

Power Play: Social Dissent and the Gentry Hegemony in Eighteenth-Century Virginia

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***Abstract:** The essay analyzes popular recreations, such as drinking, horse-racing, and gambling, in eighteenth-century Virginia. It shows how popular 'games' were used by the colonial elite for social control, consolidation of social values, and a provision of opportunities for ordered competition. Though not free of internal conflicts, rituals of popular entertainment served as formative procedures of a symbolic character, helping to make white settlers conscious of a collective identity and separating them from women and from slaves.*

***Keywords:** American Studies – Colonial Virginia – Southern culture – Colonial gentry – Play – Popular recreations – Drinking – Horse-racing – Sports – Hegemony – Electoral politics*

The present paper addresses the question of the relative success of the 18th century Virginia elite in securing cultural hegemony in a society deeply divided by class, wealth, ethnicity, and race. The Chesapeake colonies produced highly stratified, patriarchal social arrangements, based on the existence of chattel slavery. Although it was the part of British America where the differences in wealth and status between the ruling elite and the small planters were the greatest, Virginia remained a relatively cohesive and secure entity. It was perhaps the only colony to escape a major class conflict in the 18th century. Moreover, it was members of the Virginia gentry elite, representatives of the class of rich landowners and slave holders, that led the thirteen British colonies in the revolt against the mother country in the 1770s. George Washington,

Thomas Jefferson, Peyton Randolph, Richard Henry Lee, George Mason, and James Madison all came from this privileged group.

The small provincial elite was able to muster the support of small planters and successfully maintain their domination in a society deprived of many forms of institutional control or coercion available in Europe. As Rhys Isaac has shown in *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (1982), members of the Virginia squirearchy used elaborate forms of social drama to display their power and authority in conscious attempts to win respect and subordination from the lesser members of society. Few historians today would follow Charles Sydnor in his claim that simple deference toward the socially superior explains the relative stability of the Virginian political community; which was Synod's thesis in *Gentlemen Freeholders: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia* (1952). In the 18th century Virginians did assume that society must be hierarchically structured, but colonial leaders, most of whom came from families of a short gentry pedigree, had to engage in elaborate social rituals to prove that they deserved deference.

My purpose in this essay is to offer a short investigation of the complex set of relationships between political relations and social practices, such as popular festivities and communal entertainment, in the colonial south. I am interested in the ways in which the institutional forms of political power were enhanced by cultural forms of domination. In this brief investigation my attention is on the political community of adult white males only, although I am aware that the issues of race and gender need to be taken into consideration to provide a fuller interpretation of the problems. Focusing on the question of upper class supremacy, I will largely ignore the political struggle within the elite.

My hypothesis is that recognition of the political character of popular recreational practices may serve to explain several important aspects of political life in the South. In 18th century Virginia, oral discourse and public performance still provided the most effective areas for communicating social order. Playing starts as a free activity, but produces ritual behavior, coercion, and obligation. Social rituals, including communal festivities, may be viewed as discursive constructions of authority, as scripts of power relations offered in an attractive packaging of pleasurable activities. As with any cultural texts there is not just a single way of interpreting them: the meaning of rituals, and, consequently, the structure

of political relations in Virginia, had to be constantly negotiated, and the possible outcome ranged from total subordination to outright contestation.

It was the co-operation of small freeholders and leaseholders that energized the mechanisms of power and produced political domination of the gentry. Middling-sort and poor planters elected the burgesses of the Virginia Assembly, served in the colonial militia, and worked as lesser colonial officials. The growth of the colony's population and its territorial advance made it necessary to constantly reassert the power of the elite in key areas of political decision making.

