An Expanding Public Sphere: 
Women and Print in Colonial Virginia; 1736-1776

Introduction

The only newspaper operating in colonial Virginia in 1736 published a very remarkable poem. "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.¹

To today's reader, a plea for such equality would barely raise an eyebrow, but in colonial America, 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 shatters the idea that a woman's appropriate place was quietly shuttered in the home, not exposed to the public eye.²

¹ *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg: Parks, October 22, 1736), 3. Each *Virginia Gazette* had two dates, as this issue was actually dated "From Friday, October 15, to Friday, October 22, 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. The *Virginia Gazette* published most letters or articles either anonymously or pseudonymously. An anonymous letter writer contributed this poem, claiming the verses were presented to him or her by a lady. Several colonial newspapers published this same poem.

² 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
This is just one example of how colonial Virginia women had a greater role in the eighteenth-century world of print, and even public politics, than has generally been recognized by historians. 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.” However, some historians have questioned the complete separation of spheres and the closeting of women within the home. In examining women in the Southern colonies, Julia Cherry Spruill suggested some years ago, "Wifehood 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 note, however, that for a few 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. While recognizing that women had more political involvement, at least up until Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676, she suggested that living in the harsh new world proved a challenge to the unstable gender values brought with the colonists from England. As elite white males gained power, the private and public spheres developed greater separation in eighteenth-century Virginia, and women were increasingly relegated to the

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."

3 This is the somewhat 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 did note, however, that in the political fervor beginning with the Stamp Act crisis of 1765, women were increasingly caught up in the political public sphere.

solely private space, according to Brown’s analysis.⁵ Cynthia Kierner recently reached a conclusion consistent with that of Spruill, from more than fifty years ago, that elite women were not merely restricted to the domestic sphere, but actually involved themselves in the public sphere. Kierner also questioned the very distinction between the two spheres, challenging the traditional separation of the feminine domestic sphere and the masculine public sphere, 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 public sphere.⁶

This paper attempts to build on this research by focusing on the numerous printed pages left to us from eighteenth-century Virginia. While much history of print focuses on books and political pamphlets, and, in the south, the titles found on the bookshelves of the elite planters, this work instead examines less elite printed matter: books for women, the more numerous newspapers, and popular almanacs.⁷ While conclusions about elite women can be seen in their writings, explorations of less exclusive printed matter that reached the non-elites can help us to better understand the lives of a broader range of women and men.⁸

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⁸ In examining the involvement of women in the broad print culture of colonial Virginia, this paper is deeply 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-
accomplish this, the research here centers on the content, authors, and contributing writers of newspapers, almanacs, and popular books aimed at a female audience. While statistical studies may be useful, such data does not typically explore causality or culture deeply enough, giving us an incomplete picture. While this research does not ignore others' numbers, the focus here is on discourse—studying the content of popular texts, their authors, and their readers in Virginia, beginning with the earliest printed matter up until 1776. This colony is an important place to examine, since, while many of our early political leaders and ideas came from this colony, historians have more deeply studied Puritan New England. It has been argued that the Chesapeake area was more reflective of English society and may be closer to the source of national culture for America. While we know a great deal about the male leaders in Virginia, the intellectual development and the history of colonial women in the world of print remain under-explored.

century Europe, his ideas of the public sphere have been adapted by Americanists, such as 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, 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 Spread of Nationalism. Revised ed. (New York: Verso, 1991), who suggests that print capitalism was partly responsible for the rise of nationalism in Colonial British America.

9 Brown, Good Wives, 7.


11 Kevin Hayes, A Colonial Woman's Bookshelf (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), ix.
This paper finds 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.\(^{12}\) This participation may also reach deeper, beyond the planter elites, to at least some of the tradespeople, the medium farmers, or the middling sort. It concludes that, at least for Virginia, it was not only elite men involved in the debates and ideas that helped establish the ideas behind a new United States of America. Elite women and perhaps even women of the lesser ranks were involved in the public world of politics in print. This has serious implications for understanding how people of separate colonies conceived and formed a new nation.

