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The World of Goods in Pre-Revolutionary Virginia

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THE WORLD OF GOODS IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY VIRGINIA

by

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B.A. May 2010, College of William and Mary

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ABSTRACT

THE WORLD OF GOODS IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY VIRGINIA

Ronald C. Merritt, Jr.
Old Dominion University, 2014
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This paper will study the effects that the expansion of consumerism and non-importation had in the colony of Virginia. It will analyze the validity of the arguments made by T. H. Breen’s *The Marketplace of Revolution*. Breen’s first contention was that a world of goods had been formed in the American colonies and that this consumer culture helped unite the colonists. His second contention was that the non-importation and non-consumption associations were successful in unifying the colonies and quelling opposition to the Continental cause.

Evidence of the growth of consumerism in mid-eighteenth century America will be analyzed and a determination will be made regarding whether consumerism created a sense of national identity amongst the colonists. Furthermore, a thorough examination of the success of the non-importation and non-consumption associations in Virginia will be conducted.

This work will conclude having proved that the world of goods in colonial Virginia did indeed play a role in creating an American national identity. Furthermore, the non-importation associations were successful in creating a sense of inter- and intra-colonial unity in Virginia. However, while the earlier Stamp Act association led to policy changes in Great Britain, the later Continental Association of 1774-1775 failed to have an impact on British policy towards the colonies.
This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Ron and Tammy Merritt, and to Dr. Paul Mapp, Associate Professor of History at the College of William and Mary. Ever since I was a young boy my parents shared a love of learning, reading, and history with me, and encouraged me to read and investigate everything. By exposing me to libraries, museums, etc., my parents instilled in me a desire to always want to know more and provided the opportunity for me to find the answers. As for Dr. Mapp, his undergraduate courses on colonial America and the American Revolution provided the initial spark that led to this work.
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Many individuals have contributed to the successful completion of this thesis. Buckets of gratitude are extended to all the members of my thesis committee. Words cannot express the bounds of my gratitude to Dr. Jane Merritt, my thesis director, for all the hours she dedicated to guiding my research and editing this manuscript. Her enthusiasm and patience kept me going when I was floundering. I thank Dr. Timothy Orr for his guidance and for providing the initial framework to begin this project. His encouragement made me realize that this was the topic that I should research. As for Dr. Ingo Heidbrink, I appreciate his mentorship as my academic advisor. His suggestions and conversations were truly beneficial to my success as a graduate student. Others who were extremely helpful to the completion of this thesis include the library staffs at Old Dominion University, the College of William and Mary, and the Library of Virginia. Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge my parents for their moral and financial support, since in most situations, it’s always about the money.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The origins of the American Revolutionary War remain intensely debated even to this day. Most scholars agree that the Revolution was provoked in large part by a variety of political and economic issues that became aggravated in the aftermath of the Seven Years War. It is undeniable that economic issues inflamed tensions between the colonies and Britain during the 1760s and the 1770s. In his book *The Marketplace of Revolution*, T.H. Breen argued that the consumer oriented culture of the North American colonies played a role in causing the War for Independence. Breen asserted that consumer goods helped to create a sense of shared identity in the colonies. According to Breen, consumer objects gained the ability to “speak to power.” As colonial interests were threatened by British policies, the colonists organized boycotts to protest British economic decisions. These boycotts spread across colonial borders and helped to give the colonies a common set of goals, as well as established bonds of trust amongst the colonists.  

This thesis seeks to examine the influence of consumerism in the thirteen colonies, with a special emphasis on Virginia during the years 1774-1776. First, it seeks to determine how extensive consumerism was and see if it created any sense of national identity among the colonists. Most secondary sources seem to support the idea that consumerism played a large role in the colonial American culture. There is little agreement, however, on whether this “world of goods” strengthened or weakened the colonies’ ties to Great

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Britain. This analysis suggests that consumer culture was prevalent in pre-revolutionary Virginia and did have a unifying effect on the colonies, but also produced strong economic and social divisions between the colonists. After examining the extent of consumerism in the pre-war Virginia, this thesis will examine the success of the Continental Association of 1774. The Association was the last and most widespread of the non-importation movements in the thirteen colonies. Research suggests that the Association and county committees were largely successful in unifying the colonies and quashing dissent, but failed to produce meaningful action in Great Britain.

Breen’s primarily economic analysis of the origins of the American Revolution was somewhat groundbreaking. During the nineteenth century, American historians perceived the American Revolutionary struggle to be an exceptional event in world history. In the words of Gordon Wood, the Revolution was seen as a “peculiarly intellectual and conservative affair, as something brought about not by actual oppression, but by the anticipation of oppression.” Furthermore, many early American historians saw the triumph of the colonists as pre-ordained.²

This traditional view of the Revolution was overtaken in the early twentieth century by the Progressive school. Broadly speaking, Progressive historians, including Charles Beard and Arthur Schlesinger, argued that the causes of the American Revolution were primarily economic in nature. Progressives either saw the American Revolution as a colonial rebellion against an imperial power, or as an economic conflict between the upper and lower classes in colonial society. To Progressives, the high minded rhetoric and political philosophy that so dominated the pamphlets and newspapers of the day were

merely propaganda designed to mobilize the mob against British policies. The Revolution pitted conservative loyalists against patriotic radicals, who sought to use extreme measures to promote their cause. Progressives saw the American Revolution as being driven initially by the interests of the colonial elites and merchants.³

The scholarship of the American Revolution underwent a radical shift during the mid-twentieth century. The economically based theories of the Progressives were largely abandoned. A new wave of scholars, led by Edmund S. Morgan and Bernard Bailyn, in books such as Morgan’s *The Stamp Act Crisis* and Bailyn’s *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, restored political theory to a position of central prominence in Revolutionary history. Political pamphlets were no longer seen as empty propaganda or tools of demagoguery, but also as statements that reflected the political beliefs of their authors.⁴ These Republican, or Neo Whigs, theorists claimed that social and political issues were far more important in propelling the British colonies into war with Great Britain than economic issues. In fact, this new wave of scholars argued that mob violence, like that which occurred after the Stamp Act and Tea Act, had long been a part of colonial life.⁵ Scholars such as Gordon S. Wood believed that the American Revolution was truly radical but “in a very special eighteenth century sense.” In other words, the Revolution was radical because it overturned existing government and social institutions, essentially creating a new American society.⁶ Breen, in contrast, viewed the Revolution in more economic terms. Unlike earlier economic studies of the Revolution which focused on class differences, however, Breen focused his study on the rise of

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⁴ Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, v-viii.
consumer culture. Breen did not dismiss the rhetoric of the Revolution as propaganda or focus on colonial disunion and class conflict. Instead, by examining consumerism, he focused on how goods and economic issues could take on political and social meaning.

T. H. Breen’s *The Marketplace of Revolution* examined the role that consumer culture played in instigating the American Revolution. Breen argued that during the eighteenth century Britain’s North American colonies changed from being agriculturally based to being more consumer oriented. The number of goods purchased by Americans of all social classes increased. Luxury items such as utensils and fine clothing came to be owned even by backwoodsmen. By the time of the Seven Years’ War, most American colonists enjoyed a higher standard of living than their British counterparts.\(^7\) Many Americans believed that the British soldiers who came to North America during the French and Indian War viewed colonial affluence with envy and perceived that the colonists were not paying their fair share of taxes. The colonists, for their part, thought that they paid sufficient taxes and that their great consumption was fueled not so much by enormous wealth as by their extreme vanity and extravagance.\(^8\) By their own admission, the colonists were ostentatious and tended to judge people by the quality of their attire and the goods that they owned. Paintings from the period emphasize clothing over physical appearance, perhaps as a way to indicate social status. This materialistic, but cash poor, society led colonists to spend beyond their means, often purchasing goods on credit.\(^9\) The raising of higher taxes on the colonists made it harder for farmers to obtain credit, plunging many citizens into debt. In short, according to Breen, the “Myth of the

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Hospitable Consumer,” led Americans to believe that their overindulgence had caused the British to impose higher tax rates on the colonists.  

The thirteen colonies’ value as a consumer society for Britain was understood in Parliament. Many in both the colonies and England recognized that one of the primary goals of the colonies was to purchase consumer goods manufactured in Britain. This economic mercantilism allowed the British to send surplus goods to the Americas with the expectation that the colonists would buy them, providing British manufacturers with a captive market in which to sell their wares. The colonists recognized this relationship and appreciated it. In fact, this led to the acquisition of consumer goods being seen as not only a way to display wealth and proper social etiquette, but as a political act. By buying goods, the colonists were seen as performing both a political duty and supporting the British crown. Furthermore, consumer goods helped to create both a sense of shared identity among the colonists and to establish a strong tie back to Great Britain. All colonists purchased goods from Britain, giving them something in common and strengthening their bond to the British homeland.

Unfortunately, the consumer revolution produced class conflict in the colonies. Many upper class colonists feared and resented the rise in prosperity among middling and lower sort farmers. Class distinctions in the colonies were maintained primarily through the ostentatious display of luxury items. The rise of consumerism threatened traditional class boundaries, deference, and the social standing of the elite. To make matters worse, many feared that unbridled consumerism would lead to a collapse of social mores.

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causing the colonies to descend into widespread decadence and violence.\textsuperscript{13} As for gender distinctions, consumerism gave a great deal of agency and economic power to women, who had previously been excluded from economic decision making.\textsuperscript{14}

According to Breen, as colonial opposition to British policy grew, the colonists realized that they could attempt to leverage the British into being more lenient by boycotting consumer goods and only buying locally made products. Through non-importation, colonists hoped to turn their overreliance on British goods into an asset. While the early associations formed in response to the Stamp Act and the Townshend Acts had little success, the later Continental Association formed by the First Continental Congress was quite effective. In order to enforce these boycotts, the colonies formed associations and lists and used public pressure to encourage people not to buy British goods. These boycotts, combined with their shared consumer based culture, allowed bonds of trusts to form between the colonies and played a large role in the formation of an American national identity.\textsuperscript{15}

Breen’s arguments are interesting, and many of the topics he examined have been researched by other historians. One notable problem in early research of colonial economics was its focus on exports and production rather than on imports and consumption. In their 1976 work \textit{The Economy of British America}, John McCusker and Russell Menard argued that this lack of focus on consumption represented a serious oversight in early American economic history. One of the earliest scholars to focus on

\textsuperscript{13} Breen, \textit{The Marketplace of Revolution}, 148-159.
\textsuperscript{14} Breen, \textit{The Marketplace of Revolution}, 172-182.
\textsuperscript{15} Breen, \textit{The Marketplace of Revolution}, xv-xviii.
colonial consumption was Carole Shammas. Shammas analyzed economic growth both in England and in the North American colonies. One of Shammas’s primary objectives was to demonstrate that the rise of industrialization was not a watershed event in the nineteenth century, but rather the culmination of various economic and social changes that had been underway for centuries. Shammas argued that the mainland colonies still imported many of their consumer goods, even though they had more land than their English counterparts. This was likely due to the need of planters to keep most of their men out in the field to grow cash crops such as tobacco. Planters only started producing a large amount of local goods when they began to acquire large numbers of slaves, many of whom were too old for field work. Shammas also inferred that during the eighteenth century the price of consumer goods began to drop, allowing consumers to purchase more goods without expending more capital.

Breen placed some emphasis on how consumerism altered class and gender distinctions in the colonies. Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor’s The Ties that Buy, examined the role that women played in consumer culture in the New World. O’Connor analyzed the role women played in the economies of Charleston, South Carolina, and Newport, Rhode Island, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. She explored the ways in which women sought to find paid labor, enter into business, and make monetary and business transactions. Women of all classes, even slaves, frequently dealt with money. She agreed with Breen’s argument that the world of goods expanded women’s economic

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18 Shammas, The Pre-Industrial Consumer, 63-84.
19 Shammas, The Pre-Industrial Consumer, 94-120.
opportunities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As shall be shown in this thesis, women gained the ability to get credit and had a growing role in purchasing goods. While these advances did not extend into the political sphere, women gained far more economic power than they had ever possessed previously.

While O’Connor focused on the expansion of consumerism in urban areas, Ann Smart Martin’s *Buying into a World of Goods* provides a more in-depth examination of shops in rural Virginia. Martin examined the life and fortunes of a single Virginia shopkeeper, John Hook, from 1758 until his death in 1810. Martin’s work looked at how merchants conducted business, with some emphasis on how consumers selected and purchased goods. One fact that becomes clear from Martin’s work is that the credit system employed by these local shops made them vulnerable in periods of economic downturns. When the economy entered a recession, credit became harder to come by, and it became difficult for shopkeepers to sell goods, restock their inventories, and, most troublingly, to get old customers to pay off their debts.

Despite the proliferation of consumer goods and broad distribution of new goods in the eighteenth century, the assertion made by Breen that consumerism helped strengthen the colonies ties to Great Britain is widely disputed. Woody Holton, in his book, *Forced Founders*, disagreed with Breen’s assertions and examined the motivations of Virginia’s Revolutionary War leaders in an attempt to explain why these colonial leaders decided to rebel against Great Britain. Holton argued that Virginia’s founding fathers were desperate men, who were forced into a conflict they would rather have

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21 Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor, *The Ties that Buy*, 190-195
avoided by middling and lower sort farmers, as well as slaves. Unlike Breen, Holton maintained that the hated Navigation Acts played a large role in creating tension between the colonies and England. While Breen contended that the colonies saw their relationship with Britain as being salubrious, Holton claimed that the elite planters saw the Navigation Acts as a heavy yolk imposed upon them. They did not wish to bear the burden of the protectionist, mercantilist Navigation Acts and the Stamp Act simultaneously because they feared it would lead to their ruin. It was this long, simmering resentment over the Navigation Acts that aggravated the tension between colonial leaders and England during the 1760s and 1770s, with tensions reaching their peak between 1774-1776. Many of the colonial elites never desired a revolt and were actually forced into declaring independence by middling and lower sort farmers, together with Lord Dunmore's threat to liberate Virginia's slaves if the planters rebelled. In short, while Breen saw mercantilism as a source of connection and unity between the colonies and Britain, Holton saw the mercantilist system as a point of division between Virginia and Great Britain. In many ways, as this thesis will show, mercantilism had a toxic effect on colonist's opinions of Great Britain. While colonists resented the Navigation Acts, they also benefitted from them and were unwilling to directly oppose them.

Rhys Isaac's *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom*, which examined the private writings of Virginia planter Landon Carter, also portrayed Virginia's elite as being afraid of change. Landon Carter had a healthy dislike of merchants and was initially reticent to support the independence movement. Carter, who ultimately supported the patriot cause,

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was also a strong supporter of the old status quo in Virginia and feared that the revolution would severely disrupt life in Virginia.  

Thomas Doerflinger’s *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise* examined the role that Philadelphia’s merchant class played in leading the city and pushing Pennsylvania towards independence. Doerflinger explained that many of Philadelphia’s leading merchants were entrepreneurs who actually rose to prominence from modest backgrounds. Furthermore, he showed how merchants pushed Philadelphia forward both economically and culturally. In short, he demonstrated how commercialism and consumerism revolutionized life in Philadelphia.  

