MASTERING THE CHESAPEAKE:
LORENA WALSH’S MOTIVES OF HONOR, PLEASURE AND PROFIT

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It would be fair to say that Lorena Walsh numbers among the “founding mothers and fathers” of modern Chesapeake studies, to steal a phrase from historian Mary Beth Norton. There was, of course, no shortage of historical work on early Virginia and Maryland in the decades before Lorena, Lois Green Carr, Russell R. Menard, Paul G. Clemens, Gloria Main, and their colleagues began churning out articles, essays, and books in the 1970s. In addition to the already voluminous literature associated with the “origins debate” over the relationship between slavery and racism, which reached a sort of apogee with the 1968 publication of Winthrop Jordan’s *White Over Black*, there were important monographs by Wesley Frank Craven, Arthur Piece Middleton, Richard L. Morton, and Aubrey C. Land, to name just a few authors in a long list that stretched back in time to early twentieth-century historians such as Philip Alexander Bruce and Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker. In an historiographic essay written at the end of the decade, however, Thad W. Tate rightly noted that with its focus on social history and use of quantitative methods, the work being produced by a group of young scholars associated with the St. Mary’s City Commission distinctly differed not only from that of their predecessors but most of their contemporaries as well. If the full importance of these contributions by what we now know as the “Chesapeake School” were not entirely clear at the time Tate wrote his piece—as he suggested in remarking that the outpouring of new studies had “yet to reach its full momentum”—it was amply clear to Bernard Bailyn a quarter century later. By posing fresh questions and providing answers to them using innovative techniques and previously unexploited forms of evidence, he reflected, Lorena and her colleagues did nothing less than bring to light “an Anglo-American plantation
world that had never been known before.”¹

Yet duly acknowledging that these pioneering efforts generated new insights that Bailyn aptly described as being “at times astonishing,” the Chesapeake School’s work was not without shortcomings, as critics both at the time and more recently have pointed out.² Perhaps the most significant limitation was that its constituent members relied heavily upon data drawn from Maryland sources to underpin their arguments and made only limited use of Virginia material. As a consequence, their findings on a host of important topics—from trends in the tobacco trade and mortality rates among the resident white population, to servant opportunity and the growth of slavery—despite often being presented under a Chesapeake moniker, were in fact based largely on research conducted in archives north of the Potomac. That “the Chesapeake” described in their influential scholarship of the 1970s and early 1980s was, to an extent, really Maryland writ large became increasingly clear as historians pursuing similar research in Virginia, most notably Darrett and Anita Rutman, uncovered evidence and reached conclusions that diverged sharply from what had come to be perceived as the “regional” norm.³

How to solve this apparent problem of regional coherence, or rather the lack thereof? If early Virginia and Maryland clearly differed with respect to their date of

founding, geographic size, politics, wealth, and religious establishment (at least in the seventeenth century), did they not share a common reliance on tobacco that produced more or less similar patterns of economic, social and cultural development? Was “the Chesapeake” even a viable category of analysis? In what is perhaps the most important interpretive breakthrough to occur in the study of the region over the last thirty years, in a 1999 article Lorena resolved this dilemma by breaking down the Chesapeake into three distinct yet interconnected subregions. The first two were labeled according to the strain of tobacco that their inhabitants generally grew, oronoco and sweet-scented. The third was defined by its lesser reliance upon (and eventual near abandonment of) the sot weed, and so was called the peripheral subregion. The sweet-scented zone was confined to the area between the Rappahannock and James Rivers, and was thus limited solely to Virginia, while the oronoco and peripheral subregions straddled the border and included portions of both colonies. By re-conceptualizing the Chesapeake is this way, Lorena provided scholars with an analytical framework that could account for variation in economic performance and social structure in different areas but that still allowed for coherent discussion of the region as a whole, though it required using a composite rather than an aggregate perspective.  

This innovative framework is woven into the very fabric of Motives of Honor, Pleasure, and Profit, Lorena’s recent book that is the subject of this conference. As a result, Motives is a work of truly “Chesapeake” history in the fullest sense of the term, offering an examination of plantation management in multiple areas of both colonies.

