"Her Correspondence is Dangerous": Women in the Fashion Trades Negotiating the Opportunities and Challenges of Doing Business in the Chesapeake, 1766-75

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“Her Correspondence is Dangerous”: Women in the Fashion Trades Negotiating the Opportunities and Challenges of Doing Business in the Chesapeake, 1766–75

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

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The College of William and Mary
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Master of Arts

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Approved by the Committee, January 2013

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ABSTRACT

By the 1760s, Virginia had emerged not only as England’s oldest and largest colony but also as one of the wealthiest and most populous of the thirteen mainland colonies. Yet, Virginia remained extremely rural in character. The production and marketing of Virginia’s staple crop tobacco—the source of Virginia’s enormous wealth—provided little incentive for the development of large urban centers. Virginia’s capitol, Williamsburg, home to approximately two thousand individuals nearly half of which were enslaved, appears tiny and provincial in comparison to North America’s five major port cities: Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Charleston, and Newport. Nonetheless, Catherine Rathell, milliner from London, set sail for the Chesapeake in 1765 bent on starting her own shop. Within the next six years, Rathell was followed by three other London women seeking employment in the fashion trades, and even one Virginia-born, London-based milliner advertised in the Virginia Gazette. The years 1766 to 1776 marked the highest levels of millinery activity in Virginia during the colonial period. In addition to the London milliners and mantuamakers, at least nine Virginia women also endeavored to ply their trade.

Though the sources are few and far between, when properly contextualized they invite the telling of a story of rich economic opportunity for ambitious female entrepreneurs in the fashion trades working in the Chesapeake region between the end of the Seven Years’ War and the beginning of Revolution. Virginia’s urban structure did not provide a base comparable to those found in North America’s major port cities, but creative enterprise and strategic advertising could nonetheless offer a productive and stable support for a single woman. The region, however, also presented unique challenges, especially with regards to the extensive credit system on which the tobacco-marketing system was built. The impact of the Revolution reveals that a fine line existed between offering credit and demanding cash. Those milliners who failed to carefully negotiate this difficulty during the pre-war years found that their personal choices were directly limited by the very economic system that had provided their support. This study gives voice to women in the fashion trades operating in the Chesapeake and offers a perspective of the non-importation association’s impact on women from the opposite side of the shop counter.
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This M.A. thesis is dedicated to my parents Richard and Rhonda Stevenson, who have loved me, believed in me, and encouraged me every step of the way . . .
On April 18, 1766, Catherine Rathell introduced herself to Virginia society with an advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette*. Identifying herself as a “Milliner,” she announced that she was “Lately arrived from London” and in possession of a “large assortment of European and other Goods, suitable for Ladies and Gentlemen,” which she would be pleased to sell “very cheap” at her store in Fredericksburg.1 Sometime the previous year, she had arrived in Virginia, a single woman, alone, armed only with her skills as a milliner, her carefully chosen cargo of millinery wares, and a letter of introduction to Robert Carter, a prominent member of the governor’s council and one of the wealthiest men in Virginia. London merchant John Morton Jordan described Rathell to Carter as a “Person of very good Character & Family,” but “meeting with misfortunes,” Jordan explained, Rathell had determined to set off for “Virginia with a view of setting up a Milliners Shop.”2 Her advertisement certainly marked an auspicious beginning. Rathell was the first milliner in Virginia to identify not only her goods but she herself, the purveyor of fashion, as direct from London—an exceptional enticement if ever there was one in a colony where one outsider had observed “Fashion reign[ed] . . . with despotic sway.”3

Rathell began her business at a favorable juncture when the growth of the British Atlantic economy combined with proto-urban developments in Virginia.

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1 *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), Apr. 18, 1766, [3]. Although this advertisement uses the spelling “Rathall,” I have found “Rathell” to be more common and have elected to use the latter spelling throughout.
3 [Reverend Thomas Gwatkin], Gwatkin Chorography, [ca. 1774], Tyler Family Papers, Mss. 65 T97, Group F, Box 8, fol. [8], Special Collections, Earl Greg Swem Library, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia. Many thanks to Taylor Stoermer for drawing my attention to this source.
created a window of opportunity for women in the fashion trades to flourish in the region. Though she was the first, Rathell was not the only English milliner to envision Virginia as a place of economic opportunity. Rathell was quickly followed by five other single London women of fashion: Jane Hunter also in 1766; Margaret Hunter, Jane's sister, in 1767; an unidentified London milliner working alongside Virginia milliner Sarah Pitt in 1769; and Margaret Brodie, a mantuamaker in 1771. Even Virginia-born, London-based milliner Lucy Harrison Randolph Necks found herself looking back across the Atlantic finding ways to exploit her local connections to compete with milliners on the ground in Virginia. Although milliners and mantuamakers had been operating in colonial Virginia as early as the 1730s, they were few in number prior to Rathell's arrival. The period between the end of the Seven Years' War and the beginning of the Revolution marked the highest concentration of millinery activity in Virginia during the eighteenth century. In addition to these five women from London, several Virginia women, Elizabeth Carlos, Mary Dickinson, Mary Davenport, Joanna McKenzie, Sarah Pitt, Elizabeth Russal of Fredericksburg, and sisters Elizabeth, Mary, and Anne Strachan of Richmond, also found ample room to ply their trade.

However, the region also presented distinct challenges which required careful negotiation in order to ensure success. The ability to navigate the fine line between demanding cash and offering credit could mean the difference between prosperous stability or slavish dependence on one's customers—a point brought into sharp relief with the advent of revolution. Even as Rathell boldly entered into

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Virginia society, the inclusion of a careful contingency plan at the close of her first advertisement signifies a realistic awareness of the potential difficulties to be met with in doing business in an area dominated by the export of a staple crop and accustomed to trading largely on credit. At the end of a long list of fashionable and genteel goods, she asserted that as she was “but lately come into the country” and “her continuance [there] [was] very uncertain,” she would “sell[1] for ready money only.”

The experiences of the Seven Years’ War sparked a growing awareness amongst the British public of the increasingly rich possibilities for economic gain afforded by North American markets and reflect the importance of the role North America had begun to assume in British imperial commerce by the 1750s. Although nearly all of the European wars of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had their North American counterpart, the Seven Years’ War was the first major European conflict to start in North America and to be won or lost principally in the colonies. At war’s end, the expulsion of the French from the mainland together with Britain’s extensive territorial gains across the globe generated enthusiastic visions amongst merchants and imperial policy makers alike of the vast commercial opportunities to be reaped from Britain’s monumental victory. Numerous congratulatory addresses to the king suggest that most Britons shared in the sentiments expressed by Bristol’s common council, that the achievements of the war would “greatly extend the Trade and Navigation of [his] Majesty’s Commercial Subjects” and, as the king announced, offer “Solid,

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5 Ibid., Apr. 18, 1766. [3].
and, Lasting Advantages to all [his] Subjects.”7 The officers and men stationed in North America throughout the conflict brought home first-hand accounts of a prosperous America primed to consume British exports. The press coverage of the dispute over the Stamp Act, a measure designed by imperial officials to relieve tax burdens on subjects at home by tapping into American wealth, only served to focus more attention on the colonies.8

From the vantage point of Catherine Rathell’s London, reports of the colonies no doubt suggested an appealing alternative to prospects of economic struggle within one of the largest cities in Europe. As the capitol of both English government and English fashion, the city of London functioned as a central hub for every type of imaginable skilled and some highly specialized trades, offering employment to a range of skilled and unskilled labor. Only 5 to 6 percent of London workers at any given time, however, were self-employed. Most worked for somebody else, and employers showed a marked tendency to overstaff to meet high demands and layoff workers during the slow periods that inevitably followed. These practices proved exceptionally troublesome since London’s economy was highly dependent on the export trade and even a subtle shift in trade could have devastating effects on the fate of London’s working population. Additionally, fickle changes in fashion could abruptly terminate the work of a whole group of specialized tradesmen. Almost every type of skilled labor

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encountered slow periods throughout the year, and experiencing a brush with poverty was not unusual. During the late 1760s, the moment when Rathell and the Hunter sisters chose to try their fortunes in America, London was gripped by economic depression.9

The motivations which compelled Rathell and her fellow fashion tradeswomen to leave London cannot be precisely identified. As aforementioned, John Morton Jordon's account of Rathell's having "me[t] with misfortunes" as an explanation for her journey to Virginia is a story told with tantalizing lack of detail. Whatever her misfortunes may have been, the competitive atmosphere in London suggests that the possibility of establishing herself as the independent master of her own shop in a less cutthroat but nonetheless profitable environment evidently provided enough incentive to make the experiment worthwhile. Margaret Brodie's initial advertisement in the Virginia Gazette suggests that this may have been exactly what she had in mind. Her statement that she had "served her Time, and was Successour, to the original Makers, at their Warehouse in Pall Mall" where "her Partner still continues to carry on the Business in London" implies that she was a young woman who had recently finished her apprenticeship and was in hopes of starting her own business. Her expressed intention to "lodg[e]... at Mrs. Rathell's Store" only "till a more convenient House can be got" indicates that she initially viewed what was to become a lucrative partnership as no more than a temporary expedient.10

