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"As Worthless as an Eldest Son Could Be": The Decline of the Virginian Gentry in the Revolutionary Era

Celina Mogan

The study of the gentry class of colonial Virginia provides scholars with much amusement and confusion. The members of the few families who dominated the political, economic, and social culture of the colony of Virginia lived an exciting life.¹ As they farmed tobacco and managed slaves on their grand plantations, they also served in the colonial government protecting their accustomed lifestyle. Their identity as both planters and public servants defined the group. Deference was the unwritten law of colonial Virginia society, where the lower classes looked up to the gentry as the ideal. The families were proud of their familial history in Virginia, many tracing their ancestors back to the early seventeenth-century plantations. As they wore the fashions of Europe, conducted the rituals of tea, and practiced the culture of the landed elite of England, the gentry understood themselves as equals with and deserving the same rights as their English counterparts across the Atlantic.² "Taking the English gentry as their model, they tried, insofar as colonial conditions would allow, to follow the ways of the country gentlemen of the

¹ Emory Evans, *A Topping People: The Rise and Decline of Virginia's Old Political Elite, 1680-1790* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

² Evans, "A Topping People," 170-1.

homeland.”³ This placed the Virginia gentry in an awkward situation on the eve of the American Revolution. They were required to redefine themselves and their place within a society no longer tightly bound to England.

The second generation of gentry patriarchs had established a successful system that did not fail them. The young gentry inheriting this lifestyle believed they were coming into all the power and prestige in Virginia, blind to the reality that their class was not invincible. They inherited political authority, slaves, thousands of acres in the best areas of Virginia. They had all the power and money of which they could have dreamt. However, by the 1790s, the gentry had lost their standing in Virginian society in both the economic and political realms.⁴ The men were losing their coveted spots in political leadership; for example, the first governor of Virginia after independence was not a member of the gentry.⁵ Additionally, the men found themselves deeply in debt, unable to pay back their creditors, but still making purchases on the latest styles and trends to maintain their gentility. By the 1790s, the gentry found their affluent lifestyle to be disappearing. How could this prestige melt away in such a short time? Had their fathers and grandfathers failed them, or had they failed themselves?

Much has been written about the colony of Virginia

³ H.D. Farish, ed., *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*, (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 1965), xvi.

⁴ Evans, “A Topping People,” 10.

⁵ Warren M. Billings, John E. Selby, and Thad W. Tate. *Colonial Virginia: A History*. (White Plains, NY: KTO Press, 1986) 356.

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both during the colonial years and during the Revolution, including works that discuss the gentry class within Virginian society as well as texts about specific gentry families. The texts that specifically discuss the decline of the Virginian gentry or even just the gentry class are few, however, as many take on the Revolution as a whole or choose to focus on a theme such as race or gender.

One of the most reputable historians of colonial Virginia is Rhys Isaac. His work, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, is often cited and considered a great source on Revolutionary Virginia.⁶ Although not completely focused on the gentry, this work covers a wide variety of factors that could affect the gentry's downfall. The time period Isaac covers is pre-Revolutionary, so he provides an incredible amount of context for the Revolution and the world of the second and third gentry generations. His scope is so broad and covers so many aspects of Virginian life that it fails, however, to dig deeply into any one topic.

Emory Evans provides the most comprehensive study of the Virginian gentry families in his work, *A "Topping People": The Rise and Decline of Virginia's Old Political Elite, 1680-1790*.⁷ Complete with statistics and numerical data as well as narrative evidence, Evans details the rise and fall of twenty-one gentry families.⁸ His scope is both broad and detailed about every aspect of Virginian life. He uses evidence from twenty-one gentry families with statistics and personal

⁶ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

⁷ Evans, *A Topping People*.

⁸ The family names Evans uses in his study and I will use in this paper can be found in the table on page 2.

accounts. For continuity, this paper will use the same twenty-one families as Evans.

