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**“A Glass of Wine...Is Always Ready”:  
Beverages on Virginia Plantations, 1730-1799**

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Beverages are a critical component of everyday life. As such, what people drink and why they drink it can reveal the complex social, political, and economical environment of those that consume them. By the eighteenth century, the plantations in the coastal region of Virginia had developed into distinctive communities that produced, consumed, and perceived drink in unique ways. At George Washington's Mount Vernon, Landon Carter's Sabine Hall, and other neighboring Virginia plantations, drink crossed boundaries between the elite and non-elite, and the free and enslaved.<sup>1</sup> Within these tense communities, beverages exposed how everyday sustenance was also a tool for the display of power and resistance by both slaves and planters. Planters used drink to advertise their elite status and mediate between their identities as British aristocrats and American patriots. Enslaved African and African-Americans, however, used beverages as a means to negotiate control with planters, resist bondage, and create a new communal identity and culture.

Historians are only just beginning to examine the opportunities the study of foodways and drinkways can offer to our understanding of early America.<sup>2</sup> Many historians have focused their work on the socio-economic implications of the acquisition and production of beverages and have innovatively examined how planters and slaves operated as selective consumers in

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<sup>1</sup> A plantation is typically defined by scholars as a property worked by over 20 slaves. Therefore, while the great plantations of Mount Vernon and Sabine Hall were the exception to the lifestyle of free Americans, 43% of blacks living in the Tidewater region lived on plantations. For more on African-American life in this region, see Allan Kulikoff, "The Origins of Afro-American Society in Tidewater Maryland and Virginia, 1700-1900," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 35.2 (April 1978): 226-259. Beverages had a primary role throughout Virginia but only Mount Vernon, Sabine Hall, and their neighboring plantations will be considered here. Further research will be required to determine how this region compares to plantations in other areas and if it contrasts with the role of beverages on smaller farms, in cities, and with lower classes or free blacks.

<sup>2</sup> Written records from slaves, who typically relied on oral tradition, are rare. Scholars rely heavily on oral testimony of former slaves recorded in the 1930s by the Federal Writers' Project. For these narratives, see George P. Rawick, ed., *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972-9). Due to a lack of written record, studies on early African-American life increasingly rely on material sources. For more on archaeology's role in African-American studies, see John Michael Vlach, "Afro-American Domestic Artifacts in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Material Culture* 19.1 (Spring 1987): 3-23.

eighteenth-century rural and urban environments.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars have built on this foundation to examine how diet can demonstrate how enslaved African and African-Americans negotiated racial, social, or cultural boundaries and transformations.<sup>4</sup>

Much of this scholarship, however, has thus far neglected to examine how food and drink could be methods of control or markers of identity on eighteenth-century plantations. Often favoring broader studies of food's relationship to economy, politics, or cultural transference, many scholars have not investigated how food and drink—for both planters and enslaved peoples—could be tools of identity formation and resistance, particularly in the unique plantation context. These purchases were not just transactions but complex negotiations of identity and social power among and between distinct communities. A focused, regional examination of drinkways more effectively reveals the intimate cultural associations and negotiations plantation communities in coastal Virginia made through their consumption of beverages than in broader studies.<sup>5</sup>

Located on major waterways in eastern Virginia, Mount Vernon and Sabine Hall—  
inherited by their prospective planters, respectively, in 1752 and 1732—were both majestic

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<sup>3</sup> For further information on alcohol production and its implications, see Sarah Hand Meacham, *Every Home a Distillery: Alcohol, Gender and Technology in the Colonial Chesapeake* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). There is a rich array of work that examines the eighteenth-century colonial consumer revolution and the widespread desire for British goods across classes. For works that consider free and enslaved people as consumers in the eighteenth century, see T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) and John T. Schlotterbeck, "The Internal Economy of Slavery in Rural Piedmont Virginia," in *The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas*, ed. Ira Berlin and Phillip D. Morgan (London: Frank Cass and Co, Ltd., 1991). In this scholarship, many historians have used tea as an example of how colonists invested in non-essential items to emulate British culture, but they have not focused solely on beverages and their associated wares.

<sup>4</sup> For investigations of enslaved peoples' diet and its role in African-American culture, see Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) and Frederick Douglass Opie, *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> While both food and drink were daily status symbols, food and drink were made, perceived, and used in different ways by planters and enslaved peoples and can be separate forms of study. For more information on food on colonial Virginia plantations, see Damon Lee Folwer, ed., *Dining at Monticello: In Good Taste and Abundance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) and Stephen McLeod, ed., *Dining with the Washingtons* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Georgian mansions with long piazzas aimed to be a testament to their owners' success. George Washington and Landon Carter were planters, patriots, and politicians whose status reflected and affected their relationship with drink. Their hospitality and visual identity, both closely linked to what and how they consumed beverages of the period, reflected their social and political positions. As widespread public and private commodities, beverages were often effective tools for demonstrating class, identity, and political allegiances in elite Virginian society.

Beverage consumption was deeply woven into Virginian social gatherings and hospitality, especially for elite planters.<sup>6</sup> Almost every occasion was commemorated with alcohol, which was regularly consumed at funerals, weddings, court days, and elections.<sup>7</sup> This common, regular consumption demonstrates how alcohol and other beverages were entrenched in one's public appearance. This made beverages critical for hospitality in elite homes as planters paid careful attention to the variety of drinks and how they were served and consumed. Washington stated it was not his "intention that [wine] should be given to every one who may incline to make a convenience of the house in traveling or who may be induced to visit it from motives of curiosity" but that certain drinks should be reserved for notable guests and himself.<sup>8</sup> While Virginia hospitality dictated that all Mount Vernon guests should be offered a drink, Washington imposed a clear hierarchy in the consumption of beverages to reinforce his status. Through both purchase and production, planters ensured that they distinguished themselves as elites and confirmed their superior status by offering a range of beverages in their business and, more importantly, on their table.

