

# Election Day in Eighteenth-Century Virginia



*Colonial  
Williamsburg*

Department of Education Outreach

# ELECTION DAY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY VIRGINIA

## Introduction

In most years, usually during November, Americans have the opportunity to vote. We vote for numerous public officials, at many different levels of government, and votes are private. In the eighteenth century, however, Election Day was an altogether different animal. The following role-playing activity allows students to participate in an eighteenth-century election.

## Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will:

- Become familiar with eighteenth-century voting process and list some differences of voting procedures today.
- Use and interpret primary source documents.

## Materials

- Script for Sheriff
- Virginia Election Process
- Excerpt from *Transformation of Virginia*, “Election Day,” pp. 110–113.
- Excerpts from *Virginia House of Burgesses*, “Election Procedure,” pp. 51–52, 142–143; “Issues and Personalities,” and “Electioneering,” pp. 60–63.
- Excerpt from *American Revolutionaries in the Making*, “Swilling the Planters with Bumbo,” pp. 44–59.

## Strategy

- Step 1: a) Introduce the election process at an appropriate time during the study of colonial life. Discuss the qualifications for voting in the eighteenth century.

Possible questions: Who could vote? Who could not vote? How could someone protest these criteria in the eighteenth century? What do you think women and the enslaved might have thought about the right to vote?

- b) Demonstrate casting a vote eighteenth-century style (see excerpts from Transformation of Virginia and “Virginia Election Process”). Stress behavior of the voter and the candidate.

Step 2:

- a) Select one student to portray the Sheriff. A script, including a “Writ of Election,” insures a smooth opening and closing of your election. The Sheriff also counts votes and announces the winners.
- b) Choose five students to portray five gentlemen seeking the office of Burgess to represent James City County.
- c) Remaining students play the role of freeholders in James City County. Inform the freeholders that they may vote twice as they are electing two Burgesses.

Step 3:

Prepare students to consider typical eighteenth-century issues.

- a) Matthew Marrable “stated that if he were elected, he would do something extraordinary for the freeholders in the upper settlements: e.g., divide Lunenburg County into two parts.”
- b) John Syme of Hanover opposed the division of parishes because “dissenters, who were numerous in that county, opposed any multiplication of parishes because the taxes would increase.”
- c) “James Littlepage, who was opposed to the tobacco inspection law, made the promise that he would work for its repeal and wrote several freeholders, soliciting their votes.”
- d) Speaker Robinson in 1761 favored the removal of the capital from Williamsburg.
- e) The average candidate promised little more than to ‘make it a point to dispatch the business’ and to ‘study to promote the good’ of his county.
- f) Discuss campaign practices, such as treating. Possible questions: Why do you think issues seldom played an important part in an election campaign? Why were elections a question of “who” rather than “what?”

Step 4:

Set the stage for a mock election.

- a) Have candidates present a short speech stating why they should be elected. Remind the candidates that campaign strategy (treating, etc.), not issues, may prove crucial to being elected.
- b) The Sheriff opens the election by reading the “writ of Election.” Voters then present themselves one by one before the Sheriff. Voters were not registered, but the Sheriff could refuse a person a vote.

- c) The Sheriff calls each person by name and asks, “How do you vote?” The freeholder may vote twice. The candidates bow and thank the freeholder most graciously.
- d) The Sheriff concludes the election after all the freeholders cast their votes. (The Sheriff may end the election before everyone has voted.) The Sheriff then calls out three times for any freeholder to vote who had not yet done so, or the poll will close.
- e) When the poll is over, the Sheriff announces the results. In case of a tie, the Sheriff can vote and break the tie.

### **Evaluation/Assessment**

Ask students to make a statement about eighteenth-century elections based on this role-playing activity.

Possible questions: Now that you have participated in an eighteenth-century election, what are some of the benefits of this process? What are some pitfalls? How have election campaigns changed since the eighteenth century? How do you, as twenty-first-century Americans, feel about the eighteenth-century voting process?

### **Alternate Plan**

Rather than role play an election in James City County, Virginia, students may be interested in reenacting an election including George Washington in his first run for office. The activity may be conducted exactly like the one described above with different players.

The election took place on July 24, 1758, in Frederick County, Virginia. The players included (two became elected – Washington and Martin):

*Colonel George Washington* received 310 votes  
*Colonel Bryan Martin* received 240 votes  
*Captain Thomas Swearingen* received 45 votes  
*Mr. Hugh West* received 199 votes

Colonel Washington did not attend this election, but asked Colonel James Wood, the founder of Winchester, to represent him. On Washington’s behalf, Wood treated the freeholders with approximately 28 gallons of rum, 50 gallons of rum punch, 34 gallons of wine, 46 gallons of beer, and 2 gallons of cider royal. In writing to Wood after the election, Washington said

I am extreme thankful to you and my other friends for entertaining the Freeholders in my name. I hope 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 desir'd; my only fear is that you spent with too sparing a hand.

“Letter from George Washington to Colonel James Wood,” July, 1758 from *The Writings of George Washington*, edited by John C. Fitzpatrick, Volume 2, p. 251.

The major issues for this election are unknown at this time; students may select issues of their choice to speak on during their campaign speeches.

## SCRIPT FOR THE SHERIFF

**SHERIFF:** (reading the Writ of Election)

To the Sheriff of James City County, Greetings;

In the name of George, by the grace of God, of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, king, defender of the faith, &c., with consent of His majesty's Council of the Colony and Dominion of Virginia, I do Hereby require you to summon all the Freeholders of the said County, and all such as have Right to vote for Burgesses for the said County and them only, to meet at the Courthouse of the said County, at such time as you shall appoint, which shall be twenty Days, at least, after receipt of this Warrant, in order to elect two Burgesses to represent the said County in a General Assembly. And I do farther require you to give due Notice of the Day so to be appointed according to Law, and to proceed to the election of such Burgesses in the same number as is by Law directed; and you are to return to the next General Assembly this warrant with your Certificate of its due Execution.

Given under my hand and seal this \_\_\_th day of \_\_\_ in the 10th year of the reign of George, by grace of God, of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, king, defender of the faith, &c., Anno Domini 1770. ----Botetourt [pronounced "Bott-a-tot"].

The poll for the election of two burgesses to represent James City County is now open.

Will the candidates please identify themselves and speak on their behalves.

**CANDIDATES** each give a brief speech.

**SHERIFF:** Will the freeholders for James City County present themselves to vote."

**(Note: the Sheriff may refuse anyone the right to vote.)**

## VIRGINIA ELECTION PROCESS

The House of Burgesses was the only elected body in colonial Virginia.

Election procedure:

1. The Royal Governor issues a writ ordering an election to be held.
2. The writ is directed to the sheriffs of the counties.
3. The sheriff of each county decides within 6 to 8 weeks the time and place for holding the election (usually on court day).
4. The sheriff of each county delivers copies of the writ with the time, date, and location of the election to parish ministers. Ministers, in turn, inform their congregations about the election at the close of services each Sunday until election day.
5. The election is held (see “Election Day,” below). The Sheriff asks each white, male freeholder over age 21 for his vote, which is delivered orally and publicly before the candidates.
6. The Sheriff calls an end to the election.
7. A Committee on Privileges and Elections examines the results and reports to the House of Burgesses.
8. If everything is in order, the House approves the results.