As a political community, Virginia functioned on two levels: the capital one in Williamsburg and the provincial one located in counties, parishes, and neighborhoods. A powerful, nearly hereditary group of wealthy landowners controlled the Council and the House of Burgesses, which dealt with political appointments, provincial taxation, major legal cases, and the place of Virginia in the British Empire. The other dimension of politics was power relations in individual counties where members of the gentry resided or held their land and slaves. There was a political struggle over election of county burgesses, justices, sheriffs, vestrymen, or tobacco inspectors. The domination over colonial and county affairs gave the elite power to acquire the best land and manage the tobacco trade, both areas generated enormous profits.¹

The Virginia elite was aware that as rulers they lacked the political legitimacy that the English gentry had. Possession of land and slaves

1. The discussion of Virginia's social and political life in the 18th century is based, among others, on the following sources: John Gilman Kolp, *Gentlemen and Freeholders. Electoral Politics in Colonial Virginia* (Baltimore 1998); Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia: 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill, 1983). Michal J. Rozbicki, *The Complete Colonial Gentleman: Cultural Legitimacy in Plantation America* (Charlottesville, 1998); T. H. Breen, "An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690-1676," *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (1986), 467-99; Richard L. Bushman, "American High Style and Vernacular Cultures," *Colonial British America. Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era*, ed. Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole (Baltimore, 1984); *Of Consuming Interest: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, 1994); Jane Carson, *Colonial Virginians at Play* (Williamsburg, 1965); T.H. Breen, "Horses and Gentlemen: The Cultural Significance of Gambling among the Gentry of Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 34 (1977), 239-257; A.G. Roeber, "Authority, Law and Custom: The Rituals of Court Day in Tidewater Virginia, 1720-1750," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 37 (1980), 29-52; Nancy L. Struna *People of Prowess: Sport, Leisure, and Labor in Early America* (Urbana, 1996); Elliott J. Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review*, 90/1 (Feb. 1985), 18-43.

made them rise to a high status, but they lacked the prestige of a long-standing landed aristocracy and they lived within communities where individual status was not permanently set. Being aware of these shortcomings, the great landowners, William Byrd II is perhaps the best example, were working hard to demonstrate a gentility that would set them apart. They displayed their wealth through a conspicuous consumption of goods imported from abroad, their children were educated in England, and they emulated the English culture of genteel leisure. In gentry entertainment, emphasis was placed on order, decorum, and civility. "Good manners," etiquette, imported customs, and rituals centered on use of luxury goods became vehicles for status enhancement. The high style developed interest in amusements such as balls and assemblies, tea drinking, theater, concerts, exhibitions, lectures, and literary activities.

Although the elite planters were constructing forms of refined leisure to be enjoyed within their social circle, they also shared other, less refined passions with poorer colonists. Eighteenth-century Virginians were notorious for their excessive fondness of drinking, card-playing, gambling, horse-racing, and dancing. In the seventeenth century the models of entertainment known to the colonists were mostly those of rural England, but Virginia's plantation economy developed neither an urban culture nor village life. It was not only the agricultural calendar, but also the political one that regulated the frequency of recreations. As the colony matured, court days, elections, and militia musters brought huge crowds of Virginians together. Political, legal, and economic interactions of a more general character happened in the vicinity of a county courthouse. As early as the second half of the 17th century these gatherings started to be accompanied by locally created recreation rituals. Social activities outside the courthouse centered in the ordinary (or tavern), where people would be busy making business transactions, talking, drinking, playing games and carousing. This conviviality would frequently lead to a form of rivalry, with challenges resulting in boxing or wrestling bouts watched by a ring of spectators.

Ordinaries came to be significant venues for public interaction. The most famous and most prosperous ordinaries were located in the vicinity of county courts, or even hosted court sessions. Taverns provided public space where one went to have a drink and enjoy gambling in male company. They could be used as a playhouse, or even a circus. The large tav-

erns in Williamsburg, Annapolis, and Fredricksburg hosted concerts, balls, plays, political gatherings, and public receptions. Taverns became centers for socialization and places where commercial and political transactions took place. Both gentlemen and common planters learned there about the latest news and met to discuss important events, political rites, and popular festivities taking place within the same space.²

The large taverns would, by colonial standards, be fairly spacious buildings with several rooms for dining, drinking, gaming, and lodging. One of these chambers would be a large public room – as the Apollo Room in the Raleigh’s Tavern – and there would be smaller rooms that could be used for private dinners and meetings. However, it would be unusual to expect privacy in an 18th century tavern. The colonials seemed to take this lack of privacy for granted: it was only foreign visitors who objected. Johann Schoepf, a traveler to Virginia, observed:

