practice seems to indicate a growing familiarity with the value of different parts of the news space—and the willingness to use premium spaces to get a particularly important or lucrative message across.

During this period, advertisement placement, in general, appears a bit more fluid. While previous editors discussed here used the heading "Advertisements" to create a strict demarcation between editorial and sales copy, Dixon and Hunter occasionally varied this practice. In many issues from 1775, a graphic element—a small flourish—is used to mark the end of the editorial copy and the beginning of the advertising section. In a few issues, there is no delineation at all, perhaps suggesting an increasing familiarity on the part of readers with the distinct functions of news and advertising copy. This development points to another change in *The Virginia Gazette* of 1775—the introduction of a few select graphic elements. These graphic elements, which include flourishes; small woodcuts, particularly of ships; and the introduction of varying sizes of type; help break up an otherwise gray page of newsprint, creating visual interest for the prospective reader. The addition of graphic elements is no doubt an indication of the increasing sophistication of the colonial printing press, but it might also be read as increasing concern for the newspaper reader. An attractive format helps to draw eyes to *The Virginia Gazette* and its advertising section. It is perhaps not surprising that this variation in format occurred during a period of competition between three newspapers with the *Gazette* name.

While it stands to reason that the increased competition for potential advertisers would have substantially reduced the number of advertisements Dixon and Hunter published in their 1775 editions, this was not the case. While the data

collected for this project reveals a slight decrease in the average number of advertisements published in 1775, from an average of 45.22 per week in 1755 to an average of 39.5 per week in 1775, the drop is quite small. Any number of factors, including the impending threat of war with Great Britain, yearly fluctuations in the economy, or the increased competition mentioned previously might account for the reduced rate.

For Sale in *The Virginia Gazette*

If *The Virginia Gazette* is evidence that a variety of goods were bought and sold regularly in colonial America, it seems appropriate to ask which goods and services were for sale. For this thesis, I surveyed three years' worth of issues of the newspaper: from September 1736 through August 1737, printed by William Parks; from January through December 1755, printed by William Hunter, Sr.; and from January through December 1775, printed by John Dixon and William Hunter, Jr. In my study of colonial newspaper advertising, I wished to cover as much as possible of the *Gazette*'s nearly fifty-year publishing history in Williamsburg (from 1736 until 1780, when the publication moved to Richmond), and desired to space the intervals evenly over roughly twenty year periods of time. Using nine major categories, I examined each year's worth of *Gazette* issues. These categories are elaborated in Table One.

During the forty-year time span covered in this study, the types of goods and services advertised remained relatively constant (See Figures Two, Three, and Four). In all three periods, advertisements for real estate, livestock, and servants/slaves comprised more than half of all *Gazette* advertising. In 1755, these three categories made up three-quarters of the advertisements placed. Advertisements regarding the repayment of debts, the sale or loss of personal property, and the availability of positions or services made up a small percentage of the total. And while the percentage of advertisements dealing with personal property and consumer goods remained relatively constant, there were wild fluctuations in the percentage of those dealing with livestock.

Table One	
Books	notices pertaining to the sale of books by local merchants; notices advertising the sale of one or more of the printer's own publications
Consumer Goods	notices of imported or locally-produced textiles, foodstuffs, spices, beverages, tools, or miscellaneous dry goods for sale by merchants
Debts	notices requesting the repayment of debts
Livestock	notices pertaining to horses or cattle lost and found, notices of livestock for sale by owner
Personal Property	notices of miscellaneous personal property found or for sale; sales of property forming personal estates
Positions/Services	notices soliciting the help of skilled or unskilled laborers, advertisements placed by individuals seeking employment

Public Notices	public notices concerning meetings, community information; notices pertaining to entertainment and leisure events; notices of citizens leaving the Colonies
Servants/Slaves	notices of rewards for the capture and return of runaway indentured servants or slaves; notices of servants or slaves found; notices pertaining to the sale or auction of slaves

