

# AGRICULTURAL HISTORY

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# AGRICULTURAL HISTORY

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EDWARD C. PAPENFUSE, JR.

PLANTER BEHAVIOR  
AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY  
IN A STAPLE ECONOMY

According to Avery Craven, planters in seventeenth and eighteenth century Maryland were victims of a staple agriculture (tobacco) that rapidly exhausted the soil and of a market system that inhibited diversification and encouraged soil exhaustion. As a result, planters were pushed westward leaving desolation and poverty in their wake. Craven's use of evidence might be criticized, but a more profitable undertaking is to establish how representative planters behaved in a tobacco growing region. The evidence from Prince Georges County, Maryland, on the eve of the Revolution makes clear that their behavior was remarkably different from that which Professor Craven has suggested.<sup>1</sup> Planters knew the exhausting powers of tobacco, as sources cited by Craven point out, but they also knew how to cope with the "vile weed" and they used the land accordingly. As lands were taken up and settled in older counties some members of well-established families sought opportunity in the yet virgin lands of Prince Georges County. A look at the names of

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<sup>1</sup> Avery O. Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1925), 25-71. Doubts could be raised about Craven's argument by examining his sources. His evidence for declining tobacco production per laborer in the eighteenth century because of soil exhaustion is slim and, in one instance, wrongly used. On p. 66 he cites Richard Henry Lee as a source for the statement that 57 slaves produced only 27 hogsheads of tobacco, when in actuality the letter says nothing of the kind. Nor can the picture of a poverty-stricken, soil-exhausted region derived from travelers such as Isaac Weld go unchallenged (p. 58). Another observer warns that the main roads "almost invariably run over the very worst parts of the country . . . they . . . are generally, and with good reason, laid out in the driest soils, consequently in the spots which are least adapted for cultivation." As a result, travelers' accounts of rural poverty and abandoned homes were greatly exaggerated. Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *Travels Through the United States of North America in the Years, 1795, 1796, 1797* (London, 1800). 2: 29-30. Cited by Ronald Hoffman, "Economics, Politics and Revolution in Maryland" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1969), 4.

those who first took up land in the county as well as a perusal of the tax lists for 1719 and 1733 for Prince Georges County will reveal an overwhelming preponderance of family names common to the adjacent or nearby counties of Anne Arundel, Charles, and Calvert.<sup>2</sup> They moved to the new lands, not because they were forced out by exhausted soil, but because they anticipated that remaining would lead to an exhausted soil. Husbanding the soil was a generally accepted practice, even among leaseholders. When discussing the process of renewing proprietary leases in 1754, Governor Sharpe pointed out that the proprietor's lessees throughout the colony only abused the soil if their tenure was insecure and even then they only did so in the last three years of tenancy.<sup>3</sup> Those planters who migrated to Prince Georges County were not unlike the proprietor's tenants in their regard for the land. They developed it and divided it until the maximum number of plantations with sufficient land to prevent soil exhaustion was reached. This process took approximately three generations in Prince Georges County, a time frame that was probably not uncommon to other older tobacco regions as well. By 1776, the maximum point of development had been reached, however, and young people began leaving the region. They left in response to the constriction of opportunity inherent in a staple-crop economy that demanded much land and a relatively low density of settlement, but before soil exhaustion was important. The difference in 1776 from previous years was that they could not leave fast enough. After 1776 crowding occurred on the land and affected land use. There was no land nearby conducive to the planting and *effective marketing* of tobacco. Also population growth throughout the colony had reached a point where people would no longer be able to move fast enough to escape the consequences of crowding on the land.<sup>4</sup> After 1776 planters were increasingly unable to meet the space requirements of their principal money crop. By 1807 the soil was becoming depleted. This can be seen clearly by only a casual acquaintance with the history of the innumerable creeks emptying into the Potomac from both old and newly settled regions. Before the Rev.

<sup>2</sup> For the original patentees and the placement of the tracts, see Louise Joyner Hinton, "Tract Map of Prince Georges County," Map Collection, Maryland Historical Society. The tax lists are found in *Calendar of Maryland State Papers No. 1 The Black Books* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1967), 21-24, 37-44.

<sup>3</sup> Archives of Maryland, *Correspondence of Governor Horatio Sharpe, Vol. 1, 1753-1757* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1888), 38.

