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# Horses and Gentlemen: The Cultural Significance of Gambling among the Gentry of Virginia

T. H. Breen

In the fall of 1686 Durand of Dauphiné, a French Huguenot, visited the capital of colonial Virginia. Durand regularly recorded in a journal what he saw and heard, providing one of the few firsthand accounts of late seventeenth-century Virginia society that has survived to the present day. When he arrived in Jamestown the House of Burgesses was in session. "I saw there fine-looking men," he noted, "sitting in judgment booted and with belted sword." But to Durand's surprise, several of these Virginia gentlemen "started gambling" soon after dinner, and it was not until midnight that one of the players noticed the Frenchman patiently waiting for the contest to end. The Virginian—obviously a veteran of long nights at the gaming table—advised Durand to go to bed. "'For,' said he, 'it is quite possible that we shall be here all night,' and in truth I found them still playing the next morning."<sup>1</sup>

The event Durand witnessed was not unusual. In late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Virginia, gentlemen spent a good deal of time gambling. During this period, in fact, competitive gaming involving high stakes became a distinguishing characteristic of gentry culture. Whenever the great planters congregated, someone inevitably produced a deck of cards, a pair of dice, or a backgammon board; and quarter-horse racing was a regular event throughout the colony. Indeed, these men hazarded money and tobacco on almost any proposition in which there was an element of chance. Robert Beverley, a member of one of Virginia's most prominent families, made a wager "with the gentlemen of the country" that if he could produce seven

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<sup>1</sup>[Durand of Dauphiné], *A Huguenot Exile in Virginia: or Voyages of a Frenchman exiled for his Religion with a Description of Virginia and Maryland*, ed. Gilbert Chinard (New York, 1934 [orig. publ. The Hague, 1687]), 148.

hundred gallons of wine on his own plantation, they would pay him the handsome sum of one thousand guineas. Another leading planter offered six-to-one odds that Alexander Spotswood could not procure a commission as the colony's governor. And in 1671 one disgruntled gentleman asked a court of law to award him his winnings from a bet concerning "a Servant maid."<sup>2</sup> The case of this suspect-sounding wager—unfortunately not described in greater detail—dragged on until the colony's highest court ordered the loser to pay the victor a thousand pounds of tobacco.

The great planters' passion for gambling, especially on quarter-horse racing, coincided with a period of far-reaching social change in Virginia.<sup>3</sup> Before the mid-1680s constant political unrest, servant risings both real and threatened, plant-cutting riots, and even a full-scale civil war had plagued the colony.<sup>4</sup> But by the end of the century Virginia had achieved internal peace.<sup>5</sup> Several elements contributed to the growth of social tranquility. First, by

<sup>2</sup> Rev. James Fontaine, *Memoirs of a Huguenot Family . . .*, ed. Ann Maury (Baltimore, 1967 [orig. publ. 1853]), 265-266; John Mercer, cited in Jane Carson, *Colonial Virginians at Play* (Williamsburg, 1965), 49, n. 1; H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Minutes of the Council and General Court of Colonial Virginia, 1622-1632, 1670-1676 . . .* (Richmond, 1924), 252, 281, 285.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this essay I use the terms gentry, gentlemen, and great planters as synonyms. In each Virginia county a few gentry families dominated civil, ecclesiastical, and military affairs. While the members of these families were substantially wealthier than the great majority of white planters, they were not a class in a narrow economic sense. Their cultural style as well as their financial position set them apart. The great planters and their families probably accounted for less than 2% of the colony's white population. Louis B. Wright, *The First Gentlemen of Virginia: Intellectual Qualities of the Early Colonial Ruling Class* (San Marino, Calif., 1940), 57, estimates their number at "fewer than a hundred families." While entrance into the gentry was not closed to newcomers, upward mobility into that group became increasingly difficult after the 1690s. See Philip A. Bruce, *Social Life of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1907), 39-100; Aubrey C. Land, "Economic Base and Social Structure: The Northern Chesapeake in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History*, XXV (1965), 639-654; Bernard Bailyn, "Politics and Social Structure in Virginia," in James Morton Smith, ed., *Seventeenth-Century America: Essays in Colonial History* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1959), 90-115; and Jack P. Greene, "Foundations of Political Power in the Virginia House of Burgesses, 1720-1776," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XVI (1959), 485-506.

<sup>4</sup> These disturbances are described in T. H. Breen, "A Changing Labor Force and Race Relations in Virginia 1660-1710," *Journal of Social History*, VII (1973), 3-25. The fullest account of Bacon's Rebellion remains Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel: A History of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1957).

<sup>5</sup> Several historians have remarked on the unusual political stability of 18th-century Virginia. See, for example, Jack P. Greene, "Changing Interpretations of Early American Politics," in Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Reinterpretation of Early American History: Essays in Honor of John Edwin Pomfret* (San Marino, Calif., 1966), 167-168, and Gordon S. Wood, "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution," *W/MQ*, 3d Ser., XXIII (1966), 27-30.

1700 the ruling gentry were united as they had never been before. The great planters of the seventeenth century had been for the most part aggressive English immigrants. They fought among themselves for political and social dominance, and during Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 various factions within the gentry attempted to settle their differences on the battlefield. By the end of the century, however, a sizable percentage of the Virginia gentry, perhaps a majority, had been born in the colony. The members of this native-born elite—one historian calls them a "creole elite"—cooperated more frequently in political affairs than had their immigrant fathers. They found it necessary to unite in resistance against a series of interfering royal governors such as Thomas Lord Culpeper, Francis Nicholson, and Alexander Spotswood. After Bacon's Rebellion the leading planters—the kind of men whom Durand watched gamble the night away—successfully consolidated their control over Virginia's civil, military, and ecclesiastical institutions. They monopolized the most important offices; they patented the best lands.<sup>6</sup>

