Foot Soldiers in the Revolution of 1800: Democracy in Early Amelia County Virginia

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It is not surprising that historians have searched for an alternative to the Federalist backlash. After all, it contains some of the most shameful moments in the history of the United States: the militarism of the XYZ Affair of the late 1790s, the suppression of popular rebellions, and the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. The dominant narrative states that popular dissent was squashed by Federalist politicians. Urban mercantilist elites found a friend in the Federalist Party, and this elite group legislated in their interest. In Republicans’ opposition historians have fabricated a ray of hope in the midst of the American Thermidor. In championing the Republican alternative historians seldom connect material interests to political rhetoric and actions. Binding material interest to political rhetoric and actions, done on a small scale, is the purpose of this article.

The following pages argue that the Republicans were not a democratic alternative to the Federalists. This study focuses on the realpolitik of “ultra-Republicans” in Amelia County in 1798 to illustrate that they were in no way less self-interested than their Federalist counterparts. The term “ultra-Republican” needs definition. “Ultra-republican”, ultra being borrowed from 18th century political vernacular, refers to the most militant, elite, and partisan members of Madison and Jefferson’s still-forming coalition. These ultra-Republicans, counter to the description of the early Republicans found in popular and uplifting narratives, pursued means of limiting democracy while pursuing their economic interests. They did this through redoubling and refocusing their efforts in the Republican stronghold of Virginia. These Republicans, far from being ideologues concerned with liberty, freedom, and democracy, pursued the interest of the slave south in much the same way as Federalists pursued the interest of the mercantile elite. Each of the parties is best understood as representing the competing interest of different sectors of the capitalist class in the Early Republic. As the continued existence of racialized slavery in the United States suggests, the Republicans and the slaveholders they represented won.

Truly unpacking the fiction of the Republican alternative requires an examination of material events and relationships. An appeal must be made for historians to focus on what ultra-Republicans did and where they came from in order to more critically interrogate what they said. Only in this way can historians, and the public alike, recognize the lack of utility in venerating the slave holding elite Republicans. The idea of the republican alternative has penetrated society at large. One glaring example popularized by those on the left is this quote popularly attributed to Thomas Jefferson. “I hope we shall...crush in
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its birth the aristocracy of our moneyed corporations which dare already to challenge our government to trial and bid defiance to the laws of our country.”¹ In this instance, this “quote” stems from a correspondence written in 1825 between Jefferson and his valued friend and ultra-Republican William Branch Giles. Jefferson was not lamenting a rich aristocracy in his letter, but rather Federalist attacks on the agricultural sector for the benefit of mercantile urban capitalists.²

William Branch Giles, born on August 12th 1762, was an ultra-Republican from Amelia County, Virginia. Midway through an illustrious career in national politics Giles resigned his seat in Congress. The dominant narrative puts this event in a slew of Republican resignations, in all levels of government, driven by a disgust of the anti-democratic excesses of the Federalist government.³ Though this may have been the public rationale for Giles resignation and others like it, his resignation in reality is best understood as driven by a Republican strategy to regain political control and to protect elite ultra-Republicans’ economic interests.

Giles’ resignation and the surrounding events characterize a different brand of elite anti-democratic politics which is made clear in three sections. The first section shows that ultra-Republicans William Branch Giles, Joshua Chaffin, and Joseph Eggleston were wealthy elites whose power was based on kinship, geographic, militia, or economic ties with other elites in Amelia County. Amelia County is also shown to be a bastion of power for the Virginian elite, even Thomas Jefferson had family whom he financially supported in the county.⁴ This section will possibly be common sense to some. Wealthy elites have an interest which they pursue. However, the purpose of this section is to rebuke perspectives which seldom interrogate these interests and the material basis for them to the point of obfuscating analysis. This trend is found nowhere more clearly than those analyses that deploy the idea of “republicanism.”

The idea of “republicanism” as a trend in United States political and social thought was popularized by the scholarship of Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood. At its most simple, “republicanism” is an inherent trait shared by all Americans, throughout temporal space Americans’ find themselves drawn to increased liberty, unalienable rights, and popular sovereignty. Unfortunately, despite the ideological purity of the founding fathers and revolutionaries, women, indigenous persons, and people of color more broadly were not initially include. However, the power of republicanism created an upward sloping trend towards increasing inclusion, freedom, and democracy for all. This rhetoric has been continuously used by the United States’ politicians from the nation’s founding to the present. Clearly if all persons in the territorial United States are included, the idea is farcical. Most importantly, using “republicanism” as an explanatory tool and agent privileges perceived ideology and treats material interest or elite status as incidental in studies of the American Revolution and the Early Republic. It is the steadfastness and enduring nature of the belief in the “thingyness” of republicanism, and its use as an explanatory tool in historical discourse, that make such a material analysis of ultra-Republicans is necessary.