Figure Two: 1736 Advertisements By Category

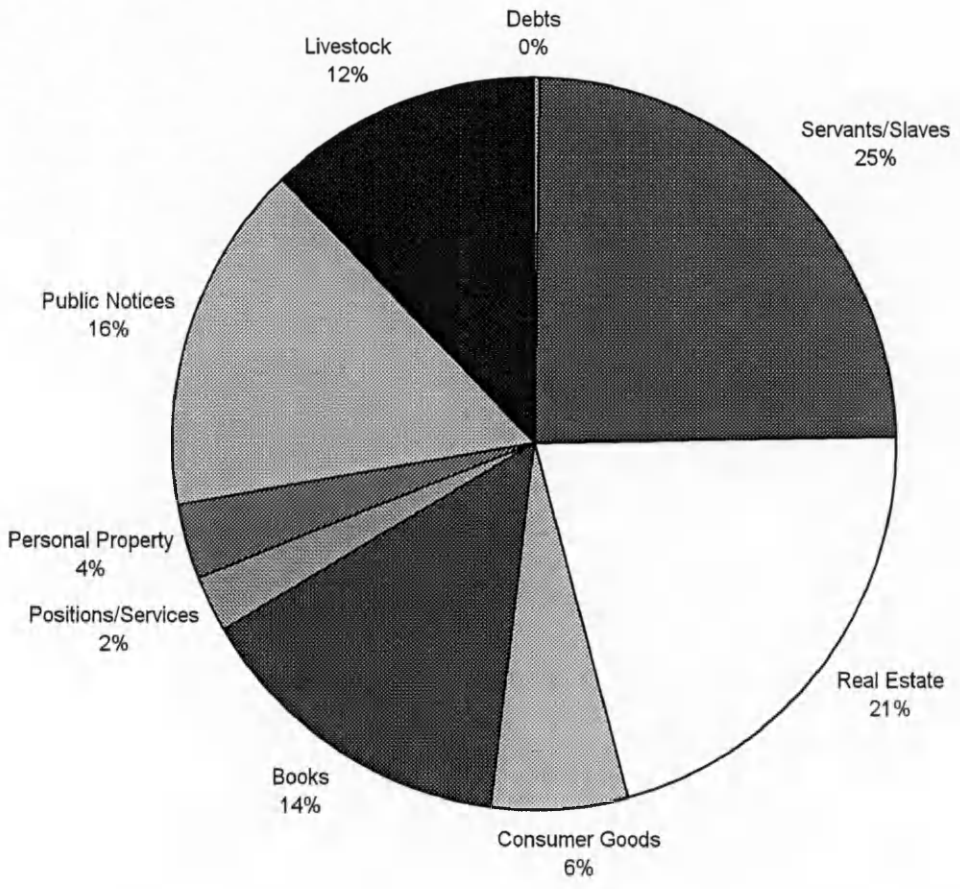


Figure Three: 1755 Advertisements By Category

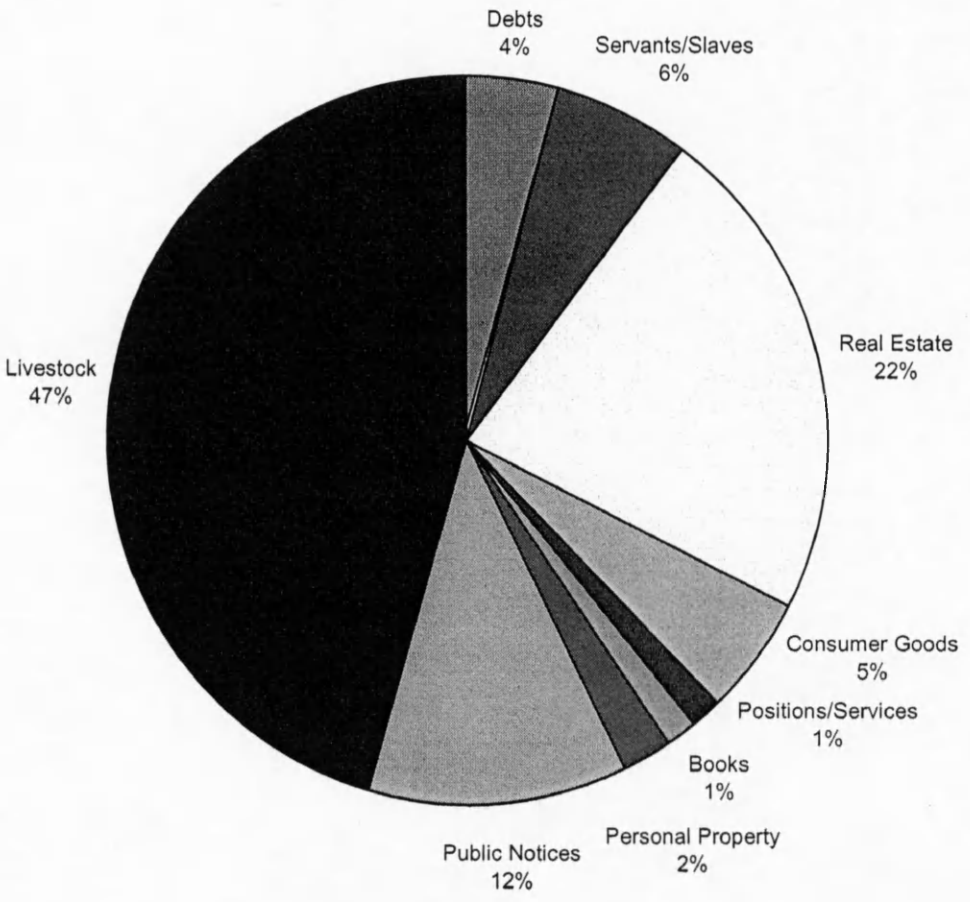
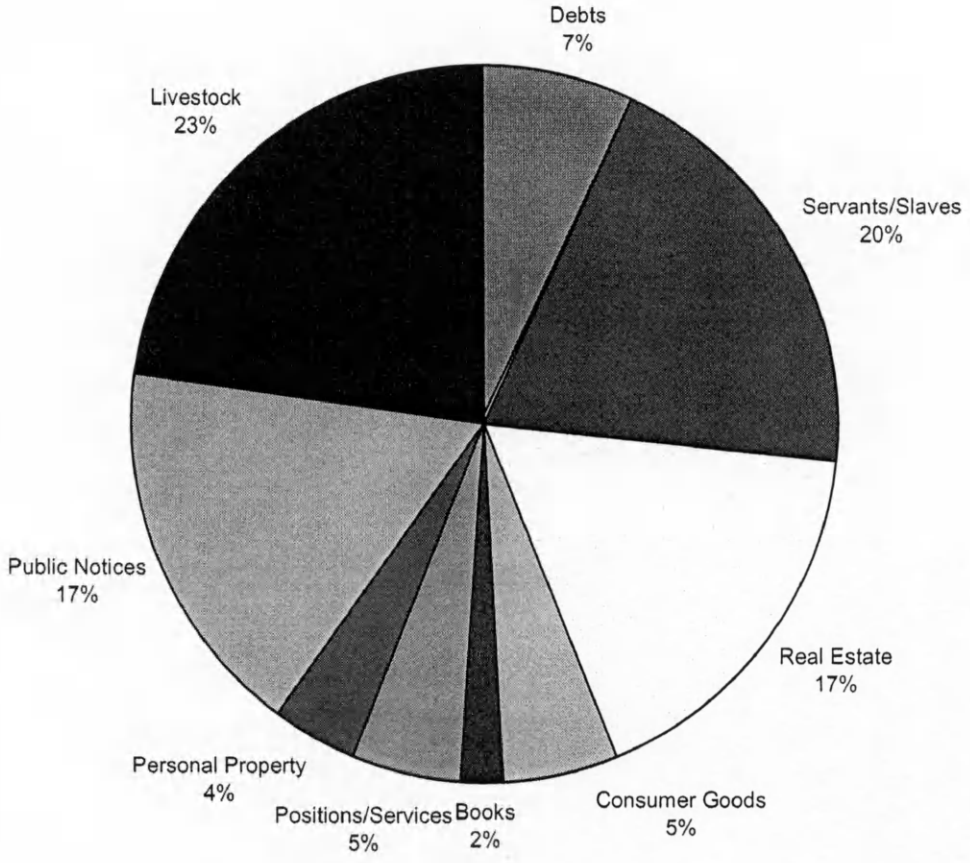


Figure Four: 1775 Advertisements By Category



One of the most frequent categories of advertising during all three time periods is the notice for runaway slaves and servants, providing a grim reminder of the reality of life for African Americans and poor whites during the eighteenth century. A typical example of this genre is found in the March 18, 1737 edition of the paper:

> Ran away from my House in York Town, on the 6th Instant, a Servant Man name Patrick Burk, a Saddler by Trade, born in Virginia, aged about 30, of a small stature, brown Complexion, short black Hair, and mark'd with the Small Pox. He wore a Kersey Coat with Metal Buttons, and a Wastecoast and Breeches. He took with him a dark Bay Horse, belonging to me, mark'd on the rear Shoulder with a Heart. Whoever secures the said Servant, so as I may have him again, shall have Three Pounds Reward, besides what the Law allows.
>
> --James Mitchell

In the pre-Civil War South, indentured servants and slaves were valuable investments —much money was spent for their purchase and time spent for their training. When they fled, many took valuable items of property with them—clothing, livestock, and reserves of food. Such was evidently the case with indentured servant Patrick Burk, who left his master's property riding a valuable bay horse. In the mind of a plantation owner, three shillings was likely money well spent for the chance to locate two such important items of personal property.

Some of the individuals who placed advertisements in *The Virginia Gazette* hoped to reclaim property that was lost, others were looking to sell it. Citizens frequently advertised real estate for sale or rent, often due to death, bankruptcy, or an impending move back to Europe. In 1775, plenty of Virginians were planning a move or an "extended visit" to Great Britain, a sign of the growing inevitability of a conflict with the "mother country." James Buchanan, "guardian for the heir" of a piece of real estate, was the advertiser in a November 4, 1775 notice in the *Gazette*.