### Election Day

The election was held at a single voting place in the county, usually at the courthouse, either within the building or on the front steps.

The sheriff sat at a long table, usually flanked by several justices of the peace; at one end sat the candidates. The candidates’ clerks sat nearby and wrote the name of the candidate at the top of a sheet of paper.

The sheriff opened the election by reading the writ that had ordered it. Voters then presented themselves one by one before the sheriff. Voters were not registered, but the sheriff could refuse to allow a person to vote.

As each freeholder came before the sheriff, his name was called out. The sheriff asked how he voted, and the voter announced his preference. The appropriate clerk then wrote down the voter’s name in his candidate’s column. Often the candidate would arise, bow, and thank the voter.

## ELECTION DAY

The supreme authority in Virginia was the General Assembly, consisting of the governor (or his lieutenant), the Council (appointed by the crown from among the heads of great landed families), and the House of Burgesses (composed of two elected members from each county). Regard for a principle of representation made the elected House a sacrosanct center of authority in the province. Elections occurred comparatively infrequently, however, only when the governor chose to dissolve the Assembly and call a new one, or when a member's death or resignation created a vacancy. On the governor's order the office of the secretary of the colony would issue appropriate writs directed to the county sheriff (a position customarily occupied by the gentlemen justices in rotation), who then appointed a day for the election, opened and closed the poll at will, determined the result, and made return accordingly.

The courthouse was prepared for election day by setting up a polling table either inside the building or out in the yard. Each candidate secured the services of a clerk to enter on a sheet the name of each freeholder who came and spoke aloud his vote for the candidate who had employed the clerk "to take his poll." A decided element of confrontation was introduced into the action by the presence of the candidates, who were seated at the table during the time of polling. An account from late in the century is suggestive of both the form of the contest and the manner in which it was integrated into the patterns of favor and obligation characteristic of a face-to-face agrarian society. The election was held to fill a single vacancy. The candidates, John Marshall and John Clopton, were at the table when the voters came up. The sheriff asked:

"Mr. Blair, who do you vote for?" "John Marshall," said he; and thereupon the future Chief Justice of the United States replied, "Your vote is appreciated, Mr. Blair." As the next voter approached the sheriff inquired: "Who do you vote for, Mr. Buchanan?" "For John Clopton," he answered; and Clopton, at the other end of the table, responded: "Mr. Buchanan, I shall treasure that vote in my memory. It will be regarded as a feather in my cap for ever."

Mr. Blair and Mr. Buchanan were gentlemen of consequence (ministers of religion, in fact) whose votes were valuable tokens of esteem and likely to influence the choices of their inferiors. For humbler men, voting was less an opportunity to confer a favor than a chance to show gratitude or to secure the goodwill of a powerful neighbor.

A report of an election in Accomac County shows how the relationship of gentry to common folk was expressed in the custom of treating voters. The seating of Edmund Scarborough as burgess was contested because he had, before the election, given

strong Liquors to the People . . . once at a Race, and the other Time at a Muster; and did, on the Day of election, cause strong Liquor to be brought in a Cart, near the Court-house Door, where many People drank thereof, whilst the Polls of the election were taking; and one Man, in particular, said, "Give me a Drink, and I will go and vote for Col. Scarborough, . . . and Drink was accordingly given him out of the said Cart, where several People were merry with Drink; But it doth not appear, whether that Person voted for the said

Scarburgh or not.

Colonel Scarburgh's election was upheld by the House, for he had not done anything unusual. A code controlled conduct at the polls, but (as James Madison was later to discover to his cost) candidates could not get elected unless they paid handsomely to treat the voters. The militia was one of the readiest channels for the social exchanges involved in the custom of treating. A single example will suffice as illustration. Testimony concerning a disputed Lunenburg County election of 1758 revealed that both of the candidates who were returned as elected had worked to enhance their standing with their own and others' militia companies by plying them with rum. The House upheld the election of Mr. Read because, with genteel decorum, he had not solicited votes for himself. "It appears . . . that after it was publicly known . . . that the Writ (for the election) was issued . . . one Memican Hunt gave a Treat on Behalf of Mr. Read to a Company of Militia he formerly had commanded, with Mr. Read's Knowledge, but not at his Request, and invited Mr. Read's Friends to partake thereof." Mr. Marrable was in every way less discreet. He postponed until after the election the fulfillment of a promise to treat Captain Williams' militia company, expressing the fear that otherwise "it would vacate his Election." But, hard pressed by opposition, he was soon treating all around the county, and on "the Morning of the Election Liquor was distributed to the Company of Mr. Marrable by his Orders, but with this Caution, To take care they should not intoxicate themselves, least a Riot might ensue at the Election, because he wanted a fair Poll, and every Candidate to stand or fall by his own interest; and Mr. Marrable declared he expended seven Weathers (wethers), and thirty Gallons of Rum on the Occasion." Nevertheless, it seems that it was not so much on account of the mighty barbecue that Marrable was unseated. He evidently lacked the support among the ruling gentry that had enabled Mr. Read to stand by while others treated on his behalf. This weakness drove Marrable to a further step, probably the decisive one in invalidating his election. He wrote a letter "to Mr. David Caldwell, a Man of great Interest in the County, strongly soliciting his Interest." Marrable actually offered a bond of £500 in an attempt to have the county divided along certain lines. Such political trafficking was disapproved of—probably the more so when employed to offset weak personal connections among the country gentry.

"Treating" was not simply a way of buying support. The paternalistic dominance of the gentry was expressed in their acceptance of an obligation to show "liberality" toward their poorer neighbors. The candidates confirmed their characters as magnanimous gentlemen when they stood treat to all voters, regardless of how they voted. This claim of a candidate to general respect was further attested by the readiness of fellow leaders in county society to preside over treats on his behalf. For the most part, without a large measure of such gentry support a candidate could not possibly carry an election.

"Interest" is the key to understanding the electoral process. The word is rich in the connotations of an entire social system based on personal relationships—kinship, neighborhood, favors exchanged, patronage given, and deterrence returned. Once the world in which gentlemen had a measurable "interest" is evoked, even such a familiar word as "friend" must be reinterpreted. A "friend" was a person, whether of higher, lower, or equal station, related by the expectation of a mutual exchange of services. In short, one's "friends" were one's "interest." The militia and election systems were integral to this social order—ready instruments of it.

Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982, pp. 110–113.

## ELECTION PROCEDURE

Elections were always held at the courthouse “where the county court is accustomed to be held”; there were no other polling places. If a man voted, he rode to the county seat to do it, regardless of how far away he lived. The hours for keeping the polls open were not designated in the law and, judging from cases of disputed elections, varied from place to place. The law said only that the sheriff should go to the door of the courthouse and announce the opening of the polls; at the end of the balloting he proclaimed the closing. Voting might, and often did, continue after dark if the freeholders there had not voted earlier and even on a second day if necessary. The evidence suggests, however, that voting normally required only one day.