A second and even more far-reaching element in the creation of this remarkable solidarity among the gentry was the shifting racial composition of the plantation labor force. Before the 1680s the planters had relied on large numbers of white indentured servants to cultivate Virginia's sole export crop, tobacco. These impoverished, often desperate servants disputed their masters' authority and on several occasions resisted colonial rulers with force of arms. In part because of their dissatisfaction with the indenture system, and in part because changes in the international slave trade made it easier and cheaper for Virginians to purchase black laborers, the major planters increasingly turned to Africans. The blacks' cultural disorientation made them less difficult to control than the white servants. Large-scale collective violence such as Bacon's Rebellion and the 1682 plant-cutting riots consequently declined markedly. By the beginning of the eighteenth century Virginia had been transformed into a relatively peaceful, biracial society in which a few planters exercised almost unchallenged hegemony over both their slaves and their poorer white neighbors.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The phrase "creole elite" comes from Carole Shammas, "English-Born and Creole Elites in Turn-of-the-Century Virginia," in Thad W. Tate and David L. Ammerman, eds., *Essays on the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake* (Chapel Hill, N. C., forthcoming). See also David W. Jordan, "Political Stability and the Emergence of a Native Elite in Maryland, 1660-1715," *ibid.* The process of forming a native-born elite is also discussed in Bailyn, "Politics and Social Structure," in Smith, ed., *Seventeenth-Century America*, 90-115; John C. Rainbolt, "The Alteration in the Relationship between Leadership and Constituents in Virginia, 1660 to 1720," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXVII (1970), 411-434; and Martin H. Quitt, "Virginia House of Burgesses 1660-1706: The Social, Educational, and Economic Bases of Political Power" (Ph.D. diss., Washington University, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> Breen, "Changing Labor Force," *Jour. Soc. Hist.*, VII (1973), 2-25; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery—American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Vir-*

The growth of gambling among the great planters during a period of significant social change raises important questions not only about gentry values but also about the social structure of late seventeenth-century Virginia. Why did gambling, involving high stakes, become so popular among the gentlemen at precisely this time? Did it reflect gentry values or have symbolic connotations for the people living in this society? Did this activity serve a social function, contributing in some manner to the maintenance of group cohesion? Why did quarter-horse racing, in particular, become a gentry sport? And finally, did public displays such as this somehow reinforce the great planters' social and political dominance?

In part, of course, gentlemen laid wagers on women and horses simply because they enjoyed the excitement of competition. Gambling was a recreation, like a good meal among friends or a leisurely hunt in the woods—a pleasant pastime when hard-working planters got together. Another equally acceptable explanation for the gentry's fondness for gambling might be the transplanting of English social mores. Certainly, the upper classes in the mother country loved betting for high stakes, and it is possible that the all-night card games and the frequent horse races were staged attempts by a provincial gentry to transform itself into a genuine landed aristocracy.<sup>8</sup> While both views possess merit, neither is entirely satisfactory. The great planters of Virginia presumably could have favored less risky forms of competition. Moreover, even though several planters deliberately emulated English social styles, the widespread popularity of gambling among the gentry indicates that this type of behavior may have had deeper, more complex cultural roots than either of these explanations would suggest.<sup>9</sup>

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ginia (New York, 1975), 295-362; Rainbolt, "Leadership and Constituents," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXVII (1970), 428-429. On the social attitudes of the small planters see David Alan Williams, "Political Alignments in Colonial Virginia, 1698-1750" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1959), chap. 1.

<sup>8</sup> A sudden growth of gambling for high stakes in pre-Civil War England is discussed in Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford, 1965). For the later period see Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700-1850* (Cambridge, 1973); G. E. Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1963), 151-153, 249-250; and E. D. Cuming, "Sports and Games," in A. S. Turberville, ed., *Johnson's England: An Account of the Life and Manners of his Age*, I (London, 1933), 362-383.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to stress here that the Virginia gentry did not simply copy English customs. As I argue in this essay, a specific, patterned form of behavior, such as gambling, does not become popular in a society or among the members of a subgroup of that society unless the activity reflects or expresses values indigenous to that culture. In 17th-century Massachusetts Bay, for example, heavy betting did not develop. A small amount of gambling seems to have occurred among the poor, especially among servants, but I can find no incidence of gambling among the colony's social, political, or religious leaders. See Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records*

In many societies competitive gaming is a device by which the participants transform abstract cultural values into observable social behavior. In his now-classic analysis of the Balinese cockfight Clifford Geertz describes contests for extremely high stakes as intense social dramas. These battles not only involve the honor of important villagers and their kin groups but also reflect in symbolic form the entire Balinese social structure. Far from being a simple pastime, betting on cocks turns out to be an expression of the way the Balinese perceive social reality. The rules of the fight, the patterns of wagering, the reactions of winners and losers—all these elements help us to understand more profoundly the totality of Balinese culture.<sup>10</sup>

The Virginia case is analogous to the Balinese. When the great planter staked his money and tobacco on a favorite horse or spurred a sprinter to victory, he displayed some of the central elements of gentry culture—its competitiveness, individualism, and materialism. In fact, competitive gaming was for many gentlemen a means of translating a particular set of values into action, a mechanism for expressing a loose but deeply felt bundle of ideas and assumptions about the nature of society. The quarter-horse races of Virginia were intense contests involving personal honor, elaborate rules, heavy betting, and wide community interest; and just as the cockfight opens up hidden dimensions of Balinese culture, gentry gambling offers an opportunity to improve our understanding of the complex interplay between cultural values and social behavior in Virginia.

Gambling reflected core elements of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century gentry values. From diaries, letters, and travel accounts we discover that despite their occasional cooperation in political affairs, Virginia gentlemen placed extreme emphasis upon personal independence. This concern may in part have been the product of the colony's peculiar settlement patterns. The great planters required immense tracts of fresh land for their tobacco. Often thousands of acres in size, their plantations were scattered over a broad area from the Potomac River to the James. The dispersed

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*of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay . . .* (Boston, 1853-1854), II, 180, III, 201, IV, pt. 1, 366; *Records of the Suffolk County Court, 1671-1680* (Colonial Society of Massachusetts, *Publications* [Boston, 1933]), XXIX, 131, 259, 263, XXX, 1162; and Joseph H. Smith, ed., *Colonial Justice in Western Massachusetts, 1639-1702: The Pyncheon Court Record* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 109.