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5 Lorena S. Walsh, Motives of Honor, Pleasure, and Profit: Plantation Management in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1607-1763 (Chapel Hill, 2010).
from the earliest years of settlement to the eve of the American Revolution. But the book covers much more ground than the topical focus of its subtitle suggests. While a great deal of attention is paid to the shifting fortunes of wealthier planters as reflected in the numerous letter and account books that comprise the core body of evidence, this analysis is set within a richly textured and thoroughly documented discussion of broader trends in the region’s economy, demography, society, and material life, and that includes copious information about the experiences of both ordinary whites and the enslaved as well as the planter elite. In short, what Lorena has produced is nothing less than a socioeconomic history of the region of unprecedented depth and scope.

In a book that does so many things so well, highlighting certain contributions carries with it the risk of diminishing the importance of others. It is thus worth stressing that, even for those who are thoroughly versed in Chesapeake scholarship, every chapter in *Motives* contains something that will enhance their understanding of the region’s early history. That being said, certain aspects of the book struck me as especially worth mentioning. The first is the coverage afforded the “particular plantations” of the Virginia Company era. This is a subject that received little to no attention in the spate of books published around the 2007 anniversary of Jamestown’s founding, which tended to concentrate on issues of leadership, English relations with the indigenous inhabitants, and the contentious internal politics of the Company.⁶ And yet it was during these early years that tobacco emerged as an important staple crop, settlers learned how to cultivate, process, and ship the weed back home, and began working out the legal and institutional arrangements for the recruitment and control of bound labor that would figure so

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prominently in the region’s development.

Making creative use of the extant evidence for Berkeley Hundred and the similar Kent Island venture of the 1630s, as well as Virginia Company records and other sources, *Motives* elucidates how the essential contours of Virginia’s plantation economy took form as the English endeavored to carve out plantations from the wilderness and make their ventures profitable. Given investors’ determination to see some return on their financial outlays and the difficulties settlers experienced in adapting to an alien environment, it is hard to imagine a different course of economic growth than the eventual result—reliance on a single staple product grown by workers bound for an extended term of years. Many of the schemes initially envisioned by the parent company’s promoters were certainly naïve, as reflected by the jewelers, perfumers, and glassmakers they sent over to the colony. But as *Motives* demonstrates, Virginia did not fail to develop a broadly-based economy because the attempted alternatives to growing tobacco were all hopelessly impracticable. Although the backers of some particular plantations wasted precious resources on activities such as cultivating indigo and cassava or planting mulberry trees for silk making that (in hindsight) were unsuited to the local environment and had no chance of succeeding on a large scale, other contemporary efforts like raising grains and producing naval stores would prove commercially viable later in the century. Even feasible diversification plans proved untenable, however, because in these early years the formidable demands of clearing land and raising subsistence crops, coupled with the scarcity of labor, made pursuing an array of different profit-making enterprises impossible. As it was, the inhabitants of the particular plantations often made growing tobacco a priority even at the cost of failing to produce
stocks of corn sufficient to see newly-arrived settlers through to the next harvest, since investors’ were unwilling to continue sending over additional supplies of food, clothing, and tools unless they received adequate returns from a cash crop.\(^7\)

The demands of settlement building also exerted a powerful influence over the character of the labor system. Like the Virginia Company’s attempts to found glass-making and perfume industries, the plans of the Berkeley Hundred investors to essentially recreate the administrative structure of the English manor—complete with a bailiff of husbandries, an usher of the hall, and keeper of armor—were clearly unrealistic and even more quickly abandoned. Yet share tenancy, another fixture of rural areas in the mother country, proved no less impractical. Tenancy worked in England because the land was already cleared and landlords could provide housing and in some cases even seed and necessary agricultural equipment to their tenants. In Virginia, however, the work of establishing farms had to begin from scratch and investors were either unable or unwilling to sustain tenants throughout the length of time it took to get plantations up and running, with the result that the former were unhappy with the productive output of their holdings while the latter could not even afford to feed and cloth themselves adequately with their share of the crop. In short, in frontier conditions tenancy simply did not work for either of the parties involved. On the other hand, the now familiar forms of bound labor, which allowed for gangs of workers to be employed felling trees and planting fields in exchange for the costs of their transportation as well as housing, clothing and subsistence during their multi-year terms, proved well suited for the arduous tasks associated with setting up new plantations and thus became the dominant form of labor.

