

Economic Diversification and Labour Utilization Among the Rural Elite of the British Mid-Atlantic Colonies: A Case Study from the Delaware Valley

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With few exceptions, relatively little is known of the economic affairs of major eighteenth-century agriculturalists of the North Eastern seaboard. The article which follows is a contribution to our knowledge of this little-known subject. By concentrating on the activities of two leading members of the New Jersey gentry (Jacob Spicer and Aaron Leaming), it shows that engaging in a variety of enterprises was crucial to their economic strategy. The author's two subjects undertook a varied array of business pursuits in addition to agriculture that included retailing, shipping, lumbering, milling, money lending, and even the encouragement of small-scale cottage industries. The profits of these supplementary activities grew until they exceeded the income received from producing foodstuffs. In addition, they managed to operate and improve their plantations without using gangs of unfree laborers. The careers of these two individuals suggest that continuing to view the northern, rural elite as a group whose basic economic orientation concerned the raising of foodstuffs for export will only distort the sweep of their economic activities.

À l'exception de quelques faits, nous ne savons à peu près rien de la condition économique des gros cultivateurs de la côte nord-est des États-Unis durant le XVIII^e siècle. L'article qui suit apporte sur ce sujet des éléments très intéressants. Portant son attention sur les activités de deux notables de la « gentry » du New Jersey (Jacob Spicer et Aaron Leaming), l'auteur démontre que, pour mener à bien leur stratégie, il était capital qu'ils diversifient leurs entreprises. Les deux individus sur lesquels a porté l'enquête ont en effet des intérêts dans d'autres domaines que l'agriculture : la vente au détail, le transport maritime, l'industrie forestière, l'exploitation de moulins, le prêt d'argent, ou même l'artisanat local. Les profits tirés de ces activités crurent à un point tel dans leurs cas qu'ils excéderent ceux venant de la production de denrées agricoles. En outre, ils réussirent à augmenter la productivité de leurs plantations sans avoir recours aux services des esclaves ou engagés. L'examen de ces deux cas tend à démontrer qu'il n'est plus possible de continuer à voir les notables du Nord-est colonial comme un groupe dont la seule orientation était de cultiver des produits alimentaires en vue de l'exportation, cette vision des choses ne correspondant pas du tout à la réalité.

Historians investigating the economic activities of eighteenth-century Anglo-America's upper class have primarily devoted themselves to the study of southern planters and wealthy inhabitants of eastern seaports.¹ Consequently, much more is known of the

1. Representative of the literature are the following: Louis B. Wright, *Letters of Robert Carter, 1720-1727: The Commercial Interests of a Virginia Gentleman* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Institute Press, 1940); Aubrey C. Land, "Economic Behavior and Social Structure: The Northern Chesapeake in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History*, XXV (1965), 639-54; Edward C. Papenfuse, "Planter Behavior and Economic Behavior in a Staple Economy," *Agricultural History*, XLVI (1972), 297-311; Russell R. Menard, Lois Green Carr, and Lorena S. Walsh, "A Small Planter's Profits: The Cole Estate and the Growth of the Early Chesapeake Economy," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., XL (1983), 171-96 [hereafter cited as WMQ]; Timothy H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tobacco Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985); W.T. Baxter, *The House of Hancock: Business in Boston*,

way in which affluent slave owners and merchants directed their financial affairs than about the economic lives of large agriculturalists and wealthy professionals in the countryside of provinces above Maryland. Scholars have paid little attention to the economic affairs of the northern rural elite, apart from the owners of New York's manorial estates, a group untypical of the region's upper class in most respects.² In effect, the systematic examination of how the gentry of the middle Atlantic and New England colonies managed their estates, utilized labour, and otherwise capitalized on their economic resources, has barely begun.

Given the scattered and fragmentary nature of the few extant sources that describe the rural elite's financial dealings in detail, the investigation of this subject as it concerns the north's leading families will have to proceed in much the same manner as that followed by historians who have studied the business affairs of southern planters: case by isolated case. In this article I attempt such a study for the northern colonies, based upon an unusually extensive collection of records left by the two wealthiest men in mid-eighteenth century Cape May County, New Jersey: Aaron Leaming, Jr. and Jacob Spicer, Jr. These materials allow one to reconstruct an unusually precise picture of the means by which two large property holders in the lower Delaware Valley generated substantial incomes and improved their estates without any significant dependence on an unfree work force. The diaries, memoranda books, and miscellaneous legal documents prepared by both men offer a rare opportunity to examine the gentry's involvement in several profitable activities that were not only vital to the local economy, but were also of inestimable importance to many persons of moderate means seeking either to supplement their incomes or to accumulate the savings required for negotiating a mortgage. Before examining how Aaron Leaming, Jr. and Jacob Spicer, Jr., maximized their incomes by combining farming with commerce, and how they tapped a readily available supply of free labour to develop their estates, it is necessary to review briefly the situation of eighteenth-century Cape May and to recount the family origins of that county's two largest landowners.

Spicer and Leaming dominated the economy of a small, isolated community situated at the mouth of the Delaware River's Atlantic estuary. Cut off from the more densely settled regions to the north by an inhospitable wilderness called the Pine Barrens, Cape May's inaccessibility discouraged immigration. A mere 1,188 people resided there in 1745, and by 1772 their descendants numbered only 1,759.³ Few truly affluent individuals lived in Cape May. As a result, Learning and Spicer were able to develop a wide range of business pursuits including a diversity of economic activities representative of the middle Atlantic's landed gentry during the 1700s.