<sup>10</sup> Two of Clifford Geertz's essays here helped shape my ideas about Virginia society: "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" and "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 3-30, 412-453. Also see Erving Goffman's "Fun in Games" in Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Indianapolis, 1961), 17-81; Raymond Firth, "A Dart Match in Tikopia: A Study in the Sociology of Primitive Sport," *Oceania*, I (1930), 64-96; and H. A. Powell, "Cricket in Kiriwina," *Listener*, XLVIII (1952), 384-385.

planters lived in their "Great Houses" with their families and slaves, and though they saw friends from time to time, they led for the most part isolated, routine lives.<sup>11</sup> An English visitor in 1686 noted with obvious disapproval that "their Plantations run over vast Tracts of Ground . . . whereby the Country is thinly inhabited; the Living solitary and unsociable." Some planters were uncomfortably aware of the problems created by physical isolation.<sup>12</sup> William Fitzhugh, for example, admitted to a correspondent in the mother country, "Society that is good and ingenious is very scarce, and seldom to be come at except in books."<sup>13</sup>

Yet despite such apparent cultural privation, Fitzhugh and his contemporaries refused to alter their life styles in any way that might compromise their freedom of action. They assumed it their right to give commands, and in the ordering of daily plantation affairs they rarely tolerated outside interference.<sup>14</sup> Some of these planters even saw themselves as lawgivers out of the Old Testament. In 1726 William Byrd II explained that "like one of the Patriarchs, I have my Flocks and my Herds, my Bond-men and Bond-women, and every Soart of Trade amongst my own Servants, so that I live in a kind of Independance on every one but Providence."<sup>15</sup> Perhaps Byrd exaggerated for literary effect, but forty years earlier Durand had observed, "There are no lords [in Virginia], but each is sovereign on his own plantation."<sup>16</sup> Whatever the origins of this independent spirit, it bred excessive individualism in a wide range of social activities. While these powerful gentlemen sometimes worked together to achieve specific political and economic ends, they bristled at the least hint of constraint.<sup>17</sup> Andrew Burnaby later noted that "the public or political character of the Virginians corre-

<sup>11</sup> Philip A. Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century* . . . , II (New York, 1935 [orig. publ. 1895]), 151.

<sup>12</sup> "A Letter from Mr. John Clayton Rector of Crofton at Wakefield in Yorkshire, to the Royal Society, May 12, 1688," in Peter Force, ed., *Tracts and Other Papers Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America* . . . , III (Washington, D. C., 1844), no. 12, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Beale Davis, ed., *William Fitzhugh and His Chesapeake World, 1676-1701: The Fitzhugh Letters and Other Documents* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1963), 15.

<sup>14</sup> On the independence of the Virginia gentry see Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York, 1972), chap. 1.

<sup>15</sup> William Byrd II to Charles, earl of Orrery, July 5, 1726, in "Virginia Council Journals, 1726-1753," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XXXII (1924), 27.

<sup>16</sup> [Durand], *A Huguenot Exile*, ed. Chinard, 110.

<sup>17</sup> I discuss this theme in greater detail in a paper entitled "Looking Out For Number One: Cultural Values and Social Behavior in Early Seventeenth-Century Virginia" (paper delivered at the Thirty-Second Conference in Early American History, Nov. 1974).

sponds with their private one: they are haughty and jealous of their liberties, impatient of restraint, and can scarcely bear the thought of being controuled by any superior power."<sup>18</sup>

The gentry expressed this uncompromising individualism in aggressive competitiveness, engaging in a constant struggle against real and imagined rivals to obtain more lands, additional patronage, and high tobacco prices. Indeed, competition was a major factor shaping the character of face-to-face relationships among the colony's gentlemen, and when the stakes were high the planters were not particular about the methods they employed to gain victory.<sup>19</sup> In large part, the goal of the competition within the gentry group was to improve social position by increasing wealth.

Some gentlemen believed that personal honor was at stake as well. Robert "King" Carter, by all accounts the most successful planter of his generation, expressed his anxiety about losing out to another Virginian in a competitive market situation. "In discourse with Colonel Byrd, Mr. Armistead, and a great many others," he explained, "I understand you [an English merchant] had sold their tobaccos in round parcels and at good rates. I cannot allow myself to come behind any of these gentlemen in the planter's trade."<sup>20</sup> Carter's pain arose not so much from the lower price he had received as from the public knowledge that he had been bested by respected peers. He believed he had lost face. This kind of intense competition was sparked, especially among the less affluent members of the gentry, by a dread of slipping into the ranks of what one eighteenth-century Virginia historian called the "common Planters."<sup>21</sup> Gov. Francis Nicholson, an acerbic English placeman, declared that the "ordinary sort of planters" knew full well "from whence these mighty dons derive their originals."<sup>22</sup> The governor touched a

<sup>18</sup> Rev. Andrew Burnaby, *Travels through The Middle Settlements In North America, In the Years 1759 and 1760; With Observations Upon the State of the Colonies*, in John Pinkerton, ed., *A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in All Parts of the World . . .*, XIII (London, 1812), 715.

<sup>19</sup> According to John Rainbolt, the gentry's "striving for land, wealth, and position was intense and, at times, ruthless" ("Leadership and Constituents," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXVII [1970], 414). See Carole Shammas, "English-Born and Creole Elites," in Tate and Ammerman, eds., *Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake*; Morgan, *American Slavery—American Freedom*, 288-289; and Rhys Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists' Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXXI (1974), 345-353.

<sup>20</sup> Louis B. Wright, ed., *Letters of Robert Carter, 1720-1727: The Commercial Interests of a Virginia Gentleman* (San Marino, Calif., 1940), 93-94.

<sup>21</sup> Hugh Jones, *The Present State of Virginia Giving a Particular and short Account of the Indian, English, and Negroe Inhabitants of that Colony . . .* (New York, 1865 [orig. publ. 1724]), 48.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Thomas Jefferson Wertebaker, *The Old South: The Founding of American Civilization* (New York, 1942), 19.



nerve; the efforts of "these mighty dons" to outdo one another were almost certainly motivated by a desire to disguise their "originals," to demonstrate anew through competitive encounters that they could legitimately claim gentility.

Another facet of Virginia gentry culture was materialism. This certainly does not mean that the great planters lacked spiritual concerns. Religion played a vital role in the lives of men like Robert Carter and William Byrd II. Nevertheless, piety was largely a private matter. In public these men determined social standing not by a man's religiosity or philosophic knowledge but by his visible estate—his lands, slaves, buildings, even by the quality of his garments. When John Bartram, one of America's first botanists, set off in 1737 to visit two of Virginia's most influential planters, a London friend advised him to purchase a new set of clothes, "for though I should not esteem thee less, to come to me in what dress thou will,—yet these Virginians are a very gentle, well-dressed people—and look, perhaps, more at a man's outside than his inside."<sup>23</sup> This perception of gentry values was accurate. Fitzhugh's desire to maintain outward appearances drove him to collect a stock of monogrammed silver plate and to import at great expense a well-crafted, though not very practical, English carriage.<sup>24</sup> One even finds hints that the difficulty of preserving the image of material success weighed heavily upon some planters. When he described local Indian customs in 1705, Robert Beverley noted that native Americans lived an easy, happy existence "without toiling and perplexing their mind for Riches, which other people often trouble themselves to provide for uncertain and ungrateful Heirs."<sup>25</sup>

The gentry were acutely sensitive to the element of chance in human affairs, and this sensitivity influenced their attitudes toward other men and society. Virginians knew from bitter experience that despite the best-laid plans, nothing in their lives was certain. Slaves suddenly sickened and died. English patrons forgot to help their American friends. Tobacco prices fell without warning. Cargo ships sank. Storms and droughts ruined the crops. The list was endless. Fitzhugh warned an English correspondent to think twice before allowing a son to become a Virginia planter, for even "if the best husbandry and the greatest forecast and skill were used, yet ill luck at Sea, a fall of a Market, or twenty other accidents may ruin and overthrow the best Industry."<sup>26</sup> Other planters, even those who had risen to the top of

<sup>23</sup> Peter Collinson to John Bartram, Feb. 17, 1737, *WMQ*, 2d Ser., VI (1926), 304.