> To be Rented for one or more years, and entered upon directly, the House and Tenement which Mr. Patrick Coutts, Merchant in this Town, presently possesses, belonging to the Estate of Capt James Gunn. It is one of the most beautiful and healthful situations in America.
>
> --James Buchanan
> Guardian for the Heir

Coults' reasons for renting out his property, instead of occupying it himself or selling it outright, remain unclear from the advertisement. Whatever they might have been, it appears his ad sparked the interest of at least one person. A long-ago reader drew a large circle around this particular notice on the newspaper used in the research for this project.[16]

Another category of advertisements that are of particular interest to this project are those for consumer goods. While the absolute numbers of these types of notices are relatively small when compared with some of the other categories, individual ads are valuable for they reveal the array of imported items available for sale in eighteenth-century Virginia. Lace, painted tablecloths, Irish Linens, fine writing paper, painter's brushes, linseed oil, sasparilla, molasses, coffee, white ginger, oil of sweet almonds, and musovado sugar—all were available to those with the resources to purchase them.

Shortly after William Parks commenced publication of *The Virginia Gazette* in 1736, and many times thereafter, he published the following announcement:

> Advertisement, concerning Advertisements.
> All Persons who have Occasion to buy or sell Houses, Lands, Goods, or Cattle; or have Servants or Slaves Runaway; or have lost Horses, Cattle, &c. Or want to give any Publick Notice; may have it advertis'd in all these Gazettes printed in one Week, for Three Shillings, and for Two Shillings per Week for as many Weeks afterwards as they shall order, by giving or sending their Directions to the Printer hereof.

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[16]*The Virginia Gazette,* November 4, 1775. Issued on microfilm by the Institute of Early American History and Culture, from originals and photostats loaned by other institutions, 1950.

> And, as these Papers will circulate (as speedily as possible) not only all over This, but also the Neighboring Colonies, and will probably be read by some Thousands of People, it is very likely they may have the desir'd Effect; and it is certainly the cheapest and most effectual Method that can be taken, for Publishing any Thing of this Nature.[17]

Several things are striking about this announcement. Rather than strictly limit his market for advertisements to artisans or entrepreneurs who had a product or service to sell, Parks keenly perceived that ordinary citizens, at times, had the need to make a public announcement. Valuable property could be lost or stolen; slaves and indentured servants sometimes took matters into their own hands and ran away. Fortunes rose and fell and citizens sometimes had the need to unload their real estate and businesses to pay off debts. Advertisements corresponding to all of these situations can be found in issues of the *Gazette* during all of the time periods discussed in this thesis. The only noted qualification for placing an advertisement in the newspaper was that the purchaser be able to afford the three-shilling fee.

Although his successors did not always draw this distinction in words, they too published advertisements by both categories of advertisers. *The Virginia Gazette*, then, provided a service to two distinct groups. Merchants, the primary purchasers of advertisements that fit into the consumer goods category, used the newspaper to "broadcast" their message to as many potential buyers as possible. Citizens used the medium to place notices regarding the rental, sale, or loss of items of personal property: real estate, livestock, servants and slaves, and other personal property, no doubt also seeking the attention of a large group of people who might be interested in what they had for sale. Savvy businessmen, Parks, Hunter, Dixon and Hunter, and other colonial printers sought maximum profit for themselves by appealing to both groups of advertisers.

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[17]*The Virginia Gazette*, October 8, 1736.

What emerges from the advertising pages of *The Virginia Gazette* is two groups of people using advertising to communicate in two distinct ways. David A. Rawson has taken a detailed look at both of these groups of buyers by examining the office journals kept by two of the paper's editors, William Hunter and Joseph Royle, which are held in the archives at the University of Virginia. The records of Hunter and Royle, which cover the periods July 1750 to June 1752 and January 1764 to January 1766 respectively, are perhaps the best available clue as to who *Gazette* advertisers were and how they used the services of the colonial printing office.

Rawson writes that citizens, often planters, used newspaper advertising, as well as the services of the printing office in general, differently than did eighteenth-century merchants. Most planters were native-born Virginians who traveled to the printing office to purchase a variety of goods. They comprised the principal market for the sale of stationery, books, and printed ephemera, and sometimes placed notices in the *Gazette* advertising the sale of real estate or personal property.[18] Merchants, on the other hand, were the principal purchasers of the blank books and forms sold by the colonial printers. During their trips to the printing office, merchants sometimes placed advertisements for their businesses, particularly when they were new in town. Merchants often added the price of advertising to their office tabs, which they paid regularly.[19]

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[18]Rawson, p. 130.
[19]Ibid, p. 136.

Eighteenth-Century Consumers

Despite the evidence of a flourishing market for goods contained in the pages of *The Virginia Gazette*, a question remains: What types of eighteenth-century people had the resources available to purchase these sorts of things in the first place? While merchant advertising provides clues about what was for sale on the market, announcements of estate sales provide an alternative way of viewing eighteenth-century buying and selling habits. Lists of goods to be liquidated at estate sales or upon a citizen's departure from the Colonies provide evidence of the things specific Virginians acquired and used in their personal lives. For example, this notice, published on May 6, 1775, lists a variety of expensive luxury items to be liquidated on the occasion of the owner's departure from the Colonies:

> To be sold for ready Money
> A Collection of valuable books, either separately or together; a Port Folio of Engravings, Etchings, and Mezzotintos (all fine Impressions, and many of them Proofs) by the most celebrated Masters; several articles of Mohagany Furniture, & c. a three Year old Chestnut Colt, by Valiant, from a high-blooded Mare; a Year old Bay Filley [sic], from the same, by Fearnought; and a single chair, both light and strong; the Property of S. Henley of William & Mary College, who designs to leave the Colony soon.

As Henley was clearly a man of means, it is perhaps not surprising that he purchased and used books, art, and furniture in his everyday life. What is somewhat more surprising is recent scholarship by authors who assert that the purchase and use of consumer goods was not limited to very rich men like Henley, but that it extended well down into the social strata.

Cary Carson, Lois Green Carr, Lorena S. Walsh, and Richard Bushman are in consensus on this point in a volume of essays called *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*. Carr and Walsh, in their essay "Changing Lifestyles and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake," mark the eighteenth century as a critical time for change in consumer behavior. During the previous century, they argue, few acquired goods beyond what was necessary for their immediate survival. Instead, they poured all available financial resources into cultivating the land—a logical move considering that many of these men and women came to America with little money to spare. What money they did manage to accumulate was necessarily invested into land and livestock—for the production of capital.[20] Those few who had come to the Colonies with wealth or had managed to acquire it, customarily used their superior resources to accumulate more of the same basic goods required for living—mattresses, ceramic bowls and plates, and pots for cooking.[21] In other words, they did not use their wealth to purchase unnecessary luxury goods.

