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"I Will Commence with My News": Elite Youth Culture and Communities of Knowledge in Early Nineteenth Century Williamsburg

Holly Nicole Stevens
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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“I will commence with my news.”
Elite Youth Culture and Communities of Knowledge
in Early Nineteenth Century Williamsburg

Holly Nicole Stevens
Fairfield, California

Bachelor of Arts, The University of California, Davis, 2009

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Holly Nicole Stevens

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Committee Chair
Associate Professor Karin Wulf, History and American Studies
The College of William & Mary

Visiting Assistant Professor Susan Kern, History
The College of William & Mary

Associate Professor Jennifer Pucel, English and Women's Studies
The College of William & Mary
This thesis reconstructs a youthful community of knowledge as it was interpreted, articulated, and perpetuated by elite educated young men and women in early republican Williamsburg. Through a close reading and analysis of letters written to and from young men and women who attended schools or lived in Williamsburg between 1803 and 1810, this thesis sheds light on the significance of educational institutions and financial resources in granting youths access to a peer-moderated heterosocial youth culture in an early-nineteenth-century academic town. Intelligence regarding local courtship was a critical aspect of this community of knowledge; however, discussions of the responsibilities and expectations placed upon those who transitioned from youthful singleness to married life were of equal importance. Although historians have consistently argued that a definable youth culture did not take shape in America until the end of the nineteenth century, this thesis argues against this notion and shows that a definable youth culture was at least regionally in place by the turn of the nineteenth century.
Introduction

The letters of William Taylor Barry, George Blow, Elizabeth Prentis, and Jane Catherine Charlton reveal a world of peer-moderated heterosocial youth culture in early republican Williamsburg, Virginia. Their letters span the years from 1803-10, when Williamsburg was an important center for education, though not as economically vibrant a city as some of its industrializing neighbors. Membership in Williamsburg's youth culture was regulated by other youths and was understood as necessary to maintaining the status ascribed to this group at birth. Although adults influence on this youthful community was largely superficial, from time to time they did intervene by both facilitating and disrupting youthful socialization. Education as well as financial resources were heavily weighed determinate factors that granted access to heterosocial young society and thus it seems fitting that educational institutions played an important role in fostering youth culture.

The use of letters as primary source evidence is nothing new in the study of history. Serving many functions, letters at their most basic relay information and can offer first or second person understandings unique to a place and time. Letters also serve as transmitters of culture, forms of social ritual, and connectors between individuals, groups, and most importantly, the past. They can be deeply personal, secretive, emotional, and revealing while at the same time formulaic, prescriptive, and self-conscious; depending on the writer, the intended receiver, and the context—three points of detail that can be difficult to tease out. But
Despite their difficulties, letters can be used to reconstruct webs of interactions as is the case with the letters of William, George, Elizabeth, and Jane. In particular, their letters reveal the connections between young men and women in early republican Williamsburg.¹

Scholars have not paid much attention to early republican youth culture in the South. Historians of education argue that additional schooling during this period was in itself emblematic of class for both young men and women. Female education in the antebellum South has been considered a “marker of gentility,” reserved for only the “daughters of the wealthy” and meant to offer females a way to enhance their desirability as mates for college-educated young men.² In contrast, a university education for males was particularly important because it “provided the means by which a boy could become his own man,” a newer value linked to Revolutionary sentiments.³ No longer able to rely solely upon his family’s pre-established prestige, a young man needed to “prove individual merit and to compete with others for power and wealth.”⁴

The few studies that have touched upon youth culture in the early

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¹ For more information about the genre of letter writing see Konstantin Dierks, In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Amy Harris, “This I beg my Aunt may not know: Young Letter-Writers in Eighteenth-Century England, Peer Correspondence in a Hierarchical World,” in The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth 2, No. 3 (Fall 2009).
⁴ Glover, 23.
nineteenth century have often favored one sex or another. Homosocial friendships that formed at educational institutions and continued upon the end of young people's schooling through letters represent one aspect of peer-moderated youth culture.⁵ Some studies of these relationships have focused on the “romantic attachments” formed between young women and have highlighted the intellectual support network they were meant to be.⁶ Others have considered the useful political and social connections young men could call upon later in life.⁷ While studying these aspects of homosocial friendships is important, these relationships were also significant because of their ability to relay information within peer-moderated heterosocial young societies. Despite their physical distance, young people remained privy to gossip and news.

Heterosocial youth culture in the early republican period has appeared in glimpses in the existing historiography, though always in light of courtship. Anya Jabour explains that as elite Southern families began to embrace the ideal of “romantic love,” courtship rituals became increasingly informal which accounts for the upswing in unchaperoned heterosocial interactions between youth in the early nineteenth century.⁸ Robert F. Pace adds to this understanding with a more modern description of early republican courtship explaining that “it was often a

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⁵ For a lengthier discussion and analysis of the significance of these relationships see Anya Jabour, Scarlett's Sisters; Catherine Clinton, The Plantation Mistress; Giselle Roberts, The Confederate Belle; Chrisie Ann Farnham, The Education of the Southern Belle.
⁷ Glover, 29.
communal affair, with several boys working up the courage to approach young ladies as a group.” C. Dallett Hemphill argues that historians have been too focused on studying committed courtships and need to broaden their studies to include young people who fell in and out of love. This requires looking at the period from puberty to marriage and as a “learning stage” free of adult influence. Although Hemphill’s work remedies some assumptions regarding courtship, it stops short of explaining the larger significance of peer-moderated heterosocial youth culture.

These four sets of letters show that peer-moderated youth cultures were not exclusively homosocial and that heterosocial interactions did not always occur under the pretext of courtship. More specifically, the letters reveal much about the regionally based youth culture of Williamsburg during the early republican period. Tensions around how young women assessed the young men they interacted with (and vice versa) suggest that their heterosocial interactions were not just positive or negative, but were also judgmental. These judgements often further evidence of peer-moderation. The relaying of and gaining access to intelligence regarding other young members of Williamsburg’s youth culture was of first concern to the participants. This important information facilitated the construction of social networks which young people could rely upon to bolster their own reputations and secure subsequent success in later life—be it financially, socially, maritally, or

9 Robert F. Pace, Halls of Honor: College Men in the Old South, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 74.
11 Hemphill, 401, 412.
politically.