<sup>4</sup> In 1782 there were 91,004 laborers (taxables) in Maryland. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that all were engaged in the cultivation of tobacco, 4,550,200 acres would be needed for proper rotation of the crop (see note 20 below). In that same year the tax assessors found 4,790,479 acres of land in the several Maryland counties. This is good evidence that, in terms of staple production, the land was close to being filled, and that people would have to look elsewhere than Maryland for tobacco land.

olution Mattawoman Creek in Charles County, Piscattaway in Prince Georges County and the East Branch of the Potomac in Prince Georges County were all navigable. By 1807 the once-bustling trading centers along their banks were largely abandoned and the creeks had begun to fill with silt. Whatever the cause of decline, after 1776 planters faced ever-depleting soil resources until the advent of fertilizer.<sup>5</sup>

The concern here, however, is not with the problems of the nineteenth century, but rather the behavior of planters in the eighteenth. In this respect, the records for Prince Georges County at the beginning of the Revolution provide data for a tentative model.

In 1776 when Thomas Dent set out to take a census of part of Prince Georges County for the Maryland Council of Safety, he traversed an area that had seen tremendous economic expansion within the previous seventy-five years. Over this period tobacco had been the principal impetus to settlement, and Prince Georges County had become an increasingly important producer of tobacco.<sup>6</sup>

The area covered by the census was part of the last virgin tobacco land in Maryland readily accessible to markets and was the last portion of the county to be settled. In 1719 it had less than half as many laborers as the rest of the county and much of the population growth of the next fifty-seven years was concentrated here. Growth was rapid, but by 1770 the population had begun to stabilize. Between 1770 and 1780 it rose by 156 a year, an increase of only 10 percent over the decade. Although more people were added each year during the next ten years (248), the increase over that decade was only 15 percent. Necessarily, the war could have taken its toll of the population and might account for some of the

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Scott, *A Geographical Description of the States of Maryland and Delaware* . . . (Philadelphia: Kinder, Conrad and Co., 1807), 121-28; Reverend John R. Biddle, "Historical Geography of Bladensburg, Maryland" (master's thesis, Catholic University, 1954).

<sup>6</sup> Jacob M. Price, "The Economic Growth of the Chesapeake and the European Market, 1697-1775," *Journal of Economic History* 24 (December 1964): 496-511, and John Glassford and Company, MSS, Library of Congress demonstrate the growing importance of the Potomac and Prince Georges County in the tobacco trade. The census was published in facsimile in Gaius M. Brumbaugh, *Maryland Records Colonial, Revolutionary, County, and Church* . . . (Baltimore: 1915). The original is in the Hall of Records, Annapolis. Dent completed the census on 31 August 1776, and was paid for his work, Archives of Maryland (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1893), 12, 269. A sample check of people in a parish encompassed by the census showed his figures to be accurate; so much so that by the births found in the Parish register correlated to the census, the dates when the census was taken can be determined. In adding up his data Dent made various errors of addition. These have been corrected. The Glassford Papers are 288 volumes of ledgers, journals, daybooks, etc. covering the years 1753 to 1834. The accounts of the Piscattaway store are used later in this article. Prior to the Revolution the Piscattaway store was owned by James Brown and Company. Its records were taken over by Glassford after the Revolution.

decline, but in fact the rate of population growth had dropped significantly before the war.<sup>7</sup>

The white population of the 1776 census exhibits characteristics of a stable, well-established population, little affected by recent immigration. In a total population of 8,848, 61.5 percent or 5,383 were white. Of these, just under 50 percent were female (ratio: 102 males to every 100 females). The sex ratio indicates the approaching equilibrium. In newly settled areas the overall sex ratio is high, many more men than women, while in long-settled communities the sex ratio is low (a preponderance of women).<sup>8</sup> It is especially clear from the notable lack of males in the 15-24 age group that the region had lost any semblance of a frontier status by 1776. Here there was a shortage of 84 males to 100 females. It might be argued that males were absent because of military service, but when the census was taken, the army in Maryland had not been mobilized and those who were known to be in the army at a later date were counted in the census.<sup>9</sup> Not only was the area no longer a frontier, but in fact the lack of opportunity was forcing young white men out of the county.

Changes in the slave population do not alter the picture of population growth among tobacco planters and their families prior to 1776. Between 1710 and 1776 the percentage increase of the Negro population in proportion to the white population was slight, and in fact declined

<sup>7</sup> Here and throughout the article "laborer" means "taxable." Taxables were defined as white males over 16, and black males and females over 16. For the law, see Thomas Bacon, ed., *Laws of Maryland at Large with Proper Indexes* (Annapolis: Jonas Green, 1765). The Census of 1776 covered the Potomac River side of Prince Georges County. In 1719 this side had 845 laborers while the other side, bounded by the Patuxent River, had 1864 laborers. By 1776 the Potomac side had 2990 laborers and the Patuxent side had 3243. The figures are drawn from the 1719 tax lists, the Census, and the 1776 levy, all in the Hall of Records, Annapolis.