On Election Day, the sheriff was in charge. He opened the polls and conducted the voting. If there were only two candidates or only token opposition, and the results could be seen clearly “upon the view” (voting being oral), all that remained for the sheriff to do was to close the polls and make a certified copy of the results, which he was to send the secretary within twenty days. If it could not be decided “from the view” who was selected, the process became more complicated and the sheriff more important. The sheriff, or in his absence an undersheriff, with the consent of the freeholders, appointed as many election clerks as to him seemed “fit.” He administered to these men an oath by which they promised a “true and impartial taking of the poll.” He then provided them with the necessary books in which to keep records of the voting. The name of each candidate was written at the head of a column or at the top of a page, and the names of the freeholders casting their votes for him listed below.

When a freeholder voted, he stepped up and took an oath that he was a freeholder in that county and that he had not been polled before in that election and stated his choices which were duly set down. Each freeholder had two votes and both had to be cast at the same time, he could not save one until later in the day. All this was done under the watchful eyes of the candidates, or persons representing them, who were present to see the “poll fairly taken.” When the sheriff thought everyone had voted, he closed the polls by making proclamation three times at the courthouse door. He then proceeded to count votes, probably with the assistance of the clerks and under the observation of the candidates, although the law was not specific here. If the vote was tied, the sheriff, or the undersheriff, as a freeholder, had the right to cast his ballot for the man of his choice. He then “returned the burgesses,” which may have included both the announcement to the waiting crowd and the written form to the secretary in Williamsburg. The law was specific about the form to be used. It read: “By virtue of this writ to me directed, in my full county, held at the courthouse of my said county, upon the \_day of \_ in the \_year of the reign of \_by the grace of God, of England, Scotland, France, and Ireland, Queen, defender of the faith, and by the assent of my said county, I have caused to be chosen (two burgesses) of my said county, to wit, A.B. and C.D. to act and do as in the said writ is directed and required.” The process was the same in a by-election. From the time the writs reached the county until the returns were sent to the secretary, the sheriff had complete charge of the election. Virginians often complained that this concentration of power led to abuses; and, after every election, the burgesses found it necessary to subpoena sheriffs to correct their returns.

There were many alleged violations of the corrupt practices code. When a defeated candidate believed that campaign tactics had gone beyond legal limits, he had the right to petition the House of Burgesses to investigate the “undue election and return” of the incumbent. Such contested elections were handled according to a set procedure. After the petition had been heard at the bar of the House,

the case was sent to the Committee of Privileges and Elections. The petitioner had to give the list of the votes he objected to and otherwise state his complaints to the committee, which was empowered to send for persons, papers, and records needed in making a thorough investigation. After it had examined witnesses and collected pertinent information, the committee reported its findings to the House, which had the final vote on the matter.

Many contested elections resulted from illegal campaign practices. The testimony in two cases taken by the Committee on Privileges and Elections will serve to illustrate. In Lunenburg at a by-election in 1857 when Thomas Nash was returned, the barkeeper Bacon supplied free liquor to all who applied in the name of Mr. Nash, but told others bluntly there was “no liquor for Marrable,” another candidate. This treating seems to have been against Nash’s advice and without his knowledge, and his election was upheld when the question was taken to the House for settlement.

There were a few recorded cases of unanimous election, but the number is very small in comparison to the elections in which there were several candidates. The exact number of burgesses who were replaced at the polls will never be known because of the absence of election information for many counties. Nevertheless, there is abundant material in election returns from fifteen counties and testimony in many contested elections which point to a very lively opposition in every part of the colony. A few instances will illustrate.

Accomac County on the Eastern Shore is good to examine because there are both election returns and the report of a contested election. At the election of 1752 ten people offered themselves as candidates, five of whom can be considered as serious contenders for office. The votes for the five stood: Mr. Edmund Allen, 300; Major George Douglas, 215; Colonel Ralph Justice, 201; Mr. John Wise, 122; and William Andrews, 118. In the 1755 election, six candidates received between 129 and 260 votes, plus three who polled a scattering few. Three years later (June, 1758), the candidates had a total of 975 votes. Ten years later (November, 1768), there were three leading candidates. Ralph Justice was defeated at the polls in 1768 by Thomas Parramore who, in turn, was defeated by James Henry in 1771.

Northumberland in the Northern Neck had fewer candidates than Accomac; but, at every one of the eight elections (three of which were by-elections), there were from one to three candidates besides the victors. George Ball and Samuel Eskridge made several attempts at the polls before they were elected, and Ball continued to be a candidate after he was defeated.

In Fairfax County, where George Washington, George Mason, and John West lived, the situation was somewhat different. No incumbent was defeated at the polls. Every one of the five burgesses who were replaced can be accounted for. George Mason, Gerald Alexander, and George William Fairfax did not run after a single term in the House, and two men died in office. John West and George Washington represented the county continuously from 1758 and 1765, respectively. All the burgesses were neighbors and friends. One has only to read the diaries of Washington and the correspondence of Mason and others to realize how close they were to one another; they hunted together, managed Pohick Church, shared the same dancing teacher for their children, traveled together, and visited one another regularly. There may have been an unwritten agreement that no one in the inner circle would stand for an office until the incumbent voluntarily gave it up. Or in reverse, the incumbent may have persuaded another of his group to run so he could retire to private life.

This account makes the political scene in Fairfax deceptively simple. No one was turned out at an

election, but that was not because other candidates were lacking. At one election, for example, William Ellzey lacked two votes of having the same number that the victor, George William Fairfax, had. At the 1765 election, one John Posey polled 131 votes and there were others who received a few votes.

Spotsylvania County lies on the border between the Tidewater and Piedmont. At the 1752 election, there were five candidates, in 1755, four leading ones and three more trailing with a few votes; in 1769, at least four, 1771, three leading ones. The story for Prince William, Cumberland, Halifax, Surry, and many, in fact almost all, of the other counties is the same—there was an opposition that tried for office and often won.

## ISSUES AND PERSONALITIES

On the advice of the council, Dunmore, when he arrived in 1771, dissolved the old assembly and called for a new election. He saw no good reason for doing so, and he personally was adverse to it because he observed that much riot and disorder came from allowing people to go to the polls. But it was customary in the province, and he was told (presumably by the council) that an election would be a “pleasure to the people, who are no doubt fond of the exercise, which makes them feel their own consequence.”

Why did Virginians go to the polls? Were they merely fond of exercising abstract power, or were there issues at stake that they wished to settle? It need not be demonstrated again that there were many hot political races in the Old Dominion. What motivated them? In searching for the answer, we learn much about the nature of politics in Virginia. Despite all the noble and patriotic sentiments expressed in petitions, pamphlets, the *Gazette*, and innumerable private letters, Virginians said almost nothing about the leading issues in their political campaigns. From the widespread concern about the Stamp Act and the Townshend Acts, it seems likely that they figured largely in the elections of 1765 and 1769, especially since some plain spoken resolves opposing them had been the cause for dissolution of the assembly. Less than three weeks before the 1765 election, an unidentified but patriotic friend of Richard Henry Lee was exhorting all Virginians to unite “to convince the world that we are firm and unanimous in the cause of liberty as so noble and exalted a principle demands.” There is little further evidence, however, that this issue or any of the other issues in which people of all parts of the colony were interested—frontier defense, paper money, or even taxation—had an influence on elections. What evidence there is suggests rather that campaigns were won or lost by appeals to local or personal interests.

