A Culture of Dissidence:
The Emergence of Liberty of the Press in Pre-Revolutionary Virginia

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To my father, who taught me that who we are is not decided by what advantages and tragedies are thrown our way, but rather by how we deal with them.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The late Lawrence Levine’s work inspired my theoretical approach, and his teaching inspired my tenacity. As Larry once admonished me, “Don’t let ’em talk you out of it.” I shall not.

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I owe special thanks to my friend, and the best copy editor for whom one could hope, James Cheney Olcott. Errata that slipped through are due to my negligence, ignorance, or intransigence.

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Thank you so much, Carol. I love you.

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

A CULTURE OF DISSIDENCE: THE EMERGENCE OF LIBERTY OF THE PRESS IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY VIRGINIA

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Free press protection in the first state constitutions inspired the similar clause in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. The first free press clause was in Virginia. When independence from Britain was declared, a Declaration of Rights including an article ensuring press freedom prefaced the new state constitution. While most legal and historical works have viewed British philosophers and legal precedents as the inspirations for this right, this dissertation expands our understanding by discovering other less-elite, more popular sources.

This work explores the evolution of the concept of liberty of the press through the newspapers, almanacs, and other printed material from colonial Virginia and the neighboring colony of Maryland. As power struggles transpired among the governors, the legislative assemblies, and the voices in print, a local understanding of the value of civic
discourse developed. A radical Whig distrust of corrupt government combined with concurrent English prosecution of political dissidence presented a stark example in the colonial newspapers of the importance of press freedom. Primary source documents, including colonial newspapers, almanacs, pamphlets, letters, and legal tracts, reveal a popular demand for freedom from both prior governmental restraint and prosecution for seditious libel. The findings of this research contrast starkly with the prevalent legal-historical view.

An interdisciplinary view incorporating mass communication theory helps us to understand a cultural shift partly responsible for this new awareness of the importance of civic discourse in the press. Media ecologists recognize that a new dominant medium—in this case, as printing spread from the colonial elites to the middling sorts—has widespread influence on social institutions and cultural consciousness. A medium such as print does not have independent agency, but is rather one of many influences, helping to erode Virginia’s strong traditional deferential culture. From this transformation emerged a new “culture of dissidence,” in which political discourse and even disagreement was valued. A free press was recognized as an important driver of public opinion, and a potential balance to a powerful—and potentially corrupt—government.
1. Introduction: 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 anywhere else.\(^1\) Although King and nobility were thousands of miles away in England, residents of the colony had a remarkable gradation of “quality.” Deference was a key to behavior, as Devereux Jarratt described in his autobiography. He was born in the early 1730s, the son of an unlearned, rustic, poor farmer in Dinwiddie County, Virginia. 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,

\(^1\) 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 common folks. See introduction by editor Arthur Shaffer in Edmund Randolph, *History of Virginia* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia for The Virginia Historical Society, 1970), xxii.
that, I dare say, I would run off, as for my life.” Jarratt’s behavior was a marked example of deference to his betters, a type of behavior 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. 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

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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. Spelling and punctuation from original sources will be retained, but capitalization of entire words and italicization, common in printed materials, will edited out without notation.
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 … ⁶

From the very beginning, the printer recognized his deference to the local political elite,
and recognized no freedom to abuse the political leaders or to undermine the respect for
authority. Another early edition 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 ... ” ⁷

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

⁶ Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg: William Parks, Aug. 6, 1736), 1. Although this first issue is not
longer 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
paper will follow the example of Lester Capon, and Stella Duff’s Virginia 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.

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 this dissertation refers to as “a culture of dissidence.”

Open and public disagreement with 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. Through education and an immersion in the printed materials of his time, Jarratt learned to read and write. He rose through the social structure. He became one to whom the lower sorts should now defer,

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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 between 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 Massachusetts Press, 1996), 4-5, David Paul Nord, “The Practice of Historical Research,” in Research Methods in Mass Communication, 3rd ed., edited by Guido Stempel, III, David Weaver, and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2003), 368, and Herbert Gutman, Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America (New York; Vintage Book, 1977), 16.
but he noted a distinct lack of deference in the post-Revolution society of the new nation.\textsuperscript{10}

The shift away from deference toward dissidence is evident in a newspaper circulating 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.”\textsuperscript{11} The printer of the \textit{Maryland Gazette} was quite sharply critical of the reigning monarch by lamenting the passing of his predecessor. These seditious comments would not have been printed just a few short years earlier.

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. The culture, society, and printing of Maryland will be an intrinsic part of this study. While the royal governor of Virginia did not allow printing there in the seventeenth-century, the proprietary colony of Maryland was more welcoming. 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.

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Life of Devereux Jarratt}, 14-15, written after the American Revolution.

\textsuperscript{11} Supplement to the \textit{Maryland Gazette} (Annapolis: Jonas Green, Oct. 31, 1765), 1.
at home. The relationship between these two presses will be 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 early recognition of the need for a free press guarantee in Williamsburg.\footnote{Arthur Pierce Middleton, *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 shipping details and lengths of voyages. Jack Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development 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, *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 dissertation, 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. This work focuses on how this influenced content in the prints and led to competition in printing and an appreciation for a press open to dissident ideas.}

This dissertation begins by exploring the cultural transformation that occurred as local printing began and public prints 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 print local versions, the news
truly became more public—more readily available to larger numbers of people. 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, less public groups. The focus here is on these prints, rather than the more completely studied area of “the history of the book.”

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 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. The culture of deference in colonial Virginia had given way to 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

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14 French historians, including Roger Chartier, are credited with beginning this field, histoire du livre, which now has many followers in the United States, including Robert Darnton. Clark, Public Prints, 5, and fn 7, 270.

1776. This dissertation 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. Rather than focus entirely on the philosophy and political ideals of the elite, this research digs more deeply into the more popular prints of newspapers and almanacs, and their influence on and from a wider swath of society. By the very nature of print and the literacy of the group, the approach used here is not overly inclusive of one extreme but large end of society: the very poor whites, the slaves, the native Americans, 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 conclusion 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 concept of a free press that came from these changes is broader than the predominant current theory suggests. The right to a free press that developed included a restriction on
both prior restraint by the government and seditious libel actions after the fact. The printing press did not cause the change, but it was one important element within a complex cultural milieu. This research adds 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—adds 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.

Theoretical Framework

A further exploration of print in the years leading up to the Revolution better explains these changes. Some historians have examined the popular prints, rather than simply books, philosophers, and ideas of the elite, which gives a better sense of the range of changes within that society. Arthur Schlesinger’s Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain explored the interplay between newspapers and the patriots’ propaganda, but focused primarily on New England and middle colonies’ publications. Schlesinger understood the impact of the Stamp Act on printers, but overemphasized their unanimity of opposition. This dissertation adds to his work by focusing on Virginia
and Maryland and by looking beyond the propaganda value of the prints to a transformational quality of print culture.\(^\text{16}\)

In studying culture and thought in a British-American colony, this research is necessarily transatlantic in nature. The newspapers and politics of Virginia owe much to their English roots. Origins of the freedom of the press are typically traced back to Englishmen John Locke and John Milton. Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard's *Letter's to Cato* and other British “radical Whig” writers were extremely influential on the American colonists. Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and Pauline Maier recognized an important influence by these country party or opposition Whigs.\(^\text{17}\) This work builds on their ideas, looking at how the British opposition writers influenced even middling Virginians through the popular press. Maier recognized that the writings and legal travails of libertarian politician John Wilkes and his newspaper the *North Briton* had a great impact in the colonies. Virginians and others saw Wilkes as a torchbearer for liberty

\(^\text{16}\) Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1957). See also Philip Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution: 1763-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941) for the classic look at how print was used for the patriot cause. The terms “patriot” and “royalist” are used here and throughout to describe the two sides that emerged during the Revolution.

in a struggle against a corrupt ministry. Press coverage of him in the colonies is intrinsic to this dissertation. His work as a publisher and his struggles for press liberty are explored in the pages ahead, and a later chapter explores how Wilkes’s experience offered the Chesapeake colonists a practical example of the need for press freedom.

The Virginia Declaration of Rights was an important precedent to the United States’ Bill of Rights in general, and specifically for the free press clause. It was the first constitutional protection for the press, and was echoed in many of the other new state constitutions. While Virginia included free press, but left out free speech, Pennsylvania’s new constitution included both, but free speech and free press have always been used somewhat interchangeably. In fact, all five elements included in the First Amendment—religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition—relate closely. The leading interpretation of the free press clause has been Leonard Levy’s *Emergence of a*

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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. His view is that the free press clause was not intended to prevent after-the-fact prosecution such as for seditious libel. 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. This dissertation 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.

Stephen Botein’s analysis of the craft of printing and the people who worked the presses presents printers not as political ideologues, but rather as “meer mechanics.” With Botein’s assistance, printers can be seen as businessmen caught in a power struggle, attempting to balance their own financial needs with political struggles. His ideas about printers help to formulate the ideas ahead about how the concepts of a free press evolved.

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20 Prior restraint is an action that prohibits communication before it occurs, rather than punishing those responsible after the fact. Paul Siegel, Communication Law in America (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2002), 534.

21 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. Thomas L. Tedford, and Dale A. Herbeck, Freedom of Speech in the United States, 4th ed. (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2001), 7-9.


from a safe business strategy to a more public ideal related to civic discourse. T. H. Breen’s ideas about a “consumer revolution” are also important to the analysis of what happened in Virginia in the 1760s. An increasing market economy led to a commonality that brought together colonists throughout the British-American colonies, a key to the Revolutionary political changes in the period. Extending Breen’s recognition of newspapers as an essential part of new marketing techniques, this research sees consumer growth within the Chesapeake colonies’ prints, sees the newspapers as driving that growth, and sees the consumer demand for public prints as an essential driver of the concept of press freedom.²⁴ Botein and Breen inform this analysis of how 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.²⁵ Benedict Anderson’s focus on print-capitalism made his work, Imagined Communities, important here. The analysis of Virginia supports his


thesis that a common language and shared printed material, especially newspapers, helped Americans to shift their views to see themselves—for the first time—not as British, but as a new nation. The research here builds upon Anderson by looking at ways that the very media and their use, beyond the content, helped to drive that shift.26

An essential part of this dissertation is examination of how newspapers influenced society. Printers and their newspapers were a crucial aspect of eighteenth-century life, however, many historians tend to simply assume the impact of the press, or just assume influence simply because something appears in print. For example, historian 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.”27 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


27 Jeffery Smith, Printers and Press Freedom: The Ideology of Early American Journalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7. Historian Jeffrey Pasley’s extremely useful book, The Tyranny of the Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), on objectivity and the early Republic made a similar assumption. Implicit was his unsubstantiated view of power of the press. For example, he suggested that the press helped Republicans to defeat the Federalists, and concluded that Aaron Burr’s faction would have died without a newspaper, assuming that words in a newspaper helped to win political allegiance, something lacking theoretical or factual support here; he merely defended this idea with contemporary comment.
pointed to the content and assumed effect. In contrast, Botein suggested that historians have tended to overstate the influence of a radical colonial American press. Sociologist 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 medium itself, that had the influence. This dissertation avoids assuming media influence and utilizes perspectives from communication theories to help to assess effects of the Chesapeake region’s print media on individuals and society.

Modern communication theorists have rejected the “magic bullet theory,” or the idea that media such as print have such complete and powerful effects. This outmoded idea has been replaced by various “limited effects models” since 1940. One theory used here is that of the two-step flow of information, which suggests that people do not get information or opinions about politics and other matters directly from media, but rather

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28 Botein, “Meer Mechanics.”


30 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.
indirectly through opinion leaders. Such influential people (perhaps the elites) receive the information from printed media, and in turn spread it further through interpersonal influences, which is ultimately more influential than communication only through a medium such as newspapers. The two-step theory has more recently been renamed the “multi-step flow” to reflect the view that more stages and multiple directions are actually involved. The multi-step framework is useful in demonstrating that media’s impact is usually indirect and limited, and it also helps to explain how newspapers had a broader impact than their actual subscriptions.\(^{31}\)

Another useful concept taken from communication theory is that of a “gatekeeper”—one who controls the flow of information. A censor or even the 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—influenced by government authorities. In a society with only one medium, only one gatekeeper controls the messages transmitted;

such gatekeepers have immense power. This dissertation utilizes these ideas in exploring selection and political slant of the stories in the Virginia Gazette and the Maryland Gazette. Also explored here is the influence from the royal governor on the gatekeeping function, and how competition—providing multiple gatekeepers—broadened available information.

On the transformational characteristics of print culture, this dissertation combines communication theory and integrative approaches for better understanding. In examining black culture in America, cultural historian Lawrence Levine noted differences between oral societies and those that utilized writing, and looked to multidisciplinary research to understand the meaning. He 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 influences as print culture spread beyond the elites to the middling sorts.

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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 a psychological perspective, 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: “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.” It is not a coincidence that scientific thinking did not emerge until after printing spread. Written language 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.34

Anthropologist Jack Goody’s study 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 monicausal 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. 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, he noted, led to accompanying shifts in the power structure of society. Marshall McLuhan extended Innis’s work from 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

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35 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.

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 Elizabeth Eisenstein noted in 1979, while he failed to coherently argue his points, 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 suggested that printing itself had a role in altering human consciousness. This dissertation expands her efforts to a later time and place by examining political change following more widespread distribution of popular prints.

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

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38 Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent Of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), xi-xiii, 41, and 226. Eisenstein also explored later periods, and noted the relationship between printing and revolution in “On Revolution and the Printed Word” in *Revolution in History* eds. Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 186-205. The word “revolution” needs more definition, she noted, to determine whether or not printing is revolutionary. Eisenstein raised several questions here about the subversive nature of print, and noted it cannot be completely controlled.
“consciousness-raising,” Ong suggests, and while it introduces division 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.\textsuperscript{39}

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.”\textsuperscript{40} Readers expand themselves and can alienate themselves from traditional society. The very process of what westerners describe as logical, or abstract thought, 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.”

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 theorist Jürgen Habermas, anthropologist Goody, among 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. While media ecology is more generally applied to modern, electronic media and seldom used by historians, it adds a unique perspective exploration of the colonial press. The ensuing chapters apply understanding of print media and their relationship to human culture to help better explain the changes in the Chesapeake area colonies that prefaced independence. This dissertation fills some of a gap in past research. With few exceptions,

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41 Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 157.

social theorists ignored the transformation characteristics of media until the television age was well under way. 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.

Media ecologists look at Habermas as someone who fits within their category, although some 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

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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 civic discourse. Habermas focused on such discourse within physical settings such as salons, coffeehouses, and reading societies, while noting specifically that this was a reading public. This dissertation will generally focus on the print medium itself as an actual forum for civic discourse, rather than perceiving it as merely something that spurs discourse within the actual physical spaces of taverns and coffeehouses that host interpersonal discourse. 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’s “transformation.” It is worth noting that while Habermas did not place his public sphere in colonial America, many historians have largely ignored that. The idea of public discourse, driven by print media, is important to changes in the period and to this work.45

Michael Warner creatively adapted Habermas’s 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.

45 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).
just as it changes the political environment. Warner’s observations and ideas about the role of print within the transformation of public discourse in the eighteenth-century colonies are a crucial element within the following pages. While he sees 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.46

Warner looked critically at 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 defines as the fundamental premise of this approach; that technology exists before and not dependent on the very culture it is changing.47 Eisenstein, however, recognized that any historical change is contingent on multiple factors, with interplay


47 Ibid., 5-9.
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. 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 the 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 than that. 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.

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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—writing, or printing. As Eisenstein wrote, while a new medium such as print has a cataclysmic influence on a wide range of human movements; including literature, politics, government, economics, religion, and philosophy, the influence of the medium itself often goes unnoted 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.\(^{49}\)

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 the Internet, as well as 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 media, not just in the words sent to others. Sorting out just how that changes us is
more difficult to determine, however. 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.

This dissertation explains some transformations by utilizing ideas from diverse
fields to explore changes initiated not only by the content of the medium, but also by the
very medium of print itself. The chapters ahead tie the emergence of the concept of
freedom of the press with the increasing influence of a print culture in Virginia. While
reading, writing, and printing were not new in 1776, they had spread a great deal in the
previous four decades, influencing ever larger numbers of people, further down the social
scale. It is this popular influence of print culture and its influence on individual thought,
culture, and society from which this dissertation’s conclusions emerge.

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, their wider circulation, and that fact that
print made older works and the knowledge they incorporated more readily available
permitted revolutionary advancements in ideas.\textsuperscript{50} 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.”\textsuperscript{51} As historian Jack Censer cautions, press is a necessary precipitant for revolution, but not sufficient in and of itself.\textsuperscript{52} In this work, print is found to be a crucial \textit{enabling} factor, rather than the \textit{sole} agent of change.

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This dissertation identifies a change of culture in eighteenth-century Virginia, from one of social deference to one of political dissidence. The conclusion is that the transformation was closely related to the spread of printing in the colony. The chapters ahead detail the delayed and rough beginning of printing in Virginia, up until 1776. The second chapter explores how printing evolved from 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

\textsuperscript{50} Eisenstein, \textit{Printing Press as an Agent of Change}, 269–270, 703–704.


Chapter four examines almanacs, the yearly booklet that probably spread to the widest audience, and reveals how they were a tool for revolutionary change by helping non-elites to think and act independently. The next section looks at the role of women and print, noting that they were more involved as readers, writers, and even as printers than has generally been recognized. Following that, the Stamp Act and other local controversies that led to open political disagreement within the newspapers are explored, showing how deference gradually gave way to dissidence, and that the public prints became a valued forum for political dissent.

Competition is seen coming to the printing business in Virginia, transforming the meaning of print, making it highly valued as a forum for civic discourse. 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. The Epilogue returns us to the simple farmer’s son who became a respected member of the elite, and uses Devereux Jarratt’s example to help to explain how deference had eroded and dissidence increased. Building on the evidence presented along the way, it theorizes that while other cultural changes were also needed to set the stage for print to grow and flourish, print played a 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, comes 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 Virginia’s Declaration of Rights was influential on other states’ constitutions and directly to 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 thesis here has implications beyond its specific conclusions. The constitutional right to press freedom emerged out of a struggle for the liberty of political dissent. Such a culture of dissidence emerged 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 much about history of the Chesapeake colonies. It reveals the important role of the medium of print as a cultural influence. In addition, this research
has a greater significance in three broader ways. First, its show 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 several hundred 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.
2. Print Culture in the Early Chesapeake

Seventeenth-century Virginia had a limited print culture that expanded and changed over time. While printed material traveled with the first English settlers, it was primarily an elite phenomenon. The printed materials brought to the new colony belonged to the few wealthy enough to afford them, the same few who were also members of the ruling elite. Lesser sorts were limited to 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. After 1730, the printing press did gain a firm foothold in Virginia. Print culture changed 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 dependant 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. 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.¹ 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

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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. New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland all had working presses before printing was successfully established in Virginia.  