10 Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Oct. 24, 1771, [2].
Even less is known concerning the immediate circumstances that propelled Jane and Margaret Hunter to leave the comforts of home and family and strike off on their own. However, much may be inferred from Jane’s emergence in later years as the prosperous American benefactress of her English family. Nearly all of the sole surviving letters between Jane Hunter and her English relatives and friends, eight dating from the period after the Revolution until her death in 1802, involve some suggestion of generous assistance. Jane’s sister Elizabeth Farrow’s 1801 letter informing her of “the hardness of the times and Dearness of Everey Artickel of Life” and thanking Jane for her especial kindness toward her two grandchildren is one of several iterations of gratitude.11 A subsequent letter from another family member in 1802 indicates that Jane carried on these beneficent attentions even earlier, from the first period of her arrival in the colonies. “It will, I doubt not, be agreeable news to you,” M. Townsend shared, that “the young people you have been so kind and liberal to are so promising.” “These young folks,” the writer continued, “have requested me in this Letter, to express their warmest thanks to you for the kindness you have intended them upon your removal” and hoped “to shew by their conduct . . . the sense they [had] of [Jane’s] Liberality to them.” 12 Jane even looked out for the interests of her husband’s family, sending regular gifts of money to her sister-in-law Phillis Weir Jordan, residing near Alnwhich. She also remembered her English relatives in her will leaving six hundred pounds each to her sister and

11 Elizabeth Farrow to Jane Hunter Charlton, July 9, 1801, Robinson Family Papers, Mss. 1 R5686 d163, Virginia Historical Society.
12 M. Townsend to Jane Hunter Charlton, Feb. 1, 1801, Robinson Family Papers, Mss. 1 R5685 d170, Virginia Historical Society (emphasis mine).
sister-in-law, her sister's portion to be divided amongst her two grandchildren in the event of her death. Perhaps as one of three sisters, two of whom remained unmarried, Jane believed the colonies to be a place where she could potentially better her condition and by extension that of her family's, if not secure a husband in the process. The fact that her sisters concurred in Jane's assessment of the situation is supported by Margaret's decision to join Jane in the colonies the following year and by Elizabeth's subsequent resolve to send her daughter Betsy Farrow to live with her two aunts in Virginia. Although the exact date of Betsy's arrival is unclear, the announcement of her marriage to William Russell appears in the *Virginia Gazette* in January 1775. In fact, both Jane Hunter's and Margaret Brodie's residence in Virginia led to marriage: Jane's to wigmaker Edward Charlton around 1771 and Margaret's to merchant William Matthews in 1776. For all of these women, life in the colonies promised at the very least, the opportunity to achieve financial stability through work and, at the most, the potential for achieving additional security through marriage.

Given Rathell's connection with a London merchant dealing with Virginia, her choice of destinations was a reasonable one based on personal

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13 For Jane's bequests to her family, see Will of Jane Charlton, Robinson Family Papers, Mss. 1 R5685 d 173–78, Virginia Historical Society. For Betsy Farrow's wedding announcement, see *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon and Hunter), Jan. 7, 1775, [2]. Many thanks to Janea Whitacre for drawing my attention to this. Jane Hunter appears for the first time in the historical record as Jane Charlton in one of her advertisements. See *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), Oct. 24, 1771, [3]. The date for Margaret Brodie's marriage is derived from her loyalist claim. See "The Meml: of Margt [Brodie] Mathews Widow of Wm Peter Mathews," in *American Loyalists: Transcript of the Manuscript Books and Papers of the Commission of Enquiry into the Losses and Services of the American Loyalists held under Acts of Parliament of 23, 25, 26, 28, and 29 of George III. Preserved amongst the Audit Office Records in the Public Record Office of England 1783–1790*, vol. 59, *Examinations in London, Memorials, Schedules of Losses and Evidences, Virginia Claimants in two books (Book ii)* (Transcribed for the New York Public Library, 1901), microfilm reel M-73, John D. Rockefeller Library. However, as will be discussed later, the timing of Brodie's marriage may have been the result of dire necessity as she found herself in need of protection in the midst of growing political instability.
relationships, but it is not difficult to deduce why her fellow milliners were also
drawn to the Chesapeake. Although no solid set of data exists on immigration
patterns for the 1760s, records from the official register of emigration from the
British Isles kept from December 1773 to March 1776 identify the middle colonies
and Upper South as the destination for fourth-fifths of all immigrants to North
America during that period. Not only was Virginia England's oldest mainland
 colony, Virginia was also her largest and most populous colony. Together, the
population of Maryland and Virginia constituted over 30 percent of the population
of British North America, and the region exported more than 750,000 pounds
sterling worth of tobacco to Great Britain every year. With the close of the Seven
Years' War and the reopening of reexport markets to France, the tobacco trade
had resumed a slow but steady pattern of growth, which would be interrupted
only by revolutionary politics and, ultimately, the Revolution itself.
Correspondingly, the demand for imported goods had risen alongside the level of
exports. According to Jacob M. Price, the year Rathell began her business saw
the introduction of 520,000 pounds sterling worth of British goods into the region.
The figure nearly doubled reaching more than one million pounds sterling by
1772, before tapering off dramatically with the successful implementation of
Virginia's second non-importation agreement.¹⁴ A careful examination of the
number of milliners doing business in Virginia at any given time together with the

¹⁴ For statistics on emigration during this period, see Bailyn and DeWolfe, Voyagers to the West, 3, 205. For data on the Chesapeake's population and the value of the region's exports, see John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, The Economy of British America, 1607–1789 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985), 130–31. For Jacob M. Price's figures on the value of goods imported into the Chesapeake, see Price, Capital and Credit in British Overseas Trade: The View from the Chesapeake, 1700–1776 (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 161–62.
frequency of their advertisements reveals a direct correlation with the rise and fall of Price's estimated levels of imports.

The diversification of Virginia's economy in the 1760s and changes in the marketing of tobacco gave rise to a greater degree of urban development and created both geographic and economic space for Rathell and her fellow milliners to conduct their businesses that would have been impossible in earlier decades. Previously, a combination of geography and the character of marketing Virginia's staple export tobacco had conspired to stifle town growth for most of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Because tobacco did not require extensive processing beyond the plantation and was largely handled on direct consignment with London merchants, Virginians had no incentive for developing central storage and processing centers. As Thomas Jefferson attempted to explain later in his Notes on the State of Virginia, "our country being much intersected with navigable water, and trade brought generally to our doors, instead of our being obliged to go in quest of it, has probably been one of the causes we have no towns of any consequence." Throughout the 1750s and 1760s, however, Virginia's economy witnessed a subtle shift towards grain production in the Northern Neck and backcountry which gave rise to increased trade with the markets of southern Europe, the West Indies, and other mainland colonies, introduced greater cash flow into the region, and fostered the development of towns on the periphery of the tidewater. By the 1770s,

15 McCusker and Menard, Economy of British America, 132.
Williamsburg's and Annapolis's populations had risen to approximately two thousand and thirty-seven hundred respectively; and Baltimore and Norfolk, as well as smaller towns in the interior, such as Fredericksburg, Richmond, and Petersburg, had begun to take shape. The 1760s also witnessed the arrival of significant numbers of Scottish factors operating directly in the region on behalf of larger Glasgow firms. Dotting the countryside, they established stores which offered wares wholesale to smaller shopkeepers as well as directly to small farmers and helped break the monopoly of the larger planters and consignment merchants in the York River region.17

Perhaps most importantly, even as early as the 1730s, Virginians were starting to garner recognition as an extremely fashion-conscious people. On learning of naturalist John Bartram's intention to go to Virginia, London merchant Peter Collinson importuned him to "pray go very clean, neat, and handsomely dressed" for Virginians "are a very gentle, well-dressed people—and look, perhaps, more at a man's outside than his inside."18 By the 1770s, Reverend Thomas Gwatkin, professor of the College of William and Mary and personal tutor to Virginia's royal governor Lord Dunmore's sons, found himself remarking with astonishment that "modes [were] imported" to Virginia "full as soon as they are . . . carried[,] conveyed into Counties at a distance from London."19

19 [Gwatkin], *Gwatkin Chorography*, [ca. 1774], Tyler Family Papers, Mss. 65 T97, Group F, Box 8, fol. [8], Special Collections, Earl Greg Swem Library.
The specialized nature of a millinery shop was ideally suited to exploit the demand for fashionable attire. The advertisements of Rathell and her fellow milliners, which grew in length and diversity as the decade wore on, reveal shops equipped to provide every sort of accessory imaginable from head to toe and many trifles besides for all members of the family, ladies, gentlemen, and children. On a ramble through the shops of Williamsburg, customers were presented with a wide range of choices including a variety of fashionable caps and ribbons; full suits of blond lace, worked Dresden, and flowered gauze (i.e., matching sleeve ruffles, tuckers, aprons, caps, and neckerchiefs); ready made satin cloaks, bonnets, and tippets; Barcelona handkerchiefs; silk, lamb, and kid gloves and mitts of various colors and leathers; French bead, paste, garnet, and pearl necklaces and earrings; wedding, mourning, and other fans; pinchbeck, stone, silver, and gilt shoe, knee, and stock buckles; gentleman’s bags and roses (for wigs); silk, cotton, thread, and worsted stockings; all manner of fashionable textiles; Didsbury’s, Gresham’s, Carpue’s, and Queen’s shoes; plain, paste, and tortoiseshell combs; toys; woolpacks and curls; Weston’s, Rappee’s and Scotch snuff; and Hemet Pearl Powder for the teeth and gums, to name just a few items. A solitary visit to just one millinery shop could connect Virginians to the wide range of fashionable commerce available from the farthest corners of the British Empire and the greater eighteenth-century world.