The whole day long, therefore, one is compelled to be among all sorts of company and at night to sleep in like manner; thus travellers, ... must renounce the pleasure of withdrawing apart ... from the noisy, disturbing, or curious crowd in the taverns every person coming in must be thoroughly answered, since there is no place apart, where one may avoid curiosity or occupy himself with his own affairs.³

Actually, it appears that for Chesapeake planters the concept of ‘the pleasure of withdrawing apart’ from the company made little sense. Enjoyment came when they could relish in the camaraderie of fellow planters. The satisfaction of tavern patrons was caused by awareness that they belonged in a male fellowship, the group that was neither politically nor economically homogeneous, but, due to the convivial atmosphere of the ordinary, they could share a sense of common belonging. The most desired pleasure was that of conversation. Oral culture had a pre-eminent importance in southern society, where life was based on personal, face-to-face interactions in which the spoken word and social ritual functioned as powerful forces in shaping an individual’s position in his group. The

2. Ruth E. Painter, “Tavern Amusements in Eighteenth-Century America,” *Americana*, 11 (1916), 92-93; Edward M. Riley, “The Ordinaries of Colonial Yorktown,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 23 (1943), 8-26; Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal & Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Charlottesville, 1968), pp. 22, 95.

3. Johann David Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation [1783-1784]* (New York, 1968), 2 vols., II 64.

spectacles of conviviality and hospitality, which could remove some potential tensions, demonstrated much better than formal legalistic relationships what constituted the core values of the community. The leading gentlemen would often speak with contempt about the manners or intelligence of small planters, but they could not refrain from personal contacts with them. The setting that taverns provided was well suited for social interactions by means of which the gentry could attempt to use male bonding for hegemonic purposes, but these designs required the gentlemen to engage in face-to-face interactions with lower class people.

The context for social communication was also provided by numerous tavern entertainments. The inventories show that most ordinaries were equipped with cards, dice, and tables for cards, backgammon, and billiards, equipment for skittles and ninepins. Symbolic tavern interactions, however, were best facilitated by drinking practices. If there is one feature that all popular recreations in Virginia had in common, it must indeed be the consumption of alcohol. A tavern offered an impressive choice of alcoholic beverages: claret, Rhenish, Madeira, red, and white French wines; hock, shrub, arrack, brandy, cherry and raspberry brandy, rum, cherry rum; Welsh ale, Bristol beer, and cask beer. Alcohol served to facilitate male drinking rituals that, if aptly used, had a powerful cohesive potential.

Some forms of recreation, related to political events, were directly sponsored by members of the elite with free drink. A liquor-induced atmosphere of conviviality, rowdiness, and rivalry accompanied musters of the militia. Ostensibly held for training colonial troops for battle, they were as treated as a day set aside for male recreation that consisted in fraternizing, drinking, and fighting. Musters gave the gentry, who served as militia officers, opportunities for patronage over a popular event.⁴ Members of the gentry competing for a colonial office used food and drink to win voters' support. Electoral campaigning necessitated direct appeals for support to freeholders at militia musters, court days, horse races, and other festive occasions. On election days, when burgesses were chosen in a viva-voce voting, usually held in front of a county courthouse, "treating" voters with liquor was a common method of

4. See *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712*, ed. by Louis B. Wright and Marion Tilling (Richmond, 1941), pp. 234-235, 410-415.

buying support. In this way the civic event turned into a frequently riotous form of general entertainment.

In 1755 George Washington made his first appearance in colonial politics, running in a burgess election in his county. The mistake that Washington made was to assume that his respectable family background and good reputation as a young colonel of the Virginia militia would be enough to carry him through. Washington failed to make a personal effort to persuade voters to support him and suffered a humiliating defeat. When his next chance came, he was not to repeat this error: in the 1758 election he not only took pains to enlist the backing of the most distinguished county gentlemen for his candidature, but also, as the practice required, arranged a 'treat' for the smallholders. He bought twenty-eight gallons of rum, fifty gallons and one hogshead of rum punch, thirty-four gallons of wine, forty-six gallons of beer, and two gallons of cider – which in total would give about two pints of liquor for each of the 391 voters in the county. Washington denied that he wanted to buy votes with food and drink, claiming that "no exception were taken to any that voted against me, but that all were alike treated and all had enough; it is what I much desired."⁵ Washington won a seat in the Assembly having learned that Virginian political culture required gentlemen to actively seek recognition of political authority. The patronage of recreational rituals accompanied, or facilitated, by consumption of liquor manifested qualities that made someone worthy of a high office: interest in public service, leadership, care about the community, sociability, and liberality.

