Maryland's Alcohol Culture: 
Topographic and Economic Influences 
on the Social Drinking Culture of the Colonial Chesapeake

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Historian Sharon Salinger illustrated colonial attitudes towards drinking as she associated Maryland resident Justice Askham with the following poetic descriptive, “Not drunk is he who from the floor, Can rise again and still drink more, But drunk is he who prostrate lies, Without the power to drink or rise.”\(^1\) Askham issued this poetic statement to defend his own sobriety after a display of public drunkenness. His witty statement demonstrated a light and playful attitude towards alcohol consumption, but further analysis of alcohol patterns in Maryland revealed more complex societal customs and developments in the English colonies.

English drinking habits encouraged colonial American brewing and distillation—the origins of which can be traced to drinking attitudes in English society. Alcohol consumption and tavern life proved commonplace in the urban centers of England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as English artist and social critic William Hogarth presented alcohol within the daily life of Englishmen and women in his *Beer Street* print.\(^2\) Low proof ales and other brews replaced water in many circumstances as urban water quality diminished. Housewives and medical practitioners had long believed in the medicinal and healing properties of alcohol.\(^3\) English society served as the basis for British colonial societies in North America, where Englishmen labored to establish new settlements often based on traditional societal standards. As with most English cultural traditions, the desire for alcoholic beverages transferred to the New World where consumers willingly paid for or produced their own alcoholic beverages.

The nature of colonial alcohol consumption and production diverged from English customs, developing more localized methods that reflected colonial conditions. Consistent trade and contact with England allowed colonists to import drinks and other luxuries, but developing economic patterns and other pressing needs altered colonial production methods. For most Maryland colonists, daily alcohol consumption demands could be met neither fiscally nor temporally by transatlantic trade, thus domestic production and sales developed within the colony itself. Topography and economic conditions of the Maryland colony encouraged more localized production efforts and social developments during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Colonial alcohol production and consumption practices demonstrated a slight divergence from English production practices, developed local economic patterns, and helped to form cultural attitudes towards health, gender roles, and leisure activity.

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\(^1\) Sharon V. Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 86.

\(^2\) Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America*, 52-53.

\(^3\) Sarah Hand Meacham, “‘They Will Be Adjudged by Their Drink, What Kinde of Housewives They Are’: Gender, Technology, and Household Cidering in England and the Chesapeake, 1690 to 1760,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 111(2003): 121-122.
ALCOHOL PRODUCTION

Local topographic conditions strongly influenced alcohol production trends in Maryland. Beer and ales required grains, crops easily cultivated in rural Europe where agricultural practices had existed for centuries. Several factors discouraged this traditional barley production, thus limiting brewing processes in colonial Maryland. Heavily forested at the time of colonization, the Chesapeake region required intensive labor to develop field cultivation of any sort. Clear-cutting and rock-clearing rendered field preparation difficult and costly in Maryland, therefore Chesapeake colonists generally limited their grain production. They initially resorted to trade with natives for food crops, although they gradually adopted native means of corn cultivation and other Indian crops. Grain production on the small farms and plantations of Maryland proved minimal, developing later with the rise of slavery in the eighteenth century. Topography rendered Maryland colonists unwilling to produce high-yield barley crops for beer, thus they turned to other means of alcohol production. While beer existed in the colonies and remained a popular drink, ciders and other fruit-based products surpassed beer as the common drink of colonial Maryland. Economics also played a key role in this aversion to beer production, as malting barley required the construction of malt houses. Such extravagant labor and monetary expenditures likely deterred colonists from ale-making and promoted more fruit-based beverage production.

The costs and supply rates of European alcohol dissuaded colonists from importing their brews. English customs encouraged high beverage consumption, as English men, women, and children drank ales and wines at meals and throughout the day. The traditional daily consumption of beer would have required a daily dependence upon transatlantic shipping rates. Although alcohol importation continued throughout the colonial period, Maryland colonists generally imported hard liquors and developed substitutions for ales. In an article on colonial alcohol production in the domestic sphere, historian Sarah Hand Meacham declared that only the upper class of Chesapeake colonists imported liquors at all, leaving most alcohol consumption dependent upon domestic production. Colonial recipes containing rum or brandy often added fruit juices, which not only enhanced flavor but increased the beverage quantity so that more individuals could enjoy the drink. Shrub became a popular example of this mixed drink, which contained rum, citrus juices, and sugar. The financial and physical difficulties of importing

