

## Almanacs of the Chesapeake Colonies: Revolutionary “Agent of Change”

The content printed in the newspapers, books, and political pamphlets of the eighteenth-century has been given much credit for the revolutionary changes that led to American independence. Historians have looked at the words printed in colonial newspapers and pamphlets and declared them have had extraordinary influence. While the most widely circulated form of secular literature in colonial British America was the almanac, its impact has generally been considered minimal. By following the path blazed by Walter Ong (1982) and Elizabeth Eisenstein (1980), and by moving beyond the content of these little pamphlets to explore how changes in media use have changed the overall human ecology, this article proposes that the lowly colonial almanac did indeed have a major impact.<sup>1</sup>

The elder Arthur Schlesinger, in his *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776* (1957), explored the crucial part that newspapers played in the war against Britain. Bernard Bailyn (1992) and others examined the important influences of political writers in England on the ideas of the revolutionary Americans, primarily through books and political pamphlets. However, the most common secular objects to come from the printing presses of the eighteenth-century were the almanacs, yet such content analysis of these small, pamphlet-like annual books has revealed little political influence. In his important study on *Propaganda and the American Revolution*, Philip Davidson (1941) had a great deal to say about political pamphlets and newspapers, while downplaying the influence of almanacs. He noted that propaganda needed to be timely to be influential, and as almanacs came out but once a year and were necessarily printed ahead of time, they had limited usefulness for the propagandist. He did recognize that

almanacs circulated into the country far beyond the normal reach of newspapers and pamphlets (p. 223).

Historian Marion Barber Stowell (1979) suggested that scholars have erred in overlooking the political influence of the popular annuals and claimed that almanacs were in fact revolutionary “trumpeters of sedition” (p. 41). She posited that these small, inexpensive yearly books influenced the average American more than did other writings. The “radical whig” ideology influenced the content of the almanacs, she noted, and through that medium the idea of a conspiracy in the British ministry against liberty gained support well into the countryside and among the small farmers. For example, *Bickerstaff's Boston Almanack, for ... 1769* included “The Liberty Song,” which used standard radical whig anti-taxation imagery. “In Freedom we’re born and in Freedom we’ll live ... Not as Slaves but as Freemen our money we’ll give” (as cited in Raymond, 1978, p. 379). Because reading an almanac had become part of the typical country farmer’s life by the mid-eighteenth century, as Stowell observed, “the lowly but ubiquitous almanac influenced American political thought and sentiment from 1766 through 1783 to a much greater extent than is generally believed” (1979, p. 41). Stowell’s work (1977; 1979) focused primarily on the almanacs of New England and Pennsylvania, generally ignoring those of Virginia and Maryland.<sup>2</sup>

While analysis of the almanacs’ contents does reveal some revolutionary sentiment, more non-traditional methods of examination prove even more revealing. In exploring the printing revolution in Europe, Eisenstein (2005) noted that historians’ focus on the “book format tends to deflect attention from the effects of rapidly duplicating diverse ‘non-book’ materials (proclamations, edicts, broadsides, calendars, and the like) that were

especially well-suited for mass production” (p. 317). In the colonial Chesapeake, the almanac was one of the most common of these diverse products and an extremely influential portion of the colonial presses’ output, as the almanacs spread the printed word further through society than it could reach earlier when printed material had to be imported from Europe. While Eisenstein focused on the influence as print spread throughout Europe’s elite, this research finds there was also increasing influence in the Chesapeake region as locally produced printed matter spread in greater numbers farther down the social structure. Applying the analysis derived from Eisenstein and media ecologists to the spread of print in Virginia brings a new perspective on the changes that occurred before the Revolution.

In exploring these almanacs, this research is informed by the simple idea that people other than the elite did matter, that history does consist of more than the ideas and actions of the intellectual and political leaders. Common people were an important part of the movement toward the American Revolution. While the elites may already have been part of a print culture for several generations, the almanac helped to bring printed material and literacy to groups further down the social ladder. The introduction of print into the lives of the lower and middling people of the eighteenth-century Chesapeake colonies can be seen as one of many influences leading to a less deferential society more accepting of dissent. Printed works, especially bibles and religious works, had certainly come to the region with the earliest European settlers, but the establishment of local presses increased circulation of printed matter, especially of secular material. In contrast to those of other colonies, the Virginia and Maryland almanacs actually had only a very

small amount of overtly political content until just prior to the American Revolution, yet the almanacs did influence social attitudes and political thinking.