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. They lost approximately six out of every seven people in the first two decades. The ocean voyage to Virginia lasted six to eight weeks in overcrowded conditions. Once on land, the early settlers did not have enough food and the marshy, unsanitary Jamestown settlement bred disease. 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.  

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colonists were told to take to Virginia did not include any books, not even Bibles. 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 *Ursinaes Catechisme* to the colony. 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 only some 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. All printed 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 was the way he wanted it to remain:

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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 in England that the colony had a shortage of  

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8 Governor Sir William Berkeley responded to, “Enquiries to the Governor of Virginia,” submitted by the Lords Commissioners of Trade and Plantations in London, from “Inquisitions, &c. 1665 to 1676,” 239, quoted in William Hening, _The Statutes At Large; Being A Collection Of All The Laws Of Virginia, From The First Session Of The Legislature In The Year 1619_ (New York: Printed for the editor, 1819-23. Facsimile reprint, Charlottesville: Published for the Jamestown Foundation of the Commonwealth of Virginia by the University Press of Virginia, 1969), 2:511-517.  

Bibles. Some owners had only a Bible and perhaps a book of prayer, and there were a few large, personal libraries among the planters and other learned elites. A few rare collections included legal books, medical books, and other utilitarian titles. Newspapers and bound periodicals from England were also found in the collections of those with the largest libraries. Discourse on many topics—from literary to professional to political—was likely to be encouraged among the few who read regularly and broadly. As Warner suggests, print culture is an important element of such public discourse, in which literary and religious discourse may have prefaced political discourse. In early Virginia, such discourse was normally limited to the elites.  

The spread of printed works and the ability to read had brought revolutionary changes to England, including emigration to the new world. 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.  

By the seventeenth century, men and women of all  

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11 Of course, Gutenberg did not invent printing per se. He invented a printing press with interchangeable metal type around 1450. Printing had existed for centuries in Korea and China. T. F. Carter, “Paper and Block Printing—From China to Europe,” 83-94, and Walter Ong, “Print, Space, and Closure,” 102-113, in David Crowley, and Paul Heyer, eds., Communication in History: Technology,
economic strata in England—not just the elites—were known to read. The printing press has been described as “an agent of change,” which 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. Virginia Governor Berkeley was not alone in believing that learning and books bring about heresy and disobedience to authority.

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14 Bridenbaugh, Jamestown, and Greene, Pursuits of Happiness, 6-9.
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. A press did not flourish in England’s first American settlement until the eighteenth century. 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 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 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 seen as a troubled beginning for freedom of the press in Virginia, it should also be viewed in the context of the times. 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.

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. Early decrees by the Star Chamber forbade publishing of domestic news and restricted the number and geographic dispersal of presses. In alliance with the King, and later with Parliament, the stationers kept printing in London, under the watchful eye of

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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. While that act was allowed to expire in 1695, it was not a clear move toward freedom of the press. Such heavy restrictions on printing had become much too bulky and commercial interests required less burden if they were to compete with freer presses on the European continent. 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 to control dissent by the opposition. In 1712, an English Stamp Act helped restrict the spread of newspapers by raising the cost.

19 Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 150.

Understanding Virginia at the beginning of the eighteenth century requires an acquaintance with significant changes in the colony’s print culture. These changes can best be understood in comparison with its neighbor, 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 to Great Britain rather than with the other colonies.²² Both colonies were agrarian societies with no large urban centers, so trade was limited.²³ 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 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.24

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.25 The former servants sometimes started their own farm in the Virginia backcountry or in


25 Taylor, American Colonies, 119–152.
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 that helped to consolidate the hierarchical social structure. In 1730, the population of Virginia 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.

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26 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.

The political structure of Virginia reflected the highly deferential society in the early eighteenth century. 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, and was typical in all of Britain, including the North American British colonies. Of all the colonies, however, the society of Virginia is 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. That elite politicians running for Virginia’s House of Burgesses between 1728 and 1755 had little if any competition, demonstrates this idea of political deference. Especially in the Tidewater region, common people deferred to their elite leaders’ superiority, and these


leaders returned that trust by recognizing the merits 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, 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 thought of as the result of just that sort of popular uprising, but

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34 Carl Bridenbaugh, *Myths and Realities; Societies of the Colonial South* (Baton Rouge; Louisiana State University Press, 1952), 14-50.
in reality, it did not have an opportunity to become a popular 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 Wilcomb Washburn noted, it was not a popular rebellion, but rather an elite-led conflict based on Indian hatred and fear. While Governor Berkeley tried to keep peace with the Indians, frontiersmen feared them and wanted war. The well-bred Nathaniel Bacon, the governor’s cousin by marriage, rallied popular support for his attacks on the Native Americans, and against the governor himself. 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. Bacon’s rebellion shows how 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 and aristocracy, as they came mostly from merchant or farmer classes. Without the clear distinctions of social class as there were

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35Rutman, and Rutman, Place In Time, 86. Wilcomb E. Washburn, in 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). See also Bridenbaugh, Jamestown, 89-103.
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. 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.\textsuperscript{36}

Print Culture Broadens

The histories of printing in the 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 the printer who was kicked out of its southern neighbor. As historian of print, Douglas McMurtrie noted, “Maryland was, as always, the haven for the distressed Virginian.”\textsuperscript{37} 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

\textsuperscript{36}Taylor, \textit{American Colonies}, 139-140. See also Bridenbaugh, \textit{Jamestown}, 89-103.

\textsuperscript{37}McMurtrie, \textit{Printing United States}, 100.
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 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 simply handwritten proclamation, thus showing more sophistication. A printed document embodied the concept of political legitimacy. 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. Nuthead’s wife Dinah took over the press for a short time after William’s death, moving to Annapolis with the shift of the state capital’s location. There

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

39 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* 217, 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].
was for a short time 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.\textsuperscript{40}

Several developments in the 1720s opened up the colony of Maryland to the use of print media in 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 them 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. The English Parliament did not yet allow reporting of its debates, so the 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

\textsuperscript{40} McMurtrie, \textit{Printing United States}, 100-104.
permission.\textsuperscript{41} 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 \textit{Maryland Gazette}, the first newspaper south of Philadelphia in the English colonies. It was discontinued for several years, but then began again in 1732.\textsuperscript{42} 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.\textsuperscript{43} While innocuous when compared to later rebellious political tracts, this pamphlet marked a move toward public discussion of political matters, removing it from the exclusive control of the political elite. As Warner notes, the earlier view was that public debate was a failure of public affairs. Maintaining proper deference to political leaders meant that one was subject to their rulings, not party to any discussion of them. Before 1720, overtly

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 110.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 104-114.
\item \textsuperscript{43} \textit{A Letter from a Freeholder, to a Member of the Lower-House of Assembly, of the Province of Maryland} (Annapolis: Parks, 1727), 4.
\end{itemize}
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.44

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 moved his entire shop to an office on Duke of Gloucester Street in Williamsburg, giving up his Maryland business. That colony got a new printer, Jonas Green, in 1738. 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. He combined the printing business with a bookbindery, a bookstore, and the post office.45

44 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.

45 McMurtrie, Printing United States, 276-306. McMurtrie, Beginnings of Printing in Virginia, 15-21, Lawrence Wroth, A History of Printing in Colonial Maryland, 1686-1766 (Baltimore: Typothetae of Baltimore, 1922), 55-87. Journals of the House of Burgesses (June 10, 1732), 6:141-2. The salary had to be voted on by the burgesses but also approved by the governor and the council. Parks’s raise is in Journals (June 16, 1740), 6:432.
A printing house was a major investment for colonial America. Although printing began as a government-sponsored and government-controlled operation, it became more of a commercial business as time passed. Without a large, urban, commercial business center, printing in a colony such as Virginia initially required government support. 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 his death, Parks’s shop sold for £288 sterling, or £313 local currency, and it was apparently a large, well-equipped shop.46

Printing was a labor-intensive task, with a press little changed since Gutenberg’s invention. 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.47 The printing press is 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

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47 Wroth, Colonial Printer, 69-80.
repeatable as a scientific experiment.” The press made books and other printed material, “the first modern-style, mass-produced, industrial commodity.” The book and the spread of printing were closely tied to mercantile capitalism and the consumer revolution. 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 was expensive and had to be imported from Europe, with little change in cost or availability during this colonial period. Paper, which could only be made from linen rags, was a key but expensive part of the process. The quality paper needed for books and other finer printing had to be imported from Britain or Holland. Newspapers and lower quality pamphlets and almanacs were printed on lesser 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 Benjamin

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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 Person 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.51

Determining just who could read several centuries ago is problematic. Some efforts have been made to determine who could sign their name 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 suggests, “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

51 Wroth, Colonial Printer, 89-133. Details of this paper mill are sketchy, but Parks sold paper to Franklin as early as 1744, Parks’s 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). Ink could be made locally from lampblack, the sooty resin from burning carbon products, and linseed oil, a dangerous and messy operation. This technology and its cost did not have any major changes during this period.
only scarce, it tells us only about learning to write rather than learning to read—let alone learning by reading.”\(^{52}\) 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.\(^{53}\) The typical measurement 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.\(^{54}\)

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.\(^{55}\) Literacy in the Chesapeake colonies is estimated to have been somewhat lower than both England and New England.\(^{56}\) One study of records

\(^{52}\) Eisenstein, *Printing Press as an Agent Of Change*, 414.

\(^{53}\) David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book: Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 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 problematic. (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.

\(^{54}\) See later in this dissertation, pp. 165-167, on women and literacy specifically.


puts men’s literacy at about 65 percent and women’s about 30 percent in the latter half of
the seventeenth century, while another suggests the rate is 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 while 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 exactly.\(^ {57}\)

An increase in reading ability is also seen in numbers of books. 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.\(^ {58}\)

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 of this.
Learning to read was difficult, but could be accomplished by a poor, yet enterprising

\(^{57}\) The higher numbers come from Darrett and Anita Rutman, *A Place in Time Explicitus*, (New
York: Norton, 1984), 165-170. The lower numbers are from Philip Alexander Bruce, *Institutional History
of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Putnam, 1910), 1: 450-459, quoted in Rawson,
“Contextual History of Print Culture in Virginia Society,” 54. He has perhaps the best analysis of Virginia
literacy, but the more concrete numbers come after the Revolution.

\(^{58}\) Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South*
individual. He attended some neighborhood schools from age 8 or 9 until he was 12. 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.\(^5\) 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 mid-to-later eighteenth century.\(^6\) The increase in printing, literacy, and available reading materials indicates a cultural shift, which may also be seen as blurring the social hierarchy. Our extremely deferential young boy who ran away from bewigged gentlemen had now—due to education—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 printed mostly government publications, religious works, and an occasional pamphlet. The official printing 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, they 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.⁶¹

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,

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⁶¹ 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 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.
and then they were distributed in manuscript form with limited circulation. These handwritten copies of the law were the responsibility of the clerk of the assembly, who sent them to every county, but they often had differences, missing statutes, and errors. Printed material had a greater sense of political legitimacy than did simply written 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 encouraging printing 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.

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63 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. 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. 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

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66 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.”
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* was printed following each session and was now more easily accessible.67

Printing the laws, Eisenstein has 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.68 Thomas Jefferson was well-aware of the preservative properties of print. In researching the laws of Virginia, he discovered that many 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?”69

67 A Collection of All the Acts of Assembly, Now in Force, in the Colony of Virginia [1661-1732] ... (Williamsburg: Parks, 1733). Berg, *Williamsburg Imprints*, 3-7. The *Journals* apparently were not regularly kept, until an order in 1679/80 by the Committee of the Privy Council for Trade and Foreign Plantations requiring the Clerk of the Assembly to keep such, make copies, and send one back to England. This was perhaps because in 1677, when Bacon’s Rebellion was being investigated, the clerk refused to send the journals. From *Journals of the House of Burgesses*, 2: xxi.


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. The first printed edition of Virginia laws had a simple index, although it was not called that. When finally compiled and printed locally, the laws had a complex index that included a catalog designed to help the reader use the subsequent “A Table to the Laws of Virginia,” which was the actual index. While a bit complex, this actually allowed 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 only what they needed to know. Prior to indexing, one would be forced to read through all of the laws. The emphasis shifted from

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70 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, 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, Gutenberg Galaxy, 1-15.

71 Lawes of Virginia (London, 1662).
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 changes in the laws. Thinking about them became more literal and more similar to what we consider logical today, and discussion about such laws could involve greater numbers of people.  

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

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72 Eisenstein, *Printing Revolution*, 69-82. See also Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, for writing and printing changing the logic of thought, and the new linearity of thinking.

73 Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics’ and an Open Press: the Business and Political Strategies of Colonial American Printers,” in *Perspectives in American History*, Vol. IX. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 166, observes “that were not necessarily seditious, and indeed could even serve to enhance the authority of local government.”

74 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 governor acting as governor.
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.75

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.76

As printing had obvious implications for making the government more visible to the public, more complex, longer-term shifts of power are also involved. As economic

75 Typographia, (Williamsburg: Parks, 1730). J. Markland is identified as John Markland by several sources; see Susan Stromei Berg, compiler, Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg Imprints (New York: Clearwater Publishing Company, 1986), 1-3. “Whilome” presumably is an alternative spelling for “whilom,” now an archaic word meaning “having once been” or “one-time.”

76 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 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, having different errors.
historian Harold Innis noted, changes in media effected 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.”

Oral-based laws were adaptable to gradual change, 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 had a positive influence on 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 medium, such as clay tablets versus parchment, versus paper, led to varying emphasis on time and space, and led to changes in political administration. 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,

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decreased the authority of the written word, emphasized authority of the printed word, and undermined church control. Any new medium influences and changes the monopoly of power.\textsuperscript{78} 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{79}

In addition to the laws, Parks printed other material that helped to spur public discourse. The burgesses would occasionally order a sermon printed and other religious works, devotionals, and prayer books were also published. 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} … in 1734 by Virginia author John Tennent.\textsuperscript{80} 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

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 7, 143-167.

\textsuperscript{79} Jack 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), sees this power shift, but does not recognize how print itself contributed to it.

\textsuperscript{80} Berg, \textit{Williamsburg Imprints}, preface to 40.
in a solution made of boiled sassafras and dogwood root.\textsuperscript{81} 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 he published a \textit{Virginia Almanack} for 1741.\textsuperscript{82} Parks began printing the weekly newspaper, the \textit{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.\textsuperscript{83}

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,\textsuperscript{84} the burgesses demanded the council allow House members to examine the


\textsuperscript{82} James Adam Bear, and Mary Caperton Bear, \textit{A Checklist of Virginia Almanacs, 1732-1850} (Charlottesville: Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1962), and Berg, \textit{Williamsburg Imprints}, 1-26, have the most complete list of almanacs and imprints in general for Virginia. Only one copy of John Warner’s, \textit{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 be printed in Williamsburg. Park’s \textit{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’s 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.

\textsuperscript{83} McMurtrie, \textit{Printing United States}, 284.

\textsuperscript{84} 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.
Journals of the Council to determine how they had proceeded on the division of two counties, Orange and Goochland. 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.” The burgesses angrily responded:

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 he Privileges of this House, and tends to interrupt that Union and Harmony which ought ever to subsist between every Branch of the Legislature.

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 newspaper. What Parks’s

85 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, (Chapel Hill: Published for the Virginia Historical Society by the University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 2:411-413.


87 Ibid., 2:337.
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 unparrarel’d Severity.” At that, the House of Burgesses
brought Parks in custody before them, to answer “for printing and publishing in the 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{88} 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, 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{89} 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. While the burgesses voted on his

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid. (March 14, 1748/9-May 11, 1749), 10: 290, 291, 335-337, 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, 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{89} Richard I. Morton, (Chapel Hill: Published for the Virginia Historical Society by the University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 2:411-3
pay, the governor and council also had to sign off on 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, shows 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

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90 Printing Office Journals, Berg, “Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg Press,” 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 for 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.
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 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’s employee William Hunter took over the printing business in 1750. [See Appendix A 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,

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except for the newspaper and almanacs.\textsuperscript{93} 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, approved by the Governor’s Council, and then signed by the governor himself.\textsuperscript{94} 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 Royle was caught 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{95} While the British authorities eventually

\textsuperscript{93} 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, \textit{Printing Office Journal} (University of Virginia Libraries, Department of Special Collections. Vol. 1, 1750-1752) and Joseph Royle, and Alexander Purdie’s \textit{Printing Office Journal} (University of Virginia Libraries, Department of Special Collections. Vol. 2, 1764-1766). These were a major source for Berg, \textit{Williamsburg Imprints}, and a subsequent Susan Stromei 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).

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia}, 10: 11, 22, 38, 158-9, 164-6, and 221.
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.\(^96\)

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 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

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\(^95\) The pay of Virginia minister’s 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.

\(^96\) 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.
border. In the appendix to his pamphlet, Camm argued that Royle refused 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.

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. As Stephen Botein noted, colonial printers managed to stay in business by remaining as neutral as possible, and were rarely critical of the

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government in power. 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 letters evolved during this time from one of privacy to “a technology of publicity” which is civic and emancipatory. Print discourse 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 that of one paid for and responsible to the government, to 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

99 Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics’,” 172-173.

100 *Letter from a Freeholder* (1727), 4.


102 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.
involvement by more people representing wider distribution, beyond simply the planter and ruler elite. While Jürgen Habermas theorized a “public sphere” as evolving in England and Germany in the eighteenth century, 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 seen questioning and even attacking each other in the public prints, making decision-making for the colony 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.

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 a system of transmission; it is also an environment within which we live. Many things in the complex of social and cultural conditions 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 oral 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 continued to be important elements of overall communication. Such a
transition to a culture dominated by print is of course not the sole cause of such changes,
but rather one agent of change among many. 103

In Virginia, then, the small elite that 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 Parsons' Cause and could influence an increasingly
important public opinion. 104 Such participation in what 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 and popular
prints, more driven by merchandising. 105 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

103 For example, see Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of
News: Thoughts on the Newspaper as Environment,” edited by Margot Hardenbergh, (paper presented at
the Third Annual Convention of the Media Ecology Association, Marymount Manhattan College, June

104 Landsman, Colonials to Provincial, 30-37.

105 Amory, and Hall, Colonial Book. 10-11.
decades, these developments would provide the basis for the emergence of a new commitment to liberty of the press.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{106} Hannah Barker wrote of the increasing importance of public opinion in England and its interrelationship with newspapers, in “England, 1760-1815” in Press, Politics and the Public Sphere in Europe and North America, 1760-1820, edited by Barker, and Simon Burrows (Cambridge, U.K; Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11-16. She also suggests that the public sphere was in fact much broader than simply bourgeois.
3. Chesapeake Newspapers and Expanding Civic Discourse, 1728-1765

Newspapers were an important driver of discourse in eighteenth-century Virginia. 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. Royal control over the 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 appears 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 newspapers between the first issue in 1736 and those of the next thirty years. These changes both reflect transformations within the society, and also indicate how the newspapers influenced an evolving social and political atmosphere. Civic discourse began to expand, with a wider group of participants both geographically and demographically. Change is apparent in the sources and characteristics of the stories, as the ties between colonies visibly strengthened, and the
close ties to England weakened. The deferential style that predominated in early Virginia gave way as dissenting opinions became much more common—first in religion, later with politics. By the early 1760s, the key concept of liberty of the press had evolved and developed to the extent that one government-controlled press would no longer suffice. Careful analysis demonstrates how the public prints themselves began to set the stage for such changes.