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5 Virginia DeJohn Anderson, Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 244.
6 Anderson even attests colonists’ aversion to goats because of the damages they created in apple orchards, thus limiting cider production. See Anderson, Creatures of Empire, 148; Carr, Menard, and Walsh, Robert Cole’s World, 35-36; Virginia funeral records revealed about equal amounts of beer, cider, and wine for the funeral party, indicative of the increased expenditures at funerals. See Salinger, Taverns and Drinking in Early America, 67.
7 Carr, Menard, and Walsh, Robert Cole’s World, 35-36.
8 Meacham, “‘They Will Be Adjudged by Their Drink,’” 121-122; The Dutch also enjoyed beer with their breakfast prior to the rise of coffee in popularity. See Salinger, Taverns and Drinking in Early America, 11.
9 Meacham, “‘They Will Be Adjudged by Their Drink,’” 128.
high quantities of alcohol led colonists to look toward independent forms of domestic alcoholic production.

Given the difficulties of grain production and the costs of alcohol imports, colonists increased fruit cultivation to produce alternative alcoholic beverages. With fruit propagation, a colonist could produce his own alcohol through orchard cultivation, free of transatlantic trade costs. Orchards required less care than barley fields, could provide fruits for food consumption, and could be easily converted into alcohol. One commentator reported that the peach, quince, and apple created the “most excellent and comfortable drinks.”

Cider proved a common beverage among Chesapeake colonists, as well as one of the easiest to produce. Colonists picked the fruit, mashed it, and let it ferment in a tub or barrel, decanting the liquid until it was ready for consumption. Pamphlets and advertisements for the Maryland colony encouraged future settlers to bring “kernels of Peares and Apples… for the making hereafter of Cider, and Perry [sic].” The pamphlet continued to discuss fruit trees, vine development for wines, and trade with Indians for hominy, a corn-based product that could be used for brewing. Cider, perry, and mobby dominated the average colonist’s alcohol stores, as each could be processed from locally grown apples, pears, and peaches respectively. Maryland residents also produced brandy, and small vineyards developed throughout Maryland. Lord Baltimore established 300 acres of vineyards in 1662 to promote domestic alcohol production. Domestic-scale wine production existed within Chesapeake households as well, and included such wines as cherry, lemon, gooseberry, blackberry, and elderberry. Maryland settlers replaced most of their ale consumption with locally-grown, fruit-based alcohols during the colonial period.

ALCOHOL AND THE ECONOMY

The increasing ability of farmers and tavern keepers to profit from alcohol production demonstrated its social and economic significance to colonial Maryland society. Colonial alcohol production primarily served the needs of the individual household but could also provide additional income or even support a family. Maryland families prized cider production, and fathers bequeathed orchards to their sons in wills. Although cider production began at a household scale, surplus beverage supplies enabled farmers and plantation owners to sell cider to

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neighboring households. With a short shelf life, cider exportation proved infeasible, thus small local-scale production was the most profitable and comfortable means through which plantation owners and farmers developed their home beverage base.17 Maryland colonist Robert Cole’s plantation records revealed increasing surplus sales of cider, as Cole sold £300 of cider in 1666 and more than doubled this sale two years later.18 As taverns developed in the Maryland colony, innkeepers and tavern owners began to process their own beverages for sale. This led to increased legislative regulations on prices and sales for the benefit of the consumer as well as the supplier in competition. Profit hunting occurred often enough within the Maryland colony to elicit a 500 pound tobacco fine for any tavern or ordinary keeper who cheated customers with heightened prices.19 The colony used the tobacco fine against price gauging for internal improvements, thus a strong correlation existed between economics, leisure, and development.

Maryland leaders worked to reduce colonial dependence on Britain for alcohol imports but continued to import hard liquors throughout the eighteenth century. An advertisement for the Maryland colony encouraged men to bring wine, sugar, and prunes for colonial trade, demonstrating an expected dependence upon England.20 From this pamphlet, proprietors and other proponents of the English colonies expected a continued dependence upon English trade for certain staple and luxury goods. Cole produced prodigious amounts of cider for domestic consumption and for sale, but his affluence also enabled him to purchase at least 2.5 gallons of rum through English trade.21 While colonists produced their own berry wines and fruit drinks, European wine and rum remained in high demand among affluent members of colonial society.

Although local legislation discouraged liquor imports, taxes on these imports accrued revenue for the colony to support colonial infrastructure. Interstate and international trade dependence had worried colonial leaders, and a 1692 imposition placed a general import tax on liquors.22 By 1704, the Maryland colony prohibited the import of malts and beers and added an import tax on rum, wine, and spirits from Pennsylvania.23 Regardless of the legislation’s intention, the alcohol tariffs encouraged cider and wine production within the colony in lieu of hard liquors.

