

**CHESAPEAKE PATTERN AND POLE-STAR: WILLIAM FITZHUGH IN HIS
PLANTATION WORLD, 1676-1701**

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THANKS to an admiring son or grandson who had his progenitor's letters copied into a bound ledger, we know today more about William Fitzhugh than perhaps about any other seventeenth-century American planter. The letters lead to Virginia colony and county records (which include letters to the Commission of the Peace, speeches in the House of Burgesses, entries in litigation, etc.), which fill in some of the finer lines of colors of the epistolary self-portrait. It is possible now to present a faithful, and I think lively, picture of an individual planter and, what may be equally interesting, of the world in which he lived.

Fitzhugh's letters have been referred to in print for more than a century, and in the 1890's a badly garbled version of most of them, with little explanatory addenda, was published in a historical journal, copies of which are now hard to come by.¹ Since then they have been used in historical studies several times, notably by Louis B. Wright, Howard Mumford Jones, and Harvey Wish.² Only recently, however, with the bringing to light of the early copy, in the possession of a distinguished Philadelphia physician (Dr. Thomas Fitz-Hugh) has it been possible to assess the full significance of the letters and their contents accurately and comprehensively.

The story of William Fitzhugh is, from one point of view, the traditional American success story—Log-Cabin-to-White-House, Immigrant-Boy-to-Millionaire. It is also the story of the making of a Southern aristocrat, or of the transplanted Englishman, or of the combination of mercantile, agricultural, and professional abilities and incentives which went into the making of individual success in the New World. But it is

¹ The first five volumes of the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 1893-1897.

² Respectively in *The first gentlemen of Virginia*, San Marino, Calif., 1940; *The literature of Virginia in the seventeenth Century*, *Mem. Amer. Acad. Arts and Sciences* 19 (2), 1946; and *Society and thought in early America*, New York, 1950.

above all the story of one man in the shaping of a culture.

In 1670, about the date of nineteen-year-old William Fitzhugh's arrival in America, the Chesapeake civilization had existed for more than two full generations. Perhaps through family relationships in his native Bedford, Fitzhugh appears on the records first in a community which contained several Bedfordshire gentlemen—Westmoreland county in the Northern Neck of Virginia. His own family, mayors and aldermen of the city of Bedford and lesser county gentry from the region about that county seat, were influential enough in a modest way to have moved emigrant fellow-countians in his behalf, though later Fitzhugh was to insist that he had always struggled alone in the New World and had come to a moderate success, with God's help, through his own "mean endeavours."³

He came into a rapidly expanding and still frontier world such as America was to possess within its borders until the end of the nineteenth century. The great difference between his frontier and the later (intra-continental) ones was the relative ease of communication with the center of civilization, London. For London ships could and did anchor off his own wharves in front of his dwelling house on the Potomac, and ship-masters brought the latest news, books, clothing, and other comforts.

But this last is anticipating a little. Though Fitzhugh may have brought little or no property with him, he did bring a legal education which was to stand him in good stead. In the early 1670's he appears in several of the Northern Neck county records, particularly in Westmoreland, as a practicing attorney. Then he married Sarah Tucker, the very young (she was between eleven and thirteen) daughter of a wealthy widow who was his client. Through his wife he was related to half the more prosperous families of Westmoreland and several counties across the Potomac in

³ To William Fitzhugh, May 18, 1685.

PREV Maryland. By 1676 he was settled in neighboring Stafford, a real frontier county stretching up the Potomac beyond the present Alexandria and Washington, sparsely populated, and all during his lifetime subject to Indian raids, alarms, and murders. Here he spent the rest of his relatively short life (he died at fifty) except for one possible trip to England in 1699-1700, seasonal excursions to Jamestown for the meeting of the General Assembly and the transaction of legal business, and rounds of the neighboring county courts as practicing attorney. His letters indicate his steady rise economically, politically, and professionally. They reveal also a sense of proportion, an ideal of moderation, a genuine piety which he kept always before him. They show that the constant threat of the barbaric Indians and the wild loneliness of vast stretches of virgin forest could and did exist side by side with active and gracious, even sophisticated, social life; with busy free enterprises in both manufacturing and agriculture; with English common law administered calmly and judicially; with an almost serene practicing philosophical idealism rooted in the concept of the Horatian, or middle way.

