

September 5, 2003

To colleagues in the Georgia Workshop in Early American History:

In anticipation of the September 26 Workshop, I am sending two essays, one very short, the other substantially longer. The longer piece, which has recently been published as part of Danny Vickers's A Companion to Colonial America (2003), offers an introduction or overview or whatever to the topic of class in the colonial era. I realize that a published piece is not the sort of work-in-progress that one usually expects in a workshop, but I think this one is necessary to set the stage for the shorter piece. More to the point, after finishing this longer essay (and just barely before the absolutely final deadline), I felt it was still incomplete, or at least not altogether satisfying to me. Then, the opportunity to present a paper at an upcoming conference on "Class and Class Struggles" led me to deal with some of my specific dissatisfaction with the notion of deference – both as I had addressed it in the "Class" essay and, more broadly, as it has been discussed and debated in the field as a whole. Since the "Deference" essay was written for oral delivery at the conference, it is necessarily sketchy and has a somewhat informal tone. Still, I hope the two essays taken together can be the jumping-off point for a more extensive and wide-ranging discussion of class and deference, which I will welcome at the Workshop. I look forward to seeing you on September 26.

Greg Nobles

[from Daniel Vickers, ed., *A Companion to Colonial America* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2003), pp. 259-287]

CLASS

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Class is a concept that has often fit uncomfortably in the study of early American history. For one thing, the term itself does not appear often in contemporary accounts of colonial society, or certainly not with the same sort of meaning it carries today. As one historian has recently noted, most early Americans “did not use ‘class’ to describe social divisions, but rather spoke of ‘ranks,’ ‘orders,’ ‘degrees,’ or . . . ‘interests, . . . using ‘class’ as a general term for any group” (Rosswurm, 1987, p. 18). Thus when the Rev. Timothy Dwight brought to a poetic conclusion his pastorate in rural Massachusetts (“Greenfield Hill,” 1794), he used the term “class” to emphasize inclusion rather than division:

Here every class (if classes those we call,
Where one extended class embraces all,
All mingling, as the rainbow’s beauty blends,
Unknown where every hue begins or ends)
Each following each, with univindious strife,
Wears every feature of improving life. . . .
See the wide realm of equal shares possess’d!
How few the rich, or poor! how many bless’d!
(Dwight, 1794, pp. 36, 153)

But Dwight’s poem also speaks to a more fundamental assumption underlying the study of class in early America. For over two centuries, the myth of America as a “classless

society” lay rooted in the colonial era, and the early American rhetoric of equality and opportunity has often diverted academic analysis away from class relations. In one of the most famous passages from his Letters from an American Farmer (1782), Hector St. John de Crevecoeur answered his own question, “What is an American?”, by asserting the absence of strong social divisions, especially compared to the extreme stratification of European society: “Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury.” Instead, Crevecoeur pointed to a “pleasing uniformity of decent competence” among the people; because of that, he declared, “we are the most perfect society now existing in the world” (Crevecoeur, 1981 [1782], pp. 67). This post-Revolutionary perfection Crevecoeur celebrated, like the “embrace” of “one extended class” that Dwight described, seemed to be the happy legacy of America’s recent past, the gift of the colonial era to the new nation.

Throughout the twentieth century, American historians have differed greatly about whether or not to accept that “gift” as a given. No one, of course, could seriously describe an essentially “classless” colonial society and say, as Dwight did, “How few the rich, or poor!” The evidence of inequality has always been inescapable. Still, the historical implications of its existence have often been debated -- and, in many cases, evaded. From the colonial period through the modern era, the apparent openness and opportunity inherent in American society have given the country a reputation of being all but devoid of class identity or class conflict. As the British historian Gareth Stedman Jones has observed from the comparative perspective of his side of the Atlantic, it has never been possible for American historians “simply to infer class as a political force from class as a structural position within productive relations”(Jones, 1983, p. 2). The task, of course, is to go beyond simple inference in order to explore the possible manifestations and meanings of class in a society so long noted for its supposed classlessness.

To be sure, in the early decades of the century, the Progressive historians -- Charles Beard, Carl Becker, Arthur Schlesinger, and others -- placed considerations of class at the center of scholarship, and they sought to develop an explanation of early

American history that clarified the conflicting interests of different classes. The most famous and certainly most controversial of the works of the Progressive historians, Beard's An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States (1913), argued that the creation of the American state clearly reflected the class interests of certain political and financial leaders who took control of the national constitution-making process in 1787. It was not wealth alone that determined their interests, Beard asserted, but wealth from particular sources -- trade, manufacturing, and government securities, for instance, rather than land and slaves -- that led them to push for a strong, centralized government that would ensure the stability of their investments. Thus the emergence of a small, self-interested elite at the end of the colonial era shaped, even determined, the transition to nationhood. In a similar vein, Schlesinger (1918) argued that the coming of the American Revolution did not by any means stem simply from a transatlantic controversy about lofty political ideas, but was in large part the result of competing economic interests, both between the colonies and Great Britain and within the colonies themselves, that had developed in the late colonial era. In general, the Progressives opened the century by taking early American history out of the realm of ideas and disinterested statesmanship and locating it in the context of increasingly coherent economic concerns that suffused colonial society: the Revolution, as the critical event marking the end of the colonial era, both reflected and heightened class identities and tensions that had existed for years before.

But the Progressive interpretation was by no means the only school of historical analysis to address questions of class. By the middle of the century, a growing group of "consensus" historians offered a more conservative vision of American society that emphasized comparative social harmony, or certainly a lack of overt social conflict. Indeed, as Edmund Morgan has observed about his own early years in the historical profession in the late 1940s and 1950s, colonial American history was considered an especially "safe" subject because it seemed so distant from the ideological debates of the Cold War (and McCarthy) era. One of the most outspoken on the consensus historians, Daniel Boorstin, wrote about "the vagueness of American social classes" in his popular and prize-winning book, The Americans: The Colonial Experience (1958): echoing Crevecoeur, Boorstin observed that "Distinctions which had been hallowed by custom,

law, and language in Europe came to seem vague and artificial in America” (Boorstin, 1958, p. 185). Instead, Boorstin described a colonial context in which early Americans “had to look to their opportunities, to the unforeseen openings of the American situation . . . [and] everyone had to be prepared to become someone else” (Boorstin, 1958, pp. 194-195). Reflecting the post-war euphoria of mainstream America in the 1950s, this sense of optimism, openness, and opportunity provided a reassuring and seemingly less controversial alternative to the more unsettling emphasis on interest, inequality, and injustice that underlay the Progressives’ approach to the past. A decade later, in 1968, Jack P. Greene surveyed the scholarship of the pre-Revolutionary era and pointed to several “tentative conclusions that flatly contradict earlier arguments of the Progressive historians” -- among them a general agreement that “social and political opportunity was remarkably wide” and, perhaps as a result, “class struggle and the demand for democracy on the part of underprivileged groups were not widespread and not a primary causative factor in the coming of the Revolution” (Greene, 1968, p. 31). Writing at essentially the same time, the radical historian Barton Bernstein noted less happily that “the progressive synthesis had been under monographic attack before Pearl Harbor, and seemed to fall apart under the sustained assaults of the postwar years” (Bernstein, 1967, p. vii). In the realm of academic, if not class, conflict, there seemed to be a mid-century consensus not just about the nature of colonial society, but about the failure of Progressive scholarship as well. Indeed, as late as 1991, Gordon Wood would still argue in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, The Radicalism of the American Revolution, that most people in colonial American society “thought of themselves as connected vertically rather than horizontally . . . [and] few groups or occupations could as yet sustain any strong corporate or class consciousness, any sense of existing as a particular social stratum with long-term common interests that were antagonistic to the interests of another stratum” (Wood, 1991, pp. 23-24).

Yet this emphasis on the apparent absence of “long-term common interests” greatly understated the longer-term processes of change underway in early America -- and likewise in early American scholarship. By the mid-1960s, the emphasis on consensus was beginning to face a serious challenge of its own, reflecting in the scholarly arena the more pervasive political and cultural challenges then taking place in American

society as a whole. Two works -- Jackson Turner Main's The Social Structure of Revolutionary America (1965) and Jesse Lemisch's "The American Revolution as Seen from the Bottom Up" (1967) -- stand out as especially important, almost emblematic, in indicating both the growing concern with class and the ways historians would come to address the issue.