The one major fault in Evans' text is the inadequate attention he pays to the decline of the gentry class.⁹ He places the discussion of the class's decline in his epilogue where he also provides a semi-detailed description of the Virginian experience leading up to the Revolutionary War. Evans presents the reasons for the gentry's decline—although part of the book's title—as more of an afterthought than as a main focus. He chooses to narrate the experience of the Revolution in Virginia while adding minimal details about the gentry class. Despite his focus on the rise and glory years of the gentry, Evans gives insufficient attention to their decline.

This paper will attempt to explain why the third generation of Virginian gentry failed to succeed in the years around the American Revolution. It will discuss the variety of factors for the gentry's failure to succeed into the nineteenth century. While some of the blame can be placed on the unlucky political and economic climates of their generation, most of their problems can be attributed to their own shortcomings. Among these reasons are the indebtedness of the families, the loss of political power as the Revolution approached, and the families' stubbornness to adapt to change. This paper will ultimately argue that the gentry experience a self-induced decline which was caused in part by their personal faults. Providing more evidence of the decline than Evans, this study will critique and add to the arguments he provides.

⁹ Emory Evans, "Epilogue," *A Topping People*, 177-202.

Indebtedness

The first and greatest failure of the gentry was their indebtedness that accrued throughout three or more the generations. Thomas Jefferson notes that "these debts had become hereditary from father to son for many generations, so that the planters were a species of property annexed to certain mercantile houses in London."¹⁰ The third generation of Virginian gentry was haunted by the incredible debt they had inherited. While the men had grown up in a world of luxury, they could not have been aware of the great debt for which they would soon be responsible. Data of the family accounts of around 1780 survives for only seventeen of the twenty-one families in this study, but even this data sample shows that these families had enormous debt. Most gentry families' debt averaged around £10,000 with a few owing more than £35,000.¹¹ These sizeable debts did not lend themselves to easy repayment—they were simply too great. How could things get so bad? The answer lies in the exceptional economic landscape in which their fathers raised them and the failure of previous generations to plan for the future.

Gentry families were not new to Virginia in the mid-eighteenth century; they had grown up in the colony's genteel culture and were accustomed to its comfortable lifestyle. Their fathers had established well-run enterprises with their slaves and fields, but

¹⁰ As quoted in Lawrence H. Gipson, "Virginia Planter Debts before the American Revolution," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 69 (July 1961): 259.

¹¹ Evans, *A Topping People*, 195-196. See chart on page 197.

they continued to look to western lands for increased property and diversification of wealth. The second generation of gentry had inherited a great blessing from their fathers but may have not inherited the same business aptitude. “Not a few appear to have been worse managers and businessmen than their fathers and grandfathers, or they simply were not willing to devote the necessary time to running complicated agricultural enterprises.”¹² Just because a man was the eldest son did not bestow upon him the ability to run an estate. Some were not skilled or intelligent, while others were simply uninterested in plantation life. Their genteel life lent itself to recreational pastimes such as gambling and horseracing, and some men found their days more enjoyable when occupied with recreation rather than business. But even for the most learned and savvy of businessmen, the economic world of tobacco was extremely complex. “Planters did not often understand the details of the sale of their tobacco.”¹³ This added another level of complication to an already shaky economic situation. Because they marketed their products in the metropole, the colonial patriarchs of gentry families were required to trust in merchants of London, many of whom they may have never met and who may not always have their colonial clients’ best interests in mind. The merchant was out to make money and would oftentimes return to the planters less profits and lower quality goods than they had expected.¹⁴ The gentry, through the complex and flawed agricultural and commercial system, heavily

¹² Evans, *A Topping People*, 112.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

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relied on others—merchants, slaves, and farming experts—for their economic success.

The system in place to sell tobacco and purchase British goods was far from perfect. The way tobacco was grown and sold had been evolving since the establishment of the colony. Beginning in the eighteenth century, planters sent barrels of tobacco to British merchants. This was an unstable situation as planters waited for the slow transportation of their product across the Atlantic, the sale in London, and the slow repatriation of their profits. They hoped and trusted that their British merchant would provide them with the best possible price on their tobacco. However, Virginians were oftentimes disappointed in their merchants.¹⁵ Many felt they were being cheated. John Custis IV complained of his poor prices on his tobacco and was "startled to see such a crop of tobacco given away."¹⁶ Gentry clients blamed their merchants for their problems. As Landon Carter wrote in his diary, "for by profession a broker is a villain in the very engagements he enters into. He must buy and must sell as cheap and as dear as he can."¹⁷ Despite the low profits returning on their tobacco crops, the gentry surprisingly did not fear increasing their spending. Many never knew how much their tobacco earned as their profits were used in London on luxury goods without ever being repatriated to Virginia.¹⁸

Although the gentry planters often blamed their

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 117

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 102

¹⁷ Rhys Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 255.