Fitzhugh's friends, colleagues, and clients among his correspondents included large-scale planters like Robert Beverley and Ralph Wormeley of Middlesex; New England-born Isaac Allerton of Westmoreland, son and grandson of two of the more eminent *Mayflower* Pilgrims; and Thomas Mathews, the author of a history of Bacon's Rebellion. In his own county lived the two George Masons. In Jamestown his correspondents include two or three colonial governors, the attorney-general, fellow lawyers, and members of the Council and House of Burgesses. He also corresponded with his factors and other merchants in London and Bristol, with several dozen ship captains, with officials and friends in Maryland, and after 1684, with his Fitzhugh relatives in England.

Like many another Englishman abroad, Fitzhugh for many years remained homesick. Again and again he offered his Virginia plantation for sale through his London friends so that he might buy a comparable estate in the mother country. In April, 1686, when he was thirty-five, he sent a description of his property to his brother-in-law, Dr. Ralph Smith (then on business in London) for possible use in negotiating its sale or exchange. Considering that the owner was at the time a prosperous man, but by no means the

wealthiest man of his region, one may add to or deduct from the picture to visualize almost any Virginia or Maryland plantation of the period. A thousand-acre tract seven-tenths wooded and the remainder fertile arable land. Three units or "quarters" for the Negroes equipped with all necessary houses, fences, and livestock. A thirteen-room main dwelling containing four large rooms hung with tapestries, nine in all well furnished. This and other smaller "dependent" houses equipped with good brick chimneys. Four good cellars, the deep freezes of the age. A dairy, a dovecote, a stable, a barn, a henhouse, a kitchen, all rather new. Nearby an orchard of 2,500 apple trees enclosed entirely with a locust fence. A fenced one-hundred-foot-square garden, and a great "palisadoed" (perhaps as protection against the Indians) yard enclosing most of the dependencies. Also cattle, hogs, sheep, horses, and household servants. About a mile and a half distant a grist-mill which more than paid its own way. Two storehouses of food and textiles and farm equipment enough to last for two or three years.

There were twenty-nine Negroes in all. What he does not enumerate are the white indentured servants, many of them skilled artisans, and perhaps the bluecoat schoolboy who could keep accounts. When Fitzhugh died he had six men and one old woman in this status. One of the men was a young cousin of his own, another a carpenter, another a glazier, and another, a "signature" witness to his will, perhaps the former student of Christ's Hospital.⁴

Despite this early prosperity, Fitzhugh was sometimes uneasy and restless. As he explained to his friend Nicholas Hayward of London (January 30, 1686/7):

Our estates here depend altogether upon Contingencies, & to prepare against that, causes me to exceed my Inclinations in worldly affairs, & Society that is good & ingenious is very scarce, & seldom to be come upon except in books. Good Education of Children is almost impossible, & better be never born than ill bred, but that which bears the greatest weight with me, for I now look upon my self to be in my declining age, is the want of spirituall help & comforts, of which this fertile Country in every thing else, is barren and unfruitfull

Contingencies kept him at worldly affairs all his life, and steadily he added to the worldly possessions which were his at this time. Charged

⁴ Letter to John Cooper, his London factor, August 20, 1690.