Elite youths may have internalized the importance of respectability and status or class in their childhood; however, they seemed to have made decisions regarding with whom to interact on their own and free of adult influence. While young men in the early nineteenth century undoubtedly experienced privileges unique to their sex, they struggled with establishing themselves in elite society just as their female peers did. Able to both confirm and deny social capital to young men, young women possessed a form of influence that was in previous scholarship only ascribed to them during the period of courtship. While we may see this as a tipping of power relations briefly in the favor of young women, it is more accurate to identify this period of adolescence as a peer-moderated youth culture. Elite young people could equally enhance or injure their own as well as other's reputations and, subsequently, their positions in adult life.

Elite educational institutions permitted access to the elite heterosocial and homosocial spheres of interaction. Both young men and women needed to acquire an education, reputation, and experience in order to be successful socially and financially. But before they were granted access to additional elite forms of schooling, they had to meet a series of criteria that included being white and having “access to one or more forms of economic, social, and cultural capital.”

12 Hemphill, 419.
13 Both Hemphill and Kathleen M. Brown have briefly touched on the increased status and influence of young women during the period of courtship. Hemphill, however, identifies young women as the gatekeepers to elite youth culture, arguing that “girls monitored boys' progress in making the right social choices.” See Hemphill, 420 and Kathleen M. Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 254.
14 Kelley, 277.
Although nineteenth-century American society eventually transitioned into a world shaped by industrialization and increased mobility, young people who attended college in the South during the early republican period still lived in a world of tradition and were somewhat reliant on maintaining the status they were born into. Consequently, college was not exclusively a time for acquiring knowledge but was also a time for “securing reputations.”

Williamsburg, Virginia was home to at least two elite educational institutions found in the South during the early republican period: the College of William and Mary and LeRoy Anderson's Female Academy. Often referred to as the “old city” by these young writers, Williamsburg was in a state of decline and dilapidation during the first part of the nineteenth century and had been for some time. William gave an interesting description of the appearance of the town seen from a non-resident's perspective. “The houses... are not built of durable materials, and none of them appear to have been built with a view to architectural fame. The prospect which they present now is gloomy and melancholy; everything seems on the decline... the ravages of the rude hand of time meet the eye in every quarter of the town; many of the houses have tumbled down, and others are daily crumbling into ruins.” In concluding his depiction of Williamsburg, William explained that when he walked around the town, he often felt as if he was “viewing the vestiges of departed grandeur.”

15 Glover, 22.
17 William Taylor Barry to Brother [Dr. John Barry], February 15th, 1804, “William Taylor Barry Papers,” Filson Historical Society, Louisville, KY.
It is estimated that in the 1790s, Williamsburg had a population of about 1,200 residents (excluding students and hospital patients).\textsuperscript{18} While its prestige and appearance may have been in a state of decline, its social culture and hospitable reputation were not. No longer the capital of Virginia, Williamsburg retained some importance due to “the College, the Public Hospital, and the courts.”\textsuperscript{19} Men with professions connected to these institutions held the most influence in the town. In addition to doctors, lawyers, judges, and educators, Williamsburg was home to farmers and merchants. Surrounded by urbanizing cities such as Richmond, Norfolk, and Petersburg, the residents of Williamsburg eventually benefited from the increased economic and social opportunities associated with industrialization.\textsuperscript{20} Williamsburg's own transformation into an urbanized town would come in the years that follow the conclusion of these letters. Consequently, the Williamsburg that William, George, Elizabeth, and Jane lived in can be best understood as a town struggling to “stay afloat and relevant in a changing world.”\textsuperscript{21}

Though perhaps not as influential or progressive as Richmond (or other industrializing cities in the early nineteenth century), Williamsburg did have a vibrant young society and a unique aristocratic, yet hospitable, culture.\textsuperscript{22} Described as “pleasing,” “agreeable,” and “attentive” to “strangers,” the residents

\textsuperscript{18} Butler, 48.  
\textsuperscript{19} Butler, 20.  
\textsuperscript{20} Butler, 18.  
\textsuperscript{21} Butler, 49.  
\textsuperscript{22} Butler argues that Williamsburg's history associated with the first settlement at Jamestown and the site of famously won Revolutionary battles in combination with the hospitable nature of its inhabitants resulted in a perception of Williamsburg by its visitors in the early nineteenth century as uniquely aristocratic. See Butler, 38.
of Williamsburg were regarded as excellent hosts. Young women in particular were expected to entertain visitors and adhere to the polite social code. Numerous balls, parties, weddings, and the occasional town celebration filled the social calendars of these young women in addition to their having regular interactions with students from the College. William commented on these social expectations placed upon young women and examples of these types of social obligations can be seen in Jane's letters as well. Furthermore, William and Elizabeth both drew a distinction between the society of Williamsburg from that of Richmond, suggesting a uniqueness about its culture.

Although not all native to Williamsburg, William, George, Elizabeth, and Jane were all born and raised in the South. Born in Lunenburg County, Virginia, William Taylor Barry spent the later part of his childhood in Kentucky, growing up in Fayette County and attending common schools in Woodford County. After graduating from Transylvania University in 1803 at the age of seventeen, William enrolled in law school at the College of William and Mary. During the one year he moved to Williamsburg, he wrote frequently to his older brother John, a doctor. With grand ideas about “mixing with a refined and cultivated society,” William specifically chose the College of William and Mary because he believed it would be socially and politically “advantageous” later in life. William had three older half-siblings (two sisters and a brother) through his mother as well as two full-

23 WTB to Brother, January 30th, 1804 and February 15th, 1804; Butler, 38.
25 WTB to Brother, September, 23rd, 1803.
blooded siblings, an older brother and a sister only a year younger then himself.26 Although he may have written just as regularly to his other siblings, only the letters he wrote to his full-blooded brother John about his life in Williamsburg remain.

