



POWHATAN
Held this state & fashion when Capt. Smith
was delivered to him prisoner
1607

MAN
GOALS
WONS



THE
VIRGINIAN
SEA



A Land “Wholly Built Upon Smoke”: Colonial Virginia and the Making of the Global Tobacco Trade, 1612–1776

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“The Floridians, when they travel, have a kind of herb dried, which with a cane and an earthen cup in the end, with fire and the dried herbs put together, do suke through the cane the smoke thereof, which smoke satisfieth their hunger; and therewith they live four or five dayes without meat or drinke.”¹ So begins the first English-language account of Amerindian tobacco use. John Sparke’s tale of the mysterious herb’s powers, taken from his account of Sir John Hawkins’s second slaving expedition to the Americas in 1565, beguiled British imaginations and helped launch the global career of *Nicotiana*, the tobacco plant.

Tobacco was just one of the many curious plant specimens collected by European explorers during their early encounters with the peoples and environments of the Americas. From Columbus’s initial voyage in 1492 onwards, the influx of exotic flora from across the Atlantic Ocean altered European landscapes and cultural practices in enduring ways. Ireland before the potato, Germany before chocolate (cacao), Italy before the tomato, and Britain before tobacco seem unimaginable, yet all of these plants arrived aboard ships returning from the New World.²

*Unlike many of its companion species from the Americas, tobacco experienced limited success on European farms. State monopolies, prominent antitobacco campaigns, and demanding labor requirements conspired with poor soil conditions, harsh climates, and land shortages to hinder expansion of cultivation. Instead, tobacco merchants depended upon production in overseas territories to supply Europe’s burgeoning domestic markets.*³

Shortly after its inception in 1607 as Britain’s first North American colony, Virginia became synonymous with tobacco cultivation. The Virginia Company of London received its charter from the English crown on April 10, 1606. The following year, Captain Christopher Newport led an expedition of 105 settlers to the southern shores of the Chesapeake Bay. Mooring at a swampy island on the James River, they established a fortified outpost called Jamestown. Deficient in precious metals and lacking a clear industrial foothold, the Virginia landscape offered its new residents few obvious foundations for profitable enterprise. Yet beneath their feet enterprising settlers soon discovered economic potential in the colony’s fertile topsoil.

Among the first European depictions of the Chesapeake Bay is John Smith’s *A Map of Virginia* (Oxford University, Joseph Barnes, 1612). Engraved by William Hole, the map is oriented with the west at the top. An image of Chief Powhatan holding a tobacco pipe while presiding over his court can be seen in the upper left corner.



In 1612, John Rolfe—best remembered for his marriage to Pocahontas, daughter of Chief Powhatan of the Pamunkey Indians—became the first Virginia colonist to plant a nonnative variety of tobacco. Instead of cultivating *Nicotiana rustica*, the harsh, nicotine-heavy species grown for centuries by North American Indians, Rolfe chose a milder West Indian variety, *Nicotiana tabacum*, which he had likely obtained in 1609 during a ten-month sojourn in Bermuda as a castaway from the shipwrecked *Sea Venture*. At Varina Farms, upstream from the Jamestown settlement, Rolfe harvested his first crop of Virginia tobacco. The pioneer planter named his leaves “Orinoco” after the river in Guiana (now Venezuela) along which Sir Walter Raleigh had journeyed in 1595 while searching for the fabled city of gold, El Dorado.⁴

Through experimentation with the “golden weed,” Rolfe had stumbled upon his own El Dorado. On July 20, 1613, the cargo ship *Elizabeth* reached England with the Virginia colony’s first shipment of cured leaves, densely packed into massive wooden barrels known as “hogsheads.” Rolfe’s botanical innovation captivated English consumers. The “sweet-scented leaf,” as London merchants dubbed the superior grades of Virginia tobacco, promptly became a cash crop to rival all others. British barrister Andrew Steinmetz was hardly exaggerating when he wrote that by 1615 “the fields, the gardens, the public squares, and even the streets of Jamestown, Virginia, were planted with tobacco—nay, it became not only the staple, but the currency of the colony.”⁵ Indeed, tobacco offered a convenient medium of international exchange. In 1622, twelve male colonists each paid 120 pounds of tobacco for the maritime passage of a dozen women of marriageable age from England.⁶