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PREV against his tobacco credits with Bristol and Liverpool and London merchants were necessities of life and luxuries of gracious living. For plantation operation he ordered cart wheels, harness, saddles, two stills, a pewter cistern, cider "racks," and smaller things such as stone jugs and nails. For the great house he wanted tapestries, leather hangings, beds and bed furniture, curtains and valences, matching chairs, leather and Turkey carpets, dress boxes, diamond-shaped panes for his windows, iron and brass andirons, iron backs for chimneys, an escritoire, pictures frames, and a large looking-glass. Of gastronomic and potable comforts he particularly wanted spice, fruit, sugar, Gloucestershire cheese, and cases of claret. For his wife and himself he ordered clothing of many kinds, including in his last years a black crepe gown and petticoat and pair of gallooned shoes for her and a calico quilted morning gown, winter and summer suits, and two Carolina hats for him. After many attempts he at last secured a light carriage which he called a *callash*, and later a larger coach.

As he grew more prosperous and more reconciled to living out his life in the colony, Fitzhugh ordered greater and greater quantities of silver plate (several pieces of which exist today in the hands of his descendants). As he observed, the silver would have a ready cash value and would be a secure and easily-divided legacy to his several sons. It also made the proper impression upon distinguished guests at his table; Lieutenant-Governor Nicholson, Fitzhugh wrote, had "first handsell'd" one recent silver importation. From 1687 to his last extant letters of 1698 he ordered candlesticks, snuffers, salt cellars, "basons," forks, (silver hafted) knives, castors, various sizes of spoons, porringers, plates, sugar bowls, ladles, etc., all to be engraved with his arms or crest, though in the last years he had a servant who could do the engraving.

Thus, William Fitzhugh provided against the turns of the fickle wheel of Fortune and at the same time made himself more and more comfortable. As for religion, he did his best to secure a *sober* (perhaps in the sense of not quarrelsome—his neighbor Parson Waugh was anything but sober in this sense) and *learned* minister for his parish. For education, he sent his two older sons (the others were still quite young at the time of his death) to a French Huguenot clergyman in a nearby parish. So thoroughly were they saturated in Gallic atmosphere that he informed

the Bristol merchant to whom he was sending the younger, eleven-and-a-half-year-old Henry (for British further schooling), that the boy could read and write only French and Latin. Over the years he ordered Latin and French textbooks for his children, and for himself with an eye to his children's future reading scientific works by Boyle, Bacon, and Burnet, and "Histories" of many kinds, including Rushworth and Acosta, and many religious works.

NEXT The ordinary concomitants of the lighter side of life, drinking and feasting, suited neither his physical nor his philosophical constitution. He mentions Bacchanalian revels at Jamestown more than once, and drinking heavily with ship captains just before their departure, but he always speaks regretfully of the necessity of indulging. Near the end of his life, he wrote to a Virginian friend and brother barrister, Henry Hartwell, then (July 21, 1698) suffering from the gout in London:

I never much frequented Bacchus Orgyes, & always avoided Adoration of Ceres shrine, & never was one of Venus Votarys: To speak plainly to you, I never courted unlawfull pleasures with women, avoided hard drinking as much as lay in my power, & always avoided feasting & consequently the surfeits occasioned thereby, tell your Doctor this, & he will conclude I am not near being his patient yet.

But Fitzhugh clearly did enjoy in moderation the lighter side of social life. Guests were always welcome, for the relatively lonely life of the frontier planter was brightened by their presence. A travel account kept by a Frenchman named Durand in 1686-1687 gives an engaging picture of life at Fitzhugh's home estate, Bedford, near the Christmas season. Durand had already visited Fitzhugh's friend and correspondent Ralph Wormeley at Rosegill in Middlesex County, where he had been so warmly wined and dined that in holiday spirit he and some other gentlemen decided to continue the frolic by riding on to another abode of open-handed hospitality.

so we rode twenty strong to Colonel Fichous' but he has such a large establishment that he did not mind. We were all of us provided with beds, one for two men. He treated us royally, there was good wine & all kinds of beverages, so there was a great deal of carousing. He had sent for three fiddlers, a jester, a tight-rope dancer, an acrobat who tumbled around, & they gave us all the entertainment one could wish for. It was very cold, yet no one ever thinks of going near the fire, for they never put less than a cartload of wood in the fireplace & the whole room is kept warm. . . .