**Literacy**

The ability to read and write is, of course, the key to involvement in the world of print, yet we are unable to ascertain just who could read and write in eighteenth-century Virginia. There is confusion for historians 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 under-represented in literacy estimates, and it is generally accepted that more early American women could read than earlier studies

\(^{12}\) Cott, in *Bonds of Womenhood* suggests erosion of an exclusively domestic sphere for women did not come until after the late eighteenth century. Linda Kerber in *Women Of The Republic: Intellect And Ideology In Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1980), especially 8 & 283, suggested that "Republican Motherhood," an intersection of the public world of politics and the private sphere of the home, began during the Revolution, and saw the non-consumption movement before the Revolution giving—for the first time—American women an important role in public politics. Rosemarie Zagarri, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1995), 28, saw the roots of protopolitical involvement for women possibly running deeper, beginning during colonial times.
suggest. There simply are no artifacts to help determine who could read. The usual practice is to measure the ability to sign one's name, usually in wills, but that is not particularly accurate as reading was taught separately, before writing, in colonial America. It is likely that many who signed with only a mark could read, and women were often left out of such legal processes, so might be vastly underrepresented in such analysis of legal documents. Reading literacy was perhaps much higher than writing literacy, especially for women. Probate records for the seventeenth century rarely mention anyone who could not read, and huge numbers of property transaction records lead one researcher to the conclusion that most women and men, in the century prior to the one being examined here, were capable of reading. 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.”

It is thought that Americans were highly literate, particularly the men, especially in New England. British-American colonists were more literate at the beginning of the eighteenth-century than any European population, with the possible exception of the Scots.

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

Many scholars have suggested that women had about half the literacy rate as men and that the south had much lower rates of literacy than New England.\textsuperscript{16} One early study estimated Virginia men’s literacy at sixty percent and women’s literacy at twenty five percent for the seventeenth-century.\textsuperscript{17} Newer statistical studies suggest higher literacy rates than earlier extrapolated. In closely examining just Middlesex County Virginia, Darrett and Anita Rutman found a higher literacy rate in women for the same period, but 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 this is an artifact of women retiring into the domestic sphere, no longer needing to sign names on legal documents.\textsuperscript{18} This does not necessarily suggest an actual decline in reading, especially at a time when print material was becoming more widely available, and the novel was just gaining popularity among women. In examining English readers, J. Paul Hunter disagreed with a similar theory of decline in women’s literacy, and suggests that about forty percent of English women could read in the 1750s.\textsuperscript{19} Most analysts suggest that American numbers were higher

\textsuperscript{15} Brown, \textit{Knowledge is Power}, 11-12.


\textsuperscript{17} Philip Alexander Bruce, \textit{Institutional History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century} (New York: Putnam, 1910) 1: 450-459, quoted in 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), 54.

\textsuperscript{18} Rutman, \textit{A Place in Time Explicitus}, (New York: Norton, 1984), 165-170.

than English literacy. While accuracy and applicability is not certain, these statistics do suggest that going into the early eighteenth-century, a third of women in Virginia could write, and it is quite possible, although not statistically demonstrated, that even more women could read, and that number is likely to have increased over time.

As Jürgen Habermas observed in Europe, literacy and the availability of printed matter prefaced the creation of an active public sphere. Reading was an important enabler, allowing anyone to become involved as critical thinking members of a public sphere involved in a Revolutionary political process, or in imagining a new nation where there had previously been only separate colonies. A transatlantic “Republic of Letters” developed in England, and in the English American colonies by the mid-eighteenth century. 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.  

Examining the difference between oral, written, and print-based cultures, anthropologists, psychologists, and historians have seen that only in literate

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20 Warner in *Letters of the Republic*, 1-174, suggests that printed material was an important aspect of a radical reconstruction of the public sphere in eighteenth century America. Print, he says, became an important element of the “public discourse” of civic, republican virtue that led to a radical reconstruction of the public sphere to one that legitimized criticism of government. This was an extremely important part of the rise of revolutionary thought in America. See, also, Habermas *Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and 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.

21 Ned Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture 1680-1760* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 31-56. To Landsman, the explosion of a reading public and increase even in a writing public—those who put their words to paper or to print—was part of a larger cultural change.
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.22

This is not to suggest causality on the part of writing. It is rather a critical precursor and interdependent on other factors in the social structure. As Elizabeth Eisenstein puts it, print is an *agent* of change, one of many factors, but one with an apparently subversive nature.23 As women in colonial Virginia were involved in the culture of printed materials, so too were they involved in the political changes to come.