Not everyone was pleased with the omnipresent Virginia leaves. As King Charles I grumbled, tobacco so dominated colonial life that Virginia was “wholly built upon smoke, tobacco being the only means it hath produced.”⁷ Yet behind this hazy façade, Virginia was fast becoming the focal point in an intricate network of global exchanges. Virginia’s tobacco farmers depended upon the labor of West African slaves, the spread of European print culture, and extensive economic protections from the British crown to grow a plant that had been cultivated by peoples of the Americas for many millennia. Scottish “tobacco lords” built fortunes on the transatlantic trade in Virginia’s staple crop, while American revolutionaries supplemented their war chest with funds from the consignment of tobacco to the French government. It is hardly a stretch to say that Virginia’s colonial development cannot be sufficiently explained without granting a central role to the tobacco leaf.

Throughout history, divergent cultural attitudes toward tobacco have blended in unique ways with the complex chemistry of the plant itself. Like tomatoes, potatoes, and peppers, tobacco is a member of the nightshade (*Solanaceae*) family. Scientists recognize seventy naturally occurring *Nicotiana* species, of which forty-five are native to the Americas. Tobacco plants produce varying concentrations of the psychoactive alkaloid known as nicotine, a compound that acts as a stimulant in mammals and is the principal source of



Figure 4.1
This carefully executed wharf scene adorns *A Map of the Most Inhabited Parts of Virginia Containing the Whole Province of Maryland with Part of Pensilvania [sic], New Jersey and North Carolina* by Joshua Fry and Peter Jefferson (London: Robert Sayer and Thomas Jefferys, 1775). The map cartouche, designed by Francis Hayman, shows a Virginia tobacco planter, seated on the left, attending to the shipment of his valuable product, while a slave on the right rolls a hogshead, presumably packed with cured tobacco leaves.

tobacco's addictive properties. For thousands of years, from as far south as Paraguay to as far north as the St. Lawrence River Valley, Amerindian peoples used tobacco as a healing herb, a social stimulant, a diplomatic tool, and a sacred vehicle for accessing the divine.⁸

After his arrival in Guanahaní (San Salvador, Bahamas) on October 12, 1492, Columbus noted that representatives of the local Taíno population regaled him with "some dried leaves, which must be held in high esteem here."⁹ Shortly thereafter, one of Columbus's scouts, Rodrigo de Jeréz, became the first European to consume tobacco. Upon his return to Ayamonte, Spain, his fellow townspeople were appalled to find wisps of smoke emanating from the sailor's nostrils. The Holy Inquisition promptly sent Rodrigo de Jeréz to prison for his demonic behavior.¹⁰

From the sixteenth century onwards, the rapid proliferation of European print culture provided diverse audiences with further clues about tobacco use in the Americas.¹¹ The publication of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés's *Historia general y natural de las Indias* in 1535 gave curious residents of the Old World a window into the social life surrounding this New World plant. Oviedo y Valdés, a Spanish mine supervisor who spent a decade in the Americas and took up smoking to alleviate the pains of syphilis, summarized the predictive powers that tobacco held for the Caquetio of northwestern Venezuela:

There is in the country an herb which they call *tabaco*, which is a kind of plant, the stalk of which is as tall as the chest of a man . . . having twisted the leaves of this herb in a roll to the size of an ear of corn, they light it at one end, and they hold it in their mouth while it burns, and blow forth [smoke], and when it is half burned, they throw down what is rolled up [i.e., the cigar]. If the burned part of the tobacco stays fixed in the form of a curved sickle, it is a sign that the thing which they desire will be given; if the burned portion is straight, it is a sign that the contrary of what is desired will happen, and what they hope to be good will be bad.¹²

Despite the intrigue that such accounts generated, most Europeans spurned tobacco's sacred meanings, embracing the leaves for their more mundane physiological effects and their alluring commercial potential. Portuguese and Spanish sailors were quick to adopt the golden weed, which became their calling card at port cities in both hemispheres. Spanish mariners introduced tobacco from Acapulco to Manila in 1575, while Portuguese and Dutch traders extended the plant's botanical reach to equatorial Africa in the late sixteenth century. By 1623, English explorer Richard Jobson was hardly surprised to find residents of the Gambia River region cultivating tobacco, "which is ever growing about their houses." Jobson described how these men and women smoked the dried leaves with "fine neate Canes."¹³