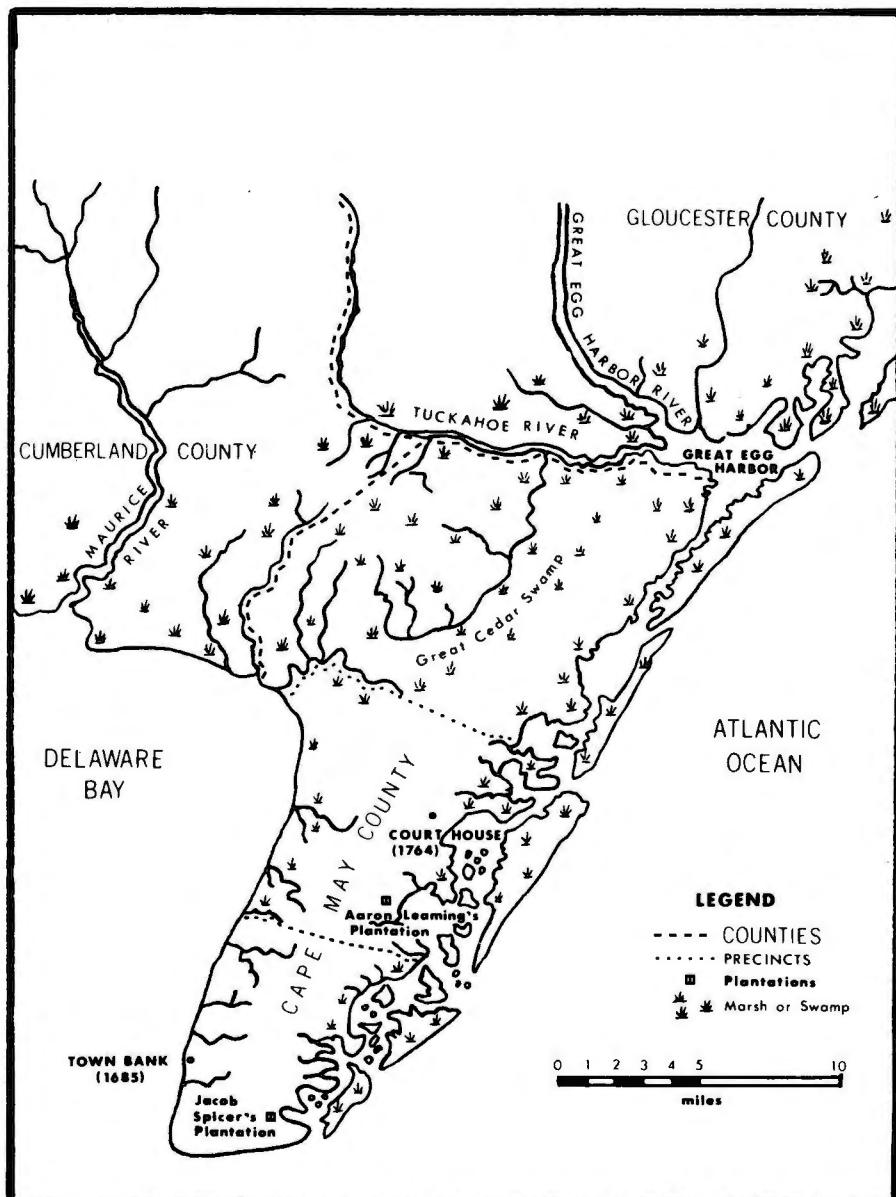
The earliest immigrants to New Jersey bypassed Cape May for more fertile lands. For two decades after England acquired the province in 1664, the area remained unoccupied except for small groups of Lenni-Lenape Indians who called themselves the Unalachtigo,

1724-1775 (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945); Frederick B. Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1948); Philip L. White, *The Beekmans of New York in Politics and Commerce, 1647-1877* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956); Thomas M. Doerflinger, "Enterprise on the Delaware: Merchants and Economic Development in Philadelphia, 1750-1790" (Ph. D. diss., Harvard University, 1980).

2. Sung Bok Kim, *Landlord and Tenant in Colonial New York: Manorial Society, 1664-1775* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1978).

3. Census of West Jersey, 1745, and Census of New Jersey, 1772, in William A. Whitehead, et al., eds., *Archives of the State of New Jersey*, 1st Ser., I-XLII, *Documents Relating to the Colonial, Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary History of the State of New Jersey* (Newark, Trenton, Paterson, N.J.: N.J. Historical Society, 1880-1949), VI, p. 242; X, pp. 452-53 [hereafter cited as *N.J. Archs.*].

Cape May County, 1765



or the "People-who-live-by-the-ocean." It was the Unalachtigo's practice of burning the woods at intervals of ten to twenty years that preserved the extensive pine forests covering most of Cape May's interior. The Unalachtigo were also the first to tap the nearby ocean's bounty. Leaving their winter homes in the uplands shortly after planting fields of maize, they established summer camps at the shore where they feasted on abundant seafood, manufactured wampum, and never imagined their way of life would end.⁴

For most of the seventeenth century the Unalachtigoes caught only brief glimpses of Europeans sailing past their home. In 1685 they allowed a small group of whalers to build a few houses on the Delaware River's eastern shore so they could dress their catches and lay over in bad weather. The whalers brought their families soon after, and by 1687 the first English child had been born in the county. Other white men followed. They were mostly hard-bitten, sea-faring folk from eastern Long Island and New England, joined by a few Germans, Dutchmen, Swedes, an occasional deserter from the British Navy, and even an Irish Jacobite or two. There were enough white people to form a county in 1692, and by 1700 they had acquired thirty-six thousand acres from the Unalachtigoes, who discovered too late that they had sold their birthright.⁵

Among the early whalers was Christopher Leaming, grandfather of Aaron, Jr. Christopher Leaming left England for America when he was about eighteen years old with his brother Jeremiah. He buried Jeremiah at sea, landed in Massachusetts about 1670, and drifted to Sag Harbor on eastern Long Island. Although handicapped by a withered hand, he became a respected artisan. He married a local girl and obtained a small farmstead as a dowry. He moved to Cape May with several neighbors in 1691. Despite the slow deterioration of his lungs from pleurisy, he went to sea during the whaling season and worked industriously as a cooper at other times. When Christopher Leaming died in 1697 or 1698, he left his widow and seven orphans a farm at Sag Harbor, 204 acres in Cape May, and a small dairy herd. He did not end his life as a gentleman, but nevertheless laid a foundation for two of his sons to enter that class.⁶

Christopher Leaming's oldest son Thomas inherited all his property and the younger children were sent out to learn trades. Christopher's fifth child Aaron became apprenticed to a shoemaker in Connecticut when about ten, but ran away to West Jersey after a few years. Aaron entered the service of a prominent Quaker widow in Salem County who became his patron; she converted him to the doctrines of the Society of Friends, tutored him in her extensive library, and launched him upon a lawyer's career. He returned to Cape May, where his brother Thomas (now also a Quaker) had been steadily accumulating property and rising in public esteem as a result.

