

THE ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF CLOTH AND
APPAREL: AN ANALYSIS OF GEORGE
WASHINGTON'S SHIPPING RECEIPTS, 1754-1772

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In eighteenth-century Virginia, textiles had great social and economic significance: a valuable resource and an excellent social signal (Spence, 1973). Textiles were costly to produce and purchase. We present a quantitative case study of George Washington's commercial correspondence with his factors between 1754 and 1772. Textiles account for 32.9 percent of orders and 46.1 percent of total expenditure. Washington bought large volumes of these items and paid relatively high prices for them. Washington spent £1943 6s. 0d. on textiles over these years. On a per year basis, this spending was nearly nine times colonial annual average income over this period.

The Utility, Expense, and Expenditure on Textiles by Virginia Elites

Textiles occupied a very prominent position in the household economies of eighteenth-century North America, particularly among the elites, and particularly in Virginia. Textiles were comparatively expensive to produce, and were highly demanded, which resulted in a comparatively high price. Elite households chose to purchase vast quantities of textiles, despite (and helping to sustain) their high prices. This is because textiles had great usefulness in eighteenth-century Virginia society. Textiles

provided protection from the elements, both indoors and out; textiles were also used for toweling, sacking, bedding, packing, and a myriad of other duties for which we now use other materials. Moreover, textiles were of primary importance to the Virginia elites as a means of signaling their gentility and wealth; therefore, their social worth and the basis for their social standing and privilege. Even if one were not of the Virginia elite, but aspired to that position, signaling gentility and wealth through the display of textiles could help secure elite status. Consequently, Virginia elites bought enormous quantities of cloth and textile manufactures, both coarse and fine, and paid high prices for them. As a result, textiles occupied a large portion of these people's expenditure.¹

Researchers of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, particularly of its material culture, have long been aware of the economic and social importance of textiles, and of how much spending people of the time devoted to textiles. However, such knowledge may not have disseminated as broadly outside of this group as one might hope. For example, in a popular book, historical journalist Henry Wiencek details George Washington's annual or biennial allowances of cloth to his enslaved people for clothing, bedding, linens, and work. He writes that "within months their clothing must have been reduced to mere rags. The clear meaning of this is that it was deemed preferable [by Washington] to have the slaves go about in tattered rags...."² While making no apologies for

¹ For more on textiles as household expenses see Richard Bushman (1993); T.H. Breen (2005); Carole Shammas (2008); Ann Smart Martin (2010); Lorena Walsh (2010); and Linda Baumgarten (2012).

² Henry Wiencek (2003), 124. One reviewer astutely noted that "unless we know the precise composition of the cloth—what percent linen, what percent cotton, what percent wool, what was the weave pattern—we cannot know if the clothing of slaves became rags. Indeed, some homespun when comprised of wool or linen and woven in a tight, plain or twill weave, while not fancy was quite sturdy and has survived in museum collections up to the present." S/He directs interested readers to Adrienne Hood (2003).

enslaving people, nor shielding slaveholders from their agency and culpability in slavery, we think Weincek underestimates or downplays the expense of textiles in his analysis. Between 1754 and 1772, our analysis of Washington's correspondence with his British factors indicates that Washington spent nearly £2000 for textiles and manufactured textile items from British merchants. Of that, he spent £520 9s. 3 ¼d. on bulk orders of cloth and thread that were almost certainly used primarily for slave clothing, although this is probably an under-estimate of his textile and apparel spending on his enslaved people and servants. Assuming an average colonist's annual income to have been between £10 and £12, Washington spent at least between 40 to 48 times the annual per person average income on clothing slaves during these 19 years.³ Of course he also spent rather more on lavish displays of clothes and cloth furnishings for home and conveyances, for himself and his family. With a broader, more interdisciplinary understanding of the historical economic and social significance of textiles, researchers and writers may be able to provide more accurate and insightful analysis of this time and place.

In this article we present a case study of George Washington's spending on textile imports from his London factors between 1754 and 1772. Our intent is to further establish (and help spread appreciation of) textiles' economic and social significance, particularly in eighteenth-century Virginia. We decided to use George Washington as the primary example for this paper for two reasons. First, in many ways, Washington typified the social climbing of Virginia's middle and higher social ranks. He was born into a respectable family of middling social class or slightly higher, but not into a planter elite family. By the standards of the common families of Virginia, his family was undoubtedly well off, but certainly not counted as wealthy among the higher status families. He was the oldest son of the second wife of a youngest son. These were serious social

³ John McCusker and Russell Menard (1985, 338) estimate colonial income per capita to have been between £10.70 and £12.50. See also Charles Hamrick (2007, 16) with this example as an entry "credit to Mr. William Walker...at your rate of £10 per year."

disadvantages, but not so much as to totally preclude Washington from ascending to the planter elite class.⁴ By his actions and correspondence, Washington revealed his desire for social advancement, for building a “Noble estate.”⁵ During the period covered in this study, Washington inherited an estate which he enlarged and re-furnished, and courted and married a wealthy widow of high status, propelling him up Virginia’s social ladder. Each additional step up the social ladder required Washington to display the clothes and household goods Virginia society expected of people of that rank.⁶ Second, Washington’s military and political positions have meant that many of his records have survived and are easily accessible. As such we believe that Washington serves as an empirically-sound source from which to analyze the importance of textiles and the relative costs associated with maintaining the appropriate level of finery to signal rank and status as well as fulfill utilitarian roles in the mid to late eighteenth century.⁷

⁴ See Thomas Lewis (1993); Douglas Southall Freeman (1995); Joseph Ellis (2005); Alan Axelrod (2007); Ron Chernow (2011); David Clary (2011); Stephen Brumwell (2013); and Robert Middlekauff (2015).

⁵ Researchers Dennis Pogue and Esther White (2005, 17) quote from a letter Washington wrote in 1767, “An enterprising Man with very little money may lay the foundation of a Noble estate in the New Settlements upon Monongahela (a river in Pennsylvania)... for proof of which only look to Frederick, & see what Fortunes were made by the Hite’s & first takers up of those Lands: Nay how the greatest Estates we have in this Colony were made; Was it not by taking up & purchasing at very low rates the rich black Lands which were thought nothing in those days, but are now the most valuable lands.”

⁶ See Bushman (1992); and T.H. Breen (1985).

⁷ Mt. Vernon has a section titled Clothing and Textiles in their research area (<http://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/collections-holdings/browse-the-museum-collections/category/clothing-and-textiles/1/>) available on their website. Included are not only items of clothing worn by the Washingtons, but also fine damask tablecloths,

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To conduct our analysis, we relied on the detailed documents Washington's British factors sent to account for the products delivered by ship in response to Washington's purchase orders. These factors sold Washington's tobacco on consignment in British markets and used the proceeds to buy products that Washington requested from British merchants. The expense of Washington's purchases typically far outstripped his tobacco revenues. Therefore, in the process of fulfilling Washington's orders, the British factors extended him large amounts of credit.

What our analysis of Washington's correspondence with his British factors reveals is that textiles, trimmings, and apparel were a large portion of his household's economic life. These records contain 2868 lines of Washington's purchase orders fulfilled with one or more items, totaling £4090 11s. 7½d. Of those lines on the receipts, 944 pertain to textiles, trimmings, and apparel, totaling £1943 6s. Thus, approximately one third of Washington's orders involve textiles and apparel. These textile and apparel orders account for 46 percent of his total expenditure through his London factors. By way of comparison, consider Washington's orders for non-perishable groceries, food and drink. Like cloth and apparel, groceries could be the coarse stuff of subsistence or the fine stuff to signal social status. Like cloth and apparel, Washington routinely placed orders with his British factors for both coarse and fine foodstuffs. However, groceries accounted for nine percent of his orders and 20 percent of his expenditures. In short, Washington routinely placed a large number of orders for both quantities large and small of comparatively highly priced textiles (and related items), of both coarse and fine quality.

The next section provides some background by discussing the historical signaling, conspicuous consumption, and ordinary usefulness of textiles, as well as comparisons of historical and modern expenditures on

towels, pieces of cloth, and seat cushions. They remark that Washington "took a keen interest in fashion." Washington may have been remarkable in becoming the first President of the United States, but in regard to clothing and signaling status he was common among his peers.

textiles. The following section discusses our data set and presents our quantitative analysis. The final section offers concluding remarks.