At roughly the same time that West Africans were cultivating tobacco and John Rolfe was experimenting with varieties of *Nicotiana tabacum* in Virginia, Chinese farmers were sowing their first seeds of the exotic plant. During the mid-1600s, the scholar Fang Yizhi (1611–1671) recorded the arrival of tobacco in the Middle Kingdom:

Late in the reign of Emperor Wanli [from 1573 to 1620], people brought it to Zhangzhou and Quanzhou. The Ma family processed it, calling it *danrouguo* [fleshy fruit of the *danbagu*]. It gradually spread within all our borders, so that everyone now carries a long pipe and swallows the smoke after lighting it with fire; some have become drunken addicts.¹⁴

Recent evidence suggests that tobacco appeared in China earlier than Fang Yizhi surmised. In 1980, an archaeological team in the southern province of Guangxi unearthed three porcelain tobacco pipes from the Ming Dynasty. Inscriptions on the artifacts situate their origins at 1550.¹⁵

As all accounts demonstrate, tobacco had permeated the major arteries of world trade by the early 1600s. Ironically, the global expansion of tobacco use met one of its most formidable challenges among the English royalty. In part, the Crown's hostility stemmed

from Spain's early dominance of the international tobacco trade. England and Spain were locked in a bitter rivalry at the end of the sixteenth century. In 1588, Philip II sent the Spanish Armada to England with the objective of overthrowing Queen Elizabeth I. During a series of dramatic naval engagements, Vice Admiral Sir Francis Drake and his fleet of agile warships sent a battered Armada limping back to the Iberian Peninsula.¹⁶

Spain had far more success in its commercial conquests. By the end of the sixteenth century, England's adversaries had established Havana and Seville as the dominant nodes in the transatlantic axis of tobacco commerce. Spaniards shipped the valuable leaves from their Caribbean plantations to the bustling Andalusian port city where the tobacco underwent processing for reexport to European markets.¹⁷

English national pride, along with the perception that tobacco threatened the vigor of the body politic, inspired the period's most widely circulated antitobacco treatise. In his anonymously published *A Counter-blaste to Tobacco* (1604), King James I of England derided smoking as a "vile and stinking a custome," which "brought foorth a generall sluggishnesse" among its practitioners. The monarch, torn between his distaste for the exotic plant and his craving for the customs revenue it generated, refrained from outlawing tobacco. Instead, he imposed a 4,000 percent duty on its sale, placing tobacco beyond the reach of commoners.¹⁸ Ultimately, however, the *Counter-blaste* demonstrated the king's ignorance of the consumer

Figure 4.2

British gentlemen share the pleasures of Virginia "sweet-leaf" tobacco in "A Smoking Club," a print illustrating Frederick William Fairholt's book, *Tobacco, Its History and Associations* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1859).



A SMOKING CLUB

are brought from the West Indias.

Fol. 34.



The proper name of it amongst the Indians is *Picielt*, The name
 For the name of *Tabaco* is given to it by our Spaniards, by of it.
 reason of an Island that is named *Tabaco*.

It is an hearbe that dooth growe and come to bee very *The descrip-*
 greate: many times too bee greater then a Lematon tree. *tion of it.*
 It casteth forth one steame from the roote which groweth
 upright, without declining to any parte, it sendeth forth
 many

¶ 2

Figure 4.3

This sixteenth-century Spanish depiction of West Indian tobacco circulated in Britain and appeared in an English edition of Nicolás Monardes's *Joyfull newes of the new-found worlde*, translated by John Frampton (London: E. Allde by assigne of Bonham Norton, 1596).

revolution overtaking his kingdom; by 1619, the Crown had granted Virginia a monopoly on tobacco exports to England. "That bewitching vegetable"—as William Byrd II, founder of Richmond, Virginia, described tobacco—had cast its spell.¹⁹