In Robert Munford’s satirical drama on Virginia politics, *The Candidates*, one of the men aspiring to be a burgess promised to move mountains, make rivers navigable, and “bring the tide over the tops of the hills for a vote.” Candidates in the flesh were no less extravagant. One candidate who opposed George Washington, a friend who had electioneered actively for him earlier, “trumpeted” about Frederick County that he would “reduce to practice” the “shining virtues” of disinterested public spirit and generous commercial schemes which were to “diffuse gold and opulency through Frederick and prove . . . a sovereign remedy against poverty.” And however “strange and chimerical these non-entities” may have appeared to common sense, there were many, particularly the “plebeians of unstable minds,” who were “agitated” by the “breath of novelty, whims and nonsense.”

Not all campaign promises offered “pie-in-the-sky”; some of them were concrete and practical. In Lunenburg in 1758, for example, Matthew Marrant favored dividing the county, which was very great in size and very injudiciously wrote a letter to David Caldwell agreeing that if he were elected, he would “do something extraordinary” for the freeholders in the upper settlements, or forfeit a large sum of money, five hundred pounds to be exact. Henry Robinson, in 1752, complained that John Chiswell and John Syme of Hanover promised to oppose a division of the parishes; the promise reportedly was made after the election writs were published. Dissenters, who were numerous in that county, opposed any multiplication of parishes because the taxes would be increased, and voted in considerable numbers for Chiswell and Syme. Robinson believed that the promise unduly influenced the freeholders. In comparison with later electioneering methods this looks innocent enough, but the House decided that the two returned members from Hanover had broken the part of the election law that prohibited promises after an election was set. Consequently, the election was thrown out and a new one ordered. Landon Carter, serving his first term in the House, could not “forebear saying with others that the petitioners being allied to the chair had great weight” in settling the matter. In his opinion, constituents had a right to exact promises from candidates if they chose.

A similar case was decided in favor of the defendants. James Littlepage, who was opposed to the tobacco inspection law, made the promise that he would work for its repeal and wrote several freeholders, soliciting their votes. “My plan, sir,” he wrote one of them, “is to serve the people that’s now injured by the damned inspecting law . . . You may depend I have interest enough to have that taken off, and I want to have the inspectors chosen every year by the freeholders of the county. I will be at your church tomorrow se’ennight and to your house.” The election was held in midwinter, and Littlepage invited the freeholders who lived in the northern part of the county, fully twenty-five miles from the courthouse, to spend the night before the election at his house. This they did, and “several were pretty merry with liquor” when they arrived, but they had chiefly cider during the night. The extensive testimony convinced the House that the treating had been early enough to comply with the law, that liquor had not been served at the polls until after the election, and that Littlepage was wholly within his rights.

The location of the capital was the topic of much heated debate in the early 1760’s. It had long been recognized that the seat of government should be nearer the center of population; but Speaker Robinson, who favored removal, had been unable to get an appropriate bill passed. In 1761, such a measure failed again but by only a single vote and then because the legislators could not agree on a new site. Whether the “great struggle” was for “other reasons than to integrate themselves for the approaching elections,” Governor Fauquier was not sure, but the arguments offered by both sides appeared to him very trifling.

These cases are the only ones that have been discovered in which real issues were at stake. It should be noted that only the promises to get the tobacco inspection law changed and the capital moved could in any way be classed as colonial; the others applied to local situations only. In all probability the average candidate promised little more than to “make it a point to dispatch the business” and to “study to promote the good” of his country. From this meager evidence, the student must conclude that issues seldom played an important part in a campaign.

Nevertheless, heated races did occur, apparently the result of personal rivalry. It seems not to have been so much a question of what as who. In some counties, unknown men stood for election; but almost always the real race was between men of equal wealth, position, and public experience. How then were the freeholders to choose between them? Family influence was always of value; many a

father-in-law used his official position and wide acquaintance to get a seat for his daughter's husband. Even this was not enough to assure victory because the leading families were so intricately interrelated that it was a rare candidate who was not kin to his opponents. It remained, therefore, for the candidates to make direct appeals to the freeholders in whatever way they thought was the most effective means of getting votes. Electioneering was practiced in every part of the colony.

Electioneering was not always delayed until an election was imminent. There seem to have been some men in public office who campaigned much of the time, men like Benjamin Waller, the most popular man Landon Carter knew, who "harangued a great deal to please the humour of the plebeians." Waller was not an isolated example; at the time of the vote on the stint law in 1755, "the worthy gentlemen" were so bent on pleasing their constituents that Landon Carter found it "most remarkable" to note the contrast between their public and private utterances, "exclaiming against" it out of doors, yet "plumb for it on every motion within."

### ELECTIONEERING

The best contemporary description of electioneering methods is found, not in the *Gazette* or political pamphlets, but in the play already mentioned, *The Candidates*, or *The Humors of a Virginia Election*, a comedy in three acts by Robert Munford. The author, a burgess of Mecklenburg County from 1765 to 1775, wrote the play shortly after the death of Governor Botetourt on October 15, 1770. It is probably America's oldest native drama. The plot of *The Candidates* was simple. *Wou'dbe*, an honorable gentleman, was seeking reelection to the House of Burgesses. *Worthy*, his partner in past elections, refused to run again. Three new candidates entered the race when they heard of *Worthy's* decision. They were *Sir John Toddy*, a convivial sot; *Strutabout*, a conceited, silly fop; and *Smallhope*, a gentleman whose chief distinction came from his devotion to horses and the turf. The action of the play centered around the antics of these three candidates in wooing the freeholders into voting for them. There was a whispering campaign that backfired; ridiculous situations when the candidates pretended to know the names of all their potential constituents; and slapstick comedy when the voters drank too much free toddy. When *Wou'dbe* refused a dishonorable alliance, a joining of interests with either of the three opponents, *Worthy* came out of his retirement and saved the election for *Wou'dbe*—and himself. The comedy ends with a quatrain:

Henceforth, let those who pray for wholesome laws,  
And all well-wishers to their country's cause,  
Like us refuse a coxcomb—choose a man—  
Then let our senate blunder if it can.

Politically minded Virginians loved a good campaign; it broke the monotony of rural existence. "We have dull barbecues," wrote George Washington's former secretary, John Kirkpatrick, during the 1758 campaign, "and yet duller dances. An election causes a hubbub for a week or so and then we are dead a while." While the hubbub lasted, the "flame of burgessing entered every heart" and elections took up the "whole talk."

Lucille Griffith, *The Virginia House of Burgesses, 1750–1774*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1970 (originally published 1963), pp. 51–52, 142–143, 60–63.