¹⁸ Evans, *A Topping People*, 102.

merchants for their apparently small profits, the fault cannot be solely placed on the dishonesty of merchants for the economic problems of the gentry. The gentry were spending far more money than their crops earned. An English visitor in the early 1770s commented that the problem was not that “their husbandry is not profitable,” but with “the general luxury and extravagant living which obtains among” the gentry.¹⁹ The gentry had a lifestyle they were pressured to maintain which included excessive spending. Robert ‘King’ Carter put it best when he wrote, “too many among us, when a good market offers for their tobacco, will lay it out in stores and leave their old debts unpaid.”²⁰ Throughout the eighteenth century Virginia became more established as a colony, and gentry families increasingly spent their earnings on luxury goods. “Indebtedness to British merchants grew as Virginian society expanded and became more stable.”²¹ A consumer revolution made buying manufactured goods affordable to a larger segment of the population.²² “In the 1760s the importation of these articles [luxury goods] increased 75 percent over that of the 1750s.”²³ The culture of buying was shifting as “manufactured goods inundated the households of people of all classes.”²⁴ The gentry, along with the

¹⁹ Ibid., 116.

²⁰ Ibid., 104.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Further reading on the consumer revolution can be found in T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²³ Evans, *A Topping People*, 169.

²⁴ Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, 52.

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common Virginians, were gaining wealth and power and wanted an external way to display it. Additionally, as common Virginians were suddenly increasingly able to buy, the gentry felt more pressure into buying bigger, better, and more fashionable goods. It was becoming much more difficult for the gentry to display their status through their appearance, because it was becoming easier for the lower classes to make purchases that gave them an appearance of wealth. The gentry began to add on to their fathers' estates, updating the furnishings to be the most fashionable and genteel, and importing the latest fashions from London and Paris, ensuring their appearance would set them apart from the more common Virginians. Excessive buying, especially after the consumer revolution, contributed greatly to the indebtedness of the gentry.

Appearance was of great, if not indeed the greatest, importance to the gentry. Thus they avoided any acknowledgment of their debt and poor business dealings. It is hard to imagine that the gentry failed to realize their debts were increasing or that they ignored the fact that they did not have the funds to repay their merchants. Therefore, they did their best to keep their debts secret to the outside world in order to maintain the appearance of gentility and grand wealth. "As debt grew, there also came increased sensitivity to criticism and the questioning of one's ability to pay."²⁵ There are multiple instances of gentry patriarchs writing that they were offended that anyone would question their ability to repay their debts. For example, when merchant John Norton wrote to John Baylor insisting

²⁵ Evans *A Topping People*, 171.

on repayment, Baylor wrote back saying he “took the word Insist...extremely unkind.”²⁶ Thomas Jones replied to his merchant, who had written asking for money, that “I must say...you did not treat me genteely.”²⁷ While many of the gentry must have known that their fellow elite were indebted to British merchants, they would not allow their appearance to give them away. They would continue to buy the newest trends from England, fooling others into thinking they did not have economic troubles. Increased spending only led to increased debt, putting the family into a worse financial situation.

The economic climate of the end of the eighteenth century is important to factor into the debt problem of the gentry. In the mid-eighteenth century, about twenty-five years before the Revolution, the economic situation in Virginia was ideal. “The tobacco trade tripled between the 1720s and the 1770s.”²⁸ Planters believed the golden age would never end and saw no foreseeable problem with spending more than their tobacco was making. On top of that, British merchants did not see much of a risk extending more credit to the gentry. “Yet from a British viewpoint the investment was generally good business...merchants normally competed intensely to advance credit to planters in order to secure as much of their product for resale as possible.”²⁹ Merchants were not going to stop advancing credit to the gentry any more than the gentry was going to stop spending. Both merchants

²⁶ Ibid., 118

²⁷ Ibid., 119

²⁸ Ibid., 111.