In more subtle ways, almanacs were an important part of a cultural transition, indeed a revolution in reading, which helped lead to revolutionary thought. The expanding medium of print did not cause Virginians to revolt against Great Britain, but rather helped them to conceive of the possibility of political independence by encouraging thought, dissent, and debate. In Virginia, the local press broke the monopoly that the local gentry had on information, influencing the balance of political power. As Berg (1993) concluded, “ordinary people were empowered to think and act for themselves and not depend on the advice of their betters” (p. 19). The almanacs were an important part of the expansion of print capitalism that helped to lead to “imagining a new nation” (Anderson, 1991, pp. 36-44).

## **UNDERSTANDING THE ALMANACS**

The colonial almanac was an important means of keeping track of time of day and time of year. It was first and foremost a calendar with the days of the year, times of sunrise and sunset, and phases of the moon. By the eighteenth-century, almanacs came in two basic forms: a broadsheet hung on the wall, or a short volume that could be placed in a pocket or tacked up on a wall. The colonial “almanack,” as that was how it was typically spelled, initially copied form, format, and even content directly from the British almanacs, but added local aspects such as Native American medicine. By the mid-eighteenth century,

printers on both sides of the Atlantic were expanding by adding data such as stage routes, names of officials, roads and distances, and short moralizing prose (Shaw, 2006).

An almanac was one of the first things to be printed by the new presses in the American colonies, and the major northern British-American cities were producing competing almanacs long before printing took hold in Virginia (Shaw, 2006). Almanacs were printed as early as 1729 in Annapolis, Maryland and 1732 in Williamsburg,



Virginia (Bear & Bear, 1962).<sup>3</sup> Prior to existence of a local press, some residents undoubtedly made use of almanacs printed in London or Philadelphia. Records show that printer Benjamin Franklin shipped copies of *Poor Richard's Almanack* to Maryland by 1741, and shipped pocket almanacs to Williamsburg by 1743. Even earlier, Philadelphia almanacs listed court dates in Maryland and gave distances of road mileage between cities as far as to Williamsburg, evidence that they were being marketed to a reading audience in the southern colonies. However, the

astronomical observations and weather predictions in an almanac favored locally produced versions (Miller, 1974, pp. 12-139).

The Philomath, or astronomical and astrological expert, calculated the signs and meteorological information. In some almanacs, the Philomath also wrote the accompanying verse and filler while in others, the printer himself added to the basic calendar, for example, basic proverbs: “lose not time, but make hay while sun doth shine” (Wreg, 1764).<sup>4</sup> Estimates on the correct time for planting and harvesting were important for the farmer, but the almanac also functioned as an astrologer and major source of entertainment for colonial Americans. For most people, almanacs were the *only* secular information source. As Stowell noted, “The almanac was, perforce, a miscellany: it was clock, calendar, weatherman, reporter, textbook, preacher, guidebook, atlas, navigational aid, doctor, bulletin board, agricultural advisor, and entertainer” (1977, p. ix). They usually were about 4 inches wide, 6 inches tall, and from 20 to 60 pages long. In both England and America, the almanacs were so popular that they “helped contribute to a fascination with ‘time’ as an objective, measurable, uniformly flowing stream in which events occurred” (Clark, 1994, p. 217). Near the back of the small book, useful information was included, such as court dates and distances between cities. Many owners used the almanacs as a sort of brief diary and account book, using the margins to record important dates and other information. Other almanacs were bound together with extra blank pages for keeping more detailed notes or a more complete diary. Readers apparently often hung their almanacs by a peg near the door, or by the fireplace, and almanacs may have been the main intellectual exercise for farmers. For such a common

little pamphlet, few have survived. This is probably because they were used so heavily that they ended up in shreds by the end of the year (Bear & Bear, 1962).

Colonial American almanacs followed the format established in England, which was slowly adapted for the American colonies. The oldest surviving Chesapeake almanac has a typically long title: *“The Virginia and Maryland Almanack. Shewing the Time of Sun Rising and Setting, Length of Days, New and Full Moon, Eclipses, Fixt and Moveable Feasts, Seven Stars Rising and Setting, Weather, Days of the several Courts, &c. For the year of our Lord Christ, 1732. Being the Bissextile of Leap-Year, And makes since the Creation ... Calculated for the Latitude of 38 Degrees, and fitted to a Meridian of 75 Degrees West from the Metropolis of Great Britain”* (Warner, 1731). The second page usually had the only engraved image in the almanac, “The Anatomy of Man’s Body,” sometimes referred to as the “Zodiac Man.” [Figure 2 here. Caption: Figure 2. Anatomy of Man’s Body, or Zodiac Man ]This engraving used symbols to indicate which zodiac sign controlled which parts of the body, astrological advice considered useful for both medicine and romance. Next would often come the months, with either one or two pages for each. These often had short verse or prose sprinkled throughout and would include “remarkable days” (holidays), predicted weather, time of sun rising and setting, time of moon rising and setting, the astrological aspects, and the places of the planets. As Bolléme noted, because the almanacs used many symbols, even those with limited reading skills may have made some use of almanacs (as cited in Hall, 1996, p. 46).