But by 1700, according to Carr and Walsh, greater amounts of local exchange allowed families all along the spectrum from "wealthy" to "poor" an increasing amount of income to purchase non-essential items.[22] Around this time, even significant numbers of the poor began to acquire goods, "if only in token amounts."[23] The purchase of non-essential consumer goods, according to Carr and Walsh, allowed families at the top of the social ladder to attempt to "establish their superiority by adopting the refinements and sophistications of English gentry."[24] Families who were not as well off economically used the purchase of goods to achieve some aspects of

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[20]Carr and Walsh, "Changing Lifestyles and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake," p. 129.
[21]Carson, "The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?," p. 497.
[22]Carr and Walsh, p. 122.
[23]Ibid, p. 111.
[24]Ibid, p. 132.

the lifestyles of those who had more money to spare. And all of these families "were using artifacts both to create social distance from those below them and to bridge the gap separating them from those above."[25]

In his chapter, "The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?," Cary Carson agrees that eighteenth-century Americans increasingly concerned themselves with wealth, luxury, and decadence.[26] Newly accessible material possessions including tables, bedsteads, frying pans, and individualized drinking vessels represented a deliberate decision to expend more money for a more comfortable style of life. Before the second half of the eighteenth century, Carson argues, most Americans shared a material culture—families of different economic groups possessed varying amounts of the same basic implements required for living.[27] But changing consumer values in the eighteenth century "put gentility up for sale," creating sharper contrasts in the lifestyles led by groups of different income levels.[28] Despite an increasing distance between the lifestyles of the rich, middling sort, and the poor, Carson agrees with Carr and Walsh that even the eighteenth-century poor occasionally managed to scrape together money to purchase non-essential "luxury" goods. Carson, Carr and Walsh, and other scholars who have studied inventories of goods owned by eighteenth-century families, have found evidence there that some of these "luxury goods"— especially eating utensils, improved cookware, and serving vessels for tea—were sometimes part of their belongings.

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[25]Ibid.
[26]Carson, p. 492.
[27]Ibid, p. 129.
[28]Ibid, p. 521.

A Consumer Revolution?

The phrase "consumer revolution" is a loaded one, with the potential to spark lively debate among students of American history. While some historians describe a consumer revolution, indicated by the availability of new consumer goods and new marketing methods, at the end of the nineteenth century, others place similar developments much earlier—in the mid- to late-eighteenth century. Both groups may be correct—that evidence of important changes in the acquisition, distribution, and marketing of goods can be found during both of these time periods. However, in both cases, the use of the phrase "consumer revolution" may be misleading. While each of these periods was one of great overall societal change, the increasing availability of and interest in material objects was likely a gradual process of evolution.

Historians and students of material culture who point to an increasing materialism that occurred during the eighteenth century have sought explanations for it. Some of these explanations, as the scholars who have put them forward concede, are preliminary and require further research and testing. Each explanation seems to supply a missing piece of the puzzle—to explain part of the reason eighteenth-century Americans began to rely on material possessions to a greater degree. When considered together, these explanations provide a convincing portrait of a society undergoing significant change.

It was increasing levels of mobility, commencing in the sixteenth century, argues Cary Carson, that sparked a growing fondness for material possessions. In "The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?," Carson describes how consumer goods and services were used as portable indicators of social

standing and reputation in colonial America.[29] In contrast with many of their ancestors who had stayed rooted in one place for generations, the American colonists were a group of people on the move. In fact, Carson argues that "the settlement of the colonies was one episode in a massive re-location of people."[30] While previous generations had lived their entire lives ". . . well within the compass of their local reputation," mobility presented new challenges to long-standing ways of establishing one's place in a society.[31]

It is Carson's view that these challenges were at least partially overcome by a reliance on material things in the conduct of social relations. Consumer goods—looking glasses, furniture, tea accessories, and dining implements—became the new tools for communicating important information about social standing in a given community. While traditionally, histories of the Industrial Revolution "have tended to treat demand as a given—something that's automatically there," Carson sees consumer demand as a prerequisite to the technological innovations introduced during the course of the Industrial Revolution and contends that Americans' "migratory impulses" were the driving factor in their materialism.[32]

Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh attribute changing lifestyles and consumer behavior in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake region to a number of conditions working in tandem. The authors agree that this key century marked a change from "plain living" to the use of possessions to mark social status.[33] They link the greater availability of goods with both better supplies from England and better marketing opportunities.[34] In the seventeenth century, argue Carr and Walsh, low population densities encouraged merchants to establish permanent stores. This

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[29]Ibid, p. 488.
[30]Ibid, p. 546.
[31]Ibid, p. 523.
[32]Ibid, p. 486.
[33]Carr and Walsh, p. 64.
[34]Ibid, p. 105.

increased merchant competition benefited consumers, as did merchants' growing practice of paying cash for tobacco crops. Like historian Carole Shammas, Carr and Walsh see availability of material goods as a function of improved trade routes and systems with England.[35] It is the authors' view that these various conditions converged to create a situation ripe for an eighteenth-century "consumer revolution:"

> Availability of new kinds of goods, including many that were inexpensive, new marketing strategies, and perhaps fluctuating improvements in the terms of trade, combined to help Chesapeake inhabitants keep abreast of changes in lifestyle occurring in England without forcing shifts in allocation of basic resources, but economic, demographic, and cultural changes more internal to Chesapeake society also had effects.[36]

In "Shopping and Advertising in Colonial America," Richard Bushman agrees that storekeeping was critical to the explosion of goods that appeared in the eighteenth century.[37] The growing number of stores and improved convenience as stores were established in greater proximity to many areas further encouraged the purchase of material goods. A heightened selection of personal goods, Bushman argues, introduced citizens to the idea of "shopping"—of comparing selection, quality, prices, and styles offered by competing outlets.[38]

Each of these arguments for an eighteenth-century "consumer revolution" stresses an economic, cultural, or social phenomena that resulted in objects becoming more affordable, available, or desirable.[39] Newspaper advertising was one such phenomena. Improved transportation routes and an expanding number of dry goods

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[35]Ibid.
[36]Ibid. p. 117.
[37]Bushman, "Shopping and Advertising in Colonial America," p. 244.
[38]Ibid, p. 246.
[39]My logic here borrows heavily from Ann Smart Martin, who writes that arguments for an eighteenth-century "consumer revolution" stress "the proliferation of goods, the new comforts and amenities of everyday households, and the larger economic, social, and cultural phenomena that made objects more affordable, available, or desirable." In "Makers, Buyers, and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework," p. 149.

stores contributed to making material objects more available. Better tools for production and the practice of outsourcing of jobs helped make them more affordable to the middling sort of person. And better marketing opportunities, such as the availability of newspaper advertising to spread information about goods and services, contributed to the process of making material objects more desirable, and perhaps more affordable and available as well.

The World of Commerce

With the establishment of Virginia's first weekly newspaper in 1736, William Parks became the first to offer Virginians a new service. Parks and successive editors of *The Virginia Gazette* allowed Virginians the opportunity to engage in a world of commerce through print. Advertisements for property that was lost, found, or for sale served a similar purpose as the "classified" pages of a modern newspaper do today. Print allowed citizens to "speak" to one another, potentially over long distances, sending and receiving messages about what was for sale in their community and beyond. Similarly, the print medium allowed businesspeople to communicate information about their products and services to as large a group as possible.