²⁹ Billings, Selby, and Tate, *Colonial Virginia*, 202-203.

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and planters found great profit in the mid-eighteenth century. This growth in wealth meant an increase in debt, and the second generation of Virginia gentry could not see the end of their golden years.

Once the Revolution began, the economic situation in Virginia declined. Most of the late 1770s and 1780s saw terrible economic conditions. This was due to the political consequences of the American Revolution, but also to causes not related to the political climate. The American Revolution caused problems such as the closure of ports, the inability to trade with Britain, and the freeing of the slaves by Governor John Murray, the Earl of Dunmore.³⁰ Additionally, British merchants were recalling their debts. "With the collapse of their own sources of credit, British merchants were by 1773, pressing their Virginia clients for payment, bringing suit against them in the courts of the colony if necessary, and denying most of them additional credit."³¹ On top of this, the planters were affected by problems out of their control. For example, in late spring 1771, there was a great flooding of the James and Rappahannock Rivers. The colonial government attempted to help the plantations, but many had not yet recovered by the time of the American Revolution.³² Additionally, the gentry continued to use credit to purchase necessary goods and luxuries. The economic situation for the gentry was just as unstable as the political situation with Britain. Ralph Wormeley Jr. describes a colony where there was "little money in the

³⁰ Evans, *A Topping People*, 195.

³¹ Billings, Selby, and Tate, *Colonial Virginia*, 322.

³² See footnote on pages 321-322 in Billings, Selby, and Tate, *Colonial Virginia*.

country, no price for lands, none for Negroes, except on credit, and laws of so little stability.”³³ Despite all of this, the gentry had hope that economics would return to the way they were in the past.

Fortunately—at least in the eyes of the gentry—their increased debt did not contribute to a loss of social status. While other aspects of the life of the gentry seemed doomed, the families were able to maintain their position at the top of Virginian society. The men of the gentry class were still highly educated, well-mannered, and well-connected in society. The already established deference between the gentry and common Virginians was mostly kept intact. They continued to be addressed with respect and maintained the social standings they had always followed.³⁴ This was reassuring for the gentry as their world fell around them. Despite their maintained social standing, the gentry did suffer from their increasing debt. Many were required to make repayments, leading to loss of land and property. Others decided to ignore their debt but lived with the internal struggle and anxiety. But while the gentry were happy to maintain deference in Virginia, they found themselves losing their greatest power. The most significant fall the gentry experienced was their loss of political power and position, not their social standing. Social standing and political power were not, in the decades after the Revolution, dependent upon one another.

While debt was not a direct cause of the gentry's decline, it was an important factor in the decline of their influence and participation in politics. With their

³³ Evans, *A Topping People*, 196.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 172-173

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increased debt, planters were now required to spend more time at home managing their estates rather than devoting time to travel and participation in public service.³⁵ Following many years of neglecting their estates, the gentry now realized that they needed to focus on managing their plantations. The gentry's absence in Virginia's politics proved to be an important factor in their decline, especially because of their great political influence in previous years.

Loss of Political Power and Influence

An identifiable marker of the power of the Virginian gentry was their presence in the colony's politics. As the eighteenth century saw its final decades and the conflict of the American Revolution was becoming more serious, the presence of the gentry in Virginian politics was dwindling.

The colony of Virginia had two governing bodies. The House of Burgesses, or the lower house of the General Assembly of Virginia, was a democratically elected body where each member represented a county in Virginia. The other body, the Governor's Council, or Council of State, consisted of around a dozen men who were elected by the Crown for life. They were the wealthiest and most prominent members of Virginian society. Their role was to advise the governor on matters of the colony. These two bodies made up Virginia's colonial political structure and power.