\(^7\) Walsh, *Motives of Honor, Pleasure, and Profit*, 46-76.
in the region. 8

Although the use of bound workers remained a cornerstone of the Chesapeake economy throughout the colonial era and beyond, over the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries white immigrants serving either by indenture or “custom of the country” were increasingly replaced by enslaved Africans and their descendants. Much has, of course, been written about the timing, causes and social implications of this crucial transition. But one aspect of the region’s shift to slavery that has remained consistently understudied is the role of credit in broadening the socioeconomic distribution of slaves in the early eighteenth century, and the attention Motives devotes to this important topic constitutes a second notable contribution.

In contrast to the gradual replacement of white servants with black slaves in Virginia and Maryland, the growth of slavery unfolded far more rapidly in the English Caribbean. The islands’ closer proximity to Africa and the high prices that sugar commanded on the English market made them a more attractive destination than the tobacco coast for transatlantic slave traders, and consequently West Indian planters not only enjoyed far greater access to slaves but also generous extensions of credit that could be used to finance their purchase. Recent scholarship has revealed how London merchants helped facilitate the transition to sugar cultivation on Barbados in the 1640s and 1650s by supplying both capital and slaves, and the Royal African Company continued to render similar assistance to Barbadians and planters on other islands through the end of the century. Just eight years after its chartering in 1672, the RAC was owed £50,000 in Barbados, £56,000 in the Leeward Islands, and £66,000 in Jamaica. As David Eltis has argued, some two-thirds of these debts were incurred between 1673 and 1679,

8 Walsh, Motives of Honor, Pleasure, and Profit, 106-110.
not during the previous year’s selling season, and the Company’s willingness to carry such debts over several years should rightly be considered as long-term capital inflows that helped to underwrite expansion of the Caribbean economy.9

Before the RAC’s monopoly ended in 1698, however, the situation in the Chesapeake was entirely different. While some historians believe that the price of slaves along the tobacco coast was set exogenously by the dominant West Indian market, this was not entirely true in the seventeenth century, at least not with transatlantic shipments. In a proclamation issued three months after its chartering, the RAC declared its willingness to provide “negroes from 12 to 40 years old” on a contract basis to various colonies throughout the empire, with the stated prices per slave being £15 for Barbados, £16 for the Leewards £17 for Jamaica, and £18 for Virginia. These prices were determined by the expected cost of procuring slaves in Africa as well as estimated rates of mortality, morbidity, and differential net transportation costs, and were thus derived independently of fluctuating Caribbean market conditions. That contracted shipments of slaves were indeed sold in Chesapeake at the stated price is demonstrated by the 1678 case of the Lady Francis. The Virginia agents who received the cargo from this vessel remitted bills of exchange in three tranches of £492 (or a total of £1476) for 82 slaves, which divides out to precisely £18 per slave.10

But if the contract system allowed Chesapeake planters improved access to

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transatlantic shipments, that access was not accompanied by the extensions of credit made available to West Indian buyers. Under the terms of the system set forward by the Company, a merchant agreed in advance to purchase a certain number of slaves at the designated price. Instead of RAC agents, the merchant’s factors performed all of the tasks associated with selling the slaves, and paid for those accepted at delivery via bills of exchange drawn on the contracting merchant, who was ultimately responsible for ensuring the Company received payment. During the 1670s and 1680s, all slaves sent to Virginia through the auspices of the RAC—which accounted for eighty-four percent of the total shipped to the colony directly from Africa during these decades—arrived via contract deliveries. The available evidence suggests that Chesapeake planters who acquired slaves through the contract system did not rely on credit to finance their purchases but instead paid for them out-of-pocket by drawing on funds they had on account with English importers to whom they sent tobacco consignments, and who were by and large the same men who arranged for contract shipments with the RAC. In other words, unlike their Caribbean counterparts, Virginians and Marylanders had to self-fund their investments in slaves, which was a major reason why slave ownership remained confined largely to elites through the end of the seventeenth century.11

As Motives shows, the liberalization of the English transatlantic trade after 1698, and consequent increase in competition, compelled slave traders (or their Virginia factors) to begin selling slaves on credit. Wealthier planters still enjoyed significant