Having wares on hand and available for immediate inspection gave milliners an edge over consignment merchants based in London. While many of the prosperous planters tended to give consignment merchants the bulk of their
business throughout this period, the long-distance ordering process was fraught with difficulty, disappointment, and sometimes plain disgruntlement. On one occasion, George Washington rather famously complained to his factor that “instead of getting things good and fashionable in their several kinds we often have Articles sent Us that could only have been usd by our Forefathers in the days of yore.”20 Others carped about paying more than an item was worth. “Several Articles in my last Invoice,” Robert Carter Nicholas wrote London merchant John Norton, “Mrs. Nicholas assures me are charged higher than they could be bought in the Stores of Williamsburg, dear as they are.”21 In another instance, Mrs. Nicholas herself took up her pen to emphatically inform Norton that the “parcel of Fans” she had received “could have [been] bought in a Milliner’s shop in Wmsbg for a third of the price wch they cost, besides the difference between Ster. & Curr. Money” and that the “Stays, Bonnets &c” had been “very ill bought & ungenteel.”22 Perhaps one of the greatest difficulties with long-distance shopping by proxy was simply anticipating long-term needs adequately in advance. One can envision a scene where Robert Carter Nicholas, besieged yet again by belated requests from his wife and children, sat down to write Norton in a tone at once frazzled and apologetic, “I am afraid you will think I shall never be done troubling you with little trifling Commissions, but so many

little articles as are wanted in a Family can't well be recollected at once."

Rathell and her fellow milliners were only too ready to supply any of those "little articles" found wanting at a moment's notice.

Although no account books survive for any of the milliners doing business in Williamsburg during this period, individual entries scattered throughout customers' personal ledger books and other sources indicate that the milliners of Williamsburg did in fact do much of their business by supplying such small, trifling articles in question. A receipt paid by Washington to Jane Hunter Charlton in 1771 records the purchase of several items of paste jewelry as well as a bit of lace for his stepdaughter Martha Parke Custis. Similarly, a March 1772 entry in one of Washington's ledger books records payment of five pence to Jane for "Mounting two fans."

Additional entries which do not denote specific items nevertheless remain at or below two pounds, fifteen shillings, three pence in price, suggesting Miss Custis and Mrs. Washington shopped for a necessary article here and there or simply for recreation. Likewise, Alexander Spotswood purchased two pairs of gloves from Rathell on one occasion and three pairs of shoes on another. The Williamsburg milliners were especially well-poised to meet special impromptu needs such as engagements, weddings, and periods of mourning. After a morning's "ramble" through town, Williamsburg resident Anne Blair penned her sister with wry amusement of an encounter with one "deeply

24 "Col Washington to Edward Charlton for J. Charlton," 1771, Mary Custis Lee Papers, Mss. 1 L5 144 a28–29, Section 2, Virginia Historical Society.
26 Alexander Spotswood in Account with James Hunter, Fredericksburg District Court Papers, microfilm reel M-146, John D. Rockefeller Library.
Loadn'd" Mr. Price who had been busily "Buying a World of things of Messrs Hunter & Pitt," she "fanc[ied]" while out "geting Wedding geer for his Betsy." In an effort to gain the "Honour of helping to Dress" another young lady on her "day of all Days," Rathell sent a small parcel of goods to the home of the prospective bride so that she and her mother could personally inspect the wares and make a selection. The episode underscores the advantages of doing business with local milliners, especially on special occasions, for the opportunity to personally select items and solicit the advice of someone who possessed the latest fashion news. Milliners' specialized wares not only connected customers to the worldwide reaches of British commerce, their specialized knowledge, skills, and advice provided vital connections with London itself.

When Anne Blair sent word to Fanny Bayler not to worry that Miss Hunter had no caps "reddy made" for she could "make them equal to the English," she paid Margaret one of the highest compliments imaginable. The ability to command financial capital was necessary to the start of any business; the ability to command cultural capital was essential for continued success in the fashion trade. A milliner's capacity to establish strong connections with the fashionable world in London validated her expertise and enabled her to better distinguish herself from amongst the competition. Rathell's choice of the descriptive phrase "Lately arrived from London" as a line second in importance only to her name.

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and the repetition of the sentiment "as she was but lately come into the country" at the close of her first advertisement was no accident.\textsuperscript{30} When she set up shop temporarily in Maryland after nearly three years' residence in the colonies, she still introduced herself to the citizens of Annapolis as "Catharine Rathell, Milliner From London."\textsuperscript{31} Hers was a move consciously calculated to garner prestige and stimulate instantaneous interest in her wares. In a society hungry for the latest fashions from the cultural center of the British empire, Rathell and her fellow milliners held a powerful tool at their disposal in their position to serve as cultural intermediaries with one foot in the colonies and the other foot, sometimes quite literally, in London.

Wherever possible, milliners attempted to establish cultural capital by drawing overt attention to their own personal connections with London. While Rathell and the Hunter sisters garnered prestige by their status as milliners from London, Margaret Brodie's qualifications as a mantuamaker outshone them all. Brodie's statement that she was "Just arrived from London," and could "mak[e] and tri[m], in the newest Taste, Sacks and Coats, Gowns and Petticoats, all sorts of Ladies Brunswick and Jesuit Dresses, Sultana Robes, [and] Robedecores" was a mere sidenote to the headline news that "She served her Time, and was Successour, to the original Makers, at their Warehouse in Pall Mall." Located on the same street as St. James's Palace, the official residence of George III, Pall Mall sat at the epicenter of London's fashionable world. Not only had she been trained in the best of all possible schools, Brodie also retained connections to

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Purdie and Dixon), Apr. 18, 1766, [3].
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Maryland Gazette}, Sept. 7, 1769, [2].
that world. Even though Brodie would not be making regular trips to London herself, her “Partner” who “still continu[ed] to carry on the Business in London” as well as “the Queen’s” very own “Mantuamaker” had promised to send her word of the latest fashions “every three Months.” 32 Again, little is known about the Hunter sisters’ methods of keeping up with the latest fashions during the early days of their tenure in Williamsburg, but evidence from the later period suggests their London family members participated in the enterprise. In July 1801, Jane’s sister sent her an invoice for “20 ladys & 12 Uropein Magazenes” while her niece sent word in February 1802, that “15 magazenis” had been sent in the Octavius.33 It may be reasonably supposed that their family was involved in forwarding the Hunter sisters the latest fashion news from the beginning. Rathell trumped everyone by making a return trip to London to personally select wares. Her October 1771 advertisement was designed to instill the utmost confidence in her customers that her goods “Just Imported from London” truly were of the “newest Fashion.” They had been purchased as recently as “July last” with Rathell’s expert knowledge from the most “eminent Shops,” and they promised to be a good bargain since they had been bought under Rathell’s shrewd eye for “the best Terms.”34

In order to compete with the new London milliners in town, Virginia milliner Sarah Pitt found it necessary to secure the services of “an assistant just arrived

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32 Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Oct. 24, 1771, [2].
33 Elizabeth Farrow to Charlton, July 9, 1801, Robinson Family Papers, Mss. 1 R5686 d163, Virginia Historical Society (“20 ladys”); W. E. Farrow to Charlton, Feb. 4, 1802, Robinson Family Papers, Mss. 1 R5865 d162-72, Virginia Historical Society (“15 magazenis”).
34 Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Oct. 10, 1771, [3] (quotations). For Rathell’s announcement of her intention to return to London to select a cargo of wares, see Virginia Gazette (Rind), Apr. 13, 1769, [3].
from London," who, she informed the public, "understood[ood] the millinery business" and would "carry on, mounting fans, and making cardinals and bonnets." The degree to which women in the fashion trades were able to draw connections between themselves and London increased the desirability of their wares and established their own reputation as authorities well-qualified to offer advice on that all-important presentation of self—dress. One of the local general merchants or Scottish factors might carry a wide range of textiles including some of the very same luxurious Indian chintzes, Persians, silks, and satins found in a millinery shop, but they were not qualified in the same way to make the sorts of recommendations that milliners offered in their advertisements, such as Rathell's observation that she carried a "fine Buff coloured Dimity suitable for Ladies' Riding Dresses," and which milliners most certainly offered in person as they brought out goods for customers to tumble through in their shop.36

If a milliner could not travel to London herself to personally select her wares, she could create ties with the metropole by forming a relationship with someone else whose connections and judgment were known and respected. In addition to the two cargoes of wares Rathell was able to boast of having chosen herself, Rathell assiduously cultivated a relationship with the London merchant house, John Norton and Sons. By the 1770s, John Norton and Sons was one of the oldest and most reputable merchant houses doing business in Virginia. It was not John Norton, however, that Rathell was most interested in dealing with; it was