Between 1750 and 1770 the percentage rate of increase in the population over five-year intervals was not less than 11.3 percent except for 1755-1760 when it was 6.8 percent because of the absence of males during the French and Indian War. Between 1770 and 1775, however, there was no war to draw off labor, yet the percentage increase was only 4.1 percent, indicating a dramatic decline in the rate of population growth before 1776.

The demographic calculations presented in this paper are computed from raw data compiled by Arthur E. Karinen, "Numerical and Distributional Aspects of Maryland Population" (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1958), the tax lists cited above, Dent's Census, and the Census of 1755. The last was used in summary form by Charles A. Barker, *The Background of the Revolution in Maryland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940) and is to be found in *The Gentleman's Magazine and Chronicle* 34 (1764): 261. Tax lists are in the Hall of Records, Annapolis.

<sup>8</sup> Jack E. Eblen, "An Analysis of Nineteenth-Century Frontier Populations," *Demography* 2 (1965): 399-413.

<sup>9</sup> *Archives of Maryland*, 18, 34-38, 76 ff. Although some people in the area covered

somewhat from a peak of 41.9 percent in 1755 to 39.1 percent in 1776.<sup>10</sup> There were 3,465 Negroes in the census area in 1776. All but a small fraction were slaves. The Negro population exhibits the same stable qualities seen in the white population; in fact, the similarities are striking. The overall sex ratio is identical: 102 males to every 100 females. The percentage representing age distribution never varies more than 1-3 percent.

By 1776 natural increase among slaves in the region supplied the demand for slave labor rather than importation. If male slaves had been imported, the age structure of the population would have been changed by increasing the number in the most desirable age bracket, 15-29 years of age.<sup>11</sup> As the census shows, however, the number of young men in this category is no different proportionately from that of the white population. In fact, the sex ratio of the 15-19 year old slaves (92 males to every 100 females) suggests a shortage of males similar to that of the white population. It is not unlikely that some of the young whites who left the area took slaves with them, although between 1776 and 1790 more whites than slaves left the county. During that period the proportion of slaves in the total population increased from 39 percent to 52 percent.<sup>12</sup>

Demographic evidence demonstrates that the population had stabilized by 1776 and that young people had begun to leave the area. Contrary to the Craven thesis, however, they were not forced out by exhaustion of the soil. The condition of the soil played a role in shaping the optimum size of a plantation. The growing of tobacco exacted certain requirements from the land. There had to be room for moving the crop, but abuse of the soil was not yet prevalent in the county for two reasons. There was sufficient land in each plantation to prevent soil exhaustion even with maximum tobacco production, and average production levels per laborer were maintained.

Both leaseholders and landowners must be considered in analyzing the actual distribution of the land among households. Early in the eighteenth century about one-third of the tobacco planters in Prince Georges County lived on and worked leased land. By 1774 the propor-

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by the census were enlisted before August 1776, mobilization did not occur on any scale until after the resolves of Congress in September.

<sup>10</sup> The percentage of 1710 is compiled from data given in *Archives of Maryland*, 25, 255-58. The percentage given for 1755 is computed from the census of that year, cited in note 7 above. The 1790 figure is derived from the manuscript federal census of that year now in the National Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Eblen, "Nineteenth-Century Frontier Populations."

<sup>12</sup> See note 10.



tion of leaseholders had grown to over one-half.<sup>13</sup> If the land had been distributed evenly among all households in 1755 there would have been 215 acres per household; by 1776 there would have been 168 acres.<sup>14</sup> This latter figure is considerably larger than the size of the typical leased plantation. If those landowners who, in 1774, had more than 500 acres are designated as obvious landlords, and if the land held by the landlords is distributed equally among the non-landowning households, the

TABLE 1. LAND TRANSACTIONS, 1755-1770

	Number	Mean (in acres)
1754-55	42	122.6
1755-56	52	131.1
1756-57	42	125.2
1757-58	58	163.8
1758-59	50	168.3
1759-60	57	167.8
1760-61	35	148.9
1761-62	40	139.3
1762-63	53	119.8
1763-64	49	130.9
1764-65	59	123.9
1770	54	142.8
Mean, 1754-1770:		140.4 acres

SOURCE: Annapolis, Hall of Records, *Proprietary Papers, Lists of Rents, Alienation Fines* . . .