Doerflinger contrasted the elite of Philadelphia with their counterparts in the Southern colonies, particularly Virginia. He noted that while the Southern colonies were more populous and more prosperous than the New England and the mid-Atlantic colonies during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, by the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Northern colonies had far surpassed the South in terms of wealth and population. Doerflinger theorized that this failure of the South to keep up with the North was due to the South’s lack of a merchant class and its failure to innovate. After the first fifty years of settlement, Southern planters, who had previously been quite innovative and entrepreneurial, simply settled into old patterns. Doerflinger noted that eighteenth century Virginian planters such as Landon Carter were excellent managers, but not innovators. This Northern “Yankee Ingenuity” was largely born from necessity and desperation. While the Southern colonies were located in fertile areas where lucrative cash crops such as tobacco, rice, and indigo could be grown, the Northern colonies were

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in colder climates and had to trade less profitable goods including foodstuff, lumber, and fish to Great Britain. This forced Northern elites to innovate by finding new crops to grow and developing more efficient ways to harvest them. It also encouraged Northerners to develop more local industry and manufacturing capabilities and to engage in trade, which led to the formation of a local merchant class. In contrast, the Southern colonies simply continued to grow cash crops. Southern planters earned sufficient money from engaging in the tobacco trade that they did not need to develop any industry. Virginia’s elite did not realize that their colony was lagging behind the Northern colonies until the late eighteenth century. In this regard Thomas Doerflinger’s assessment of the cultural elite in Virginia agreed with Holton’s, who also saw Virginia’s revolutionary founders as fallible, desperate men. In short, Doeflinger believed the elite of Virginia lacked the skill and imagination possessed by Philadelphia’s elite.30

Lastly, while some scholars argue that mercantile commerce divided the colonies from the mother country and precipitated revolution, others assert that international trade actually strengthened ties between hostile nations. Oceans of Wine by David Hancock examined the rise of the Madeira wine industry from its beginning until the early nineteenth century. Many of Hancock’s interests aligned with Breen’s. Hancock also argued that a new world of goods was forming in North America. Unlike Breen, however, Hancock claimed that international trade was multinational and heterogeneous. He argued that mercantile regulations were ineffective and that international trade was managed not by states, but by a multi-national web of individuals motivated by self-

30 Doerflinger, A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise, 335-364.
Rather than promoting Britishness, consumerism instead promoted cosmopolitan values and a new shared national identity. The rise of wine and the creation of new rituals to manage it did play a role in creating a national and cultural identity in the colonies.

This thesis will study the effects that the expansion of consumerism and non-importation had in the colony of Virginia. In the process, it will analyze the validity of Breen’s two main contentions: firstly, that a world of goods had been formed in the American colonies and that this consumer culture helped unite the colonists, and secondly, that non-importation and non-consumption associations were successful in unifying the colonies and quelling opposition to the Continental cause.

Chapter II will examine both the evidence for a growth in consumerism in mid-eighteenth century America, and determine whether consumerism created a sense of national identity amongst the colonists. The evidence seems to confirm Breen’s assertion that a world of goods had come into being in mid-eighteenth-century America.

Consumerism was on the rise both in Virginia and throughout the colonies. Colonists possessed more money, were buying more goods, and had a greater number and variety of goods from which to choose from. Consumerism also brought many new social groups into the economic marketplace. Women especially gained a much larger role in society as a result of consumerism, and were both blamed for society’s ills and seen as a group whose participation was vital if non-importation was to succeed. As for Breen’s argument that consumerism helped bind the colonies together against Great Britain, the sources disagree. Some support Breen’s contention, while others argue that trade actually

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32 Hancock, *Oceans of Wine*, 356.
divided Britain and America and created mutual distrust. Breen’s assertion that consumerism played a role in creating national unity during the buildup to the Revolution is harder to prove. It is undeniable that consumerism was on the rise during the mid-eighteenth century in the American colonies. Still, it is difficult to say whether it helped to strengthen or create a national identity. It seems likely that consumer culture was a double-edged sword for the colonies, strengthening ties between the colonies and uniting the colonists against Great Britain, while simultaneously deepening class and social divisions between the colonists.

Chapter III will analyze the success of the national non-importation and non-consumption associations in Virginia. As far as the associations are concerned, Breen’s evidence was extremely slim, especially in regards to Virginia. Analysis of primary and secondary sources, however, seems to suggest that these associations were successful at uniting the colonies behind the policies of the First Continental Congress and later the Second Continental Congress. Earlier associations during the Stamp and Townshend crises had mixed results, with the Stamp Act protests being quite successful and the Townshend Act protests not succeeding at all. Notably, neither the Stamp nor Townshend Act associations enjoyed much success in Virginia, even though Virginia was seen as one of the leading colonies fomenting rebellion. Virginia often took a large public role in opposing British tyranny, but was largely toothless in terms of actual action until the Continental Association of 1774.

Breen’s findings are generally confirmed by an examination of the records of Virginia’s County Committees of Safety. The committee records reveal that they were quite effective at squashing any dissent towards the Association and compelling citizens
to support Continental policy. Virginia’s leaders were able to unify the colony behind the Association and promote a sense of communal identity with the other mainland colonies. The Associations may have been used to intimidate suspected Tories, creditors, and social outsiders, but also seem to have been effective at deterring dissent and actually uniting Virginians behind both the Association and the Continental cause. Still, it is important to note that Breen did a poor job connecting the first and second halves of his argument. The first portion of his book mainly analyzed the growth of consumerism, while the second half focused on the Associations. Consequently, the second half of Breen’s book was more focused on elite attempts to corral popular support for their actions than it was on determining the actual sentiments of the people themselves. Both Breen and the primary sources this paper employs have a difficult time displaying the actual sentiments of the people during the crisis of 1774-1776.

All in all, mid-eighteenth century America was defined in large part by its commercial spirit. Americans purchased a great deal of imported consumer goods from Great Britain. Just as the purchase of a hybrid car or a particular brand of cell phone makes a statement in twenty-first century America, in the mid-eighteenth century these goods were more than just luxuries or commodities; indeed, they possessed political meaning and helped to propel the colonies into a war for independence. Consumerism was a double-edge sword for the colonies, uniting them against Great Britain while also raising class tensions within the colonies. Furthermore, the Continental Association of 1774 seemed to be effective at impeding trade with the British Isles, deterring hostile actions against the association, and promoting loyalty both to the Association and to the
Continental Congress. The 1774 Association failed, however, to force Parliament to change its policies towards the American colonies.
CHAPTER II
CONSUMERISM IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY VIRGINIA

One of the central arguments of T.H. Breen’s *The Marketplace of Revolution* was that Great Britain’s American colonies were part of a world of goods. Virginia, as well as Britain’s other overseas colonies in the Western hemisphere were part of a large trading network. In theory, the colonies were supposed to harvest and export commodities and cash crops such as tobacco, lumber, cod, rice, and indigo to England, while importing finished goods such as clothing, furniture, tableware, jewelry, books, paintings and other luxury items from the Mother country. England’s colonies were treated as a captive market for British goods and products while the British Isles were a captive market for colonial exports. Eighteenth century parliamentarian Edmund Burke once described the British Empire as an “Empire of goods,” since it was based primarily on economic relations and not on conquest or the imposition of force. Indeed, many in both Britain and the colonies saw it as the patriotic duty of colonists to buy imported goods. Most of the colonists were commercially minded and judged people by the goods they owned and the clothes that they wore.¹ American colonists were all consumers, and their consumption bound them into a global, interconnected web with Britain, other English colonies, and even to other European nations. These goods were more than simply luxury items, they possessed a political meaning and helped create a fragile national identity amongst the colonies during the 1770s. As various crises and disputes erupted between the American colonies and Great Britain over issues of taxation and governance during the 1760s and

1770s, the colonists began to bond over sharing a common set of grievances against Great Britain and in sharing cultures heavily based on consumerism. However, these luxury items also produced a great deal of social conflict in the colonies, dividing the colonists along economic and class lines. In many ways, consumerism divided the colonists almost as much as it united them. In short, consumerism had many profound social and political repercussions in colonial Virginia and the other mainland British colonies, uniting the colonies against British imperial policies while also dividing the colonists along social and economic lines.

British colonial policy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was governed by an economic policy modern scholars refer to as mercantilism. The concept of "mercantilism," was first created by Adam Smith in his work *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), in which he argued that Britain possessed a mercantilist economy. Mercantilist theory is concerned with the international balance of trade. British economists feared that if England ever developed a negative balance of trade it would lead to economic ruin. Balance of trade, or balance of payment, was measured in three ways: current, capital and bullion. Current measured the worth of all exchanges made in a year, capital measured investments and the creation of wealth, while the bullion system measured the transfer of gold and silver coins and bars. Ideally, a state should work to increase its bullion supply, which would allow the treasury to greatly enlarge. Proponents of mercantilism sought to achieve a favorable balance of trade by promoting economic self-sufficiency. Mercantilists favored strict regulation of the economy, tight restrictions on trade, and

high tariffs. A key component of mercantilism was the formation of new colonies. These colonies would then produce raw resources for the imperial center while also serving as a captive market for British manufactured goods. The colonies’ ability to trade with nations besides Great Britain would be extremely limited. Furthermore, the colonies would serve as a place where England’s unemployed masses could find gainful employment and thus help to prevent England from becoming overpopulated.

Mercantilist policies were enforced in the empire through the Navigation Acts. The first Navigation Act, passed by Parliament in 1651, decreed that all goods exported from the colonies to England could only travel aboard English vessels. The 1660 Navigation Act declared that enumerated items such as tobacco and sugar could only be exported by the colonies to England or to other English colonies. The Navigation Act of 1663 proscribed that all goods imported into the colonies had to pass through an English port. Initially, the colonies ignored the Navigation Acts, which was possible since the Acts were ratified during the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, a time in which all of England’s colonies became quasi-autonomous. It was only after the Restoration that the colonies began abiding by the provisions of the Navigation Acts.

Even today, interpreting the effects of the Acts remains controversial. The Navigation Acts did help the colonies in some ways. Their most important benefit was that they provided the colonies with a safe, closed market in England. Almost from the beginning, however, the colonies, especially the Southern colonies like Virginia, resented the Navigation Acts, since they prevented them from trading directly with foreign nations. Furthermore, Southern colonies felt more burdened by the Navigation Acts.

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because tobacco, the main cash crop of the Southern colonies, was extremely difficult to smuggle. Throughout the 1700s, Virginians saw the Navigation Acts as an onerous burden on their commercial affairs. In the 1740s, the Virginia House of Burgesses even petitioned the Privy Council to allow them to directly export tobacco to other countries. During the crises of the 1760s and 1770s, Virginian leaders said they would be willing to pay extra taxes to the British government if the Navigation Acts were overturned.  

Mercantilist policies had a strong effect on all of Britain's mainland colonies, including Virginia. The economy of Virginia was designed at least in part to serve mercantilist goals. The colony of Virginia was a staples producing colony. Staples based economies tie together two regions, a colony and the metropolis. Initially, the colony is a remote, under-populated region that does not possess a self-contained economy. In short, the colony is completely dependent on supply and aid from the mother country. The economy of Virginia, like many other colonies, was export driven. In order to earn money, the colonists produced resource intensive products, also known as staples. The staple was then exported back to Britain in exchange for finished goods.  

Staple based economics discouraged the development of local industry. Virginia was a plantation based colony whose main product was tobacco. According to S. Max Edelson, in eighteenth century America a plantation was defined as "a privately owned domain .... that was geared relentlessly toward the transatlantic marketplace." Plantations were
owned by large land owning entrepreneurs and operated by large numbers of slaves and indentured servants who were monitored by hired overseers.\(^{10}\)

Generally, staple based economies experienced rapid initial growth, but began to stagnate when the price of the commodity declined. After several years of stagnation, colonial economies began to experience slow but steady growth, usually due to population growth and the development of more efficient production techniques.\(^ {11}\) The colony of Virginia was no exception to this trend. During the extremely lean early years of 1607-1617, the Jamestown settlement was unsuccessful and a losing economic investment. Once Virginians started to plant tobacco in 1617, however, their economy began to expand rapidly; the tobacco trade in the Chesapeake continued to expand until the 1680s.\(^ {12}\) The Navigation Acts initially had a depressing effect on the English tobacco market, which damaged Virginia’s economy. In fact, the Act may have been partly responsible for the social unrest that was widespread throughout the Old Dominion in the 1660s and 1670s, including revolts such as Bacon’s Rebellion.\(^ {13}\) Starting in the 1740s, the price of Virginia tobacco began to rise. Tobacco prices rose in a sporadic, stop and start manner from the 1740s through the early 1770s.\(^ {14}\) The growth of Virginia’s tobacco market produced an economic boom in Virginia. Similar booms took place in the other twelve American mainland colonies, making many Americans prosperous.\(^ {15}\)

By the seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries, the main cash staple grown in Virginia was tobacco. Virginia exported a large amount of tobacco to Great Britain.

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12 McCusker and Menard, *The Economy of British America*, 120-123.
For example, between October 1772 and October 1773, Virginia exported 69,587 hogsheads of tobacco to Great Britain. Tobacco production dominated the social and political outlook of most of Virginia's citizens. This obsession with the cultivation of tobacco was at least partly due to the fact that tobacco was a labor intensive crop. Since tobacco farming was so demanding, most Virginian planters lived on their plantations and directly oversaw the management of their property, in contrast to plantation owners in other British colonies in the West Indies and South Carolina, who were often absentee landlords. As such, Virginian plantation owners lived insular lives. Their plantations were virtually self-sufficient, they conducted trade through consignment, did not use local shops or merchants, and they typically left their plantations only for church or other major community events. Planters soon came to value their personal independence, seeing it as the foundation of their own freedom and liberty. As time passed, many Virginian planters decided that growing tobacco was too burdensome and began to search for alternative crops to grow. Eventually, many plantation owners in Virginia, including George Washington, ultimately abandoned growing tobacco in favor of other crops such as wheat.

Virginian planters were so immersed in the planting and cultivation of tobacco that they would often judge themselves by the quality of their tobacco. Plantation owners believed that the process of growing tobacco was a fine art form. They desired appreciation for their work and felt insulted when the quality of their crop was unjustly

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18 Breen, *Tobacco Culture*, 84-91.
19 Breen, *Tobacco Culture*, 81-82.
demeaned. For example, when someone insinuated to Landon Carter that the quality of his tobacco was related to copious rainfall rather than his own unique methods of production he became incensed. Indeed, when John Norton wrote to William Nelson complaining of the inferior quality of his tobacco, Nelson apologized and said that his overseer would be turned away for not correctly performing his duties. Wilson Cary, on the other hand, blamed his poor tobacco crop on his being a “poor sickly Person & unable to go about & see into Things with my own Eyes & can only give directions,” and begged for forgiveness and understanding from John Norton.

