

Atlantic Virginia: Intercolonial Relations in the Seventeenth Century. By APRIL LEE HATFIELD. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Pp. 312. \$39.95.)

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In this well-researched and engaging study, April Lee Hatfield explores an overlooked aspect of the seventeenth-century Virginia experience. She argues that scholars have long portrayed Virginia as “a self-contained entity that interacted with other colonies only individually, through England” (p. 2). In doing so, early American historians have ignored the durable bonds between Virginia and other colonies in the New World. By examining the ways in which Virginians interacted with planters in the Caribbean, merchants in the New Netherlands, and Puritans in New England, Hatfield hopes to demonstrate how such networks “all worked to enmesh” Virginia “fully within an Atlantic context” (p. 7). We have, of course, long considered seventeenth-century Virginia part of the Atlantic world. Try to think of a study published in the last ten years that does not implicitly or explicitly situate the colony in such a context. But Hatfield argues that the overlapping and intersection of transatlantic and intercolonial bonds better explains the distinctive aspects of Virginia’s history, more so than, say, James Horn’s study of the direct connections between England and Virginia, *Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994).

To illustrate this argument, Hatfield provides a series of thematic snapshots showing the varied ways that Virginians were connected to other peoples living on the western shores of the Atlantic world. Virginians viewed their colony as an island, one defined by native American conceptions of geography and linked by trade routes to other European colonies in North America. Settlers both resisted and embraced this sense of isolated engagement with a wider world. They fought Indians in the Chesapeake region to “impose their own meaning on its geographic features” (p. 8) and to exploit native American exchange routes. While reinscribing the physical world around them with new meaning, English Virginians also established significant connections with colonies up and down the western littoral. This process, according to Hatfield, created “a complex Atlantic world crisscrossed with overlapping ties” (p. 50). Intercolonial bonds were defining features of everyday life in Virginia because of the dispersed nature of English settlement in the Chesapeake. With no port towns, mariners from other colonies had to travel far upriver to individual plantations. These mariners brought goods and information, further strengthening the ties that bound Virginia to places like Boston, Barbados, and New Amsterdam.

While intercolonial links were “making Virginia Atlantic” (p. 69), Hatfield asserts that they were also shaping the cultural contours of the colony. After situating the Chesapeake in what she regards as its proper Atlantic context, Hatfield considers the effects of Atlantic networks on the colony’s social development. And here she makes some far-reaching claims. The movement of Dissenters from other colonies “helped define Virginia as an Anglican colony” (p. 115), she argues. The violence of Bacon’s Rebellion, we also learn, had less to do with “out-of-control racist anger” than the struggle for control over Indian paths and trading networks (p. 35). Moreover, she contends that Virginia’s transformation into a slave society only makes sense if we view slavery within an intercolonial context. In one of the most interesting sections of the book, Hatfield makes the case that Barbados served as a model for planters who were intent on enacting slave codes in Virginia. “Evidence that legal definitions of race and slavery and regulation of slaves developed as part of an intercolonial exchange,” she argues, “raises questions about the explanatory weight historians have given to local events such as Bacon’s Rebellion in the evolution of slavery and race in Virginia” (p. 154). In making such a claim, Hatfield suggests that, if her interpretation works, studies such as Edmund Morgan’s *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*

(New York, 1975) err in placing too much emphasis on internal dynamics within the colony to explain processes that were Atlantic—or, better, intercolonial—in nature.

These points are wonderfully suggestive, even tantalizing. But they are far from definitive. To be fair, Hatfield at times admits as much herself. For instance, toward the end of the chapter devoted to slavery in an Atlantic context, she concedes that “factors other than intercolonial relations, particularly changes in relative availability and price of indentured servants and slaves, proved crucial to the development of Chesapeake slavery” (p. 168). To challenge the prevailing wisdom about the transformation of the labor force in Virginia would require not only exploring “availability,” as she correctly points out, but also revisiting the old story of social conflict within the colony and the decision of a planter elite to look increasingly to Africa for its workers, the type of work recently done by Anthony Parent in *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660–1740* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003). Hatfield’s work adds an intriguing dimension to our understanding of Virginia’s transition to slave society—in particular, the Barbadian model that planters would use to marginalize and stigmatize Africans in Virginia—but it cannot explain why the shift occurred.

What Hatfield’s work does show are the different effects of intercolonial connections on various regions of the Chesapeake. So, for example, the Eastern Shore, which had the closest connections to other colonies, developed along a much different trajectory from other areas of Virginia that, through trade and migration, were tied directly to English ports. On the Eastern Shore, mariners from other American ports mediated news from England, a sizable number of Atlantic creole slaves created a more fluid notion of race, Anglicans had to contend with other religious traditions, and, because of the region’s well-developed intercolonial networks, debtors and runaways had greater opportunities to escape.

Although we can glimpse some fascinating aspects of Chesapeake life in *Atlantic Virginia*, it remains unclear just how Hatfield’s work challenges our assumptions about the larger picture of seventeenth-century Virginia. Hatfield claims that the book forces us to rethink the region’s history. “Each of these constructions—Atlantic world, Virginia, local region, international colonial America, North America, and English Atlantic—functioned in slightly different ways, and each was relevant under different circumstances,” she believes, adding that “they coexisted and intersected.” Hatfield then goes on to argue that “all are necessary for understanding the reality of life in seventeenth-century Virginia that was connected to different parts of its wider world in very different ways” (p. 227). Fair enough. But what is the significance of that “reality of life” for a different understanding of Chesapeake history, or to what end has Hatfield unearthed some fascinating details? She argues that the interconnected nature of seventeenth-century Atlantic Virginia began to unravel about 1700. As wealthy planters from those regions tied most closely to England tried to wrest control of the colony from those varied peoples who defined themselves by intercolonial connections, they began to imagine and then to create a more bounded Virginia, a self-sustaining entity tied to the Atlantic through England alone. Only in future studies will the implications of Atlantic Virginia be borne out. In other words, only when historians begin to explore eighteenth-century Virginia in light of Hatfield’s work will they be able to consider the full meaning of this seventeenth-century story.