**Books**

Women were active participants in the world of print as readers and even authors almost as early as the printing press was permanently established in the colony of Virginia. William Parks primarily printed government documents, religious works, and business forms in the first years after he opened a printing

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office in Williamsburg in 1730.\textsuperscript{24} He rarely printed full books, but rather sold imprints imported from England and often bound locally. However, in 1742 Parks' Virginia press printed the first cookbook in America; a book written by a women, aimed at female readers. \textit{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 . . ."\textsuperscript{25} It was an extremely popular cookbook in both England and the colonies, and in addition to food, included recipes (or "receipts") for medicines and salves.\textsuperscript{26} 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 . . ."\textsuperscript{27} In fact, a medical guide, \textit{Every Man his Own Doctor}, was stitched together with \textit{The Compleat Housewife} and sold together at one point, seemingly confusing the gender

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\textsuperscript{25} E. Smith, \textit{The Compleat Housewife: or, Accomplish'd Gentlewoman's Companion} . . . (Williamsburg: William Parks, 1742), 1. Eighteenth-century spelling and punctuation will be retained here, including the common capitalization of all nouns. However, complete titles of texts, newspapers, and almanacs will be edited down. They are typically longer than our average twenty-first century sentence, filling an entire title page. Gascoign's powder was a well-known cold medicine containing Oriental bezoar, white amber, red coral, crab's eyes, powdered hartshorn, pearl and black crab's claws.
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\textsuperscript{27} Smith, \textit{Compleat Housewife}, 215.
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distinction. The medical recipes in the cookbook and the combining of these two texts demonstrates that in many homes, medicine was the purview of the wife.

*The Compleat Housewife* is rarely noted in the historical lists of personal libraries of this period, probably because it was not stored with the men's books, but rather considered part of a kitchen.\(^{28}\) Its existence does suggest that enough women in colonial Virginia could read to support many printings of this book, and that their role extended from the kitchen into home medicine.

In the next decade, the Williamsburg printer's office, now owned by Parks' successor William Hunter, advertised for sale something very new; a 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 remarkably popular. It is likely that it was an import from England being sold in Williamsburg in 1756.\(^{29}\) 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...," thus 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.\(^{30}\) The price was advertised to be a low five shillings, "that it may be afforded cheap," suggesting that the printer was attempting sales to a less elite readership.\(^{31}\)


\(^{29}\) This title is not found in research of books published in Virginia. See Berg, *Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg Imprints*.

\(^{30}\) Hayes, *Colonial Woman's Bookshelf*, 103.
Religious leaders and other prominent men often attacked such novels as unhealthy and a waste of time. Many were portrayed as more acceptable morality tales, and at least 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*. At least one female reader of *Pamela* followed the heroine’s example of analysis and critiqued the novel. Another popular English novel, *The History of Ophelia*, was advertised in the 1764 *Virginia Almanack* for sale at the printer’s office. The author was a woman, Sarah Fielding, and many of the readers who made this new form of writing popular were women.

The rise of the novel has been seen as both a subversive influence and empowering to 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

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31 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 and may not be exact.)


34 Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.) However, Davidson talks of this "revolution" as beginning in the "latter portion of the eighteenth century," (page vii) despite evidence that such novels began selling in England and American colonies before the mid-century.
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 even more evidence of women reading and contributing to newspapers and almanacs than they did with the books of eighteenth-century Virginia. Women were quite involved in what some historians label the more "ephemeral press” from the very beginning. Parks published a newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette*, starting in 1736. In the very first year of publication, he published a poem, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, which 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.

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

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35 Hunter, *Before Novels*, 73.

36 Jeremy Popkin in "The Prerevolutionary Origins of Political Journalism," in *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.
This poem concludes with a plea, quite remarkably modern in its outlook, for equal treatment under the law.\(^{37}\) Historians have taken some small note of this argument for gender equality, but perhaps the remarkable nature of such an early complaint has perhaps not been given enough attention.\(^{38}\) This poem 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.

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: “Two Things were very remarkable at this Election: ... Two old Widows tendred, and were admitted to vote; and it is said, these Two old Ladies will be chosen Constables for the next Year.”\(^{39}\) This stands in stark contrast to the widely spread British ideals of female traits, such as published in the popular magazine, *The Spectator*. 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.\(^{40}\) 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

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\(^{37}\) Parks' *Virginia Gazette* (October 22, 1736), 3.

\(^{38}\) *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.

\(^{39}\) Parks' *Virginia Gazette* (June 24, 1737), 3.

