Almanacs of the Colonial Chesapeake: “Trumpeters of Sedition” or Revolutionary “Agent of Change”?

Introduction

Almanacs were the most widely circulated form of secular literature in colonial British America. One researcher suggested that almanacs were revolutionary “trumpeters of sedition.”¹ With all the attention paid to political pamphlets, newspapers, and books of philosophical theory of natural rights, the almanac has been overlooked as an important incitement to revolution. Almanacs from the southern colonies, in particular, have been under-studied. This research examines these small, pamphlet-like annual books from the colonial Chesapeake to determine, at least for this region, if their influence was, indeed, revolutionary. The aim of this study is to examine whether almanacs influenced political thinking in Virginia and Maryland during the late Colonial period. In contrast to those of other regions, the Virginia and Maryland “Almanacks” had only a very small amount of overtly political content prior to the American Revolution. In more subtle ways, however, almanacs were an important part of a cultural transition, indeed a revolution in reading, which helped lead to revolutionary thought.

Historiography

While many studies have examined the political influence of print materials leading up to the American Revolution, few have included almanacs. In his important

study on *Propaganda and the American Revolution*, Philip Davidson had a great deal to say about political pamphlets and newspapers, while downplaying the influence of almanacs. He noted that propaganda needed to be timely to be influential, and as almanacs came out but once a year and were necessarily printed ahead of time, they had limited usefulness for the propagandist. He did recognize that almanacs circulated into the country far beyond the normal reach of newspapers and pamphlets.² Other important works explored the crucial part that newspapers played in the war against Britain, and still others explored the important influences of political writers in England on the ideas of the revolutionary Americans, primarily through books and political pamphlets.³ Marion Barber Stowell suggested scholars have erred in overlooking the political influence of the popular annuals, “The colonial almanac has been largely ignored by historians, who have however commented profusely on the political role of the newspapers and pamphlets during the latter half of the eighteenth century.”⁴ She posited that these small, inexpensive, yearly books influenced the average American more than did other writings. She suggests the “radical Whig” ideology influenced the

² Philip Davidson, *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 *Institute for Propaganda Analysis*, inspired by Harold D. Lasswell, as quoted in Jacques Ellul, *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)


⁴ Stowell, “Trumpeters of Sedition,” 41. This is her opening line and she footnotes Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution*. 
content of the almanacs, and through that medium, the idea of a conspiracy against liberty gained support well into the countryside and with the small farmers. 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.”\(^5\) 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.\(^6\)

While analysis of the almanacs' contents tell us some important things, more non-traditional methods of examination prove even more revealing. In exploring the printing revolution in Europe, Elizabeth Eisenstein noted that historians' focus on the “book format tends to deflect attention from the effects of rapidly duplicating diverse ‘non-book’ materials (proclamations, edicts, broadsides, calendars, and the like) that were especially well suited for mass production.”\(^7\) In colonial Virginia, the almanac was one of the most common of these diverse products of the press. Of even greater significance, Eisenstein suggested that the printing press itself is an “agent of change.”


\(^6\) Ibid., idem, *Early American Almanacs: The Colonial Weekday Bible* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1977). 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.

This raises the question of whether the spread of the printed materials, aside from the explicit messages contained within, could possibly have an implicit revolutionary influence, in the sense of a momentous change, in contrast to the seditious words within that might incite rebellion. While Eisenstein explored print's influence on intellectual, scientific, and religious movements in early modern Europe, similar questions are worth asking about political movements coming later in America's history. 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.

Almanacs were one piece of an enormous transition to a print culture, a change that had tremendous individual and social impact. 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." Cultural historian Lawrence Levine observed that the transition from an oral culture to one based on the printed word "produce[d] cognitive effects that are culturally expressed as psychological individualism and social heterodoxy." Literate societies were thus quite different from non-literate societies and this had a profound influence on the way that people think. Only in such a literate society could ideas such as freedom of thought and speech even develop. J. C. Carothers, Walter Ong, and Harold Innis (among others) examined how a new