The General Usefulness and Signaling Importance of Textiles and Manufactured Textile Items

Cloth (and clothing) represented such great economic significance because it was an expensive general utility item: incredibly useful but also very costly to produce in the early modern world. In an era before mechanized looms, fabric was a labor-intensive enterprise from start to finish.⁸ Whether wool, cotton, or flax, all fibers required several stages of labor before one could even move on to looming thread into fabric. Moreover, clothing had usefulness beyond providing protection from the elements (and signaling status). To these people, cloth was extraordinarily useful, a valuable and continually recycled asset for home, business, or farm. In an era before plastic, Styrofoam, cardboard, and paper packaging, cloth was frequently used in a similar capacity. Items shipped from Europe to the colonies were frequently wrapped in bundles of fabric and tied. Washington's receipts routinely list separate charges for a multitude of sacks, bags, "canvas and cord," "packing cloth and cord," and "Cotton for Wrapper." Proper packaging meant items made the long journey intact, and so even items in casks were often wrapped in fabric. Washington complained to one factor in 1771 that:

When I open'd the Packages a ps. [piece] of Duffield charged £4.13.6 was found eaten to a honey Comb by moth—whethr this was the effect of long lying, or carelessness of the woolen Draper [in the packing] I shall not undert[ak]e to determ[in]e but certain

⁸ For more on pre-mechanized cloth production see David Jenkins, ed. (2003); Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, eds. (2005); and Hood (2003).

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it is that I shall not be able to get a single Garm[en]t out of the whole piece.⁹

Having paid for packing fabric and including this damaged piece, Washington likely found uses for it; even scraps of fabric were used until threadbare. Indeed, woolen rags could be stripped into fiber and recycled as weft in the manufacture of shoddy. Washington famously, or infamously, directed his enslaved people to use their blankets to carry animal bedding:

...let the People, with their blankets go every evening, or as often as occasion may require, to the nearest wood and fill them with leaves for the purposes abovementioned [for the comfort of the Creatures]; bottoming the beds with Corn Stalks, and covering them thick with leaves. A measure of this sort will be—if strictly attended to, and punctually performed, of great utility in every point of view. It will save food, Make the Cattle lay warm and comfortable, and produce much manure.¹⁰

Furthermore, all clothing, but especially fine clothing, was shockingly expensive. For example, in 1759, George Washington ordered a bespoke suit from London through his London business agents, for which he paid £7 19s. 7d.¹¹ Of that cost, the yardage and the trimmings

⁹ “From George Washington to Mauduit, Wright, & Co, July 21, 1771.” Later in the letter Washington hints that he believed the draper included moth-eaten items as other things in same package were not damaged, or that since goods were bought in December but not received until July that a moth could have gotten in and damaged items, but why only the one.

¹⁰“Enclosure: Washington’s Plans for his River, Union, and Muddy Hole Farms, 10 December 1799.”

¹¹ “Invoice from Robert Cary & Company, 6 August 1759.”

accounted for nearly 90 percent of the total, while the tailor's skilled labor accounted for slightly above 10 percent. Assuming colonists' per capita income to have been between £10 and £12, Washington spent nearly 73 percent of colonial per capita income on a suit of clothes. By way of a modern comparison, Neal Santelman wrote an article for *Forbes* in November, 2004, in which he searched for the most expensive suits in Manhattan. Santelman concluded, "Prepare to pay up to \$3,500.00 for a truly first-rate custom number," but quotes suit maker William Fiorivanti as charging clients up to \$10,500.00.¹² As the United States per capita personal income in 2014 was \$46,129.00, the range of \$3,500 to \$10,500 represents 7.6 percent to 22.8 percent of per capita personal income; or less than one-third of Washington's percentage of per capita income.¹³ True, Santelman's tailors report customers buying multiple suits per year. However, Washington and his ilk ordered multiple suits of clothes per year, too.

Nor is there any compelling reason to believe that Washington's behavior was outrageous by the standards of his contemporaries. Others in Virginia were sending their British factors similar shopping lists with similar quantities of similar goods.¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson, now commonly thought of as a bit of a frump and somewhat of a dresser-down included in a letter ordering a piano an order for six pairs of India cotton stockings for himself—seemingly almost as an afterthought.¹⁵ He expected to pay £3, which is to say between 25 and 30 percent of average annual income for these six pairs of stockings. He finished the sentence by ordering an additional six pairs of stockings in "Best white silk." Stockings were an indispensable foundation garment for men and women in the eighteenth century, but they appear to have lasted no longer than do our stockings,

¹² Neal Santelman (2004).

¹³ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

¹⁴ "From James Minzies to John Norton, June 12, 1773." Also Washington was commonly thought of as a man who dressed according to his station, but avoided extravagance and chasing the absolute latest fashion.

¹⁵ "From Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Adams, 1 June 1771."

socks, and hose today. In most years, Washington ordered dozens of pairs of stockings, both those suitable for slaves and servants as well as those for family members. Jefferson casually spent approximately 50 to 60 percent of colonial annual income on a dozen pairs of socks that would likely only last for one year.

To place this point in perspective with a different comparison, Jacob Vanderlint estimated in England in 1734 “that a middling man would spend £16 a year on his own clothes, £7 each on his four children and £16 for his wife ‘who can’t wear much,’ a total of £60 or just over a quarter of his expenditure.”¹⁶ For a modern comparison, using US Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey data from 2011, the closest comparison (husband, wife, and 1.2 children) spent only 2.8 percent of household after-tax income and 3.6 percent of household consumption spending on apparel and household textiles.¹⁷ Using similar 2012 Consumer Expenditure Survey data, Brookings Institution staff economist Beth Akers calculates that surveyed consumer units (seemingly an amalgam of the usual individual-household-family categories) spent \$145 per month on apparel—roughly three percent of expenditure—between \$110 per month on education and \$217 per month on entertainment; rather less than the \$256 per month spent on “miscellaneous,” and much less than the top three categories of food, transportation, and housing, at \$588, \$750, \$1407, respectively.¹⁸ In the eighteenth century, textiles were costly to

¹⁶ Peter Earle (1989, 289). The quoted income of £60 is rather different from range of £10-£12 from McCusker and Menard (1985). This is because a “middling man” is a man of the middling classes, perhaps the London equivalent of the lesser gentry. Such a man, though not elite, would have been very well off compared to the entire population. The McCusker and Menard figure is a statistical calculation of per capita income in British North America. Lorena Walsh (2010, 448-457) analyzed guardian accounts for the estates for five “middling York County [Virginia] planters,” and offers estimates for clothes and shoes ranging from 20 percent to 60 percent between 1735 and 1765.

¹⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

¹⁸ Beth Akers (2014).

produce, cloth and clothes were expensive, but households bought them in large enough quantities for textiles to account for large portions of their expenditure.

Perhaps the primary message Virginians hoped to send with their clothing was that of gentility, and with it, social worthiness. They sent similar signals through their houses, their furnishings, the dress of their servants, and so on. Richard Bushman (1992) examines the concept of gentility, which originated in Renaissance ambitions, was adopted by Europe's courts as it spread across the continent, and then diffused through colonial society. Gentility was the refinement of thought, speech, taste, carriage, apparel, possessions, and surroundings; refinement not only for the pleasure of its own sake, but also critically for the knowledge that others observed you to be genteel. "Gentility heightened self-consciousness, not in any deep philosophical sense, but in the common meaning of becoming aware of how one looked in the eyes of others." As the Mother Country did not recognize anything resembling a colonial aristocracy, the Virginians (as in the Caribbean tobacco and sugar islands) chose a social strategy to create a new type of social elite, the planter. This emerging colonial gentry accepted the ideals of gentility completely and broadcast their acceptance with grand and refined houses, "new modes of speech, dress, body carriage, and manners."¹⁹ Bushman writes that, in eighteenth-century North America, gentility was a possession and mark exclusively of the colonial gentry. "By the Revolution, it was incumbent upon all gentlemen broadly defined—the great merchants and planters, the clergy and professionals, the officers of courts and government—to live by the genteel code. Lesser people might look on with envy, awe, or hatred, they could imitate and borrow, but they were onlookers, thought to be presumptuous if they assumed the manners or showed the possessions of a gentleman."²⁰ To accommodate creating and sustaining this 'genteel

¹⁹ Bushman (1992, xii-xiv).

²⁰ Bushman (1992, xiii). Being a member of the gentry, and much more so of the elite, had practical advantages as well: the social and economic deference that gentlemen were given. Significantly or even

planter' social ideal, lowland Virginia society in the mid-eighteenth century was a credit-fueled extravaganza of social climbing. Washington, like all of the Virginia planter barons of these decades who sought the epitome of gentility, lived in a world utterly fueled by credit. He was, like his contemporaries, chronically very deeply in debt.²¹ In today's terms, Washington was usually insolvent, but because of his social standing and access to credit, he could forestall bankruptcy.

Michael Spence's (1973, 2002) use of the term "signal" works as an analytical framework to help understand the importance of clothing in eighteenth-century Virginia. For Spence, signals are things an individual does that are visible communication between parties. Signals are necessary because the parties to an interaction each know things unknown to the other: does one plan to cooperate with the other person, or does one plan to cheat, steal, or fail to deliver as promised? A signal is a conscious and costly act that takes time and effort on the signaler's part to communicate capability and intention. Spence uses signaling to explain labor markets, where potential employees know more about their productivity than do potential employers. Because the statement, "I will be a productive employee" is simply not credible, the potential employee expends time and effort to earn a college degree; not just to add skills and knowledge, but also to signal employers about her dedication, persistence, and other valuable attributes.²² In order for the signals to work, both sides must understand the underlying meaning and importance of the signal; i.e. for Spence, employers must understand that a bachelor's degree indicates

critically, gentlemen had to access to credit, access to more and more types of credit, and on advantageous and flexible terms. Other advantages included political and military offices, from which one could draw wealth, influence and prestige. In social, legal, and economic transactions, elite men were given deference and the benefit of the doubt. Elites had access to social mobility. See Charles Sydnor (1965); Isaac (1982); Allan Kulikoff (1986); Linzy Brekke (2005); Phyllis Whitman Hunter (2001); Kathleen Wilson (2004); David Shields (2009).