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 only politics and serious commentary. The front page of one *Virginia Gazette* featured an advertisement from a woman requesting a response from the man who supposedly ogled her. Following a description of his appearance (she also noted that "he has very pretty Teeth"), she writes that she has observed him looking very longingly at her, and "desires the Gentleman to take the first handsome Opportunity that offers, to explain himself on that Subject." While this can be viewed as very 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 advertisement, a week later a woman signed "Sisely" posts a tongue-in-cheek attempt to return a found "bleeding heart" to its owner. The next year, "Helena Littewit" notes in a letter that women seem "out of their latitude" dealing with mathematics, but she sent the printer a poem that is a riddle, "it [the poem] has a meaning, and no meaning." While these and other letters appear to be written by women, there is no verification that in fact any of these articles were actually written by women. Publishing anonymously or with the use of pseudonyms, often with a classical reference, was quite common at this time. Men claiming to be

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41 Placement in colonial newspapers did not mean what it does today. The "lead story" was not always placed on the front page, rather news was printed in the order in which it came in, as typesetting, and printing was a time-consuming process. It was not possible to reorder a newspaper to set late arriving stories in a more prominent place.

42 Parks' *Virginia Gazette* (October 29, 1736), 1.

43 Parks' *Virginia Gazette* (November 5, 1736), 1.

44 Park's *Virginia Gazette* (July 22, 1737), 1.
women could possibly have written some of these examples.\textsuperscript{45} Either way, they demonstrate an acceptance of women into this public world of print.

There were a large number of letters apparently from women published in the \textit{Virginia Gazette}'s first several years. While some were matters of the heart, a surprising number 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 female author was familiar with political writers in London. She deferentially noted her lack of writing skills and also suggested that most of her fellow women were not literate at all: "... since it so happens that most of us are illiterate, it is certainly the greatest Piece of Friendship to give us seasonable Instruction. At the same Time I cannot forbear thinking it hard we should be attacked with a Weapon we are unacquainted with. (I mean the Pen.)"\textsuperscript{46} This writer may have been lacking in education, and belittled her own skills, but she wielded her quill as an extremely sharp instrument.

Advertisements in the \textit{Gazette} were another way that Virginia women took part in the public world of print. While many ads were aimed at women, a few actually featured women. Catherine Rathell ran several shops in Virginia and

\textsuperscript{45} Benjamin Franklin writing as "Silence Dogood" is perhaps the most famous example of a man writing pseudonymously as a woman. See, for example, \textit{New England Courant} (Boston: James Franklin, April 2, 1722), 1.

\textsuperscript{46} Parks' \textit{Virginia Gazette} (June 3, 1737), 1. For other contributions by women, see for example, July 15, 1737, November 12, 1776, November 26, 1776, June 3, 1737, p1, July 15, 1737, and July 22, 1737 page 1 and page 2. It does appear to this researcher that women appeared more often in the \textit{Virginia Gazette} in the first decade and again during the political crises of the mid-sixties and seventies. Perhaps as some researchers have theorized, women were becoming more marginalized in the domestic sphere, until a political crisis required their participation once more. An alternative explanation is that more sources for news, especially journals from England, cut down on the contributions needed from local sources considered marginal.
Maryland, and she become 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 the trades-people were usually men, widows and unmarried women often entered the public world of business, and as these examples demonstrate, even married women occasionally remained in a public sphere traditionally considered exclusively male.47

A few women in the colonial Chesapeake 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. He briefly operated a press in Virginia but the Royal Governor and his council did not welcome him there, and he was forced to move his press to Maryland.48 By February 1695, Nuthead's widow Dinah began to carry on his printing work, first moving 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


48 Wroth, 38-41. John Buckner brought printer William Nuthead to Jamestown in 1682, where he printed several things including Virginia laws recently passed. The Governor and the Council were not pleased with this unauthorized effort, and closed the press down.
she was illiterate to the extent of being unable to sign her own name." 49 Whether she or 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. 50

Printers in colonial America exercised an unusual combination of talents. They were craftspeople who got ink on their fingers, and operated a hand press requiring hard physical labor. They needed to be literary experts, skilled at writing much of their own copy, and editing the same for mistakes. They also needed to be smart businesspeople, capable of determining what the market required, and able to balance competing political interests to avoid generating trouble with the words and ideas that they printed. 51 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

49 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.