35 Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Dec. 14, 1769, [3].
his wife Mrs. Norton.37 "The very great Character I have had from Many of My 
Aquaintance of Mrs Norton's great Carefullness in buying & Sending the Neatest 
and Cheapest goods in, that's sent to Virginia," she wrote eagerly, "Makes One 
so very desirous of getting goods from your House." "As you must know," Rathell 
continued with some degree of pride, "I Peigne myself much on having the very 
best & most fashionable goods in Williamsburg."38 Presumably, Mrs. Norton 
could be counted on not only to exercise good taste but to drive a hard bargain. 
Since Rathell could not make regular trips to London herself, she took the next 
best step carefully surveying the prevailing tastes of the neighborhood and 
endeavoring to secure the connections necessary to ensure that her goods 
remained the "very best & most fashionable" in town. Mary Davenport solved the 
problem of a lack of direct personal connections with London by also dealing with 
John Norton and, presumably, Mrs. Norton in particular.39

Although Lucy Harrison Randolph Necks never kept shop in Virginia, she 
attempted to wield her own special form of cultural capital—her own strong 
personal Virginia connections and her unique vantage point in London—to enter 
into direct competition with Williamsburg milliners on their own terms by placing 
an advertisement in the Virginia Gazette. The daughter of Benjamin Harrison IV

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37 For background on the merchant firm John Norton and Sons, see Jacob M. Price, "Who Was 
John Norton? A Note on the Historical Character of Some Eighteenth-Century London Virginia 
Firms," William and Mary Quarterly 19, no. 3 (July 1962): 400–07. For the important role played 
by female members of merchant families in the trans-Atlantic trade to Virginia, see Linda L. 
Sturtz, Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia (New York, 2002), chap. 6. For a 
broader discussion of Mrs. Norton's popularity with John Norton and Sons' Virginia customers, 
and her appeal with Rathell in particular, see ibid., 163–69, esp. 168–69.
38 Catherine Rathell to John Norton, Jan. 31, 1772, John Norton and Sons Papers, Folder 52, 
John D. Rockefeller Library.
39 Mary Davenport appears on John Norton's list of foreign debtors in 1773. See "A list of foreign 
debtors," July 30, 1773, John Norton and Sons Papers, Folder 88, Oversized, John D. 
Rockefeller Library.
of Berkley Plantation on the James River, Lucy was "related to some of the principal Families" of Virginia.\textsuperscript{40} After her marriage to ship's captain Edward Randolph Jr., Lucy accompanied her husband to London where she and her two children were in residence at the time of Edward’s death in 1760. Like Rathell, Lucy’s misfortunes apparently prompted her to resort to a milliner’s shop for her own support and that of her children. An advertisement in the London papers clarifying the location of several shops lists a Lucy Randolph as the proprietress of a millinery and coat shop in 1766. Around the time of her marriage to another ship’s captain, Captain Robert Necks of the Virginia trade in 1770, Lucy placed her first advertisement in the \textit{Virginia Gazette}.\textsuperscript{41} She was the only London milliner to do so throughout the colonial period. Lucy Randolph’s London shop address, “the Three Angels, No. 9, Long Walk, Cloysters,” featured prominently in large print just below her name enabled her to command tremendous cultural capital by offering Virginia women a chance to do business directly through a milliner based in London. Yet, that was not the only advantage she offered. “Understanding that her friends in \textit{Virginia}” were “unacquainted with the business transacted by her,” Lucy explained was the reason for her “tak[ing] this method to inform them that she makes and sells all sorts of Millinery” which she would be happy to dispose of by “wholesale” or “retail” on “the lowest terms.”\textsuperscript{42} When Lucy

\textsuperscript{40} John Randolph affidavit on behalf of Lucy Harrison Randolph Necks, Oct. 17, 1782, Loyalist Commission, P.R.O., A.O. 13/32, National Archives, Kew, microfilm reel M-490, John D. Rockefeller Library.


\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Purdie and Dixon), June 14, 1770, [4].
referred to her customers as friends, Lucy was not just adopting the usual polite form of address; Lucy was quite literally acknowledging the existence of actual friends and personal relationships. Not only would customers have the opportunity to deal directly with a London milliner, they would also have the chance to deal with a person who was a known quantity. The careful, straightforward categorization of the wares in her advertisement in comparison to most millinery advertisements in Williamsburg conveys a sense of confidence and professionalism and presumably added to the appeal of doing business with her. The degree of her success in some small way can be measured by Mann Page’s directive to John Norton: “My Wife desires that hers and her Daughters Things, (whiche are under their respective names) May be bought by Mrs. Lucy Necks and Shall take it as a Favour, if You’ll pay her for them, and let them be sent in with the others.” 43 Whether through personal loyalties or professional competency, Lucy emerged as a rival to even Mrs. Norton’s popularity. Taking advantage of her personal knowledge of Virginians and the Virginia consignment trade in fashionable wares, Lucy used her command of cultural capital to fulfill a need and supplement her London business.

Regardless of whether or not milliners were able to establish cultural capital through personal connections to London, they emphasized the connection of their wares to London as a matter of course, endeavoring to present their goods in the most fashionable light possible. In addition to bulking at the price, Mrs. Nicholas’s chief complaint regarding the stays and bonnets sent by Norton

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43 Mann Page to John Norton, Oct. 25, 1773, John Norton Papers, Folder 97, John D. Rockefeller Library. Sturtz also cites this letter, emphasizing in particular Necks’s familial relationship with Page’s wife as the incentive to transfer their business to her. Sturtz, Within Her Power, 168.
was that they were “very ill and ungenteel bought.” If nothing else, Williamsburg milliners theoretically should not have been blamed for having “ungenteel” goods. Pitt’s statement by way of introduction to her May 5, 1771, advertisement was typical of the pattern generally followed by all of the milliners in the city. Sarah emphasized the newness of the wares as “Just imported,” established their origin “from London,” and assured customers of their quality characterizing them as “a Neat and genteel Assortment of Goods suitable for the Season.” All of the milliners employed this standard language with minor variations on a theme.

Goods were either “Genteel,” “new,” “Very genteel,” “fashionable,” “well chosen,” of the “latest fashion,” or, in the case of Rathell’s superlatives, sometimes all three: “the best chose, genteelst, and most fashionable.” At times, specific items gained individual attention within the advertisement such as Pitt’s “very genteel pocket books,” Dickinson’s “very pretty newest fashioned ribands,” and Rathell’s “breast flowers, equal in beauty to any ever imported” which “so near resemble[d] nature that the nicest eye c[ould] hardly distinguish the difference.”

Even when milliners did not make explicit claims to the fashionableness of specific items, close attention to changes in advertising patterns of certain goods reveals friendly competition and responsiveness to changing fashions. London Pall Mall shoemaker John Didsbury’s shoes remained fashionable throughout the 1760s and 1770s, however, the growing popularity of Gresham’s and Queen’s

44 Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), May 16, 1771, [2].
shoes is reflected in their gradual absorption into the stock of nearly all the milliners in town including Jane Charlton, Margaret Hunter, and Mary Dickinson’s inventories. Conversely, another way to heighten competition was to specialize in different sorts of goods. In addition to standard millinery wares, Sarah Pitt, perhaps reflective of her husband’s position as a doctor, often carried items in the way of groceries and medicines; Margaret Hunter routinely offered fine Bohea tea as well as Weston’s, Rappee’s, and Scotch snuff; and Rathell stocked items such as “Pugh’s famous Eye Water for weak or sore Eyes” and “Hemet (Dentist to his Majesty) his Essence of Pearl” for tooth whitening.47

Even if a milliner succeeded in establishing cultural capital for herself, acquired the latest in fashionable wares, and framed them with the proper descriptors, the crux remained when and where to effectively market them. Although urban developments in Virginia had improved a great deal since the seventeenth century, Virginia still lagged far behind other colonies in terms of urban sophistication. Despite the economic prosperity of the region, the Chesapeake remained largely rural in character and lacked a substantial urban center. In comparison to Philadelphia’s population around 1770, which constituted about thirty thousand inhabitants, New York’s at twenty-five thousand, Boston’s at sixteen thousand, Charleston’s at twelve thousand, and Newport’s at eleven thousand, Williamsburg’s population of two thousand, approximately half of which were enslaved, and Annapolis’s population of thirty-

seven hundred seem little more than small, provincial towns. Furthermore, both of those capitol cities only offered seasonal business opportunities contingent on government sessions. The success or failure of Rathell and her fellow milliners depended largely on their ability to assess the economic situation of the Chesapeake and to locate their shop in the place which promised to provide the most business.

