The Rise of the Independent Merchant in the Chesapeake: Baltimore County, 1660-1769

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Anyone who takes a hard look at the misery in the Third World today senses that economic growth is not the same thing as economic development. In colonial and neocolonial economies alike, growth and development often push in opposite directions. A rapidly expanding export sector can intensify an economy's dependence on a single staple and hamper the diversified development necessary for economic and political prosperity. Thus whether we are studying eighteenth-century Maryland or twentieth-century Bolivia, it is essential to distinguish between quantitative growth in export-related activities and qualitative development of an infrastructure that can sustain commercial and industrial expansion.¹

The economy of the Chesapeake region was clearly growing during the colonial period, but was it developing? In an ambitious overview of eighteenth-century British America, James A. Henretta has answered with an emphatic no. The Chesapeake colonies, he suggests, offer a classic case of "growth without development," in stark contrast to their dynamic neighbors to the north. The plantation system created numerous and, ultimately, insurmountable obstacles to lasting economic development by discouraging investment in areas essential to both commercial and industrial expansion. A slave work force with little incentive to work hard, an unequal distribution of wealth and income that limited local markets and stunted investment in local manufacturing, a planter elite suspicious of outright profit making, a transportation network tied more to overseas than to home markets, a marketing system that undercut native merchants while increasing de-

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¹ The literature on economic development is enormous, but useful introductions applicable to the Chesapeake are Robert E. Baldwin, "Patterns of Development in Newly Settled Regions," *Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies*, 24 (May 1956), 161–79; and Robert E. Baldwin [and others], *Trade, Growth, and the Balance of Payments: Essays in Honor of Gottfried Haberler* (Chicago, 1965). For a fine synthesis of this literature, see John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 17–34.
pendency on outside sources of credit, capital, and commercial services—these were some of the legacies of the plantation system. By the eve of independence the Chesapeake, according to Henretta, was caught up in a vicious cycle of under-development that would only intensify as the industrializing North surged further and further ahead.2

The problem with this view is that it does not fit a growing body of scholarly work on the Chesapeake economy. Twenty years ago Aubrey C. Land demonstrated that members of the planter elite had a strong entrepreneurial bent and eagerly exploited whatever economic opportunities they found in agriculture, land speculation, trade, and manufacturing. The work of Carville V. Earle and Paul G. E. Clemens has made us aware of the dynamic quality of the plantation system itself, for planters rationally shifted resources from staple production into self-sufficiency operations and domestic industry as prices for tobacco fell or prices for alternative staples rose. The shift from tobacco to grain production first on the Eastern Shore and later throughout much of the Chesapeake region testified to the planters' ability to meet new economic conditions. And studies on both colonial and antebellum slavery are revealing a surprisingly flexible institution, with blacks performing many skilled and semiskilled jobs on plantations and in such specialized industries as iron making and shipbuilding. In their survey of the literature on the colonial Chesapeake economy, John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard summarize the new picture of the plantation system: "Over the course of the colonial period plantations were transformed from specialized units producing tobacco and food into more-flexible organizations still chiefly concerned with tobacco and food but capable of supplying a much wider range of goods and services for plantation use."3

A key element of the "growth without development" thesis is that a native merchant community independent of the commercial houses of the mother country failed to coalesce in the Chesapeake. Jacob M. Price has urged us to reconsider this long-held view, referring to the rise of the native merchant as the "most dynamic feature of the Chesapeake economy" by the time of the Revolution. He argues that such local merchants have been overlooked because of the way historians have traditionally treated the marketing system for tobacco. Older works emphasized the consignment system in which a planter employed a British merchant to sell his tobacco

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in exchange for a commission. The planter then charged his yearly order of goods against the proceeds of the sale that had been credited to his account. More recently historians have paid attention to the store system that arose after the 1740s and enabled small planters to sell directly to local agents (or factors) of British commercial houses. The resident factors made substantial inroads into the trade because they could extend liberal credit and high prices to ordinary planters who did not maintain permanent accounts overseas.

But the consignment and store systems tell only part of the story, and explanations that focus on them ignore the native merchant who operated on his own. Price suggests that we add the “cargo system” to the better-known marketing arrangements to gain a fuller picture of the commercial network of the Chesapeake and the role of native merchants. Chesapeake merchants participating in the cargo system ordered large stocks of goods from British firms, usually on condition they make their remittances within a year. They paid for these goods by selling wheat and provisions in the West Indies and southern Europe. Price has examined the cargo system from the perspective of British suppliers, but the Chesapeake side of the relationship remains largely unexplored. As a result the local merchants whose stores dotted the countryside remain shadowy figures, somehow out of place in a world of planters and slaves. Bringing these men into the open will not only strengthen the scholarly literature, it will also illuminate the extent to which economic development accompanied economic growth in the colonial Chesapeake.

That is what I attempt to do here. Baltimore County, Maryland, is a good place to study the rise of the independent merchant because it encompassed a large part of the northern Chesapeake that was accessible to local traders operating through the cargo system. Local merchants flourished there for two reasons. First, the consignment system never penetrated Baltimore as thoroughly as it did the older areas of southern Maryland and tidewater Virginia. That marketing arrangement appealed chiefly to the largest planters, and there were only a handful of them in Baltimore. Second, the store system centering on factors who represented British commercial houses never took root on the Western Shore of the upper Chesapeake. Unlike parts of Virginia and the Eastern Shore, Baltimore did not attract Scottish factors and thus afforded ideal conditions in which the independent merchant could arise.


5 The first “Scotch store” was not established in Baltimore until 1768. See Pamela Satek, “William Lux of Baltimore: 18th Century Merchant” (M.A. thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 1974), 78.
A word about research strategy. The first step was to identify in the voluminous county land records everyone who called himself a merchant before 1770. Because these documents include conveyances, mortgages, leases, assignments, receipts, powers of attorney, and a variety of other commercial instruments involving practically every side of enterprise, it is safe to assume that any merchant of consequence would turn up there. The result of the survey was a list of 137 self-professed merchants. Second, the inventories of all merchants who died before 1770 were examined. It was possible to locate inventories for 56 merchants, or 41 percent of the 137. The third task was identifying all planters who fell into the richest 10 percent of inventoried decedents in Baltimore County before 1770, which required a decade-by-decade analysis of all inventoried decedents in the county probate records, a total of 1,375 individuals. By doing so, it was possible to determine whether the investment patterns of merchants differed significantly from those of wealthy planters—in other words, whether men who called themselves merchants exhibited a pattern of economic behavior setting them apart from the local elite as a whole. Of the 138 people in the top 10 percent, 111 were planters. Finally, county court records, wills, and surviving private correspondence and business papers were examined. The resulting data provide the basis of a profile of the merchant community as it evolved throughout the colonial period and permit a systematic examination of the business behavior of merchants and elite planters.6