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advantages, since transatlantic shippers were attracted to river basins with concentrations of gentry who were able to pay for slaves with dependable bills of exchange. Cash buyers were also usually afforded a discount on the purchase price of slaves and had first pick of a cargo’s captives. Yet the availability of credit brought the acquisition slaves within the reach of a significant portion of smaller planters for the first time. In the sweet-scented region of Virginia, rates of slave ownership among all inventoried non-elite decedents rose from around 16 percent in the 1690s to over 37 percent in the 1710s, and by the latter decade nearly 97 percent of the bound workers owned by ordinary planters were enslaved. While the increasing frequency of slave shipments after 1698 was certainly crucial to the spread of slave holding beyond the gentry, improving supply alone does not explain this change. After all, slaves offered for sale by the RAC and its growing number of competitors still had to be bought and paid for, and with the average price of a prime-age male field hand ranging between £25 and £30 during these years, paying up-front for slaves using bills of exchange remained a difficult proposition for the overwhelming majority of Chesapeake householders. The advent of slave sales on terms was thus just as essential for slavery’s expansion, and *Motives* does a great deal to help us understand how large and small operators alike took advantage of the availability of credit to expand their workforces.¹²

Finally, of course, there is the exquisitely detailed information on plantation operations and management that *Motives* offers based on the in-depth study of surviving diaries, correspondence, and account books of planters from throughout the region, and from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries. The sheer quantity and variety

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of material gleaned from these sources (and others) is so extensive that summarizing how it collectively constitutes a contribution to the field is a difficult endeavor. The “raw” evidence presented in tables and charts throughout the text will alone prove invaluable to researchers for years to come, and as we shall see below are useful even for scholars who do not fully agree with all of Lorena’s interpretive points. Leafing through the pages of *Motives*, the reader will find rich empirical data on numerous aspects of plantation productivity and the Chesapeake economy, including farm prices for the two major strains of tobacco, outputs per laborer for tobacco and other crops, changing hogshead weights, and total plantation revenues and expenses. Even more impressively (and helpfully), the data is not aggregated but instead broken down, where appropriate, on a colony-wide, subregional and even plantation by plantation basis, allowing the reader to compare and contrast how the strategies adopted and results achieved by planters differed in accordance with where and when they lived.

Perhaps the most commendable aspect of *Motives*, however, is the way Lorena interprets this remarkable collection of evidence with similar sensitivity to variation across space and time. Her approach stands in stark contrast to the work of other scholars such as Timothy Breen—which similarly addressed the question of whether eighteenth-century tobacco planters were rational agriculturalists—whose book by comparison seems thinly supported and rife with generalizations, and a suitable candidate for Anita Rutman’s 1987 admonishment of “history by assertion and assumption rather than demonstration” in early Chesapeake studies. If Breen was begrudgingly willing to admit that the Chesapeake gentry made reasonable economic choices, albeit within the

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perceptual parameters of a warped interpretive abstraction that he labeled “tobacco culture,” *Motives* provides a more nuanced account that shows the full extent of variation in their circumstances and decision making. While the strategies pursued by the region’s wealthier planters were not always successful, they were clearly based on the various factors such as availability of land, soil composition, labor resources, and market opportunities that structured their world, and thus by any reasonable measure were undeniably rational.

Given the extensive ground that *Motives* covers in addition to the book’s stated focus on plantation management, it seems petty to mention topics that were either not covered in detail or went unaddressed. Indeed, in responding to such a line of critique Lorena would be entirely justified if she channeled actor Jack Nicholson’s Colonel Nathan Jessup in the movie *A Few Good Men*, and after admonishing me for benefiting from the wealth of knowledge she provides only to call attention to what she left out, state that she “would rather I just said ‘Thank you,’ and went on my way.” In a weak effort to stave off her righteous irritation, then, the following two points are offered not as criticisms of *Motives* but rather as open issues raised by Lorena’s work that remain to be taken up by the field.

The first is the role of larger planters as middlemen in the region’s commercial interactions with the wider Atlantic world. Although *Motives* offers us unprecedented insight into the management strategies pursued by the Virginia and Maryland elite as planters, we still have much to learn about the extent and importance of their activities as merchants. As Darrett and Anita Rutman tantalizingly suggested in their brief sketch of the business interests of Middlesex grandee William Churchill a quarter century ago, the
great men of the Chesapeake often served as linchpins of their local economies. Churchill not only operated a store on his plantation, out of which he sold an assortment of imported items to his neighbors, but he also acted as a wholesaler of goods to other merchant-planters such as Middlesex justice Tobias Mickleburgh. As the Rutmans phrased it, just as Mickleburgh served as the “connection” for the small and middling planters who lived in his vicinity by “effecting the vital exchange of tobacco for English goods,” so Churchill served as Mickleburgh’s “connection” to the wider circuits of Atlantic trade. Moreover, their intensive study of surviving Middlesex records led them to contend that Churchill’s activities were not unique among men of his rank, and that other substantial planters in the county including Mathew Kemp, Robert Beverly, Christopher Robinson, and Richard Willis headed similar networks of local credit relationships at various times, and that such networks had a shifting, territorial aspect to them.14