An only child, George Blow followed in his father's footsteps by attending the College of William and Mary in 1804 and 1805. Seventeen during his first year and financially dependent upon his family, George wrote home to his father, Richard, at least once a month defending his spending habits and social life while living in Williamsburg. As an only child, and a son, George knew he would inherit his father's wealthy estate and would one day be responsible for its continued prosperity. Despite this pressure, George enjoyed his time while at the College and partook in the usual forms of entertainment available to youths of his status. How exactly news of George's actions made its way back to his father is unclear, yet with his numerous acquaintances and business contacts in and around Williamsburg it is not surprising that it did.

Elizabeth Prentis, often referred to as Eliza, was the youngest child of a prominent Williamsburg family. She had two older brothers, Joseph Junior and John, as well as an older sister, Mary Ann, from her parents Magaret Bowdoin and Joseph Prentis. Her father attended the College of William and Mary in his youth before his successful career as a judge and influential state politician.27 The letters

26 William's mother, Susanah Dozier, was first married to Thomas Roberts whom she had three children with before his death: Nancy, Thomas, and Elizabeth. A year after she was widowed, in 1778, Susanah married William's father, John Barry. They had three children together, John (William's older brother), William, and his younger sister, Sarah. See “William Taylor Barry” and “Susanah Dozier” in United States Federal Census Records, http://www.ancestory.com.
she left behind were to her oldest brother, Joseph Junior, written after he moved to Suffolk in 1806 at the age of twenty-three. For four years Elizabeth wrote to her brother about the young society of Williamsburg and half-way through shared her excitement in returning to a local female academy under the direction of Mr. Blackburn. Although an exact date of birth cannot be determined for Elizabeth, it can be estimated that she was most likely in her teens when she was writing to Joseph.

Finally, Jane Catherine Charlton, twenty years old in 1807, was raised and educated in Williamsburg. One of four children, Jane was born in Yorktown in 1787 to Mary Powell and Francis Charlton. Her father, Francis, came to Williamsburg in 1784 from England and married her mother, Mary, in 1786. Jane had an extended local family network through both her mother and father, with many of her relatives owning property and businesses throughout Williamsburg. In 1798, Jane's father passed away, and in 1799 her mother opened a general store which she ran until her death in 1811. Not much else is known about Jane and her family other than what she revealed in personal letters written to Sarah Watts between 1807 and 1809. From the letters we can conclude she attended LeRoy Anderson's Female Academy and, like Elizabeth, actively participated in the youth culture of Williamsburg.

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“Young people” or “youth” ranged in age from mid-teens to mid-twenties and were usually unmarried students or recent graduates. “Adolescence” is a twentieth-century term that is not appropriate in describing such letter-writers as William, George, Elizabeth, or Jane. “Adults” were married individuals or unmarried educators who had some authority or responsibility to watch over the actions of youth. Interactions organized by and which took place among young people of the same peer group would be considered “peer-moderated” and “informal” or not necessarily part of public knowledge or acknowledgement. Knowledge that was “public” would have been known by both adults and youths, while knowledge that was “private” would have only been known by the young members of elite heterosocial and homosocial peer-moderated society. Finally, interactions between men and women are considered “heterosocial,” while interactions between the same-sex—men and men or women and women are consider “homosocial.”

Parents and Youth Culture:

Away from her parents for seemingly the first time, Sarah C. Watts attended school in Williamsburg during the spring and summer of 1807. Although her mother encouraged her studies and stressed the importance of receiving an education, she also offered a warning to Sarah about whom to trust. “It is a sentiment natural to young minds to believe every body good and of course our friends,” her mother cautioned, but “daily experience proves how few there are
who deserve the name of friends.” Concerned with the potential for gossip and protecting Sarah's reputation, her mother argued that young women should be “guarded in [their] words, and actions” because those who “have nobody to trust, have nobody to betray them.” So that Sarah would not feel the need to “endure [her distresses] in silence,” her mother assured her that she could feel comfortable sharing her secrets in their private correspondence.  

Sarah's responses do not accompany the letters she received and so we cannot be certain if she ever took this advice. What we do know is that Sarah returned to her parents' home in New London in August 1807. But before Sarah left, she had found a friend in Jane. Five letters written between 1807 and 1809 survive and through them Jane relayed news and gossip, keeping Sarah informed about the community of youthful knowledge unique to Williamsburg and its young residents. Jane's letters represent what worried Sarah's mother most: the opportunity for young people to disseminate gossip in a way that could affect a young woman's chances at courtship and marriage. But more significantly, they speak to the importance of institutions of higher education in granting access to these spheres of elite heterosocial and homosocial youth culture needed to ensure success in adult life.

Sarah's mother was not the only parent to offer advice to their children on how best to navigate the perilous world of youth. George Blow's father, Richard

Blow, frequently wrote to his son to question his behavior and chastise him for spending too much money while he attended the College. Shocked and "mortified" that "some vile, malicious, slanderous calumniator ha[d] been casting assersions on [his] conduct," George wrote defensively to his father shortly after his seventeenth birthday and attempted to justify his spending habits. George proclaimed he was "not only innocent, but entirely ignorant" of whatever his father had suggested. George did "confess... that the young men have been disappated this course, and [he had] sometimes joined them; but... [he] always avoided inebriation." Furthermore, he had "neither won nor lost a single penny since [his] arrival" in Williamsburg despite the fact other young men regularly participated in gambling there.31

Because his father was questioning his expenses, George went on to include an extensive list of his expenses and enclosed receipts to further support his argument. He concluded his letter with an air of self-satisfaction, believing he successfully explained away all of his father's concerns. "I now hope the cloudy fog of misrepresentation is dissipated," he wrote, "and the bright transparent atmosphere of truth discloses innocence to conviction." Realizing he may have condemned some of his peers while clearing his own name, he added in closing, "what I have said of the young men I would have you keep secret or you embroil me in quarrels."32 In the letters that follow, George did not mention any fights nor did he have to address as many "rumors" as he did in his letter written on March

31 George Blow to Father [Richard Blow], March 20th, 1804, Box 33G: Letters written from William and Mary, "Blow Family Papers 1613-1960", Swem Special Collections, Williamsburg, VA.
32 GB to Father, March 20th, 1804.
20th. He did, however, have to continue to defend his spending habits in every one of the twelve letters written while at William and Mary between 1804 and 1805. Although he had numerous excuses, most revealing are those related to his participation in the peer-moderated youth culture of Williamsburg.