Early Newspaper Form

Critical to the colonial printers’ financial viability, newspapers were considered a vital tool for political propagandists of the American Revolution and were an important means of spreading print culture and political discourse to a wider range of people. Despite that, colonial newspapers are poorly understood. 1 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

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different. There were 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 printer appeared to design 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. Important news often appeared at the end of the story, rather than at the beginning. No headlines existed. The stories began with a dateline; a city and a date that typically noted where the news had arrived from 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.

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2 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. Other historians to follow do get it right.


4 William F. Steirer, “Riding ‘Everyman’s Hobby Horse’: Journalists in Philadelphia, 1764-1794,” in Donovan Bond, and W. Reynolds McLeod, ed., Newsletters to Newspapers: Eighteenth-Century Journalism, Papers Presented at A Bicentennial Symposium at West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia March 31-April 2, 1976 (Morgantown, WV: School of Journalism, 1977), 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 it was sent to Williamsburg via London. Each early newspaper had a date range, such as Dec. 3-Dec. 10. This dissertation will follow the example of Lester Capon, and Stella Duff’s Virginia 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.
The *Virginia Gazette* claimed to contain “the freshest Advices, Foreign and Domestick,” but the news was far from fresh, the stories focused on Europe rather than local or colonial news, and the audience was elite. This character of the Chesapeake area newspapers changed over time, a development that tells much about both the way the larger society was changing and the role of the public prints as part of that transition. Understanding the significance of these changes requires an understanding of the newspapers.

The earliest Chesapeake printers modeled their newspapers after their English predecessors. The British prints were the major sources for the colonial newspapers, which focused on European news. The 1728 issue of the *Maryland Gazette*—the oldest Chesapeake region newspaper still known to be in existence—began with a short 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

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5 *Virginia Gazette* (Parks, Sept. 10, 1736), 1.
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. 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 10 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

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6 *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis: William Parks, Dec. 10, 1728). The segment of verse is a translation by John Dryden from Juvenus. The essay is from “The Plain-Dealer,” a regular, pseudonymous contributor. Each early newspaper had a date range, such as Dec. 3–Dec. 10.

7 *Virginia Gazette*, (Williamsburg: William 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.
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.  

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 was not even mentioned. As are newspapers today, this one was designed to both entertain and enlighten, with serious news and trivial diversions. Parks mentioned “correspondents,” or letter writers who would send material from all over, but 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 start, with the expectation of active participation through writing as well as reading, the printer made it clear that his print was a vehicle for public discourse. He planned much more of a two-way medium than do today’s publishers; he expected a great deal of reader involvement and contributions.

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

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8 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.

9 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), Douglas C. McMurtrie, A History Of Printing in The United States; The Story Of The Introduction Of The Press And Of Its History And Influence During The Pioneer Period In Each State Of The Union (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1936), 111.
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.\textsuperscript{10} 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.\textsuperscript{11}

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 \textit{London Gazette}, the \textit{Daily Gazetteer}, the \textit{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. By 1776, there were four \textit{Virginia Gazettes} being published, one

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Parks, Jan. 20, 1738), 1.

\textsuperscript{11} John M. Hemphill, II, in “The Origin, Development, and Influence of the Virginia Gazette, 1736-1780” (research files, Virginia Gazette folder, Rockefeller Library, Colonial Williamsburg, no date given), suggests that local news spread more efficiently by word of mouth thus did not need to be reprinted.
in Norfolk, and three in Williamsburg. Official government announcements often needed publishing in the “Gazette,” so choosing the name may have been an important business decision. Richard Steele edited the *London Gazette* in 1707, going on to found *The Spectator* with Joseph Addison in 1711. Their writing in general and *The Spectator* specifically were very influential in the American colonies by the 1760s. They created a new literary style and focused less on political and more on social behavior. 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.

Literary essays in the public prints were a key to driving the early public discourse in the Chesapeake. In their early decades, these two newspapers 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

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newspaper tradition, especially the essay form pioneered by Addison.\textsuperscript{15} In early issues of the \textit{Maryland Gazette}, 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.”\textsuperscript{16} The Annapolis paper also ran a poem praising Virginia Governor Alexander Spotswood’s 1716 exploration across the Alleghany Mountains:

\begin{quote}
This Expedition was design’d to trace  
A Way to some yet undiscover’d Place ;  
And barbar’ous savage Nations to subdue,  
Which neither antient Greece or Rome e’re knew ;  
Or else Virginia’s Borders to secure  
And fix the Bound of his deputed Power …\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

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.\textsuperscript{18} It certainly demonstrated

\begin{flushright}

\textsuperscript{16} The Plain-Dealer [pseudo.], “No. 5,” \textit{Maryland Gazette}, (Parks, Dec. 17, 1728), 1-2. Cook considers this essay to display the author’s “Deistic” tendencies, in \textit{Literary Influences}, 159-160.

\textsuperscript{17} [Arthur] Blackamore, “Expeditio Ultramontana,” trans. George Seagood, \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{18} Richard Brown, \textit{Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865}, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 62, suggests that the newspapers supplied a needed outlet for the literary efforts of the Tidewater elite.
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.19

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 …”20 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 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

19 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.

20 Virginia Gazette (Oct. 1, 1736), 1.
eventually led to more public monitoring of state authority. In examining the British-
American colonies, Michael Warner did see a public sphere developing and radically
altering to eventually become one that 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. However, we do see a local literature and discourse about 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.\footnote{Copeland, \textit{Colonial American Newspapers}, 16.} As Habermas suggested, 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 the literary sphere in
the Chesapeake colonies, predating religious and political discourse.\footnote{Habermas, \textit{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
the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America} (Cambridge, MA:
Harvard University Press, 1990).}

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. 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. As Warner suggested, such pseudonymous writing removed the character of the author from consideration by the reader. What Warner referred to as the “principal 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

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wider range of people. Warner claimed this larger “sphere” did not include women, those lacking property, or slaves.\textsuperscript{25}

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 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{26} 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


\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Sept. 10, 1736), 1.
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 the 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.27

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 chronological order, 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. This structure makes

27 Virginia Gazette (Dec. 19, 1745), 1-4. Copeland, Colonial American 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.
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 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 …” 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

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eight months old. More typically, news from Europe was from between three months and six months old.\footnote{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 Arthur Pierce Middleton, *Tobacco Coast: A Maritime History of Chesapeake Bay in the Colonial Era* (Newport News: The Mariners’ Museum, 1953), 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.}

Most news had to come from England, as the colonial postal service was not well developed. This pattern contributed toward determining the European character of information in the public prints. The post was an extremely important means of colonial communication, not only for content within the newspapers, but also for more private, personal communication. Newspapers were sent by the same methods, 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.\footnote{Francis Moryson, Francis, 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), 52. This act was apparently repealed in 1705, *A Collection of All the Acts of Assembly, Now in Force, in the Colony of Virginia [1661-1732] ...* (Williamsburg: Parks, 1733), ch. 53.}

There were no direct postal deliveries from the other colonies. Early attempts to set up inter-colonial service stopped north of Maryland. By 1695, the mails extended as far south as the Potomac River, but regular mail service from the northern colonies still did not extend into 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{31} 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 it 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 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 ties back to London. Not until 1737 was the first postal service established to connect the Northern colonies with Virginia.\textsuperscript{32}

Advertising was the one consistently local portion of the newspaper. This was an important economic driver that later influenced discourse. Parks’ \textit{Maryland Gazette} typically had one-quarter to one full page of advertisements, on the last page out of four. The cost was “Three Shillings for the first Week, and Two Shillings for every Week

\footnote{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.}

after.” There was often land for sale, homes 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.” 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 Negro 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 . . . Whoever will secure the above Negro . . . shall be paid Twenty Shillings.” Advertisements for runaway slaves were one of the most common sights in these Chesapeake newspapers. The Virginia Gazette carried similar ads, for the same price, but while the Williamsburg paper rarely carried notices from Maryland, the Annapolis newspaper often carried advertisements for Northern Virginia. There were notices for Fairfax County properties and home sales in Alexandria. George Washington and George William Fairfax solicited

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33 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.

34 Ibid.
for a builder for a new church in Truro Parish. As T. H. Breen has written, newspaper marketing was an important part of an emerging sphere of the consumer-based economy, one that prefaced later political discourse based on perceived threats to that consumption.

One early 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 the *Philadelphia 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

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35 For example, see the notice on runaway servants from Belhaven (Alexandria), VA in *Maryland Gazette* (Oct. 24, 1754), 4, house sale advertisements for Alexandria (Feb. 2, Feb. 23, 1764, Oct. 2, 1764), 4, the church builder ad (May 17, 1764, and Oct. 24, 1765), 4.

requested the arms or the money returned to the Speaker.\footnote{Virginia Gazette (Nov. 5, 1736), 2-3, See also Hemphill, “Influence of the Virginia Gazette,” 4-6.} It was unusual that this would appear at all in the public prints, as such arguments between elite members of the political leadership rarely were printed. However, this did not even end the dispute. It continued in several Virginia Gazettes just two months later, 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.”\footnote{Alexander Spotswood, letter to printer William Parks, 1736. Washburn Autograph Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Virginia Gazette (Dec. 17, 1736), 1-3. Ibid. (Dec. 24, 1736), 1-3.} Such an answer would seem to indicate former governor Spotswood’s belief that the House of Burgesses controlled the printer and what he could publish.\footnote{Jack Greene, in 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), 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’: Political Culture, Social Change, and the Origins of the American Revolution in Virginia, 1762-1766,” in Jeffrey J. Crow, and Larry E. Tise, ed. The Southern Experience in the American Revolution (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 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).} 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 control over 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.\textsuperscript{40} 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 remained between the members of the ruling elite, never actually opening up to broad public participation, it was remarkable for the early public airing of a political dispute. It demonstrated just how important the newspaper was—even in the earliest years—as a medium for political discourse.

While circulation of the early Chesapeake-area gazettes was likely to be low, they had an influence that apparently went well beyond actual numbers. Parks wrote in an early \textit{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 …”\textsuperscript{41} There are no solid records on numbers printed or total readership, something extremely difficult to calculate even today. The papers were apparently popular enough to be intercepted, often not being delivered to the proper customer. Issues as far back as a 1729 \textit{Maryland Gazette} noted the problem and

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Parks, April 22, 1737).

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Parks, Oct. 8, 1736), 1.
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.\(^4^2\) 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.\(^4^3\) Gazettes were typically posted to be read at the printer’s office. 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 revolution in early American communications, 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 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.\(^4^4\) 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.


\(^{43}\) *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.

\(^{44}\) Brown, *Knowledge is Power*, 18 and 62.
Changes: Discourse Increases and Broadens

The pages of the Chesapeake newspapers in the second half of the eighteenth century show more inter-colonial and local news, display an increased market economy, and include more dissenting civic and religious discourse. In 1745, Jonas Green began printing the *Maryland Gazette* in Annapolis and, after a brief period with no Williamsburg newspaper following Parks’s 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 source of news began to shift from overseas to more local and inter-colonial news. Civic discourse was more visible on the pages of the newspaper. This printed discourse was also driving interpersonal discussion in local gathering places.

Both the *Maryland Gazette* and the *Virginia Gazette* evolved in size and type 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, and 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 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 available, and supplemental issues would also be printed to include increased news and ads.

No clear figures exist to determine just how many people newspapers reached or whether circulation increased. Evidence can be used to show that by mid-century, newspapers, and the civic discourse they spurred, were more pervasive. Williamsburg printing-office journals, 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

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45 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 descending, lower case “s” as in “i.” The ascending “s” 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 Lie & 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).

for the gazettes must have been kept in another book, no longer extant, but assumes a wide circulation. 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 2,000 copies of a four-page newspaper printed on one press in two normal working days. Parks’s shop sold for well more than the average two-press shop, so it probably had a minimum of two presses, indicating a circulation of four thousand or more might easily be possible. Historians assume than many people read each copy, and that newspapers were even read aloud to family and in public spaces. Copeland has suggested that colonial newspapers’ influence was far greater


48 Carl Bridenbaugh, in *Myths and Realities; Societies of the Colonial South* (Baton Rouge; Louisiana State University Press, 1952), 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. Robert M. Weir, in “The Role of the Newspaper Press in the Southern Colonies on the Eve of the Revolution,” in *The Press and the American Revolution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1980), 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 *Colonial Printer*, 66-69, and 80.
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. As Roger Chartier suggested 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. In Virginia, with readership multiplied by posting at the printing office, posting and reading aloud in taverns and coffeehouses, the influence on public discourse likely exceeded any numerical estimate.

Taverns and coffee houses in colonial Virginia served as physical spaces where public discourse took place, often generated by the public prints. Historian David Conroy has 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, or even those who could not read at all, to join in

49 Copeland, Colonial American Newspapers, 18.

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 issues.\(^{51}\) 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 and read the newspapers, and use the coffeehouse's tobacco and pipes.\(^{52}\) Newspapers worked in tandem with such public gatherings to stimulate civic discourse.\(^{53}\)

The influence of newspapers was magnified by such multiple transmission 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 retransmitted orally 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

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\(^{53}\) Habermas found the physical space of the salons and coffee houses crucial to the rise of the “public sphere,” Charles E. Clark, *The Public Prints: The Newspaper in Anglo-American Culture, 1665-1740* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3-4, suggested it also took place within the newspapers, and Warner viewed the prints themselves as the location of the discourse.
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. As Robert Weir noted, this multi-step process had the paradoxical effect of making the limited circulation of the gazettes even greater.\textsuperscript{54}

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 appeared as early as 1738, and even earlier, essays by “The Plain-Dealer” on philosophical doubting appeared in the \textit{Maryland Gazette}. The debate over deism continued for decades, with most letters expressing disproval.\textsuperscript{55} By 1767, several angry letters claimed deists had actually torn pages out of the Bible, and one even equated Methodists with such blasphemers.\textsuperscript{56} As


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. (Purdie & Dixon, Jan. 9, 1767), 1, (Purdie & Dixon, Jan. 22, 1767), 2, (Purdie & Dixon, Feb. 5, 1767), 3.
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.⁵⁷ 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 Hunter “be the Moderator of our debate.”⁵⁸ The discourse appeared to broaden in both content and the range of participants in this decade, representing viewpoints more extreme, from residents beyond 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 that the colony should allow Catholics to immigrate and the slaves should be freed, apparently with his tongue in cheek, attempting to demonstrate

⁵⁷ Virginia Gazette (Dec. 30, 1737), 4.

that the previous writer went too far. “Philo Virginia” had suggested toleration of Presbyterians would encourage needed immigrants.\(^{59}\)

Religious dissent appeared in the Virginia prints earlier than did political dissent. Political 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.\(^{60}\) One newspaper historian has gone further, suggesting that it was actually Whitefield’s visit that changed the character of colonial newspapers. David 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 disintegration of the formerly coherent social categories.\(^{61}\) 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.

\(^{59}\) “Philo-Bombastia,” *Virginia Gazette* (March 20, 1752), 1. “Philo Virginia,” Ibid. (March 5, 1752), 1.

\(^{60}\) 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.

The Chesapeake colonies’ printers themselves were part of the 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 Stephen Botein noted, the colonial printer was often a public person, but also considered a “meer mechanic.” 62 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. 63 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. 64 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, eventually


63 Most printers made their own ink, out of lampblack and varnish, a process that was both dangerous and dirty. Wroth, Colonial Printer, 115-119. Jeffrey Pasley, The Tyranny of the Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 24-27.

gained in power, and later became key players in both informal national politicization and formal political party organization.\textsuperscript{65}

Improvements in the Chesapeake area postal service changed the character of the newspapers, making them more inter-colonial and less dependent on Great Britain. Many analysts have noted that changes in transportation and postal service were key to an information revolution in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{66} In 1751, \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{67} 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

\textsuperscript{65} 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{67} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Williamsburg: Hunter, Dec. 27, 1751), 3.
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.\textsuperscript{68} There were monthly packet ships from London carrying mail, and overland couriers from Philadelphia, through the southern colonies to Charleston, apparently running by 1763. 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.\textsuperscript{69} 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 inter-colonial mails improved: what used to take six months now took just weeks.\textsuperscript{70} The improvement of postal delivery within the American colonies is a key to the changes that were happening within the newspapers and overall

\textsuperscript{68} John Clyde Oswald, \textit{Benjamin Franklin, Printer} (Garden City: Doubleday, 1917), 109.


\textsuperscript{70} Middleton, \textit{Maritime History}, 7, also verified by this research examining dates.
colonial culture. The newspapers included more material from the other colonies, creating stronger ties between them. 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.  

More news from and about other British colonies was visible beginning in 1754, and improved post was part of the reason. Much of this news 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 from Boston took only three weeks, New York, two weeks, and from Philadelphia arrived as

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71 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso 1983, revised edition, 1991), did understand how newspapers (and novels), “print as commodity” 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 is crucial to the functioning of a newspaper.

72 *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter, May 9, 1755), 1.
fast 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. \(^{73}\) 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 appears to be an oversimplification. \(^{74}\) Postal improvements certainly would not have occurred if there had been no need for 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 inter-colonial in nature. The Virginia newspaper often carried essays by “The Virginia-Centinel,” which were well-written and widely reprinted in other colonial

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\(^{73}\) Few of the 1752-54, and 1756-57 Virginia Gazettes are extant. On lightning, see Virginia Gazette (Sept. 19, 1755), 2, on Braddock, Ibid. (July 17, 1755), 3.

\(^{74}\) Copeland, Colonial American Newspapers, 269.
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 was 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.\textsuperscript{75} 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.\textsuperscript{76}


\textsuperscript{76} “The Virginia-Sentinel” [pseudo.], \textit{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.\(^7\) 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

\(^7\) Lemay, “Virginia Centinel,” 130-131. The replies are not extant. Paul K. Longmore, *The Invention
publicly print in the newspaper their dispute over what the government should or should not keep secret. Public opinion was becoming an important factor in how the colony was ruled.  

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. 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. Although Carter was a member of the lower assembly, it appears that Governor Dinwiddie had more influence with the press than did Carter, seemingly able to censor the press and suppress civic discourse on an important public policy. While not a broad public discourse, but rather dissent between

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79 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).

groups of political elites, 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 dissent. This does not necessarily mean that Maryland government was more tolerant to 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

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81 See also the dispute over the Two-Penny Act earlier here, pp. 76-78.
82 Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics,’” 169.
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 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.” One writer imagined “Dialogue between a Master and his Dog,” named Othello, and its discussion that “my species suffers from the injustice of mankind,” demonstrated serious questions about the

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83 While Laurie E. Godfrey, “The Printers of the Williamsburg Virginia Gazettes, 1766-1776: Social Controls and Press Theory” (Dissertation, Regent University, March 1998), 12, was only able to locate two regular issues and one supplement printed by Royle, this research located six, including two supplements. The online archive at the Rockefeller Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation at http://research.history.org/JDRLibrary/Online_Resources/VirginiaGazette/VGbyYear.cfm has none of Royle’s Virginia Gazettes posted.