Business success in such an environment required a great deal of flexibility. Rathell's business activities over the period reveal a shrewd assessment of the situation and a creative endeavor to exploit the economic possibilities of the region to the full, starting with her very first decision of importance: selecting a location for her shop. Although Jordon had written Carter that Rathell intended to open a shop in Williamsburg, her very first advertisement places her in Fredericksburg instead—a deviation from her plan which seems rather surprising unless one takes into account Carter's background. Requested to show Rathell "whatever Countenance or Civilities" were in his power, Carter probably felt compelled to offer advice as to her plans. As the owner and full-time resident of a townhouse in Williamsburg, Carter was well qualified to speak to the vicissitudes of doing business in a city which found itself bursting at the seams during court sessions four times a year and a sleepy little town the rest of the year. As the owner of Nomini Hall, a plantation in Westmoreland County, he was also in a position to speak of the possibilities for economic gain in the up-

48 McCusker and Menard, Economy of British America, 131.
49 Jordon to Carter, Aug. 25, 1765, Carter Papers, Virginia Historical Society, microfilm reel M-82.6, John D. Rockefeller Library. For Rathell's first advertisement, see Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Apr. 18, 1766, [3].
and-coming town of Fredericksburg. Although a fairly young town, by 1770 Fredericksburg was emerging as the third most-prosperous urban center in Virginia, trailing just behind Norfolk and Williamsburg. The location of the parish church, the county courthouse, and an iron manufacturing center, Fredericksburg promised steady clientele and economic growth.\textsuperscript{50} Evidently, Rathell must have decided to initially avoid the intermittent nature of Williamsburg business in favor of more steady prospects in Fredericksburg. However, when “scarcity of Cash” proved problematic, she boldly packed up her wares and traveled to Williamsburg for “the Sitting of the next Assembly.”\textsuperscript{51} Eventually, Rathell determined that Williamsburg provided the stronger basis for financial stability and shifted her base of operations.

Milliners were aware that, like all business enterprises in the capitol, their success revolved chiefly around meeting the needs of those who traveled to the city for public times and meetings of the General Assembly. Milliners recognized that it was crucial to their survival to make the most of those opportunities when the city bustled with activity. By the 1760s, the General Court met four times a year. In April and October, the court heard both civil and criminal cases while June and December sessions were reserved for criminal cases only. The civil sessions of the April and October courts appear to have brought the most outsiders to town, and the dates of millinery advertisements reflect that. Advertisements for the month of October comprise one-third of the total millinery advertisements placed from 1766 to 1775. Total advertisements for the months

\textsuperscript{50} O'Mara, \textit{Historical Geography}, 178, 203, 222–23.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Rind), Feb. 19, 1767, [2].
of April and May are equal and together constitute nearly one-third of the remaining advertisements. The rest of the advertisements are concentrated in November and December with a few scattered through all the rest of the months save August, which has none. The combined strength of the April and May advertisements suggests an effort to target both the April and June court sessions. The high numbers for November potentially signify goods that arrived too late for the October sessions but were advertised in hopes of selling during the December sessions. The holiday celebrations in December and January were also a very popular time for weddings, so milliners may have hoped to meet with some sales during that period as well, which might further explain the November and December advertisements.

Because business revolved around the court sessions, Rathell and her fellow milliners were engaged in a constant battle to coordinate supply and demand over long distances amidst shifting trends in fashion. A milliner's ability to have the proper goods on hand at the proper moment was critical in generating income and maintaining a loyal customer base. In November 1771, Rathell penned an urgent missive to Norton requesting that he “send & Hurry” one of her direct orders from a London tradesmen. “As Our Assembly meets in March,” she continued anxiously, “[I] must request of all things on Earth, you will by the very first ship that Sails out of London send me those Goods, or I shall at that time totally Loose the Seal of them.” After addressing some other concerns, she returned to the subject at the close of her letter in a tone almost reaching despair: “these are all the things I at this time want but My greatest distress is for
fear I should not have them in March . . . or it will be a very great loss to me." 52

As January 1772 rolled around, Rathell once again found herself nearly out of certain items and sent two letters via separate channels. If Norton could not fill the order, the invoice was to be forwarded to Colonel George Mercer for, she closed, "a disappointment would totally ruin, Cath Rathell." 53 Rathell's concern was no mere exercise in melodramatic female histrionics. Whether or not the goods arrived on time could mean the difference in selling them immediately, or "hav[ing] them on hands for 12 months longer." 54

Rathell’s advertisements spanning April 1769 to March 1770 serve as an insightful illustration of the shelf-life of a milliner’s wares. In April Rathell announced to her customers that she “hope[d] to have it in her power to go home after the June court, to purchase a cargo against the October court,” and was therefore “determined to sell.” 55 So, it may be reasonably presumed that Rathell did not import any further wares after April in anticipation of her travels. Evidently, Rathell did not sell enough of her wares to enable her to return to London as soon as planned. On route to London, Rathell took a detour to Annapolis.

Advertisements for Rathell appear in the Maryland Gazette for September 7, 1769, and November 2, 1769, announcing that “Catharine Rathell, Milliner From London, Has open’d Shop at the House of Mr. Wm. Whetcroft, Jeweler, in West- 

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52 Catherine Rathell to John Norton, Nov. 16, 1771, Folder 50, John Norton and Sons Papers, John D. Rockefeller Library.
53 Rathell to Norton, Jan. 31, 1772, Folder 52, John Norton and Sons Papers, John D. Rockefeller Library, emphasis mine.
54 Rathell to Norton, Nov. 16, 1771, Folder 50, John Norton and Sons Papers, John D. Rockefeller Library.
55 Virginia Gazette (Rind), Apr. 13, 1769, [3].
Street near the Town Gate." One last Annapolis advertisement appears on March 29, 1770, but the language of the advertisement implies that Rathell had finally returned to London. The location remains the same and the wares listed are unequivocally Rathell’s, but no specific mention of her name is made. The advertisement simply states that “An Invoice of the above Goods to be seen at Mr. Whetcrofts, Jeweller in Annapolis, who will treat with any one inclinable to purchase.”

Although milliners routinely closed their advertisements with the statement that they had “many more Articles too tedious to mention,”—therefore it is impossible to ascertain how many wares were simply not named—nearly 60 percent of the goods listed in Rathell’s April advertisement reappear in both the September and November advertisements, which are nearly equal in length. Only one entry in relation to jewelry gives some indication of the degree to which quantities were diminishing. In her November advertisement, Rathell lists only one paste necklace and earrings, singular, while previous advertisements refer to paste necklaces and earrings, plural. Two orders sent to Norton give some indication of the quantity of necklaces Rathell may have started off with. In December 1771 she requested that Norton send “12 Handsome Necklaces of Diferent Sorts & Coulors set in Silver and Some with Parrings” while in January 1772 Rathell ordered “6 neat newest fashioned foiling Necklaces.” These orders suggest that Rathell only carried half a dozen to a dozen of any one kind

56 Maryland Gazette, Sept. 7, 1769, [2]; ibid., Nov. 2, 1769, [4].
57 Ibid., March 29, 1770, 253.
of necklace at any given time. So, it appears that it took her at least eight months
to dispose of approximately twelve necklaces. The last advertisement in March is
truncated in size, listing only sewing silks, threads, and tapes; fans; various sorts
of gloves; and a small range of textiles, but estimates the value of the goods to
be worth between "Two and Three Hundred Pounds Sterling." Together, these
advertisements illustrate that even in the best of scenarios when goods arrived
on time, they could remain on a milliner's shelves for months.

Changing fashions and maintaining customer relations exerted additional
pressure on milliners to make every effort to ensure that their new wares arrived
in time for the next court session. One of the items which Rathell found herself in
"very great . . . distress" for in January 1772 was gentlemen's shoes. "I must
observe," Rathell informed Norton, "that the gentlemen now call frequently for
shoes with long line quarters, and that Buckle low on the foot, so beg you'll give
orders to send me some of them." Furthermore, they were to be sent "at the very
first opportunity" for she "suppose[d] by the time they arrive[d], there [would] be
no other called for." Recognizing a shift in fashion, Rathell realized that unless
she acquired the latest in gentlemen's shoes, she ran the risk of losing the
business in gentlemen's shoe sales to other milliners in town. Conversely, if the
goods arrived too late, they might loose their fashionable appeal by the time they
could be sold again since fashion news, such as that supplied by Brodie's
London partners and others, could arrive as early as every three months. Most
importantly, while Rathell's statement, "by the time they arrive[d], there [would]

59 Maryland Gazette, March 29, 1770, 253.
60 Rathell to Norton, Jan. 31, 1772, John Norton and Sons Papers, Folder 52, John D. Rockefeller
Library.
be no other called for," should be quite literally construed as a simple concern that gentlemen would have no interest in any other kind of shoes, the statement also held forth more dire possibilities—dire possibilities which Sarah Pitt faced when the October 1769 General Court session caught her unprepared. Although some wares had arrived in the “Two Sisters, Capt. Taylor, from London,” she still did not have her full shipment. For the next several months, she made the best of the situation by advertising what wares she had while at the same time courting the continued favor of her customers with repeated promises that she “expect[ed] by the first vessels, a larger assortment of gauzes, muslins, lawns, &cs.” No doubt Pitt was very much relieved when the long-awaited goods finally made their appearance in December, but the lesson was implicitly understood. If customers met with too many disappointments—encountering low stock or items slightly behind the fashion—Pitt and Rathell could run the risk of losing their custom entirely. In the future, Rathell might discover, no other shoes would be called for—at all.