Another important feature of popular festivities in eighteenth-century Virginia was their frequently competitive character. Sporting competitions had an appeal reaching across social classes. Virginia's favorite entertainment was unquestionably horse races. A visitor to Petersburg noticed that, "Great crowds were assembled at this place as I passed through, attracted to it by the horse races, which take place four or five times in the year. Horse racing is a favourite amusement in Virginia; and it is carried on with spirit"⁶ In Virginia the horse was a sign of the wealth and status of its owner. The famous quarter races were watched by

5. *The Papers of George Washington: Colonial Series* (Charlottesville, 1983), V 331-343, 349.

6. Isaac Weld, *Travels through the States of North America and the Provinces of Upper & Lower Canada during the years 1795, 1796 & 1797*, 4th ed. (New York, 1970), pp. 185-187.

throng of spectators who would join the riders and horse owners in heavy betting on the results. The races became the settings for fairs, with such additional entertainment as foot races, cudgeling and wrestling matches, animal shows, or acrobatic and theatrical performances. The colonists were able to display their varied talents as riders, horse breeders, and gamblers. Success in a sporting event proved one's bravery, physical prowess, cunning, aggressiveness, and determination. Within the competitive framework of recreational practices individuals displayed their ability, talents or knowledge before a collective body. They sought and received recognition and acclaim from viewers, which metaphorically established the significant discourse of colonial culture.

Another popular recreation whose allure extended across the boundaries of class was cock-fighting. Ebenezer Hazard observed in June 1777: "At Nelson's (where I dined) a Cock Match is to be fought next Thursday: great Betts are depending. Met some Men who were just going to race their Horses. Horse-racing & Cock-fighting seem to be the principal Objects of Attention between Williamsburg & Smithfield at present."⁷ Despite its brutal nature, cock-fighting, which started as a diversion of common planters, soon came under gentry patronage. Complex cock-matches were fought between representatives of different counties, accompanied by numerous other festivities such as dancing, singing, and wrestling.⁸ As T. H. Breen persuasively argues in a classic essay, gambling represented the key values of gentry culture: competitiveness, individualism, and materialism. The contests, which were such an integral part of popular recreations, brought gentlemen and small planters together, and provided a vent for accumulated aggression. The new forms of public recreation functioned as the arena within which competition became confined and so helped to alleviate violent and socially threatening forms of public contests.

The competitive sporting events, attracting huge audiences, were also ideal occasions for an elaborate discussion of the colony's social hierarchy and offered the members of the elite a chance to prove their leader-

7. "The Journal of Ebenezer Hazard in Virginia, 1777," ed. Fred Shelley, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 62/4 (1954) 411.

8. Elkanah Watson, *Men and Times of the Revolution* (New York 1856), pp. 261-262, *Journal of Fithian*, pp. 91-96.

ship qualities. Cockfights or horse races would be sponsored by landowners, who were also expected as well to provide the major purse and place the central bets. Smaller planters had to be satisfied with marginal contests and bets on the side. Although people of all ranks frequented such events, it was clear that competitive exchanges could happen only within the boundaries of social class, not across them: laborers were not allowed to challenge gentlemen.

A victory of a planter's horse, or a successful gambling bet for a sum of money that others could never afford to risk losing, testified to a high position of a gentleman. Viewers of such events, enjoying the drink and general relaxation were supposed to gratefully accept the social status quo. Public festivals provided an opportunity for the display of paternalistic norms, acted as a reminder and visualization of the colony's structure, and negotiated the planters' acquiescence to the existence of social inequalities. Play and recreation were used by the upper classes to demonstrate, through patronage, heavy gambling, or a conspicuous display of wealth, the hierarchies of power and influence and to get recognition of these divisions from the lesser settlers.