## SWILLING THE PLANTERS WITH BUMBO

It would be pleasant to think that voters were good and wise in the bright, beginning days of the American nation; that in Jefferson's Arcadia, to use a popular euphemism, the sturdy, incorruptible freeholders assembled when occasion demanded and, with an eye only to the public good and their own safety, chose the best and ablest of their number to represent them in the Assembly. It is true that the voters of early Virginia chose their representatives and that often they chose remarkably well; but it is an error to think that the voters were the only positive active force at work in elections. For good or ill, the candidates and their friends also played an important part by using many forms of persuasion and pressure upon the voters.

A play called *The Candidates*, or, *The Humours of a Virginia Election*, written about 1770 by Colonel Robert Munford of Mecklenburg County, Virginia, provides valuable insight into the part played by candidates in the elections of eighteenth-century Virginia. In this play one of the former delegates to the Assembly, Worthy by name, has decided not to stand for reelection. The other, Wou'dbe, offers himself once more "to the humours of a fickle croud," though with reluctance, asking himself. "Must I again resign my reason, and be nought but what each voter pleases? Must I cajole, fawn, and wheedle, for a place that brings so little profit?" The second candidate, Sir John Toddy, "an honest blockhead," with no ability except in consuming liquor and no political strength except his readiness to drink with the poor man as freely as with the rich, looks for support among the plain people who like him because he "wont turn his back upon a poor man, but will take a cheerful cup with one as well as another." Scorned by the leading men of the county, the other two candidates, Smallhopes and Strutabout, a vain, showy fellow, are adept in the low arts of winning the support of ignorant men.

Each of these candidates had some influence, following, or support which, in the language of that day, was known as his interest. It was common practice at this time for two candidates to join interests, as the phrase went, in hopes that each could get the support of the friends of the other. When Sir John suggests to Wou'dbe a joining of interests by asking him "to speak a good word for me among the people," Wou'dbe refuses and tells him plainly "I'll speak a good word to you, and advise you to decline" to run. Because Wou'dbe could not, from principle, join interests with any one of the three other candidates, he loses votes by affronting first one and then another of them. Just in the nick of time, Wou'dbe's colleague Worthy descends from the upper reaches of respectability and greatness to save Wou'dbe from defeat and political virtue from ruin. With stilted phrase Worthy denounces "the scoundrels who opposed us last election" and directs Wou'dbe to "speak this to the people, and let them know I intend to stand a poll." The good men of the county rally to the side of righteousness; Sir John (between alcoholic hiccougs) announces "I'm not so fitten" as "Mr. Worthy and Mr. Wou'dbe"; Strutabout and Smallhopes, looking as doleful as thieves upon the gallows, are ignominiously defeated; and Worthy and Wou'dbe are triumphantly reelected.

Among the more important of the unwritten rules of eighteenth-century Virginia politics, a rule which the candidates and their advisers often mentioned, was the necessity for candidates to be present at elections. Judge Joseph Jones, out of his ripe experience, wrote in 1785 to his young nephew James Monroe, "respecting your offering your service for the County the coming year, . . . it would be indispensably necessary you should be in the County before the election and attend it when made." In 1758 several of Washington's friends wrote him to "come down" from Fort Cumberland, where he was on duty with his troops, "and show your face" in Frederick County

where he was a candidate for burgess. One of his supporters warned him that “you being elected absolutely depends on your presence.” Thanks to the hard work of his friends and the patriotic circumstances of his absence, Washington was elected; but it is evident that the absence of a candidate from the county before and during the taking of the poll was regarded as a distinct handicap.

Fifty years later Henry St. George Tucker, who planned to stand for election at Winchester, was delayed by bad weather and other circumstances at Staunton. He wrote to his father: “I shall not be able to reach Winchester time enough for the election and I presume I shall be withdrawn in consequence of what I have written to my friends in Winchester.” But by hard driving he made it, arriving “a few moments before the polls were opened”; and he was elected. As late as 1815 Tucker continued to place himself personally before the people while the voting was in process. Even though he was “still very weak” from illness, he played his part in an election of that year while the enormous number of 737 votes was polled until, as he wrote his father, “fatigue well nigh overcame me.”

A sharp distinction must be made between election day and pre-election behavior of the candidate toward the voter. The code of the times required that in the days before the election the candidate maintain a dignified aloofness from the voters; however, this rule was broken perhaps as often as it was observed. The tipsy Sir John Toddy, in *The Candidates*, assisted by his henchman Guzzle, tries unabashedly to work himself into the good graces of three freeholders named Prize, Twist, and Stern. As they and their wives are sitting on a rail fence, with other freeholders standing about, Sir John comes up to the group. At his shoulder stands Guzzle to whisper the names of the prospective voters to him.

*Sir John.* Gentlemen and ladies, your servant, hah! my old friend Prize, how goes it? how does your wife and children do?

*Sarah.* At your service, sir (making a low courtsey).

*Prize.* How the devil come he to know me so well, and never spoke to me before in his life?  
(aside)

*Guzzle.* (whispering to *Sir John*) Dick Stern.

*Sir John.* Hah! Mr. Stern, I'm proud to see you; I hope your family are well; how many children? does the good woman keep to the told stroke?

*Catharine.* Yes, an't please your honour, I hope my ladys' well, with your honour.

*Sir John.* At your service, madam.

*Guzzle.* (whispering to *Sir John*) Roger Twist.

*Sir John.* Hah! Mr. Roger Twist? your servant, sir. I hope your wife and children are well.

*Twist.* There's my wife. I have no children, at your service.

James Littlepage, a candidate for Burgess in Hanover County in 1763, practiced nearly every art known to his generation for getting his candidacy before the people and winning their support. The gathering of worshippers at church services afforded him an opportunity to meet people; but unfortunately, he could not be at two churches at the same time. Deciding that it was more important to go to a dissenting congregation, he prepared the way by letters to two freeholders in which he announced that he would “be at your Church To-morrow, Se’nnight,” and asked their support, setting forth the platform on which he was campaigning and circulating the false rumor that his opponent had “declined serving this County.”

To take care of matters at the other church which he was unable to attend personally, he sent a letter to three freeholders for them to read and pass about among those in attendance. As one of those who saw the letter recalled its substance, Littlepage wrote that he “was that Day gone to the lower Meeting House of the Dissenters, to know their Sentiments whether they would submit to the damned Tobacco Law and desired to know whether they also would submit to it that if they would send him Burgess he would be hanged, or burnt (or Words to that Effect) if he did not get that Part of it, directing a Review of Tobacco, repealed, as being an Infringement on the Liberty of the Subjects, the Inspectors being so intimidated by it that they refused the greater Part of their Tobacco; and that he would endeavor to have the Inspectors chosen by the People.”

To meet the voters who could not be found in assemblies, Littlepage went on a house-to-house canvass. After discussing his chances in one part of the county with his friend John Boswell, and being assured that “he might have a good Chance, if he would go up amongst them, Littlepage “accordingly went up, and the said *Boswell* rode about with him among the People.” He was the soul of hospitality, inviting those who lived at some distance from the courthouse to spend the night with him on their way to the poll. Littlepage was elected.