Aaron Leaming found favour with the leading families of Cape May and married a magistrate's daughter at the age of twenty-seven. He practiced law, established a plantation where he grazed cattle, bought shallops and engaged in trade with Philadelphia, operated

4. Peter O. Wacker, *Land and People, A Cultural Geography of Preindustrial New Jersey: Origins and Settlement Patterns* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1975), pp. 67-68, 115, 302. Harold F. Wilson, *The Story of the New Jersey Shore* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1964), pp. 3-5.

5. Lewis T. Stevens, *The History of Cape May County, New Jersey* (Cape May City, N.J.: Lewis T. Stevens, 1897), pp. 1-30. George H. Cook, *Geology of Cape May, State of New Jersey* (Trenton, N.J.: the True American, 1857), p. 197.

6. Aaron Leaming, Jr., History of the Leaming Family, Sep. 10, 1771, transcribed in John E. Stillwell, *Historical and Genealogical Miscellany: Early Settlers of New Jersey and Their Descendants*, I-IV (New York: Privately Printed, 1903-1932), III, pp. 428-29. Statement of Thomas Leaming, n.d. [*1732?*], *ibid.*, p. 433.

mills, accumulated 2,300 acres, acquired a dozen slaves, and purchased one-eighth of a share in the undivided lands controlled by the West Jersey Council of Proprietors. He joined his brother Thomas as a justice on the county court in 1716, and in 1727 he gained election as an assemblyman, a position he would hold until 1742.⁷

Presiding over Cape May's county court when Leaming entered the legislature was its senior justice, Jacob Spicer. Like Leaming, he had been born on Long Island and brought by his parents to southern New Jersey, but any similarity in their backgrounds ended there. Spicer's father Samuel had arrived in the colony with sufficient wealth to purchase 750 acres for a plantation in Gloucester County. Samuel Spicer immediately gained acceptance as a gentleman, was soon appointed a judge, and married his children into locally prominent families.⁸

Samuel's son Jacob held title to eight hundred acres by the time he was twenty-eight, and purchased at least four hundred more in later years. Jacob Spicer became a justice in 1705, was made commander of a company of fusiliers raised to invade Canada in 1709, became a judge in 1710, and a lieutenant-colonel of militia in 1714. Although Jacob Spicer owned land in both Gloucester and Cape May, he chose to establish his residence in the latter county, where he gained election to the assembly in 1709. He sat in the legislature for twelve years, and continued presiding over the county courts until he retired from public service in 1733 at age sixty-five.⁹

The influence of Aaron Leaming and Jacob Spicer enabled their sons to emerge as important figures in local affairs at exceptionally early ages. Young Leaming joined his father in the assembly at age twenty-five in 1740. Jacob Spicer, Jr., received a commission as a justice of the quorum when only twenty-three and began sitting in the legislature at twenty-eight in 1744.¹⁰ When the elder Leaming and Spicer died in the 1740s, their sons in turn became Cape May's leading citizens.

Family reputation and influence greatly assisted the rapid political rise of both young men, as did the fact that they became the two richest men in Cape May upon the deaths of their fathers. Jacob Spicer left 1,237 acres and an unknown portion of his personal property to his namesake in 1742. His son improved on this inheritance and by 1751 he possessed 2,332 acres in the county's Lower Precinct, more than four times greater than the holdings of the next largest landowner. Ten years later he estimated his real estate and fishing rights in Cape May, exclusive of his home plantation, to be worth £7,000 proclamation. Upon his death, his estate included 2,500 acres of upland and marsh in Cape May and Cumberland counties, his home plantation of 400 acres, and a 437 acre tract in Sussex County. Spicer's total worth, including his personal property, livestock, ships, book debts,

7. Aaron Leaming, Jr., *History of the Leaming Family*, *ibid.*, pp. 430-31, 433. Liber AAA (Commissions), 156, 169, Division of Archives and Records Management, New Jersey Department of State, Trenton. Liber HH, 14, 22, and Liber AD, 38 (West Jersey Deeds), *ibid.* Salem County, N.J. Loan Office Books, June 7, 1741, edited in *Genealogical Magazine of New Jersey*, LIV (1979), p. 125 [hereafter cited as *GMNJ*]. Will of Aaron Leaming, Oct. 15, 1743, *N.J. Archs.*, XXX, p. 294.

8. Stillwell, *Historical and Genealogical Miscellany*, IV, pp. 292-293. Gloucester County Deed Book No. 1, 11, 113, Div. of Archives and Records Management, N.J. Dept. of State, Trenton. Spicer also owned land in Monmouth County, where he sold 616 acres in 1688. Liber E (East Jersey Deeds), 331, *ibid.*

9. Liber A, 11, and Liber B, pt. 2, 549 (West Jersey Deeds), Div. of Archives and Records Management, N.J. Dept. of State, Trenton. Liber AAA (Commissions), 50, 104, 114, 158, 210, *ibid.*

10. Council Journal, Dec. 1, 1739, *N.J. Archs.*, XIV, 96.

and servants, probably ranged between £15,000 and £20,000 when he died suddenly in 1765.¹¹

When Aaron Leaming, Sr., died in 1746, he was, according to his son's testimony, "the most considerable man in the County of Cape May," with an estate twice as large as Jacob Spicer, Sr.'s, and virtually free of debt; he bequeathed the bulk of his property to his son Aaron, who increased it substantially.¹² When the younger Leaming prepared his will in 1780, he held 2,622 acres in Cape May, most of it improved, and total property valued at an extraordinary £181,414 proclamation.¹³ Aaron Leaming, Jr., the grandson of a crippled English immigrant, ended his life as one of the wealthiest men in New Jersey.

