

Chapter 2

Social Class in Colonial America

Divisions based on income, occupation, education, and decision-making power have always existed in societies. These divisions are referred to as social classes. One can identify lower, middle, and upper classes as they are defined by income, occupation, education, and power.

The term social mobility refers to the likelihood or ability of a person to move up from one social class to another. Two hundred years ago, in Europe, it was almost impossible for an individual to improve his social position. In the colonies, however, social class divisions did not prevent social mobility. Many colonists, such as Ben Franklin, were born in poverty and rose to the highest level of society. The question remains, however, just how deep were the social divisions in America and how much mobility was there? Historians disagree. Some argue that most Americans belonged to the middle class or could easily move up into it; others claim that colonial society was deeply divided along class lines and controlled by a small upper class or elite group.

This chapter provides both primary (first-hand or eyewitness) sources and secondary accounts (based on data or information from the times) on the existence of social class divisions in the colonies.

William Byrd's Secret Diary

William Byrd, one of the richest men in 18th-century America, was born on the frontier and educated in England. He owned a huge mansion in Virginia, one of the largest libraries in the colonies, and 179,000 acres of land. He kept a detailed secret diary in a private shorthand that has only recently been deciphered. Following are several entries.



William Byrd

August, 1709

I rose at 5 o'clock and read a chapter in Hebrew and 150 verses in Homer, I said my prayers, and ate milk for breakfast. I danced my dance (exercised). The child had her fever again last night for which I gave her a vomit this morning, which worked very well. Anaka was whipped yesterday for stealing the rum and filling the bottle up with water. I went to church, where were abundance of people, among whom was Mrs. H-m-l-n, a very handsome woman. Colonel Eppes and his wife, came to dine with me, who told me that Tom Haynes was gone out of his wits. I sent Tom and Eugene to Mr. Harvey's to meet me tomorrow morning. I took a walk about the plantation I said my prayers. I had good health, good thoughts, and good humor thanks be to God Almighty.

November, 1709

I rose at 6 o'clock and read a chapter in Hebrew and some Greek in Lucian. I said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast, and settled some accounts, and then went to court where we made an end of the business. We went to dinner about 4 o'clock and I ate boiled beef again. In the evening I went to Dr. Barret's where my wife came this afternoon. Here I found Mrs. Chiswell, my sister Castes, and other

ladies. We sat and talked until about 11 o'clock and then retired to our chambers. I played at (r-m) with Mrs. Chiswell and kissed her on the bed till she was angry and my wife also was uneasy about it, and cried as soon as the company was gone. I neglected to say my prayers – which I should not have done, because I ought to beg pardon for the lust I had for another man's wife. However I had good health, good thoughts, and good humor, thanks be to God Almighty.

October, 1710

I rose about 5 o'clock and got myself ready for my journey and about 6 o'clock I recommended my wife and my family to God's protection, and after my people had set me over the creek, I got on horseback about 7 and proceeded to Williamsburg where I arrived about 12. About 1, I went to wait on the Governor, where I found Colonial Digges and several other gentlemen. My wife sent a present of blue wing which were kindly accepted. I ate some roast beef for dinner. In the afternoon we drank a bottle of claret and then we took leave of the Governor and went to the coffeehouse where after we had settled some accounts of the naval officers. We played at cards till 11 o'clock. Then I went to my lodgings but my man was gone to bed and I was shut out. However I called him and beat him for it. I neglected to say my prayers but had good thoughts, good health, and good humor, thank God Almighty.¹

The Autobiography of Devereux Jaratt

Unlike Byrd's secret diary, this autobiography was written for public consumption. Jaratt, who became a minister, used much of his autobiography to draw moral lessons for his readers. However, he also revealed something of his life and experience.

I begin, as is usual in works of this sort, with my birth and parentage. I was born in New Cent, a county in Virginia, about 25 miles below Richmond, on January 6th, 1732. I was the youngest child of Robert Jaratt and Sarah his wife. My grandmother, as I was told, was a native of Ireland. Both she and my grandfather died before I was born, and I have had no account of them, except that they were poor people, but industrious, and rather rough in their manners. They acquired a pretty good tract of land, of near 1200 acres, but they had no slaves – probably they were prejudiced against that kind of property. My father was brought up to the trade of a carpenter, at which he worked till the very day before he died. He was a mild, inoffensive man, and much respected among his neighbors. None of my ancestors, on either side, were either rich or great, but had the character of honesty and industry, by which they lived in credit among their neighbors, free from real want, and above the frowns of the world. This was also the habit, in which my parents were. They always had plenty of plain food and clothing, wholesome and good, suitable to their humble station, and the times in which they lived. Our food was altogether the produce of the farm, or plantation, except a little sugar, which was rarely used; and our clothing was altogether my mother's manufacture, except for hats and shoes, the latter of which we never put on, but in the winter season. We made no use of tea or coffee for breakfast, or at any other time; nor did I know a single family that made any use of them. Meat, bread and milk was the ordinary food of all my acquaintance. I suppose the richer sort might make use of those and other luxuries, but to such people I had no access. We were accustomed to look upon what were called gentle folks as beings of a superior order. For my part, I was quite shy of them, and kept off at a humble distance. A periwig, in those days, was a distinguishing badge of gentle folk, and when I saw a man riding the road, near our house, with a wig on, it would so alarm my fears, and give me such a

¹Louis B. Wright, ed. William Byrd, *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-12*, Richmond, Va., Dietz Press, 1941.

disagreeable feeling, that, I dare say, I would run off, as for my life. Such ideas of the difference between gentle folks and simple, were, I believe, universal among all of my rank and age.

