THE ORIGINS OF A FREE PRESS IN PREREVOLUTIONARY VIRGINIA
THE ORIGINS OF A FREE PRESS IN PREREVOLUTIONARY VIRGINIA
Creating a Culture of Political Dissent

Roger P. Mellen

With a Foreword by
David Waldstreicher

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Dedication

To my late father, Curtis Gordon Mellen, who taught me that who we are is not decided by the advantages or tragedies that are thrown our way, but rather by how we deal with them.
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Foreword by David Waldstreicher

Roger Mellen’s book addresses an enduring paradox of our past. How did the gentry-dominated society of the largest colony become the seed ground not only for political leadership but also of a lively political culture characterized not by consensus, as some historians emphasized, but by publicly expressed dissent?

Mellen finds the answer in a livelier and more important set of newspapers that gave Virginians of various classes, and some women, a venue for their not always polite opinions. He enables us to understand how a slave society could come to embrace press freedom, setting the stage for Virginians’ important efforts to make freedom of the press a national policy during the early republic.

His findings fit well with the emphasis on conflict during the revolutionary era in Virginia, from Rhys Isaac’s classic treatment in *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* to the more recent studies by Woody Holton and Michael McDonnell. He departs in making us aware that Virginia’s counties, even with their all-important court days, were not solely isolated, rural, face-to-face societies, any more than the colonial experience, or the Revolution, can be written from the perspective of the streets of Boston, where it is easier to imagine incendiary pamphlets being written and distributed. The argument for the press’s importance is unyielding, in Mellen’s hands, but he is also very careful to set the complex and gradual context for the rise in reading and the social consequences.

That context is easier to understand armed with the notion of “media ecology,” in the parlance Mellen borrows, or the idea, associated with media scholar Marshall McLuhan, that the form is as important as the content. Even in Virginia, even before the American Revolution, newspapers invited colonists who could read them into a broader world, and a “two-way dialogue” that had implications for their
relations with each other. The chapter on the almanac of Virginia is a fine example of how historians can move beyond the all-or-nothing approach to the effects of media in society by attending to questions of form’s relation to content, for if the almanacs had little radical material within them, the implications of their nature and existence embodied a liberating message: what ordinary people thought and did mattered. They could take everyday life and the workings of the cosmos literally into their own hands.

The American Revolution catalyzed these impulses, and, as elsewhere, encouraged the politicization and diversification of the press. But Mellen does not overly stress the role of politics in the expansion of the press. Print, he reminds us, was a market commodity, part of – and essential to – the consumer revolution that preceded the political controversies of the 1760s and 1770s. It may be that the relatively late and contested emergence of a competitive press in Virginia led it to be all the more prized by Thomas Jefferson, George Mason, James Madison and their constituents. We owe Roger Mellen a debt of thanks for telling the story, from the late colonial period to the Bill of Rights, of press freedom’s complex origins.

David Waldstreicher

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I owe special thanks to my friend and copy editor, James Cheney Olcott. Errata that slipped through are due to my intransigence.

Most of all, I offer special gratitude to my wife, Carol. Without her love and support this book would never have happened. She has supplied endless understanding and encouragement through an arduous process. Thank you so much, Carol. I love you.

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1 This book is set in Adobe Caslon Pro typeface, a more readable version of the actual type used by eighteenth-century printers. The original Caslon type used a combination of the normal s and an ascending f, which looks more like our modern f, and is extremely difficult for the modern reader to decipher.
Chapter 1

Prologue: Culture of Deference

Riding the rutted, rough roads of early eighteenth-century Virginia on horseback, a gentleman expected “common” folk to step aside, doff their caps, and allow him to pass. A remarkable amount of deference marked social relations between people in colonial America. This was more pronounced in Virginia than in the other British colonies.\(^1\) Although King and nobility were thousands of miles away in England, residents of Virginia had a considerable gradation of “quality.” Deference was a key to behavior, as Devereux Jarratt later described in his autobiography. Born to humble circumstances in rural Virginia in 1733, Jarratt was the son of an unlearned, rustic, poor farmer and carpenter. Should he come upon a man wearing a wig, he knew right away what that meant: “A periwig, in those days, was a distinguishing badge of gentle folk and when I saw a man riding the road, near our house, with a wig on, 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.”\(^2\) Jarratt’s behavior was a marked example of deference to his betters, a type of behavior.

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\(^1\) 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. See introduction by editor Arthur Shaffer in Edmund Randolph, *History of Virginia* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia for The Virginia Historical Society, 1970), xxii.

typical of Colonial Virginians of all social strata. As sociologist Michael Schudson explained, “Colonial politics and society operated by a practical ethic of deference and an assumption of social hierarchy.”

This deference extended into the political arena, was more marked in Virginia than in New England, and was reflected in and reinforced by the content of the printed material of the day. As one 1732 Almanac cautioned, men and women were better off if they knew their proper 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.” The very first issue of the *Virginia Gazette* newspaper outlined what its readers might expect. The publisher acknowledged that its pages would show deference to officials, and defined the limitations of its own freedom:

For, By the Liberty of the Press, we are not to understand any licentious Freedom, to revile our Governors and Magistrates ; to traduce the establish’d Laws and Religion of our Country ; or any Attempts to weaken and subvert by opprobrious Writings that sacred Respect and Veneration which ought always to be maintain’d for Authority, and Persons in Authority …

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5 John Warner, *The Virginia and Maryland Almanack ... 1732* (Williamsburg: William Parks, 1731), almanacs were not numbered by page, so no page numbers will be estimated, as missing pages are common and numbers so derived may be misleading. The name of these annual booklets was typically spelled, “almanack.” Spelling and punctuation from original sources will be retained, but capitalization of entire words and italicization, common in printed materials, will be edited without notation.

6 *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg: William Parks, Aug. 6, 1736), 1. Although this first issue is not extant, this “Printer’s Introduction” in the first issue was quoted in William Maxwell, ed., *The Virginia Historical Register, and Literary Companion*, 6 (1853), 21-31. Each early *Virginia Gazette* had two dates, as this issue would have been dated “From Friday, July 31, to Friday, August 6, 1736.” This book will follow the example of Lester Capon, and Stella Duff’s *Virginia
From the very beginning, the printer noted his deference to the local political elite, and recognized no freedom to abuse the political leaders or to undermine the respect for authority. The idea of a free press in early colonial Virginia was constrained by this concept of social and political deference. Another early edition of the newspaper reinforced this deferential treatment with an ode to the governor, “humbly addressed to the Honourable William Gooch, Esq:

… With Pleasure, Honour’d SIR, we view
Our Country Flourish under You.
And whilst You with impartial Hand,
Distribute Justice through the Land …”

As the representative of the King, the governor was due a high level of respect. A very special deference was accorded to royalty. In 1736, Britain’s King George II was lauded on the occasion of his son’s wedding, “We are called upon, by every Motive of Duty and Gratitude, to acknowledge His Majesty’s Goodness.” The divine right of kings might no longer be recognized, but in the first half of the eighteenth century nothing critical of the King is evident in the printed material of the colonial Chesapeake region.

A mere three decades later, by the mid-1760s, a remarkable shift had occurred. The culture of deference had eroded considerably, allowing for what may be referred to as “a culture of dissidence.” Open and public disagreement with

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Gazette Index, 1736-1780 (Williamsburg: The Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1950) and use the later date, which was the actual date of publishing.


8 Virginia Gazette (Oct. 1, 1736), 1.

9 Culture is defined here as all of socially transmitted behavior patterns and beliefs, or a pool of resources which traffics information among elite, middling, and lesser folk. Culture is not imposed from above. It is not uniform but rather is fractured, local, and replete with opposition. Culture flows two ways. Cultural history is interested in the lives of common people, as is social history. Cultural history looks at meanings attached to what people did, rather than their actions. While society may be thought of as a kind of arena, culture is a resource, existing within society. From David D. Hall, Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book (Amherst: University of
political leaders, even the King, was beginning to appear. By 1776, it became an obvious and violent rift. Our poor farmer’s boy who last was seen running away from “gentle folk” had himself become a literate and well-read minister. Devereux Jarratt is a key example of the influence of the burgeoning print culture of his time. As a youth, his family lived almost exclusively off what they could grow on their farm. They dressed in plain, homespun clothing. Jarratt’s father died when Devereux was only six years old, leaving him the meager inheritance of £25. Through self-education and an immersion in the printed materials of his time, Jarratt learned to read and write. He rose through the social structure and became an Anglican minister—and a gentleman. “This was due partly to respect for his sacred calling, and partly to the respect in which learning was held.” Jarratt became one to whom the lower sorts should now defer, but he noted a distinct lack of deference in the post-Revolution society of the new nation.

The shift away from deference toward dissidence is evident in a newspaper that circulated in Virginia in 1765, during the Stamp Act crisis. This new and unpopular tax led to direct criticism of Parliament and even a backhanded swipe at King George III: “This Paper has never had Occasion to appear in Deep Mourning, since the Death of our late good KING until NOW.” The printer of the Maryland Gazette was quite sharply critical of the reigning monarch by lamenting the passing of his predecessor five years earlier. These comments, certainly not deferential and quite possibly seditious, would not have been printed just a few years earlier. An intrinsic relationship between the concept of seditious libel, its


11 Life of Devereux Jarratt, 14-15, written after the American Revolution.

12 Supplement to the Maryland Gazette (Annapolis: Jonas Green, Oct. 31, 1765), 1.
relationship to political deference, and the changes in colonial Virginia as deference wanes is explored in the pages ahead.

Political dissent became obvious first in the pages of the newspaper printed in Annapolis, before it could be seen in the pages printed in Williamsburg. The nearby colony of Maryland offers a useful comparison in examining the rise of printing, the increase in dissenting discourse, and the emergence of press freedom. The two colonies not only shared printed materials and printers, they also shared the tobacco-based economy. Although settled long before the middle colonies, these southern colonies were slower to develop a press that freely criticized the government and contained dissenting opinions. With an agrarian economy and no major metropolitan areas, print competition came to the Chesapeake colonies at a later date than it came to the northern colonies.13 That transition and the culture, society, and evolution of printing in Maryland are necessarily part of this study. While printing dates back to 1639 in Massachusetts, forty-three years later the royal governor of Virginia refused to allow a printing press to operate. The proprietary colony of Maryland was more welcoming.14 When printing did finally come to Williamsburg, those who did not agree with the government often found themselves turning to Annapolis to get printed what could not be published at home. The relationship between these two presses is explored in the pages ahead, and the political biases within the prints will offer a useful perspective on government control and restrictions on local publishing. On the printed pages from both presses, a dissident civic discourse is seen developing, with crucial implications for the development of free press concepts. The finding here is that while closely


related, the relationship of printing, printers, and political dissent in Virginia
differed fundamentally from what it was in the colony to the north, leading to an
eyearly recognition of the need for a free press guarantee in Williamsburg.\textsuperscript{15}

This book begins by exploring the cultural transformation that occurred as
local printing began and printed materials spread farther through the society of
colonial Virginia. As Charles E. Clark wrote, newspapers in London were often
referred to as the “publick prints.” As British-American printers began to publish
local versions, the news truly became more public—readily available to larger
numbers of people.\textsuperscript{16} The phrase “public prints” is used here in a larger sense,
relating to a broader range of printed output to include not only newspapers, but
almanacs and pamphlets as well. Much of the output of the colonial presses, such as
specialized collections of laws, or professional books, was aimed at smaller, more
elite groups. The focus here is on the public prints, rather than the more completely
studied area of “the history of the book.”\textsuperscript{17}

A cultural transition is highly visible in the printed materials of Virginia by
1766, and that change was intrinsic to the political upheavals of 1776. The new
Virginia Declaration of Rights, with its assertion of the right to a free press, was the

\textsuperscript{15} Arthur Pierce Middleton, \textit{Tobacco Coast: A Maritime History of Chesapeake Bay in the
Colonial Era} (Newport News: The Mariners’ Museum, 1953), 354-357, notes that except for
government, the Chesapeake Tidewater was a single unit. This is also an excellent source for
of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture} (Chapel Hill: University of
North Carolina Press, 1988), pointed to Virginia and Maryland as more typical of the colonial
experience than the more generally studied New England. The research ahead here points out that
Virginia led the way for constitutional protection. Greene, \textit{The Quest for Power: The Lower Houses
of Assembly in the Southern Royal Colonies, 1689–1776} (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of
Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1963), also is
useful to this study, as it describes the shift of power from governor to assembly in the Chesapeake
colonies, and it touches on how the printers fit into this power struggle.

\textsuperscript{16} Charles E. Clark, \textit{The Public Prints: The Newspaper in Anglo-American Culture, 1665–1740}

\textsuperscript{17} French historians, including Roger Chartier, are credited with beginning this field, \textit{histoire
du livre}, which now has many followers in the United States, including Robert Darnton. Clark,
\textit{Public Prints}, 5, and fn 7, 270.
ultimate act of political dissent against a British government that was no longer being acknowledged. It declared for the first time the inalienable right of expression as a limitation on a government’s power.\textsuperscript{18} A cultural shift is evident in prerevolutionary Virginia. The ancient tradition of deference had not allowed for overt criticism of those in power, including those in political control. Examining these public prints, there is evidence of an increase in critical debate, first in the sphere of religion, later in politics and government. The idea of social and political deference was waning, and the appreciation of critical debate was increasing. The prevailing culture in colonial Virginia had shifted away from one of deference to one that valued critical civic discourse. This increase in critical debate seen in the public prints shows a larger shift in the society towards a culture of dissidence.

This research tracks the transition from the establishment of a printing press in Virginia in the 1730s, to the political dissent that resulted in the American Revolution in 1776. The book examines how change is reflected in the popular press of the colonial Chesapeake region, but it also explores a more complex relationship among print culture, thought, and political ideology. By adding the techniques of cultural history and media ecology, this work expands upon the understandings reached by political and legal historians. Rather than focus entirely on the philosophy and political ideals of the elite, this research digs more deeply into the more popular newspapers and almanacs, and their influence on—and from—a wider swath of society. By the very nature of print and the lack of literacy of certain groups of people, the approach used here is not overly inclusive of one extreme but large end of society: the very poor whites, the slaves, the American Indians, and others who had only minimal participation in the world of print. For a large number of Virginians, however, the ability to read, listen to, and disseminate ideas by print became so important that they created a constitutional protection for

the press, a declared freedom that was an important precedent to free speech and press rights in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. This work is undertaken to better understand the roots of that freedom. It examines how a colony that once rejected printing and printers transformed into a new state with a new ideal—the constitutional right to a free press.

The leading interpretation of the First Amendment free press clause has been Leonard Levy’s *Emergence of a Free Press*, where he argued that the original intent of this part of the First Amendment was only to prevent *prior* restraint by the government.¹⁹ His view is that the free press clause was not intended to prevent after-the-fact prosecution such as for seditious libel.²⁰ Others have since argued for a more libertarian view, and Levy admitted that his original work focused totally on legislative and legal precedents, and did not examine the actual practices or content of colonial presses.²¹ The research being presented here looks beyond those more elite sources, closely examines the practices and content of the Maryland and Virginia presses, and thus expands our knowledge of the origins of free press. Specifically, the pages ahead tie together the ideas of political deference and sedition, and note a strong relationship between the dissolution of the culture of deference, the popular movement against seditious libel, and the advance of the concept of free press in Virginia.


The conclusion here is that the printing press was an important part of the changes in colonial Virginia society that led to an erosion of social deference, the rise of political dissidence, and the emergence of a constitutional right to freedom of the press. The English radical whig political philosophy and interchanges with the other British-American colonies greatly influenced the idea of liberty of the press as it evolved over time. However, the concept of a free press that emerged out of these changes in Virginia is broader than the predominant historical theory suggests. The right that developed included a restriction on both prior restraint by the government and seditious libel actions after the fact. The printing press is not pinpointed here as the sole cause of the change, but rather it was one important element within a complex cultural milieu. This research attempts to add to historians’ understanding of colonial Virginia and this important political doctrine by utilizing a transatlantic, interdisciplinary, and synthesizing approach. Analyzing the spread of a new communication medium—printed material—incorporates into our history an examination of how changes in social discourse alter the way people think and react within social and political systems. While other historians have studied the newspapers, almanacs, political pamphlets, and books of the eighteenth-century Chesapeake region, this work demonstrates new connections by incorporating methods from other disciplines.

Tracking a change of culture in eighteenth-century Virginia, from one of social deference to one of political dissidence, this research concludes that the transformation was closely related to the spread of printing in the colony. Widespread availability of print media for reading and writing led to an expansion of critical civic discourse. With greater criticism of religion, government, and social leaders came a recognized need for print media capable of publicizing a wider range of ideas. That shift in the dominant medium of communication directly and indirectly influenced the development of the idea of protecting a free press from government intrusion. The next few pages begin with the delayed and difficult start of printing in Virginia. This second chapter explores the deferential society in the
colony, and demonstrates how printing evolved from being a primarily government function to one more commercially responsive, leading to a wider political discourse among the population. Chapter three focuses on the area's newspapers, the most regular output of the presses and perhaps the most influential. It reveals some common misunderstandings about the structure and organization of colonial newspapers and uncovers meaningful shifts in the sources of Virginia news. It finds that these prints played a major role in bringing civic discourse to a wider public forum. Chapter four examines almanacs, the yearly booklet that spread the printed word to the widest audience. These pages reveal how almanacs were a tool for revolutionary change in that they helped non-elites to be able to think and act independently. The next section looks at the role of women and print, noting that women were more involved as readers, writers, and even as printers than has been generally recognized. Following that, chapter six explores the Stamp Act and several local controversies that appeared as open political disagreements within the newspapers. These demonstrate an acceleration of deference dissolving into dissidence and illustrate how the public prints became a valued forum for political dissent. Chapter seven establishes how competition came to the printing business in Virginia, transforming the meaning of print, making it highly valued as a forum for civic discourse. This section debunks some myths regarding Thomas Jefferson and the procurement of a second printer. The penultimate chapter looks closely at how the Virginia Declaration of Rights in 1776 came to include freedom of the press. The final chapter concludes that the entire change of culture, from one of social deference to one of political dissidence, is closely interrelated with the spread of printing in the colony. This “Epilogue” returns us to the simple farmer's son who became a respected member of the elite, and uses Jarratt's example to help to explain how deference had eroded and dissidence increased. Building on the evidence presented along the way, this work theorizes that the spread of print played a critical role in creating that dissent, not simply providing a new civic forum, but also helping to encourage new ways of thinking. A recognition of the importance of
press liberty emerged out of this dissidence and out of reliance on print as an engine of the new, wider, political discourse. The conclusion is that from that more popular expression, rather than solely from English law and political philosophy, came the constitutional right of free press. Such freedom of communication was seen as a civic responsibility, one that served the function of counterbalancing a potentially corrupt government. The concept of a free press by 1776 went beyond simply the idea of a press that was not licensed or directly censored. In Virginia, liberty of the press ideals included protection from seditious libel prosecution after-the-fact, truth as a defense for libel, and no taxation of the press. Because the precedent of the Virginia Declaration of Rights influenced other state constitutions and directly influenced the United States Bill of Rights, the development of freedom of the press in Virginia is key to understanding the federal protection in the First Amendment.

The conclusions here have some broad implications. The constitutional right to press freedom emerged out of a struggle for the liberty of political dissent. Such a culture of dissidence developed from the growth of political discourse, especially within the public prints and spurred by the press. Thus, print itself as well as the discussions spurred by the content of the printed material were key elements of the changes in Virginia society that led to the rise of political dissidence and an erosion of social deference. The analysis reveals much about the origins of the First Amendment and also shows us a great deal about history of the Chesapeake colonies. It demonstrates the important role of the medium of print as a cultural influence. In addition, this research may have a greater significance in three broader ways. First, it shows potential for improved historical understanding by allowing for a more multidisciplinary approach. By using methods of exploration not commonly utilized by historians (such as the significance of the medium of documents, not merely the content of documents) and by using theories of mass communication to better understand changes in past societies, this work may open up new paths for understanding other times and places. Second, exploring how the new medium of
print and popular use of the prints helped create a need for the constitutional protection for free expression can lead to a broader and more complete understanding about an important legal principle, one that is still litigated and needs better understanding even hundreds of years after its inception. Finally—and perhaps most importantly—by understanding how the spread of print media helped to change colonial Virginia, a better understanding can be reached regarding changes in media in the past, the present, and the future. Television and its relationship to violence is a current concern in American culture. As new generations turn to the Internet, cell phones, and instant messaging, it is critically important to have an awareness of how changing emphasis on methods of communication influences the way that people communicate, think, and relate to the rest of the world. Recognizing how the spread of print media in the past altered the world can open up new ways of understanding more recent changes and what is happening right now. As old-regime kings and governors knew that allowing printed materials would change their world, we need to better recognize just how new media are changing our own.
Chapter 2
Print Culture in the Early Chesapeake Region

Printed material helped to drive many of the early emigrants from England to the new Jamestown colony. The Virginia Company was chartered by King James to colonize and govern the region, and the land company embarked upon a propaganda campaign to counter a very stark reality. While the vast majority of Europeans in early Jamestown died from disease, starvation, or warfare with the natives, the company distributed printed colonization literature to encourage settlement. John Smith wrote of the wonders of living in the New World, suggesting that no hard landlords charge high rents, and “here every [man] may be master and owner of his own labour and land; or the greatest part in a small time. If hee have nothing but his hands, he may set up his trade; and by industrie quickly grown rich.”1 Smith’s account was edited by an employee of the Virginia Company before it appeared in print, removing some of the starkest reality, apparently in an effort to improve their heavy investment in the venture and keep colonists coming. Despite efforts to control the flow of news back to England, negative stories did appear, and the company organized a campaign of literary patronage, sermons, and travel narratives to make life in the colony appear more positive.2

For the colonist who did make the trip to the Chesapeake region, the printed word was not a crucial possession. The culture of print, however, did

1 John Smith, A Description of New England; or The Observations, and Discoveries of Captain John Smith… 1614 (London, 1616), quoted in Copeland, Idea of a Free Press, 104.

2 Hall, Cultures of Print, 134-135.
expand, grow in importance, and change over the course of the seventeenth-century. While printed material traveled with the first English settlers to Virginia, it was then primarily an elite phenomenon. The printed materials that were brought to the new colony belonged to the few who were wealthy enough to afford them, the same few who were also members of the ruling elite. Freedom of communication was severely limited, and unseemly speech or written words could be severely punished. Lesser sorts were limited to owning a few religious prints at most, and could not take part in the larger discourse spawned by literature and politics. That remained the exclusive province of the gentlemen, who were also accorded proper deference from the lesser sort. Not until 1730 did the printing press did gain a firm foothold in Virginia, and even then the output remained restricted. However, print culture did change the way governing elites related to each other as well as the way the government related to the people. Conflicts ensued, fought out on the printed page. Printers sometimes found themselves caught in the midst of these controversies. By the mid-eighteenth century, print culture began to have a demonstrable impact on the nature and scope of political debate in colonial Virginia.

A Limited Print Culture

Printing came much later to the south than it did to the northern British-American colonies. The first press was set up in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1638. A press arrived there before one came to the older colony in the south for two reasons: There was an urban center to help finance the expensive technology, but more importantly, the written word was central to the faith of the Puritans who first settled the New England colonies. Christianity was a text-based religion, rather than one based on oral tradition, and the Protestant faith was even more dependent on vernacular text than was the Roman Catholic Church. Puritan reformers saw print as divinely ordained, and each individual was expected to read the Bible and other religious texts to individually determine their meaning, to an extent not typical of the Church of England that predominated in Virginia. Printed texts were
also critical to the important spreading of the word of God. As Alan Taylor summarized, “Puritans cherished direct access to holy and printed texts as fundamental to their liberty and identity as English and Protestant folk. They insisted every individual should read the Bible ...” Michael Warner described the Puritan press as “a technology of privacy underwritten by divine authority.” The religious texts and their meanings were very private, in contrast to the later public prints. Printing in Massachusetts became less religious, more commercial, and more “civic and emancipatory” over time.3 One issue of the first newspaper, Publick Occurences both Forreign and Domestick, was printed without license in 1690, but the governor and council suppressed it before a second issue was released. The Boston News-Letter was published with permission of the authorities in 1704, and it is considered the first successful American newspaper. James Franklin, Benjamin Franklin’s older brother, printed a competitive newspaper, the New England Courant, unusual in that it was in opposition to the Puritan leaders who shut it down in 1722. Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland all had working presses before printing was successfully established in Virginia.4

When the new settlers first arrived in Jamestown in 1607, books and other printed materials were not high on the list of needs. Simple survival was much more important for the transplanted Europeans. Half the colonists died each year, and they lost approximately six out of every seven people in the first two decades, primarily due to starvation. The ocean voyage to Virginia lasted six to eight weeks

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in overcrowded conditions. Once on land, the early settlers did not have enough food and the marshy, unsanitary Jamestown settlement bred disease.\textsuperscript{5} The colonists were primarily beggars and underemployed English, led by gentlemen adventurers. Neither group was accustomed to the hard labor needed for survival in the new land.\textsuperscript{6} One list of what early colonists were told to take to Virginia did not include any books, not even Bibles.\textsuperscript{7} A few families were likely to have had some religious books, and in 1623, the Virginia Company sent three Bibles, two Common Prayer books, and an \textit{Ursinae Catechisme} to the colony.\textsuperscript{8} The settlers were influenced by the world of print through their European roots, in contrast to the Native Americans who were here before them and lived within a completely oral culture. With few imported books, out-of-date European newspapers, and expensive paper and writing materials, the new Virginians lived within their own largely oral culture with some writing and limited printed materials.

There was no compulsory education in early Virginia. Opportunities for formal education were rare, so learning had to take place in the home.\textsuperscript{9} All printed


\textsuperscript{6} Taylor, \textit{American Colonies}, 130-148. Greene in \textit{Pursuits of Happiness}, 6-9, notes that the early Virginia settlers came as military and commercial conquerors looking for instant riches, rather than as farmers. John Smith is quoted from several of his writings as suggesting that between one third to one half of the initial settlers were “gentlemen,” and most of the laborers were unskilled, from James Horn, \textit{A Land As God Made It: Jamestown and the Birth of America} (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 40-41.

\textsuperscript{7} Samuel Purchas, list compiled for prospective colonists, in \textit{Hakluytus Posthumus, Or Purchas His Pilgrimes…} (Glasgow, 1905-1907), XIX 164-167, quoted in Warren Billings, ed., \textit{The Old Dominion in the Seventeenth Century: A Documentary History of Virginia, 1606-1689} (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 4, 15-20.

material had to be imported at substantial expense. In his 1671 reply to a query from the Commissioner of Foreign Plantations in London about education in his colony, Governor Sir William Berkeley indicated that he wanted it to remain that way:

But I thank God, there are no free schools nor printing, and I hope we shall not have these hundred years; for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both!  

Berkeley knew just how revolutionary and troublesome literacy and printed materials could be. His comments suggest that he was well aware that a printing press would undercut his domination and control of society. In England, a troublesome press often eluded regulations, and the best way to control a press was to have none. It was still recognized as appropriate for the state to limit printing to only what served the purposes of civil and religious authorities. Literacy was likely to be low, as was the demand for books and other written material.

Books and the corresponding conversations spurred by literature were largely the province of the affluent in Virginia in the seventeenth century and beyond. Books had to be either carried in person from England or specifically ordered through a ship captain or overseas merchant. There are no records of early book dealers, libraries, or stores selling books. Religious tracts were the most common titles, although throughout the seventeenth century there was a perception

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in England that the colony had a shortage of Bibles. Typical homes contained only a Bible and perhaps a book of prayer, while more extensive collections were found only in the studies of the learned elites. A few rare personal libraries included legal and medical books, newspapers, and bound periodicals from England. Discourse on many topics—from literary to professional to political—was likely to be common only among the few who read regularly and broadly. As Warner suggested, print culture was an important precursor to such civic debate, in which literary and religious conversations typically prefaced political discussions. In early Virginia, such discourse was normally limited to the elites.\textsuperscript{12}

The spread of printed works and the ability to read had brought revolutionary changes to England, including emigration to the new world. When German Johannes Gutenberg had introduced the printing press to Europe in the mid-fifteenth century, the combination of the western alphabet and moveable metal type led to a huge increase in the number of available books.\textsuperscript{13} By the seventeenth century, men and women of all economic strata in England—not just the elites—were known to read.\textsuperscript{14} Elizabeth Eisenstein described the printing press

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as “an agent of change” that helped to bring about revolutionary new ideas in science, religion, and politics in Western society. The publicity afforded by the printing press to the discoveries of “new” lands in the Americas helped to spur emigration. Europeans came to the two American continents in search of gold, new lands, and religious freedom. The Virginia Company sent new settlers specifically in search of profits and land, not for religious freedom. They found the soil to be fertile for tobacco, but the frontier settlers struggling for survival had little need for education or reading materials. Governor Berkeley was not alone in believing that learning and books bring about heresy and disobedience to authority.

Although printing was not kept out for one hundred years as Berkeley had wished, the colony of Virginia originally was not receptive to either printing or freedom of the press. Despite the royal governor’s wishes, the first attempt at printing did take place in Virginia in the seventeenth century, before Pennsylvania had its own printer, and not long after the Massachusetts’ colonists had theirs. Merchant and one-time Burgess John Buckner imported both a press and the experienced printer, William Nuthead, to the capital of Jamestown. In 1682 he printed several “papers,” the form and content of which is not known, and then set to print the laws the Virginia Assembly had just passed. “At this stage a flurry of alarm seems to have seized the Governor and Council.” After reviewing two

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16 Bridenbaugh, Jamestown, and Greene, Pursuits of Happiness, 6-9.

17 Wroth, Colonial Printer, 16-17, and 38. Buckner is listed as a Burgess from Gloucester in John Pendleton Kennedy, ed. Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia (Richmond: The Colonial Press, E. Waddey Co., 1905-15), 10:290. Thomas, History of Printing, 550-552. (Thomas was unable to unearth Nuthead’s name or any details.)
sheets of those printed laws, Governor Lord Thomas Culpeper halted the process, charging that the pair lacked a license. The Governor’s Council considered Buckner’s defense that he had ordered nothing printed without government approval, yet the Council announced, “... for prevention of all troubles and inconveniences, that may be occasioned thorow the liberty of a presse ...” no printing would be allowed. Nuthead and Buckner had to post a 100-pound bond promising not to print anything again, “until his majesty’s pleasure shall be known.” When Lord Francis Howard of Effingham arrived as the new governor in 1683, he carried specific orders not to allow the use of a printing press. This command delayed the permanent arrival of local printing to Virginia for another fifty years and was consistent with the British Empire’s emerging trade policies. The colony had to trade raw materials with England in exchange for manufactured, or printed goods, as books and newspapers had to be imported from elsewhere. While this may be viewed as a troubled beginning for freedom of the press in Virginia, it was consistent with policies in the larger Atlantic world of the seventeenth century. Licensing was still required for printing in England, and there was no such thing as a free press in the colonies or in the mother country.20

Control of the press in early Virginia simply continued the tradition established in England. The “Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers,” more commonly known as the “Stationers’ Company,” had an official monopoly over publishing since 1557. Early decrees by the Star Chamber forbade publishing of domestic news and restricted the number and geographic dispersal of


presses. In the 1600s, King James developed the idea of seditious libel, expanding the ancient law of *Scandalum Magnatum*, which outlawed discussion about the king or government. James and his son King Charles expanded the prosecution of political dissenters by using this medieval law. In a Star Chamber case in 1606, James eradicated the possibility of truth as a defense and made any printer of such sedition liable in addition to the author.\textsuperscript{21} In alliance with the king, and later with Parliament, the stationers kept printing located only in London, under the watchful eye of the government. There were no newspapers in the provinces. Parliament passed an official Printing Act (or Licensing Act) in 1662 to place into written law what had already been the practice. Printed matter needed a license, and printing took place only in London.\textsuperscript{22} Such heavy restrictions on printing were becoming much too bulky and commercial interests required less burden if they were to compete with freer presses on the European continent. The Printing Act was allowed to expire by 1695, but that was not a clear move toward freedom of the press.\textsuperscript{23} There was an increase in the number of provincial presses and newspapers throughout England after 1695, but convictions for seditious libel and breach of privilege continued the tradition of government control. Punishment after the fact—and the chilling effect of the possibility of such punishment—replaced the prior restraint of censorship and licensing. In addition, the government often subsidized newspapers, individual journalists, and even bought off critics in efforts


\textsuperscript{22} Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 150.

to control dissent by the opposition. In 1712, an English Stamp Act helped restrict the spread of newspapers by raising the cost.24

While colonial culture reflected that of its English “mother country,” it was substantially different, and an understanding of the separate evolution of print in Virginia requires an acquaintance with the colony’s overall culture. This can best be understood in conjunction with that of its neighboring colony, Maryland. Virginia had a highly stratified society that differed in many ways from the New England or mid-Atlantic colonies, but was closely interrelated to Maryland. Except for separate governments, the Chesapeake tidewater region was often considered to be a single unit. Maryland was created out of lands that were part of Virginia, and was a haven for Catholics, although the majority of settlers were Protestant. Until the end of the colonial period, the name “Virginia” was used in England to refer to both colonies. The entire region was tied tightly to England. The Chesapeake Bay was difficult to defend, wide open to pirates, and both colonies traded directly with Great Britain rather than with the other colonies.25 Both colonies were agrarian societies with no large urban centers, so trade was limited.26 Tobacco was the major export, and it required large amounts of land and labor. Plantations clustered around the rivers below the fall line, where the ground was fertile and transportation by water was possible. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, trade was

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primarily carried on by ship from the larger plantations, where smaller farmers could bring their tobacco and order shipments of supplies in return from Great Britain. Scottish merchants began offering an alternative around the 1740s, setting up trading posts that competed with the London merchants’ former monopoly. Books were part of their trade, and the new merchants brought the price of reading material down.27

Labor was always short in the Chesapeake colonies. Originally, indentured servants primarily shipped from London did the work in the fields. The “enclosure” of English lands by the aristocratic landlords created a huge number of beggars, especially in London prior to 1650. Many of the settlers had been forced to emigrate, and servants made up three-quarters of the Chesapeake settlers in the seventeenth century. They typically were required to work under extremely harsh conditions from four to seven years, and then received clothes, tools, and fifty acres of their own land if they survived the indenture. After 1665, freedmen could rarely obtain their own farms in Virginia. Such “headrights” resumed in 1705 after the native Indians were pushed farther back.28 The former servants sometimes started their own farms in the Virginia backcountry or in Maryland. Slaves were imported from Africa beginning early in the seventeenth century, and after Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676, plantation owners turned to slaves rather than servants as a more lucrative system of labor. Slaves required a larger initial investment than indentured servants, but it was a long-term advantage for the wealthiest landowners that helped to consolidate the hierarchical social structure.29 In 1730, the population of Virginia

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28 Taylor, American Colonies, 119-152. The “headright” system awarded land, typically fifty acres, for each person who traveled to the Virginia colony. A man who paid for travel for himself, family members, and servants would receive fifty acres for each person. Indentured servant would also get fifty acres of land if they completed their term of servitude.
was about 144,000 people, with an estimated 26 percent of them slaves. By 1760, the colony’s population had grown to about 480,000 with 41 percent slaves. The free white population can be divided into three groups: well-born, middling, and lower ranks. In Virginia, one estimate is that about 5 percent of the white population was the gentry, almost exclusively large planters, the leaders of the society. Somewhere around 50 percent were small landowners, owning enough property to be eligible to vote. The other 45 percent were tenants or poor whites, not owning enough land or property to take part in political decisions.\(^{30}\)

The political structure of Virginia reflected the highly deferential society in the early eighteenth century, as demonstrated earlier by the frightened young Devereux Jarratt running from bewigged gentlemen. To young Jarratt, who described people such as himself as “simple folk,” such deference was automatic: “We were accustomed to look upon, what were called gentle folks, as beings of a superior order ... Such ideas of the difference between gentle and simple, were, I believe, universal among all of my rank and age.”\(^{31}\) The non-elite regarded the elite as being of a superior status and considered elite political leadership as natural and normal. This deference was marked by little or no resentment (with the exception of rare outbursts of rebellion), and was typical in all of Britain, including the North American British colonies.\(^{32}\) Of all the colonies, however, the society of Virginia is

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\(^{29}\) Darrett Rutman, and Anita Rutman, *A Place In Time: Middlesex County, Virginia, 1650-1750* (New York: Norton, 1984), 86-133. Only the wealthier planters could afford many slaves, thus the lesser folk could not find the labor needed to plant extensively, helping to make the rich more wealthy and keep the smaller farmers small.


most often described as “deferential.”

The idea of deference as a way to describe British politics goes back to Walter Bagehot, who in the nineteenth century described social and political relations as consensual, “but hierarchical in its distribution of power and authority.” Public virtue, the principle of subordinating private interest to the public good, is thought to have encouraged the many to defer to the judgment and wisdom of the few. Such deference extended from social matters to political ones, and included conversations and written communication. “In America in the seventeenth century, though, discussion anywhere that questioned authority raised the ire and prosecutorial hackles of authorities.”

The legal system enforced this deference with the concept of seditious libel: Statements that challenged the existing religious or civil power structure were subject to severe prosecution. In 1711, Virginia Governor Alexander Spotswood issued a proclamation threatening imprisonment, loss of a limb, or even execution to anyone who spread “Seditious principles … or other Insinuations tending to the disturbance of the peace.” In 1714, one justice of the peace was prosecuted for “Seditious Speeches,” and six years later, a minister was accused of “uttering false and Scandalous Speeches.” In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, questioning the “natural order” of civil and religious leadership by the elite could—and often did—lead to prosecution for seditious libel.

Especially in the Tidewater region, common people deferred to their elite leaders’ superiority, and these leaders returned that trust by recognizing the merits

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33 Beeman, “Deference in Eighteenth-Century America,” 413.

34 Ibid., 401-430. Bagehot, English Constitution.


of the “simple folk.” As late as 1775, one British expert on American affairs suggested that in the southern colonies, “a Sort of Aristocracy prevails,” and the elite “Families have a great weight in all the affairs of the Country.” Virginia society into the early eighteenth century was aristocratic in style, with wealth conferring privilege, planters holding the political power, and the elite making decisions about what was best for all. There was no broad public discourse about political decisions. Before printing allowed wider distribution, very few actually knew what the laws were, let alone how they might best be altered. Discussions on governing were the affair of a small number of elite leaders who tended to treat each other with a courteous respect. While there were few titled nobles in the colony, wealth and disinterested public service distinguished a planter elite. The gentry could maintain this control without much social unrest, as the fluidity of position meant that the poorer could aspire to wealth and hope to one day wield such power.

Yet seventeenth-century Virginia did experience violent social unrest. Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676 is often though of as the result of a popular uprising, but in reality, it did not have an opportunity to become a rebellion with widespread support partly because of the lack of print culture. While some have viewed it as a rebellion against an oppressive government that prefaced the American Revolution,
it was in fact an elite-led uprising. What Darrett and Anita Rutman described as a “chronic enigma to historians,” the early rebellion was less an uprising of the “oppressed against oppressors, but simply a venting of frustrations.” As researchers have noted, it was not a rebellion of the lower sorts against the rulers, but rather an elite-led conflict based on fear and hatred of American Indians. While Governor Berkeley tried to keep peace with the Indians, frontiersmen feared them, desired to expand to their lands, and wanted to take over their trade routes.41 Nathaniel Bacon was a cousin-by-marriage of the governor and Berkeley had even appointed Bacon to the Governor’s Council. Despite those ties, Bacon led supporters to attack the Indians and eventually battle the governor himself. Bacon issued handwritten petitions, or manifestos, to both the House of Burgesses and to the public. Berkeley ignored the petitions, and being handwritten, they lacked the authority, or political legitimacy, that were inherent in printed documents.42 However, Bacon had no real message of governmental reform, and no desire for independence from England. Without well-read popular prints and a real reform message, Bacon’s message did not gain universal support. The rebellion collapsed when his death left it leaderless.43 An investigation by British authorities of the failed revolt supported a broader political consciousness in the colony by recognizing the dissent as legitimate grievances rather than treasonous sedition.44 Following Bacon’s rebellion, Virginia leaders had to struggle to maintain their hierarchical control. The early colonial elites lacked the gentile manners and education of the traditional English gentry.

41 Rutman, and Rutman, Place In Time, 86. Wilcomb E. Washburn, The Governor and the Rebel: A History of Bacon’s Rebellion in Virginia (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg by the University of North Carolina Press, 1957).


43 Bridenbaugh, Jamestown, 89-103.

and aristocracy, as they came mostly from merchant or farmer classes. Without the clear distinctions of social class as there were back in Europe, the lower sorts sometimes refused to defer to those who thought they were their “betters.” After the rebellion collapsed, the elites adopted more symbolic trappings of wealth and power, eventually including a printing press. With new wealth, education, and dress to mark the distinction, the differentiation became clearer. Combined with a more partnership-like style, this led to a more successful, consensual, elite-led hierarchy, and the leaders turned to print to help maintain their leadership.45

Print Culture Broadens

The histories of printing in the two Chesapeake colonies are closely intertwined, and considering developments in Maryland helps to better understand what happened in Virginia. The government to the north proved somewhat more receptive to the printing press and to the printer who was kicked out by its southern neighbor. As historian of print Douglas McMurtrie noted, “Maryland was, as always, the haven for the distressed Virginian.”46 With a governor who reported to the Proprietor, instead of directly to royal authorities, and with religious dissenters more welcome than in the colony to the south, Maryland may be considered to have been more open to a freer press. The colonial government in St. Mary’s City employed William Nuthead in 1685, after the Virginia government would not allow him to print in Jamestown. Four years later, as the Stuart King James II fled England, rebels overthrew the proprietary government of Lord Baltimore in Maryland. Many of the majority Protestants in the colony looked upon the Catholic proprietors with suspicion. The rebels had printer Nuthead publish two statements in defense of their actions. The rebels’ use of the printing press for their declarations reveals much about the significance of the printing press. It was utilized

45 Taylor, *American Colonies*, 139-140. See also Bridenbaugh, *Jamestown*, 89-103.

to establish authority, or to make the reasons for their rebellion appear more formal and legitimate by having them printed. A document published in such a way was more difficult to reproduce than a simple handwritten proclamation, thus showing more sophistication. A printed document embodied the concept of political legitimacy.47 After Maryland became a royal colony, Nuthead once again discovered that freedom of the press was elusive. In 1693, he was charged with printing a blank land warrant in the name of the dispossessed Lord Baltimore and was directed in the future to only print what the governor ordered.48 Nuthead’s wife Dinah took over the press for a short time after William’s death, relocating to Annapolis when the state capital moved there. For a short time, there was one other printer, and then John Peter Zenger, better known later for his landmark court case in New York, printed in Maryland briefly in 1720.49

Several developments in the 1720s opened up print media in the colony of Maryland to greater political discourse. Both Chesapeake colonies were without a printer for a time until William Parks moved from England in 1726 to become the official printer of Maryland. The reintroduction of printing began to open the government to greater public scrutiny. It increased the potential for civic discourse, but also brought new complications. The new printer had a problem with the government right away. The Lower House of Assembly of Maryland wanted their journals printed, but the upper house, or Governor’s Council, did not want the

47 Hall, *Cultures of Print*, 104, and 124-5.

48 Calvert, Lord Baltimore, lost the proprietorship in 1691 when Protestants William and Mary took the English thrown. The fourth Lord Baltimore became a Protestant and had the colony of Maryland restored to him in 1715. These power struggles appear to have weakened executive control and strengthened the power of the assembly. This order to not print public discourse is consistent with Michael Warner, “The Res Publica of Letters,” *boundary 2* 17, no. 1, *New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon.* (Spring, 1990): 40, where he wrote that political publications were rare in the colonies prior to 1720, and that published debate was a sign of failure of the normal state of public affairs, which included adherence to station of privacy and subjection [deference].

49 McMurtrie, *Printing United States*, 100-104.
journals made public. This appears to be an early clash between two styles of governance. The upper house, following the older tradition, did not view such public accountability as a positive thing. Back in England, the Parliament did not yet allow reporting of its debates, so the Annapolis lower house’s position can be viewed as progressive. Parks did not print the journals without the governor’s approval, earning him a reprimand from the assembly. Governor Charles Calvert delayed publication of the journals until 1727, when Parks finally printed them with his permission.50 This case is the first concrete evidence of a Chesapeake printer caught in the power struggle between the assembly and governor or upper body.

Two other developments also increased the distribution of political information, helping to make governance more open to the public. In 1727, Parks began printing the *Maryland Gazette*, the first newspaper south of Philadelphia in the English colonies. It was discontinued for several years, but then began again in 1732.51 Parks also published the first political pamphlet in the region in 1727. Written by an anonymous author, it argued in favor of controversial tobacco regulation. He wrote that having the good of his country in mind was a sufficient apology for publishing his thoughts on the matter, and continued, “so am I clearly of Opinion that it is the indispensable Duty of every Man to do it,” suggesting that more individuals should take part in such public discourse.52 While innocuous when compared to later rebellious political tracts, this pamphlet marked a move away from private debate by rulers, toward public discussion of political matters, removing such from the exclusive control of the political elite. As Warner notes, in earlier times the view was that public debate was a failure of public affairs. Maintaining proper deference to political leaders meant that one was subject to


52 *A Letter from a Freeholder, to a Member of the Lower-House of Assembly, of the Province of Maryland* (Annapolis: Parks, 1727), 4.
their rulings, not party to any discussion of them. Before 1720, overtly political publications were not the norm in the British-American colonies, which makes the anonymous tobacco pamphlet writer’s apology understandable. By publicizing a political decision, the medium of print became a vehicle for civic discourse, broadening the concept of political decision-making from the private realm of the rulers to a somewhat broader forum. Government was beginning to become public, and thus subject to public debate and criticism.\(^5^3\)

Lawmakers in Virginia saw the need for a public printer, and Parks began also printing for the Virginia government, which still had no printer in the colony. The Virginia assembly encouraged him to open an office there, which he did in 1730. For several years, he printed for both the Maryland and Virginia governments. In 1737, Parks gave up his Maryland business and moved his entire shop to an office on Duke of Gloucester Street in Williamsburg, where Virginia’s capital had moved in 1699. Annapolis got a new printer, Jonas Green, in 1738.\(^5^4\) The government in Virginia paid Parks an annual salary of £120, later increased to £200, for his official printing duties. These included printing the collected laws of the colony, and regularly printing and distributing Journals of the House of Burgesses. The printer had to be educated enough to read, write, and edit a newspaper, yet he was also a mechanic in a very hands-on trade. The print shop was a busy center of colonial commerce, housing printing presses, a bookbindery, a bookstore, and the post office.\(^5^5\)

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\(^5^3\) Warner, in “Res Publica,” 40-46, has an excellent discussion on this pamphlet and the transition it marks, from private exchanges to public discourse on political matters.

\(^5^4\) Green was from a distinguished line of printers, descending from Samuel Green who in 1649 became the second British-American printer in Massachusetts.

A printing house was a major investment for colonial America and it was a key to the spread of a newly emerging commercial marketplace. Most colonial print shops had one or two “Old English Presses,” several sets of type, at least one journeyman, one apprentice, and perhaps several more employees. At one point, Parks had at least seven men working at his shop, including one indentured servant and two slaves; one for printing, another for bookbinding. At his death, Parks’ shop sold for £288 sterling, or £313 local currency, and it was apparently a large, well-equipped shop, with as many as three presses. The process of printing was a labor-intensive task, with a press little changed since Gutenberg’s invention. Workers made ink by boiling together lampblack and flaxseed or linseed oil, a dangerous and dirty job that had to be done outdoors. Two people could turn out up to 2400 sheets with each sheet printed on twice during the course of a long day. The motion of the workers was broken down and structured in a surprisingly modern way. The printing press is


58 Lampblack is the soot derived from carbon smoke, usually created in a special house. Pennsylvania’s Benjamin Franklin often sold this to other colonial printers. Wroth, Colonial Printer, 115-119.

59 Wroth, Colonial Printer, 69-80.
considered the first method of mass production. Its output was a large number of consistent commodities and, “the assembly line of movable types made possible a product that was uniform and as repeatable as a scientific experiment.” The press made books and other printed material, “the first modern-style, mass-produced, industrial commodity.” As such a commercial product, the book and the spread of printed material was closely tied to mercantile capitalism and was a key aspect of a “consumer revolution” taking place in the British-American colonies in the eighteenth century.

Although printing began as a government-sponsored and government-controlled operation, it became more of a commercial business as time passed. Government support was crucial for the establishment of the first printing operation in each of the British-American colonies, but commercially competitive presses came earlier to the larger urban centers in the colonies to the north of the Chesapeake. Cambridge, Massachusetts had a second press by 1665, which was soon relocated to Boston. Philadelphia had a printing press by 1685, a second press by 1723, and Benjamin Franklin and a partner started a third press in 1728. New York had its first press in 1692, and a second by 1726. Without a large, urban, commercial business center, printing in the colony of Virginia came later, required continued government support, and competition in the field did not come until

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after the mid-eighteenth century. As demand for printed products increased, a print shop became less a branch of the government, and more an independent, commercial establishment.

Changes in the availability of supplies made printed products less expensive and more accessible in eighteenth-century Virginia. Such improvements brought the influences of print culture to larger numbers of people, farther down the economic scale. The press itself and the type were expensive and had to be imported from Europe, with little change in cost or availability during this colonial period. The paper to be printed upon was also expensive as it could only be manufactured from linen rags. The quality paper needed for books and other fine printing had to be imported from Britain or Holland. Newspapers and lower quality pamphlets and almanacs were printed on lesser quality paper, still made from linen rags, but often imported from Philadelphia. By 1744, Parks had built a paper mill in Williamsburg with both financial and technical help from Franklin. Parks asked the public to help in collecting the needed rags in an advertisement: "The Printer hereof; having a Paper-Mill, now at work near this City, desires all Persons to save their old Linen Rags, for making Paper." He promised from half a penny to two pence per pound, depending on the quality. Locally manufactured paper cut down on expensive shipping costs, and by making it himself, Parks further reduced the cost. While press and type remained expensive, the lower cost of paper no doubt made it possible to increase the amount of printed material, making it more available to more people, including those who could not afford expensive, imported books.64

Determining just who could read those books several centuries in the past is problematic. Some efforts have been made to determine who could sign their name

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64 Wroth, Colonial Printer, 89-133. Details of this paper mill are sketchy, but Parks sold paper to Franklin as early as 1744, Parks’ executors sold the mill in 1752. The paper was not the finest quality. Some suggest the mill was still operating in 1770. Rutherford Goodwin, The William Parks Paper Mill at Williamsburg (Lexington, VA: Journalism Laboratory Press, Washington and Lee University, 1939). Virginia Almanack … 1749 (Williamsburg: William Parks, 1748). Paper and ink technology and cost did not have any major changes during this period.
on legal documents, but that technique is only partly successful in determining who
could write. It tells us little about who could read, as reading is a type of literacy
entirely separate from writing. As Eisenstein suggested, “It is wise to sidestep
problems associated with literacy rates whenever possible since inadequate data and
uncertain criteria make all general statements suspect. Hard evidence for the
interval before the eighteenth century is not only scarce, it tells us only about
learning to write rather than learning to read—let alone learning by reading.”65 The
same problems exist in the eighteenth-century British-American colonies, where
the skills of reading and writing were taught independently. Children were often
taught to read, and then sometimes—but not always—were taught to write later.66
The typical measurement by modern historians is made by looking at who signed
court records, a technique that tells us more about writing than it does about
reading, and one that is replete with inherent bias.67

While literacy in England was high compared to continental Europe,
literacy in New England is thought to have been even higher. British-American
colonists were more literate at the beginning of the eighteenth century than any
European population, with the possible exception of the Scots.68 Literacy in the
Chesapeake colonies is estimated to have been somewhat lower than that in both
England and New England.69 One study of records puts men’s literacy at about 65

65 Eisenstein, Agent of Change, 414.
66 Hall, Cultures of Print, 124-125, notes that “literacy” was relative to the specific situation,
and some individuals who could read and write at home, might sign a court document with an
“X,” thus being counted as illiterate in historical estimates. The word “literacy” can be confusing,
as it generally intertwines the ability to read and write, which are separate skills. While some
estimates of writing literacy have been made, numbers for reading literacy are more difficult to
assess. (See Hall, Cultures of Print, 79-96.) The relationship between printing and literacy is also
problematic, with some theorizing printing as the cause of rising literacy, see Winton, “Richard
Steele, Journalist—and Journalism,” 21-23.