In addition to being labor intensive, the production of tobacco also required a great deal of land, which resulted in the population of Virginia becoming widely dispersed. According to William Nelson, the job of any good tobacco grower was “to improve any (land) that he finds worn or wearing out.” Virginia, unlike most of the mainland colonies, was slow in developing towns and other major urban centers. Due to Virginia’s large river system, merchants and planters felt little need to establish towns and cities. This is evident by the fact that in 1770, the colonial capital of Williamsburg only had a population of 2,000 settlers, while the colony’s largest city, Norfolk, had a population of a mere 6,000 people. The few major towns that did exist, like Norfolk, focused on the development of wheat and foodstuffs rather than tobacco. It is likely

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20 Breen, *Tobacco Culture*, 61, 76.
24 McCusker and Menard, *The Economy of British America*, 131-133.
that Virginia’s lack of a large city slowed the development of a local merchant class in
the colony, forcing planters to maintain relationships with merchants in Britain.25

This economic expansion that occurred during the eighteenth century transformed
America into a consumer oriented society. However, this had not always been the case. In
the seventeenth century, consumerism played little role in colonial life. Early settlers
were more concerned with surviving than with buying goods. Many of the colonies,
especially plantation colonies like Virginia, had extremely high mortality rates. Few of
the colonists lived long enough to succeed or buy luxury items. This fact was exacerbated
by the fact that many of Virginia’s earliest settlers were indentured servants, who arrived
in Virginia with little money and did not survive long enough to earn any income in the
colonies. Initially, the colonies focused most of their energies on exporting cash crops
and only imported essential items. The colonists’ lack of interest in buying consumer
goods troubled British officials. Royal governors wrote despairing letters back to the
mother country about how colonists still wore homespun clothing and could not be
persuaded to buy British manufactures. This phenomenon was not due to the colonists’
lack of interest in British goods, but rather arose from the settlers lacking the money to
buy higher quality consumer goods from Britain. In the 1730s and 1740s this began to
change. By this time, life in colonial Virginia was more stable. People were living longer,
enjoying a higher quality of life than possible in England, and were making a profit on
their tobacco crops. As a result of this stability, Virginians, as well as the inhabitants of
other colonies, began to focus more of their energies on the acquisition and display of
consumer goods. By the mid-eighteenth century, the cultures of Virginia and the other

25 Thomas Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development
twelve mainland colonies were being strongly influenced by consumerism. The mid-eighteenth century witnessed a boom in the importation of both luxury items, including utensils, tea-ware, and books, as well as necessities such as food, clothes, and tools. While necessities, obviously, had always been imported to the colonies, it was only in the eighteenth century that the colonial market for luxury goods began to expand.\textsuperscript{26} It was this increase in the consumption of luxury items that helped to fuel the consumer revolution and led to some social and class divisions amongst many colonists.

The rise of consumption in the eighteenth century in England and her colonies is undeniable. Between 1720 and 1770 colonial per capita imports doubled.\textsuperscript{27} The colonial importation trade hit its peak after the Seven Years War in 1766-1770, when an amazing £1.8 million worth of goods were shipped to the mainland colonies.\textsuperscript{28} John McCusker and Russell Menard presented statistical evidence that suggests that American imports continued to rise until shortly before the outbreak of the American War for Independence. Growth was strongest in the mid-Atlantic colonies and in the lower South. The per capita value of consumer goods imported in Virginia and Maryland actually decreased during the years of 1699-1774, however, most likely due to the large increase in the size of the Chesapeake’s slave population. Measuring the per capita imports using only the white population of the Chesapeake reveals that imports remained static during this era.\textsuperscript{29} According to Alan Kulikoff, “After 1750 imports rose a third faster than the region’s population.”\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{26} Breen, \textit{The Marketplace of Revolution}, 36-40; Kulikoff, \textit{Tobacco & Slaves}, 118.
\textsuperscript{27} McCusker and Menard, \textit{The Economy of British America}, 279.
\textsuperscript{29} McCusker and Menard, \textit{The Economy of British America}, 280-282.
\textsuperscript{30} Kulikoff, \textit{Tobacco and Slaves}, 122.
One of the best ways to learn about how colonial Virginians lived their lives is to examine the documents and records that they have left behind. One of the most fruitful sources of information about life in colonial Virginia is Virginia's main newspaper, *The Virginia Gazette*. *The Virginia Gazette*, founded in 1736, was the first newspaper to be published in Virginia. During this period in Virginia history there were actually several different newspapers published under the name of *The Virginia Gazette*. A cursory examination of the *Virginia Gazette* of this era confirms that consumerism was on the rise in the colonies. The *Gazette* was filled with advertisements promoting various goods and wares throughout the mid-eighteenth century. There were only a few advertisements in the newspapers from the 1750s, but by the 1760s and 1770s advertisements dominated the *Gazette*. In fact, these advertisements became larger and more sophisticated in the 1760s and 1770s. For example, the October 7, 1773, edition of the *Virginia Gazette* contained many advertisements. The firm of Greenwood, Ritson, and March issued an advertisement in which they claimed to have imported a large amount of European goods which they were prepared to sell for credit including Lisbon wine, ginger, and salt. Irish linen, clothes and hats. In another advertisement on the same page, Joshua Storr claimed to have just received woolens, broadcloaths and other items which he was prepared to sell for good credit.\(^{31}\) John Stoney of Norfolk offered to sell several bales of coarse woolens worth £60 to £80.\(^{32}\) Greenwood, Ritson and March, as well as John Stoney, purchased similar advertisements in the October 14, 1773, edition of the *Gazette*.\(^ {33}\) In the November 11, 1773, supplement to the *Gazette* both James Getty and William Pasteur issued advertisements for gold, jewelry, clothes, medicine, nutmeg and a wide variety of other

\(^{31}\) Advertisement, *The Virginia Gazette*, 7 October 1773, 3.

\(^{32}\) Advertisement, *The Virginia Gazette*, 7 October 1773, 4.

\(^{33}\) Advertisement, *The Virginia Gazette*, 14 October 1773, 3-4.
goods. As can be seen from these examples, newspapers advertised such products as slaves, drugs, woolens, playing cards, cutlery, sugar, petticoats, bonnets and so forth. While not all of these advertisements were for imported goods, many of them involved slave auctions and runaway slaves, almost all of them dealt with the trans-Atlantic trade. The growth and expansion of advertisements in the *Gazette* strongly suggests an expanding consumer market.

The advertisements inside of Virginia’s newspapers illustrate not only the expansion of consumerism, but also the expansion of consumer choice. One of the most notable things about the advertisements contained in the *Gazette* is that many of them take the form of long lists. Numerous advertisements in the *Virginia Gazette* were long lists that named all of the goods the merchant had ordered that were either at or arriving at the shopkeeper’s store. In fact, some advertisements contained the entire manifest of cargo that a trading vessel had shipped to the merchant. Indeed, many even named the merchant ship that was bringing them their goods, such as James Geddy’s advertisement which named the ship that carried his wares as the *Bland* commanded by a Captain Dandy. Advertisers used lists of different types of goods to sell their products for good reason. The revolution in the marketplace was not only a revolution of consumerism, but a revolution of personal choice. Consumers could either choose to buy the products offered by the merchant, or they could buy someone else’s product. Consumers could not only choose whether they wanted to buy silverware, but they could choose what type of silverware they wished to purchase. This ability to shop and choose among products was something that was new to the American colonies. By listing a wide variety of both

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34 Advertisement, *The Virginia Gazette* supplement, 11 November 1773, 4.
36 Advertisement, *The Virginia Gazette* supplement, 11 November 1773, 4.
different goods and different types of the same products shopkeepers and merchants were able to lure consumers into buying wares from them.\textsuperscript{37}

Another key component of consumer culture was the development and expansion of "credit." Newspaper advertisements make frequent references to credit. By the mid-eighteenth century, Virginia, along with the other thirteen mainland colonies, had an economy that was deeply dependent on credit. The tobacco boom of the 1750s and 1760s made Virginia tobacco plantations seem like a good investment for British investors, bankers, merchants, and traders. In short, Scottish merchant firms took out large loans with English banks, and they used these loans to extend many Virginia planters and plantation owners extremely generous lines of credit. Virginians then used this credit to buy many consumer goods.\textsuperscript{38} In colonial America, credit was in large part based on the personal standing of the planter.\textsuperscript{39} William Reynolds once wrote to George F. Norton that "I hope with the order I gave you on your Father & the proceed of the Tobo will be sufficient to make me a Creditor on your Books."\textsuperscript{40} Planters endeavored to form strong friendships with their consigner.\textsuperscript{41} Middle class farmers often acquired credit from local merchants and shopkeepers. Many stores conducted as much as eighty percent of their transactions on book credit. This growth of credit fueled westward expansion, encouraged plantation owners to improve their lands, and also encouraged the planters to extend generous credit to small farmers, thus pumping even more money into the economy.

\textsuperscript{37} Breen, \textit{The Marketplace of Revolution}, 53-59.
\textsuperscript{38} Kulikoff, \textit{Tobacco and Slaves}, 122-123, 125-127.
\textsuperscript{39} Mason, \textit{John Norton and Sons}, xiv-xviii.
\textsuperscript{40} William Reynolds to George F. Norton, 23 May 1772, in \textit{John Norton and Sons}, Mason ed., 239.
\textsuperscript{41} Mason, \textit{John Norton and Sons}, xiv-xvii, xxii-xiv.
Unfortunately, these policies put many planters deeply in debt. On the eve of the Revolution, Virginia owed £2,000,000 to British merchants, a figure that was double Virginia’s debt nineteen years earlier. Virginian planters, for their part, despised debt and indebtedness. They believed that debt denied people their independence and freedom. They also feared that debt would make them increasingly dependent on the aid of the British government. When in debt, planters tried to use their friendly ties with merchants to manipulate the merchants into allowing them extra time to pay their debts. John Norton warned his son John Hatley Norton about the danger of such tactics. Furthermore, he warned his son of the hazards of overextending their lines of credit and becoming indebted themselves. This expansion of debt led to increasing social instability in the colonies as the indebted sometimes violently attacked their creditors. Although Virginians knew of the dangers of indebtedness, they found it increasingly difficult to reduce their debt and live within their means.

Newspapers are not the only source of information about the expansion of consumerism in the American colonies, inventories and legal documents also reveal that consumer goods were permeating Virginian society. Although wills and inventories reveal much about life in eighteenth century Virginia, they do have their limitations. For instance, since wills only detail property owned by the decedent at the time of their demise, many smaller household items may have been replaced. To make matters

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43 Breen, *Tobacco Culture*, 91.  
44 Holton, *Forced Founders*, 82-83.  
worse, most wills do not provide full inventories of the goods owned by the decedent. There are several lists and catalogs that document the property of individuals and families. Studies by Lois Green Carr and Lorena Walsh suggest that household tableware like forks, knives and ceramic dishes were in use by elite members of Chesapeake society by the 1730s and by most other Chesapeake families by the 1760s. By 1774, 70.7% of Virginians who left behind wills and inventories owned forks and knives, while 45.5% owned glassware and 35.5% owned ceramics. These figures help to demonstrate that families were acquiring more and more consumer goods as the 1700s progressed. On the positive side, last wills do reveal many of the items the deceased owned at the time of their deaths. For example, William Massie, who died in 1793, left a dowry to his wife Anne, and divided the rest of his estate and his slaves between his children Hugh, Mary, and William Macon Massie. Fortunately, other types of inventories exist besides wills. An inventory of the books of the Reverend William Key, recorded in 1764, reveals that the Reverend owned many books, including a book by Josephus, Blackwell, and books containing sermons, the works of Alexander Pope in eight volumes, as well as algebra, arithmetic, and astronomy textbooks. As can be seen, consumerism was on the rise in mid-eighteenth century America, especially among Virginia’s upper classes. Many of the goods Virginians desired were not necessities but luxury items like utensils and books. Colonists were acquiring all sorts of goods that they would never have dreamed of purchasing in the past.

Consumption was not confined merely to the elite or even to English settlers, as evidence reveals folks of the middling sort owned a wide variety of consumer goods. Many complete items from this time survived and are displayed in museums. Most of these items were imported from Great Britain. Fine silverware, gold ware, furniture, stoneware, tea pots, and porcelain items from this period have all survived and tell their own tales. While the majority of these items came from elite families, some also came from normal, middling sort households. Some of the items that have survived were likely used for display and were not frequently used. The fact that a significant number of items from this era have survived seems to suggest a bustling transatlantic trade, in addition to supporting the premise that many of these items may have been owned by average American families. These items tell us a great deal about their eighteenth century owners. For instance, furniture and goods often reflected the wealth and nationality of their owners. In western Virginia, there were a great many Germanic settlers who had migrated into the colony from Pennsylvania. These settlers’ furniture and goods were more likely to reflect Germanic artistic and design styles than other colonists. Goods could also be used to display social status and wealth. Families that owned elaborate silver tea servers and tableware were most likely wealthier than their neighbors and probably used these items to flaunt their social status. Goods could also reflect the interests and erudition of their owners. Consumers who used their money to buy

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silverware and porcelain goods were not only buying what they wanted, but they were also displaying their own hobbies and education.\textsuperscript{56}

As consumerism grew in importance during the eighteenth century, the role of merchants and shopkeepers in Virginia continued to expand. During the mid-eighteenth century the nature of trade and business began to radically change. Initially, trade in the Chesapeake had been conducted directly by merchants through a method known as the consignment system. Ships that docked at Virginia ports either sold their goods directly to the public or to a local factor, who then sold the goods to consumers in exchange for cash or goods. Sometimes goods were sold by the great planters, who acquired them directly from the large merchant houses in London and held them in large storehouses until they were sold. Even after the 1730s, when this method began to fall out of practice, many large planters continued to buy their goods directly through merchants. In the consignment system, the London merchants acted as bankers for the planters.\textsuperscript{57} Merchant houses paid the planters for their tobacco either with cash or a bill of exchange, which functioned as a form of credit.\textsuperscript{58} Shipping firms made a profit on these deals by charging fees and commissions on shipping, tobacco purchases, and goods purchased by the planters. For example, John Norton and Sons charged a two and a half percent fee on freight and goods purchased and an additional three percent commission on sales. This business proved to be extremely lucrative for both merchants and planters. For example, in 1768, the firm of John Norton and Sons handled 706 hogsheads, sold 600,100 pounds of tobacco with gross sales of £25,000, and made revenue of £750. In 1772, the peak year


\textsuperscript{57} Martin, \textit{Buying into the World of Goods}, 14-15.