George understood the importance of social capital and reminded his father of its significance in many of his letters. His first mention of the financial resources needed to interact with elite young society came in the same letter already referenced. George wrote, “a young man has some relish for enjoying a little pleasure and relaxation: sometimes a ball or other amusements occur which serve to relax the mind a little, and for which you must pay.”33 In subsequent letters George relayed news of the several balls he attended, one of which “kept [him] up until twelve” and prevented him from getting enough sleep to write to his father sooner.34 As always, George also asked for more money as well as clothes and shoes to be sent from home. Collectively, these financial and material resources permitted George access to the social connections necessary to succeed in later life. He made his most explicit connection between money and access to elite society in a letter written on May 4th, 1805:

“My honoured parent, I have often mentioned to you that a young man must of necessity be extravagant at this place if he wishes to associate with the best company and on your account (For you have often exhorted me to unite in the politest circles) I have accustomed myself to be very frequently in the most refined societies. The money (which has made you believe me to be extravagant) and the greatest pains to please every body has initiated me into every respectable circle of this city, and if you choose, I can make an honourable retreat.”35

33 GB to Father, March 20th, 1804.
34 GB to Father, January 1805.
35 GB to Father, May 4th, 1805.
George's message could not have been more clear: if he spent less money, he would not be accepted into elite society. Not only would this have threatened George's success and ability to make important social connections, but it could have brought dishonor to his family and affected his father Richard's reputation as well. Additionally, George's father seemed to believe that if George regularly interacted with members of Williamsburg elite, he could refine some of his awkward teenage characteristics in a way that only interacting with other young men from the College would not. Evidence of this can be seen in another of George's letters, in which he wrote:

“I almost despair of even fulfilling your wishes with respect to acquiring any of the graces. You know too well that I have a peculiar stiffness and an awkwardness which have become so habitual to me that I shall never be able to divest myself of them, however, I exert myself to surmount these defects, and if the company of the most polished societies in Williamsburg will produce any favorable innovation in the manners of an unpolished person, it will in me, for I have free ingress to the most respectable houses in town.”

As William Taylor Barry summed it up best in a letter to his brother, John, Williamsburg was “an expensive place.” Unlike Jane or Elizabeth, who lived with their parents, William and George both had to pay for room and board while attending the College. Where and with whom they rented a room from could have both negatively and positively affected their social lives. Although initially William sought out a room in a house that kept “thirty boarders,” he soon decided it would be “disagreeable” and opted to live with Mr. Anderson instead. Because

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36 GB to Father, February 10th, 1805.
37 WTB to Brother, February, 23rd, 1804.
he was able to secure a boarding with Mr. Anderson, William wrote that he was "fortunate... to get into a pretty good house."38 Not all young women were permanent residents of Williamsburg and like William, Sarah boarded with Mr. Anderson during her time spent there.39 Because all four letter writers refer to Mr. Anderson we can assume he served as a link between the young men of William and Mary and the young women living in Williamsburg but clearly this connection came at a price.

**Heterosocial Young Society**

All four letter writers relayed news of the many heterosocial interactions initiated and hosted by both the young women of Williamsburg and the young men of the College of William and Mary. Elizabeth shared news of one such occasion with her brother, on November 15th, 1807. She explained that Williamsburg recently held a horse race which was followed by "a Ball at the Raleigh, given by the Students." "I went," she wrote, "and spen[t] a most charming evening."40 A few months later on January 10th, 1808, Jane wrote that "the Gentlemen intended giving party's once a week, but the Bishop finding it interrupted their study's soon put a stop to it."41 Jane expressed disappointment on behalf of the young women; she and her friends found the parties "pleasing, as

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38 WTB to Brother, February, 23rd, 1804.
39 Other young women may have lived with Mrs. Camp. Both Jane and Elizabeth mention Mrs. Camp and "her girls" in their letters. Never clear on what they meant by this reference, it seems as if Mrs. Camp ran a school for (or at least was responsible for) girls younger than those who attended Anderson's Female Academy.
41 Jane C. Charlton to Sarah C. Watts, January 10th, 1808, "Sarah C. Watts Papers," Swem Special Collections, Williamsburg, VA.
well as edifying” because “before the dancing commenced the Gentlemen discussed a political subject” with some of the young men displaying “great eloquence” in their speeches. The hosting of parties by the young men shows that youth culture was heterosocial and initiated by fellow youths; it was only after an adult intervened that the parties came to an end.

It is important to note that this was not the only incident Jane mentioned in regards to the president of the College, Bishop James Madison, putting an end to young people socializing. In March 1809, he once again “prohibited the Students having any more party's.” While Jane was concerned the spring would be “very dull” because of this prohibition, she also stated “I should not be surprised if they were to violate the laws again, as they have so frequently done it, with impunity.” From Jane's statements, we can conclude that parties continued or at least restarted after first ban in January 1808. This is supported by Jane's suggestion that male students frequently disregarded school sanctions without punishment.

Although both sexes initiated interactions with one another, knowledge of a double standard regarding proper behavior and justified punishment seemed to

42 JCC to SCW, January 10th, 1808.
43 JCC to SCW, March 19th, 1809.
44 The tension that existed between young men and college officials is a recurring theme in the scholarship on education in the antebellum South. (See Pace, Halls of Honor and Glover, Southern Manhood.) However, the organizing of dances or other heterosocial events by beaux has been portrayed as an infrequent source of conflict. Discussions of the rowdiness of college boys and the trouble caused by their immaturity and youth often overshadows any real meaningful discussions of interactions with young women. But young men's participation in elite social events was critical to the development of their reputation and these letters give evidence of their initiation of such events.
have created some tension between the college students and the young women of early-nineteenth-century Williamsburg. For example, Jane's comments regarding the "impunity" of young men in attendance at William & Mary have a hint of hostility to them. Young men in the early South had a "dual standard when it came to relations with women." The southern code of honor placed an expectation on young men to "seek out potential mates by courting women from their own social status." At the same time, "society also instructed them... to engage in sexual conquest." Adhering to this same code of honor, young southern women were under much more rigid constraints. With their reputations on the line, young women's actions could lead to individual and collective ruin since their honor was entwined with their family's prestige.