<sup>13</sup> Lois Green Carr, "County Government in Maryland 1689-1709" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1968). Lois Carr's analysis of Prince Georges County at the turn of the eighteenth century shows that the figure one-third applies to the whole population of planters.

<sup>14</sup> Annapolis, Hall of Records, *Debt Books 1755, 1774*, Prince Georges County. In the following table the data on landownership is based on an analysis of the proprietary debt book for Prince Georges County of 1774 and 1755. The data from the 1755 debt book was compiled by Joyce McDonald, a graduate student at the University of Maryland. I analyzed the 1774 debt book. The debt books were the Lord Proprietor's record of the collection of quitrents. As Clarence Gould has pointed out in *The Land System in Maryland, 1720-1765* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1913), the debt books were an accurate statement of acreage owned in the colony. The household figure for 1755 is estimated on the basis of ratios derived from the 1755 and 1776 censuses. The figure for 1776 is also an estimate based upon the known number of households on the Dent Census multiplied by two, in order to include the Patuxent side.

## Landowners and Households in 1755 and 1774

	1755	1774
Landowners	775	768
Households	1,357	1,846
Acreage (patented lands)	293,625	310,149
Mean Acreage (per household)	215	168

average holding for leaseholders becomes 154.7 acres.<sup>15</sup> In fact, leased plantations were likely to have been even smaller. Between 1755 and 1770 the average-size plantation purchased was 140.4 acres (see table 1). Few people bought land, as is clear from the small number of transactions, and at times merchants found that land taken in payment for debts was hard to sell. In one instance, merchants in Prince Georges County banded together and tried a lottery as a means to circumvent the sluggish market. How they fared is not known, but the plantations included in the drawing averaged nearly 130 acres.<sup>16</sup> Additional evidence that the workable plantation was thought to be at most 130 acres comes from an advertisement in the *Maryland Gazette*. The seller offered a tract of land for sale in adjacent Charles County, "containing, by patent 400 acres, but will measure more . . . on which are three plantations."<sup>17</sup> Direct evidence for the actual size of leaseholds in Prince Georges County is lacking, but the account books for Charles Carroll's Monocasy Manor in nearby Montgomery County make clear that less than 130 acres was an acceptable plantation for leasing purposes. Carroll was a careful manager of his lands and was not about to allow his tenants to exhaust the soil, yet of 79 leases for Monocasy Manor, 52 were for 100 acres, and it is probable that landlords in Prince Georges County followed Carroll's example.<sup>18</sup>

Even though the actual size of leases in Prince Georges County is unknown, few leaseholders had enough laborers available to work more than 100 acres. The maximum amount of tobacco a laborer could produce in a year was at best 1500 pounds and probably not more than 1000 pounds of marketable quality. 1500 pounds required three acres of land. The number of laborers per household times three would determine the number of acres a household could work in a given year. To prevent soil exhaustion, however, land had to be left fallow after a few years of producing tobacco. To allow for natural restoration of the soil 40-50 acres

<sup>15</sup> Gould, *Land System in Maryland*, 68-72, 92-94, gives examples of large landowners leasing, and even those with 400 acres of land leased part of their property. See *Maryland Gazette*, 4 January 1770.

<sup>16</sup> *Maryland Gazette*, 4 January 1770.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* One hundred and thirty acres compares favorably with what V. J. Wyckoff found in some of the older counties at the beginning of the century. By sampling land sales he found that there was a tendency to break up properties of more than 450 acres and to consolidate pieces of land under 50 acres. V. J. Wyckoff, "The Sizes of Plantations in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 32 (December 1937): 331-39.

<sup>18</sup> Carroll's careful management of his plantations is evident from his Journal, MS 209, Maryland Historical Society. I am grateful to Gregory Stiverson for this reference. The study of the Monocasy leases was done by Miss Frances Reynolds for a master's thesis being completed at The Johns Hopkins University.

per laborer were said to be needed.<sup>19</sup> In 1776, 428 out of 471 or 90.8 percent of the 471 leaseholding households had no more than two laborers and had little need for more than 100 acres to prevent soil exhaustion (see table 2).

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF LABORERS, 1776

	Landowners	Leaseholders
Number of laborers		
20+	11	—
—	—	—
18	2	—
17	4	—
16	1	—
15	3	—
14	3	—
13	4	—
12	3	—
11	6	—
10	4	—
9	13	—
8	15	—
7	28	—
6	42	—
5	47	3
4	43	6
3	90	34
2	81	94
1	50	284
0	—	50
Total	451	471

SOURCE: Annapolis, Hall of Records, *Census of 1776, List of Inhabitants in St. John's and Prince George's Parishes, Prince Georges County*.

