

Cavalier People and Cavalier Attitudes: Lynchpins of America's Independence¹

cavalier

adjective: **Careless:** Showing an arrogant or jaunty disregard or lack of respect for something or somebody.

noun: **Gentleman:** a gallant or chivalrous man, especially one escorting a lady.

In my childhood, I recall watching movies about America's early settlers and their heroic feats. I remember one film about the Virginia Cavaliers. They were brave, brutal, and unfailingly polite. They were swashbuckling soldiers who wore clothes resembling cross-dressers. Yet they fought-off British and Indian enemies.

It appeared to me their effete apparel and powdered wigs were at-odds with their aggressive behavior. I had trouble associating the pillages of the British colonialists with their refined accents and parlor room behavior. Their behaviors seemed disconnected from each other. They subjugated and conjugated with equal élan and efficiency. The Virginia Gentlemen fit both of the dictionary definitions cited above.

After moving to Virginia, I began to study the history of my resident state. What I learned is different from the recollections of my high school history class: The principal founding state for America's fair democracy was not very democratic and not very fair.

A significant aspect of Colonial Virginia was the hierarchical class system that prevailed throughout the culture, most of it imported from southwest England. The majority of Virginia settlers came from Wessex, It was harsh country. Unlike some parts of Europe, the people in this region believed in a strict patriarchal way of living. This culture was also imported into Virginia. If you were not part of a closed loop of the landed gentry (known as the Cavaliers), you were consigned to a rank of inferior standing. Anyone occupying a position less in status than a planter had a hard life. Only 10 percent of the population were Cavaliers, yet they owed 50-75 percent of the assets.

For centuries, the inhabitants in this part of England developed a unique way of speaking the English language as well as practicing different social norms. The so-called Southern accent was not invented in America's south (it was refined there). It came from dialects that were spoken in south and west England during the times Virginia was being settled.

Even aspects of southern cooking had its origins in southwestern England, especially the consumption of red meat and frying (the latter called "Dorset cooked"). The extraordinary food from the Chesapeake Bay took second seat to roast beef. American "plants" such as potatoes and tomatoes were not popular. English asparagus and strawberries were favorites.

Religious Intolerance

One of the most interesting ironies surrounding the Virginia Gentlemen was their religious rigidity and intolerance. Yet these very men helped forge several of America's documents that explicitly granted religious freedom and prevented the state from dictating religious practices. To gain a sense of this remarkable anomaly, here are some quotes from Fischer's masterpiece:²

¹ Unless noted otherwise, the statistics and most of the facts in this essay are sourced from David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed, Four British Folkways of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

² *Ibid.*, 233-234.

- Every Sunday all the settlers were compelled to attend two services conducted with high ceremony.
- Parishioners...had to pay a shilling for each absence. They also had to pay tithes and were forbidden to “disparage” their ministers.
- After 1642 (the colony Governor) added other laws, which required “all nonconformants...to depart the colony with all conveniency.”
- When Quakers began to appear, the authorities moved quickly against them.
- One defiant (Quaker) was ordered to be whipped (with) twenty strokes upon her bare back. She was required to confess her error upon bended knee.

No Happiness Until Morale Improves

The strict class system meant the initial land owners, who were deeded the land by the English King, formed a cadre of gentlemen who perpetuated their high rolling life. This life included electing themselves to the offices that allowed them to give away yet more land...mostly to themselves. Time-after-time, the landed gentry granted themselves thousands of acres of land. They were part of an insider network in England and transported the network to Virginia.

The system was gamed. In Virginia, the Crown owned the land. Access and passing of ownership was controlled by the Royal Governor and his governing body, the Council. For almost two centuries, these men controlled the distribution of Virginia’s terrain. To be fair to these landed gentry, as an enticement to emigrate, fifty acres was given to each person who came to Virginia. But some tracts were over 800 acres, and the grants for the insiders could be over thirty square miles (about 20,000 acres).