67 See Chapter 5 on women and literacy specifically.
68 Richard Brown, Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-
percent and women’s about 30 percent in the latter half of the seventeenth century, while another suggests the rates are about 5 percent lower. In the early eighteenth century, the elite colonists are thought to have been entirely literate, while overall rates for men rose to roughly 65-70 percent and rates for women may have actually declined to about 27 percent. These rough estimates are based on signatures in court records, so one may assume that ability to read is even higher, albeit impossible to determine with any precision.\(^70\)

An increase in reading ability is also reflected in the number of books sold. One estimate is that twenty thousand books were imported into Virginia alone in the seventeenth century, and that perhaps one-third to one-half of all Chesapeake settlers actually owned books. That pace picked up in the next century, with 40 percent of all books shipped from Britain to the colonies going to Virginia.\(^71\)

The expanding print culture combined with education appears to have helped erode the social hierarchy. Our farmer’s son, Devereux Jarratt, is a good example. Learning to read was difficult, but could be accomplished by a poor, yet enterprising individual. He attended some neighborhood schools from age 8 or 9 until he was 12 years old. After that, he learned more reading, writing, and mathematics on his own, until he found an elite patron for further studies. In the process, he became an educated man and rose above his “poor farmer” roots.\(^72\)

Jarratt was not unique in learning to read and rising from his lowly social status. He was part of what scholars allude to as a “printing revolution” in the colonies in the

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\(^72\) Jarratt, *Life of the Reverend Devereux Jarratt*, 5-82. See also Rawson, 29-31.
mid-to-later eighteenth century. The increase in printing, literacy, and available reading materials indicates a cultural shift, which may also be seen as blurring the social hierarchy. Due to education, our extremely deferential young boy had now become a minister and part of the elite himself. The spread of printed materials did sometimes lead to unforeseen consequences.

The primary purpose of bringing printer Parks to the colony was to print laws and other legal documents. He mostly produced government publications, religious works, and an occasional pamphlet. The official output of the press included the Journal of the House of Burgesses and compilations of Virginia Laws, supplemented by occasional pamphlets on court cases, and miscellany such as the William and Mary College Charter. Government officials used printing to legitimize their political authority. “Publishing” once meant reading aloud or writing down by hand. In England, royal proclamations that predated parliamentary laws were written by hand and merely fixed to walls and other public places. By the 1480s, laws were compiled, indexed, and printed. These are important changes with broad implications. Civic order was best maintained when the laws and legal precedents were widely publicized, and while scribal documents were helpful, printing could spread them more widely, and with fewer discrepancies. One could see, for the first time, the history and evolution of laws, with numbered pages and indexing making the laws much more accessible. A printed document was less easy to alter or forge than was a hand-written one. Governors, legislatures, and the governed found security and legitimacy in printed documents that they could not find in a legal system based on oral or manuscript laws.

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74 Hall, Cultures of Print, 100-105, 124-5. Eisenstein, in Printing Revolution, 79-84. This use of print was not strictly limited to rulers; as shown earlier, the rebels in Maryland had Nuthead
Whatever the original intent, printing substantially altered the relationship between the people and their government. This change had serious implications for civic discourse and public involvement in the governing of the colony of Virginia. In a smaller, simpler Virginia, the colony’s laws were read aloud at the beginning of each court session, and then they were distributed in manuscript form with limited circulation. These hand-written copies of the law were the responsibility of the clerk of the assembly, who sent them to every county, but they often had differences between copies, missing statutes, and errors. Printed material had a greater sense of political legitimacy than did simply handwritten material, which in turn had greater power of legitimacy than did simply an oral statement.

Without understanding all of these implications, the government long recognized a need to collect and print Virginia’s laws, despite not initially allowing printing to take place within the colony. Proprietary Governor Sir Thomas Dale apparently had an early set of laws printed in London in 1612. “For the colony in Virginea Britannia. Lavves divine, morall, and martiall, &c.,” were created by an executive ruling, and included punishment for not obeying the colony officers, deriding the scriptures or ministers, or slandering, detracting, calumniating, or murmuring. Displayed there was the strong connection between the state, moral codes, and the official religion.

print their declarations to prove their legitimacy. Handwritten documents did not serve the purpose with quite the same authority, although both Bacon and Governor Berkeley utilized manuscript declarations.


76 Hall, *Cultures of Print*, 104.

The first printing of an actual compilation of laws passed over multiple sessions took place in London in 1662, as requested by Governor Berkeley. Despite being reviewed and revised by the “Grand Assembly,” this printing of 138 legal acts did contain some errors, which confused the legal situation rather than set things out clearly.78 An unauthorized reprint about 1683/4 was not only rejected, but was “su’pressed” and Captain John Purvis was accused of a “Misdemeanor in presumeing to publish without License a booke of yt title and contents to ye Greate Scandall and Contempt of ye Government ...” The governor and council agreed and ordered the censorship, but the need for a compilation of laws was apparently so great that it was used anyway. This book contained very useful blank pages for writing in later acts.79 Another compilation of laws was apparently printed in London in 1727/8, but one of the first acts of new Virginia printer Parks, with the orders of the lower house, was to print an updated collection of the colony’s laws in 1733. With a printer now resident in the colony, laws were regularly printed and made available, distributed to the counties more regularly, and put on sale to the public in the printer’s office. The Journals of the House of Burgesses were printed following each session and were now more easily accessible.80

78 Francis Moryson and Henry Randolph, eds., The Lawes of Virginia Now in Force: Collected out of Assembly Records, and Digested into one Volume ... (London: E. Cotes for A. Seile, 1662).

79 Journals of the House of Burgesses (Jamestown: April 26 and April 29, 1684), 47. Also see Hall, Cultures of Print, 110-112, and “Some Virginia Law Books in a Virginia Law Office,” The Virginia Law Register, new series, vol. 12, no. 2. (June 1926), 74-84. The word “yt” is an archaic version of the word “that.”
Printing the laws, Eisenstein suggested, helped to preserve them, helped to fix them, and helped to democratize them. Printed copies were distributed in greater numbers and lasted longer than did manuscripts. While errors did occur in printed collections, the errors were at least uniform, whereas in manuscripts, errors regularly crept in randomly, and no two copies were exactly alike.⁸¹ Thomas Jefferson was well aware of the preservative properties of print. In researching the laws of Virginia, he discovered that many of the old laws had already been lost. His solution was not to store ancient manuscripts on locked shelves, but rather to spread printed copies of the historic records. He noted that printed copies of law not only helped to preserve the records; it also was democratizing to have multiple copies in distribution. As he wrote, “Has there ever been one [a law] lost since the art of printing has rendered it practicable to multiply & disperse copies?”⁸²

Perhaps of even greater significance was the influence of writing (versus oral communication) and later printing upon the way that people thought about the laws. Indexing became more common with printed works. That was important in that it organized and made information more accessible. In essence, it changed the logic of rational thought; helping people to think more linearly, allowing for


building new ideas on the foundation of past ideas.\textsuperscript{83} The first printed edition of Virginia laws had a simple index, although it was instead called a “table.”\textsuperscript{84} When first compiled and printed locally, the compilation of laws had a complex index that included a catalog designed to help the reader use the subsequent “Table to the Laws of Virginia,” which was the actual index. While a bit complex, this did allow for use of the compilation without the need to be familiar with every single page or law, a great improvement over earlier collections. With only a basic legal knowledge, a person could now look up just what they needed to know. Prior to indexing, one would be forced to read through all of the laws. The emphasis shifted from oral communication, to written, and then to printed communication, seen here in the shift from laws passed only by word of mouth, to laws written down, and then to laws being printed. With this shift comes a change in the way that people think about the laws. More people could be aware of the content of and alterations to the laws. Thinking about them became more literal, more linear, and more similar to what we consider logical today. With laws more accessible, discussion about such legal issues could involve greater numbers of people.\textsuperscript{85}

Printing was brought to the colony to help the government distribute its laws, to help the leaders maintain control over the population, and to enhance their power.\textsuperscript{86} Parks obviously had the support of the governors as well as the assembly.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{83} Written words are literal, sequential, and logical. By comparison, oral thought is simultaneous, immediate, and analogical. When ideas are written down, each new idea builds on previous ideas using a systematic logic more linear than that of non-literate cultures. Paul Grosswiler, “Jürgen Habermas: Media Ecologist?” ed. Donna Flayhan, \textit{Proceedings of the Media Ecology Association, Volume 2, Second Annual Convention, NYU, June 2001}, Media Ecology Association, 25. History as we practice it is based on the linear, written word, making it particularly difficult for historians to perceive the changes wrought by changes in media. See McLuhan, \textit{Gutenberg Galaxy}, 1-15.

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Laws of Virginia} (London, 1662).

\textsuperscript{85} Eisenstein, \textit{Printing Revolution}, 69-82. See also Ong, \textit{Orality and Literacy}, for writing and printing changing the logic of thought, and the new linearity of thinking.

Governor William Gooch was the author of several of the earliest Virginia prints by Parks, including speeches before the House of Burgesses. One of the first known works of the Virginia press is *Typographia. An Ode, on Printing. Inscrib'd to the Honourable William Gooch, Esq.* by J. Markland. It is a celebration of the art of printing and of governance by Gooch and the King. In dedicating the work to the governor, the deference is apparent, and the author credits Gooch with bringing the art of printing to the colony:

From whom Virginia's Laws, that lay  
In blotted Manuscripts obscured,  
By vulgar Eyes unread,  
Which whilome scarce the Light endur's,  
Begin to view again the Day,  
As rising from the Dead.  

By printing the laws, instead of merely distributing manuscript copies, this early pamphlet recognized they would now be more readily available to more people. Ancient laws were brought back to life by printing; it brought order out of confusion. Printing brought learning, this ode claimed, detected the gloss of errors, and functioned to circulate royal power. While the author saw the printing of laws as advancing royal power, and the authority of the governor, it appears that—at least in the long term—he would be proved mistaken.

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87 From 1714-1768, resident governors (technically lieutenant governors) ruled while the actual royal governors were absentees merely collecting the salary. William Gooch, Alexander Spotswood, Robert Dinwiddie, and Francis Fauquier are each referred to here and in contemporary writings as “governor,” when in fact they were lieutenant governors acting as governor.

88 *Typographia,* (Williamsburg: Parks, 1730). J. Markland is identified as John Markland by several sources; see Berg, *Williamsburg Imprints,* 1-3. “Whilome” presumably is an alternative spelling for “whilom,” now an archaic word meaning “having once been” or “one-time.”

89 Eisenstein, in *Printing Revolution,* 79-84, notes that printed laws meant that, for the first time, lawyers could actually know what the law said, and this had great effect on the evolution of law. Legal precedents become more difficult to break. She refers to this influence as the fixity of
The introduction of printing had obvious implications for making the government more visible to the public, but it also influenced more complex, longer-term shifts of power. As economic historian Harold Innis noted, changes in media affected changes in the monopoly of knowledge, and the structure of power in a society. Laws that were written by hand were less elastic than their oral predecessors, and supported the aristocracy. Once put on paper, they were even more difficult to avoid or change without drastic power shifts, and they tended to reinforce the current power structure. “Written codes not only implied uniformity, justice, and a belief in laws but also an element of rigidity and necessity for revolution and drastic change.”90 Oral-based laws were adaptable to gradual change, while written laws require more abrupt, revolutionary alterations. Innis suggested that the rise of print and the transition from manuscript laws to printed laws made lawyers more influential; politics took on a new importance, which eventually strengthened the concept of representative government. The power of aristocracy gave way to the power of elected assemblies, he suggests, aided by the power of print. These conclusions were drawn from his careful analysis that the transition of media, from clay tablets to parchment to paper, led to varying emphasis on time and space, resulting in alterations in political structure. Paper, for example, led to centralized administration over a wider geographic area, as it was lighter and could travel farther, although it was not as permanent as stone or clay tablets. Parchment and manuscript forms led to domination by the church rather than state, he suggested. Printing led to use of the vernacular language instead of Latin, decreased the authority of the written word, emphasized authority of the printed word, and undermined church control. Any new medium influences and changes the printed texts. While printed texts may also contain errors, there is at least a consistency in error, rather than various manuscript versions leaving some laws out and having different errors.

90 Innis, Bias of Communication, 7.
monopoly of power.\textsuperscript{91} An increase in printing in Virginia can be seen in this light as first weakening religious authority and strengthening the civil, then helping the shift in power from the governor to the lower assembly. Increased printed material and an increased visibility of laws and the workings of the government led to an increased and broader civic discourse, helping to lead in a shift in power from the governor to the assembly.\textsuperscript{92}

In addition to the laws, Parks printed other material that helped to spur public discourse. The burgesses would occasionally order a sermon printed and the printer also published other religious works, devotionals, and prayer books. While most books were imported from England, Parks did print some short books, including \textit{Every Man His Own Doctor: or, the Poor Planters Physician \ldots} in 1734 by Virginia author John Tennent.\textsuperscript{93} In it, the writer described the symptoms of common illnesses and injuries and their suggested treatments, including the use of rattlesnake root to treat pleurisy. He recognized that a cancerous lump must be cut off, and then advocated soaking the wound in a solution made of boiled sassafras and dogwood root.\textsuperscript{94} Such a locally written and produced book on medical problems commonly encountered in the colony helped to spur thought and discussion on local treatment. Parks also published more popular prints, which helped to bring civic discussion to larger groups of people further down the social strata. He printed a joint \textit{Virginia and Maryland Almanack} for 1732, and we know that by 1741, he published a \textit{Virginia Almanack}. No almanacs or printing records for the intervening years are extant.\textsuperscript{95} Parks began printing the weekly newspaper, the

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Ibid.}, 7, 143-167.

\textsuperscript{92} Greene, \textit{Quest for Power}, sees this power shift, but does not recognize how print itself contributed to it.

\textsuperscript{93} Berg, \textit{Williamsburg Imprints}, preface-40.

\textsuperscript{94} Tennent, \textit{Every Man}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Williamsburg: William Parks, 1734), Berg, \textit{Williamsburg Imprints}, preface-40.
Virginia Gazette, on August 6, 1736. All of this material helped to bring print culture and the discussions it spurred to broader segments of the population.96

As print culture became more important in the colony, the printers sometimes found themselves in the middle of disputes involving the governing elites. In March 1748/49,97 the burgesses demanded the council allow House members to examine the Journals of the Council to determine how they had proceeded on the division of two counties, Orange and Goochland.98 Council refused the request and sent back a message, “That we expected a Message from your House to inform us that a Committee was appointed for that purpose [to search Council’s Journals], before we permitted our Journals to be searched.”99 The burgesses angrily responded:

95 James Adam Bear and Mary Caperton Bear, A Checklist of Virginia Almanacs, 1732-1850 (Charlottesville: Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1962), and Berg, Williamsburg Imprints, 1-26, have the most complete list of almanacs and imprints in general for Virginia. Only one copy of John Warner’s, The Virginia and Maryland Almanack … 1732 (Williamsburg: William Parks, 1731) exists, at J. Carter Brown Library, and it lists printing offices in Virginia and Maryland, but is thought to have been printed in Williamsburg. Park’s Almanac for 1741 (published 1740) only exists in a fragment at the Library of Congress, Rare Books Reading Room, and is confirmed to be Parks’ only by his ad for books at the end. It is not clear if both Maryland and Virginia are in the title as there is no title page extant. This issue is not listed in the above bibliographic works.

96 McMurtrie, Printing United States, 284.

97 This incident began in March 1748, according to the old, Julian calendar. Great Britain, including the colonies, did not adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1752. This has led to great confusion for historians, as the Julian New Year did not begin until March 25. Specific dates in the old system will be written thus: March 20, 1748/49, to indicate old style/new style.

98 The terms “House of Burgesses” and the “Lower House of Assembly” were used interchangeably. The “Governor’s Council” was also referred to in contemporary legal documents as the “King’s Council in Virginia,” and the “Council of Virginia.” This upper house shared legislative, administrative, and judicial power with the governor, and while the governor could nominate them, they were appointed by the King. Members of the council were often simultaneously burgesses and council members. Richard L. Morton, Colonial Virginia (Chapel Hill: Published for the Virginia Historical Society by the University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 2:411-413.

Resolved, That it is the undoubted Right of this House to search the Journals of the Council, as to their Proceedings upon any Bills or other Matters, sent from this House to the Council.

Resolved, That the Council's ordering their Clerk to refuse the Committee appointed by this House to search their Journals, as to their Proceedings upon the Bill, For Dividing the Counties of Orange and Goochland, is a Violation of that Right, an high Infringement of the Privileges of this House, and tends to interrupt that Union and Harmony which ought ever to subsist between every Branch of the Legislature.¹⁰⁰

While they passed the bills in question, realigning the borders of the two counties, the two houses continued the dispute.

The next move put printer Parks right in the middle of the power struggle. Council decided to take the argument public via the newspapers, and delivered to the printing office an order to publish their next response in the Virginia Gazette. What Parks’ assistant had printed in his absence, but apparently had not yet distributed, were these “heated resolves” against the burgesses. Parks saw this would cause trouble with the burgesses, who voted his salary, so he went before the council and explained he had been threatened with both arrest and a loss of his salary if he complied with council’s orders. They refused to back off, and again ordered him to publish. The next gazette came out without the resolves, and the council demanded his appearance and asked why Parks had failed to comply. Governor Gooch had commanded him to defer publication, but several months later Parks petitioned the council with an apology, and forty copies of the resolves. These accused the burgesses of acting contrary to “ancient, decent, and establish’d Methods,” forcing the Councilors to the unusual method of airing their grievances in the newspaper: “the Council find themselves under the unpleasing Necessity of publicly vindicating the Legality of their Proceeding, which has been reflected upon with such mistaken Heat, and unparrallel’d Severity.” At that, the House of Burgesses brought Parks in custody before them, to answer “for printing and publishing in the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 2:337.
said Paper a malicious and scandalous Libel highly and injuriously reflecting on the Proceedings of the House of Burgesses ...” The lower house accused the council of actions, “unparliamentary and beneath the character assumed by the Council, to have their proceedings printed in a common news-paper.” When the council backed up Parks, confirming he had printed the condemnation upon their orders, he was released. The governor prorogued the assembly the same day, ending the problem at least for printer Parks.\textsuperscript{101}

This dispute demonstrates a new role for the public prints and thus for public opinion, as mediator between disputes between the ruling elites. The lower house was beginning to display an independent spirit, or lack of deference to the higher officers of the Governor’s Council, and that did not sit well with the councilors. When two groups of the governing elite could not agree with each other, they turned to printing their dispute in the newspaper. The council took the unprecedented step of appealing to public opinion, beyond the elite rulers, by publishing the dispute.\textsuperscript{102} This is a marked difference from earlier consensus-style governance with the typical settling of any inter-governmental disputes in private. Increasingly, those who governed were turning to the public for validation and support. This also displays an erosion of political deference, as the popularly elected burgesses deferred not to the elite council, but rather to the larger, more common public. When the two sides had only one public printer, he got caught in the middle, and his income was directly threatened. As Stephen Botein noted, printers were primarily businessmen, not ideologues, and while dependent on government income, they had to walk a careful line, attempting to avoid controversy and

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., (March 14, 1748/9-May 11, 1749), 10:290, 291, 335-337, and 401-404. John M. Hemphill, II, “The Origin, Development, and Influence of the Virginia Gazette, 1736-1780” (research files, Virginia Gazette folder, Rockefeller Library, Colonial Williamsburg, no date given), 4-7. Morton, \textit{Colonial Virginia}, 2:504-5. The newspapers for this period are not extant, but while Morton suggests the Council’s resolve was published, Hemphill claims that it was not, at least until later.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 2:411-3
alienating anyone in power. While the burgesses voted on the printers’ pay, the governor and council also had to approve it. In this case, Parks apparently chose not to anger the burgesses by initially not publishing, and eventually managed to remain on the government payroll.

The transition of printing from an official government function to that of a consumer-oriented business is evident in the few remaining business records from the printers’ shops, and that is significant in that it enabled a broader discourse. Two extant daybooks show that customers increased faster than the population grew between 1752 and 1766. Book buyers listed in the accounts increased by 54 percent, from 256 to 395. According to an analysis by Susan Stromei Berg, the customers became less elite, and leaned more toward the middling sorts, and the spread was geographic as well as economic. Her analysis of the names, economic positions, and geographic locations of customers listed showed that more people farther from the Virginia colonial capital were also becoming involved in the world of print. The extant printing-office records make clear that the type of book being sold was changing. Fewer Bibles, prayer books, and other religious matter were listed in the journals. Even among the religious works, change was apparent. Sermons and verse by dissenting ministers were being printed and sold. In 1765, the printer sold novels, a relatively new form of book, including the erotic work, *Fanny Hill or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, by John Cleland. A new consumer marketplace was rapidly

103 Botein, “’Mere Mechanics’,” 172-3.

104 *Printing Office Journals*, Berg, “Agent of Change or Trusted Servant: The Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg Press,” (Williamsburg: Master’s Thesis, American Studies, The College of William and Mary, 1993), vi, and 30-32. While Berg compares the book sales increase to the local population, which she says increased by 16 percent, the overall white population in the state increased by 47 percent between 1750 and 1760, much closer to the sales numbers. (See population estimates in *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 2:1168. Numbers derived from British colonial office records.) However, there were a great many more merchants selling books, among other items, by this time.

105 Joseph Royle, *Printing Office Journal* (July 2, 1765), 182. See also Stiverson, “Colonial Retail Book Trade in Virginia,” 158, who notes how difficult this book was to procure, and Berg,
developing, and the commercial press was an important part of this process. Printed materials were not only a product, but they also advertised other products. Newspapers and other printed matter expanded, part of a “consumer public sphere.”

The Williamsburg print shop had become a key part of the colony’s social fabric, and it lasted through controversies both political and religious. For thirty years, Virginia had a succession of printers running the one print shop in the colony, with competition only from imports from overseas or other colonies. Parks’ employee William Hunter took over the printing business in 1750. [see Appendix for a timeline of the Virginia printers.] There was a short period without the Virginia Gazette, but it resumed in 1751. About this time, religious controversy started to appear in published pamphlets, with sermons against “new-light” evangelist George Whitefield, and for and against Separatists. After 1757, Hunter only printed what others paid for prior to publication, except for the newspaper and almanacs. When he died in 1761, his brother-in-law Joseph Royle took over the newspaper and print shop, in the joint interest of himself and William Hunter, Jr. The annual salary for Virginia’s official printer was increased to £350 in 1762, and raised again to £375 in 1764. Royle must have kept good relations with the entire government, as such pay increases had to first be passed by the House of Burgesses.


107 Daybooks, or journals from the printing offices, tell us much about what was printed, what made money, and who bought what. Unfortunately, only two such journals are extant, William Hunter’s, *Printing Office Journal* (University of Virginia Libraries, Department of Special Collections, vol. 1, 1750-1752) and Joseph Royle and Alexander Purdie’s *Printing Office Journal* (University of Virginia Libraries, Department of Special Collections, vol. 2, 1764-1766). These were a major source for Berg, *Williamsburg Imprints*, and the subsequent Berg, “Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg Press.”
approved by the Governor’s Council, and then signed by the governor himself.\textsuperscript{108} But printer Royle could not stay completely out of public controversy.

The dispute over the Two-Penny Act, also known as the Parson’s Cause, brought printing of the first overtly political pamphlets to Virginia in the mid-1750s, and caught printer Royle between the two sides. This dispute between burgesses and Church of England ministers over pay produced some sharp attacks, with Burgesses Landon Carter and Richard Bland on one side, and Reverend John Camm on the other. Bland wrote the Virginia legislation, which passed in 1755 and—in effect—negated a pay raise for the clergy when the price of tobacco rose.\textsuperscript{109} While the British authorities eventually disallowed this, it was a controversial act and created a considerable split in local public opinion. Carter paid for the printing and sold some of his own writings, including one entitled, “Rector Detected.” His diary noted, “Printer sent me up 50 copies of my Pamphlet [Rector Detected] against Cam [sic]. Sent 18 over to [shopkeeper] A. Ritchie to sell at 15d. each.” Royle published two pamphlets from the burgesses, and then refused the first of Camm’s responses, apparently because the pamphlet was considered too inflammatory. It sharply attacked the burgesses, the source of Royle’s annual salary. With no available outlet in Virginia, Camm instead turned to the Maryland press and got his response published in Annapolis.\textsuperscript{110}

It became something of a tradition in Virginia to turn to Maryland to print what could not be published in Williamsburg. This was a transatlantic phenomenon, similar to what was happening in Europe. Writers in countries where

\textsuperscript{108} Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 10: 11, 22, 38, 158-9, 164-6, and 221.

\textsuperscript{109} The pay of Virginia ministers had been written into law in pounds of tobacco, rather than in rare currency. When tobacco prices tripled, the Virginia legislature passed a law allowing tobacco debts to be paid in currency at the former equivalency, in essence cutting back what would have been a pay raise for the clergy.

\textsuperscript{110} Botein, “ ‘Meer Mechanics’,” 169, noted that while Annapolis printer Joseph Green had no problem printing anything critical of Virginia authorities, he could not print anything critical of the Maryland proprietors or leading families.
the press was tightly controlled would turn to nearby nations where controls were looser, or where it served the censors’ purposes to print what was forbidden elsewhere. For example, books banned in France were regularly printed in Holland or Switzerland and smuggled across the border.\footnote{See, for example, Robert Darnton, The Literary Underground of the Old Regime (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), vi. Eisenstein, Agent of Change, 410-421, and Jeremy Popkin, “The Prerevolutionary Origins of Political Journalism,” The French Revolution and Intellectual History, edited by Jack Censer, (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1989), 117.} In the appendix to his pamphlet, Camm accused Royle of refusing to publish his response, “shew[ing] beyond Contradiction, that you want either the Inclination, or the Permission, to keep a Free Press.” Royle’s response was that it would be very imprudent of him to print criticism of the General Assembly, “it is my Duty, as Printer to the Public, studiously to avoid giving Offence to the Legislature.” Royle did print Camm’s next two pamphlets. Royle’s records show that he profited more on Camm’s two pamphlets than on the two written by Carter and Bland. Overall, seven pamphlets were published regarding this dispute; six were printed in Williamsburg, one in Annapolis.\footnote{Royle to Camm, Williamsburg, Aug. 1, 1763, quoted in John Camm, Single and Distinct View of the Act, Vulgarly entitled, The Two Penny Act… (Annapolis: Green, 1763), Appendix, 47, Landon Carter, The Diary Of Colonel Landon Carter Of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778, ed. Jack P. Greene (Charlottesville: Published for the Virginia Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1965), entry for Monday, March 19, 1764, 261. Royle’s Printing Office Journal, Cynthia Stiverson and Gregory Stiverson, “The Colonial Retail Book Trade: Availability and Affordability of Reading Material in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” in William Joyce, David Hall, Richard Brown, and John Hench, eds., Printing and Society in Early America (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), 151 and 158-9, and Berg, “Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg Press,” 52-59.}

Starkly displayed here was the conflict between two views of the press. The first perspective, demonstrated here by printer Royle, was one of his press as a subservient agent to a controlling government. Early colonial printers managed to stay in business only by remaining as neutral as possible, and were rarely critical of the government in power.\footnote{Starkly displayed here was the conflict between two views of the press. The first perspective, demonstrated here by printer Royle, was one of his press as a subservient agent to a controlling government. Early colonial printers managed to stay in business only by remaining as neutral as possible, and were rarely critical of the government in power.\footnote{See, for example, Robert Darnton, The Literary Underground of the Old Regime (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), vi. Eisenstein, Agent of Change, 410-421, and Jeremy Popkin, “The Prerevolutionary Origins of Political Journalism,” The French Revolution and Intellectual History, edited by Jack Censer, (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1989), 117.} The second view, shown here by Pastor Camm, was...}
that of a press that should contain and encourage discussion of public issues, similar to the ideas expressed in the Maryland tobacco pamphlet years earlier. As Warner wrote, the cultural meaning of writing and literature was transforming during this period. The meaning of “letters” was evolving from one of privacy and religious faith into “a technology of publicity” that was civic and emancipatory. Print was a critical element of the public discourse that became the major feature of republican political relations as they later emerged in the new nation. The publishing of such political debates marked the beginning, in Virginia, of newspapers and other popular prints nudging politics out of the exclusive realm of the elite, and into a larger arena, where a wider population could read and even take part in such critical discussion. It also demonstrates the beginning of a transition for the Chesapeake area press, from one paid for and responsible to the government, towards a free press that could inspire public discourse and political involvement by a wider range of people.

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Expansion of print was closely tied both to the rise of the market economy and to an increasing public discourse. Because of this growth, there is evidence of more civic involvement by more people representing wider distribution, beyond simply the planter and ruler elite. Sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas developed a theory that is extremely relevant here, that of an expanding civic public engaging in civic discourse. Habermas focused on such discourse within physical settings such as salons, coffeehouses, and reading societies, while noting specifically

114 Letter from a Freeholder (1727), 4.
116 Barker, Newspapers, 125-127. Referring to England, Barker saw this happening in the early eighteenth century, as newspapers expanded in the wake of the lifting of license restrictions. This happened some fifty years later in Virginia, where printing came later.
that this was a reading public. The research here finds the medium of print itself as an actual forum for civic discourse, in addition to perceiving it as merely something that spurs discourse within the actual physical spaces of taverns and coffeehouses that host interpersonal conversations. This rise of civic discourse and its connection to an increasing print culture was key to the changes being observed here, changes that are consistent with Habermas’ “transformation.” The idea developed in the current work is that it was not simply the printed content providing common topics for discussion but also that the expanding medium of print helped to transform individuals and society in ways that enabled new dissenting thought and action.117

While Habermas theorized his “public sphere” as evolving in England and Germany in the eighteenth century, and did not locate these developments in the colonies, many historians of America have largely ignored that important detail. Michael Warner and others saw its equivalent in the British-American colonies, with some modifications. Discussion of political affairs had moved out of elite political bodies, into print, and from there into the taverns and streets. Elites were for the first time seen questioning and even attacking each other in the local public prints, allowing decision-making for the colony to be visible to the public for the first time. Print thus became an important element of public discourse, legitimizing such criticism of government. As print materials became more widely available and political conflicts among the elite came to be mediated by print, non-elites started to be drawn into the political debate.

Warner creatively adapted Habermas’ public sphere to colonial America, and saw a transformation in the mid-eighteenth century, consistent with the research findings here. He pointed out that technology such as print has no separate and individual agency. Rather, it operates within a cultural context, and print itself is changed just as it changes the political environment. Warner’s observations and

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117 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought)*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
ideas about the role of print within the transformation of public discourse in the eighteenth-century colonies are a crucial element of what is being theorized here. While he saw newspapers as sustaining civic discourse, the research here demonstrates that such public discourse actually took place within the public prints, more consistent with Clark’s findings. The distinction is subtle but significant, especially as this research goes beyond Warner in seeing participation by groups of people he suggested were not involved, and in pinpointing the changing media landscape as an important element of such change.118

This view—that the medium of print helped to bring more people into civic discourse—is consistent with the theories of Media Ecology. Scholars in this field view forms of communication as more than systems of transmission; they are also part of our overall environment. Many elements in the extensive complex of social and cultural conditions within which we live have an influence upon us, including the dominant forms of communication. These media are typically viewed as one of myriad influences, not as independent agents. As the dominant form of communication moved toward print, away from speech or handwriting, interconnected changes in society can also be observed. Of course, the culture never completely changed from oral-based to print-based—no culture ever has. Speech and handwriting continue to be important elements of overall communication. Such a transition to a culture dominated by print is certainly not the sole cause of such changes, but rather one agent of change among many.119


While media ecologists look at Habermas as someone who fits within their category, some do question the translation of his most famous work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. The phrase, “Bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit,” was rendered into English as “bourgeois public sphere,” but it has been argued that he meant neither a sphere nor bourgeois. The first term, “Bürgerliche,” has a larger context in German than simply “bourgeois,” as “civil” or “citizen.” The second term, “Öffentlichkeit,” more literally means “publicness.” Bourgeois, or middle class, is not a good term for the colonies where such an economic class was not fully formed. For media ecologists who view print and the thought it engenders as linear, the description of a spherical space is antithetical. Of some importance here is the view that, “literate and print culture favors the linear, detached, abstract, rational, and individual, while print culture, by extension, encourages individualism, nationalism, and democracy.”

The term, “Civic Publicness,” may be a more apt translation, although a bit awkward, and “civic public,” or “civil society” are the most usable translations. While dealing with the concept of a civic public engaging in such discourse, this study will largely avoid the term, “public sphere,” using rather the idea of an expanding public engaged in civic discourse.

Returning to Virginia, then, what can be observed here is that the small number of elite leaders who once monopolized such discourse was beginning to give way by 1760 to a larger, more literate population who read about political disputes such as the Parson’s Cause and could influence an increasingly important public opinion. Such participation in civic discourse, which was formerly was above their station, naturally contributed to a weakening of deference. This civic public, rather than Habermas’s “bourgeois public sphere,” is seen in the British-American colonies as a “republic of letters,” a more middling cultural space, with room for both elite

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121 Landsman, *Colonials to Provincials*, 30-37.
and popular prints, more driven by merchandising.\textsuperscript{122} The ephemeral press of newspapers and almanacs were at the forefront of this new market for print, and the rising influence of printers and their publications contributed to the expansion of a realm where the political issues of the day could be scrutinized and debated by elites and non-elites alike. In the next several decades, these developments would provide the basis for the emergence of a new commitment to liberty of the press.\textsuperscript{123}


Chapter 3
Chesapeake Newspapers and Expanding Civic Discourse, 1728-1764

Newspapers were an important driver of discourse in eighteenth-century Virginia. Even our unlearned farmer’s son, who later became a minister, admitted to reading newspapers in between his serious books and religious works.¹ During Devereux Jarratt’s lifetime, a transformation occurred in the character and influence of the popular press. This chapter closely examines newspapers from when they were first printed in the Chesapeake region up until the political crisis of the Stamp Act. In the first half of the century, most news came from England, and there was little local coverage or news from other British-American colonies. The social norm expressed in the articles was one of deference to religious and governmental authorities. The early concept of press freedom was extremely limited, as elucidated on the pages of the newspaper, and as exercised by editorial selection. There is evidence that royal control over the Virginia colony’s press was quite strong, forcing those with dissenting opinions to turn to the nearby Maryland press for publication. Nonetheless, the beginning of civic discourse between members of the elite is seen in the early pages of the public prints. Over time, the very existence of a local press opened up the civic arena to a broader group of people.

Changes are visible in the pages of the Virginia newspapers between the first issue in 1736 and those of the next thirty years. These are partly a reflection of transformations within the society, but they also are indicative of the newspapers’ influence upon an evolving social and political atmosphere. This character of both the Maryland and Virginia newspapers progressed over time, a development that

¹ Jarratt, Life of the Reverend Devereux Jarratt, 9.
tells much about both the way the larger society was changing and the role of the public prints as part of that transition. A shift is apparent in the sources and characteristics of the stories, as the links between colonies visibly strengthened, and the close ties to England weakened. Civic discourse can be seen in the pages, beginning with literature and then expanding, with a wider group of participants both geographically and demographically. The deferential style that predominated in early Virginia gave way as dissenting opinions became much more common—first in religion, later in politics. By the early 1760s, frustration over a lack of press freedom became evident, the key concept of liberty of the press had evolved and developed to the extent that dissatisfaction with the single, government-controlled press emerged. Careful analysis demonstrates how the public prints themselves began to set the stage for such changes. However, understanding the significance of these changes requires an understanding of the newspapers themselves.

Early Newspaper Form

Newspapers were critical to the colonial printers' financial viability and were considered a vital tool for political propagandists of the American Revolution. They were an important means of spreading print culture and political discourse to a wider range of people. Despite that, colonial newspapers are poorly understood.\textsuperscript{2} Modern day assumptions about the newspapers often cloud views of early America as seen through those pages. How a newspaper was laid out by the editor and read by the reader has changed considerably since the eighteenth century. Many historians read and interpret colonial newspapers as if they had the same structure as

today's papers, but they were much different. While modern newspapers are laid out so that the most important story is the most highly visible, and the content is summarized in a line or two, eighteenth-century newspapers had no headlines and no concept of a lead story. While modern readers may scan a newspaper, reading in detail only items of interest, the colonial printers appear to have designed the newspaper to be read completely, from top to bottom. Newspapers followed the form of books. The reader reads straight through, not skimming or skipping stories. There was no modern concept of the "inverted pyramid," where a news story begins with the most timely and essential matter. Important news often appeared at the end of the story, rather than at the beginning. No summary appeared at the top. The stories began with a dateline: a city and a date that typically noted when the news had arrived and from where rather than where it actually occurred. Understanding the sources of news—where it came from, how information arrived, how long it took to travel, and how it was ordered and structured on the pages—helps make sense of the changes that took place, and what they mean. The Virginia Gazette claimed to contain "the freshest Advices, Foreign and Domestick," but the news was far from fresh. In the 1730s and 1740s, the stories focused on Europe rather than local or colonial news, and the audience was elite.

3 See for example, Eric Burns, Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), where he criticizes selection of the lead story, 136 and 218, or J. A. Leo Lemay, “Robert Bolling and the Bailment of Colonel Chiswell,” Early American Literature (1971) 6:106, where he refers to a letter printed on page one of Purdie & Dixon's Virginia Gazette of July 11, 1766, as if that placement indicated importance. Other examples are too numerous to include. Some other historians do get it right.

4 Barker, Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 44, recognizes many differences in structure.

5 William F. Steirer, "Riding ‘Everyman’s Hobby Horse’: Journalists in Philadelphia, 1764-1794," in Newsletters to Newspapers, Bond and McLeod, eds., 263-269. For example, the Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg: William Parks, Aug. 21, 1746), 2, has an item, “London, May 8. They write from Hamburg, that his Prussian majesty ...” The story from Hamburg is datelined London, as that indicates it was sent to Williamsburg via London.

6 Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg: Parks, Sept. 10, 1736), 1. (The oldest extant Virginia Gazette.)
The earliest Chesapeake printers modeled their newspapers after their English predecessors. The British prints were the major sources of stories that were then reprinted in the colonial newspapers, thus they focused largely on European rather than local news. The 1728 issue of the *Maryland Gazette*—the oldest Chesapeake region newspaper still known to be in existence—began with a short translation of a Latin verse on man’s ignorance of his own worth, followed by nearly two pages of a locally written literary essay, “designed for the Entertainment of the Fair-Sex.” The stories then continued with “Foreign Affairs,” which included the torture of a Russian prince suspected of theft, a flood on the River Dee, and the story of a 140-year-old cat in Wales. Almost half of the news was from Europe, mostly about England, with little news from other colonies. The oldest extant *Virginia Gazette* also began with a literary essay, and not until the second page was what we may recognize as “news,” the threat of war between Russia and Turkey. Eighteenth-century

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newspapers were not very accurate. Rather than written by professional journalists, most of the items came from other newspapers or were taken from letters: “Newspapers were less purveyors of information that had been screened and tested for its veracity than a forum for accounts provided by readers and correspondents.” On the last page was local news of the reelection of a burgess whose election had been declared void, and an item on an anticipated cider shortage, “the Apple-Orchards having generally fail’d.” Local and colonial news made up about ten percent of the total content in this newspaper.

A written introduction to this first Virginia newspaper outlined from the beginning the characteristics the printer wished his prints would demonstrate, including the fact that public discourse would be on display:

The Design of These Papers, is to inform the Readers, of the most material Occurrences, as well of Europe, and other Foreign Parts of the World, as of these American Plantations; which relate to Peace and War, Trade and Navigation, Changes of Government, Parliamentary Affairs, … by which the Readers may be improve’d, amus’d or diverted: which I shall faithfully collect, as well from the Public Prints, which I have ordered to be transmitted to me, from several Parts of England and the American Plantations, but all Opportunities, as from the private Accounts I may receive from my Correspondents … Letters, Poems, Essays, Translations, &c. which may tend to the Improvement of Mankind in general or the innocent Diversion or Entertainment of either Sex, without Offence to any in particular, they may depend on a Place in this Paper; and their names concealed if desir’d.10

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9 Virginia Gazette, (Parks, Sept. 10, 1736), 1-4. By comparing column inches, advertisements were about 20%, European news made up about 45%, Virginia news was about 3%, news from other colonies about 7%, and literary material with no real location took 25% of the space.

10 Virginia Gazette (Aug. 6, 1736), 1:1. Although this first issue is no longer extant, this “Printer’s Introduction” from the first issue was quoted in William Maxwell, ed., The Virginia Historical Register, and Literary Companion, 6 (1853), 21-31.
Printer William Parks noted that his “occurrences” would come from Europe, other parts of the world, and lastly from the “American Plantations.” News within the colony of Virginia was not even mentioned. The stated design was to both entertain and enlighten, as are newspapers today, with both serious news and trivial diversions. Parks mentioned “correspondents,” or letter writers, who would send material from all over. He also anticipated readers of both sexes, and he invited contributions to the paper with the option of having the author’s name concealed. From the beginning the printer made it clear—with the expectation of active participation through writing as well as reading—that his newspaper was a vehicle for public discourse. He designed it to be much more of a two-way medium than do today’s publishers; he expected a great deal of reader involvement and contributions.11

These early Virginia and Maryland newspapers were published weekly, and the typical layout included a page and a half of literary matter, essays or poems, a half page or more of “Foreign Affairs,” regarding wars or European court intrigues, and a half page or more of English news, datelined London. This usually included news of the royal family, considerations in the House of Commons, and often some brief sensational items, for example, a woman who was almost hanged for being a witch because she floated in water.12 There was typically very little local news or news within the colony, but what was printed usually centered around government and shipping. Included was approximately one page of advertisements.13

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11 Parks arranged for “correspondents” in the original sense of the word, letter writers from Europe and elsewhere. See the *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis: Parks, June 9, 1730), McMurtrie, *History Of Printing in The United States*, 111.

12 *Virginia Gazette* (Parks, Jan. 20, 1738), 1.

13 Hemphill, “Influence of the Virginia Gazette,” suggests that local news spread more efficiently by word of mouth and thus did not need to be printed.
The newspapers often did not include any news from other colonies. While Parks sometimes indicated the newspaper from which he took an item, the stories often had no direct attribution to the print from which they were taken, a common practice at a time when no copyright ownership was recognized. Parks often took articles directly from the *London Gazette*, the *Daily Gazetteer*, the *Gentlemen’s Magazine*, and other London prints. The former was the official government publication, and typically focused on King, court, and foreign news from official dispatches from European capitals. “Gazette” was one of many common newspaper titles in Britain and the colonies, but due to its use by the official English paper, it often did indicate “official,” which is likely the reason for its overuse in Virginia.14 Richard Steele edited the *London Gazette* in 1707, going on

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14 By 1776, there were four *Virginia Gazettes* being published: one in Norfolk and three in Williamsburg. Governments often required the publishing of official announcements in the “Gazette,” so choosing the name may have been an important business decision. Sidney Kobre, *The Development of the Colonial Newspaper* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1960), 8, Black, *English Press*, 87-100, and the *London Gazette* (London: 1666-1778). Kobre, 179, wrote that the colony law required publishing notices in the *Virginia Gazette*, but this could not be confirmed in the *Journals of the House of Burgesses*. 
to found *The Spectator* with Joseph Addison in 1711. Their writing in general and *The Spectator* specifically were very influential in the American colonies. They created a new literary style and focused less on political and more on social behavior.\(^{15}\) By running such material, newspapers reinforced ties back to the mother country, but also brought political, social, and literary developments from London to the colonies.\(^{16}\)

Literary essays in the public prints were a key to driving the early public discourse in the Chesapeake. In their early decades, the *Maryland Gazette* and the *Virginia Gazette* were more literary in orientation than those of the other British-American colonies. Many works were taken directly from British newspapers, usually with no notation of source, but many locally written essays and poems were published as well. These items often followed the English newspaper tradition, especially the essay form pioneered by Addison.\(^{17}\) In early issues of the Annapolis newspaper, local author “The Plain-Dealer” wrote of politics, literature, and even freedom of thought: “Whereas the Man who Thinks Freely, whose Heart is set upon Truth, Doubts only in order to be Certain; removes his Doubts by Doubting; and Believes or Disbelieves a Proposition, in Proportion to the Evidences, that appear to him for it or against it.”\(^{18}\) The *Maryland Gazette* also ran a poem praising Virginia Governor Alexander Spotswood’s 1716 exploration across the Alleghany Mountains:

> This Expedition was design’d to trace

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\(^{15}\) Louis T. Milic, “Tone in Steele’s Tatler,” *Newsletters to Newspapers*, 33-45.


\(^{18}\) The Plain-Dealer [pseudo.], “No. 5,” *Maryland Gazette*, (Parks, Dec. 17, 1728), 1-2. Cook considers this essay to display the author’s “Deistic” tendencies, in *Literary Influences*, 159-160.
A Way to some yet undiscover’d Place;
And barb’rous savage Nations to subdue,
Which neither antient Greece or Rome c’re knew;
Or else Virginia’s Borders to secure
And fix the Bound of his deputed Power … 19

This verse was part of an early literary culture seen especially in Virginia, centered on both the College of William and Mary and the planter elite. 20 It certainly demonstrated extreme deference for the royal governor, giving high praise to him and his exploration. Essays by “The Monitor” appear in the early issues of the Williamsburg paper, seeming to perform a watchdog function on both Virginia and London society. The dramatic style of this author, his witty critiques of fashion and commentary have been mistaken for a reprint of an unknown English writer, but careful examination reveals local references. 21

Essay nine by “The Monitor” dealt with decorum, virtuous behavior, envy, and was a lesson in social deference, “The generous Part of Mankind, are free from Vehemence and Contention; their Behaviour modest and chaste, their Discourse easy and pleasant, void of Slander or Detraction …” 22 The Monitor’s specialty was social commentary, and the extant essays do not venture deeply into politics. This development of a literary culture in the Chesapeake colonies has not been widely recognized and is an extremely important observation regarding the development of

19 [Arthur] Blackamore, “Expeditio Ultramontana,” trans. George Seagood, Maryland Gazette (Annapolis: Parks, June 24, 1729), 1-2. The College of William & Mary was required to write and deliver to the Virginia governor two new verses in Latin each year in lieu of rent. The newspaper ran an English translation of the Latin original of the poem, written ten years before this publication, which is not extant.

20 Brown, Knowledge is Power, 62, suggests that the newspapers supplied a needed outlet for the literary efforts of the Tidewater elite.

21 Cook, Literary Influences, 179-185. For example, in “The Monitor [pseudo.], No. 17,” Virginia Gazette (Parks, Dec. 31, 1736), 1, he refers to returning to “this colony,” and later refers to the York River. Cook evaluated the literary content of the Virginia newspaper to be superior to anything else in the colonies, and perhaps comparable to London’s literature.

22 Virginia Gazette (Oct. 1, 1736), 1.
public discourse. This appears to parallel what Jürgen Habermas saw as the rise of literary culture and discourse in England and Germany. He theorized that such public discussion of literary matters prefaced the broader political discourse that eventually led to greater monitoring of state authority by the wider public. In examining the British-American colonies, Michael Warner did see a civic public developing and observed that the discourse altered radically to eventually include legitimized criticism of government. Here too, in Virginia and Maryland, the development of literary discourse is apparent; a development often discounted by colonial historians. Colonial British America was often thought not to have its own literary scene, being rather totally dependent upon the mother country for literature.23 However, we do see a local literature and discourse centered around it developing in the Chesapeake as early as the 1730s. The newspapers featured literature more than politics in the early years, and it appears this was an important precursor to the political discourse that developed later.24 As Habermas theorized, it was literary discourse that came first, setting the stage for future political discussion. Where some have suggested the colonies lacked such a literary output to spur discussion, a close look shows literary discourse in the Chesapeake colonies, predating religious and political debate.25

The contributors to the gazettes often kept their identity secret, adding to the possibility of public discourse by legitimizing participation by a wider range of people. Letter writers from within the colony or from overseas mailed their thoughts to the printer to be published. At times, letters to private parties were also published, even if not intended for such a public forum when they were written.26

23 Cook, Literary Influences, 1.

24 Copeland, Colonial Newspapers, 16.

25 Habermas, Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Warner, Letters of the Republic. Cook, Literary Influences, 1, 2, and 5, did observe the early development of literature in the Virginia and Maryland newspapers.

Rather than use actual names, many letter-writers employed pseudonyms, or wrote anonymously, as Parks had suggested in his introduction to the *Virginia Gazette*. The pseudonyms were often Greek or Latinized names, such as “Dikelphios,” or “Junius,” or a catchy phrase in English such as “Tom Tell-Truth,” or a descriptor such as “Old Sterling.” The practice served several purposes: it shielded the writer from legal action, it allowed criticism of both friends and enemies, and it protected one’s reputation. Writing for a newspaper was considered a less-than-honorable pastime.\textsuperscript{27} As Warner suggested, such pseudonymous writing removed the character of the author from consideration by the reader. What Warner referred to as the “principle of negativity,” or the negation of persons in public discourse, allowed evaluation of what was written based entirely on the quality of the writing and argument, not on the social position or reputation of the author. Political discourse had typically been limited to the elites. Pseudonymous writing opened up such discourse to a wider range of people. Warner claimed this larger “sphere” did not include women, those lacking property, or slaves.\textsuperscript{28}

Content of the early newspaper reflected the paths of trade, as that is how information—or news—arrived. The Chesapeake colonies typically exchanged goods directly with England, or with slave traders from Africa, rather than with the other colonies, and this favored the inclusion of news from England. News from outside of Williamsburg or Annapolis took a long time to make it into the newspaper pages, and this had a great deal of influence on the style of presentation and content. The papers often did not include any news from other colonies, except for an occasional note of the arrival of a new governor or an Indian atrocity. Until the middle of the century, much of the news from the other English colonies

\textsuperscript{27} *Virginia Gazette* (Parks, Aug. 6, 1736), issue # 1:1, quoted in Maxwell, Virginia Historical Register, 21-31. *Virginia Gazettes* (Parks, April 7, 1738), 1 (Purdie & Dixon, Aug. 29, 1766), 2 (Hunter, Jan. 24, 1752), 3. Mark Lipper, “Benjamin Franklin’s ‘Silence Dogood’ as an Eighteenth-Century ‘Censor Morum’,” in Bond, Newsletters to Newspapers, 73-83

arrived in the Chesapeake via London, typically taking several months. For example, one story about the death of a preacher in nearby South Carolina came only through London and was five months old.\textsuperscript{29} Another revealing example is the \textit{Virginia Gazette} of December 19, 1745. A speech to the British House of Commons that took place eight months earlier filled the first two pages. On page three, this was rather abruptly cut off with a “to be continued,” and a note that two ships had just arrived with fresh news, and that the speech would be continued in later issues. It took so long to print an entire newspaper that, while the presses could be stopped and new news inserted in the remaining pages, there was no way to reprint an entire second version. The printer simply added more recent news to the bottom of pages two and three, pages that were typically printed last. In fact, this issue had important information about the Jacobite rebellion in Scotland and Bonnie Prince Charles, yet this was “buried,” by modern standards, on the last page. This issue of the newspaper contained no news from other colonies and only a few paragraphs on local shipping.\textsuperscript{30}

Printer Parks looked back to England as the major source of his news stories and obviously made some decisions about placement within this newspaper of the information that had just come in, decisions that seem unusual today. He appeared to place the oldest of the newly arrived information first, and the most recent last, in order of occurrence, in a way that placed the most recent and important updates last. (This contrasts with the modern newspaper, which typically places the most important and most recent news first. Older information usually comes later in the story or in the paper.) Items on the latest military moves, where the rebels were, and the new commander of his Majesty’s forces were on the last page, while news that was three weeks older that arrived by the same ship appeared on the previous page.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Sept. 10, 1736), 1.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Dec. 19, 1745), 1-4. Copeland, \textit{Colonial Newspapers}, 275–6, notes that page 1 and 4 were typically printed first, with advertisements on the last page. The most current news thus ended up in the inside, pages 2 and 3.
This structure makes sense if the reader anticipated a narrative; a chronological series of events that he or she was expected to consume entirely, from front to back. Typically, “‘The freshest Advices,’ according to colonial standards, appeared on the last pages set by a colonial printer each week—pages two and three.” What little local news that was included often was near the end of the newspaper, but that did not necessarily indicate any relation to importance. The logic of the selection and order of stories elude the modern reader, yet this was the norm, not an aberration, and certainly related at least in part to the limitations of the technology and the process of printing.

