

Was the
Liberty Hall Academy
Culturally Isolated

Marc Ottinger
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Dr. McDaniel

The purpose of the Liberty Hall Academy archaeological excavations is to test five hypotheses about the Scotch-Irish who resided in the area during the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century. One of the hypotheses being tested is that the school, being located near the frontier at this time, was culturally isolated. The perspective of being culturally isolated can be examined by looking at commercialism and the trade routes running out of the valley. This should be examined because commercialism is one of the key contributions to the European configuration of early American society and the dominant force in the creation of a Europeanized landscape.¹ Commercialism can be defined as a set of attitudes or a way of viewing the external world. Here we see that exchanges between men can be interpreted from a utilitarian, exploitive perspective and surplus items from productive enterprises are regarded as potential sources of trade and profit within a money-based economic system.² So, how and where were the economic linkages and exchanges made with the external or outside world, that is the world east of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and what consequences did they have for the distinctiveness of frontier life. This point is to be looked at because people have presented a general impression of the early Shenandoah Valley as a backcountry removed from the Tidewater during the 1760s through the 1820s. This image was also held by many colonial officials who regarded the interior areas as remote from the coast, as politically un consequential, though

strategically significant, and who equated their backwardness with the settlement of people of different origins and background from their own.³ It seems necessary not only to correct such impressions but also, to dispel the notion of indifferenced western frontiers displaying few regional differences in their occupance patterns.

The increasing commercialization of the Shenandoah Valley (Appendix I) in the last quarter of the eighteenth century was evident in the increasing specialization and intensification of primary production. Also marking this increase in commercialization was the diversification of the manufacturing and trading activities. The success seen in the region's agricultural enterprises was in part the result of its diversification, which provided farmers with a relatively wide range of production options, which in turn gave the farmer considerable flexibility to respond to changes in external demand. At the same time, other processes were in operation which contributed to a more broadly based economy, but also an economy which was more tightly organized. Internal diversification gained momentum by the expansion of Valley's service, craft, and manufacturing activities, which affects both the conduct and content of local trade and trade outside the Valley. In general trade growth was encouraged by the doubling of the Valley population during the last quarter of the century. This population growth created more producers of primary and secondary goods for sale and a larger market for

goods and services.⁴

Now, in order to achieve the transition from pioneer economy to a postpioneer economy of a more balanced and integrated nature able to export commodities two important structural changes were necessary. First a better transportation network had to be constructed to improve accessibility within the Valley and to the eastern Virginia markets. Second, a system of town had to emerge providing order for both organization of services within the Valley and the conduct of external trade.⁵

So, in the absence of any easily navigatable streams, the valley of the James River produces less meandering and entrenched pattern, but it breaks through the Blue Ridge Mountains in a narrow, steep sided gorge which can be negotiated only with difficulty, and the stream flow of river depth of the Shenandoah River as well as the James River showed great seasonal fluctuation causing it to be of little worth for transportation, causing the development of Valley communications during the pioneer period to be focused around a network of roads.⁶ The backbone of the network was the Great Wagon Road along which the regions major settlements were located. (Appendix IV) The movement of cattle to northern markets made use of the Great Wagon Road as they moved then to Philadelphia during 1740s.⁷ Because of this movement the initial improvement on the road network was on a north-south orientation. It was along this Great Wagon Road where the region's major settlements developed (Appendix II). These settlements became

the crossroads for the Shenandoah Valley and here was where the county seats grew providing functions that were beyond the initial administrative responsibilities having the advantage of establishing a commercial function.⁸

From the Great Wagon Road the east-west roads linking the Valley with the eastern Virginia markets the Blue Ridge Mountains create a barrier to movement which becomes harder as you move south (Appendix I). Along the lower or northern part of the Valley, the Blue Ridge seldom rises over 3000 feet and is pitted with numerous low wind gaps ranging from 1000 to 1800 feet, and rarely possess any serious problems to road builders. However, along the upper or southern part of the Valley the Blue Ridge increases in height to 3500 and 4000 feet. Wind gaps are higher and more widely spaced, Rockfish Gap is 1850 feet and Swift Run Gap is 2400.⁹ For this reason the wagon transportation between Winchester and eastern Virginia markets was possible in 1740 and only feasible between Staunton and the east in the late 1750s.¹⁰