Main's book was an ambitious attempt to deal directly with the definition of class. Looking back at the major scholarly trends of the century, Main located himself in the aftermath of the clash between the progressive and consensus schools. The progressives, he noted, "took for granted the existence of economic classes, the conflict between which was assumed to be vitally significant" (Main, 1965, p. 3). On the other hand, the recently dominant consensus historians "minimize[d] social distinctions and class conflicts . . . [and] even denied that classes existed at all" (Main, 1965, p. 3). For his own part, Main took nothing for granted and neither assumed nor denied the existence of class: rather, he set out to demonstrate the dimensions of social and economic inequality in early America. And he succeeded -- to a degree. As the title of his book indicates, Main described in some detail the social structure of pre-Revolutionary America -- differing levels of wealth, position, prestige, and opportunity -- but he ultimately shied away from a more intensive investigation of social relations, much less social conflict: "I had indeed originally planned to conclude this book with an essay on the relationship between class and the structure of power," he admitted, "but the subject proved much too large" (Main, 1965, p. viii). What he did conclude with was a distinction between class and class consciousness:

If the word 'class' requires the presence of class consciousness, if it can be used only when men are aware of a hierarchical structure and of their own rank within it, then this study indicates that America during the period 1763-1788 was relatively classless. . . . If on the other hand the existence of classes does not depend on class consciousness but implies nothing more than a rank order within which an individual can move up or down without any insurmountable difficulty, then revolutionary America can and indeed must be described in terms of classes. (Main, 1965, p. 270)

He then invited other scholars to take his work as a point of departure for further studies, both backward and forward in time, and ended his own analysis on a curious, almost contradictory, note. After observing that at the end of the colonial era, “[t]he long-term tendency seems to have been toward greater inequality, with more marked class distinctions,” he nevertheless suggested that someone living at the time might have cause for “cautious optimism”: “Classes remained, to be sure, and he might note with alarm the growing concentration of wealth and the growing number of poor, but the Revolution had made great changes, and westward the land was bright” (Main, 1965, p. 287). This final Turnerian twist, pointing to new opportunities inherent in national expansion, might have been a necessary concession to the consensus historians, but it tended to undermine the impact of much that had come before.

Shortly after the appearance of Main’s Social Structure, Jesse Lemisch took a more combative stance toward the consensus historians by explicitly emphasizing class consciousness, or at least drawing attention to social action and historical agency among the lower classes of early America. Beginning with his 1967 essay on “The American Revolution as Seen from the Bottom Up” and following that with “Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen and the Politics of Revolutionary America” (1968), Lemisch chided historians for their willful denial of class in colonial history: “Our earliest history has been seen as a period of consensus and classlessness, in part because our historians have chosen to see it that way” (Lemisch, 1967, p. 4). By exploring the past from the perspective of the poor, he argued, historians could “make the inarticulate speak” and thus better understand that “the inarticulate could act on their own, and often for very sound reasons” (Lemisch, 1967, pp. 6, 19).

In this regard Lemisch represented an American counterpart to the British Marxist historian, Edward P. Thompson, whose important and influential new book, The Making of the English Working Class (1963) was just beginning to have an impact on American scholars. Unlike many scholars, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, Thompson did not rely on traditional definitions of class that were limited to the distinct categories of “proletarian” and “bourgeoisie” that emerged with the rise of industrial capitalism. Class, Thompson explained, could not properly be understood as a rigid social structure but was, rather, “an historical phenomenon” that grew out of people’s understanding of their

relationships with other people, when “as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), [they] feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other[s] . . . whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs” (Thompson, 1963, p. 9). The definition of class, then, depended on the awareness and actions of people “as they live their own history” and thus reflected a fluid process of becoming -- or “making” to use Thompson’s term -- in different historical situations (Thompson, 1963, p. 11).

For Lemisch, the historical situation of early America provided excellent opportunities to examine the historical agency of the poorer sort in order to appreciate the making of class relations in colonial society. His path-breaking investigation of the political values and behavior of common seamen, “Jack Tar in the Streets,” provided an exciting invitation for other scholars, especially those in the early stages of their professional careers, to bring forth (or perhaps bring back) an historical emphasis on the roles of the many sorts of common people who both spoke and acted with self-directed agency in colonial society.

From the late 1960s on, the approaches suggested by Main’s analysis of social structure and Lemisch’s attention to social agency gained increasing importance in early American scholarship, though not always in equal measure. The “new” social history, with its emphasis on the close (and usually quantitative) study of the lives of common people, quickly became the most innovative and, to many, the most exciting development on the scholarly scene. Some established historians and, above all, junior scholars and graduate students eagerly embraced the almost-microscopic analysis of society with an academic passion that had been missing for decades, and the results of their research were especially impressive. That is not to say, however, that early American historians became, on the whole, an especially “class conscious” lot, at least not in comparison to some of their counterparts on both sides of the Atlantic who studied nineteenth- and twentieth-century history and the rise of industrial capitalism. More often, they have been content to make a brief bow to the theoretical discourse about class and then, apparently with pragmatic impatience, plunge into the evidence at hand to write about particular people, places, and events. More to the point, in many cases the most significant findings of the new social history among early Americanists remained located

in a very localized context, safely isolated from larger social and political issues and too closely focused to offer a broader historical view; indeed, some studies became so obsessed with their own methodological sophistication that they made little effort to address larger historical or historiographical questions at all. Others considered only the experience of Anglo-American settlements in the eastern parts of North America, especially in New England and the Chesapeake region; to the extent that they explicitly invited a broader, comparative analysis, it was only to other Anglo-American communities or perhaps to rural villages in England. The economic distance between the hardscrabble inhabitants of colonial communities and the ruling classes of England seemed so immense as to be almost meaningless.

The face of early American historiography has changed dramatically in recent years, however, and scholars have challenged the earlier, and certainly easier, assumptions about what -- or who -- "American" means. Now the task is to develop a more inclusive yet still coherent analysis of early America that not only draws on the Anglo-American example but speaks to the experience of other European imperial powers, most notably the Spanish and French, not to mention the histories of the native peoples of North America and the people of African descent, both enslaved and free. Admittedly, to approach these different peoples from the perspective of class carries some risks. Above all, we necessarily narrow our vision by making implicit yet important teleological assumptions about the emergence of capitalism and thus focusing attention on those societies that became, in a word, capitalist. We cannot lose sight of how those peoples who came into contact with (or as Edward Countryman [1996] has put it, collided with) Euro-American culture were marked, even scarred, by the experience in a variety of ways -- including, in many cases, the imposition of class identity.

Yet taken together, the combined efforts of the past three decades of early American historiography -- the almost inescapable emphasis on the lives of common people inherent in the new social history and the equally significant studies of the different cultures that encountered each other in North America -- have created a picture of early American society that differed greatly from the harmonious images inspired by the consensus historians. Throughout the colonial era, and especially in the two or three decades leading up to the outbreak of the American Revolution, people repeatedly

challenged the hierarchical structure of colonial society and, in so doing, often discovered and developed horizontal bonds of identity that would provide alternatives to the vertical. That recurring tension between horizontal and vertical relationships might not properly be called colonial-era class conflict, at least not in the more overt and enduring sense that scholars might find in later eras. Rather than enduring, though, class relations were emerging. With that notion in mind, the purpose of this essay is not to argue for imposing an ahistorical emphasis on class analysis on the preindustrial era of American history; it is, however, to trace the origins of more explicit class relations back into the colonial era. In a sense, just as earlier historians found the roots of an allegedly unique American classlessness in the colonial era, I will argue the opposite -- that the trajectory of increasingly explicit class divisions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries stemmed, both economically and ideologically, from the evolution of early American society. Put simply, class in America did not begin with the birth of industrial capitalism; it had a history -- a prehistory, as it were -- in the various forms of inequality that suffused American society from the earliest days of European settlement.

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Certainly, the most pervasive and persistent sort of social inequality in early America was unfree labor, especially slavery. Various forms of unfree labor had deep historical roots on both sides of the Atlantic, of course, and servitude was hardly unique to the colonial era. In the ancient Mediterranean world, for instance, early Greek and Roman cultures took slavery for granted as one of the common conditions of life, the unfortunate fate of people vanquished and captured in battle. By the same token, some indigenous peoples in Africa and the Americas also held other human beings in bondage, again usually as the result of war or captivity. But in those cases, unfree people did not always suffer a permanent loss of personal freedom, nor did their status extend to their offspring. More to the point, their bondage did not depend primarily on their racial or ethnic identity. Beginning in the fifteenth century, however, the European invasion of the Americas created an economic and social context in which unfree labor became the cornerstone of colonization and eventually evolved into a race-based system of perpetual

slavery that had critical implications for the broader development of later class relations. Indeed, as Ira Berlin has observed, “if slavery made race, its larger purpose was to make class, and the fact that the two were made simultaneously by the same process has mystified both” (Berlin, 1998, p. 5). The task of Berlin and other historians, then, has been to demystify the process of class formation in the preindustrial past by tracing it back to its early foundation in unfree labor.