Baltimore County was established around 1659. Although it originally included both sides of the northern Chesapeake Bay and the lower Delaware Valley, in 1674 Maryland authorities staked the eastern boundary at the Susquehanna River. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries most inhabitants clustered along the bay between the Patapsco River and the Susquehanna. Oceangoing vessels could navigate five to ten miles on the Middle, Back, Bush, and Gunpowder rivers, and fifteen on the Patapsco. Not until 1700 did the white population reach the Indian levels of a century earlier. The best estimates put the number of settlers at 300 to 400 in 1659 and 1,300 in 1671. The loss of the eastern half of the county cut the population to 800 in 1674, but by the end of the century some 1,700 people were living in the county.7

The period from 1659 to 1690 witnessed the stillbirth of the county’s first merchant community. During those years ten men came to Baltimore calling themselves

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6 The major sources consulted were Baltimore County Land Records (Maryland Hall of Records, Annapolis); Cecil County Land Records, ibid.; Baltimore County Court Proceedings, ibid.; Inventories & Accounts, ibid.;Accounts, ibid.; Testamentary Proceedings, ibid.; Parents, ibid.; Wills, ibid.; Inventories, ibid.; Ridgely Papers, MS 692.1 (Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore); Ridgely Account Books, MS 691, ibid.

merchants. Whatever hopes and ambitions they carried with them must have soon vanished on the Chesapeake frontier. Perhaps the clearest evidence of failure comes from the inventories and accounts of their estates taken at their deaths. Seven of the ten left inventories appraised at an average of £180. On the surface that figure would suggest a respectable economic performance, placing the merchants in the wealthiest 30 percent of probated decedents in Baltimore before 1699. Yet this impression is mistaken because creditors claimed most of the merchants' property. Administrative accounts listing charges against the estates survive for four of the merchants. In three cases creditors completely wiped out the estate; in the fourth they took over half of it. None of the merchants, not even the successful ones, could bequeath prosperity to the next generation. It has been possible to identify the inventories of three sons of the merchants of this group. The estates of these sons, all of whom died in Baltimore County, were valued at an average of £65, compared to their fathers' £248. Not surprisingly, none of the sons chose the profession of his father.8

* For references to the occupations of the sons, see folios 281–82, 307–9, vol. HW no. 2, Baltimore County
The merchants’ failure does not mean that trade languished. The probate records suggest that local commercial activities were controlled largely by the wealthiest planters, who might more accurately be labeled “planter-merchants.” Table 1 presents a breakdown of the estates of planters who ranked in the top 10 percent of Baltimore decedents during three periods—1659–1699, 1700–1729, and 1730–1769—and compares them with the estates of merchants during the same periods. The most striking disparity between seventeenth-century planters and merchants appears in the category debts. Over two-fifths of the planters’ wealth was tied up in outstanding debts, compared to less than a third of the merchants’ wealth. It seems likely that the planter-merchants traded actively among their neighbors, and in the process they became the major creditors of the county.

Yet lifeless statistics from probate records cannot recapture the fate of those merchants who tried their luck in Baltimore, nor can they suggest why merchants failed. Only a closer examination of individuals can illuminate such questions. Consider the case of Godfrey Harmer. Harmer was only a boy when he migrated to the tiny colony of New Sweden on the Delaware. In 1664 he was described as a “Holland servant,” but Harmer was no ordinary servant. One of his kinsmen, a native of the German town of Wesel, served as the chief commissary of the company store and the Indian trade. Perhaps Harmer also came from the lower Rhine River. The youth quickly excelled in the Indian trade, prompting the governor to remark that he “knows the savage languages and understands well how to carry on the trade.” When the Dutch conquered New Sweden in 1655, Harmer went south and three years later claimed a headright for transporting himself to Maryland.9

Once in Baltimore Harmer continued to trade with the Indians. Soon after arriving he obtained additional land warrants and patented nearly one thousand acres on the Sassafras, Gunpowder, and Susquehanna rivers. A tract that he boldly named Mount Harmer (today Havre de Grace) was located at the mouth of the Susquehanna where English and Indian traders had been haggling for a generation. By 1659 Harmer and his father-in-law had constructed a “fort” on the neck of the Gunpowder River to protect their trading interests there. And as befitted an Indian trader, Harmer paid off many of his local debts in beaver pelts. In 1661 Maryland authorities put his linguistic skills and commercial contacts to good use by appointing him interpreter to the Susquehannock Indians, who were then at war with the Iroquois and who largely controlled the fur supply of the upper Chesapeake. In reward for his public services, Harmer was granted the full rights of a Maryland denizen and an English freeman.10


Table 1
Estates of Baltimore County Merchants and Planters, 1666–1769

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1666–1699</th>
<th>1700–1729</th>
<th>1730–1769</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N = 6)</td>
<td>(N = 10)</td>
<td>(N = 40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livestock</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<td>13%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital/Tools</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crops</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchandise</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debts</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Inventories & Accounts (Maryland Hall of Records, Annapolis); Inventories, *ibid.*

Note: These inventories were registered throughout a century as prices fluctuated. To eliminate the effects of inflation, the 56 merchant inventories and 111 planter inventories analyzed in this table have been adjusted according to a price deflator compiled by the St. Mary's City Commission. I would like to thank Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh for generously making this invaluable tool available to me. For the specific items comprised in each category of assets, see Gloria L. Main, *Tobacco Colony: Life in Early Maryland, 1650–1720* (Princeton, 1982), 48–96.

But Godfrey Harmer could not resist the many temptations Baltimore offered for turning an illicit profit. In 1659 a Dutch emissary from New Netherlands reached Maryland, hoping to negotiate disputed claims to the Delaware Valley. One of the chief sticking points was Harmer, who was accused of “enticing and transporting” runaway servants from New Amstel to Maryland. While Harmer’s in-laws did not dispute the charge, they claimed that he had sheltered fugitives who “had eaten him so bare that he would scarcely have enough food for himself for the winter.” That explanation did not change the Dutch ambassador’s suspicions that Harmer was marketing runaways among the planters of the Severn River. Whatever the case, by 1670 Harmer was in trouble and needed cash. In that year he sold nearly everything he had acquired a decade before. By his death in 1673 Harmer had withdrawn from the fur trade, leaving behind a paltry supply of “Indian trading stuff” valued at five shillings and not a single fur. The appraisers found his small plantation neglected and run down with much of the livestock roaming “in the woods.” In his will Harmer could give each of his three daughters only a cow and a calf. What remained went to his widow Mary, who described the estate as “Very Small and many Debts due to be paid.”