One of the most concise repudiations of this school of thought on the American Revolution is found in George Van Cleve’s *A Slaveholders’ Union: Slavery, Politics, and the Constitution in the Early American Republic*. This 2010 publication argues that scholarship influenced by Wood and Bailyn “treats slavery as incidental to the republican enterprise.”⁵ Van Cleve’s project is to prove slavery’s centrality. Van Cleve does so by insisting that the Constitution was a proslavery document, and that the division of powers we term “federalism” was an intentional structural block to any abolition of slavery through political means. The three fifths compromise cemented the proslavery interest on the national landscape, but also meant that slave states themselves could execute proslavery policies without the need to convince northern voters to act in the interest of the slave south. Van Cleve also asserts that the Virginia Resolutions, penned by ultra-Republicans in 1798, was the beginning of the states’ rights doctrine of chattel slavery. The validity of this argument will be demonstrated by the occurrences in Amelia County.

The second section will demonstrate that ultra-Republicans’ public rhetoric was part of a strategy to achieve these groups’ elite interests on the national political level. This process is defined by a moderation of rhetoric, which was a change to maintain power in the face of accusations of unpatriotic behavior. The events in Amelia County in 1798 are also shown to be part of a broader national political strategy. This is critical for understanding Giles’ and

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his fellow Republicans’ resignations and participation in manipulating elections in the late 1790’s.

The third section shows that this viscous electioneering in which Amelia County ultra-Republicans carried out their strategy to regain power demonstrates they were not the flag bearers of the democratic alternative and “republicanism.” All too often historians speak of the Revolution of 1800 as a remarkably peaceful and democratic transfer of power between warring factions, solidifying the promise of the American Revolution. It is told as “a thunderclap like the shot heard round the world at Lexington or the storming of the Bastille. … This image of tranquility camouflages the remarkably strenuous electioneering that characterized the long campaign of 1800.”6 After close investigation it appears ultra-Republicans’ actions more closely reflect those of self-serving elites defending their interests. In these instances the actions of Amelia County Republicans fall far short of even their moderated rhetoric.

Amelia County: Friends, Family, and Slave Owners

Today, from a bird’s eye view, Amelia County’s landscape reveals its agricultural past. Giles Road winds past Jones Lake and the tributaries that end in the Appomattox River. On either side of Giles Road farmland extends until it hits the brush and forests of what could have only been old agricultural fields. There are no urban areas. This agricultural community is situated only fifty-five miles outside of Richmond, and the Amelia County Courthouse is located on a small-town grid like most old colonial communities. Outside of this small town William Branch Giles’ old home, named the Wigwam, still stands just a tenth of a mile off of his namesake highway.7

In the period before the elections of 1798 Amelia County was not dissimilar to Virginia as a whole. The members of the economic and political elite were characterized by their wealth, a strong interest in the expansion and acceptance of chattel slavery, connections to the militia, and familial ties. Chaffin’s, Giles’, and Eggleston’s elite status manifested itself in their political careers. Though individuals may have had strong ideological convictions, their desires to maintain their economic interest is what underpinned most of their actions and rhetoric. This economic interest was rooted in the cultivation of

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tobacco and the use of chattel slavery, and was deeply threatened by the economic and political climate of the late 18th century that so favored their creditors and the exporters of their goods.

At the time of the first census in 1790, Virginia as a whole had roughly seven hundred and fifty thousand residents. Of these residents nearly three hundred thousand were enslaved. An additional three hundred thousand residents were women, children or free blacks. This left the entire state with only one hundred and fifty thousand potential voters. Roughly one in six Virginians could even dream of voting. 8 So was the state of the state of Republican democratic virtue.

Amelia County records show that there was an even lower level of enfranchisement and a greater number of enslaved peoples than the state’s average. Only one in nine had the potential to be voters. That pool of voters was further limited by the freehold requirement. The average number of voters in the three elections in this study was only four hundred hundred persons, though two of the elections had fewer than two hundred voters. Enslaved persons outnumbered these potential voters by ten to one. From 1782 to 1785 the white population in Amelia remained fairly stable at around five thousand persons, but the number of enslaved persons increased by three thousand persons in just eight short years. 9 Elites in Amelia County had a stake in this expansion of slavery. William Branch Giles often spoke of expanding slavery. His arguments centered on how an expansion of slavery geographically would help to improve the quality of slaves’ lives. 10

The slave ownership of these individuals is as pervasive as it is disturbing. In 1782 Eggleston held twenty three adult slaves and thirty five children in bondage. In 1790 he held some fifty-eight persons of all ages and in 1798 there were fifty-three. By 1800 that number had increased to sixty nine. An entry from 1782 also includes over 124 head of cattle. Chaffin’s slave ownership was much more modest, if such a term can apply, fluctuating from eleven to eighteen persons between 1782 and 1796. Giles taxes show ownership over a comparatively large amount of enslaved persons. In 1782 he held sixty six adults and fourteen children. In 1796 he held a total of twenty five, and in 1798 he held

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10 Anderson, William Branch Giles, 60.
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twenty one persons in forced labor. These trends can be interpreted in a number of ways.  
First, it must be noted that Joseph Eggleston’s extended family often held enslaved persons and cattle at a number which show that their familial wealth double what Eggleston’s taxes suggest. Giles, though he held progressively fewer slaves, was progressively more involved in national politics and thus deriving revenue from another source. Chaffin, the least wealthy of the four, received his class membership through kinship ties and military service as will be discussed later. Amelia County property records also reveal another important characteristic of that community.