Following the calendar pages, Chesapeake colonies’ almanacs typically listed court session dates, travel times between cities and towns, names of government representatives, important dates in history, tables for interest and currency exchange,

religious tracts, literature, poetry, and "...maxims, entertaining epigrams, curious anecdotes, diverting stories, &c. &c. Calculated for Instruction and Amusement" (Wreg, 1766). The entertainment came in short snippets of verse, or in selected prose, usually taken directly from other publications. Authors had no copyright protection in the colonies at this time, and what we would now consider intellectual theft was quite common. Printers often used English newspapers, magazines, and other almanacs as the source for such filler (Stowell, 1977, pp. 135-141). For example, at the top of the January page in the 1742 *Virginia Almanack*, is the seasonal advice:

The Year its steady Course doth constant run,  
No sooner ends, but 'tis again begun :  
One is no sooner past, but still appears  
Another New ; thus Years are chain'd to Years: ... (Warner, 1741)

This rather weak and trivial verse continues through the calendar pages.

While designed to be useful and entertaining, almanacs also were an inexpensive way of introducing plain folks to the world of letters: "'almanacks,' selling for a few pennies, found their way into practically every household" even those of the poor and illiterate (Schlesinger, 1958, p. 41). The price in Virginia and Maryland of seven-and-a-half pence to "Eight Coppers" (Bear & Bear, p. x; *Maryland Almanack*, 1761) each was low enough that virtually every white customer could afford an almanac. Historian Susan Stromei Berg (1993) suggested that in eighteenth-century Virginia, "Everyone had to have one" (pp. 32-34). The records of the Williamsburg printers allow us to estimate the number of almanacs that were sold and paid for in 1751 at between 2,000 and 3,400, and in 1764, between 3,000 and 5,000 copies (Hunter, 1750-1752; Royle & Purdie, 1764-1766). Other estimates run as high as 5,000 issues printed each year for a Virginia population of about 130,000 white people, or about one almanac for every 26 white people (Berg, 1993, pp.



32-34; Stiverson & Stiverson, 1983, pp. 157-9).<sup>5</sup> All of these estimates ignore the fact that most local almanacs were aimed at a wider audience than just one colony. For example, the later Virginia almanacs indicated on the front cover, “Fitting Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, &c” (Wreg, 1764). Such inter-colonial distribution would confuse estimates of almanac sales in any one colony, as some sales would be to outside the colony and people within the Chesapeake region would be buying almanacs from elsewhere, including Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and England. It is also important to recognize that most almanacs served many readers, at least an entire household. Whatever the actual numbers, almanacs sold more widely than any other printed material. Almanacs thus spread the printed word and the influences of a print culture far down the economic ladder, reaching out even to the rural farming families.

Sprinkled throughout the pages of these almanacs were numerous messages on social behavior. Short segments of verse and prose essays both subtly and overtly reinforced social norms. The Chesapeake almanacs often reinforced traits such as temperance, munificence, the proper role of women, and deference to members of higher social status. The oldest extant almanac from this region stressed the importance of people remaining within their proper social place: “The Harmony of Converse best appears, where Menkind move all in their proper Sp[h]eres: Societies ill-match’d, themselves annoy, And clashing Int’rests, their own Hopes destroy” (Warner, 1731). One *Maryland Almanack* had advice to a son from a dying father who was repenting of his own heavy drinking, “‘tis working for Death to drink hard in one’s Youth” (1761). The next year’s issue warned against both excessive greed and the risks of paper money: “Man makes false Money; Money makes Men so” (*Maryland Almanack*, 1762). These messages can

be considered part of a social propaganda campaign to educate and uplift the common folks to social ideals of thrift, sobriety, and proper social behavior.

