How Early Stuart Colonial America Reflected The Rise of Class Hierarchy in America

In the entire history of the colonial period of the United States of America, there has almost always been a clear and noticeable form of social hierarchy of groups of individuals that either through land, wealth, familial prestige, or merit are seen as a higher class of person than most others in America. Even though this social hierarchy seems to have died off in the modern era, it remains in specific areas and cultures within the United States. The clearest example of this is in the Deep South where hierarchal social ladders still exist as a whole. However, this profound, entrenched, cultural, and social aspect was once common throughout the country. Where did this American social hierarchy originate from and how did it become a part of the American society? In this paper, I will argue that due to what was occurring at that time period in Great Britain, led to a societal transition in colonial America in the early Stuart period. One can see the origins of the rise of a new class-based socio-economic hierarchy in American culture through the influence of Massachusetts and Virginia. These two colonies became the driving force of this change as they broke away from the Tudor societal views respectively and somewhat embraced the Stuart social hierarchy through the cultural change that occurred in these two colonies by the 1660s. This was seen through a variety of means such as art, court cases, transference of power to the crown, conversion of religious groups, and a large change in cultural views of being an American and an English subject.

The reasons behind this transformation from a form of peasant society into a land ruled by an upper elite has experienced some investigation by various historians, with many different
explanations for the rise of an American Gentry. With two main existing views on the manner
having emerged in the late 1900s, with the two having an origin in a different country, these
countries being the United Kingdom and the United States. The first of these views, being the
British view, on the rise of the American Gentry was that of pure economics, stating that the
creation of this elite upper-class was formed from the sheer wealth that these families gained
while in the colonies. This few towards an economic rise to prominence was a view mainly held
by the English, as stated by Michal J. Rozbicki in his article "The Curse of Provincialism:
Negative Perceptions of Colonial American Plantation Gentry."\(^1\), Where he argues that the
British view on the newly created upper-class, was extremely harmful as they, in the mind of the
British, were just wealthy peasents trying to copy the culture of the British nobility. The view of
upstarts would remain active within England in some ways into the modern day. The second
view is American in its origin and differs from the economic standpoint offered by Michal J.
Rozbicki. With the American take on the rise of the upper-class being culturally based on the
immigration of the Cavaliers and other English nobility into the American colonies. This
interpretation comes from the works of Martin H. Quitt or more specifically his work,
"Immigrant Origins of the Virginia Gentry: A Study of Cultural Transmission and Innovation."\(^2\)
Where in, he argues that the arrival of the Cavaliers changed the cultural makeup of the Southern
colonies through Virginia and that the children of the immigrating Cavaliers wished to retain
their English nobility but to also be different from it as well. Causing the creation of the
American Gentry through cultural shift over time.

\(^1\) Michal J Rozbicki, "The Curse of Provincialism: Negative Perceptions of Colonial American
\(^2\) Martin H Quitt, "Immigrant Origins of the Virginia Gentry: A Study of Cultural Transmission
The origins of this movement towards a socio-economic hierarchy began with the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603. With her death, the meritocracy that she created which allowed for talented individuals to move upward socially began to decline under King James I, the newly made King of England in 1603, and the other early Stuart monarchs as a whole. The decline of this meritocracy was firmly felt in England with the overthrow of the Tudor sumptuary laws that were replaced somewhat by Stuart sumptuary laws. These laws, when compared to the old laws, were much more authoritative and restrictive, not allowing for upward social movement found in the less restrictive but still authoritative Tudor sumptuary laws. However, while the Stuarts attempted to replace the Tudor style within England’s aristocracy, the nature of the Tudor meritocracy remained prominent within those who lived and experienced life during the Tudor period. A prominent example of this is the very nature shown within the Virginia Company of London. A company that from its conception, seemed to embody the very nature of social climbing with the foundation of the "head right system" within the Virginia colony. The head right system was when an individual made it over to the New World and paid their own ticket for the voyage, wherein they instantly received fifty acres of land. This access to land ownership soon attracted individuals from England who would be considered the disenfranchised; the lower-class peasants who back in England had no real access to land ownership under the King James I. They flooded to the New World where they continued to honor the more Tudor traditions due to their existence outside of the aristocracy. This lower class-based community