The simultaneous making of race and class in early America began with the first moment of contact between Europeans and native peoples. When Christopher Columbus encountered the Taino people in his initial island landfall in the Caribbean, he almost immediately projected their future social status. Although the natives he saw were not as dark as he had expected and were, indeed, “very well-built people, with handsome bodies and very fine faces,” he still concluded that they seemed different enough, physically and culturally, to be best suited for servitude: “They ought to make good and skilled servants,” he reported to his Spanish superiors. “I think they can easily be made Christians, for they seem to have no religion. . . . With 50 men you could subject everyone and make them do what you wished” (Columbus, 1992 [1492], p. 47).

In the decades that followed, Spain sent many more men than that. In the early era of Spanish conquest, a combination of missionaries and the military made good the conquest Columbus had begun, and native people increasingly found themselves threatened with subservience and slavery. Officially the Spanish authorities in Madrid discouraged the enslavement of Indians, but as David Weber has observed, “The pragmatic Crown . . . often allowed appearances to mask harsh realities and did not look too closely into the ways in which its distant colonials circumvented laws intended to shield natives from compulsory labor” (Weber, 1992, p. 128). In Spain’s North American colonies, Florida and New Mexico, Franciscan priests brought Indians into missions first for conversion, then for coercion, extracting forced labor from them on the assumption that hard work would cure them of their alleged indolence and make them better Christians. Soldiers and secular officials scarcely bothered with such rationalizations. They forced Indians to work for little or no pay under the repartimiento -- a compulsory labor program instituted for public works deemed necessary by the Spanish -- or simply enslaved them. In the North American colonies that did not yield

the vast mineral riches of Central and South America, Spanish officials counted slaves as their most prized and profitable possessions; in New Mexico, in fact, slaves became a valuable export commodity and were shipped south to work in the mines of New Spain. While Spanish religious and secular leaders in the North American colonies both exploited Indian labor, they bickered about whose form of exploitation was best. Missionaries decried the enslavement of Indians, but government officials, soldiers, and frontier settlers pointed their fingers back at the friars for their own abuse of the Indians.

This conflict among the colonizers, Weber argues, undermined their authority and credibility in the eyes of the native population, and Indians began to grow restive and even resistant. In both Florida and New Mexico, Indians engaged in small-scale rebellions against their Spanish oppressors, and in some cases they gained a measure of freedom from Spanish control. The most notable example of Indian revolt came in 1680, when a Pueblo leader named Pope led some 17,000 Indians in New Mexico in a widespread and well-organized attack against Spanish authority, both political and religious. The Pueblo Rebellion came remarkably close to succeeding, and as it spread to other native groups in the region, the Spanish conquest of New Mexico seemed on the verge of collapse. Ultimately, however, the revolt proved as disastrous to the native peoples as it did to the Spanish, leaving everyone in the region exhausted and fearful. Still, in the wake of the various revolts, especially the Pueblo Rebellion, the Spanish began to modify their demands for native labor, becoming less aggressive and certainly less confident in their practices of enslavement and oppression. Moreover, in addition to the resistance of Indians in the seventeenth century, the beginning of the eighteenth century brought a new worry to the Spanish -- the increasing competition for land, power, and slaves from two other European imperial powers, England and France.

The Spanish may have taken the early lead in promoting slavery in early America, but it was the French and especially the English whose comparatively later embrace of slavery had the longest and most profound impact on race and class relations in America. That impact seems especially impressive because slavery had shallower cultural roots in northern Europe than it did in the Mediterranean region. Indeed, as Winthrop Jordan has argued in his classic study of early race relations, White Over Black (1968), slavery represented in many respects a significant departure from English law and custom. In

the 1620s, for instance, an English explorer in western Africa turned down the offer of a slave with a rather huffy assertion of his country's commitment to higher standards: "I made answer, We were a people, who did not deale in any such commodities, neither did wee buy or sell one another, or any that had our owne shapes" (quoted in Jordan, 1968, pp. 60-61). That is not to say, however, that the English and French had no tradition of unfree labor. They had long accepted indentured servitude as a common form of employment, in which one person, usually a child or young adult, served a limited term of bondage to a master in exchange for food, clothing, shelter, and some measure of job training. Although there were laws that governed master-servant relations and prohibited excessively abusive behavior on the part of the master, actual practice often fell far below a modern measure of decency. As Peter Kolchin has observed, "In many ways the world from which the colonists came was a world of pre-modern values, one that lacked the concepts of 'cruel and unusual punishment,' equal rights, and exploitation; it was a world that instead took for granted natural human inequality and the routine use of force necessary to maintain it. In short, it was a world with few ideological constraints against the use of forced labor" (Kolchin, 1993, p. 7). When the English began to establish colonies in North America, they quite easily, even naturally, included indentured servitude in the process. In fact, indentured servants formed a significant segment of the colonizing population, especially in the southern settlements, where plantation agriculture quickly became the basis of the colonial economy.

In seventeenth-century Virginia, for instance, upwards of eighty-five percent of the English immigrants who came to the colony arrived as indentured servants, and the labor of unfree workers provided the basis for free men's success. Throughout at least the first half of the century, the curious combination of easy wealth and early death, of extremely profitable tobacco production and extremely inhospitable environmental conditions, created an almost unquenchable demand for bonded labor: landowners desperately wanted cheap agricultural workers to tend the tobacco fields and, not incidentally, to take the places of workers who had died of mistreatment and disease. In fact, as Edmund Morgan has shown in his impressive and persuasive American Slavery, American Freedom (1975), the exploitation of indentured labor proved to be one of the most prevalent, albeit least attractive, attributes of English settlement in the Chesapeake

region. From the beginning of Virginia's tobacco boom, masters were reported to "abuse their servantes there with intollerable oppression and hard usage" (Morgan, 1975, p. 126) -- overwork, barbarous punishment, and even outright buying and selling of bonded labor. "Whether physically abused or not," Morgan observes, "Englishmen found servitude in Virginia more degrading than servitude in England" (Morgan, 1975, p. 127), and the terms of tobacco-boom bondage seemed to foreshadow the sort of exploitation that would become the more common fate of the laboring classes in subsequent centuries:

In boom-time Virginia, then, we can see not only the fleeting ugliness of private enterprise operating temporarily without check, not only greed magnified by opportunity, producing fortunes for a few and misery for many. We may also see Virginians beginning to move toward a system of labor that treated men as things. . . .

The boom produced, and in some measure depended upon, a tightening of labor discipline beyond what had been known in England and probably what had been formerly known in Virginia.

(Morgan, 1975, p. 129)

At the same time, Morgan and other historians have indicated that this extreme exploitation of unfree labor in the colonial South was not initially race-based, or at least not exclusively so. In the very early stages of colonization, English and French settlers, like the Spanish, forced indigenous people into bondage, often obtaining their supply of Indian slaves among captives taken by other Indians. But in the long run, because they were both susceptible to European disease and capable of escape into a familiar landscape, Indians did not become as successful a source of unfree labor as people from the far side of the Atlantic, especially Africans. Still, despite the arrival in Virginia of twenty or so Africans on a Dutch ship in 1619, and despite the appearance in the English colonies of laws supporting the institution of slavery by the 1640s, the number of enslaved Africans remained comparatively small during most of the seventeenth century: as late as 1670, blacks in Virginia, the leading plantation colony, numbered only around 2000, a little over five percent of the English colony's population. In fact, there is some evidence, or certainly sufficient historical ambiguity, to suggest that some people of African descent in early Virginia managed to gain their freedom -- and with it, the

freedom to buy the labor of others, both white and black. The point is that, in the early years of colonial settlement, the burdens of bondage apparently weighed almost equally on unfree people, no matter what their race or place of origin: the critical category of inequality seems not to have been white over black, but master over servant.