In the same 1745 issue of the *Virginia Gazette*, the printer—in a rare statement of both the source of the news and the speed it took to arrive—demonstrated the fastest speed of news from the British Isles to the Chesapeake, a travel time that did not substantially change in the eighteenth century. As Parks cut off the Parliamentary speech, he noted, “Last Tuesday arriv’d in Hampton Road, the ship *Duke of Cumberland*, Capt. Aiselby, in 6 Weeks from Bristol: And the same Day arriv’d in York River, the *Monmouth*, Capt. Twentyman in 6 Weeks from Liverpool. By whom we have the printed Papers to the 24th of October; from which we collect as much of the most material News as we have room for now …” Thus, the freshest news from Britain was forty-two days old, from a fast ship just landed. The Parliamentary speech earlier in the same paper was more than eight months old. More typically, news from Europe was from three months to six months old.\footnote{\textit{Virginia Gazette} (Dec. 19, 1745), 1-4. Copeland, \textit{Colonial Newspapers}, 276.}

\footnote{\textit{Virginia Gazette} (Dec. 19, 1745), 1-4. This was faster than the typical voyage, which normally took seven to eight weeks from England to Virginia, according to Middleton, \textit{Tobacco Coast}, 7. This estimate was also verified in this research, by analyzing dates in news items, and figuring in some lag time between publication in England and shipping, plus arrival and printing in the colonies.}
Postal service was an extremely vital communications tool and was an important factor in the development of colonial newspapers.\textsuperscript{33} Most news had to come from England in the first half of the eighteenth century, as the colonial postal service was not well developed and interchange between Virginia and the middle and northern colonies took place primarily via London. This pattern contributed toward determining the European character of information in the public prints. Newspapers were sent by the same methods as private letters, either by post or by ship, thus spreading news that could be printed in other newspapers. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, letters to and from Virginia were carried primarily by ship captains who also transported tobacco to and supplies from England. An early law required each plantation along the river to pass mail on to the next settlement upriver.\textsuperscript{34} There were no direct postal deliveries from the other colonies. Early attempts to set up inter-colonial service failed to reach as far south as Maryland. By 1695, the mails extended to the Potomac River, but regular mail service from the colonies to the north still did not reach Virginia. The British Post Office Act of 1710 attempted to standardize service and raise money. Rates went up substantially with the new system. Ship captains had carried letters to England for 1 or 2 pence, but the new minimum was now supposed to be 1 shilling.\textsuperscript{35} Some Virginia residents viewed the new postal requirements as taxation without representation, as Parliament passed the new regulation without input from the colonial representatives, but the new postal act was primarily ignored in the colony. This early royal postal service was not able to extend to Virginia, as local opposition to the higher fees was too strong and the service from tobacco ships was


\textsuperscript{34} Moryson, \textit{Lawses of Virginia Now in Force} (1662), 52. This act was apparently repealed in 1705, \textit{Collection of All the Acts of Assembly … Virginia [1661–1732]}, ch. 53.

\textsuperscript{35} In the British currency of the time, there were 12 pence (abbreviated d.) to the shilling (s) and twenty shillings to the pound (£), or 240 pence to the pound.
satisfactory. Several further attempts to establish a royal mail service in Virginia in the early eighteenth-century also failed. In 1732, former Governor Alexander Spotswood became the deputy postmaster-general, but once again, Virginians generally avoided involvement in the British-American postal system, keeping to the old system and maintaining their ties back to London. Not until 1737 was the first postal service established to connect the Northern colonies with Virginia, but even then it was slow and arrived every two weeks at best.\(^{36}\) In this expanded intercolonial postal system, delivery of newspapers and letters was irregular. Deputy postmasters had arbitrary franking rights: “Letter service was slow, expensive, and erratic, and newspapers continued to be carried at the whim of the local deputy [postmaster].\(^{37}\) The tobacco ships continued to be the fastest and most efficient method of delivering news and information until after the middle of the century.

Readers of the newspapers were able to keep track of when letters or other commodities arrived by reading the shipping notices. Typically placed just before advertisements on the last pages of the newspapers were the announcements of shipping, indicating what vessel had arrived or left port and what she was carrying. The difficulty of transportation in that age is evident in one of the early Maryland Gazettes: “Last Friday Capt. Mason, in the Brigantine *Thomas and Sarah*, from Barbadoes, arrived in 30 Days, at the Mouth of our River, which was frozen so hard, that he could not come into the Cove; however, he broke his Way thro’ the Ice; (Which was Three or Four Inches Thick).” Captain Mason went on to report the loss of another ship on the way to Virginia. Most of the shipping reports were not so dramatic, but rather more specific about merchandise departing or arriving:


“Enter’d in the Upper District of James River, 1738, Oct. 23. Sloop Anne, of Bermuda … with 4 Barrels of Sugar, 3 Hogsheads of Rum…”\textsuperscript{38} “Clear’d out. June 7. Snow Phoenix, of Virginia, William Spry, Master, for London, with 204 Hogsheads of Tobacco, 5 Hogsheads of Skins, 4 Hogsheads of Ipecacuana, 1 Box of sundry return’d Goods, 6000 Staves, and 1 Hogshead of Sassafras.”\textsuperscript{39}

Following the news of shipping was another consistently local portion of the newspapers: advertisements. Parks' \textit{Maryland Gazette} typically had one-quarter to one full page of advertisements, on the last page out of four. The earliest issues still extant had only local advertisements, with none from nearby Virginia or other colonies. The cost for an ad was “Three Shillings for the first Week, and Two Shillings for every Week after.” There was often land for sale, houses for sale or lease, or a common product being offered by a local merchant: “Very good Madera-Wine, to be sold, for Twelve Pounds Sterling, or Three Thousand Pounds of Tobacco per Pipe, by Peter Hume, at London Town.”\textsuperscript{40} More striking to the modern reader are the common ads for runaways: animals, servants, and slaves. For example, “Stolen or strayed from the City of Annapolis, Two horses belonging to the Subscriber; One being a large white Horse, with a standing Mane and long Switch Tail …” or “Run away from the Subscriber, near the Upper Ferry of Sassafras, a Servant Man named Samuel Davis …” or “Run away from Samuel Peel’s Quarter … a Negroe Fellow called Lime-house, about Thirty Years old. He had on when he went away, a new felt Hat, a new grey Fear-nothing Coat …

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Jan. 5, 1739), 4.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Ibid.}, (June 9, 1738), 4. Ipecacuana is an alternate spelling of ipecacuanha, a South American plant used as an emetic.

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Maryland Gazette} (July 15, 1729), 4. Three shillings per ad was the price for both Maryland and Virginia newspapers into the 1760s. Wine was often sold by the “pipe,” the measure of a size of a large barrel of wine. Tobacco was a common currency as it was more generally available than was hard currency. “London Town” refers to a Maryland community just a few miles from Annapolis.
Advertisements for runaway slaves were one of the most common sights in these Chesapeake newspapers. When the *Virginia Gazette* began publication, there were sometimes no advertisements, typically a partial or full page of ads, rarely more than a full page. Labor was always short in this colony: “The Subscriber hereof, is in Want of Two honest Millers.” Most of the advertisements in the Williamsburg paper were from Virginia, but occasionally an ad from North or South Carolina would slip in, indicating some circulation in the colonies to the south. The earliest issues had no ads from nearby Maryland. The advertisements and shipping lists were both very closely tied to the growing commercial life in the colonies and visibly increased in size over time.

Also seen to increase over the decades was political debate, something rarely seen in the newspapers in the first half of the century. One unusual political controversy was debated within the pages of the *Virginia Gazette* in the 1730s. Dueling letters from former Governor Spotswood and Speaker of the House of Burgesses John Randolph spilled out of the assembly and into the newspaper. The acrimonious exchange was about an arms expenditure for the Brunswick militia that apparently took Spotswood six years to complete. Randolph complained that Spotswood took the debate public, “mak[ing] a Complaint to the World, in a common News-Paper,” instead of keeping the inquiry within the limited confines of the assembly. Spotswood’s original letter was published in Philadelphia’s *American Weekly Mercury*, and later printed in the Virginia newspaper. Spotswood argued that he had instructed his London agent to make the purchases and that interference from Randolph and later misunderstandings had delayed the purchases. Spotswood offered evidence that he requested the arms or the money returned to the Speaker.42 The dispute continued in several *Virginia Gazettes* two months later,

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41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., (Nov. 5, 1736), 2-3, See also Hemphill, “Influence of the Virginia Gazette,” 4-6.
using an additional six pages of the paper, and turning quite personal and venomous. Spotswood, in his reply, wrote to the printer that, “I hope he [Speaker Randolph] will not fall out with you, and cut off your Salary from the Assembly, if you carry back to him my Answer to his extraordinary Epistle.” Such an answer would seem to indicate former governor Spotswood’s belief that the House of Burgesses influenced the printer and what he would publish. It also demonstrates the importance of control over what could get into the newspaper. Spotswood understood that the only way to spread his message widely was through the local gazette, and that constraints on the printer might prevent him from being able to do that. The controversy continued with letters in the newspapers even after Randolph passed away the next year. Burgess Edwin Conway had a letter printed, which noted not only Spotswood’s mishandling of the money, but his continued disputes with the lower assembly while governor. Both sides appeared to turn to print to establish the legitimacy of their argument and to appeal to a wider group than simply the members of the government. While the discourse was limited to members of the ruling elite, never actually opening up to broad public participation, it was a remarkable early public airing of a political dispute. That this would appear at all in the public prints was unusual, as such arguments between elite members of the political leadership rarely were published at this time. It demonstrated just how


44 Greene, Quest for Power, 289, suggests this was not actually the case, that the Governors had more control at this time than did the assembly. The Burgesses voted on the printer’s salary, but the Governor and his Council needed to approve it as well. Greene also notes, in “‘Virtus et Libertas’,” in Crow, Southern Experience, 55-59, that during and after Spotswood was a time of political harmony in Virginia, with no factions and much cooperation between the governor and gentry. (Spotswood was of course technically the Lieutenant Governor, acting as resident governor).

45 Virginia Gazette (Parks, April 22, 1737).
important the newspaper was—even in the earliest years—as a medium for political discourse.

As a driver of literary, social, and political discourse, the colonial newspapers are thought to have had an influence beyond their actual circulation, but specific numbers are impossible to determine. Circulation of the early Chesapeake-area gazettes was likely to be low. Parks asserted in an early *Virginia Gazette* that, “these Papers will circulate (as speedily as possible) not only all over This, but also the Neighboring Colonies, and will probably be read by some Thousands of People …”\(^{46}\) There are no solid records on numbers printed or total readership, something extremely difficult to calculate even with today’s newspapers and readers. The papers were apparently popular enough to be intercepted, often not being delivered to the proper customer. Issues as far back as a 1729 *Maryland Gazette* noted the problem and announced that customers’ names would now be written on the front page, and the papers would be henceforth sealed in a cover. The *Virginia Gazette* announced a similar problem and proposed solution a few years later.\(^{47}\) There were no regular government post riders until after 1753. Thus the printer—who was typically the postmaster as well—often hired riders to deliver the papers.\(^{48}\) The printer typically posted gazettes for public reading at the door of his shop. As a combination post office and store, as well as a print shop, the office was heavily traveled and posted items likely had many readers. Studying the revolutionary changes in the diffusion of information in early America, historian Richard D. Brown suggested that in the early eighteenth century, the political elite (the governor, his councilors, the members of the House of Burgesses, and their friends

\(^{46}\) *Virginia Gazette* (Parks, Oct. 8, 1736), 1.


\(^{48}\) *Virginia Gazette*, (Williamsburg: William Hunter, Dec. 27, 1751), 3, includes an apology to subscribers, noting that issues are often stolen, and blames the lack of a regular post for the problem.
and relatives) made up the majority of subscribers to the newspaper. He also notes that despite the limited circulation, the number of taverns was on the rise in colonial America, meaning there were more gathering places where such news might be discussed. Changes in transportation, new local gathering places, and changes within the newspapers themselves were all part of a larger transformation in mid-eighteenth century Virginia. Public debate is visible within the Chesapeake newspapers prior to 1750, but it was limited. Literary debate, an important preface to Habermas’ civic discourse, appeared first. By the 1730s, limited political debate is visible, but only among and between the civic elite. It was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that widespread civic discourse becomes visible within the public prints of Virginia and Maryland.

Changes: Discourse Increases and Broadens

The pages of the Chesapeake newspapers in the second half of the eighteenth century show a shift in the source of news, display an increased market economy, and include more dissenting discourse. In 1745, Jonas Green began printing the Maryland Gazette in Annapolis and—after a brief period with no Williamsburg newspaper following Parks’ death in 1750—William Hunter took over the Virginia Gazette. When the paper reappeared, there were few, and generally subtle, changes. It remained a four-page newspaper, published weekly. On the masthead, Hunter added the colony’s coat of arms, and in the back of the paper, the number of advertisements grew, sometimes filling nearly three full pages. As the market economy increased, so did the amount of advertising. More news was packed into the pages, and the location from which the news originated began to shift from overseas to more local and inter-colonial news. Political and religious discourse was more visible on the pages of the newspaper. This printed discourse was also driving interpersonal discussion in local gathering places.

49 Brown, Knowledge is Power, 18 and 62.
Both the *Maryland Gazette* and the *Virginia Gazette* evolved in size and typeface and now contained more news and advertising. The earliest gazettes consisted of four pages, each about seven and a half inches wide by twelve and a quarter inches high, with two columns of print. Although the actual page size, columns, and type size would vary with availability of paper and type, the size and number of words generally increased with time. By the 1760s, the normal page size was about fifteen by eleven inches, a considerable space increase of about eighty percent. In addition, the printer often used a smaller type font and used three and sometimes four columns, allowing for more stories and advertisements. The number of pages stayed consistent at four, but the printers published additional issues, or “supplements” to the weekly paper more often. With a local supply of paper, that expensive commodity became more readily available, and supplemental issues would also be printed to include increased news and ads.

Newspaper advertisements were an increasingly important part of the Chesapeake printers’ business and the ads and the newspapers that ran them were part of an important cultural shift towards consumerism. The ads took an increasingly larger percentage of the available space in the newspaper, even as the overall number of words printed increased. Both newspapers sometimes carried

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50 Originally, they consisted of two columns per page, but later some versions expanded to three columns, or even four columns, with a smaller type. Parks originally used a Dutch type font, but eventually switched to the more readable Caslon font. The most eye-catching aspect of both of these type fonts, to the modern reader, is the lower case “s” as in “f.” The ascending “f” was used only in the middle and end of sentences, not at the beginning, and was generally differentiated from an f by having only a half crossbar or none at all. It remained in use until about 1800. See Parke Rouse, Jr., *The Printer in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg: An Account of His Life & Times, & of His Craft* (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1955; reprint, ed. Thomas K. Ford, 2001), i, ii, and 5. (Page citations are to the reprint edition).

more than two full pages of advertisements by the mid-century. These ads were extremely important to the printers’ incomes, as actual sales of the *Virginia Gazette* were only a small part of the printers overall revenue. Hunter’s extant accounts show very little circulation income, but they also demonstrate that newspaper advertising was one of his biggest profit centers. He charged as little as 3 shillings and as much as 13 shillings to run an ad in one issue.\(^5^2\) The *Maryland Gazette* carried similar ads for similar prices, but while the Williamsburg paper rarely published notices from Maryland, the Annapolis newspaper often carried advertisements for Northern Virginia, indicating some circulation there. Ads for Fairfax County properties and house sales in Alexandria were common: “To be rented or sold in Alexandria. An Acre of Ground, or Half Acre, on the River Side, in the Middle of the said Town, whereon stands a Dwelling-House.” George Washington and George William Fairfax solicited for a builder for a new church in Truro Parish.\(^5^3\) These advertisements and the newspapers themselves are a visible indication of a “consumer revolution” taking place in the Chesapeake colonies, as in all of the British-American colonies. Newspapers were not only a commodity made available for sale, but the advertisements also were an important driver of the increasing market of consumption. As T. H. Breen theorized, newspaper marketing was an important part of an emerging realm of the consumer-based economy, one that prefaced later political discourse based on perceived threats to that consumption.\(^5^4\) Extending Breen’s recognition of newspapers as an essential part of new marketing techniques, these gazettes visibly display consumer growth. The marketing

\(^{5^2}\) Hunter, *Printing Office Journal*. See also Stiverson, “Colonial Retail Book Trade,” 145-147. Bookbinding was the largest income source, and almanac sales were also important. Hunter’s successor Joseph Royle, did not separate out advertising and newspaper sales in his account book.

\(^{5^3}\) *Maryland Gazette* (Feb. 23, 1754), 3. For other examples, see the notice on runaway servants from Belhaven (Alexandria), VA in *Maryland Gazette* (Oct. 24, 1754), 4, other houses for sale in Alexandria (Feb. 2, 1764, Oct. 2, 1764), and the church builder ads (May 17, 1764, and Oct. 24, 1765), 4.

\(^{5^4}\) Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, especially 143 and 248.
demonstrated by these advertisements is one important driver of that growth, and the growing consumer use of these public prints was an essential preface to the growing concept of press freedom. The printing process—the first form of mass production—was an integral part of and intrinsic to the beginnings of an important consumer revolution that helped bring competition and new press freedom to Virginia.

The Chesapeake colonies’ printers themselves were part of a growing middling class of tradesmen, a group with increasing influence. While Parks and his successors were educated and knowledgeable in literary matters, they were not part of the ruling elite. Printing was a hands-on craft that did not always pay well. Literacy was essential, and knowledge of literature beneficial, but printing was most often considered a trade. As Botein noted, the colonial printer was often a public person, but also considered a “meer mechanic.” The printing process was hard labor, and it could also be dirty. Pulling the press to make the impression on the page sometimes left printers with one arm longer and stronger than the other, a bent over back, a shuffling gait, and hands stained with ink. Most printers employed several apprentices and several journeymen to do the most difficult manual labor. William Parks died with an estate worth more than six thousand pounds, William Hunter more than eight thousand pounds, a substantial fortune for the eighteenth century. Printers were comparably well-educated for craftsmen. They had a great deal of contact with the educated elite, who were their main customers. As Jeffrey Pasley suggested, middling printers did have influence,

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55 Botein, “‘Mere Mechanics’,” 162-163.


eventually gained in power, and later became key players in both informal national politicization and formal political party organization.\textsuperscript{58}

No clear figures exist to determine just how many people the newspapers reached or whether circulation increased. There is evidence that, by mid-century, newspapers—and the civic discourse they spurred—were more pervasive. Williamsburg printing-office account books, covering about four years in the 1750s and 60s, unfortunately do not provide a complete picture. We do know the printers had trouble collecting for newspapers delivered. One analysis of these financial records assumed that subscriptions for the gazettes must have been kept in another book, no longer extant, but assumes a wide circulation.\textsuperscript{59} Other estimates range from 800 to 2,300 issues with the possibility of as many as 4,000 copies printed weekly. According to historian of printing Lawrence Wroth, one crew and one press could print 2,400 sheets of paper in a long day. As each sheet would contain two pages of the newspaper, this would mean half of the newspaper could be printed each day. (Each newspaper was actually one piece of paper, printed on four times, and folded.) This translates to just more than 2,000 copies of a four-page newspaper printed on one press in two normal working days. Parks’ shop sold for well more than the average two-press shop, so it probably had a minimum of two presses, indicating production of four thousand or more might easily be possible.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} Pasley, \textit{Tyranny of the Printers}, 24-27. Wroth, \textit{Colonial Printer}, 178, also notes that printers held “a position of influence in the community.”

\textsuperscript{59} They were sold only by yearly subscription, 15 shillings, until 1766. \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Parks, 1737), price of “15 s. per Annum” listed on page 4. Hunter, \textit{Printing Office Journal}, and Royle, \textit{Printing Office Journal}. Stiverson, “Colonial Retail Book Trade in Virginia,” 147. See advertisement for debt collection, for example, \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Royle, Feb. 12, 1762), 4.

\textsuperscript{60} Bridenbaugh, \textit{Myths and Realities}, 42, estimated the circulation of (both) Virginia Gazettes (there were two in Williamsburg from 1766 to 1775) at “probably” fewer than 1,500, but gives no basis for this estimate, and does note they were read by and to thousands more. Weir, in “Role of the Newspaper Press,” 112-113, suggests that figure is too high, and that there may have been only 800 subscribers as late as 1765. That seems too conservative. Wroth, \textit{Colonial Printer}, 66-69 and 80.
Historians assume that many people would read each copy, and that newspapers were even read aloud to family and in public spaces. David Copeland suggested that colonial newspapers’ influence was far greater than their actual circulation with the newspapers reaching “virtually all the literate persons in the colonies,” and through public readings in places such as taverns, beyond to many who could not read.61 As Roger Chartier theorized when looking at pre-revolutionary France, reading was often much more than silently reading in isolation, but often included reading aloud, reading to groups, and with those who could not read listening to the written word.62 In Virginia, with readership multiplied by posting at the printing office and posting and reading aloud in taverns and coffeehouses, the influence on public discourse likely exceeded any numerical estimate.

Taverns and coffeehouses in colonial Virginia served as physical spaces where public discourse took place, often generated by the public prints. Historian David Conroy suggested that taverns in the British-American colonies were “conducive contexts for the abandonment of deferential, flattering speech and posture” and thus functioned as centers of opposition thought and helped to break down the deferential culture. There was not enough paper, nor enough newspapers, to circulate to everyone, so people would gather around in public forums to hear the latest news. In fact, the public lounges of colonial America’s inns were even called “news rooms.” This enabled those who could not afford a yearly newspaper subscription and those who could not read at all to join in the discussion. As historian Peter Thompson concluded in his study of tavern life in eighteenth-century Philadelphia, people of different social status mingled and debated civic

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The institution of the coffeehouse was growing in popularity both in England and in the colonies. This type of gathering place also served as a forum for civic discourse. Proprietors often charged a penny for customers to come in to read the newspapers and use the coffeehouse's tobacco and pipes. Newspapers worked in tandem with such public gatherings to stimulate civic discourse.

The influence of newspapers was magnified by such multiple transmissions from reader to listener to other listeners. This “multi-step flow” of information extended and may have helped to channel the influence of print. “Opinion leaders” or “influentials” often orally retransmitted the messages they had received via print. This interpersonal communication is seen as much more influential than mass media messages, and the retransmitted messages were doubtlessly reshaped by the secondary senders. A message read in a newspaper inconsistent with preconceived opinion was unlikely to have substantial influence, but when relayed personally, by a respected person in a coffeehouse or tavern, the influence was likely to be greater. The oral retransmission of what had been printed in the newspapers may have actually increased the influence of that printed material. As Robert Weir noted, this multi-step process thus had the paradoxical effect of making the influence of the gazettes even greater than if they had a larger circulation. The civic discourse that went on in the taverns and coffeehouses had the effect of undercutting the...

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65 Habermas found the physical space of the salons and coffee houses crucial to the rise of the “public sphere.” Clark, *Public Prints*, 3-4, suggested discourse also took place within the newspapers and Warner viewed the prints themselves as the location of the discourse.
traditional power of the elites by “short-circuiting” the usual hierarchical flow of information.66 Newspapers and the civic debate that they engendered were undermining the culture of deference.

Public discourse began with literary matters, as Habermas theorized for England and Germany, but religious matters directly preceded, and set the stage for, political discourse in the Chesapeake newspapers. The debate over deism—a creator who does not directly intervene in human affairs—appeared as early as 1738, and even earlier, essays by “The Plain-Dealer” on philosophical doubting appeared in the *Maryland Gazette*. The debate over deism continued for decades, with most letters expressing disproval.67 By 1767, several angry letters claimed deists had actually torn pages out of the Bible, and one even equated Methodists with such blasphemers.68 As early as 1737, the newspapers began to take notice of the “Great Awakening” or “New Light” religious movement. The popularity of George Whitefield’s preaching in London and the fact that he would soon be traveling to the colony of Georgia was reported.69 A debate between a dissident minister and someone supporting the more traditional position of the Church of England took place on the newspaper pages in 1753. Samuel Davies requested that printer

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69 *Virginia Gazette* (Dec. 30, 1737), 4.
Hunter “be the Moderator of our debate.” The discourse appeared to broaden in both content and the range of participants in this decade, representing viewpoints more extreme, including some letters from residents well below the ruling elites. For example, in 1751, “Philo-Bombastia” joined a debate over whether religious dissenters should be taxed to support the Church of England. He “agreed with my Hybernian relation to make one in a Debate out of Doors,” using the newspaper as the vehicle of discourse. He suggested (apparently with his tongue in cheek, attempting to demonstrate that the previous writer went too far) that the colony should allow Catholics to immigrate and that the slaves should be freed. “Philo Virginia” had suggested toleration of Presbyterians would encourage needed immigrants.

Religious dissent appeared in the Virginia prints earlier than did political dissent. Religious discourse thus set the stage for later political discourse. Letters in the newspaper debating the religious leadership of the gentry, when combined with the earlier-mentioned controversy in pamphlets and the newspapers over the Parson’s Cause, support the conclusion that religious and social transformation prefaced the political change to come. One newspaper historian has gone further, suggesting that it was actually Whitefield’s visit that changed the character of colonial newspapers. Copeland argues that the coverage of the popular preacher led to the prints becoming more local and inter-colonial in nature, and helped lead to

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72 Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1999), especially 6, 264-269, and 271.
disintegration of the formerly coherent social categories. At a minimum, religious debates in the *Virginia Gazettes* did help to lessen the deferential character of the social structure, and prefaced political dissidence yet to be seen.

Another extremely important factor in the newspapers’ shift towards more inter-colonial news—and less news from England—were major improvements in the Chesapeake area postal service. Many analysts have noted that changes in transportation and postal service were key to an information revolution in the eighteenth century. In 1751, *Virginia Gazette* printer William Hunter complained that deliveries of the paper were not as efficient as they might be, “for Want of a regular Post through the Country. However, as we daily expect the Arrival of a Postmaster-General, we have no Reason to doubt, but that the Post-Office will be regulated in such a Manner as will give Content.” While inter-colonial mail had been established earlier, service was not regular and efficient until Benjamin Franklin and that same William Hunter became joint deputy-postmasters for the colonies in 1753. The post office in Williamsburg shared the space with the printing shop. The two businesses were more compatible than is readily apparent, as not only did the printer sell stationery supplies necessary for letter writing, but the post also carried newspapers from the various colonies as a sort of early wire service. Before Franklin, the post would carry these papers for free, but local postmasters would exclude the competition from the mails. Franklin opened the mail to all, but at a cost: henceforth, there was a charge of nine pence a year for each fifty miles distance of carriage for newspapers in the post. However, the new regulations did

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73 Copeland, *Colonial Newspapers*, 199, 202-203.


75 *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg: Hunter, Dec. 27, 1751), 3.

allow for a free exchange of a single copy of each newspaper between printers, thus encouraging a free flow of news and increasing the intercolonial nature of newspapers. By 1763, there were monthly packet ships from London carrying mail and overland couriers from Philadelphia through the southern colonies to Charleston. This important inter-colonial connection now meant that regular mail service between the colonies no longer had to travel all the way to England and back. By 1775, there was a weekly courier south from Philadelphia through the Chesapeake region to South Carolina. Private letters and public news were traveling at much greater speeds than they were just a half-century earlier. By the time of the political crisis of the Stamp Act in 1765, the Virginia newspaper was reporting what happened in Boston, Providence, and New York just three and four weeks after it occurred, without the news having first to travel through England. While the speed of shipping to and from England remained constant, the intercolonial mails improved: what used to take six months now took just weeks. The improvement of postal delivery within the American colonies is a key to the changes that were happening within the newspapers and overall colonial culture. By the 1750s, the newspapers included more material from the other colonies, creating stronger ties between the people of those once-distant and separate colonies. Until direct and speedy communication was established, there could have been no shared sense of crisis and no American unity or nation could have been imagined.

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77 Brown, “Post, Postmasters, and Newspapers,” 4-5.


79 Middleton, Maritime History, 7. Also verified by this research examining dates of stories in the Chesapeake gazettes.

80 Anderson in Imagined Communities referred to newspapers and novels as “print as commodity.” He understood how such printed works were essential to tying people together with a shared common language. He did not explore how an efficient post office would also bring that sense of commonality and community, and was crucial to the functioning of a newspaper.
Much of the news from and about other British colonies beginning in 1754 was about the Seven Years War, including patriotic letters on the importance of driving out the French. According to one letter writer, that war should be “always considered in a national Light, not as Virginians, but as Britons.”

Obvious from that comment is that at least some colonists were developing a sense of identity with their colony rather than their mother country. Although it is easy to assume that the increase of inter-colonial news was due to the fact that the war provided more news of fighting with the French and the Native Americans, a better answer is more complex, more multi-directional, and more related to technical improvements. Through 1752, it typically took two and a half months for news from New York or Boston to be printed in Virginia. By 1757 however, some news arrived from Boston in only three weeks, from New York in two weeks, and from Philadelphia as quickly as ten days. Not just war news, but trivial and interesting news that used to come from London, now was printed from American sources. From South Carolina, for example, came the story of a house outfitted with one of Benjamin Franklin’s “electrical Rods.” Despite the protection, lightning struck the house, the damage being caused by too small a wire grounding the charge. The war was, however, covered extensively and quickly. Just eight days after British General Edward Braddock was defeated near what is now Pittsburgh, the Williamsburg newspaper reported the disaster, with hopes that the news was false.

Historians such as Copeland suggested that news of the war and New Light religious developments led to the increased colonial character of the news in the mid-eighteenth century, but that may perhaps be an oversimplification. Postal improvements certainly would not have occurred if there had been no need for

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81 *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter, May 9, 1755), 1.

82 Few of the 1752-54 and 1756-57 *Virginia Gazettes* are extant. On lightning, see *Virginia Gazette* (Sept. 19, 1755), 2. On Braddock, see *Ibid.*, (July 17, 1755), 3.

83 Copeland, *Colonial Newspapers*, 269.
improved communication, but news stories from the other colonies could not have increased without more efficient distribution.

Public debate on political issues also became more visible during the 1750s. Many letters were less deferential to the established political leaders, and in some cases the topics were intercolonial in nature. The Virginia newspaper often carried essays by “The Virginia-Centinel,” which were well-written and widely reprinted in other colonial newspapers. Essay number 10 in 1756 was a rather veiled but harsh attack on George Washington and the Virginia Regiment he commanded, written by someone obviously not a member of the elite. The “Centinel’s” style and critical attitude toward the status quo were in marked contrast to the traditional style of the Virginia gentry, and the writing displayed resentment toward those elites. The author is thought to have been the dissenting minister Samuel Davies.84 The essay gave historical examples of armies defeated through their own enjoyment of luxury and debauchery, and then took aim at Washington and his men:

But when the Officers give their Men an Example of Debauchery, Vice and Idleness; when they lie sculking in Forts, and there dissolving in Pleasure till alarmed by the Approach of the Enemy, who could expect to find them no where else; when instead of searching out the Enemy, waylaying and surprising them, obstructing their Marches, and preventing their Incursions, they tempt them by their Security and Laziness, to come in Quest of them, and attack them in their Fortifications. — —When this is the Case, how wretchedly helpless must a Nation be? What useless Lumber, what an Incumbrance, is the Soldiery? ... But when nothing brave is so much as attempted, but very rarely, or by Accident, or for necessary Self-defence; when Men whose Profession it is to endure Hardships, and encounter Dangers, cautiously shun them, and suffer their Country to be ravaged in their very Neighborhood; then, certainly, Censure cannot be silent; nor can the Public receive much Advantage from a Regiment of such dastardly Debauchers. 85


85 “The Virginia-Sentinel” [pseudo.], Virginia Gazette (Hunter, Sept. 3, 1756), 1.
This attack so enraged Washington and his officers that both published letters of reply in the *Virginia Gazette*. Washington even considered resigning his commission. Notably, Washington was not yet the revered figure he was to become, and his clash with the French and Indians just two years earlier was considered rash and widely thought to have exacerbated the dispute.86 This incident was an important example of emerging civic discourse, where those below the level of the political elite were now visibly monitoring and commenting critically upon political matters. The Seven Years War was not simply a local or a British matter but was also inter-colonial in nature, and the newspapers of other colonies printed “The Virginia-Centinel” letters. The beginnings of a sense of American unity can be seen here.

Political disputes become more prominent in the 1755 newspapers. There was even a debate over government secrecy versus the right of the public to know. Governor Robert Dinwiddie admonished the assembly for inserting letters regarding a military expedition from the British Secretary of State into the printed minutes of the House. In the next newspaper, the burgesses replied to the governor that they could keep a necessary secret, but the letters had been sent with no such request, and it had been the custom of the house for some thirty years to print such communications. Rather than debate behind closed doors, the governor and members of the lower house thought it appropriate to publicly print in the newspaper their dispute over what the government should or should not keep secret. Public opinion and the freedom to print government documents were both becoming important factors in how the colony was ruled.87


The limits of public debate in Virginia and the growing importance of public opinion were apparent during a major political dispute in 1753-54. Governor Dinwiddie unilaterally imposed a very unpopular fee of one pistole for each land patent he signed. 88 This tax and its controversy foreshadowed in many ways the taxation disputes with Parliament of the next decade. The burgesses argued it was a tax without the consent of the representatives of the people, arbitrarily and unconstitutionally imposed by the governor and his council. While the fee was eventually eliminated, Burgess Landon Carter was forced to turn to London to print a pamphlet and to the Maryland newspaper to print a letter against the Governor’s actions. Carter expressed his frustration with a lack of press freedom and the inability of opponents of the pistole fee to publish their point of view in the local newspaper: “the Press in this Colony [Virginia], either through particular Inclination, or some other cogent Bias, in the Proprietor of it [printer William Hunter], is, in many instances, shut against us …” Although Carter was a member of the lower assembly, it appears that Governor Dinwiddie had more influence with the local printer than did Carter. The governor was seemingly able to censor the press and suppress civic discourse regarding an important public policy. 89 While not yet a broad public discourse, but primarily dissent between groups of political elites, the fact that political disagreement again found its way into the public prints is significant. At least one side attempted to rally public opinion to its side. Again, Virginians turned to the Maryland press to print what they could not get published at home. This was not the only time that the Annapolis press printed what could not be printed in Williamsburg; it was becoming a regular escape valve for

88 The pistole was the commonly used French name for a Spanish coin that circulated widely in the colonies, worth £1.1.6 (or about $4), according to Theophilus Wreg [Grew], *The Virginia Almanack for the Year of our Lord God, 1767*… (Williamsburg: Purdie and Dixon, 1766).

dissent. This does not necessarily mean that Maryland government was more tolerant of dissent, but it demonstrates use of a press not under the control of the authorities one was criticizing. Even in Maryland, political dissenters were forced to turn to another colony to be printed. While Annapolis printer Jonas Green had no problem printing anything critical of Virginia authorities, he was said to be controlled by the Maryland proprietors and the influential Dulany family, and anything they did not want to see in print needed to be published in Pennsylvania.

When printer Joseph Royle took over the *Virginia Gazette* in 1761, there were subtle changes, but much stayed the same, including content control by the governor. The newspaper had much the same format, slogan, name, and logo as under his predecessors. The page size was larger, the type size was smaller, and each page was now divided into three columns with line separators between columns and stories. The newspaper had become easier to read in several ways and now had substantially more content. News from Europe still took two to six months from occurrence to publication in the Chesapeake. With only six issues extant, it is difficult to draw substantial conclusions regarding the content, but some observations are possible. Several issues had more advertising content than news, running from one and a half pages of ads to nearly three full pages. There was some indication of general support for political dissidence, with a report on John Wilkes, the radical English politician who was thrown out of Parliament. There was much speculation about political changes in the British ministry, and some outright speculation

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90 See also Chapter 2 for the dispute over the Two-Penny Act.

91 Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics’,” 169.

92 While Laurie E. Godfrey, “The Printers of the Williamsburg *Virginia Gazettes*, 1766-1776: Social Controls and Press Theory” (Ph.D. Diss., Regent University, March 1998), 12, was only able to locate two regular issues and one supplement printed by Royle, this research located four regular issues and two supplements.

criticism of the British government, “From private letters, by the packet, we learn
the national discontent seemed rather to increase than abate, and it was thought the
ministry would soon be changed.”94 One writer imagined a “Dialogue between a
Master and his Dog,” named Othello, and the dog’s claim that “my species suffers
from the injustice of mankind.” This implied serious questions about the institution
of slavery. 95 Discourse reflecting Anglo-American political radicalism found its way
into print. On the other hand, one letter regarding freethinkers was very negative
about such liberal attitudes, and as the watershed political dispute over the Stamp
Act hit Royle’s pages in 1765, several commentators suggested that the governor
controlled Royle’s newspaper.96

By the mid-1760s, the Maryland Gazette was less expensive than was its
Virginia counterpart, and it was more radical with more content on opposition
politics.97 Jonas Green and his partner William Rind published the newspaper from
Annapolis. It kept close track of the libertarian Wilkes, publishing a glowingly
complimentary report on his defense in his 1763 trial, “A more glorious Contest
has not been known for many Ages,” and even published the manifesto of Corsican
revolutionary Pasquale Paoli.98 More disagreement with the British ministry was
printed in this newspaper than in Williamsburg. The British government was able

94 Ibid., (Feb. 12, 1762), 3, Ibid., (Nov. 4, 1763), 2.

95 Ibid., (July 6, 1764), 1.

96 Ibid., (Feb. 12, 1762), 1. Governor Francis Fauquier noted, “the press was then thought to
be too complaisant to me,” letter to the Board of Trade, Williamsburg, April 7, 1766.
(Handwritten transcription in Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Great Britain
PRO CO 5, Container v. 1331 [Public Record Office] 189-190), 2. An anonymous letter in A
Supplement to the Maryland Gazette, of last week. (Annapolis: Jonas Green, Oct. 17, 1765), 1,
accused Royle of deceiving his readers and acceding to the governor’s pressure.

97 Maryland Gazette (Green, Oct. 24, 1754), 3, indicates the price had been 14 shillings, but
was lowered two years before 12 s. 6 d. per year, compared to 15 s. for the Virginia Gazette.

98 Maryland Gazette (Jonas Green and William Rind, Sept. 29, 1763), 1. Ibid., (Feb. 28,
1765), 1.
to keep tighter control in Virginia through its royal governor. Maryland had a proprietary government during this period, which added a level of insulation from British control. The Calvert family proprietors stood between the colony (the assembly and the governor) and Britain (the Parliament and the King). It is possible that the Maryland press had more freedom to publish political criticism and dissent, and it is certainly true that the press in Annapolis was free to publish letters critical of Virginia government. As conflict with the British government over tax policies approached, a broader civic discourse was visible in both newspapers and dissatisfaction with the Williamsburg press was becoming evident.

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Despite some restrictions in content, newspapers were a major force in bringing political debate out of the exclusive hands of the elite, and into a wider public forum. Historian Hannah Barker noted that even the lower classes in England were reading newspapers. 99 Such a transition apparently happened somewhat later in the British-American colonies, and perhaps even later in Virginia than in highly literate New England. There is no evidence here that the very lowest classes in the Chesapeake colonies, the slaves and the Native Americans, were involved in the world of print, and probably few white servants were directly involved as regular readers or contributors. Changes did occur, however. By the 1750s, the content of the Virginia Gazettes reflected a bit less of an elite nature, with fewer quotations in Latin, less complexity in the essays, and more contributions from those farther down the social scale. One writer, in fact, apologized for not being able to write in a higher style, admitting to his own social deficits:

I must introduce myself to you with this Request, that you would not count my Arguments invalid, merely because they may not be express’d in the manner to which is common to many of our modern

99 Barker, Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 125.
Gentlemen. It was my unhappiness not to have so much money, when at College, as to pursue an A.B. or an A. M. to be annex'd to my Name ...100

The pseudonymous letter-writer argued in support of laws against drunkenness and gaming. The letter significantly demonstrates a wider civic discourse by mid-century. By utilizing what Warner referred to as the “principle of negativity,” this author claimed for himself equal consideration in the court of public opinion, despite his lower status, suggesting the argument should be considered solely on the basis of its merit, not its source. Thus printing was beginning to allow for a more open and impersonal political discourse.101

Colonial newspapers overall are considered to have an influence greater than their circulation might suggest, “with the newspapers reaching ‘virtually all the literate persons in the colonies’ and even a large part of those who were illiterate through public readings in taverns.”102 By the mid-eighteenth century, Americans had one newspaper copy printed for about every sixty-seven inhabitants, the same estimate as for Great Britain. According to Charles E. Clark, such spreading of the public prints drew in a wide range of readers, allowing less-elite citizens to share “a kind of open communion” with the elites by reading the news. Our poor farmer’s son Devereux Jarratt wrote of staying up late after the sun set, reading by the light of the fire as he could afford no candle. He is likely to have read newspapers borrowed from his wealthy patrons, and possibly during rare visits to a tavern or coffeehouse. While as a man of the cloth he esteemed reading the Bible above all else, he admitted that for many people, the popular prints were more highly esteemed, and that even a true believer of that time might well “find greater relish for reading a pamphlet, a newspaper, or almost any other book.” He specifically

100 “B.M.,” Virginia Gazette (Hunter, March 28, 1751), 1.
102 Copeland, Colonial Newspapers, 18.
writes of his reading *The Spectator*, the British periodical full of new Enlightenment ideas regarding both religion and politics.\(^{103}\) For Jarratt and other non-elites, such reading became a “ritual of communal identity,” drawing readers into an English-Atlantic “collective mentality,” making the colonists a part of both the wider British Empire and the American colonies. This mentality included “Whiggish doctrines of limited government and personal liberties.” That “representation of shared beliefs” was the most important function of the colonial newspapers, Clark suggests.\(^{104}\) Virginians were being widely influenced by the newspapers, coverage of colonial issues (versus English issues) had increased, a wider range of readers was becoming part of a collective mentality with the other British-American colonists, and they were sharing ideas of individual rights limiting the power of government.

An essay in a 1755 *Virginia Gazette* on “The Benefits of the Press to the People” recognized the importance of the printing press. It claimed the press was a useful source of knowledge, a security against errors, and a way to unmask faults:

> It is their great Buckler against Oppression. … the Press will ever afford injured Innocence an Opportunity of carrying its Cause before the awful Tribunal of the Public; which, in a free Country, is ever to be feared. …
> Ought the People, therefore to sacrifice, for upon them it will ever depend, the Instrument of Knowledge, the Test of Truth, the Bulwark of public Safety, the Guardian of private Freedom, the Treasure of their Hopes … Not while they have common-Sense.

As this anonymous writer noted, to be a bulwark of freedom the press needs to be free, as “a licensed Press is worse than none.”\(^{105}\) This clearly demonstrates just how the idea of press freedom was evolving. Citizens in the colony were now beginning to recognize that the public prints were becoming an essential element of balance in


\(^{104}\) Clark, *Public Prints*, 3-5, 11, and 256-257.

\(^{105}\) *Virginia Gazette* (March 14, 1755), 2.
the power structure. From a press that just thirty years earlier recognized a limitation on press freedom, not allowing for, “any Attempts to weaken and subvert by opprobrious Writings that sacred Respect and Veneration which ought always to be maintain’d for Authority, and Persons in Authority,” a more inclusive view of press liberty was emerging that allowed for broader criticism of the government. The culture of deference was waning, social and political dissent was beginning to appear, and the value of liberty of the press was recognized. This was not, of course, due entirely to newspapers. There were other important printed materials that would facilitate the development of Virginia’s commitment to freedom of the press.

106 Ibid., (Parks, Aug. 6, 1736), 1, quoted in Maxwell, ed., Virginia Historical Register (1853), 21-31.
Chapter 4

The Colonial Chesapeake Almanac: Revolutionary “Agent of Change”

While books and newspapers have been closely examined by historians for their influence on revolutionary thought in colonial America, it may have actually been the lowly almanac that had the most dramatic impact. Almanacs were the most commonly read form of secular literature in colonial British America, yet these small, pamphlet-like annual books have generally been overlooked as an important precursor to Revolution. They circulated widely, bringing print culture both further down the social scale and farther out to the small farms on the frontier fringes of civilization. Historian Marion Barber Stowell suggested that scholars have erred in overlooking the political influence of the popular annuals and that almanacs were in fact revolutionary “trumpeters of sedition.”1 She posited that these small, inexpensive yearly books influenced the average American more than did other writings. Barber suggested the “radical Whig” ideology influenced the content of the almanacs, and through that medium, the idea of a conspiracy against liberty gained support well into the countryside and among the small farmers. While analysis of the Chesapeake almanacs’ contents does reveal a small amount of revolutionary sentiment, more non-traditional methods of examination prove even more revealing.

This chapter explores the transformational characteristics of a shift in dominant medium, as print culture spread throughout the region. Applying ideas

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from the multidisciplinary field of media ecology helps to identify cultural changes that took place in eighteenth-century Virginia, partly spurred by the spread of printed materials. Almanacs were an important part of the colonial presses’ output as they spread the printed word further through society than it could reach earlier, when printed material had to be imported from Europe. Just as Elizabeth Eisenstein found important consequences when print spread throughout Europe’s elite, this research finds there was also continued influence in the Chesapeake colonies as printed matter spread farther down the social structure.\(^2\) Applying the analysis derived from Eisenstein and media ecologists to the spread of print in colonial Virginia brings a new perspective on the changes that occurred before the Revolution.

In exploring these almanacs, this work follows the examples of historians incorporating other forms of research to better understand historical change. This chapter 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, and that 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 an erosion of the traditional social and political deference and an increase in political dissent. Printed works—especially Bibles and religious works—had certainly come to the region with the earliest European settlers, but the establishment of local printing increased circulation particularly of secular material. In contrast to those of other colonies, the Virginia and Maryland “Almanacks” actually had only a very small amount of overtly political content until just prior to the American Revolution, nonetheless

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. Barber was correct in the supposition that almanacs influenced ordinary folks more than most other materials, but in Virginia, they did not contain the radical content she suggested. 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 both Chesapeake colonies, the local press broke the monopoly that the local gentry had on information, influencing the balance of political power. “[O]rdinary people were empowered to think and act for themselves and not depend on the advice of their betters.” Consistent with Benedict Anderson’s ideas, this chapter demonstrates how the Chesapeake almanacs were an important part of the expansion of print capitalism that helped lead to the colonists’ ability to “imagine a new nation.”

The “Almanacks”

To understand the influence of these popular prints, it is necessary to understand just what they were. The colonial “almanack” (as that was how it was typically spelled) was a 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 (with a loop of string inserted) tacked up on a wall. The small books usually were about 4 inches wide, 6 inches tall, and from 20 to 60 pages long. The colonial almanacs initially copied form, format, and even content directly from the British almanacs, but added local aspects such as planting times, court dates, and

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4 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 36–44.
Indian medicine. By the mid-eighteenth century, British and colonial printers were expanding from the standard sixteen pages by adding data such as stage routes, names of officials, roads and distances, and short moralizing prose.⁵

An almanac was one of the earliest commodities to be mass-produced on the new presses in the American colonies, and the major northern British-American cities were printing competing almanacs long before printing took hold in Virginia.⁶ Almanacs were printed as early as 1729 in Annapolis, Maryland and 1732 in Williamsburg, Virginia.⁷ Prior to existence of a local press, some residents undoubtedly made use of almanacs printed in London or Philadelphia. We know that Benjamin Franklin shipped copies of *Poor Richard’s Almanack* to Maryland by 1741, and shipped pocket almanacs to Williamsburg by 1743. Ten years earlier, Philadelphia almanacs listed court dates in Maryland and gave distances of road mileage between cities as far as Williamsburg. The inclusion of Maryland information indicates that at least they were being marketed to a reading audience in the Chesapeake colonies. However,

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⁶ One version of printing history suggests that an almanac was the second thing to come off the presses in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As this almanac is not extant, some doubt the veracity of this claim. See Shaw, “Almanacs and the Atlantic World,” 1.

⁷ Bear, *Checklist of Virginia Almanacs*, xxix. 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.
the astronomical observations and weather predictions in an almanac favored locally-produced versions. 8

The Philomath, or astronomical and astrological expert, calculated the signs and meteorological information. In some cases, the same person also wrote the accompanying verse and filler. In other almanacs, the printer himself added to the basic calendar. 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. Stowell suggested that for most people, almanacs were the only secular information source, “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.” 9 Charles E. Clark suggested that 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.” 10 Useful information such as court dates and distances between cities was included near the back of the small book. For many, “its margins served to chronicle the first snow, the birth of a child, or an event of importance in the community. Interleaved, it served many for diaries or account books.” Some were bound together with extra blank pages for keeping notes or a diary at a time when writing paper was scarce. 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;


10 Clark, Public Prints, 217. This move towards linearity is an essential development of print culture.
probably because they were used so heavily that they ended up in shreds by the end of the year.\textsuperscript{11}

Colonial American almanacs followed the format established in England, which was slowly adapted to 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, Fict 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."\textsuperscript{12} The second page usually had the only engraved image in the almanac, "The Anatomy of human Body," sometimes referred to as the "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 in the almanac would often come the calendar portion with each month taking one or

\textsuperscript{11} Bear, \textit{Checklist of Virginia Almanacs}, vi-vii. Most almanacs were also not bound in quality covers, or not even bound at all, helping to increase the wear and tear.

\textsuperscript{12} Book titles in this period often filled the entire title page, and almanacs were no exception. Left out in the middle of the title as presented here is a table showing years since the creation according to various groups, as the Eastern Greeks (7239), Roman Chronology (5681), etc.
two pages. These often had short verse or prose scattered 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. By using these symbols, even those with limited reading skills may have made some use of almanacs.13

Following the calendar pages, Chesapeake 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.”14 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.15 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: …

This rather weak and trivial verse continues through the calendar pages. 16

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14 Theophilus Wreg [Grew], *The Virginia Almanack for the Year of our Lord God, 1767…* (Williamsburg: Purdie and Dixon, 1766). The almanacs’ pages have no numbers, so no page numbers will be used here as missing pages may throw off calculations.


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. The price in Virginia and Maryland of seven-and-a-half pence to “Eight Coppers” each was low enough that virtually every family of European descent could afford an almanac. Historian Susan Stromei Berg suggested that in eighteenth-century Virginia, “Everyone had to have one.” 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. Other estimates run as high as 5,000 issues printed each year for a Virginia population of about 130,000 of European descent, or about one almanac for every 26 white people. 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

17 Schlesinger, Prelude to Independence, 41.

18 “Eight Coppers” from The Maryland Almanack … 1762 (Annapolis: William Parks, 1761). Many advertisements in the newspapers, including the Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg: Hunter, Jan. 2, 1756), 4, or Bear, Checklist of Virginia Almanacs, x, listed seven and a half pence as the price. “Everyone” quotation from Berg, Eighteenth Century Williamsburg Press, 32-34.

19 The price listed in Virginia Gazette, (Hunter, Jan. 30, 1752), 4, advertisement states the Virginia Almanack price at 7½ pennies retail, 5 shillings per dozen wholesale (or 5 pennies each), Hunter, Printing Office Journal, lists total almanac sales for 1751 at £70.6.6½. See also, Berg, Eighteenth Century Williamsburg Press, 32-34. Royle and Purdie, Printing Office Journal, vol. 2, 1764-1766, lists £75 credit only almanac sales for 1764. Stiverson, in “Colonial Retail Book Trade,” in Joyce, Printing and Society in Early America, 157-9, estimated that if the ratio of credit to cash sales were constant, about 5,000 almanacs were printed in 1764 and 1765. Constant newspaper ads requesting payment indicated the printers were often not paid for their work, so actual distribution is likely much higher, when almanacs not paid for are included.

20 Berg, Eighteenth Century Williamsburg Press, 32-34. Stiverson, “Colonial Book Trade,” 59-74. Population estimates from Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, 2:1168. Numbers derived from British colonial office records. The use of “white” population only is necessitated by the population estimates of the time, which did not often include Native Americans or slaves. There is no indication that the black population of Virginia, primarily slave, had any substantial literacy rate by this period.
Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, &c." 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 would be buying almanacs from elsewhere, including Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and England. It is also worth noting that most almanacs served many readers, at least an entire household. Whatever the actual numbers, almanacs sold more widely than any other printed material. Such wide distribution of the almanacs spread the printed word and the influences of a print culture far down the economic ladder. While almanacs did reach the rural farmers, printed materials rarely directly influenced the very poorest groups, especially Native Americans and slaves.