\textsuperscript{58} Mason, \textit{John Norton and Sons}, xv.
of sales for the firm, Norton handled 1,897 hogsheads, sold 1,612,400 pounds of tobacco with gross sales of £67,182 and made revenue of £2,015, while in 1775 the company handled 1,456 hogsheads, sold 1,237,600 pounds of tobacco with gross sales of £51,566 and made revenue of £1,547.\textsuperscript{59}

The consignment system was based on strong personal relationships between the merchants and planters and functioned as a sort of patronage network. At the beginning of their careers, merchants would try to gain standing by seeking employment with their friends and families. As a result, a merchant’s early customers were often family members or friends. Over time these networks would expand; their customers in the colonies would introduce them to new customers, or other potential customers would seek them out based on their reputation. David Hancock argued that these business networks were as important to the identity of eighteenth and nineteenth century businessman as familial, ethnic and religious ties. In fact, he asserted that all of these ties—family, friends, ethnicity, religion, and business—were often bundled together in the minds of many businessmen and consumers.\textsuperscript{60} Merchants and customers often tried to maintain strong relations. Most merchants and consumers corresponded frequently with each other, with customers often alerting the merchants to changes in the market or to potential new customers. Merchant houses would often station representatives in the colonies in order to collect debts and to maintain strong ties with consumers.\textsuperscript{61} The bonds between planter and consigner were not absolute. George Wythe, for example, who once placed an order with the merchant house of James Buchanan, failed to receive any notice.

\textsuperscript{59} Mason, \textit{John Norton and Sons}, xvii-xviii.
\textsuperscript{60} David Hancock, \textit{Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 139-162.
\textsuperscript{61} Hancock, \textit{Oceans of Wine}, 162-166.
as to whether his goods had been purchased. Due to this lack of information, Wythe contacted the house of John Norton and asked them to deliver his goods. 62

One of the most significant shipping firms operating in Virginia during the mid-1700s was John Norton and Sons. John Norton was a major merchant involved in the Virginia tobacco trade. He began to work in Virginia as a representative of the firm Hatley & Flowerdewe, which later became known as Flowerdewe & Norton, shortly before 1740. As the chief local representative of the shipping firm, Norton soon became well connected among Virginia’s elite, and quickly became a large landholder and planter himself. The elder Mr. Norton was friends with the planter Robert Carter Nicolas. In fact, his son John Hatley Norton married Robert’s daughter Sally in 1772. In 1767, John Norton moved to London to take over the company’s main office. One of Norton’s sons, John Hatley Norton, became the firm’s new local agent in Virginia. Norton’s business, which changed its name to John Norton and Sons during the 1770s, remained one of the most prominent shipping firms in Virginia. Unfortunately, the firm lost its connection with the London market following the death of John Norton in 1777; and the firm was ruined in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War. 63

Most of the letters that John Norton and Sons and other shipping firms received during these years were from clients asking them to purchase goods for them and in exchange receive tobacco and cash. Merchant houses often acted as the London representatives of their larger colonial clients. For example, the letter book of William Nelson confirms that many elites frequently acquired goods, such as chariots and

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63 Mason, John Norton & Sons, xii-xxxiii.
fashionable clothing, from factors in London. The letters John Norton and Sons received from 1750-1775 are filled with many similar requests. For example, on August 11, 1766, Mary Savage requested that John Norton send her “Broadcloth enough for two suits of cloaths like the colour I send enclosed a 15/ or thereabouts; Linings and Trimings all suitable for it…” and other items including one ream of paper, 3,000 pins of different sizes, 1 ps. Yard wide linen, and a dozen ivory handled knives and forks. According to the invoice, this request was received on November 3, 1766, and answered in March 1767. On September 6, 1768, Robert Carter Nicholas sent a large invoice to John Norton requesting, among other things, multiple cambric spotted, blue and white and purple and white pocket hankerchiefs, coarsers, black satin bonnets, children’s mittens, white hose for a small woman, and many other items. On October 2, 1773, Thomas Everard sent an invoice to John Norton ordering items including a copper kettle, tongs and poker, a dozen pairs of strong shoes for a negro man, India silk handkerchiefs, a woman’s satin cloak and bonnet, women’s shoes, men’s cotton hose, tea, pepper, mace, salt petre, mops, meat sifters, and several books, including Spiritual Quixote, Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, and Essay on the Character Manners and Genius of Women. These handful of examples help to demonstrate that consumerism was an integral part of life in colonial Virginia.

The consignment system, while favored by elites, fell out of mainstream usage in the mid-eighteenth century. Starting in the 1730s, this system was replaced with a chain store system. Chain stores were often owned by a large merchant house and agreed to sell

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goods to consumers in exchange for cash or labor. These stores maintained a wide selection of produce and merchandise that the shopper could examine at his or her leisure. Such shops quickly spread beyond the Tidewater coast, with businesses opening in the Piedmont and the Blue Ridge mountains. While shops in the Tidewater still mainly traded tobacco for goods, rural stores were more likely to sell items in exchange for cash or labor. Although most consignment merchants in Great Britain were located in England, the chain store system was controlled by Scottish merchants, mainly located in Glasgow. The Scottish soon came to monopolize the tobacco market in the Americas. As Anne Smart Martin noted, “More tobacco went to Scotland than all the English ports combined.” Soon, the Scottish became synonymous with both trade and greed in the colonies, with the term “Scottish” becoming a derogatory epithet used against all merchants. The rise of frontier shops increased the population of many western Virginia counties and was a boon to local business, and brought consumer goods to many people who had not previously been able to purchase them.

One successful shopkeeper was John Hook, who acted as a Virginian merchant from 1760 until his death in 1810. Hook, like many merchants in Virginia, was an immigrant from Britain who came to America in a bid to seek his fortune, and, if successful, to retire to Britain as a wealthy man. Hook came to Virginia in the employ of the James and Ronald Donald Company before breaking out on his own and forming a partnership with planter Donald Ross, which would last through the mid-1770s.

Consumers purchased many types of goods in John Hook’s store, including rum, spirits,

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70 Holton, *Forced Founders*, 41.
hats, handkerchiefs, buttons, powder, sugar, linen, cotton, and thread. The most popular product purchased at John Hook’s store was alcohol; one in ten purchases made from the store was rum. Hook also sold a large amount of textiles. While Hook’s store offered a wide variety of choices, most buyers still preferred purchasing simpler, less expensive cloth. Additionally, Hook sold a large amount of foodstuffs including sugar, chocolate, salt, coffee, tea, pepper, molasses, nutmeg, and allspice.74 Buying goods from a merchant or shopkeeper was not the only way to acquire goods in colonial Virginia, as travelling peddlers sold goods to many. Peddlers appeared most frequently at fairs and at other public events. Public auctions were yet another way of acquiring goods. Auctions were held as a way settling debt, dealing with overstock, and to fulfill wills. Lastly, individuals could acquire goods through inheritance.75 In short, it is difficult to deny that consumerism was a growing and integral part of life for most Virginians.

The question remains, what effect did this massive surge of consumption have on colonial life and identity? It seems likely that consumerism had a major transformative effect on the lives of many Virginians. It is undeniable that consumer goods became increasingly important throughout the thirteen colonies. Many colonists believed that they had to buy consumer goods in order to be respected by their peers. Breen recounted that colonists desired goods not only to make their lives easier but to improve their social standing. Dr. Alexander Hamilton recounted in part how consumer goods had penetrated even into the New York backcountry.76 Benjamin Franklin, in his famous Autobiography, showed how “Luxury will enter Families” by recounting how his wife replaced their frugal tableware with china plates and silverware at the cost of 23 shillings because she

74 Martin, Buying into the World of Goods, 74-84.
76 Breen, The Marketplace of Revolution, 33-35.
"thought her Husband deserv'd a Silver Spoon & China Bowl as well as any of his Neighbors."  

As time passed, consumer goods came to be seen as signs of social status.

It is also noteworthy that the colonists were obsessed with external appearance. Colonists in Virginia and elsewhere judged physical attractiveness and character not only by physical appearance and the quality of their character, but also by the cut of their clothes and the quality of their manners. Breen noted how eighteenth century American painters devoted most of their skill to capturing their subject's style of dress rather than focusing on his or her physical appearance. This obsession with appearance was also noted by Jonathan Boucher, an Anglican preacher who moved to Virginia in the 1750s. His letters captured the opinions, lifestyles, and personalities of Virginia settlers and helped to convey the spirit of independence and freedom that flowed through the region, as well as providing a general outline of the events that led to the American Revolution. Boucher was troubled by the lifestyle that most Virginians led, and was amazed to find the colonists of Virginia handsomely dressed and attired. He remarked that the ladies of the colony wore clothing beyond their economic means "...the common Planter's Daughter's here go every day in finer cloaths than I have seen content you for a Summer's Sunday."  

In addition to this growing obsession with external appearance, the growth of consumption was leading to an increased interest in the rule of manners. It is already well established how obsessed George Washington and America's other founding fathers were with courtesy, manners, and customs. The importance of manners and rituals was

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80 Jonathan Boucher to the Reverend Mr. James, 7 August 1759, *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 7, no. 1 (March 1912): 4-5.
especially important in dining situations. David Hancock, in *Oceans of Wine*, elaborated on how important it was to drink Madeira in just the right way. Madeira wine exporters not only sold wine, they invented elaborate wine drinking rituals that they convinced their buyers should be observed while drinking. Madeira exporters realized that the presentation of the wine was almost as important as the quality of the wine they sold. By making wine drinking into an art, they improved the reputation of their wine and helped turn Madeira from being a drink of the people into the wine of choice for America’s elite.\(^\text{81}\) Drinking wine required the use of the proper decanter and glass. According to these customs, wine glasses should be held from the bottom rather than the stem.

Drinking was an integral part of almost every social occasion, and people would judge you if you had bad form. Wine was drunk in the tavern, in universities, and at work, and was always served when entertaining guests. This colonial emphasis on rituals and procedures flabbergasted many European attendees and visitors. By placing so much emphasis on external appearance, the colonists were encouraging each other to live lavishly and quite possibly beyond their means. Wine merchants were some of the earliest merchants to engage in specialization, or selling a specific type of product rather than being a general store.\(^\text{82}\)

This growth in consumerism created growing class resentments. Some elite colonists believed that consumption was encouraging decadence among the lower and middling sort. To make matters worse, it was feared that consumerism was encouraging middling farmers to act in ways that did not befit their social station and was perhaps even eroding the social order. These concerns were reflected in the 1772 tale *News From*

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\(^{81}\) Hancock, *Oceans of Wine*, 166-171.  
\(^{82}\) Hancock, *Oceans of Wine*, 275-278, 316, 333-355.
the Moon, that Breen recounted in *The Marketplace of Revolution*. This 1772 allegory, written by an anonymous author, recounted a colonist’s trip to the Moon where he visited Lunar City. While in Lunar City, the traveler ran across many problems with Lunar Society. For instance, he learned that most Lunar merchants are corrupt, forcing consumers to pay far too much for products. The traveler soon saw how consumerism had caused families to spend excessively on goods. To make matters worse, it led many Lunar residents to develop pride and tastes that were far above their station. For example, maids were often dressed as finely as their mistresses, manservants wore fine wigs, and daughters bankrupted their families by buying the latest fashions. Ultimately, the colonist sadly reflected that the residents of the Moon “Did and acted just like the people in (his) country.” Francis Jerdone also noted that many elites thought that both they and the middling and lower sort were far too spendthrift with their funds and indulged themselves too much. He complained that the gentry were “...proud spirits, that nothing will go down, but equipages of the newest and finest fashions.”

Boucher, as an Anglican clergyman, was also concerned with the rise of decadence and vanity. The colonists, in Boucher’s view, were obsessed with luxury and relaxation. Virginians indulged themselves with races, gambling, and parties while ignoring their spiritual and mental lives. This was especially a matter of concern for Boucher, since he had travelled to Virginia to strengthen the Anglican Church establishment in Virginia and to serve as a tutor. These sentiments were shared by the leading preacher of the Great Awakening, George Whitefield. After spreading his

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religious message with much success in mid-eighteenth century New England and the mid-Atlantic, Whitefield was surprised that the Virginia Tidewater received his arrival with such little interest. The planters there were more concerned with gathering and maintaining their tobacco crop than they were with attending Whitefield’s revival meetings. Boucher did admit, however, that underneath their shallow, arrogant, exterior, Virginians were among the nicest and most friendly people he had ever encountered. In short, Boucher’s correspondence revealed a Chesapeake society obsessed with consumer goods and property. Indeed, Virginians could be as vain as peacocks!

Additionally, the rise of consumerism allowed new actors to play a role on the economic stage, thus exacerbating social tensions. Consumerism provided a path for women to become major economic actors, as most shopping in eighteenth century households was done by women. Women used their new power to their advantage and tried to exert their influence in the political arena. Women also found that consumerism bound them more closely to colonial society than they had ever previously been. Women were often viewed by males as spendthrifts who spent cash frivolously on accessories. The ladies, however, prided themselves on their frugal ways and often asserted that men were more prone to spend ostentatiously than women. While women were often associated with consumerism, most women were unable to purchase goods without the support of a man. Wives could only gain credit through their husband’s name.

Women often gained credit and spent money not as individuals, but as members of a larger credit patronage network. While according to the law women were unable to gain

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86 Breen, Tobacco Culture, 69-70.
87 Jonathan Boucher to the Reverend Mr. James, 7 August 1759, Maryland Historical Magazine 7, no. 1 (March 1912): 5.
89 O’Connor, The Ties That Buy, 140-141.
credit or spend money without the consent of their husbands, there were special exceptions allowed for “necessities of life,” and the precise definition of a “necessity” varied from colony to colony.90 Furthermore, in cases in which married couples separated, many shops differentiated between the credit of a husband and the credit of his wife. John Norton, for example, sold goods directly to several females, including, for instance, Catherine Rathell.91

While consumerism led to many divisions amongst the colonists, it also led to increased resentment towards Britain. This was partly due to the growing presence of indebtedness among colonial planters. As mentioned earlier, despite their profligate behavior, Virginia planters hated debt, believing that debt enslaved them to merchants and bankers. Furthermore, the economies of colonial America were strongly dependent on the presence of credit. Unfortunately for the colonists, the credit system employed by shops and consignment traders became a great liability during economic slumps. When the economy entered a recession, credit became harder to come by, shopkeepers had growing difficulty in extending new lines of credit, meaning people bought fewer goods.92 To make matters worse, it became difficult to get old customers to pay off their debts.93 By the early 1770s, Virginia and the other twelve mainland colonies found themselves deep in a credit crisis. For example, in 1773, 398 Virginians were debtors to the merchant house of John Norton and Sons. Combined, these debtors owed the firm £63,856.94 Soon, merchants were calling in their debts to planters, while planters called them in from middling farmers. Many planters, both rich and middling, plunged into

92 Kulikoff, Tobacco and Slaves, 129-134.
93 Martin, Buying into the World of Goods, 31-35.
94 Mason, John Norton and Sons, 293.
bankruptcy and insolvency due to their inability to find currency to pay for trifling debts. The collapse of many middling farmers had a ripple effect throughout the colonies, impacting both the rich and the poor. Boucher also noted how deeply indebted the colonists were. Boucher, a planter himself, shared sympathy with the patriot cause during the Stamp and Townshend Act crises and only became a loyalist after the Boston Tea Party. These fears are also borne out in the letters of Robert Beverly. Similarly to Boucher, Beverly spent a great deal of time in his correspondence discussing debt and his opposition to the Stamp and Townshend Acts, but became a loyalist during the crisis of 1774. On top of this, Virginia’s elite blamed English and Scottish merchants for usurping their lucrative position as brokers between the merchants and middle class planters.