The balance between white and black began to shift significantly toward the end of the century, however, largely because of changing relations between masters and servants. For a combination of demographic and economic reasons -- a drop in the birth rate and a rise in real wages in England -- the supply of young people willing (or needing) to go to the English colonies as indentured servants began to decline: between 1680 and 1699, Allan Kulikoff has noted, the number of emigrant whites bound for Virginia, around 30,000, represented a decrease of about twenty percent over the preceding three decades (Kulikoff, 1986, p. 39). At the same time, changing demographic trends in the Chesapeake region -- a modest but significant increase in life expectancy for both white and black workers in the second half of the century -- created new social and economic considerations for landowners employing unfree laborers. As indentured servants began to outlive their terms of service, they became an increasingly unsettling presence as freedmen, restless in their search for equal or even decent economic opportunity, resentful of the disadvantages they suffered in comparison to the wealthier, better established planters. Indeed, Kulikoff argues, "Class conflict therefore broke out between rulers and upwardly mobile freed servants in the third quarter of the seventeenth century" (Kulikoff, 1986, p. 261), coming to a head briefly but boldly in 1676, when a prosperous and politically ambitious newcomer named Nathaniel Bacon led an armed movement, first against Indians still living in Virginia's frontier regions and then against the governor and other wealthy whites who formed Virginia's ruling elite: in the midst of the racial and even personal hostility that suffused Bacon's Rebellion, there also ran a stream of social protest against the "grandees" who governed the colony to their own advantage but who, as Kulikoff points out, "inspired too little confidence to gain the respect of poorer whites and had too little power to suppress their demands" (Kulikoff, 1986, p. 261). Although short-lived and unsuccessful and not really a prelude to sustained class conflict in the longer historical run, Bacon's Rebellion did reveal the dangers of degrading workers who might one day become free. It made better sense, at

least from the standpoint of masters, to inflict that sort of treatment on slaves, people who were offered very little prospect of ever gaining their freedom. Thus it was in the wake of -- and, to some degree, because of -- Bacon's Rebellion that masters in the Chesapeake region increasingly began to fill the demand for unfree labor by shifting from white servants to black slaves.

By 1700 the racialization of labor relations marked the emergence of a slave society not just in the Chesapeake, but in other southern colonies as well. In French Louisiana, for instance, the number of immigrant indentured servants (engages) resident in the colony in 1721 slightly exceeded that of imported African slaves. Those engages fortunate enough to survive the term of their indentures eventually joined the ranks of the free, however, while Africans continued to exist as slaves for life. By 1731, Louisiana had two thousand French settlers and four thousand slaves, and even with a slowing of slave imports over the next fifteen years, the colony's 4100 slaves still outnumbered its 3300 settlers and 600 soldiers in 1746. But as Daniel Usner (1992) points out, only a comparative few Frenchmen in Louisiana could afford to own slaves, and those wealthier settlers became increasingly worried as they saw poorer French settlers, African slaves, and Indians engage in economic exchange and other forms of intercultural interaction not sanctioned by colonial law or custom. Accordingly, French officials adopted a "divide and rule" policy to distinguish and separate the races and "improvised ways to impose a racially divided law and order upon peoples who crossed all kinds of boundaries whenever it suited their interests" (Usner, 1992, p. 76). Similarly, Peter Wood (1974) has noted both the emergence of a black majority in South Carolina's population by 1710 and, equally important, a growing emphasis on racial control. During the early stages of South Carolina's development as a slave society, Wood observes, "servants and masters shared the crude and egalitarian intimacies inevitable on a frontier," but increasing white anxiety about the growing black presence manifested itself in an increasing racial segregation of tasks: artisans of African origin found themselves "forced away from certain skilled trades . . . [and] receiving more exclusive custody of society's most menial tasks" (Wood, 1974, pp. 96, 229). Although the social and economic distance between wealthy planters and poorer whites could be substantial when measured in its own right, the occupational and legal degradation of enslaved Africans created a racially distinct

demarcation of the bottom of southern society, above which even the poorest white person could claim privileged status. Put differently, race masked class in the eighteenth-century South, or certainly created a relationship among whites based more on alliance than antagonism.

The power of that racial alliance seems especially striking in light of its economic and political imbalance. Even in the regions of the highest level of slaveholding, Tidewater Virginia and the South Carolina lowcountry, most slaveowners held fewer than ten slaves; more to the point, in those regions around a third to half of all white landowners held no slaves at all. In the piedmont and backcountry regions, the number of slaveowners (and slaves) was smaller still. Yet although the wealthy slaveowners always remained a small minority in the early American colonies, they retained an enormous degree of almost unchallenged authority over their poorer neighbors.

There is probably no colonial slaveholding elite that has been more carefully or creatively studied than the members of the Virginia gentry, men who clearly understood the connection between property and power. They reinforced their status through kinship ties, using marriage and inheritance strategies to create connections between families and thus both consolidate and extend their social and economic influence. The most prominent planter families acquired sizable holdings in several locations, which allowed them to pass property on to their offspring. More to the point, the geographical dispersion of planter families allowed them to send kinsmen from different counties to the colonial assembly. There their common identity enabled them to direct political affairs to their own benefit, not the least of which was the acquisition of even greater property holdings by awarding themselves generous land grants. This mutually-reinforcing relationship between property and political power also operated at the local level, where governors or the assembly appointed members of the gentry to other leadership positions of more immediate influence, especially in the vestry, militia, or county court. Control over such issues as taxation, military service, and legal matters -- above all, credit and debt proceedings -- gave them direct authority over critical concerns in the lives of the lesser landowners. Equally important, control over appointments to lower positions in the local political hierarchy gave them a patronage base that could enhance their prestige and gain them the loyalty of the grateful few they favored. In this

sort of self-perpetuating and certainly self-serving system, a comparatively small number of wealthy kinsmen could hold enormous sway over a free but dependent population of their fellow white landowners.

But the system was never so enclosed as to insulate members of the gentry wholly from the people they governed, at least not those who could vote. As Kulikoff has rightly observed of Virginia, "Eighteenth-century elections were contests between representatives of gentry families rather than ideological battles" (Kulikoff, 1986, p. 285). Still, they were contests, there were local issues at stake, and two prominent men seeking the same seat in the assembly somehow had to convince the voters to choose one candidate over the other. To do so, they not only argued the merits of their respective stances on the issues, but they also, more subtly, reminded some men of earlier personal favors -- a position conferred, a loan made and perhaps extended or even forgiven -- and relied on personal largesse to impress the rest. In many instances, free food and drink fueled the political process, providing both a real meal and a symbolic expression of respect to potential voters. Such patrician gestures of reciprocity seemingly loosened the grip the gentry had on political power, but in the longer run the two-way interplay of gentry-yeoman relationships reinforced a system of mutual support that defined a common identity for men of significantly different situations: those who owned enough land to be eligible to vote became, in a sense, partners with the more prominent planters, and together they dominated a society that gave no voice to the propertyless and politically impotent -- poor white men, all women, and, of course, slaves. Based more on distinctions of gender and race than on class, this white men's alliance gave the colonial South a reputation for deferential social relations and comparative political stability that was not seriously challenged until the era of the American Revolution. But deference stems more from coercion than from persuasion, and behind the appearance of peaceful class relations always lay the reality of power that no man, rich or poor, could easily ignore.

* * * *

In the North, slavery was not as prevalent nor were social distance and racial distinctions as pronounced as they were in the plantation South, but inequality nonetheless lay embedded in colonial culture. To a large degree, the religious traditions of the founding generations emphasized collective identity over individual interest and therefore mitigated against assumptions of social divisions. In one of the most emphatic, and certainly most famous, statements of initial intent, the English Puritan leader John Winthrop underscored the importance of mutuality, even while recognizing inequality. In 1630, even before the main Puritan migration reached the shores of North America, Winthrop preached a sermon aboard ship in which he told his followers that “God almighty . . . hath so disposed the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity, others mean and in subjection.” Still, since both rich and poor Puritans now found themselves bound together for a new beginning in the New World, “We must be knit together as one . . . We must delight in each other, make others’ condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes . . . our community as members of the same body” (Winthrop, 1985 [1630], pp. 82, 91). This forceful repetition of the word “together” gave audible emphasis to the necessary acceptance of common concerns that would relegate the needs and desires of the individual to secondary status in favor of a covenanted community. In practice, early Puritan settlements sought to institutionalize this sentiment, especially when it came to distributing the community’s most important resource, land: property was not a commodity to be bought and sold for profit, but a means of subsistence to be shared among households, giving everyone a stake in the community and thus reinforcing their communal commitment. Springfield, Massachusetts, for instance, which was established in 1636, just six years after the arrival of the main body of Puritans in Massachusetts Bay, spelled out the principles of property-holding in its initial articles of agreement: “We intend that our town shall be composed of forty families . . . rich and poor,” in which “every inhabitant shall have a convenient proportion for a house lot, as we shall see meet for everyone’s quality and estate” (Springfield, 1972 [1636], pp. 53-55). To be sure, the notation that some households would be (or already were) “rich and poor,” and that land would be allocated according to the “quality and estate” of the male head of the household indicated that this early Puritan

town was not exactly an experiment in strict Christian communism, but the initial distribution of land to all households did make clear the assumptions of social inclusiveness that defined the first religious settlements.