The size of their estates placed Jacob Spicer, Jr. and Aaron Leaming, Jr., at the pinnacle of county's society. While Cape May's population was overwhelmingly composed of families which owned of both land and livestock, the distribution of wealth among the inhabitants was far from even. The 3.3 percent (amounting to thirteen individuals) of taxpayers with at least four hundred acres collectively held almost one-quarter of all the county's improved land in 1774. (See Table 1) More than one-third of all real estate was in the hands of twenty-seven individuals (6.7 percent of all rateables) possessing at least three hundred acres, and the richest tenth of the area's people owned 43 percent of all improved land. Similarly, the eighteen largest livestock grazers (4.7 percent of all taxpayers) owned more than a fifth of all cattle in Cape May, while almost one-third of the county's dairy animals were the property of thirty-one persons (8.1 percent of those assessed). (See Table 2) The typical resident worked about one hundred acres of improved ground and kept eleven cows; furthermore, 36 percent of all taxpayers had no cattle and 40 percent were landless. In contrast, during the course of their lives Leaming and Spicer each acquired more than two thousand acres and built up the two largest livestock herds in Cape May, with more than fifty head of cattle apiece.¹⁴

Neither Jacob Spicer nor Aaron Leaming could have accumulated such extensive property had they simply lived off their inheritances. Each personally managed his own plantations and undertook a number of supplementary economic pursuits to increase his yearly income, in particular retail sales and the intercoastal trade. An examination of these activities will provide a better understanding of how the upper class utilized their financial resources to best advantage.

The first families of New Jersey enjoyed most of the benefits commonly associated with high social status and economic privilege except for leisure. Few such families contented themselves with living off rents from inherited lands, leaving their plantations in the hands of overseers, or allowing others to handle their business affairs. The rural elite of the Delaware Valley gave scrupulous attention to the operation of their plantations, as did the upper class of the Chesapeake. A tutor from neighbouring Cumberland County wrote in 1774 of how unexceptional it was to "see Gentlemen, when they are not actually engaged

11. Frank H. Stewart, ed., "Cape May County Rateables," *Cape May Magazine of History and Genealogy*, II (1939-46), p. 74 [hereafter cited as *CMMHG*]. Instructions for Will of Jacob Spicer, and Diary of Jacob Spicer, June 4, 1761, Jacob Spicer Papers, New Jersey Historical Society, Newark.

12. Aaron Leaming, Jr., History of the Leaming Family, in Stillwell, *Historical and Genealogical Miscellany*, III, p. 431.

13. Inventory of Aaron Leaming Estate, Sep. 4, 1780, *N.J. Archs.*, XXXIV, p. 302.

14. Kenn Stryker-Rodda, ed., "New Jersey Rateables: Cape May County, 1773-4," *GMNJ*, XXXVIII (1963), p. 9. Stewart, "Cape May County Rateables," p. 74.

Table 1 **Distribution of Land in Cape May County,
New Jersey, 1774**

Taxpayers No.	(%)	Size of Landholding	Total Acres Owned by Entire Group	% of All Assessed Land
5	(1.3)	750 +	4,956	13.4
4	(1.0)	500-749	2,225	6.0
4	(1.0)	400-499	1,650	4.4
13	(3.4)	300-399	4,181	11.3
8	(2.1)	250-299	2,028	5.5
24	(6.3)	200-249	5,172	14.0
39	(10.2)	125-199	5,871	15.9
78	(20.5)	100-124	7,949	21.5
54	(14.2)	1-99	2,969	8.0
152	(40.0)	0	0	.0

Source: Kenn Stryker-Rodda, ed., "New Jersey Rateables: Cape May County, 1773-4," *Genealogical Magazine of New Jersey*, XXXVII (1962), 119-121; XXXVIII (1963), 8-12.

Table 2 **Distribution of Cattle in Cape May County,
New Jersey, 1774**

Taxpayers No.	(%)	Number of Cattle Owned	Total Cattle Owned By Group	% of all Cattle Listed
5	(1.3)	50 +	309	8.7
13	(3.4)	30-49	485	13.7
13	(3.4)	25-29	342	9.6
28	(7.3)	20-24	589	16.6
32	(8.4)	15-19	537	15.1
68	(17.9)	10-14	776	21.8
47	(12.3)	6-9	374	10.5
38	(10.0)	1-5	141	4.0
137	(36.0)	0	0	.0

Source: See Table 1.

in the public Service, on their farms, setting a laborious example to their Domesticks."¹⁵ Few men who ranked among the gentry did field work, of course, unless it was necessary to prevent a harvest from being lost. Gentlemen did, however, personally supervise the fieldhands, servants, or slaves who tended their crops and livestock, in order to ensure that tasks were properly completed and to save themselves the expense of hiring an overseer.

The lands of Spicer and Leaming probably required less personal attention than most plantations elsewhere because the two men relied more heavily on livestock than grain for their income. Both men kept the larger proportion of their cattle herds on coastal islands where they could be left untended to forage freely for long periods, and grazed others under the supervision of tenants in return for lower rents. Even so, their diaries show them to have carefully devoted themselves to the management of their estates and to have been busily

15. Philip Vickers Fithian to John Peck, Aug. 12, 1774, in Hunter D. Farish, ed., *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion* (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg, 1943), p. 211.

engaged in improving their property whenever possible. For example, during the spring of 1755, Jacob Spicer filled his diary with the following entries after his return from legislative duty.

- May 7th agreed to give Mr. Mills Priscilla's [his daughter's] Cow & fat her into the bargain for raising her — returned home & drove Cattle with me.
- May 12th assisted about making the line fence Between Mr. [William] Smith & myself.
- May 13th compleated the sd. Fence & repaired other fence.
- May 14th Finished repairing the Fence at the place I bought of Smith & returned home.
- May 15th drove Cattle over to the above place & tried for water & lodged all Night at Thos. Eldredge's.
- May 16th Finished digging water — & retd. home —
- May 17th went to Saml. Matthews'es for Sheep
- May 19th ...went to Morris [Maurice] River [in Cumberland Co.]
- May 20th returned home after Taking care of my Cattle. — at Morris River —
- May 21st at home plan[n]ing the Land I bought of Mr. Smith
- May 22d. went to Dennis Neck to procure water for my Cattle — & propose to make an Essay tomorrow
- May 24th made the above Essay in part...
- May 25th made a further progress in the above Essay & retd. home —
- May 26th went to Smith's place to compleat my watering holes
- May 28th ...Employed today upon giving advice & plan[n]ing the Land I bought of Mr. Smith —
- June 2nd attended the Gelding of some of my Creatures & ct.¹⁶