In Parks' "Advertisement, concerning advertisements," he bragged of the wide circulation of his publication, writing that it would likely reach "Some thousands of people."[40] While this boast was no doubt designed to place advertising in his newspaper in the best possible light, he may not have been too far off of the mark. Historians including David A. Rawson, who have examined the account books kept by William Parks' successors, estimate that the newspaper was probably printed in runs of 1,000 copies.[41] When the sharing of newspapers between friends and family members is factored into the equation, Parks' estimate that his paper reached "thousands" of readers becomes possible.

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[40]*The Virginia Gazette*, October 8, 1736.
[41]Rawson, p. 130.

Whatever the exact circulation figures may have been for the eighteenth-century *Gazettes*, it is clear that their potential for communicating a given message was well beyond any other method available. Options were fairly limited for Virginia planters and merchants with information to get across. If they wished to avoid the use of newspaper advertising, they could post an announcement, a "flyer" with their message written on it, or they could tell their family, friends, and acquaintances the message they wished to have conveyed and hope that it spread through word-of-mouth. Town criers also spread important announcements.[42] But for three shillings, a print notice in the newspaper allowed a citizen or businessman a sure-fire, systematic, and relatively economical way to attract the attention of "Some thousands of people." The increased visibility of a newspaper likely helped some to sell their goods faster than they may have been able to on their own. Likewise, it may have assisted others in securing their asking price. A larger pool of potential buyers meant that sellers could be selective—but so could buyers.

While the colonial newspaper had little or no impact on the trading systems in place to transport goods from overseas, it had the potential to affect the availability of items in another important way. Without information about what was for sale on the marketplace—information the newspaper provided on a weekly basis—citizens had no systematic way of finding out about land, animals, or objects for sale. Thus, while production and trade routes affected *actual* availability of goods, newspaper advertising created greater visibility of items for sale, affecting *perceived* availability of items on the market.

Despite the newspaper medium's unprecedented ability to reach people, it is doubtless that its reach did not extend to all levels of society. Camille Wells, the author of a study of eighteenth-century real estate advertising in *The Virginia Gazette*,

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[42]Ferdinand, p. 397.

warns that "Promising as they are, eighteenth-century Gazette advertisements can be misleading little documents."[43] The "literate elite," those with the ability to read a newspaper and the money to purchase both newspapers and advertising, are disproportionately represented in its pages, Wells warns. Because the only rhyme or reason behind the appearance of a particular notice was an "individual's inclination," advertisements should in no way be regarded as a comprehensive survey of all that was available on the market in the eighteenth century in the arena of real estate or other goods.[44]

When examining the reach and scope of these publications, scholars must also factor in eighteenth-century literacy rates. During this time period, the ability to read was far from universal, especially for women, African-Americans, and the poor.[45] On the other hand, it is also important to acknowledge that the inability to read did not necessarily mean someone did not have access to a publication. Journals and diaries from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveal that it was common for family members to take turns reading to one another. In this way, even those who could not read would have access to the information contained in newspapers. It is not difficult to construct a number of scenarios where the information in a publication might have been passed from those who could read to those who could not. In spite of its limitations, in many circumstances newspaper advertising had the potential to reach more consumers than any other communication method of its time.

While the similarities between eighteenth-century *Gazette* advertisements and their modern counterparts—the persuasive messages that fill twentieth century airwaves, television broadcasts, Internet sites, and magazines and newspapers—are

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[43]Wells, "The Planter's Prospect: Houses, Outbuildings, and Rural Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," p. 3.
[44]Ibid.
[45] For more information on literacy in the eighteenth century, see David A. Rawson, "Guardians of Their Own Liberty: A Contextual History of Print Culture in Virginia Society, 1750 to 1820."

surprising, it is important to note that there were many differences. As an example, consider the following advertisement placed in the newspaper by William Hooper in 1737. Hooper was a frequent advertising customer of William Parks in 1736 and 1737 who was trying to get the word out about his new business—he had recently assumed control of a Mrs. Archer's store in Williamsburg.

> Just Imported, from London, by William Hooper, and to be Sold by him, at his Store, (which was formerly Mrs. Archer's) In Williamsburg, the following Goods: Broad Cloaths of all Sorts; Druggets, Duroys, German Serges, Kerseys, Camblets, Sagathees, Dussils, Scarlet Ditto, with suitable Trimmings for them, of Gold, Silver or Plain . . .[46]

Hooper also sold ready-made clothing, hats, wigs, stockings, shoes, and cutlery.

To the twentieth-century consumer of advertising, what is curious about this advertisement and others from more than two hundred years ago is their straightforwardness. Available goods are noted in what Richard Bushman has called long "laundry lists," characterized by sparse description and seemingly little attempt to convince potential buyers of their worth or value.[47] How would such an ad, as I have asserted, ever succeed in making an object desirable?

Advertisements for imported cloth, groceries, and potions served an eminently practical purpose—they let potential consumers know about the latest shipment of goods from England, things they might care to buy. Similarly, notices advertising the sale of personal property broadcast practical messages about the availability of a particular piece of land, or a colt born of a high-bred horse. They seem to have little in common with their modern cousin, a breed of advertising that scholars including Vance Packard, David Potter, and John Kenneth Gailbraith blame for manipulating passive consumers into buying unnecessary and unwanted goods by the sheer power of

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[46]*The Virginia Gazette*, April 29, 1737.
[47]Bushman, p. 245.

their persuasive messages.[48] While Parks termed it "very likely they [the advertisements] may have the desir'd Effect," in his "Advertisement, concerning advertisements," his terminology likely reflects his certainty that buyer would meet seller in the pages of his *Gazette*, rather than that potential consumers would be tricked into buying things they didn't need or want.

In "The Availability of Literature to Eighteenth-Century Georgia Readers," C.R. Kropf shares the results of a study in which he examined the availability of contemporary literature titles in early Georgia. Kropf, who relied on newspaper advertising to conduct his study, distinguishes eighteenth-century advertising from the modern variety because it "was not designed to create interest, merely to reflect availability."[49] Kropf does not discuss *The Virginia Gazette* specifically, but applies his observation equally to all colonial newspapers. While Kropf makes a legitimate point, that colonial newspaper advertising is quite different from modern conceptions of advertising, his statement is not entirely correct.

Kropf distinguishes "availability" from "interest." While this leads readers to believe that they are clear-cut and easily separable categories, many of the advertisements in my study bring this proposition into question. For example, one of the more dubious ads placed in the *Gazette* during 1736 was for an essay written by John Tennent and published by William Parks. Tennent was the author of the popular eighteenth-century publication *Every Man his Own Doctor* or *The Poor Planter's Physician*, which first appeared in Williamsburg in 1734.[50] The notice lists the price of the publication at a little more than one shilling and Parks' shop as the place for its purchase, but leaves it unclear as to what relationship the author had with William

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[48]Ann Smart Martin characterizes Vance Packard, David Potter and John Kenneth Gailbraith as blaming advertising "for the manipulation of passive consumers" and as suggesting that "modern capitalist culture forced Americans to desire." In "Makers, Buyers, and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework," p. 147.