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<sup>6</sup> Dennis J. Pogue, "Drink and Be Merry: Liquor and Wine at Mount Vernon" in *Dining with the Washingtons*, ed. Stephen McLeod (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 97.

<sup>7</sup> Sharon V. Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2002), 126.

<sup>8</sup> Pogue, "Drink and Be Merry," 101.

## Production of Beverages

Taking advantage of their wealth and accessible labor force, many Virginia planters expanded the variety of beverages they could serve, enjoy, and sell by making their own alcohol and beverages on their plantations. Many small planters in the Chesapeake crafted their own ciders, fruit brandies, and ales to meet the needs of the household. Elite planter families, however, could further afford to supplement their table and income with alcohol and beverages made by slaves and hired workers, emphasizing and reinforcing their elite status.<sup>9</sup> After retiring from the presidency, Washington built his own distillery at Mount Vernon under the guide of Scotsman James Anderson, who had large aspirations for the business. Looking for comfort, the reluctant Washington revealed to a friend and rum distiller in Alexandria that “Mr. Anderson has engaged me in a distillery, on a small scale, and is very desirous of encreasing it: assuring me from his experience in this country, and in Europe.”<sup>10</sup> Washington’s reluctance to enter the alcohol business was short-lived. By the end of his life in 1799, Washington would have the largest distillery in Virginia with five stills, compared to the usual two or three.<sup>11</sup> After just two years of operation, Washington’s distillery produced 10,500 gallons of whiskey and brandy in a single year, valued at more than \$7500.<sup>12</sup>

Though also adept businessmen, plantation owners’ reputations rested on their abilities as planters and it was expected that Virginia planters achieve a level of self-sustenance.

Washington, for example, noted that buying new seeds after the first growing season was

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<sup>9</sup> Sarah Hand Meacham, ““They Will be Adjudged By their Drink, What Kinde Housewives They Are”: Gender, Technology and Household Cidering in England and the Chesapeake, 1690-1760,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 111.2 (2003): 118-119.

<sup>10</sup> Washington to John Fitzgerald, June 12, 1797, *The Papers of George Washington: Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel, Rotunda Press.

<sup>11</sup> Dave DeWitt, *Founding Foodies: How Washington, Jefferson and Franklin Revolutionized American Cuisine* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, Inc. 2010), 95.

<sup>12</sup> Pogue, “Drink and Be Merry,” 101.

“disreputable.”<sup>13</sup> Going beyond self-sustenance and growing more exotic crops would have been an even greater expression of exceptional agricultural achievement. The elite sought to demonstrate their agriculture prowess through production of beverages—such as wine—though with limited success. Washington attempted to start his own vineyard, acquiring the grape used to make his prized Maderia wine and others from overseas, but with little reward.<sup>14</sup> Even with numerous plantings of grape cuttings and the reference book, *The abridgement of the Gardeners dictionary: containing the best and newest methods of cultivating the kitchen, fruit, flower garden, and nursery...together with the management of vineyards, and the methods of making wine in England* by Philip Miller in his library, all of Washington’s attempts to grow European grapes failed in the harsh Virginia climate.<sup>15</sup> French military officer Francois-Jean de Chastellux, who served as liaison between French and American forces in the Revolutionary War, missed the beauty of Mount Vernon but teased Washington about his disappointing vineyard:

[I wish I could] walk and go towards the grove to observe the growth of your trees, even of your vineyard, that a french man can, I dare say, examine without jealousy; for, my dear general, you can sow and reap laurels, but grapes and wine are not within the compass of your powers.<sup>16</sup>

Since attempts to recreate European beverages were either widely successful or monumentally disastrous investments, planters instead often used their wealth to bring these desirable products directly to Virginia from across the Atlantic Ocean.

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<sup>13</sup> Washington to William Pearce, November 16, 1794, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources*, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new?id=WasFi34.xml&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=14&division=div1>.

<sup>14</sup> Pogue, “Drink and Be Merry,” 99.

<sup>15</sup> Charles M. Holloway, “Romancing the Vine in Virginia,” *Colonial Williamsburg Journal* (Summer 2002), <http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/Summer02/wine.cfm>.

<sup>16</sup> Francois-Jean de Chastellux to Washington, December 12, 1785, *The Papers of George Washington: Digital Edition*.

## Importation of Beverages

Importing beverages was the clearest marker of a planter's wealthy status. Elevated by their unique, unlimited access to commodities, eighteenth-century planters chose beverages that would display their elite status and their participation in the global market. Many commodities, including select spirits, coffee, drinking chocolate, and other exotic beverages, were attainable only to those with access to the transatlantic trade. Mixed drinks like syllabub, punch or toddy, and cherry bounce—which required expensive additives or spices—were impressive displays of imported alcohol and wealth. For Mount Vernon, Washington ordered coffee from Yemen, the West Indies, and Surinam, wine from France, the Canary Islands, and Portugal, and additives like cinnamon and nutmeg from Asia.<sup>17</sup> This range of products reflects how his wealth gave him comprehensive contact with the global market and the ability to differentiate his practices from other classes. Alcohol, for example, could be created by simply fermenting fruit and was extremely accessible, so planters used the transatlantic trade to distinguish their consumption from the general Virginia population.<sup>18</sup>

Planters and their families were as much concerned with the variety of drinks they offered as the quality since this would demonstrate their ability to afford beverages beyond the means of the majority of the population.<sup>19</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, tea was the most expensive nonalcoholic beverage on a pure price basis, while coffee and chocolate provided cheaper, but more laborious, options per-pound.<sup>20</sup> Though they were more affordable, most colonists did not have the opportunity to commit the labor and time required to roast and prepare

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<sup>17</sup> “Exotic Foods and Beverages,” in *Dining with the Washingtons*, ed. Stephen McLeod (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 108.