The average Prince Georges County landowner did not need more than 150 acres in order to rotate his tobacco fields. Over half the landowning households had less than 4 laborers (see table 2), yet the distribution among those owning less than 500 acres in the county averaged 194 acres with a median of 163 acres. Neither leaseholder nor landowner lacked sufficient land to prevent soil exhaustion.

<sup>19</sup> John Mitchell, *The Present State of Great Britain and North America . . .* (London, 1757), 136. Mitchell argues that 40–50 acres were necessary per laborer when tobacco is the staple crop. This is probably based on the theory that without fertilizer each tract of land planted in tobacco could be worked for three years and then had to be left fallow for twenty. See Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 69. But Mitchell's work was a polemic directed against the Proclamation of 1763. He used his data to prove that soil was fast becoming depleted east of the line and that the Southern colonies had to expand westward in search of new land. His logic is faulty and his estimate is probably high.

If the soil were being exhausted by tobacco, production figures on a per laborer basis should noticeably decline over the eighteenth century both in Prince Georges County and in older settled areas. In 1776, however, one man could produce, on an average, as much tobacco as he could in 1700 in any of the tobacco growing counties. Craven argued that tobacco production declined over the eighteenth century because the quantity of tobacco exported remained stable while population grew.<sup>20</sup> In the aggregate Craven is correct, but tobacco production did not decline because yields per acre declined. It declined in a relative sense because population continued to grow in those areas of Maryland where tobacco was not the principal crop.<sup>21</sup>

At the beginning of the eighteenth century it was generally agreed that one man could produce annually 1500 to 2000 pounds of tobacco.<sup>22</sup> By 1755 the accepted estimate was 1000 pounds.<sup>23</sup> With the inspection law of 1748 almost one-third of the crop previously counted in estimates was regarded as unmarketable. In other words, once the distinction is made between marketable and unmarketable tobacco it becomes clear that between 1700 and the Revolution average tobacco production per laborer did not decline, but remained stable.<sup>24</sup> Accounts at the Piscatta-

<sup>20</sup> Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 65-66.

<sup>21</sup> By the Revolution very little tobacco was grown on the Eastern Shore and yet population growth was similar to that on the Western Shore. Karinen, "Maryland Population," and Robert Alexander, "Remarks on the Economy of the Peninsula or Eastern Shore of Maryland," Chalmers Collection, The New York Public Library.

<sup>22</sup> Barker, *Revolution in Maryland*, 101-2; Carr, "County Government," Appendix, 94, note 1; Craven, *Soil Exhaustion*, 69; Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Washington, D. C.: Carnegie Institution, 1933), 1: 218-19.

<sup>23</sup> William Douglass, *A Summary Historical and Political, of the First Planting, Progressive Improvements, and Present State of the British Settlements in North-America* (Boston, 1755), 2: 360. "A peck of Indian corn and some salt is their weekly allowance of provision for each negro; they are reckoned to raise 1000 lb. wt. of tobacco besides some barrels of corn per head."

<sup>24</sup> Barker, *Revolution in Maryland*, citing newspaper accounts at the time of the inauguration of the inspection law in Maryland. Inventories in Charles County demonstrate the effect of the inspection law in reducing the amount of marketable tobacco one laborer could produce. Before the law all tobacco had a value and was included in estate valuations. An analysis of *Prince Georges County Inventories BB #1, 1696-1720* for the years 1710/11 and 1720/21 confirms the statement that average production per laborer before 1748 was about 1500 pounds of uninspected tobacco per year. Undoubtedly the first crops of tobacco grown on virgin land were on the average higher than later yields, but yields did not decline once the initial crops were harvested. They remained at a plateau of about 1500 pounds of all grades of tobacco or 1000 pounds of marketable tobacco per laborer per year. After the inspection law went into effect in 1748, poor quality tobacco had no value and was no longer included in the appraisal of an estate. According to the Charles County Inventories, in 1746 the mean amount of tobacco produced per laborer was 1466 pounds in a sample of 26 estates. In 1750 the mean was 930 pounds in a sample of 22 estates. (Accounts and inventories are in the Hall of Records, Annapolis.) The estimates were

way store of James Brown and Company supplemented with estate records drawn from all of Prince Georges County make it clear that in the years before the Revolution Prince Georges County planters averaged 1000 pounds of marketable tobacco per laborer.<sup>25</sup>