One reason for the general lag in improving the road network was because the Valley was so thinly populated before the last quarter of the century so there was a lack of labor, until after the 1760s. (Appendix II) Moreover, in the period of pioneer settlement it was difficult to impose and collect taxes to pay for construction. This was particularly true of the area south of Lexington. So, road connections between the upper valley and eastern Virginia by 1760 was neither so centralized nor as well developed as in the lower valley. Settlers in the upper valley

were working against greater physical handicaps, the gaps in the Blue Ridge were higher, more difficult to negotiate and further from the markets in eastern Virginia.¹¹ These handicaps were particularly acute to the settlers in the future Rockbridge County, because wagons had to go up to Staunton and through Rockfish Gap which connected with Richmond. (Appendix II)

From 1760, during the next forty years many links in the road network were connected. (Appendix III) So, by the beginning of the nineteenth century six main roads connected the lower valley with eastern Virginia, Winchester had consolidated its highway link to Baltimore, Staunton was connected to Richmond, a road which connected the upper valley with eastern Virginia had been opened from Lexington via South Mountain at the end of the Blue Ridge, and highways had been constructed from the Valley as far west as Pittsburgh and the New River Valley. There were four main factors responsible for the rapid development of this road network at the end of the eighteenth century.^{12, 13} These are, 1) the increasing size and density of the Valley's population, 2) the westward population expansion and access to the thermal springs west of Staunton, 3) the need to move men and materials during the Revolutionary War, and 4) the further growth and expansion of long distance travel.¹⁴ Because of the increase in population and density the growth of the western frontiers led to the formation of new counties that were linked more effectively with their traditional market centers in the Valley through the

improvement of western roads for wagon traffic.

An ambitious project was the attempt to make the Potomac and James Rivers navigable for their entire length and to force links with the Ohio River. In George Washington's initial plan in 1774 bypassed the Shenandoah River, but he pushed for the founding and became President of both the Potomac River Company and the James River Company. The purpose of the Potomac River Company launched in 1785 was to improve the Potomac for navigation up to Berkely Springs and the James River Company was to improve the James for navigation to just east of Buchanan. However, in the early 1790s after initial improvements had been made, more direct steps were made to involve the Shenandoah Valley in both schemes. Obstacles to navigation were removed from the south fork of the Shenandoah River as far as Front Royal and on December 28, 1797 authorization was received from the General Assembly to improve the branch of the James known as the North River up to Lexington.¹⁵ Neither company had much to show for its efforts. By 1807 only eight miles of the South Branch of the Shenandoah River above Harpers Ferry had been cleared for navigation, and the James River had been improved to just above Buchanan, and the deepening of the North River had scarcely begun.¹⁶ In short, except for settlers at the extreme ends of the Valley, the region was without cheap water transportation throughout the entire eighteenth century and the functioning of towns was entirely dependent upon the maintenance of its highway network.

On February 5, 1816 the Board of Public Works was established and the following year seeing a need to control the construction and maintenance of roads the General Turnpike Law of 1817 was passed on February 7, 1817.¹⁷ During that time turnpikes were financed in a mixed enterprise system gaining capital to build the turnpike from both state and private institutions, so there had to be a control. The General Turnpike Law regulated the width of turnpikes, their surfacing, their construction, the erection of toll gates, the weights of wagons and width of wheels, as well as repairs to the turnpikes. This general law designated that the roads through Vestal's, Swicher's, Ashby's, and Chester's Gaps in the lower valley and Swift Run Gap and Rockfish Gap in the upper valley were all designated as turnpikes.¹⁹ So, now these roads were all well maintained roads to the eastern markets. (Appendix I, Appendix III, Appendix IV)

One more thing to look at, in seeing if the area was isolated, is the correspondence between Tidewater and Valley merchants which steadily increased during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Papers from William Allason, a merchant from Falmouth on the Rappahanock River, showed not only that he was doing business with hundreds of people in the Valley but that there were at least a dozen other merchants competing with him for the Valley trade. Articles he listed in trade with the Shenandoah Valley range from luxuries to necessities.²⁰ Edward Johnson of Manchester, at the falls of the James River, did a flourishing

business in the upper valley in the pre-revolutionary days.²¹
And finally Robert Gamble, a Staunton merchant who moved to
Richmond after the Revolutionary War wrote Jefferson saying,
" . . . In four years three counties of Augusta, Rockbridge, and
Rockingham which is contiguous to your seat, from having but one
manufacturing mill only has upwards of one hundred merchant mills
in great perfection, and their Batteau loaded down the James River
through the Blue Ridge three or four miles of Lexington . . . "22

So, it seems with the information presented here that the
extensive road network which was developed by 1800 and what Mr.
Gamble wrote to Jefferson, that Liberty Hall Academy was far
from being culturally isolated. But, there seemed to be a good
amount of trade going on in the area with eastern Virginia
markets.