50 The Maryland presses and Virginia presses were closely related in the eighteenth century. Nuthead moved from Virginia to Maryland. William Parks ran printing presses in both Annapolis and Williamsburg before moving full-time to Virginia. Jonas Green’s partner William Rind set up a competitive print shop in Williamsburg in 1766. In addition, the *Maryland Gazette* appears to have had a large readership in northern Virginia, as many of the advertisements are from and about Fairfax County and Alexandria. See Edith Moore Sprouse, *Along the Potomac River: Extracts from the Maryland Gazette, 1728-1799* (Westminster, MD: Willow Bend Books, 2001).

51 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*. 
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 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 her 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.  

This is consistent with printer Benjamin Franklin's well-known ideas that while printers often cannot avoid

52 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. 

giving offense by printing opinions, he "refus’d to print such things as might do real Injury to any Person."\(^{54}\) While Franklin wrote of the importance of press freedom, he noted that the one area where it should indeed be limited was that of personal libel. Published opinion should be allowed, "as far as by it, he [the author] does not hurt or control the Right of another."\(^{55}\) 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.

At Clementina Rind’s death, both her successor as printer and the competitors' *Virginia Gazette* wrote eulogies extolling her virtues and merit.\(^{56}\) 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. Printing, as a business and profession was not the exclusive province of men in eighteenth-century Virginia. This has important implications for the make-up of the public sphere there, as the printer, with his or her hand on the flow of books and news information, was an intellectual leader and center of communication for the entire colony.

Almanacs were even more ubiquitous than newspapers in eighteenth-century colonial America. One estimate is that there was about one almanac for


\(^{55}\) Silence Dogood, number 8 of his pseudonymous letters, in *The New England Courant*, (Boston: James Franklin, July 9, 1722), 1.

\(^{56}\) John Pinkney’s *Virginia Gazette* (Sept. 29, 1774), 3, and Alexander Purdie and John Dixon’s *Virginia Gazette* (Sept. 29, 1774), 3.
every twenty-six white people in the colonies.\textsuperscript{57} These “. . . ‘almanacks,’ selling for a few pennies, found their way into practically every household” even those of the poor and illiterate.\textsuperscript{58} The price was low enough that virtually every white resident could afford an almanac: "Everyone had to have one." Thousands circulated in the colony of Virginia by the mid-eighteenth century. One estimate is that between 1764 and 1766, just one Williamsburg printer sold more than 4,000 almanacs.\textsuperscript{59} Almanacs were often used as a poor person’s diary. Blank pages were sometimes included, and many owners would write on and keep their almanacs as a diary for many years.\textsuperscript{60} One historian has suggested that even people who could not really read could use almanacs, filled as they were with astrological signs and symbols.\textsuperscript{61} It is evident that the almanac helped to spread the practice of reading well beyond the male elites, and this helped to expand the influence of the new print culture.

A philomath, the astrological expert who computed the signs and meteorological information, composed much of the early Virginia almanacs, often

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{57} Hall, \textit{Cultures of Print}, 60. It is estimated that very few Africans, African-Americans, or Native Americans could read at this time.


\textsuperscript{59} Berg, "Agent of Change," 32-34. Beginning in 1766, there were two printers in Williamsburg, and by 1776 there were actually three competing print shops, all issuing \textit{Virginia Almanacks}, and newspapers with the same name, \textit{Virginia Gazette}. Publications will be footnoted here with the name of the printer to attempt to avoid confusion.

\textsuperscript{60} James Adams Bear, and Mary Caperton Bear, \textit{A Checklist of Virginia Almanacs, 1732-1850} (Charlottesville: Biographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1962), viii, ix.

with additions by the printer.\textsuperscript{62} They originally offered little opportunity for the two-way communication such as that offered by letters printed in a newspaper, but it is obvious in small ways that almanacs were intended for women as well as men. In fact, one of the rare surviving almanacs appears to have been owned by a woman named Sarah Curry, as she inscribed her name at the top of the front page, as many almanac owners did.\textsuperscript{63} Another year included an epigram, "To a Young Lady with an Almanack bound," suggesting that within the slim volume, women could find more meaning than in an entire bookshelf.\textsuperscript{64} 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 even suggest almanacs had a greater political influence than generally recognized, with political messages discreetly sprinkled between predictions of weather and humorous stories. As the Stamp Act was being hotly contested, one \textit{Virginia Almanack} included a short ode to liberty, "Oh Liberty! thou Goddess, heav'nly bright, Profuse of Bliss, and pregnant with Delight; ..."\textsuperscript{65} Not so hidden among the amusing stories and astrological signs was this celebration of just how important liberty was to the