<sup>18</sup> Meacham, “They Will be Adjudged By their Drink,” 122.

<sup>19</sup> Joe Gray Taylor, *Eating, Drinking and Visiting in the South: An Informal History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 53.

<sup>20</sup> Kurt Richter and Nghiem Ta, “How Much is that Cocoa in the Window?: Cocoa’s Position in the Early American Marketplace,” in *Chocolate: History, Culture and Heritage*, ed. Louis Evan Grivetti and Howard-Yana Shapiro (Hoboken: John Wiley Sons, Inc., Mars, Inc., 2009), 224.

coffee or drinking chocolate, which made these beverages luxuries and the domain of elite planters' tables. To ensure their distinction, planters frequently ensured that labor-intensive imports, which could only be afforded by the extremely wealthy, made it to their table.

Planters ordered imported beverages primarily because it was expected of their status and would fulfill their desire to display their aristocratic ties. Ordering imports was a time consuming, costly process that was a source of constant frustration for planters and usually undertaken only for its social benefits. In addition to the high cost, beverages had a particular risk for contamination and leakage on lengthy ship voyages. Writing in his diary about his order of wine for his neighbor, Carter wrote that he "opened Mr. Lee's claret...and had 5 bottles broke in it, entirely by the loose careless way of packing it up," an all too frequent occurrence in the shipment of alcohol.<sup>21</sup> William Byrd of Westover, another elite coastal Virginia planter, noted in his diary that "we unpacked the beer that came from England and a great deal was run out" and later exhibited great outrage at those who delivered his goods, remarking that "your convict ship arrived safe with the goods, if one may call that safe where everything is damaged and broke to pieces."<sup>22</sup>

Even beverages that arrived safely could be wrought with problems for planters, who were expected to have these drinks in their household. Washington was continuously irritated with long waits on his orders and poorly packaged goods. Writing an order to his agent in London, Washington pleaded that the Company "send me [these items] by the first Ship bound either to Potomack or Rappahannock, as I am in immediate want of them, Let them be Insurd, and in case of accidents reshipd witht Delay."<sup>23</sup> While these imported beverages were meant to

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<sup>21</sup> Meacham, "They Will be Adjudged by their Drink," 128.

<sup>22</sup> Louis B. Wright and Marion Tingling, ed., *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712* (Richmond: The Dietz Press, 1941) 315; Meacham, "They Will be Adjudged by their Drink," 128.

<sup>23</sup> Washington to Robert Cary & Company, May 1, 1759, *The Papers of George Washington: Digital Edition*.

demonstrate their wealth, Virginia planters resented being taken advantage of by overseas merchants, as planters were at risk for being overcharged for goods months after they were ordered. Washington, on seeing he was charged 17 guineas for a case of 16 bottles that was “a plain one, and such as I could get made in this Country,” dramatically argued that “here must be as great a mistake, or as great an Imposition as ever was offered by a Tradesman.”<sup>24</sup> Though Washington could receive a comparable item for beverage storage in America, he and other planters went through considerable trouble and expense to purchase beverages and items of British and European origin. Imported beverages and related utensils embodied associations with the British Empire and displayed elites’ desire to be linked with English culture.

### **Beverages and Gentility**

Not just an opportunity to display wealth, particular beverages and drinking wares were an opportunity to reinforce genteel English identity. Before revolutionary politics emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century, Virginian planters used beverages to claim a relationship with British aristocracy. The transatlantic trade was a symbol of British imperial power so, by buying British as well as other imported beverages, planters made a distinct political statement. By consuming imported, specialized beverages and associated items, American planters could display their shared connections to elite British society and could demonstrate their participation in the cultural and economical dominance of the European aristocracy.<sup>25</sup>

In the 1760s, 27.5% of expenditures in the colonies were for items produced or imported by Britain. Beverages, like rum and tea, were some of the most popular purchases.<sup>26</sup> Tea, especially symbolic of British culture, was part of the daily life for most Americans of all

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<sup>24</sup> Washington to Robert Cary & Company, August 1, 1761, *The Papers of George Washington: Digital Edition*.

<sup>25</sup> T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): xi-xii.

<sup>26</sup> Terrence H. Witkowski, “Colonial Consumers in Revolt,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 16.2 (Sept. 1989): 218.

classes, including that of elite planters in the eighteenth century.<sup>27</sup> Washington began and ended his day with tea, having multiple cups of tea with his breakfast and then sitting down for tea with his family and guests at sundown after the main meal of the day.<sup>28</sup> Washington's colleague and neighbor George Mason also enjoyed an imported beverage on a daily basis. Mason's son recalled that his father's "habit was every day between 1 and 2 to send for one of his Sons to make the Bowl of Toddy—which was compounded always of West Indian Spirits" which reflects how these imported British beverages were linked with the daily life of colonial elites.<sup>29</sup>

Mason was not alone. As a British import from the West Indies, rum was the most widely-consumed drink in colonial America and appeared frequently on planters' tables in the form of punches and other mixed drinks.<sup>30</sup> Rum's popularity encouraged the development of over 140 colonial rum distillers by 1774, which made sure to use imported molasses from the Caribbean and maintain the drink's connection to the British economy.<sup>31</sup> Though he had a recipe for a "small beer" jotted in his notebook and would have had the means to brew his own beer, Washington often imported porter from England and frequently included specific instructions for his merchant to attain "the best Porter in Bottles."<sup>32</sup> The careful consideration planters gave to the origin of beverages reinforces how colonists were aware of how the transatlantic trade signified British authority and confirmed their cosmopolitan identity.