<sup>24</sup> Davis, ed., *Fitzhugh Letters*, 229, 241-242, 244, 246, 249-250, 257-259. For another example of the concern about outward appearances see the will of Robert Cole (1674), in *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXXI (1974), 139.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Beverley, *The History and Present State of Virginia*, ed., Louis B. Wright (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1947), 226.

<sup>26</sup> William Fitzhugh to Oliver Luke, Aug. 15, 1690, in Davis, ed., *Fitzhugh Letters*, 280.

colonial society, longed for greater security. "I could wish," declared William Byrd I in 1685, "wee had Some more certain Commodity [than tobacco] to rely on but see no hopes of itt."<sup>27</sup> However desirable such certainty may have appeared, the planters always put their labor and money into tobacco, hoping for a run of luck. One simply learned to live with chance. In 1710 William Byrd II confided in his secret diary, "I dreamed last night . . . that I won a tun full of money and might win more if I had ventured."<sup>28</sup>

Gaming relationships reflected these strands of gentry culture. In fact, gambling in Virginia was a ritual activity. It was a form of repetitive, patterned behavior that not only corresponded closely to the gentry's values and assumptions but also symbolized the realities of everyday planter life. This congruence between actions and belief, between form and experience, helps to account for the popularity of betting contests. The wager, whether over cards or horses, brought together in a single, focused act the great planters' competitiveness, independence, and materialism, as well as the element of chance.<sup>29</sup> It represented a social agreement in which each individual was free to determine how he would play, and the gentleman who accepted a challenge risked losing his material possessions as well as his personal honor.<sup>30</sup>

The favorite household or tavern contests during this period included

<sup>27</sup> William Byrd I to Perry and Lane, July 8, 1686, in "Letters of William Byrd I," *VMHB*, XXV (1917), 132.

<sup>28</sup> Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinsling, eds., *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712* (Richmond, Va., 1941), 223-224.

<sup>29</sup> Gaming was so popular among the gentry, so much an expression of their culture, that it became a common metaphor in their discussion of colonial politics. For example, an unsigned essay entitled "The History of Bacon's and Ingram's Rebellion, 1676" described the relationship between Nathaniel Bacon and Gov. William Berkeley as a card game. Charles M. Andrews, ed., *Narratives of the Insurrections, 1675-1690* (New York, 1915), 57. In another account of Bacon's Rebellion, written in 1705, Thomas Mathew noted that several members of the House of Burgesses were "not docill enough to Gallop the future Races, that Court seem'd dispos'd to Lead'em." *Ibid.*, 32. In May 1697 William Fitzhugh explained to Capt. Roger Jones: "your self will see what a hard Game we have to play the contrary party that is our Opposers, having the best Cards and the trumps to boot especially the Honor. Yet would my Lord Fairfax there [in England], take his turn in Shuffling and Dealing the Cards and his Lordship with the rest see that we were not cheated in our game, I question not but we should gain the Sett, tho' the game is so far plaid" (Davis, ed., *Fitzhugh Letters*, 352).

<sup>30</sup> Rhys Isaac provides a provocative analysis of the relationship between games and gentry culture on the eve of the Revolution in "Evangelical Revolt," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXXI (1974), 348-353. See also Mark Anthony de Wolfe Howe, ed., "Journal of Josiah Quincy, Junior, 1773," Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings*, XLIX (1915-1916), 467, and William Stith, *The Sinfulness and pernicious Nature of Gaming. A Sermon Preached before the General Assembly of Virginia: At Williamsburg, March 1st 1752* (Williamsburg, 1752), 5-26.

cards, backgammon, billiards, nine-pins, and dice. The great planters preferred card games that demanded skill as well as luck. Put, piquet, and whist provided the necessary challenge, and Virginia gentlemen—Durand's hosts, for example—regularly played these games for small sums of money and tobacco.<sup>31</sup> These activities brought men together, stimulated conversation, and furnished a harmless outlet for aggressive drives. They did not, however, become for the gentry a form of intense, symbolic play such as the cockfight in Bali.<sup>32</sup> William Byrd II once cheated his wife in a game of piquet, something he would never have dared to do among his peers at Williamsburg. By and large, he showed little emotional involvement in these types of household gambling. The exception here proves the rule. After an unusually large loss at the gaming tables of Williamsburg, Byrd drew a pointed finger in the margin of his secret diary and swore a "solemn resolution never at once to lose more than 50 shillings and to spend less time in gaming, and I beg the God Almighty to give me grace to keep so good a resolution . . ." Byrd's reformation was short-lived, for within a few days he dispassionately noted losing another four pounds at piquet.<sup>33</sup>

Horse racing generated far greater interest among the gentry than did the household games.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, for the great planters and the many others who

<sup>31</sup> The best discussion of these household games is Carson, *Virginians at Play*, 49-89. See also Charles Cotton, *The Compleat Gamester or Instructions How to Play at Billiards, Trucks, Bowls, and Chess . . .* (1674), in Cyril H. Hartmann, ed., *Games and Gamesters of the Restoration: The Compleat Gamester by Charles Cotton, 1674, and Lives of the Gamesters, by Theophilus Lucas, 1714* (London, 1930).