The crisis was made worse by the Revenue, Stamp and Townshend acts imposed on the colonies after the French and Indian Wars. After the war, Britain imposed stern commercial and economic regulations such as the Stamp Act on the American colonies. The Currency Act of 1764, which banned paper currency in the colonies, led to economic chaos. Many Americans came to believe that the British soldiers who came to North America during the French and Indian War viewed colonial affluence with envy and thought that the colonists were not paying their fair share of taxes to fund a war that had primarily been fought in defense of colonial interests. The colonists, for their part, felt

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96 Jonathan Boucher to the Reverend Mr. James, 31 January 1769, 9 December 1765, Maryland Historical Magazine 7, no. 1 (March 1912): 18, 295-296.
97 Jonathan Boucher to the Reverend Mr. James, 9 December 1765, Maryland Historical Magazine 7, no. 1 (March 1912): 295-296; Jonathan Boucher to the Reverend Dr. James, 31 October 1775, Maryland Historical Magazine 8, no. 1 (March 1913): 242-243.
99 Holton, Forced Founders, 41-44.
that they had paid for the war effort through higher local taxes and with their lives.\textsuperscript{100} Virginia’s founding fathers were increasingly desperate men. On the brink of insolvency and bankruptcy, they decided to oppose the economic policies of Great Britain. Virginia’s elite used images of consumption and democracy to gain the support of middling and lower sort farmers.\textsuperscript{101}

The question remains, did these goods create a shared sense of identity amongst the colonists? Furthermore, did the act of consumption increase the settlers’ ties to Britain or tie the colonies into a vast international network of trade? While it can easily be established that consumerism was extensive in Virginia and the other twelve mainland colonies, the question of whether consumerism helped create any sense of shared identity among the colonies and Britain or between the colonies themselves is harder to discern. The DeWitt Art Gallery does contain a famous teapot with the words NO STAMP ACT emblazoned on the side. This is certainly proof of Breen’s contention that goods can speak to power.\textsuperscript{102} While intriguing, this teapot and other similar items are not really representative of the content of the collection and only provide us with a little insight into the opinions of the American people at this time. Given the extent of consumerism throughout the colonies, however, it does seem quite likely that the consumerism did give all thirteen colonies a common frame of reference.

In conclusion, mid-eighteenth century America was defined in large part by its commercial spirit. Americans purchased a great deal of imported consumer goods from Great Britain. These goods were more than just luxuries or commodities. In fact, they possessed political meaning and helped to propel the colonies into a war for

\textsuperscript{100} Breen, \textit{The Marketplace of Revolution}, 12-19
\textsuperscript{101} Holton, \textit{Forced Founders}, xvii-xxi.
\textsuperscript{102} Breen, \textit{The Marketplace of Revolution}, xii.
independence. Virginians were united not only in their love of consumer goods, but in their hatred of debt and resentment towards the very merchants who sold them the goods they desired. However, these goods were not simply a unifying force; they also created new social rifts within Virginia. Indeed, in many cases, the empire of goods divided the colonists as much it united them.
CHAPTER III
THE ASSOCIATIONS

While consumerism may have helped create some sense of common identity among the British colonists in mainland North America, it was the American Revolution that transformed the British mainland colonies into an independent country with a sense of national identity. While most people believe that the American Revolution is more or less identical to the American War for Independence (1775-1783), it has been argued that the Revolution was separate and distinct from the Revolutionary War. Indeed, John Adams once stated that "A history of military operations... is not a history of the American Revolution... The revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people, and in the union of the colonies; both of which were substantially effected before hostilities commenced."¹ In short, the American Revolution was not simply a military conflict, but a revolution of ideas. This changing of hearts and minds began not in 1776, but in 1763, shortly after the conclusion of the French and Indian War (1754-1763). Changes in British policy towards the American colonies in the aftermath of this war provoked outrage in Virginia and the other mainland colonies. Colonists protested these changes by petitioning Parliament, lobbying government officials and merchants, and, most importantly, establishing non-importation and non-consumption associations designed to stop the purchase of British goods in the colonies. The most significant of these acts of colonial resistance took place in the aftermath of the Boston Tea Party, after the passage

of the Coercive Acts of 1774. The Intolerable Acts created outrage throughout the thirteen colonies, as the other twelve mainland colonies rallied behind the city of Boston and the colony of Massachusetts. These Acts led to the calling of the First Continental Congress and the establishment of the Continental Association, a national policy to regulate importation and consumption. Furthermore, the protests of these acts led to the formation of county committees to enforce the provisions of the Association. As British political control eroded in America, these local committees took over most of the basic functions of government in twelve of the thirteen colonies. In light of this, the records of the Virginia Committee of Correspondence and the Virginia County Committees of Safety provide detailed insight into the goals and methods of policy makers and the level of success they enjoyed in promoting the patriot cause throughout Virginia. The actions of the national and local associations proved effective in Virginia at promoting colonial unity and quashing dissent.

The actions of the colonists against Great Britain in the 1760s and 1770s were revolutionary in their goals but not in their methods or principles. The concept of opposing government policies by protesting and rioting was, in fact, a well-established concept in British political philosophy. John Adams once noted that riots occurred in “all governments at all times.”¹² British subjects often mobilized to protest new royal or local taxes and to oppose the impressment of local sailors into the British navy. These protests occurred against actions taken by the local, colonial government just as frequently as they did against the policies of the British Crown and Parliament. ³

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The British colonists in the New World were strong believers in the so-called Whig history of the British nation. Real Whig political theorists believed that governments existed to protect the “unalienable rights” of man, namely life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In return, the people were expected to obey the laws set down by the government. If the state failed to live up to its side of the bargain, then its citizens were no longer obligated to obey the government’s laws. This idea was not new. English Philosopher John Locke had said the same shortly after the Glorious Revolution, a conflict that real Whigs saw as being one of the defining moments in British political history. Radical Whigs, unlike their more mainstream counterparts, even questioned the absolute sovereignty of Parliament, believing that even Parliament was subject to the will of the people.4

While both Great Britain and the British mainland colonies believed in and shared a similar set of values, as the eighteenth century progressed both their political philosophies and policy approaches began to differ. Real Whiggism reached the peak of its influence in the British Isles during the lead up to and the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution. After the Glorious Revolution, Real Whig ideas began to wane in influence in Great Britain. Over time, more and more power was invested in Parliament. Eventually, Parliament came to be seen as the chief representative body of the people. Many British politicians believed that the power of the people to check the power of a corrupt monarch had been completely transferred to Parliament, and that since the Parliament represented the British people, it was impossible for Parliament to take actions that were against the people’s interest. Radical Whigs, on the other hand, believed

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4 Maier, From Resistance to Revolution, 28-35.
that the people still possessed a right to revolt if the government exceeded its authority or began to strip the people of their liberties.\(^5\)

Although Old Whiggism was on the decline in Great Britain, it still maintained strong support in the Americas. Many Americans viewed the growing power of Parliament with great suspicion and feared that the British government was becoming tyrannical. The writings of Trenchard and Gordon, which were generally ignored in Britain, gained widespread popularity throughout the British colonies. As time passed, the American colonies increasingly believed that the parliament of Great Britain was abusing its power. The Revenue Act, Stamp Act, and Townshend Acts were seen as great abuses of parliamentary power.\(^6\) Americans were further alienated from Parliament since they had no representation in it. James Otis, in his pamphlet, *Of the Political and Civil Rights of the British Colonies*, praised the British constitution as the finest in the world, but believed that the British Parliament was overstepping its authority in raising taxes on the colonies.\(^7\) Otis asserted that “Every British subject born on the continent of America....is by the law of God and nature, by the common law, and by act of parliament....entitled to all the natural, essential, inherent and inseparable rights of our fellow subjects in Great-Britain,” rights which included the right not to be taxed without representation.\(^8\)

As colonial opposition to British policy grew, Americans sought a way to oppose the actions of the British government and to compel Parliament to reverse its course.

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Ultimately, the colonists realized that they could attempt to leverage the British into being more lenient by not purchasing British manufactured goods and only buying locally made products. These non-importation associations of the 1760s and early 1770s were a radically new idea and truly revolutionary in their goals. In short, colonists hoped to turn their overreliance on British goods into a weapon. In order to enforce these boycotts, the colonies formed associations and used public pressure to encourage merchants and their customers not to buy British goods. According to Breen, the Associations, in conjunction with the colonists’ shared values, cultures, and goals, allowed bonds of trusts to form between the colonies and played a large role in the formation of an American national identity.\(^9\)

The policies of non-importation and non-consumption represented a form of non-violent resistance to British measures. The colonists’ actions were non-violent in the sense that they attempted to alter the policies and change the opinions of British lawmakers without resorting to violence or the use of force.\(^10\) While mob violence sometimes occurred during the Stamp Act and Tea Act protests, this sort of action stopped short of full-fledged revolt, was usually condemned by the leaders of the Patriot movement and tended to be the exception rather than the norm.\(^11\) Patriot leaders employed three types of non-violent action in their attempts to alter British policy: persuasion, non-cooperation, and non-violent intervention. Persuasive methods often employed pamphlets, sermons, speeches, protests and marches to convince officials to change their stance. Non-cooperation, on the other hand, involved actions like non-

consumption, non-exportation, and outright refusal to obey laws. Lastly, non-violent intervention involved engaging in disruptive but non-destructive behavior.\textsuperscript{12}

During the political crises of the 1760s and 1770s, Virginia took a leading role on the inter-colonial political stage. Virginians including Patrick Henry, Peyton Randolph, the Lee family, George Washington, George Mason and Thomas Jefferson were viewed as the greatest leaders of the Patriot movement outside of Massachusetts. It was often Virginia's political leaders who took the first steps in opposing British policies that colonists saw as tyrannical. Other colonists and even British political leaders saw Virginia as perhaps the second most important political center for the Patriots in the mainland colonies. The Earl of Dartmouth, writing to Virginia's Royal Governor Lord Dunmore in response to the crisis in the colonies following the passage of the Boston Port Act, feared that Virginia could serve as a bad role model for the colonies "as it has already become in other instances."\textsuperscript{13} While Virginia's political elite were taking bold actions against Great Britain on the inter-colonial stage, their authority in Virginia was beginning to decline. Small and middling Virginian farmers, hit especially hard by increased taxation, were often faced with indebtedness, bankruptcy, and even imprisonment. In the face of economic ruin, they began to increasingly question the policies of the planter elite. Poorer Virginians suspected that the non-importation and non-exportation movement was designed not to alter British policy, but to increase planter control in Virginian politics. Fearful of growing dissension in their colony, planters proceeded slowly with regard to the Patriot movement. While Virginian

\textsuperscript{13} Earl of Dartmouth to Lord Dunmore, 6 July 1774, in Documents of the American Revolution: 1770-1783, ed. K.G. Davies, Volume VIII of 21 (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), 145.
politicians were often bold in making declamations against British imperial policy, they were often reticent to take more tangible steps like non-importation.\textsuperscript{14}

The first major crisis between the American colonies and Great Britain occurred after the passage of the Revenue Act, more commonly known as the Sugar Act, in March 1764. The protests to the Sugar Act in the Americas were immediate, though mainly confined to New England and the mid-Atlantic states.\textsuperscript{15} Southern colonies, including Virginia, were not substantially affected by the act. The most significant effect the Sugar Act had on the Southern and mid-Atlantic colonies was that the Revenue Act extended the prohibition on the printing of paper money from New England to all of the American mainland colonies. Resistance to the Sugar Act, while taking place in several colonies, was mainly confined to urban areas in the Middle Colonies and New England where the impact of the Revenue Act was the strongest. In Southern colonies like Virginia, on the other hand, there were initially few protests or demonstrations against the act.\textsuperscript{16}

This, however, changed rapidly after Parliament not only failed to repeal the Revenue Act, but passed an even more onerous law, the Stamp Act. The Stamp Act called for a tax on all manners of paper documents, including newspapers, playing cards, legal deeds, and marriage licenses, clearance papers for docking ships, calendars, and advertisements.\textsuperscript{17} Patriots in the thirteen colonies used a variety of different measures to attempt to quash the measure. Firstly, and most importantly, colonists used coercion and

\textsuperscript{14} Michael A. McDonnell, \textit{The Politics of War: Race, Class, \& Conflict in Revolutionary Virginia} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 32-33, 36-37.


intimidation to force the locally appointed Stamp Act collectors to resign. Appointed
Stamp Act collectors were burned in effigy, publicly taunted, and large mobs often
formed around their homes.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, many lawyers and judges refused to enforce
the act, prosecute offenders, or use any items covered under the Stamp Act, effectively
shutting down the legal system. Lawyers were not the only ones who refused to abide by
the Stamp Act. Many newspapers ceased publication after the act went into effect, while
some continued to be released without an official stamp.\textsuperscript{19} In short, the colonists
managed to effectively nullify the Stamp Act before it was ever implemented; no stamps
were ever distributed because all stamp tax distributors were either forced to resign or
refused to enforce the law; the few stamps that did enter the colonies sat unused in
warehouses and government buildings.\textsuperscript{20}

The Stamp Act protests ultimately led to the calling of an inter-colonial Stamp
Act Congress to discuss possible responses to the act. Unfortunately, the Stamp Act
Congress did not have official delegations from all thirteen mainland colonies; in fact,
only nine of the thirteen colonies participated. Virginia and North Carolina could not
send delegations because their local assemblies had been shut down by their royal
governors, and Georgia also did not participate in the conference. The Stamp Act
Congress issued a declaration of grievances and sent a petition to King George III as well
as to the British Parliament.\textsuperscript{21}

Virginia played a large and public role in opposing the Stamp Acts, however
Virginia was not as active as the New England colonies in the anti-Stamp Act movement

\textsuperscript{18} Conser Jr., "The Stamp Act Resistance," 31-51.
\textsuperscript{19} Schlesinger, \textit{The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution}, 70-71.
\textsuperscript{21} Edmond S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, \textit{The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution}
and popular support for the movement was surprisingly tepid. When news first arrived in Virginia that Parliament was considering implementing a Stamp Act, it provoked a massive sense of outrage. The House of Burgesses assembled a committee to draft a letter to the Parliament condemning the passage of any Stamp Act. On December 18, 1764, the committee issued an address to Parliament condemning the issuing of a Stamp Act. The address, which was mainly the work of Landon Carter, insisted that Virginia was deeply indebted due to the French and Indian War and that the colony had already contributed its fair share of funds to pay off Britain’s war debt. The address further submitted that the power to raise taxes on Virginians ought not to be used without “the consent of representatives chosen by themselves.” The address was sent to Parliament, but was not considered because of procedural issues and because the address questioned absolute supremacy of Parliament on matters of taxation.