²¹ Breen (1985).

²² Michael Spence (2002, 434). See also Spence (1973).

dedication, persistence and goal orientation. For our purposes, wearers and observers must have been able to “read” fabric and trimmings as indications of status, rank, and wealth.

Debt-enabled spectaculars of sartorial display to exhibit gentility, wealth, and social standing emerged from a historical process as a regional economic and social strategy. As a strategy and behavior, it seems more prevalent and significant in Virginia and the southern colonies than in the Mid-Atlantic or New England. Why this was so is beyond the scope of this manuscript, due largely to the fact that our case-study data set affords us very little chance to observe change through time or across space. Nor is that our purpose, which is to provide a case study that demonstrates the significance of textiles in the elites’ household economy of early modern Virginia. However, as we do, one can take an economist’s point of view: that one’s preferences are ones’ preferences, and investigate the pursuit of those preferences, constrained by prices and income. Without going any further into why he did so, by his actions, Washington seems to have adopted the Virginia strategy signaling his status and wealth through textiles, among the other trappings of genteel society.

Clothing had long been an understood signal dating back to the ancient world. Colors, fabrics, draping, and adornments all sent signals about rank, status, and sex. Wearers both broadcast and internalized parts of their identity through clothing, and used it to help differentiate or integrate themselves into the world around them.²³ Clothing was used by

²³ Literature on consumerism and the significance of clothing as part of a signaling mechanism within that is growing rapidly. A good place to begin is Cary Carson, et. al (1994) and Martin (1993). For more on consumerism see Billy G. Smith (1981); Neil McKendrick, et. al. (1982); Breen (1986); Bushman (1992); *Dress and Identity* (1995); Baumgarten (2002); *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830* (2006); John Styles (2007); and Martin (2008). For more on clothing and crossdressing (theatre and cultural) see: Laura Levine (1994); Timothy Shannon (1996); Marjorie Garber (1997); and Wendy Lucas Castro (2008). For more on clothing and material culture as

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strangers to signal where both parties ranked so that all appropriate deference could be given to superiors by subordinates.²⁴ Breen reports that a friend of John Bartram, a pioneering American botanist, upon learning he was to visit prominent Virginians advised him to buy new clothing, “for tho I should not esteem thee less, to come to me in what dress thou will, —yet these Virginians are a very gentle [that is, genteel], well-dressed people— and look, perhaps, more at a man’s outside than his inside.”²⁵ Signaling status through (comparatively) expensive cloth diffused throughout the colony and across social strata.²⁶ Rhys Isaac (1982) notes that in Virginia, “Symbols and practical necessities were combined in the conventions of dress. A periwig and lace-ruffled cuffs proclaimed freedom from manual work in field or workshop; the plain attire of the common planter, by contrast, admitted subjection to the necessities of such labor.”²⁷

expressions of revolutionary zeal see Terence H. Witkowski (1989); Michael Zakim (2003); Breen (2004); Brekke (2005); and Tim Edwards (2011). For more on the actual site of consumption see Katherine Egner Gruber (2015); and Martin (2000).

²⁴ Virginian Reverend Deveraux Jarratt remembered that as a boy in the 1730s, “A periwig, in those days, was a distinguishing badge of gentle folk—and when I saw a man riding the road, near our house, with a wig on, it would so alarm my fears...that I dare say, I would run off, as for my life.” (as quoted in Breen (1985)) The periwig signified to Jarratt—a farmer-artisan’s son—that the rider was someone of importance, and he was too afraid to participate in the rituals that should have come next.

²⁵ Breen (2004, 160).

²⁶ For more on the dispersal of goods to the backcountry see, Martin (2008). It also diffused from the gentry to the middling sorts. For more on that process see, Bushman (1992).

²⁷ Isaac (1982, 43-44). Cloth and clothing, then, signaled both externally and internally critical information about identity. It quickly and easily revealed the status, sex, ethnicity, and sometimes even profession of the wearer. For this reason, the Thomas/ine Hall case in seventeenth-century Virginia and the periwig controversy in New England both focus

Moreover, drawing on the legacy of economist Gary Becker's work of expanding utility functions beyond the consumption of narrowly defined goods and services, economists would recognize social climbing Virginians' public performances of gentility as a consumption activity in its own right; a behavior they engaged in not only for its signaling value, but also for its utility.²⁸ In addition to any utility deriving from gentility for its own sake, these performers derived pleasure and satisfaction (utility) from knowing that others in society thought them to be gentlemen on the basis of the costly signals of apparel and possessions that they broadcast. Colonial newspapers gave detailed descriptions of what members of the royal family were wearing at events in Europe. "To know what the nobility wore was to know of *le monde*, the fashionable world. That knowledge could make one feel included, a part of that universe..."²⁹ Buying the same cloth, embellishments, and clothes as *le monde* of Europe from European merchants and manufacturers was to claim at least a token membership in that society, even if one lived in North America. In British colonial cities, members-only dancing clubs emerged, where fashionable local elites went to both be seen and compete with each other. "Dancing the minuet one couple at a time put a man and woman on display as all eyes fixed on two figures."³⁰

on the role that clothing (or an adornment like a wig) might play in misleading individuals who were being tricked by improperly used signals. For Hall case see Kathleen Brown (1996, Chapter 3). For Periwig controversy see Richard Godbeer (1997). Sometimes individuals chose to purposely obfuscate the signals. In the case of some mixed-race Euro-Indians, their combination of Indian and European clothing often represented what they had internalized as their dual identity. See Lucas Castro (2004).

²⁸ For a useful introduction of Gary Becker's innovative expansion of microeconomics, see Gary S. Becker (1978).

²⁹ Kate Haulman (2011, 36).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

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Other displays of ostentatious gentility were not exclusively for elite audiences. “Church supplied a more socially heterogeneous setting where elites might not only view one another but see others and be seen by them.”³¹ Outdoor parks and promenades in Boston and New York City also gave elites an outlet to display the latest fashions they had purchased. “When getting dressed for any social gathering, particularly those in which your person might be studied at some length, men and women had to consider whether to blend in and avoid censure but also forgo admiration or to step out sartorially and potentially invite both.”³² Take, for example, the hoop skirt, which became popular in the eighteenth century. It was designed for conspicuous consumption. Its large, bell-like shape displayed expensive imported fabrics. As lighter frames made of cane or wicker became available, the hoop could be blown in the wind and accidentally expose too much of a woman. It also provided a buffer of space around the female body while simultaneously drawing attention to it.³³ Yet another example was the 1782 festivities in Philadelphia to celebrate the birth of the French dauphine. Dr. Benjamin Rush recounted the festivities which included a purpose-built edifice and garden, complete with seating constructed under the orders of the minister of France. “Eleven hundred tickets were distributed, most of them two or three weeks before the evening of the entertainment. Forty were sent to the governor of each state....the same number to General Washington....” Rush noted that for ten days before the event, preparations occupied the city’s hairdressers, “tailors, milliners and mantua-makers.” This event was not only an opportunity for the elites to see and be seen, but the minister of France had “pulled down a board fence” so that the 10,000 uninvited Philadelphians could be gratified “with a sight of the company and the entertainment.” Quaker women, whose religion dictated plainer dress than the other elites were accommodated with “a private room where several Quaker ladies,

³¹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ For more on the political dilemma of hoops see Haulman (2011).

whose dress would not permit them to join the assembly, were indulged with a sight of the company through a gauze curtain.”³⁴

One could argue that these signals of wealth and gentility were purely instrumental, the means to establish one’s social standing in order to claim the benefits thereof. If so, however, there were surely less expensive ways to send the necessary signals. Certainly, to simply signal wealth and status, one need not specifically and purposely parade in one’s finery in a public park. Simply wearing the clothes while going about one’s daily business would have been sufficient. The elements of public display, as opposed to simple ownership and public use, argue for a consumption motive in addition to Spencian signaling.