Before the Revolution there was sufficient land on the typical plantation to prevent soil exhaustion, and levels of tobacco production per laborer confirm that the soil was not abused significantly; nevertheless, there were great disparities in the structure of opportunity within the community. In general, those who owned land also owned slaves, and those who leased land did not own slaves.<sup>26</sup> Half of the total number of households owned slaves and land and were in a much better position to prosper than the other half who leased land and did not own slaves. Slaveowners were in a better position because they had fewer people per laborer to support than did non-slaveowners. Over half (51.4 percent) of the slaveowners had three or fewer people to support per laborer; only 19.3 percent of the non-slaveowners had three or less people to support per laborer (see table 3). In addition, the non-slaveowner had to pay annual rent of at least £10 per 100 acres as a leaseholder.<sup>27</sup> When the tobacco market floundered, however, even the slaveowner faced difficult times. After 1793, when tobacco exports remained at al

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derived by dividing the number of laborers in the inventory plus the deceased, into the amount of the crop listed in the final accounts for the estate. The estimates were then added and the means computed. I am indebted to Russell Menard and Gregory Stiverson for supplying the data from the inventories and accounts.

<sup>25</sup> *Prince Georges County Inventories ST #2, 1780-1787* and *Prince Georges County Accounts ST #1, 1777-1790*, Annapolis, Hall of Records; Piscattaway Store Accounts, Glassford Papers, Library of Congress. Five hundred and nine or 60.6 percent of the total number of households covered by the census had two or less laborers available per household. In other words, nearly two-thirds of the households covered by the census could be expected to produce no more than 2000 pounds of tobacco per annum. Aubrey Land's analysis of Western Shore inventories confirms these expectations. He found that between 1750 and 1759 40 percent of all producers made from 1000 to 2000 pounds of tobacco per year. Aubrey C. Land, "Economic Behavior in a Planting Society: The Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake," *Journal of Southern History* 33, (November 1967): 473, see note 11.

<sup>26</sup> This statement is based on a correlation of landownership in 1776 with slaveholding households on the Census. All landowners, with the exception of a few, owned slaves. The slight variation between landowning and slaveowning is indicated by the percentage of householders who owned land (52 percent) and the percentage of households that contained slaves (48 percent), but the generalization that non-slaveowners were leaseholders for practical purposes remains valid as the number of non-slaveowners who owned land was not more than 4 percent. Gregory Stiverson, completing his Ph.D. at The Johns Hopkins University, has done an analysis of the 1788 tax list for sample counties in Maryland and has proved the correlation of non-landowning with non-slaveholding.

<sup>27</sup> In 1774 the going price of tobacco was 20 shillings per hundred pounds according to the Glassford Papers. The most common rent on Carroll's Monocasy Manor was 1000 pounds of tobacco per 100 acres or £10 at the going market price for tobacco.

TABLE 3. RATIO OF HOUSEHOLD SIZE TO THE LABOR FORCE, 1776

Ratio	Slave households	Non-slave households
1-2	63	30
2-3	169	61
3-4	91	80
4-5	50	77
5-6	29	51
6-7	14	54
7-8	15	32
8-9	10	13
9-10	5	11
10-11	2	7
11-12	1	3
12-13	1	2
Households without laborers	1	50
Totals	450	471

SOURCE: Annapolis, Hall of Records, *Census of 1776, List of Inhabitants in St. John's and Prince George's Parishes, Prince Georges County.*

most half their pre-1793 level for a number of years, there was a dramatic increase in the number of free blacks in the population. In 1776 there were only 59 in half the county. In 1790 there were only 164 in the county as a whole, but by 1800 there were approximately 800.<sup>28</sup>

The household-to-laborer ratio was better for slaveholding landowners, but in Prince Georges County many planters, both slaveholding and non-slaveholding, faced mounting debts at the local store even before the Revolution. Accounts with James Brown and Company at Piscattaway, a settlement covered in the census, make it clear that even with maximum production of tobacco income did not keep pace with the cost of living for at least sixty households. Regardless of how many laborers there were in a household and in spite of good yields per laborer, regular customers went increasingly into debt in the years between 1766 and 1776. The accounts of Francis Wheat, John Coe, Alethea Parker, and John Robey are not unusual.