Matthew Shaw, "Keeping Time in the Age of Franklin: Almanacs and the Atlantic World," (paper presented at the conference, Atlantic World of Print in the Age of Franklin, Philadelphia, September 29, 2006), 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.

communication medium itself, separate from its content, can effectuate these changes. As Carothers wrote from a psychological perspective, literate people live in a visual world and this is 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. “I suggest that 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.” This is related to the scientific approach to thinking, which did not emerge until just after printing did. Verbal thought becomes separable from action and becomes not necessarily behavioral. 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. It requires literate individuals to develop intellectual individuality. Written words become symbols that have no independent existence. Only with written communication did deductive and sequential thinking allow for detachment, objectivity, reason, and order. “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 nonliterate societies such distinctions are not made.” Through the spread of the printed word and education, the influence of reading and writing also spread. Marshall McLuhan referred


12 Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 157.
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.\textsuperscript{13} 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."\textsuperscript{14} Michael Warner suggested that printed material was an important aspect of a radical reconstruction of the public sphere in eighteenth-century America. Print became 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. This was an extremely important part of the rise of revolutionary thought in America. Warner noted the change from a society that did not allow public criticism of government to one that tolerated such criticism, an important development prefacing political revolution.\textsuperscript{15}

Several European historians 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, the wider circulation, and that fact that older works and thus knowledge were more readily available made such

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revolutionary advancements in ideas possible. Roger 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, press is a necessary precipitant for revolution, but not sufficient in and of itself. We might consider print to be enabling rather than the sole agent of change. As Eisenstein noted, “. . . historical change, in and of itself, is indeterminate, always contingent on numerous factors and usually compatible with movement in diverse directions." Media ecologists refer to print and other communication media as a crucial part of an overall environment within which we live. The introduction of print into the lives of the lower and middling people of the eighteenth-century Chesapeake can thus be seen as one of many influences, albeit an important one. Printed materials, especially Bibles and religious works, certainly came to the Chesapeake with the earliest European settlers, but the establishment of local printing increased the circulation, especially of secular material. 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. As Benedict Anderson theorized, a virtual revolution took place in eighteenth-century America as the amount of printed material mushroomed. Circulation of popular prints

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expanded as part of a consumer revolution. Anderson pointed to "print-capitalism" and the rise of provincial elites as enabling British-Americans to "imagine" a new nation.  

Almanacs, as one very popular facet of this rising print culture, "offer[ed] support for the notion of a distinct, and growing, American identity, which incorporated an English, imperial heritage, while also giving support to local difference." In Virginia, 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."

Chesapeake Almanacs

Almanacs were printed as far back as 1729 in Annapolis, Maryland and 1732 in Williamsburg, Virginia. Prior to that, some residents undoubtedly made use of almanacs printed in London or Philadelphia. Records show that Benjamin Franklin shipped copies of Poor Richard's Almanack to Maryland by 1741, and shipped pocket

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21 Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Revised ed. (New York: Verso, 1991), 36-44. As T. H. Breen suggested in Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence (New York : Oxford University Press, 2004), 329, it was a common experience of consumption of goods that allowed the colonists to imagine a new nation together. Of all the consumer goods, newspapers and almanacs may have had the strongest influence on binding separate colonies together, as they increasingly shared words and ideas with each other.


24 James Adams Bear, and Mary Caperton Bear, A Checklist of Virginia Almanacs, 1732-1850 (Charlottesville: Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1962), 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.
almanacs to Williamsburg by 1743. Ten years earlier, however, Philadelphia almanacs listed court dates in Maryland and gave distances of road mileage between cities all the way to Williamsburg. This indicated that at least they were being marketed to a reading audience into the Chesapeake. However, the astronomical observations and weather predictions in an almanac favored locally produced versions.  