Planters continuously paid very close attention to where their beverages were coming from in both their personal and business correspondence. In his diary, Byrd dutifully recounted

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<sup>27</sup> "Room Use Study: Recommended Objects," Gunston Hall Plantation, [http://gunstonhall.org/mansion/room\\_use\\_study/beverage.html](http://gunstonhall.org/mansion/room_use_study/beverage.html).

<sup>28</sup> Mary V. Thompson, "Served Up in Excellent Order: Everyday Dining at Mount Vernon," in *Dining with the Washingtons*, ed. Stephen McLeod (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 38-42.

<sup>29</sup> "Room Use Study: Recommended Objects," Gunston Hall Plantation.

<sup>30</sup> DeWitt, *Founding Foodies*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> DeWitt, *Founding Foodies*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Dewitt, *Founding Foodies*, 93; Invoice of Goods to Robert Cary & Company, September 27, 1763, *The Papers of George Washington: Digital Edition*.

all that he ate each day and ensured he noted the type and origin of beverages he drank, including “a bowl of punch of French brandy and oranges” or “some French wine sent... to the Governor.”<sup>33</sup> In the colonial era, Chinese tea was a particular strong symbol of gentility in England and the colonies. Washington was a frequent recipient of “6lb. finest Hyson tea,” showing the consideration he gave to the tea’s origin.<sup>34</sup> Washington also made sure to be precise when he ordered items from abroad, preferring the sweet Maderia wine from Portugal for himself,<sup>35</sup> and requested that, instead of the Maderia, “a box of claret, and some Lisbon, or Tenerif wine,” be laid out for guests.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to variety, quality, and exoticism, planters also concentrated on how they presented beverages in order to exhibit their status and cosmopolitan identity. Specialty wares involved in the preparation, presentation, and consumption of beverages served as tools to strengthen and demonstrate planters’ social distinction and carry out their knowledge of complex, elite manners.<sup>37</sup> Washington served his exotic Chinese tea in impressive Chinese porcelain to guests but owned a variety of tea sets—he bought tea sets three different times—with an astonishing variety of tea cups, saucers, slop bowls, tea kettles, and other specialized wares that required specific knowledge of the tea ceremony that only elites would possess.<sup>38</sup> According to a study of rural elite probate inventories in Virginia and Maryland, 100% document the ownership of tea equipage but only 12% had definite tea sets, which reflects how planters

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<sup>33</sup> Wright and Tinling, ed., *Secret Diary of William Byrd*, 442, 450.

<sup>34</sup> Carol Borchert Cadou, “An Excellent Table: The Art of Dining At Mount Vernon,” in *Dining with the Washingtons*, ed. Stephen McLeod (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 62; Invoice from Robert Carey & Company, April 13 1763, *Papers of George Washington: Digital Edition*; Invoices To Robert Carey & Company, November 15, 176, *Papers of George Washington: Digital Edition*.

<sup>35</sup> Pogue, “Drink and Be Merry,” 99.

<sup>36</sup> Mary V. Thompson, “That Hospitable Mansion: Welcoming Guests at Mount Vernon,” in *Dining with the Washingtons*, ed. Stephen McLeod (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 13.

<sup>37</sup> Ann Smart Martin, “Magical, Mythical, Practical and Sublime: The Meanings and Uses of Ceramics,” in *Ceramics in America*, edited by Robert Hunter (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001), 37.

<sup>38</sup> Cadou, “An Excellent Table,” 62; “Room Use Study: Recommended Objects,” Gunston Hall Plantation.

used both the beverage and its associated vessels to display their superior wealth and familiarity with British aristocratic practices.<sup>39</sup> With a political shift in the second half of the eighteenth century, however, planters altered their consumption patterns and what those beverages conveyed about their identity.

### **Beverages and Patriotism**

With the emergence of the American revolutionary movement and increasing protest against British interference, Virginian planters like Washington and Carter revised their use of beverages to demonstrate their allegiance to the American cause. Formerly used to reinforce their English identity, many elite colonists used beverages to publicly display their patriotism and reject British cultural and economical dominance. After Britain imposed a variety of revenue-raising acts, like the Stamp Act and Townshend Duties, on imported commodities, many colonists participated in a nonimportation movement between 1764 and 1776 in an effort to repeal those laws.<sup>40</sup> In 1770, Washington and Mason helped form the Virginia Nonimportation Association and encouraged fellow planters in Fairfax County to publicly “Agree and promise, that he will strictly and firmly adhere and abide by every Article and resolution therein,” the Association’s pledge to refrain from imported goods.<sup>41</sup> Rather than use beverages to emphasize social distinction, beverages became a method for planters to participate in a new “imagined national community” of Americans—not Englishmen—by publicly displaying personal sacrifice.<sup>42</sup>

Previously a tool for constructing elite status, imported beverages were suddenly shunned by many elite Virginian planters and replaced with new “American” products to demonstrate

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<sup>39</sup> “Room Use Study: Recommended Objects,” Gunston Hall Plantation.