The use of recreations for political purposes was possible only if they truly offered participants a sense of pleasure. My analysis so far has focused on recreational pleasures that were of a productive nature (what Roland Barthes calls "plaisir"). They were socially produced and had their roots in the dominant ideology. This does not mean, however, that the pleasures that festive occasions provided could be derived only from confirming the dominant ideology and the subjectivities it proposed. The recognition of the presence of a dominant ideology in the discourse of a festival frequently led to oppositional interpretations that produced pleasures of a different kind, as descriptions of many recreational events contain evidence of people openly challenging the values these events were supposed to represent. Perhaps the most obvious examples are open manifestations of alternative political beliefs, as Grand Jury presentments like this one indicate: "Owen Crawford for Drinking a health to King James & refusing to drink a health to King George."⁹ Recreation rituals exposed the existing political tensions in the colony, which were often a reflection of the home country's political turmoil. Large gatherings were potentially

9. *Augusta County Court Records*, Order Book 2, 1748-1751, Nov. 27, 1751, p. 206.

subversive occasions, where the social order could be easily challenged. On St. Andrew's Day, 1737 there was a race held in Hanover County. An advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* stated that "As this Mirth is designed to be purely innocent and void of offence, all, persons resorting there are desir'd to behave themselves with Decency and Sobriety; the subscribers being resolved to discountenance all immorality with the utmost rigor." After the event the *Gazette* reported that the race had been accompanied by "variety and plenty of cheer," and "entertainment of noise," hinting that there was some fighting as well.

There are a few historical records that might help to reconstruct the atmosphere of tavern recreations. One evening in Richard Joslin's ordinary in Norfolk, five local planters, William Finiken one of them, engaged in horseplay and dancing while somewhat over-indulging in punch. In a friendly tussle Finiken was pushed and fell backwards on the floor. His friends, thinking he was just drunk, put him to bed. The events of the evening were recorded only because the next morning Finiken was found dead.¹⁰ The Finiken incident is best interpreted within a certain discourse of pleasure. Male companionship, escape from social norms through clowning and rowdiness, feats of strength and agility were associated with the atmosphere of ribald conviviality and a sense of freedom that the consumption of alcohol helped to achieve. Evasive pleasures of a male Chesapeake planter were close to Barthesian "jouissance." The pleasure of the body out of control was an escape from the socially constructed meaning reproducing the social forces in the subject. Thus, it was an escape from the discursive discipline of civility, order, and subordination demanded within colonial culture. Evasive pleasures came from getting around social control and dodging the discipline over self and others. Elements of a subversive and transgressive character appeared in Virginian festive activities with a regular frequency.

The passion for communal entertainment, which frequently had a disorderly or openly violent character, remained the matter of serious concern for the ruling gentry throughout the whole century. The evasive pleasures constituted threats to such values as propriety, sobriety, moderation, work ethics, and class subordination. The colonial authorities

10. Norfolk County Deeds IX (1710-1717), p. 163 (after Patricia Ann Gibbs, "Taverns in Tidewater Virginia, 1700-1774," unpublished M.A. Thesis, William and Mary, 1968, p. 34).

attempted to regulate popular festivities, preserve their traditional character, and prevent the growth of free, commercial, spectator types of play, which seemed dangerous for the stability of communities. The colonial legislature passed acts aimed at curbing unlawful gaming, drunkenness, and disorder. Drunkenness was punishable with the fine of five shillings, with ten lashes given on a bare back at non-payment. Grand jury presentments against drunkenness and Sabbath breaking were relatively frequent. It was forbidden to sell liquor to servants and slaves. Ordinaries were licensed only for one year on condition the keeper would not "Suffer & permit any unlawfull Gaming in his house nor on the Sabbath day suffer any person to Tipple & drink more than is necessary." Acts of the Assembly specifically targeted "ministers notoriously guilty of drunkenness," justices who would get drunk on a court day, and even burgesses who would attend the proceedings of the House "disguised with drink." Needless to say, treating voters with liquor to win votes was also forbidden by law.¹¹