<sup>32</sup> After 1750, however, the gentry's attitude toward household or tavern games seems to have changed. The betting became so heavy that several eminent planters lost fortunes at the gaming tables. A visitor at Williamsburg in 1765 wrote of these men that "they are all professed gamesters, Especially Colonel Burd [William Byrd III], who is never happy but when he has the box and Dices in hand. [T]his Gentleman from a man of the greatest property of any in America has reduced himself to that Degree by gameing, that few or nobody will Credit him for Ever so small a sum of money. [H]e was obliged to sel 400 fine Negroes a few Days before my arival." "Journal of a French Traveller in the Colonies, 1765, I," *American Historical Review*, XXVI (1920-1921), 742. Byrd was not alone. Robert Wormeley Carter and Robert Burwell were excessive gamblers, and as the aging Landon Carter (Robert "King" Carter's son) observed the wagering of the gentry on the eve of the Revolution, he sadly mused, "they play away and play it all away." Jack P. Greene, ed., *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778*, II (Charlottesville, Va., 1965), 830. On this generation's addiction to gambling see Emory G. Evans, "The Rise and Decline of the Virginia Aristocracy in the Eighteenth Century: The Nelsons," in Darrett B. Rutman, ed., *The Old Dominion: Essays for Thomas Perkins Abernethy* (Charlottesville, Va., 1964), 68-70.

<sup>33</sup> Wright and Tinsling, eds., *Secret Diary*, 75, 442, 449.

<sup>34</sup> Only one mention of cockfighting before 1730 has come to my attention, and that one refers to contests among the "common planters." Jones, *Present State of Virginia*, 48. See Carson, *Virginians at Play*, 151-152.

came to watch, these contests were preeminently a social drama. To appreciate the importance of racing in seventeenth-century Virginia, we must understand the cultural significance of horses. By the turn of the century possession of one of these animals had become a social necessity. Without a horse, a planter felt despised, an object of ridicule. Owning even a slow-footed saddle horse made the common planter more of a man in his own eyes as well as in those of his neighbors; he was reluctant to venture forth on foot for fear of making an adverse impression. As the Rev. Hugh Jones explained in 1724, "almost every ordinary Person keeps a Horse; and I have known some spend the Morning in ranging several Miles in the Woods to find and catch their Horses only to ride two or three Miles to Church, to the Court-House, or to a Horse-Race, where they generally appoint to meet upon Business."<sup>35</sup> Such behavior seems a waste of time and energy only to one who does not comprehend the symbolic importance which the Virginians attached to their horses. A horse was an extension of its owner; indeed, a man was only as good as his horse. Because of the horse's cultural significance, the gentry attempted to set its horsemanship apart from that of the common planters. Gentlemen took better care of their animals, and, according to John Clayton, who visited Virginia in 1688, they developed a distinctive riding style. "They ride pretty sharply," Clayton reported; "a Planter's Pace is a Proverb, which is a good sharp hand-Gallop."<sup>36</sup> A fast-rising cloud of dust far down a Virginia road probably alerted the common planter that he was about to encounter a social superior.

The contest that generated the greatest interest among the gentry was the quarter-horse race, an all-out sprint by two horses over a quarter-mile dirt track.<sup>37</sup> The great planters dominated these events. In the records of the county courts—our most important source of information about specific races—we find the names of some of the colony's most prominent planter families—Randolph, Eppes, Jefferson, Swan, Kenner, Hardiman, Parker, Cocke, Batte, Harwick (Hardidge), Youle (Yowell), and Washington.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, *Present State of Virginia*, 48. This observation was repeated in other accounts of Virginia society throughout the 18th century. William Byrd II wrote "my Dear Countrymen have so great a Passion for riding, that they will often walk two miles to catch a Horse, in Order to ride One." William K. Boyd, ed., *William Byrd's Histories of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (Raleigh, N. C., 1929), 258. See also Carson, *Virginians at Play*, 102-105.

<sup>36</sup> "A Letter From Clayton," in Force, ed., *Tracts and Other Papers*, no. 12, 35.

<sup>37</sup> On the development of racing in Virginia, especially the transition from the quarter-mile straight track to the oval course, see W. G. Stanard, "Racing in Colonial Virginia," *VMHB*, II (1894-1895), 293-305, and Fairfax Harrison, "The Equine F. F. V.'s: A Study of the Evidence for the English Horses Imported into Virginia before the Revolution," *ibid.*, XXXV (1927), 329-370. I suspect that quarter-horse racing was a sport indigenous to Virginia.

Members of the House of Burgesses, including its powerful speaker, William Randolph, were frequently mentioned in the contests that came before the courts.<sup>38</sup> On at least one occasion the Rev. James Blair, Virginia's most eminent clergyman and a founder of the College of William and Mary, gave testimony in a suit arising from a race run between Capt. William Soane and Robert Napier.<sup>39</sup> The tenacity with which the gentry pursued these cases, almost continuations of the race itself, suggests that victory was no less sweet when it was gained in court.

Many elements contributed to the exclusion of lower social groups from these contests. Because of the sheer size of wagers, poor freemen and common planters could not have participated regularly. Certainly, the members of the Accomack County Court were embarrassed to discover that one Thomas Davis, "a very poore Man," had lost 500 pounds of tobacco or a cow and calf in a horse race with an adolescent named Mr. John Andrews. Recognizing that Davis bore "a great charge of wife and Children," the justices withheld final judgment until the governor had an opportunity to rule on the legality of the wager. The Accomack court noted somewhat gratuitously that if the governor declared the action unlawful, it would fine Davis five days' work on a public bridge.<sup>40</sup> In such cases country justices ordinarily made no comment upon a plaintiff's or defendant's financial condition, assuming, no doubt, that most people involved in racing were capable of meeting their gaming obligations.

The gentry actively enforced its exclusive control over quarter-horse racing. When James Bullocke, a York County tailor, challenged Mr. Mathew Slader to a race in 1674, the county court informed Bullocke that it was "contrary to Law for a Labourer to make a race being a Sport for Gentlemen" and fined the presumptuous tailor two hundred pounds of tobacco and cask.<sup>41</sup> Additional evidence of exclusiveness is found in early eighteenth-century Hanover County. In one of the earliest issues of the colony's first newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette*, an advertisement appeared announcing that "some merry-dispos'd gentlemen" in Hanover planned to celebrate St. Andrew's Day with a race for quarter-milers. The Hanover gentlemen explained in a later, fuller description that "all Persons resorting there are desir'd to behave themselves with Decency and Sobriety, the Subscribers being resolv'd to discountenance all Immorality with the utmost

<sup>38</sup> Besides Randolph, there were John Stone, William Hardidge, Thomas Yowell, John Hardiman, Daniel Sullivant, Thomas Chamberlain, Rodham Kenner, Richard Kenner, William Soane, and Alexander Swan.

<sup>39</sup> Aug. 1690, Henrico County, Order Book, 1678-1693, 340. All references to manuscript county records are to the photostat copies at the Virginia State Library, Richmond.

<sup>40</sup> Jan. 16, 1666, Accomack Co., Orders, 1666-1670, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Sept. 10, 1674, York Co., Deeds, Orders, Wills, 1672-1694, 85.