Between 1768 and 1775 Francis Wheat produced an average of three hogsheads of tobacco a year. He owned 100 acres and had two taxables, including one slave, in his household. He had sufficient land for corn rotation and a crop production level that indicated he used his land to best advantage. Yet after seven years of trading at the Piscattaway store his debt had grown from £14 to £79 while his labor force and produc-

<sup>28</sup> Federal Census returns for 1790 and 1800. Data on tobacco exports is to be found in U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1960), 547, 767.

tion levels remained constant. Wheat's plantation was, at best, a marginal operation. He owned slaves, but for one working taxable he had two additional non-working dependants and was unable to make any financial progress.<sup>29</sup>

When John Coe died in 1763 he had no slaves but owned 100 acres of land and had an estate valued at £84/14/0. The land passed to his eldest son, who worked it to support his own children as well as his mother, brothers, and sisters. When James Brown opened his Piscattaway store, both members of the Coe family opened accounts. Debts mounted each year and production remained stable at about two hogsheads per household, or about 1100 pounds of tobacco per taxable. When a bad year hit, as it did with the depression of 1773, the debt increase was most notable. Mary Coe went into the red for an additional £12. By 1775 both household accounts had doubled their debt at the store.<sup>30</sup>

Alethea S. Parker is perhaps not typical of planters, but her plight was equalled by others. A deed drawn up in 1764 puts her economic condition clearly in focus.

Whereas the aforesaid Hutchison Parker and Alethea his wife long before the 11th day of May 1754 had a decline in their fortunes which were very ample for their handsome support and maintenance become poor and almost destitute of necessary subsistence and from an unhappy disagreement between them had lived separate for some time the whole or chiefly all the Estate left of their original fortunes consisting of the lands and appurtenances herein after mentioned lying near Piscattaway in Prince Georges County . . . [and some land in Calvert County]

<sup>29</sup> Amounts due are derived from the store accounts of James Brown and Company at Piscattaway and are expressed in pounds, shillings, and pence. Ledgers 19-25 and 136-43 were used primarily. The latter are wrongly identified as pertaining to the whole county. In fact they are the continuation of 19-25 with a gap of two years, 1770 and 1771. These accounts are typical of over 60 such accounts studied. It is hoped that at some future point all of the Glassford accounts can be computerized and correlated with other data on Prince Georges County planters.

<sup>30</sup> John Coe's inventory is to be found in *Prince Georges County Inventories*, Annapolis, Hall of Records, Bx 20, Folder 27. See the general discussion of the Glassford Papers in note 6. Glassford ended up with the Brown Company ledgers as he eventually took over the Piscattaway business. Although the primary interest of this paper is with the small planter it should be noted that even the large planter had to find some other activity than planting if he hoped to be an economic success. Mrs. Carr and Aubrey Land have made this point abundantly clear. See Carr, "County Government," Appendix 4, pp. 79-96; Land, "The Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake." In the Piscattaway store accounts the most prosperous men were such as John Baynes who rented the store to James Brown and Company and carried on as a merchant as well as a planter after the Revolution; or William Digges who owned a number of boats and rented them out. Necessarily the opportunity to be a merchant, lawyer, clerk, or sheriff was not open to many. The typical planter simply struggled on.

was to be divided between them. They then promised to pay the debts to John Glassford and Company using the lands as collateral.<sup>31</sup> By virtue of this deed Alethea was legally separated from her husband and was given 350 acres with which to support herself. This was sufficient for her to hire an overseer for her sixteen slaves (a total of five taxables) and at the same time allow her to rent part of the land on a short-term leasehold. Yet neither she nor her lessee managed very well. Charles Farrell, who leased part of her land in 1769 (the year in which her commitment to James Marshall was paid), found it impossible to pay the rent and Alethea, with little satisfaction, took him to court.<sup>32</sup>

In the meantime Alethea's account at the Brown Company store shows her income falling behind her expenditures. The store accounts end in 1776 but when she divided the property among her grandchildren in 1780 she had not improved her estate since 1776, as her constant fights against creditors testify.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps a good summary of the plight of the leasehold planters can be seen from the experiences of John Robey. Robey was a leaseholder who owed James Brown and Company £32/1/6 by the time of the Revolution.<sup>34</sup> After the war Alexander Hamilton, Brown's factor at Piscataway, attempted to collect the debt. Hamilton recorded the encounter:

I went to John Robey's house about half-way betwixt Bladensburgh and Georgetown and demanded payment of his debt—I showed him the bond and his mark, he said it was right, and was an acco[un]t of his son John, and that he would pay the principal but not the interest and would go to jail and lye there rather than pay my interest, and swore he would go to hell sooner than

<sup>31</sup> *Provincial Court Deeds DD #3, 1763-1765*, pp. 216-26, Annapolis, Hall of Records.