The colonial almanac was primarily 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. The philomath, or astronomical and astrological expert, calculated the signs and meteorological information, and in some cases wrote the verse and filler that accompanied this. 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, 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." They usually were about 4 inches wide and 6 inches tall, and were from 20 to 60 pages long. Near the back of the small book, useful information was included, such as court dates and distances between cities. For many, it was one of the few sources of paper to write upon, and "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. Readers 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; probably because they were used so heavily that they ended up in shreds by the end of the year.27

Colonial American almanacs followed the format established in England, which was slowly adapted for the American colonies. The oldest surviving Chesapeake almanac has a typically long title: "The Virginia and Maryland Almanack. Shewing the Time of Sun Rising and Setting, Length of Days, New and Full Moon, Eclipses, Fixt and Moveable Feasts, Seven Stars Rising and Setting, Weather, Days of the several Courts, &c. For the year of our Lord Christ, 1732. Being the Bissextile of Leap-Year, And makes since the Creation ... Calculated for the Latitude of 38 Degrees, and fitted to a Meridian of 75 Degrees West from the Metropolis of Great Britain."28 The second page usually had the only engraved image in the almanac, "The Anatomy of Man's Body," sometimes referred to as the "Zodiac Man." This used symbols to indicate which parts of the body were controlled by which zodiac sign, astrological advice considered useful for both medicine and romance. Next would often come the months, with either one or two pages for each. These often had short verse or prose sprinkled throughout and would include "remarkable days" (holidays), predicted weather, time of sunset and sunrise,

27 Bear, 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.

28 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. While spelling was not yet standardized, eighteenth-century American almanacs were typically called “Almanacks.”
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.  

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.” The entertainment came in short snippets of verse, or in selected prose, usually taken directly from other publications. There was no copyright protection for authors 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. For example, at the top of the January page in the 1742 Virginia Almanack, is the seasonal advice:

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

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


30 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. The original spelling will be retained here, but some punctuation and capitalization, including the custom of writing words in all capitals or often using italics, will be altered without notation.

31 Stowell, Early American Almanacs, 135-141.
While designed to be useful and entertaining, these almanacs also were an inexpensive way of introducing plain folks to the world of letters. These “‘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 white customer could afford an almanac. "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 2,250 and 3,400, and in 1764, between 3,000 and 3,600 copies. Other estimates run as high as 5,000 issues printed each year for a Virginia population of about 130,000 white people, or about one almanac for every 26 white people. All of these estimates ignore the fact that most local almanacs were aimed at a wider


35 The price listed in *Virginia Gazette*, (Hunter, Jan. 30, 1752), 4, advertisement states *Virginia Almanack* price at 7½ pennies retail, 5 shillings per dozen wholesale (or 5 pennies each), William Hunter, *Printing Office Journal* (University of Virginia Libraries, Department of Special Collections) Vol. 1, 1750-1752, lists total almanac sales for 1751 at £70.6.6½. Joseph Royle, and Alexander Purdie, *Printing Office Journal* (University of Virginia Libraries, Department of Special Collections) Vol. 2, 1764-1766, lists £75 total almanac sales for 1764. Constant newspaper ads indicate the printers were often not paid for their work, so actual distribution is likely much higher, when almanacs not paid for are included. See also 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, ed., *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1983).

audience than just one colony. For example, the later Virginia almanacs indicated on
the front cover, “Fitting Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, &c.”\textsuperscript{37} This 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 widely spreading the printed word and the influences of a print
culture far down the economic ladder. While they did reach the poor rural farmer, print
rarely directly influenced the very poorest groups, especially Native Americans and
slaves.

Sprinkled throughout the pages of these almanacs were numerous messages of
social behavior. Short segments of verse and prose essays both subtly and overtly
reinforced proper social conduct. 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 the upper class. 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.”\textsuperscript{38} But this same issue cautioned of the vulnerability
of kings and suggested that they rule carefully with compassion:

\textsuperscript{37} For example, Wreg, \textit{Virginia Almanack}… 1765.