Tavern life revealed several fiscal characteristics of Maryland. Slow to develop in the rural Maryland colony, entrepreneurs gradually established taverns in more frequented areas, such as well-traveled roads and areas of higher population concentrations. When Lord Baltimore issued his annual report in 1661, no ale-houses or taverns existed in Maryland, but by the end of the seventeenth century, established taverns produced their own beers for sale.24 Individuals frequented taverns on credit, owing tavern keepers payment in tobacco according to standard, colony-wide rates.25 These fixed prices revealed the integral role of tobacco in the local economy and the internal Maryland trade of tobacco and alcohol. Regulations and permits provided taverns with legitimacy but also supported the colonial administrations.

17 Carr, Menard, and Walsh, Robert Cole’s World, 95-96.
18 According to his estate records, Cole sold 710 pounds of cider in 1668, evidencing an increasing quantity of cider and a continued market for sale. See Carr, Menard, and Walsh, Robert Cole’s World, 183-184.
19 Thomann, Colonial Liquor Laws, 74-75.
21 Carr, Menard, and Walsh, Robert Cole’s World, 190.
22 Thomann, Colonial Liquor Laws, 79.
23 Thomann, Colonial Liquor Laws, 80.
24 Thomann, Colonial Liquor Laws, 71-78.
CULTURAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS ALCOHOL

While drinking attitudes reflected those of Europe, they also reflected concerns of human health in colonial Maryland. Brackish water conditions and bacterial contaminants contributed to poor water quality in many areas surrounding Maryland and Virginia. Although Maryland colonists considered straight water dangerous, several Chesapeake region recipes required water but mixed the liquid with other ingredients for taste and health benefits.\(^{26}\) Wary of its ill effects, colonists clearly incorporated water into their diets but at a minimal rate. As colonists became aware of poor water conditions, they relied upon prepared beverages to supplement water consumption.\(^{27}\) Richard Frethorne’s letter to his parents in 1623 attested to the poor water quality and the cultural beliefs in the healthy affects of alcohol. He summarized the commonly held belief when we wrote, “As strong beer in England doth fatten and strengthen them so water here doth wash and weaken these here.”\(^{28}\) Though he lived in the Jamestown settlement, Frethorne’s statement rang true to many Marylanders within the lower water table of the Chesapeake. The detrimental impacts of water use encouraged alcohol consumption in the Chesapeake region.

Chesapeake colonists used alcohol in remedies to promote physical and spiritual health. Catholics believed that wine was transformed into the blood of Jesus Christ, thus consuming the wine to receive God’s grace. Jesuit letters from Maryland inventoried their wine stores for communion rites.\(^{29}\) Most colonists, regardless of religious affiliation, believed in the healing properties of malts and liquors. Colonial cookbooks contained selections of alcohol-based medicines and home remedies. Many recipes called for aquavitae or strong spirits, as the recipe “Aquimirabelis” or miracle water, listed white wine, aquavitae, and juices as the three major components.\(^{30}\) Colonists then added spices and herbs to the mixtures, creating a drink thought to improve health and energy. Individualized home remedies proved popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as housewives developed their own cures and methods to alleviate illness. The importance of wine and spirits in these remedies signified a high use of alcohol in cultural practices as well as a positive view of alcohol.

Attitudes towards water and the health impacts of alcohol often revealed class distinctions within the colonies, but Maryland may have experienced a more egalitarian alcohol distribution. Most English colonists considered water a poor man’s drink fit for animals rather than human consumption. An analysis of South Carolina yielded similar sentiments and explained that “only slaves, the poorest of whites, and hard-pressed frontiersmen drank water.”\(^{31}\) Although wealthy colonists and planters could afford to import wines and liquors, most colonists enjoyed the same quality drinks of cider, perry, and ale. An advertisement for Maryland displayed less social discriminations, as a servant contract compelled employers to provide “him

\(^{26}\) Mead required one part honey to seven parts water, while cinnamon water required rose water mixed with white wine to soothe the stomach. See Hess, *Martha Washington’s Booke of Cookery*, 387, 418.
\(^{27}\) Meacham, “‘They Will Be Adjudged by Their Drink,’” 123-125.
\(^{28}\) Richard Frethorne, “Letter to his Father and Mother,” History 341 Class Handout, 1623.
\(^{30}\) Smith’s recipe calls for a wine, brandy, water, and spices, while the Washington cookbook mixes wine, spirit, and juices. See Smith, *The Compleat Housewife*, 258-259; and Hess, *Martha Washington’s Booke of Cookery*, 397-399.
[the servant] with Meat, Drinke, Apparell and Lodging [sic].” Marylanders considered malts and ciders to be fit for individuals of all economic levels, and many specifically obligated themselves to providing servants with standard drinking and eating provisions.