Finding the right location in town to set up shop was nearly as important as having goods arrive in a punctual manner. Even though Williamsburg was a small town, there were still key spots best-suited to command the most business in the midst of the hustle and bustle of public times. One visitor to Williamsburg during public times in 1765 described the center of activities: “In the Day time people [hurry] back and forwards from the Capitoll to the taverns, and at Night, Carousing and Drinking In one Chamber and box and Dice in another, which

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61 Virginia Gazette (Rind), Oct. 26, 1769, [2]; Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Nov. 2, 1769, [4]; ibid., Dec. 14, 1769, [3].
continues till morning Commonly.” Ideally, the preeminent location to conduct business in Williamsburg was as close to the capitol as possible preferably amongst the taverns and shops in the block on the west side of the building. On her return from London in 1771, Rathell succeeded in securing a shop “opposite to the south Side of the Capitol” but still felt compelled to offer her customers an apology. “As it was impossible to get a House on the main Street,” she explained, she remained “hopeful [that] the little Distance [would] make no Difference to her former Customers.” Only in January was she satisfied with her position when she found herself on the main street once more. “I now have got a store exactly opposite the Raleigh Tavern,” she shared excitedly with Norton, “which I look on as the best situation in Williamsburg, where I hope to do three times the Business I ever did.” In reality, both shop locations were nearly equidistant from the capitol. If anything, her first location was actually closer. But in Rathell’s estimation, the location on Duke of Gloucester Street was far superior and directly related to the amount of custom that she could expect.

Mary Dickinson’s movements through town document a slow but persistent effort to position her business to advantage and to achieve in two years what Rathell accomplished over the course of three months. Although not in the heart of the business district, if the block next to the capitol could be called that, Mary Dickinson’s first advertisement in April 1770 placed her at “Mr. William

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63 Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Oct. 10, 1771, [3].
64 Rathell to Norton, Jan. 31, 1772, John Norton and Sons Papers, Folder 52, John D. Rockefeller Library.
Holt’s Store.\textsuperscript{65} Next to the post office a block and a half down the main street from the capitol, the location was reasonably conducive to business. A little over a year later, however, an advertisement in October 1771 places her in a new location “next Door to Mr. James Geddy’s Shop, near the Church.”\textsuperscript{66} Whether driven by problems with her lease or a lack of funds to seek cheaper rent, Dickinson could not have picked a less promising place to set up shop. If Rathell had felt compelled to offer apologies for a shop located less than one minute’s walk from the main street, Dickinson’s new location nearly ten minutes brisk walking from the capitol would have a great deal to compensate for in the way of attracting business. Even James Geddy, owner of the shop and proprietor of a silversmith shop next door felt compelled to offer incentives to encourage customers to make the trek. “The Reasonableness of [his] Goods,” he hoped would “remove that Objection of his shop’s being too high up Town” especially as he “propose[d] to sell any Article exceeding twenty Shillings Sterling at the low Advance of sixty-two and a Half per Cent.” “The Walk,” he added optimistically, “may be thought rather an Amusement than a Fatigue.”\textsuperscript{67} Only in April 1772 was Dickinson able to finally achieve a competitive spot in the “Store above the Coffeehouse, near the Capitol,” the first building on Duke of Gloucester Street west of the capitol, where she remained for the rest of the documented tenure of her business.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{65} Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Apr. 19, 1770, supplement, [2].
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., Oct. 17, 1771, [2].
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., June 4, 1772, [3].
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., Apr. 30, 1772, [3].
The activities of the other milliners in town confirm that they shared in Rathell's and Dickinson's opinion of the value of setting up shop as close on the main street to the capitol as possible. Although the location of Sarah Pitt's shop remains unknown, all of the shops occupied by the Hunter sisters were in the vicinity of Rathell's esteemed position across from the Raleigh. In 1770 Jane leased property that Margaret would later buy only a few doors down from that tavern. Margaret's advertisements on her own, in between the time of Jane's marriage and her own purchase of their former shop, place her "next door to Mr. Robert Anderson's Tavern" and in "the Corner Store in Doctor Carter's Brick House," both within the same neighborhood in the first block next to the capitol. The house purchased by Jane and her husband in 1772 was located directly across from the shop purchased by Margaret and later described in the newspaper to be "situated in the most public Part of the City. and well calculated for any public Business." Likewise, Mary Davenport also advertised her location as "near the Capitol." Securing the best possible customer base required an understanding of the town's economic landscape and a conscientious effort to locate oneself in a position to exploit it to advantage.

Given that the time for doing a brisk business was short and concentrated, milliners found it necessary to seek out other creative ways to attract as much business as possible during public times. During May 1768, Rathell offered

[71] Virginia Gazette (Dixon and Hunter), Apr. 29, 1775, supplement, [4].
[72] Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Nov. 12, 1772, [2].

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theater tickets for sale for three different theater performances: “The Constant Couple” on May 12, “The Gamester” on May 19, and a benefit performance of “The Beggar’s Opera,” on May 26. Likewise, she also agreed to sell lottery tickets for James Hamilton’s drawing to take place in Fredericksburg later that month. Sarah Pitt not only sold lottery tickets, she organized her own lottery. Indeed, Pitt was so “encouraged” by the “many adventures concerned” in her first lottery, she proposed a second. Perhaps hoping to seize on the “carousing” traffic between taverns during the evening, Rathell endeavored to make the most of all possible hours for doing business in 1772 by running her own business by day while offering goods sent on consignment by night. “Having received from London, on Commission, a Parcel of neat Goods, and as disposing them in my Store will interfere with both my Time and Business,” she announced to her patrons “I propose selling them every Evening, during the Sitting of the Assembly, till all are sold.” Rathell also attempted to diversify operations during one session by advertising “Lodgings” for up to “six Gentlemen.”

During the slow times between government sessions, Rathell and Dickinson attempted to improve on the time by packing up their wares and traveling to more promising locations. As stated previously, on at least one occasion, Rathell endeavored to profit by the lull and gain an edge over her competitors by traveling to London via Annapolis to personally select wares for

73 Virginia Gazette (Rind), May 12, 1768, [2]; Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), May 12, 1768, [2], May 19, 1768, [3], May 26, 1768, [2].
74 Virginia Gazette (Rind), May 26, 1768, [3].
75 Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Nov. 26, 1767, [3] (“encouraged”); for the first lottery, see ibid., Nov. 12, 1767, [2].
the upcoming court. The following year, in October 1772, Rathell proposed, “if a House [could] be got, to reside at Petersburg from the End of [the October] Court until April,” another developing center comparable to Fredericksburg.77 Similarly, Mary Dickinson attempted to move from one capitol to another trying her fortunes between court sessions twice in Annapolis, in September 1771 and September 1772.78

Anne Blair’s letter shopping for caps by proxy for Fanny Bayler and Rathell’s parcel sent to Mrs. Mercer identify another source of income for milliners in Williamsburg during moments between sessions—cultivating relations with a customer base in the country. At the close of her advertisement for the June 1771 court session, Margaret Hunter finished with a line which anticipated the slow summer season by reminding her customers that “Orders from the Country [would] be faithfully and punctually executed, on the most reasonable Terms.”79 Mary Dickinson’s efforts to “particularly” thank “her good friends in the country” and assure them they could continue to “rely on their orders being attended to with the strictest care” in May 1774 indicate that they played an essential role in her business.80 While the public sessions of Williamsburg offered tremendous opportunity for women in the fashion trades, the nature of the seasonal business patterns left their business in a vulnerable spot for much of the year.

77 Ibid., Oct. 22, 1772, [2].
78 Maryland Gazette, Sept. 26, 1771, 578; ibid., Sept. 24, 1772, [2].
79 Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), June 20, 1771, [3].
80 Virginia Gazette (Rind), May 12, 1774, [3].
The most critical challenge for milliners doing business in the Chesapeake revolved around the perpetual problem of credit. Dominated by the tobacco trade, the Chesapeake economy in which Rathell and her fellow tradeswomen found themselves was largely dependent on a series of short- and long-term credit obligations. To transport tobacco to market, planters, local Scottish factors, or consignment merchants in London first had to have sufficient investment capital to cover the freighting and insurance costs of a trans-Atlantic shipment. Once the tobacco arrived in London, investors had to mobilize enough capital or available credit to cover duties and warehouse costs until the tobacco could be sold and profits realized. Tobacco was sold in London for either cash or short-term credit, which was then used to purchase goods for export back to the colonies. Warehouses and wholesalers in London usually offered long-term credit of twelve months on goods for export merchants but also made extended credit available with interest. Oftentimes these processes overlapped. Therefore, sufficient operating capital was necessary not only to start a business but to maintain it until profits started coming in. Price estimates that to open a simple shop in the Chesapeake cost about two to three hundred pounds. The estimated value of the goods Rathell left to be sold in Annapolis were worth approximately three to four hundred pounds after twelve months since her last shipment, so it may be assumed that Rathell needed upwards of four hundred pounds to stock her shelves. A shop that intended to accept tobacco and offer credit in exchange for goods while assuming the risks involved in shipping and selling it needed at least three thousand pounds to start. Most Glasgow and London merchant firms
operated with somewhere between ten and twenty thousand pounds worth of investment capital. Operating on much less available capital, Rathell and others had to find ways to compete with consignment merchants and Scottish factors who could afford to extend customers extensive credit. The principle line of defense for the majority of milliners was to simply avoid offering any credit at all. Announcements of goods sold at a “low advance” or “low price” for “cash” or “ready money only” run as a constant refrain through milliners’ advertisements.