Edging closer to overtly political messages, these almanacs often contained anti-lawyer screed, were full of hatred of the Pope, and had a highly selective view of history. One 1772 almanac suggested that laws were made to assist the just, and admitted that some lawyers are honest, “But Vermin in the Law Corruptions breed, And on poor Mankind their damn’d Knavery shed” (*Virginia Almanack*, Purdie & Dixon, 1771). The Pope and Catholicism were the target of a special hatred. One Virginia almanac suggested that the Pope’s, “... Purgatory is a Furnace, the Fire whereof, like the Philosopher’s Stone, shall melt all his leaden Bulls into pure Gold” (*Virginia Almanack*, Purdie & Dixon, 1771). Even history was subject to heavy bias, and the may have been more influential than readily evident, as the list of dates in “Almanacs constituted the only history lessons the majority of Britons received.” These lists of monarchs and the highly selective world history, replete with anti-Catholic animus, helped support the majority Protestants’ anti-Catholic beliefs (Colley, 1992, pp. 20-26). For example, in the 1732 *Virginia and Maryland Almanack*, the Gunpowder Plot was prominently mentioned. Charles I was listed as “murdered.” While the rule of Oliver Cromwell was not even mentioned, his death was noted, as was the “Return in Peace” of King Charles II. However, in the 1765 *Maryland Almanack*, Pope Clement XIII’s birth was listed among the “Birth of Princes, &c.” In the 1741 *Virginia Almanack’s*, “Chronology of Things Remarkable,” readers were told that King Charles I was “murdered” ninety three years ago, that King Charles II “Returned in Peace,” “King James II abdicated,” and that “The Pretender’s [James Edward Stuart, son of James II] Attempt on Great-Britain” took place

thirty three years ago. This history was heavily imbedded with political bias supporting the British monarchy, with loaded words such as “murder,” “abdicated,” and “Pretender.”

The pages of these almanacs began to reflect some cultural change in Chesapeake society before the political unrest leading up to the American Revolution. As early as 1741, one almanac printed verse that suggested the wealthy and the powerful were often greedy:

The Proud and Great in Quest of Honour soar,  
And batter down Peace for noisy Power ;  
The Rich unthankful for the Gifts they hold  
Disturb their Quiet to encrease their Gold (*Virginia Almanack*, 1740).

This criticism of the elite was in sharp contrast to the traditional deference traditional displayed in colonial Virginia. According to Arthur Shaffer and many other writers, social relations in all of Great Britain, including the American colonies, was marked by social deference. In Virginia, however, the visible differences between the great planters and others were remarkably similar to the European differences between nobility and commoners (1970, p, xxii).

A development in 1757 demonstrated a sense of colonial unity, perhaps prefacing future political unity. The *Virginia Almanack* began to list the governors of the various American colonies, including Nova Scotia and those that eventually became part of the United States, but did not include any of the colonies in the West Indies. Other lines demonstrated deference, at least superficially:

Twixt King and Peasant if no Odds there were,  
Why should each Monarch Crown and Scepter bear?  
But, if Superiors can Obedience claim,  
Sure Kings and Queens may first command the same;  
Then let each Subject due Allegiance tender  
To GEORGE our rightful King and Faith’s Defender (Wreg, 1758).

While showing deference to royalty, this verse from 1759 hinted at potential friction between the highest and lowest members of society.

Other almanacs displayed evidence of an erosion of the traditional culture of deference. One issue humorously demonstrated the weakening of this respect for higher social classes. Contained within was the tale of a farmer who failed to yield to the Parson when meeting on a country road, “and not giving him the Way so readily as he expected, the Parson, with an erected Crest, told him, He was better *fed* than *taught*. *Very true, indeed, Sir*, replied the Farmer, for you *teach* me, and I *feed* myself” (Wreg, 1763). This farmer’s attitude is in marked contrast to the reaction of the Reverend Devereux Jarratt, who remembered that as a poor Virginia farmer’s son in the 1730s and 40s, he was so frightened by the sight of bewigged gentlemen that “it would so alarm my fears, and give me such a disagreeable feeling, that, I dare say, I would run off, as for my life” (Jarratt, 1806). The *Maryland Almanack ... 1765* included some verse that displayed less than deference to the highborn. A son asked his mother to stop looking for the blood of nobility in their ancestry, and insisted that, “Virtue only is Nobility.” Michael Warner (1990) observed such colonial discourse as clashing with a social order that included the concept of “superiors.” The old rules of social order are seen clashing with a new discursive order (pp. 48-53). The local almanacs displayed an increasing erosion of the traditional deferential culture and an increase in the civic discourse of dissent as an increasing print culture and a broadening reading public was undermining the old social structure.