<sup>40</sup> Witkowski, “Colonial Consumers in Revolt,” 220.

<sup>41</sup> Donald M. Sweig, “The Virginia Nonimportation Association Broadside of 1770 and Fairfax County: A Study in Local Participation,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 87.3 (July 1979): 316-317.

<sup>42</sup> Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*, xiii.

their patriotism. In 1770, Washington wrote an order to his merchant in London but vehemently expressed that the order should be fulfilled only “upon [the] condition that the Act of Parliament Imposing a Duty upon Tea, Paper &ca for the purpose of raising a Revenue in America is totally repealed...as it will not be in my power to receive any Articles contrary to our Non-Importation Agreement, to which I have subscribed, & shall religiously adhere to.”<sup>43</sup> Carter conveyed nationalistic passion similar to Washington’s when he ordered silver tablespoons that read “after the repeal of the Stamp Act—1766” in celebration of the perceived success of the nonimportation movement.<sup>44</sup>

Loyal American planters could no longer enjoy tea and imported alcohol, symbols of the British gentry. Carter completely rejected tea from his household in protest of the Parliamentary acts. This act was highly symbolic, as the theatrical machinations and excessive materials required for the elite tea ceremony came to signify the suppressive presence of English rule and culture.<sup>45</sup> Much to his dismay, Carter also had less opportunity to import fine alcohols and was appalled with guests who expected them in the same abundance as before the nonimportation movement and war. In 1776, Carter complains about his son’s disrespect of his hospitality:

The violence of the Present day...is not to be endured. I have been glad to treat all who came to see me as well as I possibly could; but...wine could not be got in the same plenty as usual. I gave as much toddy, beers and Cyder as could be drunk...I thought it pleased; but it seems—because it was not as much as reveling throats could away with, an Opportunity was taken yesterday to resent it.<sup>46</sup>

Washington, too, sacrificed his imported pleasures for the American cause and discontinued his purchased of the imported English beer he enjoyed so much. Replacing his English beer with American brews even after the war, Washington wrote to a friend in France that “we have

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<sup>43</sup> Washington to Robert Cary & Company, August 20, 1770, *Papers of George Washington: Digital Edition*.

<sup>44</sup> Kate Rowland Mason, “Silver Spoons at Sabine Hall,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 18.4 (April 1910): 234.

<sup>45</sup> Rhys Isaac, *Landon Carter’s Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 290; Witkowski, “Colonial Consumers in Revolt,” 223.

<sup>46</sup> Isaac, *Uneasy Kingdom*, 297.

already been too long subject to British prejudices...I use no porter or chess in my family but such as is made in America.”<sup>47</sup> Abstaining from British goods, planters looked to find new “American” beverages to replace tea and imported alcohol.

Refraining from imported products, planters began to “buy American” and seek independence by rejecting imports and their associated meanings.<sup>48</sup> Requiring a new, politically correct national drink but not wanting to give up enjoying their hot beverage in the afternoon, planters turned to coffee and hot chocolate as a substitute for tea.<sup>49</sup> Carter became an avid coffee drinker despite the increased labor, writing that he “had the West India Coffee roasted in my Spit roaster...took nearly 4 hours to roast it well” and ordered 102 pounds of coffee in 1773.<sup>50</sup> In 1767, Washington purchased a coffee pot and two chocolate pots which could indicate an increase in his family’s enjoyment of these beverages as chocolate was commonly served for breakfast at Mount Vernon.<sup>51</sup> Thomas Jefferson, a fellow Virginian, recognized the latest race between coffee and chocolate to become the new national drink for Americans and predicted chocolate would be the victor. Jefferson believed that “by getting it [chocolate] good in quality, and cheap in price, the superiority of the article both for health and nourishment will soon give it the same preference over tea & coffee in America which it has in Spain.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Pogue, “Drink and Be Merry,” 97-98.

<sup>48</sup> Witkowski, “Colonial Consumers in Revolt, 223.

<sup>49</sup> James Gay, “Chocolate Production and Uses in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century North America,” in *Chocolate: History, Culture and Heritage*, ed. Louis Evan Grivetti and Howard-Yana Shapiro (Hoboken: John Wiley Sons, Inc., Mars, Inc., 2009), 294; Anna Blaschke, “Chocolate Manufacturing and Marketing in Massachusetts,” in *Chocolate: History, Culture and Heritage*, ed. Louis Evan Grivetti and Howard-Yana Shapiro (Hoboken: John Wiley Sons, Inc., Mars, Inc., 2009), 349.

<sup>50</sup> “Room Use Study: Recommended Objects,” Gunston Hall Plantation.

<sup>51</sup> Invoice to Robert Carey & Company, July, 20 1767, *Papers of George Washington: Digital Edition*; Thompson, “Served Up in Excellent Order,” 37.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, Nov. 27, 1785, *Founders Early Access*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2009.

## Beverages and the Enslaved Community

The status and identity these planters aimed to uphold, however, depended on complex plantation systems that operated on the labor and bondage of hundreds of enslaved individuals. While the precise number of individuals varied over time, there were about 200 slaves living on the Sabine Hall plantation and over 300 slaves at Mount Vernon near the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>53</sup> With anywhere from 40 to 90 slaves each living in their own communities on Mount Vernon's five adjoining farms, these communities could develop identities with less supervision from whites on large plantations.<sup>54</sup> Within these enslaved communities on plantations, enslaved individuals crafted a unique African-American culture that entwined African tradition with new innovations despite their bondage. African and African-American slaves who lived and labored on these Virginia plantations used beverages as a means of preserving identity, creating community, and negotiating control in the master-slave relationship.