Edward Gunnel took a different path to disaster, attempting to parlay his position as a British factor into commercial independence. He reached Maryland in the

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1670s with his brother George. Gunnell’s prospects must have seemed bright since he was agent of the London partnership of Edward Bleeke, Micajah Perry, and Thomas Lane—some of the biggest names in the Chesapeake trade. Although Gunnell acquired three hundred acres of land before his death, he scarcely touched it. A quick windfall in Maryland and an equally quick departure for England seem to have been Gunnell’s objective—he never even bought a bed, much less tools or servants. Because Gunnell lacked the capital to strike out on his own, he formed a partnership with Joseph Sayres, another recent immigrant who also had business dealings with Bleeke and Company. In 1676 the partners rented a room in a private house and converted it into a store. Their landlord agreed to supply “dyet washing & lodging” at the rate of fifteen hundred pounds of tobacco for the first two months and one thousand pounds for each month thereafter. Since the “Small old Suncke Sloope Boate” that Gunnell owned was useless, the partners also hired a boat from the landlord to collect their tobacco consignments.

But everything went wrong. Gunnell and Sayres ran up a bill of seven thousand pounds of tobacco for six months’ rent and kept the boat for a full year without paying. Their landlord finally sued. Then in 1677 Sayres died and left Gunnell with the task of sorting out their entangled finances and satisfying their impatient creditors. The two men had probably imported several shipments of merchandise from Bleeke and Company to stock their store. Either the customers did not materialize or Gunnell and Sayres could not collect their debts because, according to Bleeke and Company, they refused to make a “reasonable accompt.” of their bill. Gunnell was dragged into court again, this time by his old employers who demanded seven hundred pounds sterling in damages. Only his death in 1679 saved Gunnell from further legal actions, but the disposition of his estate brought a fitting end to his career. Brother George, who was appointed as administrator, embezzled as much of the estate as he could lay his hands on and fled the colony. In 1685 he was rumored to be in Virginia and a year later in Carolina. George had run about as far as he could.

John Gilbert was another hopeful factor who fell victim to his own ambitions. He arrived in the province in the 1660s, perhaps by way of England’s newly conquered colony of Jamaica, where he had connections. Gilbert served as an agent of a Jamaican merchant and named his three hundred-acre tract on the Sassafras River Jamaica. Like Gunnell, he died only a few years after patenting his tract and therefore did little with it. And also like Gunnell, he attempted to establish an independent trading operation in partnership with Philip Shapleigh of St. Mary’s County. For a 20 percent commission, Shapleigh agreed to sell merchandise that Gilbert had imported and to collect debts that local planters owed him.

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Neither the partnership nor much else worked. Within five years of the agreement Gilbert was suing Shapleigh in an apparently futile attempt to recover £70 that his partner never accounted for. Nor was Gilbert above a swindle reminiscent of Harmer, for in 1670 a local sheriff arrested him on suspicion of selling a freeman as an indentured servant. When Gilbert died seven years later, his English supplier Peter Quodman stood in a long line of anxious creditors, asserting that his agent still owed him £83 for a cargo of goods shipped in 1669. The court named Quodman’s attorney as administrator of the estate, which was completely consumed by outstanding debts.15

One last example, this time a success story, illustrates the ingredients that went into a commercial fortune in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake. By 1651 Thomas Todd had reached Virginia, leaving behind his birthplace in Denton, England. He patented a six hundred-acre tract in Gloucester County, Virginia, and christened it Toddsbury. Although Todd and his wife Ann put down roots there and raised a large family, they eventually became restless. Thirteen years later the Todds were building a new plantation along the Patapsco River called Todd’s Range, which eventually encompassed 1,500 acres. In 1684 Augustine Herman produced a map that attempted to identify all the noteworthy plantations of the Chesapeake; the only one he found on the Patapsco was Todd’s Range. The family’s prosperity resulted in no small part from their having reached Baltimore with considerable capital for investment. The thirty-eight people Todd imported into the province entitled him to nineteen hundred acres of land. By contrast, Harmer claimed only one headright, Gunnell one, and Gilbert six. Unlike the merchants who failed, Todd built his commercial interests on the solid foundation of a thriving plantation. He invested 65 percent of his assets in livestock and labor, compared to 21 percent for Harmer and Gunnell. Thomas Todd was the planter-merchant par excellence.16

Todd created a family enterprise spanning the Chesapeake. He and Ann settled in Baltimore with their five youngest children, leaving their first son Thomas, Jr., to manage Toddsbury. It is noteworthy that neither Harmer, Gunnell, nor Gilbert had a son to help shoulder the burdens of business. The young man quickly doubled his Virginia holdings. In 1676, as Todd boarded the ship Virginia bound for London, he wrote his son a letter revealing how the two plantations operated as a joint venture. Frightened that he might not survive the passage, the ailing Todd asked his son to send “some good Syder,” which he hoped might “keepe mee alive.” Because Toddsbury was older than Todd’s Range, its mature orchards produced fruit and cider for both branches of the family. Cider, a scarce but vital staple of frontier commerce, was a lucrative trade item in the Chesapeake.17


diet, would have found a ready market among Todd’s Patapsco neighbors whose fruit trees were still saplings. The two small boats that Todd owned were both outfitted with sails and perhaps carried cider and other local products between Gloucester and Baltimore. The links between Toddsbury and Todd’s Range included their work forces. “I looked long for you to bring up the Negroes,” Todd wrote, “which I shall loose my Crop for want off them.” The Todds seem to have been shifting laborers between the plantations as the need arose. That such a delay could jeopardize Todd’s harvest underscores how interdependent his operations had become.17

Todd also expanded into the transatlantic trade. In his letter he urged Thomas, Jr., to “send me what tobaccoes you Can.” Todd probably intended his son to buy directly from Gloucester planters tobacco that he might market in London on his arrival. But as Todd feared, the voyage killed him. In his will recorded in London, Todd bequeathed the proceeds from the sale of eighty-seven hogsheads of tobacco to his daughters. Most likely, he had shipped that tobacco aboard the Virginia. Since the Todd plantations together could not have produced a crop that size, most of the tobacco must have been purchased from Virginia and Maryland planters. Since Todd owned the hogsheads outright, he was an independent merchant, rather than a factor for a London house. To represent his interests in the metropolis, Todd could have called on his brother Christopher, who resided in England and who received an unusually generous bequest in the will.18 The familial and business ties that Todd had in Virginia and England set him apart from loners like Gilbert, Gunnell, and Harmer. Their careers demonstrated that an aspiring merchant needed connections overseas to succeed on the northern frontier of the Chesapeake. Only after 1690 would a new generation of merchants representing prominent English firms reach Baltimore County and usher it into the larger world of the transatlantic economy.