One of the first examples of these tensions can be found in William's letters to his brother. In his first mention of the young women in Williamsburg, William wrote, "the female society in this place has fallen off very much; that refinement of manner that once characterized the fair sex of this place no longer exists." Although his "acquaintance in such circles [was] very circumscribed," he sensed a "certain looseness of manners and conversation amongst them that [he did] not admire." "In trying to be familiar, in which they all appear to be ambitious to excel," he wrote, "some of them appear to have gone a little too far and approximate to near the borders of licentiousness." He concluded by explaining that "such freedom of conduct may be altogether consistent with the

45 Pace, 73.
46 Pace, 73.
47 Jabour, Scarlett's Sisters, 140.
strictest principles of virtue; but, I must confess it does not meet my notions of propriety.”

A week later, William wrote to his brother again with similar criticisms. "Tho I am pleased with the familiarity of the people and the sociability which enlives every circle... I cannot admire the manners of the females.” This time he complained that “they admit the men to too great liberties.” Yet despite his distaste for their manners, William confessed, “I feel very little embarrassment in entering the company of ladies here, and I spend a good deal of my time in that way. It sometimes encroaches on my studies, but I take care that such encroachment shall be rare.” Finally, William concluded his letter in a somewhat puzzling statement, “I don't conceive the time I spend in this way to be altogether lost, for it will tend to give a polish to the manners, that is absolutely essential to enable us to glide smoothly thro' society.” If the young women William interacted with were as “licentious” or dishonorable as he claimed, how could he hope to improve his manners through associating with them? Perhaps what William meant was that the more he participated in heterosocial interactions and became familiar with the members of Williamsburg's elite youth culture, including its “licentious” young women, the more connections he would have which would allow him to succeed socially.

William's last mention of the young women of Williamsburg was in a letter written on February 15th, 1804. He wrote:

48 WTB to Brother, January, 30th, 1804.
49 WTB to Brother, February 6th, 1804.
“The company of the Ladies is to be enjoyed almost at any time. They are very familiar and easy to become acquainted with, but there is very little knowledge to be acquired by such associations. I have not met with more than one or two girls of reading in the place; they generally see so much company that little time can be devoted to the cultivation of letters. They are not only deficient in literary attainments, but their manners are by no means as polished as I expected. In this respect they have fallen off very much from what they were formerly.\textsuperscript{50}

William never revealed his point of reference or where he acquired his knowledge about the “former” good manners of the young women of Williamsburg. He may have formed his opinions based on previous interactions with young women while living in Kentucky. William’s parents were both originally from Virginia. Perhaps they had instilled in him a preconceived notion of how Virginians were to act, a standard to which the young women that William interacted with did not live up. What can best be surmised from William's letters was that despite disagreements and tensions over how young women (or how young men) should behave, both sexes continued to interact with the other and mutually initiate heterosocial events. More than just a form of entertainment, young men and women needed to participate in youth culture in order to establish themselves socially, gain information about others, and build a reputation which could benefit them in later life.

George Blow reminded his father of this social obligation in a letter he wrote on April 9\textsuperscript{th}, 1805. In a previous letter he had requested his father's permission to escort some young ladies on a trip before returning home for the summer. “I hope you will have no objection” he wrote, “to accommodating my

\textsuperscript{50} WTB to Brother, February 15th, 1804.
time of departure to the time they appoint.” Unfortunately (or perhaps not) for George, his father denied his request which resulted in the following response:

“As to my wishing to be a galant and wishing to loose time in travelling about with ladies, my answer is that you pointed out pretty clearly the time I was to go down, you have often scolded me for being so very shy and diffident before ladies & you have often exhorted me to go into their company oftner; I thought that by this little act of gallantry (which by the by would have been a violent exertion to give you pleasure at my own expense, for I am not [normally?] fond of ladies company) I should please you and make you think that their was a reformation taken place in my sentiments of them & you may be assured that I am highly delighted at being refused.”

Like William, George claimed he was not “fond of ladies company,” but instead interacted with them out of a sense of obligation; William believed his manners would improve, George believed it would please his father. Regardless of their specific reasons, George's letters suggest that parents expected their children to participate in heterosocial interactions and peer moderated youth culture, free from the watching eyes of adults. Furthermore, William's letters suggest that young people internalized these cultural expectations and made the decision to fulfill them on their own. So although young men may not have always enjoyed interacting with young women, they did so because of the social benefit. The same can be said for the young women's motives.

An example of the young women's perspective on this same issue can be seen in many of Jane's letters. Like William, Jane seemed to both enjoy the company of the young men of William and Mary and despise it. In her writings regarding the banning of parties and later the antisocial behavior of the new

51 GB to Father, March 13th, 1805.
52 GB to Father, April 9th, 1805.
students, she seemed disappointed when they could not participate in heterosocial young society. Additionally, Jane shared news of watching the students “parade every Saturday” after forming a “military company,” which shows that observing the students was equally entertaining as interacting with them. However, for every positive experience Jane shared about the students, she had something equally negative to say about them. In March 1809, when Sally Browne returned to Williamsburg, Jane wrote that “she is not much admired by the Gentlemen here” because “she is too retiring and retarding.” “In my opinion,” she stated, “[it] shows the depravity of their tastes.”