As Stephen Innes (1983) has shown, however, the degree of rough equality that existed in the early days of Springfield soon gave way to rising inequality and a pattern of economic dominance by one family and dependency for dozens of others. William Pynchon and his son John, prominent property-owners and entrepreneurs in seventeenth-century Springfield, extended their reach into a wide range of economic activities -- farming, milling, commerce, land speculation, and loans -- and became the most significant figures in the economy of western New England. In doing so, they exerted economic influence, if not outright control, over the lives of many of their fellow English settlers throughout the region, becoming generous patrons to some and perhaps a menacing presence to others. Whatever its intent or effect, the power of the Pynchons demonstrated quite strikingly that Springfield, not to mention other Puritan towns, would indeed be a community of "rich and poor" where the early emphasis on shared resources for all came to be replaced by a perhaps surprisingly early concentration of wealth in the hands of a few.

Springfield was perhaps the earliest, and probably the most extreme, example of a tension between mutuality and inequality that quietly underlay many other northern communities in the seventeenth century, and that tension became increasingly pronounced over the course of the colonial era. Certainly, the recognition of that tension emerged emphatically from the scholarly study of those communities in the late twentieth century. Beginning in the mid-1960s and taking its place as one of the most exciting areas of research in the 1970s, the "community study" became an important building block of scholarship in early American history. The earliest of these studies typically took a very local focus on Puritan villages, usually in Massachusetts, and tended to portray the New England town, to use Kenneth Lockridge's (1970) description of Dedham, as a "Christian Utopian Closed Corporate Community," in which the inhabitants defined themselves by inner-directed bonds of common commitment. While this sort of enclosed conceptual framework generally isolated the community from the rest of the region, much less the broader Atlantic world, it did allow for a close analysis

of the internal transformations that would eventually expose conditions of increasing inequality and thereby undermine the intensity of initial commitment. Above all, by examining the interplay of patriarchy, property, and power in town after town, historians were able to discern patterns of change that proved common in many communities in the colonial North.

In 1970, Philip Greven's influential study of Andover, Massachusetts, first brought those three factors sharply into focus. As the title of Greven's book, Four Generations (1970), implied, the key to understanding the history of the community was the study of the family over time; more specifically, the critical issue was the passing of property through successive generations. Among the earliest English inhabitants of Andover, Greven discovered, the practice of partible inheritance -- that is, dividing a father's land among his adult sons -- offered important opportunities to both generations: it provided sons the prospect of being able to establish themselves as independent farmers in their own hometown and, as a result, it gave parents the assurance that their offspring would be around to care for them in their old age. But Greven also found that this system of inheritance was founded not so much on intergenerational generosity as on patriarchal authority. Fathers most often delayed giving their sons complete ownership of family lands until the young men were in their late twenties or early thirties, thus using the promise of inheritance as a form of familial leverage to maintain of control a son's labor and even dictate the timing of his marriage. "The psychological consequences of this prolonged dependence of sons are difficult to assess," Greven observed, "but they must have been significant" (Greven, 1970, p.).

The social and economic consequences have been much easier to measure. As long as land remained reasonably abundant -- or, more to the point, as long as some fathers could continue to amass adequate landholdings in the community -- the system of inheritance seemed to promote both persistence and power for the more fortunate Andover families. However much they might quietly resent their fathers' continuing control over their adult lives, most sons stayed in town and eventually inherited not just their fathers' land but, in many cases, their fathers' local leadership positions as well: as Greven and other historians discovered, political office, like land, passed from father to son in these colonial communities, and a few leading families seemed to have a lock on

local leadership year after year. But this practice of passing along property and political power from one generation to the next contained inherent, some would say even inevitable, flaws that became evident over time. Even the most successful intergenerational inheritance strategy eventually ran up against the demographic and geographical constraints of the community: after the first or second generation, as the growth of early settler families and the arrival of new ones increased the population of the community as a whole, fathers found it increasingly difficult to acquire enough land in the town to provide an adequate inheritance for all their offspring. The repeated divisions of family land meant that successive generations of sons had to make do with smaller holdings or, increasingly, move on to other communities where land was more abundant and available. In Dedham, for instance, the average estate had shrunk from around 150 acres in the first generation to 100 acres in the third generation, and it would continue to decline to around 50 acres by the middle of the eighteenth century. In Andover, the near-universal practice of partible inheritance similarly declined after the first generation, so that by the third generation, just under sixty percent of all estates were divided among all of a father's sons. Indeed, in a study of colonial Concord, Massachusetts, Robert Gross (1976) wrote that the inhabitants of that community were coming increasingly to live in a "world of scarcity" in the middle of the eighteenth century, when opportunities for providing for family prosperity, and therefore posterity, had become severely constricted. "From mid-century onward," he wrote, "Concord was in the throes of a long, protracted decay to which [the inhabitants] adapted as best they could but which no one seemed able to stop. Signs of decline were everywhere . . . most of all, in the steady exodus of the young" (Gross, 1976, p. 105). Just as Greven speculated on the psychological implications of parental control among the young, Gross suggested that the members of the older generation in mid-eighteenth-century Concord paid "a heavy social and psychological price" for their understandable but nonetheless unstoppable failure to maintain the inheritance standards of the earlier generations (Gross, 1976, p. 106).

Many of these northern towns "failed" in another sense as well: among the "signs of decline" was the inescapable economic inequality among families in the community, a disturbing distance between those who maintained, even increased, their property

holdings and those who had little or none. In Concord, for instance, the top 20% of property owners held 55% of the town's land in 1749, while the bottom 40% owned only 3%; by 1771, both groups had experienced a slight shift in their shares of property, to 48% and 4%, respectively, but the meaning was essentially the same in Concord as it was in others: some families could be confident of living a reasonably comfortable existence and providing at least some of their offspring with a decent inheritance, but many households lived a hardscrabble life in which a "world of scarcity" was the only world they knew.

Evidence of economic and social stratification alone, however, cannot predict or explain human behavior, and inequality does not always lead to conflict. Several students of colonial-era tenancy have argued, for instance, that even those landless farmers who rented rural property from others generally seemed content with their condition. Daniel Vickers has observed that although tenancy arose from "the fact of economic inequality," it still served the needs of both landowner and tenant in the early years of English settlement in seventeenth-century Essex County, Massachusetts: not only was it "the most effective means of putting land under the plow and obtaining a revenue" for the landowner, but it offered the tenant a "measurable if qualified degree of independence" (Vickers, 1994, pp. 81-82). Likewise, in a study of eighteenth-century Chester County, Pennsylvania, Lucy Simler has concluded that tenancy "was, in general, a rational, efficient response to economic conditions, and both landowners and tenants . . . were able to use it to advantage. . . . Despite the rhetoric claiming that tenants were shiftless and landowners were tyrannical, in everyday life tenancy was widely seen as equitable and generally profitable" (Simler, 1986, p. 569).

Indeed, what is most striking about the many recent histories of rural society in the colonial North is the relative absence of sustained social unrest. To be sure, there occurred on occasion rather dramatic chapters in the histories of numerous communities, when the town erupted in conflict over some local issue -- the location of the meeting house, the division of town lands, even the outbreak of suspected witchcraft -- and those struggles have often been analyzed in economic terms, as contention between the community's "haves" and "have nots." In some cases, in fact, the level of conflict rose to remarkable intensity. During the middle decades of the eighteenth century, for instance,

both New Jersey and the Hudson Valley of New York became the scene of recurring land riots. In both areas, vast tracts of land lay in the hands of wealthy proprietors and landlords, and common farmers, many of whom were tenants, resorted to collective violence when they felt a growing threat to their right to remain on the land. If historians agree on anything about the outbreak of violence in these regions, it is that the causes were complex -- a combination of unclear and conflicting land titles, ethnic and cultural differences among the inhabitants, and potentially oppressive practices by the large landowners -- and they are reluctant to oversimplify the roots of the unrest by ascribing it to economic inequality alone. On the whole, the picture that emerges of the rural North in the colonial era is that of a society in which inequality, even scarcity, clearly exists, but in which social conflict is stemmed by the traditions of communal cohesion and the comparatively open access to productive property.