Textiles appropriate for signaling and utility creation through genteel performance represented expensive assets which were typically imported from Europe—indeed, as Spence points out, to be credible, the signal must be costly and (therefore) not easily counterfeited. Kate Haulman notes that “Imported fabric was significant in part due to its utility. All residents of British North America needed cloth for attire, but laws prohibited its [commercial] manufacture in the colonies. As the production of cloth increased and prices fell, purchasing fabric made more sense than investing time and energy in the creation of homespun, particularly in port cities where imported cloth could be had easily and cheaply.”³⁵ When this occurred, the richness of fabric and the added ornamentation of fine buttons, buckles, and laces continued to help distinguish between social ranks. Imported fabric was not only more expensive, it was seen as closer to the current fashion trends in Europe. Fabric alone was often not sufficient. Washington and others were also spending large amounts of money to have clothing made for them in England. For example, Robert Pringle of Charleston almost exclusively used London tailors as the “the workmanship [was] very bad” on the one suit he had made in Charleston in 1739.³⁶ Washington repeatedly complained to his factors about ill-fitting clothing made by London merchants (despite having sent

³⁴ David S. Shields (1997, 1-4).

³⁵ Haulman (2011, 19).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 108 & 69.

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measurements), but apparently even ill-fitting London-made clothing was preferable to clothing produced in Virginia.

For imported clothing to function as a signal, viewers had to be able to distinguish between American-made and European-made cloth at a glance—and they did. For example, Washington wished to make a statement for his first inauguration as president by wearing a suit of American-made cloth (by implication, the observers could distinguish between American and British cloth). He wrote to Henry Knox in January 1789 after seeing an advertisement for “superfine American Broad Cloths” available in shops in New York City. He left the selection of color to Knox, but qualified that “if the dye should not appear to be well fixed, & clear, or if the cloth should not really be very fine” that Knox should keep in mind that for Washington “some colour mixed in grain might be preferable to an indifferent[ly stained] dye.” It is important to note that Washington was placing priority on high quality dying in order to more easily hide deficiencies in the fabric itself. After visiting several shops, Knox replied to Washington that he was “a little apprehensive You will be disappointed with respect to the fineness, it being about the quality of a second english cloth.”³⁷ On a trip to New England after his inauguration, Washington visited the Connecticut factory that produced the broadcloth he had sent Knox to procure. In his diary entry for October 20, 1789, Washington noted that the Hartford Woolen Manufactory was producing broadcloths “not of the first quality, as yet, but they are good.”³⁸ Dorothy Twohig, editor of the *Papers of George Washington*, noted that the factory closed in 1794 due in part to a “public prejudice against American manufactures.”³⁹ When indentured servants and slaves ran away from their masters, they typically took fashionable, fine clothing with them to pawn later. “Several notices describe men wearing ‘fashionable’ coats or clothes

³⁷ “From George Washington to Henry Knox, 29 January 1789.”; “To George Washington from Henry Knox, 12 February 1789.”

³⁸ Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig (1976–79, 5:468).

³⁹ *The Papers of George Washington* (1987, 1: 291).

‘made fashionable.’⁴⁰ Masters hoped that a man in a “fashionable coat with waistcoat sleeves of a dark cinnamon colour” who did not otherwise look like he should own such a coat would be obvious to individuals who would notice and turn him in.⁴¹ Critical to the announcement was that “items could be recognized as at once made of fine fabric, used, and fashionable, ornamenting the bodies of those who inhabited society’s lowest social echelon.”⁴² As another example, in 1746, a writer for the *American Magazine and Historical Chronicle* complained that while Britain (and by extension its colonies) was at war with France, he observed French fashions when he was out in the city. He “knew French fabric when he saw it, and its adoption distressed him.”⁴³

Finally, outside of certain research and academic circles, it is no longer common to think of cloth and clothing in quite the same way as did early modern people. Technological advances in agriculture and industry made fiber and textile production more efficient and increased total output. Coupled with broad-based rising real incomes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these effects lowered the relative price of textiles and clothing became more commodified. As a result, cloth and apparel has lost much of its signaling power relative to what it had in the mid-eighteenth century. Jonah Berger and Morgan Ward (2010) make this case persuasively. Sumptuary laws have disappeared. Modern manufacturing allows high quality production at any price point. Indeed, top designers specifically produce versions of their clothes for low-end, mass-market retailers. Cheap communication and travel diffuse style changes at a rapid rate. Generally rising wealth, economic mobility, the development of consumer credit markets, and declining relative real prices for many luxury items has made it more difficult to infer socio-economic status from an individual’s consumption bundle. When even the comparatively less

⁴⁰ Haulman (2011, 27).

⁴¹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 2, 1738 as quoted in Haulman (2011, 27).

⁴² Haulman (2011, 27).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 38.

affluent can purchase one or two extravagant goods, those products' ability to signal social standing is diminished.

A second story of the modern era's economic development has been the creation and application of new materials, especially plastics, alloy metals, and pulp-wood derived products. In most applications where modern people will use plastic, paper, cardboard, fiberboard, and alloy metals, early modern people would use wood, leather, and textiles—a large amount of textiles.

Therefore, we believe it may be useful to conduct a quantitative analysis of Washington's expenditure on imported textiles. We do this as an initial step to further two objectives; first, to emphasize cloth and clothing as central elements in early modern historical narratives, and second, as a means to better understand how much individuals were willing to invest for the ability to signal their wealth and status through clothing.

Quantitative Analysis of Washington's Shipping Receipts

As noted, the raw data are the shipping receipts of Washington's London factors. Washington would send a letter by sea to his factors which included—for want of a better term—a shopping list. Washington's factors would attempt to fulfill the list based on product availability, the written instructions, and their understanding of Washington's tastes and desires. For example, if a specific item was unavailable, they would select an item they thought similar, or—as in the case of some household decorative items—they informed Washington that what he wanted would be more expensive than would please him, so they made a substitution. When Washington's "shopping cart" was shipped to Virginia, the factors would send a detailed receipt.

The available shipping receipts spanned 1754 through 1772, but none were available for 1755, 1756, or 1769. We cannot say whether Washington's London factors shipped no orders during those years, or whether the factors did ship to Washington, but these receipts are lost or undiscovered; however we can hypothesize. It seems possible that there were no orders in 1755 and 1756 as Washington was in the field of war, away from Mount Vernon. In 1769, Washington had joined other planters

in the Virginia Association, a series of agreements to abstain from British imports (including many textiles) to protest the Townshend Acts. In all, we obtained 27 receipts in total for 16 years.

The receipts offer a wealth of information, including a relatively detailed description of the item and its total cost, broken down by line. In total, there are 2868 “item rows.” However, this is somewhat misleading. Some receipt rows contain multiple items, such as “one tea pot and one milk pot.” In these cases, sometimes the expenditure is broken down by item; often, though, it is not. In other instances, a receipt row relates to packaging, carriage, or shipping of items listed in antecedent rows, such as “a box” for twelve pennies, to convey three pairs of women’s shoes, or “paid carriage of the plough” for roughly £1.7. Even so, most logistical and administrative costs are expensed separately at the bottom of each receipt, and we did not count that spending as part of the receipt totals. Typically, each row corresponds to a single item, the quantity, and the expense, such as “six bright iron table spoons” for 10 s., total. Although obviously not a single item, this was a single, discrete purchase to satisfy a particular desire in the minds of both Washington and his factors.⁴⁴

All researchers seek additional data to validate their ideas, and we are no different. We sought other exemplars to compare to Washington. However, that search has also proved to be unexpectedly difficult. Washington’s data are ideal for our purposes because of a confluence of

⁴⁴ The receipts were unevenly distributed by year and by season. In nine of the sixteen years, Washington received a single receipt; 1754, 1758, 1760-1762, 1767, 1768, 1771, and 1772. He received two receipts in 1759, 1763, 1766, and 1770; three in 1757 and 1764. The year 1765 saw the most shipping receipts, at four (possibly Washington was trying to “stock up” in advance of the Stamp Act). Across years, the number of receipts was distributed unevenly across season, as well. 19 percent of the receipts were shipped from Britain during the winter, 35 percent during the spring, 15 percent during the summer, and 31 percent during the fall. No orders were shipped during the month of June; one was shipped in July, and two were shipped in May.

characteristics: (1) they pertain to general household consumption of a uniquely identified household; (2) they offer years-worth of detailed descriptions of items purchased, and (3) they have explicitly written expenditures per item line. A final characteristic is that they are available online, allowing us to avoid the prohibitive expenditure of in-person archival research. We have discovered numerous data sources relating to several other potential points of comparison. However, to date, we have found none that are directly comparable. For example, some sources (e.g. the York County Estate Inventories and the Public Store at Williamsburg Journal) list items, quantities, and prices, but are not related to household consumption or expenditure. Other sources, such as letters, relate to household consumption, but lack expenditures, quantities, or both.⁴⁵

The critical caveat in this analysis is that it contains no records of expenditures for consumption of domestic products, or, more realistically, for domestic purchases of imported goods, as most consumer goods would have been imported. Given that we are attempting to determine how much Washington spent on various categories of consumer products, this omission in the data is a problem we must take very seriously. Washington's account books, basically his transaction ledgers, exist: Series 5 of The George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress. They appear to contain substantial records of his domestic purchases and sales. To date there appears to have been very little scholarly use—

