

Sport Among the Chesapeake Gentry, 1750-1775.

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During the eighteenth century a recognizable cultural elite emerged in the Chesapeake. By 1740 the gentry had acquired the wealth, status, and power which enabled them to direct most aspects of life in Virginia and Maryland, and they had formulated a distinctive code of manners which incorporated sport. Many gentlemen expected to sport, and their sports in turn reflected the central features of the mainstream gentry style — competition, display, materialism, and pride. Not only did sport distinguish the landed gentlemen from their common planter neighbors and servants, but it also helped to unify them by providing a common set of behaviors and interests which heightened their identity as a cultural elite.

Sport met certain needs of the gentry. Field sports, for example, yielded food, necessary physical skills, and a sense of camaraderie with English gentlemen. Athletic sports and table and alley games enabled them to compete with one another on friendly terms, stimulating what social anthropologists have called “joking relationships,” as well as to fulfill traditional responsibilities for providing hospitality and joy to family and friends. Horse racing, the most visible sport, improved the breeds in displays of strength and cunning before the entire community. Through these sports the Chesapeake gentlemen distinguished themselves and translated critical, unspoken values into observable behaviors.

Not all landed gentlemen, however, responded uniformly to sport or to the cultural forces which produced the mainstream style. Competition and display, for instance, provoked a broad spectrum of actions which ranged from overextension of one’s abilities and resources to withdrawal and near-miserliness. Wealth and prestige, on the other hand, provided security and stability for some, but they also stimulated feelings of insecurity and burdens for others. Consequently some Chesapeake squires atypically limited their participation; others manifested obvious disinterest in and, at times, even disdain for sport. On the other hand, a few refused to accept constraints imposed by traditional genteel responsibilities and dissipated their inheritances. Thus, as reflected by sport, a prevailing gentry style did exist, but this was merely a cultural core around which revolved other less typical patterns of social behavior.

On the eve of the Revolution, then, some of the Chesapeake landed elites found that their tradition of sport had mired them in a paradox. While sport could enable gentlemen to distinguish themselves from others in society and to bind them together in common endeavors, it could also differentiate among the gentry themselves. Games which resulted in victories for some, for example, also produced losses for others. Men who earned prestige in cock fights and horse races did so at the expense of other competitors who lost status. Further, the occasions and the contexts in which sport occurred often fostered additional behaviors such as excessive drinking and gambling which induced discomfort and disorder among spectators, families, and even military ranks. And, while sport ultimately did not fragment the gentry as a group, except perhaps within families or among neighbors, the spectrum of attitudes and the diverse styles which appeared did reflect other, more significant schizms.