Given the relative absence of anything that might reasonably be called sustained “class conflict” in colonial-era agrarian communities, then, the analysis of structural economic inequality in rural regions has created the context for a more intensive, albeit often elusive, investigation of cultural economic attitudes. Put simply, the question concerned the ways in which rural people understood the economic context in which they lived, and how that understanding manifested itself in behavior. More specifically, historians have explored the extent to which rural people pursued economic gain as a goal unto itself, or whether they restrained, even rejected, profit-seeking activities in favor of maintaining a comparatively moderate level of economic activity more in keeping with the traditions of family and community. Though difficult to answer, the question was important to ask. Like the long-standing assumption that America had been, from the beginning, a classless society, the notion that the American people were almost inherently eager profit-seekers had been often taken too easily for granted. In a study of rural southeastern Pennsylvania, *The Best Poor Man’s Country* (1972), James Lemon had discovered a “‘liberal’ middle-class orientation” among the eighteenth-century inhabitants, people who produced for the market as much as for the family and who “planned for themselves much more than they did for their communities” (Lemon, 1972, p. xv). The implication, of course, was that such an individualistic, market-oriented attitudes predicted, perhaps even justified, the patterns of economic inequality that would

become increasingly prevalent in early American society. Making the point in even more striking language, Charles Grant had found in colonial-era Kent, Connecticut, a “drive for profits” among the eighteenth-century settlers and “perhaps the embryo of John D. Rockefeller” (Grant, 1961, pp. 53-54). Clearly, such assumptions made the eventual emergence of a much more complex capitalist society in the nineteenth century seem not only a logical extension of economic attitudes and behaviors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but a seemingly unquestioned one as well.

By the late 1970s, however, those assumptions suddenly defined the target of a sharp scholarly debate, which began with three path-breaking articles by Michael Merrill (1977), James Henretta (1978), and Christopher Clark (1979), respectively. In an original and provocative essay rooted in Marxist theory, Merrill challenged the then-prevailing image of the liberal orientation of American rural society. While not denying that, as historians like Lemon and Grant had certainly demonstrated, many farm families did indeed engage in exchange relationships, Merrill nonetheless located those relationships within what he called a “household mode of production,” in which economic exchange tended to be decentralized and horizontal, defined by patterns of localized reciprocity and “controlled by need rather than price.” That is, when rural households engaged in economic relationships with each other (or, quite frequently, with a local merchant) they did not often use cash as the medium of exchange, Merrill observed; rather, they traded goods and services, often keeping track of debts that might run for years before balancing out. In this sense, indebtedness defined interdependence among rural households and “served not to separate the community into classes so much as bind it together” (Merrill, 1977, p. 63).

Following close on the heels of Merrill’s important article, subsequent works by Henretta, Clark, and a host of other scholars made the rural (and usually New England) household a central issue of early American history. The goal, argued Henretta, was to go beyond the analysis of “the ever-growing mass of data that delineates the structures of social existence” that had been the signal contribution of the first generation of the 1970s community studies and inquire more deeply into “the consciousness of the inhabitants, the mental or emotional or ideological aspects of their lives” (Henretta, 1978, p. 3). In colonial Anglo-America, Henretta suggested, this cultural consciousness, or mentalite, of

rural people was defined, first and foremost, not by the concerns of the economically energetic individual but by the needs of the lineal household – that is, the intergenerational welfare of the family over time. By pointing to a popular perspective that suggested widespread and deeply-rooted skepticism about unfettered self-interest as the foundation of economic relations, historians challenged the primacy of the profit motive -- and, by extension, the cultural acceptance of capitalism. The point was not to create a clear division between those rural people who were aggressively seeking after the main chance and those who were nostalgically clinging to their inherited traditions of farm and family; people's behaviors and beliefs are usually far too complex and inconsistent to lend credence to that sort of crude categorization. Instead, Henretta and other historians more often found a tension between immediate economic aspiration and long-term familial and communal cohesion that reflected creative adaptations among people in the colonial era. "Economic gain was important to these men and women," Henretta explained, "yet it was . . . subordinate to (or encompassed by) two other goals: the yearly subsistence and the long-run financial security of the family unit" (Henretta, 1978, p. 19). To describe better the desired balance between economic activity and security, Daniel Vickers put forward a term familiar to early American authors (among them Timothy Dwight, whose words introduce this essay) -- competency. Competency, Vickers noted, "connoted the possession of sufficient property to absorb the labors of a given family while providing it with something more than a mere subsistence . . . in brief, a degree of comfortable independence" (Vickers, 1990, p. 3). To maintain this comfortable independence, rural households often produced a surplus for sale and engaged rather easily, if not eagerly, in market exchange: indeed, Vickers observes that the "distinction between production for use and production for sale was sometimes recognizable and sometimes not, but it was never a matter of significance." Market-oriented activities and profit *per se* were not a matter of cultural concern -- as long as they helped promote the "propertied independence" of the household (Vickers, 1990, p. 7).

Had Merrill, Henretta, Vickers, and other historians not been decently clear-eyed in their description of this early American mentallite, the emphasis on the centrality of interlocking relationships within the rural community and in the rural household could

well have contributed to the sort of romanticized rhetoric about the “self-sufficient” farm family that emerged later -- not to mention the evocation “community values” and “family values” that often marked social and political discourse in the late twentieth century. It is one thing to analyze familial relationships, but quite another to sentimentalize them. In that regard, historians have been careful to distinguish between the independence of the property-owning rural family as a unit and the dependent status of its constituent members as individuals: indeed, the independence of the household essentially required conditions of dependency for most family members within it. For example, after arguing that the patterns of reciprocal indebtedness among rural households tended to mitigate against class divisions within the community, Merrill described the household mode of production in surprisingly stark terms, where “class relations are not market relations, but personal ones . . . [in which] the exploited class very likely consists of one’s own family” (Merrill, 1977, p. 64). Vickers made the point more strongly still: “A rural economy that operated chiefly on child labor was to a significant degree responding to precisely the same pressures that created systems of slavery, servitude, and peonage elsewhere in the Americas” (Vickers, 1994, p. 82).

The depiction of family members as an “exploited class,” even near-slaves, directs our attention to the inner workings of the household, which are discussed more extensively elsewhere in this volume. For the issue at hand, though, it is important to understand the ways familial relationships in rural society contributed to the development of class relationships in early American society more generally. Over time, the declining opportunities for dependent sons and daughters to gain the independent status of property owners meant that a growing number of young people were available for alternative forms of labor. By the early years of the nineteenth century, many young men worked as hired hands on farms or as wage laborers in manufacturing or other forms of non-agricultural employment emerging in the North. Similarly, a sizable number of young women engaged in “outwork,” making home-produced goods -- hats, textiles, and the like -- on a “putting-out” basis for local merchants; by the 1820s, others began to go one step further and, like many of their male counterparts, left home to work in the early textile mills. At the same time, their mothers began increasingly to take advantage of the greater availability of manufactured goods for the household, especially textiles, and

bought from a local merchant the items they would formerly have made at home. As Christopher Clark has explained, “The altered household consumption patterns that saw many rural families purchasing essentials that even two decades before they would have acquired locally enhanced the local importance of merchants, storekeepers, and other traders . . . [and] this helped change the balance of power in rural society and brought rural households increasingly to the point where their ‘independence’ was compromised, not in this case by the need for interdependence with other rural households, but by essential connections with entrepreneurs” (Clark, 1990, p. 152). In turn, local merchants took advantage of the changing labor and consumption patterns to accumulate sufficient capital to develop, most often in partnership with other merchants, larger-scale enterprises (e.g. canal and turnpike projects, more fully-integrated manufacturing concerns) that would form the infrastructure of early industrial capitalism in the United States -- and thus the basis for the consequent creation of an increasingly self-conscious class identity among American workers. But such developments did not become commonplace until the era after the American Revolution, and especially in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Keeping our focus on rural society in the colonial period, we can at best anticipate in the late eighteenth century the changing conditions that would contribute to a more fully elaborated set of class relations in the future.

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To get a better view of class structure and class relations in early America, we can turn to the colonial cities, those emerging urban outposts of distant imperial systems. In looking at seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American cities, however, it is important to remember that they were hardly large by modern or even early modern standards. By 1690, for instance, Boston and New York, the leading Anglo-American cities were, as Gary Nash has put it, “really only overgrown villages,” with populations of around 6000 and 4500, respectively; two more recently-settled cities, Philadelphia, with around 2200 inhabitants, and Charleston, with under 2000, were still in their urban infancy. (Nash, 1979, p. 3) Almost a century later, on the eve of the American Revolution, these seaport

cities had grown considerably -- Boston to just over 16,500 inhabitants, New York and Philadelphia to over 21,000, and Charleston to just under 10,000 -- but they still remained much smaller than secondary cities in Europe, not to mention London, Paris, or Madrid. Similarly, New Orleans, which had been established by the French in 1718 and then had passed into Spanish hands at the end of the Seven Years War in 1763, had only 3000 inhabitants by 1777. Even the oldest North American city, St. Augustine, had a population of less than 2000 by the second half of the eighteenth century; as David Weber notes, this provincial outpost on Spain's Florida frontier "could not boast of impressive cathedrals or public buildings, convents, seminaries, universities, libraries, theaters, newspapers, or presses -- much less of the professors, nuns, lawyers, writers, and poets that such institutions supported elsewhere in Spanish America." (Weber, 1992, p. 322). In general, Nash's characterization of "overgrown villages" in the Anglo-American North could apply as well to all the European urban outposts in North America throughout the eighteenth century.