In Jane's own assessment of Sally, she wrote, “I think her manners if possible are more captivating then ever.” In a previous letter, Jane had described Sally as “among the most amiable of her sex.” This conflicting interpretation of Sally shows a disparity between what Jane found to be ideal in a young women and what the young men of William & Mary found attractive. Jane's comments suggest that young women placed more stock in the attractiveness of “proper behavior” than young men did. But William's comments demonstrate that the way young women acted was not altogether ignored either. The emphasis on manners and morals in constructing an ideal young woman in many ways was meant to

53 JCC to SCW, December 4th, 1808.
54 JCC to SCW, March 19th, 1809.
55 JCC to SCW, March 19th, 1809.
56 JCC to SCW, January 10th, 1808.
57 According to historian Anya Jabour, the importance of outward appearance (dress and hair) as well as the adherence to “principles of proper feminine behavior” defined the ideal young southern women. More specifically, the “perfect Woman” would be “well-bred... gentle and virtuous,” and although “fine clothes and hair ribbons” could attract attention, they “were not enough to earn social approval.” See Jabour, Scarlett's Sisters, 31, 35, 44-45.
downplay the significance of appearance and indeed young women believed that this was how attraction and social acceptance worked.\textsuperscript{58} The young men's description of Sally as "retiring and retarding" directly challenged Jane's understanding of the female ideal. Although young men were not necessarily interested in only looks, they were clearly not interested in shy or reserved girls. It is difficult to discern what effect the disparities in conceptions of attractiveness would have had on peer-moderated young society in Williamsburg. For Jane, it seemed to have caused annoyance, but not enough for her to stop interacting with the young men altogether.

More of Jane's frustration with Williamsburg's young men can be seen in a letter written in July 1808. Jane explained that three or four students were remaining in Williamsburg for the summer. Somewhat bad-tempered about it, Jane followed this comment with: "we are all very sorry for [this], as we feel under a kind of restraint while they are in Town." Elaborating on what she meant, Jane wrote that the students "are such impudent creatures [that] if we walk out they say directly we are looking for them."\textsuperscript{59} Jane's statement could be read in multiple ways, depending on the meaning she ascribed to the word "impudent." Taken to mean presumptuous, Jane would be negatively commenting on the young men's character, implying that they were a bumptious bunch. Though typically a negative term, impudent could also mean cheeky. The students intentions may have been strictly playful. Perhaps they were only making an

\textsuperscript{58} Jabour, \textit{Scarlett's Sisters}, 45.
\textsuperscript{59} JCC to SCW, July 14\textsuperscript{th}, 1808.
effort to tease Jane and the other young women when they suggested the girls were looking for them.

Either way, Jane's comments in a letter written on December 4th, 1808 suggested that participation in heterosocial youth culture derived from a sense of obligation. She concluded her letter to Sarah upon the arrival of her friends Sally Bracken and Mary by noting that they were returning from church services with "some smart Beaux's." Although Jane wrote that she would rather continue writing Sarah than "go out to see the Beaux's," she felt compelled to participate in this heterosocial interaction because "the Girls prefer[ed]" her to." Most likely from the college, it is unclear as to whether Jane had previously met these young men; not identifying them by name suggested she had not. However, she may have neglected to specify who the "smart beaux" were simply because Sarah would not know them, having been gone from Williamsburg for a year and a half. Earlier in her letter, Jane mentioned that the new students had a tendency to "seclude themselves entirely from female society." This statement provides further evidence that Jane was at least familiar with the young men visiting with her that day, or at least they were not new students. But why did Jane feel compelled to join the gathering? William's letters offer us a reason.

William wrote that the young women's "hospitality... proceeds from a kind of family pride, of which the citizens of [Williamsburg]... are pretty full." This could explain the sense of obligation Jane may have felt in interacting with the

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60 JCC to SCW, December 4th, 1808.
61 JCC to SCW, December 4th, 1808.
62 WTB to Brother, February 15th, 1804.
male visitors. Not wanting to appear rude, Jane joined the gathering despite her preference to continue writing Sarah. However, Jane may have been more calculated in her interactions with the opposite sex. She may have been trying to establish herself as a “desirable” in Williamsburg by interacting with and casting a favorable impression on as many beaux as possible. Regardless of Jane's precise motives, it was important for both sexes to participate in heterosocial youth culture because from these interactions, young people established reputations, learned important social rituals, and gained information about their peers that could go on to benefit them in their adult lives.

Youthful Communities of Knowledge

Young people also participated in youth culture in order to gain access to information about their peers. By knowing such information as who was dating whom, or who was related to whom, who boarded with whom, young people could strategically build their social networks in a way that would benefit their immediate and adult lives. Youth culture was also a transmitter of societal and cultural expectations about proper behavior, education, courtship, friendship, gender, age, and class. The intelligence gained from participating in Williamsburg's youthful society could make or break a young man's or woman's future social, economic, political, and or marital success. Although this intelligence undoubtedly passed between young people through the spoken word,

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63 Jabour has argued that in the process of southern courtship, “some girls... reveled in the attention of the suitors” and so would lead on several beaux in order to increase their desirability to potential marriage partners. See Jabour, Scarlett's Sisters, 132.
they also relayed this information through written correspondence.

Although Joseph no longer lived in Williamsburg, his continued relationships with Elizabeth and his cousin, Julia F. Pagaud, sustained his connection to the town's youth culture and permitted him access to intelligence regarding courtship and perspective mates. An excellent example of this can be seen in a letter written from Julia to Elizabeth's brother, Joseph Junior. Julia relayed news to Joseph Junior about local parties and balls that she had attended and had seen his sister Elizabeth at. On March 21st, 1808, Julia decided to write to Joseph with information about Mary Miller. "Mary has several admirers from what I can learn;" she warned, "[and] I think if you have any notion that way, you had better be in haste My Friend; or else perhaps, you may loose your chance." The fact that Julia felt compelled to write to Joseph with this information suggests two things. First, that she was privy to private information about Joseph's previous feelings towards the young woman and secondly, that she was privy to private information about Mary and her potential suitors.

A letter between Elizabeth and Joseph offers another example of this circumstance. While at the ball, Elizabeth ran into several members of Williamsburg's young society familiar with her brother and passed along the sentiments shared by these individuals. "Your friend Miss C. Russell was also there, she inquired after you, and desired her love to you when I wrote, Her

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64 Julia was a cousin of both Elizabeth and Joseph who resided in Williamsburg and was unmarried at the time of her first letter.
admirer, Mr. Miller, was there, & inquired after you.⁶⁶ These causal references give evidence of the presence of a social network that Joseph remained part of through his sister Elizabeth.