⁴⁵ Doubtless, directly comparable records exist, but locating them would require archival research, which is nearly cost-prohibitive. For some examples of letters with single instance of all our required details see: "Letter from Thomas Everard to John Norton, August 1, 1770;" "Letter from Thomas Everard to John Norton, October 2, 1773;" "Merritt Moore Invoice, September 3, 1770;" "Henry Tazewell's account with Charles Hunt, January 12, 1793;" "To Thomas Jefferson from Perkins, Buchanan & Brown, 2 October 1769;" "Letter from James Minzies to John Norton, June 12, 1773."

particularly quantitative scholarly use—of these resources.⁴⁶ At present, they are publicly available as digital images of handwritten records, rather than fully digital documents suitable for importing into a spreadsheet. The Papers of George Washington at the University of Virginia is nearing the completion of its George Washington Financial Papers Project, and it now appears that this project will have transcribed Washington's ledgers into an electronic format suitable for importing into a spreadsheet. The Papers of George Washington website announces that the project is expected to be complete in autumn of 2016.⁴⁷ All we have (in usable form, at present) are records of Washington's transactions with his London factors. Although there is a wealth of data available in these records, our understanding of Washington's transaction is incomplete; therefore, our results are suggestive rather than definitive. Having said that, we do know that historians who have looked at consumption in Virginia, such as Ann Smart Martin (2000, 201-218), have shown that "the wealthiest planters were more likely to use the consignment system of marketing—selling their own crops and obtaining goods on account in England" rather than buy items in local retail stores whose patrons "were usually lesser farmers."

We know that Washington spent vast amounts of money both domestically and abroad to buy assets, capital, professional services, and consumption goods. Domestically, he bought enslaved people, land, and services to improve the land using local materials, as well as some foodstuffs. Internationally, he bought much of his capital equipment and consumption products. We can show that his textile expenditures were a large percentage of his international orders, a large percentage of his

⁴⁶ Ragsdale (1989) may have used some of the records in Series 5, but the organizational pattern of the papers has changed since Ragsdale's publication. In any event, Ragsdale did not offer a deliberate analysis of these records. Otherwise, there is Helen M. Cloyd (1979), which was a description of Washington's accounting practices.

⁴⁷ "Nearing Completion, the George Washington Financial Papers Project Will Expand Scholarship on Washington and the Versatility of the Digital Humanities."

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international spending, and represented as vast outlay in absolute terms. It is general knowledge that Washington spent a fortune on land and enslaved people during this time period. We can show that, by any reasonable measure appropriate to the time, Washington also spent additional fortunes on plain textiles and fancy textiles in absolute terms, even if we cannot calculate percentages relative to his domestic spending. However, we believe that what we can demonstrate is sufficient to demonstrate the economic significance of textiles and apparel during this time.

Washington's plantation economy appears to be a microcosm of colonial economies. Like the colonies at large, Washington purchased luxuries and necessities, consumption goods and capital equipment, in qualities coarse and fine, and in quantities great and small. The difference is that Washington purchased many of his products directly from London, rather than through colonial importers. Washington's shipping receipts would seem to indicate that he received nearly a full suite of eighteenth-century market products directly from London. For example, we find orders for horse tack, furniture, andirons, ropes, fish hooks, seines, a sword, parts for repairing a shotgun, oars, blankets, books, magazines, wallpaper, pots and pans, tableware, paint, and distillery equipment. It seems to us that the only products consistently absent from Washington's British purchases were the types of items that Eric Hinderaker and Peter Mancall (2003, 169-170) list as the colonies' major output: flour, raw cereals, and perishable foods such as fresh meats, fruits, and vegetables; smoked or salted meats; building supplies such as lumber, stone, bricks, and mortar; and leather. The only items we know Washington purchased—and purchased domestically—that do not appear on Hinderaker and Mancall's list are land, livestock, and enslaved people.

Like his contemporaries throughout the colonies Washington was buying a dizzying array of imported products. For example, among the 192 lines of the March 15, 1760, receipt, we find: Four dozen Monmouth caps (a knitted woolen cap similar to a watch cap); 451 "ells" (probably 360 yards) of Osaburg cloth, a durable cloth suitable for work clothing; a bespoke suit of Duroy, a relatively lightweight woolen; sewing pins of various sizes; preserved capers and anchovies; a Cheshire cheese of 124

pounds; 100 pounds of hardtack; six broad axes; six steel spades; half a ream of pre-cut writing paper; nine large and three small paint brushes; five and three-fourths ounces of liquid laudanum; a pewter pan; a bushel of tares (vetch seed probably used as a cover crop or as animal fodder), and “Two Groupes, with two Statues each of Bacchus & Flora, finisht Neat, & bronzd wt. Copper.”

When we began this project analyzing Washington’s receipts from his British factors, we had hoped to be able to use the data organized and made available by Historic Mount Vernon. Their “complete database includes 32 groupings of orders and receipts inclusive of 72 unique documents.”⁴⁸ As we started working with their spreadsheet we discovered major issues which make this database problematic. The main issue is that the receipts sent to Washington frequently list two or three items on the same line, and often give both the individual item prices and the combined expenditure for all items in the far right column. Historic Mount Vernon’s data coders frequently entered the total amount twice rather than each item’s contribution to the total expenditure; furthermore, this error was made inconsistently. These problems made the Historic Mount Vernon data unusable to us. Therefore, we went back to the original receipts available online and created our own extracted data set. To ease calculations, we converted the figures from “old money” of pennies-shillings-pounds to a decimal figure based on the equality of £1 and 240 silver pennies. Therefore, all figures in the remainder of the paper are in terms of counter-factual “decimal pounds” unless explicitly expressed as pennies-shillings-pounds.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ “George Washington Invoices and Orders Project Cataloguer’s Manual.”

⁴⁹ All monetary figures are nominal; we did not attempt to adjust these figures for inflation or deflation. Nor did we attempt to adjust Washington’s purchasing behavior for market or climatic conditions. For example, we did not attempt to relate the length and expense of Washington’s shopping list to the tobacco productivity of his Virginia plantations, or to the tightness of London credit conditions, nor to whether

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The average number of item lines per receipt was 106, while the median number of lines was 115. The shortest receipt was dated April 2, 1764. It consisted of four item lines for casks of ironmongery fasteners; nails, brads, and similar. It was certainly not the cheapest receipt, however; it was the most expensive receipt on a “per line” basis. The longest receipt, dated February 13, 1764, consisted of 249 item lines. It was also the most expensive receipt, at £368.78. Three receipts (11 percent) were 200 item lines or longer; 12 receipts (44 percent) were between 100 and 199 item lines, while 12 receipts (44 percent) were less than 100 lines long. Ten receipts (37 percent) had fewer than 50 lines. Table 1 lists receipts by (counterfactual) pounds of expenditure, while Table 2 lists the receipts’ descriptive statistics. In Table 3, we grouped the receipts by year, and report the descriptive statistics for the item lines and for expenditures annually.

Washington maintained credit from tobacco revenues with his London merchants rather than receiving currency or letters of credit. Similarly, we did not attempt to relate the timing of Washington’s return shipments to the tobacco growing season, the extent to which Washington’s economic activities were shifting away from tobacco and into grain production, trade winds, or other natural conditions affecting trans-Atlantic, tobacco-derived trade. We consider this strategy to be acceptable, given the present purpose of analyzing Washington’s expenditure on cloth, clothing and apparel relative to other items. Certainly, a small, late harvest of Washington’s in an otherwise “bumper year” for tobacco production could pinch Washington’s purchasing power, and cause him to (a) limit his order, and (b) substitute into or out of cloth and apparel. A relative increase in cloth and apparel prices would cause Washington to substitute non-‘cloth and apparel’ items for these items. At this point, however, we do not have data regarding Washington’s revenue and credit, nor do we have information that would allow us to confidently guess the direction and intensity of Washington’s cloth and apparel choices relative to changing purchasing ability. Likewise, we have no information regarding direction and size of relative price changes. Any such adjustments on our part would be rather *uninformed* guesses.