From 1690 to 1720 Baltimore County began to shed its frontier appearance. During the first decade of the eighteenth century its population increased twice as fast as the province’s, reaching forty-one hundred by 1720. The old knots of settlers pushed inland along the river courses and in the process created unprecedented demands for roads, bridges, and ferries. Yet this demographic expansion occurred against a backdrop of economic recession. The period 1689 to 1713 witnessed an increase in tobacco duties and unremitting warfare that convulsed overseas markets. The commercial fatalities of war included small-time operators like Harmer, Gunnell, and Gilbert. At the same time, however, substantial merchants who possessed the economic resources to ride out periodic slumps consolidated their position in the tobacco trade, particularly if they enjoyed London connections.19


18 The crop would have required 30 to 40 workers; the elder Thomas Todd owned only 3 slaves at his death. See folios 227–28, vol. 5, Wills.

Eleven merchants were active in Baltimore County between 1690 and the 1720s. An analysis of their inventories points to two conclusions. First, the county's economic elite was undergoing a process of functional specialization. (See table 1.) Their investment strategies diverged as merchants increasingly poured their assets into trade and planters channeled theirs into agriculture. No longer did planters eclipse merchants as local creditors; debts receivable made up only 16 percent of their assets compared with 27 percent of the merchants' assets. Likewise, merchants put twice as much of their wealth in merchandise as planters did. Planters concentrated their energies on building plantations and growing tobacco, for livestock and labor formed 54 percent of their assets compared to 40 percent of the merchants' assets. Second, the new merchants climbed to the top of the wealth hierarchy. Five of the eleven were among the wealthiest 10 percent of Baltimore County decedents at their deaths. Their average personal estate was appraised at £685, almost a four-fold increase over those of their predecessors. The top merchant was nearly ten times richer than his first-generation counterpart. Only 13 percent of the assets of the second generation went to retire estate debts; in contrast 86 percent of the assets of the first generation had.

Yet one fact marred the economic success of the second-generation merchants. They continued to grapple with appallingly high death rates that interrupted generational continuity and undermined the smooth transmission of wealth. Only four of the eleven had sons, none of whom had reached the age of twenty-one when his father died. Growing up in the homes of stepfathers, uncles, cousins, godfathers, and guardians, fatherless boys frequently lost their inheritance through deliberate embezzlement or inept management. Consider the case of Richard Colegate's four sons. As the wealthiest merchant of his generation, Colegate probably expected to bequeath to each of his children a sizable estate and a secure future. What he did not count on was an early grave. He had not been dead more than a few years before Richard, Jr., entered the home of his second guardian and Benjamin his third. Not surprisingly, the sons did not measure up to their father's economic attainments. All of them became planters; none of them served on the court or in the assembly; only one adopted the honorific "gentleman." The only son to leave an inventory was Benjamin Colegate, whose estate was worth about one-twentieth of his father's.

This period might appropriately be called the age of the London agent. Nearly all of the eleven merchants active between 1690 and 1720 migrated to the northern Chesapeake as factors of large London commercial houses. Richard Colegate, the preeminent figure of his generation, appeared in 1698 as a factor for the London partnership of Michael Yoakley and John Pettit. Four years later William Talbot reg-

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istered a letter of attorney at the county court identifying him as factor of the London merchants George Purthas and Company. In 1705 both John Israel and James Crooke were described as factors. Edward Stevenson came as “factor & Agent” of Peter Paggan and Company of London. When Mark Swift first surfaced in the records in 1698, he was a factor of London merchant John Sheffield “to Dispose of a Cargoe of Barbadoes and Other European Goods.” Roger Newman certainly brought metropolitan connections to Baltimore, for as late as 1689 he was described as “merchant of London.” Like Thomas Bale who testified to being “Aged fforty or thereabouts” a few years after his arrival, most of these agents probably came as mature men. Only Thomas Hedge, Jr., reached Maryland as a youth, but within twenty-five years he was serving as factor of Richard Bell and Company. And only William Marshall from Ireland’s county Downe clearly fell outside the English fold.22

These merchant-factors represented their London employers, but they nonetheless aspired to independence. After a decade spent managing the Maryland business affairs of Yoakley and Pettit, Colegate took control of the company he had helped to create. In 1708, upon the deaths of the two principals, he paid £130 sterling for the legal rights to the company’s Maryland debts. Most commission agents probably undertook ventures on their own as well as entering partnerships with other local merchants. When Colegate died in 1722, appraisers found £260 in merchandise in his store. In addition, he had just received a spring shipment of goods on his own account invoiced at £161 and another in partnership with Israel, one of his Patapsco neighbors, worth £241. Those cargoes overshadowed any that the first generation had imported.23

In contrast to the first-generation merchants, who exhibited little awareness of shared interests or common outlook, the London factors formed a compact community. They did not scatter across the county as their predecessors had, but settled in southern Baltimore County where earlier only Thomas Todd had ventured. The residences of eight merchants have been identified: seven resided on the Patapsco and one on the nearby Back River. Whether or not they knew each other from London, the merchants quickly developed bonds of friendship and mutuality along the Patapsco. When Talbot drew up his final will in 1713, he appointed his two neighbors, Colegate and Stevenson, as executors of his estate. All three men were merchants. In another gesture of trust and affection, Stevenson and his wife named one of their sons after merchant Richard King.24


Patapsco merchants invested less of their wealth in livestock and labor than the planter elite did, but they nevertheless carefully tended their plantations. Members of the second generation did not repeat the mistake of Harmer, Gunnell, and Gilbert by pinning their hopes on trade alone. Seven of the eleven merchants owned over seven hundred acres of land, and four over one thousand acres. To work their fields, they assembled some of the largest slaveholdings the county had ever seen. In contrast with the first-generation merchants, who each owned an average of one servant and one slave, Patapsco merchants each held, on the average, one servant and eight slaves. The success of their agricultural endeavors appeared in their growing herds of livestock, for the average merchant estate included fifty-eight cattle, forty-three hogs, twenty-eight sheep, and eight horses. Colegate’s estate exceeded five thousand acres and eclipsed those of his peers. The center of his agricultural complex was the home plantation where he and his wife Rebecca raised their six children. Colegate also carved out four outlying “quarters,” placing on them nineteen of his thirty-two slaves and two-thirds of his livestock. These primitive work camps were equipped with the barest essentials: working tools, “Negro bedding,” a few pots and pans, a parcel of earthenware, and perhaps a kettle or a candlestick. The slaves at the quarters seem to have been largely on their own, for at only one site did Colegate supply a flock bed for the white overseer.25