[49]Kropf, "The Availability of Literature to Eighteenth-Century Georgia Readers," p. 362.

[50]Wroth, *The Colonial Printer*, p. 242.

Parks. It announces the publication of "An Essay on the pleurisy Wherin the Cause of that Disease is plainly accounted for, from the Circumstances of this Climate." The notice promises that Tennent's publication will reveal a readily-available cure for the disease, a "Vegetable that grows; plentifully in many Places of this advertisement."[51]

Readers of the September 24, 1736 edition of the *Gazette* were not likely to have been *planning* to spend money on such a publication, nonetheless, once made aware that a "simple cure" for a dreaded disease could be theirs for the cost of a single shilling, how many could have resisted such a bargain? In a case such as this one, it is possible to see how news of a product's availability might *lead* to interest.

Consider this: A notice printed a few weeks later, on November 5, 1736, attempted to clear up a misunderstanding related to the sale of the publication. In this follow-up, local apothecaries were accused of providing customers with inauthentic rattlesnake root, which was the cure for the pleurisy that Tennent had revealed in the publication:

> Whereas I understand, That several Persons have provided Rattle Snake Root, which is not of the genuine Kind, to follow my Directions in the Cure of the Pleurisy: These are therefore to give Notice, That any Person after the 26th Inst. May have the genuine Rattle-Snake Root, Gratis, at Mr. George Gilmer's, Apothecary, in Williamsburg, and at John Dixon's Merchant in York, giving a Note of their Name, and Place of Abode. And I desire that they will take particular Observation of the Manner of Recovery of the Patient.
>
> --John Tennent

Tennent's follow-up seems to indicate that there was a fuss over—and considerable interest in—his publication. As Tennent tries to redeem his name by making potential consumers aware that any failure of the cure was due to inauthentic treatment, it becomes apparent that his initial advertisement was at least somewhat successful in

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[51] *The Virginia Gazette*, September 24, 1736.

getting out his message. Successful enough, in fact, that he was later faced with the task of amending his original message.

The Art of the Sale

C.R. Kropf's distinction between "reflecting availability" and "creating interest" is further called into question by the language used to word many of these advertisements. Advertisements commonly emphasize the best features of an item while at the same time attempting to downplay its negative ones. Camille Wells writes of the "key emphases" and "telling omissions" found in *Gazette* real estate advertising from the eighteenth century.[52] This characteristic is apparent from the earliest days of *Gazette* advertising and continues throughout the century. For example, in the *Gazette*'s inaugural issue of September 3, 1736, the following notice appears: "To be sold by the subscriber, in Goochland County, a Tract of valuable, well-timber'd land." Even at this early date, the advertiser in question thought to draw attention to one of the chief selling points of his property—that it had plenty of available trees to be used for lumber or firewood.

This tendency continues strong throughout the years examined in this study—positive descriptors such as "best," "valuable," "likely," and "fine" virtually jump out at the reader from every issue. This type of description and positive emphasis is perhaps most common in the *Gazette*'s advertisements for real estate, which may not be surprising considering that land, houses, and farms are among the costliest things an individual owns. Their sale is an important event with the potential to result in enormous gains or losses for a family. Thus, the sale of real estate is an important

[52]Wells, p. 24.

business transaction that must be carried out carefully—today as well as in the eighteenth century.

For example, a May 6, 1775, advertisement for a dwelling house promises that "The situation is as pleasant as any in Town." Other notices emphasize spaciousness: "a very commodious Dwelling House;" location: "in one of the most agreeable Parts of the Town;" and worth: "a valuable Farm on James River." A few others, such as the June 17, 1775, advertisement placed by James Winston to advertise his Huntingtour plantation, take a more creative approach in conveying a property's selling points. Among Winston's claims is that "The Air is so pure that I never knew an Instance of any Person having the Ague and Fever at Huntingtour."

In a few advertisements appearing later in the century, advertisers appear to pull out all the stops to persuade consumers of a product's merit. Ads for a medicinal substance known as Maredant's Antiscorbutic Drops frequently appear in the *Gazette* in 1775 — often on the first page of the newspaper. In his text, advertiser John Norton uses a series of product testimonials to convince readers of his curative's power. Another potion, known as "Wills Universal Drops for the Flux," was marketed in the September 19, 1755, issue of the *Gazette* as a cure-all for a plethora of flu symptoms:

> The preparation of this Medicine was communicated to me, by a Mahometan Doctor, in the East Indies, where its wonderful Efficacy is well known; I have administered it in different Climates, especially in this Colony, with great success; it gives the patient immediate Ease, and causes to cease racking and griping [sic] Pains in the Intestines, often going to Stool, inward and slow Fevers, a Burning at the Stomach; it promotes natural Rest, and slackens Thirst by Degrees, and Many other symptoms that attend this Malady, during the Cure. Above one hundred persons, near this Place, have been perfectly cured by this Medicine, and two other simple Medicines, which will be given with the above. . .

Advertisers of medicinal substances were not the only ones to make lofty claims about their products. A November 11, 1775, advertisement for "Sketchley's new invented Conversation Cards" announces that the illustrated cards have the ability to "amuse

and improve the mind" and teach buyers to "speak with propriety, and tell a story well."

After further exploration, C.R. Kropf's statement that colonial newspaper advertising was intended to "reflect availability" and not to "create interest" seems almost preposterous. As I have demonstrated, the two are not mutually exclusive. Often, it seems that informing potential consumers about availability is the first step in creating interest. Further, the wording of these advertisements reveals a strong desire to sell—the impetus ultimately behind all advertising. In order to sell something, an advertiser needs to create interest, to convince consumers that the good in question is worth spending money on—that it is better, cheaper, or more useful than similar items on the market.

In "Shopping and Advertising in Colonial America," Richard Bushman describes the changing face of the colonial dry goods store between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Stores, writes Bushman, went "from being places for obtaining supplies to places for realizing aspirations."[53] This was a change that worked hand-in-hand with newspaper advertising. By the middle of the eighteenth century, merchants used newspaper advertising to communicate the wide array of goods offered by their stores, some even including the available colors and sizes of different items—all things that could set a gentleman or lady apart from his or her neighbors.[54] Through advertising in the colonial newspaper, Bushman argues, potential consumers "encountered and were invited to adopt a more refined style of life."[55]

This diversity of goods offered for sale by merchant shopkeepers—fabrics of all types, spices, wine and liquor, pins, buttons, lace and trimmings, and more—gave buyers unprecedented choices about quality and style. This range of choice, Bushman

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[53]Bushman, p. 235.
[54]Ibid.
[55]Ibid.

speculates, introduced colonists to the idea of "shopping," which is "the survey of a broad range of goods, mentally or actually trying them on for fit and suitability, deciding if this or that item truly meets our desires — or if it can arouse a desire."[55]

Implicit in the definition of shopping put forth by Bushman is the idea of competition among merchants for a consumer's business. Perhaps in response to heightened competition, many *Gazette* advertisements emphasize the price of an item as a selling point. "For Sale, cheap" is a common opening line. But this preoccupation with price was not limited to consumer goods. Real estate advertisements too include references to bargain pricing. A March 11, 1775, advertisement for a tract of land in Caroline County claims that the property "will be sold, and very Cheap."