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3 The upward movement experienced under the Tudor’s while still very class based, still allowed for those skilled to move upward socially as a meritocracy does. Allowing individuals such as Francis Drake, William Shakespeare, and John Smith to attain positions of influence and authority in their time.
6 Walter Stitt Robinson. Mother Earth Land Grants in Virginia 1607-1699.
allowed for the establishment in the early Virginia colony as more of a communal, equality-based society. This more communal-based society that did not follow the Stuart hierarchy can be seen in the lack of evidence that there were not many court cases relating to the breaking of the royal sumptuary laws before the colony fell under direct royal power in 1624. This only became relevant when, as stated above, the colony became a crown colony firmly establishing Virginia as a royal foothold in the colonies both legally and socially. This direct control by the monarchy began to subtly change the nature of the colony from its origins based in settlement and trade into domination and expansion in this New World. The transformation in the attitude and purpose of this colony was the beginning steps towards the firm entrenched hierarchy within the colonists of Virginia. The later arrival of the English Cavaliers during the English Civil War were the final parts of this transformation in the culture of Virginia.

However, before explaining the role of the English Cavaliers, I do have to mention the other colony that was a primary antagonist to the Stuart Dynasty in many ways throughout the 1600s. That colony was the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Massachusetts Bay Colony differed from its economically founded "sister" colony of Virginia as the founding of Massachusetts was religiously based creating a clear fundamental difference between these two colonies. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was more independent than the Royal Colony of Virginia, due to the lack of a direct economic tie to the royal family, crown, royal governor, or parliament. Because

7 During this time before being made a crown colony, the colony of Virginia was in a near constant state of almost being destroyed. As a result, it could be interpreted that they had many more important issues at hand then to worry about who can wear what color and material. However, there were still legal cases against indentured servants that were doing things such as stealing, running away, not doing work, getting pregnant, or causing pregnancies.


9 "Massachusetts and Virginia." The Old Guard (1862-1870) 3, no. 5 (1865): 221.
of this independence, it could govern itself in a more localized manner based on the colony’s founders own Puritan religious beliefs.\textsuperscript{10} This removed the need to report to a higher entity like the monarchy, at least on paper. As a result, there was larger freedom for the Puritans who founded the colony to govern and worship among themselves without royal interference, even though they were still under the British monarchy though not in the same manner when compared to Virginia. There are not many cases of someone breaking a royal sumptuary law in Massachusetts, but there are many cases of local Massachusetts-based sumptuary laws being broken instead, as seen in various court records from this time in Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{11} This lack of following royal powers would lead James I to bring down dominant royal influence onto the colony while claiming that it was to protect them against other European powers settling in the area.\textsuperscript{12} This increase in the influence of the crown also came with a crackdown on those not following sumptuary laws. Due to this influence, it seems that a form of resistance was started mainly revolving around the painting of portraits that showed a more Tudor based style with delicate lace instead of the stiff neck ruffles typical of Stuart England.\textsuperscript{13} This style of subtle resistance would continue throughout the rest of the 1600s in the northern colonies. This would create a form of unique culture in Massachusetts and the other northern colonies that seems to reverie the Elizabethan era as a sort of golden age, leading them to share many secular Tudor ideals in a manner similar to the southern colonies. However, when certain actions were taken

\textsuperscript{10} Pilgrim Fathers. \textit{The Mayflower Compact}. 1977.

\textsuperscript{11} Henry William Whitmore. \textit{The Colonial Laws of Massachusetts: Reprinted from the Edition of 1672 with the Supplements through 1686: Containing Also a Bibliographical Preface and Introduction Treating of All the Printed Laws from 1649 to 1686: Together with the Body of Liberties of 1641, and the Records of the Court of Assistants, 1641-1644}. Boston, Massachusetts, 1890.

\textsuperscript{12} This stance of King James I, did hold some merit. As to the south of the colony, was New Amsterdam a Dutch colony. With the Dutch being one of Britain’s main rivals in the New World at the time.

after the conclusion of the English Civil War in 1651, this would lead to a complete change in
the culture and the other southern colonies as a whole.