\begin{itemize}
  \item Bear, \textit{Checklist of Virginia Almanacs}, xii suggests that Theophilus Wreg [Grew] wrote the entire almanac, while many other philomaths composed only the astrology and weather.
  \item Theophilus Wreg, \textit{The Virginia Almanack for the Year of our Lord God, 1758} . . . (Williamsburg: Hunter, 1757), 1.
  \item \textit{Virginia Almanack} . . . 1771 . . . (Williamsburg: William Rind, 1770), 16.
\end{itemize}
colonists, especially at a time when many argued that liberty was being 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.\(^{66}\) The next year it was called, *The Virginia Almanack and Ladies Diary, for the year of our Lord, 1769 . . .*, in which the publisher proclaimed that women "will have a certain Opportunity of carrying on a poetical Correspondence with their Friends and Acquaintance, tho' at a very great Distance, even when they know not where to direct to each other . . ." This section included entertainment, diversions, enigmas, paradoxes, and "rebusses," or lines of verse inside of which was hidden a name or word. In answering one of the previous year's enigmas, what we might call a brainteaser, Miss Polly S. claimed in verse, "An honest Country Girl am I, Untaught to patch, or paint, or lie..." This suggests a young woman, not of the tidewater elite, was not only reading but also contributing to the almanac. A

\(^{66}\) The 1768 Rind almanac is not extant, 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.
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?"67 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.68

**Women and the Public Sphere**

The pre-Revolutionary move to boycott British consumer products did perhaps the most to nudge women into the political public sphere. 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.69 The implications of this involvement by women is better understood by reading what women wrote in the *Virginia Gazettes*. Verses composed by women of Bedford, Massachusetts to

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

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

support the non-consumption of tea were just one of many colonial actions by women republished in the Williamsburg newspaper:

The coarsest Food we choose to eat,  
Before we'll lose our Liberty.  
Don't cast Reflections on our Sex,  
Because the weaker Sort we be;  
We'll work our Fingers to the Bone,  
Before we'll lose our Liberty.  

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. "Much, very much, depends on the public virtue the ladies will exert at this critical juncture; permit us, therefore, to exhort you to be firm in withstanding luxuries of every kind . . . banish India tea from your tables."  

Another letter in the Virginia Gazette was addressed to wives of the members of Britain's Parliament. It 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!"  

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

70 Purdie's Virginia Gazette (March 17, 1774), 2.  
71 Rind's Virginia Gazette (Sept. 15, 1774), 1.  
72 Pinkney's Virginia Gazette (Sept. 14, 1775), 1.
Oppression of the other..." In the letter from "A Planter's Wife," the female author, writing to a female audience, clearly 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 goods. 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 sphere and active involvement in the politics of non-consumption.

Through print, the act of writing could blur the lines between the domestic and public spheres, 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 or pseudonymously, posing as a man, to gain credibility, as did Mercy Otis Warren in Massachusetts. 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

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73 Purdie's Virginia Gazette (March 4, 1773), 2.

74 South Carolina Gazette, reprinted in Rind's Virginia Gazette (September 15, 1774), 1.

75 See Zagarri, Woman's Dilemma.
break down the gender restrictions of the public sphere. In a sense, print culture was emancipatory for women by allowing them access to civic debate.\textsuperscript{76}

There were changes in just who governed colonial Virginia that predated the Revolution, and these changes can be seen in the composition of the public sphere. 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. Their political authority was eventually undermined by a wider group of influence that included a newly rising middling sort of lawyers and tradesmen, in addition to smaller farmers. They used the newly available print sphere to establish their social authority. Out of this burgeoning print culture emerged the first actual public sphere in Virginia. Its emergence and character diverge somewhat from the bourgeois transformation Habermas described in Western Europe.\textsuperscript{77} His theory of a public sphere was criticized as assuming that women and more plebian members of society were not involved, without any solid evidence that they actually were excluded. Some have theorized greater involvement by women and others who typically were excluded in analyses of the public sphere.\textsuperscript{78} Published accounts of

\textsuperscript{76} Warner, in \textit{Letters of the Republic}, uses the idea of print being emancipatory, but here I connect it specifically to women.