85 Ibid. (Feb. 12, 1762), 3, Ibid. (Nov. 4, 1763), 2.
institution of slavery. 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.

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. 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. More disagreement with the British ministry was in this newspaper than in Williamsburg. The British government was able to keep tighter control in Virginia through its royal

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

87 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.

88 *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*.

89 *Maryland Gazette* (Jonas Green and William Rind, Sept. 29, 1763), 1. Ibid. (Feb. 28, 1765), 1.
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 previously observed, frustrated writers from Virginia sometimes turned to Annapolis to publish what would not be printed in Williamsburg. A letter to the Virginia printer ran in a 1765 *Maryland Gazette*, claiming that the writer could not get it printed in Williamsburg, “… I must therefore apply to you (who have always appeared to be a bold and honest Assertor of the Cause of Liberty) to give it a Place in your next Paper.” This pseudonymous letter-writer believed that the Maryland press was more open to political dissent, and that the Virginia press did not have the freedom to disagree with the British ministry. The civic discourse in the newspapers was becoming a valued part of colonial society, and dissatisfaction with the Williamsburg press was becoming evident.

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90 “A Virginian” [pseudo.], *A Supplement to the Maryland Gazette of last Week* (Green, Oct. 17, 1765), 1. This is the first issue of the Maryland newspaper to no longer have William Rind’s name on the bottom of page 4, indicating he had left by this time, heading for Virginia.
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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. 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 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 . . .

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92 *Virginia Gazette* (Hunter, March 28, 1751), 1.
The letter-writer, “B. M.,” argued in support of laws against drunkenness and gaming. The letter significantly demonstrated a wider public discourse by mid-century. By utilizing what Warner referred to as the “principle of negativity,” this anonymous author claimed for himself equal consideration in the court of public opinion, despite his lower status, suggesting his 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.93

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.”94 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 historian Charles E. Clark, spread 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. This 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

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of limited government and personal liberties.” That “representation of shared beliefs” was the most important function of the colonial newspapers, Clark suggests. Virginians were being widely influenced by the newspapers, with a wider range of readers becoming part of a collective mentality with the other British-American colonists, and 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 just how important the printing press was. 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.” 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 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

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95 Clark, *The Public Prints*, 3-5, 11, and 256-257.

96 *Virginia Gazette* (March 14, 1755), 2.
Respect and Veneration which ought always to be maintain’d for Authority, and Persons in Authority, ”97 a broader view of press liberty was emerging that allowed for broader criticism of the government. Social and political dissent was beginning to appear, and other printed materials would facilitate the development of Virginia’s commitment to freedom of the press.

97 Ibid. (Parks, Aug. 6, 1736), 1, quoted in Maxwell, ed., Virginia Historical Register (1853), 21-31.
4. The Colonial Chesapeake Almanac: Revolutionary “Agent of Change”

Almanacs were the most widely circulated form of secular literature in colonial British America, yet with all the attention paid to books, political pamphlets, and newspapers, the almanac has generally been overlooked as an important precursor to Revolution. These small, pamphlet-like annual books from the southern colonies, in particular, have been under-studied. While many works 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.1 The elder Arthur Schlesinger, in his *Prelude to Independence: The

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1 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, 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
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 influences of political writers in England on the ideas of the revolutionary Americans, primarily through books and political pamphlets.  

Historian Marion Barber Stowell suggested that 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.” She suggested that almanacs were in fact revolutionary “trumpeters of sedition.” 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. 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


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.\(^5\)

While analysis of the almanacs’ contents does reveal some revolutionary sentiment, more non-traditional methods of examination prove even more revealing. In exploring the printing revolution in Europe, 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.”\(^6\) In colonial Virginia, the almanac was one of the most common of these diverse products of the press. 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

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\(^5\) Stowell, “Trumpeters of Sedition,” 41, Stowell, 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.

imported from Europe. While Eisenstein found influence as print spread throughout Europe’s elite, this research finds there was also continued influence in the Chesapeake colonies as printed mater spread farther down the social structure. 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 dissertation 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 consists of more than the ideas and actions of the intellectual and political leaders. Common people were an important part of the movement toward the American Revolution. While the elites may already have been part of a print culture for several generations, the almanac helped to bring printed material and literacy to groups further down the social ladder. The introduction of print into the lives of the lower and middling people of the eighteenth-century Chesapeake colonies can be seen as one of many influences leading to a less deferential society. 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 the circulation, especially 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, yet the almanacs did influence social attitudes and political thinking. In more
subtle ways, almanacs were an important part of a cultural transition, indeed a revolution in reading, which helped lead to revolutionary thought. The expanding medium of print did not cause Virginians to revolt against Great Britain, but rather helped them to conceive of the possibility of political independence by encouraging thought, dissent, and debate. In Virginia, the local press broke the monopoly that the local gentry had on information, influencing the balance of political power. “[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 colonies’ almanacs were an important part of the expansion of print capitalism that helped to lead to “imagining 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 tacked up on a wall. The

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colonial almanacs initially copied form, format, and even content directly from the British almanacs, but added local aspects such as Indian medicine. By the mid-eighteenth century, English 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.9

An almanac was one of the first things to be printed by the new presses in the American colonies, and the major northern British-American cities were producing competing almanacs long before printing took hold in Virginia.10 Almanacs were printed as early as 1729 in Annapolis, Maryland and 1732 in Williamsburg, Virginia.11 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 to Williamsburg. The inclusion of Maryland information indicates that at least they were being marketed to a reading

9 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), 4-8

10 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.

11 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.
audience in the Chesapeake colonies. However, the astronomical observations and weather predictions in an almanac favored locally-produced versions.  

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.” They usually were about 4 inches wide, 6 inches tall, and from 20 to 60 pages long. Charles E. Clark suggested that in both England and America, the almanacs were so popular that

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they “helped contribute to a fascination with ‘time’ as an objective, measurable, uniformly flowing stream in which events occurred.” Near the back of the small book, useful information was included, such as court dates and distances between cities. 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. 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; probably because they were used so heavily that they ended up in shreds by the end of the year.15

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


15 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.
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.”  

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 engraving 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 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.  

Following the calendar pages, Chesapeake almanacs typically listed court session dates, travel times between cities and towns, names of government representatives, 

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16 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.”

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.”¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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 through the calendar pages.²⁰

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

¹⁸ 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, including the custom of writing words in all capitals or often using italics will be altered without notation.

¹⁹ Stowell, Early American Almanacs, 135-141.

²⁰ John Warner, Warner’s Almanack … 1742 … (Williamsburg, William Parks, 1741).
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. 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 white people, or about one almanac for every 26 white people. All of these estimates ignore the fact that

21 Schlesinger, Prelude to Independence, 41.

22 “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.

23 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. See also, Berg, Eighteenth Century Williamsburg Press, 32-34, Joseph Royle, and Alexander Purdie, Printing Office Journal (University of Virginia Libraries, Department of Special Collections) vol. 2, 1764-1766, lists £75 credit only almanac sales for 1764. Cynthia Stiverson, and Gregory Stiverson, in “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), 157-9, estimate that if the ratio of credit to cash sales were constant, about 5,000 almanacs were printed in 1764 and 1765. 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.

most local almanacs were aimed at a wider audience than just one colony. For example, the later Virginia almanacs indicated on the front cover, “Fitting Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, &c.” 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 they did reach the 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 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

25 For example, Wreg, *Virginia Almanack … 1765*. 
Hopes destroy.” But this same issue cautioned of the vulnerability of kings and suggested that they 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

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.

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27 Ibid.

28 Maryland Almanack … 1762 (Annapolis, Jonas Green, 1761).

29 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.

30 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).
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.”31 Another compares their greed to gluttony: “Lawyers, by endless Controversies, Consume unthinking Clients Purses …”32 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 pure Gold.”33 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.34 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.

31 Virginia Almanack … 1772 (Williamsburg, Purdie & Dixon, 1771).

32 Virginia Almanack … 1773 (Williamsburg, Purdie & Dixon, 1772).

33 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.

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” 93 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 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.”

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

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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. 
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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

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

36 *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.

37 *Virginia Almanack … 1741* [Parks?]
United States, but did not include any of the colonies in the West Indies. Other lines demonstrated deference, at least superficially:

Twixt King and Peasant if no Odds there were,  
Why should each Monarch Crown and Scepter bear?  
But, if Superiors can Obedience claim,  
Sure Kings and Queens may first command the same;  
Then let each Subject due Allegiance tender  
To GEORGE our rightful King and Faith’s Defender.\textsuperscript{38}

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 \textit{fed} than \textit{taught}. \textit{Very true, indeed, Sir}, replied the Farmer, \textit{for you teach me, and I feed myself.”}\textsuperscript{39} 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

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Virginia Almanack … 1759} (Hunter).

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Virginia Almanack … 1764} (Royle).
is Nobility.” Michael Warner observed such colonial discourse as clashing with a social order that included the concept of “superiors.” The old rules of social order are seen clashing with a new discursive order. Reading and taking part in a broadening reading public was undermining the old social order. Increasingly, print discourse in the Chesapeake region displayed erosion of that deferential culture.

One almanac in 1768 contained some remarkable verse that conflicted with the dominant social structure of slavery. These words were “sent by a young lady of Edinburgh to a Relation with a Present of a Negroe Boy,” and were 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,

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40 Maryland Almanack ... 1765 (Green).

Such Grace from Thee let Ferdinando find.\textsuperscript{42}

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

Some overtly political material did appear in Chesapeake almanacs as conflict with Great Britain began in the mid-1760s.\textsuperscript{43} 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:

\begin{quote}
“Oh Liberty! thou Goddess, heav’nly bright,
Profuse of Bliss, and pregnant with Delight;”
\end{quote}

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

\textsuperscript{42} 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 \textit{Virginia Almanac} of 1768, previously thought to not be extant. With only four pages available, positive identification is not possible.

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

44 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).

By the advent of the Revolution, verse and prose with obvious patriot-bias became more prevalent.\textsuperscript{46} 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.\textsuperscript{47} More overtly patriotic in defiance of Britain were the instructions in a 1776 almanac for the making of gunpowder, an act supportive of colonial independence and of revolutionary violence as information helpful in supplying the local military forces facing shortages. 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 help to transform the colonists into a unified group, enabling them to imagine themselves eventually as not British, but American.\textsuperscript{48} 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

\textsuperscript{46}The terms “patriot” and “royalist” are used here to describe the two sides that emerged during the Revolution.

\textsuperscript{47}Rittenhouse, \textit{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 Isaiah Thomas, \textit{The History of Printing in America, With a Biography of Printers}, 2\textsuperscript{d} ed. (New York: Weathervane, 1940), 555.

\textsuperscript{48}Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 64, and 78-80.
jar …” 49 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 are fewer extant almanacs from Maryland, so there is no real evidence of their content. 50

Almanacs of the Chesapeake region had the largest impact on the overall society through their role as one part of a watershed transition to a culture whose communication became dominated by print media. They spread print and the subtle changes that accompany such a medium; the society slowly transformed. The changes had tremendous individual and social impact, eventually shaking up the political structure. According to a British historian of almanacs, they were part of a major paradigm shift. Matthew Shaw suggests 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.” 51 As cultural historian Lawrence Levine observed, the spread of literacy has

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49 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.

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

51 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, Roger Chartier, The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France, trans Lydia Cochrane, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 5, where he notes that no culture is completely oral or completely print-based, but rather that, “different media and multiple practices almost always mingled in complex ways.”
profound and revolutionary changes on a society. Through the spread of education and the printed word in these almanacs, the influence of reading and writing also spread. Marshall 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. The print medium itself is seen as enabling those very changes.

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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 almanacs sprinkled literary matter throughout. By spreading bits of literature wider throughout the social structure, colonial societies had increased potential for such literary discourse. A transatlantic “Republic of Letters” developed in England and in the British-American colonies by the mid-eighteenth century. This civic forum existed within the printed materials, and in public meeting spaces, driven by printed matter. Public opinion grew to importance, 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

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56 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.

57 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.
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.\(^{58}\)

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 causality on the part of writing. It is rather a critical precursor and is 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.\(^{59}\) While it was not the sole cause of change, print allowed such discourse to happen, and it aided the erosion of deference.

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 marks next to other lines, likely expressing whether the reader agreed with what was printed.

Wealthier owners sometimes had extra pages bound with the issues, and kept accounts or more complete diaries within 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 their words. Writing helped create a consciousness of the self-as-individual, a consciousness of interaction between people, and an increase of raising overall awareness. 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

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60 Ong, Orality and Literacy, 178-9, notes that while writing can be consciousness-raising, it can also increase division and alienation.
printing and corresponding literacy.\textsuperscript{61} 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 *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{62} When George Washington began keeping a daily diary, he used a copy of the *Virginia Almanack* that had been bound with interleaved pages. He recorded daily weather observations and notations on his crops. Later, Washington made more complete diary entries in a separate bound book.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{61} Carothers, “Culture, Psychiatry, and the Written Word,” 312-319.

\textsuperscript{62} Shaw, “Almanacs and the Atlantic World,” 2. Carter’s surviving almanac is the *Virginia Almanack ... 1774 ...* (Purdie & Dixon, 1773), and is at the American Antiquarian Society.

One surviving almanac copy gives evidence that women wrote in their almanacs as well. For example, one appears to have been owned by a woman named Sarah Carlyle, as she inscribed her name at the top of the front page, as some almanac owners did. It is obvious in small ways that almanacs were intended for women as well as men. Another year included an epigram, “To a Young Lady with an Almanack bound,” that suggested that within the slim volume, women could find more meaning than in an entire bookshelf. While historians rarely tie almanac reading with female readers, many do suggest that almanacs spread further into the country and down the social ladder in ways that books, pamphlets, and newspapers never could. Some historians even suggest almanacs had a greater political influence than is generally recognized, with political messages discretely sprinkled between predictions of weather and humorous stories. 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; 

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65 *Virginia Almanack ... 1771* . . . (Williamsburg: William Rind, 1770), 16.
Eas'd of her Load, Subjection grows more-light ...” 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. 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

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67 A fragment of what appears to be Rind’s 1768 *Virginia Almanack*, thought to not be extant, was recently discovered by this researcher in the Library Company of Philadelphia archives. 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.
Correspondence with their Friends and Acquaintance, tho’ at a very great Distance, even when they know not where to direct to each other . . .” This section included entertainment, diversions, enigmas, paradoxes, and “rebusses,” or lines of verse inside of which was hidden a name or word. In answering one of the previous year’s enigmas, what we might call a brainteaser, “Miss Polly S.” claimed in verse, “An honest Country Girl am I, Untaught to patch, or paint, or lie…” This contribution suggests that a young woman, not of the tidewater elite, was not only reading but also contributing to the almanac. A majority of these contributions to the “Ladies Diary” appeared to be written by men, but a simple count shows that almost a third were signed with a woman’s name, 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.\(^{69}\)

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\(^{68}\) The Virginia Almanack And Ladies Diary, for the year of our Lord, 1769. . . (Williamsburg: Rind, 1768).

\(^{69}\) The Virginia Almanack for the Year of our Lord, 1770 ... Containing Several Interesting Pieces in Prose and Verse (Williamsburg: Rind, 1769).
The colonial Virginia and Maryland almanacs contained very little directly political content, and the evidence does not support the idea that they were vehicles of political propaganda, or that they strongly trumpeted sedition. On close examination, however, there was some small amount of overtly political propagandist content, especially after 1766. Other than a few essays extolling liberty, there was little evidence of radical Whig influence in the almanacs still extant. No issues of the *Maryland Almanacks* between 1766 and 1777 are extant, making them impossible to assess, although the newspaper issued by the same printer was 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.

Of greater importance was the deeply inherent and implicit transformation caused 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. Deference had eroded, and print media had much to do with that transition. As Gordon Wood wrote, deference “was not a mere habit of mind; 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

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70 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 chapters 3, 6, and 7.
occurred when Americans shook off British rule was this change from deference to those with a higher hereditary social position to an equality where worth instead mattered, at least for white men. Historian Robert M. Weir also noted that “deference waned” in the British-American colonies during this period. He suggested the emergence of a new personality type, “the psychologically autonomous individual.” That type of person, in contrast to a deferential sort, was threatened by attempts from Britain to assert more control over the colonies. Weir did not note the role of print and literacy in this transition, nor could he explain how once-deferential Americans could now rebel against such an important authority figure as the King. This description by Weir fits precisely with the personality that has been transformed by literacy that J. C. Carothers and Walter Ong described: 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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A 1736 *Virginia Gazette* published a remarkable poem that 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 the laws were even more unfair, and the verse ended with a plea for equal treatment for women:

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

Such a plea 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

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1 A version of this chapter was presented at the conference, *The Atlantic World of Print in the Age of Franklin* (Philadelphia, September 29, 2006). Commentator David Waldstreicher was extremely helpful in suggesting improvements.

2 *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg: Parks, October 22, 1736). 3. An anonymous writer contributed this poem, claiming it was presented to him or her by a lady. Several other newspapers published this same poem later.
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 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.”

Historian David Copeland described the restrictive, 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. 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.

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3 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.”


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. Kathleen Brown took a different approach in her more recent exploration of gender and power in colonial Virginia. She recognized that women 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. 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

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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.\(^8\)

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 printed matter: the more numerous newspapers, popular
almanacs, and books for women receives attention here.\(^9\) Such exploration can help us to
better understand the lives of a broader range of women and men.\(^10\) While we know a
great deal about the male leaders in Virginia, the intellectual development and the history

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\(^8\) Cynthia Kierner, Beyond the Household: Women’s Place in the Early South, 1700-1835 (Ithaca:

\(^9\) See, for example, Richard Beal Davis, A Colonial Southern Bookshelf: Reading in the Eighteenth

\(^10\) In examining the involvement of women in the broad print culture of colonial Virginia, this chapter
paper is informed by colonial American interpretations of Jürgen Habermas’ public sphere, and the role of
printed material as a driving force behind that. While Habermas, in 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, Mass.: MIT
Press, 1989), focused on eighteenth-century Europe, his ideas of the public sphere have been adapted by
Americanists. See Michael Warner in The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in
Eighteenth-Century America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 1-174, who suggests
that printed material was an important aspect of a radical reconstruction of the public sphere in eighteenth-
century America. See also Craig Calhoun, ed., Habermas and the Public Sphere, (Cambridge: MIT, 1992),
especially Michael Schudson’s, “Was There Ever a Public Sphere? If So, When? Reflections on the
American Case.” Also, see Benedict Anderson, in Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and
of colonial women in the world of print remain under-explored.\textsuperscript{11} This chapter centers on the content, authors, and contributing writers of newspapers, almanacs, and popular books aimed at a female audience. Statistical studies are useful, but such data does not typically explore causality or culture deeply enough, leaving an incomplete picture.\textsuperscript{12} 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 and that involvement in public discourse may have begun earlier than many historians acknowledge.\textsuperscript{13} The participation may also reach deeper, beyond the wives of the planter elites, to at least some of the tradespeople, the medium farmers, or the middling sort. 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

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\textsuperscript{11} Kevin Hayes, \textit{A Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf} (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), ix.
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\textsuperscript{12} Brown, \textit{Good Wives}, 7.
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\textsuperscript{13} Cott, in \textit{Bonds of Womenhood} suggests erosion of an exclusively domestic sphere for women did not come until after the late eighteenth century. Linda Kerber in \textit{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—for the first time—American women an important role in public politics. Rosemarie Zagarri, \textit{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.
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women and perhaps even women of the middling ranks were involved in the public world of politics in print, and thus were part of an expanding civic public.