The first census reveals that there were roughly twelve entries of properties with a large number of black inhabitants, but no white family members. This is evidence of absentee planters. Some entries recorded numbers of black residents (slaves) as high as forty-four, which would constitute a large agricultural enterprise. These absentee planters, most likely residing in nearby Richmond, are evidence that Amelia County was a lucrative agricultural area.

The significance of Giles, Chaffin, and Eggleston as slave owners is that it demonstrates conclusively that a shared economic and communal interest existed. These political comrades, all of whom lived in this sleepy southeastern Virginia County, had shared material interest in slavery and tobacco. This interest relied on access to uninhibited markets for tobacco and a political climate sympathetic to the system of slavery that produced the commodity. The Amelia County elite, along with the absentee planters, shared these interests.

In Amelia County, like most of Virginia, one of the primary connections between elites was through the militia. Joshua Chaffin appears most frequently in records containing revolutionary soldiers. On August 28, 1777 Joshua Chaffin was recommended to serve as the Captain of Jenkins Company.  
A year later Chaffin served under Lieutenant Colonel Giles as a Second Lieutenant. Though the record does not contain a first name for Lieutenant Colonel Giles, it is hard to imagine there was no relation to William Branch Giles. The wealthiest family, the Egglestons, appear to have no connection to the revolutionary militias. Eggleston’s membership in the elite seems to have hinged on his wealth, which surpassed that of both Giles and Chaffin.

In the post-revolutionary years the economy entered a downward spiral that threatened the prosperity of Virginia’s elite. In the context of the economic

downturn, caused by the massive debt incurred by the various states during the War of Independence, their shared interest would have been evident in stark relief. This economic downturn, as in all economic downturns, had specific effects in specific localities. Fortuitously for this study Benjamin Henry Latrobe, an English architect, arrived in Virginia in 1796 with the hopes of selling his services to the Virginia elite. He commented on what he found.\(^\text{13}\) His firsthand account demonstrates both the pathways elite membership as well as the economic concerns of the slave holding elite in the late 1790s.

The elite of Amelia County stood out to Latrobe as “a society of English country gentleman.”\(^\text{14}\) Latrobe clearly identified an elite and even oligarchic class in Virginia. Most importantly he noted that they were in turmoil. “Latrobe’s remarks on the desolate state of architecture and housing in this region demonstrated that the bad economic times affected most aspects of elite life.”\(^\text{15}\) While the impact of the downturn was felt everywhere in the new country, Latrobe identified some exceptions. His observation of Mount Vernon and the North Neck revealed “good fences, clear grounds, and extensive cultivation.”\(^\text{16}\) Amelia County was not noted in Latrobe’s detailed negative assessments of agriculture in Virginia despite his lengthy stay in the county. This is significant when compared to the economic growth evident in property records.

Property records show that Amelia County planters experienced economic growth and an increase in the amount of slave labor in the state despite the economic downturn. Such an increase is an indicator that Amelia County was one of the most economically stable and profitable sections of Virginia.\(^\text{17}\) Elites in Amelia County were not simply members of an elite or oligarchic group; they were amongst the very top in Virginia. Amelia County elites could only be compared to the businessmen of Richmond or the Washington’s of Mount Vernon who excelled in the face of the economic downturn.

Latrobe met both Joshua Chaffin and Joseph Eggleston.\(^\text{18}\) Eggleston, identified as an Amelia County planter, was one of the few to be a leader in the House of Delegates who was not directly tied “to the first families of Virginia.”\(^\text{19}\) Though Eggleston was absent from the military records and from the first families, he still stood out remarkably on the top of elite planters both in terms of


\(^{14}\) Ibid., 390.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 391.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 403.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 401.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 397.
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slave ownership and political clout. Chaffin and Giles had a much more personal relationship. After roughly twenty years of political co-operation Joshua Chaffin married William Branch Giles’ sister, Patty Giles, on October 10, 1809. The relationship between kinship connections and political power in Virginia has been thoroughly discussed in the scholarship on the Early Republic. Giles had originally secured his elite status through intermarriage. He had married into the prestigious Tabb family. His wife’s father, John Tabb, was a member of the House of Burgesses, a member of Virginias Committee of Public Safety that helped to wage revolution. Upon his death left a personal estate of over thirty thousand pounds. While wealth could make up for a lack of familial connections, kinship ties’ cultural importance was still significant.