One 1768 almanac contained some remarkable verse that conflicted with the dominant cultural view of slavery. These words were “sent by a young lady of Edinburgh

to a Relation with a Present of a Negroe Boy,” written from the point of view of the slave:

Doom'd in my Infancy a Slave to roam,  
Far, far, from Africk's Shore, my native Home,  
To serve a Caledonian Maid I come.---  
In me no Father does his Darling mourn,  
No Mother weeps me from her Bosom torn!  
Both now are Dust: The filial Tear I owe;  
But who they were, alas! I ne'er shall know!  
Lady, to Thee her Love my Mistress sends,  
And bids Your Grandsons be Fernando's Friends;  
Bids Thee suppose, on Africk's distant Coast,  
One of Thy Lilly-colour'd Fav'rites lost;  
Doom'd in the Train of some proud Dame to wait,  
To serve as she should Will, for Use or State;  
If to the Boy You'd with her to be kind,  
Such Grace from Thee let Ferdinando find (*Virginia Almanac*, Rind?, 1768).<sup>6</sup>

While falling short of abolitionist sentiments, this poem was unusual for Virginia of this time as it actually acknowledged a slave as a person with feelings deserving of kind treatment. To even acknowledge a slave's right to be treated with compassion undermines the hierarchical social structure that rested on the bedrock assumption of black slaves being merely property and not actual human beings deserving of consideration.

Some overtly political material did appear in Chesapeake almanacs as conflict with Great Britain began in the mid-1760s. At the height of the Stamp Act crisis, just as the tax on paper and advertising seriously threatened the financial viability of printers, the following ode to liberty appeared:

Oh Liberty ! thou Goddess, heav'nly bright,  
Profuse of Bliss, and pregnant with Delight;

Tucked into the calendar section, this verse went on to suggest that liberty, “Giv'st Beauty to the Sun and Pleasure to the Day,” and that such rights should not be sold, even

for gold. These lines were taken from a larger poem written by influential British whig writer Joseph Addison, and could thus be viewed as radical whig propaganda (Letter from Italy, 1704, in Grant, 1766). The praise of freedom reflected the idea that corrupt governmental ministers were threatening the colonists' freedom. In the context of colonists sharply accusing Parliament of stealing their liberties and turning the Americans into slaves, this verse appears to be not simply harmless filler but rather a strong political statement. The tax in the Stamp Act of 1765 seriously threatened the income of colonial printers. The price of almanacs would have gone up by 2 pence, or twenty-seven percent (British Parliament, 1765). Subsequently, the directly political output of their presses increased (Allen, 1996, pp. 1-6 & 24; Botein, 1975, p. 211; Morgan & Morgan, 1953). In the Chesapeake colonies' almanacs, however, this politicization was less visible than within those of Boston or Philadelphia. Following the above verse was another seemingly trivial poem, arguing against excess luxury. Appearing in the midst of a non-importation movement against Britain where colonists encouraged each other to not import goods from England, gives this line greater meaning. These lines of protest can certainly be viewed as political propaganda, but they appeared in the midst of a great deal of less overtly political content. What is clear from the almanacs still extant is that the idea of the Chesapeake colonies being dutiful members of a larger Great Britain was eroding. By the 1760s, the deferential celebrations of England's history and Kings had disappeared, instead being replaced by odes to Virginia (Grant, 1766).

By the advent of the Revolution, verse and prose with obvious patriot-bias became more prevalent. One 1777 almanac had the names of representatives to the Continental Congress, a list of British ships in the waters of the American colonies contesting

colonial independence, plus tips for producing ink and sealing wax that were now difficult to import (Rittenhouse, 1776). More overtly patriotic in defiance of Britain were the instructions in a 1776 almanac for the collection of saltpeter and the making of gunpowder, an act helpful in supplying the local military forces facing shortages and overtly supportive of colonial independence and of revolutionary violence (Rittenhouse, 1775). Virginians were beginning to be portrayed here as part of a larger group of colonies, as Anderson suggested, through the aid of common language and shared commerce of print. Almanacs were among the many commodities that help to transform the colonists into a unified group, enabling them to imagine themselves eventually as Americans rather than Britons (1983, pp. 64 & 78-80). The 1776 almanac lists the Continental Congress as the authority for a population count in the colonies, rather than Parliament or King, and it includes a plea to the King, “O George ! restrain the hand of civil war, And let thy faithful subjects cease to jar ...” (Rittenhouse, 1775).<sup>7</sup> The new colonial unity, reflected here in print, is consistent with Breen (2004), as “trust [was] established across space, impersonally, a product of a print culture ...” necessary for revolutionary solidarity (p. 252). While Chesapeake almanacs did not contain a great deal of overtly political language, political propaganda did appear in small amounts in the Virginia almanacs as the Revolution approached. With fewer extant almanacs from Maryland, there is little direct evidence of their content.