The English Civil War occurred between 1642 and 1651. The leading cause of the
conflict was the actions of King Charles I in disbanding parliament, then eleven years later
reestablishing the governing body. Parliament, still fearing that it would disband again, began to
pressure King Charles I into relinquishing some of his monarchal power. He refused, and the
English Civil War began. The war was fought between the royalist Cavaliers and the
parliamentary Roundheads. Over the next few years, the Roundheads defeated the Army of King
Charles I twice and finally captured the monarch resulting in his execution on January 30, 1649.
With the King's death and his son fleeing to continental Europe, the Cavaliers had to find a place
to flee to after the war. Their choice of a haven, away from the parliamentary forces under
Cromwell, was Virginia. At this point in the early 1650s, Virginia had firmly entrenched itself as
the wealthiest of the American colonies as well as being the center of royal power and influence
in Northern America due to its position as the first crown controlled colony.\(^{14}\) It would be the
arrival of these Cavaliers that would lead to the rise of a social hierarchy in Virginia as they
attempted to create a "New England".\(^ {15}\)

Their arrival would lead to the destruction of the last remnants of Elizabethan influence.
They brought with them the authoritarian beliefs into the southern colonies, which by this point
had remained still somewhat within the Tudor tradition, even they were leaving these traditions
somewhat. This new authoritative view would typically not be enough to challenge the colonists

(1835): 385.

\(^ {15}\) Nell Marion Nugent, *Cavaliers and Pioneers: Abstracts of Virginia Land Patents and Grants.*
who at this point, were quite entrenched landowners of Virginia as they were descended from the original colonists. However, the Cavaliers fearing retribution from Cromwell and the new Republic of Great Britain, fled with their wealth to the New World. Using their considerable wealth or what was left of it, the Cavaliers were able to buy the various holdings of the more impoverished landowners as well as bribe their way into the House of Burgesses\textsuperscript{16} which allowed them to change various policies within the colony to better themselves and their positions.\textsuperscript{17} At first this was contested by those who lived within Virginia, but over time they began to follow in the footsteps of the Cavaliers. They would gain wealth though acquiring vast cash crop plantations based on heavy use of slave labor. They also began to believe in the cultural beliefs of the Cavaliers. One of which is the superiority of bloodlines and hierarchy with few differences when compared to the old noble bloodlines found within the Cavaliers. One’s superiority came from the length of time that one's family had spent and lived in America after immigrating, as those descended from Jamestown are in a way better than the children of a man who would come to the colonies in the early 1700s. As for the hierarchy portion, it would also change from the traditional view of the Cavaliers, of that being a member of a bloodline and service to the king. The southern American hierarchy is based around land as well as blood. Even if a person has a family who can trace its origins back to Jamestown, it does not mean anything if they do not have any land. As a result, while a Cavalier based hierarchy does appear, it is not based on the standard of rulership or titles as seen back in the Old World. Instead it is based on the amount of land owned, family bloodline, and how far the bloodline can be traced back to the early days of

\textsuperscript{16} In this statement where the use of bribes to make their way into the House of Burgesses, is, in reality, them doing this to the Virginian General Assembly with the terms general Virginian General Assembly and House of Burgesses being used interchangeably as they were both terms used to describe Virginia’s governing legislative body. They would, however, create an upper house making the General Assembly bicameral, with Cavaliers and the new elite making up the upper house.

\textsuperscript{17} Kate Mason Rowland “The Virginia Cavaliers” Louisville: Kentucky, 1886.
settlement. Which led to the creation of a group of families called the "First Families of Virginia"\textsuperscript{18}, who were those that during this cultural change caused by the arrival of the Cavaliers, used the event for own their betterment, emerged as a collection of various, influential, landowning elites within the colony of Virginia, making them the leaders of this new hierarchy that had emerged within the colony, became what we refer to as the First Families of Virginia. The names of these families have gone down in history as a result, with the more famous families being the likes of Washington, Jefferson, and Lee.

While this "Cavalier revolution" was occurring in Virginia, the colonies in New England were doing quite well for themselves due to the parliament being Puritan as they were. On a general level, they found the conclusion of the English Civil War to be a good and acceptable outcome overall. This "good time" would change after Charles II, son of Charles I, was placed back on the throne. Charles II remembered and even fought in the English Civil War against the majority Puritan Roundheads of Parliament. In the first few months of his reign, Charles II became angry and bitter towards the Puritans which would cause him to level a series of laws against the New England colonies and Puritans as a whole.\textsuperscript{19} These laws which targeted all non-Anglicans, prevented them from gathering in a group of more than four, along with preventing them from wearing certain types of clothing. He also forced them to use the state-mandated book of prayers. These various laws would remain in effect for decades\textsuperscript{20}. Due to the nature of these laws, many Puritans began to convert to Anglicanism rather than deal with these laws. This act of conversion would then lead them to adopt other English tendencies in a bid to appear loyal to