Excluding Sundays, Spicer spent all but seven of the twenty-seven days from May 7 to June 2 directing his farmhands about their tasks or planning how to use his land to best advantage in the coming season. Nor did his colleague Leaming differ in his own work habits. Leaming's diary records him travelling to Maurice River in Cumberland to supervise hay gathering as late as 1775 — an unexceptional event except that he was approaching sixty and it was the middle of winter.¹⁷

Leaming and Spicer took such care to improve their lands that the increased value of their property enabled them to earn large incomes. Like most Cape May farmers, they depended primarily upon livestock raising for their sustenance since the soil was generally thin and poor. Spicer — who undoubtedly produced more grain than the typical resident — sowed sixteen acres of wheat in 1755 and reaped a harvest of sixty-seven bushels, which probably earned him £15 Pennsylvania currency.¹⁸ His gains from selling livestock were far more substantial, at least £123.9 proclamation in that year,¹⁹ well above the £16 estimated by Jackson Turner Main to be the average earnings of a Jersey farmer at approximately the same time.²⁰

16. William A. Ellis, ed., "Diary of Jacob Spicer, 1755-6," New Jersey Historical Society, *Proceedings*, LVIII (1945), pp. 84-86 [hereafter cited as Jacob Spicer Diary, with entry dates and page numbers from Ellis's transcription].

17. Aaron Leaming Diary, Jan. 27, 1775, Pennsylvania Historical Society, Philadelphia.

18. Jacob Spicer Diary, July 16, 1755, Ellis, ed., p. 94. Wheat was selling for 4 sh., 6 d. per bushel in Philadelphia in 1755. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 772.

19. Jacob Spicer Diary, Sep. 19, Dec. 15, 1755, Ellis, ed., p. 109, 178.

20. Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 107.

Unlike many members of the landed gentry, Leaming and Spicer invested little money in the two economic activities that most commonly absorbed the rural elite's excess capital: milling and extending credit. Jacob Spicer investigated the prospect of building a sawmill in 1755, but seems to have abandoned the venture.²¹ Aaron Leaming jointly owned a sawmill with his brother Jeremiah in 1761, but had sold his share by 1774.²² Nor apparently did either man lend substantial sums of cash at interest. Evidently, both of these notables preferred to invest their farming profits in trade.

The most important source of nonagricultural income for Spicer and Leaming came from commerce, an ironic development for two country gentlemen. Both men engaged in the intercolonial coastal trade, but Spicer's dealings are documented in more detail and so offer a better indication of how significantly mercantile activities might contribute to a landed gentleman's prosperity. Spicer was already exporting flour, bread, and pork to Boston in 1741 on a twenty ton sloop manned by a crew of four.²³ For the next decade his participation in trade was limited to dispatching small cargoes of local products to New England, North Carolina, and occasionally the West Indies. He began accepting sizeable consignments of goods from a Philadelphia merchant shortly before 1755 and opened a store in Cape May's Lower Precinct.²⁴

Spicer's initial experiences as a retailer disappointed him. He found the work time-consuming and less profitable than he had imagined. "[H]ave not had Time today to Tie upon my Stockings being so closely Engaged in the Sale of Goods," he wrote after a day of haggling with customers over prices and terms of credit, "& have Sold but £28.1.5 worth of Goods so Trifling is the retail way."²⁵ His sales on succeeding days were much less considerable, and within a week he recorded receiving only £52.9.3.²⁶ His coastal voyages were evidently yielding middling returns as well, perhaps an average of £100 per trip, from which sum the cost of goods and the crew's wages would have to be deducted.²⁷

His commercial ventures nevertheless developed into a highly remunerative enterprise within a few years. He calculated that his store in Cape May and the ships sailing under his orders turned a profit of £273 in 1759 on merchandise purchased at £1,116, a return of almost one-quarter. From this amount he had to subtract the cost of carrying goods by sea, and perhaps £100 for the wages of his crewmen, but much of that expense was offset by fees gained through carrying freight for others.²⁸

21. Jacob Spicer Diary, May 19, 1755, Ellis, ed., p. 85.

22. Aaron Leaming Diary, Nov. 25, 1761, Pa. Hist. Soc. Stryker-Rodda, "New Jersey Rateables: Cape May County, 1773-4," p. 9.

23. Register of Ships Entering Philadelphia, Oct. 23, 1741, Pa. Hist. Soc.

24. Jacob Spicer Diary, Nov. 18, 1755, Ellis, ed., pp. 175-176. On Spicer's involvement in the Carolina and West Indian trade, see Lewis T. Stevens, ed., "Memorandum Book of Jacob Spicer, 1757-1764," *CMMHG*, I (1931-38), pp. 115, 172 [hereafter cited as Jacob Spicer Memorandum Book, with entry dates and page numbers from Stevens's transcription].

25. Jacob Spicer Diary, Jan. 19, 1756, Ellis, ed., p. 187.

26. *Ibid.*, Jan. 19-22, 1756. Later entries typically read like of that of Jan. 23, "Employed as above but small Sales today," Ellis, ed., p. 187.

27. *Ibid.*, July 28, 1755, Ellis, ed., p. 95.

28. Jacob Spicer Memorandum Book, n.d., [Jan. 1760], Stevens, ed., p. 171. On wages, see entries for Feb. 6, 18, 19, 1760, *ibid.*, pp. 171-72. Spicer charged 6 sh. per barrel sent to Carolina and 5 sh. per thousand shingles sent to New York or Philadelphia. Jacob Spicer Diary, July 5, 1761, Jacob Spicer Papers, N.J. Hist. Soc.

The produce of his plantation and the profits of retailing seem to have been earning Spicer approximately £413 proclamation annually by the late 1750s. His income from rents, shipping fees, and payments for lumber cut on his land is unknown, but it probably offset a large portion, if not all, of the overhead expenses he incurred while carrying on the coastal trade. At the same time, he estimated the yearly expenses of his family and servants, exclusive of what his plantation furnished, to be £86.4.0 in 1758.²⁹ If these figures are representative of his earnings and expenditures, then Spicer was receiving more than £300 annually beyond the cost of maintaining his household of twelve persons, a figure roughly twenty times greater than the estimated income of a contemporary Jersey farmer.³⁰ Spicer's agricultural and mercantile activities consequently may have provided him with £3,000 of net savings per decade by the time he was in his mid-forties: money available for improving his plantation, investing in real estate, or expanding his business activities.