<sup>32</sup> Between 1763 and 1769 James Marshall was charged with Alethea's property (Sangwhar) on the debt book. In 1770 Marshall was no longer responsible for the quitrent, which means Alethea had settled the debt. See Annapolis, Hall of Records, 1763 *Debt Book, Liber 34*, p. 16 and 1770 *Debt Book, Liber 35*, p. 27, Prince Georges County for the transferal of property from Marshall back to Parker. The Parker suit against Farrell dragged on to 1774 with little satisfaction to either side (Annapolis, Hall of Records, *Provincial Court Judgments DD #20*, pp. 582-87).

<sup>33</sup> Alethea Parker's account at the Piscataway store begins in 1768. By 1774 her debt had grown from £52 to £173. Because she had bonded herself to pay the debt, Hamilton was able to recover all but £44 in court in 1775. Undoubtedly Alethea had to borrow to pay the debt. In 1772, for instance, she had to mortgage her slaves as bond in a suit for debt brought against her by her late husband's creditors. See Annapolis, Hall of Records, *Provincial Court Deeds DD #5*, pp. 387-88. Alethea's store account is found in the Glassford Papers, *Piscataway and Prince Georges County Ledgers, 1768-75*. The deeds for the division of Alethea's property among her heirs are to be found in Annapolis, Hall of Records, *Prince Georges County Deeds CC #2*, pp. 633-35.

<sup>34</sup> Alexander Hamilton *Letterbook*, Glassford Papers, Library of Congress. Hamilton was the storekeeper at the Piscataway store.



pay the interest. I asked him for the money and if he could not pay to give security, he said he could not pay any at this time, he said he was going to Virginia to live about 16 miles from the ferry opposite to Georgetown on Mr. Lee's land.<sup>85</sup>

In 1784 Robey was seventy years old. After a long life of struggling against mounting debts he felt it was time to join the younger members of the community in search of greater opportunity. This was a common reaction among leaseholders to conditions after the war, but it was a reaction that had its roots in the prewar years.<sup>86</sup>

From census material, land records, and store accounts, a tentative model of the typical Maryland planter and his fate in a tobacco economy has been constructed. The planter either leased or owned the land he worked. If he leased he had a labor force of two, owned no slaves, and farmed about 100 acres. If he owned the land he had four laborers, owned slaves, and cultivated about 50 acres more than the leaseholder. Yet, whether he owned land and slaves, or neither, he spent more than he earned.

In the course of three generations, or about seventy-five years, the limits of opportunity in a staple economy had been reached. The demographic evidence demonstrates that some people perceived the decline in opportunity and began to leave the region, but even those who remained faced difficult times as tobacco planters. Tobacco prices and production did not meet the costs of living and debts at the local store grew larger each year. Why then, if opportunity existed to the "west" did not more people abandon Prince Georges County and move on? A partial answer is that there was no land nearby conducive to the planting and effective marketing of tobacco. Other reasons can be only tentatively advanced until further work is done. As long as there was a demand for tobacco and credit was available at the local store, people seemed reluctant to move. Perhaps they did not perceive their existence as marginal or their fortunes as declining. Debts had been and would be a fact of life for the planter. Community ties and hope of better prices and better crops were probably stronger than any fears of mounting

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Census of 1776, p. 60. A letter in the *Maryland Gazette*, Thursday, 8 September 1785, expressed the anxiety property owners had over tenants leaving for the Ohio Country. The author took great delight in reporting an Indian uprising that he hoped would deter people from moving. Putting down the Indians would, in his view, be "opening a door for our citizens [tenants], to run off and leave us, as a means of depreciating all our landed property already settled, and disabling us from paying taxes, and funding the state debts already contracted. And for these reasons, if there was not an Indian within a thousand miles of us, I should reprobate the idea of such boundless settlements."

debts, while diversification to some extent offset dependence on tobacco as the cash crop. Still, a prolonged period of time when tobacco was unmarketable could have disastrous consequences and cause dislocation. Debts that mounted slowly did not have the same effect as large arrears imposed by a sudden depression such as that of 1772/1773.<sup>37</sup> Some of the mobility out of the area by 1776 might in fact be attributed to this shock to the community, while the migration after 1790 could be tied to the precipitous decline of the tobacco trade in the years after 1793. Regardless of what happened after the Revolution, and regardless of the economic condition of people in a staple economy, soil exhaustion played an insignificant role in their fortunes before 1776.

<sup>37</sup> For the crisis of 1772/73 see Richard B. Sheridan, "The British Credit Crisis of 1772 and the American Colonies," *Journal of Economic History* 20 (June 1960): 161-86 and Hoffman, "Economics, Politics, and Revolution in Maryland."