Tobacco acted as a social salve during a period of political upheaval. Thomas Hobbes, who fled to Paris during the English Civil War (1642–51) and memorably characterized life in the state of nature as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short," made his own seventeenth-century existence tolerable with a daily regimen of no fewer than twenty pipes of tobacco.²⁰ By the end of the seventeenth century, more than half of all Englishmen smoked the golden weed; its price had fallen enough "so that every ploughman has his pipe."²¹

With each passing year, more of the tobacco chewed, snuffed, and smoked in England, Scotland, and Wales came from Virginia. A British visitor to the Commonwealth in 1690 acerbically commented, "For the most general true character of Virginia is this, that as to the natural advantages of a country, it is one of the best; but as to the improved ones, one of the worst in all the English plantations. . . . So it is at present, that Tobacco swallows up all other Things."²² *Nicotiana tabacum* not only had emerged as the first truly global agricultural commodity, it had become the centerpiece of the world's earliest plantation monoculture, a system in which farmers cultivate one species to the exclusion of all others.²³

Tobacco is a delicate crop, requiring meticulous care at each stage of cultivation. "The tobacco-grower has to tend his tobacco not by fields, not even by plants, but leaf by leaf. The good cultivation of good tobacco does not consist in having the plant give more leaves, but the best possible," remarked Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz.²⁴ Removal of the leading stem and the lateral shoots of the plant—known as "topping and suckering"—diverts the plant's energy toward leaf production, thereby increasing the nicotine content of the leaves. Virginia tobacco planters often performed this delicate operation with their untrimmed thumbnails, which they would harden by repeated passes through a candle's flame.²⁵

The management of soil fertility also became an essential skill of the successful tobacco farmer. *Nicotiana tabacum* has a voracious appetite for nitrogen, phosphorous, and calcium, and soil exhaustion becomes a pressing problem after only a few years of cultivation. Tidewater planters—those who farmed the eastern coastal region of Virginia below the Piedmont plateau—often rotated their crops, cultivating tobacco for three years, farming corn for the next three, and allowing their fields to revert to forests for twenty years. This approach helped worn-out lands recover from the severe nutrient demands imposed by a plant that required "uncommon fertility of soil," as gentleman farmer Thomas Jefferson put it in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*.²⁶

Between 1620 and 1680, small tobacco farms dominated Virginia's coastal landscape. As wealthier planters expanded their holdings, chronic labor shortages arose. Initially, growers hired European indentured servants who paid for their transatlantic passage with

several years of fieldwork. By the end of the seventeenth century, the servant trade had turned prohibitively expensive. The emergence of an English slaving fleet allowed Virginia's nascent planter class to reconstitute their workforce with African slaves. Between 1700 and 1780, approximately 78,000 slaves arrived at the colony's ports.²⁷

Curiously enough, many of the women and men who survived the hellish ordeal of the Middle Passage arrived on Virginia's shores with abundant knowledge of the tobacco plant. Slaves from Senegambia, the Gold Coast, and the Windward Coast of West Africa came from cultures that had featured tobacco as a staple crop for several generations. Extensive knowledge of tobacco farming made certain slaves more desirable at auctions, and the Virginia planters who purchased them appropriated these African cultivation strategies from their field laborers.²⁸

During the transition from a nominally free workforce to a system reliant on slavery, tobacco output skyrocketed. Exports from Virginia and Maryland tripled between 1725 and 1776.²⁹ However, much like the transatlantic system of slavery upon which it depended, tobacco production was never free from constraints. As plummeting prices in the 1630s and 1680s had demonstrated, stability was perpetually elusive for the tobacco farmer. Also absent during this period was an accepted standard for the leaves being shipped abroad. After taking office in 1727, Virginia governor William Gooch worked tirelessly to implement a system of quality controls for the colony's staple crop. His legislative masterpiece, the Virginia Inspection Act of 1730, required that growers transport their tobacco to public warehouses where at least two assessors would crack open the hogsheads "and diligently view and examine the same" to determine "that the [tobacco] is good, sound, well-conditioned, and merchantable, and free from trash, sand, and dirt."³⁰ Inspectors burned any tobacco that failed to meet these criteria. Initially, these rules provoked resistance, even rioting, among planters; they also heralded a new phase in the long march toward a more uniform tobacco plant. As markets expanded and tastes developed among consumers, buyers demanded further refinements to their commodity. The resulting experiments and modifications conducted by farmers, and eventually by scientists, confirmed that the emerging capitalist marketplace was as much a botanical intervention as a commercial revolution.