Maryland alcohol production revealed developing gender roles and societal ideals within the colony. As the female population increased and colonists began to establish households, gender divisions developed in the Chesapeake region that mirrored the English private sphere. Men generally frequented taverns, and respectable women rarely entered taverns unaccompanied. While men worked the tobacco fields and negotiated trade agreements, women tended to food preparation. In fact, dairying, poultry-raising, and small-scale vegetable production fell under the woman’s domain, while women, girls, boys, and household servants worked to harvest and preserve food stores and alcohol. Even on plantations, where slaveholding began to satisfy the proprietor’s labor needs, colonial women continued to maintain a steady hand in food preparation. Society expected women to prepare meals and tend to alcohol demands. One affluent colonial, John Hammond, traveled through Maryland and Virginia and critiqued that only “slothful and careless [sic]” housewives failed to produce enough alcoholic drinks for guests. When a hostess offered only water to Hammond, he chided the woman’s domestic skills and declared, “they will be adjudged by their drink, what kinde of Housewives they are [sic].” English and colonial cookbooks supported this sentiment in a more subtle manner and addressed a female readership. Many women authored recipe collections and domestic guides that included advice and direction for proper meal preparation and general domestic care.

A society steeped in regular alcohol consumption, English colonial society expected women to prepare victuals and drinks for daily use. With Maryland colonists separated by distance, leisurely drinking began as a private affair. Cookbooks and home manufacture of light alcoholic beverages suggested more private drinking customs and standards than the urban areas of New England or London, where taverns quickly established themselves and became objects of social commentary. European artist William Hogarth’s and colonial Dr. Alexander Hamilton’s portraiture of British and New England drinking customs placed drunken revelry in urban environments. The popularity of low proof alcohol and the spatial distances between neighbors helped to minimize drunken conflicts and social commentary in the Maryland colony.

Inns and taverns served a social purpose in the Maryland colony as well. Circuit court judges used taverns for travel around counties, and average colonials frequented taverns to share

34 Salinger, Taverns and Drinking in Early America, 222-223.
35 Carr, Menard, and Walsh, Robert Cole’s World, 72, 109.
38 The following cookbooks contained recipes and forewords by women already engaged in the domestic processes of the eighteenth century. They contain recipes handed down from generations, thus include seventeenth-century recipes. Martha Washington and Harriott Horry’s books reflect Chesapeake and southern cookery during the seventeenth- and eighteenth- centuries. Smith’s book, though English, was used in the colonies, according to historian Sarah Hand Meacham. See Meacham, “‘They Will Be Adjudged by Their Drink;’” E. Smith, 1753. The Compleat Housewife; or, Accomplish’d gentlewoman’s companion (London: Literary Services and Production Limited, 1753); Hess, Martha Washington’s Booke of Cookery; and Hooker, A Colonial Plantation Cookbook.
39 Salinger, Taverns and Drinking in Early America, 52-53; 77-78.
social and business news. Traveling colonists and visitors to the colonies stopped at taverns for food, lodging, and drink. Taverns served multiple purposes for all parties involved, as colonists socialized and received local political and economic news, grand juries convened in taverns, and taverns created revenue for the colonial government. Sharon Salinger cited a scene of political and economic discussions in an Annapolis tavern following the passage of the Stamp Acts. As colonial business and judicial decisions occurred within taverns, the early stages of Maryland’s public drinking sphere witnessed relaxed leisurely drinking like that of the private sphere.

Colonial legislation worked to limit disorderly conduct and promoted healthy social situations for colonists. The colony outlawed alcohol purchases on Sundays but passed no legislation concerning daily consumption limits. The Maryland colony outlawed public drunkenness as early as 1638 and implemented a fine of thirty pounds of tobacco. By 1642, this fine had more than tripled, and a third charge of drunkenness resulted in a three year loss of voting rights. While these laws prohibited drunken behavior, Charles, Kent, and Talbot Counties only heard thirteen cases of drunkenness from 1658 to 1676, and most of these concerned property damages and debts rather than basic public disorder. However, prosecutions for drunkenness rarely occurred in the Maryland legal system.