Distributed 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. More than ideals of industry and thrift, 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.” But this same issue cautioned of the vulnerability of kings and suggested that they should rule carefully with compassion:

As none can stop the Whirl of Fortune’s Wheel
Princes may Revolutions fear and feel:
In wisest Monarchs therefore shall we find,
Compassion formed, and reigning in the Mind

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21 For example, Wreg, *Virginia Almanack ... 1765*.


One Maryland almanac 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.” The next year’s issue warned against both excessive greed and the risks of paper money; “Man makes false Money; Money makes Men so.” 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.” Another compared their greed to gluttony: “Lawyers, by endless Controversies, Consume unthinking Clients’ Purses …” The Pope and Catholics in general 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

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24 Maryland Almanack … 1762 (Annapolis: Jonas Green, 1761).
25 Maryland Almanack … 1763 (Annapolis: Jonas Green, 1762). The political meaning of the “false money,” or paper money, should not be ignored, as the issuing of paper currency to make up for a lack of hard money in the colonies was an important local political issue of the time.
26 Propaganda is just one name commonly used for persuasion processes that also go by many other names. We typically think of propaganda as involving political doctrines, but propaganda can also be aimed at other types of thought, such as religion, or even social behavior such as drinking alcohol, or deference to one’s betters. When viewed in this light, many of the well-known Poor Richard’s maxims can be seen as social propaganda of sorts. To view “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise” as part of a propaganda campaign to make people, especially the poorer working sorts, more useful and industrious citizens is not stretching the definition of propaganda too far. Richard Saunders [Benjamin Franklin], Poor Richard, 1735. An Almanack for the Year of Christ 1735 … (Philadelphia: Benjamin Franklin, 1734).
27 Virginia Almanack … 1772 (Williamsburg: Purdie & Dixon, 1771).
28 Virginia Almanack … 1773 (Williamsburg: Purdie & Dixon, 1772).
The list of historical 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. For example, in the 1732 Almanac, 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 current British monarchy, with loaded words such as “murder,” “abdicated,” and “Pretender.”

Such history lessons loaded with bias are certainly a form of propaganda, yet while many works have examined the political influence of print materials leading up to the American Revolution, few have included almanacs, and those of the southern colonies in particular have been largely ignored. In his important study on Propaganda and the American Revolution, Philip Davidson had a great deal to say

29 Virginia Almanack … 1772 (Williamsburg: Purdie & Dixon, 1771). This anti-papist propaganda ties back directly to King Henry VIII’s split with the Catholic Church and the publicity campaign by his minister Thomas Cromwell, which is referred to as the first European government’s successful use of the press for propaganda. Eisenstein, Printing Revolution, 154-5.


31 Maryland Almanack … 1765 (Jonas Green, 1764).

32 Virginia Almanack … (Williamsburg: William Parks?, 1740). The only copy known to be extant, at the Library of Congress, is missing the title page, leaving the title and printer assumed rather than confirmed.
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. Davidson did, however, recognize that almanacs circulated into the country far beyond the normal reach of newspapers and pamphlets.\textsuperscript{33} The elder Arthur Schlesinger, in his \textit{Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776}, explored the crucial part that newspapers played in the war against Britain. Bernard Bailyn and others examined the important effect of political writers in England on the ideas of the revolutionary Americans, primarily through books and political pamphlets.\textsuperscript{34} Stowell wrote that by ignoring the political influence of almanacs, historians missed an important factor bolstering the cause of American independence.\textsuperscript{35} She posited that these small, inexpensive yearly books influenced the average American more than did other writings. Stowell suggested the British country party ideology was reprinted in colonial almanacs and that through this widely distributed print medium, those radical political ideas spread. She posited that the idea of a ministry conspiracy against liberty thus gained support beyond the well-read elites, well into the

\textsuperscript{33} Philip Davidson, \textit{Propaganda and the American Revolution: 1763-1783} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 223. Davidson calls propaganda, “simply an attempt to control the actions of people indirectly by controlling their attitudes …” (xii) A more sophisticated definition may be, “Propaganda is the expression of opinions or actions carried out deliberately by individuals or groups with a view to influencing the opinions or actions of other individuals or groups for predetermined ends and through psychological manipulations.” From \textit{Institute for Propaganda Analysis}, inspired by Harold D. Lasswell, quoted in Jacques Ellul, \textit{Propaganda; The Formation of Men’s Attitudes}, trans. Konrad Keller and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), xi-xii. One might also consider that to be called propaganda, it must be part of a persuasion plan by proselytizers of a certain doctrine. Ellul suggests that propaganda cannot exist without mass media, and the printing press was the first medium able to address a mass audience, and thus the first potential vehicle of propaganda, 7-11.


\textsuperscript{35} Stowell, “Revolutionary Almanac-Makers,” 41.
American frontier and among the lesser sorts. For example, one Boston almanac in 1768 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.”

Because reading them had become part of the typical country farmer’s life by the mid-eighteenth century, “the lowly but ubiquitous almanac influenced American political thought and sentiment from 1766 through 1783 to a much greater extent than is generally believed.” Stowell’s work primarily focused on the almanacs of New England and Pennsylvania, generally ignoring those of Virginia and Maryland.

These Chesapeake region almanacs had less overtly political messages but did contain many of the more subtle cultural messages.

Cultural changes in Chesapeake society appeared in the almanacs long before the political unrest leading up to the American Revolution. As early as 1741, one verse 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.

A development in 1757 demonstrated a sense of colonial unity, perhaps prefacing 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

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37 Stowell, “Trumpeters of Sedition,” 41, Stowell, *Early American Almanacs*. Raymond, “Almanacs and the American Revolution,” 394, reached much the same conclusion, again focusing largely on the annuals from the northern colonies. He agrees that within historians’ research of revolutionary era-writings, almanacs have “virtually escaped notice.” Raymond did note that the Virginia almanacs, to his surprise, had virtually no political content.

38 *Virginia Almanack … 1741* [Parks?]
the United States, but did not include any of the colonies in the West Indies. Other almanacs continued to demonstrate 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.  

39 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.”  

40 This farmer’s attitude is in marked contrast to the earlier reaction of Devereux Jarratt, who as a poor farmer’s son ran away from bewigged gentlemen. One 1765 Maryland almanac 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.”  

41 Such discourse in the public prints, Michael Warner observed, was at odds with a social order that included the concept of “superiors.” The old rules of social position are seen as clashing with a new discursive order.  

42 Reading and

39 Virginia Almanack … 1759 (Hunter).

40 Virginia Almanack … 1764 (Royle).

41 Maryland Almanack … 1765 (Green).

taking part in a broadening reading public was undermining the old social hierarchy. Increasingly, print discourse in the Chesapeake region encouraged and displayed erosion of that deferential culture.

One almanac in 1768 contained some remarkable verse that conflicted with the dominant attitude toward the institution 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 wish her to be kind,
Such Grace from Thee let Ferdinando find. 43

While falling short of abolitionist sentiments, this poem was unusual to have been published in Virginia at this time as it actually acknowledged a slave as a person with feelings who was deserving of kind treatment. To even acknowledge a slave’s right to be treated kindly undermines the hierarchical social structure that rested on the bedrock assumption of black people as being merely property.

Some overtly political material appeared in Chesapeake almanacs as conflict with Great Britain began in the mid-1760s. 44 At the height of the Stamp Act

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43 This poem comes from a fragment of an almanac 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 thought to not be extant. With only four pages available, positive identification is not possible.
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.” These lines were taken from a larger poem written by influential British whig writer Joseph Addison, and could thus be viewed as part of radical whig propaganda. The praise of freedom reflected the idea that corrupt governmental ministers were threatening the colonists’ liberty. In the context of colonists sharply accusing Parliament of stealing their liberties and turning the Americans into slaves, this verse appears to be more than simply harmless filler. When Parliament passed the Stamp Act in 1765, the tax seriously threatened the income of colonial printers and the directly political output of their presses increased. 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, this line gains


45 Job Grant, Virginia Almanack … 1767 … (Williamsburg: William Rind, 1767). This verse was printed earlier in the Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg: Hunter, March 5, 1752), where it is credited to Joseph Addison, “[A] Letter from Italy,” (1704).

greater meaning. These words of protest can certainly be viewed as political propaganda, but they appeared in the midst of a great deal of less overtly political content.

By the advent of the Revolution, verse and prose with obvious patriot-bias became more prevalent.\(^47\) One 1777 almanac had the names of representatives to the Continental Congress, a list of British ships in the Americas contesting colonial independence, plus tips for producing ink and sealing wax that were now difficult to import.\(^48\) More overtly patriotic in defiance of Britain were the instructions in a 1776 almanac for the making of gunpowder, information helpful in supplying the local military forces facing shortages, and certainly writing that can be viewed as supportive of colonial independence and of revolutionary violence. Virginians are 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 helped to transform the colonists into a unified group, enabling them to imagine themselves eventually as not British, but American.\(^49\) 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 …”\(^50\) While Chesapeake almanacs did not contain a great deal of overtly political language, political propaganda did appear in

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\(^{47}\) The terms “patriot” and “royalist” are used here to describe the two sides that emerged during the Revolution.

\(^{48}\) Rittenhouse, *Virginia Almanack … 1777* (Williamsburg: Dixon & Hunter, 1776). William Hunter of the printing house publishing one of two Virginia almanacs of this time, was a royalist and soon left for Britain. See Thomas, *History of Printing*, 555.

\(^{49}\) Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 64 and 78-80.

\(^{50}\) Rittenhouse, *Virginia Almanack … 1776* (Williamsburg: Dixon & Hunter, 1775). The new colonial unity, reflected here in print, is consistent with Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 252, as “… trust [was] established across space, impersonally, a product of a print culture …” necessary for revolutionary solidarity.
small amounts in the Virginia almanacs as the Revolution approached. Unfortunately, there are fewer extant almanacs from Maryland, so there is no substantial evidence of their content.\(^{51}\)

An important question to ask here is: does such overt political propaganda actually change the minds of those who read it? While printers and their almanacs, newspapers, and pamphlets may have been a crucial aspect of eighteenth-century life, many historians erroneously assume the impact of the content of the press or just posit influence simply because something appears in print. Davidson, for example, was certain that “The written word … carries an authority of its own—people believe what they read.” He suggested that printed material, and especially newspapers, “exercised a vital influence on the minds of the reading public,” and were a preface to the Revolution.\(^{52}\) The power of such propaganda was inherent in Bailyn’s persuasive proposition that the writings about a conspiracy against liberty were above all else what propelled the colonists toward independence.\(^{53}\) More recently, Jeffery Smith concluded that in colonial America, “the amount of contentious, antiauthoritarian writings was sufficient to contribute substantially to radical political theory and practice before the Revolution.”\(^{54}\) While his interesting ideas about press liberty are consistent with those presented here, he failed to offer a theoretical basis or strong argument to support his assumption that the newspapers had this influence on politics. He merely pointed to the content and assumed effect. In contrast, Stephen Botein suggested that historians have tended to overstate the influence of a radical colonial American press.\(^{55}\) Sociologist

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\(^{51}\) There are no *Maryland Almanacks* from 1766-1777 known to be extant.

\(^{52}\) Davidson, *Propaganda*, 209 and 225.


\(^{55}\) Botein, “Meer Mechanics.”
Michael Schudson would seem to have agreed, noting that, “Despite the general plausibility of claims about media influence, the accusations are devilishly difficult to prove. People tend to overestimate the power of the media for the simple reason that the media are the visible tip of the iceberg of social influences on human behavior.” Closer examination often shows that it was indeed what the news may have been reporting—rather than the content of the medium itself—that had the influence.\(^56\) Combining mass communication theory to the perspective of historians suggests that the content of printed material had only a minor influence on the politics of the age, that propaganda was less effective than theorized, and that in fact an overall, systemic influence of the new media is more important to consider.

Modern communication theorists have rejected the “magic bullet theory,” or the idea that the content of media such as print have such complete and powerful effects. Since 1940, various “limited effects models” have replaced this outmoded idea.\(^57\) Media cannot tell the public what to think, according to media theorist Ben Bagdikian, but they can tell the public what to think about—to set the public agenda.\(^58\) This agenda-setting theory recognizes that while media propaganda may have some influence, the direct effects are mediated by existing opinions and preconditions.\(^59\) Another theory applicable here is that of the multi-step flow of information, which suggests that people do not get information or opinions about politics and other matters directly from media, but rather indirectly through


\(^{57}\) Jean Folkerts and Stephen Lacy, The Media in your Life: An Introduction to Mass Communication, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), 452-457. Schlesinger and Davidson, for example, appear to assume such a magic bullet influence and formulate no argument or defense about assumed effects of the newspapers.

\(^{58}\) Bagdikian, The Media Monopoly (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), xvi.

opinion leaders. Such influential people (perhaps the elites) receive the information from printed media, and in turn spread it further through direct interpersonal contacts, which is ultimately more influential than communication only through a medium such as almanacs. This type of multi-step framework is useful in demonstrating that media's impact is usually indirect, limited, and dependent on oral retransmission. Applied to colonial propaganda in almanacs, newspapers, and pamphlets, these models suggest that the direct effects on the readers were primarily limited to determining what was topical, indirectly influencing the public through interpersonal conversations and reinforcement of existing political opinions.

The greatest influence that the expanding world of print media had on eighteenth-century Virginia was not through the content on its pages at all. The words that were printed did not have a direct, “magic bullet” type of influence, but rather a limited effect moderated by existing opinions. The almanacs of the Chesapeake region actually had a larger 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. As the almanacs helped to spread the printed word and the subtle changes that accompany such a medium far down the social structure and far out to the edges of European settlements, the society slowly transformed. Reading, writing, and the thought processes that accompany such had tremendous individual and social impact, eventually shaking up the political structure. Several scholars refer to a “reading revolution” that occurred during the eighteenth century. According to a British historian of almanacs, the widely

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distributed annuals were part of a major paradigm shift. Matthew Shaw suggested that in the British-American colonial world, “Almanacs played an intimate part in the shift from a predominantly oral culture, to one in which the authority of print was paramount.”⁶² As cultural historian Lawrence Levine observed, the spread of literacy has profound and revolutionary changes on a society. Levine noted differences between oral societies and those that utilized writing, and he turned to multidisciplinary research to understand the meaning. Levine reached across fields to theories from psychology, anthropology, and communication to explore the overall psychological and social changes spurred by a new print culture. Literate societies, he noted, are quite different from non-literate societies, reflected in the way that people within these societies are capable of thinking. Levine’s analysis is crucial to understanding the influences as print culture spread beyond the elites, beyond the middling sorts, down to the small farmers and workers.⁶³

Levine pointed to groundbreaking work by J. C. Carothers and Marshall McLuhan who examined how a new communication medium itself—separate from its content—can bring these changes. As Carothers wrote from the perspective of an ethnopsychiatrist, literate people live in a visual world, a fundamental key to the development of thought. In a preliterate world, words have a magic power, the same power possessed by whatever the word represents: “it was only when the written, and still more the printed, word appeared upon the scene that the stage was set for words to lose their magic powers and vulnerabilities.” It is not a coincidence that scientific thinking did not emerge until after printing spread. Written language

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⁶² Shaw, “Almanacs and the Atlantic World,” 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 still shifts today. See, for example, Chartier, Cultural Uses of Print, 5, where he noted that no culture is completely oral or completely print-based, but rather that, “different media and multiple practices almost always mingled in complex ways.”

permits separation of verbal thought from action. Carothers concluded that individuals in a society cannot be actually capable of thinking independently, “of being potentially unique at the level of ideation and of will” until verbal thought is seen as potentially independent of action.\footnote{J. C Carothers, “Culture, Psychiatry, and the Written Word,” Psychiatry 22, no. 4 (Nov. 1959): 308-312.}

Anthropologist Jack Goody demonstrated that literacy had a major influence on both an individual’s cognitive processes and on society’s major institutions. Both the means of communication and the control of such communication are important. While he notes that he is “not attempting to put forward a simple, technologically determined sequence of cause and effect, there are too many eddies and currents in the affairs of men to justify a monocausal explanation of a unilinear kind,” he also rejects the tendency to neglect such technological changes for fear of such techno-determinism. He sees literacy (and the availability of print culture) as shifting thought patterns toward “abstractedness.” Oral cultures, according to Goody, tend toward a cultural homeostasis, while written cultures tend toward more revolutionary changes.\footnote{Jack Goody, The Domestication of the Savage Mind (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 10. These definitions of thought and logic are, of course, replete with western biases. Goody noted that Claude Lévi-Strauss’s division of mind and thought into domesticated and savage was too simplistic. These theories—from the point of view of a literate culture—may also undervalue oral cultures. What is critical here is not a comparative worth, but rather the transformational characteristics.}

Applying these ideas helps make sense of the revolutionary changes in eighteenth-century Virginia. An increasing influence of print helped to transform culture, society, and political power in Virginia.

Economic historian Harold Innis discovered that changes in communication profoundly influenced western civilization, and that each new medium (such as clay tablets or paper) emphasized time and space in varying ways. These changes,
McLuhan extended Innis’s work from beyond the changes between orality and literacy, to those between print and electronic media. Important here is his examination of how media—as extensions of human senses—alter the way we think and interact. McLuhan criticized historians for failing to perceive the “multilinear” patterns of civilization and for ignoring an important revolution in thought caused by changes in media. With his ahistorical, pop-culture approach, McLuhan’s reputation among academics remains questionable today. However, as Eisenstein noted in 1979, while he failed to coherently argue his theses, McLuhan’s work, “points to a large number of significant issues that cry out for historical investigation and have, as yet, received almost none.” Eisenstein’s own work is influential in examining the printing press as an “agent of change,” as she traced its revolutionary impact on religion, science, and human thought in early modern Europe. The spread of the printed word encouraged the spread of literacy, she noted, and she suggested that printing itself had a role in altering human consciousness. While she wrote of the transformation that occurred earlier among the European elite thinkers, in examining a different time and place, this research uncovers social, cultural, and political change following widespread distribution of popular prints.

Walter Ong also carefully built upon McLuhan’s work, and he cautiously noted the changes new media wrought from a “relationist” perspective rather than as a “technological determinist.” He noted that while written media change how we think, residual orality remained even as writing and printed works expanded. Writing is “consciousness-raising,” Ong suggests, and while it introduces division

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and alienation, it can also introduce a higher unity. Through changes in communication media, we have also changed our forms of culture and consciousness. Literacy and written documents are key to our American national identity, according to Ong.\\(^{69}\)

Based on theories from Ong, Goody, and others, Carolyn Marvin argues certain features of texts and certain textual practices have broader effects: “literacy produces cognitive effects that are culturally expressed as psychological individualism and social heterodoxy. These features include the solitary nature of reading, the preservative capacity of text, and the divorce of textual messages from non-textual contexts of creation and transmission.”\\(^{70}\) Readers expand themselves and can alienate themselves from traditional society. The very process of what westerners describe as logical thought, or abstract thinking, is believed to develop more readily among literates than among those with solely an oral culture. It requires literacy for individuals to develop what we think of as intellectual individuality. As Levine summarized, written words become symbols with no independent existence. “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. In non-literate societies such distinctions are not made.”\\(^{71}\)

In the last twenty years, Neil Postman has integrated work by these historians with communication theory to form the multidisciplinary field of “Media Ecology.” That field incorporated the work of historian Eisenstein, sociological

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\\(^{71}\) Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 157.
theorist Jürgen Habermas, anthropologist Goody, and others. Media ecology examines the interplay between the process and technology of human communication and its influence upon individual cognition, cultural change, and social structure. Techniques used include an examination of media environments and exploration of the social, cultural, and psychological influence of media and media technology on public discourse. With few exceptions, social theorists ignored the transformation characteristics of media until the television age was well under way. While media ecology is more generally applied to modern electronic media and seldom used by historians, it does help us to understand the influence of expanding colonial print media and their relationship to human culture. By applying the ideas of media ecology to eighteenth-century Virginia, this research finds a connection between the spread of popular printed matter, a rise in literacy, and the increase in dissent.

Warner wrote critically of Eisenstein and others who explore the influence of a new medium on individuals and society, but he misunderstood Eisenstein’s basic premise. Warner challenged what he called a “McLuhanite” tendency to explore the influence of printing as a technological change, as “a medium itself unmediated.” He claimed Eisenstein’s perspective was “technodeterministic … which sees literate elites as rising with writing and falling with printing—an exchange that appears to have taken place independent of contingent social relations, actions, and representations.” Warner rejected what he defined as the fundamental premise of this approach; that technology exists before and not


dependent on the very culture it is changing.\textsuperscript{74} Eisenstein, however, recognized that any historical change is contingent on multiple factors, with interplay back and forth in diverse directions: “I regard printing as an agent, not the agent, let alone the only agent, of change in Western Europe.” She does not support the idea of a monocausal interpretation. Printing is one of many variables, but one with important implications.\textsuperscript{75} The crucial point here is that the spread of printed materials, aside from the explicit messages contained within, can have an implicit revolutionary influence in the sense of a momentous change, in contrast to any seditious words within that might incite rebellion.

Most historians tend to reject the idea of a technology of communication having an agency separate from the people it influences. Media ecologists, however, present a more nuanced analysis. They see interrelationships between many cultural and social agents interacting as part of a larger, overall, human ecosystem, with multi-directional, multi-dimensional influences among people, organizations, and structures. A new medium—such as print—would not exist until a human need for the technology existed. People choose to adopt such technologies, but certainly can never completely foresee all changes such new media can bring. Social structures of power and control are important variables once print exists, as is the content on the pages. However, the printed medium itself has some characteristics that are an important and often undervalued part of the mix. The analogy of not being able to see the forest for the trees is of some value here. Historians typically study documents (the trees) looking for change over time reflected within the printed or manuscript pages. While looking at the individual items, it is difficult to recognize the overall influence of the medium itself (the forest), such as writing or printing. As Eisenstein wrote, while a new medium such as print has a cataclysmic influence

\textsuperscript{74} Warner, \textit{Letters of the Republic}, 5-9.

\textsuperscript{75} Eisenstein, \textit{The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xiii, 317-333.
on a wide range of human movements—including literature, politics, government, economics, religion, and philosophy—the influence of the medium itself often goes unnoticed due to the attention to the content it carries. While literature on the history of printing is growing, such studies “are isolated and artificially sealed off from the rest of historical literature.” The influences of print, Eisenstein noted, are difficult to precisely determine and describe.76

Historians working centuries after the introduction of an influential medium are likely to take for granted the existence of the medium as it has evolved by their own time. At the present time, for example, television, computers, and cell phones have had major influences just now being recognized. Those growing up with such new media technologies are virtually unable to conceive an existence without such devices. Yet for those literally watching those changes, it is simple to observe that constant, instant communication with portable, pocket telephones is extremely different from occasional use of devices tied to wires. The influence upon communication extends to the medium, not just in the words sent to others. Sorting out just how that changes individuals and the larger society is more difficult to determine. To look back several hundred years, discerning how the new medium of print changed a society is even more complicated to observe and impossible to quantify. While examples of such changes in culture and society can be found in contemporary print and writing, determining causality is seemingly impossible.

Several historians of Europe have related these transformational characteristics of printing to major cultural shifts and political revolution. When Eisenstein referred to the printing press in early modern Europe as an “Agent of Change,” she described it as the “crucible” within which modern science, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment were formed. The comparative fixity of printed texts, their wider circulation, and that fact that print made older works and

the knowledge they incorporated more readily available permitted revolutionary advancements in ideas. Jürgen Habermas 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 literary matter was spread throughout the almanacs. Chartier, in writing of the cultural origins of the French Revolution, saw cultural changes—including the expansion of print—as making such revolution “conceivable.” As historian Jack Censer cautions, the press is a necessary precipitant for revolution, but not a sufficient cause in and of itself.

By spreading bits of literature wider throughout the social structure, colonial societies had an increased potential for such literary and civic discourse, leading to a less rigidly hierarchical social structure. Through the spread of education and the printed word in these almanacs, the influence of reading and writing also spread through the Chesapeake colonies. McLuhan 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. As journalism historian David Paul Nord wrote, 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.” 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 loss of power. Reflected in the almanacs’ pages was the transformational characteristic of print culture. Aided by the spread of printed works to larger numbers of people lower in the social order, increased heterodoxy, erosion of the old order and power structure, and declining deference is displayed in the content of the prints. A transatlantic “Republic of Letters” developed in England and in the British-American colonies by the mid-eighteenth century. This civic forum existed within the printed materials, and in public meeting spaces, driven by printed matter. Public opinion became important and a large portion of the public became actively involved at least in thinking about civic affairs. Anthropologists, psychologists, and historians have examined the difference 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:

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.

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83 Warner in *Letters of the Republic*, 1-174, notes 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.

84 Ned Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture 1680-1760* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 31-56, noted that the explosion of a reading public and increase in those who put their words to paper or to print was part of a larger cultural change.

When printed material became a part of the lives of an increasing number of colonial Virginians, the ability to take part in critical discourse about the government increased. This is not to suggest that the technology of printing was the sole cause of such a transition. It was rather a critical precursor that was interdependent on other factors in the social structure. As Eisenstein put it, print is an agent of change, one of many factors, but one with an apparently subversive nature.\(^{86}\) As print enabled and encouraged such discourse to happen, it also aided in the erosion of the culture of deference and the formation of a culture of dissidence.

Another relevant characteristic of almanac use is that people did not merely read them, they wrote in them and made notations in them. Paper was scarce and relatively expensive in the eighteenth-century colonies, so the pages of the almanacs offered an uncommon opportunity to practice handwriting and keep notations. Many of the surviving copies have the owner’s name written on them and notations of when people were born or died, when a calf was birthed, or when the first snowfall came. Other issues have check marks in ink next to certain printed verse or sayings, and x

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marks next to other lines, likely expressing whether the reader agreed or not with what was printed.

Wealthier owners sometimes had extra pages bound with the issues, and kept accounts or more complete diaries within their almanacs. For both rich and poor, 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. Writing helped create a perception of the self-as-individual, a consciousness of interaction between people, and an increase in overall awareness.\textsuperscript{87} 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 is important to note that it does not correlate directly with the invention of the printing press, but more specifically with the spread of printing and corresponding literacy.\textsuperscript{88} The introduction of printing and almanacs in Virginia of the mid-eighteenth century marked an important watershed for printing, literacy, and the corresponding political culture.

Several almanacs from 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 \textit{Virginia Almanack}. (Carter noted that pumpkin soup seemed to be helpful in treating measles.) When he noted 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.\textsuperscript{89} When George Washington began keeping a daily diary, he used a copy of the \textit{Virginia Almanack} that had been bound

\textsuperscript{87} Ong, \textit{Orality and Literacy}, 178-9, notes that while writing can be consciousness-raising, it can also increase division and alienation.

\textsuperscript{88} Carothers, "Culture, Psychiatry, and the Written Word," 312-319.

\textsuperscript{89} Shaw, "Almanacs and the Atlantic World," 2. Carter's surviving almanac is the \textit{Virginia Almanack … 1774 …} (Purdie & Dixon, 1773), and is at the American Antiquarian Society.
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.  

One surviving almanac copy gives evidence that women wrote in their almanacs as well. A 1758 *Virginia Almanac* appears to have been owned by a woman named Sarah Carlyle, since she inscribed her name at the top of the front page, which some almanac owners did. It is obvious in small ways that almanacs were intended for women as well as men. Another issue 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. While historians rarely tie almanac reading with female readers, many do suggest that almanacs spread farther into the country and down the social ladder in ways that books, pamphlets, and newspapers never could.

There is little evidence in this research to support the claim that the content of the almanacs—with political messages discretely sprinkled between predictions


92 *Virginia Almanack …1771 …* (Williamsburg: William Rind, 1770), 16.
of weather and humorous stories—had a greater political influence than is generally recognized. There were, however, a few political messages as the colonial dispute with England developed. As the Stamp Act was being hotly contested, the *Virginia Almanack* included the ode to liberty by Addison quoted earlier here: “And smiling Plenty leads thy wanton Train ; Eas'd of her Load, Subjection grows more-light …”93 Not so hidden among the amusing stories and astrological signs was this suggestion that the goddess liberty would again smile when subjugation was lifted, relevant at a time when colonists saw liberty as threatened by new taxes enacted by Parliament. By including such political messages while simultaneously making efforts to attract a female and socially wider readership, almanacs certainly spread literacy and interest in public affairs beyond the elite males.

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.94 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 …”

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94 *Virginia Almanack [Rind?, 1768?]* The exact title is not known as only four pages remain, but 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.
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, and at least one pushed for social equality in affairs of the heart: “A Lady” queried, “Why should the Man begin the Courtship rather than the women, setting aside Custom?”

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.

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The colonial Virginia and Maryland almanacs were not “trumpeters of sedition,” yet they were nonetheless important as both an agent of change and as an historical record where such changes are reflected. The printers felt their little volumes were of great importance: “The Sun’s whole Labour in Epitome” were said to be visible on their pages. They contained very little directly political content, and the evidence does not support the idea that they were important vehicles of political propaganda. On close examination, however, there was some small amount of overtly political propagandist content, especially after 1766. Other than a few

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95 The Virginia Almanack And Ladies Diary, for the year of our Lord, 1769 … (Williamsburg: Rind, 1768).

96 The Virginia Almanack for the Year of our Lord, 1770 … Containing Several Interesting Pieces in Prose and Verse (Williamsburg: Rind, 1769).

97 The Virginia Almanack for the Year of our Lord, 1771 … (Williamsburg: Rind, 1770).
essays extolling liberty, there was little evidence of radical whig influence in the almanacs still extant. No issues of the *Maryland Almanacks* between 1766 and 1777 are known to have survived, making them impossible to assess, although the newspaper issued by the same printer was a bit more radical than was the *Virginia Gazette*. More material contained indirectly political content, both reinforcing social conformity and later suggesting more radical attitudes, supportive of the patriot cause. This small amount of propaganda was likely to be more reflective of the public attitudes than a direct influence upon the public, as we recognize the limitations of the influence of the content of printed media.

Of greater importance was the deeply inherent and implicit transformation spurred by the spread of printed material. 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. Reading, writing, and the use of calendars and devices for measuring time increased people's linear orientation, leading to what we consider modern logic, and almanacs increased this tendency. These important popular prints spread both close to the edges of civilization and close to the bottom of the social strata. (However, it is important that such media should be viewed only as an agent of this development, setting the stage, and not the sole cause.) Deference had eroded, and print media both spurred and reflected this transition. From the earliest issues which noted that, "The Harmony of Converse best appears, where Menkind move all in their proper Sp[h]eres," to later issues that lauded freedom, the almanacs of the Chesapeake colonies displayed changes in culture, society, and politics. As Gordon Wood wrote, deference “was not a mere habit of mind;

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98 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. See previous chapter.

it had real economic and social force behind it.” It had been a crucial part of the political process in Virginia. Wood concluded that part of the radical transformation that occurred when Americans shook off British rule was this change from deference toward those with a higher hereditary social position to an equality where worth instead mattered, at least for white men. Historian Robert M. Weir also noted “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.

This description by Weir fits precisely with the personality that has been transformed by literacy as described by Carothers and Ong: a heterodox, psychologically independent individual. The expansion of printed materials helped to bring about the erosion of deference in colonial Virginia.

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Chapter 5
Women, Print, and Discourse

The culture of deference in Virginia is believed to have relegated women to very specific roles and severely limited their involvement in political discourse. However, a remarkable poem published in the 1736 *Virginia Gazette* raises questions about women’s roles in both public prints and in civic discourse in the colony. “The Lady’s Complaint” pointed out that men and women had quite unequal positions in society. It noted that custom was partial to men, and failed to give women equal measure. This unknown poet wrote that even the laws were unfair to women and the verse ended with a plea for equal treatment:

Then Equal Laws let Custom find,
And neither Sex oppress;
More Freedom give to Womankind,
Or give to Mankind less.¹

Such an appeal for equality was quite remarkable in colonial America, where a woman hardly existed under the law. Typically, she had no separate standing at all, treated by the practice of coverture as part of either her husband or her father. For such a poem—allegedly written by a woman—to appear in a public forum such as this newspaper brings into question the ubiquitous acceptance of the notion that a woman’s appropriate place was quietly shuttered in the home, rather than exposed to the public eye. Publication of this verse is just one example of how women in colonial Virginia had a greater role in the eighteenth-century world of print, public

¹ *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg: Parks, October 22, 1736), 3. An anonymous writer contributed this poem, claiming a lady had presented it to him. Several other newspapers published this same poem later.
discourse, and even the public discussions about politics, than has generally been recognized by historians. As women's historian Sara Evans wrote, colonial men are thought to have developed a public arena of politics and kept it quite separate from the private realm of the home: “[E]veryone knew that politics was the province of men alone.” 2 Historian David Copeland described the restrictive, private, and domestic role: “The sphere of women in colonial America was the family dwelling and the yard surrounding it …” Women were expected to defer to their husbands in all situations. 3 Catherine Kerrison wrote that these earlier works found women absent from the intellectual life in the eighteenth-century south, but she raises doubts about such a conclusion. 4

Other historians have questioned the complete separation of spheres and the cloistering of women within the home. In examining the lives of women in the Southern colonies, Julia Cherry Spruill suggested some years ago, “Wifedom and motherhood … were held before the colonial women as the purpose of her being, and home as the sphere of all her actions.” She did conclude, however, that for some elite women, involvement in affairs beyond the home was common, but only for a special few. 5 Kathleen Brown took a different approach in her more recent exploration of gender and power in colonial Virginia. She recognized that women in

2 This traditional view of the separate colonial spheres expressed here by feminist historian Sara Evans, Born to Liberty: A History of Women in America (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 43-46. Evans noted that beginning with the Stamp Act crisis of 1765, women were increasingly caught up in the political public discourse. Mary Beth Norton, Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), writes that colonial women had an entirely subservient and domestic role. Not until the Revolution were the boundaries of this women’s sphere pushed. Nancy Cott, in Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), refers to this as the “cult of domesticity.”


the earlier years of the colony had more political involvement, at least up until Bacon's Rebellion of 1676. Brown suggested that living in the harsh new world proved a challenge to the unstable gender values brought with the colonists from England. As life in America stabilized, elite white males gained power and the private and public spaces developed greater separation in eighteenth-century Virginia. Women were increasingly relegated to a solely private space, according to Brown's analysis.6 Cynthia Kierner recently reached a conclusion consistent with that of Spruill, that elite and middling women both were not completely restricted to the domestic sphere, but actually involved themselves in the civic public. Kierner also questioned the very distinction between the two spaces, challenging the traditional separation of the feminine domestic sphere and the masculine public space, noting that even politics can be part of a domestic role, and that some elite women in the south, even in the late colonial period, did take part in the civic public.7

This chapter attempts to build on previous research by focusing on the numerous printed pages left to us from eighteenth-century Virginia. While much history of print in the southern colonies focuses on books and political pamphlets found on the bookshelves of the elite planters, less-elite publications—the more numerous newspapers, popular almanacs, and books for women—receive attention here.8 Such exploration helps us to better understand the lives of a broader range of women and men. While we know a great deal about the male leaders in Virginia, the intellectual development and the history of colonial women in the world of


8 See, for example, Richard Beal Davis, A Colonial Southern Bookshelf: Reading in the Eighteenth Century (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979).
print remain under-explored. This chapter centers on the content, authors, and contributing writers of newspapers, almanacs, and popular books aimed at a female audience. The main focus here is on discourse—the content of popular texts, their authors, and their readers in Virginia—beginning with the earliest printed matter up until 1776.

The sources show that some women were indeed involved in public debates in the world of print, that participation in public discourse may have begun earlier than many historians acknowledge, and that the contributions increased over time. That involvement may also have reached deeper, beyond the wives of the planter elites, to at least some wives of the tradespeople, the medium farmers, or the middling sorts. Reflected in the public prints are signs that the traditional female deference was waning during this period and dissent in matters social and political was increasing. At least for Virginia, it was not only elite men involved in the debates and ideas that helped establish the ideas behind the United States of America. Elite women and perhaps even women of the middling ranks were also involved in the public world of politics in print, and thus were part of an expanding civic public.

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10 Cott, in *Bonds of Womenhood* suggests erosion of an exclusively domestic sphere for women did not come until after the late eighteenth century. Linda Kerber in *Women Of The Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1980), especially 8 & 283, suggested that “Republican Motherhood,” an intersection of the public world of politics and the private sphere of the home, began during the Revolution, and saw the non-consumption movement before the Revolution giving American women an important role in public politics for the first time. Rosemarie Zagarri, *A Woman’s Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1995), 28, saw the roots of protopolitical involvement for women possibly running deeper, beginning during colonial times.
Women and Literacy

While the ability to read and write is the key to involvement in the world of print, precise estimates as to who could read and write in eighteenth-century Virginia remain elusive. As noted previously here, much confusion exists as to what makes a person literate—the separate skills of reading and writing are often intertwined—and there are severe problems with estimating any type of historical literacy. Women are probably underrepresented in literacy estimates and it is now generally accepted that more early American women could read than earlier studies suggest.11 Few artifacts remain to help determine who could read. The common practice of measuring the ability to sign one’s name, usually in wills and court documents, misses many women in colonial British America who were taught only to read and never taught the more technical details of writing with a quill pen. As Kerrison noted, most girls were not taught to cut a pen from bird feathers, as were the boys, as such use of a penknife was not considered very feminine.12 It is likely that many who signed with only a mark could read. As women were often left out of such legal processes, they may be vastly underrepresented in such analysis of legal documents. Reading literacy was likely to be much higher than writing literacy, especially for women. As David D. Hall suggested, even in seventeenth-century Virginia, women participated in the world of reading, but literacy in the Chesapeake was relative to the specific environment: “Literacy was thus a two-sided situation, involving a hierarchy of skills but also open-ended in ways that sharply reduced the significance of gender and class.”13

11 For example, see Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, 14 or Hayes, *Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf*, ix.

12 Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 15.

A fairly large number of Virginia women were able to read by the mid-eighteenth century. Many scholars have suggested that women had a literacy rate half as high as that of men, and that the South had much lower rates than New England.14 In closely examining Middlesex County, Virginia, Darrett and Anita Rutman found a higher rate than was previously estimated for women of the same period. They also calculated that literacy actually declined from about thirty-three percent in the seventeenth century to twenty-nine percent in the mid-eighteenth century. The Rutmans suggest this is an artifact from women retiring into the domestic sphere, no longer needing to sign names on legal documents.15 Notably, this does not necessarily demonstrate an actual decline in reading, not at a time when printed material was becoming more widely available and the novel was just gaining popularity among women. What it suggests is a very modest decline of women signing their name in public, which may—or may not—suggest a decline in writing. In examining readers in England, J. Paul Hunter disagreed with a similar theory of decline in women’s literacy, and suggested that about forty percent of English women could read in the 1750s.16 Most analysts believe that American numbers were higher than they were in England. While the accuracy and applicability of these numbers is uncertain, these statistics do suggest that in the early eighteenth century, approximately one-third of women in Virginia could write, and it is quite likely (although not statistically demonstrable) that even more women could read. That number is likely to have increased over time.

Massachusetts Press, 2005), 5, also support the idea that use of legal signatures is inherently biased against women and likely deflates their literacy rate. On seventeenth century, see Hall, Cultures of Print, 124-5

14 See for example, Gilmore, “Literacy, the Rise Of An Age Of Reading,” 23-46.


Historians often see the rise of a civic public (or public sphere) as crucial to the development of modern society, but women are not typically considered a part of this development. As Jürgen Habermas observed in Europe, literacy and the availability of printed matter prefaced the creation of active civic discourse, or what he termed “civic publicness.” As Michael Warner suggested, a transatlantic “Republic of Letters” developed in England and in the British-American colonies by the mid-eighteenth century. Reading was an important enabler, and expressing oneself in print was even more important. Such acts allowed anyone to become involved as critical, thinking members of a public involved in a revolutionary political process, or even in imagining a new nation where there had previously been only separate colonies. In this civic forum of printed materials, public opinion grew to importance, and a large portion of the public became actively involved at least in thinking about civic affairs. Historians generally consider women as not involved in this public. As Kierner noted, Habermas excluded women, suggesting they were solely relegated to the private realm. She rejected what she calls this “gender-biased definition.” Kierner viewed the lines of distinction between the public and private realms as less sharp, and suggested greater involvement by women in politics as the Revolution approached.

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17 Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere*. See also Grosswiler, “Jürgen Habermas: Media Ecologist?,” for a critique of the standard translation of Habermas’s phrase as “public sphere.”

18 Warner in *Letters of the Republic*, 1-174, notes print was an important aspect of a radical reconstruction of the civic space in eighteenth-century America, an important element of the “public discourse” that legitimized criticism of government—an extremely important part of the rise of revolutionary thought. See also Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, as the latter suggests that print capitalism was partly responsible for the rise of nationalism in Colonial British America. Stories published throughout the colonies in the same language helped to create a sense of commonality that helped bring about a new sense of nationhood.

19 Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture 1680–1760* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 31–56, noted that the explosion of a reading public and increase in those who put their words to paper or to print was part of a larger cultural change.

20 Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 2, 37, and 73.
as enabling discourse by non-elites, but he specifically excluded involvement by women. Colonial Virginia provides a contrasting situation, as women were involved as readers, writers, and even the editors of printed materials. This chapter demonstrates that women were a part of civic discourse in the decades leading up to the American Revolution.

Books

Women were active participants in the local world of print soon after the printing press was permanently established in Virginia, as reflected in the choice of what was printed. Printer William Parks rarely printed full books, but rather sold imprints imported from England and often bound locally. In 1742, Parks’ Virginia press printed the first cookbook in America: a book written by a woman, aimed at female readers. *The Compleat Housewife; or, Accomplish’d Gentlewoman’s Companion …* was written by Eliza or Elizabeth Smith in England and was first published there in 1727. The author suggested, for example,

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“To make a Soop. Take a Leg of Beef, and boil it down with some Salt, a Bundle of sweet herbs, an Onion, a few Cloves, a bit of Nutmeg ...”23 It was a popular cookbook in both England and the colonies, and in addition to food, included “receipts” (recipes) for medicines and salves.24 For a cold, Smith suggested, “Make some Sack-Whey, with Rosemary boil’d in it ; mix a little of it in a Spoon, with twenty grains of Gascoign’s powder ...”25 In fact, a medical guide, Every Man his Own Doctor, was bound together with The Compleat Housewife and sold combined at one point, seemingly confusing the gender distinction. The fact that there were medical recipes in the cookbook and the combining of these two texts demonstrates that in many homes, medicine was the purview of the wife. The Compleat Housewife is rarely noted in the historical lists of personal libraries of this period, probably because it was not stored with the men’s books, but rather considered part of the kitchen.26 Its existence does suggest that enough women in colonial Virginia could read to support many printings of this book, and that their role extended past the kitchen into home medicine.

In the next decade, the Williamsburg printer’s office advertised for sale something new: a British novel aimed at both young male and female readers. Samuel Richardson’s Pamela or Virtue Rewarded was first published in England in 1739 and was quite popular. It is likely that it was an import from England being

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25 Smith, Compleat Housewife, 215. Gascoign’s powder was a well-known cold medicine containing Oriental bezoar, white amber, red coral, crab’s eyes, powdered hartshorn, and pearl and black crab’s claws.

sold in Williamsburg in 1756. The advertisement for the sale of this book claimed that it was “published in Order to cultivate the Principles of Virtue and Religion in the Minds of the Youth of both Sexes,” suggesting that there were enough potential young female readers in Virginia to advertise for their patronage. Diaries and letters reveal that this novel was commented on more often than any other book of the time. The price was advertised to be a low five shillings, “that it may be afforded cheap,” suggesting that the printer sought sales to a less elite readership. Religious leaders and other prominent men often attacked such novels as unhealthy and a waste of time. Many novels were portrayed as more acceptable morality tales, and one section of Pamela can be viewed as inviting the readers to develop their own critical thinking. The novel contains a lengthy critique of John Locke’s Some Thoughts Concerning Education by the title character. One female reader of Pamela followed the heroine’s example of analysis and critiqued the novel herself. Another popular English novel, The History of Ophelia, was advertised in the 1764 Virginia Almanack for sale at the printer’s office. The author was a woman, Sarah Fielding, and many of the readers who made this new form of writing popular were women.

The rise of the novel has been seen as both a subversive influence and an empowering experience for women. Cathy Davidson credited exactly this type of sentimental novel with opening the world of letters to women, and she referred to it

27 This title is not found in research of books published in Virginia. See Berg, Williamsburg Imprints.

28 Hayes, Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf, 103.

29 Wreg [Grew], The Virginia Almanack for the Year of our Lord God, 1756 ... (Williamsburg: Hunter, 1755).

30 Hayes, Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf, 107.

31 See Hunter, Before Novels, 272, and Berg, “Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg Press,” vi and 62, where author notes that by the mid-1760s, book-buying taste had shifted from religious works to novels.
as a “reading revolution.” Another literary historian suggested that the very existence of novels provides evidence of a large female reading public: “When there were novels to be read in the middle of the eighteenth century, we can be sure—as were novelists themselves—that large numbers of women were ready for them.”

**Ephemeral Press**

There is greater evidence of women reading and contributing to newspapers and almanacs than there is of their involvement with the books of eighteenth-century Virginia. Women participated in what some historians label the more “ephemeral press” from the very beginning. Before a newspaper was even printed in Virginia, the nearby *Maryland Gazette* featured regular contributions by “The Plain-Dealer,” who expressed a desire “of improving the Fair-Sex,” diverting “their Minds from useless Trifles” by offering them knowledge and setting women “upon the Level with Men in their boasted Superiority of Reason.” Parks’ first issue of the *Virginia Gazette* in 1736 invited readers “of either Sex,” but actually requested contributions only from gentlemen. Despite that omission, he did publish a poem by a woman later that year, the one quoted at the beginning of this chapter, which is quite surprising in its straightforward plea for women’s rights. “The Lady’s

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32 Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, suggests that this “revolution” began in the “latter portion of the eighteenth century,” (page vii) despite evidence that such novels began selling in England and American colonies before the mid-century.

33 Hunter, *Before Novels*, 73.

34 Jeremy Popkin, “The Prerevolutionary Origins of Political Journalism,” *The French Revolution and Intellectual History*, ed. Jack Censer (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1989), 111-112, is just one of many print historians who refer to newspapers, almanacs, and periodicals as ephemeral, or written for a specific time and place, and thus studied by historians less often than books. This can be viewed as somewhat elitist, as books were more expensive and difficult to access by poorer folk than were newspapers and almanacs.


Complaint” begins by pointing out that men and women have unequal positions in society:

Custom, alas! doth partial prove,
Nor gives us equal Measure;
A Pain for us it is to love,
But is to Men a Pleasure.

They plainly can their Thoughts disclose,
Whilst ours must burn within:
We have got Tongues, and Eyes, in Vain,
And Truth from us is Sin.

Men to new Joys and Conquests fly,
And yet no Hazard run:
Poor we are left, if we deny,
And if we yield, undone,

Then Equal Laws let Custom find,
And neither Sex oppress;
More Freedom give to Womankind,
Or give to Mankind less.³⁷

The concluding plea for equal treatment under the law is remarkably modern in its outlook. Several historians have taken small note of this argument for gender equality, but the remarkable nature of such an early complaint deserves greater attention.³⁸ At a time when women are generally thought to be restricted to a private sphere, relegated to the home, here is a very public complaint. The author criticizes men’s behavior, notes the restrictions on women, and pleads for a change in the laws that do not treat women equally. Contained within this poem is a contradiction. While noting that women cannot disclose their thoughts publicly,

³⁷ Virginia Gazette (October 22, 1736), 3.

³⁸ The William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd ser., vol. 33, no. 2. (April 1976), 331, reprinted the poem under “Trivia” and referred to it as “Women’s Liberation: Early American Style,” without further comment or analysis. Kerrison, Claiming the Pen, 21-24, took note of this poem published later elsewhere, and commented on it as an example of resistance to the accepted model of male superiority.
the writer—masked by anonymity—does exactly that. She steps boldly into the public arena, asserting the right of all women to do so at a time when that was highly irregular. The verse is unusual not only for what it contains, but also for the fact that it inspired no complaints or responses by the readers, printed in the following issues, something quite common for letters with any type of controversial content.39

In 1737, a report that women had voted in an election in Jamaica, Queen’s County, New York, and might even take public office was unusual enough to get published in Williamsburg: “Two Things were very remarkable at this Election … Two old Widows tendred, and were admitted to vote; and it is said, these Two old Ladies will be chosen Constables for the next Year.”40 This stands in stark contrast to the widely printed British ideals of female traits. Participating in politics was “repugnant to the softness, the modesty, and those other endearing qualities … natural to the fair sex …” and women would do better as mothers than as partisans in politics.41 Both the political participation by the women in New York, and the verse in Virginia can be viewed as surprisingly direct moves by women into the bright glare of the public spotlight, looking for more equal treatment under the law, inconsistent with the traditional roles assigned to “the fair sex.”

The newspaper contained much more than politics and serious commentary. The front page of one Virginia Gazette from 1736 featured an “advertisement” from

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39 The next sixteen issues (weeks) of the Virginia Gazette are extant and were reviewed. When printed in the South Carolina Gazette of August 15, 1743, it did receive a response suggesting the woman writer needed a “swain” to ease her of anguish, as noted by Martha Joanne King, “Making an Impression: Women Printers in the Southern Colonies in the Revolutionary Era” (Ph.D. diss., The College of William and Mary, December, 1992), 182-3.

40 Virginia Gazette (Parks, June 24, 1737), 3.

41 Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, The Spectator, nos. 57, 81, 342, quoted in Spruill, Women in Southern Colonies, 244.
a woman requesting a response from the man who supposedly ogled her. Following a description of his appearance (she also noted that "he has very pretty Teeth"), she writes that she has observed him looking very longingly at her, and "desires the Gentleman to take the first handsome Opportunity that offers, to explain himself on that Subject." While this can be viewed as similar to one of today’s “personal ads,” it can alternatively be seen as a satiric take on affairs of the heart and women’s (and men’s) public flirtations. Perhaps in response to that writer, a week later a woman signed “Sisely” posts a tongue-in-cheek attempt to return a found “bleeding heart” to its owner. The next year, “Helena Littewit” notes in a letter that women seem “out of their latitude” dealing with mathematics, but she sent the printer a poem that is a riddle, “it [the poem] has a meaning, and no meaning.” While these and other letters appear to be written by women, there is no verification that any of these articles were actually written by women. Publishing anonymously or with the use of pseudonyms, often with a classical reference, was common. Men claiming to be women could have written some of these examples, but either way, they demonstrate an acceptance of women into this public world of print, in contrast to Warner’s claim that women were left out of the broader access to the public arena. His “principle of negativity” suggests that pseudonymous writing removes the possibility of evaluating writing based on the legitimacy of the writer, allowing evaluation of it to be based entirely on the content, rather than the author’s character. While opening up the public debate to

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42 Placement in colonial newspapers did not mean what it does today. There was no “lead story” and the most recent news often came last in the paper. See Chapter 2.

43 *Virginia Gazette* (Parks, Oct. 29, 1736), 1.


46 Benjamin Franklin writing as “Silence Dogood” is the best-known example of a man writing pseudonymously as a woman. See, for example, *New England Courant* (Boston: James Franklin, April 2, 1722), 1.
wider economic classes, Warner suggests, the wider discourse did not include women, but a closer look at women and print in the Chesapeake colonies suggests that civic discourse did sometimes include women.47 Whether authors or not, their presence is plain. While writing as a woman, any author gave up the potentially liberating quality of anonymity, allowing readers appreciation to be colored by assumptions of feminine abilities. The fact that so many writers willingly did so is revealing. In contrast to Linda Kerber’s idea that print combined with the gender literacy gap was a hurdle for women before the Revolution, the pseudonymous world of print as seen here is actually empowering. As Kerber notes, in oral communication the gender difference is automatically conveyed, while the anonymity of print can disguise that difference, as needed.48 It is quite possible that women contributed essays, even serious political discourse, while not revealing their gender.

The Virginia Gazette published a large number of letters apparently from women in the newspaper’s first several years. While some were matters of the heart, a number of the letters dealt with public issues. The pseudonymous “Andromache” wrote criticizing the author of a letter published earlier, and with some wit, suggested that the earlier correspondent’s quality of writing exceeded that of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, demonstrating that the presumably female author was familiar with political writers in London. She deferentially noted her lack of writing skills and suggested that most of her fellow women could not write, “… since it so happens that most of us are illiterate, it is certainly the greatest Piece of Friendship to give us seasonable Instruction. At the same Time I cannot forbear thinking it hard we should be attacked with a Weapon we are unacquainted with. (I mean the


This writer may have lacked education and belittled her own skills, but she wielded her quill as an effectively sharp instrument.