Rigour." The purpose of these contests was to furnish the county's "considerable Number of Gentlemen, Merchants, and credible Planters" an opportunity for "cultivating Friendship."<sup>42</sup> Less affluent persons apparently were welcome to watch the proceedings provided they acted like gentlemen.

In most match races the planter rode his own horse, and the exclusiveness of these contests meant that racing created intensely competitive confrontations. There were two ways to set up a challenge. The first was a regularly scheduled affair usually held on Saturday afternoon. By 1700 there were at least a dozen tracks, important enough to be known by name, scattered through the counties of the Northern Neck and the James River valley. The records are filled with references to contests held at such places as Smith's Field, Coan Race Course, Devil's Field, Yeocomico, and Varina.<sup>43</sup> No doubt, many races also occurred on nameless country roads or convenient pastures. On the appointed day the planter simply appeared at the race track and waited for a likely challenge. We know from a dispute heard before the Westmoreland County Court in 1693 that John Gardner boldly "Challeng'd all the horses then upon the ground to run with any of them for a thousand pounds of Tobo and twenty shillings in money."<sup>44</sup> A second type of contest was a more spontaneous challenge. When gentlemen congregated over a jug of hard cider or peach brandy, the talk frequently turned to horses. The owners presumably bragged about the superior speed of their animals, and if one planter called another's bluff, the men cried out "done, and done," marched to the nearest field, and there discovered whose horse was in fact the swifter.<sup>45</sup>

Regardless of the outcome, quarter-horse races in Virginia were exciting spectacles. The crowds of onlookers seem often to have been fairly large, as common planters, even servants, flocked to the tracks to watch the gentry challenge one another for what must have seemed immense amounts of money and tobacco. One witness before a Westmoreland County Court reported in 1674 that Mr. Stone and Mr. Youle had run a challenge for £10 sterling "in sight of many people."<sup>46</sup> Attendance at race days was sizable enough to support a brisk trade in cider and brandy. In 1714 the Richmond County Court fined several men for peddling liquors "by Retaile in the Race Ground."<sup>47</sup> Judging from the popularity of horses throughout planter

<sup>42</sup> *Virginia Gazette*, Nov. 19-26, 1736, Sept. 30-Oct. 7, 1737.

<sup>43</sup> Bruce, *Social Life*, 195-209; Carson, *Virginians at Play*, 108-110.

<sup>44</sup> Apr. 7, 1693, Westmoreland Co., Order Book, 1690-1698, 92; "Racing in Virginia in 1700-05," *VMHB*, X (1902-1903), 320.

<sup>45</sup> Aug. 1683, Henrico Co. Records [Deeds and Wills], 1677-1692, 254.

<sup>46</sup> Oct. 16, 1674, Westmoreland Co., Deeds, Patents, Etc., 1665-1677, 211; Bruce, *Social Life*, 197-198; Carson, *Virginians at Play*, 109.

<sup>47</sup> Beverley Fleet, ed., *Richmond County Records, 1704-1724*, Virginia Colonial Abstracts, XVII (Richmond, Va., 1943), 95-96.

society, it seems probable that the people who attended these events dreamed of one day riding a local champion such as Prince or Smoaker.

The magnitude of gentry betting indicates that racing must have deeply involved the planter's self-esteem. Wagering took place on two levels. The contestants themselves made a wager on the outcome, a main bet usually described in a written statement. In addition, side wagers were sometimes negotiated between spectators or between a contestant and spectator.<sup>48</sup> Of the two, the main bet was far the more significant. From accounts of disputed races reaching the county courts we know that gentlemen frequently risked very large sums. The most extravagant contest of the period was a race run between John Baker and John Haynie in Northumberland County in 1693, in which the two men wagered 4000 pounds of tobacco and 40 shillings sterling on the speed of their sprinters, Prince and Smoaker.<sup>49</sup> Some races involved only twenty or thirty shillings, but a substantial number were run for several pounds sterling and hundreds of pounds of tobacco. While few, if any, of the seventeenth-century gentlemen were what we would call gambling addicts, their betting habits seem irrational even by the more prudential standards of their own day: in conducting normal business transactions, for example, they would never have placed so much money in such jeopardy.

To appreciate the large size of these bets we must interpret them within the context of Virginia's economy. Between 1660 and 1720 a planter could anticipate receiving about ten shillings per hundredweight of tobacco. Since the average grower seldom harvested more than 1500 pounds of tobacco a year per man, he probably never enjoyed an annual income from tobacco in excess of eight pounds sterling.<sup>50</sup> For most Virginians the conversion of tobacco into sterling occurred only in the neat columns of account books. They themselves seldom had coins in their pockets. Specie was extremely scarce, and planters ordinarily paid their taxes and conducted business transactions with tobacco notes—written promises to deliver to the bearer a designated amount of tobacco.<sup>51</sup> The great preponderance of seventeenth-century planters were quite poor, and even the great planters estimated their income in hundreds, not thousands, of pounds sterling.<sup>52</sup> Fitzhugh, one of the wealthier men of his generation, described his financial situation in detail.

<sup>48</sup> Carson, *Virginians at Play*, 105. See Aug. 29, 1694, Westmoreland Co., Order Book, 1690-1698, 146.

<sup>49</sup> Aug. 22, 1695, Northumberland Co., Order Book, 1678-1698, Pt. 2, 707-708.

<sup>50</sup> Morgan, *American Slavery—American Freedom*, 142, 198, 204.

<sup>51</sup> Bruce, *Economic History*, II, 495-512.

<sup>52</sup> Aubrey Land's analysis of the probate records in a tobacco-producing area in nearby Maryland between 1690 and 1699 reveals that 74.6% of the estates there were worth less than £100 sterling. According to Land, the differences between the social structures of Maryland and Virginia at this time were not "very great." Land, "Economic Base and Social Structure," *Jour. Econ. Hist.*, XXV (1965), 641-644.

"Thus I have given you some particulars," he wrote in 1686, "which I thus deduce, the yearly Crops of corn and Tobo. together with the surplusage of meat more than will serve the family's use, will amount annually to 60000lb. Tobo wch. at 10 shillings per Ct. is 300£ annum."<sup>53</sup> These facts reveal that the Baker-Haynie bet—to take a notable example—amounted to approximately £22 sterling, more than 7 percent of Fitzhugh's annual cash return. It is therefore not surprising that the common planters seldom took part in quarter-horse racing: this wager alone amounted to approximately three times the income they could expect to receive in a good year. Even a modest wager of a pound or two sterling represented a substantial risk.