**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, there is confusion 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.¹⁴ Few artifacts remain to help determine who could read. The usual 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 suggests, 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.¹⁵ 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

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

¹⁵ Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, 15.
for women. As David D. Hall suggests, even in seventeenth-century Virginia, women participated in the world of reading, but literacy in the Chesapeake was relative to a specific situation: “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.”

At least some 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 of literacy than New England. In closely examining Middlesex County, Virginia, Darrett and Anita Rutman found a higher literacy rate than was previously estimated for women of the same period. They also found that it actually declined from about thirty-three percent in the seventeenth century to twenty-nine percent in the mid-eighteenth century. They suggest the decline results from women retiring into the domestic sphere, no longer needing to sign names on legal documents. Notably, this does not necessarily suggest an actual decline in reading, not at a time when print material was becoming more widely available, and the novel was just

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gaining popularity among women. What it suggests is a very modest decline of signing one’s 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.¹⁹ Most analysts suggest 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.

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 as 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.”²⁰ As Michael Warner suggested, a transatlantic “Republic of Letters” developed in England and in the British-American colonies by the mid-eighteenth century.


century. Reading was an important enabler, and expressing oneself in print was even more important. These 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 sphere. 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. Warner viewed the public print 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

21 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” 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. 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.

22 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.

23 Kierner, Beyond the Household, 2, 37, and 73.

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’s 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, “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 …” It was a popular cookbook in both England and the colonies, and in addition to food, included

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26 E. Smith, The Compleat Housewife: or, Accomplish’d Gentlewoman’s Companion . . . (Williamsburg: William Parks, 1742). 1. Eighteenth-century spelling and punctuation is retained here, including the common capitalization of all nouns. Complete titles of texts, newspapers, and almanacs will be edited down as they typically fill an entire title page.
“receipts” (recipes) for medicines and salves. 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 …” In fact, a medical guide, Every Man his Own Doctor, was stitched together with The Compleat Housewife and sold combined at one point, seemingly confusing the gender distinction. The medical recipes in the cookbook along with the combination 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. 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

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28 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.

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 sold in Williamsburg in 1756.30 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.31 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.32 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 by the title character of John Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. One female reader of *Pamela* followed the heroine’s example of analysis and critiqued the novel herself.33 Another

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

31 Hayes, *Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf*, 103.

32 Theophilus Wreg [identified as Theophilus Grew by Evans], *The Virginia Almanack for the Year of our Lord God, 1756* . (Williamsburg: Hunter, 1755), 30 (almanac pages are not numbered, so page numbers listed here for almanacs are based on counting existing pages ).

33 Hayes, *Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf*, 107.
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 credits exactly this type of sentimental novel with opening the world of letters to women, and she refers to it as a “reading revolution.”  

Another literary historian suggests 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 also 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”

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36 Hunter, *Before Novels*, 73.
from the very beginning.37 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.”38 Parks’s first issue of the *Virginia Gazette* in 1736 invited readers “of either Sex,” but actually requested contributions only from gentlemen.39 Despite that omission, he did publish a poem by a woman later that year, the one quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that is quite surprising in its straightforward plea for women’s rights. “The Lady’s 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.

37 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.


39 Issue number 1, *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg: Parks, August 6, 1736). 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.
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. 40

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 more attention. 41 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. 42

In 1737, a report that women had voted in an election in Jamaica, in 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

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

41 The William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series, 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.

42 When printed in the South Carolina Gazette of August 15, 1743, 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, it did receive a response suggesting the woman writer needed a “swain” to ease her of anguish.
be chosen Constables for the next Year.” 43 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. 44 Both the move by the women in New York, and the letter 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 a woman requesting a response from the man who supposedly ogled her. 45 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.” 46 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

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43 *Virginia Gazette* (Parks, June 24, 1737), 3.


45 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 earlier here, pp. 84–85.

46 *Virginia Gazette* (Parks, Oct. 29, 1736), 1.
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 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 a wider group,

47 Ibid. (Nov. 5, 1736), 1.

48 Ibid. (July 22, 1737), 1.

49 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.
including women.\textsuperscript{50} 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 word of print may instead be viewed as empowering. As Kerber notes, in oral communication the gender difference is automatically conveyed, while the anonymous world of print can disguise that difference, as needed.\textsuperscript{51} It is quite possible that women contributed essays, even serious political discourse, while not revealing their gender.

The \textit{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 his 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

\textsuperscript{50} Warner, \textit{Letters of the Republic}, 41-49.

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 Pen.)”

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. 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.

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52 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.

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 Maryland in 1695 after the death of her husband, William Nuthead. 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.” 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.

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,

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54 Wroth, 38–41.

55 Douglas McMurtrie, *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 *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.

56 Thomas, 542–543, and Wroth, 22–23.
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. 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.

Women’s involvement with print—as authors, readers, and even printers—meant that they, too, contributed to the growing assault on social deference and 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. 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. 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

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57 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. Stephen Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics’ and an Open Press: the Business and Political Strategies of Colonial American Printers,” vol. 9 of *Perspectives in American History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Wroth, *Colonial Printer*.

to date in an American periodical and certainly the greatest in any southern colonial
newspaper."  

Mrs. Rind found herself in the middle of another 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. She wrote that the letter in
question contained personal, rather than public, accusations, that she felt its publication
would injure several respectable people. A more appropriate place for such charges was in
a court of law, she suggested. Rind did agree to print the letter if the author would attach
his name, instead of remaining anonymous.  
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.”  

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59 Jane Carson, Clementina Rind (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library, research report series
47, [19--]), quoting Rind’s Virginia Gazette (March 3, 1774), 3, and of September 15, 1774, 1. Kierner,
Beyond the Household, 79.

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

61 Benjamin Franklin, “An Apology for Printers,” first printed in the Pennsylvania Gazette, June 10,
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.” 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 printer, a woman took 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. 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. 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 mass media available. He or she had a great deal of control over the flow of books and news information and 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.

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64 See Introduction, pp. 16-17, for an explanation of the term “gatekeeper” and the power over information flow which gatekeepers hold.
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.\(^{65}\)

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 brewing and serving tea, and women who had to do the physical labor to replace manufactured cloth with homespun.\(^{66}\)

The implications of this inclusion are better understood by reading what women wrote in the *Virginia Gazettes*. Verses composed by women of Bedford, Massachusetts to support the non-consumption of tea were just one of many colonial actions by women republished in the Williamsburg newspaper:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The coarsest Food we choose to eat,} \\
\text{Before we'll lose our Liberty.}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{65}\) See Almanac chapter here, pp. 156-157.

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.67

But the ladies of the South were not to be outdone by their New England counterparts, sending a letter “from Countrywomen of Virginia to Ladies of Philadelphia” urging them to stop using and importing English goods and to ban India tea from their tables.68

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!”69 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 equality, “One Sex was not designed to be the Oppression of the other…”70 In the letter from “A Planter’s Wife,” the presumed female author, writing to a female audience, stepped beyond a purely domestic sphere 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

67 *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie, March 17, 1774), 2.
68 Ibid. (Rind, Sept. 15, 1774), 1.
69 Ibid. (Pinkney, Sept. 14, 1775), 1.
70 Ibid. (Purdie, March 4, 1773), 2.
The political crisis leading to the American Revolution made women highly visible in the pages of the *Virginia Gazette* and encouraged women further into a 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 restricted. 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. A woman could also publish a letter to a newspaper, a poem in an almanac, or even a political pamphlet without attaching her name, or without using her own name. This was a major step into the sphere of public debate, especially when the topic was political. Thus printing helped women break down the gender restrictions of the civic public. Print culture was emancipatory for women by allowing them access to civic debate.

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

72 Zagarri, *Woman’s Dilemma*.

73 Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, 48, uses the idea of print being emancipatory, but not for women as this research suggests.
There were changes in the composition of those who governed colonial Virginia that predated the Revolution, and these changes can be seen in the composition of the civic public. In comparing the changes in colonial Virginia with Habermas’ pre-modern Western Europe, we can view the royal governor and his counselors, the elite planters, 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 that included a newly rising middling sort of lawyers and tradesmen, in addition to 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.74 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 there was indeed some involvement by women.75 Published accounts of politics within an emerging print culture are viewed as a crucial precondition of any such civic public. To take part in

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74 David Andrew Rawson, “‘Guardians of their Own Liberty’: A Contextual History of Print Culture in Virginia Society, 1750 to 1820” (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1998), 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.”

75 Craig Calhoun, ed., Habermas and the Public Sphere, (Cambridge: MIT, 1992). This supports the conclusions of Kierner, Beyond the Household, xi, and 213.
Habermas’ public discourse, however, required taking part in discussions in taverns, coffeehouses, and other public spaces, activities that typically excluded women. Women did form active political groups that could be considered a female civic public, while debating and taking action over non-consumption and non-importation in the years leading to the Revolution. While no evidence of 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 can, perhaps, be seen as separate spaces, but as more complex multi-dimensional groupings, or lines of communication. These communication networks are made up of both physical discussion groups, and other groups of people connected by media such as newspapers. The groups touch and overlap at certain points, and 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 within lines 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 domestic, private lines of activity.

76 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.

77 Replacing the traditional spheres with the spatial metaphor was suggested by David Waldstreicher, commentary, The Atlantic World in the Age of Print conference, (Philadelphia, Friday, September 29,
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 new nation’s “new Code of Laws,” 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 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. 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. However, Lee was

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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.

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Women in eighteenth-century Virginia were involved as readers, writers, and even editors of the public prints—especially of the more ephemeral ones such as newspapers, almanacs, and inexpensive books. While most printed material of 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 at least several others 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 involvement with printed matters. Some of this material 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, and occasionally in the political debates in the press.

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 discourse 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 raises questions about a theoretical solid wall 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 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 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

81 Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere.*
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. 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.82 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.83 As women were an important part of this new world of consumption, so too were they an important part of the movement toward the Revolution and the new republic.

82 Anderson, Imagined Communities.
83 Breen, Marketplace of Revolution, especially xvi, 314, and 329.
6. The Stamp Act and Origins of Print Competition

The American Stamp Act of 1765 marked a turning point for the role of print media in the colony of Virginia. This controversy 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. The ministry appeared to have aimed the Stamp Act directly at the sources of such dissidence. Participants in a widening, broader 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.

Print competition came to Williamsburg in 1766, marking the beginnings of local commercial competition in the print media for the first time in Virginia. Competition in

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\(^1\) See Introduction, pp. 16-17, for an explanation of the term gatekeeper and the power over information flow which gatekeepers hold. The importance here is that gatekeepers control the messages transmitted, and in a society where there is only one gatekeeper, the power is immense.
the distribution of printed matter was an important watershed for the culture and
government of the colony, for it signified a shift in the power structure. Control of public
messages began to relocate from the royal government to the consumer marketplace and
this transformation had a major impact on civic discourse in the colony. Despite such
significance, the motivations behind this change and the relevance of it have often been
misunderstood. For example, it is widely accepted that Thomas Jefferson was responsible
for bringing such print competition to Virginia. This dissertation shows the claim and
the evidence behind it are apparently erroneous. This work attempts to reach a better
understanding of both the specifics of these changes and their larger significance.

A new comprehension of how print competition in Virginia changed the
relationship between the printer, the government, and the readers is of some
consequence. Each of the two printers became less an official mouthpiece, more a voice
of dissent, which encouraged the transition from a deferential society to one that openly
questioned the government. The value of an open and critical press became more evident
to residents, and the practice of civic discourse became visible in the public prints. Old
style political deference gave way to dissidence, and eventually to Revolution. This
change was both reflected within the pages of, and to some extent driven by, printed
material such as newspapers and pamphlets. The research reported here brings a new
understanding of the changes and how they influenced the press in this important colony
on the verge of Revolution.
The Stamp 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 ensued. In the summer of 1764, the 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, which had to be imported from England and this substantially raised 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, 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 was 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 pence per sheet of paper, plus an additional tax on advertisements. It was largely to raise revenues, but it also served to restrict newspaper circulation.³ 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 passed 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.


³ Newspapers in England were taxed up until 1855, from Hannah Barker, Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1695-1855 (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 1 and 65-68.
This virtually assured that all the colonists would be well informed about why this tax should never be paid.\footnote{Schlesinger, Prelude, 68. Morgan, Stamp Act, 307.}

Contemporaries saw the tax as intentionally aimed at sources of dissidence, and some historians agree. John Adams wrote in the \textit{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.\footnote{Adams, “A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law,” Boston Gazette, Aug. 26, 1765, from The Works of John Adams, edited by Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1851-1865) 3:464, also found in Schlesinger, Prelude, 70. Michael Warner, The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 69.} Historians, British records, and Grenville’s papers do not, however, give evidence to support this claim. Whatever the intent, by challenging the printers’ viability, reaction to the tax had the effect of strengthening the ties between the printers and between the separate colonies and actually increasing printed dissidence.\footnote{Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis.}

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…

There were no stamps or stamped paper to be utilized in publishing, as popular pressure had forced the resignation of the stamp officials. 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 …” Jonas Green and his partner William Rind filled their *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 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

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9 *Maryland Gazette* (Jonas Green and William Rind, August 22, 1765 special supplement), 1.
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 sleeppeth” 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 contains much on the unpopularity of the tax, it contains 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,

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

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

12 Ibid. (Oct. 10, 1765), 1.
the tax might have only added a direct cost of four percent. Pamphlets could easily multiply in cost, with a tax of up to one shilling for each four pages on a document that typically would initially cost less 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.\textsuperscript{13} All colonial printers faced tough choices that tended to politicize the output of their presses. The newspapers of both the Chesapeake colonies took a short hiatus, perhaps for fear of 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.\textsuperscript{14}

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

\textsuperscript{13} Morgan, \textit{Stamp Act}, 72, Schlesinger, \textit{Prelude to Independence}, 68.

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.\textsuperscript{15}

Contemporaryprinter and early historian Isaiah Thomas witnessed both the
stamp tax opposition and the printers’ reaction to it first hand. He observed the impact of
the new law on printers:

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, 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{16}

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 too much under the influence of crown officials, and
brought in a second printer just before the Stamp Act.\textsuperscript{17}

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

\textsuperscript{15} Morgan, \textit{Stamp Act Crisis}.

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

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 332.
greater influence on the colonial population from the printed opposition thus generated and disseminated. Using Thomas as a major source, Arthur Schlesinger, the elder, 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, *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, which openly invaded the first, and threatened a great diminution of the last, 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.  

Susan Macall Allen, in her 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 perhaps was Royle. 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 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.

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, instead of obtaining a relatively reliable text from a publication in the colony itself, got news of Virginia’s action from the more ardent supporters of the resolutions.” They were instead published in Maryland and in other newspapers throughout the colonies. Several letters

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20 Maryland Gazette (July 4, 1765), 1052: 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 Donovan Bond, and W. Reynolds McLeod, ed., Newsletters to Newspapers: Eighteenth-Century Journalism, Papers Presented at A Bicentennial Symposium at West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia March 31-April 2, 1976 (Morgantown, WV: School of Journalism, 1977), 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 latter version got the greatest colonial circulation and inspired most other colonies to approve similar resolves against the Stamp Act.

21 Morgan, Stamp Act, 102.
appeared in the Maryland newspaper, complaining about the resolves 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, Extracts of Letters, &c. respecting Virginia, which are as destitute of Truth, as they are of right Reason.”22 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.23

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.

\[22\] *Virginia Gazette* (Aug. 30, 1765). This issue is no longer extant, but this quotation was republished in the *Maryland Gazette* (Oct. 3, 1765), 2.

\[23\] *Maryland Gazette* (Green and Rind, Oct. 3, 1765), 2.
Reaction in the Chesapeake Prints

A direct comparison of the *Virginia Gazette’s* and the *Maryland Gazette’s* reaction to the Stamp Act reveals a great deal about political bias and the two newspapers’ perspectives on contemporary politics. Unfortunately, few of Royle’s Williamsburg newspapers are extant.\(^{24}\) By 1765, the Maryland newspaper was much more likely to run articles critical of governmental authority than would its Virginia counterpart. For example, the Annapolis newspaper published a remarkable comment that includes quite severe criticism of King George III: “This Paper has never had Occasion to appear in Deep Mourning, since the Death of our late good KING until NOW.”\(^{25}\) The comment appears along with other notices by the printer and has no dateline or source listed, so it probably was written by the printer himself. This is strongly anti-royalist sentiment, the likes of which had certainly not been seen in any *Virginia Gazettes* up until this date. The few extant issues of the *Virginia Gazette* from before 1766 displayed a remarkably conservative, 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 to the

\(^{24}\) The nearly complete online collection at Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s Digital Library (Rockefeller Library) contains none of Royle’s *Virginia Gazettes*. Six issues were located and examined for this dissertation.

\(^{25}\) *Maryland Gazette* (Green, Oct. 31, 1765), special supplement, 1.
Virginia press, but it is apparent that Royle’s choices would not tend to 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 took risks 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, Governor Horatio Sharpe instead inquired of his assembly what action he should take when the stamped paper arrived in the colony.26

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 direct comparison supports 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.)27

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 state


27 Second Supplement to the Maryland Gazette … (Green, Oct. 24, 1765), 1.
assemblymen. This was a sharp protest of the Stamp Act 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 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 praised the “Great Patriot Mr. [William] Pitt,” the elder, the former Prime Minister in great favor with the Americans, and ridiculed the current ministry for bringing back a
disgraced minister. Overall the Maryland newspaper contained a great deal of politically dissenting material with very little royalist in nature.

In contrast, Royle’s *Virginia Gazette* contained a great deal of warning against opposing the British position. 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 Williamsburg paper did not mention proroguing of the Virginia assembly. A long story on page three

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28 Ibid., 1-4.
detailed the unfriendly reception that the appointed distributor of stamps for Virginia received when he arrived in Williamsburg from England. Clearly, this one Virginia paper showed more bias toward the official British position than did the Maryland paper with the similar date.  