Chaffin’s, Giles’, and Eggleston’s membership in the Amelia County elite manifested itself in their political careers. William Branch Giles entered political office in the United States first in the House of Representatives in 1790. He remained in office, either on the federal or state level, from the age of twenty-eight to sixty-seven. Eggleston had a slightly less illustrious career, holding office from thirty-one to forty-six. Chaffin’s exact date of birth is unknown, but he held office in the Virginia House of Delegates from 1790 to 1800. It is likely that Chaffin was of a similar age to Giles if not older because he served in the Revolutionary Militia and married Giles’ sister. Somewhat of an outsider, Chaffin began with no familial connections apparent in the 1790s and only an insecure membership among Virginia’s elite planter. It is perhaps his participation in the election of 1798 that most adequately demonstrates the fear and desperation of Virginia’s elite classes.

As Latrobe left Virginia for Philadelphia he noted that 1798 was defined by “intense political agitations.” While this may have made some elites’ positions less tenable, ultra-Republicans lost very little leverage. Based on their wealth, familial connections, and place in Virginia’s militia culture they still stood atop this county with its minuscule electorate. The threat at home to elite hegemony coupled with national political concerns to make Amelia County the site of a national political power play in 1798.

National Politics Resign to Virginia

The 1790s were a period of political turmoil in the United States. Republicans in 1797 feared that with the election of John Adams the previous

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21 Anderson, William Branch Giles, 58.
year that the United States and the Republicans themselves were under attack. The polarization of the period was such that “former friends, separated by party barriers, now refused to speak and dared not stop at the same tavern. A federalist who entered a Republican boarding house did not escape without a fight.”

This polarization existed in the context of a decade of Republican failure in the national political sphere. After the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts the Republicans were seemingly on the run from the Federalist state.

The series of Republican resignations from the federal government in the late 1790s is most often interpreted by historians as demonstrative of the republican convictions of Jefferson’s followers. In many narratives, this becomes a selfless struggle for the values of republicanism in the face of the excesses of the Federalist government. Kevin R.C. Gutzman states that Republicans were fearful that the nation was “no longer headed by a Virginian Cincinnatus who had proven himself willing to relinquish power” and that the XYZ Affair had left the country on a “war footing.” A greater fear to American revolutionaries, who had fought despotism and warmongering, could hardly be imagined.

Understanding political events in the 1790s as a series of ideological fights about republicanism ignores issues of economics, particularly agriculture and the slave system that supported it. This section first demonstrates Giles and Thomas Jefferson’s close connection and supports the identification if Giles as an ultra-Republican. Then the section will move to how political maneuverings and rhetoric was used in the defense of the agricultural interest. This process was also part of a moderation of political rhetoric. That is to say rhetoric could be effective at discrediting the Federalists and winning votes if couched in republican and patriotic terms. As Seth Cotlar explains in “The Federalists’ Transatlantic Cultural Offensive of 1798 and the Moderation of American Democratic Discourse,” the Federalists policies “produced more unrepentant and vocal martyrs than it did silenced victims.”

As long as Republicans could prove their patriotism, the series of Federalist policies could be used as rhetorical leverage. Lastly, the section illustrates why Amelia County and Virginia was the logical starting point for the Republican counter-offensive.

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23 Anderson, William Branch Giles, 63-64.
25 Gutzman, Virginia’s American Revolution, 113.
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Cotlar’s observation is overwhelmingly correct, save one distinction. The “unrepentant and vocal” Republicans who led the fight against the Federalists were not “martyrs,” they were political conquerors. The adjectives vocal and unrepentant are perhaps most aptly applied to William Branch Giles. Giles was a longtime ally of Thomas Jefferson and Giles’ politics were almost a carbon copy of Jefferson’s views.27 James Monroe even hoped to elicit Giles support in persuading Jefferson to view him in more sympathetic terms after he temporarily placed himself in the opposition to James Madison’s candidacy in 1808.28 Giles and Jefferson not only worked together, but also put great value on each other’s opinions.

Giles spent a lifetime in public office. Giles’ personal brand of ultra-Republicanism was “profoundly conservative.”29 His brand of Republicanism was not centered on ideological concerns with representation, but rather in keeping with the Virginian tradition of “a localist set of principles, one grounded in a Burkean sense that theirs was essentially a good society.”30 Considering the demographics of Virginia, and Amelia County, Giles most likely favored a ruling landed aristocracy of large planters and slave-owners, with strict freeholds to prevent change in that society.31 This was his probable vision for the nation, and he thought Virginia perfect to lead the way.

In the pursuit of these goals in the political upheaval of the 1790s Giles had no limit. As the political situation nationally became more hostile to Republicans, Giles became more vocal, steadfast, and committed. In 1793 Giles led republican oppositionists in the House of Representatives. The opposition failed to achieve any concrete results but it did earn “Giles immortal fame (perhaps infamy) as the hatchet man for Jefferson and Madison.”32 Giles knew that the resolutions produced by his opposition would be defeated, but he believed it would hold value as an attempt to sway public opinion. Jefferson, in

27 Anderson, William Branch Giles, 54.
30 Gutzman, “Preserving the Patrimony”, 370.
32 Gutzman, “Preserving the Patrimony.” 342.
his personal papers, referenced the tactic as useful. Additionally, in 1798 Giles defended Mathew Lyon, who was in the process of being impeached from the House for using inappropriate language on the floor. Giles built his political career on his reputation for taking difficult and often controversial stands for the Republicans and Jefferson.