Gentlemen sealed these gaming relationships with a formal agreement, either a written statement laying out the terms of the contest or a declaration before a disinterested third party of the nature of the wager. In either case the participants carefully stipulated what rules would be in effect. Sometimes the written agreements were quite elaborate. In 1698, for example, Richard Ward and John Steward, Jr., "Covenanted and agreed" to race at a quarter-mile track in Henrico County known as Ware. Ward's mount was to enjoy a ten-yard handicap, and if it crossed the finish line within five lengths of Steward's horse, Ward would win five pounds sterling; if Steward's obviously superior animal won by a greater distance, Ward promised to pay six pounds sterling.<sup>54</sup> In another contest William Eppes and Stephen Cocke asked William Randolph to witness an agreement for a ten-shilling race: "each horse was to keep his path, they not being to crosse unlesse Stephen Cocke could gett the other Riders Path at the start at two or three Jumps."<sup>55</sup>

Virginia's county courts treated race covenants as binding legal contracts.<sup>56</sup> If a gentleman failed to fulfill the agreement, the other party had

<sup>53</sup> William Fitzhugh to Dr. Ralph Smith, Apr. 22, 1686, in Davis, ed., *Fitzhugh Letters*, 176.

<sup>54</sup> The full covenant is reproduced in Stanard, "Racing in Colonial Virginia," *VMHB*, II (1894-1895), 296-298.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>56</sup> Virginia law prohibited fraudulent gaming, certain kinds of side bets, and gambling by persons who had "no visible estate, profession, or calling, to maintain themselves." William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia . . .*, IV (Richmond, 1820), 214-218; George Webb, *Office and Authority of A Justice of Peace . . .* (Williamsburg, Va., 1736), 165-167. Wagers made between two gainfully employed colonists were legal agreements and enforceable as contracts. The courts of Virginia, both common law and chancery, apparently followed what they believed to be standard English legal procedure. Whether they were correct is difficult to ascertain. Sir William Holdsworth explains that acts passed by Parliament during the reigns of Charles II and Anne allowed individuals to sue for gaming debts, but he provides no evidence that English courts regularly settled disputed contests such as horse races. Holdsworth, *A History of English Law* (London, 1966), VI, 404, XI, 539-542.



legitimate grounds to sue; and the county justices' first consideration during a trial was whether the planters had properly recorded their agreement.<sup>57</sup> The Henrico court summarily dismissed one gambling suit because "noe Money was stacked down nor Contract in writing made[,] one of wch in such cases is by the law required."<sup>58</sup> Because any race might generate legal proceedings, it was necessary to have a number of people present at the track not only to assist in the running of the contest but also to act as witnesses if anything went wrong. The two riders normally appointed an official starter, several judges, and someone to hold the stakes.

Almost all of the agreements included a promise to ride a fair race. Thus two men in 1698 insisted upon "fair Rideing"; another pair pledged "they would run fair horseman's play."<sup>59</sup> By such agreements the planters waived their customary right to jostle, whip, or knee an opponent, or to attempt to unseat him.<sup>60</sup> During the last decades of the seventeenth century the gentry apparently attempted to substitute riding skill and strategy for physical violence. The demand for "fair Rideing" also suggests that the earliest races in Virginia were wild, no-holds-barred affairs that afforded contestants ample opportunity to vent their aggressions.

The intense desire to win sometimes undermined a gentleman's written promise to run a fair race. When the stakes were large, emotions ran high. One man complained in a York County court that an opponent had interfered with his horse in the middle of the race, "by meanes whereof the s[ai]d Plaintiff lost the said Race."<sup>61</sup> Joseph Humphrey told a Northumberland County court that he would surely have come in first in a challenge for 1500 pounds of tobacco had not Capt. Rodham Kenner (a future member of the House of Burgesses) "held the defendt horses bridle in running his race."<sup>62</sup> Other riders testified that they had been "Josselled" while the race was in progress. An unusual case of interference grew out of a 1694 race which Rodham Kenner rode against John Hartly for one pound sterling and 575 pounds of tobacco. In a Westmoreland County court Hartly

<sup>57</sup> Not until the 1750s did Virginians begin to discuss gambling as a social vice. See Stith, *The Sinfulness . . . of Gaming*; R. A. Brock, ed., *The Official Records of Robert Dinwiddie*, I (Richmond, Va., 1883), 30-31; Samuel Davies, *Virginia's Danger and Remedy. Two Discourses Occasioned by The Severe Drought . . .* (Williamsburg, 1756).

<sup>58</sup> Oct. 1690, Henrico Co., Order Book, 1678-1693, 351. See also Aug. 28, 1674, Northampton Co., Order Book No. 9, 1664-1674, 269, and Nov. 4, 1674, *ibid.*, No. 10, 1674-1679.

<sup>59</sup> Stanard, "Racing in Colonial Virginia," *VMHB*, II (1894-1895), 267; Henrico Co. Records [Deeds and Wills], 1677-1692, 466.

<sup>60</sup> Carson, *Virginians at Play*, 109-110.

<sup>61</sup> "Some Extracts from the Records of York Co., Virginia," *WMQ*, 1st Ser., IX (1900-1901), 178-179.

<sup>62</sup> Jan. 1694, Northumberland Co., Order Book, 1678-1698, Pt. 2, 643.

explained that after a fair start and without using "whipp or Spurr" he found himself "a great distance" in front of Kenner. But as Hartly neared the finish line, Kenner's brother, Richard, suddenly jumped onto the track and "did hollow and shout and wave his hat over his head in the plts [plaintiff's] horse's face." The animal panicked, ran outside the posts marking the finish line, and lost the race. After a lengthy trial a Westmoreland jury decided that Richard Kenner "did no foule play in his hollowing and waveing his hatt."<sup>63</sup> What exactly occurred during this race remains a mystery, but since no one denied that Richard acted very strangely, it seems likely that the Kenner brothers were persuasive as well as powerful.

Planters who lost large wagers because an opponent jostled or "hollowed" them off the track were understandably angry. Yet instead of challenging the other party to a duel or allowing gaming relationships to degenerate into blood feuds, the disappointed horsemen invariably took their complaints to the courts.<sup>64</sup> Such behavior indicates not only that the gentlemen trusted the colony's formal legal system—after all, members of their group controlled it—but also that they were willing to place institutional limitations on their own competitiveness. Gentlemen who felt they had been cheated or abused at the track immediately collected witnesses and brought suit before the nearest county court. The legal machinery available to the aggrieved gambler was complex; and no matter how unhappy he may have been with the final verdict, he could rarely claim that the system had denied due process.

