



A "Topping People": The Rise and Decline of Virginia's Old Political Elite, 1680-1790

Emory G. Evans

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A "Topping People" is the first comprehensive study of the political, economic, and social elite of colonial Virginia. Evans studies twenty-one leading families from their rise to power in the late 1600s to their downfall over one hundred years later. These families represented the upper echelons of power, serving in the upper and lower houses of the General Assembly, often as speaker of the House of Burgesses. Their names—Randolph, Robinson, Byrd, Carter, Corbin, Custis, Nelson, and Page, to note but a few—are still familiar in the Old Dominion some three hundred years later.

Their decline was due to a variety of factors—economic, social, and demographic. The third generations showed an inability to adapt their business philosophies to the changing economic climate. Their inclination was to mirror the English landed gentry, living off the income of their landed estates. Economic diversification was the norm early on, but it became less effective after 1730. Scots traders, for example, introduced chain stores, making it more difficult to continue family-run stores. And land speculation was no substitute for diversification. An increase in population resulted in the creation of new counties, which weakened the influence of the Tidewater region. These leading families began to spend more than they earned and became heavily indebted to British mercantile firms. The Revolution only served to make matters worse, and by 1790 these families had lost their political and economic status, although their social status remained.

A "Topping People" is a thorough and engrossing study of the way families came to gain and, eventually, lose great power in this turbulent and progressive period in American history.

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