The ability to generate such large cash flows would have allowed Spicer and Leaming to purchase sizeable numbers of slaves, indentured servants, or imported convicts. Neither man, however, chose to place any substantial reliance on unfree labour. Jacob Spicer owned just one slave in 1751, and seems to have maintained only four slaves, indentured servants, or hired laborers in 1759.³¹ Aaron Leaming held but four slaves as late as 1774.³² Rather than invest a large amount of capital acquiring bound laborers who might prove to be unreliable, short-lived, or even dangerous, Cape May's two leading planters chose to offer full or partial employment to local residents. As a consequence, the estates of Leaming and Spicer provided an important source of yearly or seasonal work for young men starting to accumulate the savings necessary to negotiate a mortgage and for older individuals heading established families who needed to supplement their income during times of financial difficulty.

In Cape May county, economic opportunity still existed in the mid-eighteenth century, but personal success was hard won. "The land is generally poor," wrote historian Samuel Smith in 1765, "but the adjoining salt marshes serve to breed cattle and horses; these with the red cedar beaches, and fish and oysters, with which the coast abounds, afford the inhabitants an easy maintenance."³³ Smith's opinion that the residents enjoyed an "easy maintenance" (i.e., an adequate income) was only correct for those already established as property holders. Others had little choice but to order their lives according to the maxim of Aaron Leaming, Jr.: "those who did not intend to die as poor as they were born must bestir themselves with great industry."³⁴

Approximately two of every five free adult males in the county owned no land. Most landless men were the sons of ordinary farmers who had to begin building their fortunes almost from scratch, much as their parents or grandparents had done when they migrated to southern New Jersey. Only the wealthier families could have afforded to provide their

29. Jacob Spicer Memorandum Book, n.d., [Jan. 1759], Stevens, ed., p. 164.

30. Main, *Social Structure of Revolutionary America*, p. 107.

31. Spicer wrote that twelve persons lived on his plantation in 1759, of whom his own family numbered eight (including a stepson and niece residing with him). Jacob Spicer Memorandum Book, n.d. [Jan. 1759], Stevens, ed., p. 164. Jacob Spicer Diary, Mar. 25, 1755, Ellis, ed., p. 45. Will of Jacob Spicer, May 6, 1762. N.J. Archs., XXXIII, pp. 403-04.

32. Stryker-Rodda, "New Jersey Rateables: Cape May County, 1773-4," p. 9.

33. Samuel Smith, *The History of the Colony of Nova-Caesaria or New Jersey* (Burlington, N.J.: James Parker, 1765), pp. 498.

34. Aaron Leaming, Jr., History of the Leaming Family, in Stillwell, *Historical and Genealogical Miscellany*, III, p. 431.

children with sufficient land for a farm when they married, assuming that they were inclined to do so.

The demographic realities of life in colonial New Jersey furthermore ensured that few sons would receive a large inheritance from their parents, at least not until long after they had already started a family and earned sufficient savings on their own to obtain a mortgage. Since most young American men took wives while in their mid- or early twenties in the 1700s, the oldest children of a family tended to marry when their own fathers were in their mid or late forties. These newly espoused husbands could not expect to receive much financial aid from their parents, who were still at the expense of raising younger children and had often not yet paid off their mortgage.³⁵ Because most adult males lived into their sixties — or beyond — the eldest sons of a man who had himself begun married life between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-five would be unlikely to receive any inheritance until they reached middle age.³⁶ Furthermore, the almost universal practice of dividing property in approximately equal portions among children in a will effectively precluded any single heir from receiving very much property from a testator of average wealth, since colonial families usually raised six, seven, or more children who survived to adulthood.³⁷ If any child were likely to inherit the family farm intact it would be the youngest son, as a reward for delaying marriage and taking care of his aged parents at home.

Social mobility was nevertheless much in evidence in Cape May. The percentage of residents without land, for example, remained approximately stable from 1751 to 1774, despite a rising population. Of twenty-two landless men on the Lower Precinct tax rolls of 1751 whose property holdings can be determined from later assessment lists or wills, sixteen held real estate by 1774.³⁸

Men like James Miller and John Williams, both without real estate in 1751 but in possession of seventy and fifty-four acres respectively in 1774, were heavily dependent upon the gentry for their economic success.³⁹ Their own parents rarely had the financial resources to help them negotiate a mortgage, and they could only accumulate the standard down payment of one-third of a farm's selling price, or begin purchasing livestock, through the elite's economic patronage. It was the upper class that provided them with tenancies to rent, employment in the winter months, work for their wives to complete at home, credit to carry them over in hard times, and often the land they would eventually own. In a similar manner, the gentry offered families already established on farmsteads with opportunities to supplement their income when they needed cash to better their lot or during emergencies.

35. Robert V. Wells, *Revolutions in Americans' Lives: A Demographic Perspective on the History of Americans, Their Families, and Their Society*, Contributions in Family Studies, VI (Westport, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), pp. 54-55. Jim Potter, "Demographic Development and Family Structure," in Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole, eds., *Colonial British America: Essays on the New History of the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 140-41.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Donald J. Mrozek, "Problems of Social History and Patterns of Inheritance in Pre-Revolutionary New Jersey, 1751-1770," *Journal of the Rutgers University Library*, XXXVI (1972), pp. 4-5. Daniel Snydacker, "Kinship and Community in Rural Pennsylvania, 1749-1820," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XIII (1982), pp. 47-48.

38. Thirty-seven percent of Lower Precinct taxpayers were landless in 1751, compared to 39 percent of all county rateables in 1774. Stewart, Cape May County Rateables, pp. 74-77. "Cape May Land Owners in Revolutionary Times," *CMMHG*, I (1931-38), pp. 91-101. Some information on land acquisition was also taken from abstracts of wills from 1750 to 1769, *N.J. Archs.*, XXXII, XXXIII, and Jacob Spicer's Diary.