James Madison in his old age recalled that when he entered politics it was “the usage for the candidates to recommend themselves to the voters . . . by personal solicitation.” Madison thoroughly disliked this practice. Shortly before the election of representatives to the first Congress of the United States he wrote from Philadelphia to George Washington: “I am pressed much in several quarters to try the effect of presence on the district into which I fall, for electing a Representative; and am apprehensive that an omission of that expedient, may eventually expose me to blame. At the same time I have an extreme distaste to steps having an electioneering appearance, altho’ they should lead to an appointment in which I am disposed to serve the public; and am very dubious moreover whether any step which might seem to denote a solicitude on my part would not be as likely to operate against as in favor of my pretentions.”

Colonel Landon Carter, writing in 1776, said that he had once been “turned out of the H. of B.” because “I did not familiarize myself among the People,” whereas he well remembered his “son’s going amongst them and carrying his Election.” The contrasting experiences of father and son suggest that going among the people was important to get a man elected. However, the son, Robert Wormeley Carter, lost his seat in an election in Richmond County in 1776 even though, according to his father, he had “kissed the———of the people, and very seriously accommodated himself to others.” With mounting anger the Colonel wrote: “I do suppose such a Circumstance cannot be paralleled, but it is the nature of Popularity. She, I long discovered to be an adultrous of the first order.” The son was likewise displeased with the decision of the voters, but he naturally thought that

his campaign methods were above reproach. He wrote in his diary “as for myself I never ask’d but one man to vote for me since the last Election; by which means I polled but 45 votes an honorable number.”

Father and son were miles apart in describing what the son had done; but they were in complete agreement as to what he ought to have done. Both thought that candidates should not solicit votes, and there were other men who thought exactly as they did. Henry St. George Tucker wrote to his father before an election to be held on April 6, 1807, “Please to take notice also, that I am no *electionerer*.” “I have studiously avoided anything like canvassing . . . My opponents are sufficiently active I learn.” Of his victory he wrote: “it has been entirely without solicitation on my part.” Eight years later he was again elected though he declared that he had “never attended a public meeting or been at the home of a single individual, and though my adversary and his friends had ransacked the county in the old Electioneering Style.”

The contrast between ideal and reality was well illustrated by statements made during an election quarrel in Accomac County. The following advice was given to the freeholders: “If a man solicits you earnestly for your vote, avoid him; self-interest and sordid avarice lurk under his forced smiles, hearty shakes by the hand, and deceitfully enquires after your wife and family.” However, it was said, referring to the candidates, that “every person who observes the two gentlemen, allows that the smiles of Mr. S.—h are more forced than Mr. H—ry’s, and of this Mr. S.—h himself is so conscious that he has declared, he would give an Hundred pounds could he shake hands with the freeholders, and smile in their faces with as good a grace as Col. Pa—e, that he might be more equally match’d.”

Some candidates sought to injure a rival by starting the rumor that he was withdrawing from the race, that he had joined interests with an unpopular man, that he was a common drunkard, that he despised poor folks, or that “It’s his doings our levies are so high.” If the rumor was false, it was better for the candidate to keep silent and let one of his supporters circulate it. More often, the candidate, with the help of his friends, undertook to set himself and his views on current issues in a favorable light.

Sir John Toddy, whose supporters were great lovers of rum, promised to get the price of that article reduced, as it is said of Strutabout that “he’ll promise to move mountains. He’ll make the rivers navigable, and bring the tide over the tops of the hills, for a vote.” The noble Worthy promised no more than to “endeavour faithfully to discharge the trust you have reposed in me.” And Wou’dbe answered the questions of the voters with carefully measured words. When asked if he would reduce the price of rum and remove an unpopular tax, he answered, “I could not,” explaining that it would be beyond his power to accomplish these things. His position on other matters is set forth in the following dialogue.

*Stern.* Suppose, Mr. Wou’dbe, we that live over the river, should want to come to church on this side, is it not very hard we should pay ferrage; when we pay as much to the church as you do?

*Wou’dbe.* Very hard.

*Stern.* Suppose we were to petition the assembly could you get us clear of that expense?

*Wou'dbe.* I believe it to be just; and make no doubt that it would pass into a law.

*Stern.* Will you do it?

*Wou'dbe.* I will endeavour to do it.

*Stern.* Huzza for Mr. Wou'dbe! Wou'dbe forever!

*Prize.* Why don't you burgesses do something with the damn'd pickers? If we have a hogshead of tobacco refused, away it goes to them; and after they have twisted up the best of it for their own use, and taken as much as will pay them for their trouble, the poor planter has little for his share.

*Wou'dbe.* There are great complaints against them; and I believe the assembly will take them under consideration.

*Prize.* Will you vote against them?

*Wou'dbe.* I will, if they deserve it.

Littlepage, it will be recalled, promised to fight the existing system of tobacco inspection, and thereby was said to have gained much favor with the people. He also proposed to have the inspectors chosen yearly by the freeholders of the county, an extension of democracy which must have seemed radical to some men of the time. Friends of George Wythe, appealing to those who felt burdened by taxes, declared that "he would serve as Burgess for the said County for nothing," and they offered to "give Bond to repay any Thing that should be levied on the County for him." A rival candidate, William Wager, realizing that he must follow suit, immediately upon "hearing this Declaration, came up and said, he would serve on the same terms."

There is some evidence that the House of Burgesses frowned upon campaign commitments by candidates, especially upon those which reflected upon the prerogative of the House by promising that it would act according to the will of a single member. The powerful Committee of Privileges and Elections investigated the making of campaign promises by some of the candidates, and the committee gave detailed reports to the House of its findings. Perhaps it was to protect himself against the disapproval of the House that Littlepage, who had promised much during his campaign, "Just before the Poll was opened . . . publicly and openly declared, in the Court House, before a great Number of People, that he did not look upon any of the Promises he had made to the People as binding on him, but that they were all void."

There is no way of knowing how many of the candidates followed the rule approved by the Carters, Tucker, and Munford's character Wou'dbe: "never to ask a vote for myself," and how many of them followed the example of Littlepage in unashamedly and energetically courting the voters wherever they could find them, even going on house-to-house canvasses. Most of the candidates seem to have operated between these extremes. While they did not insulate themselves from the voters before elections, they avoided unseemly and ostentatious activity in their mingling with the people. The distinction between approved and disapproved conduct was close, and it is easier to be sure that a

line was drawn than to be sure just where it was drawn. A man was likely to shift it a bit, depending on whether he was judging his own actions or those of his rival. John Clopton once gave his candidate son shrewd advice about cultivating the people and tricking a rival at the very time that he was fulminating against the tricks, deceptions, and intimidations practiced by the son's opponents!

Whether the candidates actively campaigned or not, a good many votes were committed before the election. The Quakers or the Presbyterians, the men along the south side of a river or in the northern corner of a county—these and other groups might discuss the candidates and decide which of them to support. Similarly, powerful men would let their friends, relatives, and dependents know how they stood toward the candidates. Thus, elections were often settled before they were held. A curious attempt to hold back this natural operation of democracy was made in a brief notice published in the *Virginia Gazette*. It was addressed “To the free and independent ELECTORS of the borough of NORFOLK,” and it desired them “not to engage your votes or interest until the day of election, as a Gentleman of undoubted ability intends to declare himself as a candidate on that day, and hopes to succeed.