The same can be said for Sarah Watts and the intelligence she retained access to through her continued correspondence with Jane Charlton and Eliza Wright. Perhaps of most importance to Sarah was the information Jane relayed to her about Sarah's fiance, “Mr. Irvine.” Unfortunately, not much information exists about “Mr. Irvine” beyond the references Jane made to him in her letters.⁶⁷ At first mention, Jane referred to him as a “student,” presumably at the College of William and Mary, and explained she had yet to meet him because “the new students seclude themselves entirely from female society.”⁶⁸ But just because Jane had not met him personally did not mean she did not have information about him. After she spent some time describing a new “military company” formed by the students that paraded around the town every Saturday, Jane wrote, “I wish you could be here to see your Beaux in uniform,” suggesting that Jane knew what Mr. Irvine looked like and had seen him in the parade.⁶⁹

The last bit of intelligence Jane shared regarding Mr. Irvine was perhaps the most personal. “I can’t forbear telling you what I heard of him yesterday,” she

⁶⁷ Unfortunately, the College of William & Mary has been involved in numerous fires and as a result, most records from 1800-1810 have been destroyed. Swem special collections has created a provisional list of alumni through the use of outside records and can be found at the following website: http://swem.wm.edu/departments/special-collections/exhibits/exhibits/provlist/frame.htm According to this list, a William Irvine attended the college in 1809 and 1810. Jane first referred to him as a new student in December of 1808 so this could be the same Mr. Irvine.
⁶⁸ JCC to SCW, December 4th, 1808.
⁶⁹ JCC to SCW, December 4th, 1808.
wrote, "which is that his talents are thought superior to any in the junior class, which consists of forty, or fifty. I make no doubt it will afford you great pleasure to communicate this to his Sister." Jane did not specify where she had learned this bit of information about Mr. Irvine but by communicating it to Sarah, she continued Sarah's access to knowledge reserved for members of Williamsburg's youth culture.

Because letters circulated among family and peers, explicit discussions of gossip regarding heterosocial interactions were difficult. Paying attention to when Jane used real names versus when she used nicknames reveals important details about the difference between public and private relationships in peer-moderated youth culture. When referring to Sarah and Mr. Irvine, Jane used real names, solidifying that their relationship was public knowledge. But just because a relationship was public did not mean the information Jane was relaying to Sarah was not at times private. Between 1807 and 1809, Jane wrote five letters to Sarah and each one of them contained private information about Eliza Wright and her public relationships.

Jane's choice to identify Eliza's beauxs by name suggested the relationships were public knowledge. Eliza was first in a relationship with a young man identified as "Hamilton" before moving on to Thomas Mayo.  

70 JCC to SCW, December 4th, 1808.
71 Eliza and her relationships are excellent examples of how educational institutions permitted access to the sphere of elite courtship needed to procure a marriage. According to Jane, Thomas, Eliza's eventual husband, was a Williamsburg "outsider," his family lived in North Carolina and Thomas was in town only to attend college. Thomas appears in the provisional list of alumni for the College of William & Mary though Hamilton does not. It is estimated that Thomas attended the College in 1808. See JCC to SCW, July 14th, 1808 and Swem's Provisional Alumni List.
September 1807, Jane acknowledged their relationship in a letter to Sarah; Jane wrote, “it is generally supposed here, that Hamilton and Eliza will make a match.” Furthermore, by highlighting the fact that they would most likely “make a match,” or become married, Jane suggested the information was common knowledge among those in Williamsburg. Jane, however, predicted the future in her next line when she wrote in regards to the general opinion that Eliza and Hamilton would marry, “my sentiments differ.”72 In January 1808, Jane revealed to Sarah that Eliza “has made a conquest of Mr Mayo.”73

But how actively did Eliza pursue Mr. Mayo and why, if she was already in a relationship with Hamilton? The decision to use the term “conquest” suggested an aggressiveness on Eliza's part. Although Eliza may have been trying to establish herself as a “preeminent young lady” in Williamsburg by acquiring as many admiring beaux as possible, she may also have been unhappy in her relationship with Hamilton and was simply moving on to someone she was more interested in: Thomas Mayo.74 Whatever Eliza's motive, Jane perceived Thomas as equally interested in her friend. “He thinks her one of the most divine mortals he ever beheld,” she wrote. Whether Thomas stated this directly to Jane or she deduced it from observing the two interact is unclear. Either way, Jane had seen (or heard) enough to conclude that Thomas would “provide a formidable rival to Hamilton,” which suggested that Eliza and Hamilton had yet to mutually end their

72 JCC to SCW, September 13th, 1807.
73 JCC to SCW, January 10th, 1808.
74 Often times in the process of southern courtship, young women “led men on simply to obtain a proposal.” By leading on and “collecting” beaux, young women achieved “recognition in southern society” and demonstrated their desirability and prestige. See Jabour, Scarlett’s Sisters, 133, 134.
The next mention of Eliza and Thomas came from Eliza herself. She wrote to Sarah at the beginning of May 1808 and confirmed that the two were engaged and planning to wed. Eliza wrote: “I suspect this is the last letter you will receive from me until I am married which I suppose will take place in about a week.” Eliza then informed Sarah that as soon as the two were wed, she would be moving “up the country” to “Mr. Mayo's about 10 miles from Lynchburg,” where she expected to be neighbors with Sarah who resided in New London. A week after Eliza wrote to Sarah, Jane did the same informing her that Thomas was not able to “obtain a licence” in time which “postponed” the wedding. According to Jane, on June 25th, 1808, “Eliza left for North Carolina... accompanied by Mr. Anderson and her Adonis.” Eliza and Thomas were finally wed, but not without a bit of delay; Jane explained, “Mr. Anderson tells me they could not prevail on her to say the word Obey.”