Advertisements in the *Gazette* were another way that Virginia women took part in the public world of print. Many ads were aimed at women; several of them actually featured women. Catherine Rathell ran several shops in Virginia and Maryland, and she became a visible public figure with her large and frequent ads for textiles, millinery, and jewelry in the newspaper:

> Just Imported from London, and to be Sold for ready Money only, at the cheapest Rates, by the Subscriber, at her Shop where Mr. Ayscough lately lived, opposite the south Side of the Capitol,

> A Genteel Assortment of Mercery, Millinary, Jewellry, etc.50

When Frances and John Person Webb ran advertisements for their dry goods store, the wife's name was listed first. When Edward and Jane Hunter Charlton advertised in 1775 that they were leaving the colony, and called in their debts, it broke with the tradition of only the man being listed, as Jane was independently in business as a milliner. While tradespeople were usually men, widows and unmarried women often entered the public world of business. As these examples demonstrate, even married women occasionally remained in a public space traditionally considered exclusively male.51

A few women in the Chesapeake colonies were directly involved in the public prints as publisher and printer. The wife of Virginia's first printer became the first female printer in the American colonies. Dinah Nuthead took over a press in

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49 *Virginia Gazette* (Parks, June 3, 1737), 1. For other contributions by women, see for example: July 15, 1737; Nov. 12, 1776; Nov. 26, 1776; June 3, 1737, 1; July 15, 1737; and July 22, 1737, 1 and 2.


Maryland in 1695 after the death of her husband, William Nuthead.\textsuperscript{52} She moved the printing shop from St. Mary's City to Annapolis, following the move of the state capitol. According to Douglas McMurtrie, this is the first time a woman was in charge of a press anywhere in America, but she was probably not the actual typesetter, “for she was illiterate to the extent of being unable to sign her own name.”\textsuperscript{53} Whether she or a journeyman printer actually composed the type, there is no record of her press after 1696. Anne Catherine Green took over a print shop in Maryland in 1767, when her husband Jonas passed away, and Mary Katherine Goddard published a newspaper in Baltimore beginning in 1775.\textsuperscript{54}

Printers in colonial America exercised an unusual combination of talents. They were craftspeople who got ink on their fingers and operated a hand press requiring hard physical labor. They needed to be literary experts, skilled at writing much of their own copy, and editing the same for mistakes. They also needed to be smart businesspeople, capable of determining what the market required, and able to balance competing political interests to avoid generating trouble with the words and ideas that they printed.\textsuperscript{55} Print shops were sometimes located within the home, and it was common for women to help in the shop, often with accounting, sometimes proofreading copy, or even composing type.\textsuperscript{56}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Wroth, 38-41.
\item \textsuperscript{53} McMurtrie, \textit{Pioneer Printing in Maryland} (Springfield, IL, 1932), 1-3. While McMurtrie notes Dinah Nuthead could not sign her name and was therefore “illiterate,” the more recent awareness that reading and writing were taught separately raises new possibilities. Warner in \textit{Letters of the Republic}, 16, suggests that the widow Nuthead could read and set type, yet perhaps was not able to handle the different skills of quill and ink.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Thomas, 542-543, and Wroth, 22-23.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Of course, a printer may not do all the physical labor or all of the writing. They typically may have an apprentice or two and a journeyman or two employed, often to do the dirtiest labor. Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics’,” and Wroth, \textit{Colonial Printer}.
\item \textsuperscript{56} King, “Women Printers,” 218.
\end{itemize}
Women’s involvement with print (as authors, readers, and even printers) meant that they too contributed to the growing assault on social deference, joined in the formation of a culture of political dissent, and began taking part in the undermining of British political authority in the 1760s and 1770s. In Williamsburg, Clementina Rind took over husband William Rind’s print shop when he died in 1773, publishing one version of the *Virginia Gazette* for two years. [See Appendix for a timeline of the multiple Virginia printers.] At least one researcher suggested that her personal interests influenced the content of her newspaper. A poem by “A Lady” celebrated the arrival in the colony of Lady Dunmore, the governor’s wife: “Hail, noble Charlotte! Welcome to the plain …”57 As unrest regarding Parliament’s actions towards the colonies intensified, Mrs. Rind reprinted from the *South Carolina Gazette* a letter from “A Planter’s Wife” exhorting women to not use tea, and another letter from Virginia women addressed to ladies of Pennsylvania, exhorting them to avoid all imported luxuries. This was “probably the greatest concentration of women’s writing to date in an American periodical and certainly the greatest in any southern colonial newspaper.”58

Mrs. Rind found herself in the middle of a political controversy, forcing her to define what freedom of the press meant, when she refused to print a contribution she thought libelous. Her competitors’ newspaper printed an anonymous letter questioning Rind’s principles of press liberty, suggesting that she suppressed a contributor’s letter despite her newspaper’s motto, “*Open to ALL PARTIES, but influenced by NONE.*” Rind reluctantly replied to that charge in her next issue: “I shall ever feel a very sensible concern at being obliged to enter into altercations of any nature whatever …” but she felt forced to vindicate herself. She wrote that her open publication policy did not include slander, that the letter in question contained


personal (rather than public) accusations, and that she felt its publication would
injure several respectable people. She suggested that a more appropriate place for
such charges was in a court of law. Rind did agree to print the letter if the author
would attach his name, instead of remaining anonymous.59 Her response was
consistent with printer Benjamin Franklin’s well-known idea that while printers
often cannot avoid giving offense by printing opinions, he “refus’d to print such
things as might do real Injury to any Person.”60 While Franklin wrote of the
importance of press freedom, he noted that the one area where it should indeed be
limited was that of personal libel. Published opinion should be allowed, “as far as by
it, he [the author] does not hurt or control the Right of another.”61 Mrs. Rind, by
exercising editorial judgment and not printing what she thought was harmful and
libelous, was doing exactly what the most prominent printer of her time (and
publishers today) consider responsible editing.

As a printer, a woman had taken an important and prominent place in the
colony. At Clementina Rind’s death, both her successor as printer and the
competitors’ Virginia Gazette wrote eulogies extolling her virtues and merit.62
During a short two-year period as a printer, writer, and businesswoman, the widow
Rind had apparently earned the respect of her customers and her peers. The fact
that printing as a business and profession was not the exclusive province of men in
eighteenth-century Virginia has important implications for the make-up of the
civic public there. The printer functioned as the “gatekeeper” of the only form of

59 Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon, Dec. 23, 1773), 1. Ibid., (Rind, Dec. 30, 1773), 3. See
also Spruill, Women’s Life, 265-6.

60 Benjamin Franklin, “An Apology for Printers,” first printed in the Pennsylvania Gazette,
June 10, 1731.

61 Silence Dogood, number 8 of his pseudonymous letters, in The New England Courant,
(Boston: James Franklin, July 9, 1722), 1.

62 Virginia Gazette (Pinkney, Sept. 29, 1774), 3, and Ibid., (Purdie & Dixon, Sept. 29, 1774),
3.
mass media available. Communication theorists recognize the importance and power of an individual who controls the flow of information by selecting what is published in any mass medium. A censor or editor of the newspaper influences public debate by selecting what is included in the public prints and what is omitted. The printers in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake region functioned as the editors—or gatekeepers—with some control or influence by government authorities. In a society with only one or two media of mass communication, a limited number of gatekeepers controlled the messages transmitted to large numbers of people. Such gatekeepers had immense power, stemming from a great deal of control over the flow of books and news information, and he—or she—was an intellectual leader and center of communication for the entire colony. This was a position with a great deal of inherent power for a woman to hold.63

Almanacs were even more ubiquitous than newspapers in eighteenth-century colonial America, and were important in spreading print culture to women. As noted in the prior chapter on almanacs, women were valued as both readers and contributors, especially when print competition arrived in Virginia in 1766. As both a source of reading and writing, almanacs helped to introduce women to the world of letters, thus drawing women as well as men into print culture and an expanding realm of public discourse.64

Women and the Civic Public

The pre-Revolutionary move to boycott British consumer products did perhaps the most to nudge women into political public discourse. As T. H. Breen noted, the Stamp Act crisis increased the range of political involvement: “Everywhere the circle of politics was expanding.” It was women who had to give up


64 See previous chapter.
brewing and serving tea, and women who had to do the physical labor to replace manufactured cloth with homespun.\textsuperscript{65} The implications of this inclusion can be better understood by reading what women wrote in the \textit{Virginia Gazettes}. Verses composed by women of Bedford, Massachusetts to support the non-consumption of tea were among the many colonial actions by women republished in the Williamsburg newspaper:

\begin{quote}
The coarsest Food we choose to eat,
Before we'll lose our Liberty.
Don't cast Reflections on our Sex,
Because the weaker Sort we be;
We'll work our Fingers to the Bone,
Before we'll lose our Liberty.\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

But the ladies of the South were not to be outdone by their counterparts to the north, sending a letter “To the Ladies of Pennsylvania” from “… your affectionate countrywomen, of Virginia,” urging the northern women to stop using and importing English goods and to ban India tea from their tables.\textsuperscript{67} Another letter, addressed to wives of the members of Britain’s Parliament, suggested they should convince their husbands to be just to the American colonists: “Now, ladies, how noble, how glorious would it be to the female character, if you would redeem your husbands from guilt, and your country from ruin!”\textsuperscript{68} An “Essay on Women” published in 1773 demonstrates that at least for some Virginians, women were more than just “pretty figures,” but rather an important balancing factor on the predominant influence of men, even in the public arena. While not suggesting


\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Purdie, March 17, 1774), 2.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Ibid.}, (Rind, Sept. 15, 1774), 1.

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Ibid.}, (Pinkney, Sept. 14, 1775), 1-2.
equality, “One Sex was not designed to be the Oppression of the other…” In the letter from “A Planter’s Wife,” the presumed female author, writing to a female audience, stepped beyond a purely domestic realm and into the political arena when she boldly stated, “we no longer have any confidence in the British parliament,” and insisted that her “sisters” give up imported tea and all East India goods. The political crisis leading to the American Revolution made women highly visible in the pages of the *Virginia Gazette* and encouraged women to enter into public discourse and active involvement in the politics of non-consumption.

Through print, the act of writing could blur the lines between the domestic and public spaces, allowing women access to political debate, which typically had been limited. Writing a letter or a diary was a private practice, which could remain completely within the private or domestic sphere. When printing began in Virginia, the potential for such writing was amplified by the possibility of publication with an increased audience. Women could write anonymously, as did Mercy Otis Warren in Massachusetts, or pseudonymously, posing as a man to gain credibility. Without attaching her name, or without using her own name, a woman could publish a letter to a newspaper, a poem in an almanac, or even a political pamphlet. This was a major step into the sphere of public debate, especially when the topic was political. Thus print culture was emancipatory, helped women break down the gender restrictions of the civic public, and allowed women access to political debate.

Predating the Revolution, there were changes in the composition of those who governed colonial Virginia, and these changes can be seen in the composition

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70 *South Carolina Gazette*, reprinted in *Virginia Gazette* (Rind, Sept. 15, 1774), 1.

71 Zagarri, *Woman’s Dilemma*.

72 Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, 48, uses the idea of print being emancipatory, but not for women as this research suggests.
of the civic public. In comparing colonial Virginia with Habermas’ pre-modern Western Europe, we can view the royal governor and his counselors (the gentry) as the colonial equivalent of the King and court, without any truly public discourse at all in the early years of the colony. A wider range of influential people (including a newly rising middling sort of lawyers, tradesmen, and smaller farmers) eventually undermined the elite’s political authority. The new group used the newly available print discourse to establish their social authority. Out of this burgeoning print culture emerged the first actual civic public in Virginia. Its emergence and character diverge somewhat from the bourgeois transformation Habermas described in Western Europe.73 His theory of a civic public assumed—without presenting any solid evidence—that women and the more plebian members of society were not involved. The findings here suggest that in Virginia some women were indeed involved.74 Published accounts of politics within an emerging print culture are viewed as a crucial precondition of any such civic public. To take part in Habermas’ public discourse, however, required taking part not only in printed debates but also in oral discussions in taverns, coffeehouses, and other public spaces, activities that typically excluded women.75 Women did form active political groups that could be considered a female civic public, debating and taking action over non-consumption and non-importation in the years leading to the Revolution. While no evidence of

73 Rawson, “‘Guardians of their Own Liberty’,” 79, fn 17, suggested that in colonial Virginia, rather than a public sphere, there was a tight elite he described as a closed socioeconomic oligarchy that thought of itself as “the public.” He wrote that new economic, political, and cultural elites used print to establish a new authority and Virginia’s first real public sphere. This research suggests that instead of a pseudo-public, the original elite structure relates more to a pre-modern monarchy, and a totally private discourse. We agree that out of the new print culture emerges a public discourse, which he describes as a “sphere.”

74 Craig Calhoun, ed., Habermas and the Public Sphere, (Cambridge: MIT, 1992). This supports the conclusions of Kierner, Beyond the Household, xi, and 213.

75 Sharon Salinger, in Taverns and Drinking in Early America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), noted that women, especially the lower sort, took part in drinking and tavern discussions, but Salinger also suggested that gender and class differences were actually accentuated, not broken down, by tavern custom.
women’s involvement in the physical spaces where men’s public discussions took
place has been noted, women did take part in the public world of print, as both
readers and contributors. The public should be viewed not simply as functioning in
totally separate spaces, but rather in more complex multi-dimensional groupings, or
utilizing intersecting lines of communication. These communication networks are
made up of both physical discussion groups and other nonsynchronous
interconnections of people through media such as newspapers. The groups touch
and overlap at certain points, but are completely separate at others. Some groups
are completely within private realms, some are completely public, while others
touch upon both. Within this image, women are represented taking part in debates
that touch upon public matters, but women are also sometimes not completely
involved in public, political matters. Some women are shown to be involved to
some extent in public affairs, while also having private, domestic lines of activity.76

This involvement of women in the public prints and the public political
sphere led to a few outright requests for political equality by the Revolutionary
War, and some consideration by one of Virginia’s political elite. While
Massachusetts’ John Adams may have quickly rejected his wife’s request to
“Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them” in the
young nation’s “new Code of Laws,”77 at least one political leader did not so casually
reject women’s involvement outright. Richard Henry Lee of Virginia suggested that
he would support giving the vote to widows and unmarried women who owned
property. He wrote this comment to his sister, in response to her complaint that

76 Replacing the traditional spheres with the spatial metaphor was suggested by commentator
David Waldstreicher at the conference, The Atlantic World in the Age of Print in the Age of Franklin
(Philadelphia, Friday, September 29, 2006) where an earlier version of this chapter was presented.
Combining that idea with the criticism of the idea of a sphere by Grosswiler, “Jürgen Habermas:
Media Ecologist?,” 22-31, leaves the idea as a generic space, or intersecting straight lines or
strings.

77 Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31 to April 5, 1776 [electronic edition]. Adams
http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/
widows in Virginia were taxed on their property yet had no right to vote for or against that tax. When he claimed that, “it has never been the practice either here or in England” for women to vote, he was apparently unaware of some colonial exceptions.78 While it was not usual or customary for women to vote, the previously noted 1737 _Virginia Gazette_ reported on two women voting in New York. During the Revolution, women in New Jersey were also briefly allowed to vote.79 However, Lee was correct in the larger sense: any direct involvement of American women in the political process at this time was an aberration and not the norm.

* * *

Women in eighteenth-century Virginia were involved as readers, writers, and even editors of the public prints—especially of the more ephemeral forms such as newspapers, almanacs, and inexpensive books. While most printed material was written by men and aimed at a male audience, the extent of this bias was not as extreme as formerly believed. While elite women were certainly involved, so too were some female members of an emerging trade class, or middling sort—an economic group between the planter elite and the poorer sorts. Printer Clementina Rind was an example of this trade class, while several of the female writers appear to have been from farming families below the economic level of the planter elite. There is no evidence that any slaves, servants, Native Americans, or women from the poorest strata were contributing to this world of print.

Women in colonial Virginia and Maryland were also more involved in civic discourse than is typically theorized. At the very least, women participated through their contributions to, and reading of, printed matter. This involvement dates back

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79 _Virginia Gazette_ (Parks, June 23, 1737), 3. Norton, _Liberty's Daughters_, see for example xviii, 50, and 297-299.
to the 1730s, to the very origins of printing in the colony, but it visibly increased by
the time of the Stamp Act controversy and the non-importation movement. Some
of the printed evidence left to us was directly political in nature, including pleas for
political action, legal equality, and involvement in the boycott of British goods.
This also led to women holding public meetings and discussing the political matter
of non-importation. Some women, at least, did indeed take part as both readers
and active contributors to that colony's literary world of print in the mid-eighteenth
century, occasionally participated in the political debates in the press, and by the
time of the Stamp Act actually took part in interpersonal civic discourse.

Women sometimes transcended any purely private sphere of the home, if
such a completely private realm actually did exist. The public prints of colonial
Virginia display a relationship between the culture of print and the civic public. As
Habermas suggested, civic discourse was stimulated by printed material and took
place in the physical settings of taverns and coffeehouses. In colonial Virginia,
much of that debate took place on the pages of the newspapers where women were
involved. In addition, women took part in civic discourse at events such as public
teas where matters of non-consumption were discussed. This undermines the theory
that a solid wall existed between the totally feminine domestic space and the
exclusively masculine public space of politics. Women of Virginia stepped
occasionally into the civic public, as women in other colonies no doubt also did. The
traditional deference expected of women is seen as waning as they spoke out in the
public prints, vigorously disagreeing with current political and social conditions.
The active involvement of women was greater than has been previously
acknowledged, and that has implications for our understanding of the society in
general and colonial politics in particular. At least a few women in late colonial
Virginia were part of the world of participatory politics. By the time of the
American Revolution, several women were publicly asking for greater legal and

80 Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere*.
even political status. In the end—at the beginning of the new republic—women were left out of the formal political process (for the time being.) Nonetheless, women were a part of the growing print culture in Virginia, and did seek to become part of the body politic.

Connections between British-American colonies were made possible through commonality of language, increased trade connections, and emerging consumerism as reflected in print capitalism. Women were a key to this, as consumption was considered part of the women’s realm. Shared communication through newspapers was a crucial basis of a new national consciousness where once there had been only separate colonies. Inter-colonial communication—with revolutionary messages reprinted in local newspapers around the colonies—helped to create a new sense of a larger community for both men and women.  

This was an important part of a consumer revolution that prefaced the political revolution. Inexpensive almanacs and newspapers reached well down in the economic strata, broadening involvement and allowing for the shared experience and popular mobilization that made the American Revolution possible. The decision to consume or boycott British products largely affected—and was made by—women. As women were an important part of this new world of consumption, so too were they an important part of the movement toward dissatisfaction with British policies, the Revolution, and the new republic.

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81 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

Chapter 6
The Stamp Act

The American Stamp Act of 1765 marked a turning point for the role of print media in the colony of Virginia. This controversial law polarized political opinion and led to dissatisfaction with the only printer in the colony. Many contemporaries expressed the opinion that the royal governor kept tight control over this one printer and the output of his press. That had serious political and social consequences, as he was the sole gatekeeper for the one mass medium based in the colony.\(^1\) With control over distribution of messages, the royal governor had a great deal of control over political discourse and dissent and the British ministry appeared to have aimed the Stamp Act directly at the disseminator of such dissidence. Participants in a widening, more broadly based civic discourse saw the most important source of information threatened by government action. The outcry was immediate and the subsequent changes were dramatic. The subordinate relationship of the printer to the royal governor was soon to give way to a much more adversarial role. The old-style political deference gave way to dissidence, and eventually to Revolution. This change was both reflected within the pages and driven by the printed material such as newspapers and pamphlets.

Parliament’s Act

The Stamp Act was designed to defray the cost of defending the American colonies, and the British government did not expect the intense opposition that

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\(^1\) See previous chapter for an explanation of the term gatekeeper and the power which gatekeepers hold over information flow. The importance here is that gatekeepers control the messages transmitted, and in a society where there is only one gatekeeper, the power is immense.
ensued. In the summer of 1764, new Prime Minister George Grenville warned colonial governors that a stamp tax in the colonies was being considered. It was one of several taxes imposed to help pay the heavy debt incurred from Seven Years War, a large portion of which had been fought on American soil. What Parliament passed was, “An act for granting and applying certain stamp duties, and other duties, in the British colonies and plantations in America, towards further defraying the expenses of defending, protecting, and securing the same,” and it was to take effect November 1, 1765. The tax required legal and business documents of all types to be printed or issued only on paper with a royal stamp, and the paper itself had to be imported from England, substantially raising costs. Legal and business forms were to be taxed from three pence to six pounds, paperwork for indentures from two and a half to five percent, almanacs two pence and up, newspapers a halfpenny to a penny per sheet, and advertisements in newspapers two shillings. College students would have to pay two pounds to matriculate and another two pounds to graduate while lawyers were to pay ten pounds for admission to the bar. Even playing cards had a tax on them. Penalties for paper without the stamps were substantial—from forty shillings to twenty pounds. Residents in England were among the most heavily taxed in Europe and Grenville assumed that the colonists would be willing to pay more of their share, especially as a large portion of this debt was accrued in defending American lands. The outcry from the colonies and their allies in England caught the ministry unprepared.2

Although there were precedents for such a stamp tax, several differences led to the colonists’ refusal to pay this tax. In England, a stamp tax had been in effect since Lord Bolingbroke instituted it in 1712. That tax was one penny per sheet of paper, plus an additional tax on advertisements. Its purpose was largely to raise

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revenues, but it also served to restrict newspaper circulation. Even the colonies had used stamp taxes: Massachusetts passed its own stamp tax in 1755, New York in 1757. The 1765 act was different, however. It was both an internal tax, rather than a tax on trade (which colonists had learned to accept), and it was viewed as taxation without representation. It was enacted by a Parliament lacking any delegates from the colonies. Of greater importance for publicity and propaganda, it also hit American printers hard and in the process radicalized them. This virtually assured that all the colonists would be well-informed about why this tax should never be paid.

Contemporaries saw the tax as intentionally aimed at sources of dissidence, and some historians agree. John Adams wrote in the Boston Gazette that the ministry was intentionally trying “to strip us in a great measure of the means of knowledge, by loading the press, the colleges, and even an almanack and a newspaper, with restraints and duties.” With the price going up, printed material would not be distributed as widely, nor as far down the economic ladder. If newspapers were more expensive, the poorest members of society could not afford them. Michael Warner theorized that “it was an attempt by authority to curtail civil liberty” by restricting press freedom. Historians, British records, and Grenville’s papers do not, however, give evidence to support this claim. Whatever the intent, by challenging the printers’ viability, the tax had the effect of strengthening the ties

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3 Newspapers in England were taxed up until 1855, from Barker, Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1 and 65–68.


among the printers and between the separate colonies, increasing printed
dissidence.\textsuperscript{7}

Reaction from the colonies was sharply negative, as Adams observed:

In every colony, from Georgia to New Hampshire inclusively, the
stamp distributors and inspectors have been compelled by the
unconquerable rage of the people to renounce their offices ... Our
presses have groaned, our pulpits have thundered, our towns have
voted; the crown officers have everywhere trembled ... \textsuperscript{8}

There were no stamps or stamped paper available as popular pressure had forced the
resignation of the stamp officials and prevented importation of stamped paper.\textsuperscript{9}
The Annapolis printing partners initially wrote that they were being forced to stop
publishing because of the uncertainty of the cost of stamped paper, and asked
subscribers to pay more before printing could resume: “But even that advanced
Price cannot yet be known, as the Paper, the —— Stamped Paper, Must be
Bought of the —— Stamp Master, but what Sort or Size of Paper, or at what
Price, it is impossible yet to tell.”\textsuperscript{10} Printers would be forced to pay not just for
stamps, but also for imported paper instead of using cheaper paper made in the
colonies. Jonas Green and his partner William Rind filled their \textit{Maryland Gazette}
with comments sharply critical of the tax and notices that because of it, the
newspaper would no longer be published. The last regular issue had a new
masthead, “The Maryland Gazette, Expiring: In Uncertain Hopes of a Resurrection
to Life again.” The newspaper referred to the stamp deadline as, “That Dooms

\textsuperscript{7} Morgan, \textit{Stamp Act Crisis}.


\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Maryland Gazette} (Annapolis: Jonas Green and William Rind, August 22, 1765), 2.
Day,” with a special type font to emphasize the deadliness. A story on the same page noted that while the stamps had arrived in Boston, threats of public action against them led the heavily-guarded vessel to not bring them into the port. The hated stamps were instead kept in a fortress in the harbor: “‘Tis said those detestable Stamps are to be lodged at the Castle, and there to remain till further Orders from Home, there being at present no Demand here for such a superfluous Commodity.”  

Green continued to publish supplemental issues with such names as, “Third and Last Supplement to the Maryland Gazette, of the Tenth Instant” and “An Apparition of the Maryland Gazette which is not dead, but only sleepeth”  

On the bottom of the first page on one issue, Green printed a skull and crossbones outlined in a thick, black border, with the headline, “The Fatal STAMP.”  

Only one issue of the Virginia Gazette from this entire year is extant, and while it included much on the unpopularity of the tax, it contained none of the theatrics included in the Maryland Gazettes.  

The Stamp Act put Virginia printer Joseph Royle and all colonial printers in an untenable political and financial bind. It forced them to decide to either stop printing, print without stamps and face prosecution, or attempt to get expensive stamped paper and face angering numerous critics who opposed any payment of the tax. For newspapers, the tax might have only added a direct cost of four percent. The cost of pamphlets would have escalated even more, with a tax of up to one shilling for each four pages on a document that typically would initially cost less

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11 Ibid., (Oct. 10, 1765), 1.

12 Ibid., (Jonas Green, Oct. 31, 1765, and Dec. 10, 1765.) William Rind was no longer listed as partner.

13 Ibid., (Oct. 10, 1765), 1.
than two shillings. The tax on almanacs was about twenty-seven percent, but no tax was placed on books. Two hidden costs added to the expense beyond the tax: stamped paper would have to be imported from London instead of being produced locally, and taxes had to be paid in hard-to-come-by sterling instead of colonial currency. All colonial printers faced tough choices that tended to politicize the output of their presses. The newspapers of both of the Chesapeake colonies took a short hiatus, perhaps for fear of the penalties for not paying a tax there was no way of paying. It is not clear if that is the reason the Virginia paper stopped printing, or if it was because of the death of printer Royle.

Historians have not always agreed on why the new tax generated such stiff defiance from the American colonies. The prevalent theory was that the colonists united against the stamp tax because it was a tax on their internal affairs, something Parliament had previously left to local legislatures. In their definitive 1953 history of the Stamp Act crisis, Edmund and Helen Morgan undermined that old internal tax theory. They concluded that what emerged was an important reaffirmation of the principle of taxation only by representative government. Another important aspect of their work is that they recognized the Stamp Act as uniting the various colonies against the tax and that the newspapers had an important role in spreading information between regions.

Contemporary printer and early historian Isaiah Thomas had firsthand knowledge of both the stamp tax opposition, its effect on printers, and the printers’ reaction to it:

In the troublesome times, occasioned by the stamp act in 1765, some of the more opulent and cautious printers, when the act was to take place, put their papers in mourning, and, for a few weeks,

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16 Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*. 
omitted to publish them; others not so timid, but doubtful of the consequences of publishing newspapers without stamps, omitted the titles, or altered them as an evasion.\textsuperscript{17}

Thomas suggested that opposition to the tax was not universal, but rather ranged from opposition to neutrality, with no American printers actually supporting the act, but some rather weak in their opposition. In New Hampshire, Thomas reports, some patriots thought the one press there was under the influence of crown officials and brought in a second printer just before the Stamp Act.\textsuperscript{18}

Other historians have posited that the Stamp Act’s impact on printed material generated a universal opposition to it from colonial printers. Historians have also seen a greater influence on the colonial population from the printed opposition thus generated and disseminated. Using Thomas as a major source, Arthur Schlesinger wrote a groundbreaking study regarding the importance of printers during the American Revolution and how the Stamp Act actually unified their support for the patriot cause. His analysis suggested not only the importance of American newspapers in rallying opposition to new British taxes, but argued that the Stamp Act changed the actual role of printers in colonial American. This transformed them, he argued, from merely transmitters of ideas to actual makers of opinion. The Stamp Act was an unprecedented internal tax and “as though deliberately to provoke resistance, it saddled them [the taxes] largely on the printers, lawyers and merchants who, along with the clergy, formed the most literate and vocal elements of the population.” He claimed that newspaper opposition was unanimous, “throughout the colonies the printers in one manner or another defied the Stamp Act.” Schlesinger quotes David Ramsay’s 1789 work, \textit{The History of the American Revolution}, in saying that printers generally favored liberty but were more interested in profits. He claimed they universally opposed this tax: “A stamp duty,

\textsuperscript{17} Thomas, \textit{History of Printing in America}, 16-17.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 332.
which openly invaded the first [liberty], and threatened a great diminution of the
last [profits], provoked their united zealous opposition.” All continued to publish
without stamps, although some suspended printing briefly. “Never again in like
circumstances,” Schlesinger notes, “would the press present so united a front.” His
premise regarding the unanimity of printers’ opposition to the Stamp Act has since
been challenged.19

Susan Macall Allen’s dissertation on colonial printers and the Stamp Act
concluded that while no American printers actually supported the tax, their
opposition was not as universal as Schlesinger claimed. She suggested that he erred
by treating printers as a monolithic group. Allen took a quantitative approach, and
suggested that printers in strong financial positions tended to oppose the tax, while
those on less solid financial ground were more often neutral. With no extensive
financial records or newspaper circulation numbers available, she based her financial
estimates only on the amount of paper used for books, broadsides, and pamphlets
printed in 1765. She categorizes Maryland’s Green as very strong financially, and
Virginia’s Royle as merely strong, but not as financially solid as was Green. This
would tend to support the idea that Green was in better position to oppose the
British government in this dispute than was Royle.20 The research that follows here
suggests a refinement of her findings for the Chesapeake region printers. The
printer who was more financially dependent on—and thus more controlled by the
royal governor—was less firm in his opposition to the stamp tax.

In May 1765, firebrand Patrick Henry succeeded in getting support for
some strong declarations against the Stamp Act, but many in Virginia would not

19 David Ramsey, The History of the American Revolution (Philadelphia: R. Aitken & Son,

20 Susan Macall Allen, “The Impact of the Stamp Act of 1765 on Colonial American
Printers: Threat or Bonanza?” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1996), 1-6, 24,
and 67.
hear about it for some time. After some heated debate, the House of Burgesses passed the *Virginia Resolves*:

Resolved therefore, That the General Assembly of this Colony, with the Consent of his Majesty, or his Substitute, HAVE the Sole Right and Authority to lay Taxes and Impositions upon It’s Inhabitants: And, That every Attempt to vest such Authority in any other Person or Persons whatsoever, has a Manifest Tendency to Destroy AMERICAN FREEDOM.21

These challenging words were never printed in the local newspaper. According to the Morgans: “… the resolves were too much for Joseph Royle, the conservative editor of the *Virginia Gazette*. He failed to print them, and consequently other colonies got news of Virginia’s action from the more ardent supporters of the resolutions, instead of obtaining a relatively reliable text from a publication in the colony itself.”22 The resolves were published in Maryland and in other newspapers throughout the colonies. Several letters appeared in the Maryland newspaper, complaining about them not being printed in Virginia. The demand for civic discourse, including controversial criticism of the British government, was creating tension between the public and the colony’s sole mass-media gatekeeper. For his part, Williamsburg printer Royle complained about the accuracy of the *Virginia Resolves* as printed elsewhere: “It is with no small Degree of Suprize that we have of late observed several Northern Newspapers stuffed with Paragraphs of Intelligence.

21 Maryland Gazette (July 4, 1765), 3. Another version of Henry’s Resolves was printed first in the *Newport Mercury* by Samuel Hall on June 24, 1765, according to Francis Walett, “The Impact of the Stamp Act on The Colonial Press,” in Bond, *Newsletters to Newspapers*, 263-269, also in Schlesinger, *Prelude*, 71. There are several conflicting versions of these resolutions passed by the burgesses on May 31. See Edmund Morgan, *Prologue to Revolution: Sources and Documents on the Stamp Act Crisis, 1764-1766* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 44-50, for the disagreement over what the precise resolves were. According to Governor Fauquier, Henry wrote seven specific resolves, but only five were debated and passed, and one was later rescinded. Henry left us a copy of five resolves, the Maryland newspaper printed seven, and the Rhode Island newspaper printed six. This R.I. version got the greatest colonial circulation and inspired most other colonies to approve similar resolves against the Stamp Act.

22 Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 102.
Extracts of Letters, &c. respecting Virginia, which are as destitute of Truth, as they are of right Reason.”23 This elicited a response in the very same *Maryland Gazette* that printed the Annapolis assembly’s own resolves:

If Mr. Royle had been pleased to publish those [VA] Resolves, the Authenticity of his Intelligence, would have been undisputed, and he would not have had any Reason of Complaint on that Story: But if Mr. Royle is under such Influence as to be obliged to Print what he is directed, and nothing else, he may very truly be said not to be the most Independent and Self-Sufficient Man in the Worlds.24

Virginia’s printer was clearly reluctant to fan the flames of dissent. Royle’s refusal to publish more radical sentiments, even those passed by an act of the lower house, clearly clashed with the growing culture of dissidence, and the public desire for civic discourse in the newspaper.

**Reactions in the Chesapeake Prints**

A direct comparison of the reactions to the Stamp Act in the *Virginia Gazette* and the *Maryland Gazette* reveals a great deal about political bias and the two newspapers’ perspectives on contemporary politics. Unfortunately, few of Royle’s Williamsburg newspapers are extant.25 By 1765, the Maryland newspaper was much more likely to run articles critical of governmental authority than its Virginia counterpart. For example, the Annapolis newspaper printed a sharp criticism of British attempts to undermine the system of trials by jury:

> Without Liberty, no Man can be a Subject. He is a Slave: And to say that he is bound to obey without being protected, is to say that there is no Difference between absolute Power and limited

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23 *Virginia Gazette* (Aug. 30, 1765). This issue is no longer extant, but this quotation was republished in the *Maryland Gazette* (Oct. 3, 1765), 2.

24 *Maryland Gazette* (Green & Rind, Oct. 3, 1765), 2.

25 The nearly complete online collection at Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s Digital Library (Rockefeller Library) contains only three of Royle’s *Virginia Gazettes*. Six issues were located and examined for this book.
Government, between Englishmen and Frenchmen, between Law and Despotism, Freedom and Vassalage, Tyranny and Justice.26

After passage of the Stamp Act, the Maryland newspaper published a remarkably disparaging comment on the reigning monarch, King George III: “This Paper has never had Occasion to appear in Deep Mourning, since the Death of our late good King until Now.”27 This criticism, disguised as a compliment to the King’s late father, appeared along with other notices by the printer and has no dateline or source listed, so the printer himself was the likely author. This is anti-royalist sentiment (dissent bereft of deference) the likes of which had certainly not been seen in any Virginia Gazette. The few extant issues of the Williamsburg newspaper from before 1766 displayed a remarkably conservative and apologetic framing, defensive of Parliament’s position. In general, the Maryland Gazettes of this period had much greater emphasis on opposition to the Stamp Act and earlier governmental actions, while Royle’s Virginia Gazette focused more on the governmental viewpoint. This is not to insinuate that dissent never made it into the Virginia press, but Royle appeared to make editorial choices that would not anger the governor. The newspaper published by Green (or earlier Green and Rind) in Annapolis showed much less evidence of royal influence than did Royle’s newspaper. The Maryland printer took risks that the one Virginia printer did not, perhaps because Maryland was a proprietary colony rather than a royal colony and political pressure from London was less direct. While Virginia’s governor complained about “the lawless and riotous State of this Colony,” and prorogued the assembly in Williamsburg so they could not elect representatives to the Stamp Act Congress, Maryland Governor Horatio Sharpe instead inquired of his


27 Maryland Gazette (Green, Oct. 31, 1765), special supplement, 1.
assembly what action he should take when the stamped paper arrived in the colony.²⁸

Two newspapers from 1765 afford a direct comparison supporting the suggestion of different bias. The Annapolis paper put out a supplement dated October 24, 1765, and the Williamsburg paper published a supplement dated the next day. The contrast between the two support the conclusion that Green’s newspaper was more whiggish or patriot in leanings, and Royle’s was more royalist or conservative politically. (Green’s partner William Rind left Annapolis about this time, and this issue lacked his name.)²⁹

The Annapolis newspaper featured a full-page copy of the “Remonstrance of the Freeholders and Freemen of Anne-Arundel County” which was sent to their colony’s assemblymen. This was a sharp protest of the Stamp Act, arguing it was a tax passed by a Parliament without their representation: “How then in Point of Natural or Civil Law, are we rightly chargeable, or liable to be burdened, by the Stamp-Act, attempted to be imposed upon us by the Mother Country? Have we assented to it personally or representatively?” This radical political protest argued against the claim of “virtual representation,” alleged the tax was a violation of Maryland’s charter, and requested that delegates be sent to the Stamp Act Congress being held in New York. On the next page, a short letter to the printer argued that no one individual should be punishable for transacting business without stamped paper, as none was available because the people as a whole prevented stamps from being imported. From New York, there was a short item on Royal Governor Cadwallader Colden greeting representatives to the Stamp Act Congress; ”He received them very coldly, and told them that the Meeting of the


²⁹ Second Supplement to the Maryland Gazette … (Green, Oct. 24, 1765), 1.
Commissioners was unconstitutional, unprecedented, and unlawful, and that he should give them no Kind of Countenance or Encouragement.” Several short items regarding what took place at the Congress and who attended followed. One noted that the Virginia governor prorogued the assembly there, not allowing members to meet as scheduled. (This actually prevented Virginia from sending representatives to the Congress.) Several items from England ridiculed the party in power for bringing back a disgraced minister and praised the “Great Patriot Mr. [William] Pitt,” the former Prime Minister now in great favor with the Americans. Overall, the Maryland newspaper contained a great deal of politically dissenting material with very few articles appearing royalist in nature.

In contrast, Royle’s Virginia Gazette contained warnings against opposition to the British action. A speech by Massachusetts Royal Governor Francis Bernard, taking up most of the first page, admonished and threatened legislators for refusing to obey British law. He called upon the assembly to help enforce the Stamp Act, decried recent acts of violence against public officials, and declared the colony on the precipice of disaster. He warned of “the consequences if you should suffer a confirmed disobedience of this act of Parliament to take place.” This long article was certainly supportive of the royal position. (It is important to remember that colonial newspapers did not order their stories in regard to importance, so the page placement is not directly relevant.) The second page reported apologies for instances of mob violence issued to court justices in smaller cities in Massachusetts. The exact story about the New York Governor meeting the Stamp Act Congress delegates ran here as in the Maryland paper, with only minor differences in capitalization. Both newspapers noted the same source, a letter sent via Newport, Rhode Island. One short story from London indicated hope that the Stamp Act would be repealed, and another item noted that the appointed Stamp Act distributor for North Carolina resigned following public pressure. The

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30 Ibid., 1-4. He is now known as “William Pitt, the Elder.”
Williamsburg paper did not mention proroguing of the Virginia assembly. A long story on page three detailed the unfriendly reception that the appointed distributor of stamps for Virginia received when he arrived in Williamsburg from England. Clearly, this Virginia paper showed more bias toward the official British position than did the Maryland paper with the similar date.31

That story regarding local opposition to the stamp official bears closer examination as well as a comparison with a letter sent by Virginia Royal Governor Francis Fauquier to his superiors in London. Royle’s pro-royalist sympathies are evident in the similarities of these two accounts of this key local Stamp Act incident. When George Mercer arrived in Williamsburg from London, after being appointed official Distributor of Stamps, the Governor witnessed a hostile crowd that forced Mercer to resign his post. The report in Royle’s Gazette—apparently a firsthand account—was remarkably similar to the detailed account in Fauquier’s letter to the Board of Trade, despite the fact that separate eyewitness accounts of any event are rarely consistent. The newspaper reported that Mercer “was accosted by a concourse of Gentlemen assembled from all parts of the colony, the General Court sitting at this time. They insisted he should immediately satisfy the company (which constantly increased) whether he intended to act as a Commissioner under the Stamp Act.” Fauquier’s letter stated: “This concourse of people I should call a Mob, did I not know that it was chiefly if not altogether composed of Gentlemen of property in the Colony … They met Colonel Mercer on the way just at the Capitol there they stop’d and demanded of him an Answer whether he would resign or act in his Office as Distributor of the Stamps.” Both accounts say the crowd demanded an immediate response, but Mercer refused, saying he needed to consult with “his Friends,” according to Fauquier’s account, or “the Governour and Council,” according to the newspaper. The crowd finally agreed to wait for his response until five o’clock the next day, at which time he agreed to delay execution.

31 Virginia Gazette (Royle, Oct. 25, 1765), 1.
of the tax until the colony’s General Assembly agreed upon it. Although the two accounts are not exact enough to suggest the same author, neither report is supportive of the crowd’s action. The newspaper account is neutral enough that Fauquier included a copy of the newspaper in his letter to his London superiors, to detail the ending of the affair. It appears clear that Royle was politically allied with the royal governor, a situation that was generating unrest among those Virginians who were more critical of the British government.32

Changing Virginia Press & Discourse

This new tax placed the Virginia printer in the middle of a power struggle. Exploring the printed material and the few financial records available reveals much about potential political restrictions on the content, while at the same time uncovering a wider dissemination of a broader range of views. As printer, Royle was at both the center of growing commercial activity and the intellectual heart of the colony. The town was the market hub for a region without an urban center, and his shop was a retail outlet for the entire colony. The printing office journals, or daybooks, exist only for part of 1750-52 and 1764-66, but they indicate a substantial trade in books, stationery, business forms, legal blanks, almanacs, newspapers, postal services, playing cards, and other miscellaneous items. An important income source for this Virginia tradesman came from printing government documents.33 The government of the colony paid Parks and his


33 William Hunter’s, Printing Office Journal (University of Virginia Libraries, Department of Special Collections, vol. 1, 1750-1752) and Joseph Royle and Alexander Purdie’s Printing Office Journal (University of Virginia Libraries, Department of Special Collections, vol. 2, 1764-1766).
successors to print laws and the *Journal of the House of Burgesses*. The House of Burgesses voted on this appointment, which then had to be approved by the Governor’s Council, and also by the Royal Governor. The annual salary was increased from two hundred to three hundred fifty pounds a year in 1762, and again to three hundred seventy five pounds a year in 1764. This substantial amount of money made the printer quite wealthy for a tradesperson. Printers also sometimes got additional personal and governmental work from the governor for additional pay. The Williamsburg printers also ran a post office and in 1753, William Hunter was appointed Deputy Postmaster General for the colonies, splitting a salary of three hundred pounds a year with Benjamin Franklin. Royle was only the local postmaster, but this lucrative post was subject to the whims of the British government and anyone invoking the wrath of the royal governor was likely to lose this position. As colonists began to take divergent positions over the Stamp Act dispute, printers had difficult editorial decisions to make, any of which could subject them to possible financial disaster. Anger the governor—who supported the official British position—and the Virginia printer would lose royal support and possibly his government salary. Anger the burgesses—a majority of whom opposed the Stamp Act—and Royle could also lose his government salary. Anger potential customers—who were on both sides of the issue—and he could lose much retail business. Printers had no stamps to allow them to print legally. If they stopped printing altogether, they would lose income and anger the patriots by not defying the tax. If they printed without stamps, they risked expensive prosecution.

34 John Pendleton Kennedy, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia* (Richmond: The Colonial Press, E. Waddey Co., 1906), 10:11, 22, 38, 158-9, 164-6, and 221. See for example William Hunter’s will where his estate was valued at 8,614 pounds. Joseph Royle left four separate Williamsburg properties, from “Old Virginia Editors,” *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine* 7 (July 1898) 1:10.

Sources of revenue were shifting for the Williamsburg printer. Retail products were becoming more important. The major source of printing income was no longer government work but rather the private output of the press: primarily newspapers, the yearly “almanack,” printed forms, handbills, lottery tickets, and the occasional pamphlet or book. While the office did print its own books, bind books, and even had a papermaking facility, most of the books sold there were printed in England. Many students at nearby College of William and Mary purchased textbooks at the shop. The daybook records indicate a growth in customers faster than the rate of the colony’s population increase, an expanding range of customers, and a shift in the content of books between 1752 and 1766. Royle made an estimated profit of £240 per year on book sales alone, more than double what his predecessor made just fifteen years earlier. While his total profits cannot be determined, his daybooks show that Royle received £1,742.19.00 in credit sales of non-book items for the last two years (1764-65) of his life. Part of this income was from the newspaper, stationery sales, and post office revenues. As the almanac sales were known to be quite profitable, we can assume that figure—not included here—must have also been considerable. As David Rawson suggested, the role of the printer at this time began to shift from “a dispenser of privileged and controlled information, whose success was tied to government contracts” to one more tightly tied to the commercial marketplace, which sought a wider variety of information.

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38 Royle & Purdie, *Printing Office Journal*, lists £75 credit only almanac sales for 1764. It does not indicate any cash sales, including for almanacs or newspapers.

While Royle did still receive £375 per year from the colony’s government, the importance of this subsidy lessened as the retail business increased.

The types of books sold and the demography of the customers had shifted by this time as well. While a majority of sales were to the gentry—planters and other members of the wealthy elite—an increasing number of sales were to the middling classes: craftsmen, tavern keepers, and merchants. There is no evidence that sales were made to those lower on the social scale: wage workers, subsistence farmers, servants, or slaves. The types of books sold shifted as well in this period. The number of religious works dropped dramatically, political tracts increased, and there was even a trend toward the new novels. Controversial works began to appear, starting with dissenting religious tracts, and eventually pamphlets on politically divisive subjects such as the Parson’s Cause and on the tax disputes with Britain. The demand for politically-oriented books and pamphlets increased by 1765, while demand for religious and classical works noticeably decreased.

Pamphlets of this period helped broaden the range of people involved in political conversations in Virginia. The political pamphlet was an important aspect of the dramatic rise of the political press in the colonies by the mid-eighteenth century. Historians confirm that this encouraged a wider interest in politics. Iconoclastic thought first appeared in pamphlets printed in Williamsburg as part of the Great Awakening, when a dissenter paid printer William Hunter to print several works. The writings from both sides in the

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40 Royle & Purdie, *Printing Office Journals.* Berg, “Agent of Change,” vi. Her analysis indicates book buying increased by 54% between 1752 and 1765, compared to a local population growth rate of 18%. However, colony-wide population records indicate a population growth similar to the book buying increase. See *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 2:1168. For titles, see also Berg, *Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg Imprints.*


Parson’s Cause are the first apparent political pamphlets from the Virginia press. Even in that early controversy between political leaders and religious leaders, some voices could not get printed in Williamsburg and were forced to turn to Annapolis.\footnote{See Chapter 2 regarding the Parson’s Cause.} In 1765, Landon Carter sent a pamphlet against the Stamp Act to printer Royle, asking him to make public his threat to resign in reaction to the move to tax Americans without their approval. He refers to Great Britain’s Parliament as “submitted to anticonstitutional measures” and to the Stamp Act a “blow … fatal to American Freedom … to be a Representative of a People divested of Liberty is to be a real Slave.”\footnote{Landon Carter, “Address to the Freeholders of the County of Richmond,” sent to Joseph Royle, June 3, 1765, Fairfax Proprietary Papers, Brock Collection (BR Box 229), Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.} Royle apparently refused to print this, perhaps due to the governor’s influence.\footnote{Greene, \textit{Quest for Power}, 158-162 and 289.} The daybooks indicate that pamphlets were typically produced only when the author or another sponsor paid for the whole lot, but the printers would share the responsibility for selling them, and they would also sell pamphlets produced outside the region. Royle’s successor, Alexander Purdie, ran an ad in the \textit{Virginia Gazette} for Richard Bland’s pamphlet denouncing the Stamp Act, “An Inquiry into the Rights of the British Colonies…” selling for 1 s, 3 d.\footnote{Royle & Purdie, \textit{Printing Office Journals, Virginia Gazette} (Williamsburg: Purdie, March 7, 1766), 3.} Bland argued forcefully against taxing the colonies without their approval and against the concept that the colonists were “virtually, represented in Parliament.” He accused those favoring the tax of attempting to “to fix Shackles upon the American Colonies: Shackles which, however nicely polished, can by no Means sit easy upon Men who have just
Sentiments of their own Rights and Liberties.” One of the best-known pamphlets, Daniel Dulany’s, *Considerations on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes on the British Colonies for the purpose of raising a Revenue by Act of Parliament*, was printed in Maryland in 1765, but sold in Virginia by the next year. These pamphlets, along with the newspapers, were an increasingly important part of a widening public debate of political issues in Virginia.

Print and Related Cultural Shifts

By the mid-eighteenth century, several cultural shifts were evident within Virginia society. First, what was primarily an oral culture began to shift, in the mid-eighteenth century, to one that was primarily print-based, as reading and writing became more common. The records portray a wider range of reading customers, and clearly, literacy in Virginia had increased by this time. From reading being the exclusive province of the elite, print culture had spread to include at least a majority of the white men in the colony. Historian Richard D. Brown suggested that more than half the white male population of the British-American colonies could read by the eighteenth century, although literacy in the Chesapeake colonies was considerably lower than in Puritan New England. “In both regions [north and south] literacy was more frequent among propertied men, but even the poor were

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50 While estimated numbers are subject to many questions, some 60-70% of white men in Virginia and as many as 30% of white women are thought to have been able to read by 1765. See Chapters 2 and 5 regarding literacy.
often literate.” The gender gap “all but vanished during the course of the 18th
century,” Brown concluded.\(^5\) Historian Charles E. Clark agreed that the literacy
gap between men and women was closing and suggested that in the colonies it was
likely that men, women, boys, and girls all read newspapers. The British-American
colonists, Brown said, were even more literate than residents back home in the mother
country.\(^5\)

Hannah Barker found that the English reading public was more diverse than earlier
studies had shown. Those who could not read could listen to reading aloud in taverns and
coffeehouses, as they also did across the Atlantic in Williamsburg. She found contemporary evidence that even
English working classes could read. A 1751 engraving by William Hogarth, for
example, “shows a butcher and a blacksmith reading a newspaper.”\(^5\) With
indications that the colonies had a greater reading rate than England, this helps to
alter our view of reading being the exclusive domain of the Virginia elite in the
mid-eighteenth century. Warner found it worth noting that by the end of the
century, there were more printing presses in the colonies than there were in
England, and that “... more people could read than statistics suggest.”\(^5\) Rawson

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\(^{51}\) Brown, *Knowledge is Power*, 11-12.

\(^{52}\) Clark, *Public Prints*, 259.


estimates that by this period, Virginia was heading toward universal literacy. Literacy was permeating the middling sorts, and illiteracy was becoming a characteristic exclusive of the lower classes.\textsuperscript{55} Newspaper reading had become widespread, and Schlesinger suggested these prints were an integral part of the move toward independence: “This wider reach of the press greatly enhanced its influence in the coming war of words with Britain.”\textsuperscript{56}

A second cultural shift was evident in the way that the colonists were becoming more Virginians and Americans, less focused on England. This change was reflected in the popular prints and was partly driven by the media. By 1765, newspapers in the Chesapeake colonies had changed in several ways. Improvements in the postal service, mentioned earlier, strengthened the connections between the various British-American colonies. The importance of these postal changes is impossible to overemphasize. As Brown noted, an information revolution was happening at this time, and it was changing society. Transportation changes and postal developments combined with increased education and printing to drive what eventually led to a major shift of power.\textsuperscript{57} The official post now had overland couriers from Philadelphia, through the southern colonies to Charleston. By 1775, there was a weekly courier south from Philadelphia through the Chesapeake region to South Carolina.\textsuperscript{58} Private letters and public news were traveling at much greater speeds than just a half-century earlier. Newspapers were exchanged between colonies and printers for free and at

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{55} Rawson, “Virginia Print Culture,” 53.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Schlesinger, \textit{Prelude}, 53-55. On circulation, see also Clark, 259.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Brown, \textit{Knowledge is Power}, 3-5.
\end{itemize}
greater speeds. By the time of the political crisis of the Stamp Act in 1765, the Virginia newspaper was reporting what happened in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York just two to four weeks earlier, without the news having first to travel through England. Shipping speeds from London did not change substantially, and the Virginia Gazette was still running European stories more than four months old.