On May 30, 1765, the Virginia House of Burgesses considered a series of resolutions opposing the Stamp Act proposed by newly elected delegate Patrick Henry from Louisa County. Henry made his passionate case near the end of the Burgesses term when only 39 of the 116 Burgesses were present in Williamsburg. The House, persuaded by the fiery words of Henry, passed five of Henry’s resolutions, but the fifth was later repealed by the House on May 31 after Henry had returned to his home district. The first five resolutions stated that Virginians possessed all of the rights and privileges of native Englishman, that these rights had been affirmed by King James the First, that the principle that taxes can only be levied by a legislature elected by the people composed of

23 Morgan and Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis, 71.
24 Morgan and Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis, 92-98.
legislators who understand the needs of the British people is a core component of British freedom, and that taxes in Virginia had always been raised by their own assembly. The controversial fifth resolution stated that "The General Assembly of this Colony have the only and sole exclusive Right and power to lay Taxes." Henry's resolutions were recorded in the records of the House of Burgesses (although Henry's failed fifth resolution was expunged from the records, but is still preserved in Patrick Henry's personal papers).

The Virginia Gazette, the main newspaper in Virginia, did not mention Henry's resolution, largely due to the pro-royalist position of its editor. However, the bold action of the House of Burgesses was reported in other newspapers outside of Virginia. For example, The Newport Mercury, a Rhode Island publication, erroneously reported the content of Henry's resolutions. It deleted the third resolution completely, preserved the fifth resolution, and added two further resolutions that had not been put to a vote. These two additional resolutions stated that Virginians "are not bound to yield Obediance to any Law nor Ordinance ... to impose any Taxation upon them, other than the Laws... of the General Assembly as aforesaid," and that any person who maintained that any political body other than the House of Burgesses could levy taxes in Virginia should be considered an enemy of the State. Word of Virginia's apparent boldness inspired Patriots throughout the colonies. These resolutions, which came to be known as the Virginia Resolves, had a profound impact on the other colonies, and led to several other colonial assemblies passing similar resolves.

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26 Morgan and Morgan, Stamp Act Crisis, 98-102.
In addition to public protests and petitions, many of the colonists also founded non-importation associations designed to cut off trade with Great Britain. The main goal of these early associations was to promote non-importation and non-consumption.\(^{28}\) The hope of the early members of the association was that the reduction in trade to the Americas would hurt the British economy and lead to British merchants and manufacturers to call for the repeal of the act. As Benjamin Franklin argued before the House of Commons, “The goods they (the colonies) take from Britain are...mere articles of fashion, purchased and consumed because the fashion in a respected country; but will now be detested and rejected. The people have already struck off, by general agreement, the use of all goods fashionable in mournings, and many thousands pounds worth are sent back as unsaleable.”\(^{29}\) In this regard, the Stamp Act associations’ efforts were largely successful. British merchants and manufacturers quickly sided with the colonists and successfully lobbied Parliament to repeal the Stamp Act.\(^{30}\)

Several associations designed to oppose the Stamp Act were formed in Virginia. One early Stamp Act association was founded in Westmoreland County in a pledge known as the Westmoreland Resolves. In the Resolves, the members of the association pledged not to pay the stamp tax, not to buy items covered under the Stamp Act, and to report any individuals who did buy stamped goods or who seemed to support the Stamp Act to the county association.\(^{31}\)


The colonists were also helped by a change of leadership in the British government. George Grenville, who had devised the plan for the Stamp Act, was replaced as Prime Minister by the Marquis of Rockingham, whose administration adopted a more conciliatory policy towards the colonies. The Rockingham administration was persuaded to overturn the Stamp Act due to protests from British merchant and manufacturers, who were especially vulnerable to a reduction in the American trade due to an unrelated economic recession, as well as the impassioned testimony of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin convinced the House of Commons that the Stamp Act could not be enforced in the American colonies and that a failure to overturn the Stamp Act would result in a large reduction of American commerce and would damage the credibility of the British government in the colonies. Parliament decided to overturn the Stamp Act, although at the same time Parliament ratified the Declaratory Act, which announced that Parliament had unlimited authority to tax and regulate the American colonies.

Ultimately, colonial efforts to repeal the Stamp Act proved successful. The Stamp Act was one of the first occasions that the colonies attempted to act in unison to oppose the policies of the British government. The colonists successfully implemented protests to stop the act from being carried into effect, and managed to successfully lobby Parliament to overturn the act. The success of non-importation, however, is less clear. Associations only lasted for one year, and due to the rapid repeal of the Stamp Act, there was no need to extend them. As for Virginia, the colony played a large role in the beginning of the Stamp Act crisis, but as time passed, Virginia receded to the background in the crisis.

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33 "Examination of Benjamin Franklin," 527-532.
Virginia’s House of Burgesses was shuttered early in the crisis, and the protests in Virginia and the other lower colonies were relatively small when compared to the protests in New England and the mid-Atlantic colonies. This was possibly due to the fact that the Southern colonies had fewer urban areas, a more elite based political structure, and a smaller merchant class than the other mainland colonies. The only major Southern colony to experience protests was in South Carolina, which had large protests in its capital city of Charleston, one of the four largest cities in the mainland colonies.  

After the Stamp Act was repealed, things quieted down in the colonies until 1767 when Parliament passed the Townshend Acts. The Townshend Acts, unlike the earlier Stamp Act, were an external duty. It placed a tax on imported goods including glass, paper, and tea. Colonial protests to the Townshend Acts were immediate, although not nearly as vociferous as the earlier Stamp Act protests. Colonists throughout the thirteen colonies set into motion plans to enter into non-importation agreements. Unlike the earlier Stamp Act associations, these boycotts were far stricter, enumerating various goods and items which the colonists were not supposed to purchase. These associations were also more enduring than the Stamp Act associations, staying in effect from 1768 until 1770. The Townshend Acts associations, while more extensive than the Stamp Act protests, were far less successful. Unlike the Stamp Act protests, where the colonists had many advocates in Britain, the Townshend Acts protests enjoyed little support in the British Isles. During the late 1760s the British economy was entering into a period of

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expansion and was less dependent on the colonies for its economic well-being.\textsuperscript{41} Additionally, enforcement of these non-importation agreements was left in the hands of the colonial merchants. Colonial merchants, many of whom had strongly supported the Stamp Act protests, dithered over protesting the Townshend Acts and balked at the idea of forming associations. Many merchants refused to support non-importation agreements, and those who did often skirted them, smuggling consumer goods into the colonies.\textsuperscript{42} The Townshend Acts were partly repealed in 1770. This repeal, however, had less to do with colonial protests and more to do with changes in the leadership of the British government.\textsuperscript{43}

The Townshend Acts non-importation agreements spread through almost all of the thirteen colonies, including Southern colonies like Virginia. Virginia, while initially strongly opposed to the Townshend Acts, took little part in the broader Townshend Acts protests and non-importation movement. On the whole, Virginians seemed far more invested in the consumption of consumer goods than many northern colonists. Virginia was slow ratifying non-importation agreements after the passage of the Townshend Acts, with Virginia not forming an association until the summer of 1769, nearly two years after the Townshend Acts had been passed by Parliament.\textsuperscript{44} Virginia’s cause was not helped by the fact that most of the merchants in Virginia were not Virginia natives, but came from Scotland and England. As such, Virginian merchants were even less inclined to support the Patriot cause and non-importation than their northern counterparts.

\textsuperscript{41} Conser Jr. and McCarthy, "The Impact of Commercial Resistance, 378-381.
\textsuperscript{42} Breen, \textit{The Marketplace of Revolution}, 245.
\textsuperscript{44} Breen, \textit{The Marketplace of Revolution}, 245.
Consequently, Virginia’s planter class took the lead in forming associations. Virginia’s planter elite was motivated in large part by its growing fear of debt and insolvency. George Washington, writing to George Mason in the spring of 1769, argued that Virginia should adopt a policy of non-importation. He argued that the policy appeared to be succeeding in the northern colonies and might be Virginia’s last option for responding to British despotism. Washington did note that imposing non-importation in Virginia would be more difficult than in New England since “Trade is so diffused, and in a manner wholly conducted by Factors for their principals at home.” Furthermore, Washington argued that non-importation could actually benefit Virginia in the long term by reducing colonial spending and thus decreasing Virginians’ indebtedness to British creditors.

Non-importation also offered Virginian debtors an excuse not to pay their debts without looking like they were indebted. Without the support of the merchant class, Virginia’s protest movement relied more on non-consumption than non-importation. Additionally, Virginia’s non-importation movement was far less restrictive than those in the New England colonies, due in large part to the tepid support for the boycott movement in the colony.

The House of Burgesses first convened to discuss the issue of non-importation in May 1769. When the assembly declared that the sole right to tax Virginians lay within the House of Burgesses, Lord Botetourt, Royal Governor of Virginia, disbanded the legislature. The Burgesses, undeterred by this action, assembled in a private home and established a plan of non-importation, which included the provision not to import any

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item that was being taxed under the Townshend Acts, to refrain from buying various luxury items generally, and to practice frugality. The association was widely signed throughout the colony, and supported by most of the colonists outside of the merchant class.\textsuperscript{48} The non-importation movement in Virginia and the upper South against the Townshend Acts was much less effective than the associations in the other colonies. In fact, the upper South’s imports from Great Britain steadily rose between 1768 and 1772.\textsuperscript{49} Planter William Nelson, in a letter to John Norton, noted with distaste that the imports of Virginians “rather encrese than diminish.”\textsuperscript{50} Virginia’s lack of success was due to the fact that the association was not as broad as it should have been. Many colonists, while they stopped buying the boycotted items, still continued to purchase other types of British goods.\textsuperscript{51} The effectiveness of the association was also diminished by the active resistance of local merchants to the proposal, who attempted to undermine and evade the association at every turn, as well as by the colony’s late entrance into the protest movement, and by the fact that consumer demand never decreased. When the Townshend Acts were partly repealed in 1770, non-importation quickly broke down altogether.\textsuperscript{52} In short, the protest movement against the Townshend Acts was not as successful as the protest movement against the Stamp Act. The protest movement failed due to strong economic conditions in England, a dearth of support for the movement

\textsuperscript{49} Conser Jr. and McCarthy, “The Impact of Commercial Resistance, 373.
\textsuperscript{51} Holton, \textit{Forced Founders},91.
among the colonial merchant class, the absence of consumer willingness to decrease their demand for the products, and a lack of coordination amongst the colonies. 53

After the partial repeal of the Townshend Acts, the colonies settled into a state of uneasy peace with the Mother Country. Even though tensions with Great Britain were low during this period, Virginia was still seen by many colonists as being at the forefront of the Patriot movement. One of the most significant disruptions in this period of comparative stability in British-colonial relations was the so called Gaspee Affair. In early 1772, the British schooner HMS Gaspee, which had been engaged in the enforcement of custom duties in Rhode Island, ran aground and was burned by a group of angry Rhode Islanders. This incident, while not unprecedented in colonial history, provoked extreme outrage in Great Britain, prompting the British government to form a court of inquiry to investigate the incident. The board of inquiry was charged with finding and identifying the culprits of this act and determining if there was enough evidence to charge the suspects with treason, a crime for which they would be prosecuted in England. Colonists were shocked when news reached them of this development, with many seeing the court of inquiry as a potentially grave violation of their constitutional rights. Ultimately, the court of inquiry was unable to find sufficient evidence to charge anyone with burning the Gaspee, and the affair was slowly forgotten by the colonists as they dealt with more pressing matters. 54

While the effects of the Gaspee Affair were mainly localized to New England, it was actually Virginia that took some of the boldest steps in opposing British policy. In response to this crisis, the Virginia House of Burgesses moved to form an inter-colonial Committee of Correspondence. The resolution declared that Virginia's interests "frequently connected with those of Great Britain as well as of the neighboring colonies." The committee was established in order to "obtain the most early and Authentic intelligence of all such Acts and Resolutions of the British Parliament... As may relate to or affect the British Colonies in America," and to find out more details concerning the court of inquiry that had been assembled to investigate the Gaspee Affair. The committee was composed of eleven Burgesses, including Peyton Randolph, Robert Carter Nichols, Richard Henry Lee, Patrick Henry, and Thomas Jefferson. This proposal was greeted with enthusiasm by the other twelve colonies. The formation of these Committees of Correspondence was a large step in creating a sense of common interest amongst the colonies. The committees helped to build trust between colonial assemblies and Patriots throughout the mainland colonies, and helped Patriot leaders craft a more cohesive policy of resistance by 1774.

Tensions with Great Britain heated up again after the passage of the Tea Act in 1773. The Tea Act, designed by the government of Lord North to avert the bankruptcy of the East India Company (EIC), gave the EIC the exclusive right to sell tea in the Americas. Furthermore, it allowed them the right to grant trading monopolies to

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56 John Pendleton Kennedy, ed., Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia 1773-1776 Including the Committee of Correspondence (Richmond: Library Board of Virginia State Library, 1905), 28.

57 Morgan, The Birth of the Republic, 57.
American merchants whom they favored. In response to the Tea Act, Patriots throughout the thirteen colonies resolved to cease drinking and purchasing tea and to stop the East India Company from shipping more tea to America. The protests to the Tea Act were of a scale not seen since the Stamp Act protests. Patriots conspired to either stop the East India Company from landing more tea in the colonies or to stop that tea from being sold. These protests were for the most part non-violent and extremely successful.

Throughout the colonies new shipments of tea were either not landed or were stored in warehouses and not sold. The one notable exception to this policy was in the colony of Massachusetts, where the famous Boston Tea Party occurred.

In response to the Boston Tea Party Parliament passed the Coercive Acts, which became derisively known as the Intolerable Acts in the American colonies. These acts included closing the port of Boston to all trans-Atlantic commerce until Boston repaid the East India Company for the destroyed tea, shutting down the Boston colonial assembly, installing General Thomas Gage, Commander-in-Chief of British forces in North America, as military governor of Massachusetts, and sending 25,000 British troops to the city of Boston to restore order. These acts provoked unprecedented outrage in the colonies. Unlike earlier British policies which had primarily targeted the pocketbooks of the colonists, these acts aimed to strip the Bostonians of their political liberty. The British treated the colonial assemblies, which the colonist held in such high regard, with disdain and disbanded the Massachusetts assembly by Parliamentary fiat. While many colonists viewed the actions of the Boston Sons of Liberty with disdain, they also feared that Britain might mete out the punishment it had delivered to Boston on other colonies. In

short, the Intolerable Acts were seen as an existential threat to liberty in the British American colonies.  

It was undoubtedly the severity of this threat that lead Virginians to act much more promptly to this crisis than they had to the earlier Stamp and Townshend Acts. Word of the Boston Port Act first reached Virginia through the Committee of Correspondence. The Committee of Correspondence received a letter from Boston warning of the Boston Port Act and calling for solidarity. On Tuesday, May 24, 1774, the House of Burgesses entered these letters into its official journal, published the letters in the *Virginia Gazette*, and adopted a resolution that condemned the Intolerable Acts and asked that June 1, the day the Boston Port Act was to be set into effect, be a “Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer.... For averting that heavy Calamity which threatens Destruction to our civil Rights,” and promised to “oppose, by all just and proper Means, every Injury to American Rights.” Two days after proposing this declaration, Governor Dunmore responded by disbanding the House of Burgesses, which would never again officially reassemble. On the next day, eighty-nine members of the House of Burgesses assembled in the Apollo Room of the Raleigh Tavern and formed an association. This gathering of Burgesses also called for the convening of a “general congefs” to discuss an appropriate response to British action. Unbeknownst to assembled Burgesses, however, New York City and Philadelphia had already called for a Continental Congress and

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supported a more radical policy of non-importation. After belatedly receiving this news, Peyton Randolph called a second impromptu meeting of the House of Burgesses in Williamsburg on May 30. At this meeting it was decided to schedule a meeting of all of the Burgesses as soon as possible to discuss how to address the various problems facing Virginia and the other mainland colonies, and to select delegates to attend the Continental Congress.