The next day, after they had caroused until after noon, we decided to cross this river. The Colonel had a quantity of wine & one of his punch-bowls brought to the shore; he lent us his boat. . . .⁵

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The accommodations for twenty guests, the flowing bowl, and the gleaming silver had been earned by hard work and clever management in several directions. Fitzhugh planted both Oronoco and Sweet-Scented tobacco and moved on to newly acquired fields as his topsoil became less fertile. He shipped for himself and his neighbors tobacco of all grades and kinds, experimenting with buyers and markets. He also exported black walnut plank, pipe staves, and wheat, with a little Virginia cider. The largest number of letters he wrote were to the merchants who handled his shipments and the sea captains who carried them. To grow the tobacco, he operated the first plantation in Stafford to use Negro slave labor on a large scale, as the county tax records indicate. About him, certainly at the beginning of his years in Stafford, were many smaller farmers who used white indentured servants and few if any Negroes.

Tobacco led Fitzhugh and other large-scale planters into commission-merchant and storekeeping work, as his proposals to English firms suggest. His letters are full of schemes of partnerships with English merchants, ship captains, and friends. Since most of the tobacco buying at this period was intrusted to the ship captains themselves, the merchants frequently felt the need for agents in the colonies. In his double capacity as lawyer and planter Fitzhugh acted for several of them. At the end of his life he was himself part owner of a tobacco ship. And he was always enthusiastic about the port-towns for tobacco shipment and trade proposed by the colonial administration but successfully blocked by the British merchants, who wanted no middlemen to absorb their profits. Fitzhugh and his planter-neighbors bought lots themselves in the laid-out town sites and tried to get various English tradesmen to settle upon them. There is every evidence that the Southern colonial planter of this period, at least, held no feeling that trade was socially demeaning. Quite the contrary.

As a businessman, Fitzhugh was most active in land purchase and sale. All the Northern Neck county records include listings of his activities. He died possessed of some 54,000 acres in several

⁵ Chinard Gilbert, ed. and transl., *A Huguenot exile in Virginia . . .*, 158-159, New York, Press of the Pioneers, 1934.

tracts, the largest of which, Ravensworth, opposite what is now Washington, D. C., has just recently become a gigantic residential subdivision. He once offered the Northern Neck Proprietary agent a goodly sum for the whole parish in which he lived, and at another time offered to buy a 100,000-acre tract. Later, when he himself was Proprietary agent for Lord Halifax, he not only firmly secured for himself all the tracts he had previously bought with somewhat doubtful titles but also confirmed to certain fellow-planters like Richard Lee enormous tracts of undeveloped land which they held for speculation. Dr. Douglas S. Freeman gives Fitzhugh the credit, or the blame, for doing much to encourage, if not to inaugurate, the speculation-in-lands policy which accompanied our frontier throughout its history. Fitzhugh's confirmations of lands, says Dr. Freeman, were full of evil potentialities.⁶

Fitzhugh's fame in the Virginia colony apparently first came as a learned lawyer. In his very earliest letters he is advising his clients and brother barristers on obscure technical points. His forte seems to have been in citing historical precedent. All through his life he appeared in celebrated Virginia cases as an expert on precedent, and as a member of the House of Burgesses was clearly the authority on legal history. In his final session in the General Assembly he was chairman of the Committee for the Revisal of the Laws. In commenting upon one vulnerable decision of a judge, he said:

By this you may see what precipitate judgment may be given of any Statute, without understanding the common Law, before the making thereof, which is the only guide, & which is only to be learn'd out of antient Authors, (for out of the old fields must come the new Corn) contrary to the opinion of the generality of our Judges & practisers of the Law here. [To Richard Lee, May 15, 1679.]

The extant Fitzhugh speeches in the General Assembly as well as his letters afford evidence of his awareness of the difference in function and situation of colonial and British parliaments and of the potential significance of this difference. He also pointed out to his fellow Burgesses that the colonial legislature could never work effectively as long as the home government was so dilatory or indifferent in observing and remedying patent injustices.