Members of the gentry dominated both the House of Burgesses and the Governor's Council. This gave them the ability to ensure matters of the colony were

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 199

decided in their favor. Similarly, the governor wanted to keep the gentry happy, not only to protect his own interests, but to keep the colony thriving. In a letter to the Board of Trade, Lieutenant Governor William Gooch protected the gentry by pursuing more favorable tobacco trade laws and preventing laws which allowed for easier debt collection.³⁶ The status of the colony and its people, among the rest of the British colonies, was important to the Governor and to the gentry. Thus, the gentry's ability to win seats in the House of Burgesses or be appointed to a seat on the Governor's Council allowed the gentry to create and reinforce laws that benefitted their class, and for most of the colony's history the system worked extremely well in the gentry's favor.

The greater political influence of the gentry may be seen in the change in power from the Governor's Council to the House of Burgesses.³⁷ The number of gentry in the Governor's Council was diminishing as the Virginian families increasingly identified themselves as Virginians rather than as British. The gentry then focused on being elected to the House of Burgesses, where they expanded the power of this section of colonial authority. Social rank would be retained through election to the House, as well. Especially for the Speaker of the House, the most powerful politician in Virginia, an elected seat in the House of Burgess meant that the system of deference in Virginia society remained intact with the gentry on top.

³⁶ Paul G. E. Clemens, ed., *The Colonial Era: A Documentary Reader*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008): 127-130.

³⁷ Evans, *A Topping People*, 23.

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From a first glance, the overlap of the political system and its elected representatives appears to make sense. Simply, the gentry claimed to act as the big planter representing the smaller planter. The gentry were the group with the free time and disposable income needed to travel to Williamsburg and serve in the government. In addition to deference, this claim made it easy for the gentry to be elected year after year. However, despite what they intended or thought they were doing, the gentry who represented their county in government ended up serving their own interests. The needs and desires of the large plantations did not completely coincide with those of the smaller planter.

One important aspect of their political influence was that the gentry families were only comfortable being ruled by their peers. They had the "belief that power should be, as in the past, 'in the hands of Substantial landholders.'"³⁸ They feared a future with a government ruled by the middle classes or those with "new money." They believed that the only way the colony could be successful and remain equal with the British was for it to be ruled by the landed elite. It was not surprising that their definition of public service was consistent with creating and enforcing laws that benefitted themselves. This could really only be achieved by the gentry dominating the colonial government and ensuring that every decision went their way.

The gentry used their political power to their advantage. Some laws were beneficial to the colony as a whole, while others were used to serve the gentry's

³⁸ As quoted in Evans, *A Topping People*, 201.

own interests. For example, in 1762, the Virginian colony government passed a bankruptcy law. One merchant commented, "The Virginians are in a bad plight and no appearance of recovery except they can get an Act passed to exclude 'em from paying their Debts."³⁹ As the ones creating these laws, the gentry were able to address and fix their own situations by passing laws that got them out of trouble, saved or made them money, and ensured their position on the top of society.⁴⁰

Serving in the colonial government was not all business for the gentry. Members traveled to Williamsburg, where they were able to participate in nightlife as well as socialize with their peers, something that was not common to the large planter. The capital city of Williamsburg perked up when the government was in session. The men resided in one of the taverns located around the Capitol building where they were surrounded by other gentry and wealthy Virginians. They socialized in the taverns and coffeehouses where they discussed politics and entertainment as well as partook in the current gossip. There was other entertainment available in Williamsburg such as traveling shows or plays. The gentry also loved to gamble and won or lost large sums of money while playing cards or betting on horseraces. These trips to Williamsburg exacerbated the gentry's

³⁹ As quoted in Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 61.

⁴⁰ John E. Selby, *The Revolution in Virginia, 1775-1783* (Williamsburg, VA: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1988), 244.

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debt problems, by taking them away from their plantations for many months as well as allowing them to waste money by excessive eating, drinking, gambling and spending on other entertainment. The time and money commitment became too overwhelming and the gentry needed to remove themselves from the government. Not only were they not elected, they were not putting themselves in the running to be elected and serve. Many of the gentry families needed their patriarch at home and could not afford for them to spend months away traveling. It was a tough decision for many, but spending the time on their plantations and families was crucially needed.