In 1794 the House of Representatives was divided into two camps, and Giles had already made himself known as an ardent Republican. The next political fight was over the Jay Treaty. Spurning a closer relationship with France for the English caused an explosion in rhetoric. The Republicans became Jacobins in Federalist rhetoric as the Federalists became Tories and monarchists for the Republicans. The dominant narrative that Republicans, inspired by the democratic French Revolution, fought bitterly for republicanism fits nicely with this rhetoric but it is no more illuminating now than it was in the 1790s. The Federalist onslaught was part of an attempted consolidation of power and the Republicans fought bitterly for their interests.

The opposition of Giles to all Federalist policies, though couched in “republican” terms, distinctly reflects the slave agriculture interests of Amelia County, Virginia. When Giles spoke on the Jay Treaty he discussed it in terms of it being evidence that the Executive was hoping to wage war. The Federalist government, in rhetoric, was a power-hungry aspiring monarchy. Many historians have accepted this rhetoric as fact. However, Giles focused on the “bad effects of French depredations on our farming interest.” For Giles the main problem was the possibility of armed conflict severing Amelia County from the tobacco market in Europe. Given Amelia County’s success in the midst of a national economic downturn, he must have seen this as a last resort to protect the wellbeing of his elite planter neighbors. If Virginia tobacco went without a market, there would be massive overproduction, and a sharp decline in the price. Giles resistance to Federalist policy was shaded not by a belief in republican government, but to protect Amelia County’s economic interests. The rhetoric Republicans used did not address their economic interest manifestly.

The Republicans characterized the 1790’s as a “road to despotism.” They cried out against warmongering and a standing army, which were popular

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37 Ibid., 56.
38 Ibid., 73.
39 Ibid., 120.
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rhetorical punching bags of the American Revolution. In reality, Republicans were losing ground fast. When John Adams penned his signature to the Alien and Sedition Acts the crisis became even more real. July 1798 was a moment of reckoning for Republicans. They had seemingly lost the battle on a national scale. In national defeat, the Republicans found both the strategy and the rhetoric by which to cement their interest and vision on the national scene.

The events leading up to 1798 persuaded many that drastic measures were needed to re-secure power. Two individuals who first identified that drastic means were needed to retain Republican power were Thomas Jefferson and William Branch Giles.40

Political discourse had shifted dramatically “during the war crisis of 1798” and now a “patriarchal conception of ‘patriotism’ became an even more central aspect of public political discourse.”41 The significance of this is that Republicans’ outspoken opposition to Federalist policy was now unpatriotic on the national level. Rhetoric of protest, perceived as insult to the new country, was unpalatable and ineffective on the national scene. It seems only natural for the ultra-Republicans to turn to their allies and constituents in Virginia who remained receptive to their criticisms. Ultra-Republicans, Seth Coltar contends, “faced a choice between either changing their intellectual course or losing their audience.”42 In fact, the Republicans changed both their “intellectual course” and their “audience.” Republicans embraced rhetorical patriotism, moderated their politics, and turned to the state government of Virginia to exert leverage on the federal level.

Giles resigned on October 2, 1798, from the House of Representatives and headed to “Virginia ready to do his share in promoting the cause of the Republican Party and in carrying out the will of Thomas Jefferson.”43 Many Republicans followed suit. In order for this to work Republicans would need to secure victory in the turbulent, drunken, and violent world of elections in the Early Republic. In this pursuit, Virginia had a number of structural, social, and cultural factors to facilitate Republican reorganization.

Amelia County in 1798 contained the structural and social factors that made Virginia the logical starting place for the Republican fight back. The structural features of Virginia that made it an effective location for reorganization were the state’s method of enfranchisement and the power held by the House of Delegates. There also existed a “deferential political culture” which could bolster

40 Ibid., 113.
41 Coltar, in Beyond the Founders. 294-295.
42 Ibid., 295.
43 Anderson, William Branch Giles, 63.
the Republicans chances in elections. More importantly, a belief in a “deferential political culture” legitimated the move to Virginia in so far as this “good” state could model politics for the rest of the country. Lastly, Giles had already demonstrated in 1793 his fondness of using symbolic actions to appeal to the public at large, and Jefferson’s writings suggest he felt similarly.

The first issue of importance is Virginia’s unique history with voting requirements. Virginia had “relatively high colonial enfranchisement.” The turmoil of the revolution and the struggle for power between the interests that would become the Republican and Federalist parties severely restricted enfranchisement. Virginia would be one of a minority of states that began “clinging to a freeholder franchise as a shield against change.” This effectively made the majority of voters in Virginia hail from the same group of slave-owning planter elites as the ultra-Republicans themselves.