\textsuperscript{77} Rawson, in "Print Culture in Virginia Society," P 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. I argue that instead of a pseudo-public, the original elite structure relates more to a pre-modern monarchy, and a totally private sphere. We agree that out of the new print culture emerges a public sphere.
politics within an emerging print culture are viewed as a crucial precondition of any such public sphere. To take part in Habermas' public sphere, however, required taking part in discussions in taverns, coffee houses, and other public spaces, activities that typically excluded women. Women did form active, political, groups that could be considered a female public sphere, while debating and taking action over non-consumption and non-importation in the years leading to the Revolution. While this study provides no evidence of women's involvement in the physical spaces where men's public discussions took place, it does show women taking part in the public world of print, as both readers and contributors.

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 at least 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

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[78] Craig Calhoun, ed., Habermas and the Public Sphere, (Cambridge: MIT, 1992.)

[79] 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, and not broken down, by tavern custom.

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.\textsuperscript{81} While it was not usual or customary for women to vote, the earlier-noted 1737 \textit{Virginia Gazette} reported on two women voting in New York, and also during the Revolution, women in New Jersey were allowed briefly to vote.\textsuperscript{82} However, Lee was correct in the larger sense: any direct involvement of American women in the political process at this time was an aberration and not the norm.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Women in eighteenth-century Virginia were involved as readers, writers, and even editors of the public prints, especially the more ephemeral newspapers, almanacs, and inexpensive books. Women actually participated in the general public sphere, at the very least through their involvement with printed matters. Some of this material was directly political in nature, including pleas for political action, legal equality, and important involvement in boycotts of British goods, which also led to women holding public meetings and discussing the political matter of non-importation. There is no evidence here to suggest that large numbers of colonial Virginia women were involved to any great extent in the


\textsuperscript{82} Parks’ \textit{Virginia Gazette} (June 23, 1737), 3. Norton, \textit{Liberty’s Daughters}, see for example 50, xviii and 297-299.
political arena, or in the physical spaces of taverns and coffee houses where most public discussions took place. This examination of the output of the Virginia printing press suggests that at least some women 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. While elite women were certainly involved, so too were some 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 planter elite. There is no evidence that any slaves, servants, Native Americans, or women from the very poorest strata were contributing to this world of print. While the printed materials of this time and place may have been predominantly written by men and aimed at a male audience, the extent of this bias was not as extreme as it formerly appeared. The active involvement of women was greater than previously acknowledged, and has implications for our understanding of the society in general and colonial politics in particular.

As Habermas suggested, an active public sphere that deals with politics was stimulated by printed material and began in the literary, non-political sphere, and then evolved into a more politically centered debate. Women were involved in the print-centered public sphere of Virginia by the mid-eighteenth century. As the printed word is such a crucial element of the emerging public

83 Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere.*
sphere, this demonstrates that at least some women in late colonial Virginia were indeed part of that world of participatory politics. By the Revolution, at least some were publicly asking for greater legal and even political status.

There are potential implications here for future historical research. More research into the roles of women and print media of this time period can perhaps lead us to a better understanding of the ways in which women transcended any purely private sphere of the home. The more ephemeral prints of colonial Virginia do display a relationship between the culture of print and the public sphere, and do raise questions about a theoretical solid wall between the totally feminine domestic sphere and the exclusively masculine public sphere of politics. If women of Virginia stepped occasionally into the public sphere, research can no doubt show such movement in other colonies.

Connections between British-American colonies were made possible through the commonality of language, increased trade connections, and emerging consumerism as reflected in print capitalism. Shared communication through newspapers was a crucial basis of a national consciousness where there had once only been separate colonies. Inter-colonial communication, with revolutionary messages shared by both women and men, reprinted in local newspapers around the colonies, helped to create a new sense of a larger community.84 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, allowing for the shared experience and popular

84 Anderson, Imagined Communities.
mobilization that made the American Revolution possible.85 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 eventually the new republic.

In the end—at the beginning of the new republic—women were left out of the political process, for the time being. Women were a part of the growing print culture, in Virginia at least, and did seek to become part of the body politic, setting the stage for the myriad changes ahead.

85 Breen, Marketplace of Revolution, especially xvi, 314, and 329.
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