Almanacs of the Chesapeake region had the largest impact on the overall society through their role as one part of a watershed transition to a culture whose communication became dominated by print media. The media environment transformed radically as print materials spread, and accompanying such a shift in media, the society slowly

transformed. The changes had tremendous individual and social impact, eventually shaking up the political structure. Almanacs were an essential driver of this change, as Shaw (2006) noted: “Almanacs played an intimate part in the shift from a predominantly oral culture, to one in which the authority of print was paramount” (p. 2). This is not meant to imply that oral or scribal culture was—or has been—killed off by print. In reality, they still coexist today, but the emphasis, the predominant medium, has shifted—and continues to shift today. Despite such overlap of media, as cultural historian Lawrence Levine (1978) observed, the spread of literacy has profound and revolutionary changes on a society. As a society shifts from one-based on primarily oral communication, there are radical shifts in thought and social relations. As people becomes more literate, the sense of past and present become more clearly delineated, and the awareness of the past becomes more dependent on impersonalized words printed on a page rather than solely personal experience. Space and time has a sacred character for preliterate societies, but not after the printed word has spread and literacy has become pervasive: “Thus it is typically in literate societies that the concepts of freedom of thought and speech can develop for only literate societies believe that verbal thought is separable from actions, that ideas are distinct from behavior, that ideation can be contained” (pp. 157-158). Through the proliferation of education and the printed word in these almanacs, the influence of reading and writing also spread. Marshall McLuhan (1965) referred to this as a revolution of thought resulting from the development of print. The media content is less important, in McLuhan’s analysis, than the very characteristics of the medium itself, the cultural transformational qualities of the communication technologies (pp. 9-28). As journalism historian David Paul Nord wrote (2001), with the



printed word control of meaning is lost, and heresy of both a religious and secular nature, “runs rampant among the reader of all forms of print, from Bibles to newspapers” (p. 3). When individuals read the material alone, thinking and analyzing independently, the author or teacher can no longer control the interpretation of the work. With loss of control of such meaning comes a diversification of power. Reflected in the almanacs’ pages was the transformational characteristic of print culture. Increased heterodoxy, erosion of the old order and power structure, and declining deference is displayed in the content of the prints, and this cultural transition—from deference to dissidence—is driven by the spread of printed works to larger numbers of people, including those lower in the social order. The print medium itself is seen as enabling those very changes.

Jürgen Habermas (1989) theorized that in Britain and Germany literacy and the availability of printed matter prefaced the creation of active civic discourse, or what he termed civic “publicness.” Reading was an important enabler, allowing middle class men to become involved as critical thinking members of a public involved in a revolutionary political process. Habermas viewed literary discourse as an important precursor to political discourse, and almanacs sprinkled literary matter throughout. By spreading bits of literature wider throughout the social structure, colonial societies had increased potential for such literary discourse. A transatlantic “Republic of Letters” developed in England and in the British-American colonies by the mid-eighteenth century. Warner (1990) noted that print was an important aspect of a radical reconstruction of the public sphere in eighteenth-century America, an important element of the “public discourse” of civic, republican virtue that led to a radical reconstruction of the public sphere to one that legitimized criticism of government—an extremely important part of the rise of

revolutionary thought (pp. 1-174). Theorists suggest that this civic forum existed in public meeting spaces such as taverns and coffee houses and was driven by printed matter, but such civic debate can also be seen in the pages of the public prints. Expanding from literature to politics, public opinion grew to importance, and a large portion of the public became actively involved at least in thinking about civic affairs (Landsman, 1997, pp. 31-56).

Anthropologists, psychologists, and historians have examined the differences between oral, written, and print-based cultures, and these researchers have concluded that only in literate societies can independent thinking and legitimate criticism of government be tolerated. As Kathleen Gough (1968) wrote:

Literacy is for the most part an enabling rather than a causal factor, making possible the development of complex political structures, syllogistic reasoning, scientific enquiry, linear conceptions of reality, scholarly specialization, artistic elaboration, and perhaps certain kinds of individualism and alienation (as cited in Rawson, 1998, p.18; see also Levine, 1978, p. 157; Carothers, 1959, pp. 308-312).