The plaintiff brought charges before a group of justices of the peace sitting as a county court; if these men found sufficient grounds for a suit, the parties—in the language of seventeenth-century Virginia—could "put themselves upon the country."<sup>65</sup> In other words, they could ask that a jury of twelve substantial freeholders hear the evidence and decide whether the race

<sup>63</sup> Aug. 29, 1694, Westmoreland Co., Order Book, 1690-1698, 146-146a. Also see Oct. 1689, Henrico Co., Order Book, 1678-1693, 313, and Stanard, "Racing in Virginia," *VMHB*, II (1894-1895), 296.

<sup>64</sup> A gentleman could have challenged an opponent to a duel. Seventeenth- and early 18th-century Virginians recognized a code of honor of which dueling was a part, but they did everything possible to avoid such potentially lethal combats. I have found only four cases before 1730 in which dueling was even discussed. County courts fined two of the challengers before they could do any harm. ("A Virginian Challenge in the Seventeenth Century," *VMHB*, II [1894-1895], 96-97; *Lower Norfolk County Antiquarian*, IV [1904], 106.) And two comic-opera challenges that only generated blustery rhetoric are described in William Stevens Perry, ed., *Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church*, I (Hartford, Conn., 1870), 25-28, and Bond, ed., *Byrd's Histories of the Dividing Line*, 173-175. On the court system see Philip A. Bruce, *Institutional History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century . . .*, I (Gloucester, 1910), 484-632, 647-689.

<sup>65</sup> Aug. 29, 1694, Westmoreland Co., Order Book, 1690-1698, 146a.

had in fact been fairly run. If the sums involved were high enough, either party could appeal a local decision to the colony's general court, a body consisting of the governor and his council. Several men who hotly insisted that they had been wronged followed this path. For example, Joseph Humphrey, loser in a race for 1500 pounds of tobacco, stamped out of a Northumberland County court, demanding a stop to "farther proceedings in the Common Law till a hearing in Chancery."<sup>66</sup> Since most of the General Court records for the seventeenth century were destroyed during the Civil War, it is impossible to follow these cases beyond the county level. It is apparent from the existing documents, however, that all the men involved in these race controversies took their responsibilities seriously, and there is no indication that the gentry regarded the resolution of a gambling dispute as less important than proving a will or punishing a criminal.<sup>67</sup> It seems unlikely that the colony's courts would have adopted such an indulgent attitude toward racing had these contests not in some way served a significant social function for the gentry.

Competitive activities such as quarter-horse racing served social as well as symbolic functions. As we have seen, gambling reflected core elements of the culture of late seventeenth-century Virginia. Indeed, if it had not done so, horse racing would not have become so popular among the colony's gentlemen. These contests also helped the gentry to maintain group cohesion during a period of rapid social change. After 1680 the great planters do not appear to have become significantly less competitive, less individualistic, or less materialistic than their predecessors had been.<sup>68</sup> But while the values persisted, the forms in which they were expressed changed. During the last decades of the century unprecedented external pressures, both political and economic, coupled with a major shift in the composition of the colony's labor force, caused the Virginia gentry to communicate these values in ways that would not lead to deadly physical violence or spark an eruption of blood feuding. The members of the native-born elite, anxious to preserve their autonomy over local affairs, sought to avoid the kinds of divisions within their ranks that had contributed to the outbreak of Bacon's Rebellion. They

<sup>66</sup> Jan. 1694, Northumberland Co., Order Book, 1678-1698, Pt. 2, 643.

<sup>67</sup> Sometimes the courts had an extremely difficult time deciding exactly what had occurred at a race. A man testified in 1675 that he had served as the official judge for a contest, and that while he knew which horse had finished first, he was "not able to say much less to Swear that the Horse did Carry his Rider upon his back over the path." Sept. 16, 1675, Surry County, Deeds, Wills and Orders, 1671-1684, 133. For another complex case see Mar. 5, 1685, Rappahannock Co. Orders [no. 1], 1683-1686, 103, 120, 153.

<sup>68</sup> For evidence of the persistence of these values among the gentry in the Revolutionary period see Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXXI (1974), 348-353.

found it increasingly necessary to cooperate against meddling royal governors. Moreover, such earlier unrest among the colony's plantation workers as Bacon's Rebellion and the plant-cutting riots had impressed upon the great planters the need to present a common face to their dependent laborers, especially to the growing number of black slaves who seemed more and more menacing as the years passed.

Gaming relationships were one of several ways by which the planters, no doubt unconsciously, preserved class cohesion.<sup>69</sup> By wagering on cards and horses they openly expressed their extreme competitiveness, winning temporary emblematic victories over their rivals without thereby threatening the social tranquility of Virginia. These non-lethal competitive devices, similar in form to what social anthropologists have termed "joking relationships," were a kind of functional alliance developed by the participants themselves to reduce dangerous, but often inevitable, social tensions.<sup>70</sup>

Without rigid social stratification racing would have lost much of its significance for the gentry. Participation in these contests publicly identified a person as a member of an elite group. Great planters raced against their social peers. They certainly had no interest in competing with social inferiors, for in this kind of relationship victory carried no positive meaning: the winner gained neither honor nor respect. By the same token, defeat by someone like James Bullocke, the tailor from York, was painful, and to avoid such incidents gentlemen rarely allowed poorer whites to enter their gaming relationships—particularly the heavy betting on quarter horses. The common planters certainly gambled among themselves. Even the slaves may have laid wagers. But when the gentry competed for high stakes, they kept their inferiors at a distance, as spectators but never players.

The exclusiveness of horse racing strengthened the gentry's cultural dominance. By promoting these public displays the great planters legitimized the cultural values which racing symbolized—materialism, individualism, and competitiveness. These colorful, exclusive contests helped persuade subordinate white groups that gentry culture was desirable, something worth emulating; and it is not surprising that people who conceded the superiority of this culture readily accepted the gentry's right to rule. The wild sprint down a dirt track served the interests of Virginia's gentlemen better than they imagined.

<sup>69</sup> The planters' aggressive hospitality may have served a similar function. Hospitality in Virginia should be analyzed to discover its relationship to gentry culture. Robert Beverley makes some suggestive comments about this custom in his *History and Present State of Virginia*, 312-313. An interesting comparison to the Virginia practice is provided in Michael W. Young, *Fighting with Food: Leadership, Values and Social Control in a Massim Society* (Cambridge, 1971).

<sup>70</sup> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses* (New York, 1964), chaps. 4, 5.