That story regarding local opposition to the stamp official bears closer examination and a comparison with a letter sent by Virginia Royal Governor Francis Fauquier back 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, a hostile crowd forced him to resign his post. The report in Royle’s *Gazette* 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’s and demanded of him an Answer

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29 *Virginia Gazette* (Royle, Oct. 25, 1765), 1.
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 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.30

Changing Virginia Press & Discourse

This new tax caught 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

30 Francis Fauquier to Board of Trade, Nov. 3rd, 1765, handwritten transcript in Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Great Britain PRO CO 5, Container v. 1331 [Public Record Office] 97-106[137-148], Virginia Gazette (Royle, Oct. 25, 1765), 1-4. From Library of Congress Photostat, Newspaper and Current Periodical room, box 31, folder 34, on the back the original source is noted as, CO 5.1345 Colonial Office, London, Series 5, vol. 1345. On the top of page one is penned in, Lt. Gov. Fauquier, of the 24th Nov. 1765. Note the dateline of the Mercer story is Oct. 31, so despite the newspaper’s date, it was likely printed on Nov. 1, 1765.
growing commercial activity and the intellectual heart of the colony. The town was the market hub for a region without an urban center, and this shop was a retail outlet for the entire colony. The office journals, or daybooks, exist only for part of 1750–52 and 1764–66, but they indicate a substantial trade in books, stationery, business and legal forms, almanacs, newspapers, postal services, playing cards, and other miscellaneous items. An important income source for this Virginia tradesman came from printing government documents. The government of the colony paid Parks and his successors to print laws and the *Journal of the House of Burgesses*. The House of Burgesses voted on this position, then it had to be approved by the Governor’s Council and then by the Royal Governor himself. 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 printers quite wealthy for tradespeople. 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.

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32 John Pendleton Kennedy, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia* (Richmond: The Colonial Press, Ed. Waddy Co, 1906), 10: 11, 22, 38, 158–9, 164–6, and 221. See, for example, William Hunter’s will where his estate was valued in excess of was valued at 8,614 pounds, and Joseph Royle left four separate Williamsburg properties, in “Old Virginia Editors,” *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine* 7 (July 1898) 1:10. JSTOR. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0043-5597%28189807%291%3A7%3A%3C9%3AOVE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-C>, 13-15.
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.\textsuperscript{33} Anger the governor—who supported the official British position—and you lose his support and possibly your government salary. Anger the burgesses—a majority of whom opposed the Stamp Act—and you could also lose your government salary. Anger your potential customers—who were on both sides of the issue—and you 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. If they printed without stamps, they risked expensive prosecution.

Retail income was becoming more important to the Williamsburg printer, and the sources of income were shifting. The major source of printing income was now the private output of the press, rather than the government work: primarily newspapers, the yearly “almanack,” printed forms, handbills, lottery tickets, and the occasional pamphlet and book. While the office did print its own books, bound books, and even had a

papermaking facility, most of the books sold there were printed in England. Many students at nearby William and Mary College 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 pounds 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 of his life (1764-65.) Part of this income was for the newspaper, stationary sales, and post office income. 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


36 Royle and Purdie, Printing Office Journal, lists £75 credit only almanac sales for 1764. It does not indicate any cash sales, including for almanacs or newspapers.
the commercial marketplace who dispensed a wider variety of information. While Royle did still receive £375 per year from the colony government, the importance of this government 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 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 was paid to print several works. The writings from both sides in the 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. 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 a “blow … fatal to American Freedom … to be a Representative of a People divested of Liberty is to be a real Slave.” Royle apparently

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41 See earlier in this dissertation, pp. 76-78, for the Parson’s Cause, or the Two-Penny Act, and that dispute between political and religious elites.

42 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.
refused to print this, perhaps due to the governor’s influence. 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 *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. 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

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43 Jack Greene, *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), 158-162 and 289.


46 *Rind’s Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg: Rind, May, 16, 1766), 3.
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 often literate.” The gender gap “all but vanished.

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48 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 be able to read by 1765. See earlier here, pp. 57-59.
during the course of the 18th century,” Brown concluded.49 Historian Charles Clark agreed that the literacy gap between men and women was closing and suggested that in the colonies it was likely newspapers were read by men, women, boys, and girls. The British-American colonists, Brown said, were even more literate than residents back home in the mother country.50 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.”51 With evidence 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


51 Barker, Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 46–51.
century. Warner finds 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.”

Rawson suggests 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.

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.”

A second cultural shift was the way that the colonists were becoming more Virginians and Americans, and less focused on England. This change is reflected in the popular prints, and is at least partly driven by the medium. 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

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54 Schlesinger, *Prelude*, 53-55. On circulation, see also Clark, 259.
education and printing to drive what eventually led to a major shift of power.\textsuperscript{55} 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{56} Private letters and public news were traveling at much greater speeds than 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 Philadelphia, Boston, and New York just two to four weeks earlier, without the news having first to travel through England.\textsuperscript{57} Shipping speeds from London did not change substantially, and the \textit{Virginia Gazette} was still running European stories more than four months old.\textsuperscript{58}

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.\textsuperscript{59} The emphasis by the 1760s shifted to local

\textsuperscript{55} Brown, \textit{Knowledge is Power}, 3-5.


\textsuperscript{57} \textit{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.


and inter-colonial news, away from England, which had 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 in Charles-Town, South Carolina, but no one was hurt. 60 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-American. 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.” 61 Until direct and speedy communication

Regarding English model, see also Barker, Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 44, Clark, 3–5, and Thomas, History of Printing in America, 2–164.

60 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.

61 “Northamponiensis,” Virginia Gazette (Purdie, April 4, 1766), 2.
was established, there could have been no shared sense of crisis and no American unity or nation could have been imagined.\textsuperscript{62}

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. That 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 ran more than a full page, and often there were more than two full pages of ads. Most common were advertisements for land to sell, slaves to sell, or runaways who slave 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.”\textsuperscript{63} 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,\textsuperscript{64} to get them bread,

\textsuperscript{62} Benedict Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism} (New York: Verso 1983, revised edition, 1991), did understand how newspapers (and novels), “print as commodity” 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 is crucial to the functioning of a newspaper.

\textsuperscript{63} Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon, March 16, 1769), 3.

\textsuperscript{64} A variant spelling of empiric, one who believes that practical experience is the source of knowledge or a charlatan.
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 were an important part of an increasing market economy and consumer culture that prefaced social and political changes. David D. Hall identified printing, and especially the trans-Atlantic book trade, as a crucial part of the “consumer revolution” that connected Virginians both to the British back in Europe and to their fellow British colonists. The newspapers themselves as items to buy or sell, plus the advertisements within their pages, helped to drive that very economy. Newspapers were a crucial aspect of the new marketing techniques, which not only drove business, but also helped to drive social changes. In an astute analysis, T. H. Breen noted that, “advertising copy might best be seen as fragments of cultural conversations linking ordinary colonists

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65 *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, Jan. 18, 1770), 2.

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 …”67 Increased consumer marketing, visible on the pages of the Chesapeake colonies’ prints, helped to preface revolutionary changes there.

Increased commercial activities and personal consumption were also reflected in the growing popularity of taverns and coffeehouses, which also became hotbeds of political dissent. In a cultural center such as Williamsburg, where 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 wrote in his dairy 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. By 1765, Governor Fauquier wrote of sitting there with members of the council, almost being accosted by a Stamp Act mob. 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. There were as 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

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

70 *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, June 25, 1767), 3.

to read the newspapers and discuss politics; they were ideal sites for these public acts of affiliations,” such as toasts against importation, or for Revolution. These taverns and coffeehouses were important locations for the development of a critical political culture.  

Increased participation in civic discourse within the press and spurred by the press in public gatherings was a fourth cultural shift evident in Virginia. 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 the discourse that people had in public spaces. Printed material generated discussions in coffeehouses and taverns, centered on this literature. The participants were initially the elites, but by 1765 the discussion expanded to include a larger, middling group, including smaller farmers, craftsmen, and tradespeople. This was a key to development of political criticism, operating for the first time outside of the government. To see that printed material combined with public discussions to create a civic public that was able to be independently critical of eighteenth-century government is key to

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understanding what happened in pre-revolutionary Virginia. A growing and changing print culture, and the public discourse it spawned, played taking an important role in a social and political transformation.

The expanding market nature of colonial society was both a force for expansion of the reading world while it also tended to force printers 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’ normal, 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: “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

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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 views 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.  

Dissent and Press Clash

Another cultural shift evident by the 1760s in the Chesapeake colonies was an increase in dissent—open criticism of religious, political, and social leaders. The need for a media outlet to express that critical discourse was problematic, especially in Virginia,

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where the sole media gatekeeper was reluctant to stir up trouble. As long as printing was limited to one government-sanctioned press, there could be no real press freedom, and no local media outlet for dissent. As historian of the book Hugh Amory noted,\(^75\) printing was reflective of the power structure of the colony within which it existed. In Puritan New England, about which he was writing, printing was initially licensed and sanctioned, serving rather than challenging the power structure, and it was initially the same in Virginia. Eventually, the pressures of trade and merchandising altered the function of a press from merely a duplicator of official governmental and religious works to one of commercial output. As Amory and 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 press free to publish dissident ideas. With a second press, and consumer pressure to allow for a free “diffusion of useful knowledge,” the very character of printing and the very idea of a “free press” would change.\(^76\) T. H. Breen theorized the existence of a growing marketplace as part of a consumer revolution that was an important preface to political change. Newspapers—as part of this increased consumption—helped expand

\(^{75}\) Amory is one of the best known specialists in “history of the book,” a field that combines print history, bibliography, literary analysis, and cultural anthropology.

civic discourse.\textsuperscript{77} 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 such a strong, commercial economy developed. He suggested that the royal governor had a great deal of control over what was printed prior to 1766.\textsuperscript{78}

There was increasing frustration evident with the Virginia printer’s refusal to publish anything too radical, anything that might make either the royal governor or the burgesses uncomfortable. As early as 1754, a Virginia resident complained turned to the Maryland 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 …” 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 press in Maryland.\textsuperscript{79} Accusation of control by the burgesses surfaced in some disputes. The controversy over pay for the official Church of England ministers in the mid-1750s again brought accusations of censorship by the Virginia printer. Reverend John Camm was

\textsuperscript{77} Breen, \textit{Marketplace of Revolution}, xvi, 133, and 248.

\textsuperscript{78} Greene, \textit{Quest for Power}, 287-289.

forced to go to the Maryland press to print a pamphlet in answer to comments by two burgesses that had been printed in Virginia. Apparently, printer Joseph 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 demonstrates an ideal of a press not overtly controlled by the government, but rather more of one where the private printer had some discretion, which he believed he needed to exercise with care.

One researcher has suggested that for a brief time, the Virginia Gazette opened its pages to increased local controversy, leading to a reassertion of control by the governor just prior to the Stamp Act. Virginia printer William Hunter was ill and spent much time

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80 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. This dispute, also referred to as the Parson’s Cause, pitted the burgesses against ministers who contested an act that in essence lowered their pay.

81 Camm, Two Penny Act, appendix.
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 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, 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.” (From the context, the seemingly positive description of Stretch reads as sarcasm, while the writer appears even more negative toward Hunter.) While presumably not printed in its entirety in the Gazette, the text of the letter itself 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 the latest news. Rawson claimed the paper offered more lively political debate

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82 William Parks was succeeded as Virginia’s sole printer in 1750 by William Hunter, who in turn was succeeded by Joseph Royle in 1761.
under Stretch’s stewardship. This allegedly resulted in governmental pressure on Hunter, and forced the reassertion of gubernatorial control over the newspaper. The conclusion is largely conjectural, however, based on this one letter, as the five extant *Virginia Gazettes* from this period do not support the suggestion.\(^8^3\)

Control by the royal governors, however, constantly frustrated the more radical Virginians, and eventually led to action. In October of 1765, the *Maryland Gazette* published a letter written anonymously to the Virginia printer, but never published in that paper. It accused Williamsburg printer Royle of deceiving his readers and yielding to royal pressures. The Annapolis newspaper published the 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 …”\(^8^4\) This insinuated not just gubernatorial control, but also implicit bias in favor of corrupt ministers back in England. The more radical political element in Virginia increasingly turned to the Maryland press to distribute their ideas, and this partly fulfilled their goals, as the Maryland newspaper was

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\(^8^3\) “Tim Pastime” [pseudo.], letter to William Hunter, Williamsburg [?], [c. 1760], Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. 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, “Print Culture in Virginia,” 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.

\(^8^4\) A *Supplement to the Maryland Gazette*, of last week (Oct. 17, 1765), 1.
apparently read by a large number of readers in Northern Virginia. In a later Virginia Gazette, a “Man of Principle” wrote that Royle’s Williamsburg 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 either 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 to be inspected before it could be seen by the publick?

The author of this piece claimed that Royle acted as though he were dependent upon a license to print, and that the governor was checking everything before it could be published. The view expressed in this letter is that of a press tightly controlled by the royal governor, a press that was not suited to the needs of political allies 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 printers elsewhere to print anything critical of the British government or the local

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85 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).

86 Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon: August 22, 1766), 2. This was written after Royle’s death, after Purdie & Dixon took over the business.
governor, and readers also had to look elsewhere. Such censorship of the local press could also, of course, have been the result of several other reasons: 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 Dinwiddie, and was quick to form partnerships with leaders in

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87 There are numerous contemporary references to the governor’s control, including one letter to the newspaper where the author claimed the *Virginia Gazette* was hand-carried to the governor to be inspected before it was distributed. “Man of Principle,” *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon: August 22, 1766), 2. Even the governor admitted that the press was “thought to be too complaisant to me,” 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].

the House of Burgesses. In contrast to his predecessor, Fauquier had strong alliances with local leaders, including the powerful House Speaker and Colony Treasurer John Robinson. The colonists appreciated that Fauquier sometimes evaded obeying instructions from his superiors in London. Virginians considered the governor amiable, just, and “moderate in Power.” It is clear from the correspondence of Fauquier to his supervisors at the Board of Trade that he closely monitored what was printed in the newspapers, and used them to defend his actions. He often included copies of the Virginia Gazette and occasionally the Maryland Gazette in his letters to London. He 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.

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90 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 several times instructed 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-xlv. Fauquier obituaries in Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon, March 3, 1768), 2, and quotation from ibid., (Rind, March 3, 1768), 2.

91 Francis Fauquier to the Board of Trade, Williamsburg, April 7, 1766.
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. He suggested that some of the more radical burgesses 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 was gaining 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.

Historians have generally agreed who was involved in this somewhat rebellious move to bring in an opposition printer. 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.”

The claim of Jefferson’s involvement has been repeated in many books, including those by Arthur Schlesinger, Philip Davidson, Sidney Kobre, and an anthology edited by Bernard Bailyn.

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works have also included the assertion that the former president wrote about this specifically in a letter to Isaiah Thomas.  

In her dissertation, Laura Godfrey noted that it was extremely unlikely that Jefferson was that deeply involved, but few have noticed 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’s 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.”

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Only in the second edition of his book, however, had Thomas claimed Jefferson wrote this directly to him, a letter that does not exist in either Thomas’s extensive papers nor in Jefferson’s, despite the fact that the former president kept copies of virtually all of his correspondence in this period.97 Jefferson did write those words about the press being overly influenced by the governor and the procurement of Rind, with only minor discrepancies of capitalization and abbreviation, to William W. Hening just the year before Thomas’s book was first published.98 It is also known that Hening wrote to Thomas about another matter within a year of Jefferson’s letter.99 The first edition of Thomas’s book only states it was a letter from Jefferson, and does not indicate to whom it was written.100 In a copy of that book that Thomas notated 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.101 It seems


99 Thomas G. Knoles, Curator of Manuscripts, American Antiquarian Society, emails to author, Dec. 29, 2005, notes 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.

100 Thomas, History of Printing, 1rst ed., 2:148 fn.

101 Thomas, History of Printing, annotated 1rst. 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’s 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.
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 would have been well more than 61 years old and perhaps as
old as 83 when he made the 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.\textsuperscript{102}

Furthermore, the suggestion that Jefferson was a key player in the recruitment of
the new printer does not stand up. It would have been necessary, before Rind would leave
his lucrative partnership in Annapolis, to offer him either cash or a promise of becoming
the official printer of the colony, which would guarantee an income.\textsuperscript{103} Jefferson was 22
years old and not a member of the House of Burgesses until three years later. He was not
even a practicing lawyer until the following year. According to his own autobiographical
draft, he was a mere law student in 1765.\textsuperscript{104} Jefferson later had enough of a relationship

\textsuperscript{102} 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.

\textsuperscript{103} Rind’s name last appears on the \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{104} 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, \textit{Jefferson}, 1:3. Jefferson,
http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field(DOCID+@lit(tj010010))> (27 March 2005).
with Rind’s competitor, printer Alexander Purdie, that Purdie promised to pack up
Jefferson’s books for him.\textsuperscript{105} 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 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

\textsuperscript{105} William Fleming to Thomas Jefferson, Williamsburg, June 22, 1776, \textit{The Papers of Thomas
and patriotism of Richard Henry Lee, whom Godfrey includes in the group.\textsuperscript{106} These include men who supported Henry’s resolves against the Stamp Act and who later became leading Virginia supporters of the American Revolution.

The 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 successors to the former public printer, the deceased Joseph Royle, would normally be leading candidates, but Alexander Purdie and John Dixon’s combined 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 agreed, despite the fact that the Royle/Purdie & Dixon press had a history of subservience, and Rind was paid £375 a year for his official printing.\textsuperscript{107}

Effects of Competition

Rind’s arrival and appointment 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


\textsuperscript{107} Journals of the House of Burgesses (Nov. 7, 1766), 11:18, 11:72, 11:75. Purdie began publishing the \textit{Virginia Gazette} under his name, but soon joined with Dixon in a partnership.
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. The 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 interesting editorial insertion penned in, apparently by the original owner, noting this is the first well-conducted newspaper ever in the colony: “and the first that has ever been Established in this Province.” While it is not known who that writer is, his comment does demonstrate the hope of Virginia residents of 1766 to have a better-run newspaper

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108 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.

109 “Gazette” was the name normally used for the official newspaper, and Rind may have dropped his name from the masthead because official business traditionally went to the *Virginia Gazette*. See Godfrey, “Printers of the Virginia Gazette,” 254.
that would be freer to publish criticism of the government. Rind claimed his newspaper would be, “Open to all parties, but influenced by none.”

The original *Virginia Gazette* quickly joined the competitive fray, matching the new competitor’s moves and gaining for itself a reputation as a “free press.” Now published by Alexander Purdie, and soon joined by John Dixon, they quickly matched the lower price, and even announced a new, open press policy, before Rind’s 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 and renowned for its freedom: “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,” and “You, Sir, have behaved yourself as the director of a press ought to do.” However, these writers’ praise included 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

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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 both.”\textsuperscript{113} It was believed that only with two presses, only with print
competition, could the press be free.

Competition for subscribers from the \textit{Maryland Gazette} may have decreased as
options in Virginia increased. Anne Catherine Green took over the press in Annapolis
after her husband’s death in 1767, later in partnership with her son. Fewer letters and
fewer advertisements from the colony to the south are evident in the \textit{Maryland Gazette}
after 1768, and more from “Baltimore-Town,” and “George-Town.” The residents of
Northern Virginia, who formerly turned to Annapolis for news, could now rely on the
Williamsburg presses, open to more radical and diverse sentiment, and more accessible by
improved roads and postal deliveries. Even as the commercial center of Maryland shifted
to Baltimore, and a printer William Goddard began a newspaper there in 1773, the
Annapolis gazette continued.\textsuperscript{114}

In Williamsburg, Rind for a short time included a claim that his was the official
newspaper, demonstrating the transition was a confusing period for the press. The
masthead of his version of the \textit{Virginia Gazette} included the claim, “Published by

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Purdie & Dixon, Nov. 27, 1766), 1.