When printed material became a part of the lives of an increasing number of colonial Virginians and Marylanders, the ability to take part in critical discourse about the government increased. This is not to suggest absolute causality on the part of writing. It is rather a critical precursor and is interdependent on other factors in the social structure. As Eisenstein (1986) carefully phrased it, print is an *agent* of change, one of many factors, but one with an apparently subversive nature (pp. 191-193). While it was not the sole cause of change, print allowed such discourse to happen, it aided the erosion of deference, and allowed for the possibility of revolutionary thought and action.

Another relevant characteristic of almanac use is that people did not merely read them, they also wrote in them. Paper was scarce and expensive in eighteenth-century America,

so the almanac pages offered an uncommon opportunity to practice handwriting and keep notations. Many of the surviving copies have the owner's name inscribed and contain records of when people were born or died, when a calf was birthed, or when the first snowfall came. Other copies have check marks in ink next to some lines, and X marks next to others, apparently expressing whether the reader agreed with what was printed.

In this way, the almanac became more than simply a one-way medium from the writer to the reader. Almanacs actually allowed for creative thinking and input on the part of the reader, even if no one else ever read their words. As Walter Ong theorized (1982), writing helps to create a consciousness of the self-as-individual, a consciousness of interaction between people, and an increased overall awareness. Printing and the spread of literacy is a key our identity as Americans (pp. 8-9, 32 & 178-179; 2002, p. 476). Reading and writing are the acts of people who are capable of thinking for themselves. While theorists have attached this ability to the printed word and literacy, it does not correlate directly with the invention of the printing press, but rather with the spread of printing and corresponding literacy (Carothers, 1959, pp. 312-319). The introduction of printing and the spread of almanacs in Maryland and Virginia of the mid-eighteenth century marked an important watershed for printing, literacy, and the corresponding political culture.

Wealthier owners sometimes had extra pages bound with the issues, and kept accounts or more complete diaries within their almanacs. Several almanacs owned by Virginia's leading citizens have survived, complete with their notations. Robert Wormely Carter—a member of the colony's wealthiest family—recorded the health of his wife and children and attempted cures in his copy of the 1774 *Virginia Almanack*. (Carter noted that

pumpkin soup seemed to be helpful in treating measles.) When he wrote in his pages what presents he should buy for his family, he included a memo to buy an almanac for his father, Landon Carter, the son of Robert “King” Carter (as cited in Shaw, 2006, pp. 14-15.). When George Washington (1760) began keeping a daily diary, he used a copy of the *Virginia Almanack* that had been bound with interleaved pages. He recorded daily weather observations and notations on his crops. Later, Washington made more complete diary entries in a separate bound book (Jackson, ed., 1976-1979).

One surviving almanac copy gives evidence that women owned and wrote in their almanacs as well. The name Sarah Carlyle was inscribed at the top of one front page, as almanac owners sometimes did (Wreg, 1757). It is obvious in small ways that almanacs were intended for women as well as men. Another year included an epigram, “To a Young Lady with an Almanack bound,” that suggested that within the slim volume, women could find more meaning than in an entire bookshelf (*Virginia Almanack ... 1772, 1771*, Rind). When competition first came to printing in Virginia in 1766, it also brought additional attention to women as potential readers and contributors to almanacs. William Rind began printing a second, competitive *Virginia Almanack* in 1767. In the following year’s issue, he apparently began to focus on women with the addition of a “Ladies Diary” section with brainteasers and opportunities for women to contribute and even communicate with each other.<sup>8</sup> The next year the almanac was called, *The Virginia Almanack and Ladies Diary, for the year of our Lord, 1769 ...* in which the publisher proclaimed that women “will have a certain Opportunity of carrying on a poetical Correspondence with their Friends and Acquaintance, tho’ at a very great Distance, even when they know not where to direct to each other ...” This section included

entertainment, diversions, enigmas, paradoxes, and “rebusses,” or lines of verse inside of which was hidden a name or word. In answering one of the previous year’s enigmas, what we might call a brainteaser, “Miss Polly S.” claimed in verse, “An honest Country Girl am I, Untaught to patch, or paint, or lie....” This contribution suggests that a young woman, not of the tidewater elite, was not only reading but also contributing to the almanac. A majority of these contributions to the “Ladies Diary” appeared to be written by men, but a simple count shows that almost a third were signed with a woman’s name (Rhymer, 1768). This aspect of the experiment in bringing women into the world of the *Virginia Almanack* ended after just two years. In his 1770 almanac, Rind no longer included “Ladies Diary” in the title and left out the enigmas and rebuses, with no explanation printed (*Virginia Almanack*, 1769). While historians rarely tie almanac reading with female readers, many do suggest that almanacs spread further into the country and down the social ladder in ways that books, pamphlets, and newspapers never could. By making efforts to attract a female and socially wider readership, almanacs certainly spread literacy and interest in public affairs beyond the elite males.