The legal regulations and punishments failed to change the prevailing appetite for communal play in the colony. Popular sporting events were held regularly and people drank heavily. Marquis de Chastellux, visiting Virginia in the 1770s found that "the general spirit of gaming is prevalent."¹² The gentry did not put their heart into the reform of public recreations because they were expression of well-established values, and, if used wisely, they could serve as effective social rituals. Thus, the attitude to popular recreations was at least ambivalent. On one hand it was important to use recreational rituals to cultivate the masculine bonds, on the other the gentry was supposed to imitate the decorum and refinement of their English counterparts, so the participation in popular entertainment brought concerns that Virginia, through its uncontrolled passion for entertainment, was falling behind the standards of the mother country. The conduct of some gentlemen showed that the gentry were also sus-

11. *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*, ed. William Walter Hening (Richmond, 1809-1923), 13 vols., I 51, 206, 240, 433-434, 508; II 48; III 71-75, 110, 359, 395-396, 138; IV 428, 214-218; V 171, 102, 229. For records of prosecutions of Sabbath breaking and drunkenness see *Norfolk County Orders*, Nov. 16, 1678; June 16, 1682; March 16, 1685/1686; *Henrico County Orders*, May 5, 1712; May 7, 1722; May 7, 1724; *Essex County Orders*, April 10, 1693; *Elizabeth County Orders*, Aug. 19, 1695; *Richmond Count Orders*, May 7, 1719.

12. Marquis de Chastellux, *Travels in America in the Years 1780-1781-1782*.

ceptible to the debasing nature of popular entertainment. Some of them, like William Byrd III, succumbed to the lure of gambling, others showed excessive violence in public, or competed too fiercely with each other, endangering the cohesion of the elite as the superior class.

Despite the fears about over-indulgence, play was too attractive a means of cultural expression and ideological manipulation to become censored. The gentry, with just a few exceptions, enjoyed participating in vernacular amusements. In 1777 Ebenezer Hazard noticed that there is "a severe Act of Assembly against Gaming, but I observe the Members of that House are as much addicted to it as other Men, & as frequently transgress the Law" ("Journal of Ebenezer Hazard," p. 423). Recreations served as significant social rituals, a function of which was also to endorse the upper rank's aspirations to status. They furnished mechanisms of social control, helped to consolidate such social values as belief in inequality, but also tested the suitability of gentry candidates for social leadership. Patronizing horse races or sponsoring public festivities, gentlemen tried to earn the deference and prestige on which their power and authority ultimately rested.

In the long run, popular recreational festivals proved to have worked as effective formative procedures in colonial Virginia. Festivities offered all white planters the myth of fraternal festive culture. One of the ideas shared by both rich and poor planters was that physical labor could not be considered a primary life objective since it was performed by the totally unfree, degraded slaves. The sphere of play, including popular recreations, was a cultural area where spectacles of the fundamental unity of white planters could be easily staged. Recreations offered temporary relief from social tensions by carnivalesque reversals of order and mock-challenges of authority. Participation in the hierarchically structured forms of play helped the common planters deal with mounting aggression and with the apparent contradiction of being equal, as white males, to their wealthier neighbors, and yet having to show obedience to rank and authority. Popular entertainment offered ideological constructions of authority hidden behind pleasurable rituals.

What sometimes appeared to be a threat to the elite's authority – the need to condescend to attitudes and beliefs of the lower classes – might in fact have helped the Virginia elite to integrate white society around their rule. Popular recreations were important discursive practices involving

symbolic negotiation of the colony's power relations. Negotiations over the validity of such (tran)scripts of power helped the Chesapeake society reach a certain fluid cohesion, as they constantly worked to re-forge an alliance of white planters. In *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* Woody Holton argues that it might have been the pressure of Virginian smallholders, suffering from the effects of the American boycott of the British trade, that made the colony's elite choose independence as the preferred option in the conflict with England. Social rituals of play – the familiar procedures for symbolic negotiation of political power – had taught the gentry how to test the extent of their dominance over smaller planters. Popular recreational rituals were one of the factors that helped to ease the 1770s tensions in the colony without resort to violence. In the end, these were the gentlemen of Virginia who led the poor and middling planters in the revolt against the mother country and, in the revolutionary period, the well-known patterns of recreational practices could be used again in the construction of a new political system around a re-negotiated core of political values.