Table 1: Receipts by Expenditure

Pounds of Spending	Number of Receipts	Percent of Receipts
0 to 50	8	30%
50-100	3	11%
100-150	5	19%
150-200	2	7%
200-250	1	4%
250-300	3	11%
300-350	2	7%
350+	3	11%

Table 2: Receipts Descriptive Statistics

Mean	£ 151.20
Median	£ 126.20
Maximum	£ 368.78
Minimum	£ 4.20
St. Dev.	£ 124.20

Table 3: Annual Descriptive Statistics

	Item Lines	Expenditures
Maximum	302.0	£ 1,095.75
Minimum	22.0	£ 135.42
Mean	179.2	£ 711.36
Median	187.5	£ 808.15
St. Dev	71.7	£ 297.43

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Overall, the single most expensive purchase was a carriage, which appeared in the September 28, 1768, receipt:

To a new handsome Chariot, made of best Materials, handsomely carvd, carvd anticks to middle of Pillars, & carvd scrowl Corners to top of Pillars & roof, Batten sides, Sweeps of Sides & mouldings rd the roof carvd; with dble ribings, hind batten's & fore battens archd and carvd; panneld back & Sides Japand & Polishd, & roof Japand; lined wt. green Morocco Leather trimmd with Cuffey Lace, an oval behind, a large Trunk under the Seat, the bottom coverd with red leather, & a handsome carpit to bottom: Plate Glass diamd cut, handsomely Paintd the Body & Carridge, & Whls paintd a glazd green; all the framd Work of Body gilt, handsome scrowl, shields Ornamend wt. flowers all over the Panls, body & Car[riag]e Oil varnishd; the car[riag]e wt. Iron Axletree screwd at end handsomely carvd scrowl Stand[ar]ds twisted behind & before, & Stays of foot board barrs & beads carvd with Scrowls & Paneled; Patent woorm Springs wt. brass Sockets; a boot coverd wt. lea[the]r Japand & garnishd, brass Nails, a han[dsome]e Seat cloth bd wt. brd la[ce] & 2 rows of hand[som]e fringe wt. gimp head, all compt.⁵⁰

The price tag for this handsome conveyance was £103 0s. 0d. plus £5 0s. 0d. to get everything aboard ship. Washington also bought matching equipment for the carriage horses, matching saddles for outriders, Venetian blinds for the carriage windows, and a green baize cover for the carriage. In all, the carriage accounted for eight item lines, with an additional three item lines for transportation and lading. At a distant second, the next most expensive order was for “1 pr French Burr Millstones 4 feet 4 Inchs Diameter” at £38 0s. 0d. in December, 1771.

⁵⁰ “Invoice from Robert Cary & Company, 28 September 1768.”

The next five greatest expenditure lines all relate to textiles. Washington spent £28 16s. 1d. to buy 675 yards of osnaburg in 1762. In this single line Washington purchased the annual allotment of cloth for 68 enslaved people, and spent nearly three times average annual income.⁵¹ Washington spent £27 14s. 7d. to buy 630 yards of hemp cloth in 1771. In 1772 he spent £53 10s. 3d. on 611 yards of hemp osnaburg and 400 yards of white cotton cloth, over two lines. In 1762 Washington purchased 377 yards of cotton cloth for £25 18s. 4d. Of the twenty most expensive item lines there are two lines for the chariot and harness (first most expensive and nineteenth), one for the millstones (second), and two more for mahogany furniture (eighth and eighteenth). The remainder are orders for large yardages of fabric. These fabrics were appropriate for use by slaves, servants, and for ordinary, “non-signaling” household purposes. However, one order in 1766, the seventeenth most expensive, was for 76 yards of

⁵¹ Internal evidence from Washington’s correspondence with his factors indicate that he paid 11d., sterling, per yard of osnaburg, on average (Authors’ calculations). Suppose Washington were to provide 10 yards of osnaburg to each of his 200 slaves per year. This was roughly the number of Washington’s own slaves on the four outlying Mount Vernon farms in 1790. This amount would be roughly sufficient for two sets of clothing per slave, similar to Baumgarten (2012). Of course, Washington did not provide 10 yards of osnaburg to his slaves. Rather he provided a variety of textiles and ready-made items for a variety of purposes. Some were less expensive than osnaburg, but some were much more expensive. We selected osnaburg to define a baseline for thinking about the choices Washington faced. Given these assumptions, Washington’s annual expenditure on slave cloth, not counting his personal household use of coarse materials like osnaburg, would have been £91 13s. 4d. per year. For a man who could not scrape together £90 of currency to avoid the humiliation of court (Breen (1985, 149)) and who faced volatile then collapsing tobacco prices in the 1760s and 1770s, more than £91 sterling for slave clothing every year would have been a formidable amount of money.

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“superfine, high bleached” Irish linen, for 5s. per yard, or £19 overall. This luxury fabric was probably used to make shirts and shifts for Washington and his immediate family.

To investigate the significance of cloth and apparel to Washington’s household economy we coded each item line according to whether the purchased item(s) was cloth or a distinctly apparel-related, non-cloth item. That is, we coded each item line as a “1” if the described purchase as cloth or apparel, and coded all other items as “zero.”⁵²

In addition to cloth, we also coded as “1” non-cloth apparel items and apparel-related services, such as tailoring. Thus, we counted items such as shoes, hats and hose as cloth and apparel; likewise, we counted buckles, stays, and wires ordered from a haberdashery as cloth and apparel. Washington purchased not only cloth and haberdashery. He also purchased bespoke clothing for himself and other members of his household. In these instances, the tailor’s labor was usually billed separately from the cloth and haberdashery used by the tailor. As fine

⁵² We did not code all fibrous or thread-based items as cloth or apparel. For example, Washington regularly ordered rope, line, nets, and seins. Although these textiles could be considered cloth or fabric, they are more accurately described as cordage. They are items produced solely for their utilitarian value and lacking the broader social significance of cloth and apparel. The industries producing the items are different. Typically, we do not think of cord makers as belonging with carders, spinners, weavers, dyers, fullers, and tailors. Neither, apparently, did Washington’s factors. Orders for cordage and nets were fulfilled by a specialist who did not, for example, also sell bulk fabric or clothing. We did include as cloth those separate item lines relating to upholstery fabric, bed curtains, window dressing, and wall coverings. To us, these items were (1) cloth or textile, and (2) held personal and social significance. As our focus is on cloth and apparel, we did not include similar items of home décor and social signaling made of paper, plaster, leather, or other materials. Likewise, we excluded leather items if they were obviously horse tack, even if they likely also included textile components.

tailoring, as opposed to home sewing, could also be a social signal, we included the tailor's services in our measure of cloth and apparel.

Of course, these decisions and all similar decisions are matters of understanding and professional judgment. Regarding understanding, consider that on February 13, 1765, Washington's London factor, Robert Cary, sent him "a lawn search," ordered from Thomas Johnson, a "turner." Although "lawn" often refers to a linen fabric, a "turner" produces items of worked wood using a lathe, and Washington normally ordered brushes, brooms, and the like from Johnson. We believe the "lawn search" to be a large sieve with a wooden frame and a fabric screen, used for sifting ground grain. Although replacement "lawn bottoms" are clearly a textile item, how should we code the original sieve? As a matter of judgment, should a "steel buckle" bought at an ironmongers' with several carpentry tools be coded the same as "one dozen knee buckles" or "shoe buckles" ordered from a haberdashery? In any event, of the nearly 2900 item lines in the receipts, the number of and expenditure on such "judgment call" items are few and small.⁵³ These necessary judgement calls do, however,

⁵³ Accounting for which lines required judgement calls to code is something of a slippery process. At the most basic level, every line required a series of judgements about coding. Furthermore, each judgement was not equally easy or difficult. Some lines required very little thought to code, while other lines required more thought to code. The entire process was hampered by the nature of the eighteenth century: Different men wrote these documents using different names for similar products, different spellings for the same product, different abbreviations, and different units of weight and measure. Nonetheless, limiting ourselves to only those lines that required additional research or returning to the original source documents to attempt to understand the entry, we believe that there were 37 such instances, or 1.3 percent of the item lines. Because many of these item lines involved undifferentiated expenditure, we have no estimate of the percent of expenditure these items represented. We did not code using multiple raters, so we cannot demonstrate inter-rater reliability, but we expect other coders' results would be very concordant

caution us against coding too many similar variables. As the number of variables we use to sift the data grows, the number of such judgement calls will grow, potentially casting doubt on the analysis.

To provide contrast, however, we did code a similar variable for “grocery.” We selected grocery as a comparison because—like textiles—imported, non-perishable food and beverages were another way that elite Virginians displayed their wealth and gentility, but could also serve the more practical purpose of keeping people alive. Furthermore, as with textiles, grocery items would have been purchased repeatedly. “The dining table in the 18th century was not merely a place to take sustenance but a stage for social theater.... Dining—*the foods served*, the way they were presented on the table, the dishes and utensils used to serve and consume it, and the manner with which host and guest comported themselves during the meal--were all important parts of the dinner as social theater.”⁵⁴ As such, imported food stuffs signaled to guests that a planter was able to afford imported and specialized food and drink which connected them to elite British society and the transatlantic world.⁵⁵ Mount Vernon seemed to have been plagued by visitors—not only because of the expectation placed on the Virginia gentry that one was obligated to entertain any company who came calling, but his status as war hero and later president made visiting the home a ‘location destination’ stop for travelers and old acquaintances. The researchers at Mount Vernon have tabulated how often Washington had guests; for example, in 1774, “there were dinner guests on 136 of the 207 days when Washington was home, nearly 66% of the time.”⁵⁶ Anyone visiting Washington would have expected not only a

with our own although we do not doubt that there are, and will continue to be, errors in the coding.

⁵⁴ Gunston Hall Plantation.

⁵⁵ Christina Regelski (2014, 59). See also Dave DeWitt (2010); *Dining with the Washingtons* (2011); *Chocolate: History, Culture and Heritage* (2009); Joe Gray Taylor (1982); and Mary V Thompson (n.d.)