\textsuperscript{38} John Warner, \textit{The Virginia and Maryland Almanack} … 1732 (Williamsburg: William Parks, 1731).
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.\textsuperscript{39}

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.”\textsuperscript{40} The next year’s issue warned against both excessive greed and the risks of paper money; “Man makes false Money; Money makes Men so.”\textsuperscript{41} 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.\textsuperscript{42}

Edging closer to 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 while some lawyers are honest, “But Vermin in the Law Corruptions breed, And on poor Mankind their damn’d Knavery shed.”\textsuperscript{43} Another compares their greed to gluttony: “Lawyers, by endless Controversies, Consume unthinking Clients Purses …”\textsuperscript{44} The

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\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Maryland Almanack … 1762 (Annapolis, Jonas Green, 1761).
\item \textsuperscript{41} 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.
\item \textsuperscript{42} 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).
\item \textsuperscript{43} Virginia Almanack … 1772 (Williamsburg, Purdie & Dixon, 1771).
\item \textsuperscript{44} Virginia Almanack … 1773 (Williamsburg, Purdie & Dixon, 1772).
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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 pure Gold.” The list of historical events and 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,” and 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 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” 93 years ago, that King Charles II “Returned in Peace,” “King James II abdicated,” and “The Pretender's [James Edward Stuart, son of James II] Attempt on Great-Britain” took place 33 years ago. This history was heavily imbedded with political bias supporting the current British Monarchy, with loaded words such as “murder,” “abdicated,” and “Pretender.”

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45 *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.


47 *Maryland Almanack* … 1765 (Jonas Green, 1764).

48 *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.
There were some indications of cultural change in Chesapeake society, as reflected in these almanacs, prior to political unrest leading up to the American Revolution. As early as 1741, one almanac printed verse that suggested the wealthy and the powerful were often greedy:

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

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 the United States, but did not include any of the colonies in the West Indies that did not join the Revolution. Other lines demonstrated deference, at least superficially:

Twixt King and Peasant if no Odds there were,
Why should each Monarch Crown and Scepter bear?
But, if Superiors can Obedience claims,
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.  

While showing deference to royalty, this verse from 1759 hinted at potential friction between the highest and lowest members of society. Another issue humorously demonstrated the weakening of traditional deference for higher social classes. This tale of was of a farmer who failed to yield to the Parson when they met 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

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49 Virginia Almanack ... 1741 (Parks?)
50 Virginia Almanack ... 1759 (Hunter).
taught. Very true, indeed, Sir, replied the Farmer, for you teach me, and I feed myself.\textsuperscript{51}

One 1765 Maryland almanac included some verse that was less than deferential to the highborn. The son asked his mother to stop looking for the blood of nobility in their ancestry, and insisted that, “Virtue only is Nobility.”\textsuperscript{52} Popular print discourse is seen here as attacking the social order of “superiors,” as Warner suggested.\textsuperscript{53} One recently discovered almanac from 1768 contained some remarkable verse, “sent by a young lady of Edinburgh to a Relation with a Present of a Negroe Boy,” that was written from the point of view of the slave:

Doom’d in my Infancy a Slave to roam,
Far, far, from Africk’s Shore, my native Home,
To serve a Caledonian Maid I come.---
In me no Father does his Darling mourn,
No Mother weeps me from her Bosom torn!
Both now are Dust: The filial Tear I owe;
But who they were, alas! I ne’er shall know!
Lady, to Thee her Love my Mistress sends,
And bids Your Grandsons be Fernando’s Friends;
Bids Thee suppose, on Africk’s distant Coast,
One of Thy Lilly-colour’d Fav’rites lost;
Doom’d in the Train of some proud Dame to wait,
To serve as she should Will, for Use or State;
If to the Boy You’d with her to be kind,
Such Grace from Thee let Ferdinando find.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{51}Virginia Almanack … 1764 (Royle).

\textsuperscript{52}Maryland Almanack … 1765 (Green).

\textsuperscript{53}Warner, Letters of the Republic, 48-53.

\textsuperscript{54}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.
While falling short of abolitionist sentiments, this poem was unusual for Virginia of this time as it actually acknowledged a slave as a person with feelings deserving of kind treatment.

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

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

Tucked into the calendar section, this verse went on to suggest that liberty, “Giv’st Beauty to the Sun and Pleasure to the Day.” This was 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 tax in 1765, the income of colonial printers was seriously threatened, and the directly political output of their presses increased. In the


56 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, “Letter from Italy,” (1704).