Despite their considerable economic achievements, merchants battled against great odds in the political arena. Men of Colegate’s stature naturally expected political preferment and social distinction, but they reached Baltimore just as a planter elite was coalescing and gaining confidence. To these natives the London agents could easily appear as grasping outsiders. The distribution of political power between the two groups was reflected in the county court. From 1709 to 1723 twenty-two justices sat on the bench: eighteen planters and four merchants. The same ratio held true for the delegates that Baltimore sent to the Lower House of the provincial assembly; twelve planters and three merchants won elections between 1708 and 1724. The planters in the coterie that dominated the court and assembly differed from the merchants in three respects. First, they were either born in Maryland or had long lived there. Second, they frequently arose from humble beginnings. Third, they lived in the northern end of the county around the Gunpowder and Bush rivers.26

In retrospect, a clash between the merchants and planters seems to have been inevitable. The immediate issue was the location of the county courthouse, which since the 1670s had been situated on the Bush River. As the population shifted into the lower parts of the county, the Bush proved to be an increasingly inconvenient site. Everyone agreed a new seat was necessary, but they could not agree where. In

1707 the assembly proclaimed Joppa Town on the Gunpowder River as the new county seat and directed local magistrates to build a courthouse there. The Gunpowder site promised great benefits for the northern planters who lived in the region, but it threatened the commercial interests of merchants. They desired a courthouse nearer the Patapsco. In November 1709 the county court voted a general assessment to defray the costs of construction, provoking Richard Colegate, a justice of the peace, to defy his planter colleagues and declare his opposition. At the next session, in March 1710, the justices awarded the lucrative building contract to James Maxwell, a justice of the peace and a delegate. Colegate once again voted against the contract as did Talbot, the only other merchant on the bench. By November a majority of the grand jury, consisting of small planters, called the merchants' schemes to relocate the courthouse "a palpable Notorious Greevance" that would "reduce us to the Lowest Ebb of Poverty."[27]

Colegate, outmaneuvered in the court, shifted his attack to the assembly. He was now one of the county's delegates and proposed that the courthouse be moved to the Middle River, closer to his home on the Patapsco. In April 1711 the assembly ordered that a countywide referendum be held to decide the issue once and for all. The voters rejected the idea of starting construction on yet another courthouse, and soon afterwards Colegate and Talbot began boycotting the court. When in the fall of 1712 the first new assembly elections in four years were staged, the Patapsco merchants campaigned hard and swept the delegation. They were not above strong-arm tactics, for the county sheriff testified that he had received "some menacing Letters . . . from some Gentlemen living about Potapsco." Although Colegate and the merchants pressed the issue again, the assembly declared its weariness of the whole affair and commanded the people of Baltimore to refrain from all "Heats, Debates, Reflections, or Disturbances" regarding the courthouse question. At the same time a county grand jury ordered the recalcitrant Colegate and Talbot to show cause for their failure to take their seats on the bench. A few days later the merchants admitted defeat and took their places alongside the planters.[28]

By the time the last of the Patapsco merchants died in 1728, Baltimore County had come of age. Its population reached ninety-one hundred in 1737. Although the county remained overwhelmingly agrarian, the large number of specialized occupations reflected the diverse needs of a maturing provincial society. One out of three residents who appeared in the local records of the 1730s called himself something other than a planter. The expansion of slavery also indicated that Baltimore was developing along the same path as the older Chesapeake communities. In 1737 three out of ten households contained at least one slave over the age of sixteen. These

[27] Folios 71, 96–97, 182, 313, vol. IS no. A. Baltimore County Court Proceedings; Thomas Bacon, ed., Laws of Maryland (Annapolis, 1765), ch. XIV, Apr. 1706; ch. XVI, Apr. 1707; Browne et al., eds., Archives of Maryland, XXIX, 51; Mathews, Counties of Maryland, 445.

trends bore witness to steady economic growth, for after 1720 tobacco prices began an upward swing that continued to the Revolution.29

During the period from 1730 to 1769, there were 117 merchants active in Baltimore County. Of that group, 40 died before 1769 and left inventories. An analysis of the probate records suggests that the merchant community continued to develop along the lines established during the early eighteenth century. (See table 1.) First, the merchants and planter elite continued to pursue different investment strategies. The merchants tied up more of their wealth in commercial assets—merchandise, cash, debts receivable—while the planters plowed more of theirs into livestock and labor. Second, the merchants held their place in the wealth hierarchy. Almost half of them, 18 of the 40, fell into the wealthiest 10 percent of Baltimore County decedents. Their average assessment was £1,426, double the figure for the second generation.

What most clearly set the merchants of the third generation apart from their predecessors was their ability to conserve their wealth. They established their children on a sounder economic basis than ever before, a reflection of the continued drop in eighteenth-century mortality rates. Baltimore County remained a dangerous place to live, but the epidemiological outlook had brightened. Of the twenty merchants who began their careers in the 1720s and 1730s, it has been possible to ascertain the ages of ten at their deaths. They lived to an average age of 59.2, ranging from the 45-year-old John Moale to the octogenarian Jacob Giles.30 Longer lives meant more children. Fourteen of the twenty merchants left wills, and thirteen mentioned children. The average number of children was five, but Isaac and Margaret Webster boasted of twelve sons and daughters. For the first time genuine merchant families began to emerge. Charles Ridgely, Sr., Darby Lux, and Moale each had two sons who became merchants and whose economic and political accomplishments surpassed those of their fathers.

The 1730s brought a radical change to commercial life—the emergence of the independent merchant. The London agent did not disappear, but never again would he dominate the merchant community as Richard Colegate did. The change can be charted through an examination of the twenty merchants who launched their careers in the 1720s and 1730s. They seem to have been fairly typical of the entire group; their average assessed wealth when their estates were probated amounted to £1,648, close to the figure for all merchants active from 1730 to 1769.

The most obvious characteristic of these merchants was that natives outnumbered immigrants for the first time in Baltimore’s history. Ten of the seventeen whose origins have been determined were born in Maryland, in stark contrast to the mer-

29 The population was estimated by multiplying the county’s taxables by 3.0, as is suggested by Karinen, “Maryland Population,” 367. For taxables and slaveholding patterns, see “Baltimore County Court Records, Joppa, Maryland: Levy Allowances and List of Taxables by Hundreds, 1737,” typescript (Maryland Hall of Records). The occupational data are based on an analysis of 717 individuals who appeared in Baltimore County Land Records and Baltimore County Court Proceedings between 1729 and 1739. Tobacco prices fell until the 1680s, gradually rose until the 1720s, remained relatively constant until the 1740s, and then rose again during the rest of the colonial period. See McCusker and Menard, Economy of British America, 120–22.

