

Recreation of the Colonial Virginia Planter

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Two strong factors influenced the recreational patterns of the Colonial Virginia aristocrat. The first was the desire to emulate the life-style of the English country gentlemen and the second was the hard realities of the plantation economic system.

The acquisition of wealth and of land coupled with genealogical ties to the English aristocracy provided the Virginia planter with the requisite symbols and means to assume the role of a country gentlemen. The development of tobacco growing as an agribusiness fostered the development of the plantation system which brought with it both social isolation and economic instability. The social engagements of the planter functioned to produce a psychological, if not always physical, escape from the exigencies of plantation management as well as to imitate the English country gentlemen's life-style. Although the planter wished to emulate the recreational patterns of the English country gentry, the realities of the plantation system required a modification of these patterns and resulted in a unique recreational idiom in Colonial Virginia.

Recreational activities centered around gambling, social gatherings in the planters homes and the biannual Court Days in Williamsburg. Gambling was the most popular form of recreation and cut across social and economic lines. Gambling was a natural extension of the unstable economic conditions. The chief forms of gambling were wagering on billiards, bowling, cards, and cock fights; however horse racing was the most popular.

Entertainment in the home was an important facet of Colonial recreation. Most planters sponsored balls, which were extended social engagements lasting 3 to 4 days. During the day, guests engaged in card playing, horse racing, bowling, billiards or fox hunting, while the evenings were devoted to music and dancing. Because of the isolation inherent in plantation life, the planters were extremely hospitable and anxious to take full advantage of any opportunity for social interaction.

The biannual Court Days in Williamsburg provided another opportunity for much of the planter's recreation. While government business was being transacted, taverns provided entertainment for the planter and his family. Fairs, which consisted of a variety of contests, were also a fixture of Court Days. Theatre was firmly established in Williamsburg in the 18th century, and created a popular diversion during Court Days. The recreational patterns of the Virginia aristocrat aided him in his feeling that he was truly a country gentleman, but yet it also clearly marked him as a Colonial.