The ways African and African-Americans were able to use and consume beverages, however, depended heavily on what they were able to access. Washington and Carter, like most planters, provided rations for slaves, but beverages were rarely mentioned in their accounts. Forms of milk appear to be one of the only nonalcoholic beverages distributed to slaves by planters on a regular basis. Washington occasionally apportioned buttermilk to his slaves, most likely intended for children, and a European visitor to southern plantations noted that a slave's

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<sup>53</sup> John Michael Vlach, "Afro-American Domestic Artifacts in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Material Culture* 19.1 (Spring 1987): 4; "Slavery at Mount Vernon," Mount Vernon Ladies Association, <http://www.mountvernon.org/meet-george-washington/biography-and-influence/view-slavery>.

<sup>54</sup> Mary V. Thompson, "The Lives of Enslaved Workers on George Washington's Outlying Farms," (lecture, Neighborhood Friends of Mount Vernon, June 16, 1999). By the late eighteenth century, only 17% of the adult enslaved population had emigrated from Africa within the last 10 years. While many slaves may have been descended from diverse African regions and cultures, these differences in ethnic backgrounds faded as most enslaved communities became comprised of native Virginians. For more on the enslaved population, see Allan Kulikoff, "The Origins of Afro-American Society in Tidewater Maryland and Virginia, 1700-1900," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 35.2 (April 1978): 226-259.

midday meal included “skimmed milk.”<sup>55</sup> This indicates slaves were provided few beverages as part of their rations and would have been responsible for providing this nourishment for themselves.

Due to both necessity and resolve, slaves applied their resources and skills to acquire or produce beverages. Regularly subjected to burdensome tasks and extreme exertion in the master’s house, fields, or artisan shops, slaves might have turned to water as a form of sustenance. Before knowledge of purification, colonists commonly perceived water as unhealthy and fit only for animals. Slaves, however, most likely would have been forced to rely on an available water source.<sup>56</sup> Water could come from dug wells, springs, or, most likely, a stream which, even if contaminated, would have an agreeable taste and would not likely be refused by an exhausted individual.<sup>57</sup>

Slaves also might have created their own beverages in their personal time which would provide them the opportunity to craft beverages to fit their distinctive needs and preferences. While juicing fruit was a laborious process that slaves would not have had much personal time to commit to, little labor was required to produce cider once the juice was acquired.<sup>58</sup> Joseph Holmes, a former slave from Henry County, Virginia, stated that Virginia “had its own law about drink [since] dey made de bes’ peach an’ cherry brandy an’ mos’ any kin’ o’ ebber hyeard ob, ‘ceptin dey didn’t ‘low yo’ tuh make drink out ob anything yo’ cud made bread” like corn, so cider would be more likely to appear in slaves’ homes than beer.<sup>59</sup> Possibly using techniques

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<sup>55</sup> Thompson, “The Lives of Enslaved Workers;” Martha B Katz-Hyman, “In the Middle of this Poverty Some Cups and a Teapot: The Material Culture of Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Virginia and Furnishing the Slave Quarters at Colonial Williamsburg,” *Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library Report Series* 350 (1994), <http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/View/index.cfm?doc=ResearchReports%5CRR0350.xml>.

<sup>56</sup> DeWitt, *Founding Foodies*, 37-38.

<sup>57</sup> Taylor, *Eating, Drinking and Visiting in the South*, 90.

<sup>58</sup> Meacham, “They Will be Adjudged By their Drink,” 139.

<sup>59</sup> “Joseph Holmes,” *American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/holmes1.html>.

passed down through their family and community, slaves also created their own unique beverages that mimicked colonial drinks using the limited materials available to them in their enslavement. Just as poor whites did, slaves used items from their own gardens—such as cowpeas and sweet potatoes—to make substitutes for inaccessible beverages, like coffee.<sup>60</sup> Refusing to be limited to the commodities the master dictated and those that the plantation offered, slaves used beverages to demonstrate personal choice and control over their daily life.

### **Beverages and the Internal Economy**

Through an internal economy on the plantation, slaves appropriated some control over their diet from their masters by purchasing their choice of beverages for themselves. By tending gardens and raising livestock on their personal time, slaves could sell animals and produce to earn income and buy beverages. Many slaves at Mount Vernon sold their goods to the Washington family or in the nearby port city of Alexandria, demonstrating a remarkable level of entrepreneurship. Using their income, slaves became active consumers who made their own decisions about what they consumed.<sup>61</sup> Slaves could purchase necessities and luxuries such as coffee, tea, and sugar, as well as alcohol for themselves and their families.<sup>62</sup> In a custom known as “night shop” at Sabine Hall, slaves would trade chickens for rum with Carter’s overseers, creating a complex economy between free and enslaved people on the plantation.<sup>63</sup> Despite their agency, slaves’ access to some products was still restricted by limited income and the constraints of enslavement. One pound of chocolate, for example, cost as much as 15 pounds of salted fish

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<sup>60</sup> Taylor, *Eating, Drinking and Visiting in the South*, 90. Many of the items slaves grew in Virginia would have been familiar to individuals from Africa or those of African descent. Crops, like sweet potatoes or black-eyed peas, were either native to Africa or had been part of African agriculture since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For more on the relationship between African and African-American foodways, see Frederick Douglass Opie, *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>61</sup> Thompson, “The Lives of Enslaved Workers.”

<sup>62</sup> Taylor, *Eating, Drinking and Visiting in the South*, 90; Thompson, “The Lives of Enslaved Workers.”