Although the consignment system was clearly central to the structure of trade in Middlesex by the early eighteenth century, exactly when it became important both there and in other sweet-scented counties is not well understood. While the practice among larger planters of shipping tobacco on their own account seems to have expanded in the last two decades of the seventeenth century, some Chesapeake planters had begun trading in this manner as far back as the late 1650s.15 It is not clear, however, how rapidly the consignment system of trading took root. In the early 1670s, Virginia justices John Page of York County and John Burnham of Gloucester had an ongoing relationship with London merchant John Jefferyes, though in this instance they were not trading on their


15 See, for example, the accounts in York Deeds, Orders, Wills, Etc. 3 (1657 – 1662), 115-16, 159.
own account. They were instead acting as local factors for Jeffereys, since they handled shipments of wine and at least two contract slave shipments on his behalf, while in the late 1670s councilor Nathaniel Bacon, Sr. of York seems to have provided similar services for Alderman Richard Booth. This form of relationship persisted even after consignment trading became more prominent. By the early 1680s, for example, a consortium of large operators on the upper James River that included Peter Perry and Edward Hill of Charles City, Henry Hartwell of James City, Benjamin Harrison of Surry, and William Byrd, Francis Eppes, and William Randolph of Henrico was tied to the London firm of Micajah Perry and Thomas Lane in a consignment relationship as conventionally understood. But this consortium competed for the business of surrounding small and middling planters with Richard Kennon and John Pleasants of Henrico, who served as factors for London house of William Paggen and Company in the same way as Page, Burnham and Bacon had previously.16

Understanding the precise nature of the relationship between a given planter and the English merchant (or merchants) with whom they dealt is crucial, since it would have determined exactly who benefited from the spread between the farm price of tobacco in the Chesapeake and the higher wholesale prices the weed obtained on the English market. As far as I can tell, Motives calculates receipts from tobacco using the various farm price

16 Elizabeth Donnan, ed., Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to North America, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1930-35), 4:53-55; W.N. Sainsbury, ed., “Virginia in 1677,” Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 22 (1914): 355-357; Jacob M. Price, Perry of London: A Family and a Firm on the Seaborne Frontier, 1615-1753 (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 25, 69; Marion Tinling, ed., Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia, 1684-1776, 2 vols. (Charlottesville, Va., 1977), 1: 9-60, 64-66; Charles City County, Orders (1687-1695), 359, 368, 373, 381, 384; Surry County, Order Book (1671-1691), 561. Of the consortium’s members, Byrd was a member of the Council by this time, and Hartwell, Harrison, and Hill would join that body in the 1690s. Eppes and Randolph were both Henrico justices and represented the county in the House of Burgesses. That Kennon and Pleasants were factors for Paggen, rather than consignors of tobacco to him, is demonstrated by their request that they be exempted from paying taxes on slaves in their possession because “the sd Negroes” were “goods belonging to the Mercht. in England & ought not (in any reasonable time) to put them more in charge (by taxes) then other their Comoditys imported hither.” See Henrico County, Order Book (1678-1693), 163.
series that Lorena first presented in her landmark *William and Mary Quarterly* article. Yet if a planter was consistently consigning on his own account, then such receipts should properly be calculated using the net proceeds of sales in England. Resolving this question has important implications not only for discerning the returns leading Virginians and Marylanders gleaned from crops grown on their own estates but also how much their activities as merchants contributed to their overall income, since they would have similarly “pocketed” the difference between the local value of tobacco acquired through the retail or wholesale selling of merchandise and the net proceeds of that tobacco when it was sold by their merchant correspondents in the mother country.