⁶ *George Washington* 1: 488, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948.

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But time and space are short, and it will not be possible even to glance briefly at the details of his work as lawyer, farmer, chairman of the County Commission of the Peace, lieutenant-colonel of militia, provider of supplies for a frontier garrison, staunch supporter of the Stuarts, nor even to go more into his moral, philosophical, and religious principles and practice than has already been done.

But even an outline portrait of the man against his world is disproportionate unless one considers his ability as a writer and his urge to write. Fitzhugh, perhaps like many another of his countrymen, might in another age or clime have been poet or novelist or essayist. For he loved written expression for its form's sake as well as its idea's sake. Always conscious of style, he mentions his own inferiority in this regard to Nicholas Hayward over and over again, e.g. (April 22, 1686): "I must confess I want abilities, to polish & adorn my expressions with that elegance & sweetness of Stile your two letters I this year receiv'd are full freighted with. . . ." Yet he was too modest, for at his best he used consciously picturesque idiom and image. For example:

Necessity as 'tis the Mother of Invention, so it is the Nurse of Industry. . . . [To Captain Thomas Mathews, August 24, 1681.]

but to meet with a Concatenation of an Indulgent Husband, an obliging nature, and generous temper in one person is very rare. . . . [To Thomas Harris, January 30, 1686/7.]

& as certain you are not Yorkshire enough, to set the Course of your advice by the Compass of your Interest. [To Richard Lee, January 18, 1687/8.]

Yet would my Lord Fairfax there, take his turn in Shuffling & Dealing the Cards & his Lordship with the rest see that we are not cheated in our game, I question not but we should gain the Sett, tho' the game is so far plaid. . . . [To Roger Jones, May 11, 1697.]

Regarding the writing of letters, he observed to his friend Hayward in London:

[I]do fully agree with you in your Philosophical sentiments of y^e. Simpaty of absent friends, as you in Laconick expression aptly deliver in your last, for which reason the first Invention of letters deserves

eternal Commendations, by whose means I have not only the opportunity, of the first acquaintance with so worthy & judicious a friend, but a continued Communication & Society, which I as really enjoy, whilst I am reading your most endearing letters, or answering them, as if happily present with you[.] [To Nicholas Hayward, January 30, 1686/7.]

Later Fitzhugh planned a long history of Virginia which might induce more colonists hither, and he actually did write a short history of the colony as a preface to an edition he prepared of the Virginia laws. Much of his time was spent pen in hand, but clearly he would have preferred more leisure from other active concerns for this work at his desk.

Fitzhugh's death at fifty found him surrounded with most of the luxuries possible to a transplanted Englishman in the New World, a respected place in government and society, a congenial wife and five sons who would carry his name and blood in distinguished examples into later generations. Without exception, the second generation married into the other great families of the Chesapeake community in Virginia and Maryland. Their descendants with *Fitzhugh* as Christian name or as surname have been distinguished from the Revolution to our own time. Perhaps no one of them has been at the same time more of a pattern and a pole-star—for he is both type and leader—than this modest, kindly man who showed how the middle-class Englishman might realize himself in the American Dream and remain a follower of Horatian idealism and Christian piety. Fitzhugh had been a hard-pushing, driving farmer and sharp businessman, as we have seen, but the enduring impression of the man is in his philosophy of living. Perhaps the statement of it he gave his mother just three years before his death is a fair final impression. It has in it, by the way, a beautiful serenity I do not find among the Puritans.

Before I was ten years old as I am sure you very well remember, I look'd upon this life here as but going to an Inn, no permanent being[.] by God's [grace] I continue the same . . . good thoughts & notions still. therefore am always prepared for my certain Dissolution, w.^{ch} I ca'nt be perswaded to prolong a wish. [To Mary Fitzhugh, June 30, 1698.]



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