30 Most of the demographic data are based on Dielman File (Maryland Historical Society).
This engraving, printed in 1817, was based on a sketch of Baltimore Town done by John Moale in 1752. The two ships in the harbor portend a dynamic future for the young settlement. Courtesy Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.
chants active before 1720, when not a single known merchant was "country-born." Like many younger sons throughout colonial America, native merchants adopted trade in part because their fathers could not establish them on land. The six fathers who appear in the records were moderately successful planters, but by no means aristocrats. At their deaths they owned an average of seven hundred acres of land and £378 in personal property, putting them in the top quarter of the county's probated decedents. Partible inheritance threatened to transform such men's viable plantations into several marginal holdings. To avoid that ruinous outcome, they often willed the home plantation to the first son and undeveloped tracts to the younger boys. A second or third son might either develop his unbroken land or start a career outside of planting. No fewer than three of the six known native merchants were younger sons, at least two of whom watched the home plantation go to their older brothers. And although merchant William Hammond was a first-born son, his failure to inherit exclusive rights to the home plantation put him in the same squeeze as younger sons. In 1725 his father willed that William and his younger brother should possess the home plantation jointly on their mother's death.

With planting a distant prospect, native merchants decided early to enter the world of trade. Six of the ten called themselves merchants from the beginning of their careers to the end. Another three switched to trade either in their late twenties or early thirties. As mortality rates declined throughout the Chesapeake, the abrupt generational breaks that wreaked havoc among earlier merchant families became less frequent. Many young men could now count on parental assistance when they launched their careers because their fathers were still living. Charles Ridgely, Sr. and Richard Gist lost their fathers at the age of three and eight respectively, but other merchants were adults at their fathers' deaths: Giles was twenty-one, Hammond twenty-three, and Webster probably in his fifties. When Webster's father died at the age of ninety-one, the provincial newspaper marveled that he "lived to see One Hundred and Eight of his Posterity, Twenty-two of which died before him."

The rise of the native merchants infused a new element of stability into the political arena. Three factors were involved. First, the rivalry that had previously split the elite naturally subsided as growing numbers of merchants arose from planter families. Second, the merchant community lost its sectional identity as it spread more evenly across the county. The Patapsco River still accounted for nine mer-

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chants, but the Back and Middle had three, the Gunpowder three, the Bush two, and the Susquehanna three. Third, native merchants increasingly served political apprenticeships at the grass roots, unlike second-generation merchants who had catapulted over minor offices to the court and assembly. Such experience acquainted merchants with the ins and outs of local governance, gave them a chance to cultivate political support, and allayed jealousies that might have arisen had they immediately assumed top offices. Seven of the ten natives received local appointments: five as overseers of the roads, three as grand jurymen, three as vestrymen, two as constables, two as sheriffs, and one as pressmaster, the official in charge of recruiting men for militia service. Another five rose to the county bench, with Thomas Sheredine serving twenty-one years, Richard Gist fifteen years, and Charles Ridgely, Sr., fourteen. Four merchants made it to the assembly, where Sheredine sat for twenty years and William Govane for ten.34

Immigrants continued to make up the second component of the merchant community. The English merchants who sought their fortunes in Baltimore still represented London commercial interests. Three of seven whose birthplaces are known came from the western counties of Lancashire and Devonshire. Like their predecessors, they arrived as mature men. Moale reached the province in 1719 at the age of twenty-two, and Josias Middlemore a year later at thirty-eight. No fewer than six of the immigrants served as partners, attorneys, or factors of London merchants. In 1724 Edward Fell registered a power of attorney for London merchant Thomas Bond, giving him jurisdiction over both Virginia and Maryland. His brother William came as the partner of London merchant John Philpot. During his long career Middlemore acted as attorney for London merchants Richard Partridge, Samuel Lawrence, and Edward Hankin. He also appeared as the factor of London merchant Daniel Herbert. Brian Taylor established a store in partnership with London's Philip Smith, who supplied most of the capital. Both Moale and Lux served as attorneys and principal agents for London merchant Jonathan Forward.35

But immigrant merchants no longer stepped into high political office upon their arrival. Only three of seven received appointments to local offices as vestrymen and church wardens. None of them served as constables, grand jurymen, or sheriffs. Only a pair sat on the county bench, and then for brief terms of one and two years. Nor did immigrants make a lasting impression in the legislature, where Moale served five years and Lux two.

Yet the political eclipse of the London agents did not cause a clash between immigrants and natives. On the contrary, the two groups pooled their local and overseas connections through marriage. By the mid-eighteenth century, the thirteen Anglican and four Quaker merchants whose religion can be identified were entan-

34 Data from Baltimore County Court Proceedings, and Papenfuse et al., eds., Bibliographical Dictionary of the Maryland Legislature.
Mrs. Ellen Moale was the daughter of Capt. Robert North, one of the leading traders of his day. Not surprisingly, she attracted the attention of several of Baltimore’s aspiring young merchants, including John Moale and Charles Ridgely, Jr. She was in her late twenties when John Hesselius painted this portrait.

_Courtesy Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore._

gled in a variety of kinship networks, usually because their children intermarried. With so much hinging on the proper match, courtship could elicit intense rivalry. When Robert North died in 1749, his daughter Ellen received a handsome inheritance of five hundred acres of land, two lots in Baltimore Town, and £125 sterling for her “Education.” Nine years later she married the son and namesake of John
Moale. Charles Ridgely, Jr., who had also courted Ellen, received the bad news from his older brother John: “This Day Mr. J. Moale is to be Married to Miss North happy for You that you did not engage with her but Suppose you’d be Angry with yourself for not Plucking the Bud as without Doubt it was in your Power. I wish you had, as it might have saved Poore Johnny Some Trouble in Entering.” Apart from the pointed humor, the incident is remarkable because every man involved was a merchant — Robert North, John Moale, Sr. and Jr., Charles Ridgely, Sr. and Jr., and John Ridgely.36

The rise of the independent merchant coincided with a new way of trading, what Jacob Price terms the “cargo system.” The case of Charles Ridgely, Jr., scion of one of Baltimore’s leading merchant families, illustrates how the system operated. Born in 1730, Ridgely embarked on a commercial career in his late twenties as a shipmaster in the service of James Russell, the foremost London merchant sending goods on consignment to the Baltimore vicinity. According to one report, his ships carried 1,800 hogsheads of Maryland tobacco each year. Because Russell usually chartered a 300- to 650-hogshead vessel for the Patapsco, Baltimore accounted for one-sixth to one-third of his provincial consignments. Russell also enlisted the services of Ridgely’s brother John and merchants William Lux and John Dorsey, all of whom were connected through marriage.37