The First Virginia Convention, held on August 1, 1774, helped to define the objectives of the Virginia Non-Importation Association. The resolves of the Association declared that Virginians were troubled by the policies of the British Crown and Parliament towards both Virginia and the other mainland colonies and pledged to “Guard against such dangerous and extensive mischiefs, by every just and proper means.” The associators claimed that the best way to deter Great Britain’s policies was to persuade the merchant class that continuing good relations with the American colonies was in their self-interest. In order to prove this point, Virginians pledged not to import any British made good from anywhere or anyone, with the exception of medicine, after November 1, 1774. On that same day, Virginians agreed to cease importing and consuming tea until the Intolerable Acts were repealed, and, in fact, to stop purchasing any goods from the East India Company if Boston was forced to repay them for the destroyed tea. Indeed, to demonstrate support for Boston, Virginians agreed to collect funds to help maintain the city of Boston during its time of need. Additionally, a decision was made to halt all exportation to Great Britain and her dominions by August 1, 1775. To add “teeth” to this

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move, Virginian’s agreed to shun anyone who exported tobacco after the date the non-exportation association went into effect. Furthermore, decisions were made to halt the slave trade and to improve sheep herding techniques. Finally, the Virginia associators decided to force merchants not to inflate prices, but to sell all goods at the same price they had been sold at for the past year and, to require all merchants to sign the association unless they wished to be shunned.\(^\text{65}\) In many ways these proposals were similar to the ones Virginia enacted in 1769.\(^\text{66}\)

Virginia’s leaders were still worried about whether the people of Virginia supported non-importation. During the months of June and July 1774, many of Virginia’s counties released resolutions declaring their support for the Patriot cause. For example, Surry County, although declaring its loyalty to George III, refused to submit to any taxes not levied by the Virginia General Assembly, it agreed to cut ties to the Atlantic slave trade and declared its solidarity with the “suffering brethren of America” and, the people of the city of Boston whose cause was “the common cause of all America.”\(^\text{67}\) The Fauquier County resolution, on the other hand, stated that the Boston Port Act was “a dangerous attack on the liberty of the British Colonies in America in general, strongly tending to the dissolution of Government.”\(^\text{68}\) Although many of Virginia’s counties issued such declarations, it seems likely that these works did not represent the views of the common citizen in Virginia. In fact, few Virginia residents participated in these resolves. For example, only three percent of the male population signed the Loudoun

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County resolves. Many Virginians in public meetings expressed their disinterest in the Tea Act protest, with one speaker in Westmoreland County saying the Tea Act did not concern them since they did not drink tea. In order to bolster popular support for non-importation and the Continental cause, Virginia’s elite had to win the support of middle class farmers by acceding to popular demands, like closing down the debtor’s court and making popularly elected institutions more democratic.

In September 1774, the First Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia Pennsylvania. Unlike the earlier Stamp Act Congress, the First Continental Congress had a broader base of inter-colonial support. Twelve of the thirteen mainland colonies sent formal delegations to Philadelphia, with only Georgia abstaining. Fifty-six delegates attended the Congress. Virginian Peyton Randolph served as President of the Continental Congress and Patrick Henry played a large role in the proceedings. The two main accomplishments of the Continental Congress were the drafting of the Olive Branch Petition to Great Britain and the formation of the Continental Association. The Continental Association, which was partly modeled on the Virginia Convention, called for total non-importation of British goods as well as luxury items from other countries that the British had imposed duties upon, such as Madeira wine. Beginning on December 1, 1774, the Continental Association called for the restriction of the slave trade, a non-consumption pact, and the implementation of non-exportation of colonial goods (with the exception of rice to Europe). In the following year, the Continental Association endorsed the promotion of colonial sheep herding and agriculture, compelling merchants to continue to sell goods at the same price they had been selling them for the past year, as

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70 Ammerman, “The Continental Association,” 233-244.
well as the formation of county committees to enforce the terms of the Association and to
"observe the conduct of all persons touching this association."

The county committees eventually formed the backbone of the Association in
Virginia. Once Lord Dunmore dissolved the House of Burgesses in May 1774, control of
the colonial government slowly but surely began to pass from the legitimate government
to extra-legal organizations like the committees. As Lord Dunmore noted in a letter to the
Earl of Dartmouth in December 1774, the Association was enforced "throughout this
country with the greatest vigour." He further noted that the control of government "is
totally disregarded if not wholly overturned. There is not a Justice of the Peace in
Virginia who acts except as a Committee-man." Committees were quickly established
throughout Virginia after the First Virginia Convention. By late 1774, thirty-three
counties and three towns had established Committees of Safety. By late 1775, forty-six
counties and three towns had a committee, which means that over three quarters of
Virginia's counties had Committees of Safety. The city of Norfolk, while it technically
did not have a Committee of Safety, did have a borough committee, which performed an
equivalent function until Governor Dunmore seized control of Norfolk late in 1775.73
Committee members were chosen in an annual election in which all voters who were
allowed to vote for legislators were allowed to participate. Initially, these elections were
supposed to take place annually each November; however, a later state convention
moved election day to October to ensure that winter weather did not impede voter
turnout. At first, the number of members each county committee of safety was supposed

71 "Continental Association, October 1774," in Resistance, Politics, and the American Struggle for
72 Earl of Dunmore to Earl of Dartmouth, 24 December 1774, in Documents of the American
73 Larry Bowman, "The Virginia County Committees of Safety, 1774-1776," The Virginia
Magazine of History and Biography 79, no. 3 (July 1971): 323-324.
to have was not set. This led to a great variation in the number of members each committee had, some committees had as many as seventy men while others had only thirteen men. In order to impose order on this unwieldy system, the July 1775 session of the Virginia Convention fixed the size of each county committee at twenty-one members. Committee members were faced with a wide variety of responsibilities. In compliance with these responsibilities, committee members investigated the business transactions of merchants, forced shopkeepers to pay a reasonable price for their wares, and investigated whether individuals were violating the state or national Association. The committee members took these responsibilities seriously.

Finding out precise information about the proceedings of Virginia’s Committees of Safety is difficult since only a small handful of the county committee proceedings have survived. Unfortunately for historians, no special effort was made to preserve these records after the war had ended. Many committee notebooks, including the notebook for Caroline County, ended up being converted into a record book for the county. Out of the forty-three Virginia counties to form Committees of Safety, the records of only six have survived today, and none of those record collections is complete. The records of Caroline, Westmoreland, Fincastle, Isle of Wright, Southampton, and Cumberland County do, however, reveal a great deal about the functioning of the associations. Unfortunately, many of these surviving records come from the later part of the Committee of Safety period, when the focus had shifted from enforcing non-importation to forming colonial militias and procuring gunpowder. One of the committees with the

74 Bowman, “The Virginia County Committees,” 324-325.
75 Bowman, “The Virginia County Committees,” 325-337.
most thorough records still extant is Fincastle County, located in the far western frontier of Virginia, incorporating many areas that would later become part of the states of Kentucky and Tennessee. In fact, the Virginian government subdivided Fincastle County into smaller counties in 1776, after hostilities commenced. The Committee of Safety of Fincastle County showed little concern for enforcing the Association, instead focusing its resources on repelling Indian raids. While few complete committee records still survive to this day, the Virginia Gazette also provides some records of the meetings of the Committees of Safety and the Association of Virginia. The Gazette recorded the results of committee elections or major incidents involving the Association, often ignoring or passing over many of the committees less sensational functions.

It is also important to note that not all of the county committees’ duties were related to the Continental Association. The county committees were also responsible for appointing officers and raising troops to serve in the state militia, as well as organizing them into companies. Other responsibilities of the committees included monitoring the activities of Native American tribes and procuring supplies necessary to the war effort, such as gunpowder. Most of the actions performed by the six county committees whose records are still extant had nothing to do with enforcing the non-importation association. Additionally, the Virginia Gazette, which also documented the activities of the county committees, spends comparatively little time talking about the committees investigating violators of the Continental Association. The fact that the county committees spent so little time dealing with violators of the Association is perhaps one of the strongest pieces

78 Harwell, Committees of Westmoreland and Fincastle, 17.
79 Harwell, Committees of Westmoreland and Fincastle, 61-95.
80 Harwell, Committees of Westmoreland and Fincastle, 10.
of evidence that the policies enforced by the county committees enjoyed widespread support.

Perhaps the most important function of the county committees was enforcing non-importation. This job was especially difficult during the early months of the Association. The non-importation agreement had been decided upon so abruptly that many merchants had already placed orders for goods in Great Britain. One prominent person who ordered imported goods that arrived after the boycott went into effect was Thomas Jefferson, who had ordered fourteen pairs of sash windows that arrived in Virginia on December 1, 1774. Jefferson was so embarrassed that he wrote a letter to attempt to justify his actions. In order to avoid penalizing colonists like Jefferson, who may have unwittingly violated the embargo, the Continental Congress established a grace period between December 1774 and February 1775. Any goods that had been ordered or arrived in the colonies after December 1774 or before February 1775 would either be returned to Britain, stored at the importer’s own risk until non-importation was ended, or auctioned off by the committee, in which case the importer would be reimbursed from the sales for the cost and charges of the goods that they had purchased, with the remainder of the proceeds going to the poor in Boston.

Most importers who purchased goods or had goods arrive during this intermediate period chose this third option for disposing of their unwanted goods. Consequently, a good deal of the early work that the committees performed was organizing these public auctions. For example, on Monday, December 19, 1774, the Fairfax County Committee ordered the organization of an auction for “sundry packages of Irish linen,” that had been

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82 Bowman, “The Virginia County Committees,” 333.
purchased by John Fitzgerald and Valentine Peers. This auction was to be held on December 24, 1774, at 3:00 PM, with the proceeds going to Misters Fitzgerald and Peers to reimburse them for the costs and charges of their purchase. Any extra proceeds from the auction would be donated to the poor in Boston who were suffering as a result of the Boston Port Act. The results of the auction were later reported in Pinkney’s *Virginia Gazette*. The linen was sold at auction for £1,106 and 14 shillings, £1101 and 4 shillings of which was used to reimburse Fitzgerald and Peers for prime cost and charges while the remaining £5 were donated to aid the poor in Boston. Similarly, Henrico County authorized a public auction at the house of Abraham Cowley in mid-January 1775, in order to auction off 3,596 bushels of salt that had been purchased by Thomas Bowen. In short, the Association showed a great deal of leeway towards individuals who had unwittingly violated their rules. The Association’s policies towards individuals who inadvertently violated non-importation show a great deal of prudence. Furthermore, the provision that indicated that the residual proceeds from public auctions go to the poor in Boston probably strengthened the relationship between Massachusetts and the other mainland colonies while creating a sense that all thirteen colonies were engaged in a common cause.

Once the February 1775 deadline had passed, however, the duties of the local committees became more difficult, especially once armed conflict with Great Britain commenced. The committees were now tasked with stopping all import and export of goods to and from Great Britain. Individuals who violated the Continental Association

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were to be considered enemies of American liberty. Out of all of the county committees, it was the Norfolk Borough Committee that had to deal most frequently with violators of the importation embargo due to its importance as a trade and shipping center. For instance, on August 23, 1775, the Norfolk Borough Committee ordered that Walter Chambre be declared an enemy of America for his attempts to export goods to Great Britain after Virginia’s exportation ban had gone into effect on August 5, 1775. Chambre had refused to recognize the authority of the Continental Association and was thus promptly declared an enemy of the state.87

Violators of non-exportation were also treated harshly. For example, John Sampson, master of the snow *Elisabeth* from Bristol, arrived in Norfolk harbor in February 1775, carrying salt. He informed the committee of his cargo, told them his ship was damaged and required repairs and requested that the committee store his salt until his ship completed its repairs, at which point he would put the salt back on board his vessel.88 A month later the committee was shocked to find that Sampson had checked out of the local customs house and was loading his vessel with lumber, not the salt. Sampson was summoned to appear before the committee where he claimed that he would take the salt onboard his vessel the next day.89 Once again, Sampson did not load the salt aboard the snow *Elizabeth*, but instead sought refuge aboard a nearby British ship of war. The Borough committee therefore declared Sampson “a violator of the association, and an enemy to American liberty.” After the committee published this notice, Sampson took back possession of his salt and set sail for Bristol.90 As can be seen, the county

87 Bowman, “The Virginia County Committees,” 325.
committees were often effective at promoting the embargo. Individuals who violated the Association were often persecuted and shunned by other members of the community and the reports of such violations were infrequent.