⁵⁶ Thompson (n.d). Additional figures for other years are included as well as some analysis of where guests hailed from. “After the Revolution,

display of his wealth through household items and textiles, but also by being served imported food items for consumption. The expense of hosting visitors was not lost on Washington, who complained to his mother in a 1787 letter: “My House...in truth it may be compared to a well resorted tavern, as scarcely any strangers who are going from north to south, or from south to north do not spend a day or two at it.”⁵⁷ As such, Washington devised a strategy to entertain according to status. Washington wrote his farm manager William Pearce in 1794 that he was concerned by news that “since I left Mount Vernon she [Martha Washington’s niece, Fanny] has given out four doz and eight bottles of wine.” He instructed Pearce that it was not his “intention that [wine] should be given to every one who may incline to make a convenience of the house in traveling or who may be induced to visit it from motives of curiosity” but that certain drinks should be reserved for notable guests and himself and to be sure to serve the claret rather than Madeira, as there was less duty on the former. “Unless some caution of this sort governs, I should be run to an expence as improper.” Washington needed to maintain appearances of genteel hospitality, but his staff needed to use their judgement when entertaining in his absence.⁵⁸

Since Jordan almonds, Spanish capers, French olives, mustard (likely the famous Norwich and Tewkesbury varieties), preserved anchovies, orange chips, and copious amounts of Cheshire and Gloucester cheeses would have been effective at signaling wealth and gentility, we believe grocery is a sound comparison. In this category we included all food items, alcoholic beverages, coffee, tea, spices, preserves, pickles, and

the guest list, while still including friends and relatives, became more national and international in scope, reflecting Washington's vastly increased prominence that drew visitors from all over the newly independent America, and Europe. Of the 588 individuals who came to the Estate between 1784 and 1789, well over a third (38.44%) either came from a state other than Virginia (25%), or visited from Europe or the West Indies (13.44%).”

⁵⁷ “From George Washington to Mary Ball Washington, 15 February 1787.”

⁵⁸ “From George Washington to William Pearce, 23 November 1794.”

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condiments. We did not make a distinction between items intended for the family's use, such as chocolate, Turkish coffee, and truffles, and items intended to feed servants and slaves, such as barrels of hardtack. We did not include those items purchased from an apothecary and intended as medicine which a modern reader may be more likely to interpret as kitchen supplies than as medicines.

Regarding textiles, once invoice—accounting for one year—sticks out as anomalous, October 23, 1754. It is a short invoice, only 22 item lines. It is the least expensive year in total expenditure, at £135.42, but it is the most expensive year in terms of expenditure per item line. What makes the receipt anomalous is that 21 of the 22 item lines are for cloth, trimming, and apparel. The remaining line is for a packing box to ship the order. It is also anomalous in that the entire order appears to have had a single purpose, the construction of military uniforms. We believe that this invoice reflects Washington getting dressed to fight the Seven Years' War. We excluded 1754 because it could tend to bias our results in favor of our premise.

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of Washington's annual orders of and expenditures for textiles. After excluding 1754, we see that textiles account for nearly one-third of Washington's annual item lines. Even more impressively, Washington's average annual expenditure on textiles amounted to nearly forty-five percent of his total annual expenditure. Cumulating over all nineteen years and all 2868 item lines, there were 944 textile lines, or *32.9 percent* of the total. Cumulative textile spending accounted for *46.1 percent of total expenditure*, or £1943 6s. 0d. of £4090 11s. 7 ½ d.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Annual Textile Purchases and Expenditures

		Item Lines	Textile Lines	Textile %	Textile Expndtr	Tex Exp % of Total
1754 incl.	Max	302	120	95.5	622.7	99.9
	Min	22	16	15.0	80.1	24.1
	Mean	179.2	59	36.0	328.2	48.0
	Median	187.5	55	31.4	321.2	45.3
	St Dev	71.7	29.5	18.0	165.1	17.9
<i>ex</i> 1754	Max	302	120	46.2	622.7	65.4
	Min	65	16	15.0	80.1	24.1
	Mean	189.7	61.5	32.0	341.0	44.6
	Median	192	56	31.0	335.2	44.9
	St Dev	60.2	28.7	8.8	162.4	11.8

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Annual Grocery Purchases and Expenditures

		Item Lines	Grocery Lines	Grocery %	Grocery Expndtr	Gro Exp % of Total
1754 incl.	Max	302	32	23.1	149.3	41.3
	Min	22	0	0	0	0
	Mean	179.2	15.2	8.4	66.2	9.8
	Median	187.5	17	8.2	65	8.2
	StDev	71.7	7.8	5.3	43	9.5
<i>ex</i> 1754	Max	302	32	23.1	149.3	41.3
	Min	65	0	0	0	0
	Mean	189.7	16.2	8.9	70.6	10.4
	Median	192	17	8.3	66.9	8.6
	StDev	60.2	6.9	5	40.6	9.5

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Table 5 replicates Table 4 for the grocery category. Relative to textiles, grocery accounts for rather less of Washington's order lines and expenditure. Washington's average annual grocery order was nine percent of his total order, only one-third as great as his average annual textile order. His average annual grocery expenditure was 10 percent of total expenditure; less than one-quarter of his average annual textile expenditure percentage. Cumulating over all 19 years and all 2868 item lines, there were 243 grocery lines, or 8.5 percent of the total. Cumulative grocery spending accounted for 20.2 percent of total expenditure.

Another method of demonstrating the relative importance of cloth and apparel is to compare the percentage of cloth and apparel expenditure to the percentage of cloth and apparel purchases, as measured by item lines. A positive value of this difference would indicate that the "expenditure weight" of cloth and apparel is greater than its "item weight." For example, textile orders on the November 17, 1766, receipt accounted for 22 percent of the receipt's purchases, but accounted for 41 percent of the receipt's expenditure; a difference of (+) 19 percentage points. This difference is a measure of the average economic value of cloth and apparel relative to the average economic value of "all purchases." The value of cloth and apparel can be greater than that of all items because: (1) more textile items were ordered per item line than non-textile items per item line, at relatively similar prices; (2) similar volumes of textiles and non-textiles per line were ordered, but textiles had comparatively higher prices, or (3) both—large volumes of comparatively highly priced cloth and apparel items were ordered.

Over all receipts, the median difference between textile expenditure percentage and textile item percentage was 11 percentage points. The differences ranged from a minimum of (-) 4.4 percentage points to 40.4 percentage points. The difference was negative on only two receipts.⁵⁹ For comparison's sake, the grocery median difference was zero percentage points, ranging from (-) 7.01 percentage points to 20.09 percentage points,

⁵⁹ One should note that by this measure the 1754 receipt is not an outlier, as nearly 100 percent of *both* the item lines *and* the expenditure were cloth and apparel.

with nine “negative value” receipts out of 27. Repeating the analysis on an annual basis median excess of the percent of textile expenditure over the percent of textile item lines was 11.4 percentage points. In no year was the percentage of cloth expenditure less than cloth’s percentage of item lines. On one third of the receipts, grocery’s expenditure percentage was less than its item line percentage. Thus, grocery items are basically indistinguishable from non-grocery, non-textile items. That is not the case for textiles and apparel. Compared to non-textiles, cloth and apparel discrete purchases (item lines) were some combination of greater volume of product and higher relative prices.

To summarize, a consistent picture emerges. (1) Consumption of textiles and apparel was a substantial portion of Washington’s domestic economy. (2) Washington’s shipping receipts reveal that textiles and apparel account for a large percentage of his purchases and an even larger portion of his expenditure. (3) By either measure, he was making more purchases and spending more money on cloth and apparel than on groceries, whether due to large order volume per purchase, a high price per purchase, or both, (4) Washington spent more per cloth and apparel purchase than he did on all other purchases, on average.

To examine the distinction between textile and apparel’s general utility versus luxury and signaling utility, we coded several additional variables using the item lines already coded as textiles. We did this with some misgivings. We had to make a somewhat arbitrary choice about how many categories to create, and make a judgement call on every line as to which categories it belonged. Even the definitions of the categories are somewhat arbitrary. For example, we chose to categorize yardages of cloth greater than fifty yards as a “bulk purchase.” We could have chosen 40 yards, 60 yards, or 100 yards, with some marginal changes to our results. Furthermore, some of the item lines contain multiple items which belong in different categories. For example, a single line might contain 10 ounces of silk ribbon, a stomacher, and a gross of plain buttons. These items are, in order, high fashion trimmings, a high fashion article of ready-to-wear clothing (although the stomacher could possibly have been ordered to sew it into a gown—or an existing dress since a new stomacher would substantially change the look of an old gown—being produced at Mount

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Vernon, making it an article of trimming rather than pret-a-porter), and trimmings or notions that were clearly *not* high fashion, but were sundries designed for general use by household, servants, and enslaved people. Typically, the separate expenditure on these items could be extracted from the receipt line, but not always. Moreover, some separate line items *appear* to belong together as part of a larger whole, but they might not be related. For example, several lines of recording different yardages of different fabrics, as well as lace, ribbons, buttons, and silk thread were purchased from the draper and the haberdasher. They appear directly above a set of lines related to bespoke tailoring, which are clearly payments for labor, only. Altogether, they appear to be an order for a bespoke suit of clothes, but they are also clearly separate orders for cloth yardage, trimmings, and labor. Our basic approach was to double count when in doubt. As a result of these types of difficulties, we present this analysis but think that it should be taken with a grain of salt.

