

American Revolutionaries in the Making

Political Practices in
Washington's Virginia

originally published as **Gentlemen Freeholders**

Charles S. Sydnor

HISTORY



COLLIER BOOKS

A history of politics
in 18th-century Virginia,
home of Washington,
Jefferson, Patrick Henry,
Madison and Monroe



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American Revolutionaries in the Making* originally appeared under the title *Gentlemen Freeholders

This Collier Books edition is published by arrangement with The University of North Carolina Press

Collier Books is a division of The Crowell-Collier Publishing Company

First Collier Books Edition 1962

Originally published by the University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia. The Institute is sponsored jointly by the College of William and Mary and Colonial Williamsburg, Incorporated.

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To My Sons

CHARLES SACKETT SYDNOR, JR.

VICTOR BROWN SYDNOR

Acknowledgments

OF THE many persons who have assisted in this study, and to all of whom I am grateful, there are three who have been notably helpful: my Wife, Mr. William W. Abbott, III, and Dr. Noble E. Cunningham, Jr. An award by the Library of Congress and grants by the Duke University Research Council speeded its completion. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to Oxford University for permission to reprint some passages of my Inaugural Lecture as Harmsworth Professor of American History. This lecture was published at the Clarendon Press in 1951 under the title, *Political Leadership in Eighteenth-Century Virginia*.

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Chapter 1

Behind the Virginia Dynasty

IF WASHINGTON, Jefferson, Madison, and Marshall had never lived, the nation could not, of course, have benefited by their thoughts and actions; neither, for that matter, would it have received much profit from them, alive and in full possession of their powers, if they had been left in the obscurity of private life. Statesmen come to the helm of government only if society has ways of discovering men of extraordinary talent, character, and training and of elevating them, rather than their inferiors, to office. Democracy must do two things and do them well: it must develop men who are fit to govern, and it must select for office these men rather than their less worthy contemporaries.

To understand the making of any one of the leaders of revolutionary Virginia one should know much about the ancestry and family life, the education and friendships, and the host of other particular influences which made him the man that he was.¹ Biographers of Washington must write of his intimacy with the Fairfaxes and his work as a surveyor in the wilderness; Jefferson's biographers must tell of his friendship with George Wythe, learned student of law and of the classics, William Small, the ablest teacher in the College of William and Mary, and Francis Fauquier, Governor of Virginia, child of the Enlightenment and man of the world. Those who write about Madison must consider his friendship with Jefferson; and the biographer of John Mar-

shall must weigh the influence of his father, Thomas, and the impression made by a winter at Valley Forge when he saw patriots suffering because the government was too weak to supply them with food and clothing.

In ways such as these each of the leading men of revolutionary Virginia was influenced by innumerable circumstances peculiar to him alone that made him unlike any other person. But all of them were subjected to several general influences that gave a distinctive character to them as a group. With few exceptions, they were members of families that were well-to-do and that had enjoyed a favored place in society for several generations. If they had taken the trouble to look at old records, they would have found the names of their ancestors in lists of burgesses, councilors, justices, and vestrymen at the beginning of that century and before. The family traditions of the Randolphs, the Nelsons, the Pages, the Lees, the Harrisons, the Carters, the Byrds, and others were variant versions of Virginia history.

Neither the family's history nor the colony's history was always above reproach. The founders of these families sometimes used their political power to get lucrative public offices and extensive grants of land; in this way the economic foundation of many a great family was laid. But the attachment of these families to the social order and to the government that gave them prominence and prosperity was nonetheless strong. This attachment may be variously described as enlightened selfishness, family tradition, patriotism, or a sense of public responsibility; but whatever the dominant motive in the individual case, there existed in Virginia long before the American Revolution what Alexander Hamilton wanted to bring into existence in the nation: the firm attachment to government of the rich, the well-born, and the able.