The constitution of Virginia and the structure of the state’s assembly played an even more dramatic role in the utility of using Virginia as the next battleground. In the colonial period Virginia’s Privy Council was selected by the legislature. Senators continued to be elected in this fashion after the writing of the Constitution and this combined with the strict freehold and “deferential political culture” to increase the potential and hopes for the enfranchised aristocracy’s hegemony in Virginian politics to extend to the national level.

“Deferential political culture,” as explained by Andrew Robertson, is defined by the electorate deferring to elites because of their standing in the community and elite status. Part of this “deferential political culture” was an importance placed upon kinship. In elections “bloodlines might be as important of a topic of public discussion as the pedigree of a racehorse.” These blood connections Chaffin and Giles had in excess. This view is altogether correct in that elites dominated the political process, but aspects of this analysis need to be rethought.

Part of the innate deference is no doubt tied to the elites’ historical communal strength and, by 1798, the strength of the Republican Party. This is evident because in this period there were increasing numbers of middling Americans “who were full participants in economic and social life but who lacked political rights.” Possible oppositionists to elite rule were

45 Chute, The First Liberty, 282.
47 Robertson, in Beyond the Founders. 60.
48 Keyssar, The Right to Vote, 35.
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disenfranchised. Those who were enfranchised often shared many of the same interests as their political representatives. A “deferential political culture” is only significant if people are voting against their interests. The strict freehold requirement makes this unlikely. More so, if elites held a belief in a Virginian “deferential political culture” they also believed this should apply nationally. That is to say that “deferential political culture” was the model of democracy that Amelia County ultra-Republicans favored; they felt it could apply on a national level. The nation, in a good democracy, would defer to their elite protectors in Virginia. In implementing this strategy “Virginia would not be threatening violence, but would be attempting to persuade” the public at large.\(^49\) While the Republicans might have viewed themselves as having power through a secure elite class of eligible voters, the initial move of emphasis from the national scale to the locality of Virginia was defined by contestation.

Contestation occurred because this “deferential political culture” played out in the theater of elections. In Virginia the pressures of the voice vote were used to sway voters.\(^50\) These voters were not only enticed with food and drink, but were also assaulted with elite rhetoric. In Virginia politicians expounded the idea that representatives should represent the community. In this case, the community was one of large planters. “In the end, polling ritual was designed to exert coercion toward local consensus and to favor the restoration of the status quo once the polling days were over.”\(^51\)

The scholarship on this political theater is extensive, but one major conclusion is rarely made. Elections were primarily a means to bring members of the elite to political power. Alan Taylor’s article on political culture in New York in the 1790s, while not directly applicable, does speak to electioneering practices outside of the voice vote. The article centers on “the practices of ‘making interest.’” This was a practice that “existed far beyond rural New York to most of the American countryside” before 1800.\(^52\) “Making interest” constituted rallying voters around a prominent member of the community. Members of this interest paid people to mobilize voters and also ensured that they voted for the “right” candidate. This was often done with providing an incentive in free alcohol. The process was only quasi-legal, but it was altogether common.\(^53\) The process was

\(^{49}\) Gutzman, *Virginia’s American Revolution*, 126.

\(^{50}\) Robertson, in *Beyond the Founders*. 60.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 63.


\(^{53}\) Ibid., 1389.
entirely coercive and while “interests, rather than parties were the essential components of New York politics prior to 1800,” in Amelia County the “interest” was the Republican Party.

In sum, three conditions existed that made Virginia a logical starting point for a political fight back against the Federalists. First, the national political landscape was unwelcoming to Republicans, making state government a more sympathetic site for political struggle. Secondly, Virginia before the 1790’s had strong legislative bodies, a sympathetic and elite electorate, and a “deferential political culture” that appeared to contain the potential for creating a Republican stronghold from which to build a national political offensive in the face of the Federalist backlash. Third, ultra-Republicans perceived Virginia as being the finest expression of government in the United States, giving the state a symbolic value they hoped would convince the country more broadly of their platform. Thus Virginia was viewed as capable of leading the way for other states to join in the counter offensive against the Federalists.

**Election Days**

It was against this backdrop that the elections of 1798 took place. Giles, having tendered his resignation, sought his next political office in the Virginia House of Delegates in order to harness the power of the body for the Republican’s national offensive. What transpired was a series of elections in which Giles placed his allies in every seat of importance from Amelia County. Alexander Jones, an individual seldom found in the historical record with no discernible party affiliation, was the victim. In themselves, these events may just signify hotly contested elections and elite manipulation of results. However, in the context of the heated politics of resignations, condemnations, and an economic downturn they clearly represent an effort to protect elite Republican’s and slaveholders’ interests and political power.

The timeline for this great political office swap of 1798 in Amelia County is somewhat murky. The first election that took place in April of 1798 was the most suspect. Eggleston and Chaffin ran for reelection to their respective seats in the spring. Joseph Eggleston won one of two seats from Amelia County outright. He carried forty six percent of the votes at their first counting. Joshua Chaffin lost the second seat to Alexander Jones by 12 votes. Joshua Chaffin petitioned the House of Delegates on the grounds that sixty-one voters had not been eligible to vote. He won.