We coded dichotomous variables for yardage of cloth; bulk yardage; trimmings (T); sundries; utility; hats, shoes, and gloves (HSG); home décor; pret-a-porter (P); sewing supplies; bespoke; and labor. We coded a line as “1” for yardage if it contained cloth yardage of any fabric but not finished apparel, décor, or utility items. Bulk yardage received a “1” if the line’s cloth purchase was for greater than 50 yards of cloth, with the remainder classified as non-bulk yardage. We reasoned that this cloth would be more likely to be used by Washington’s household or within Washington’s house, itself. Trimmings included lace, ribbons, fabric tapes, laces, buttons and fasteners, feathers, other ornamental items, and fine threads and yarns. As opposed to sundries, trimmings were fine quality, high fashion items designed to signal wealth and status. We coded a “1” for pret-a-porter for purchases of ready-made clothing or apparel items that were not headgear, footwear, or gloves. Washington ordered many ready-made items, such as stockings, handkerchiefs (actually neckwear, like a stock), breeches, waistcoats, and stomachers. HSGP is the combination of hats/shoes/gloves and pret-a-porter; basically Washington’s purchase of off-the-rack, finished clothes and apparel. With few exceptions, such as several orders of ready-made stockings and Monmouth caps, these purchases would have been used by Washington

and his family. HSGPT is the combination of HSGP and trimmings. We think of this variables—again, with a few exceptions—as wearable, portable ostentation, though not the ultimate wearable, portable ostentation: bespoke British clothing. These are the means by which Washington signaled his family’s gentility, identity, and social status.

We coded as sundries thread, laces, tape and buttons if they were obviously (to us) not high fashion items suitable for signaling, but were simply the stuff that held cloth together into apparel. We coded a separate variable, bulk, that took a value of “1” when either bulk yardage or sundries was coded as “1.” We coded a similar variable, utility, when the textiles were used for protection and carriage; all of the lines recording cloth sacks, bags, wrappers, and so on. We separately coded home décor items including such things as window treatments, tablecloths, tester curtains, sheet sets, and pre-made blankets. Sewing supplies included the large amounts of sewing pins, needles, and thimbles Washington purchased. We coded labor as “1” for those lines clearly related to tailoring: charges from a clearly identified tailor’s shop, and often including phrases like “To the making of your blew Riding Coat” or “To the lining of your sleeves.” We coded as bespoke all of those lines that we judged went toward labor, trimmings, and yardage for custom-ordered clothing.

Table 6 presents the percentage of expenditure and line items for textiles as a category, and for all lines and expenditures, of some of our coded textile. It highlights the great significance of *cloth* in Washington’s household consumption, as a part of his textile consumption but more importantly as a part of his overall consumption. Twenty-seven percent of his total expenditure during this period, £1213 16s. 11d., was on cloth yardage. Nearly 11 percent of his total expenditure, £497 11s. 0d., was on bulk yardage of cloth (which we have argued was likely for consumption by enslaved people) even though these item lines account for less than two percent of all item lines. The cloth accounts for a large majority of the bulk purchases of bulk textiles. The combined category, bulk, accounts for more than 11 percent of Washington’s expenditure, or £520 9s. 3 ¼ d.

Table 6: Textile Expenditure and Line Item Percentages by Category

	% of Textile Expndtr	% of Total Expndtr	% of Textile Lines	Percent of Total Lines
Yards	59.2	27.3	31.9	10.5
Bulk	24.7	11.4	8.3	2.7
Bulk Yards	23.3	10.8	4.4	1.5
Sundries	1.4	0.6	9.0	3.0
Non-bulk yardage	35.9	16.5	27.4	9.0
HSGP	20.8	9.6	29.6	9.7
Trimmings	10.8	5.0	22.7	7.5
HSGPT	31.6	14.5	52.2	17.2

Note: HSGP is the combination of hats/shoes/gloves and pret-a-porter. HSGPT is the combination of HSGP and trimmings.

This is almost certainly an underestimate of Washington's spending on cloth and apparel for his enslaved people and servants because it does not account for ready-made items, or for the probability that enslaved people likely used many of the smaller yardages of cloth which we did not code as bulk, or for sewing supplies such as thimbles, pins, and needles consumed in constructing slave clothing. Washington spent more than £2000 to buy enslaved people during this period.⁶⁰ We estimate that he also spent much more than £520 to clothe them.

Even more striking was Washington's expenditure on shorter yardages of (typically) finer, higher-end cloth. Nine percent of his expenditure lines and 16.5 percent of his total expenditure went toward fine cloth, one-third more expenditure than on bulk cloth for far less material. The £716 5s. 10 ¾ d. Washington spent on finer fabrics during this time period was similar to 65 times average annual income.

Of course, cloth (nor cloth tailored into fashionable clothing) was not the only wearable means by which Washington signaled his gentility, wealth, and status. He ornamented his clothes with fine buttons and

⁶⁰ Fritz Hirschfeld (1997, 12).

fasteners, ribbons, tapes, braids, and embroidery. He also wore London-ordered hats, shoes, gloves, and ready-to-wear clothing. Hats, shoes, gloves, fine trimmings, and pret-a-porter⁶¹ accounted for over seventeen percent of Washington’s order lines and nearly fifteen percent of his total expenditure, £546 0s. 0d. Adding fine fabrics gives us an idea of wearable ostentation, over 26 percent of Washington’s order lines and 31 percent of his total expenditure.

Table 7: Textile Expenditure and Line Item Percentages by Category

	1759	1765	1767	1771
	One suit of clothes	One suit of clothes	Riding Coat & Breeches	One suit of clothes
Expenditure	£7 19s. 7d.	£5 4s. 6d.	£7 12s. 9d.	£5 3s. 0d.
% Annual Per Capita Income (£11)	73%	48%	68%	47%
Percent of Expenditure				
Yards	43%	46%	81%	76%
Trimmings	47%	35%	9%	10%
Labor	10%	18%	10%	14%

⁶¹ Recall that some of the ready-to-wear clothing would likely have been common goods for slave usage, such as Monmouth caps and ordinary hose. It is also useful to recall that Washington’s white employees, servants, and his family itself also would have worn some “common goods” such as a Monmouth cap.

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The ultimate in ostentation, or the ultimate signal of wealth and status (no matter how false the signal), was fine bespoke clothing from London. We encountered the most difficulties in attempting to code bespoke clothing. As a result, the figures are not directly comparable with the rest of our analysis, and we view these results as the most tentative or suggestive. In four separate years we found what we believe to be clearly attributable item lines corresponding to a single set of garments. In some other years, Washington ordered multiple sets of bespoke clothing. We were not confident that we could attribute different item lines and expenditures to particular sets of clothes with any accuracy. Nevertheless, data for the four sets of garments are illuminating, which we present in Table 7.

Conclusion

We set out to try to establish the significance of textiles in the household economy of early modern people—elite households in the plantation economy of Virginia, in this instance—by quantifying how much George Washington spent on cloth and textiles. We do this as an initial step to further two objectives; first, to emphasize cloth and clothing as central elements in early modern historical narratives, and second, as a means to better understand how much individuals were willing to invest for the ability to signal their wealth and status through clothing. This is the first time, to our knowledge, that anyone has explicitly applied economists' concept of signaling to an analysis of clothing in early modern British North America. Signaling theory as developed by economists offers intriguing possibilities for adding nuance and context to several historical phenomena. In undertaking the project, we have uncovered some unfortunate difficulties when trying to use the data supplied by Historic Mount Vernon and ultimately built our own database.

In conclusion, Washington's shipping receipts from his British factors reveal that (1) the consumption of cloth and apparel was a substantial portion of his economic life. He made many discrete purchases of cloth and apparel; cloth and apparel thereby accounted for 46.1 percent of his foreign purchases for which we have records. (2) He spent enormously on cloth and apparel. Washington bought large volumes of

these items and, moreover, paid high prices for them compared to the prices paid for many non-cloth items or categories.

At a minimum, our findings re-inforce the conclusion that textiles were economically important in the household economies of Virginia's social elites, as objects of ordinary utility, as a medium for sending Spencian signals about status, wealth, and power, and as a source of utility through the 'performance of gentility.' We hope this study reminds researchers to carefully consider in their own analyses the total amounts early modern people were spending on textiles, and how their calculus of consumer choice would be affected by the high cost of textiles relative to their high utilitarian and high signaling benefits.

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