Regardless of colonial statutes, local accounts suggested that society encouraged drinking and accepted occasional drunkenness. Although Paul A. Shackel documented Charles Carroll’s critique of a drunken disturbance in the governor’s household, many colonial accounts promoted alcohol consumption. Bodily function proved the deciding factor to determine drunken behavior. Judge Askham issued a second definition for drunkenness when he stated that “a man is never drunk if he can go out of the carts way when it is coming towards him.” As long as a man could control his actions in matters of safety and job performance, colonists deemed his intoxication levels acceptable. Destruction of property and other crimes associated with inebriation proved a different matter to colonists, as these Maryland courts processed cases dealing with such matters.

The colony not only accepted alcohol but integrated it as a staple item in the colonial diet. Colonists expected alcohol with meals, as Hammond critiqued his hostess’ shy liquor supplies. Cole’s plantation household attested to alcohol’s importance with its material inventories. With eight family members and four servants in the household, Cole inventoried only five chairs and four beds. The plantation focused time and energy on food production and economy before luxuries. His surpluses of cider, described earlier, served to emphasize the integral role of cider as a necessity to Maryland colonists—more important than chairs and bed frames. Alcohol proved to be more important than luxury items to Maryland colonists. It ranked as a vital item to any civilized household.

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40 Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America*, 219.
41 Prosecuted colonists were expected to pay a 1,000 pound tobacco fine if involved in Sunday alcohol sales. See Thomann, *Colonial Liquor Laws*, 78.
44 Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America*, 97.
45 Paul A. Shackel, *Personal Discipline and Material Culture: An Archaeology of Annapolis, Maryland, 1695-1870* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 75.
46 Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America*, 86.
47 Hammond, “Leah and Rachel,” 292
More than a societal expectation, alcohol consumption proved an integral leisure activity in colonial Maryland. Anderson explained the importance of cider production to the Maryland colonists and declared that alcohol provided “one of the few pleasures in their lives.” Justice Askham’s poetic definitions of drunkenness revealed a playful attitude towards inebriation and downplayed any somber messages that the public may have wanted to portray. Dinners and social parties incorporated alcoholic drinks in showy fashion, as fruit juices and spices added flavor and color to punch bowls. Such extravagant displays of beverages increased during the eighteenth century, as lower and upper class households contained increasing amounts of dinnerware and drinkware in the 1740s. Colonists’ attention to detail in preparing drinks revealed a societal emphasis as well as a private pride in beverage preparation. As in Maryland, alcohol preparation and presentation in Virginia served as a mark of hospitality among colonials to visiting travelers. Martha Washington’s cookbook contained many Chesapeake recipes that would have correlated to Maryland cuisine compilations, and contained about twenty-five recipes for wines, ales, cider, and other drinks containing spirits. Beverage preparation proved a detailed process revered by domestic women and expected by colonial men in the Chesapeake region.

The production processes in the colonies established a markedly regional industry. Costs and agricultural developments led to orchard-dependent alcohol production within Maryland households, while Maryland recipes, mixes, and customs reflected colonial innovation and tendencies towards self-sufficiency. Alcohol in the Chesapeake served as an egalitarian product among social classes, while manufacturing patterns established gendered roles in the public and private spheres. Legislative and judicial processes of the colonial period largely overlooked alcohol-related discrepancies, and the average colonist seemed to revere alcoholic beverages. The product developed an integral role in colonial society and remained a staple among colonists throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Maryland’s drinking culture acted as a unique and localized extension of traditional English drinking practices, a phenomenon that has continued in modern American culture. Even today, American songwriters have continued to praise the consumption traditions of the Chesapeake colonies, as one West Virginia songwriter deftly defined alcohol: “I’m medicine and I am poison, I can help you up or make you fall, You had some of the best times, You’ll never remember with me, Alcohol.” Such humorous sentiments reflected the basic attitudes expressed in colonial Maryland. To the colonists, alcohol served as a healing agent, a tool for social interaction, a surplus profit, and a means of quenching thirst. Socially accepted and promoted, alcohol provided colonists with a refreshing drink as well as a tool for socialization and communication in Maryland.

49 Anderson, Creatures of Empire, 111.
50 Shackel, Personal Discipline and Material Culture, 101.
51 Hess, Martha Washington’s Booke of Cookery, 378-432.
Primary Sources


Richard Frethorne, “Letter to his Father and Mother,” History 341 Class Handout, 1623.


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