Appendix II

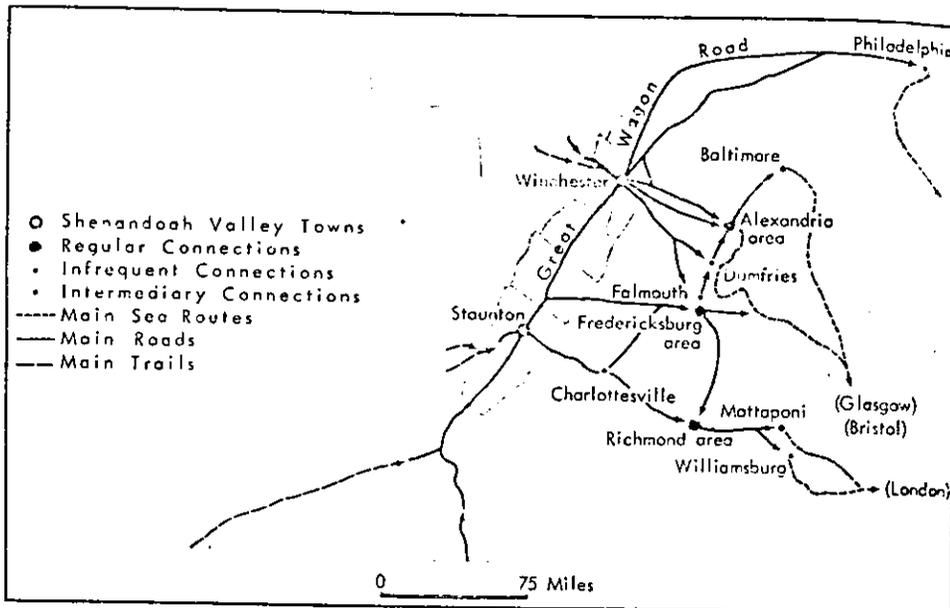


Fig. 21. Trading connections of the Shenandoah Valley by 1760 (data from Augusta Judgments and Orders, 1745-60; Bliss, *Tuckahoe in the Valley*; Coulter, *Virginia Merchant*; Roberts, *Roads of Virginia, 1607-1840*; Thomson, *Merchant in Virginia, 1700-1775*)

Appendix III

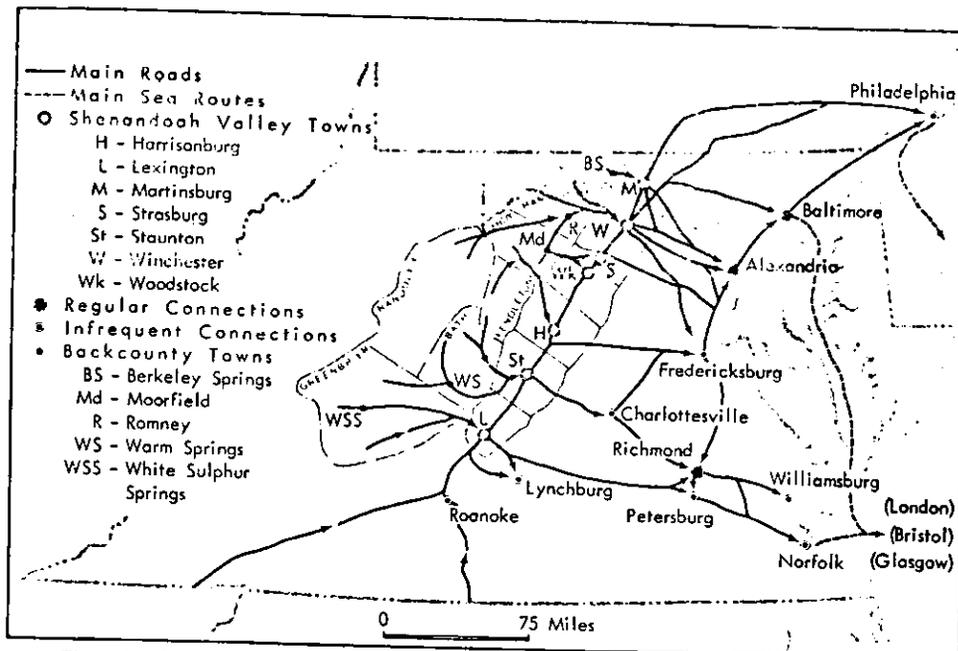


Fig. 24. Trading connections of the Shenandoah Valley by 1800 (data from Augusta Judgments and Orders, 1760-1800; Bliss, *Tuckahoe in the Valley*; Roberts, *Roads of Virginia, 1607-1840*; County Legislative Petitions, 1776-1800; merchant account books)