39. Stewart, "Cape May County Rateables," p. 76; "Cape May Land Owners in Revolutionary Times," pp. 95, 99.

Young men most commonly supported themselves and their growing families by renting a farm while saving money for real estate or livestock. Owning more than a tenth of the taxable acreage in Cape May, Leaming and Spicer were in a position to assist a substantial number of persons who would eventually become established as freeholders, and of course as voters. They leased tenancies or fixed sums or a share of the crop, and frequently added terms that would permit an industrious individual to increase his profit by performing additional work. Aaron Leaming, Jr., for example, allowed tenants to pay their rents in shingles or furs, leaving them all the income earned from the crop they had harvested.⁴⁰ Jacob Spicer, Jr. reduced rents for tenants who tended his cattle, improved his lands by building fences, or furnished his household with dairy products; he often permitted them free use of the cows under their care, fruit from his orchards, and even provided some with oxen at plowing time — all considerations that could be of substantial advantage to a new household with limited resources.⁴¹ In return, Spicer was spared the expense of maintaining a large number of servants or slaves, but still had the value of his property increased by his tenants' labour.

Besides providing tenancies, the Leaming and Spicer estates offered a regular source of part-time employment for many people after the crops had been sold or the fishing season had ended. When Leaming hired Jonathan Foster and his wife to seal his parlour with cedar, or Spicer negotiated with Robert Atchesson about draining a meadow, they afforded the two families a chance to supplement their incomes and improve themselves.⁴² They created other opportunities by promoting ventures to diversify the local economy, as Spicer did in collaborating with several Philadelphia investors to erect a salt works and construct ships in the county at Great Egg Harbor.⁴³

Seasonal employment was especially important for Cape May's inhabitants because the area's poor soils limited the profitability of raising grain, and building a livestock herd required substantial savings. The county then — as now — experienced mild winter temperatures averaging 34 degrees Farenheit during the coldest month, and it usually received no more than one foot of snow from mid-November to mid-March.⁴⁴ The weather allowed residents of the county to work outdoors almost continuously from late autumn until spring. At this time of year a large property holder like Jacob Spicer, Jr. might hire men, women and children to clear new fields, drain meadows, or undertake major projects like building a wharf and causeway.⁴⁵

The most common source of winter employment offered by Leaming and Spicer was work in the cedar swamps and pine forests covering much of their several thousand acres. Reliable lumbermen like Samuel Edwards might earn wages of 45 shillings per month for a half year, or £13.10 proclamation, an amount probably greater than the value of the crops

40. Aaron Leaming Diary, Nov. 25, 1761, Penn. Hist. Soc.

41. See terms of rent for Mr. [Daniel] Mickle, Jacob Spicer Diary, June 26, 1755, Ellis, ed., pp. 89-90, and for John Hartshorn, Jacob Spicer Memorandum Book, n.d. [Dec. 1757] and Jan. 10, 1759, Stevens, ed., pp. 111, 163.

42. Aaron Leaming Diary, Sep. 8, 1761, Penn. Hist. Soc. Jacob Spicer Memorandum Book, n.d. [Oct. 1757], Stevens, ed., p. 100.

43. Jacob Spicer Diary, Apr. 5, 1755, Ellis, ed., p. 48. Jacob Spicer Memorandum Book, n.d. [Aug. 1758], Stevens, ed., 177-78.

44. Wacker, *Land and People*, 8-10.

45. Jacob Spicer Memorandum Book, entries for Sep.-Dec. 1758, Stevens, ed., pp. 162-63.

a typical farmer in the county might expect to harvest.⁴⁶ Less experienced men either worked for a fixed percentage of the boards and shingles they produced or paid cash for the privilege of making tar from pine cones.⁴⁷ Those individuals who did not wish to labour as woodsmen but who owned wagons and draft animals might also find employment hauling staves, boards, or tar to wharves where these would be loaded onto the vessels owned by Spicer or Leaming.⁴⁸

In their capacity as merchant-shippers, Spicer and Leaming performed yet another essential function for their less affluent neighbors by accepting a wide range of articles produced in Cape May for sale in the intercolonial trade, including beeswax, tallow, deerskins, turpentine, barrels, hats, and even human hair for wigs.⁴⁹ Men like Sampson Hawk, a proficient wampum maker, and Peter Moslander, a skillful fur trapper, could not dispose of their goods locally, and so depended on the county's two leading gentlemen to find a means of selling them in nearby ports, the Carolina coast, or the West Indies.⁵⁰ Jacob Spicer, Jr. played an important role in helping to stimulate a significant cottage industry that enabled local women to contribute directly to their family's income by knitting mittens. Not only did he develop markets for such goods in Philadelphia and Cape Fear, he also advanced credit to poorer households for the wool and dye necessary to manufacture them.⁵¹ In this way, Spicer and Leaming served as the vital connection linking producers of a wide range of specialized articles with external markets.

Leaming and Spicer also assisted men hoping to expand their agricultural production or engage in deep-sea fishing, but who lacked the financial ability to do so. A small farmer who had cleared sufficient land to raise his income rarely found it economical to purchase the slaves or indentured servants necessary to increase his yields, since he needed them only during the short period required to sow and harvest a crop, and could not employ them efficiently during the remaining months. Freeholders caught in this dilemma nevertheless managed to expand their production by renting day labour from the gentry to plow and reap for them. Leaming's work force reaped for twelve of his neighbors in July of 1775 alone.⁵² In a similar fashion, groups of men sometimes obtained the use of ships for whaling voyages in exchange for a share of the catch, an arrangement that enabled individuals with little capital to participate in a potentially lucrative enterprise at minimal expense while offering the owner an opportunity to profit from a vessel lying temporarily idle.⁵³

One cannot read the diaries of Spicer and Leaming without being struck by the number of individuals who trudged to their plantations inquiring about tenancies, employment, credit, permission to work in their cedar groves, and many other such requests.

46. *Ibid.*, n.d. [Nov.-Dec. 1758], Stevens, ed., p. 163. Spicer sowed 16 acres of wheat in 1755, worth about £15 Pennsylvania currency, see note 18.

47. *Ibid.*, n.d. [Dec. 1757], Dec. 10, 1759, Feb. 15, 1760, Stevens ed., pp. 111, 171, 172. Spicer charged 5 sh. per 100 barrels of tar.