While some gentry did choose not to run for office and remain home on their plantations, others wanted to serve in office, but were not reelected. One example of this is Landon Carter who was defeated in the election of 1768. Carter writes in his diary, "I can well remember when I was turned out of the House of Burgesses. It was said that I did not familiarize myself among the people."⁴¹ In an era as significant as the American Revolution, voters wanted to elect men who would represent their desires and needs. The viewpoints and stances of the gentry were not what some voters were looking for. The gentry were not seen as obsolete; they appear to be respected but not always taken seriously about their political stances and positions.

The gentry's participation in the House of Burgesses was dwindling, but remained strong until

⁴¹ Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom*, 300.

Governor Dunmore dissolved the group in 1774.⁴² Political participation in Virginia following this dissolution was through committees and conventions held in Richmond and Williamsburg. The new political situation the colonies were in made way for creating new laws and new structures of government, and for the gentry, a group not fond of change, this was a hard situation.

A clear representation of the decline of gentry in government was seen between the Fourth and the Fifth Virginia Conventions. In December, 1775, the Fourth Virginia Convention was held in Williamsburg, Virginia. The political stance of the men was changing as they moved closer to supporting independence. The gentry families were well represented at this convention, about seventeen of the twenty-one gentry families were present. There was a steep drop in the few months that separated the Fourth and Fifth Conventions. In May, 1776, the Fifth Virginia Convention declared their support for independence. About one-third of the members were newly elected from the emerging elite families who had more free time to serve and were open to new ideas. Patrick Henry, a man far from being gentry, was chosen as the new governor of Virginia. This was the beginning of the downfall of the gentry, who were perceived as being old-fashioned and not open to new ideas, and in a debate on something as important as independence, the positions of the members were crucial. The

⁴² George F. Willison, *Behold Virginia: Fifth Crown, Being the Trials, Adventures, and Disasters of the First Families of Virginia, the Rise of the Grandees, and the Eventual Triumph of the Common and Uncommon Sort in the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951) 365.

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declining representation of the gentry in these important Virginia Conventions is a significant indicator of their decline in public service in the 1770s.⁴³

The emerging powerful non-gentry politicians both scared and comforted the gentry. They were familiar with these men, as they had served with them in the House of Burgesses. Many were of "new money," those who were just as wealthy as the gentry but were not a part of the old gentry families. The gentry had experience serving alongside many of them in government and were aware of their choices and perspectives. However, they were nervous about placing so much power in the hands of the "inexperienced,"⁴⁴ as Landon Carter put it. The gentry were nervous about their new colleagues' inexperience both in government but also in the elite Virginian society. The gentry were proud of being Virginians and did not want that identity to be tainted. In any case, in stepping down from public service, the gentry knew the hands in which they were leaving the government. While they were familiar with their replacements, the change that was to come in Virginia scared them.

Change was on the horizon for the gentry. They were giving up their political power and the benefits it provided. They also risked losing status and deference among the lower classes as the new emerging elite were taking their places. While they understood that change was necessary, they were reluctant to give up the lifestyle to which they were accustomed. They would resist any change and found themselves

⁴³ Evans, *A Topping People*, 189-191.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

stubbornly stuck in the past.

Resistance to Change

The young, new patriarchs were certainly expecting to live the genteel lives of their fathers, lives of luxury and extreme power. They had grown up watching their fathers leave for Williamsburg to serve in the government, they attended church services on Sundays and saw the way their fathers were treated by the lower classes, and they sat at the dinner table listening to the news and gossips brought by the dinner guests. Hoping to inherit similar lifestyles, they were surely disappointed to find the only thing they inherited from the past was debt, failing plantations, and well-known family names. Whether or not they were previously aware of their fathers' economic and agricultural situation, they were suddenly thrust into lives of responsibility. These young men were finding themselves in a new position of power that they had long awaited. They were the new patriarchs of their estate having to make decisions to keep the plantation successful and thriving. And because they believed they were to inherit the lifestyle of their fathers, they were determined to regain that lifestyle for themselves. "They 'believed that the path to prosperity lay in following the traditions of the past. The image of the independent planter who grew tobacco and dominated the household powerfully resonated with them' even while they were already witnessing 'the collapse of many tidewater families.'"⁴⁵ These newest members of the gentry class were determined, despite indicators of

⁴⁵ As quoted in Evans, *A Topping People*, 201.