Appendix IV

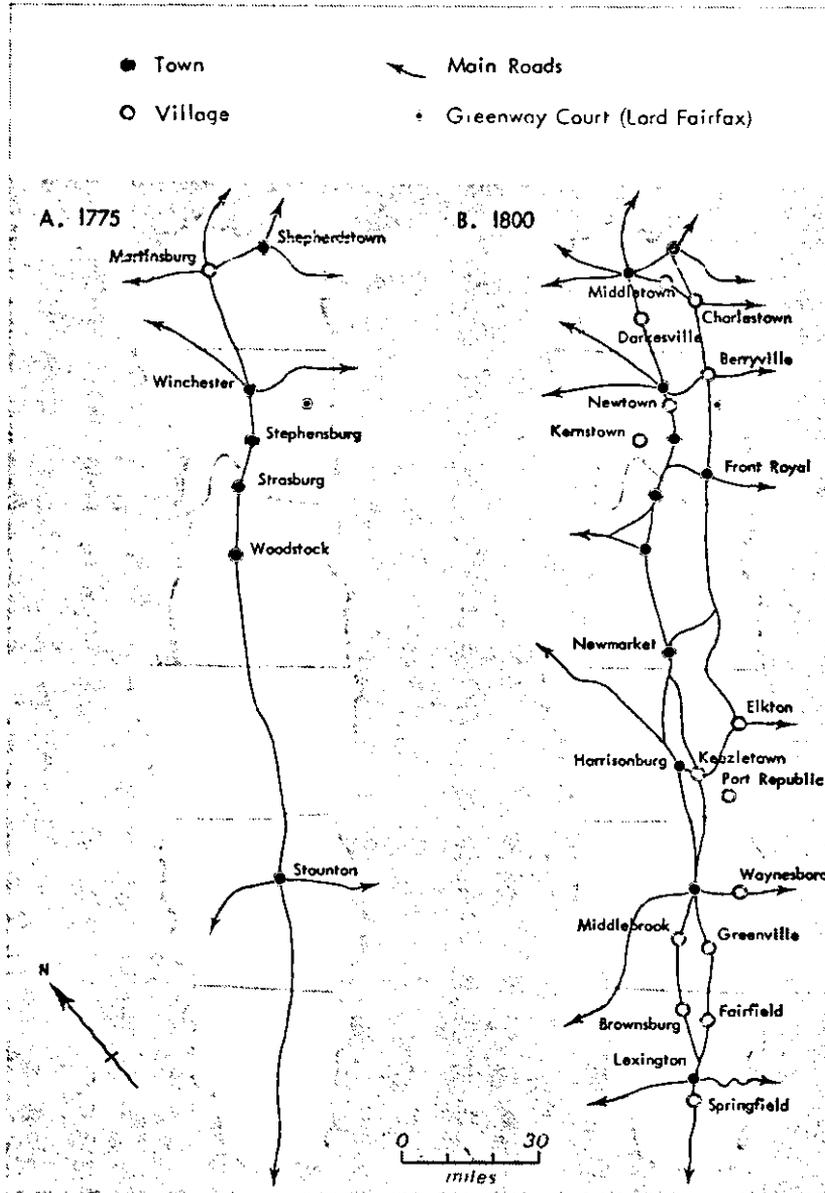


Fig. 25. Towns and villages of the Shenandoah Valley, 1775 and 1800 (data from Hening, *Statutes at Large*; Shepherd, *Statutes at Large*; county histories; Land Tax Books)

Endnotes

¹Robert D. Mitchell, Commercialism and Frontier Perspectives in the Early Shenandoah Valley (Charlottesville, 1977), p. X.

²Ibid., p. X.

³Ibid., p. XII.

⁴Ibid., p. 189.

⁵Ibid., p. 189.

⁶Ibid., p. 24.

⁷Ibid., p. 149.

⁸Ibid., p. 13.

⁹Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 154.

¹¹Freeman H. Hart, The Valley of Virginia in the American Revolution (Durham, 1942), p. 21.

¹²Ibid., p. 21.

¹³Mitchell, p. 190.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 180.

¹⁵Dunaway, The James River and Kawawha Company (New York, 1972), pp. 10-12 and pp. 31-32.

¹⁶Mitchell, p. 195.

¹⁷Historical Society, Proceedings of the Rockbridge Historical Society (Lexington, 1961), p. 55.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 56-57.

¹⁹Mitchell, p. 194.

²⁰Freeman, p. 23.

²¹Ibid., p. 24.

²²Mitchell, p. 175.

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