<sup>63</sup> Vlach, “Afro-American Domestic Artifacts,” 7.

so slaves most likely rarely consumed this beverage.<sup>64</sup> In addition to purchasing beverages, slaves also bought specialty wares associated with drinking that aided them in constructing their own environment on the plantation.

Besides beverages, slaves also bought vessels and accoutrements associated with drinking. This commitment to beverages demonstrates that, like planters, enslaved communities had expectations over how drinks should ideally be prepared and consumed within their culture. Living in comparatively impoverished conditions, slaves would have had a variety of needs when it came time to purchase goods but drinkware was continuously selected as a proper purchase. A Polish visitor to Mount Vernon described a cabin there as “more miserable than the most miserable of the cottages of our peasants” but, unexpectedly, he found “in the middle of this poverty, some cups and a teapot” which reflects how slaves put more importance on having specialty drinkware in their homes than other possible needs.<sup>65</sup>

In the excavation of the House for Families at Mount Vernon, where a majority of slaves who worked the Mansion House Farm lived, almost 100 sherds of various teawares were identified, including tea bowls.<sup>66</sup> The variety of wares suggests that most of these goods would have been purchased or acquired over an extended period of time. Over one-fourth of the ceramics at the site were white salt glazed stoneware and the Washingtons used ceramics of this style in their household for many years before it fell out of fashion.<sup>67</sup> These findings indicate some of these wares may have been passed down to slaves for their use.<sup>68</sup> Many sherds, however, are Chinese porcelain which is a more elite product and would most likely have been

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<sup>64</sup> Gay, “Chocolate Production and Uses,” 292.

<sup>65</sup> “The Slave Diet,” in *Dining with the Washingtons*, ed. Stephen McLeod (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 110.

<sup>66</sup> House for Families, Query, DAACS, The Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery, <http://www.daacs.org/resources/sites/background/24/>.

<sup>67</sup> “The Slave Diet,” 111.

<sup>68</sup> “The Slave Diet,” 111.

selected by slaves themselves. While they bought items similar to what planters' families utilized, it cannot be assumed enslaved communities were using these items in the same way or that these had the same meanings for slaves as they did for elite Anglo-American whites. Holmes recalled that "us had our brandy same as yo'wud coffee, 'cayse hit wuz cold sum mawnings" which shows that different cultural and practical preferences altered the way beverages were viewed and consumed by slaves.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to operating within a sanctioned economy to gain personal choice, slaves resorted to thievery to attain their desired beverages and resist the control of masters. Writing to the manager of his estate in 1792, Washington wrote a scathing tirade against his overseers for their negligence and noted that "it is to such inattention & want of exertion, together with the opportunities that are given my Negros, that Robberies have got to the height they are," a common complaint by planters.<sup>70</sup> Thievery, especially of or to acquire alcohol, was a source of constant grievance for planters. Masters, however, were hesitant to carry out intense punishment since slaves possessed valuable skills they depended on.

Carter was convinced Manuel, the enslaved plowman at Sabine Hall, stole and sold the fodder from the animals in his care to procure liquor and Carter even took Manuel to trial in 1774.<sup>71</sup> Arguing that Manuel "took to drinking and whoring til at last he was obliged to steal, and robbed my storehouse of near half the shirts and shifts," Carter failed to carry out his threats because of Manuel's talents.<sup>72</sup> Dejectedly, Carter admitted that Manuel was "a valuable fellow, the best plowman and mowman I ever saw" despite his drinking. Manuel's constant pursuit of drink and stealing indicates he was aware of his value and actively exploited Carter's

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<sup>69</sup> "Joseph Holmes," *American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology*.

<sup>70</sup> Washington to Anthony Whitting, December 2, 1792, *Papers of George Washington: Digital Edition*.

<sup>71</sup> Isaac, *Uneasy Kingdom*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> Isaac, *Uneasy Kingdom*, 21.

dependence on him.<sup>73</sup> Carter found himself in similar situation with his enslaved gardener, Johnny. Johnny was demoted from his job because he was “a drunkard, a thief and a rogue” but the replacement lacked the skills Johnny had so Carter reinstated him after only three months.<sup>74</sup> Washington also had to make concessions with slaves in skilled, trusted positions, like his butler Frank Lee. Martha Washington requested that her niece at Mount Vernon refrain from giving out “another Bottle out of the vault—I make not the least doubt Frank drinks as much wine as he gives to visitors—and rum both.” Even though she acknowledged Frank’s pilfering, Frank was still left in charge of managing the household and overseeing the care of expensive linens, china, and silverware.<sup>75</sup> Thievery reflects how slaves’ persistent pursuit of drink was not only a way for slaves to obtain desirable beverages but to also resist their master’s expectations for their behavior.

### **Beverages and Bargaining**

Drink was also a bargaining tool used by both masters and slaves to gain advantages and control in their relationship. Masters often provided slaves with rations of alcohol as a reward or for special occasions. Many masters, including Washington, would provide their slaves with alcohol, like whiskey or rum, at Christmas and the Fourth of July when they typically received one to five days off.<sup>76</sup> Slaves were also rewarded with alcohol after they performed particularly laborious tasks, such as during harvest time when they would receive a half-pint to a pint of rum or whiskey each day.<sup>77</sup> In addition to harvest time, Washington would provide a pint of rum to

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<sup>73</sup> Isaac, *Uneasy Kingdom*, 21.

<sup>74</sup> Isaac, *Uneasy Kingdom*, 32, 201.

<sup>75</sup> “Frank Lee the Butler,” in *Dining with the Washingtons*, ed. Stephen McLeod (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 75.