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54 Ibid., 1396.
55 *A New Nation Votes: American Election returns 1787-1825.*
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In the petition the reasons for voters being labeled ineligible were diverse. Some voters were said to have been too young or to not have residence “recorded long enough to entitle” them to vote. Others were “not a freeholder.” Some had “no land on the record in Amelia.” Chaffin signed the document, May 4th 1798.56

It took only one day to determine that his election was nullified. The House of Delegates noted on the Jones petition that “James Braddock made oath before me that he delivered Alexander Jones’ lady at his dwelling house, a true copy of the notice on the 5th of May.”57 It is unclear what kind of investigation took place, but it took only twenty-four hours. The possibility of due diligence taking place in such a short period of time is highly suspect. The level of research required to verify the sixty-one varying charges against voters was beyond the scope of this paper’s inquiry, making it hard to imagine that the House of Delegates completed a comprehensive investigation. It is more likely that it was Chaffin’s elite credentials that won him the election.

On December 24th, Jones petitioned the House of Delegates. Suffrage requirements were again the focus. This time, Jones accused Joshua Chaffin himself of not being a freeholder. This attempt was futile. Jones asserted that he had pored over every record available and discovered that Chaffin had no land that entitled him to the freehold. Chaffin, said Jones, only held only “one third part of fifty five acres of land with a mill, jointly held by Chaffin, Truly and Robertson.”58 The House of Delegates left no response in the historical record. Chaffin kept the seat.

Based on the demographic analysis of Amelia County and the political culture of Virginia one can draw a number of conclusions. First and most likely, it is possible that Jones initially out-mobilized Chaffin, Eggleston, Giles, and the Republican forces in the process of voting. Secondly, it is likely that the House of Delegates, gearing up for what was the most important Republican struggle in the history of the nation at that time, sought to keep Giles and his supporters in power. Republicans in the House of Delegates were already waging a political

war against the national government that some historians have even categorized as a road to nullification and succession. Most importantly, the Amelia County tobacco market was seemingly on the verge of drying up much like the economy of the state and country at large. Lastly, Giles was intimately involved in the process. His influence and prestige most likely influenced results directly or indirectly.

The certainty the Giles had an influence over the House of Delegates in this decision is evident in that he had secured a seat in that very body only nine days before Jones filed his petition. Giles in a special election, called because of Eggleston’s ascendance to Giles’ old seat in the House of Representatives, beat Edward Ward by a margin of almost two to one on December 15th, 1798, two months after his resignation from the House of Representatives and one month after Chaffin’s petition.

The special election that is the hardest to attach to a chronology was the 1798 House of Representatives Special Election for District 9. This was the previously mentioned electoral contest for Giles old seat in the House. Joseph Eggleston beat Alexander Jones by a vote of two hundred and ten to one hundred and thirty three. There was no petition. The strength of Amelia County for Giles’ compatriots is evident in that Amelia voted at a rate of almost four to one for Eggleston.\(^{59}\) The election results were published in November.

This swap preserved Giles’ Republican seat in the House through Eggleston’s election as a Republican one. The elections also allowed Giles to continue his outspoken political career locally. These developments caused alarm in the Federalist camp. George Washington was drawn into the conflict by fears of Republican meddling. Washington stated that “the endeavors of a certain party among us to disquiet the public mind with unfounded alarms; to arraign every act of the administration; to set the people at variance with the government; and to embarrass all its measures.”\(^{60}\) The most prominent men in Virginia were urged to come forward and aid their respective parties in all electoral contests in the state, “Washington rode ten miles to cast his vote. Riots took place in Richmond.”\(^{61}\) The ultra-Republicans made massive gains, even if it had to be solidified by legislative action after Election Day was over.

**Conclusion**

This is the type of historical inquiry that makes many historians uncomfortable. The unknown is often frustrating. We may never know what exactly happened in Amelia County in 1798. What we do know is that the events

\(^{59}\) A New Nation Votes: American Election returns 1787-1825.

\(^{60}\) Anderson, William Branch Giles, 71.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 72.
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were part of the road to the “Revolution of 1800.” When Jefferson ascended to the presidency in March of 1801, it was only after ten years of factional struggle. He and his Republican comrades had triumphed over the heavy handed Federalist who had secured and remade the republic in their own image despite continued rhetorical assault. Ultra-Republicans successfully used their position to wage legislative campaigns on the state level, and the Republicans secured national political power only two years after the events in Amelia County. With the success of Eggleston swapping seats with Giles, the now Republican state was able to support and direct work on the national level. Lastly, the Republicans were able to clear Virginia of all opposition and secure Jefferson’s presidency.

From his new position Giles was able to sponsor the Virginia Resolutions that were written by Thomas Jefferson.62 The Virginia Resolutions were a polemical piece that condemned the Alien and Sedition Acts and would have been impossible to achieve through his previous position in national government. Additionally, through these resolutions and his ultra-Republican political connections he was able to instruct Virginia senators to “procure a reduction in the Army,”63 In this way, he was able to defend his shared interests with the other Amelia County planters by endorsing symbolic resolutions while dictating the moves of Republicans in the federal government.