The custom of filling offices with planters' sons made the homes of the gentry preliminary training schools for future officeholders. The social advantages enjoyed in these favored homes gave to their sons some preparation for entering the more sophisticated society of Williamsburg, Philadelphia, London, or Paris, should public service send them there. Inasmuch as the son was often following his father into public affairs, he could profit by his father's knowledge of public questions and important men. Because the father

could afford it, the son was often given a superior education. At a time when American colleges were few and small, most of the Virginians who sat in the early Congresses and who served as governor in the first years of statehood were college men. A few had studied abroad, at the University of Edinburgh or at one of the Inns of Court, but most of them had attended an American institution. Princeton and especially William and Mary were the favorite colleges for Virginia youth.

Princeton, in this day of John Witherspoon, was the better college; but William and Mary, though small and poorly staffed, afforded an excellent extra-mural education in politics. Its location in the colonial capital gave to its students a remarkable opportunity to observe the operations of government. Those who were well connected could bring themselves to the attention of Richard Bland, Peyton Randolph, Robert Carter Nicholas, and the other powerful and experienced men who operated government. And those who cared for such things, as Jefferson did, could stand at the door of the House of Burgesses and hear the thrilling oratory of Patrick Henry. Few of the students equalled Jefferson in seizing the chance to learn from older men. But some of those who learned little from their professors or from the rulers of the province nevertheless learned the temperaments and character, the strength and weaknesses, of fellow students who would some day be fellow burgesses and fellow congressmen.²

In time the sons of planters became planters themselves and learned their first lessons in administration by managing their own farms or plantations. In some instances the establishment was small, but a visit today to Mount Vernon, Montpelier, Gunston Hall, and Monticello, or Carter's Grove and Shirley of the Carters, Westover of the Byrds, Stratford of the Lees, Brandon of the Harrisons, Bremo of the Cockes, Berry Hill of the Bruces, or the homes of other leading families of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, leaves no doubt that many of these men were masters of large estates. Their broad acres and ample houses set the stage for independent and dignified living; but their lives were not carefree. The management of the economic, social, and political microcosm that was theirs was a heavy and multifarious responsibility. Plans had to be made and executed for maintaining buildings, for allocating fields to

the several crops, for planting and harvesting, for providing food for man and beast, and for securing a money income by the sale of tobacco, wheat, and other commodities. There were unwilling laborers to be pushed on to their tasks, and problems as numerous and varied as the complexities of human nature to be settled among the slaves and within the master's immediate family.

Records had to be kept and letters written in longhand in rooms without screened windows to keep out flies, mosquitoes, and moths. The planter knew the feel of plowed land under foot, the smell of manure, the heat of the sun, the bite of cold wind, the heavy breathing of an overworked horse, the holiday spirit of the quarters, and the sullen scowl of an angry slave. He learned to accommodate his plantation management to the inexorable laws of nature and his dealings with people to real men and women. Perhaps from these experiences he gained wisdom for public life. At any rate, in politics the Virginia planter seemed to understand that, although ideals and ultimate goals were worth striving for, legislation and political policy had to be fitted to Virginia and Virginians as they existed in the eighteenth century, to the nation as it was in 1789.

The planter, of course, could indulge in theories and speculations to his heart's content, and often did. He could experiment with unorthodox crops, methods of marketing, or ways of controlling human beings; but if his penchant for experimentation was too great or his judgment too frequently wrong, the error of his ways was made plainly and painfully obvious to him—and to his neighbors, for the planter's business operations were carried on in public. Untidy fields, scrawny livestock, and a dilapidated house gave notice through the countryside that the owner lacked energy, judgment, or some other quality essential to good management. A man who could not manage well his own affairs would hardly impress his neighbors as a man who ought to be entrusted with the management of public affairs. In eighteenth-century Virginia failure in business was seldom rewarded with a seat in the county court or in the legislature or with such offices as sheriff, clerk, or coroner.

The possession of power that was almost dictatorial over his own little world left its mark on the manners and character of the planter. With kindly humor, John Pendleton Kennedy described this effect: