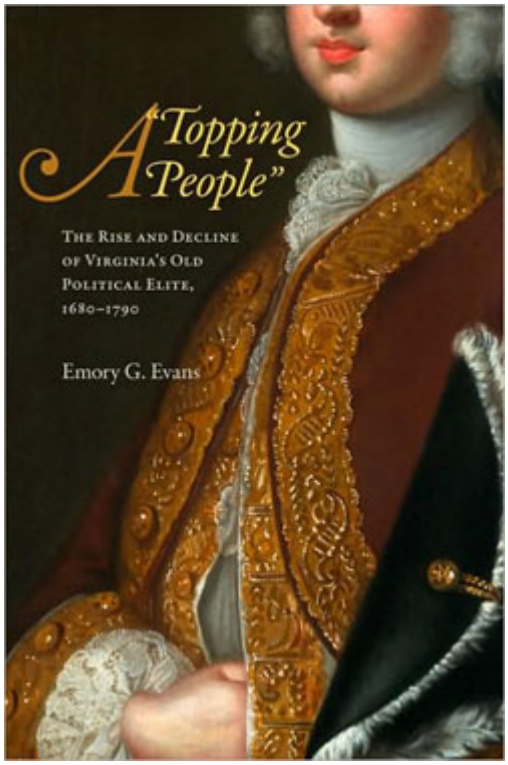
The First People in the Province



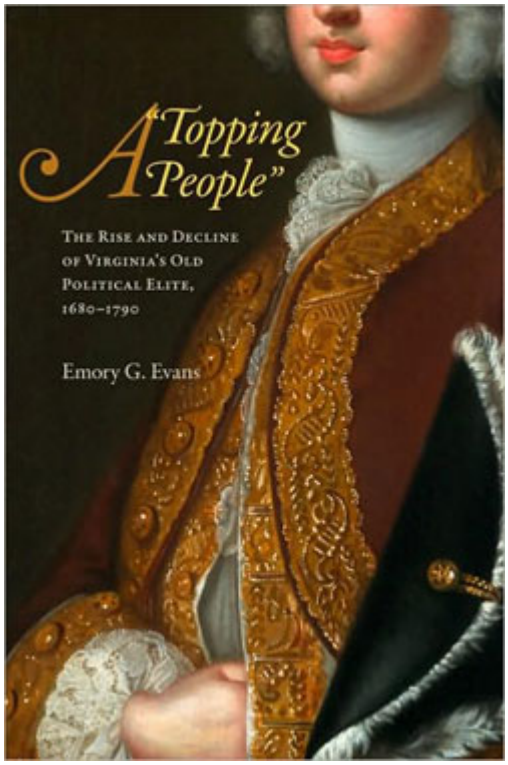
After a journey in 1764 and 1765 that took Lord Adam Gordon through British provinces from Jamaica to Quebec, the 39-year-old army officer wrote that if he ever had to live in colonial America, he would spend his days in Virginia. "[I]n point of Company and Climate," the ancient colony on the Chesapeake "would be my choice in preference to any, I have yet seen." Having tarried there for a month in the spring of 1765 to enjoy "an opportunity to see a good deal of the Country, and many of the first people in the Province," Gordon was particularly impressed with the Virginians themselves. "The Women make excellent wives" and the men "far exceed in good sense, affability, and ease" any others he had encountered in his travels. Even those who had never been outside of the province were "as sensible, conver[s]able and accomplished people, as one would wish to meet with." These "topping people" of eighteenth-century America enthralled Gordon in ways that "must deeply touch a person of any feeling."

Two hundred years later, one can find Gordon's kindred spirit in Emory G. Evans, whose last published work, *A "Topping People": The Rise and Decline of Virginia's Old Political Elite, 1680-1790*, is an accessible, informative, and subtly provocative history of the people Gordon found so congenial and whom Evans spent a career studying. A native Virginian who earned his Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in 1956, Evans was a distinguished professor of colonial America whose early work on the relationship between indebtedness and the coming of the American Revolution in Virginia was followed by a generation's worth of writing and teaching about the lives of Chesapeake elites. Evans'

intimate knowledge of those people and their world clearly shows in A “Topping People,” the first comprehensive study of Virginia’s governing political community since Charles Sydnor’s *Gentleman Freeholders: Political Practices in Washington’s Virginia*, published more than 50 years ago.

Drawing primarily on personal correspondence and public papers, Evans tells the story of a “representative elite group” of 21 families drawn from those that enjoyed “long-term membership” on the Virginia Council—a peculiar constitutional hybrid of legislative, executive, and judicial authorities that Gordon described as possessing powers “greater than those of any other Province” (1). According to Evans, the combination of “political, social, and economic power” enjoyed by the families made them “the most influential people in the colony” throughout the colonial period; they were, in effect, a super-elite, distinct even from the rest of the free, white, protestant Virginia gentry who more or less ran things in the British Chesapeake, and as such are worthy of study in their own right (3). Evans sympathetically follows them from the last years of the reign of Charles II to the first years of the American republic, tracing along the way their increasingly tenuous claim to prominence in a rapidly changing world. Their rise was built on the close ties they forged with the Chesapeake yeomanry in the early 1700s, while their fall from political, social and economic eminence was tied to rising indebtedness to British merchants. By 1776, most of Evans’ elite families were in “serious financial trouble” (114) and their power and influence faded from the public scene soon thereafter.