The shift driven by postal changes was visible in the source of the stories. Just a few decades earlier, there were very few articles from other colonies other than close neighbors of Maryland and North Carolina. The emphasis by the 1760s shifted to local and inter-colonial news, away from England, which has serious loyalty and political implications. Both the Virginia and Maryland gazettes included more stories from the other British-American colonies, and fewer items from Britain or Europe, although items on ministry matters and Parliamentary debates on the colonies proved of great interest. Even the trivial items, which once came from England, now were more likely to come from New England, the middle colonies, or the West Indies. In 1768, for example, from St. John’s (Antigua) came a story about the death of a “young Lady [who] was cut off in the second year of her teens.” From Portsmouth, New Hampshire, a petition from the inhabitants requested a town meeting. Lightning struck and demolished a house.

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60 Virginia Gazette (Royle, July 6, 1764), 2. This recently recovered issue (from Rockefeller Library, Colonial Williamsburg) had a story from Philadelphia datelined just 16 days earlier, but none datelined from Europe. Ibid., (Nov. 4, 1763), 2, had a story from Philadelphia just two weeks old, but European stories nearly 4 months old. Ibid., (Oct. 25, 1765), 1-2.

61 Middleton, Tobacco Coast, 7. Virginia Gazette (Royle, March 16, 1764), 1-2.

62 Virginia Gazette, Williamsburg, 1751-1766. Nord, Communities of Journalism, 50-52. Regarding English model, see also Barker, Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 44, Clark, 3-5, and Thomas, History of Printing, 2-164.
in Charles-Town, South Carolina, but no one was hurt. There was no obvious reason to run any of these stories, except that all these places were now considered part of the same region as Virginia, and the mails now brought these stories to the printers. Writers were beginning to refer to the colonists as “Americans,” instead of Virginians, or British-Americans. In 1766, one writer referred to the unfair taxation on “Americans,” and referred to anyone who supported the Stamp Act as “an enemy to this country,” referring to America and not to Britain as “this country.” Until direct and speedy communication was established, there could have been no shared sense of crisis and no American unity or nation could have been imagined. As Benedict Anderson posited, a common language and shared printed material, especially newspapers, helped Virginians to shift their views, to see themselves—for the first time—not as British but as part of a new nation. It was not merely the content and the fact that reports and articles were now shared among colonies, but it was also the very existence of printed media and their widespread use that helped to drive that shift.

The third cultural shift evident in this period was an increasing emphasis on consumption and a growing market economy that also helped to tie the separate colonies together. Expanded emphasis on consumption was visible in the advertising in the Virginia newspaper. The percentage of ads in the newspapers grew over the years. By the 1760s, advertisements commonly took up more than a full page, and often there were more than two pages of ads. Most common were advertisements

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63 Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon, May 19, 1768), 1. Ibid., (Aug. 4, 1768), 2. Virginia Gazette (Rind, May 12, 1768), 1. There were still many stories of British or European origin, but the mix had now shifted to more American stories.

64 “Northamptoniensis,” Virginia Gazette (Purdie, April 4, 1766), 2.

65 Anderson, Imagined Communities, did understand how “print as commodity” (newspapers and novels) was essential to tying people together with a shared common language. He did not note how an efficient post office would also bring that sense of commonality and community, and was crucial to the functioning of a newspaper.
for land to sell, slaves to sell, or runaways whom their masters wanted returned. One 21-year-old man, about six feet tall, was “in want of a young Lady, of a good family” for marriage. Being very bashful, this young advertiser said that he “dreads the thought of courting.” The very breadth of what could be found in the newspaper ads was extolled in verse:

If any gentleman wants a wife,
(A partner, as 'tis term’d, for life)
An advertisement does the thing,
And quickly brings the pretty thing.
If you want health, consult our pages,
You shall be well, and live for ages;
Our empiricks, to get them bread,
Do every thing but raise the dead.
Lands may be had, if they are wanted,
Annuities of all sorts granted,
Places, preferments, bought and sold,
Houses to purchase, new and old,
Ships, shops, of every shape and form,
Carriages, horses, servants swarm,
No matter whether good or bad,
We tell you where they may be had.
Our services you can’t express,
The good we do you hardly guess;
There’s not a want of human kind,
But we a remedy can find.

The content and character of many ads were very similar to what one can see in personal ads in today’s newspapers. The popular prints and the advertisements within them were an important part of an increasing market economy and expanding consumer culture that prefaced social and political changes. As mentioned earlier, a “consumer revolution”

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66 Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon, March 16, 1769), 3.

67 A variant spelling of empiric, a charlatan or one who believes that practical experience is the source of knowledge.

68 Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon, Jan. 18, 1770), 2.
in the colonies has been theorized by T. H. Breen and others as a critical development prefacing Revolution. In colonial Virginia, this evolution is evident in the public prints of the 1760s. Extending Breen’s recognition of newspapers as an essential part of new marketing techniques, this research also sees evidence of that consumer growth within the Chesapeake colonies’ print and finds that the newspapers are one important driver of that growth. The printing process—the first form of mass production—was an integral part of and intrinsic to the beginnings of an important consumer revolution that helped bring competition and new press freedom to Virginia. The newspapers themselves as items to buy or sell, plus the advertisements within their pages—which were taking up an increasing percentage of column inches—helped to drive that very economy. Newspapers were a crucial vehicle for the new marketing techniques, which not only drove business, but also helped to drive social changes. Newspapers were a commodity made available for sale and the advertisements within their pages were an important driver of the move toward consumer consumption. The relevance here is that this increasing market economy led to a commonality that brought together residents throughout the British-American colonies, a key to the Revolutionary political changes in the period. In an astute analysis, Breen noted that, “advertising copy might best be seen as fragments of cultural conversations linking ordinary colonists to a larger Atlantic economy.” This economy of consumption connected the Chesapeake colonists through trade and merchandise and a sense of commonality to both London and the other British colonies. Referring to it as “a consumer public sphere,” Breen also noted that such marketplace choice also had the tendency to undermine the status and class lines that marked society, in essence undermining subordination and deference. In a larger sense, the rise of printing and its influence in Virginia was part of a wider transatlantic rise of mercantile capitalism and the consumer revolution that begin in sixteenth-century Europe. For Breen, this marketplace was a necessary precedent for a new American national unity and Revolution: “trust [was] established across space, impersonally, a product of a print culture.” Increased
consumer marketing, visible on the pages of the Chesapeake colonies’ prints, helped
to preface revolutionary changes there. This research discovers consumer growth
within the Chesapeake colonies’ prints, regards the newspapers as one important
driver of that growth, and views the consumer demand for public prints as an
essential driver of the concept of press freedom.69

Increased commercial activities and personal consumption were evident in
the growing popularity of taverns and coffeehouses, which also became hotbeds of
political dissent. In a cultural center such as Williamsburg, which many Virginians
visited for court appearances or other business, people in the taverns and
coffeehouses read the newspapers and discussed what was in them. Even those who
could not read joined in those conversations. William Byrd’s diary contains the first
known reference to a coffeehouse in Virginia. He noted that he wrote letters, played
cards, and gambled with dice at a coffeehouse near the Williamsburg capitol in
1709. Charlton’s Coffee-House opened for business as early as 1755.70 By 1765,
Governor Fauquier wrote of sitting there with members of the council and almost
being accosted by a Stamp Act mob.71 An ad in the Virginia Gazette just a few
years later showed that Richard Charlton was altering his business, expanding; “The
Coffee-House in this city being now opened by the subscriber as a Tavern, he
hereby acquaints all Gentlemen travelers, and others …” Charlton would now be
offering overnight accommodations and drink stronger than coffee.72 There were as


70 Goodwin, “Coffee-House of the 17th and 18th Centuries.” Michael Olmert, “Coffeehouses:
the Penny Universities,” The Journal of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (Spring 2001), 68-73,
(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and
Culture, 1995), 233. Peter Thompson, Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in

71 Francis Fauquier to Board of Trade, Nov. 3, 1765, 97-106, Virginia Gazette (Royle, Oct.
25, 1765), 1-4.

72 Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon, June 25, 1767), 3.
many as four or five coffeehouses in Williamsburg, although not necessarily all at once, according to a research report based on archeological and documentary evidence. The coffeehouses did sometimes serve liquor, they were often the site of gambling, and commonly the main entertainment was the political discussions. Both coffeehouses and taverns were places to read and discuss the news. “Yet taverns were far more than places to imbibe,” as David Waldstreicher wrote, “Men repaired there to read the newspapers and discuss politics: they were ideal sites for these public acts of affiliation,” such as toasts against importation or for Revolution. These taverns and coffeehouses were important locations for the development of a critical political culture.

Coffee and tea were not luxuries that Devereux Jarratt and his poor family enjoyed in his youth. He wrote that such extravagant living such as that was only for the “gentle folk.” Jarratt may not have been debating politics in the coffeehouses by the time of the Stamp Act, but he was involved in one dissenting movement. Jarratt returned from England in 1763 as a priest of the Church of England, but he was one of the few who supported the “New Light” Methodist reform movement. Jarratt read the sermons of George Whitefield and actively supported evangelical conversions, although he remained in the established church. The movement of religious dissidence is the fourth cultural shift observed in the Virginia prints. These new evangelical beliefs practiced by Baptists and Methodists in colonial Virginia were a form of dissent against the established church and faith, empowering the poor and uneducated and questioning the


power of the religious elites.\textsuperscript{75} Such religious dissent was evident in the public prints prior to the appearance there of political dissent. Some of the earliest issues of the Williamsburg newspaper followed George Whitefield’s preaching both in England and in the colonies, noting the popular response to his message. Amidst the notices of pending war with Spain and details of the lives of royalty was this observation of Whitefield’s popularity: “Several Hundred Persons stood in the street during his preaching his Sermon, endeavoring to force themselves into the Church, which was incredibly full early in the Morning.”\textsuperscript{76} By 1767, one Virginia Gazette included a poem critical of the Methodist style of preaching and another article claimed that a Methodist preacher became so emotional during a service that he tore a Bible. The next issue had a reader suggesting perhaps it was a Deist, rather than a Methodist, ripping that religious text.\textsuperscript{77} Religious debate is seen in the popular prints, and this was an important preface to critical political discourse. Challenges to the power structure began with the Great Awakening, as those non-elites with less education began to insist on being involved in civic conversations.\textsuperscript{78} As Rhys Isaac suggested, the American Revolution was prefaced in Virginia by this religious and social transformation.\textsuperscript{79}

A fifth cultural shift evident in Virginia was the increased participation in political discourse within the press and increased debate in public gatherings.


\textsuperscript{76} Virginia Gazette (Parks, Jan. 8, 1738), 4.

\textsuperscript{77} Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon, Jan. 1, 1767), 1 & 2. Ibid., (Jan. 8, 1767), 3.


\textsuperscript{79} Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790 (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 1-6.
Jürgen Habermas viewed such civic discourse spurred by printed materials in Europe as a crucial aspect of the transition from monarchy to democracy. Warner emphasized the relevance of print in this development, and saw this transition taking place in the British-American colonies. The disputes over taxation by Parliament became a major subject of the public prints of this period and of the discourse that people had in public spaces. Printed material generated discussions centered on this literature in coffeehouses and taverns. The participants were initially the elites, but by 1765 the discussion had expanded to include a larger, middling group, including smaller farmers, craftsmen, and tradespeople. This was a key to development of political dissent, operating for the first time outside of the government. A key to understanding what happened in pre-revolutionary Virginia is to recognize that printed material combined with public discussions to create a civic public that was able to be independently critical of government. A growing and changing print culture, and the public discourse it spawned, played an important role in a social and political transformation.

The expanding market nature of colonial society was a force for expansion of the reading world as well as a force that made printers tend to avoid anything controversial that might lose business. Print historian Stephen Botein noted that colonial printers were not ideologically driven revolutionaries, but rather lower-class, “meer mechanics,” who were primarily interested in good business. He concluded that the Stamp Act profoundly changed their business. Financial interests overrode printers’ normally cautious tendencies to stay out of controversies. The standard viewpoint had been that a free press meant presenting varied opinions while staying out of extreme disputes that might alienate any business. Botein quoted printer Benjamin Franklin, who suggested that up until just before the Revolution, commercial pragmatism encouraged neutrality:

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“Printers are educated in the Belief that when Men differ in Opinion, both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick.” The Stamp Act directly threatened the printers’ business by raising the prices of their products, encouraging many of them to abandon impartiality. In addition, political writing became a hot seller, making it financially worthwhile to take a more radical stand with their printed products. Most printers, Botein suggested, abandoned neutrality and chose sides, the majority opting for the more popular patriots’ position. However, Botein suggested that printers for the most part did not become partisan until the decade after the Stamp Act, until the Revolutionary controversy was well-developed. In Virginia and Maryland, the printers became clearly supportive of the patriot position by 1766. Along with other historians, Botein viewed colonial American newspapers as being driven by the marketplace. Commercial concerns, not political ideas, drove Franklin’s concept of press liberty: “printers were attracted to the principle because it suited their business interests to serve all customers.” In Virginia as in other colonies, the idea of a press open to all who would pay to express their ideas in the commercial marketplace helped to both expand the reading world and create the foundation for a new concept of liberty of the press.81

By 1765, civic discourse in Virginia—driven by the print media of the newspaper and pamphlets—had increased and moved beyond the elites. The expanding consumer marketplace helped to fuel this expansion. A new public discourse critical of government began to flower in the eighteenth century. It began

with the religious Great Awakening, continued with political leaders clashing with religious leaders in the Parson’s Cause, and emerged more broadly during the Stamp Act crisis. A simultaneously emerging print culture not only reflected this dissidence, it was in fact a precedent for it. Print was a necessary preface, but not sufficient in itself. The expanding economy of consumption was an important force behind both the increasing importance of books, newspapers, and pamphlets and also the increasing discourse in public places of consumption. Driven by commercially burgeoning print media, critical political debates continued in the taverns and coffeehouses, allowing both dissident lawmakers and their constituents to take part in political decisions for the first time.

It was the very market commodity of print that allowed the colonists to relate together in new ways, to help them imagine a new community—a nation. In the British-American colonies, it was the new distribution of political pamphlets and newspaper stories among colonies, especially during the Stamp Act crisis, that helped to bring about public support for a new nation. In contrast to Habermas’ public sphere, this colonial discourse began with the gentry, as nobility was virtually nonexistent in the colonies. It started with a literary focus as in Europe, expanded to include debate on religion, and then transitioned to incorporate political debate and dissent. Habermas suggested the civic discourse devolved in later centuries as the capitalistic profit motive consumed it. What we see in Virginia is such discourse spurred by the very beginnings of capitalism—an expanding market economy. The burgeoning drive for consumption actually helped to create a civic public. As we shall see, this expanding civic discourse has serious implications regarding the development of freedom of the press.

However, the one printing office in the colony was still dependent on government subsidies in 1765. The royal governor was able to strongly influence the

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82 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. A common language was an important preface to the shared print commodity.
Virginia printer and the output of his press. As this was the only source of mass media produced in the colony, this had a serious impact on the breadth of civic discourse generated by print. The new stamp tax severely threatened Royle's increasing retail business. At the same time, some readers clearly had become dissatisfied with the content of the only Virginia newspaper. The repeated refusals by Royle to print controversial material had a limiting influence on discourse. Many residents with leanings toward the emerging patriot cause were unhappy with royalist control of the only media outlet in the colony. Something had to be done.
Chapter 7
Thomas Jefferson and the Origins of Newspaper Competition

Thomas Jefferson has long been credited with bringing print competition to Virginia, allowing for a “patriot” voice for the first time in a colony where printing was controlled by the royal government:

Until the beginning of our revolutionary dispute, we had but one press, and that having the whole business of the government, and no competitor for public favor, nothing disagreeable to the governor could be got into it. We procured [William] Rind to come from Maryland to publish a free paper.\(^1\)

Just at the time Parliament’s hated 1765 Stamp Act threatened the printers’ very livelihood, a new printer was encouraged to open a second shop in Williamsburg, bringing competition to that field—and a second newspaper to Virginia—for the first time. This was an important watershed for the culture and government of the colony, because it signified a shift in the power structure. Control of public messages began to relocate from the royal government to the consumer marketplace. This was a transformation that had a major impact on civic discourse in the colony. Despite such significance, the reasons behind such change and the relevance of it have often been misunderstood. It has widely been accepted that Jefferson was responsible for bringing such print competition to Virginia, and that direct “patriot” influence was behind a freer and more open press. This Jefferson connection has been constantly repeated by historians, as has early print historian Isaiah Thomas’ contention that Jefferson confirmed this in a letter written

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specifically from the former president to Thomas. This research shows that both of these assertions are apparently erroneous and attempts to reach a better understanding of why these claims were originally made, how they were constantly repeated, and the larger significance of the motivations behind and relevance of such change.

Print competition came later to Virginia than it did to the northern and mid-Atlantic colonies. This chapter explores the impact of the transformation that occurred when a second printer arrived in the colony and ended the existing monopoly on locally printed news. Print competition in Virginia altered the relationship between the printer, the government, and the readers. Furthermore, this research finds as the role of print expanded and evolved, that medium had substantial long-term influence on civic discourse, culture, and the radicalization of politics. Both of the two printers responded to market pressure and the realities of new competition. They each became less an official mouthpiece and more a voice of dissent, enabling the transition from a deferential society to one that allowed for open questioning of the government. The importance of an open and critical press became more evident to residents and the practice of civic discourse became visible in the public prints. This chapter attempts to bring us a better understanding of these changes and how they influenced the press in this important colony on the verge of Revolution.

A Government Press

From the very beginning, the government in colonial Virginia tightly controlled the press and there was no real freedom of expression. From Governor William Berkeley's warning to his superiors about a troublesome press in 1671; to Governor Thomas Culpeper's expulsion of a printing press for being unlicensed in 1682; to the eventual welcoming by the Royal Government of a press in 1730,
government income and control were key influences. The press in colonial Virginia began as a royally sanctioned and controlled institution, paid for and licensed by the government in power. While printing was limited to one government-sanctioned press, there could be no real press freedom. As historian of the book Hugh Amory noted, printing was reflective of the power structure of the colony within which it existed. In Puritan New England, about which Amory was writing, printing was initially licensed and sanctioned, serving rather than challenging the power structure. As historian Jack Greene wrote in his exploration of the shifting of power in the southern colonies, government support for a printer was crucial in such colonies as Virginia before a strong, commercial economy developed. He suggested that the royal governor had a great deal of control over what was printed prior to 1766. By the 1760s, the pressures of trade and merchandising altered the function of the press from merely duplicating official governmental and religious works to providing a wider range of commercial output. Mass-produced printed products were an important part of the growing consumer demand and rising marketplace that constituted a consumer revolution, an important preface to political change. Newspapers—as part of this increased consumption—helped expand civic discourse.

With a second press and consumer pressure, the very character of printing and the idea of a “free press” transformed. With a wider range of content, print was freed to function as a medium for the “diffusion of useful knowledge.” As Amory

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2 Berkeley’s superiors were the Commissioners of Trade and Plantations in London. See Chapter 2 for early history of the Virginia and Maryland presses. William Parks was invited by the lower house to move his printing office from Annapolis to Williamsburg, and paid him a government salary. *Journals of the House of Burgesses* (June 10, 1732), ed., John Pendleton Kennedy (Richmond: The Colonial Press, E. Waddey Co, 1905-15), 6:141-2.

3 Greene, *Quest for Power*, 287-289.


and Richard D. Brown noted, knowledge is power, and in the early colonial period, information was in the hands of governmental and ecclesiastic authorities. Not until a second printer existed and commercial competition began could there be a free press.\(^6\)

William Parks began his newspaper publishing in Virginia with an overt recognition of the limits of press freedom and announced a need to defer to those in power. The first issue of the *Virginia Gazette* had an explanation of such in the “Printer’s Introduction:”

> By the Liberty of the Press, we are not to understand any licentious Freedom, to revile our Governors and Magistrates; to traduce the establish’d Laws and Religion of our Country; or any Attempts to weaken and subvert by opprobrious Writings that sacred Respect and Veneration which ought always to be maintain’d for Authority, and Persons in Authority.\(^7\)

Such deference was necessary for a printer in early Virginia. Without any large urban community or a strong commercial economy, all of the southern colonial printers before 1766 counted on a government salary as part of their support, but it was not always clear who in the government controlled the printer. The House of Burgesses in Virginia voted on the printer’s salary, but it also had to be approved by the royal governor and his council. Greene suggested that despite the lower house’s control of money, the governor was generally able to exert the most censorship, at least until the 1760s. However, former Governor Alexander Spotswood wrote a letter to printer Parks in 1736, complaining that it was the burgesses who maintained a tight control over the content of printed matter. He prefaced what eventually was printed with a note to Parks: “If his Worship will permit you to Publish in your News Paper, this answer …” The reference was to John Randolph,

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\(^7\) *Virginia Gazette* (Aug. 6, 1736), 1. As noted in Chapter 3, this first issue is no longer extant, but the “Printer’s Introduction” was quoted in Maxwell, *Virginia Historical Register*, 6:21-31.
Speaker of the House of Burgesses, and Treasurer for the colony, with whom Spotswood was having a very public dispute over the spending of public money dating back to his administration. As Greene observed, the assembly struggled against the royal governor’s authority, and control of the press was an important part of that power structure.8

This control by the governor over the content of the newspaper again became apparent in 1754 when a Virginia resident turned to the newspaper of a neighboring colony to complain, “the Press in this Colony [Virginia], either through particular Inclination, or some other cogent Bias, in the Proprietor of it [William Hunter, Parks’ successor], is, in many instances, shut against us …” The Virginia governor had accused the burgesses of neglecting the safety of the colony by not taking any actions against French aggression. To counter that accusation publicly, the burgesses had to turn to the Maryland Gazette published in Annapolis.9 In contrast, the few extant issues of the Virginia Gazette of that period show only mutual respect and deference between the burgesses and the governor.10 The Williamsburg press appears to have been largely under the control of the governor at this point.11 As historian Stephen Botein suggested, the colonial printer could

8 Spotswood to printer Parks, 1-2. See Chapter 3 for more details on this dispute. Greene, Quest for Power, 287-289.

9 Maryland Gazette (Annapolis: Jonas Green, Oct. 24, 1754), 1-2. This dispute closely intertwined with the “Pistole Fee” controversy. See Chapter 3. At the death of printer William Parks in 1750, he was succeeded by William Hunter, who was succeeded in 1761 by Joseph Royle. (See Appendix.)

10 Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg: Hunter, Nov. 7, 1754), 2, had Governor Dinwiddie praising the burgesses for approving the supplies, with no indication of the controversy.

11 In 1762, printer Joseph Royle received a stipend of £350 per year, voted on by the House of Burgesses but also approved by the governor and his council. This was increased to £375 in 1764. Journals of the House of Burgesses (Jan. 19, 1762), 10:38, (Nov. 5, 1764), 10:227, “for printing the Journal of the House of Burgesses, printing the Laws of each Session, and sending as many Copies to the County Court Clerks as there are Justices in the Commission in each respective County, and one another, which is to be half-bound, for the Use of the Court, and ten to the Clerk of the Court of Hustings of the Borough of Norfolk, printing Inspectors Notes and Book,
little afford to offend powerful individuals or groups with anything he printed. As a small business, profits were first and foremost rather than political propaganda. As a craftsman running a small business, colonial printers typically shunned controversy to avoid alienating any possible source of income.\textsuperscript{12}

Few issues of the newspaper published by Hunter’s successor, Joseph Royle, still exist, but those that remain are filled more with literary essays, news from Europe, and debates over social practices than they are with local politics. For example, a recently recovered rare issue from 1764 begins with a letter declaring that oaths are sworn all too often without considering the responsibility of making such a promise. Two essays take a large portion of column space; one describes a conversation between a master and his dog, the other a farmer’s dream that leads him to riches: “I know no better moral to apply ... but that an honest industrious man may always find a pot of gold.” Such stories are obvious attempts to instill strong moral values in the readers. Several short items talk about new crops being raised in South Carolina, reported clashes with the Indians and the French in other colonies, and scientific advances to measure longitude. Finally, future president George Washington ran an advertisement in an attempt to find the owner of two runaway horses found on his plantation.\textsuperscript{13} Very little in this or other extant issues demonstrates a willingness by the printer to tackle controversial issues.

Accusation of control by the burgesses, rather than the governor, also surfaced in the dispute over ministers’ pay discussed earlier here. Reverend John Camm charged the Virginia printer with allowing the burgesses to censor his press. Camm turned to the Maryland press to print a pamphlet in answer to comments by

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\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Williamsburg: Royle, July 6, 1764), 1-4.
two burgesses that had been printed in Virginia. Apparently, printer Royle was afraid of offending burgesses who were satirized in Camm’s response:

… if it should Displease, would be taken as ill by this Assembly, as if pointed directly at them; I am far from saying it would give them Offence, nay, I think otherwise; however as there is a Possibility in the Case, it will be most prudent in me not to risk forfeiting their Good-will upon such an Issue, as I cannot but own myself a Dependent upon the House of Burgesses, and the Public in general. I therefore return you your Pamphlet …

Royle appeared in this to be more timid than overtly controlled. While Camm argued that he should be able to use the press to tell his side of a story that had already been printed, he recognized the printer’s editorial right: “I acknowledge as much Prudence as you please, in the Rule by which your Press is Conducted.” This view of the press demonstrates a theory of the press that was not so overtly controlled by the government, but rather more of one consistent with Botein’s thesis where the private printer had some discretion, which he needed to exercise with care. Offending either the governor or the burgesses could threaten his government printing contract, an important part of a printer’s income, which had to be approved by all branches of the colonial government.

One researcher suggested that for a brief time, the *Virginia Gazette* opened its pages to increased local controversy, eventually leading to a reassertion of control by the governor just prior to the Stamp Act. Printer William Hunter was ill and spent much time out of the colony between 1756-1759. He apparently left his assistant John Stretch in charge of his print shop, the newspaper, and the post office. According to one local resident who wrote a letter to Hunter upon his return, the newspaper contained a bit more lively, local debate in that interim.

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14 Royle to Camm, Williamsburg, Aug. 5, 1763, quoted in John Camm, *Single and Distinct View of the Act, Vulgarly entitled, The Two Penny Act…* (Annapolis: Green, 1763), appendix, 48-49. See Chapter 2 for more on this dispute, also referred to as the Parson’s Cause, which pitted the burgesses against ministers who contested an act that in essence lowered their pay.

15 Camm, *Two Penny Act*, appendix.
period and was more boring after Hunter’s return. “Tim Pastime” wrote a thirty-six page letter addressed to Hunter, “Demipostmaster, Printer and Linnen Draper.” (The latter appears to be a bit of Cockney rhyming slang, paper being made from linen, perhaps insulting the newspaper business, as in “linen draper/newspaper.”) The pseudonymous author suggested that now after Stretch, “that Flower of Beauty, and Cream of all Proportion, has left this Colony … your Publications are but sometimes little entertaining and, at every other Time extremely dull.” While presumably not printed in its entirety in the Gazette, the author of the letter recommended another alternative of hanging it on a peg in the printing office where visitors could read it, and suggested that had been done before with other letters. This offers an interesting image of the printing office as a busy center of discourse and information beyond what printed material and post office business would offer. Local residents stopped by, read letters not yet printed, and discussed this latest news. According to historian David Rawson, Stretch was in charge of the newspaper for more than three years and it offered more lively political debate under his stewardship. Rawson suggested that this resulted in governmental pressure on Hunter, and forced the reassertion of gubernatorial control over the newspaper.

This is largely conjectural as there are very few extant Virginia Gazettes from this time period to confirm the content biases suggested by this single letter.16

It was such control by the royal governors, however, that constantly frustrated more radical Virginians, eventually leading to action. In October of 1765, the Maryland Gazette printed a letter written anonymously to, but never published by, the Virginia printer. It accused Williamsburg printer Royle of deceiving his

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16 “Tim Pastime” [pseudo.], letter to William Hunter, Williamsburg [?], [c. 1760], MS 90.4, Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, VA. Emma L. Powers, Department of Historical Research, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, provided a transcript and some annotations of references within this letter, which was discovered in the 1990s. Rawson, “Virginia Print Culture,” 100-115. An advertisement from “deputy Postmaster” John Stretch in Virginia Gazette (Hunter, April 22, 1757), 3-4, suggested that he was editing the newspaper but also leaving the colony in the summer.
readers and yielding to royal pressures. The Annapolis newspaper published this letter with an added note by the author saying that Virginia did not have a free press, “as the only one we have here, is totally engrossed for the vile Purpose of ministerial Craft: I must ... apply to you ... Bold and honest Assertor of the Cause of Liberty ...”

This insinuated not just gubernatorial control of the Williamsburg newspaper, but also implicit bias in favor of corrupt ministers back in England. The more radical political element in Virginia turned increasingly to the Maryland press for distribution of their ideas, and this partly fulfilled their goals, as the Maryland newspaper was read by a substantial number of readers in Northern Virginia.

In a 1766 *Virginia Gazette*, a “Man of Principle” wrote that while Royle was the only Virginia printer, between 1761 and 1765, the press “was not renowned for its freedom,” and alleged that the governor was allowed to read the newspaper before it was circulated, and actually censored it:

> If a Counselor or a Burgess was only squinted at in any thing sent to the press before this period, it was wither too low or too------but if a Governour was------ O Horrible!---Has it not been said that Mr. Royle owned a private license, and that a paper was constantly carried to a certain house in Palace street [the Governor's palace] to be inspected before it could be seen by the publick.

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17 A *Supplement to the Maryland Gazette*, of last week (Green, Oct. 17, 1765), 1.

18 Advertisements from Fairfax and Alexandria in Northern Virginia often appeared in the newspaper from Annapolis, and with transportation by water being faster than by land in the eighteenth-century, parts of the southern colony were served faster by the northern printer. There were notices for home sales in Alexandria, and George Washington and George William Fairfax solicited for a builder for a new church in Fairfax County’s Truro Parish in the *Maryland Gazette*. See, for example, house sale advertisements for Alexandria, VA in *Maryland Gazettes*, Feb. 2, Feb. 23, 1764, Oct. 2, 1764, the church builder ad May 17, 1764, and a May 26, 1768 advertisement in the *Maryland Gazette* from William Rind, now printing in Williamsburg, for a revised edition of the Laws of Virginia, price 40 shillings. See also introduction to Edith Moore Sprouse, *Along the Potomac River: Extracts from the Maryland Gazette, 1728-1799*. (Westminster, MD: Willow Bend Books, 2001).

19 *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon: August 22, 1766), 2. This was written after Royle’s death, after Purdie & Dixon took over the business.
This author claimed that Royle acted as though he was dependent upon a license to print, and that the governor was checking everything before it could be published. This view is one of a press tightly controlled by the royal governor, and describes a press that was not suited to the needs of political allies (later referred to as the “patriots”) attempting to oppose official British colonial taxation policies. Such a tightly controlled government press was a challenge to the evolving concept of civic discourse and a free press. Writers were constantly forced to turn to presses elsewhere to print anything critical of the British government or the local governor, and readers also had to look elsewhere for broader discourse. Such censorship of the local press could also, of course, have been the result of several other factors: the printer might simply have been more timid than others, his personal loyalties may have been closer to the British ministry, and it was always easier to print matter critical of one government in another jurisdiction where the local government was not the focus. Whatever the reasons, local patriots found the printer too conservative to allow them to express their dissenting opinions.

Press Competition Comes to Virginia

While it was often inferred that Royal Governor Francis Fauquier kept tight control over the output of the press, he was a popular governor. A young Thomas Jefferson, often a guest at the governor’s dinner table, later referred to “Fauquier, the ablest man who ever filled the chair of government in Williamsburg.” Fauquier followed the unpopular Governor Robert Dinwiddie, and in contrast to his predecessor, was quick to form partnerships with local leaders, including the powerful House Speaker and Colony Treasurer John Robinson. The

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21 See also Greene, “Landon Carter and the Pistole Fee Dispute,” 66-69, for Dinwiddie angering burgesses by his unilateral actions.
colonists appreciated that Fauquier sometimes avoided obeying instructions from his superiors in London. Virginians considered the governor amiable, just, and “moderate in Power.”

It is clear from the correspondence of Governor Fauquier to his supervisors at the Board of Trade that he closely monitored what was printed in the newspapers. He often included copies of the *Virginia Gazette* and occasionally the *Maryland Gazette* in his letters to London. In a 1766 letter, Fauquier noted that the Stamp Act forced the shutting down of the newspaper, and that new print competition was on the way:

> From the first of November we have been without any newspaper till very lately. The late printer to the Colony is dead, and as the press was then thought to be too complaisant to me, some of the hot Burgesses invited a printer from Maryland, upon which the foreman to the late printer, who is also a Candidate for the place, has taken up the News paper again in order to make Interest with the Burgesses.

The governor wrote that a second, competitive newspaper was about to begin, one that would be in addition to the original *Virginia Gazette*, now being published by Alexander Purdie, the foreman of the late Joseph Royle. He suggested that it was the work of some of the more radical burgesses who were unhappy with the old press because it was too willing to please the royal authority in the colony. As colonial opposition to British taxation policies gained ground, the readers in Virginia who were not content with their local printer hoped that a new, competitive press and newspaper would allow for a more critical civic discourse.

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22 George Reese, ed., *The Official Papers of Francis Fauquier, Lieutenant Governor of Virginia, 1758–1768* (Charlottesville: Published for the Virginia Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1980-1983), 1: xxxviii-xliv. He was instructed several times to separate the offices of Speaker of the House of Burgesses and Colony Treasurer, but avoided doing so. He also sided with the burgesses in the Parson’s cause, earning him rebuke by the Board of Trade. Ibid., xli-xliv. Fauquier obituaries in *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, March 3, 1768), 2, and quotation from Ibid., (Rind, March 3, 1768), 2.

23 Francis Fauquier to the Board of Trade, Williamsburg, April 7, 1766. Handwritten transcription, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Great Britain PRO CO 5, container v. 1331:97- 106 [137-148].
Historians have generally agreed that Thomas Jefferson was directly responsible for this somewhat rebellious move to bring in an opposition printer. The original source for this claim is traceable to early historian of print Isaiah Thomas. He was intimately involved in the world of print and printers in the early revolutionary period in America and has left later historians with important details as well as misconceptions. He was the first writer to seriously look at the history of printing in the United States, and he was also an early printer and the founder of the American Antiquarian Society. Thomas' *The History of Printing in America* was first published in 1810 and contained considerable research plus his intimate personal knowledge of the early days of printing in the colonies and republic. As Susan Macall Allen noted in her dissertation on the Stamp Act and colonial printers, Thomas' eyewitness account provided invaluable details regarding American printing, and that, “Its accuracy has been trusted by scholars, and it is often cited as the authoritative source.” However, she suggested that his work “has occasional errors of fact that subsequent scholars have pointed out.”

uninfluenced Gazette” encouraged a second printer, William Rind, to come to Williamsburg. Thomas added that a letter to him from Thomas Jefferson confirmed this, and that Jefferson said he was involved in procuring Rind.25 Isaiah Thomas claimed that Jefferson wrote, in a letter to Thomas, “Until the beginning of our revolutionary dispute, we had but one press, and that having the whole business of the government, and no competitor for public favor, nothing disagreeable to the governor could be got into it. We procured Rind to come from Maryland to publish a free paper.”26

Many well-known historians have repeated Thomas' claim about Jefferson. Philip Davidson, in his important 1941 work, Propaganda and the American Revolution, cited no source for his statement that “… Thomas Jefferson, dissatisfied with the old [VA] Gazette, now edited by Alexander Purdie and John Dixon, brought William Rind from Maryland, and the second Virginia Gazette was begun.”27 The venerable journalism historian Sidney Kobre was also certain of Jefferson’s involvement:

William Rind’s third [sic] Virginia Gazette indicated the change in the social forces, for Thomas Jefferson backed Rind because he believed the Virginia Gazette, which was then being published by Alexander Purdie and John Dixon, was too closely tied to England. He considered that it was not representing the colonial cause with any strong determination and belief. He secured William Rind from Annapolis and Rind’s Virginia Gazette began in Williamsburg in May, 1766.28

As Kobre cited no source, it is unclear how he determined Jefferson’s reasoning in such unlikely detail. Influential historian Arthur Schlesinger cited Thomas in a


27 Davidson, Propaganda, 231.

28 Kobre, Colonial Newspaper, 179.
1935 article, where he wrote, “Thomas Jefferson and his friends persuaded William Rind … to settle in Williamsburg,” but the Jefferson connection was not repeated in his book on the subject of colonial newspapers and the Revolution a few decades later. More recently, other prominent historians continued the error. Jack Greene cites Carl Bridenbaugh when he writes of the Jefferson connection, and an article by Robert Weir in Bernard Bailyn’s book on *The Press and the American Revolution* notes that the new printer “had come to Williamsburg at the invitation of Thomas Jefferson and some other leading men.” Numerous other works have also included the assertion that the former president wrote about this specifically in a letter to Isaiah Thomas.

While such prominent historians apparently did not see the weakness in Thomas’ attribution, a 1998 dissertation by Laurie Godfrey did raise serious questions about Jefferson’s direct participation. Godfrey wrote that it was extremely unlikely that Jefferson was that deeply involved. She noted that at the young age of twenty-two, Jefferson was likely to be merely a bystander in procuring a printer, and that the widely repeated claim actually came from a letter Jefferson wrote to someone else. She does not speculate as to why Jefferson included himself by using the term “we,” why Thomas might have claimed that Jefferson wrote that in a letter to Thomas, nor does she recognize the significance of print competition on the ideological bent of the newspapers. As a minor point not central to her larger work, the argument was not completely researched and developed, and few have noticed

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her point. A deeper look into the evidence confirms Godfrey’s doubts on both the claim that Jefferson was directly involved and that he wrote directly to Thomas about it. This raises some questions about memory and historical research, and it also helps explain the origins of print competition in the colony. When the provenance of the Jefferson claim was cited, it was either directly from Thomas’ influential *History of Printing in America*, or a secondary or tertiary source that took it from there. Thomas wrote that, “a number of gentlemen who were desirous of having a free and uninfluenced Gazette, gave an invitation to Rind,” and he footnoted it, “This fact is corroborated by the following extract of a letter to the author from Thomas Jefferson, late president of the United States, dated July, 1809.”

What Godfrey and other researchers have failed to note is that only in the second edition of his book had Thomas claimed Jefferson wrote this directly to him. The first edition merely noted that Jefferson wrote this in a letter, with the recipient unidentified; “This fact is corroborated by the following extract of a letter from Thomas Jefferson, esq. late president of the United States, dated July 1809.” Later editions of *History of Printing* claim that Jefferson wrote that letter specifically to Thomas. That letter does not exist in either Thomas’ extensive papers nor in Jefferson’s records, despite the fact that the former president kept copies of virtually all of his correspondence in this period. Jefferson did write those words about the press being overly influenced by the governor and the procurement of

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Rind, with only minor discrepancies of capitalization and abbreviation, to William W. Hening just the year before Thomas’ book was first published. It is also known that Hening wrote to Thomas about another matter within a year of Jefferson’s letter. In a copy of the first edition of History of Printing that Thomas notated by hand for a revised second edition, he wrote in the addition, “to the author,” indicating the former president’s letter was to him, and that is how it ended up in the subsequent edition of the book. It seems probable that either Thomas stretched the truth to make the point that a former president of the United States corresponded with him, or that time and old age had distorted his memory. (He was at least sixty-one years old and possibly as old as eighty-three, but it is not known exactly how old he was when he made that notation.) What is remarkable is that this claim, reasonably easy to double-check, has been passed on by other historians for more than one hundred years.

Furthermore, the suggestion that Jefferson was a key player in the recruitment of the new printer does not stand up. As Godfrey noted, Jefferson was

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37 Thomas G. Knolles, Curator of Manuscripts, American Antiquarian Society, emails to author, Dec. 29, 2005, says that Thomas left a handwritten note in an annotated copy of his first edition stating that Hening had written to him on July 21, 1810 about a fact regarding earlier Virginia printing.

38 Thomas, History of Printing in America, annotated 1st ed., Isaiah Thomas Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Box 12. Thomas was not able to publish the second edition of his History of Printing before his death. A committee served as editors, following Thomas’ notes for changes, and it is they who ultimately included the footnote citing a letter from Jefferson to Thomas as the source, but that decision was based on Thomas’s notes.

39 Godfrey, “Printers of Virginia Gazettes,” 249-250, also noted that the popular quotation could not be found in correspondence to Thomas, but rather in a letter to Hening. She apparently did not explore how this discrepancy got into Thomas’ book.
only 22 years old and not yet a member of the House of Burgesses. Before Rind would have left his lucrative partnership in Annapolis, it would have been necessary to offer him either cash or a promise of becoming the official printer of the colony, which would guarantee an income. According to Jefferson’s own autobiographical draft, the future president was a mere law student and not yet a practicing lawyer in 1765. In addition, Jefferson apparently later had some type of relationship with Rind’s competitor, printer Alexander Purdie. While Jefferson was writing the Declaration of Independence at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1776, a friend wrote to him noting that Purdie promised to pack up Jefferson’s books to be shipped to him. It appears that when Jefferson wrote, “we procured Rind,” he simply meant to include himself among his political associates in Williamsburg who were later identified as patriots, including some who were senior to him and in a better position to do the actual procuring.

It is reasonable to conclude that some of the “hot burgesses” to whom the governor referred, and very possibly the Lee family specifically, had greater involvement in recruiting a new printer than did Jefferson. When Rind moved to Williamsburg, he lived in and worked out of a brick house on Duke of Gloucester

40 Ibid. Her argument was simply that he was young and still a law student, thus could not have been directly involved, but did not contrast those facts with the financial and political requirements behind bringing a new printer to the colony.

41 Rind’s name last appears on the Maryland Gazette dated October 10, 1765. By the next issue of October 17, the name of his former partner, Jonas Green, appears alone. While Rind’s first Virginia newspaper did not appear until May, 16, 1766, the Stamp Act interrupted publication of many newspapers. It appears likely that whatever negotiations brought Rind to Williamsburg were completed by October of 1765.

42 By the new calendar, Jefferson was born on April 13, 1743. (The actual date was April 2, 1743, old calendar, the use of which was discontinued while he was a boy.) Malone, Jefferson, 1:3. Jefferson, “Autobiography Draft Fragment, January 6 through July 27, 1821” from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes, Federal Edition, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York: G. P. Putnam’s sons, 1904-5).

Street that belonged to Philip Ludwell III, uncle of the Lee brothers: Thomas Ludwell, Richard Henry, Francis Lightfoot, William, and Arthur. Richard Henry Lee and Arthur Lee contributed many essays to Rind's newspapers, and in 1770, William Lee inherited “The Mansion” in which Rind lived. Edmund Randolph, who was a young contemporary in 1766, describes a new group of burgesses at the time of the Stamp Act, who very likely correspond with the governor’s “hot burgesses.” Randolph suggests that new “upper counties,” farther from the old power base of the James River, were supplying burgesses who no longer displayed the traditional “fortune, rank, and perhaps fashion.” He mentions specifically Patrick Henry, John Fleming, and George Johnston. Later Randolph lauds the oratory and patriotism of Richard Henry Lee, whom Godfrey includes in the group. These men supported Henry's resolves against the Stamp Act and later became leading Virginia supporters of the American Revolution.

The eventual selection of William Rind to be official “Public Printer” of the Virginia colony was a disputed one. In November 1766, four different printers, or groups of printers, petitioned the burgesses for the appointment. The partnership of Alexander Purdie and John Dixon was the successor to the former public printer, the deceased Joseph Royle, thus the likely leading candidate. However, their petition received only 10 votes in the House of Burgesses, while Robert Miller received 17 votes, William Stark 19 votes, and Rind received a majority of 53 votes. The governor and his council later approved that selection, despite the fact that the Royle/Purdie & Dixon press had a history of subservience. Rind was paid £375 a year for his official printing. It is clear that someone with a great deal of influence

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45 Journals of the House of Burgesses (Nov. 7, 1766), 11:18, 72, and 75. Purdie began publishing the *Virginia Gazette* under his name, but soon joined with Dixon in a partnership. It is not clear from the records who Robert Miller or William Stark were or what happened to them after they lost the vote, but only two print shops remained.
in the government—which Jefferson did not yet have—lobbied hard to get Rind this appointment.

**Effects of Competition**

Rind’s arrival and election as official printer meant that there was now competition for local printing in Virginia, and that had an immense impact on the printed material available in the colony. Two printing houses now operated in Williamsburg. Rind immediately undercut his rivals’ newspaper sales price, from 15 shillings per yearly subscription to 12 shillings, 6 pence. The new paper was originally called, *Rind’s Virginia Gazette*, but soon the printer removed his name from the title, leaving the colony with two newspapers with the exact same name.46 The very first issue of Rind’s paper boldly stated his intent to run “a well conducted News-paper” which he noted was essential just then, “especially at a Crisis, which makes a quick Circulation of Intelligence peculiarly interesting to all the American Colonies.” The only extant copy of this issue has an intriguing editorial insertion penned in, apparently by the original owner, noting this is the first well-conducted newspaper ever to be printed in the colony, “and the first that

46 As noted in Chapter 3, Kobre, *Colonial Newspaper*, 179, wrote that the colony law required publishing notices in the *Virginia Gazette*, and Rind may have dropped his name from the masthead because official business traditionally went to the *Virginia Gazette*. 
has ever been Established in this Province.” While that writer is unknown, his comment does demonstrate the hope of Virginia residents of 1766 to have a better-run newspaper that could be freer to publish criticism of the government. Rind claimed that his newspaper would be, “Open to all parties, but influenced by none.”

The original *Virginia Gazette* was quick to join the competitive fray, matching the new competitor’s moves and gaining for itself a reputation as a “free press.” Now published by Alexander Purdie, who was soon joined by John Dixon, they quickly matched the lower price, and announced a new, open press policy before Rind’s newspaper even came out: “my press shall be as free as any Gentleman can wish or desire; that is, as free as any publick press upon the continent.” Just a few months later, two writers arguing opposing sides of an issue did agree on one thing. The press run by Purdie and Dixon was now well run: such freedom of the press “is [a] matter of rejoicing,” and “You, Sir, have behaved yourself as the director of a press ought to do.” However, these writers’ praise was for both presses. A notice in Purdie’s paper acknowledged that only with real competition, only with at least two newspapers, could a free flow of information be sustained. With the loss of the government subsidy, Purdie was in danger of being forced out of business, and he pleaded with the “friends of liberty” to help keep his newspaper and print shop in business; “we have reason to believe it the almost universal desire that there should be two presses maintained, for the security of freedom to one or

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They requested that their readers continue their subscriptions with the original *Virginia Gazette*, since only with print competition could the press be free. For a short period of time, Rind included a claim that his was the official newspaper, demonstrating that this was a confusing transition period for the press. The masthead of his version of the *Virginia Gazette* included the claim, “Published by Authority,” beginning early in 1767, just months after his appointment as “Public Printer.” This phrase had often been used in English papers since the days of licensing to indicate an official government imprint, and it was on the masthead of the first regularly published British-American newspaper, John Campbell’s 1704 *Boston News-Letter*, but it had never before been used in Virginia. In a letter published in the other *Virginia Gazette*, “A Man of Principle” wrote questioning that claim: “Several of your readers are very solicitous to know what authority you have for publishing a paper now, more than formerly. Some, I suppose of the most intelligent, allege that because you have had the good fortune (for certainly you cannot ascribe it to anything else) to be chosen Publck Printer, that gives you an exclusive privilege.” The author pointed out that anyone who wished could publish a newspaper and call it the *Virginia Gazette*. This demonstrates the confusion of the period, as printers shifted from functioning as official government printers to public businesses. While Rind still had a lucrative government contract, the profit center had shifted to one where satisfying the public was critical to financial success. By July, Rind had dropped from his masthead the claim that he published by

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50 *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, Nov. 27, 1766), 1.

51 The *Virginia Gazette* Rind published at the end of December 1766 did not include this claim. The first extant issue of the next year, February 19, 1767, includes the phrase, “Published by Authority” in the masthead on the top of page one.


The newspaper in Virginia had moved from a quasi-governmental source to one where public opinion and marketplace competition was paramount. The Stamp Act controversy offers a contrast of the earlier restricted press with the competitive presses exercising greater freedom. As noted in the prior chapter, when the British tax enraged the colonists, Royle even failed to print the Stamp Act Resolves, which were passed just down the street by the Virginia House of Burgesses. Yet other newspapers across the colonies published this heated reaction to Parliament. Instead, Royle’s newspaper called on the assembly to help enforce the tax, and warned of the dangers of disobedience. This was quite different from reports published in the neighboring colony of Maryland, but also in sharp contrast to what was printed in both versions of the Virginia Gazette in just the next year. The original Virginia Gazette, now published by Purdie, contained an item that referred to the Stamp Act as a flagrant violation of the British constitution, and called the idea of virtual representation in Parliament a “despicable subterfuge.” Competitor Rind’s newspaper ran letters from the radical Boston Gazette, “Letters from a Farmer,” and “The Monitor’s Letters,” a Virginia-based attack on the Stamp Act. The latter admonished Britain for attempting to enslave the American colonists, suggesting “that though we are a weak people, yet the principles of liberty fully infused into us, will render it impossible to enslave us.”

54 Virginia Gazette (Rind, July 23, 1767), 1, no longer ran this claim. The March 12 issue still did. There are no extant issues in between.

55 Morgan, The Stamp Act Crisis, 102.

56 Virginia Gazette (Royle, Oct. 25, 1765), 1.

57 See Chapter 6 for a direct comparison of two issues of the two newspapers.

58 From the Gentleman’s Magazine, quoted in the Virginia Gazette (April 4, 1766), 1.

The content in the pages of the two gazettes reflected a substantial change. With an enormous amount of coverage of the Stamp Act crisis and later taxation issues, neither newspaper displayed the former tendency to buckle under royal pressure. The two Virginia Gazettes ran more stories critical of the colonial government, Parliament, and the British ministry, including stories that would not have been printed just a few years earlier. Each newspaper also covered the scandal following the May 1766 death of the very powerful Virginia Treasurer and Speaker of the House of Burgesses, John Robinson. It was discovered that he had illegally loaned some one hundred thousand pounds of public money. One planter complained that “very large Sums of the Public Money have been misapplied,” and recommended that in the future, the offices of treasurer and house speaker be held by separate individuals. He noted that his participation in this civic debate “would not have been in my Power without the Benefit of a Free Press.”

A related incident displayed a new power to criticize the elites within the public prints. Both newspapers published letters questioning the actions of several of the colony’s chief justices following the very public killing of Robert Routlidge by Colonel John Chiswell in June 1766. According to a detailed newspaper description, an angered but sober Chiswell stabbed his unarmed and drunk friend Routlidge through the heart with his sword. Both Virginia Gazettes eventually ran articles not just about the slaying, but also about the subsequent actions regarding the accused killer. Three of the highest judges in Virginia had released Chiswell from jail. One anonymous letter noted that the original court refused to release the accused murderer on bail and remarked that Chiswell was a well-connected member of the colony’s elite (in fact, probably one of the men to whom Robinson had lent the public money). This article questioned the legality of the judges’ release of the accused, “before he was delivered to the keeper of the publick prison, the

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60 Rind’s Virginia Gazette (August 8, 1766), 2.

61 Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon, July 18, 1766), 2.
Judges of the General Court, out of sessions, took him [Chiswell] from the sheriff who conveyed him from Cumberland, and admitted him to bail, without seeing the record of his examination in the county or examining any of the witnesses against him. Another letter writer, who called himself “Dikelphilos,” suggested that because of his social standing, “… the murderer was treated with indulgence and partiality inconsistent with our constitution, and destructive of our security and privileges.” That both newspapers made public the details of this controversy and included critical comments regarding the actions of the colony’s elite was something that would not have happened just a few decades earlier.

By 1766, new commercial competition had led to less government control and a freer forum for civic discourse in both Virginia newspapers. No longer was there only one press in Virginia, and no longer could the governor control the press. Power was shifting from the governor to the burgesses, and newer, more radical burgesses were gaining in influence. Politics in Virginia was fractionalizing, and soon that was reflected in the media of the time. After a second press began printing in the colony, leading political elites, the Parliament, and the British Ministry were subject to criticism on the pages of the Virginia newspapers. As Carl Bridenbaugh wrote in his essay about violence in Virginia, Purdie “completely revised the former policy of the newspaper” and from then on, the residents of Virginia were “served up … what they had never before experienced, the sensations


63 Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon, Aug. 29, 1766), 2.