*Both my brothers were taught the trade of a carpenter and millwright, at which they worked for the most part of their lives. They both died about the middle of life. At 8 or 9 years old, I was sent to an English school in the neighborhood: – and I continued to go to one teacher another, as opportunity served (though not without great interruptions) till I was 12 or 13. In this time I learned to read in the Bible, (though but indifferently) and to write a sorry scrawl, and acquired some knowledge of Arithmetic. With this small fund, I left school; no further care was bestowed on my education.*²

Story of a Virginia Servant

A Virginia servant, accused of attempting to kill his mistress, tells his tale in court. This account is taken from court records.

*I was delivered into the custody of one Lewis Connor of Barme-doe Hundred Virginia who sold me off to one Cutbeard Williamson, living at a Plantation called Hard Labour, Virginia. Williamson promised me I should be employed in Teaching his Children, and not be set to any manual work, unless necessity did compel now and then, merely for a short spurt. But though I did not lack for clothes or food, yet I found their dealings contrary to their fair promises; which much disheartened me. And though my labour at the House was very irksome, I was however resolved to do my utmost at it; yet that which embittered my life, and made everything I took in hand difficult to me, was the unworthy ill-usage which I received daily and hourly from my ill-tongued Mistress; who would not only swear and curse at me within doors, whenever I came into the house casting on me biting Taunts; but like a live Ghost would haunt me, when I was quiet in the Ground at work. And although I silently worked as fast as she demanded, doing my labor, without so much as muttering at her, or answering anything good or bad; yet all the silence and observance that I could use, would not charm her vile tongue. Those things burning and broiling in my breast, tempted me to take the trip, and give my master the bag to hold; thereupon I ran off, and got on board Capt. Larimore's ship, where I remained eleven days, or thereabouts. At length home I came, begg'd pardon of my Master for my fault, and all seemed pretty well again. But my ill-usage proving still worse than before, my Mistress ever taunting me with her wicked Tongue.*³

A Slave is Beaten

Philip Fithian, the tutor on one of the largest Virginia plantations, kept a diary from which the following excerpt was taken.



Thursday, December 23, 1773. Except for some favorite slaves who wait on the table, their [the slaves'] weekly allowance is a peck of corn and a peck of meat apiece! And Mr. Carter is admitted by everyone to be, and from what I have seen of others I have no doubt at all that he is, by far the most humane master to his slaves of any in this area! Good God! Are these Christians?

While I am on the subject, I will relate further what I heard Mr. George Lee's overseer say the other day that he had done to Negroes himself and had found useful. He said that whipping of any kind does them no good for they will laugh at your latest severity. But he told us he had invented two things and proved their effectiveness by trying them several times. First tie them fast to a post. Then take a sharp curry comb and comb and curry him severely until he is well scraped; then call a boy with some dry hay and make the boy rub him down for

²Douglass Adair, *The Autobiography of Devereux Jaratt*, "William and Mary Quarterly", Vol. IX, no. 3, July, 1952, p. 360-63.

*several minutes; and then salt him and release him. He will, said this human savage, attend to his business afterwards!*³

Probate and Tax Records

Much fragmentary evidence of colonists' wealth and life styles can be found by examining tax and probate records. Parts of such records are reproduced below:

Name: William Call
Occupation: Baker
Estate: £24.14.2*
Including: £10 household equipment
Other: £2.6 silver watch

Name: Ebenezer Kezar
Occupation: Blacksmith
Estate: £287.10
Including: £50 personal property
£3.96 tools

Name: Andrew Sigourney
Occupation: Distiller
Estate: £1,400

Name: Ephraim Copeland
Occupation: Tailor
Estate: £266.13.4 house and land, silver watch, silver buckle, two gold rings, etc.⁴

An Historian's Conclusions

A well-known historian, Jackson Turner Main, spent years examining the evidence of social class divisions in the colonies and published his conclusions in a highly regarded book, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America*. The following excerpt is taken from the final chapters of this book:

Revolutionary society was certainly not classless, yet neither was it entirely aristocratic. It contained the essential elements for an aristocracy while at the same time possessing the potential for social and economic democracy. There was, of course, a proletariat class of those who always remained at the bottom. Slaves formed the largest part of this class. They totaled 23 percent of the whole population in 1760 and a little less than that thirty years later. Four-fifths of these were in the South, near the coast. Where slaves were scarce, white indentured servants or wage-workers were used instead. Less numerous than the Negroes, the white laborer usually formed only about one-fifth of the whites...certainly fewer than half, possibly only one-fourth of them failed to become small property holders. Therefore out of twenty whites only one or two remained permanently poor....Thus the whole proletariat, white and black, totaled less than 30 percent of the population. At any point in time, revolutionary society contained a lower class comprising between one-third and two-fifths of the men. If defined by occupation, it included Negro slaves, white servants, and landless laborers employed by property owners such as farmers, artisans and merchants. If defined by income, the lower class (generally) had almost none, except that they were given food, clothing, and shelter; free workers,

³Quoted in Charles Sellars, et al. *As It Happened*, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1975, p. 85, from *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774, A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*, ed. Hunter D. Farish Williamsburg, Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 1965, pp. 38-39.

⁴Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1965, pp. 133-34.

however, did receive a money wage which enabled them to save. If defined by property, the men of this economic rank almost always had estates of less than £50 and usually they had none.

The free workers, with their money and opportunities for advancement, belonged to an intermediate category. They were partially independent, owned some property and perhaps some skill, were poor but not impoverished, and often were moving up into the middle class. Many farmers were no better off; there were, for example, numerous landowners in western Massachusetts and southern Delaware, the annual value of whose land was assessed at under £50. Many tenants were also poor, while perhaps 30 percent of the skilled artisans, especially many weavers, cordwainers, carpenters, coopers and tailors, left very small estates. These men did not earn enough money to support their family adequately most of the time.

The middle class of America consisted of small property holders who were usually self employed. Its members are distinguished, at the lower end of the scale, from servants and slaves, others who had little or no property, and from the wage workers who depended entirely upon their daily labor; while at the other end they merge without any sharp definition into the upper-class of men with large estates. Whereas the lower class lived at or barely above the subsistence level, the "middling sort" lived in comfort.

This largest and most important part of revolutionary society was made up of several occupational groups. Small farmers were the most numerous element, comprising 40 percent of the whites and one-third of the whole population....These farmers furnished most of their own needs and earned at least £16 in cash (or credits) which permitted them to pay their debts and taxes, buy a few luxury articles, and save a little....The more fortunate, who had good land in commercial farming areas, cleared much more than £16 and presented an agreeable picture of the ideal American, the prosperous farmer. Second in number among the middling sort were the "artisans and mechanics" or "craftsmen". These were of two types. Some of them were not entrepreneurs, but skilled workers who hired themselves out by the day, week, or year. Receiving from £40 to £50 annually, they could save a good deal of money so long as they remained single, but the married man just broke even; indeed if he had to rent a house and buy all of his food, £50 scarcely met expenses. Fortunately most of these artisans raised much of their own food and were thereby able to live in reasonable comfort and even acquire some property. Apparently almost half of them significantly improved their economic position.

The great majority of skilled workers...were independent businessmen who ordinarily kept a workshop in or near their houses. These were equivalent to farmers in that they were self-employed, but they usually ranked somewhat below the free farmer both in wealth and prestige. Their income and chance of increasing it depended upon their particular craft. The majority never rose above the middle rank, for the trades of cooper, cordwainer, blacksmith, tailor, weaver, or carpenter seldom provided a large return. On the other hand, they also required little equipment and were in great demand, so that the apprentice could quite easily become a master. A few types of enterprise were by their nature more profitable for the enterpriser. Distillers, rope makers, goldsmiths and the like were businessmen whose economic position compared favorably with that of prosperous farmers and many professional men.

Professional men as a whole also belonged to the middle class, earning considerably more than most farmers and artisans but not enough to raise them decisively into the economic elite.⁵

⁵ Ibid.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Define or identify and briefly show the importance to the chapter of each of the following:

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| a. social class | e. Byrd and politics | i. Virginia servant's mistress |
| b. secret diary | f. Jarratt's parents | j. "fair promises" broken |
| c. Byrd and servants | g. Jarratt's education | k. weekly allowance |
| d. Byrd and women | h. Jarratt and "gentle folks" | l. curry comb |

Drawing Conclusions from Primary Sources

This chapter contains both primary and secondary source material depicting social classes at the time of the Revolution. Primary sources consist of records left by the people who lived at the time. They may include diaries, court records, autobiographies, newspaper articles, and such objects as weapons, paintings, pictures, household furnishings, old buildings and so forth. Secondary sources, on the other hand, are accounts written by historians or observers who have used primary or secondary sources to comment on the events. Historians are trained to analyze and evaluate primary documents and to write balanced and objective accounts.

2. Using the primary sources contained in this chapter, draw some conclusions about social class in colonial America. If your teacher directs, present these conclusions in a paragraph or short essay, containing a thesis, main body, and a conclusion.
3. Using the secondary sources, try to diagram the class structure in the colonies.
4. Evaluate the advantages and disadvantage of using primary and secondary sources to answer the question, "what happened?".