A “Topping People” could well be considered the definitive insider’s take on the eighteenth-century Virginia elite. In many ways, Evans’ approach mirrors that taken by Gordon in his eighteenth-century journal. Like Gordon, a Scottish aristocrat and member of parliament, Evans’ view of colonial life is decidedly, perhaps even defiantly (as the title coyly suggests), from the top down. Gordon reported that he was “well assured by Gentlemen, whose veracity I can depend on” for information about the things he did not observe firsthand. Evans similarly depends heavily on many of the same gentlemen. Scholars of the colonial Chesapeake will be already familiar with much of his source base, which is dominated by published material from such well-known planters as Robert Carter, William Byrd II, Landon Carter, and John Custis IV, as well as commentators close to their circles, like the New Jersey tutor Philip Fithian. Evans seldom employs sources from beyond that group and almost never in counterpoint to it. But just as a view from the top of a mountain can reveal much about one’s surroundings, so the book covers an impressive amount of topical ground. Again, Gordon appears to have served as something of a model for Evans, as both authors comment upon religion, architecture, horse racing, marriage, tobacco, slavery, politics, and more, all from the perspective of the male super-elites from whom they garnered almost all of their information.



Emory G. Evans, A "Topping People": The Rise and Decline of Virginia's Old Political Elite, 1680-1790. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. 256 pp., $35.

Evans' treatment of the relevant historiography is similarly focused. There is very little evidence in the book that reflects the contributions of relatively recent titles in the field, such as studies of elite women and families in the Chesapeake, or the broader influence of Atlantic history. Evans reserves his engagement of other historians for those whose work directly relates to his subject group, such as Anthony Parent and Kathleen Brown, both of whom Evans believes went beyond the available evidence in their generally critical characterizations of Virginia's elites (238). Evans decorously relegates such differences to the endnotes or to indirect references in the text, immediately recognizable only to those familiar with the material. He disagrees with Michael Rozbicki on whether the families were full of anxiety over maintaining their social status (they weren't, Evans claims) and he takes issue with Rhys Isaac on the extent to which gentry and commons were united as the American Revolution approached (they were but only "to a degree," he argues) (175).

For scholars of the period, *A "Topping People"* is perhaps more important for the questions it leaves unanswered than for the answers it provides. Evans has deepened our understanding of Virginia's political sociology in the eighteenth century by giving us a clearly argued and readable account of an important part of it, but the work raises a question about a core precept of much of colonial Virginia historiography: were its elites as coherent or even as comprehensively dominant a group as Evans presumes? Perhaps not. Doubts are raised when he goes outside his group for evidence, like using Roger Atkinson, a Quaker merchant unconnected to any of the families, to represent the elite point of view, or

when he relies too heavily on the accounts of one observer, such as the feckless William Byrd II, to reflect elite opinion throughout the century. Moreover, the sheer size of Evans' families by the late colonial period complicates any attempt to generalize their experience. For example, by the end of the colonial period one of those families, the descendants of William and Mary Isham Randolph, included more than 200 members who lived on both sides of the Atlantic and could be found up and down the social and economic scale of the British world, from plantation homes to alms houses. They also wound up as both loyalists and patriots when the War of Independence erupted.

To his credit, Evans suggests that his categories may be less static than they first appear: He shows how many of his elites adapted to new interests and ways of thinking that transformed the eighteenth-century British Atlantic, Virginia included. This can be seen most clearly in the distinction he draws between "old elite" and "new men" that emerged in the decades before the American Revolution; this distinction owed less to social standing or generational change than to the highly contingent tides of political economy. Evans points out that many of Virginia's elite continued to participate in the old metropolitan tobacco trade by consigning their crops to English merchants for sale and consumption on the "home market," which "brought a better return" (103). At the same time, Scots traders connected to European markets "began to dominate the landscape," which thereafter developed into a new web of transatlantic commercial and intellectual influences that replaced the metropolitan trade at the center of Virginia's economy (100). The interplay between old and new political economies also reflected shifting sets of social relationships within the province, which severed some connections between Virginians just as it created others. For example, planters whose tobacco was intended for continental consumers of snuff found common ground as opponents to mercantilist rules and imperial conflicts that inhibited direct trade with European ports, matters of little concern to the shrinking proportion of Chesapeake planters who continued to grow tobacco exclusively for English smokers. Economic allegiance helped shape political allegiance; Evans' evidence sheds considerable light on the various paths taken by Virginia's elites in 1776, a large number of whom—many more than Evans finds—either remained loyal to Britain or stayed out of the revolutionary conflict altogether.

Although *A "Topping People"* does not reflect the insights of newer work in related fields and identifies Virginia elites in ways that might be analytically problematic, it is very useful to have Evans' mature reflections on a subject that for centuries has been shrouded in the mythology of the so-called First Families of Virginia. In giving readers what should amount to the last word on how Virginia's elite saw themselves—providing the kind of insight that can come only from a lifetime of work—*A "Topping People"* has the potential to fuel a generation's worth of scholarship on the complex political sociology of the largest, most diverse society in the British colonial world. There could be no better memorial to a scholar of Emory Evans' considerable stature than that.