64 Greene, Quest for Power, 3-6, 361, and 367.
and sensationalism of a free press.”65 Bridenbaugh suggested that the new freedom of the press did bring excesses, but the newspapers also now put the feet of the wealthy to the fire.66 One anonymous writer wrote of the changed newspapers, in a satire in mock-biblical fashion, that now, “Party shall menace Party, and Dunce shall enflame Dunce, and the Gazettes of Purdie and of Rind shall contain Wonders … and Much Paper be wasted, and Words shall lose their Meaning.”67 Not everyone was happy with the political controversies now being openly publicized in the newspapers nor with the decreased sophistication of the letter-writers.

Both newspapers appeared to be directing their content to the same, somewhat middling-to-elite audience, with the same political bias. One contributor noted that what was now being printed in both papers no longer had the high standards once upheld. “Dikelphios” requested that potential authors would examine carefully their own abilities, and “that they would not usher into the world sentiments which are neither useful nor entertaining …”68 This seems to be an expression of dissatisfaction with the contributions from those further down the social scale to both gazettes. There was no longer an obvious elite bias to the papers’ content, with no more Latin verses, fewer classical references, and more common pseudonyms such as “A Farmer,” or “Tit for Tat.”69 Sales and satisfied customers had become more important to the printer than pleasing the governor. As Botein wrote, the business philosophy of the printers had to change with the times, and it


66 Ibid., 209-211.


68 Ibid., (Purdie & Dixon, Nov. 6, 1766), 1.

was now political material with a patriot slant that was the best seller. Newspaper circulation in the colonies had increased, and political writings became popular.\textsuperscript{70} Both printers featured a patriot viewpoint. There was no noticeable difference in the bias or content, including the advertisements, in the two newspapers. As Godfrey concluded, “Rind and Purdie … provided the same voice for the community.”\textsuperscript{71} The readers that the two newspapers served also appeared to be the same, geographically and economically. What Godfrey did not recognize was that this was not only because of Royle’s death, or the direct influence of a new political force. It was also because of the new commercial pressures, requiring both printers to respond to the needs of the customers.

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The myth of Thomas Jefferson corresponding with Isaiah Thomas, confirming that he invited Rind to bring his printing press to Virginia, offers a patent example of questionable memory, misinterpretation, and weak historical method. Human recall is not as precise as we sometimes presume, and our language is often ambiguous. Thomas erroneously claimed that the former president wrote to him regarding the Virginia printer. However, this did not happen until later in Thomas’ life, and only in his note for the second edition of his book.\textsuperscript{72} Old age may well have begun to cloud his memory, or it may have been a case of braggadocio that a former president had corresponded with him. Jefferson’s actual statement, written in a letter to Hening rather than to Thomas, has been misinterpreted by

\textsuperscript{70} Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics,’” 215–221. There are no specific circulation figures for the \textit{Virginia Gazette’s} available.

\textsuperscript{71} Godfrey, “Printers of the Virginia Gazette,” 249–250 and 289, wrote that the two Virginia newspapers had an “authoritarian” stance throughout this period, not shifting to a more “libertarian” revolutionary ideology until three to six months before the Revolution. Her analysis utilized Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm’s, \textit{Four Theories of the Press}, and downplayed some obvious shifts in the presses’ viewpoints in the 1760s.

\textsuperscript{72} Thomas, \textit{History of Printing in America}, annotated 1\textsuperscript{st} ed., Isaiah Thomas Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Box 12. Thomas, \textit{History of Printing}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., 556.
Thomas and following generations of historians. “We procured Rind” did not mean that Jefferson himself was a leading actor, as countless historians have inferred from the line.\[73\] As a 22-year-old student, Jefferson did not have the means to arrange Rind’s election to the public printer post. Jefferson noted in his own autobiographical draft that at an incident during that same time (the 1765 passing of the Stamp Act Resolves in Williamsburg) he was merely a young observer: “I was yet a student of law in Wmsbg. I attended the debate however at the door of the lobby of the H. of Burgesses.”\[74\] It is more likely that by “we,” Jefferson either meant “we, the people of Virginia,” or was referring to the group of more radical politicians in the colony that later supported the patriot cause, a group with whom Jefferson was to eventually take a leadership role. For nearly two hundred years, authors have repeated Thomas’ story—even elaborated on it—apparently without confirming its veracity. While Godfrey did get it right, it was not a major focus of her work, she apparently did not publish her findings, and she never really developed the reason for the errors.\[75\]

This story of how one person’s flawed personal memory became part of the historical record holds warnings for all historians. We too often take the work of others at face value, without verification, as it is nearly impossible to double-check everything that comes before us. We constantly build our own work on the foundations of the work of prior historians, sometimes without enough digging to verify, and thus errors large and small often multiply. As Alfred Young has observed, personal memory shifts over time, and historical memory also can be far from perfect.\[76\]

\[73\] Thomas Jefferson to William W. Hening, July 25, 1809.

\[74\] Jefferson, “Autobiography Draft Fragment.”


\[76\] Young, The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 11-12 and 124.
Going beyond questions of memory and accuracy, the situation reveals much more about the evolution of print—and of press freedom. The character of the newspapers in the colony of Virginia changed as competition came to Williamsburg. From being a single newspaper that several times was accused of censorship in favor of the British ministry, depriving the Virginia citizens “of that great Support of Freedom, the liberty of the press,” the competing gazettes now openly published controversy.\(^77\) Just one year later, another reader proclaimed that “… the press, one of the principal handmaids of liberty, is become a free channel of conveyance whereby men may communicate their sentiments on every subject that may contribute to the good of their country …”\(^78\) Another letter directly questioned the official actions of the colony’s supreme judges in their handling the Routlidge murder: “I ask, whether this act of the three Judges of the General Court be legal.”\(^79\)

The causes of this radical transformation of the press were more complex than simply Jefferson or other patriots importing a new printer to publish a newspaper with more radical sentiments. New competitive pressures that accompanied an emerging consumer economy brought a change in factors of power and domination. Government control dramatically lessened, and marketplace pressures became paramount, necessary precursors to both a second printer and a more open press. As Hugh Amory wrote, a single sanctioned printer could not run a truly free press: “The first step toward that distant nineteenth-century goal [of a free press] was often the advent of a second press …”\(^80\) As T. H. Breen theorized, such marketplace choices began to erode colonial power structures, and a new

\(^77\) “A Virginian” [pseudo.], letter “To the Printer of the Virginia Gazette,” in *A Supplement to the Maryland Gazette of last Week* (Royle, Oct. 17, 1765), 1.

\(^78\) “Philanthropos” [pseudo.], *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, August 22, 1766), 1.

\(^79\) *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, June 20, 1766), 2.

\(^80\) Amory, “Printing and Bookselling,” 116.
“consumer public sphere” developed. Newspapers were an essential driver, supplying substance and expanding this new discourse: “Everywhere Americans reached out to each other through the channel of print.” As Botein noted, colonial printers were forced to abandon their cautious approach, attempting to please all sides, as the Stamp Act threatened their very livelihood. Just as in the other colonies, Virginia printers began to take a stand against British policies. The Virginia press became freer, more open to a wider range of opinions, including those critical of powerful members of government. Quotations from John Wilke’s radical newspaper *The North Briton* appeared in Rind’s gazette. Dissent was printed openly, even harsh words written by those farther down the social scale aimed at the once-untouchable elites. For example, “An Enemy to Hypocrisy” began his letter to the newspaper with a disclaimer of his own abilities, yet he went on with a thinly disguised attack on Colonel Richard Henry Lee, calling him a rogue. The new competition in the newspaper and overall printing business in Williamsburg assured a broader public of more outlets for wider viewpoints. The new printer did not provide the only open press, however. The older press, now run by Royle’s successors, proved just as open to the faction that eventually became the patriots, running stories about the Sons of Liberty, and attacking the Stamp Act as illegal. Governmental pressure no longer reigned supreme. Civic discourse in the colony of Virginia had broadened and become more radical. The traditional culture

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82 Botein, “ ‘Meer Mechanics’,” 211. Botein notes that those few who supported a Tory position were soon forced to moderate their positions or flee, as “free press” came to mean free to support only the patriot position.

83 *The North-Briton*, issue 191, quoted in *Virginia Gazette* (Rind, May 16, 1766), 2.

84 *Virginia Gazette* (Rind, July 18, 1766), 2-3.

85 *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, June 20, 1766), 1, From the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, quoted in the *Virginia Gazette* (April 4, 1766), 1.
of deference was giving way to one that allowed for dissent and critical political discourse, setting the stage for a recognition of the right to press freedom.
The liberty of the press in Virginia evolved in just a few decades from an extremely limited theory to a broader right that was highly valued. This transition is visible on the pages of the eighteenth-century *Virginia Gazettes* and the nearby *Maryland Gazettes*. The early expressions of this freedom were so limited that they did not include the right to question political authority. Over the next thirty years, as political deference declined and civic discourse broadened, a revolutionary concept of press freedom developed and various writers in the public prints championed the cause. It was on the pages of the newspapers and the political pamphlets where civic discourse began, and the ability of those pages to freely publish such thoughts had become highly valued.

When the framers of the new Virginia Constitution with its Declaration of Rights sat down in 1776, the local public prints—far more than the political philosophers or the British legal precedents—influenced their thinking. The author of this first-ever clause ensuring constitutional protection for freedom of the press is actually not known, although most historians assume that George Mason wrote it. More important than who wrote the clause is why it was written—why it was considered so important. This chapter focuses on why freedom of the press was considered so valuable that it had to be protected as an essential liberty, and what colonial Virginians intended when they wrote and supported that clause.

A close examination of the record of seditious libel in the colony demonstrates much broader origins of press freedom than were previously recognized. The Virginia Declaration of Rights was an important precedent for other states’ protection of rights. These were, in turn, influential in the writing of
the United States’ Bill of Rights, including the First Amendment. This important amendment includes not only protection for free speech and press, but also protection for religion, the right to assemble, and the right to petition the government. This compilation is no historical accident because in colonial Virginia these ideas were closely intertwined. The conclusion here is that the experiences of the local Virginia printers, the writings in the popular press, and the value placed on the civic discourse generated by the public prints were the primary influences on the emergence of press liberty—more than British political philosophy, censorship practices, or the evolving legal precedents. The “liberty of the press,” as it was often termed, was intended to encourage civic discourse, including criticism of the government. The idea of government prosecution for seditious libel is inconsistent with this idea of press freedom as it is seen, developing over time, within the local public prints.

Context

The free press clause of the First Amendment is traditionally analyzed by the courts, legal historians, and other scholars from the perspective of the law and its philosophical roots. As judges look for its meaning to apply to individual court cases, they examine origins of the amendment to help to determine the intent of its creators. As several critics have noted, judges and politicians claim to know such “original intent” without any clear idea of what actually was said several hundred years ago or the essential historical context. Author James Madison and his collaborators left us little evidence of precisely what they intended, so precedents in English law, British philosophical writings, and early American court practices are considered. However, the actual practice of printers and the evidence right there on the pages of their newspapers is too often ignored.

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1 Dwight L. Teeter, Jr. "Decent Animadversions: Notes toward a History of Free Press Theory," in Bond, Newsletters to Newspapers, 237
In contemporary legal usage, free speech means free communication, including that of the press.\(^2\) Even in the eighteenth century, writers would often use “speech” or “press” interchangeably when discussing these important rights. While the focus here is on the press, the origins of free press are closely intertwined with those of free speech. Viewpoints regarding the meaning of the free press and speech clauses may be divided into two extremes: the first is a broad and sweeping libertarian right that would absolutely disallow any government intrusion and the second is a more limited right that considers that the First Amendment only forbids the government from most instances of prior restraint. (Prior restraint is prohibition imposed before printing, only rarely against speaking, in contrast to action taken after publication.) Multiple interpretations exist that fall somewhere in between these two extreme positions.\(^3\)

The more generally accepted libertarian concept is that the First Amendment, while not absolute, does prevent most governmental interference, as well as forbidding prior restraint in all but the most extreme clashes with other important rights. Legal theorist Zechariah Chafee wrote in 1941 that the First Amendment goes much further than simply forbidding prior restraint and includes prohibition of seditious libel laws and prosecution.\(^4\) He suggested that it was

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\(^3\) Former Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black is the best-known First Amendment “absolutist,” who espoused the extreme libertarian view. This theory takes the wording “no law” literally, and claims that what was intended by the press and speech clauses is an absolute barrier against any government interference at all. Black did draw a distinction between speech and action, providing an escape clause for such an absolute view. See for example, T. Barton Carter, Marc A. Franklin, and Jay B. Wright, *The First Amendment and the Fourth Estate: The Law of Mass Media*, 8th ed. (New York: Foundation Press, 2001), 76-77.

\(^4\) Seditious libel was—and still is—a criminal offense under British common law. Sedition is speaking of something that brings the King, the government, or any member of the government into hatred or contempt. A seditious statement in writing or print is seditious libel. Blasphemy was once included within sedition. Truth was not a legitimate defense under British common law. See Tedford and Herbeck, *Freedom of Speech in the United States*, 7-9.
intended to “wipe out the common law of sedition, and make further prosecutions for criticism of government, without any incitement to law-breaking, forever impossible in the United States of America.” The First Amendment, in this view, is a national policy in favor of unlimited civic discourse regarding public questions. Chafee rejected the concept of limiting free press to include only allowing no prior restraint by the government. As he saw it, the boundary to free press rights is only where such expression gives rise to unlawful acts. While this is a difficult line to draw clearly, it is a definition that precludes prior restraint. This view was prevalent until the 1960s when serious doubts about it were raised and a more restrictive view gained widespread support.⁵

Leonard Levy turned the history of the First Amendment on its head with his 1960 book, Legacy of Suppression: Freedom of Speech and Press in Early American History. Even his critics suggest his is now the most influential scholarly investigation of press freedom and original intent. Levy theorized that British jurist Sir William Blackstone supplied the legal prototype for the Americans as they began to write their own laws. In his Commentaries on the Laws of England, Blackstone recognized that “The liberty of the press is indeed essential to the nature of a free state: but this consists in laying no previous restraints on publications, and not in freedom from censure for criminal matter when published.”⁶ Blackstone’s


view of press freedom was narrow, limiting the idea of freedom of the press to a lack of prior restraints on publication. This restricted view of press freedom, prevalent in England during the 1760s and 1770s, suggested that prosecution for seditious libel (criticism of the government), personal libel, and government taxation of the press were all constitutional under common law. The press should be free, but libel was not allowed, especially against the government. While forbidding direct prior restraint, except for taxation, it did allow for punishment after the fact. Even when Levy redrew his position some years later, he still claimed that this Blackstonian concept was the only restraint intended when the free press clause of the Bill of Rights was written: “the First Amendment was not intended to supersede the common law of seditious libel.”

Although influential, Levy's research did contain some omissions that when closely examined help to reveal a more complete picture. In later writing, Levy himself noted that even conservative judges had not used his theory to restrict free press, although several Supreme Court opinions had cited his work. The power of precedent is such that courts rarely overrule landmark cases abruptly, but rather chip slowly away at them. Both the courts and some scholars rejected Levy's views. Historians suggest that Levy failed to take a broad enough view, failed to find specific statements of libertarian viewpoints, and ignored the actual practices of printers and newspapers. Law professor David Anderson criticized Levy's

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7 Levy, Freedom of Speech and Press, ix. This 1963 edition of his 1960 original work, Legacy Of Suppression: Freedom Of Speech and Press In Early American History, included some expansion, corrections, and may indeed mark the shifting of the author's own opinion with the change in title. Suppression now comes second and freedom first. Levy's analysis suggested that the prevailing opinions of the courts had been too liberal. He claimed such freedom was not a civil or natural right at all but rather simply a restriction on the government. His narrow interpretation, that the amendment regarding freedom of the press was only a restriction against governmental restraints in advance of publication, dominated the field of First Amendment history for at least twenty years and is still influential today. However, Levy's work did not radically alter court opinions. Stephen A. Smith, “The Origins of the Free Speech Clause,” Free Speech Yearbook 29, no. 48 (1991): 48. See also Anderson, “Origins of the Press Clause,” section IV.

8 Levy, Emergence of a Free Press, xviii. On precedents, see Siegel, Communication Law, 14-16.
interpretation as being too narrow. He suggested that Levy ignored the legislative
history of the press clause, since it was inconsistent with his conclusion. Levy
replied that, “No demand at all existed for the legal protection of the press, and
Anderson cites none.” Levy noted that the Virginia Declaration of Rights was the
first free press clause and that it was written by George Mason, composing alone,
confronted by no pressure for press freedom. Close examination of early printing
in Virginia moves us beyond Levy’s conclusion by exploring aspects that Levy did
not consider. This chapter raises doubts about Mason’s authorship of the free press
clause, the idea that he composed it alone, and demonstrates that there actually was
active lobbying for free press protection. A civic discourse based in and generated by
the public prints had broadened to include a large part of the population, and the
role of a critical press was recognized as crucial. A culture of political dissent had
developed that included public criticism of government. Enlightenment thought—
filtered by popular writers, published in the local prints, and influenced by the local
political situation—had formed an ideal of what a free press should be. Finally, such
a free press was viewed as a crucial counterweight against potentially corrupt
governments. This research discovers that in Virginia there was indeed a great deal
of pressure for “liberty of the press.”

Early Limits to Press Liberty

When the royal governor first denied Virginians the right to print in 1682,
it should not be considered a refutation of press liberty, because a free press did not

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Clause,” Jeffery Smith, Printers and Press Freedom, Dwight L. Teeter, Jr., “From Revision to
Orthodoxy” Reviews in American History 13, no. 4. (Dec. 1985): 518-525, Teeter, "Decent

yet exist in Great Britain. The English Bill of Rights granted free speech only to members of Parliament while in debate. Printing in England was restricted to only those with a license until Parliament allowed the Licensing Act to expire in 1695. Poet John Milton had argued unsuccessfully against licensing in “Areopagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing” to Parliament in 1644. He suggested that such prior restraint by the government did not work and that it weakened character by preventing the study of opposing viewpoints. For Milton, the freedoms of printing, speech, thought, and religion were closely tied together, “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.” At the beginning of the eighteenth century, after the licensing of the press had expired, the government severely prosecuted seditious libel in England. The ministry influenced newspapers and bribed journalists, and Parliament did not freely allow public reporting of their debates. Far from being the champion of unrestricted press freedom as he is sometimes held up to be, Milton even suggested executing those who published anonymously and he supported strong punishment for those who libeled church or state. John Locke, the champion of classical liberal theory, is today considered a supporter of free press, but what Locke proposed was simply an end to licensing. He saw the

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11 In 1682, printer William Nuthead and a press came to Jamestown but were forced to leave. See Chapter 2. Orders to prohibit printing arrived the next year, and thus printing in Virginia did not take hold until the 1730s. Hening, Statutes At Large, 2:511-517. McMurtrie, Beginnings of Printing in Virginia 6-7.


business advantages that the free press in Holland had over the Stationers' Company monopoly in England, and pushed for greater business opportunities without the cumbersome licensing.\textsuperscript{16} Locke's hatred of book sellers and printers appeared to have driven his philosophy on this: “This profound suspicion of book tradesmen, rather than any argued belief in liberty of expression, made John Locke the champion of the freedom of the press.”\textsuperscript{17} His concept of “natural law” has been applied to free speech, yet applying it to a free press is more problematic, as the technology of the press did not exist prior to governments.\textsuperscript{18} As Locke considered property rights as a basic element of natural law, and he defined property rights broadly, the right of printing can be considered to have as much to do with the property rights of printers as it does a right of free expression.\textsuperscript{19} In fact, Locke's argument has been viewed more as practical than philosophical. While much admired by the American revolutionaries, neither Locke nor his confederate Algernon Sydney did much to develop the philosophy of freedom of the press. Locke had an opportunity to give constitutional protection to free press and speech when he co-authored a new constitution for the colony of Carolina, but it contains no such clause. In fact, The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina included licensing of the press as part of the law as a function of the “councillor's court.”\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
  \bibitem{16} Innis, \textit{Empire and Communications}, 153.
  \bibitem{20} John Locke [and Lord Ashbury, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury], \textit{The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina} (March 1, 1669), article 35. Experts suggest this Restoration constitution
Governmental licensing of the press lingered in all the British-American colonies long after the authorities let the English licensing law lapse in 1695. With no printing press allowed, there was no press freedom in Virginia at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The struggle for freedom of the press began very slowly, as the colonial governments of the Chesapeake kept a firm control. The first Maryland printer ran into legal problems after the political situation there changed. When Virginia denied him a license for his press, printer William Nuthead left for the relative freedom of the colony to the north. In 1693, he printed some blank warrants issued in the former Proprietor Lord Baltimore’s name. The new royal government (which had replaced the proprietary government) did not plan to allow such a challenge to its authority. The printer sent an apologetic deposition to the Royal Governor’s Council, disclaiming his personal ownership of the press and type, implying it was in reality only a tool of the government. He promised to no longer print anything without governmental orders. The claim was extremely telling, regarding the ownership and control of the press, especially as the physical property was apparently Nuthead’s. His family inherited it at his death.21 No matter who actually owned the press and type, the government controlled the output well after licensing had lapsed in England. In terms of content, the press was very much controlled—and even owned—by the government.

Eventually, the government welcomed the printing press to Virginia, and a limited concept of press freedom developed.22 As outlined in Chapter 2, in 1730

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21 Lawrence Wroth, A History of Printing in Colonial Maryland, 1686–1766 (Baltimore: Typothetae of Baltimore, 1922), 8–9. This was one of several periods when the Calvert family’s Proprietary Colony of Maryland was taken from them, and it was briefly a royal colony.

22 In 1726 the colonial government in Williamsburg allegedly issued a blunt warning: “Governor Alexander Spotswood of Virginia threatened execution or loss of an arm or leg for disseminators of seditious principles or other insinuations tending to disturb the peace,” according
the Virginia House of Burgesses invited William Parks to bring a printing press to Williamsburg. They paid him a government salary for the printing of official documents. In his first newspaper published there, his “Printer’s Introduction” was more remarkable for its recognition of the limitations of press freedom than for its assertion of such a right: “By the Liberty of the Press, we are not to understand any licentious Freedom,” Parks wrote, and he recognized the need for deference to laws, religion, political leaders, and private reputations. His idea of a press is consistent with the standard ideology of that time in England, including Blackstone’s observation that press liberty—albeit a very limited freedom—was essential to a free state. This concept of liberty meant a press was free from licensing, yet allowed what we today consider prior restraints, or interference before publishing such as taxation on newspapers and buying off critics, as well as prosecution after the fact—including punishment for seditious libel and blasphemy. Another essential difference was that the law did not recognize truth as a defense against libel; in fact, truth could exacerbate the violation. Within that relatively conservative concept, however, free press was viewed as an important watchdog to balance against potentially corrupt governments. “The Lord Chancellor, Lord Hardwicke, for


24 Issue number 1, Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg: Parks, August 6, 1736), 1, no longer extant, quoted in Maxwell, Virginia Historical Register, 6: 21-31.


26 While not often recognized in discussions of the American Stamp Act, English newspapers were taxed from 1721-1855, as noted here in Chapter 6, from Barker, Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1 and 31.

example, argued in 1739 that ‘the liberty of the press is what I think ought to be sacred to every Englishman.’”

The Virginia printer, in his description of “liberty of the press,” outlined an extremely restricted concept. This early model of free press was circumscribed by his government salary, and by the limited development of the ideal within the British state.

The concept of freedom of the press was debated across the entire British-Atlantic world in the eighteenth century. John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, writing pseudonymously as Cato, claimed in 1720 that freedom of speech was essential to overall liberty. They pointed back to the example of Rome, and said that its citizens lost their freedom of speech and thus lost their liberty as well: “Freedom of Speech is the great Bulwark of Liberty; they prosper and die together: And it is the Terror of Traytors and Oppressors, and a Barrier against them.”

Just a few years later, the newspaper that first printed Cato’s claim, turned around and disagreed. The London Journal now claimed that “the Liberty of the Press is not essential for a free Government,” and also pointed to Rome and to Athens to support that idea. While once a vehicle for the radical whig opposition, the British ministry had bought out the Journal, and turned it into a government mouthpiece. Once licensing lapsed, this was a common tactic for controlling opposition press. The ministry subsidized writers and entire newspapers to support the official policies. Dissent was not completely silenced, however, as the Craftsman stepped into the fray and claimed that the liberty of the press “was one of the blessings of a free people,” and “the chief bulwark and support of Liberty in general,” and the

28 Barker, Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 12.


This statement, credited to Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, emphasized the concept of liberty of the press supported by those who opposed the ministry in power. In this view, press freedom was a countermeasure that swayed public opinion against the efforts of the ministerial press, or papers controlled by those in power.

In the Massachusetts colony, a young Benjamin Franklin joined in the debate. When his brother James Franklin’s newspaper, *The New England Courant*, included writings opposed to the Puritan leaders, local authorities jalled the elder Franklin. Hiding behind the pseudonym, “Silence Dogood,” young Ben fired back:

> Without Freedom of Thought, there can be no such Thing as Wisdom; and no such Thing as publick Liberty, without Freedom of Speech; which is the Right of every Man ... This sacred Privilege is so essential to free Governments, that the Security of Property, and the Freedom of Speech always go together; ... Whoever would overthrow the Liberty of a Nation, must begin by subduing the Freeness of Speech;32

He used the phrase “free speech” when in fact he was referring to a case in print, something quite common as the printed word was considered merely an extension of speech. Franklin here excerpted the *London Journal*, but took the idea of press liberty beyond the normal English concept, to question the idea of punishment after the fact. The Grand Jury refused to indict James Franklin in 1723, and this failed attempt to silence the opposition newspaper marked the last time that Massachusetts authorities tried to censor a newspaper by licensure.33

Radical whig or country party British writers were influential on both the style and function of Franklin and the newspapers of the Chesapeake colonies. The

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33 Kobre, *Colonial Newspaper*, 33.
essays of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele had perhaps the most direct impact on colonial print form, especially in the early decades of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{34} Praise of Addison appeared in Virginia’s earliest printed pamphlets, and a \textit{Virginia Gazette} of 1737 lauded the pair’s writing.\textsuperscript{35} Both a 1752 newspaper and a 1767 almanac from Virginia contain an “Ode to Liberty,” from Addison’s \textit{A Letter from Italy}. The printers of both the \textit{Virginia Gazette} and the \textit{Maryland Gazette} often excerpted Addison and Steele’s \textit{The Spectator} magazine in their newspapers and almanacs.\textsuperscript{36} Steele’s early innovations brought greater numbers of readers to the public prints, including many from further down the social scale. He originated the concept of letters to the editor, which made newspapers more participatory than earlier ones that simply ran stories or items. The papers became a two-way medium that allowed people to contribute rather than simply read what others had said and encouraged active involvement in civic discourse. The increased citizen contribution to newspapers and potential criticism of civic affairs were key developments in the evolution of freedom of the press. With the use of pseudonyms, even readers of a lower social position were now free to criticize the elites, eroding the traditional culture of deference.\textsuperscript{37} Addison and Steele’s focus was less on politics and more on

\textsuperscript{34} Louis T. Milic, “Tone in Steele’s Tatler,” in Bond and McLeod, \textit{Newsletters to Newspapers}, 33-45.

\textsuperscript{35} J. Markland, \textit{Typographia. An Ode, on Printing. Inscrib’d to the Honourable William Gooch, Esq.} (Williamsburg: Parks, 1730.) See Chapter 2. \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Williamsburg: Parks, June 3, 1737), 1, where a letter signed “Andromache” suggests that the skill of an earlier contributor exceeds that of Addison and Steele, implying that their writing was highly esteemed.

\textsuperscript{36} Job Grant, \textit{Virginia Almanack ... 1767 ...} (Williamsburg: William Rind, 1767). This verse was printed earlier in the \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Williamsburg: Hunter, March 5, 1752), where it is credited to Joseph Addison, “[A] Letter from Italy,” (1704). For example, Addison’s Cato is quoted in the \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Purdie, Jan. 8, 1767), 3. Performance of the play, \textit{Cato: A Tragedy}, is announced in the first \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Williamsburg: Parks, Aug. 6, 1736), quoted in \textit{Virginia Historical Register}, 6:21-31.

\textsuperscript{37} Warner, \textit{Letters of the Republic}, 42-48, notes that pseudonymous writing removes the character of the writer from consideration, allowing evaluation of the work based on argument, not on social position. This legitimized participation by middling classes.
cultural customs and behavior. Franklin admitted to taking his literary style from Addison. In his efforts at self-improvement, Franklin took his motto from Addison, and the fictitious characters such as “Silence Dogood,” and “Poor Richard” reflected Steele’s innovations. Franklin’s style, in turn, influenced many colonial writers, printers, and newspapers. Chesapeake printer Parks improved on the Addison style with essays by “The Plain Dealer” published in the *Maryland Gazette*, and “The Monitor” published in the *Virginia Gazette*. Both of these regular columns monitored and commented on both society and the government.

These radical whig writers also influenced the development of a colonial American free press theory, especially as a counterbalance to misuse of governmental power. As newspapers throughout colonial British America printed *Cato’s Letters*, the influence was seen not only in the writing style and content of local contributors but also in the political philosophy behind the words. Trenchard and Gordon took a more directly political approach than Addison, and tied the right to a free press with that of speech and religion. “Cato’s” entire theory of freedom and liberty was dependent on freedom of expression, with printing considered an extension of expression by speech. According to David Paul Nord, “Central to Cato’s philosophy was the principle that governmental authority must

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41 Cook, *Colonial Newspapers*, 81 and 150-230. Jeff Broadwater, *George Mason: Forgotten Founder* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 42. While the original *Cato’s Letters* would predate most Chesapeake newspapers, the pseudonym was commonly used, and collected books sold, see for example ads in *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, Feb. 25, 1768), 4, *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, Nov. 29, 1770), 2.
be limited and that it could be limited only if individuals were free to speak truth to
power.” Freedom of expression was closely tied to the new religious diversity and
the importance of individual minds seeking religious truth. “The individual had the
right only to serve the truth, as men were free to serve God.”

Nord agrees with Gary Nash, Rhys Isaac, and others that the Great Awakening helped to undermine
the deference to authority, setting the stage for the political dissidence that in turn
led to the American Revolution. “Junius” also made that connection in writing:
“Let it be impressed upon your minds, let it be instilled into your children, that the
liberty of the press is the *palladium* of all the civil, political, and religious rights of
an Englishman …” Religious freedom of thought is one of the key roots to the
development of freedom of speech and print in Virginia.

While espousing liberal political ideology might be fine for anonymous
writers, the printers themselves had to face the hard realities of business. When
Benjamin Franklin ran his own press in Pennsylvania, he found the need to
apologize in advance for offending people for what he printed, and he espoused a
somewhat less radical and more practical ideology of press freedom than he had in
his youth:

Printers are educated in the belief, that when men differ in opinion,
both sides ought equally to have the advantage of being heard by the
public; and that when truth and error have fair play, the former is
always an overmatch for the latter. Hence they cheerfully serve all

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42 Nord, *Communities of Journalism*, xxxii, 70-76.

43 William G. McLoughlin, “‘Enthusiasm for Liberty': The Great Awakening as the Key to
1977), and Gary Nash, *Urban Crucible, the Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American
Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), chapter 8, both quoted in Nord,
*Communities of Journalism*, 73. Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*.

44 “Junius’s Dedication to the English Nation,” *Virginia Gazette* (Rind, May 21, 1772), 1.
contending writers that pay them well, without regarding on which side they are of the question in dispute.\textsuperscript{45}

Franklin boldly reflected what print historian Stephen Botein later noted: the colonial printer was primarily a businessman attempting to stay solvent, and that meant trying to please all parties. Their concept of liberty of the press in the early to mid-eighteenth century was to straddle the fence. While many printers depended on government largess to stay afloat, they also could not afford to alienate those opposed to governmental policies, leading to “a certain ambiguity of purpose” displayed in Franklin’s apology. Only in the larger urban colonial cities—Boston, Philadelphia, and New York—which generated enough business to make government support unnecessary, could the public prints freely criticize those in political office. Income from governmental sources was a key to survival in a Virginia that lacked a major city. Before 1766, the press there was more official and deferential than it was politically dissenting. Liberty of the press in the first half of the century meant political neutrality and perhaps equal access, but only to the extent of not giving serious offense to any party.\textsuperscript{46}

Expanding Press Freedom

\textit{Truth as a Libel Defense}

The legal principle of seditious libel was a serious impediment to open criticism of the government, and that concept evolved both in Virginia and the other British-American colonies in the eighteenth century. The most famous seditious libel case of this period was the 1735 New York trial of John Peter Zenger. He published a newspaper established for the specific purpose of opposing


\textsuperscript{46} Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics’,” 127-225. See also Hunter, \textit{Printing Office Journal} and Royle, and Purdie’s \textit{Printing Office Journal}. 
the royal governor and to no surprise, the Governor’s Council charged Zenger with seditious libel. Longstanding British common law principle, first established by the infamous Star Chamber, defined seditious material as any published material critical of the government that had a tendency to undermine the government or its officers. No specific statute existed; rather it existed in common law, or legal tradition. A judge, not a jury, would decide whether the material in question was seditious. The truth or falsity of the statement was not relevant, in fact the truth of such criticism could possibly exacerbate the legal travails. Lawyer Andrew Hamilton convinced the jury that they should acquit Zenger because the printed material was true, and despite the judge’s instructions to the contrary, they did just that. The Zenger case was not a formal legal precedent and did not firmly establish truth as a defense in colonial courts, however the concept did make headway. As David Copeland has noted, several subsequent seditious libel cases in Massachusetts and South Carolina were consistent with the Zenger verdict. It is not simply the law and the courts that control legal outcomes, but in the end, public opinion prevails.

This important advance of the concept of freedom of the press allowed for greater criticism of the government.

Truth as a defense for seditious libel also made headway in colonial Virginia. Printer Parks was prosecuted in 1750 for publishing a libel about a member of the House of Burgesses. This newly-elected representative had a criminal past that had nearly been forgotten. Someone wrote in the Virginia Gazette that some years earlier the man had been convicted of stealing sheep. Although the name of the

47 The English judge in the 1731 trial of Richard Francklin ruled that the truth of what he published in the Craftsman was not relevant to his charge of seditious libel. Levy, Emergence of a Free Press, 11-12. See Ibid., 127 for the common law rule that truth worsened the libel, as truth is more likely to provoke the libeled party to revenge, thus breaching the peace.

new burgess was not mentioned, the transgressor was clearly recognizable. The accused and the entire lower assembly were not pleased with such wanton freedom of the press, and charged Parks with seditious libel:

But Parks begged that the records of the court might be produced, which would prove the truth of the libel. This was allowed, and the records were examined, though contrary to the doctrine of some men, who would impose on the community as law, that a libel is not less a libel for being true, and that its being true is an aggravation of the offence; and, such men observe, no one must speak ill of rulers, or those who are intrusted with power or authority …

The record showed the newspaper story to be correct. Some years earlier in a different county, the man accusing Parks of libel had stolen sheep. The charges against the printer were dropped, and the disgraced burgess retired from public life. As Levy noted, the house accorded Parks the right to use truth as a defense, advancing the Zengerian concept in contrast to the common law principle. This important step increased the ability of the press to criticize members of the government when truth could be successfully used as protection from prosecution.

The scales of justice once again tipped in favor of press freedom and away from seditious libel in a 1766 Virginia court. A lawsuit charged printers William Rind, Alexander Purdie, John Dixon and newspaper contributor Colonel Robert Bolling with libel. These charges stemmed from stories published in both gazettes questioning the decision of higher court judges to release a murder suspect. The

49 Thomas, History of Printing in America, 552-554. The exact date and the newspaper from which this is taken were not noted by Thomas, and the source is apparently not extant. See also Ingelhart, Press and Speech Freedoms, 22. Research in the Journals of the House of Burgesses could not confirm this incident.

50 Levy, Emergence of a Free Press, 60-61.

judges were also powerful members of the governor’s council and were not accustomed to being publicly criticized. For William Byrd III, one of the judges in question, these accusations were too much and he brought libel charges against the printers and the alleged author of one of the letters. The Grand Jury refused the indictment, for “Not a True Bill.”52 “Philanthropos” concluded that the press in Virginia had now become free in that it published the details of this controversy, despite the fact “that a tyrannical arbitrary power should show itself, by traducing, and threatening with prosecution, patriot spirits” who would attempt to reveal the truth about this case.53 This letter suggests that even contemporaries saw liberty of the press advancing, both with the issues presented in the public prints regarding this case, and with the jury rejecting the charges. Truth as a defense against accusations of libel had begun to establish itself in Virginia. The Zenger case may not have been an actual legal precedent in the colonies, but it marked an important turning point. As Levy noted, it raised a new standard that many colonial legislatures chose to follow.54 Furthermore, as historian Alison Olson suggested, bringing attention to printed political attacks became folly: “After the trial, any politician was a fool to take a satirist to court. The Zenger case lay at the crossroads of literature and law.”55 In Virginia following Zenger, these examples demonstrate

52 Maryland Gazette (Annapolis: Jonas Green, Oct. 30, 1766), 2, quoting an issue of Rind’s Virginia Gazette, no longer extant. The issue for which Bolling was charged is also no longer extant. See also Greene, “Virtus et Libertas,” 98-100, and John M. Hemphill, II, “The Origin, Development, and Influence of the Virginia Gazette, 1736-1780” (Williamsburg: From the research files, Virginia Gazette folder, Rockefeller Library, Colonial Williamsburg [date unknown]), 11-13.

53 “Philanthropos,” Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon, Aug. 22, 1766), 1. Although the charge was reported in the newspapers to be libel, not seditious libel, as a government official, Judge William Byrd III could well have accused all of seditious libel, and the involvement of a grand jury in considering the indictments suggests that it was a criminal case, not civil. Seditious libel in British law was criminal, while libel was civil.

54 Levy, Emergence of a Free Press, 129-130.

55 Olson, “Zenger Case Revisited,” 224.
that seditious libel was becoming difficult to prosecute. The legislature allowed truth as a defense, and juries refused to indict on libels they considered to be true. Truth as a defense against libel was an important advance toward allowing the liberty to criticize in print those in power. The tradition of deference to one’s betters was visibly eroding, as even those of the lower social orders could openly criticize those high in government.

Changes were not only seen in the courts, but were also reflected in the public discourse. Letters in the newspapers demonstrated an evolving meaning of press freedom and displayed an increasing value given to liberty of the press by the public. One reader’s comment credited the second printer with bringing freedom from the former control: “Congratulations, on Account of the Freedom of the Press we now enjoy … LIBERTY can never exist, where every Thing designed for public Inspection, must (as was our unfortunate Case in Time past) receive an Imprimatur from a private Quarter.”56 In responding to the Chiswell controversy and the attempt to sue the newspapers for libel, one issue of the *Virginia Gazette* contained three references to press freedom. “Dikelphios” noted that “The freedom of the press must be esteemed an invaluable advantage,” but suggested that it has been abused by bad writers and comments of no use. A second contributor, “A Freeman of Virginia,” noted his satisfaction in the new liberty of the press, which has existed only since Purdie and Rind “made it [the press] a free channel, whereby men may convey their sentiments.” He applauded both the public criticism of men of high station and the recent ruling against the libel charges filed against the printers by Byrd, “it affords …[not readable] satisfaction to my brethren Freemen that our liberty has been lately asserted by the Grand Jury of the colony, when attacked by certain Bills, which were pointed against you Gentlemen Printers.” Finally, “R. R.” contributed a tongue-in-cheek piece where he attacked the idea of “great men” having special protection and mocked the libel charges by suggesting

that additional indictments for 37 people should be issued immediately, “so that they may suffer for their presumption.” If not, he threatened to sell his estate and move to another part of the world where his dignity might be better supported.\textsuperscript{57}

Several important points are apparent here. Satire had become an effective tool for “reducing ‘great men’ to disposable size,”\textsuperscript{58} something certainly inconsistent with the traditional deference to such men. The public reading the newspapers valued press freedom: they saw the Virginia papers as being free because now there were two papers that were free from control by the governor. Libel suits by powerful government figures such as Byrd were seen as a threat to press liberty. These developments support the notion that Virginians did have an expansive view of press freedom that goes well beyond merely a lack of prior censorship.

\textit{Wilkes and Press Freedom}

Domestic dissent in England against the government there became visible in the \textit{Virginia} and \textit{Maryland Gazettes} as the Stamp Act crisis hit colonial shores in the mid-1760s. As Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and others have written, British opposition thought—the “real whigs,” or “country party”—influenced early American leaders, perhaps even more than the ideas from Locke or classical republican writings. Historians reached a newer understanding of the transatlantic nature of political thinking and the media that transmit such ideas. In this view, corrupt ministers conspired against traditional English freedoms, threatening not only the liberty of British radicals such as John Wilkes, but also the liberty of the colonists.\textsuperscript{59} Americans saw the Stamp Act as directly threatening colonial liberty by

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Purdie & Dixon, Nov. 6, 1766), 1.

\textsuperscript{58} Olson, “Zenger Case Revisited,” 227. Satire not only bonded its readers, but she suggested such mockery of the elites also helped to “shrink” them in status.

restricting freedom of the press. One letter to printer Royle about his not printing Patrick Henry’s *Stamp Act Resolves* appeared in the Annapolis paper, claiming the Williamsburg printer was a tool of the vile ministers back in England, and that “… we are in this Colony [Virginia] deprived of that great SUPPORT of FREEDOM, the liberty of the press.” Royle’s *Virginia Gazette* was seen as being controlled too much by the governor, so the radicals brought a second printer to the colony, which sharply altered the meaning of freedom of the press. Competition brought new commercial pressures, which meant the ideas of the radicals had to be printed, or their business would be taken elsewhere. To attract readers, both newspapers then became more open to criticism of government. One letter referred to “the liberty of the press” as something now enjoyed, but it “was in a great measure shut up until you [printers Purdie and Dixon] and Mr. Rind made it a free channel, whereby men can convey their sentiments for amusement, instruction, or information, of their fellow subjects.” The newspapers had moved away from direct government influence, toward the freedom of the marketplace. Virginians now perceived the freedom of the press as closely tied to this new, competitive situation, ensuring that the government could no longer overtly control the newspaper content. Political dissent could now be seen on the pages of the public prints.

British publisher and politician John Wilkes had a great deal of immediate and practical influence on the development of freedom of the press in Virginia. While American newspapers were struggling at home and against Parliament over taxes and liberty of the press, they simultaneously reported on a struggle for press freedom that was also going on in England. Wilkes is better known today as a radical politician with a licentious personal life, but he was also a publisher who fought for the rights of the press. The Chesapeake area prints closely followed

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60 *Maryland Gazette* (Oct. 17, 1765).

61 *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, Nov. 6, 1766), 1. Shop foreman Alexander Purdie took over at the death of Joseph Royle, and John Dixon soon joined him. (See Appendix.)
Wilkes’ travails. The *Maryland Gazette* mentioned Wilkes in a complimentary fashion as early as 1763, and repeatedly praised him by 1766: “he risqued his Life and lost his Liberty, and as the Arbitrary and illegal Violations of the Rights of every Englishman, in his Case, had given them a Cause to stand upon …” Wilkes was hugely popular in London with the middling sorts, the tradesmen and craftsmen who also made up the bulk of the expanding audience for print in Virginia. Such residents of London elected Wilkes to Parliament, but the House of Commons expelled him and he was arrested for seditious libel in 1763. He had criticized a speech by King George III in his libertarian weekly newspaper, *The North Briton*, and was then marked as an enemy of the British Ministry and of the king himself. Wilkes successfully fought against the use of general warrants, the ability to search virtually anyone’s home, fought against the squelching of his newspaper, and in 1771 succeeded in opening the Parliament to press coverage of their debates. He was a libertarian hero both in England and in the colonies, known for his protection of the rights of the common man.

Many testimonials to press freedom in the Chesapeake region alluded to efforts by the English government to stifle Wilkes’ publishing. An anonymous letter-writer from London notes eight attacks on the press by the government in the past year: “There is no Liberty in this Country which is held more dear than that of the PRESS< nor indeed with so much Reason; for if that is destroyed, what we have else to boast of, is gone in an Instant. Arbitrary Ministers (and none but such) are Enemies to this Liberty, because it ever has been a Check upon their Tyranny.” At least some of these attacks on the press were undoubtedly the

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62 *Maryland Gazette* (March 27, 1766), 2. Wilkes is also mentioned for example in the *Maryland Gazettes* (Sept. 29, 1763, April 18, 1765, March 13, 1766, and Sept. 25, 1766).


64 *Maryland Gazette* (July 11, 1765), 1.
attacks on Wilkes’ newspaper. Royle’s *Virginia Gazette* did not have that same interest in the radical Wilkes, however. The index of extant copies of Royle’s newspaper had only one mention of Wilkes, that he traveled to France “which his enemies represented as a flight.”\(^{65}\) The first issue of the revived *Virginia Gazette*, after the Stamp Act threat was waning, mentioned that Wilkes was expected to return to England from exile in Paris soon, and Rind’s first newspaper issue took material directly from his newspaper, *The North Briton*.\(^{66}\) Wilkes also supported the American cause as the Revolution neared, and he was extremely popular in the colonies, perhaps more than history remembers: “To Americans, Wilkes despite his unsavory private life was a martyr to freedom of the press and to the subject’s right to resist oppression.”\(^{67}\) He was named so repeatedly that the *Virginia* and *Maryland* newspapers appeared at times to be almost obsessed with Wilkes. For example, one 1770 newspaper wrote about Wilkes four separate times on one page, including a mention about preparations for his birthday celebration. On the next page, there was a report that 45 Virginia residents sent 45 hogsheads of tobacco to support Wilkes in his financial difficulties.\(^{68}\) Referencing the number of the newspaper issue for which he was prosecuted, the number 45 was an important symbol of support not only for Wilkes but also for what he stood for: opposition to the ministry in power, structural political reform, and a free press.\(^{69}\)

There are many examples of direct ties between Wilkes and the concept of freedom of press as it developed in colonial newspapers. Of special note was the stated resistance to government control, especially opposition to seditious libel

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\(^{65}\) Cappon and Duff, *Virginia Gazette Index*, 2. *Virginia Gazette* (Royle, Nov. 4, 1763), 2.


\(^{67}\) Schlesinger, *Prelude*, 35.

\(^{68}\) *Virginia Gazette* (Rind, Jan. 11, 1770), 1 and 2.

\(^{69}\) Brewer, “The Number 45,” 349-376.
prosecution, which was a major tactic in the ministry’s efforts to stifle Wilkes. In *The North Briton*, he lauded a free press as a birthright and “the firmest bulwark of the liberties of the country,” and a way of exposing the evil designs and duplicity of corrupt ministers. However, Wilkes’ example, more than any detailed philosophy of press freedom, was what inspired the Americans. The Sons of Liberty in Boston, mobilized by his efforts for English liberties, corresponded with Wilkes, and under a Liberty Tree in South Carolina, mechanics honored Wilkes’ banned issue of *The North Briton*. In Pennsylvania, “When the Sons of St. Patrick forgathered on March 17, 1769, they drank as a matter of course to ‘Mr. Wilkes,’ adding the sentiments: ‘May the liberty of the Press remain free from ministerial restraint’ …” In New York, the Sons of Liberty celebrated the repeal of the Stamp Act with toasts to John Wilkes and the liberty of the press, and again later saluted, “The Printers who nobly disregarded the detestable Stamp act, preferring of the public Good to their private Interests.” *The New-York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* also suggested that “Speaking and writing without restraint, are the great privileges of a free people,” and that “The liberty of the Press …ought to be defended with our lives and fortunes, for neither will be worth enjoying, when freedom is destroyed by arbitrary measures.”

The colonies had their own John Wilkes, according to historian Pauline Maier. When James McDougall wrote a pamphlet critical of the New York

70 *The North Briton* (Dublin: John Wilkes, June 5, 1762), 1:1, quoted in Levy, *Emergence*, 146.


colonial legislature in 1770, he spent several months in jail for seditious libel, and became the local darling of American libertarians. Popular opinion tied his case to similar governmental action against Wilkes in England. He was released only when the legislative session was ended. Wilkes’ fight for liberty were closely linked—in the colonists’ minds—with their own struggles. They viewed the British ministry’s efforts to stifle Wilkes the politician and Wilkes the publisher as an example of a corrupt ministry’s threat to liberty, similar to the threats to their own liberties, including their freedom of the press. Wilkes’ travails supplied a very real and pragmatic example of why a free press needed to be shielded from a potentially corrupt government.

The British newspapers also had some visible changes prior to the American Revolution. The political writing and the concept of freedom of the press seen on the pages underwent a transformation following King George III’s ascension to the throne in 1760. As politics became more radical and reform-oriented, the newspapers became more critical and public opinion became more important. Political journalism became harsher, historian Eckhart Hellmuth noted, as writers blurred the line between the public and private spheres. Private lives of those in power were now a fair target for criticism. Social groups beyond the elites were also taking part in political discourse, and a popular political culture was forming. Hellmuth saw Wilkes and the controversies surrounding him as an essential stimulation of this popular criticism. Hellmuth tied a shifting concept of press liberty in Britain with this broadening political sphere and press freedom developed beyond Cato’s ideal in this period. Intrinsic to this development was the evolving concept of the sovereignty of the people, with Parliament viewed as simply their representatives. The press was seen as deriving their authority to criticize government from that sovereignty. Such a medium was part of the crucial balance

75 Maier, “John Wilkes,” 385–386. See also Levy, Emergence, 80–82.
of power, with press serving the function of aiding “the people” as a counterbalance to a powerful government.\textsuperscript{76}

In the wake of both the ministry’s apparent efforts to control the American press through taxation and efforts to stifle Wilkes and his newspaper, references to press freedom appeared more regularly in the Chesapeake prints. The new competition in Williamsburg led to both presses appearing more open to the patriot cause, leading to some lauding of a newly freed press:

It is [a] matter of rejoicing to every well-wisher to mankind that the press, one of the principal handmaids of liberty, is become a free channel of conveyance whereby men may communicate their sentiments on every subject that may contribute to the good of their country, or the information and instruction of their fellow subjects; and it is to be lamented that a tyrannical arbitrary power should show itself, by traducing, and threatening with prosecution, patriot spirits, who appear to glow with an honest and unaffected zeal for their country’s good, and seasonably and generously lay hold on the freedom of the press whereby to exert their consummate abilities to instruct and inform mankind in things of the most interesting nature.\textsuperscript{77}

This writer emphasized the importance of press liberty to prevent tyranny and specifically referred to prosecution after the fact (the libel charges by Byrd), rather than simply prior restraint, as a method used by arbitrary powers to subvert the press. In December 1766, Rind’s newspaper ran an essay, “Of the Liberty of the Press,” by the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume. He argued that such freedom of communication was essential for the British balance of mixed government:

The spirit of the people must frequently be roused in order to curb the ambition of the court; … Nothing is so essential to this purpose as the liberty of the press … As long, therefore, as the republican

\textsuperscript{76} Hellmuth, \textit{Transformation of Political Culture}, 2 and 467-501. The concept of “the people” was, at this time, primarily restricted to white, property-owning males.

part of our government can maintain itself against the monarchical, it must be extremely jealous of the Liberty of the press, as of the utmost importance to its preservation.\footnote{Virginia Gazette (Rind, Dec. 25, 1766), 1. The version printed in this newspaper is somewhat different, and longer, than the version generally published in Hume's collected works, such as Essays, Moral and Political, vol. 1.}

For Virginians who feared the power of a corrupt court and threats on their freedom, a free press was becoming a crucial part of liberty.