A second challenge confronting Chesapeake historians is ascertaining how areas that eventually abandoned tobacco for alternative crops were tied commercially to those that remained committed to the regional staple. The economy of what Lorena terms the “periphery” receives the least detailed coverage of the three subregions discussed in *Motives*, and aside from the discussion of Thomas Cable and his widow Sorrowful Margaret, there is no discussion of the activities of an individual planter—undoubtedly because no account books are known to be extant. And yet this outlying subregion presents an interesting historical problem: if the subregion’s prosperity became closely tied to the coastwise trade in provisioning goods, naval stores, and wood products to the Caribbean, how did its residents transform the sugar, rum, and molasses they received through exchange with the islands into the manufactured goods that inhabitants elsewhere in the Chesapeake obtained by sending tobacco to England?

Citing purchases that Rappahannock planters Stephen Loyd, John Tayloe and Edmund Bagge made on the Eastern Shore and Lower James, *Motives* posits that planters

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17 Walsh, “Summing the Parts,” 87-94.
on the periphery perhaps found an expanding market for their produce in tobacco
producing areas, though it also cautions that such contacts were uncertain and dependent
on personal contacts. A surviving 1696 account of the dealings between councilor
Daniel Parke of York County and Lower Norfolk merchant Thomas Walke, on the other
hand, suggests that such contacts, once made, could result in a fairly steady business.
From October 1692 to May 1695, Parke purchased an assortment of goods from Walke
that included rum, molasses, sugar, pork, bread, candles, tar, hoops, and cables, that were
collectively valued at £234:16:8 1/2. Most of entries listing Parke’s remittances—which
totaled £217:14:11 and thus left a balance of £17:2:9 due Walke—were for bills of
exchange that could have been used to purchase items on wholesale from regional
merchants or English correspondents, while a “parcel of goods” valued at £110 accounted
for over half of the total. This is just one brief account, of course, and at this point there is
no telling whether Walke’s business with Parke was characteristic for either him or his
contemporaries along the Lower James, or even if the months covered in the account
represent the typical pace of transactions or an exceptional spate of activity. Nevertheless,
if we are to come to some informed understanding of how the Chesapeake economy
functioned overall, the question of how the inhabitants of the peripheral (I prefer
provisioning) subregion made their living will need a more satisfactory answer than even
Motives offers.19

If I have one bone to pick with Lorena’s exceptional book, it is with her
characterization of the period between 1680 and 1730 as “an era of hard times” in

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18 Walsh, Motives of Honor, Pleasure, and Profit, 333-334.
19 Lower Norfolk County, Deed Book 6 (1695-1703), 31.
Virginia. This should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with a 2006 article I co-authored with Douglas Bradburn of SUNY Bingamton. In that piece, Doug and I attacked the use of staple theory to define the pivotal decades surrounding the turn of the eighteenth century as a period of “stagnation,” “depression,” or “the locust years,” citing both Lorena’s work on subregional differences in the tobacco trade and unanswered questions regarding the scale of intercolonial exchange, trade with Native Americans, the emergence of a Chesapeake shipbuilding industry, and western land development to support our case. In the years since our article appeared, my faux “discovery” (born of previous ignorance) of price currents documenting the value of tobacco on the London market, combined with Doug’s very real discovery of an embargo and convoy regime that was implemented to protect the transatlantic tobacco trade during the prolonged years of warfare between 1688 and 1714, have caused us to become thoroughly convinced that these years of conflict were marked by prosperity rather than hardship for many Virginians.

Doug discusses the workings and consequences of the system he discovered at length in a forthcoming article. Yet to briefly summarize, his argument is that during the war years the character and conduct of the tobacco trade to England was not determined by market forces as it had been in peacetime, but was instead tightly regulated by policies adopted by the English government to protect vessels trading with the Chesapeake from seizure by enemy ships. The number of sailors allocated to man the tobacco fleets that ventured back and forth across the Atlantic was placed at a set amount,

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20 Walsh, Motives of Honor, Pleasure, and Profit, ch. 3.
21 Bradburn and Coombs, “Smoke and Mirrors.”
and thus the number of ships that were authorized to legally trade with Virginia and Maryland was also strictly limited. What ships made it into the departing fleets in Britain was determined by the leading tobacco importers of London and Bristol—the very same men who acted as factors for large, consigning planters—while the Council of Virginia managed affairs in the Chesapeake. The whole system was policed and protected by vessels of the Royal Navy.