## CONCLUSION

The colonial Virginia and Maryland almanacs contained very little directly political content, and the evidence does not support the idea that they were vehicles of political propaganda, or that they strongly trumpeted sedition. On close examination, however, there was some small amount of overtly political propagandist content, especially after 1766. Other than a few essays extolling liberty, there is little evidence of radical whig

influence in the surviving almanacs. No issues of the *Maryland Almanacks* between 1766 and 1777 are extant, making them impossible to assess, although the newspaper issued by the same printer was more radical than was the *Virginia Gazette*.<sup>9</sup> Political propaganda was rare, but the almanacs did contain indirectly political content that reinforced social conformity and later suggested more radical attitudes supportive of the patriot cause.

Of greater importance than the actual content was the deeply inherent and implicit transformation caused by the spread of printed material. The predominant communication shifted away from orality towards a print culture, and this change enabled and allowed for independent thinking, helped to erode social and political deference, and opened up the possibility of widespread and deep political dissent. Deference had eroded, and print media had much to do with that transition. As Gordon Wood (1991) wrote, deference “was not a mere habit of mind; it had real economic and social force behind it,” and had been a crucial part of the political process in Virginia. An important part of the radical transformation that occurred when Americans shook off British rule was this change from deference to those with a higher hereditary social position to an equality where worth instead mattered, at least for white men (pp. 1-27, Schudson, 1998, pp. 1-22). Historian Robert M. Weir (1978) also noted that “deference waned” in the British-American colonies during this period. He suggested the emergence of a new personality type, “the psychologically autonomous individual.” That type of person, in contrast to a deferential sort, was threatened by attempts from Britain to assert more control over the colonies, Weir did not note the role of print and literacy in this transition, nor could he explain how once-deferential Americans could now rebel against such an important authority figure as the King (pp. 25-40). This description by Weir fits precisely with the personality that has

been transformed by the written word and literacy that J. C. Carothers and Ong described: a heterodox, psychologically independent individual (Carothers, 1959, pp. 307-320; Ong, 1982). The expansion of printed materials helped to bring about the erosion of deference in colonial Virginia, and replacing that deference was a new culture of dissidence. It was no longer necessary to defer to one's betters. Political discourse progressed to a level never before seen. Disagreement and political debate was becoming common, helping to lead to revolutionary ideas and actions that produced the American Revolution and the development of democratic ideals. Almanacs and the very act of reading are tied to independent thinking in such a way that establishes such material as a very important precedent for political independence. Almanacs were a precursor to Revolution—not a sole agent of change—but rather one of many factors enabling such change.

## NOTES

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1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Consortium on the Revolutionary Era Conference, Arlington, VA, April 2007.

2. Raymond (1978, p. 394) reached much the same conclusion, again focusing largely on the annuals from the northern colonies. Raymond did observe that the Virginia almanacs, to his surprise, had virtually no political content.

3. The oldest extant *Virginia Almanack* is for 1732, but no others exist until 1741. *The Maryland Almanacks* are even less plentiful, with only some issues from the 1760s still available.

4. The almanacs' pages have no numbers, so no page numbers will be used here as missing pages may throw off calculations. The original spelling will be retained here, but some punctuation, including the custom of writing words in all capitals or often using italics will be altered without notation. When a Philomath is known, he will be listed as the author, although he may not have composed much of the verse and prose.

5. The use of white population only is necessitated by the population estimates of the time. There is no indication that the black population of Virginia, primarily slave, had any substantial literacy rate by this period.

6. This poem comes from an almanac fragment discovered by this researcher at the Library Company of Philadelphia, misidentified as part of another almanac. It appears to be William Rind's *Virginia Almanac* of 1768, previously considered not extant. Only four pages exist making positive identification impossible.

7. The new colonial unity, reflected here in print, is consistent with Breen (2004), as "... trust [was] established across space, impersonally, a product of a print culture ..." (p. 252) necessary for revolutionary solidarity.

8. References to last year's "enigmas" in the 1769 almanac make it apparent this section began in his second year of publication. Rind apparently created this "Ladies Diary" aspect of the almanac in imitation of the popular *Ladies' Diary; or, Women's Almanack* first published in England sixty years earlier.

9. Virginia patriots sometimes turned to the *Maryland Gazette*, published by Jonas Green and William Rind, to publish what they could not get printed in Williamsburg (Mellen, 2009).

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