<sup>76</sup> Pogue, “Drink and Be Merry,” 101; Sarah Hand Meacham, *Every Home a Distillery: Alcohol, Gender and Technology in the Colonial Chesapeake* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>77</sup> Meacham, “They Will be Adjudged By their Drink,” 127.

the slaves who fished large catches from the Potomac in the spring.<sup>78</sup> By using desirable beverages as a reward, masters attempted to maintain control over their exploitation of slaves' labor and appear to be caring masters. Byrd recalled that he "inquired of my people how everything was and they told me well; I gave them some rum and cider to be merry with" which demonstrates how Byrd felt he was acting as an attentive and generous master.<sup>79</sup> Slaves, however, could also use alcohol to their own advantage in bartering control and exercising their will.

While planters perceived their use of alcoholic rewards as an indicator of their willful munificence, slaves seized the opportunity to make demands of their masters and create customs they expected to be followed. If planters set a precedent for supplying slaves with alcohol, slaves would often come to expect such a reward and rebelled if planters attempted to stop providing it.<sup>80</sup> At first thinking about no longer providing his slaves with alcohol during harvest time, Washington changed his mind and decided that since his slaves "have always been accustomed to it, a hogshead of rum must be purchased."<sup>81</sup> Slaves were also aware that these beverages could be used to take advantage of farm managers and overseers, in a form of passive, yet effective, resistance. Scolded by Washington for giving slaves more rum than usual during harvest time, his overseer James Butler wrote that the slaves cutting oats "assur'd me that your Excellency always allowed 'em that--& I really cou'd not think, or imagine, that any Person WhatsoEver dare ask, or even take, more that What you allow'd them."<sup>82</sup> Slaves used drink to subvert the master's power and to distort the master's perceived instrument of control for their

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<sup>78</sup> DeWitt, *Founding Foodies*, 87.

<sup>79</sup> Wright and Tirling, ed., *Secret Diary of William Byrd*, 459.

<sup>80</sup> Meacham, *Every Home a Distillery*, 19.

<sup>81</sup> Meacham, *Every Home a Distillery*, 20.

<sup>82</sup> James Butler to Washington, August 7, 1793, *Papers of George Washington: Digital Edition*.

own purpose. Not just a tool for negotiating control with masters, slaves also used drink as a means to preserve identity and create community.

Beverages were a critical part of religion and celebration for slaves who began to construct a new, shared identity based on African tradition and innovation. Though a rare opportunity, slaves took advantage of personal time and escape from the master's surveillance by gathering, playing music, and drinking. A traveler in nearby Maryland observed slaves celebrating, noting "100s and 100s of blacks were assembled...gaming, fiddling, dancing, drinking, cursing and swearing."<sup>83</sup> These alcohol-laden celebrations were moments of communal escape and enjoyment where slaves could dictate their own identity and behavior. Slaves also used alcohol in religious ceremonies, which were critical to their sense of identity.

Besides fulfilling true beliefs and spiritual need, religious ceremonies and beverages associated with them provided slaves with the opportunity to make demands from masters and create community outside of masters' surveillance.<sup>84</sup> While most ex-slave testimonies mysteriously failed to mention alcohol, these beverages were frequently consumed in both secret and recognized gatherings.<sup>85</sup> While the planters generally supplied the alcohol slaves enjoyed at weddings, funerals, and other gatherings, slaves used alcohol in a way that demonstrated slaves' own sense of tradition and their anticipation of certain rights.<sup>86</sup> Similar to their expectations at harvest time, slaves expected their master's cooperation in fulfilling their religious ceremonies, like when a slave came to planter Robert Carter to request money to purchase brandy for the

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<sup>83</sup> Meacham, *Every Home a Distillery*, 20.

<sup>84</sup> Different slaves—exposed to African traditions, Christianity, and Islam—had complex, diverse beliefs systems. In some cases, slaves and their communities used their faith and religious practices as a form of resistance to planters' control. For additional insight on early religions, see Charles E. Orser, Jr., "The Archaeology of Slave Religion in the Antebellum South," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 4:1 (1994): 33-45.

<sup>85</sup> Isaac, *Uneasy Kingdom*, 220.

<sup>86</sup> Meacham, *Every Home a Distillery*, 20.

funeral of his granddaughter and Carter obliged.<sup>87</sup> Slaves also used alcohol in medicine, which was often incorporated into religious belief and ceremony since medicine men were often spiritual leaders as well.<sup>88</sup> Planters also provided beverages to treat slaves' illnesses, though not in spiritual fashion. Washington reluctantly allowed his farm manager to provide "sweeten'd Teas-broths" to ailing slaves and acknowledged, "Sometimes a little wine may be necessary to nourish & restore the patient."<sup>89</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Prevalent in the lives of both elite planters and enslaved blacks, beverages provide a unique perspective of the cultural and political conflicts that existed on plantations in eighteenth-century Virginia. Not just forms of sustenance, beverages were used in the complex negotiations of power and identity for these two distinct, yet intersecting, communities. The purchase, consumption, and use of beverages on plantations reflect how drinkways and material culture can offer critical, personal insight into these intricate relationships. During an era of great tension, both elite planters and slaves used beverage consumption as a way to display, maintain, and create new identities and personal statements.

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<sup>87</sup> Meacham, *Every Home a Distillery*, 20.

<sup>88</sup> Kulikoff, "The Origins of Afro-American Society," 257.

<sup>89</sup> Washington to Anthony Whitting, October 28, 1792, *Papers of George Washington: Digital Edition*.

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