The victory was decisive and long lasting. “Opposition to Federalism had yielded a new Virginia position, and the Virginia Federalist party would soon melt away, resulting in the ‘natural’ elite consensus” that so many of Virginia’s elite craved.64 In essence, the ultra-Republicans had homogenized political belief through the exclusion of oppositionists. It appears that foul play again surrounded the elections of 1799. Which party was at fault is unclear. The Alexandria Times reported that people were spreading rumors throughout the countryside that elections were not to take place.65 It is obvious that extra electoral means were still in use to help to achieve results. By the end of these elections Amelia County fulfilled their ultra-Republican task. The county cast all their votes for Republican electors.66 In the wake of total victory, Giles expected the drastic steps to continue.

62 Gutzman, “Preserving the Patrimony,” 343.
63 Anderson, William Branch Giles, 73.
64 Gutzman, Virginia’s American Revolution, 135.
66 Anderson, 75.
Ultra-Republicans expected a “general purgation of office” after Jefferson’s inauguration. Giles made this clear in his letter of congratulations to Thomas Jefferson. He advocated for “the removal of all (of the Federalist governments) officers indiscriminately.” Giles also recommended a friend to office. Giles describes William Davis Meade as a “gentleman who has been firm and uniform in his principles in the worst of times, of amiable and delicate mind and manners, and who is universally respected by his acquaintances. He is connected to the sister of the present marshal… a lady universally respected.” Giles goes on to state that Meade remained steadfast in the struggle for Jefferson’s election, in this “most critical period.” This piece of correspondence displays the continuity in the importance of kinship relations and how Giles and his ultra-Republican counterparts viewed the recent past as a period of political agitation and eventual victory.

Jefferson wrote to Giles on the 26th of December 1825 a letter asserting that agricultural interests were still central to Republican political maneuverings. This is the letter that the opening quotation is drawn inaccurately from. In the letter Jefferson laments that through the executive the Federalist had taken over all commercial interests. They “call it regulation to take the earnings of” agricultural producers who were “the most depressed and put them in the pockets of the other, the most flourishing of all.” The “most flourishing of all” are the “banking institutions” and the “manufactures” who, according to Jefferson, are stealing from the coffers of planters. Historians of the ante-bellum United States will find these discourses striking similar to the grievances of southern slave states in the run up to the Civil War. It is these planters that were many of ultra-Republicans and the majority of their enfranchised supporters. Jefferson also states that those with “incorrect views of government” continue to “vote together” and attempt to “out-number the sound parts.” Perhaps he was thinking drastic measures were again necessary. Although he states that such steps are only a last resort, and only should be considered if national politics continue on the same trajectory, he ends his correspondence by stating “are we then to stand to our arms…?”

Making sense of events with little descriptive primary source evidence is exceedingly difficult, but not without its benefits. The primary significance of

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67 Gutzman, *Virginia’s American Revolution*, 139.
69 Ibid., 78.
70 Ibid., 77.
71 Jefferson Papers, From Thomas Jefferson to William Branch Giles, 26 December 1825.
72 Ibid.
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this study of Amelia County’s ultra-Republicans is that it illustrates that ultra-Republicans had an elite conception of democracy. It is not true that in 1800 “reformers” defeated “the money power of the nation, monocrats, and aristocrats” as Dice Robins Anderson believed in 1914. The ultra-Republicans who fought most viciously for Republican power were the most moneyed of the slaveholding Amelia County elite.

Secondly, this study begs scholars of the period to rethink the trajectory of party formation and its importance. Alexander Keyssar who wrote one of the most important texts in the historiography of voting rights, The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States downplays the importance of political parties before 1820. If nothing else the coordination on both a state and national level through the Republican Party apparatus brings this interpretation into question.

All histories that focus on a limited number of individuals and emphasize a small geographic scope are open to criticisms centering on applicability to the national, multi-national, and global. This paper makes no pretenses that it should apply to all Republicans or slaveholders broadly. However, this study does suggest that ultra-Republicans constituted a powerful faction with the Republican Party, had significant influence over prominent members such as Thomas Jefferson, and occupied a place in the party’s leadership. Though ultra-Republicans may not have been the majority of Republicans, they were at least on the cutting edge of party politics and electoral manipulation.

Ultra-Republicans were the foot soldiers in the “Revolution of 1800.” The ultra-Republicans showed that their interest was in political outcomes, not in defining the contours of America democracy. The ultra-Republicans pursued their economic interest and conservatized their rhetoric. In the political process of the 1790’s, of which these elections in Amelia County were but a small feature, “America’s more moderate reaction came to be called democracy.”73 For this, in part, we can thank Amelia County’s elite and business minded ultra-Republicans.

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73 Coltar, in Beyond the Founders. 295.
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