In "Shopping and Advertising in Colonial America," Bushman addresses what he perceives as the changing tone of mid- to late-eighteenth century ads. By mid-century, advertisers sometimes addressed prospective buyers directly in their ads, seeming to wish to establish a relationship through the print medium.[56] Advertisers, Bushman argues, were not above flattering their potential customers with the opener "Ladies and Gentlemen," a form of address normally reserved for those of wealth, position, and education. Although Bushman is concerned primarily with merchant advertising, his observation extends to other forms of advertising as well, such as the following notice of the availability of a prime piece of real estate. Advertiser William Harrison, in the October 21, 1775 edition of *The Virginia Gazette* writes: "If any Gentleman wants to move his Family up the Country, he may be accommodated directly with a genteel two story new House."

While the prospective buyer of a new two story house *was* likely a person of money, wealth, and position, dry goods merchants who used the opener "Ladies and

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[55]Ibid, p. 246.
[56]Ibid, p. 248.

Gentleman" made assumptions about their customers which may or may not have been true. The use of a familiar tone and assumption of gentility that characterize some eighteenth-century ads may have served as a subtle inducement to consume. Purchasers of refined consumer goods such as clocks and silver spoons were accepted by shopkeepers as gentry—even if they were only "marginal gentry."[58] It is easy to imagine that customers felt a sense of pride and accomplishment in their ability to purchase the new and fashionable goods. Ann Smart Martin writes that "consumers seek sensation, novelty, creativity, or religious verification" in their purchases and that they "daydream and fantasize about the things they purchase."[59] And unlike their counterparts in England, Cary Carson writes that American shopkeepers quickly learned to treat all paying customers equally and to sell their goods to anyone with ready money.[60]

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[58]Ibid.
[59]Martin, p. 144.
[60]Carson, p. 660.

A World of Goods

Besides specific information about what was for sale in Virginia, colonial newspaper advertising provided key information about the business environment—things Virginians needed to know to make their way in an increasingly complex local and regional economy. In his dissertation, "Publication and Retail Book Advertising in the Virginia Gazette," John Edgar Molnar calls *The Virginia Gazette* a regional newspaper, not a local one.[61] As evidence, he points to its title—the "Virginia" Gazette, not the Williamsburg Gazette. No doubt, Williamsburg *was* the heart of the publication—its headquarters were located in the colonial capital for nearly fifty years, and the city's government, business, and social news account for a large part of the newspaper's content. Still, news and advertisements from locations in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and the North frequently appear in the *Gazette*'s pages. Runaway slaves and escaped livestock did not always confine themselves to the borders of Virginia. And Cary Carson's picture of an American people on the move provides another reason why Virginians might have been interested in the business matters of their entire region—readers likely did not feel confined to their particular locale, but free to move if a better opportunity should present itself. Thus, *Gazette* advertisements served to connect readers in Virginia and throughout the Chesapeake region with an expanding economy and business environment.

[61]Molnar, p. 6.

Few businessman could afford to advertise regularly, but, as might be expected, many chose to do so when they had moved to a new location or made a similar change in their business. Craftsmen chose newspaper advertising when they had been out of the business for a while, like wheelright William Cosby who had been sick for the better part of a year in 1775. Cosby's notice let Virginians know that he was ready to take on work once again after his extended illness.[62] Others notices made readers aware of opportunities for employment:

> Journeymen shoemakers, who understand making Boots and Men's Wood Heel Shoes, by applying to the Printers, may be informed where they can meet with great encouragement.[63]

> A Young Man who can teach Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic, that will come well recommended, will meet with Encouragement by applying to Philip Grymers.[64]

the end of business relationships:

> This is to certify all whom it may concern, That Mr. Zaeboriah Marsingale is no longer in my Employ, nor has he any Concern or Connection with the Affairs of Mr. James Hamilton of Hull.[65]

and provided warnings about suspected thiefs:

> . . . For several weeks before the above-mentioned Horse was missing, there had been lurking in the neighbourhood of Chesterfield, in the above-named Parish, a dark Mulatto, who called himself a Portuguze [sic], and went by the Name of James Wallace. [66]

Through these advertisements, readers in Virginia and the Chesapeake region learned of changes in the regional business scene. This information likely proved critical at

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[62]*The Virginia Gazette*, April 8, 1775.
[63]*The Virginia Gazette*, January 28, 1775.
[64] *The Virginia Gazette*, Sept. 19, 1755.
[65]*The Virginia Gazette*, October 3, 1755.
[66]*The Virginia Gazette*, January 21, 1775.

times—knowledge about bad credit and scams could help keep people, property, and investments safe. And although perhaps less critical, news of opportunities for employment and changes in local businesses could result in money earned and time saved.

Advertisements established mutually helpful links between fellow colonists in the Chesapeake region, but they also served as a link between these colonists and the world at large. Advertisements were printed proof of the connection between isolated settlements in the New World and the mother country, Great Britain. In "Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution," T.H. Breen discusses the relationship between Britain and her colonies in a consumer context. Breen argues that colonists saw opportunities for commerce as "the foundation of a civil society" and a distinct advantage of being, and remaining, part of the British empire.[67]

In correspondence, eighteenth-century Americans described themselves as being "enriched" by the commodities that flowed from overseas.[68] In this context, *Gazette* advertisements for imported goods served as a visual reminder of the colony's place in the British empire, its role in a larger world of trade, and the opportunities available for enrichment in a "civilized society." Cary Carson argues that eighteenth-century Americans were buoyed by the fact that they no longer needed to travel abroad to enjoy fine luxury goods, that the world now "came to their doorstep." Advertisements in *The Virginia Gazette* hawk "European goods," "imported goods," and even "German Spa Water." Material objects were "made by the best workmen from London," medicines were "faithfully prepared by the best hands in London," and some goods were even available "At the Same prices as sold in England."

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[67]Breen, "Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution," p. 481.
[68]Ibid.

In the seventeenth century, poor trade routes and travel had resulted in long lags between the time goods left Europe and the time they arrived in America.[69] Improvements in trading and travel routes meant that eighteenth-century colonists had the hope of purchasing and receiving clothing and accessories from England while they were still in style. Dry goods merchants who advertised in *The Virginia Gazette* during the eighteenth century often sought to emphasize the fact that their stock was fresh from Europe and of the latest fashion with the phrases "Just imported" and "Just imported by the subscriber," adding an air of urgency to a potential sale. Even the craftsmen who made goods locally seemed to realize that they were in competition with imported products. Williamsburg leather craftsman William Keith tried to convince customers that his work was as fashionable and as inexpensive as the English imports:

> William Keith, of the City of Williamsburg, having lately purchas'd an ingenious workman in Leather, does hereby give Notice to all Gentlemen, and others, That they may be supplied with Buck-Skin Breeches, and Gloves, made after the neatest Fashion, and as Cheap as any where else.[70]

Imported goods presented a challenge to local craftsmen like William Keith, who needed to be able to reproduce the latest fashions at a low price. At the same time, the improved availability of imported goods was a boon to eighteenth-century colonists who could live thousands of miles away from the mother country, but still clad themselves in the latest fashions.