The “Northern Neck” (the birthplaces of George Washington and Robert E. Lee) was given to the supporters of Charles II (after the Restoration). Do the names of Fairfax and Culpepper ring a bell? These rough and ready settlers---who have a county and city named after them respectively---got their land through this spoils system. The famous Beverley Manor was given to William Beverley. The price was one pound for every 1,000 acres. The plantation had 118,000 acres. Beverley became even more affluent by his farming of this land. He built stores for his “employees” to purchase their goods. He even built their churches.

The lower class people had little leverage on life. They ate a lot of gruel and their owners beat them with regularity. One of the famous Virginia families (the Byrds) kept records of their violence. William Byrd made these entries into his diary (the italics are mine):³

4 April 1720: My maid Rose had endeavored to steal a sheep from Jack (but *not from Mr. Byrd*), for which reason I caused her to be whipped.

26 April 1720: I walked home and by the way beat my man for being drunk and disorderly. (*Mr. Byrd was known to have a few cups himself.*)

4 August 1720: Jenny B-s-n was whipped for several defaults. (*Several defaults! I wager Jenny would have liked Mr. Byrd to be more specific.*)

³ Fischer, 401.

7 August 1720: My people almost all got drunk from cider which I had given them (*Those ingrates*), for which I was very angry with them and threatened to punish them that I should ever see them drunk again. (*And no more cider until morale improves.*)

His wife was not much better. Her cruelty to the servants even alarmed her husband. On one occasion, Jenny Byrd ordered a slave girl to be burned with a hot iron for a minor infraction of a household rule. The author of *Albion's Seed* tells one story of the Byrds becoming involved in an argument because Mrs. Byrd, "flogged a servant in the presence of a house guest---a major breach of etiquette in Virginia where slaves were supposed to be beaten after the guests had gone home."⁴ It's a wonder the American Revolution did not occur against these tyrants instead of against King George.

Roger that!

Sexual predation was commonplace, especially the upper class men against their slaves or servants. It was not the exception that Thomas Jefferson bedded-down one of his slaves (Sally Hemings).⁵ It was part of the routine of plantation life. But the culture was not just the exploitation of black women. White women were secondary citizens in most households. The duty of the female was to obey the male. If a woman became pregnant without a husband, it was she who was vilified. The impregnator was sometimes fined, or just ignored.⁶

When an unmarried woman gave birth outside of wedlock, a heavy fine was levied upon her (writer: the forerunner to our entertainment tax). If the fine could not be paid...she was trussed up like animal, her dress was open to the waist, and she was publicly whipped in the sight of a surrounding mob until the blood flowed in rivulets down her naked body and breasts.

Perhaps a bit of hyperbole from Mr. Fischer, but his study of colonial Virginia is well-researched. I think he chose his words carefully-enough to portray this climate. As seen above, Byrd kept a diary, perhaps not realizing it would become a 21st century blog. Here are some entries:⁷

- Jenny, an Indian girl, had got drunk and made us good sport.
- At night, I asked a negro girl to kiss me.
- ...then came upon Mrs. Johnson with whom I supped and ate some fricassee of rabbit and about ten went to bed with her and lay all night and rogered her twice.
- ...then came Mrs. S-t-r-d. I drank a glass of wine to our good rest, and then went to bed and rogered her three times. However, I could not sleep and neglected my prayers (Writer: his inability to sleep was not because of his excessive prayer omissions, it was because of his excessive roger emissions.)
- ...I met Molly and had some oysters for supper and about eleven we went to bed, and I rogered her twice.

⁴ Fischer, 291.

⁵ Some historians disagree with this claim. The proponents cite evidence from X and Y chromosome factors and state the probability is 99% that Thomas rogered Sally. Why should we be surprised? Read on.

⁶ Fischer, 299.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 300-301.

And so on. Granted, television had not come along to divert our forebears' attention. But these diary entries were written between September 7- 14 of 1719. One week in which the married Mr. Byrd bedded three white women and had "sport" with two other females. He has no diary entry on September 10. Perhaps he had stayed home for the evening and was too tired for any serious rogering with his mate.