From these cases it is evident that although many candidates entered the race several weeks before election day, a few of them, like the unnamed gentleman of Norfolk or like Worthy in Munford's play, waited until the last minute before announcing their decision to stand a poll. John Marshall recalled in his old age that he had the unusual experience of being made a candidate contrary to his wishes. He described the event, which occurred at Richmond during an election to the Virginia legislature in the spring of 1775, in the following words.

“I attended at the polls to give my vote early and return to the court which was then in session at the other end of the town. As soon as the election commenced a gentleman came forward and demanded a poll that should be taken for me. I was a good deal surprized at this entirely unexpected proposition & declared my decided dissent. I said that if my fellow citizens wished it I would become a candidate at the next succeeding election, but that I could not consent to serve this year because my wishes & my honour were engaged for one of the candidates. I then voted for my friend & left the polls for the court which was open and waiting for me. The gentleman said that he had a right to demand a poll for whom he pleased, & persisted in his demand that one should be opened for me—I might if elected refuse to obey the voice of my constituents if I chose to do so. He then gave his vote for me.

“As this was entirely unexpected—not even known to my brother who though of the same political opinions with myself was the active & leading partisan of the candidate against whom I voted, the election was almost suspended for ten or twelve minutes, and a consultation took place among the principal freeholders. They then came in and in the evening information was brought me that I was elected. I regretted this for the sake of my friend. In other respects I was well satisfied at being again in the assembly.”

Many of the candidates may have been perfectly circumspect in their pre-election behavior, but all of them, with hardly an exception, relied on the persuasive powers of food and drink dispensed to the voters with open-handed liberality. Theoderick Bland, Jr., once wrote with apparent scorn that “Our friend, Mr. Banister, has been very much ingaged ever since the dissolution of the assembly, in swilling the planters with bumbo.” When he supplied the voters with liquor Banister was in good company; it included Washington, Jefferson, and John Marshall.

The favorite beverage was rum punch. Cookies and ginger cakes were often provided, and occasionally there was a barbecued bullock and several hogs. The most munificent as well as democratic kind of treat was a public occasion, a sort of picnic, to which the freeholders in general were invited. George Washington paid the bills for another kind of treat in connection with his Fairfax County campaigns for a seat in the House of Burgesses. It consisted of a supper and ball on the night of the election, replete with fiddler, “Sundried &ca.” On at least one occasion he shared the cost of the ball with one or more persons, perhaps with the other successful candidate, for his memorandum of expenses closes with the words: “By Cash paid Captn. Dalton for my part of ye Expense at the Election Ball. £8.5.6”.

A supper and ball of this kind was probably more exclusive than a picnic-type of treat. Hospitality was often shown also to small groups, usually composed of important and influential men. Mumford describes a breakfast given the morning of the election by Wou’dbe for the principal freeholders. Worthy was the guest of honor; fine salt shad, warm toast and butter, coffee, tea, or chocolate, with spirits for lacing the chocolate, were set before the guests; and although it was said that “we shall have no polling now,” it was understood that all were for Worthy and Wou’dbe.

It was a common practice for candidates to keep open houses for the freeholders on their way to the election, and it is a marvel where space was found for all to sleep. When Littlepage heard that some of the voters who lived more than twenty-five miles from the courthouse were unwilling to ride so far in cold weather, he invited them to call at his house which was about five miles from the courthouse. Some ten of them came and were hospitably entertained, “though their Entertainment was not more than was usual with him.” Some of the company “were pretty merry with Liquor when they came” to his home. That evening “they chiefly drank Cider. Some of them drank Drams in the Morning, and went merry to the Court House.”

Candidates frequently arranged for treats to be given in their names by someone else. Lieutenant Charles Smith managed this business for George Washington during a campaign in Frederick County in 1758. Two days after the election, which Washington had not been able to attend, Smith sent him receipts for itemized accounts that he had paid to five persons who had supplied refreshments for the voters. A year or two earlier in Elizabeth City County, Thomas Craghead sought to repay William Wager, a candidate for burgess, for help he had once received in time of distress. He invited several people to Wager’s house and out of his own purse entertained them with “Victuals and Drink.” He also had a share in treating all who were present at a muster of Captain Wager’s militia company, after which they drank to Wager’s health.

Samuel Overton, a candidate in Hanover County, directed Jacob Hundley “to prepare a Treat for some of the Freeholders of the said County at his Houses.” Later, Overton withdrew from the race, but a group of freeholders, perhaps ignorant of Overton’s withdrawal, came to Hundley’s house. He thereupon sent a messenger, desiring Overton’s “Directions whether they were to be treated at his Expense,” and Overton ordered him “to let them have four Gallons of Rum made into punch,” and he would pay for it.

At this juncture some of the finer points of campaigning begin to appear. Littlepage, an active candidate, was among those present at Hundley’s house; and Littlepage had agreed in return for Overton’s withdrawal to reimburse Overton the sum of £75, which was the expense he had incurred

in this and a previous election. As a codicil it was agreed that Littlepage would pay only £50 in case “Mr. Henry,” presumably Patrick Henry, should enter the race and be elected. While the treat was in progress Hundley told Littlepage “that the Liquor was all drank.” He immediately ordered two gallons more, telling Hundley that he supposed Overton would pay for it. Whether any of the company heard this conversation is in doubt; but this much is clear, that Littlepage paid Overton to withdraw, that Littlepage attended a treat for Overton’s friends, and that Littlepage succeeded, according to the testimony of one of the guests, in winning “the Interest” of most of them.

On election day the flow of liquor reached high tide. Douglas S. Freeman calculated that during a July election day in Frederick County in the year 1758, George Washington’s agent supplied 160 gallons to 391 voters and “unnumbered hangers-on.” This amounted to more than a quart and a half a voter. An itemized list of the refreshments included 28 gallons of rum, 50 gallons of rum punch, 34 gallons of wine, 46 gallons of beer, and 2 gallons of cider royal. During the close and bitter struggle between John Marshall and John Clopton for a seat in Congress in 1799, a “barrel of Whiskey . . . with the head knocked in” was on the courthouse green.

Defeated candidates often complained of the wrongdoing of their successful opponents. George Douglas of Accomac County alleged before the Committee of Privileges and Elections that Edmund Scarburgh, shortly before the issuance of the writ of election, had twice given “strong Liquors to the People of the said County; once at a Race, and the other Time as a Muster; and did, on the Day of Election, cause strong Liquor to be brought in a Cart, near the Court-house Door, where many People drank thereof, whilst the Polls of the Election were taking; and one Man in particular, said, *Give me a Drink, and I will go and vote for Col. Scarburgh, . . .* and drink was accordingly given him out of the said Cart, where several People were merry with Drink: But it doth not appear, whether that Person voted for the said *Scarburgh*, or not; or was a Freeholder.” Contrary to the recommendation of the Committee, Scarburgh was seated.