Among the beneficiaries of these new benchmarks was a tight-knit group of Scottish merchants. Concentrating their capital on the transatlantic tobacco trade, this cartel transformed Glasgow into an unrivalled hub for re-exportation of the golden weed to continental Europe. By 1762, tobacco grown in the Chesapeake Bay region accounted for 85 percent of all Scottish imports from North America. Glasgow's "tobacco lords" met frequently to strategize about their profitable trade. Sporting "red cloaks, satin suits, powdered wigs, three-cornered hats, and gold-topped canes," Scotland's elite amassed their fortunes by pairing "sweet-scented" Virginia tobacco with the new cravings of European consumers.³¹

Across the Atlantic, a similar tobacco aristocracy was emerging. Although the vast majority of Virginia's farmers spent their lives mired in debt, eking out a hardscrabble existence from one growing season to the next, a few men, such as Robert "King" Carter, William Randolph, Benjamin Harrison, and Richard Lee, built sprawling tobacco estates. Their agrarian dominance translated into an unbridled political oligarchy. "As early as 1660 every seat on the ruling Council of Virginia was held by members of five interrelated families, and as late as 1775 every council member was descended from one of the 1660 councilors," notes one historian.³²

Despite underwriting the consolidation of colonial Virginia's landed gentry, tobacco also helped North American colonists topple British colonial rule. During the American Revolution, Virginians traded tobacco for shipments of ammunition from France via the West Indies. Additionally, Benjamin Franklin secured a substantial monetary loan from the French Government using five million pounds of Virginia tobacco as collateral.³³ As one historian aptly put it, the 1700s were the years of "King Tobacco Diplomacy."³⁴

In the centuries following 1776, tobacco incited more than its share of controversy. A 2009 World Health Organization report noted, "Tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable death, and is estimated to kill more than 5 million people each year worldwide."³⁵ Despite the overwhelming human tragedy that tobacco use has caused, if we take "a plant's eye view" of history, the tale of *Nicotiana tabacum* would be one of remarkable success.³⁶ Currently, 130 countries grow commercial varieties of tobacco, making it the world's most widely cultivated nonfood crop.³⁷ Little could Charles I have known that the Virginia Colony, "wholly built upon smoke," would play such a crucial role in the globalization of a humble weed from the Americas.

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Notes

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4. Philip D. Morgan, "Virginia's Other Prototype: The Caribbean," in *The Atlantic World and Virginia, 1550–1624*, ed. Peter C. Mancall (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 362.
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6. W. A. Penn, *The Sovereign Herbe: A History of Tobacco* (New York: Dutton, 1901), 73; Eric Burns, *The Smoke of the Gods: A Social History of Tobacco* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 71.
7. King Charles I, as quoted in George Louis Beer, *The Origins of the British Colonial System, 1578–1660* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 91.
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9. Christopher Columbus, as quoted in Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Columbus on Himself* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010), 59.
10. C. de Jesus, ed., *The Tobacco Monopoly in the Philippines: Bureaucratic Enterprise and Social Change, 1776–1880* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1980), 2.
11. For more on this relationship, see Peter C. Mancall, "The Tales Tobacco Told in Sixteenth-Century Europe," *Environmental History* 9, no. 4 (2004): 648–78.
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13. Anthony Reid, "From Betel-Chewing to Tobacco-Smoking in Indonesia," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no. 3 (1985): 535; Iain Gately, *Tobacco: A Cultural History of How an Exotic Plant Seduced Civilization* (New York: Grove, 2001), 59; and Richard Jobson, *Discovery of the River Gambia and the Golden Trade of the Aethiopians*, ed. Charles G. Kingsley (1623; repr., Devonshire, UK: Speight and Walpole, 1904), 159 and 119.
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22. John Jones Spooner, "The Present State of Virginia," in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, ed. The Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston: John H. Eastburn, 1835), 124, 127.
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25. Lois Green Carr, Russell R. Menard, and Lorena S. Walsh, *Robert Cole's World: Agriculture and Society in Early Maryland* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 60–61.
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