Yet despite their small size and the lack of institutional and social diversity, at least in comparison to larger contemporary cities, these emerging urban centers nonetheless contained the greatest concentration of population and the broadest continuum of social status one could find in colonial North America; from the mix of people and the range of social relations came the clearest expression of emerging class identity and activity. As Nash has argued at the outset of The Urban Crucible (1979) -- still the most significant comparative study of colonial cities to date -- the early American cities provided a preview of the future for society as a whole:

Almost all the alterations that are associated with the advent of capitalist society happened first in the cities and radiated outward to the smaller towns, villages, and farms of the hinterland. In America, it was in the colonial cities that the transition first occurred from a barter to a commercial economy; where a competitive social order replaced an ascriptive one; where a hierarchical and deferential polity yielded to participatory and contentious civic life; where factory production began to replace small-scale artisanal production; where the first steps

were taken to organize work by clock time rather than by sidereal cycles. (Nash, 1979, p. vii)

Similarly, Ronald Schultz -- one of Nash's students and a historian of Philadelphia artisans -- argues explicitly that "the roots of the American working class run deep into the eighteenth century and beyond." (Schultz, 1993, p. xi) Like Nash, Schultz finds these roots first taking hold in the urban environment.

Nash and other historians of social relations in early American cities have taken a page from Jackson Turner Main by beginning with a detailed description of the urban social structure. Though packed together in a relatively confined space, urban dwellers were separated by perceptible, yet to a degree permeable, boundaries of wealth and status. At the bottom of the urban population, as at the bottom of colonial society in general, stood several sorts of unfree people -- European indentured servants and African and Indian slaves; indeed, Nash notes that the unfree population of the seventeenth-century Northern cities was as significant as that of the Chesapeake tobacco colonies. At the other end of the urban social spectrum were men (and some widows) of wealth, people of modest fortunes made mostly in mercantile pursuits. In between these extremes lay people with a host of other occupations and social identities -- common workers, mariners, journeymen and artisans of various sorts, lesser merchants, shopkeepers, clergymen, teachers, and government officials -- all of whom interacted in the urban economy and shared, albeit unevenly, the wealth of the city. But in seventeenth-century American cities, as Nash has argued, even the extremes were not especially extreme, at least compared to conditions in contemporary European counterparts. "We need not be surprised," he notes, "that the top tenth of society controlled 40 percent of the community's wealth and the bottom half possessed only about 10 percent." The concentration of wealth at the top was even more pronounced in European cities, and the appalling poverty of those at the bottom had become a troubling social problem. In American cities, the poor "did not starve or go unclothed and unhoused. . . . The incidence of poverty, in fact, was extremely low and was confined for the most part to the widowed, disabled, and orphaned, who were decently cared for." (Nash, 1979, pp. 20-21) On the whole, by the end of the seventeenth century the leading early American cities on the Atlantic coast could still be considered comparatively close

communities, where social distinctions clearly existed, but where social distance did not involve the great gaps it did in Europe -- or eventually would in America toward the end of the eighteenth century.

The long-traditional narrative of American history emphasizes upward social mobility, and there is probably no more familiar story of such good fortune than that of young Ben Franklin, a printer's apprentice in Boston who would later rise to the position of elder statesman in Philadelphia. Throughout the eighteenth century, the path to improvement, or at least opportunity, could be as open to other early American urban dwellers. In times of prosperity -- and especially in times of war, when the sudden demand for military supplies pumped government money into seaport cities -- some of the wealth trickled down to a broad pool of the urban population. But times of prosperity were not permanent, and even temporary economic upswings in the eighteenth century had a more enduring downside. As Nash notes, for instance, war profits for some were matched by privation for others. Common soldiers, most of whom were recruited from the lower ranks of society in the first place, often returned from military campaigns diseased, weakened, and maimed, frequently unfit to take up a productive life in the aftermath of war; those who did not return at all often left widows and children to fend for themselves in a community that had increasingly strained resources (and often equally strained tolerance) for poor relief. Throughout the eighteenth century, for a larger part of the population and for a large part of the time, the historical record tells a discouraging story: poverty became increasingly prevalent, and the distance between those at the bottom of urban society and those at the top grew greater throughout the colonial era.

James Henretta's pathbreaking analysis of economic inequality in colonial Boston (which appeared in 1965, the same year as Main's Social Structure) offers detailed and compelling evidence of the increasing distance between the rich and the poor. In 1687, he notes, 14% of the adult males were listed on the city's tax rolls as propertyless; by 1771, the propertyless accounted for 29% of those listed. During that same period, the concentration of wealth among the most prosperous propertyholders increased substantially: in 1687, the top 15% owned 52% of taxable assets, and their portion rose to 65.9% by 1771; indeed, the top 5% raised their share from 25% to 44.1%. "Society had become more stratified and unequal," Henretta concluded, to the point that

on the eve of the American Revolution, “‘merchant princes’ and ‘proletarians’ stood out as the salient characteristics of a new social order.” (Henretta, 1965, p. 92) But perhaps most revealing about the implications of this growing economic divide was the situation of “well-to-do artisans, shopkeepers, and traders” who formed the middling group of propertyholders: their collective hold on the city’s wealth fell from 21% in 1687 to 12.5% in 1771. So it was elsewhere, at least in terms of the eighteenth-century trend if not the actual measure: those cities that have been documented all show an increasing level of social stratification, with a growing level of economic concentration among those at the top. Eighteenth-century urban dwellers did not have such statistical indicators available, of course, but they hardly needed them. The overfilled almshouses and the influx of the “strolling poor” gave ready evidence of the impact of poverty on city life, while the appearance of new mansions, liveried carriages, and elegantly dressed and bewigged residents in the city streets provided highly visible signs of the luxurious indulgence of the rich. More than a century before the nineteenth-century social critic Thorstein Veblen would coin the term, “conspicuous display” had come to the streets of colonial American cities.

The people with perhaps the best perspective on the growing distance between the rich and the poor were those of middling means, the small shopkeepers and artisans, who often associated with their wealthier neighbors in professional, if not social, relationships, but who more often worked and mingled with the common laborers and the poor. Whatever social aspirations they had to move upward in society were repeatedly offset by the prospect of falling downward, and they could seldom be assured of maintaining, much less improving, their status. Throughout the eighteenth century, their response to their uncertain situation provides the best historical insight into the nature of class relations and the emergence of class identity in colonial America.

Thanks to numerous and notable works by scholars in recent decades, Philadelphia, much more than Boston or New York, offers the best-documented case study of the economic and political lives of middling urban dwellers, especially artisans. To speak of “artisans,” of course, is not to define a coherent, homogenous group, much less a consistently self-defined class. As Steven Rosswurm (1987) has noted in an important monograph on Philadelphia’s “lower sort,” the common tendency of historians

to lump all laboring people into one class obscures the differences among them. Some occupations, such as baking, tanning, and bricklaying, required significant amounts of capital and were not readily open to anyone who wanted to enter the trade; others, such as goldsmithing, instrumentmaking, and clockmaking, required specialized skills that only a few artisans possessed. Perhaps not surprisingly, the occupations requiring greater capital and skill also typically provided the best living, and practitioners of those trades ranked near the top of the artisanal social structure. At the other end of the artisanal spectrum, trades such as weaving, tailoring, and shoemaking offered easier access but lower income. Still, despite their occupational and economic differences, artisans did share a common sense of their place in society and, equally important, of the nature of a just society. Ronald Schultz writes of an “artisan moral tradition” in eighteenth-century Philadelphia, “encompassing an ethic of community, equality, competency, and the value of labor.” (Schultz, 1993, p. xiii) Like the notion of competency that, as we have seen, suffused rural society, the ethic of competency among urban artisans went beyond income alone: as Schultz explains, it involved “an unwritten covenant between the artisan and his community . . . [whereby] the skilled artisan expected to receive the respect of his community and a life free from protracted want . . . an expectation of middling status in the community, and acknowledgment of economic independence that brought with it small comforts, a few luxuries, and an abiding sense of self-esteem.” (Schultz, 1993, pp. 6-7) One Philadelphia artisan put it plainly: “Our professions rendered us useful and necessary members of the community; proud of that rank, we aspired no higher.” (quoted in Rosswurm, 1987, p. 15)