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[69]Carr and Walsh, p. 60.
[70]*The Virginia Gazette*, June 10, 1737.

The Role of the Colonial Printer

External forces, including the availability of goods from overseas, the economic health of local businesses, and even the condition of the local tobacco crop, affected the advertising content in the colonial newspaper by reducing or increasing both the need for and the cash available to take out ads. In this thesis, I have argued that this relationship worked in both directions—that newspaper advertising also worked to shape the local economy. The eighteenth-century newspaper was largely under the control of one individual—the colonial printer and newspaper editor—who worked with his apprentices and assistants to produce the weekly publication. In this section, I will explore how the colonial printer shaped the newspaper as a place to buy and sell goods, affecting in turn the economic health of his creation and of the larger society.

Colonial printers of *The Virginia Gazette* were by no means unique in their ambition to use their papers as a place to conduct the business of the local economy. In fact, some colonial printers had even loftier ambitions than William Parks, William Hunter, Sr. and John Dixon and William Hunter, Jr. in the use of their paper as a forum for sales. In his *Pennsylvania Gazette*, printer Benjamin Franklin made a risk-free proposition to readers with property to unload:

> Read, Try, Judge. WHEREAS many honest People in this City, in this great Scarcity of Money, are put to great Difficulties to get enough to go to Market, and are oftentimes, forc'd with great Loss, to sell their Household Goods, Apparel, &c. At Venues; This is therefore to give Notice, That there is an Office set up for selling all Sorts of Goods that shall be brought to the Printer hereof, who will faithfully transact that Affair for 'em, with exact Justice, unwearied Diligence, and profound Secresy; and will advertise any Goods for 'em in the Gazette, Two Hundred and Fifty of which are printed every Week. If the Goods are sold, at the Owner's Price, the Printer only desires Three Shillings for his Advertisements, and if the Goods are not sold, he

> desires nothing for his Trouble in advertising; and will return the Goods again upon Demand . . .[71]

Franklin was willing to go so far as to offer a guarantee of "satisfaction or your money back" in order to encourage those with property they wished or needed to be rid of to advertise in his newspaper. In his "Advertisement, concerning advertisements," William Parks issued a more conservative invitation to local merchants and planters to buy space in his publication.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence that the colonial printers believed the newspaper an effective medium for stimulating purchase is their use of it to convey information about their own products and services. All three administrations of *Gazette* editors used the newspaper to print prices and availability of the books and pamphlets that their offices produced, as well as subscription rates and information about their book binding services. For example, a November 25, 1775, notice catalogued the available books for sale by Dixon and Hunter, including folios, quartos and octavos. While it might at first seem only natural that an editor should take advantage of extra space in his publication to print such information, this practice sent a clear message to the paper's subscribers—that the newspaper was a useful medium for selling goods. This sort of self-promotion was nothing less than an indicator of the colonial printer's belief in the basic premise that the printed word could mediate buying and selling. Thus, all three editors began their attempt to join the worlds of commerce and print at home—with the promotion of their own businesses.

But the colonial printer worked to stimulate a developing capitalist economy in more ways than just one, through the sale of advertising space in his newspaper. Like other eighteenth-century printing houses, *The Virginia Gazette* offices also served as stationery store and post office.[72] Parks and his successors advertised and sold

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[71] *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 20, 1729.
[72] Wroth, p.13.

supplies including writing paper, envelopes, pens, and ink, as well as blank forms and ledgers used by area businessmen to keep track of their affairs. The income from this additional business, writes Laurence Wroth, was crucial to the financial success of the colonial printer.[73] In this way, the colonial printing office already served as a place where government officials, business owners, planters, and other members of the public regularly came to buy a variety of goods.

On more than one occasion, these editors extended their offices as a place to conduct commercial sales of other sorts of products. For example, in the April 15, 1737, edition, William Parks made readers aware of some cloth he had for sale: "A Parcel of Kerfey, and plain narrow Cloth, sent from the West of England, to be sold for the Maker, by the Piece, as cheap as can be imported. Enquire of the Printer." This cloth presents perplexing questions. For example, what sort of arrangement did Parks have with its manufacturer? What was the profit sharing arrangement? And how did Parks come across these and other such opportunities to make some extra cash? The answers to these questions remain unclear after this study. Still, these types of arrangements point to the fact that the colonial printer was willing to be inventive in the use of his paper to make a profit, and, when necessary, to become involved in all aspects of the market economy. Again, this method of using newspaper advertising does not appear to be unique to Park's *Gazette*. In *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, Benjamin Franklin too advertised the sale of dry goods including sugar, coffee, and soap through the printing office. In the May 9, 1734, issue of the paper he made one such plug: "VERY good single Refin'd Loaf Sugar sold reasonable by the great or small Quantity, at the Printer's hereof. Also Coffee, and Cases of Bottles."

The activities of the colonial printers provide an illustration of the evolutionary process philosopher Jurgen Habermas describes in his book, *The Structural*

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[73] Ibid.

Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, a process that has perhaps become obvious by this point. Habermas describes how, beginning in the seventeenth century, the existing political and social order in Europe was transformed by the mercantilist phase of capitalism. Among the changes was the commercialization of the news; Habermas argues that "the traffic in news developed not only in connection with the needs of commerce; the news itself became a commodity."[74] To various degrees, the eighteenth-century editors of *The Virginia Gazette* depended on selling the news—and its accompanying advertising—for their livelihood. Throughout the century, they showed their cleverness and ingenuity in marketing print as a forum for buying and selling goods. The increasing number of advertisements placed in the Gazette—from an average of 5.45 in 1736, to 45.22 in 1755, to 39.5 in 1775—is perhaps evidence of an increasing amount of capitalist transactions taking place in colonial society. It might also be evidence of the increasing reliance of the printer and newspaper editor on advertising revenue to support a publication. But increasing numbers of advertisements must also be read as a tribute to the colonial printer. Through his efforts, communicating information about the sale of goods through print gained legitimacy and credibility.

Interestingly, their biographers use the same word to describe both Benjamin Franklin and William Parks—"go-getter."[75] Both men were creative, quick-thinking, and above all, unafraid to take risks in order to achieve a measure of success. In hindsight, these appear to be some of the prerequisites for success in the tough world of colonial printing and publishing. If Franklin and Parks are any indication, successful colonial printers were also successful advertisers. They were individuals who were able to convince others in their communities that their newspapers had an important role to play in a developing capitalist economy. Their very creations, the newspapers

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[74]Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 21.
[75]Wroth, *William Parks: Printer & Journalist of England & Colonial America*, p. 26.

they printed, helped facilitate the development of such an economy by bringing together buyers and sellers in previously unrealized ways. Both Franklin, Parks and the other colonial printers of *The Virginia Gazette* saw opportunities open in a new world of commerce, a world none was evidently afraid to manipulate, shape, and help to create.

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