\textsuperscript{20} \textit{The Puritans in America a Narrative Anthology}: 380-42
the crown. This change occurred in some cases en masse. While the religious aspects of the laws were later revoked, the attitudes changed as the colonies of New England began to take a deep obsession with being proper English citizens. They also began to adopt a manner of social hierarchy similar to the Stuart-Virginian variant while also having portions of an existing religious social hierarchy mixed in as well. It was during this point in time in the 1660s to 1670s that the large merchant class of the New England colonies began to see themselves as superior to the more rural groups in the interior of the colonies through wealth, intelligence and family bloodline, becoming known later as The Boston Brahmin. The rise of this elite merchant class within the northern colonies was seen most clearly within the newly conquered colony of New Amsterdam.

This newly conquered colony was a city of Dutch merchants and tradesmen, meaning that this new view of superiority went originally not noticed, as the Dutch people were part of a republic that really did not like the idea of bloodline superiority. However, as they decided to stay in New York they began to hear about how wealth and prestige or family bloodline made one an important figure among locals. This quickly caught up with the remaining Dutch citizens of the colony, who are now called Knickerbockers. The taking of New Amsterdam by the Duke of York in 1690 also allowed for the complete control of the northern east coast of the area that would become the continental United States. This allowed for this new idea of an American

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hierarchy to spread across the English holdings on the east coast. This would cause over time the firm establishment of a socio-economic hierarchy leading to the creation of various differing versions of the Knickerbockers, Boston Brahmin, and First Families of Virginia across the colonies. This transformation of New York into a promoter of this new social hierarchy is what really allowed for the spread of this ideal across the colonies due to its important function as a colonial center of trade.

It is evident the creation of the modern American social class system had its origins buried in a series of events that took place within the early Stuart Dynasty with the founding of Virginia and Massachusetts. While originally holding the ideals of the Tudor meritocracy of Elizabeth I, the colonies began to lose their connection with these views as events in the early Stuart Dynasty created various crisis, laws, migrations, and actions. By the early 1700s the idea of superiority of the American Gentry was established within the mindset of some Americans that continues to exist in some parts of our nation to this day.

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The three colonial regions of early America, the New England, Middle, and Southern Colonies, had distinctly varied characteristics and histories. As displeasure with British rule spread through the Colonies, New England saw the rise of the celebrated Sons of Liberty, a secret group of politically dissenting colonists formed in Massachusetts during 1765 dedicated to fighting against taxes unfairly imposed on them by the British government. Several major battles and events of the American Revolution took place in the New England Colonies, including The Ride of Paul Revere, the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the Battle of Bunker Hill, and the capture of Fort Ticonderoga. Protestantism in Colonial America. The 18th century saw a host of social, religious, and intellectual changes across the British Empire. In the colonies, this could be seen in the evolution of Protestantism over the centuries. The Great Awakening saw the rise of several Protestant denominations, including Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists (who emphasized adult baptism of converted Christians rather than infant baptism). These new churches gained converts and competed with older Protestant groups like Anglicans (members of the Church of England), Congregationalists (the heirs of Puritanism in America), and Quakers. The influence of these older Protestant groups, such as the New England Congregationalists, declined because of the Great Awakening. Life in colonial America. Reports of the economic success and religious and political freedom of the early colonists attracted a steady flow of new settlers. Through immigration and natural growth, the colonial population rose to 11/3 million by 1753. Most of the settlers came from Britain, but the colonies also drew newcomers from almost every other country of Western Europe. Other people who went to America had no choice in the matter. They included prisoners from overcrowded English jails, Irishmen captured by the English in battle, and black Africans captured in intertribal warfare and sold to European traders. The prisoners and captives were sold into service in America. The economy. The earliest colonists had to struggle to produce enough food to stay alive. Colonial settlers came to America for many reasons. Some came for religious freedom. Some came to make money. They settled into 13 colonies, areas that are now the states known as New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maryland, Georgia, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Delaware. There were other scattered colonies like St. Augustine in what is now known as Florida. In the early days of the colonial period, the settlers did not know how to live in the wilderness, and they faced many hardships. In Massachusetts, for example, the Plymouth settlers, spent most of their first winter (1620–21) on board the Mayflower. The following winter, the Pilgrims lived on land but in wigwams and sailcloth tents.