48. See Spicer's arrangement with Lazarus Riggen and John Vangelder, *ibid.*, n.d., [Oct. 1757], June 1, 1759, Stevens, ed., pp. 110, 165-66, and Leaming's arrangement with Thomas Peterson, Aaron Leaming Diary, Apr. 8, 20, 1750, Pa. Hist. Soc.

49. See list of goods carried to Philadelphia. Jacob Spicer Diary, Nov. 21, 1755, Ellis, ed., p. 165, and purchase of hair, Feb. 14, 1765, *ibid.*, p. 38.

50. Jacob Spicer Memorandum Book, June 29, 1759, Stevens, ed., p. 166. Aaron Leaming Diary, Apr. 16, 1750, Pa. Hist. Soc.

51. Agreements with Sarah Nevill and Mrs. Daniel Miller, Jacob Spicer Memorandum Book, n.d. [May 1758], Stevens, ed., 116-17. Stevens, *History of Cape May County*, p. 127.

52. Aaron Leaming Diary, July 7-13, 1775, Pa. Hist. Soc.

53. *Ibid.*, Feb. 28, 1775.

The gentry's economic patronage was virtually indispensable to the great majority of young men whose parents could not provide them with a down payment for a mortgage and to the many farmers who periodically found themselves overwhelmed by the burdens of raising a large family on poor soil. The vast estates of Leaming and Spicer were an important means by which young men might be able to rise to the status of freeholders or, once established, maintain their households through a period of financial adversity.

Leaming and Spicer did not organize their economic lives for their neighbors' benefit, but rather for the advantages that would accrue to themselves. By seeking out new markets for local products in other colonies they undoubtedly helped Cape May's struggling farmers to earn a supplemental income, but their primary motivation was to increase their own profits through a higher volume of export shipping. Leaming and Spicer's preference for relying on indigenous, free workers rather than on a bound labour force was likewise based on self-interest rather than altruism. This alternative to purchasing slaves, indentured servants, or imported convicts spared them the considerable risk entailed in expending large amounts of money to buy individuals who might create disciplinary problems, run away, or die unexpectedly; it also afforded them the flexibility to employ persons with skills appropriate to specific tasks who would be likely to work harder than unfree laborers.

In a similar vein, while Leaming and Spicer certainly did not plan to engage in specific economic activities as a means of expanding their own political influence, there can be little doubt that their business dealings had the unexpected result of allowing both men to build a significant base of electoral support. Neither of Cape May's two leading citizens was the type of man who wasted favours on the ungrateful. The wide range of their financial dealings inevitably gave them an enormous advantage in commanding popular support, since men whose families' well-being might depend upon their favorable disposition scarcely dared to oppose them or the candidates they backed in a period when secret ballots did not exist. Even persons who were financially secure might hesitate to vote publicly against individuals with such extensive economic leverage, lest they prejudice the chances of other family members to obtain their economic patronage. In a county as small as Cape May, no other members of the local gentry could realistically expect to overcome the accumulated weight of gratitude for past favors owed to Leaming and Spicer or to compete with them in offering tenancies and seasonal employment. These considerations must have played an important part in allowing Spicer and Leaming to serve a total of fifty-one years in the assembly from 1740 to 1771, at a time when the average representative sat for just four years.⁵⁴ This influence lasted to the very end of their careers — Spicer died in office and Leaming retired voluntarily.

The manner in which Cape May's two leading gentlemen diversified their financial dealings and met their labour requirements led to an extraordinary degree of economic interaction between themselves and the local free population. This situation stands in marked contrast to the southern colonial elite's management of its estates. Although the south's upper classes also engaged in a variety of business pursuits besides agriculture, they generally restricted themselves to milling, land speculation, money lending, and renting tenancies. None of these activities, except the last, offered many of their neighbors a significant opportunity to obtain an income for themselves.⁵⁵ Indeed, the efforts of southern planters

54. Thomas L. Purvis, "'High-Born, Long-Recorded Families': Social Origins of New Jersey Assemblymen, 1703-1776," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXXVII (1980), p. 612.

55. Land, "Economic Base and Social Structure," pp. 646-50.

to make their estates self-sufficient by using slaves not only as ordinary manual laborers, but also as skilled artisans, often denied local residents the opportunity to earn money on a seasonal or yearly basis.⁵⁶ Their increasing willingness to hire out slaves benefitted established landowners unable to purchase bondsmen themselves, but it also tended to displace white labour and threatened to reduce wage levels for landless young men trying to save money for a mortgage.⁵⁷ Nor did planters provide a significant outlet for locally produced goods to be marketed elsewhere in the intercoastal trade, for British firms carried virtually all the region's export shipping.⁵⁸

Had Leaming and Spicer limited themselves to raising grain and livestock for foreign markets, they could never have increased their real and personal property to such a degree. Cape May's two largest property holders undertook, besides their agricultural activities, a remarkably varied array of business pursuits as far as their capital permitted, including retailing, shipping, lumbering, milling, money lending, and even the nurturing of small-scale cottage industries, all of which helped stimulate and diversify the local economy. The profits of these supplementary activities grew until they exceeded the income Leaming or Spicer received from producing foodstuffs. Furthermore, both men managed to operate and improve their plantations without using gangs of unfree laborers; instead, they hired their tenants and neighbors for seasonal or yearly work, and as a result the livelihoods of many small landowners in Cape May became entwined with the expansion of their estates through a series of intricate relationships. Thus, the careers of Jacob Spicer and Aaron Leaming suggest that we should not continue to view the northern rural elite as a group primarily concerned with the raising of foodstuffs for export. Such a view distorts and minimizes the wide sweep of their economic activities, for in diversifying their own sources of income they inevitably created opportunities for industrious individuals and, even more importantly, they assumed a dynamic role in promoting the development of their locality.

56. Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 3-9.

57. Sarah S. Hughes, "Slaves For Hire: The Allocation of Black Labor in Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1782-1810," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., XXXV (1978), p. 286.

58. Aubrey C. Land, "Economic Behavior in a Planting Society: The Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake," *Journal of Southern History*, XXXIII (1967), p. 472.