Unfortunately, aspiring no higher did not protect them from falling lower. Like other Anglo-American cities involved in the Atlantic economy, Philadelphia suffered its share of economic downturn, disruption, and depression during the eighteenth century, and the artisan community saw its expectation of a decent competency repeatedly threatened. In the 1720s, for instance, the crisis of the Atlantic economy, most immediately occasioned by the collapse of the South Sea Bubble, a speculative investment scheme, but also by a longer-term decline in the West Indies trade, threw Philadelphia into a deep depression, sucking specie out of the city and leaving residents reeling from the loss of a readily-available medium of exchange. Then, after three

decades of comparative economic stability in the middle of the century, the effects of a postwar depression in the wake of the Seven Years' War once again shook the foundations of the artisanal order. Faced with declining wages and chronic unemployment, Schultz notes, "Philadelphia craftsmen now appeared to be witnessing the collapse of their small producer world." (Schultz, 1993, p. 39) Billy G. Smith has described the impact that collapse in material terms, providing a detailed "analysis of the incomes and living costs of the lower sort in one city [that] paints a markedly darker portrait of their economic circumstances than that generally limned by historians." Where other scholars had emphasized good wages and regular employment, downplaying or denying the financial and occupational hardships facing working people, Smith concluded that in the late colonial period, the laboring poor of Philadelphia were as vulnerable as their counterparts in contemporary European cities, living "so near subsistence before the Revolutionary War that there appears to be no lower level from which they could have risen." (Smith, 1981, pp. 201-202)

Economic crisis occasionally caused the city's working people to take concerted action to protect their place in society -- something they had not generally been accustomed to doing. Compared to the lower sort in eighteenth-century Boston and New York, who had a record and certainly a reputation for political volatility, the common people of Philadelphia had a much more placid appearance in politics. As was common throughout other parts of colonial America, deference defined the basic approach to Philadelphia's political life, and a combination of convenience and coercion kept the coalition of urban merchants, lawyers, and proprietary officials insulated from serious challenge in peaceful and prosperous times. The lower and middling classes usually accepted the city's elite leadership, "not because they believed others had a right to rule them," Rosswurm explains, "nor because they thought themselves inferior to those who stood over them, but rather because their social situation demanded that they display deference and accept powerlessness." (Rosswurm, 1987, p. 24) But when economic forces both within and beyond the city seemed to threaten their livelihood and legitimate place in society, artisans began to see themselves as an oppressed group greatly endangered by those in control.

During the currency crisis of the 1720s, for instance, when the lack of a circulating medium undermined their ability to pay or be paid, artisans took up the cry for paper money as an immediate source of relief. Doing so put them directly at odds with local leaders such as James Logan, a wealthy merchant who scorned the poor and unabashedly blamed the victims for their allegedly profligate habits and lack of industry and frugality. But they also found an ally in the colony's appointed governor, Sir William Keith, who for his own personal and political reasons had turned against the colony's ruling elite. The details of the alliance and its political successes need not be listed here: the important point is that the middling people of Philadelphia began to depart from their accustomed acceptance of deferential relations with the city's and colony's leaders and, indeed, to challenge their hold on power. "This antagonism grew in the course of the decade and became more pointed with each passing year, so that by 1729, Philadelphia's political rhetoric had begun to acquire the class-inflected voice that would distinguish it for more than a century," Schultz observes. Indeed, he concludes, "the entry of Philadelphia's laboring classes into the political arena during the 1720s marked the beginning of America's first working class." (Schultz, 1993, pp. 24, 26)

Throughout most of the era leading up to the American Revolution, however, that "class-inflected voice" remained relatively muted. Philadelphia's working people did not play an especially aggressive or altogether independent role in the political life of the city, and even in their occasional outbursts of extralegal activity, the "people out of doors" proved to be rather tame. Rosswurm points out that in the early stages of overt opposition against the policies of the British government, beginning with the Stamp Act struggle in 1765, the common people of Philadelphia engaged in a comparatively mild form of protest: "Crowds in Philadelphia, whether multi- or single class in composition, were neither as violent, as frequent, nor as significant as those in New York or Boston." They turned out, to be sure, but they still seem to take their political cues from the established leadership of the city. "Though the laboring poor clearly had the capacity to organize themselves and act on their own," Rosswurm concludes, "none of this activity fundamentally challenged class relations in Philadelphia." (Rosswurm, 1987, p. 34)

But the increasing crisis of the early 1770s changed that, both quickly and dramatically. When local merchants proved reluctant to adhere to nonimportation

agreements designed to put economic pressure on Great Britain, Philadelphia's lower orders began to speak more forcefully with an independent voice and to take significant political action. Gary Nash describes how artisans began to run their own candidates for public office and, through them, to press for local as well as imperial reform. In Philadelphia as elsewhere, the agitation over British policy also provided an opportunity for common people to make demands for class-based changes, including, Nash notes, "curbing the individual accumulation of wealth, opening up opportunity, divorcing the franchise from property ownership, and driving the mercantile elite from power." Moreover, in Philadelphia, the outbreak of armed conflict in 1775 created an additional source of class identity for the city's artisans and their allies, the organization of a local militia that served, as Nash puts it, as a "school of political education" for the common people (Nash, 1979, pp. 378-379).

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As it was in Philadelphia, so it was elsewhere in the British-American colonies. In general, the American Revolution proved to be a time of accelerating awareness of class identity. Although a fuller consideration of the Revolutionary era and its aftermath goes beyond the scope of this volume, the eighteenth-century trajectory of class relations had already become clear by the outbreak of war in 1775. The imperial crisis confronted people of all social strata with the need to evaluate their interests, to take a stance, and eventually to take action. As they did so, they brought into sharper focus not only the competing interests between the colonies and the mother country, but also the competing interests within American society itself. The point is not to reduce the Revolution to a crude caricature of a class conflict: if the recent historiography of the era has told us anything, it is that the War for Independence in all parts of America proved to be a struggle that revealed a complex pattern of economic, ethnic, racial, and regional conflicts and alliances. People defined and defended their interests for a variety of reasons, some quite personally pragmatic, some more loftily patriotic. But no matter what the particular cause of one's commitment, the more general call of the Revolution echoed long after the shooting was over: the rhetoric and spirit of the Revolutionary era,

the near constant emphasis on liberty and equality, implied a promise of opportunity for all people. And for people in the lower ranks of American society, comprehending fully the possibilities of greater equality in the future could only come from understanding better the inequality they had experienced in the past.

Perhaps the best expression of this Revolutionary-era awareness comes from Alfred Young, who has long been one of the leading students of the lower classes in colonial America. In his sensitive and engaging portrayal of George Robert Twelves Hewes, a poor cordwainer in pre-Revolutionary Boston, Young describes the transformation Hewes experiences as he begins to take part in the political protest of the 1760s and 1770s. Once awed by wealthy and powerful men like John Hancock, Hewes found himself suddenly assuming a new relationship with them as, to use his own term, “associates”: no longer playing the deferential inferior because of his poverty and status, Hewes took on a decisive and self-directed role in the crisis facing Bostonians. He was no “leveler,” to be sure, but neither was he a groveler. Along with his allies in the artisanal and laboring ranks, Hewes emerged as an increasingly independent actor: “His experiences transformed him,” Young concludes, “giving him a sense of citizenship and personal worth” (Young, 1999, p. 55). Becoming a citizen meant more, of course, than simply taking part in the politics of protest. For Hewes and other members of the lower classes, it also meant embracing the ideal of equality that the Revolution offered, claiming legitimacy as actors in an unfolding democratic drama, and displaying a social identity, both personal and collective, that had been developing for decades.

To be sure, the American Revolution did not produce an immediate and dramatic social revolution for working people like Hewes: he remained barely a step above poverty for most of his life, as did many other people of the lower sort. But toward the end of his life, when he returned to Boston as a Revolutionary-era relic and something of a working class hero in the mid-1830s, he did so at a time when working people had begun to assert their rights quite forcefully and increasingly in direct opposition to the merchants and manufacturers who controlled the economy of the early republic. Young female factory workers in the nearby Lowell textile mills engaged in a “turn-out,” or strike, singing defiantly that they were “too fond of liberty” to be enslaved by the emerging industrial system. Workingmen likewise began to assert their place in society,

proudly proclaiming their identity as “producers” of the new nation’s wealth and clearly distinguishing themselves from the “parasites” who garnered the profits without doing the work. It was not until the early decades of the nineteenth century, a time history texts invariably call the era of the common man (and, increasingly, the common woman), that the language of class became openly spoken in American political and social discourse. But it was in the two centuries before that the structural and ideological roots of class became embedded in the soil of American society. Whether or not most people of the colonial era -- and many historians who have written of that era -- felt comfortable in using the concept of class to describe the nature of their social relations, the legacy of inequality and its discontents in early America leads us inescapably to one point: the history of colonial period, no less than that of the more mature capitalist society that emerged later, not only connects but contributes to the larger analysis of class in America.