By demanding cash only, milliners actually increased their chances of gaining access to those with more extended capital. In order to operate a shop full of imported wares, a milliner needed to secure a reliable source of supply. A milliner could either return to London periodically to purchase goods, or, more practically, obtain the services of a London consignment merchant—sometimes, one of the very merchants they hoped, in some small measure to compete with. Cash-only business practices made dealing with milliners attractive to consignment merchants for the way such practices ensured that they would be more likely to settle their debts in a timely fashion, unlike the majority of customers who were all too happy to leave lingering debt on the books. In 1773, for example, John Norton and Son’s list of foreign debtors in Virginia numbered 398 individuals with a combined total of 63,856 pounds 7 shillings 5 pence in outstanding debts. Linda L. Sturtz has argued quite rightly that Rathell’s continual emphasis on cash payments was a conscientious effort to impress creditors. In

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81 For a discussion of the capital necessary to start various businesses, see Price, Capital and Credit, 25, 38, and chap. 6, esp. 99–103.
82 For John Norton and Son’s outstanding foreign debts in 1773, see Mason, John Norton and Sons, 293. For Sturtz’s discussion of Rathell’s cash-only policy, see Within Her Power, 173.
fact, John Norton Jr.'s sole stipulation for doing business with Rathell was that she be “punctual in [her] payments.” After speaking in person with John Norton Jr. in Yorktown, she immediately sent a letter to John Norton Sr. in London reassuring him that he could “depend” on her punctuality adding that she would “always be proud to have Mr. Norton [Jr.] on the spot to receive the cash as it comes in.”

In January 1773, still only a few months into their business dealings, Rathell again attempted to allay any fears Norton might have about her dependability. “Perhaps, sir, you may scruple sending so much goods to a person who you know so little of,” she speculated, “but you may depend on my being very exact in my payments.” If Norton entertained any lingering doubts, she directed him to consult with Colonel George Mercer. Colonel Mercer, Rathell informed Norton, “is not unacquainted with my Method of Dailing, and . . . Can Inform you I sell for Nothing but ready Cash, So by giving no Credit, I can at all times Either Command Goods or Cash.”

Likewise when she asked Roger Atkinson to write a letter of introduction on her behalf in an effort to secure a new supplier, she requested that he inform the merchant house that she dealt “only for ready Money,” was “very industrious & frugal,” and “propose[d] to pay ye Money to Mr. Hanson . . . as She recovers it.”

By referring Norton to Mercer and requesting a letter of introduction, Rathell was operating within the usual custom of colonial business dealings, smoothing the way through mutual

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83 Rathell to Norton, Nov. 16, 1771, John Norton and Sons Papers, Folder 50, John D. Rockefeller Library.
84 Rathell to Norton, Jan. 31, 1772, John Norton and Sons Papers, Folder 52, John D. Rockefeller Library.
connections and personal relationships. However, her reference to Mercer almost as an afterthought to verify her main point is suggestive in the way it implies she believed her business dealings should carry nearly equal weight as the recommendation itself. Staying out of extended debt and credit tangles enabled women of limited means to prove that they were a worthwhile credit risk.

Dealing on a cash only basis also helped milliners to offer their goods at competitive prices. One of the chief incentives for planters to do business directly with consignment merchants was the opportunity to obtain goods at reasonable rates. By having a merchant make purchases direct in London, a planter stood to gain by achieving discounts on duties and the exchange rate.86 As Robert Carter Nicholas remarked to John Norton in 1771, Williamsburg stores had a reputation for being "dear." Setting prices too high could be disastrous as Mary Dickinson quickly discovered much to her chagrin when she found herself having to offer her customers "lower terms than the former" as an "inducement for a continuance of their favours."87 But, the consignment trade was not without its problems. In addition to Mrs. Nicholas' complaints that Norton had sent her goods that were "ill bought and ungentleel," she objected to both orders on the basis that they were too expensive: they were "charged higher than they could be bought in the Stores of Williamsburg" and the fans priced so high they "could have [been] bought in a Milliner's shop in Wmsbg for a third of the price" exchange rate aside. The Williamsburg milliners' opportunity for sales lay in their ability to manipulate the credit system to their own and their customers' advantage. By demanding

86 Price, Capital and Credit, 100–01.
87 Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Nov. 22, 1770, supplement, [2].
cash only, Rathell was able to price goods to advantage despite the exchange rate since she did not need to allow for the interest which would accrue as she waited for a customer to settle an account on credit. As she explained to her customers, since she “[sold] for ready money only, and at a very low advance; and [was] . . . contented to make a reasonable profit . . . the fall of the exchange” would be “to their benefit.” On the reverse side, her ability to “command cash or goods” and pay for recent shipments as they arrived also helped to keep prices low since she would not have to include interest on her own loans into the cost of items which accrued as she waited to sell her wares.

Most importantly, Rathell succeeded in keeping prices low through her activities as a shrewd and careful shopper. When milliners advertised their wares as “well bought” and “well chosen,” they were not just advertising their expert knowledge of fashion, they were marketing their expert skills as shoppers. One way Rathell secured bargains was by using her specialized knowledge of London to deal directly with London wholesalers. In November 1771 Rathell informed Norton that since she had been “so lately in England,” she needed “few goods” and those few “chiefly from Messrs. Wooley & Hemings.” However, she had already “sent them . . . directions.” All she required of Norton was to “send and hurry them.” Similarly, in December 1771 she had “ordered Some Goods from Messrs Flight & Co.” directly and begged Norton to “receive and send them.” By reducing Norton’s role as a middleman, Rathell probably succeeded in

88 Ibid., Apr. 18, 1766, [3]. Sturtz has also made this point. See Sturtz, Within Her Power, 172.
89 Rathell to Norton, Nov. 16, 1771, John Norton and Sons Papers, Folder 50, John D. Rockefeller Library.
90 Rathell to Norton, Dec. 29, 1771, John Norton and Sons Papers, Folder 51, John D. Rockefeller Library.
minimizing fees. More importantly, when Rathell used Norton to make purchases, she was very precise about the prices she was willing to pay. Fully cognizant of the prices the market would bear in Williamsburg, Rathell knew exactly what she could pay for an item and still make a profit. If, as in the case of a shipment of tupees, Norton did not follow her instructions precisely, she was not afraid to confront him and send the goods back. When a shipment of tupees arrived that were not of the quality or price she expected, Rathell resolutely packed them up again and sat down to vent her disappointment to Norton: “I sent for woolpacks at 2/6 or 3/ apiece these with Curls, and he sends me 2 Dozn tupees from 6/6 to 12/ a price that would never suffer me to sell them, even at first cost, besides he made a mistake in charging them, he charges one with 7 tupees with 2 curls a 12/ makes 4. 4. 0.” She closed the letter by giving instructions for their return. While she did offer an apology that she hoped he would “excuse [her] giving [him] so much trouble,” she remained firm with her closing line stating “I dar say you approve on being particular as well as I do.”91 While such hard-nosed bargaining would have earned her the praise and custom of her Williamsburg patrons, they did not endear her to the merchants she did business with. Perhaps an exasperated Norton had the last word after all when he wrote his son, “I am glad you have rec’d Mrs. Rathell’s Debt, with several others, her Correspondence is dangerous, & she plagues almost every one she deals with by returning large quantities of Goods yearly which don’t suit her to keep.”92

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91 Catherine Rathell to John Norton, July 22, 1772, John Norton and Sons Papers, Folder 66, John D. Rockefeller Library.
Not all milliners were as successful as Rathell in working the credit system to their advantage. The wording of Sarah Pitt's advertisements suggests that while she continually demanded ready money, she was largely unsuccessful in obtaining it. Every single one of Sarah Pitt's nine advertisements starting with her first placed on November 12, 1767, stipulated that she sold at "a low price" for "ready money only," but her last November 8, 1770, advertisement still found Pitt pleading with her customers that as she was "obliged to be punctual in her remittances" she "must sell for ready money only."93 Although Mary Davenport's sole advertisement does not mention the terms on which she dealt, she appears on both of Norton's list of foreign debtors in 1770 and 1773 for 153 pounds and 104 pounds 3 shillings 3 pence respectively.94 In contrast, Rathell, who dealt with Norton on a regular basis, does not appear on either list—evidence that her cash-only policy was largely successful. It is unclear whether the Hunter sisters ever attempted to demand credit since their advertisements only announce that the goods were to be sold "on reasonable terms." While both Margaret Hunter and Rathell ended up in court at least once trying to collect outstanding debt, the debt Margaret was attempting to recover was a much larger debt, "One Hundred five Pounds and nine pence sterling with interest" as opposed to Rathell's "Twenty four Pounds three shillings and four pence," suggesting that hers was

93 Virginia Gazette (Rind), Nov. 8, 1770, [1] ("obliged to be punctual"). For the rest of Pitt's advertisements, see Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Nov. 12, 1767, [2]; ibid., Oct. 27, 1768, [3]; ibid., May 18, 1769, [3]; Virginia Gazette (Rind), Oct. 26, 1769, [2]; Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon), Nov. 2, 1769, [4]; ibid., Dec. 14, 1769, [3]; ibid., Apr. 19, 1770, supplement, [2]; Virginia Gazette (Rind), July 12, 1770, [3].

94 For Dickinson's outstanding debts, see "List of foreign debtors," July 31, 1770, John Norton and Sons Papers, Folder 31, Oversize; "List of foreign debtors," July 30, 1773, John Norton Sons Papers, Folder 88, Oversize, John D. Rockefeller Library.
part of a long-standing credit arrangement that had built up over time.\textsuperscript{95} Even if demanding cash was the wisest and most prudent path to maintaining solvency, the reality of the business climate in the Chesapeake where hard specie was scarce and customers could obtain credit easily from local Scottish factors and London consignment merchants sometimes made offering credit unavoidable.