The end result was that throughout the war years, the great planters of Virginia (and to a lesser extent of Maryland) and their English correspondents exercised a cartel-like monopoly over the trade and enjoyed preferred access to the market for tobacco in the mother country, where prices for the high quality sweet-scented leaf skyrocketed once existing stocks were depleted. By the mid-to-late 1690s, the best sweet-scented was fetching as much as 15 pence sterling per pound at a time when the local price for even this preferred strain of the weed averaged just 1.1 pence sterling. Such prices were more than enough to compensate for higher freight rates, which steadily declined as kinks in the convoy system were worked out, and those planters with sufficient influence to regularly get their crops aboard a ship experienced windfall profits. Nor did the bonanza prices disappear when hostilities ended, with sweet-scented still getting between 10.5 and 11 pence sterling per pound as late as 1720.

These findings call into question the overarching characterization of the period in Motives. No doubt the war years were difficult for most inhabitants of the oronoco subregion, forced as they were to take a back seat to better-situated sweet-scented growers anxious to find freight for their own leaf. Considering the circumstances, it is little wonder that Maryland councilor Colonel Robert Quarry detested the convoy system,
complaining that “as manedg’d it is injurious to all” and had “done more damage to [the tobacco] trade and the intrist of these Provinces than all that were concern’d in it were worth,” though he added for clarification that “I mean the Aronoco tobacco.” Even in the sweet-scented area of Virginia, not all planters shared fully in the opportunities that the convoy and embargo regime afforded. According to a 1702 account, the net proceeds of sixty-six hogsheads of tobacco belonging to Richard Johnson of King William County that were “lodged in the hands of Thomas Corbin” of Westmoreland amounted to £532:13:09 or £8:01:05 per hogshead. When divided by the range of hogshead weights for the period given in Motives this computes to a per pound price of between 1.59 and 4.61 pence current money (or 1.45 to 4.19 pence sterling), an above average but hardly spectacular return.23

Planters who had the means and connections to command some space in the convoy, on the other hand, could expect exceedingly handsome profits. Had Thomas Corbin consigned the tobacco he had from Johnson to a London merchant, he could have expected to receive a return of 6.5 pence sterling per pound after paying freight, customs and other charges. When the price paid to Johnson is deducted, this would have netted him between 2.31 and 5.05 pence sterling per pound, or something on the order of £583 to £774 sterling. It is important to note that Corbin would have garnered these hypothetical profits simply by his ability to take advantage of the wide price differential between the farm price of sweet-scented tobacco in the Chesapeake and its wholesale price in London. The full import of the opportunities open to men who could gain access to shipping is perhaps better conveyed by multiplying the average tobacco crop per

laborer listed in Motives by the expected net return of sales in London, which would give us a good idea of the potential returns generated by the planting operations of a well-connected sweet-scented grower who knew his business and could produce high quality leaf. As an illustrative example, consider the prospects of Robert “King” Carter in 1697. That year, Carter paid taxes on fifty-nine workers in Lancaster County, where his home plantation of Corotoman was located. Motives lists the mean output per laborer in the Rappahannock basin for the 1690s as 1,207 pounds per worker, so for the purposes of argument let’s assume that Carter shipped 71,213 pounds of tobacco from Corotoman on consignment to his English factors. According to Proctor’s Price Current, the going price for Rappahannock sweet-scented on the London market was between 10.0 and 10.5 sterling pence per pound in 1697. Carter was ever mindful about the quality of his crops, so at the higher price he would have netted 5.5 sterling pence per pound after paying all charges, for a total of £1631:19:03 or £27½ sterling per worker.24

Clearly, for those planters with the clout necessary to gain access to freight, growing sweet-scented tobacco paid well in this purported “era of hard times.” In a 1698 letter to English merchant John Cooper, William Fitzhugh noted that because “Oronoko Tobo. was generally sorry” he had not “made any thing but sweet for some years,” and the previous December had seen the wisdom of this decision confirmed by a return of “£23rd sterling a hhd. clear.” With such profits some members of the Virginia elite were able to run up impressive balances with their merchant correspondents. In 1720, for instance, an account taken of the remaining estate of William Churchill’s widow Elizabeth (who had previously been married to councilor Ralph Wormeley II) listed cash