Even in cases of non-exportation, however, the committees frequently showed leniency towards individuals who may have inadvertently breached the Association. For example, Arthur Upshur had loaded a ship with grain which was supposed to sail on July 20, 1775, for the West Indies, but an outbreak of sickness among the crew delayed the ship’s departure until after the non-exportation clause had gone into effect. The Accomack County committee restored the good graces of Mr. Upshur for this breach and urged the residents to restore him to good graces, since he had unintentionally violated the embargo. 91

While the importation and consumption of all British goods was frowned upon by the associators, the importation and consumption of tea was held in special disdain by almost all of the Patriots. Tea was seen as a symbol of both the Boston Tea Party and the hated Boston Port Act. One early incident of mass anger at the importation of tea into Virginia occurred on November 8, 1774. On this day the Virginia arrived in Yorktown, carrying among other items, two half chests of tea that had been ordered by John Prentis from John Norton. When members of the Gloucester County Committee learned of this, they sent an inquiry to the members of the House of Burgesses and awaited a response. After several hours had passed, and with no word from the Burgesses, members of the community entered the Virginia and dumped all of the tea on the vessel into the York River. 92 The so-called Yorktown Tea Party resulted in jubilation in Virginia and intense

91 Bowman, “The Virginia County Committees,” 326.
92 Scribner, The Committees and the Second Convention, 164.
anger against both John Prentis and John Norton. Norton was declared to have “been
guilty of a daring Insult upon the People of this Colony, to whom he owes his ALL.” The
Gloucester County Committee declared that they “will not in future consign Tobacco, or
any other Commodity, to his House, until satisfactory Concessions are made;” and that
John Preston, who purchased the tobacco, should be censured and made “a publick
Example of.”93 These sentiments were soon echoed by the members of the York County
committee.94

Both Prentis and Norton took swift steps to repair the damage done to their
reputations by this scandal. Prentis gave a public declaration before the Gloucester and
York County Committees, begging pardon for violating the terms of the Continental
Association, which he had not intended to violate.95 Meanwhile the firm of John Norton
& Sons sent a letter to the inhabitants of Virginia imploring that they not censure him for
sending to tea to Virginia, and restating his strong personal commitment to the cause of
the colonists.96

While enforcing the non-importation and non-consumption embargoes was
perhaps the most important part of the Continental Association, the county committees
also performed many other functions. County committees kept a close eye on local
merchants in order to make sure that they were not importing new goods and to prohibit
traders from engaging in price gouging. Colonial leaders wanted the prices of all goods
and services to remain at the same price they had been the year before the association
went into place in order to help protect colonists from some of the more harmful

93 Scribner, The Committees and the Second Convention, 163.
94 Scribner, The Committees and the Second Convention, 166.
repercussions of their non-exportation and non-importation policy. County committees checked the books of local shopkeepers to make sure they were abiding by the provisions of the Continental Association. Many merchants initially balked at these proposals on principle, but faced with massive public pressure, they usually relented. For example, the Caroline County committee inspected the record books of all of the local merchants, including Patrick Kennan, James Miller, and Andrew Leckie. Several merchants initially refused to allow the committee members to inspect their books, but ultimately agreed. In Caroline County, at least, all of the local merchants abided by the provisions of the local association. The county committees often relied on the testimony of people who shopped at the merchant’s shop to determine whether a merchant needed to be investigated. The committee’s investigations were generally fair. Several shopkeepers who were falsely accused of inflating their prices were exonerated by the committee to the consternation of many locals. For example, the Westmoreland County committee investigated the business activities of merchant Henry Glass after he was accused by Martin Fisher of raising the prices of several goods. When confronted by the committee, Glass damned them and insisted he would sell his goods for whatever price he pleased. The committee declined to use punitive measures against Mr. Glass, since he had raised his prices before the Westmoreland Committee was formed, but nonetheless recommended that he be held out for public censure. Virginians seemed to be especially supportive of this part of the Continental Association. There was a great amount of resentment towards merchants in Virginia, largely because so many Virginians

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97 “The Continental Association,” 552.
100 Harwell, Committees of Westmoreland and Fincastle, 52-53.
were deeply in debt to them. In fact, many colonists saw the Continental Association as a way to escape paying their debts. After the Revolutionary War ended, many merchants, including John Hatley Norton, spent years attempting to get Virginian planters to repay their debts.\textsuperscript{101}

Non-consumption not only involved not purchasing new goods, but avoiding ostentatious displays of wealth and luxury. According to the articles of the Continental Association, colonists were to refrain from dressing ostentatiously and were only permitted to wear black arm bands at funerals instead of the more showy attire often worn on such occasions. The Continental Association also regulated social behavior, condemning gaming and other rowdy activities as inimical to the patriotic cause.\textsuperscript{102}

Infractions of these minor provisions were often treated more lightly than major infractions, such as violating the non-importation agreement. First time violators were often let off with a warning on the condition that they agreed to amend their miscreant behavior. If trouble makers were caught for second time gambling or being ostentatious, the committee would declare them enemies of America. For example, Rodham Kennan was warned by the Caroline Committee of Safety for engaging in gaming, after a second violation he was declared an enemy of the America.\textsuperscript{103} On the other hand, John Scruggs, who violated the Association’s ban on gaming, was restored to favor after confessing his guilt and agreeing to testify against two other citizens who had been accused of gaming.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{101} Mason, \textit{John Norton & Sons}, xxxi-xxxiii.
\textsuperscript{102} "The Continental Association," 552.
\textsuperscript{103} McIlwaine, “Committees of Caroline and Southampton County,” 130,140; Bowman, “The Virginia County Committees,” 331.
Lastly, the county committees restricted free speech, together with actions that were deemed disloyal. Individuals who were accused of making statements that seemed to oppose the policies of the committee, the Continental Congress, or the Patriot’s cause were subject to extreme censure from local committees. For instance, Robert Scruggs was accused before the Cumberland County Committee of Safety of making remarks that “might seem to reflect upon some members of Committee,” but that since “he is a sincere Wellwisher to the Interest of America,” he begged that the committee forgive him. The Cumberland County committee subsequently exonerated Mr. Scruggs. One person, a certain Mr. Wardrobe, had one of his private letters to a relative in Glasgow intercepted by Continental forces. In the letter, Wardrobe made statements that seemed both opposed to the Continental cause and favorable to Loyalist positions. Wardrobe was severely censured and forced to make a public apology and recantation of his written statements. Ministers, such as John Wingate and John Agnew, who delivered sermons that seemed pro-Royalist in tone, became victims of smear attacks where congregants were either told to stay away from the minister’s church or were persuaded to force the ministers to stand down. Even members of the local county committees were not above suspicion. Michael Blow, the chairman of the Sussex County Committee of Safety, was accused of making statements hostile to the American cause. Blow promptly stepped down from the committee to avoid the appearance of impropriety. He defended himself before the committee, claiming that he had only criticized the Virginia Convention’s

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106 Harwell, Committees of Westmoreland and Fincastle, 32-36.
107 Bowman, “The Virginia County Committees,” 329.
provisions for paying the army and had not questioned the Continental cause. The committee subsequently exonerated Mr. Blow of all charges.108

The Continental Association and the county committees proved effective at promoting intra–colonial and inter-colonial unity. The committees made use of persuasive and coercive tactics to compel the citizenry of Virginia to comply with the Continental Association and support the Continental cause. The Committees of Correspondence allowed the colonies to communicate with each other, share intelligence and form bonds of trust. Virginia’s leaders also worked to link the Old Dominion’s problems with the struggles of the other colonies. Money from county auctions was sent to the poor in Boston. Additionally, the Virginia Gazette reported on the actions of other colonies’ Committees of Safety. Furthermore, the Virginia county committees, Virginia Convention and the Committees of Correspondence regularly communicated with their counterpart bodies in other colonies in order to pass on information and intelligence. By the time the county committees dissolved in late 1776, they had largely successfully completed their functions, creating a new system for independent governance in Virginia, halting trade with Great Britain, and creating solidarity between Virginia and the other twelve rebelling colonies.109

While the Continental Association was effective at enforcing norms at home, it failed to produce meaningful effects back in Great Britain. Ultimately, it neither altered public opinion in Great Britain nor changed the policies of the British Crown and Parliament. There are several possible explanations for this failure. Firstly, the British economy was in a much stronger position in the mid-1770s than it was during the mid-

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108 Bowman, “The Virginia County Committees,” 328.
109 Bowman, “The Virginia County Committees,” 335-337.
1760s. Since the British economy was fairly strong, non-importation resulted in only minimal negative economic impact. Secondly, the decision to delay non-exportation until the summer of 1775 diluted the effectiveness of the Continental Association. Non-exportation was ultimately a more powerful weapon than non-importation. However, the fact that the colonies provided British merchants almost a year’s warning that non-exportation was coming gave British merchants time to prepare for economic hardship and to seek alternative markets for tobacco and rice. To make matters worse, by the time British manufactures began to feel the negative effects of non-exportation, the War for Independence had already begun, rendering the embargo useless. Thirdly, the buildup of British military forces in preparation for the American Revolutionary War caused the British economy to grow just as quickly, if not faster, than it would have if the crisis had been settled earlier in 1774. In short, the growing intransigence and resistance of the American colonies had inadvertently strengthened and not weakened the British economy.\textsuperscript{110}

The most important reason why the colonists’ approach failed was that by the time Americans had implemented the Continental Association, Britain’s political leaders, namely Prime Minister Lord North and King George III, had already decided not to negotiate with the mainland colonies. They had come to the conclusion that the resistance of the colonies was not only unacceptable but treasonous. They asserted that if the American colonists could tax themselves without Parliamentary approval, then they were no longer dependent on Great Britain and no longer subject to British laws. Britain’s leaders still believed that the Patriot movement was mainly confined to radicals in New England and a few extremists in the other colonies. They suspected that if the Patriot

movement was quashed and defeated, that the large silent majority in the colonies in favor of Parliament’s policies would rise up and support Great Britain. In order to quell the rebellious tendencies of the colonies, Britain began using increasingly violent and aggressive measures to put down colonial resistance. In the face of British intransigence, many colonies began to take steps to defend themselves by strengthening colonial militias.

After the battles of Concord and Lexington on April 19, 1775, many colonists came to believe that a peaceful settlement of their problems with Great Britain was impossible. Even as the British government began pushing for harsher measures to be taken against the colonists, many Americans were growing disillusioned with Great Britain and her government. Instead of interpreting British tyranny in the Americas as being a product of corrupt ministers and parliamentarians, many Americans now saw the King himself as being behind most of the problems the colonies were facing. These individuals argued that the only way to protect American liberty was to gain independence from Great Britain.\textsuperscript{111} Popular opinion in Virginia only began to swing towards independence in April and May 1775 when Lord Dunmore attempted to seize control of the colonies’ gunpowder, prompting widespread protests. Dunmore responded to these protests by threatening to incite a slave revolt and enfranchise the slaves unless the colonists stopped protesting British policies, a proposal which permanently alienated Virginians from both Dunmore and the British government.\textsuperscript{112} Colonists throughout the thirteen colonies came to believe that the previous associations had been failures and that


\textsuperscript{112}Holton, \textit{Forced Founders}, 143-152.
more aggressive steps were necessary to secure American liberty. Furthermore, a growing number of Americans were becoming convinced that Great Britain had been corrupted and had lost touch with its ancient constitutional beliefs. Americans began to interpret the British people’s lack of response to the injustice’s being committed in the Americas as a symptom of growing apathy, indifference, and corruption at the heart of the British nation. Soon, many colonists began to believe that the mainland colonies were the last bastion of English freedom and liberty and that the only way to protect their rights and privileges was to defend them on their own.113

Thus, as the 1770s progressed the American colonies began to feel increasingly oppressed by Great Britain. The situation deteriorated even further in the aftermath of the Gaspee Affair and the Boston Tea Party, when Britain closed the port of Boston and sent 25,000 troops to the American colonies. The mainland colonies believed that they were not receiving the protection that they were guaranteed under British common law. Virginia ultimately chose to declare independence from Great Britain. Although Virginia took a public leading role in the Patriot movement during the late 1760s and early 1770s, the colony often lagged behind the Northern colonies when it involved taking tangible action against British policy. By the time of the Continental Association, however, Virginia’s political leaders had figured out how to rally the people of Virginia behind the Continental cause, and as a result, Virginia’s county committees proved effective at promoting national unity.

113 Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 258-265.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

The American Revolution wrought profound change on Virginia and the other
twelve rebelling colonies. Indeed, the American Revolution transformed the thirteen
British mainland colonies into a new nation with a growing sense of national identity.
The new American society that arose in the aftermath of the War for Independence was
more democratic, more egalitarian, and more commercially minded than colonial society
had been. The American electorate, which was already larger than the British electorate
had been prior to the Revolution, expanded even further after the War for Independence.
While class and social distinctions remained, they were not nearly as significant as they
had been prior to the Revolution. In fact, the new American society of the late eighteenth
and early nineteenth centuries was more upwardly mobile than almost any other society
on Earth.\textsuperscript{114} Colonial legislatures, many of which had dissolved during the Continental
Association, reformed as state assemblies in 1776. The county committees, which had
conducted so much of the business of government in Virginia after the dissolution of the
House of Burgesses in 1774, themselves disbanded in the summer of 1776, when
Virginia's new constitution went into effect and the Virginia legislature, now known as
the General Assembly, reconvened.\textsuperscript{115} Consumerism, which had been extensive prior to
the Revolution, continued to expand after the war was over. Americans maintained their
old business relationships with British merchants even while expanding their interests

\textsuperscript{115} Larry Bowman, "The Virginia County Committees of Safety 1774-1776," \textit{The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography}, 79, no. 3 (July 1971), 337.
into new, foreign markets. As can be seen, the growth of consumerism had indeed played a large role in shaping the newly formed United States.

This thesis has argued that consumerism was a major force influencing the growth and development of eighteenth century Virginian society, that this newly formed “world of goods” was a double-edged sword in colonial society, creating stronger ties between the colonies and uniting the colonists against Great Britain while also exacerbating pre-existing class and social conflicts in Virginia. Furthermore, this paper has attempted to examine the impact of the early colonial attempts at enforcing non-importation, and argued that the county committees created to enforce the Continental Association of 1774 were effective at enforcing the association and squashing dissent.

Consumerism was indeed spreading throughout eighteenth century Virginia and the other mainland colonies. Britain’s mainland North American colonies existed under a mercantilist economic system. Mercantilist policies led to the colonies becoming a closed market for British consumer goods. Colonies like Virginia produced cash crops such as tobacco for export to Great Britain while importing consumer goods manufactured in Great Britain. Mercantilist policies were designed to make the mother country self-sufficient while maintaining a culture of dependency in the overseas colonies.

The massive explosion in consumerism in the mid-eighteenth century was due to an economic boom in the British colonies that began in the 1740s and continued until the end of the French and Indian War. As the colonists acquired more funds they began to purchase more goods, often using credit. The evidence of consumerism can be found in newspapers, wills, ledger books, correspondence, and historical artifacts from the period.

This rapid expansion of consumerism had a transformative effect on colonial society giving more power to disenfranchised groups like the poor and women. Coupled with the growth of credit, the expansion of consumerism led to rampant debt in the colonies, which fueled growing resentment towards Great Britain.

A world of goods did indeed exist in Virginia and the other twelve rebelling colonies. This world of goods helped to create a common culture in the colonies based on consumption and taste. As the expansion of consumerism fueled lingering resentments between various social groups in the colonies, it also stirred animosity towards Britain and their creditors, who Virginians blamed for their misfortunes. The belief that Britain was a common threat shared by all the colonies generated solidarity between the colonies, and also created an embryonic national identity.

The protest movements of the 1760s and 1770s deepened these feelings of national unity. The Stamp Act protests of 1765 had compelled the British to the repeal the dreaded Stamp Act, while the Townshend Acts protests were mostly ineffectual. Neither the Stamp Act nor Townshend Acts protests enjoyed great success in Virginia. Virginia played a leading role in patriotic rhetoric, but took little direct action until the early 1770s.

The Continental Association of 1774, enforced by county committees in Virginia, was ultimately quite successful in generating inter-colonial unity. Virginia’s elite had learned how to rally the people behind non-importation by giving them a greater say in local governance. Committees effectively squashed dissent while rewarding dedication to the Patriot cause. Violators of the Association and those who engaged in questionable conduct were severely punished and ostracized from the community. The county
committees were not always harsh; people who unknowingly violated the Continental Association were treated with leniency. While the Continental Association was quite effective at promoting unity in the colonies, it failed to galvanize any positive action in Britain. The delay between the implementation of non-importation and non-exportation diluted the effects of the Continental Association. Furthermore, Lord North had already decided to respond to colonial intransigence with force.

All in all, a world of goods did exist in colonial Virginia and this world of goods did help create an American national identity. Just like Americans of the 21st century are united by their love of technology and big cars, Americans of the eighteenth century unified around similar consumer goods. Non-importation was successful at producing changes in British policy, and these non-importation associations, in addition to changing parliamentary policy, further strengthened the Patriot movement in the colonies, deepening the colonies’ fledgling sense of group identity.
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