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the futility of this path, to live the life of their ancestors and their way of accomplishing this was to follow the ways of the past.

The determination to carry on the life of the gentry tobacco planter was very strong in these young men. Remembering the past and the life led by their ancestors pushed them even further in their pursuit of the plantation life. "The young men believed they could prosper as planters despite the picture of economic distress among them. They wanted to live, as they believed as their parents had, entertaining lavishly and importing foreign goods."⁴⁶ And as the gentry found themselves in more and more trouble, the further they romanticized the past. These failing men believed they were born too late. They lamented over the great gentry lives of the past. They were disappointed to find that "the 'old gentry' had disappeared."⁴⁷ However, the evidence did not stop them from continuing to pursue a planter life.

The gentry's stubbornness to change is visible in many ways. First, the new gentry were set on being planters. They inherited grand plantations with many slaves and, in their minds, they inherited a planter way of life. They were not interested in learning of their other career options, because they did not envision themselves as anything other than planters. They only saw their status being tied to the land, the crops they planted, and the grandness of their plantation homes. While the up and coming non-gentry wealthy young men of Virginia used the avenues of the law to gain status and wealth, the gentry were standing by the

⁴⁶ As quoted in Evans, *A Topping People*, 200.

⁴⁷ As quoted in Evans, *A Topping People*, 201.

traditions of their past. It was only to be expected that the failures of the gentry would lead to the emergence of a new Virginia elite that included Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and James Madison.

Second, the plantations of the young gentry continued to be planted with tobacco. Many of their fathers had begun to experiment with crop diversification planting crops such as grain, which they hoped would be easier to grow and be easier sold in the colonies. They looked into other investments while continuing to survey and purchase western lands. These men knew that tobacco was not going to fuel their wealth in the long term, especially with decreasing prices and the common planter's ability to grow tobacco and purchase more land. However, the new young patriarchs looked to the past beyond their fathers' time and wanted to mirror the lifestyle of the wealthy tobacco planter. The men believed that "if they were going to maintain their lifestyle and status, they would have to do so through planting alone."⁴⁸ So, in an attempt to decrease debts, they sold newly acquired lands to reduce debt and only planted tobacco on their families' plantations. This proved to be a terrible choice as tobacco was expensive and hard to grow, requiring many more slaves than most other crops. Additionally, the tobacco continued to deplete the soil of its nutrients, resulting in decreasing success of the crop each year.⁴⁹ Philip Vicker Fithian, a tutor on a gentry plantation notes in his diary, "their land in

⁴⁸ Evans, *A Topping People*, 171.

⁴⁹ Louis B. Wright, *The First Gentlemen of Virginia: Intellectual Qualities of the Early Colonial Ruling Class* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1940), 351-2.

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general being so poor that it will not produce it—and their method of farming is slovenly, without any regard to continue their Land in heart, for future crops—they plant large quantities of land, without any manure and work it very hard to make the best of the crop.”⁵⁰ Unfortunate problems with weather, such as the flooding in the early 1770s, caused problems with the gentry’s tobacco crops. Also, trade with England was decreasing, if not halted, by the time these men were marketing their tobacco. This meant they needed to sell their tobacco elsewhere, which usually resulted in less profit. Yet despite these problems, the men were set on growing tobacco. “They were trapped by the assumptions of a staple culture.”⁵¹ This stubborn misunderstanding of growing tobacco only contributed to their decline.

Another way the gentry men stubbornly fell into decline was their weariness of living a more simple life as a way of decreasing their enormous debt. While they did cut back on a few luxuries, they did too little to make a decent dent in repaying their debt. To maintain their status and power through deference, the men felt that they needed to keep up the appearance of wealth. “Pressure to maintain a genteel lifestyle created insecurity because they had to be constantly vigilant to maintain ‘complete gentility’ on the English

⁵⁰ Philip Vickers Fithian, “Fryday April 1st 1774” in *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*, edited by Hunter Dickinson Farish, (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 1965), 88-89.