24 John C. Coombs, Virginia Tithable Files; Walsh, Motives of Honor, Pleasure, and Profit, 350; Bradburn, “The Visible Fist.”
sums in the hands of various Virginia and English factors totaling £3,657:13:02¾, and the small fortunes garnered by planters who operated on the scale of William Byrd I were doubtlessly even more impressive. In a 1691 letter to English trader John Cary, Byrd promised that he could ship 300 hogsheads by himself if Cary would send over a suitable vessel, which six years later would have brought him a net return of £3,493:15:00 sterling at the median hogshead weight and lowest sweet-scented price.⁵

Realizing that many of Virginia’s leading planters became flush with cash through war profiteering helps to explain their buoyant behavior in the midst of the prolonged years of conflict and their immediate aftermath. The profits generated by their tobacco consignments to England, for example, paid for the construction of lavish new homes, from Lewis Burwell’s Fairfield in the 1690s to the Benjamin Harrison IV’s Berkeley and Robert “King” Carter’s Corotoman in the 1720s. More importantly, their hefty balances supplied the needed capital to rapidly expand their workforces when slaves became more available following the ending of the Royal African Company’s Monopoly in 1698. The largest slave labor force enumerated in a surviving seventeenth-century Virginia inventory belonged to John Carter II—the elder half-brother of “King” Carter—who at his death in 1690 owned 107 enslaved men women and children. Yet Edmund Jennings and Daniel Parke both had more than a hundred slaves by the late 1700s, and the holdings of councilors only continued to grow larger during the 1710s and 1720s, with William Byrd II accumulating 220 slaves by 1716 and Nathaniel Harrison 163 by 1728. The biggest enslaved workforce built up during these years belonged to “King” Carter, who likely drawing on account balances built up during the war years,

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⁵ Richard Beale Davis, ed., William Fitzhugh and His Chesapeake World: The Fitzhugh Letters and Other Documents (Chapel Hill, NC, 1963), 357-358; Middlesex County, Will Book B (1713-1734), 137; Tinling, ed., Correspondence of the Three William Byrds, 1:150-151.
bought “near four score slaves” from Colonel George Braxton of King and Queen County in 1727, picking “the choice of the ship three men to one woman at twenty pound per head.” Notably, in order to cover their cost, he drew bills of exchange on five different merchant houses with whom he regularly consigned tobacco for a total sum of £1,490. At his death in 1732, Carter owned no fewer than 736 slaves on forty-nine quarters in nine different counties.26

To end this lengthy disquisition of the interpretation Doug and I are developing on a conciliatory note—and even Doug might not agree with everything argued here—I do not think that the detailed analysis presented in the third chapter of Motives is necessarily incompatible with how we see the period, even if some of the descriptive language Lorena uses might be. Only one of the men who receive individual treatment in the chapter potentially fit the profile of the consigning planters who benefited most from embargo and convoy system. John Bagge was clearly outside this privileged circle since he sold his crops locally, and his son Edmund’s career began after the peak years for sweet-scented had ended. Robert Bristow was in a much better position—he was one of the fifteen London and Bristol merchants granted control over deciding what ships were included in the convoy—but the incompetent overseers who worked on his quarters seem

to have been incapable of producing a marketable crop. John Tayloe alone fits the profile and thus stands as a potential bone of interpretive contention. He began his adulthood with wealth and position and would eventually move up through the ranks of county level office-holding to join the upper echelons of the Virginia elite. By his death in 1747, he was a member of the Council of State and commanded an impressive labor force of 427 slaves.²⁷

So why did he seemingly achieve such mixed results during the period covered in *Motives?* Let me offer two possible explanations. First, he possibly could have utilized what space he could get aboard ships headed to England for his own crops and sold the oronoco tobacco produced on the partners’ Stafford plantation at depressed local prices. Second, assuming he did consign the Stafford crops, perhaps net returns derived from the London price currents should be substituted for the farm prices that Lorena used to calculate tobacco income. I look forward to hearing her take on both of these potential solutions, but regardless of her response, I would add that I consider her book to be truly a masterwork of social history. I stand in awe of *Motives of Honor Pleasure and Profit,* and so should anyone else who loves studying and learning about the early Chesapeake.

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²⁷ Petition of the merchants trading to Virginia and Maryland to the Queen. CO 1/68, No. 83. Oct 12, 1691; Richmond County, Will Book 5 (1725-1753), 547-553.