In 1762 Ridgely opened a store in Baltimore Town and ordered his first shipment of goods from Russell. For the next five years Russell relied heavily on Ridgely, chiefly for supervising the loading and unloading of his vessels each spring. Russell regularly urged his Baltimore agent to prod the notoriously slow-paced planters, since the first ships back from the Chesapeake each summer fetched the highest prices in the European tobacco markets. Keeping the planters in good spirits could prove costly, as Ridgely once explained: “I am 70 or 80 Gallons of Rum out of Pocket having so Large a Ship and The Planters always on Board and collecting her Load in Three Flats They having a Bottle every Trip.” Ridgely also helped Russell collect debts from local planters, although he often had to accept bonds in lieu of hard cash. To weed out the bad risks, Ridgely supplied credit ratings on local planters and recommended only “safe men.” In addition, he reported information on the expected size of the local tobacco crop so that Russell could charter the appropriate vessel. For these valuable services Ridgely expected and received special treatment. Russell not only waived his commission fee on store goods, but also represented Ridgely’s legal interests in several court cases and land transactions involving London residents. And, of course, Ridgely could always count on a comfortable bed in Russell’s home when he visited the metropolis.38

36 Folios 561-63, vol. 25, Wills; John Ridgely to Charles Ridgely, Jr., May 26, 1758, box 1, Ridgely Papers. Most of the marital connections and church affiliations can be traced through Fred Barnes, comp., Maryland Marriages, 1634-1777 (Baltimore, 1975).
38 Charles Ridgely, Jr., to Russell and Molleson, [Sept. ?], 1763, box 1, Ridgely Papers; Russell and Molleson to Charles Ridgely, Jr., Nov. 12, 1763, ibid.; Charles Ridgely, Jr., to Mildred and Roberts, July 25, 1764, ibid.; Charles Ridgely, Jr., to Russell and Molleson, Oct. 8, 1764, ibid.
The Independent Merchant in the Chesapeake

Charles Ridgely, Jr., was a thirty-year-old ship captain when this portrait was painted, about 1760. Soon after, he opened a store in Baltimore Town.

The Ridgely-Russell connection reveals the independent merchant at work. In 1786, in an effort to recover £312 sterling he claimed Ridgely owed him, Russell drew up a comprehensive account of their transactions covering the decade after 1763. During that time Ridgely was constantly in debt. In May 1763, only a year after opening shop, he had already fallen £1,857 sterling behind. Although Ridgely reduced the debt to £797 in 1764, a year later the figure had almost doubled. Store
goods accounted for three-fourths of the total debts that Ridgely accumulated. He apparently kept enough stock on the shelves to last two years, for the vast majority of his purchases arrived in the springs of 1763 and 1765.39

Ridgely made four types of remittances. The first were bills of exchange, drawn on London merchants, which constituted the largest single credit, 53 percent of the total. Ridgely probably obtained the bills in the retail trade at his store. Second, Ridgely earned credits by consigning iron and lumber to Russell for sale in London. In 1762 Charles Ridgely, Sr., set aside twenty-five hundred acres in northern Baltimore for the construction of Northampton Iron Works, stipulating that he and his two sons would operate the business as tenants in common, with each possessing a one-third share in the undivided enterprise.40 Russell marketed the company's pig and bar iron and credited one-third of the profits to Ridgely's account. These iron shipments alone accounted for 33 percent of remittances. In the process of building the furnace and clearing nearby timber lands, Ridgely entered the lumber trade and consigned thousands of staves to Russell, which constituted 6 percent of his credits. The third type of remittance came from services that Ridgely performed while in Russell's employ, accounting for another 6 percent of the total.

The last kind of remittance was tobacco, but it never figured greatly in Ridgely's business. Rather than risk competing directly with Russell, who bought tobacco from Chesapeake planters, Ridgely left the tobacco trade to London consignment merchants who possessed the large-scale capital and connections to finance and market the crop. Only when a frost in 1764 destroyed two-thirds of the local harvest did Ridgely buy up tobacco. Yet this small speculation in twelve hogsheads only netted £76 sterling. Taken together, tobacco made up just 2 percent of his remittances.41

The Ridgely family records also cast light on the independent merchant's activities as a retailer. Thirty years before Charles, Jr., decided to open a store, his father had done the same thing a few miles away. In 1734 and 1735 Charles, Sr., entered into his ledgers a list of customers together with their annual debits and credits. Those accounts reveal the operations of a typical dry goods merchant. Although Ridgely stocked his store with eighty individual items, two-fifths of accounts receivable represented purchases of cloth. (See table 2.) The biggest seller was osnaburg, a coarse and durable material used in the making of work trousers, shirts, and skirts. Ridgely was also a substantial moneylender, for loans comprised one-fifth of accounts receivable.

Customers made their payments in several ways. Most of them settled accounts with tobacco, of which Ridgely received a total of sixty-five thousand pounds. Those customers whose crop was still in the fields or the barns often delivered promissory notes. Cash, a scarce commodity in Baltimore, made up only a tenth of accounts

39 "Mr. Charles Ridgely in Accot. Curt. with James Russell," [1786], box 2, ibid.
41 Charles Ridgely, Jr., to Mildred and Roberts, Sept. 28, 1764, box 1, Ridgely Papers; Russell to Charles Ridgely, Jr., March 3, 1766, ibid.
Table 2
Accounts Receivable and Payable in the Ledgers of Charles Ridgely, Sr., 1734–1735

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accounts Receivable</th>
<th>Accounts Payable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cloth</td>
<td>Tobacco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufactures</td>
<td>Cash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loans</td>
<td>Goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brought Forward</td>
<td>Cash Transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Ledger 1734, MS 691, Ridgely Account Books (Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore); Ledger 1735, ibid.

Note: Brought Forward includes debts that Ridgely’s customers had accumulated in previous daybooks that have disappeared. Loans took five forms: Ridgely issued cash directly to his customers and charged it against their accounts, juggled cash and credit between one customer’s account and another’s, transferred the costs of goods from one account to another, gave loans in the form of tobacco, and extended payment on overdue promissory notes while charging interest. For a discussion of eighteenth-century bookkeeping, see W. T. Baxter, The House of Hancock: Business in Boston, 1734–1775 (Cambridge, Mass., 1943), 24–26, 11–38.

Ridgely’s customers also paid off their debts by doing odd jobs like “trimming” his garden, plowing fields, mowing oats, tanning leather, burning bricks, or running errands to Annapolis and Joppa Town. A few of them entered into long-term contracts, packing Ridgely’s tobacco into hogsheads and transporting it to the landings and warehouses. Finally, customers bartered everything from beef, pork, oats, and corn to rum and “squirrel scalps.”