\textsuperscript{114} Thomas, \textit{History of Printing}, 542-543.
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, 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 Publick 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*. While Rind still had a lucrative government contract, the profit center had shifted to one where satisfying the public was paramount. By July, Rind dropped from his masthead the claim that he published by authority. The newspapers in Virginia had moved from a quasi-governmental source, where printers functioned as official printers, to a public business where marketplace competition mattered.

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115 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.


118 *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.
The content of the two gazettes reflects this change. With an enormous amount of coverage of the Stamp Act crisis and later taxation issues, neither newspaper any longer displayed the tendency to buckle under royal pressure. The two *Virginia Gazettes* ran more stories critical of the colonial government, Parliament, and the British ministry, including some that would not have run just a few years earlier. Purdie’s paper printed 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.” Each newspaper also covered the scandal following the 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 £100 thousand 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 critical of several of the colony’s chief justices regarding their actions in the very public killing of Robert Routledge by Colonel John

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

120 *Rind’s Virginia Gazette* (August 8, 1766), 2. The burgesses voluntarily separated the two offices following this incident, something the British authorities had long been demanding.
Chiswell. According to a detailed newspaper description, an angered but sober Chiswell stabbed his unarmed and drunk friend Routlidge through the heart with his sword.\textsuperscript{121}

Both \textit{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 criticized the higher court judges for releasing him despite the fact that they were out of session and did not examine any record or witness: “I ask, whether this act of the three Judges of the General Court be legal.”\textsuperscript{122} 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.”\textsuperscript{123} That both newspapers made public the details of this controversy, and included critical

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Purdie & Dixon, July 18, 1766), 2.


\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Purdie & Dixon, Aug. 29, 1766), 2.
comments regarding the actions of the colony’s elite, was something that would not have happened just a few decades earlier.

New commercial competition had led, by 1766, to less government control and a freer forum for civic discourse in both Virginia newspapers. No longer was one Virginia press controlled by the governor. After a second printer arrived 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 and sensationalism of a free press.”

Bridenbaugh suggested that the new freedom of the press did bring excesses and sensationalism, but the newspapers also now put the feet of the wealthy to the fire. One anonymous writer wrote of the changed newspapers, 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.”

Not everyone was happy, obviously, with the directions that the newspapers had taken.


125 Ibid., 209-211.

126 Virginia Gazette (Rind, Aug. 15, 1766), 2. Also quoted in Bridenbaugh, Early Americans, 206.
Both newspapers appeared to be directing their content at 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…”127 This seems to be an expression of dissatisfaction with the contributions of lesser sorts 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.”128 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 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.129 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.” One might add that the community also appeared to be the same, geographically and economically. What

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


129 Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics,’ ” 215-221. There are no specific circulation figures for the Virginia Gazette’s available.
Godfrey did not recognize was that this was not only because of Royle’s death, it was also because of the new commercial pressures, requiring both printers to respond to the needs of the customers.\textsuperscript{130}

Civic discourse in the colony, as displayed in the public prints, had reached a level of criticism not seen earlier, and the customary deferential attitude was giving way to dissidence. In a sly satire, “R. R.” noted that, “subordination is proper and necessary in all societies, and I am sure nothing entitles a man to superiority as much as family and fortune.” He went on to note that in a recent incident (the Chiswell case), some of inferior station had dared to judge their superiors. The writer suggested that all “great men” should be indignant, and some 37 people involved should be indicted; including the printers, the writers, and even the sheriffs. If not, he wrote, “I shall dispose of my estate, and remove with my family to some other part of the world, where I may better support my dignity.”\textsuperscript{131} This subtle mocking of those who had suggested that their high station should protect them from such indignities not only critiqued letters written in support of the actions of the elite regarding the Chiswell case, it critiqued the traditional deferential culture. It is a strong sign that this well-established social custom was in fact being eroded. The governor complained about such dissent in a letter back to London:

\textsuperscript{130} Godfrey, “Printers of the Virginia Gazette,” 289.

\textsuperscript{131} “R. R.,” \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Purdie & Dixon, Nov. 6, 1766), 1. He was referring to the Chiswell murder case, the actions of the judges involved, and the subsequent libel suit by William Byrd, a well-connected judge. See next chapter, pp. 278-280.
The people are sour partly occasioned by their private Distresses and partly by being spirited up by the news papers, every thing is become a Matter of heat and Party Faction, every thing is contested: a Spirit of Discontent and Cavill runs through the Colony, so opposite is the general Tenor of their Conduct to that Moderation, which the late Indulgencies received from their mother Country ought to inspire them with.\textsuperscript{132}

The deferential attitude to which Fauquier was accustomed was no longer visible on the pages of the public prints. Such deference had been replaced by dissidence.

Competition in the newspaper business in Virginia continued to expand, despite the difficulties that came with the Revolutionary War, demonstrating the commercial base for printing and publishing. When William Rind died in 1773, his wife Clementina Rind continued the printing business and the newspaper.\textsuperscript{133} When she died the next year, John Pinkney continued publishing until the war, when the second \textit{Virginia Gazette} was discontinued. (See Appendix A for a timeline of the confusing evolution of printers.) In 1775, William Hunter, Jr., son of the former printer, joined John Dixon in publishing the original \textit{Virginia Gazette}. They continued the newspaper until 1778, at which time loyalist Hunter left Virginia. The newspaper continued, moving to Richmond along with the state government in 1780. Also in 1775, Alexander Purdie opened a new printing firm in Williamsburg, and published a third newspaper called the \textit{Virginia Gazette}.

\textsuperscript{132} Fauquier to Board of Trade, Sept. 4, 1766, \textit{Papers of Fauquier}, 3:1382-1383.

\textsuperscript{133} King, “Women Printers in the Southern Colonies,” 218, and earlier chapter here, pp. 176-178.
**Gazette.** He gained the public printer contract from the government from 1776-1778. When he died in 1779, the shop and newspaper were taken over by John Clarkson and Augustine Davis, who published a *Virginia Gazette* until 1780. Their printing press also moved to Richmond in 1780, but they discontinued the newspaper. In 1774, a printing office was established in Norfolk, Virginia, and a newspaper with the name, *Virginia Gazette or, Norfolk Intelligencer* was published. At this point, there were four *Virginia Gazettes* being printed. In 1775, Royal Governor Lord Dunmore captured the Norfolk press in a raid, and published several issues of a royalist *Virginia Gazette* from onboard his ship.\(^{134}\) Despite the raging war, shortages of paper, and disrupted economy, competition continued for the Virginia newspapers, which in turn encouraged the growth of a culture of dissidence.

\*[134 McMurtrie, *History Of Printing in The United States*, 288–297. The capital of Virginia was moved to Richmond in 1780.]

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, continuing with political leaders clashing with religious leaders in the Parson’s Cause, and
emerging more broadly during the Stamp Act crisis. A simultaneously emerging print
culture not only reflected this dissidence, it was in fact a precursor for it. Print was a
necessary preface, but not sufficient in itself. The increasing economy of consumption
was an important force behind the increasing importance of books, newspapers, and
pamphlets. It also helped to encourage the subsequent 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.

The character of the newspapers in the colony of Virginia changed as a second
printer came to Williamsburg. The reason behind this new competition was more
complex than simply because Thomas Jefferson or other patriots had imported a new
printer to publish a newspaper with more radical sentiments. Competition and the
changing commercial climate made possible a change in factors of power and
domination. Government control dramatically lessened, and marketplace pressures
became paramount. The Virginia press became freer, more open to a wider range of
opinions including those critical of powerful members of government. Dissent was
printed openly—even that which was aimed at the elites—and it was written by those
farther down the social scale. 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. Governmental pressure no longer reigned supreme. Civic discourse in the colony of Virginia had broadened and become more radical.

Public opposition to the stamp tax was so universal across the British-American colonies, according to Warner, that it united “the colonists in opposition to the British for the first time.” It reinforced the symbiosis of print culture, republicanism, and political resistance. Print “sustained” a new local, public discourse that for the first time was linked together by printers’ networks that shared the printed word and were united in opposition. Colonial opponents and their allies in London—the merchants who relied on the American trade—put great pressure on Parliament to repeal the Stamp Act. Unrelated political battles led to the downfall of the Grenville government and in 1766, Parliament repealed the tax without it ever having been enforced. In the separate Declaratory Act, Parliament did assert its right to tax the colonies. Rather than end the dispute, it marked the beginning of the revolutionary struggle.

It was the very market commodity of print, allowing people to share the same language, which allowed them to relate together in new ways, to help them imagine a new community—a nation. In the British-Americas, the new distribution of political pamphlets and newspaper stories between colonies, especially during the Stamp Act

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crisis, helped to bring about public support for a new nation.\textsuperscript{137} In contrast to Habermas’ public sphere, this colonial discourse began with the elite bourgeoisie, as nobility was virtually nonexistent in the colonies. It started with a literary focus, as in Europe, then expanded to include debate on religion, and then transitioned to incorporate political debate and dissent. Habermas suggested the public sphere devolved as capitalistic accumulation consumed it. What we see here instead began as one aspect of that very expanding market economy. The burgeoning drive for consumption actually helped to create a civic public, rather than destroy it. This expanding civic discourse has serious implications regarding the development of freedom of the press.

\textsuperscript{137} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}.
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.*\(^1\) 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 Virginia Declaration of Rights sat down in 1776, the local public prints—far more than the political philosophers or the British legal precedents—infused their thinking. The author of this first-ever clause ensuring constitutional protection for freedom of the press is actually not known, despite the fact

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\(^1\) The intertwined societies of the entire Chesapeake region require inclusion of the Maryland press in this study. See page 6, fn 12, earlier in this dissertation. Ultimately, however, it is the development of freedom of the press in Virginia upon which this chapter focuses.
that 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.

The legal record regarding seditious libel within the colony reveals a great deal, and in the end, this research uncovers 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. That 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 is no historical accident. In colonial Virginia, these ideas were closely intertwined. This research concludes that it was the experiences of the local Virginia printers and the value placed on the civic discourse generated by their 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. This concept virtually rejects the acceptance of seditious libel prosecution and can be seen, developing over time, within the local public prints.
Historiography

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. 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. 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;³ the second is a more restrictive right that considers


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*
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.

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. He suggested that it was 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 public discussion of 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

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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 Thomas L. Tedford, and Dale A. Herbeck, Freedom of Speech in the United States, 4th ed. (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2001), 7-9.
rights is where it gives rise to unlawful acts, a difficult line to draw clearly, but one 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, with the idea of freedom of the press limited to meaning 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 as 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

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7 Leonard Levy, Freedom of Speech and Press In Early American History: Legacy Of Suppression (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), ix. This 1963 edition of his 1960 original work, Legacy Of Suppression: Freedom Of Speech and Press In Early American History (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), 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 Free Press,” section IV.
courts rarely overrule landmark cases abruptly, but rather chip slowly away at them.⁸ Both the courts and some scholars rejected Levy’s views. Law professor David Anderson criticized Levy’s interpretation as being too narrow. He suggested that Levy ignored the legislative history of the press clause, since it was inconsistent with his conclusion.⁹ 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.¹⁰ Close examination moves 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 was active lobbying for free press protection. More important than pinpointing the author, this chapter looks at why the amendment was written and adopted. 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 dissidence had developed that included public criticism of government. Finally, a free press was viewed as a crucial balance against potentially corrupt governments. This

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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 yet exist in Great Britain.\(^{11}\) The English Bill of Rights granted free speech only to members of Parliament while in debate.\(^{12}\) 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.\(^{13}\) For Milton, the freedoms of printing, speech, thought, and

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\(^{11}\) In 1682, printer William Nuthead and a press came to Jamestown. The governor and council ordered such unlicensed printing cease until the King’s wishes were known. Orders to not allow printing arrived the next year, and thus printing in Virginia did not take hold until the 1730s. William Hening, *The Statutes At Large; Being A Collection Of All The Laws Of Virginia, From The First Session Of The Legislature In The Year 1619* (New York: Printed for the editor, 1819-23. Facsimile reprint, Charlottesville: Published for the Jamestown Foundation of the Commonwealth of Virginia by the University Press of Virginia, 1969), 2:511-517. Douglas McMurtrie, *The Beginnings of Printing in Virginia* (Lexington, Va. [Printed in the Journalism Laboratory of Washington and Lee University], 1935), 6-7.


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 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 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.

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.” His concept of “natural law” has

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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. 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. In fact, Locke’s argument has been analyzed 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.”

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20 John Locke [and Lord Ashbury, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury], *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* (March 1, 1669), article 35. Online at the Avalon Project at Yale Law School at http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/states/nc05.htm. Experts suggest this Restoration constitution was co-authored by Locke’s mentor, Lord Ashbury. See Laslett, in Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 24-33.
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 print no longer 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] 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.
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. In 1730, 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

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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 to Louis Edward Ingelhart, Press and Speech Freedoms in America, 1619–1995: A Chronology (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997), 17. Research could not verify this claim. No footnote provides evidence, and Spotswood was governor only until 1722.


24 Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg: Parks, Aug. 6, 1736). Although this first issue is no longer extant, this was quoted in William Maxwell, ed., The Virginia Historical Register, and Literary Companion, 6 (1853), 21–31.
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, including 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 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 liberty 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


26 While not often recognized in discussions of the American Stamp Act, English newspapers were taxed from 1721-1855. Hannah Barker, Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1695-1855 (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 1, 31.


28 Barker, Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 12.
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 by then it was 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 “great bulwark of our Constitution.”

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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 jailed 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 press 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

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³² Silence Dogood [Benjamin Franklin], no. 8, in *The New England Courant*, (Boston: James Franklin, July 9, 1722) 49: 1.
opposition newspaper marked the last time that Massachusetts authorities tried to censor a newspaper by licensure.\textsuperscript{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 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

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\textsuperscript{35} J. Markland, \textit{Typographia. An Ode, on Printing. Inscr'd to the Honourable William Gooch, Esq.} (Williamsburg: Parks, 1730). \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, suggesting 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.
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numbers of readers to the public prints, including many from farther down the social scale. He originated the concept of letters to the editor, which made newspapers more participatory than ones that simply run 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. Addison and Steele’s focus was less on politics and more on 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

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37 Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 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.

in the *Maryland Gazette*, and “The Monitor” published in the *Virginia Gazette*. These regular columns monitored and commented on both society and the government.

These radical Whig writers also influenced development of 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 political philosophy, but also in the writing style and content of local contributors. 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 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

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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 (P&D, Nov. 29, 1770), 2.
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.

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


44 “Junius’s Dedication to the English Nation,” Virginia Gazette (Rind, May 21, 1772), 1.
Hence they cheerfully serve all contending writers that pay them well, without regarding on which side they are of the question in dispute.  

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.  


Expanding Press Freedom

*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 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 and the truth or falsity of the statement was not relevant. In fact, the truth of such criticism would merely exacerbate the legal travails.47 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

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.

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 \textit{Virginia Gazette} that some years earlier the man had been convicted of stealing sheep. Although the new burgess’s name 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 accused Parks of 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 …\footnote{Isaiah Thomas, \textit{The History of Printing in America, With a Biography of Printers} (2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. Albany, 1874. Reprint, edited by Marcus A. McCorison from the second edition. New York: Weatherwane Books, 1970), 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, \textit{Press and Speech Freedoms}, 22. Research in the \textit{Journals of the House of Burgesses} could not confirm this incident.}

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.\textsuperscript{50} This important step increased the ability of the press to criticize members of the government when truth was 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.\textsuperscript{51} Behind these charges were challenges to powerful members of the government contained in stories about the Chiswell killing of Routlidge published in the two rival \textit{Virginia Gazette} newspapers.\textsuperscript{52} Higher court judges were accused of releasing Chiswell without proper procedures. These judges were also powerful members of the governor’s council who were not accustomed to being publicly criticized. For William Byrd III, one of the judges in question, these accusations were too much. He brought libel charges against the printers and alleged author of one of the letters. The Grand Jury refused the

\textsuperscript{50} Levy, \textit{Emergence of a Free Press}, 60-61.

\textsuperscript{51} Purdie and Dixon were partners in publishing one \textit{Virginia Gazette}. Rind published a newspaper with the same name.

indictment, for “Not a True Bill.” “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. 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 a formal 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. In Virginia following Zenger, these examples demonstrate that seditious libel was becoming difficult to prosecute. The legislature

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54 “Philanthropos,” Virginia Gazette (Purdie and 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.

55 Levy, Emergence of a Free Press, 129-130.
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 press freedom to criticize 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. Recall the reader comment identifying a second printer as 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.”

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

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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. Several important points are apparent here. 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.

**Wilkes and Press Freedom**

The domestic dissent in England against the government there became visible in the *Virginia* and *Maryland Gazettes* as the Stamp Act crisis hit colonial shores in the

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57 *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie & Dixon, Nov. 6, 1766), 1.
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. Corrupt ministers conspired against traditional English freedoms, in this view, threatening not only the liberty of British radicals such as John Wilkes, but also the liberty of the colonists.\(^58\) Americans saw the Stamp Act as directly threatening colonial liberty by 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.”\(^59\) Royle’s \textit{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 needed to be


\(^{59}\) \textit{Maryland Gazette} (Oct. 17, 1765).
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. Ideas of 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 Wilkes’s travails. The *Maryland Gazette* mentioned Wilkes in a complimentary fashion as early as 1763, and repeatedly praised

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60 *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon. Nov. 6, 1766), 1. Shop foreman Alexander Purdie took over at the death of Joseph Royle, and John Dixon soon joined him.
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.62

Many testimonials to press freedom in the Chesapeake region alluded to efforts by the English government to stifle Wilkes’s publishing. An anonymous letter-writer from London notes eight attacks on the press by the government in the past year: “There

61 Wilkes is mentioned, for example in the Maryland Gazettes (Sept. 29, 1763, April 18, 1765, March 13, 1766, Sept. 25, 1766), quotation from Maryland Gazette (March 27, 1766), 2.

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 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.” 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 *The North Briton*. 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.” He was named so repeatedly that the Virginia and Maryland newspapers appeared at times to be almost

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63 *Maryland Gazette* (July 11, 1765), 1.


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.\textsuperscript{67}

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 prosecution, a major tactic in the ministry’s efforts to stifle Wilkes. In \textit{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.\textsuperscript{68} However, Wilkes’s example, more than any detailed philosophy of press freedom, was what inspired the Americans.\textsuperscript{69} 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 celebrated Wilkes’s banned issue of \textit{The North Briton}.\textsuperscript{70} In Pennsylvania, “When the Sons of St. Patrick forgathered on March 17, 1769, they drank as a matter of

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Rind, Jan. 11, 1770), 1, and 2.