The Revolution disrupted these carefully constructed enterprises and served as a moment of truth which revealed their very real vulnerability. The first rumblings of revolutionary interference appear with Sarah Pitt’s advertisement in November 1770, wherein she excused herself for selling imported wares after the signing of Virginia’s first non-importation association on the basis that “the above goods were sent for before the association took place, and there has not been time for counter orders.”\textsuperscript{96} Virginia’s first non-importation association, organized by the former Burgesses in May 1770 in response to the Townshend Duties, however, did little damage to the milliners. In fact British imports rose 60 percent from 1770 to 1771. The real trouble came with the second non-importation association. Once again signed by former burgesses in May 1774, the association was adopted in August by the First Continental Congress. This time the boycott would be effective. Gripped in the midst of a credit crisis as a result of a glut in the tobacco market, Woody Holton has argued, small farmers and planters alike seized the opportunity to retrench and stave off creditors under the

\textsuperscript{95} For Hunter's and Rathell's attempts to collect debts in court, see "Margaret Hunter Pitt Against Matthew Marrable, Deft.," July 19, 1773, York County Records Project, JO-3 (1772-1774) 318; "Catherine Rathell Pitt. Against Mathew Holt, Deft.," Nov. 16, 1772, York County Records Project, J O-3 9 (1772-1774) 164, transcriptions of both held at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's Department of Historical Training and Research.

\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Rind), Nov. 8, 1770, [1].
guise of political protest. From her vantage point across the Atlantic, unable to personally exert pressure to collect her debts, Lucy Harrison Randolph Necks was one of the first to encounter difficulties with her Virginia business. During one of his Virginia voyages, her husband, Captain Robert Necks, was forced to place an advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* on her behalf. If those “persons indebted . . . to Mrs. Necks” did not “settle their Accounts at the next Meeting of the Merchants,” he threatened to place their accounts “into a Lawyer’s Hands” which, as he explained, “Necessity [would] oblige him to do, as many, too long in Arrears, have often . . . promised to pay . . . [and] were not so kind as to comply.” As the political turmoil increased, milliners in Williamsburg itself felt the pinch of credit even more deeply. Within fifteen months of the Continental Congress’s adoption of the non-importation association, every single Williamsburg milliner and mantuamaker who had arrived from London between 1766 and 1771 announced their intention to quit the colony. Yet, as they quickly discovered, their plans to leave were directly impacted by their success or failure in negotiating the fine line between demanding cash and offering credit over the previous decade.

Jane Charlton and her husband Edward Charlton were the first to advertise their plans to leave Virginia starting in November 1774. Over the next month, the couple ran a pair of advertisements in the *Virginia Gazette*. Although the only explanation Jane offered for leaving was that she “[found] it necessary to go for England in the spring,” the timing of their departure and Edward’s

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98 *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), Dec. 23, 1773, [2].
advertisement directly beneath it attempting to sell their house imply that they intended the move to be a semi-permanent one, arguably driven by concerns over the political and economic turmoil. Even though they did not plan to leave until the spring, however, they found it necessary to begin advertising months in advance. Jane's plea to her customers reveals why: "It is hoped those ladies and gentlemen who have favored me with their orders, and have not discharged them," she politely but firmly reminded her customers "will be kind enough to make payment as early as possible, that I may be enabled to put my designs in execution."99 Jane's ability to finance her return home was directly linked to her ability to collect her outstanding debts. Initially, Jane's sister Margaret appears to have been inclined to wait out the situation, but as the political turmoil deepened, she too decided it was time to leave. As the Second Virginia Convention was on the brink of its March 1775 meeting where Patrick Henry famously advocated putting Virginia in an immediate posture of defense, Margaret also placed an advertisement announcing to her customers that she found it "necessary . . . to go to England this Spring." Margaret's advertisement makes the problem of uncollected debt even more explicit: "I shall esteem it a particular Favour if those who are indebted to me would be as early as possible in discharging their Accounts, without which it will not be in my power to accomplish my Intention."100 By dealing in credit, Margaret's ability to make her own choices was no longer in her power but that of her customers. The seriousness of the problem is underscored by Jane and Edward's last appeal to their customers to settle their

99 Virginia Gazette (Pickney), Nov. 4, 1774, [3]; Nov. 10, 17, and 24, 1774, [4].
100 Virginia Gazette (Dixon and Hunter), Mar. 4, 1775, [3].
debts. On April 19, 1775, just days before Lord Dunmore's ill-conceived seizure of the public powder caused tensions within the city to nearly reach the breaking point, Jane and Edward made one more attempt to collect: “The Subscribers intending to leave the Colony as soon as they can settle their Affairs, once more most earnestly entreat the Favour of those who are indebted to them to discharge their Accounts at the ensuing Meeting of the Merchants. The Goods they have on Hand will be sold cheap for Cash; and as their Continuance here is uncertain, it makes such a Notice necessary.” Despite their intense desire to remove themselves from the increasingly troubled economic and political climate, they were as indebted to their customers as their customers were to them.

Conversely, when Rathell announced her intention to “go to England as soon as I dispose of my Goods . . . until liberty of importation is allowed,” the day after Jane and Edward's last advertisement, she was able to set her plans in motion without delay. In fact, if she had not perished in a shipwreck in sight of the coast, she would have been in England by October. Although her “request, as a favour, that all who are indebted to me will pay off their accounts this meeting” implies that she had relaxed her policies on cash only, Rathell was still evidently able to “command cash or goods” to the extent that she could finance her passage while leaving the remaining goods with her partner. In fact, gossip around town reported that Brodie was two thousand pounds the richer for

101 Virginia Gazette (Dixon and Hunter), Apr. 19, 1775, supplement, [4].
102 Virginia Gazette (Pinkney), Apr. 20, 1775, [3].
103 A London paper carried the announcement of her death in a shipwreck just off the coast of England. See London Evening-Post, Oct. 28–31, 1775, [3].
104 Virginia Gazette (Pinkney), Apr. 20, 1775, [3].

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Rathell’s death. Yet, even the possession of two thousand pounds worth of wares did Brodie little good if she could not convert them into cash. Perhaps encouraged by the prospect of running her own shop with the goods inherited from Rathell, Brodie waited out the political situation the longest. But by November 1775, she too was ready to return to England. October 1775 marked what was to be the last official meeting of the General Court, which typically generated the briskest business a Williamsburg millinery shop would see in a year. Perhaps more disturbingly, the beginning of November 1775 was also the moment Lord Dunmore issued his provocative proclamation offering freedom to all slaves of rebel masters who would come and join him in taking up arms against the colonists. On November 24, 1775, Brodie joined the others in making an attempt to leave the colony. “As I intend for Great Britain immediately,” she alerted the public, “all mrs. Rathell’s Stock of Goods will be absolutely sold by publick vendue . . . for read money.” “All persons’ indebted to mrs. Rathell” were “requested to discharge their accounts immediately.” Whether it was for love or for security in the wake of a failure to turn capital in goods into actual capital in cash, Brodie did not leave Virginia but married a recently emigrated English ship’s captain in 1776.

In the end, out of all four London milliners, only Rathell’s business succeeded in providing her with enough security to allow her to realize her intentions and withstand the pressures of the revolutionary marketplace. Despite their best efforts to return to England, Jane, Margaret, and Brodie were forced to


106 Virginia Gazette (Purdie), Nov. 24, 1775, [3].
remain in Williamsburg in the midst of an increasingly volatile political situation while their counterpart on the other side of the Atlantic, Lucy Necks found herself equally in trouble, destitute, staving off creditors under threat of imprisonment in part as a result of “outstanding Debts in Virginia to a very capital Amount” that remained unsettled.\textsuperscript{107} On one hand, the riches of the economy generated by tobacco sales following the Seven Years' War and the corresponding demand for imported wares in the Chesapeake combined to create an enormous opportunity for ambitious female entrepreneurs in the fashion trades. Even though Virginia's urban structure did not provide a base comparable to those found in other major port cities in North America, creative enterprise and strategic advertising could nonetheless provide a productive and stable support for a single woman. On the other hand, the economy was based on a credit system that could go up in smoke just as easily as the tobacco which supported it. While the Chesapeake was one of the wealthiest regions of Britain's North American mainland possessions, together Maryland and Virginia were responsible for 58 percent of the total debts outstanding to British merchants following the Revolution reaching a grand total of 2,876,864 pounds.\textsuperscript{108} As Rathell and her fellow milliners discovered only too well, the very economic system which afforded them such rich opportunities could, if not carefully navigated, directly circumscribe their personal choices at critical moments. In that light, Rathell's careful contingency plan at the beginning of her first advertisement stipulating that she would do business “for ready money only” was not just to impress creditors or achieve

\textsuperscript{107} John Randolph Grymes affidavit on behalf of Lucy Harrison Randolph Necks, May 13, 1781, Loyalist Claims, P.R.O., A.O. 13/32, microfilm reel M-490, John D. Rockefeller Library.

\textsuperscript{108} Price, Capital and Credit, 7, 9.
lower prices, but a deliberate strategy to retain control of her finances and thereby her own independence.
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