The individuals who appear in Ridgely’s ledgers spanned a wide spectrum, from indentured servants to slaveholders. As a young merchant starting out, Ridgely exhibited little reluctance in dealing with small planters. He could not afford to be discriminating, for eight other merchants were competing in the area. Among customers who can be traced, two out of five owned no land. Half were subordinate members of households—probably overseers, tenants, hired hands, and servants. Small and middling planters constituted the bulk of the customers, but one out of four was a slaveholder.42

The ledgers reveal the enormous economic power that independent merchants exercised in their communities. First, Ridgely did business with a great many of his neighbors. The county was divided into eleven “hundreds,” administrative units

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42 Of the 159 customers in the ledgers, I have traced 125 through Baltimore County Land Records and Rent Rolls (Maryland Hall of Records); 50 of them owned no land. See ledger 1734, MS 691, box 1, Ridgely Account Books (Maryland Historical Society); and ledger 1735, ibid. Of 60 customers who appear in “Baltimore County Court Records, Joppa, Maryland: Levy Allowances and List of Taxables, 1737,” household members outnumbered household heads 31 to 29.
used mainly in the assessing and collecting of taxes. In his own hundred along the Patapsco, Ridgely kept accounts with at least 13 percent of white men in 1737, 15 percent of household heads, and 25 percent of slaveholders. By the next decade more than one-third of the hundred’s white men turned up in his daybooks. Second, nearly all of Ridgely’s customers were in debt. Of 161 accounts in the ledgers, 137 were in the red. Finally, the debts were considerable. In 1734 and 1735 Ridgely collected only 59 percent of what was owed him. The average indebted account was £4 in arrears, a large sum since the average tenant farmer cleared only about £3 a year from tobacco after his expenses, a nonslaveholding landowner £3 to £6, and a slaveholder £15 to £20.43

Nor was Ridgely exceptional. The native and immigrant merchants who arose after the 1730s consolidated their economic position by creating credit networks entangling virtually every planter in the county. At their deaths they had extended an average of £729 in good credit to ninety-eight persons, compared to only £95 for the second generation and £45 for the first.

The credit networks went deep into the county. Because four merchants died within a few years of a 1737 assessment list, it is possible to locate their debtors. Merchants extended most credit within five to ten miles of their stores. John Moale, Sr., and Richard Gist lived in Upper Patapsco Hundred, which accounted for 38 and 41 percent of their respective debtors. Brian Taylor operated a store in one of the Gunpowder hundreds where 57 percent of his debtors lived. Only William Smith of Upper Spesutia Hundred diverged from the pattern and drew his debtors evenly from across the county. The merchants knew that many debtors would never make good. In eight merchants’ inventories, appraisers included both “sperate” debts that could be recovered and “desperate” debts that could not. For every £7 of credit advanced, merchants lost £2. Although desperate debtors were not necessarily limited to the indigent, poor planters definitely posed the greatest risk. Of thirty-three desperate debtors identified in the 1737 list, only three were slaveholders.44

A clear indication of the merchants’ growing influence as creditors comes from the county court records. The overwhelming majority of cases were suits for recovery of debt. From 1710 through 1729, merchants accounted for only 10 percent of the cases that the court handled. The emergence of men like Charles Ridgely, Sr., in the 1730s, however, coincided with a dramatic increase in merchant litigation. During that decade merchants doubled their share of court cases to 20 percent. During the 1740s it rose to 35 percent. Merchant litigation remained at about that level until the Revolution, dropping to 30 percent in the 1750s and climbing back to 35 percent in the 1760s. To appreciate those numbers, it must be remembered

43 The estimate of the proportion of planters trading with Charles Ridgely, Sr., is based on Daybook 1742-1743, 1745, box 1, Ridgely Account Books. Clemens, Atlantic Economy and Colonial Maryland's Eastern Shore, 150–61.
44 “Baltimore County Court Records, Joppa, Maryland: Levy Allowances and List of Taxables, 1737.” In the inventory of merchant Isaac Webster, 14 desperate debtors were listed as dead, 11 as “runaway,” and 1 as a “Begar.” See folios 20–21, vol. 70, Inventories.
that during the eighteenth century merchants never made up even 1 percent of the county’s population.\textsuperscript{45}

Let me summarize the argument. During the colonial period Baltimore County witnessed the rise of a merchant community that increasingly specialized in commercial activities at the same time that members of the planter elite were concentrating their efforts in agriculture. The first generation was active from about 1660 to about 1690 and included a generally hapless collection of frontier traders, few of whom enjoyed lasting success. During those years local commercial activities seem to have been in the hands of the planter elite. The second generation, between 1690 and 1720, was dominated by agents of prominent London firms who drove out the small-time merchants. They stood among the richest men of the county, but they did not make their money in the same way that planters did. Merchants in fact as well as in name, they plowed their assets into commercial endeavors to a greater degree than the planter elite. The final period, between 1720 and 1769, witnessed the rise of native-born merchants. The disparity between the investment strategies of merchants and planters continued and in some ways increased. These merchants were no longer mere factors selling British goods on commission; they increasingly established their own independent businesses through the cargo system.

Baltimore County was only a part—and a fairly small part—of the Chesapeake, and it would be reaching beyond the evidence presented here to call it “typical.” Yet it was illustrative. The emergence of a native merchant community at the northern edge of Chesapeake society meant that entrepreneurial talent was shifting out of agriculture and into commerce. It meant that a sizable share of the capital used to finance commercial operations was coming from inside Baltimore, not from across the Atlantic. And in a larger sense, it meant that the plantation system was generating economic development alongside the growth of staple exports. That is not to say that commercialization went as deep or as far as it did in the northern colonies, but it should warn us against drawing too stark a contrast between the growing South and the developing North. One of the most striking characteristics of the political leadership that rose to prominence in Maryland and Virginia as an independent nation took shape was its sanguine belief that in any new union the South could hold its own in open competition with the North. Given what we know about the subsequent economic development of both regions, that optimism seems profoundly misplaced. At the time, though, a reasonable person could survey the economy of the Chesapeake and predict a bright future of growth with development.

\textsuperscript{45} Conclusions about the merchants as creditors are based on an analysis of the 9,464 cases in the surviving Baltimore County Court Proceedings for 1710 to 1769. For the estimates of merchant population, see Charles G. Steffen, “Gentry and Bourgeois: Patterns of Merchant Investment in Baltimore County, Maryland, 1658 to 1776,” \textit{Journal of Social History}, 20 (Spring 1987), 531-48, esp. 547-48.