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{The North Briton} (Dublin: John Wilkes, June 5, 1762), 1:1, quoted in Levy, \textit{Emergence}, 146.


course to ‘Mr. Wilkes,’ adding the sentiments: ‘May the liberty of the Press remain free from ministerial restraint’ …”\textsuperscript{71} In New York, the Sons of Liberty celebrated 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 the public Good to their private Interests …” \textit{The N.-Y. 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.”\textsuperscript{72}

The colonies had their own John Wilkes, according to historian Pauline Maier. When James McDougall wrote a pamphlet critical of the New York 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.\textsuperscript{73} Wilkes’s travails and fight for liberty were closely linked—in the colonists’ minds—with their own struggles. They viewed the British ministry’s efforts to stifle

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Pennsylvania Journal}, March 23, 1769, quoted in Schlesinger, \textit{Prelude}, 122

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{N.Y Gazette} (New York: James Parker, March 20, April 4, Nov. 2, 1769), quoted in Schlesinger, \textit{Prelude}, 113-114.

\textsuperscript{73} Maier, “John Wilkes,” 385-386. See also Levy, \textit{Emergence}, 80-82.
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’s travails supplied a very pragmatic and real 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. The concept of liberty of the press developed beyond Cato’s ideal in this period. Intrinsc 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 a crucial balance of power,
with press serving the function of aiding “the people” as a counterbalance to a powerful
government.\textsuperscript{74}

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 \textit{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{75}

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

\textsuperscript{74} 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.

\textsuperscript{75} “Philanthropos,” \textit{Virginia Gazette} (Purdie and Dixon, August 22, 1766), 1. Emphasis added.
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 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.  

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.

*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. John Adams noted in his widely circulated *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.”

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76 *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.

treatment in the *Boston Gazette* of 1768, he requested the lower assembly take action against the seditious libel. However, radical Samuel Adams dominated the house. 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.” 78 Another 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. 79 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 others have written, “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.  

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 freedom of the press—Virginia held a series of revolutionary conventions that led to a declaration of independence from England. 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,

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80 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.

81 Helen Hill Miller, George Mason: Gentleman Revolutionary (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 148-149.
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.”

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.”

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

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later confirmed Mason’s primary role in creating what is now known as one of the most important documents ever written in support of human rights.\textsuperscript{84}

George Mason is a lesser-known but important Virginia patriot leader who has generally been credited with composing the entire Virginia Declaration of Rights. While his contributions were a key to the very concept of a bill of rights, there are serious questions about the claim that Mason wrote the clause on free press. He was an intellectual leader of the Revolution and an important statesman. He played a crucial role in the creation of the United States Constitution, yet he refused to sign it or support it. 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.\textsuperscript{85} It is likely that Mason and other committee


\textsuperscript{85} See, for example, Schwartz, “George Mason: Forgotten Founder,” 154, Shumate, \textit{The Legacy of George Mason}, and Brent Tarter, “George Mason and the Conservation of Liberty,” \textit{The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography}, 99, no. 3 (July 1991): 279-291. No actual inventory of George
members read both Richard Henry Lee’s and John Adams’s 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. 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.

Mason’s bookshelf remains. However, Bennie Brown, the former librarian at Mason’s home, Gunston Hall Plantation, suggested what books might be likely to have been on Mason’s bookshelf in an unpublished list in 2000.


88 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, 1:364-365.1
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.” It was a watershed point in government, where the rights of individuals were seen as the source of governmental power, and as such, were protected from abuse by the government. While many of the rights show the influence of Locke, Mason made actual law out of 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.

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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 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.

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.”

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93 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, *Papers*, 1-276-278. For Jefferson’s first draft, see his “Later Reflections on the Declaration of Independence” in Gordon Lloyd and Margie Lloyd, eds., *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.
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. The northern Chesapeake colony had greater potential for problems in exercising religious freedom, with a large number of Catholics in residence, resulting 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.

While George Mason has been widely credited as the author 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. A fire later destroyed some of what he did save. No minutes or notes

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95 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. The proprietor of Maryland and his governor had more independence from the King and Parliament than did the royal governor of Virginia, who had to report to government superiors in London. This is not to suggest that the Maryland printer was free to publish anything at all, but until 1766, more radical sentiments are visible both in the pamphlets and in the newspapers printed there. 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.

96 Rowland, Life of George Mason, 1:preface to 53.
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. The authorship of the press clause has been left in question by more recent findings. 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.

97 Rowland, Life of George Mason, 1:237-241, assumed Mason’s claim to be accurate.

98 Irving Brant, 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
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. 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 or 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 …”

99 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

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Ludwell Lee’s handwriting is indeed the original. Most scholars who have studied it concur. Rutland, *Papers*, 1:274–291, confirms Brant’s analysis.

similar phrase. Mason had apparently also read the “Letters of Junius,” by an English author who also emphasized the importance of the liberty of the press. Junius was highly critical of Blackstone’s claims on seditious libel.

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 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. Apparently, Mason read the Virginia Gazette, as this letter was in response to something printed there. It is also likely that he read the 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

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100 [John Trenchard, and Thomas Gordon], “Of Freedom of Speech: That the same is inseparable from Publick Liberty,” (Letter no. 15), London Journal (Saturday, Feb. 4, 1720), from Cato’s Letters, 1:96-102. Craftsman (Dec. 9, 1726, June 24, 1727, Sept. 28, and Nov. 2, 1728), quoted in Black, English Press, 125, referred to liberty of the press as the chief bulwark of liberty and the constitution. In 1768, the Massachusetts House, dominated by Adams, declared, “The liberty of the press is the great bulwark of the liberty of the people.” From Bradford, Speeches, 119.


103 Mason, to the Committee of Merchants in London, Potomack, June 6, 1766, in Rutland, Papers, 1:65-72. There is no evidence this letter was ever published.
Annapolis. 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 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

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104 Mason owned land in Maryland. His first wife was from Maryland. For example, George Washington and George William Fairfax solicited for a builder for a new church in Fairfax County’s Truro Parish by advertising in the *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.


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 other committee members were chastised for the 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 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

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107 Broadwater, George Mason: Forgotten Founder, 81-89.

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.

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

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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 writer 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.110 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 Connecticut replied, “It is unnecessary. The power of Congress does not extend to the Press,” and the motion was voted down.111


Despite his role in its creation, Mason was one of three delegates who refused to sign the Constitution, regardless of pleas for unanimity.\(^{112}\) Mason had seconded a motion by Elbridge Gerry that a bill of rights be considered as part of the Constitution, but that proposition was unanimously 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 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.”\(^{113}\) It is thought that Mason


also was the author of a widely published article arguing against ratification under the pseudonym “Cato Uticensis.” This did not refer to civil liberties or freedom of the press at all.\footnote{Virginia Independent Chronicle (Richmond: Oct. 17, 1787), quoted in Merrill Jensen, ed., The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976), 8:70-76.}

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 …”\footnote{Richard Henry Lee to Samuel Adams NY, Oct. 5, 1787, quoted in Jensen, Documentary History, 8: 36-38. Lee was also arguing for the need for a guarantee of a jury trial.}

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.\footnote{Richard Henry Lee to Edmund Randolph, “Proposed Amendments,” New York, Oct. 16, 1787, quoted in Jensen, Documentary History; 8:61-67.} 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
Lee wrote a series of *Letters from the Federal Farmer*, that were considered some of the most effective, comprehensive arguments against ratification of the Constitution. 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 possibly particularly 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

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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.

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

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120 Henry speech, Virginia State Ratifying Convention, June 15, 1788, in ibid., 2:803-804.
121 Randolph speech, Virginia State Ratifying Convention, June 15, 1788, in ibid., 2:804-808.
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.\textsuperscript{123} 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.”\textsuperscript{124} The wording echoed the Declaration of Rights, but added speech and writing.

The Maryland ratification debate provided 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.”\textsuperscript{125} As legal historian David Bogen noted, “If freedom of the press 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 thought

\textsuperscript{123} Madison to Alexander Hamilton, June 22, 1788. Ibid., 2:848.

\textsuperscript{124} June 27, 1788, in Schwartz, \textit{Bill of Rights}, 2: 840-845.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 2:730-738.
that something in addition to prior restraint would violate such freedom, and thus their view of freedom of the press was broader than was Blackstone’s.¹²⁶

**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 did oppose 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.¹²⁷ 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.¹²⁸

Madison’s draft Bill of Rights used as its guidepost the Virginia Declaration of Rights, the similar bills of rights from various states (themselves mostly offshoots of the

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Virginia declaration), plus proposals from the various state ratifying conventions. Madison’s first draft, later altered by Congress, echoed the words from Virginia, but added the 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, shall be inviolable.” Madison had tightened the constitutional language, substituting the imperative “shall” in place of the more vague wording of Mason’s. 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. As Edmund Pendleton wrote to Madison, “… it will have a good effect in quieting the

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129 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.

130 Schwartz, Bill of Rights, 2:1009. While the press clause in the Virginia Declaration said, “press … can never be restrained but by despotic governments,” (See Appendix B here) 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.


132 Ibid.
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." 133

On August 13, 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 people peaceably to assemble and consult for their common good, and to apply to the government for redress of grievances, shall not be infringed.” 134

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 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 &

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134 Schwartz, Bill of Rights, 2:1148.
substantial Amendments, I have not the least hope.” After they emerged in final form, however, Mason did express “much Satisfaction,” but hoped for further additions.

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. 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 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.

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135 George Mason to John Mason, Gunston-Hall, July 31, 1789, in Rutland, Papers of George Mason, 3:1162-1167.

136 Mason to Samuel Griffin, Gunston-Hall, Sept. 8, 1789, in Ibid., 3:1170-1173.


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.\textsuperscript{139}

\textit{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 a 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.\textsuperscript{140} 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

\textsuperscript{139} Schwartz, \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{140} 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.
new Bill of Rights was considered of so little importance that before Jefferson even mentioned the amendments, he informed the governors of a new act to regulate fisheries and fishermen.141

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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 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.142 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.143 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.144 A published

141 Jefferson to the governors of the several states, March 1, 1792, Ibid., 2:1203.

142 Virginia Gazette (Aug. 6, 1736), no longer extant, quoted in Maxwell, Virginia Historical Register, 21-31.

143 Ibid. (Rind, May 16, 1766) issue number 1, 1.

144 On free press as an extension of the natural right of free speech, see for example, “Civis,” Virginia Gazette (May 18, 1776), 1. The same letter noted how free press was crucial to removal of “popish” kings,
letter in 1773 refers to the motto of one of the two Gazette’s, “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 free press is seen here as more than 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.

Civic discourse—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. Restrictive government control of the press was no longer tolerated. The examples of prior decades here at home, 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. The “Address to the Inhabitants of Quebec” stated that one of the important aspects of a free

\[\text{145 Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon, Dec. 23, 1723), 1, referring to the motto and editorial selection of their competitor, Mrs. Clementina Rind.}\]
press was how, “oppressive officers are shamed or intimidated, into more honourable and just modes of conducting affairs.”\(^{146}\) 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.”\(^{147}\) Press freedom was now viewed as a guarantee of other human rights.

Despite the evidence undermining Mason’s claim of authorship of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, many historians simply ignore the controversy and continue to credit Mason with the authorship. This leads to misunderstandings about its origins, which tends towards misinterpretation. Anderson and Levy both credit Mason with the first free press clause, 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.”\(^{148}\) 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

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\(^{147}\) Anonymous, London, April 19, 1765, Maryland Gazette (Green & Rind, July 11, 1765), 1.

studied. This research adds to 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, 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

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150 *Virginia Gazette* (Dixon & Hunter, Nov. 29, 1776), 1.
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. Transatlantic and inter-colonial concepts—from the ideas of the British opposition, especially the writings of “Cato” and John Wilkes—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 the theoretical basis. The travails of the opposition—especially Wilkes—set the practical example. 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 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. With the historical
background of an expanding civic discourse, beginning with religious discourse, including
the right to assemble and debate, and the idea of petitioning and instructing one’s
legislatures, it constitutes 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.  

Press, 1995), 373-402.

152 First Amendment to the United States Constitution.
8. Epilogue

By the time of the ratification of the Bill of Rights in 1791, our poor farmer’s boy Devereux Jarratt had risen to the ranks of the elite. Jarratt was a well-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 the 1730s, just as local printing began. 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 trade, laboring with 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. “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, printed material of all sorts was becoming more common in Virginia. Jarratt writes in his autobiography of hungrily reading borrowed books while on break from his plowing.¹

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 was taking 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, the colony became one that was largely based on print.² 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.

² While the dominant medium became printed texts, of course residual orality remained, and continues to remain even in today’s society.
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. 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 dissidence became accepted behavior. Ruling 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 not the sole cause of the change, it was an essential factor, a crucial antecedent, which

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allowed such a reshaping of culture to occur. Without the influence of print, such dissent would have surfaced much more slowly, if at all.

The rising civic public in eighteenth-century colonial Virginia resembles Habermas’s public sphere, but differs in composition and description. 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. Michael Warner adapted Habermas's 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. It also shows the growing market economy aided the increased discourse through the public prints: It was not a disintegrating influence in the time period studied.

Along with increased civic discourse and dissent came an understanding of the value of a press that was able to print and spread more diverse ideas. People wanted and expected a print outlet for dissenting ideas, and the concept of liberty of the press

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4 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).

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 this need, and from this dissent, came the idea of a constitutional protection of 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. 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.⁶

This dissertation 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 a lesser 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 new contextualizing of the origins of the constitutional right to a free press advances our

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⁶ 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. See Paul Siegel, *Communication Law in America* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2002), 118. Press has often been restricted in times of war or conflict.
understanding beyond the important work of Leonard Levy. In addition to the influences of John Locke 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 better explain 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 the 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.

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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 once-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 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 contributed 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 spread required the existence of print.

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 could not 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 happened. 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 one of many agents of change, setting the stage for the possibility. Print became an important engine of a new and broader public discourse, helping tie diverse colonists and colonies together in radical new ways of thinking. The colonies—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 the changes in early America. Applying theories of media ecology to historical studies demonstrates the influence of changes in media, helping to reach better understanding of 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. Better understanding of 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 “leveling,” he wrote, was having a negative influence on the new nation and its government. “This can arise from nothing so much as the want of a proper distinction, between the various orders of the
people.” For Jarratt, 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. 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

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8 Life of Devereux Jarratt, 14-15.


10 [Bolingbroke?] Craftsman, Dec. 9, 1726, June 24, 1727, Sept. 28, Nov. 2, 1728, quoted in Black 125.
of thinking, speaking, and writing.”\textsuperscript{11} 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.”\textsuperscript{12}


\textsuperscript{12} The Virginia Declaration of Rights (Williamsburg: May 27, 1776), section 12.
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Appendix A

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 Printers Move to Richmond

Norfolk

1766
William Rind (2nd Print Shop)

1775
Alexander Purdie (3rd Print Shop)

1780
John Clarkson & Augustine Davis

Lord Dunmore Captures Press
Appendix B

The Virginia Declaration of Rights

A DECLARATION OF RIGHTS made by the representatives of the good people of Virginia, assembled in full and free convention which rights do pertain to them and their posterity, as the basis and foundation of government.

Section 1. That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.

Section 2. That all power is vested in, and consequently derived from, the people; that magistrates are their trustees and servants and at all times amenable to them.

Section 3. That government is, or ought to be, instituted for the common benefit, protection, and security of the people, nation, or community; of all the various modes and forms of government, that is best which is capable of producing the greatest degree of happiness and safety and is most effectually secured against the danger of maladministration. And that, when any government shall be found inadequate or contrary to these purposes, a majority of the community has an indubitable, inalienable, and indefeasible right to reform, alter, or abolish it, in such manner as shall be judged most conducive to the public weal.

Section 4. That no man, or set of men, is entitled to exclusive or separate emoluments or privileges from the community, but in consideration of public services; which, nor being descendible, neither ought the offices of magistrate, legislator, or judge to be hereditary.

Section 5. That the legislative and executive powers of the state should be separate and distinct from the judiciary; and that the members of the two first may be restrained from oppression, by feeling and participating the burdens of the people, they should, at fixed periods, be reduced to a private station, return into that body from which they were originally taken, and the vacancies be supplied by frequent, certain, and regular elections, in which all, or any part, of the former members, to be again eligible, or ineligible, as the laws shall direct.

Section 6. That elections of members to serve as representatives of the people, in assembly ought to be free; and that all men, having sufficient evidence of permanent common interest with, and attachment to, the community, have the right of suffrage and cannot be taxed or deprived of their property for public uses without their own consent or
that of their representatives so elected, nor bound by any law to which they have not, in like manner, assembled for the public good.

Section 7. That all power of suspending laws, or the execution of laws, by any authority, without consent of the representatives of the people, is injurious to their rights and ought not to be exercised.

Section 8. That in all capital or criminal prosecutions a man has a right to demand the cause and nature of his accusation, to be confronted with the accusers and witnesses, to call for evidence in his favor, and to a speedy trial by an impartial jury of twelve men of his vicinage, without whose unanimous consent he cannot be found guilty; nor can he be compelled to give evidence against himself; that no man be deprived of his liberty except by the law of the land or the judgment of his peers.

Section 9. That excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

Section 10. That general warrants, whereby an officer or messenger may be commanded to search suspected places without evidence of a fact committed, or to seize any person or persons not named, or whose offense is not particularly described and supported by evidence, are grievous and oppressive and ought not to be granted.

Section 11. That in controversies respecting property, and in suits between man and man, the ancient trial by jury is preferable to any other and ought to be held sacred.

Section 12. That the freedom of the press is one of the great bulwarks of liberty, and can never be restrained but by despotic governments.

Section 13. That a well-regulated militia, composed of the body of the people, trained to arms, is the proper, natural, and safe defense of a free state; that standing armies, in time of peace, should be avoided as dangerous to liberty; and that in all cases the military should be under strict subordination to, and governed by, the civil power.

Section 14. That the people have a right to uniform government; and, therefore, that no government separate from or independent of the government of Virginia ought to be erected or established within the limits thereof.

Section 15. That no free government, or the blessings of liberty, can be preserved to any people but by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue and by frequent recurrence to fundamental principles.

Section 16. That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practise Christian forbearance, love, and charity toward each other.
CURRICULUM VITAE

Roger P. Mellen was born in Manchester, Connecticut. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Broadcast Journalism from Hampshire College, and a Master's Degree in Mass Communication from the University of Denver. He was employed as a television journalist and news producer for some twenty years before moving to academia. For two years, he was Assistant Professor of Journalism at American University's School of Communication. For three years, he was Coordinator of Electronic Journalism and Visiting Assistant Professor of Journalism at George Mason University's Department of Communication. When he resumed his formal education, Mellen was a Graduate Teaching Assistant for George Mason University's Department of History and a Graduate Research Assistant at the Center for History and New Media. Additional support for this research has come from a Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship from George Mason University's College of Humanities and Social Sciences, a McKinnon-Morton Dissertation Fellowship, and a research grant from the Cosmos Club Foundation. You can see more details on the Web at http://mason.gmu.edu/~rmellen/fullvitae.htm.

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