But not all relationships were public knowledge like Eliza's and because letters were frequently circulated between friends and family, their youthful writers often had to discern which information they chose to relay was private knowledge and which was public. Nicknames were one way to allow private relationships and information about them to be available to public knowledge.

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75 JCC to SCW, January 10th, 1808.
76 Eliza Wright to Sarah C. Watts, May 4th, 1808, “Sarah C. Watts Papers,” Swem Special Collections, Williamsburg, VA.
77 EW to SCW, May 4th, 1808.
78 JCC to SCW, May 8th, 1808.
79 JCC to SCW, July 14th, 1808.
80 Anya Jabour argues that young southern women “distanced themselves from their hopeful beaux by giving them ridiculous nicknames [and] describing them in highly unflattering...
Because Jane did not employ the use of nicknames when she wrote about formally recognized courtships, it can be assumed that Jane deliberately used concealing nicknames when sharing news of heterosocial interactions that occurred within peer-moderated spheres. In one of her first letters which commented on heterosocial interactions, Jane informed Sarah that “Little Bat... is attached to S B, but whether it is mutual or not I can't say.”\textsuperscript{81} It is impossible to determine who “Little Bat” was, however, “S B” was most likely Sally Browne, a friend of Jane and Sarah's. Sally left Williamsburg in January 1808 but returned in March 1809 much to Jane's delight.\textsuperscript{82} Although Sally was “not much admired by the Gentlemen” in Williamsburg, “Bat appear[ed] to be entirely devoted to her.”\textsuperscript{83}

Nicknames safeguarded the agency of female friends who wanted to explore their marital options without alerting adults to their intentions. Nicknames excluded adults, such as Mr. Anderson or the girls' parents, from the youthful community of knowledge unique to Williamsburg. Sarah, and any of the other members of this peer-moderated social network, would have understood Jane's obscure references whereas adults, and outsiders, would not have. In this sense, assigning males as well as females nicknames protected budding romances from the scrutiny and potential disapproval of authority figures. For young southern women, “marriage was the most important (and, for a few, nearly the only) choice of their adult life;” Jane's use of nicknames could be viewed as being sensitive to

\textsuperscript{81} JCC to SCW, September 13\textsuperscript{th}, 1807.
82 JCC to SCW, January 10\textsuperscript{th}, 1808 and March 9\textsuperscript{th}, 1809.
83 JCC to SCW, March 9\textsuperscript{th}, 1809.
Marriage brought about many changes in a young person's life. It physically relocated young people, which resulted in the formation of new connections and associations. Concerns about establishing themselves in adult society and starting and supporting a family were very different from advancing their education and finding a potential spouse. Marriage interfered with homosocial friendships formed prior to courtship and once more we can turn to Jane's letters to see the evidence of this.84 “I have never heard from Eliza Mayo, since she wrote me a few lines with a stick,” Jane wrote six months after Eliza's wedding.85 Three months later Jane asked Sarah to “give [her] most affectionate love to [Eliza]” despite the fact Jane “believe[d Eliza] ha[d] ceased to remember [her].” In the same letter, Jane asked Sarah if she had seen “Mrs Ann E Callaway when she passed thro' Lynchburg” because she had “not received a letter from her for two months, and she generally answer[ed her] letters very quick.” Jane wondered if “perhaps matrimony ha[d] made as great a change in her sentiments [as] in Eliza Mayo's” and concluded her letter: “I hope it will not alter my dear Sarah.”86

Conclusion

The letters of William Taylor Barry, George Blow, Elizabeth Prentis, and

84 Jabour has touched on this topic and argues that “young women in the Old South saw marriage as a barrier to female friendship.” See Jabour, Scarlett’s Sisters, 93-94.
85 JCC to SCW, December 4th, 1808.
86 JCC to SCW, March 19th, 1809.
Jane Catherine Charlton demonstrate the presence of an elite peer-moderated heterosocial youth culture in Williamsburg during the early republican period. More specifically, their letters show that heterosocial youthful gatherings were forms of networking and establishing oneself in adult society part of a necessary stage in growing up needed to maintain the status they were born into. Furthermore, homosocial relationships were key to intelligence regarding heterosocial youth culture and elite educational institutions permitted access to these relationships. Consumed with renegotiating relationships, transitioning into a ritualized period of life with prescribed rules, and establishing intellectual and emotional independence from adults, members of this heterosocial youth culture relied on one another to navigate this stage in life.87

While instructors and educational officials both facilitated and impeded youthful socialization, their influence over the actions of the adolescents of Williamsburg was largely superficial and inconsequential. Furthermore, the letters Sarah Watts received from her mother as well as the letters George wrote to his father show that parents were well aware of the presence of a youth culture and understood the importance of a young person's participation in it. Young people themselves understood its importance as well and whether they enjoyed the company of the opposite sex or not, they complied with the necessity of it. The tensions between young men of the College and Williamsburg's young women revealed in many of the letters give evidence to the fact that this youth culture was peer-moderated and initiated by both sexes.

87 Hemphill, 399, 405.
One of the greatest benefits of participating in youth culture was gaining access to intelligence about peers. No longer residents of Williamsburg, nor active participants in the town's young social events, Joseph Prentis and Sarah Watts remained privy to important information regarding courtship and heterosocial interactions through their continued correspondence with Elizabeth and Jane. The letters they received informed them about private and public relationships along with often private and public knowledge that accompanied them. While finding a potential mate was not the sole purpose of heterosocial youth culture, it served that function well, and a resulting marriage confirmed a young person's place in society and severed their participation in youth culture.

While never appearing in each others letters, it is highly likely that Elizabeth Prentis and Jane Charlton would have been familiar with one another. Frequent attenders of parties, balls, and weddings, both interacted with other youths in more intimate social gatherings. Adding to their similar social lives, both young women recorded news of trips to Surry County as well as interactions with many of the same individuals. Reoccurring most often in Jane's letters were Jane and Sarah's mutual friends and former classmates, Eliza Wright, Sally Browne, and Sally Bracken. Coincidentally, Elizabeth wrote about Sally Browne as well as Maria Savage, another regular in Jane's letters.