\textit{Colonial Precursors}

Three other important precursors to the free press clause in the Virginia Declaration of Rights appeared in the decade before the American Revolution. First, John Adams noted in his widely circulated \textit{Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law} that general knowledge among the people, even those of the lowest ranks, was essential to preserving the liberties of the colonies: “But none of the means of information are more sacred, or have been cherished with more tenderness and care by the settlers of America, than the press. … for the jaws of power are always opened to devour, and her arm is always stretched out, if possible, to destroy the freedom of thinking, speaking, and writing.”\footnote{Boston Gazette, Aug. 1765, from Works of John Adams, 3:457.}

Second, and also in Massachusetts, when the royal governor became furious with his treatment in the \textit{Boston Gazette} of 1768, he requested the lower assembly take action against the seditious libel. Radical Samuel Adams dominated the house, however, and the charges were denied on the grounds the news items were not libelous. In defense of their actions the assembly noted, “The liberty of the press is the great bulwark of the liberty of the people.”\footnote{“Answer of the House of Representatives” to Governor Francis Bernard, March 3, 1768, from Alden Bradford, ed., \textit{Speeches of the Governors of Massachusetts from 1765-1775} (Boston: 1818), 119.} And third, an important statement for press freedom came from the Continental Congress, in an attempt to gain support from their neighbors in Quebec. This address claimed, among other things, the importance of
freedom of the press, not only to counterbalance the government, but also in a broader claim for social improvement. The idea of freedom of the press was evolving and gaining support in many of the British-American colonies.

By 1776, “Civis” was writing in the *Virginia Gazette* that “Liberty of the Press is the palladium of our LIBERTIES,” and he quoted an unidentified writer, “the liberty of the press is inviolably connected with the liberty of the subject … The use of speech is a *natural right*, which must have been reserved when men gave up their natural rights for the benefit of society. Printing is a more extensive and improved kind of speech.” It was only through a free press that England escaped the tyranny of “Popish” factions, Civis wrote, and later it was only because of the press that King George I was able to escape the Jacobite plot. Undue and excessive prosecution of the press was against the principles of the British constitution. “Blasphemy, perjury, treason, and personal slander, are the principal offences which demand restraint” by the press, Civis argued, but he noted that only punishment consistent with the damage would be constitutional. Most important, this letter did not include seditious libel as a punishable offense, but only personal libel. This was a strong editorial lobbying for a protection of press rights in the new state constitution, as it was printed in Williamsburg just days before the Virginia Declaration of Rights was drafted.

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82 *Virginia Gazette* (John Dixon and William Hunter, May 18, 1776), 1. The word “palladium” had been used earlier in the *Virginia Gazette* (Rind, May 21, 1772) by “Junius,” and use of the term in an anonymous English pamphlet in 1770 is noted by Hellmuth, “‘The palladium of all other English liberties:’ Reflections on the Liberty of the Press in England during the 1760s and 1770s,” in Hellmuth, ed. *Transformation of Political Culture*, 487.

George Mason and Rights Declared

In the context of the struggle with Parliament over rights—amidst calls in the newspaper for overall liberty, and specifically for freedom of the press—Virginia held a series of revolutionary conventions that led to the colony’s declaration of independence from Britain. On May 15, 1776, convention president Edmund Pendleton appointed a committee to form a plan of government and a Declaration of Rights. This group eventually swelled to 36 members including George Mason, Patrick Henry, James Madison, Edmund Randolph, Thomas Ludwell Lee, and committee chairman Archibald Cary. Mason grumbled that the committee was full of useless members likely to throw out a “thousand ridiculous and impractical proposals, & of Course, a Plan form’d of heterogenous, jarring & unintelligible Ingredients.” Pendleton wrote to Jefferson, who was in Philadelphia at the Continental Congress, that Mason seemed “to have the Ascendancy in the great work” of creating the declaration and a new constitution. The statement of rights that emerged from this committee is considered a landmark: “The Virginia Declaration of Rights … was the first time in history that freedom of conscience and of the press was guaranteed by a Constitution.”84 Most important, perhaps, was the originality of the precedent which it established: “Virginia’s Declaration of Rights would be an unprecedented political statement; nowhere in modern times had a government acknowledged such a concept as individual inalienable rights, let alone formalized it as a limitation on its own power.”85 While Mason’s principal authorship of the landmark Declaration of Rights and the new state constitution was not widely recognized at the time, both Madison and Randolph later confirmed

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Mason’s primary role in creating what is now known as one of the most important
documents ever written in support of human rights.86

Mason has generally been credited with composing the entire Virginia
Declaration of Rights, but while his contributions were a key to the very concept of
a bill of rights, there are serious questions about the claim that he actually wrote the
clause on free press. Mason was an intellectual leader of the Revolution and
an important statesman. Early in the dispute with Britain, George
Washington and other Virginia leaders turned to Mason’s mind and his pen for
“The Fairfax Resolves” and other agreements to boycott trade with
England. When the Continental Congress called on the colonies to create
new constitutions, Virginia turned to Mason. Although he was not a lawyer and was primarily self-educated, Mason had
studied the British constitution, English and colonial laws, and the prevalent legal
theories of the day.87 It is likely that Mason and other committee members read

86 George Mason to Richard Henry Lee, Williamsburg, May 18, 1776, from Kate Mason
Rowland, The Life of George Mason, 1725–1792: Including His Speeches, Public Papers, and
Correspondence; With An Introduction by General Fitzhugh Lee (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons,
1:271. Background from Rutland, editorial notes 1:274-276, and Brent Tarter, ed., Revolutionary
Virginia: The Road to Independence (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), vol. 7, part

87 See for example, Schwartz, “George Mason: Forgotten Founder,” 154, Shumate, The
Legacy of George Mason, and Brent Tarter, “George Mason and the Conservation of Liberty,” The
Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, 99, no. 3 (July 1991): 279-291. No actual inventory of
George Mason’s bookshelf remains. However, Bennie Brown, the former librarian at Mason’s
both Richard Henry Lee’s and John Adams’ ideas for a new government before either the rights declaration or the new constitution were drafted. While both these other works envision a balance of power between governmental branches, neither envisioned a free press as a part of that balance and neither included any sort of bill of rights. Thomas Jefferson did include protection of rights in his draft constitution, writing that “Printing presses shall be free, except so far as by commission of private injury cause may be given of private action.” However, there is no evidence that Mason or any other committee member was able to read Jefferson’s ideas until after the Declaration of Rights had been presented to the entire convention. Mason completed the first draft of the Virginia Declaration of Rights sometime before May 27.

While the committee—and later the full convention—modified it, this important document remained primarily Mason’s creation. Even the biographer of James Madison, the author of the Bill of Rights, acknowledged Mason’s accomplishment: “There is nothing more remarkable in the political annals of America than this paper. It has stood the rude test of every vicissitude.”

home, Gunston Hall Plantation, suggested what books might be likely to have been on Mason’s bookshelf in an unpublished list in 2000.


90 Thomas Jefferson’s draft constitution was not seen by the committee until after the *Declaration of Rights* had been written, and the constitution drafted. Some of his ideas were added to the constitution. See Tarter, *Revolutionary Virginia*, 7:1:9-13, and Boyd, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 1:364-365.

source of governmental power, and thus were protected from abuse by the
government. While many of the rights show the influence of Locke, Mason made
actual law out of what had until then been merely abstract ideas. His insight was
that a republic must begin with a written and binding commitment to an
individual’s “inalienable rights—rights that came from the Creator and were
superior to any government.”

The Virginia Declaration of Rights had a tremendous influence on other
states, other nations, and other key American documents. Robert Rutland, the
Mason biographer who also assembled the definitive set of Mason papers, focused
on the thoughts behind Mason’s words:

George Mason was a producer of ideas who flourished at the time
when leaders of the struggling former colonies were eager to
experiment and to expand. Mason’s ideas, placed on paper, drew the
whole of the Revolution into focus. Soon they were read in Europe
and drew the admiration of the men destined to guide France.

This was not simply an intellectual influence, as his very words became the basis of
many other bills of rights and constitutions. Benjamin Franklin and John Adams
paid Mason the ultimate compliment by using his ideas. They copied Mason’s
words from the Virginia Declaration of Rights almost verbatim into the
Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts constitutions. Nine new state constitutions
show influence from Mason’s list of rights. Less recognized is that fact that his
writing heavily influenced the American Declaration of Independence. Thomas
Jefferson wrote his famous declaration just days after reading Mason’s draft of the
Virginia declaration. Jefferson’s preamble only varied slightly from the first three

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93 Robert A. Rutland, George Mason: Reluctant Statesman (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State

Levy, Emergence, 183-192. Connecticut and Rhode Island did not write new constitutions but
rather kept their colonial charters. New York and New Jersey did not include bills of rights.
paragraphs of Mason’s Declaration of Rights. Several historians have noted the similarity in the wording of one of the most recognizable phrases of the Declaration of Independence to Mason’s words.\footnote{Mason wrote, “That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights ... namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.” Jefferson wrote just a short time later, “We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with [certain] inherent and inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” For the first draft of the VA Declaration, see Rutland, \textit{Papers of George Mason}, 1:276-278. For Jefferson’s first draft, see his “Later Reflections on the Declaration of Independence” in Gordon Lloyd and Margie Lloyd, eds., \textit{The Essential Bill of Rights: Original Arguments and Fundamental Documents} (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), 175-180. The Continental Congress added the word “certain” and edited out the word “inherent,” but the similarity is unmistakable.}

The nearby state of Maryland followed Virginia’s lead, and in their new constitution declared, “That the liberty of the press ought to be inviolably preserved.” Maryland was actually the first colony to guarantee religious freedom, with a liberal Toleration Act in 1649, and its phrase, “the free exercise of religion” ended up in the First Amendment.\footnote{Maryland Declaration of Rights, section 37, Nov. 3, 1776, from Levy, \textit{Emergence of a Free Press}, 184, Toleration Act from Levy, \textit{Origin of the Bill of Rights}, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999; Reprint, Yale Nota Bene, 2001), 6.} With a large number of Catholics in residence, the northern Chesapeake colony had greater potential for problems in exercising religious freedom, a situation that resulted in their leadership on this issue. Virginia had more conflict over control and content of the press resulting in that colony’s leadership on the issue of press freedom as they became a state.\footnote{Maryland’s press had some similarities with that of Virginia, but there were important differences. Until the development of Baltimore as a port city in the years leading to the Revolution, Maryland was also a primarily farming-based state without a large city, thus there was no print competition. The printer in Annapolis was also depended on the government stipend, but the government was different. (See Chapter 6.) Without such a strong clash between the royalist sentiments of those governing and the growing patriot ideals, the concept of liberty of the press was perhaps not as crucial to residents in Maryland, who had a bit more freedom in that area all along.}

While George Mason has been widely credited as the author of the free press clause in the Virginia Declaration of Rights, there is now evidence
undermining his claim that he did write that article. Unfortunately, there is little documentation to point to a specific author. Mason did not carefully collect notes and papers, as did many of his contemporaries and a fire later destroyed some of what he did save.\textsuperscript{98} No minutes or notes from the Virginia committee charged with writing the declaration and constitution are extant. Early biographers claim that Mason wrote all the relevant articles, with some editing by other committee members, including Madison’s substantial rewrite of the clause on religious freedom. Mason sent a letter to his cousin with what he claimed was a copy of his first draft of the Declaration of Rights.\textsuperscript{99} Irving Brant determined that another “first draft,” found in the Mason papers, was the actual original. This version has twelve paragraphs in George Mason’s handwriting and additions in the handwriting of Thomas Ludwell Lee. The phrase, “That the freedom of the press, being the great bulwark of Liberty, can never be restrained but in a despotick government,” was in Lee’s hand. This indicates that this article, and some others, were added in committee and could have been written by Lee, Patrick Henry, any other member of the committee, a correspondent to the committee, or by Mason himself. Although he did later claim authorship of the press clause, as it was part of what he claimed as his original draft, the actual first known version of this article is in another’s handwriting. There are only speculative theories on who may have written that original phrase.\textsuperscript{100}

Prior to the writing of the Declaration of Rights in 1776, Mason’s interest in press freedom was limited and his commitment to the principle ambiguous.

\textsuperscript{98} Rowland, \textit{Life of George Mason}, 1:preface to 53.

\textsuperscript{99} \textit{Ibid.}, 1:237-241, assumed Mason’s claim to be accurate.

\textsuperscript{100} Irving Brant, \textit{James Madison}, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941-1961), 1:239, in researching the papers of James Madison, discovered yet another copy with Madison’s note that it was the first draft. In comparing versions, including the Mason–Ludwell draft in the Mason papers, he determined Madison erred in his old age and that Mason’s claim was also inaccurate, and that the version partly in Thomas Ludwell Lee’s handwriting is indeed the original. Most scholars who have studied it concur. Rutland, \textit{Papers}, 1:274-291, confirms Brant’s analysis.
There is no conclusive documentation as to what books he had read or kept in his study, as no inventory remains. It appears that he did have Blackstone's *Commentaries*, which treated freedom of press as merely preventing prior restraint by the government. There is also some speculation that Mason had an edition of Trenchard and Gordon's collected *Cato's Letters*. These articles contained many references to freedom of thought, speech, and press. At least one letter included the phrase, “bulwark of liberty,” that ended up in the press clause. The phrasing of this free press clause shows more similarity to Cato, Bolingbroke, or Samuel Adams than it does to legal precedents, Locke, or Milton. The political philosophers may have directly influenced the Virginia elites, but their ideas were filtered through the radical whigs and the popular prints before they reached most people. Trenchard and Gordon’s works “were found more frequently on southern bookshelves than was Locke on government.”\(^{101}\) In *Cato*, however, the “bulwark” was specifically referring to freedom of speech. Bolingbroke used the word “bulwark” in conjunction with a free press, and Adams and his fellow Massachusetts delegates used a similar phrase.\(^{102}\) Mason had apparently also read the “Letters of Junius,” by an English


author who also emphasized the importance of the liberty of the press.\textsuperscript{103} Junius was highly critical of Blackstone’s claims on seditious libel.\textsuperscript{104}

As far as researchers of his papers can determine, Mason did not exercise his own freedom of the press by contributing to newspapers as often as many of his contemporaries. He did write a letter to a London newspaper in 1766, responding to a letter from London merchants published in the \textit{Virginia Gazette}. Mason complained that the colonists were being treated as children, and noted inequities in new trade laws and the erosion of colonists’ rights to trial by a local jury.\textsuperscript{105} Apparently, Mason read the \textit{Virginia Gazette}, as this letter was in response to something printed there. It is also likely that he read the \textit{Maryland Gazette}, as he had many ties to the colony just across the Potomac River, and many of his neighbors obviously read the newspaper printed in Annapolis.\textsuperscript{106} While Mason later supported press freedom among other civil rights, his remaining papers show no evidence that he was concerned with this prior to 1776, or that this was one of his consistent priorities.

On the other hand, Richard Henry Lee and his brothers made constant use of the free press with letters published in Maryland and Virginia newspapers. Arthur Lee wrote as “The Monitor” a series of letters during the Stamp Act crisis. Richard

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\textsuperscript{103} Frederick Schauer, “Free Speech and Its Philosophical Roots,” in Shumate, \textit{Legacy of George Mason}, 133-134.


\textsuperscript{105} Mason, to the Committee of Merchants in London, Potomack, June 6, 1766, in Rutland, \textit{Papers of George Mason}, 1:65-72. There is no evidence this letter was ever published.

\textsuperscript{106} Mason owned land in Maryland. His first wife was from Maryland. As noted in Chapter 3, George Washington and George William Fairfax solicited for a builder for a new church in Fairfax County’s Truro Parish by advertising in the \textit{Maryland Gazette} (Annapolis: Jonas Green & William Rind, May 17, 1764). 3. Cato Uticensis was a statesman in the late Roman Republic, also known as Cato the Younger, known for his stubbornness and tenacity, distaste for corruption, all characteristics of Mason, who refused to support the Constitution.
\end{flushright}
Henry had arranged with printer Rind to publish a pamphlet of brother Arthur’s anti-Stamp Act writings along with John Dickinson’s *The Farmer’s Letters*. Philip Davidson claimed, “He [R. H. Lee] knew the power of the press, bewailed the absence of any newspaper whatever in Virginia for some months in 1781, and throughout the war regretted the failure of the leaders to make use of what facilities they had for reaching the people.”

One researcher has suggested that the Lee family was the key to bringing a second, competitive printer to Williamsburg to expand the practice of press freedom. Thomas Ludwell Lee was on the committee that edited Mason’s Declaration of Rights, and the press clause first appeared in Lee’s handwriting. One recent book suggests that Lee may have written the free press provision at Mason’s suggestion.

Both Mason and Thomas Ludwell Lee actively corresponded with Richard Henry Lee, who was serving in the Continental Congress in New York. Mason respected him as he respected few others. The day that Mason arrived at the convention, and just as the committee considered the declaration and the constitution, he wrote to Richard Henry Lee, pleading for his attendance, “I need not tell you how much you will be wanted here on this Occasion. I speak with the Sincerity of a Friend, when I assure you that, in my opinion, your absence can not, must not be dispensed with. We can not do without you.”

This is the same letter in which Mason chastised other committee members for their lack of usefulness. Richard Henry Lee was meeting in the Continental Congress and did not return to Virginia, and while no letter is extant, it is quite possible he wrote to Mason or to his brother Thomas Ludwell with

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suggestions for the Declaration of Rights. Richard Henry Lee showed a consistent concern regarding press liberty.

Richard Henry Lee or Thomas Ludwell Lee could have been the author of the free press clause in the Declaration of Rights, but it could also have been Mason, any other committee member, or another correspondent. If Mason had composed the article, it would have likely been in his handwriting. It is far from clear, however, just who did originate the concept. Whether or not Mason wrote the free press clause is less important than the fact that Mason did originate the concept of the Declaration of Rights, that free press became part of those rights, and that the need for such a right came out of a cultural transformation within the colony. As Edmund Randolph wrote a few decades later, the Virginia Declaration of Rights is a monument deserving of admiration, and he had a useful observation upon the article in question here: “The twelfth securing the freedom of the press,” Randolph wrote, was the fruit “of genuine democracy and historical experience.” This contemporary recognized both the democratic impulses and the historical imperatives that led to this important protection. Yet, the realities of war quickly altered the meaning of “liberty of the press.”

Revolution and Press Freedom

The American Revolution brought a troubled time for newspapers and for freedom of the press. Paper to print on was hard to obtain as imports were limited, and mobs attacked printers and destroyed presses not fully behind the patriot cause. The meaning of a free press changed from one that was free from all influence to one that was free from Tory influence or free from influence from a corrupt British

ministry. “A free press was supposed to be an instrument of liberty enabling a scattered people to make common cause against oppression,” but during the crisis of the Revolution, that concept allowed for suppression of Tory newspapers within the concept of press liberty. New Yorkers attacked printer James Rivington for his Tory positions and forced him out of business. In Boston, printer James Mein was also attacked by mobs and driven out of town. The ideals of a free press were being subordinated to the fight for freedom.

In Virginia, the printing presses became an active part of the war. A new newspaper was published in Norfolk, Virginia in 1775, and reportedly mocked the actions of Governor Dunmore and the captain of the British ship upon which the governor had taken refuge. Troops landed and seized the Patriot press, allowing Dunmore to use it to publish another Virginia Gazette—but one with a Tory perspective—from onboard the British ship. In Williamsburg, William Hunter, Jr., son of the former printer, took over the first Virginia Gazette in partnership with John Dixon. But the partnership did not last long, as Hunter was a Tory sympathizer who joined the British forces and left the colony in 1778. All of the Williamsburg presses moved when the state capital relocated to Richmond at the end of 1779.

By the 1770s, colonial newspapers were markedly partisan with little printed in support of the Tories. As Copeland concluded, British suppression of American

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112 Botein, “Printers and the American Revolution,” 43.
The Constitution and the Bill of Rights

The United States Constitution was strongly influenced by Mason and the other Virginia delegates. The new nation had many troubles under the Articles of Confederation, including an inability to regulate commerce and to raise funds to pay back debts. The Continental Congress called for a Constitutional Convention and it was held in Philadelphia in 1787. A reluctant George Mason believed it was important enough to come out of retirement and take the long and uncomfortable trip north as one of Virginia’s delegates. George Washington, James Madison, Edmund Randolph, John Blair, and George Wythe also represented Virginia. (Thomas Jefferson was in Europe serving as Minister to France, Patrick Henry refused to take part. James McClurg also represented Virginia, but left before the signing.) Madison was the main author of the Virginia Plan, created in consultation with the other delegates from the state, and presented by Randolph. It became the basis for the new Constitution, and Mason was a major contributor to the final form. Most delegates thought a bill of rights was not necessary, but just three days before the end of the convention, Charles Pinckney of South Carolina moved to insert a declaration “that the liberty of the Press should be inviolably observed.” Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts seconded the motion, but Roger Sherman of

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Connecticut replied, “It is unnecessary. The power of Congress does not extend to the Press,” and the motion was voted down.\(^{119}\)

Despite his role in its creation, Mason was one of three delegates who refused to sign the Constitution, regardless of pleas for unanimity.\(^{120}\) Mason had seconded a motion by Elbridge Gerry that a bill of rights be considered as part of the Constitution, but that proposition was soundly defeated. The lack of a bill of rights, and many other flaws perceived by Mason, led him to refuse to sign the Constitution. In a letter to George Washington, which was later published widely, Mason repeated his argument: “There is no Declaration of any kind for preserving the Liberty of the Press.” Although these objections began with the complaint that there was no “Declaration of Rights,” Mason noted many other flaws, including the lack of a council (cabinet) to advise the president, the supremacy of the federal courts over the states, the fact that only a simple majority was needed for navigation laws that could subjugate the Southern states to the majority of the Northern and Eastern states, and the prohibition on the federal legislature from banning the slave trade for at least some twenty years. Mason believed that the government could develop into a monarchy or a “corrupt, tyrannical aristocracy.”\(^{121}\) It is thought that Mason also was the author of a widely published article arguing against ratification.


under the pseudonym “Cato Uticensis.” This argument did not refer to civil liberties or freedom of the press at all.\textsuperscript{122}

Richard Henry Lee was also a strong opponent of ratification of the Constitution and was considered a leader in the fight for a bill of rights. In a letter to Samuel Adams, Lee wrote of the need for a Bill of Rights:

Suppose that good men came first to the administration of this government; … and the restraint of the Press would then follow for good purposes as it should seem, and by good men—But these precedents will be followed by bad men to sacrifice honest and innocent men; and to suppress the exertions of the Press for wicked and tyrannic purposes …\textsuperscript{123}

During the ratification debate in Virginia, R. H. Lee again proposed the addition of a declaration of a federal bill of rights, including a guarantee of press freedom.\textsuperscript{124} In another letter, he noted that for such a government to work, the citizens must be well informed: “Here arises the necessity of the freedom of the press, which is the happiest organ of communication ever yet devised, the quickest and surest means, of conveying intelligence to the human mind.”\textsuperscript{125} Lee wrote a series of \textit{Letters from the Federal Farmer} that were considered some of the most effective, comprehensive arguments against ratification of the Constitution.\textsuperscript{126} He noted that nothing would prevent Congress from doing exactly what the British ministry did during the Stamp Act, and impose a heavy tax on the press, and even institute particularly


\textsuperscript{123} Richard Henry Lee to Samuel Adams NY, Oct. 5, 1787, quoted in Jensen, \textit{Documentary History}, 8: 36-38. Lee was also arguing for the need for a guarantee of a jury trial.


\textsuperscript{126} Schwartz, \textit{Bill of Rights}, 1:464.
heavy duties on the printing of certain pieces. He suggested that Congress could possibly ignore state press freedoms by claiming to have a superior contract directly with the people.  

**State Ratification of the Constitution**

During the 1787 state ratifying convention in Richmond, Edmund Randolph switched positions and supported the Constitution while Mason and Patrick Henry led the opposition. In preliminary speeches and amendments, neither opponent mentioned free speech or press. However, the lack of a federal bill of rights became the key point of contention between Federalists and Anti-Federalists. Later, Henry asked that, “the great rights of religion, liberty of the press, trial by jury, interdiction of cruel punishments, and every other sacred right, [be] secured, before they agree to that paper [the Constitution.]”  

Randolph argued that although the new Constitution was not perfect, it should be nonetheless be approved, without a bill of rights added. He suggested that the Virginia Declaration of Rights never really protected rights, and argued against Henry’s position:

> Then sir, the freedom of the press is said to be insecure. God forbid that I should give my voice against the freedom of the press. But I ask, (and with confidence that it cannot be answered,) Where is the page [in the Constitution] where it is restrained? If there had been any regulation about it, leaving it insecure, then there might have been reasons for clamors. But this is not the case. If it be, I again ask for the particular clause which gives liberty to destroy the freedom of the press.  

Randolph’s position was that the federal government would not have any authority to legislate anything that could damage press liberty.

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While James Madison initially opposed adding any bill of rights to the new federal Constitution, he came to see the political necessity of such protection. Jefferson wrote his friend Madison from France, praised the Constitutional Convention’s work, but added what he did not like; “First the omission of a bill of rights providing clearly and without the aid of sophisms for freedom of religion, freedom of the press …” and other freedoms, stating that such a list of rights is what “the people are entitled to …” Madison opposed the Virginia convention adding a bill of rights as a condition of ratification, but eventually went along with the plan to add a bill of rights after ratification. In a letter to Alexander Hamilton, he noted this action as a prudent expedient to passage. The convention recommended to Congress twenty amendments and a proposed bill of rights, to be considered after passage. The sixteenth article of Virginia’s proposed bill of rights read, “That the people have a right to freedom of speech, and of writing and publishing their sentiments; that the freedom of the press is one of the greatest bulwarks of liberty, and ought not to be violated.” The wording echoed the Declaration of Rights with the addition of speech and writing.

The Maryland ratification debate provides evidence that—for at least some convention members—freedom of the press meant more than just prohibition of prior restraint. A minority report at the ratification convention proposed amendments to the Constitution, including, “That the freedom of the press be inviolably preserved. In prosecutions in the federal courts for libels, the constitutional preservation of this great and fundamental right may prove invaluable.” As legal historian David Bogen noted, “If freedom of the press

131 Madison to Alexander Hamilton, June 22, 1788, in Ibid., 2:848.
132 June 27, 1788, in Schwartz, Bill of Rights, 2:840-845.
133 Ibid., 2:730-738.
means merely the absence of prior restraint, its value in a libel suit would be nil.” This suggests that at least some of the Maryland delegates believed that actions in addition to prior restraint would be a violation of such freedom, and thus their view of freedom of the press was broader than was Blackstone’s.134

_Congress and the Bill of Rights_

In Virginia, the Anti-Federalists were strong enough to jeopardize Madison’s election to the new Congress. He tried to counter reports that he opposed any amendments to the new federal Constitution, especially regarding religious liberty. In a letter, he wrote that while he had opposed previous alterations that he said were meant to prevent the Union from remaining together, now that the Constitution had been ratified, he now supported moderate amendments, including freedom of the press.135 Both of Virginia’s Senators to the new Congress had opposed the Constitution, as did a majority of the ten Congressmen. Virginia Congressman Theodorick Bland began a movement—early in the first session of the House—to hold a Second Constitutional Convention. It was then that Madison introduced his proposal for a Bill of Rights, effectively cutting off the push for another convention.136

In drafting the Bill of Rights, Madison used as his guideposts the Virginia Declaration of Rights, the similar bills of rights from various states (themselves mostly offshoots of the Virginia declaration), plus proposals from the various state ratifying conventions. Madison’s first draft was later altered by Congress, but it echoed the words from Virginia with the added idea of free speech: “The people shall not be deprived or abridged of their right to speak, to write, or to publish their sentiments; and the freedom of the press, as one of the great bulwarks of liberty,

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shall be inviolable.” Madison had tightened the constitutional language, substituting the imperative “shall” in place of the more vague original wording. This draft also included a prohibition on states’ violation of freedom of the press, a clause that did not make it to the final amendments.

Rather than act quickly, Congress sent Madison’s proposal to a committee, where it took several months before an altered version emerged. The Federalists were in no hurry to amend their new Constitution, and many of the Anti-Federalists were said to prefer the amendments to never pass, so as to justify their continued opposition to the Constitution. As Edmund Pendleton wrote to Madison, “it will have a good effect in quieting the minds of many well meaning Citizens, tho’ I am of opinion that nothing was further from the wish of some, who covered their Opposition to the Government under the masque of uncommon zeal for amendments, & to whom a rejection or a delay as a new ground of clamour, would have been more agreeable.” On August 13th the House finally passed Madison’s amendments with some changes. The fourth amendment, as it was then, was reworded to: “The freedom of speech and of the press, and the right of the

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137 For Madison’s draft, see his proposed “Amendments to the Constitution,” in “Remarks to Congress,” June 8, 1789, in Lloyd and Lloyd, Essential Bill of Rights, 331-344. See also Levy, Essays, 258-289 and Smith, “Origins of Free Speech,” 48-82. Pennsylvania was the first to add free speech to the press clause in their constitution.

138 Schwartz, Bill of Rights, 2:1009. While the press clause in the Virginia Declaration said, “press … can never be restrained but by despotic governments,” Madison instead wrote the stronger, “shall be inviolable.” For many of the clauses, he replaced the somewhat flaccid “ought” and “ought nots” of the original language.


140 Ibid.

people peaceably to assemble and consult for their common good, and to apply to
the government for redress of grievances, shall not be infringed.”¹⁴²

George Mason was initially critical about the amendments, but he
eventually recognized they were of some worth, although incomplete in his view.
He first wrote very negatively regarding the amendments as they were being
debated, suggesting that Madison made the motions only because he needed to
fulfill the promise he made in order to get elected: “Perhaps some Milk & Water
Propositions may be made by Congress to the State Legislatures by Way of
th[r]owing out a Tub to the Whale; but of important & substantial Amendments,
I have not the least hope.”¹⁴³ After they emerged in final form, however, Mason did
express “much Satisfaction,” but hoped for further additions.¹⁴⁴

The Bill of Rights then faced opposition and editing in the United States
Senate, where it finally emerged close to the form in which we know it today.
Senator William Grayson of Virginia complained to Patrick Henry that the
amendments failed to tackle the important political issues and dealt only with
personal liberty. Grayson and Senator Richard Henry Lee attempted to add
amendments restricting direct taxation, treaty, and commerce powers, but they
were voted down.¹⁴⁵ Lee suggested that “Some valuable rights are indeed declared,”
but noted that the Anti-Federalist strategy had failed miserably: “In fact the idea of
subsequent amendments, was little better than putting oneself to death first, in
expectation that the doctor, who wished our destruction, would soon afterwards

¹⁴² Schwartz, Bill of Rights, 2:1148.

¹⁴³ George Mason to John Mason, Gunston-Hall, July 31, 1789, in Rutland, Papers of George
Mason, 3:1162-1167.

¹⁴⁴ Mason to Samuel Griffin, Gunston-Hall, Sept. 8, 1789, in Ibid., 3:1170-1173.

restore us to health.” The Senate removed Madison’s clause that prohibited the states from violating press freedom, and passed only twelve of the House’s seventeen amendments.

After Senate passage, a Conference Committee was formed with the House, to reconcile the two versions. This committee accepted all of the Senate changes, but made three more alterations, including adding the religious freedom clause to the press and speech clauses to form what is now the First Amendment. Both houses agreed to the changes, and sent twelve articles to the states for ratification. The first two articles failed that approval, and the free press and religion clauses became the First Amendment only by an accident of history.

**Ratification of the Bill of Rights**

While Virginia was the first state to compose its own bill of rights, it was one of the last to agree to the federal Bill of Rights. Nine states ratified the ten amendments within six months, leaving Virginia a critical state. There, the opposition was able to slow the consideration of the Bill of Rights to a crawl. Finally, at the end of 1791, Virginia ratified the ten amendments, followed by the newly admitted state of Vermont. The three states that did not ratify the amendments—Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Georgia—belatedly did pass them in 1939 as a symbolic gesture. When ratification had been complete, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson sent official notice to the states. The new Bill of Rights was considered of so little importance that before Jefferson even mentioned the

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147 Schwartz, *Bill of Rights*, 2:1159-1167. The first failed amendment established the ratio of Representatives in Congress to the population; the second delayed any increased compensation for members of Congress from going into effect until the next House election was held.

148 Ibid., 2:1171-1203. Initially only ten states were needed to ratify, but by the time Virginia approved the amendments, Vermont had been added to the Union, meaning that eleven states were then needed. There are no records of the state ratification debates.
amendments, he informed the governors of a new act to regulate fisheries and fishermen.\footnote{Jefferson to the governors of the several states, March 1, 1792, \textit{Ibid.}, 2:1203.} 

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The concept of freedom of the press in Virginia had evolved a great deal in half a century. It was no longer simply an Enlightenment philosophical ideal, a right for the political elites. Citizens now could—even should—criticize their government. The first Virginia newspaper noted that liberty of the press did not include overt criticism of governing officials and recognized that veneration must always be maintained for authority.\footnote{\textit{Virginia Gazette} (Aug. 6, 1736), no longer extant, quoted in Maxwell, \textit{Virginia Historical Register}, 21-31.} In contrast, the introduction to the first competitive Virginia newspaper stated bluntly that it would support liberty and treat with contempt factious political zealots. This article displayed no deferential attitude. By 1766, all of the Chesapeake newspapers were full of criticism of Parliament and the British ministry, with little or no sign of political deference.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, (Rind, May 16, 1766) issue number 1, 1.} While some writers referred to free press as a natural, individual right, they also recognized it as a watchdog on corrupt governments, with a crucial role within the balance of British government.\footnote{On free press as an extension of the natural right of free speech, see for example the letter previously noted, “Civis,” \textit{Virginia Gazette} (May 18, 1776), 1. The same letter noted how free press was crucial to removal of “Popish” kings,} A published letter in 1773 refers to the motto of one of the two \textit{Gazettes}, “Open to all Parties, but influenced by none,” as “properly descriptive of that Freedom which renders the Press beneficial to Mankind.” The “Attentive Observer” goes on to criticize the printer for not running a piece submitted, and notes that it is only through the freedom of the press “by which the
guilty Great can be punished.” Freedom of the press is seen here as not simply an individual libertarian right but rather as one with a larger benefit to all people. Far from remaining in a role deferential to the elites, the newspapers were now seen as one of the few venues through which the elites could be brought to justice.

Political dissent—both within the pages of the public prints and in the public spaces, spurred on by printed writings—had increased in the late colonial period in Virginia. As the culture shifted from one of deference to political leaders to one of discussion, disagreement, and dissent, the prints as a source of information and expression became highly valued. Government censorship and control of the press were no longer tolerated. The example of press restrictions during the prior decades in Virginia, combined with the persecution of Wilkes in England and McDougall in New York, and the general fear of a powerful and potentially corrupt government helped to make a free press important. Writers now referred to a free press as a potential balance against government power. The “Address to the Inhabitants of Quebec” stated that one of the important aspects of a free press was how “oppressive officers are shamed or intimidated, into more honourable and just modes of conducting affairs.” When the rights of the people were threatened, a free press was essential. One newspaper contributor suggested, “There is no Liberty in this Country which is held more dear than that of the PRESS, nor indeed with so much Reason; for if that is destroyed, what we have else to boast of, is gone in an Instant.” Press freedom was now viewed as a guarantee of other human rights.

153 *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, Dec. 23, 1723), 1, referring to the motto and editorial selection of their competitor, Mrs. Clementina Rind.


Despite the evidence undermining Mason’s claim of complete authorship of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, many historians simply ignore the controversy and continue to credit Mason with originating the free press article. This leads to misunderstanding about its origins and thus misinterpretation of its original intent. Anderson and Levy both credit Mason with the first constitutional protection of a free press, and Levy erroneously notes: “The first free press clause, in the Virginia Declaration of Rights, was the product of George Mason, the great planter and amateur political theorist, who composed alone and without being confronted by demands.” In reality there was indeed pressure by the public as demonstrated in the colonial newspapers of the period, and a committee, rather than a single individual, responded to those pressures in creating the clause. In focusing on Mason, Levy assumed great influence from the English constitution and legal tradition, which Mason had studied. As Jeffery Smith noted, in contrast to Levy’s findings, a libertarian ideology had developed in the colonies, supporting a broader concept of press freedom. As Larry Eldridge concluded, a liberty of expression had been developing, and the colonists were exercising an expanded freedom to criticize their government. This research builds upon that understanding by uncovering the underlying details about the authorship, the free press practices, and a citizenry that had repeatedly called for increased press freedom.

Liberty of the press in Virginia had evolved from a limited right to one valued and repeatedly defended on the pages of the local newspapers. Letters publicly criticized efforts to stifle the press by government influence or seditious libel actions. At least one newspaper contributor openly lobbied the committee writing the new state constitution to include protection of the press. In June 1776,

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the local newspaper printed a committee draft of the Declaration of Rights, and shortly thereafter a Philadelphia newspaper and others reprinted it. By December 1776, Dixon and Hunter were running the free press article from the Virginia Declaration of Rights as the motto on the masthead of their *Virginia Gazette*: “The freedom of the press is one of the great bulwarks of liberty, and can never be restrained but by despotic governments.”

This constitutional right to a free press was part of the emergence in Virginia of a culture of political dissidence that displaced a traditional deference to the elites. Freedom of conscience, spurred in part by religious dissidence and the Great Awakening, prefaced a need for a broad-based political discourse. Local efforts to get a printer free from governmental interference led to the establishment of print competition, and consumer pressures helped to guarantee that dissident ideas would be printed. The press had evolved from an official government function to a private concern, where criticism of the government had become allowed and even essential. More than the elite Enlightenment philosophy and political theory, it was rather the more populist transatlantic and inter-colonial concepts—from the ideas of the British opposition (radical whig or country party), especially the writings of “Cato” and John Wilkes—that influenced the ideas of what a free press should be. The philosophic roots of natural rights, filtered through the popular writings of Trenchard and Gordon, formed a theoretical basis that could be supported by larger numbers of citizens than simply the well-educated elite. The travails of opposition in the local press that was being controlled by the royal governor and the actions of the British ministry to stifle the opposition by Wilkes set the practical examples. Of more importance than a libertarian concept of an individual right, a watchdog press was seen as necessary to balance potentially corrupt governmental power. By 1776, the concept of a free press went beyond

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160 *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon & Hunter, Nov. 29, 1776), 1.
simply being a restriction on prior restraint to include protection from seditious libel prosecution after the fact, truth as a defense for libel, and no taxation of the press. While often referred to as a natural right, an extension of the individual right to free speech, press freedom was also a civic responsibility, one that served the function of counterbalancing a potentially corrupt government. This is a much broader interpretation of free press origins than what is currently prevalent.

It was largely Virginia’s Declaration of Rights, and the proposed amendments by the various state ratification conventions, that inspired what became the federal Bill of Rights. The First Amendment, as it evolved, is not the loose collection of unrelated clauses commonly assumed today. The right to gather, discuss, and spread ideas by print—including both political ideas and possible heresy from the established church—is a unified idea, supported by the experience in colonial Virginia. The historical background is one of an expanding civic discourse that began with religious discourse. Colonial Virginians valued the right to assemble and debate both politics and religion. This practice included the right to petition and instruct one’s legislators on these matters. Together, these rights constitute a unified whole:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.162

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162 First Amendment to the United States Constitution.
Chapter 9
Epilogue

By the time of the ratification of the Bill of Rights in 1791, our poor farmer’s boy Devereux Jarratt had risen from humble circumstances to the ranks of the elite. Jarratt was a self-educated, well-read pastor in the Anglican Church. His example is useful in understanding the influence of a growing print culture. Jarratt was born in the colony of Virginia in 1733, just as a printing press began operating in Williamsburg. The opportunities for learning to read and write blossomed as printed material became more available. From a family of poor farmers, Jarratt had opportunities not available to his parents. He was not comfortable with his father’s trades of carpentry and farming nor with laboring with the hammer, the plough, and the ax. It was his ability to read and write—his education and his print literacy—that allowed him to advance in social status. Both Jarratt’s sacred calling in the ministry and his learning were held in such respect that he was able to join the elite ranks of the colonial aristocracy.1 “One of the most remote means, as I consider it, which led me to the station, which I now fill, was my being called from the ax to the quill.” While books were remote to Jarratt in his youth, by the American Revolution printed material of all sorts had become common in Virginia. Jarratt writes in his autobiography of hungrily reading borrowed books while on break from his plowing.2 By the time of his death in 1791, he had earned respect and wealth, accumulating 717 acres and 17 slaves.3 Jarratt had transformed

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2 Jarratt, Life of the Reverend Devereux Jarratt, 24-25.
himself—through the aid of print—from one who was deferential to one who expected deference from others.

Jarratt’s life and his transformation from near the bottom of the society to a high position is the epitome of the cultural changes we have seen in Virginia. It is no coincidence that books and reading were part of the reason for his rise. A cultural transformation had taken place in mid-eighteenth-century Colonial Virginia, and the spread of the printed word was a major driver of that change. (Of course, there were many other factors behind such a transition. Quite closely tied to the influence of print was the symbiotic relationship of education and literacy.) From a society that was largely oral, with limited print circulation, Virginia had developed an extensive and broadly based print culture. The mid-eighteenth century was a time when these expanding possibilities, not only through print but also through an increasing commercial economy, allowed the “lesser sort” to aspire towards higher status.

Print was an essential part of a growing consumer marketplace. The advertisements in the newspapers were an important part of the increasing influence of commerce, marketing, and consumption. Printed materials were themselves important consumer articles. Newspapers, with their exchanges with the larger Atlantic world—and increasingly the inter-colonial British-American world—helped to create a sense of unity among colonists. Printing had become an important part of this new economic freedom, but government control threatened this emerging new liberty.

Along with these changes of economic mobility came changes in thought, attitude, and social relations. The traditional deferential culture had been undermined by both political and social dissent. From the new post-revolutionary

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4 While the dominant medium became printed texts, of course residual orality remained, and continues to remain even in today’s society.
society, Jarratt observed that the deference that had existed in his youth had virtually vanished: “Such ideas of the difference between gentle and simple, were, I believe, universal among all of my rank and age. But I have lived to see, a vast alteration, in this respect, and the contrary extreme prevail.” Deference had not completely vanished, of course, but the times had changed. The hierarchical distribution of power and authority had given way to one where the lower sorts such as Jarratt could rise in status, depending on ability. As popular prints such as almanacs and newspapers spread to people farther down the social scale, so too did the ability of people to think for themselves. Individualism and heterodoxy in matters of religion and politics were becoming more widespread. Public discussion of political matters, including disagreement with the political leadership, became more common. Civic discourse appeared more often in the newspapers and pamphlets, driving debate both on the printed page and in public gathering places. Political dissent became accepted behavior. As Larry Eldridge observed, the “colonists themselves became more outspoken and less respectful as authority in general became less sacrosanct.” The power to rule was no longer exclusively in the hands of the elite, as a broader public opinion became important to governance. It was no longer a cultural anomaly to disagree with the royal governor, the British ministry, or the king. An open “culture of dissidence” had emerged out of what had been a culture of deference, and the spread of print was a key to that transformation. While print was certainly not the sole cause of the change, it was an essential factor—a crucial antecedent—that allowed such a reshaping of culture to occur.

The expanding civic public in eighteenth-century colonial Virginia resembled Habermas’ civic public, but differed in composition and description.

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7 Eldridge, *Distant Heritage*, 138.
While Habermas theorized about European bourgeoisie, discourse in Virginia spread to middling sorts, and even women and groups not previously considered part of a civic public. In the Chesapeake colonies, women were involved in civic discourse, especially within the prints themselves. Habermas theorized a degeneration of his civic public as lower classes became involved, yet in the Virginia colony, we see it strengthening as it expanded.\(^8\) Michael Warner adapted Habermas’ theories to the American colonies, and the research reported here reinforces Warner’s premise that a great deal of discourse actually took place on the printed page.\(^9\) This study finds that the growing market economy aided the increased discourse through the public prints, rather than being a disintegrating influence at that time.

Along with increased civic discourse and political dissent came an understanding of the value of a press that was able to spread more diverse ideas through print media. People wanted and expected a publishing outlet for dissenting ideas, and the concept of liberty of the press broadened to include criticism of the government. While initially press freedom may have meant simply freedom to publish without a license—a lack of prior restraint—that was no longer sufficient. There was now dissatisfaction with even indirect government influence over a single press. Prosecution after the fact for seditious libel was, by the 1760s, disparaged in the public prints and rarely if ever enforced in the courts. By then it was considered an impediment to a truly free press. From this increased discourse and the recognized need for a voice freed from the gatekeeping of the royal governor emerged the idea of constitutional protection for press freedom. Print competition—free from government control—was needed to counterbalance a potentially corrupt and powerful government, whether British or American. From

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\(^8\) Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

this need and from this dissent came the new idea of constitutional protection for freedom of the press.

The meaning of this right has always been—and remains to this day—highly contested. The application of press freedom has never been as unqualified as Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black or other absolutists would want. Mob action limited press freedom during the Revolution, and the federal Sedition Act of 1798 banned exactly the type of criticism of government that appeared to inspire the idea of protecting the freedom of the press in Virginia. Federalists defended the Sedition Act by pointing to Blackstone’s limited definition, while Republicans argued it was inconsistent with the First Amendment’s guarantee of freedom of the press. The act expired in 1801, but certainly the threats against free press did not end there.¹⁰ During times of war and crisis, freedom of expression continues to be threatened.

This work focused on liberty of the press in a specific time and place, having the disadvantage of not being able to apply the findings more widely, and having the advantage of greater detail, depth, and knowledge of the specifics. By closely examining colonial Virginia, and to some extent neighboring Maryland, it is evident in the public prints, the political battles, and the legal cases how freedom of the press developed over time and was preserved by the public. Close focus brings a more complete understanding of the concept in that time and place. Because the Virginia constitutional protection of the press inspired other states, and because, both directly and indirectly—through the other state constitutions—it was the key precedent for the First Amendment, this study does give us greater understanding about the larger federal protection.

A critical legal protection such as freedom of the press can develop from more egalitarian sources than political theory or accepted legal practice. The public prints of both Maryland and Virginia displayed clear calls for press freedom. This

¹⁰ There was no test of the Sedition Act’s constitutionality while it remained in force, but in 1964 the Supreme Court, in ruling on New York Times v. Sullivan, in essence ruled seditious libel unconstitutional. Siegel, Communication Law in America, 118.
new contextualizing of the origins of the constitutional right to a free press advances our understanding beyond the important work of Leonard Levy and other historians. In addition to the influences of Enlightenment philosophy and British legal tradition, this research has found other sources. First, the battles with the Virginia governor to get dissenting material printed led the local colonists to view all government control—via prior restraints or through prosecution for seditious libel after the fact—as having a negative impact on civic discourse. Second, the theoretical writings of John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, and other radical whigs more directly influenced ideas on press liberty than did John Locke and other British philosophers. Third, the travails of John Wilkes concurrent with the colonists’ clash with British authorities over freedom provided great practical reinforcement of the need for press freedom.

As Virginia’s Declaration of Rights was a model for most of the new state constitutions and the United States’ Bill of Rights, understanding these roots helps to clarify the original intent of press freedom. As an important protector of a new, broader, more critical civic discourse, the liberty of the press envisioned was a more inclusive concept than merely a Blackstonian ban on prior restraint. Constitutional protection for freedom of the press was intended to incorporate a wider range of prohibition, specifically excluding prosecution for seditious libel.

Recognizing the public prints themselves as an “agent of change” illuminates one major factor that helped bring about an important transition toward a new, democratic form of society. Myriad influences helped to create a new nation out of the formerly dependent British-American colonies during the eighteenth century. Religious dissent had swept through, and the Great Awakening helped Virginians and other Americans to begin to think critically and independently. Radical whig ideas spread, bringing concern that the British ministry was conspiring to steal away American liberties. The Seven Years War had lessened the threat from the French

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and the Native Americans, allowing for less dependence on British military might. Americans were no longer simply struggling to survive as they had just a century before. A newly active commercial marketplace linked diverse colonists together and undermined the classical deference. Amid these many changes is another important factor little-recognized by historians accustomed to looking for evidence within documents. The very influence of the medium of the document itself is difficult to perceive across the centuries. After 1730, print evolved from an object of-and-for the elites to a more broadly-based cultural medium. Writing and reading became more common far down the social scale. Newspapers were read aloud in taverns and coffeehouses, spurring civic discourse. Men and even women not of an elite status could read and contribute their thoughts on governmental affairs to newspapers. Almanacs spread even to the small farmers, allowing reading and even writing on the blank spaces to touch those far down the social scale. Such reading and writing spurred independent thought and social heterodoxy, allowing for the growth of new ideas of freedom of thought, speech, and press. The very existence of print media was essential to the spread of such revolutionary thought.

The American Revolution would not have happened had it remained simply the idea of a highly-educated elite. Common men and women joined in the life-and-death struggle for liberty. The Revolution could not have happened if they failed to understand the importance of the concepts for which they were fighting. An expanded print culture that spread far and deep within the society enabled that to happen. People chose to use a new technology, without necessarily realizing that such use helped to change the way that they thought and interacted. Print did not cause the Revolution, of course. It did, however, function as a crucial agent of change, setting the stage for the possibility. Print became an important engine of a new and broader public discourse, helping to tie diverse colonists and colonies together in radical new ways of thinking. The colonists—through the changes encouraged by a broadening print culture—could now imagine themselves as
Americans instead of British. A broad print culture was indeed a necessary prerequisite for the changes that made the American Revolution possible.

This study has relevance beyond helping to understand such changes in early America. Applying theories of media ecology to historical studies demonstrates the influence of changes in media, helping to reach a better understanding of broader historical changes. As historians in recent decades added to knowledge by incorporating archeology, sociology, and popular culture, for example, so can we better understand the past by looking closely at media such as print, which have more pervasive influences than are currently acknowledged. Understanding the importance of the changes in dominant media as one aspect of evolving cultures can help us to better comprehend critical historic transitions.

If development of a print culture can influence a society of some 250 years past in such a fashion, it also behooves us to pay attention to more recent changes. The rise and fall of radio and of television has been of particular interest to media scholars, and historians should also be able to learn much from that. More importantly, the current trend toward computer-based electronic communication is influencing the way that we converse and the ways that we think. While modern media influence is well beyond the scope of this study, this work might suggest to historians and other scholars how we might research and better understand more recent and even current cultural transitions.

As Devereux Jarratt looked back at the changes in his lifetime, he was not totally pleased with the changes that had occurred. As he wrote in 1794, Jarratt regretted the loss of deference to men of “quality.” The universal distinction “between gentle and simple” had now eroded, and the opposite prevailed. Such “want of a proper distinction, between the various orders of the people,” he wrote, was having a negative influence on the new nation and its government. For Jarratt,

12 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, tied print literacy to the ability to envision such a new nation.
the cultural, social, and political changes that took place as the colony of Virginia became a state in the new United States were not all positive. Now that Jarratt himself was a member of the elite, deference was no longer automatically given: “In our high republican times, there is more levelling than ought to be.”

So it is as we use new technologies, communicate in new ways, and spread new ideas and ways of thinking. We change, lives change, our world changes, and not always in ways that we wish or appreciate. As we stumble through such transitions seemingly beyond our control, it behooves us to remember warnings from 250 years ago, from those who thought the open communication of ideas was important enough to protect. As Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard wrote, “Without Freedom of Thought, there can be no such Thing as Wisdom; and no such Thing as publick Liberty, without Freedom of Speech: Which is the Right of every Man.” Liberty of the press, according to Lord Bolingbroke, was “the chief bulwark and support of Liberty in general,” and “this great bulwark of our Constitution.”

As John Adams warned, “the jaws of power are always opened to devour, and her arm is always stretched out, if possible, to destroy the freedom of thinking, speaking, and writing.” It serves us well to remember the importance of protecting our own freedom by protecting the liberty of the press and all modern communication media. As an unknown author wrote in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1776: “That the freedom of the press is one of the great bulwarks of liberty, and can never be restrained but by despotic governments.”

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13 Life of Devereux Jarratt, 14-15.

14 Cato [John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon], “Of Freedom of Speech: That the same is inseparable from Publick Liberty,” (Letter no. 15), London Journal (Feb. 4, 1720), from Cato’s Letters, 1:96.

15 [Bolingbroke?] Craftsman, Dec. 9, 1726, June 24, 1727, Sept. 28, and Nov. 2, 1728, quoted in Black, English Press, 125.


17 The Virginia Declaration of Rights (Williamsburg: May 27, 1776), section 12.
Appendix
Virginia Printers’ Timeline

Jamestown
1682
Thomas Nuthead

Williamsburg
1730
William Parks

1750
William Hunter

1761
Joseph Royle

1765
[The Stamp Act]

1766
Alexander Purdie &
John Dixon

1773
Clementina Rind

1774
John Pinkney

1775
John Dixon &
William Hunter, Jr.

1780
All Presses Move To Richmond

Norfolk
William Duncan
Lord Dunmore Captures Press

Williamsburg
(Third Print Shop)

Williamsburg
(Second Print Shop)

Alexander Purdie

John Clarkson &
Augustine Davis
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