Captain Robert Bernard was charged with intimidation as well as improper treating in his efforts to help Beverley Whiting win an election in Gloucester County. He attended a private muster of Captain Hayes’ men and solicited the freeholders among them to vote for Whiting. “And the next Day, at a Muster of his own Company, the said *Bernard* brought 40 Gallons of Cyder, and 20 Gallons of Punch into the Field; and promised one *James Conquest*, to give him Liquor, if he would vote for Mr. *Whiting*, which *Conquest* refused; and then *Bernard* said he should be welcome to drink, tho’ he would not vote for him: That the said *Bernard* promised one *Gale*, a Freeholder to pay his Fine, if he would stay from the Election; which *Gale* accordingly did: That the Day of election, the said *Bernard* treated several Freeholders, who said they would vote for Mr. *Whiting* at one *Sewell’s* Ordinary: And that, at the Election, one of the Freeholders said, he was going to vote for Mr. *Whiting*, because he had promised Capt. *Bernard* so to do; but that he had rather give Half a Pistole than do it: And other Freeholders, who were indebted to Col. *Whiting*, said, that Capt. *Bernard* told them, that Col. *Whiting* would be angry with them if they voted against Mr. *Whiting*; which the said *Bernard* denied, upon his Oath, before the Committee.”

The House of Burgesses compelled Bernard to acknowledge his offense, to ask the pardon of the House, and to pay certain fees; and it requested the Governor to issue a writ for a new election in Gloucester County.

The law strictly prohibited any person “directly or indirectly” from giving “money, meat, drink, present, gift, reward, or entertainment . . . in order to be elected, or for being elected to serve in the General Assembly”; but in one way or another nearly all the candidates gave treats, and seldom was a voice raised in protest. One of the rare protests was adopted at a general meeting of the citizens of Williamsburg two years before the Declaration of Independence. In an address to Peyton Randolph, who was a candidate for reelection to the House of Burgesses, the townsmen declared themselves to be greatly scandalized at the Practice which has too much prevailed throughout the Country of entertaining the Electors, a Practice which even its Antiquity cannot sanctify; and being desirous of setting a worthy Example to our Fellow Subjects, in general, for abolishing every Appearance of Venality (that only Poison which can infect our happy Constitution) and to give the fullest Proof that it is to your singular Merit alone you are indebted for the unbought Suffrages of a free People; moved, Sir, by these important Considerations, we earnestly request that you will not think of incurring any Expense or Trouble at the approaching Election of a Citizen, but that you will do us the Honour to partake of an Entertainment which we shall direct to be provided for the Occasion.

Three years later young James Madison, feeling that “the corrupting influence of spirituous liquors, and other treats,” was “inconsistent with the purity of moral and republican principles,” and wishing to see the adoption of “a more chaste mode of conducting elections in Virginia,” determined “by an example, to introduce it.” He found, however, that voters preferred free rum to the high ideals of a young reformer; “that the old habits were too deeply rooted to be suddenly reformed.” He was defeated by rivals who did not scruple to use “all the means of influence familiar to the people.” For many years to come liquor had a large part in Virginia elections. In 1795 Jefferson wrote that he was in despair because “the low practices” of a candidate in Albemarle County were “but too successful with the unthinking who merchandize their votes for grog.” In 1807 Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, writing from Charlotte Court House, informed his father, St. George Tucker, that “In this part of the state . . . every decent man is striving to get a seat in the legislature. There are violent contests every where that I have been, to the great of old John Barleycorn, who suffers greatly in the fray.”

Although the custom of treating was deeply ingrained, the law was not entirely disregarded. It did not prohibit a man’s offering refreshment to a friend; it only prohibited treating “in order to be elected.” Through various interpretations of these words most of the candidates found ways of dispensing largess to the freeholders without incurring the censure of the House of Burgesses and perhaps without suffering from an uneasy conscience. Everyone would agree that it was wrong to give liquor to “one *Grubbs*, a Freeholder,” who announced at an election that “he was ready to vote for any one who would give him a Dram.” Neither should a candidate ask votes of those whom he was entertaining though it was perhaps all right for him to make the general remark “that if his Friends would stand by him he should carry his Election.” Some men thought that there should be no treating after the election writ was issued until the poll had been taken. James Littlepage “expressly ordered” Paul Tilman, whom he had employed “to prepare his Entertainment at the Election . . . not to give the Freeholders any Liquor until after the closing of the Poll,” and Littlepage produced evidence to show that “none of them had any Liquor, except some few who insisted on it, and paid for it themselves.”

To avoid the appearance of corruption, it was well for the candidate to have the reputation of being hospitable at all times. When William Wager’s campaign was under investigation, especially in the matter of the treat given in his home by one of his friends and another treat given in his honor to his militia company, Wager introduced evidence to show that he customarily entertained all who came

to his house, strangers as well as freeholders, and that he usually treated the members of his militia company with punch after the exercises were over. "They would after that come before his Door and fire Guns in Token of their Gratitude, and then he would give them Punch 'til they dispersed, and that this had been a frequent Practice for several Years."

To avoid the reality as well as the appearance of corruption, the candidates usually made a point of having it undertook that the refreshments were equally free to men of every political opinion. If a candidate's campaign was under investigation, it was much in his favor if he could show that among his guests were some who had clearly said that they did not intend to vote for him. Washington reflected an acceptable attitude when he wrote while arranging for the payment of large bills for liquor consumed during a Frederick County election: "I hope 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 desir'd." Washington seems to have followed this policy in subsequent elections. A young Englishman, who witnessed an election at Alexandria in 1774 when Washington was one of the two successful candidates, wrote: "The Candidates gave the populace a Hogshead of Toddy (what we call Punch in England). In the evening the returned Member gave a Ball to the Freeholders and Gentlemen of the town. This was conducted with great harmony. Coffee and Chocolate, but no Tea. This Herb is in disgrace among them at present."

Bountiful supplies of free liquor were responsible for much rowdiness, fighting, and drunkenness, but the fun and excitement of an election and the prospect of plentiful refreshments of the kind customarily consumed in that day helped to bring the voters to the polls. Thus in a perverse kind of way treating made something of a contribution to eighteenth-century democracy. Although one sometimes found a man who lived by the rule, "never to taste of a man's liquor unless I'm his friend," most of the voters accepted such refreshments as were offered. As they drank, they were less likely to feel that they were incurring obligations than that the candidate was fulfilling his obligation. According to the thinking of that day, the candidate ought to provide refreshments for the freeholders. His failure to fulfill this obligation would be interpreted as a sign of "pride or parsimony," as a "want of respect" for the voters, as James Madison found to his sorrow.

The Virginia voter expected the candidate to be manly and forthright, but he wanted the candidate to treat him with due respect. He had the power to approve and reject, and the sum total of this consciousness of power among the voters was a strong and significant aspect of the democratic spirit in eighteenth-century Virginia.

Charles S. Sydnor, *American Revolutionaries in the Making*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1952, pp. 44–59.