57 The price of almanacs would have gone up by 2 pence, or twenty-seven percent. British Parliament, The Stamp Act (London: March 22, 1765) See also Edmund Morgan, and Helen Morgan, The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution (1953: rev. Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early
Chesapeake 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. Again, in the midst of a non-importation movement against Britain where colonists encouraged each other to not import goods from England, this had greater meaning. While these lines of protest could be considered political propaganda, it must be recognized that they appeared in the midst of a great deal of more apolitical almanac content.

By the advent of the Revolution, content with an obvious patriot-bias became more prevalent. One 1777 almanac had a list of representatives to the Continental Congress, balanced by mention of British ships in the Americas contesting colonial independence, plus tips for producing ink and sealing wax now difficult to import. Most overtly patriotic in defiance of Britain were the instructions in a 1776 almanac for the making of gunpowder, an act extremely supportive of colonial independence and supportive of revolutionary violence by supplying the local military forces facing shortages. Virginians are beginning to be portrayed here as part of a larger group of colonies, as Anderson suggests, through the aid of common language and shared commerce of print. Almanacs are one of many commodities that help to transform the colonists into a unified group, enabling them to imagine themselves eventually as not

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58 The terms “patriot” and “royalist” are used here to describe the two sides that emerge during the Revolution.

59 Rittenhouse, *Virginia Almanack … 1777* (Williamsburg: Dixon & Hunter, 1776). The fact that partner William Hunter of the printing house, publishing one of two Virginia almanacs of this time, was a royalist and soon left for Britain may have influenced this balance. See Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America, With a Biography of Printers*, 2d ed. (New York: Weathervane, 1940), 555.
British, but American. This 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...” While Chesapeake almanacs did not contain a great deal of overtly political language, political propaganda did appear in small amounts in the Virginia almanacs as the Revolution approached. Unfortunately, there is less remaining evidence of the content of the almanacs from Maryland, so there is no conclusive answer regarding their content.

Another important aspect of the almanacs 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 a rare opportunity to practice handwriting and keep notations. One almanac from 1757, for example, has the name, “Sarah Carlyle,” and the year written neatly on the front page. This reinforces the idea that even women read these almanacs. Many other surviving copies have 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 marks next to other lines, likely expressing whether the owner agreed with what was printed. Wealthier owners sometimes had extra pages bound with the issues, and kept accounts or more complete diaries within

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60 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 64 and 78-80.

61 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.

62 There are no *Maryland Almanacks* from 1766-1777 known to be extant.

63 *Virginia Almanack ... 1758* (Hunter), the original is at the Huntington Library.
their almanacs. In this way, the almanac became more than simply a one-way medium from the writer to the reader. Almanacs actually allowed for creative thinking and input on the part of the reader, even if no one else ever read it. Writing helps create a consciousness of the self as individual, conscious interaction between people, and is overall consciousness-raising. 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 this does not correlate directly with the invention of the printing press, but rather correlates more specifically to the spread of printing and corresponding literacy. 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.

Conclusion

The colonial Virginia and Maryland almanacs contained very little directly political content and the evidence does not support the idea that they were vehicles of political propaganda, or that they strongly trumpeted sedition. On close examination, however, there was some small amount of propagandist content, especially after 1766. Other than a few essays extolling liberty, there was little evidence of radical whig influence in the almanacs still extant. There are no surviving issues of the Maryland Almanack

64 Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (New York: Methuen, 1982), 178-9, notes that while writing can be consciousness-raising, it can also increase division and alienation.

between 1766 and 1778, making that impossible to assess, although the newspaper issued by the same printer was a bit more radical than was the *Virginia Gazette*.66 There was more material with indirectly political content, both reinforcing social conformity and later suggesting more radical attitudes supportive of the patriot cause. Of greater importance was the deeply inherent and implicit transformation caused by the spread of printed material. This enabled and allowed for independent thinking, and opened up the possibility of widespread and deep political dissent. This in turn led to such momentous change as Revolution. Almanacs and the very act of reading are tied to independent thinking in such a way that such material was a very important precedent for political independence. Almanacs were a precursor to political independence—not a sole agent of change—but rather one of many factors enabling such change.

66 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. By 1766, some residents encouraged Rind to move to Williamsburg to start competition in the Virginia press.