⁵¹ Timothy H. Breen, “The Symbolic World of the Tobacco Planter” in *Major Problems in Colonial History*, edited by Karen Ordahl Kupperman (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1993), 439.

model.”⁵² They continued to buy and increase their debt, ignoring the declining economic situation in which they found themselves.

The Revolution presented additional problems for the young gentry. They found themselves needing to choose a side, Loyalist or Patriot, which was hard for many who considered themselves equals with the landed elite of England. Although the Virginian gentry had some representation, many of these men did not participate in political events of the Revolution such as the Continental Congress. Virginia was, rather, represented by an emerging new elite while the gentry were at home tending to their failing plantations. Additionally, they were accustomed to their imported goods and struggled as they were unable to make new purchases through their British merchant. Along with the other colonists, the gentry were affected by closure of ports and the inability to trade with England. Life was unpredictable as change was constantly happening around them.

There are two good examples of the gentry being directly affected by a Revolution-related decision. The first was in 1775 when Governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, promised freedom to any slave who left their homes and fought for the British.⁵³ Landon Carter, along with many of the gentry planters, suffered from this proclamation. Carter writes in his diary of the struggle, “much is said of the slavery of negroes, but how will servants be provided in these times? Those

⁵² Evans, *A Topping People*, 170-1.

⁵³ “Lord Dunmore Promises Freedom to Slaves Who Fight for Britain, 1775,” *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791*, 2nd edited by Richard D. Brown, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 259-60.

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few servants that we have don't do as much as the poorest slaves we have."⁵⁴ The gentry planters, who heavily relied on their slave labor, struggled to run their plantations as they were in constant fear of their slaves running away. Another decision that was troubling and difficult for the gentry was the Continental Congress' passing of "The Non-Importation Agreement" during the Virginia Association in the fall of 1774. This act declared, "To obtain redress of these grievances which threaten destruction to the lives, liberty, and property of His Majesty's subjects in North America, we are of an opinion that a nonimportation, nonconsumption, and nonexportation agreement, faithfully adhered to, will prove the most speedy, effectual, and peaceable measure."⁵⁵ Virginia had signed this agreement, pressuring the gentry into its terms. While the gentry did want peace and an end to the conflict and troubles with Britain, these were hard terms for the gentry to adhere to.⁵⁶ They were being asked to give up the luxuries that defined their class. The Revolution was not presenting the gentry with many changes which pleased them.

Overall, the young gentry men were unwilling and stubborn to change. They were determined to be successful tobacco planters and live the lives of their fathers and grandfathers. As they faced increased debt they failed to live a more modest lifestyle and drastically cut back on their spending. And as the Revolution changed the identity of the colonies, it also

⁵⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁵ "The Non-Importation Agreement" as cited in Billings, Selby, and Tate, *Colonial Virginia*, 330.

⁵⁶ Billings, Selby, and Tate, *Colonial Virginia*, 335.

changed the gentry's world and presented them with new insurmountable challenges.

Conclusion

As a whole, the third-generation gentry class failed to live up to the lives of their fathers and grandfathers. They were unable to save their families or their plantations from the many problems they faced. While their decline was largely due to their own shortcomings, the third generation did inherit a terrible economic situation unfamiliar to their fathers. The debt they inherited and contributed to became so large it was completely unbearable and impossible to repay. This contributed to a loss of political power as the gentry stopped running for public office to focus on their plantations. The biggest failure of the gentry, however, was their inability to react to change and adapt to the changing world. The gentry feared the future and held onto the memory of the past so tightly that they were unable to see the reality of their situation. They believed that the old ways would always be the best ways. Their wariness of change can be seen in their planting of tobacco, failure to diversify, and continued buying of luxurious goods. Although they did what they thought was best, they were unable to pull themselves out of difficult times, as a new emerging elite took their place on history's main stage. They were truly "as worthless as an eldest son could be."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Evans, *A Topping People*, 202.

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