I'll close this part of the narrative with one more quote from this book: An old saying in those times defined a virgin as a girl who could run faster than her uncle.

Cavaliers' Wives: Another Form of a Lower Class

It likely comes as no surprise to the reader that the wives of the upper class men were not considered equal in status in relation to their husbands. Like children, they were to be seen, not heard. They were to be used, when convenient to the man. The Declaration of Independence was drafted by Thomas Jefferson, a man who kept women at bay, under the social and political rugs. His attitude toward women, keeping them in bed and out of politics, is reflected in the first sentence of the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness

Dolly Madison, seen today in radical feminists' eyes as a rather milk toast woman (and regaled by some semi-literate historians as a boring person who hung red curtains), often went against the grain of the Capital's male-dominated hierarchy. But she could get away with more, because her husband, James Madison, according to historical accounts, seemed to have less chauvinistic genes in his DNA.

Liberty for the Few

Are you surprised? I was. I had assumed the Virginia colony (and later the nascent capitals of America) operated at least on somewhat of an egalitarian basis. Of course, I was aware the blacks did not "qualify" for any sort of classless consideration.

But the Puritans of New England were much fairer to one another than the Cavaliers, although the folks up North did have their funky ways. For example, in the Bay Colony of Massachusetts, time-wasting was a criminal offence, and people were fined for, "misspending their time." (Twitter and Facebook had yet to come along.)

Even though the northern Puritans did have class distinctions based on their legacies from England, the distribution of wealth (mostly land) allowed lower classes to get ahead---certainly more so than in the Southern colonies. Also, the Quaker settlements in the Pennsylvania area had a more equitable philosophy about how to distribute their wealth.

Slipping Slavery under the Door

In Virginia, semi-slavery existed before formal slavery slipped under the Cavaliers' door. These men became accustomed to having cheap labor from yeomen and indentured servants, even before the arrival of the blacks from Africa. They became accustomed to being the unquestioned authority on most matters in their lives. Some historians trace the mental seed of the Virginia's disposition toward slavery to southwest England.

“I love liberty; I hate equality.”

The Virginia Gentleman never considered that liberty might belong to everyone. Their southwest England mentality had them believe they had the right to rule the under classes---even the educated rising middling class (middle class). Another famous early Virginian (John Randolph) summed it up, “I am an aristocrat. I love liberty; I hate equality.”

Given this deeply-seeded belief among the most powerful men in Virginia, and given that this philosophy was held, albeit to a lesser extent, in other colonies, it is amazing that our founding fathers ever got around to writing the very documents that would lead to the disassembly of their way of life, including their turn-around on religious repression.

It’s extraordinary: We Americans are the beneficiaries of our founding fathers actually changing their minds about governance. Or did they? Let’s look at the situation from a different angle.

Hegemonic Liberty

How did these cavalier Cavaliers become a critical underpinning to the American Revolution, to a democratic, republican nation? It came about for several reasons: The gross incompetence of the English Parliament, the arrogance of the King, the pompous and supercilious attitude of the English Lords toward the American landed gentry, and the increasingly restrictive laws imposed on the colonies (Restrictive in the sense that there were none to begin with, and they therefore greatly agitated these independent souls.)⁸

But something else was involved. Ironically, the superior attitude of the Cavaliers toward their yeomen, indentured servants, women, and slaves gradually inculcated into their minds the idea that they thought themselves *superior to everyone*. They began to think they should not be controlled by any supposedly superior power, especially one across the ocean.

From their powerful positions, from their wealthy plantations, they developed the idea of hegemonic liberty: Freedom to rule but not be ruled by others.⁹ And the higher their status, the more freedom and liberty they thought they should possess. The notion was remarkable in its arrogance, but effective in its contribution to the founding of our Republic.

Haughty? Superior? Snobbish? Lordly? Insolent? Yes. Granted, many other factors came into play, but this characteristic of the Cavaliers is one reason America is not a colony of Great Britain.

⁸ And these laws paled in comparison to the laws the King and Parliament imposed on their English citizens

⁹ Fischer, 401-418.